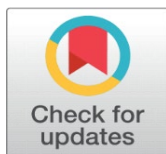
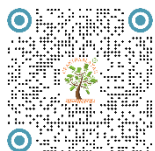


ROLE OF ONLINE TRAVEL AGENCIES IN SHAPING REVENUE DYNAMICS OF BUDGET HOTELS: A REVIEW PAPER

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ABSTRACT

OTAs (online travel agents) are the dominant intermediaries of hotels, particularly for chain-affiliated budget hotels which require strong online presence, rapid conversion for booking, and a competitive price. The OTA economy is complex. On the positive side, OTAs create a market, making more hotels discoverable and increasing their occupancy rates. On the negative side, OTAs create commission costs to hotels and drive price competition, reducing the hotelier's ability to drive customers to book direct. This review paper uses findings from the literature and industry to examine the role of OTAs in budget hotel revenue management. It discusses the concepts of hotel revenue management, OTA intermediation, channel conflict, consumer booking behavior, as well as OTA pricing pressure and profitability in the context of the budget hotel sector. The review concluded that OTAs are effective at driving customer acquisition for hotels with little brand presence and poor marketing capabilities. However, the review found that overreliance on the OTAs can lead to hotel net revenue declines due to commission leakage, discounting pressure, and a lack of direct customer relationships. From this the paper concludes that distribution should not be seen in isolation from the overall revenue management strategy of budget hotels. It suggests that budget hotels should adopt a balanced channel strategy in which OTAs are used to ease market access and demand stimulation, but which is supported by direct booking, online review management and guest retention to deliver long term profitability.

Keywords: Online Travel Agencies, Budget Hotels, Revenue Management, Channel Economics, Direct Booking, Profitability, Hospitality Industry, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The industry is characterized by a fixed and perishable inventory: an unsold room cannot be stored and sold as inventory on a later date. Pricing, channel management and forecasting demand are key competitive issues for success in the hotel industry. Customarily, hotel revenue management has been seen as a dynamic pricing function. However, it has evolved into a broader revenue-generating system, covering distribution, inventory management, segmentation, value optimization, etc. In an online hospitality environment, the system is increasingly influenced by

online travel agencies (OTAs), which over the years have emerged as strong intermediaries [Lv et al. \(2020\)](#).

OTA websites such as Booking.com, Expedia, Agoda, MakeMyTrip, and others have changed the hotel distribution landscape. They are a consumer-facing digital market that aggregates hotel listings, reviews, rates, and bookings into one location. For budget hotels, OTAs are often the first place that hotels are discovered, and in some cases, the first place a potential customer interfaces with a hotel, given that the OTA often may have a weaker brand name, marketing budget, or direct booking capability [Raab et al. \(2018\)](#).

The economic consequences of OTAs are mixed. While they increase occupancy and visibility, OTAs charge commissions and foster price transparency, leading to strengthened discount competition. Additionally, hotels may find it difficult to convert OTA customers into repeat guests booking directly. This lack of repeat customers can have a long-term negative impact on the hotel's profitability [García et al. \(2022\)](#). These issues are heightened in the budget hotel sector that works at thin margins and deals with price-sensitive clients.

The Indian hospitality sector presents a useful context for this problem. Recent industry reports show a strong recovery in organized hotel performance and the sustained importance of midscale and economy hotels. At the same time, the rise of digital booking channels has made channel management critical for hotel profitability [Taslim et al. \(2024\)](#). Given this background, OTAs are worth studying from a budget hotel perspective, as budget hotels are particularly dependent on OTAs from a distribution perspective, while also incurring the burden of the cost.

This paper reviews the literature on OTAs and budget-hotel revenue performance from the perspective of the impact of OTAs on occupancy, pricing, customer acquisition, direct booking and profitability of budget hotels, with no new hypotheses or primary data generated. By doing so, the paper provides a conceptual understanding of OTAs as planned economic actors rather than mere distribution partners [Gabelaia and Gabelaia \(2025\)](#).

2. REVENUE MANAGEMENT AND THE ECONOMICS OF HOTEL INVENTORY

The right room for the right customer at the right time, through the right channel, and at the right price is a vital principle of hotel revenue management. The importance of revenue management is heightened due to the short-run fixed and perishable nature of inventory in hotels [Lee et al. \(2020\)](#), [Choi et al., 2022](#)). Thus, as a room cannot be sold more than one night, hotel revenue management includes not only revenue controls, but also demand forecasting, allocation of inventory, segmentation of demand, and distribution strategy [Ortega \(2016\)](#).

Customarily, hotels' management performance is assessed by occupancy, ADR and RevPAR. These remain relevant measures, but are less important if channel costs vary [Vives et al. \(2018\)](#). However, a room sold through a direct booking channel will not incur the same costs to the hotel as a room sold through an OTA, resulting in two rooms sold at the same gross rate having a different net value to the hotel. Thus the real economic value of a booking in this situation is based on both the revenue it brings, as well as the cost of acquiring that booking [Toh and Dekay \(2002\)](#).

A third stream, while not abandoning the focus on revenue management, seeks to broaden the conceptualization. Pricing is indeed just a tool, part of a philosophy of profit maximization [Gayar et al. \(2011\)](#). This is particularly important in the

digital platform world where hotels face multiple distribution options with varying distribution costs, level of control, and ownership of the end customer. This is even more relevant in case of budget hotels where the margins are low so that channel-related leakage directly impacts the bottom line [Guadix et al. \(2009\)](#).

The literature therefore suggests that hotel managers should go beyond focusing on top-line revenue and instead use bottom-line metrics that reflect the net contribution of each channel [Vaeztehrani et al. \(2015\)](#). This means that OTAs should not be evaluated exclusively in terms of how many bookings they generate but rather, the net profit contribution of bookings they generate taking into account the cost of commission, discounting, and the long-term value of customer retention [Baker and Collier \(1999\)](#).

3. OTAS AS DIGITAL DEMAND INTERMEDIARIES

OTAs are intermediaries for the digital travel marketplace and lower consumer searching costs by providing hotel search and advertising, price comparisons, user reviews, and booking on one platform to make travel easier. From the traveler perspective, OTAs have the advantage of simplifying travel search and booking. From the hotel perspective, OTAs provide a distribution channel to a broad base of consumers that is difficult to reach directly [Raad et al. \(2022\)](#).

This is widely recognized as one of the key benefits that OTAs provide. For hotels with underperforming websites, a limited online presence, or tight online marketing budgets, OTAs provide access to an already established and trusted consumer search space [Vinod \(2024\)](#). This is particularly helpful for smaller, budget hotels, which may lack the technological and marketing infrastructure to compete with the larger, established hotel chains.

Properties that rely heavily on OTAs for bookings may find that OTAs help them with discovery. This is especially true for budget hotels in secondary markets or hotels with weak brands, as direct customer acquisition may be more challenging [Marzo-Navarro et al. \(2019\)](#). OTAs, have filled this gap by providing these hotels with a wider distribution network, allowing hotel and travel buyers to find, compare and consider these hotels alongside known brands.

But the value of OTAs creates lock-in. When hotels have few other sources of distribution leverage, when OTAs control visibility, comparison, and conversion, hotels find it difficult to abandon them. In the literature, OTAs are sometimes seen as enablers, other times gatekeepers, to the contemporary hotel market, with a focus on how pricing pressures over time decrease hotels' bargaining powers and their reliance on OTAs for demand [Tao \(2022\)](#).

4. COOPERATION, COMPETITION, AND PLATFORM DEPENDENCE

One of the most salient ideas that emerged in OTA research is that the relationship between hotels and OTAs can be described as co-competition. The OTAs and hotels cooperate in generating demand and compete with each other to control price, customer relationship, and customer loyalty in the long term [Marty and Pillot \(2021\)](#).

Thus, OTAs serve as both an indirect distribution channel and competitor for hotels, as the OTA becomes the preferred search, trust, and booking platform for consumers [Cohen and Zhang \(2022\)](#). This could be described as a phenomenon in which if an OTA serves as the platform in which the customer discovers the hotel

they may later book their future trips through that OTA. Because of this, OTAs are not just short-term relationship holders but can also serve as long-term partners for hotels [Ren et al. \(2025\)](#).

Such literature stresses the importance of commission rates, cashback programs, service quality, and digital trust. Other research finds that OTAs may be better at attracting one-time and repeat customers, as they may be perceived as a more standardized and frictionless booking channel than many hotel websites [Karanović et al. \(2020\)](#). Hotels are trying to win such customers back through direct channels, from loyalty incentives to better communication of services and a more-personalized booking experience.

There are concerns that platform dependence is keenly felt in budget hotels that need intermediaries for visibility, and are less well suited than OTAs for websites, payments, or rewards programs. Platform dependence may therefore be deeply embedded in a hotel's revenue model. It has been argued in the literature that the more dependent a hotel is on a platform, the more it is unable to cut back on OTA distribution without losing occupancy [Cutolo and Kenney \(2020\)](#).

More generally, it has been argued that OTA participation should be considered not as a tactical but as a planned decision involving short-term and long-term (often opposing) trade-offs: OTAs may increase room sales in the short term while in the long run they may lead to loss of control over customer retention, price and brand relationships for hotels [Rietveld and Schilling \(2020\)](#).

5. COMMISSION BURDEN, DISCOUNT PRESSURE, AND PROFITABILITY

The direct economic cost of using an OTA is commission. Commission is usually a percentage of reservation value paid by a hotel to the OTA for each booking. For helping with the visibility of a hotel on the platform and supporting its sales, the hotel offers a part of the revenue from the sales of its rooms [Lechner and Londoner \(1976\)](#), the exact ratio may vary from market to market.

This is especially true for budget hotels where room rates are low and margins difficult; even a modest commission rate will materially reduce the contribution made to the hotel by each room sold [Sheen \(2005\)](#). When commissions are coupled with discounting obligations or promotional campaigns, OTAs often index and reward visibility and ranking based on conversion rates (i.e. based on the price at which a booking is made compared to the price at which it is offered), thereby encouraging hotels to offer discounts on mobile, last-minute, and promotional rates.

This has been described as a double pressure on profitability: hotels effectively give a discount via commission, but may also reduce their own effective average realized rate, in part to remain visible and not be driven out of the OTA ecosystem. The net value of a reservation may be very limited due to these related costs, despite the apparent value of providing an occupancy unit from the hotel's perspective [Richards et al. \(2012\)](#).

Timing of the inventory for sale is another issue. OTA bookings are not equally financially valuable. At times of low demand, OTA bookings can be a good event as they increment demand and permit the occupancy of otherwise unsold inventory. Conversely, OTA bookings may be less valuable during peak demand or close to sell-out if they displace a more valuable direct booking or a later-arising booking that could earn higher net revenue. The literature would, therefore, suggest that the value of OTAs is marginal, and depends on tool and context.

Another implication of the supply chain view is that OTA-based demand needs to be evaluated based on the margin, not volume, of the revenues generated. For hotels (especially budget hotels) this means determining if the channel is a net contributor after accounting for these other costs.

6. CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR, TRUST, AND BOOKING CHOICE

However, price is not the only consideration consumers have when choosing OTAs. Convenience, webpage design, trust cues, and perceptions of review transparency, cancellation, and transaction safety are other factors that influence traveler choices. OTAs outperform other distribution channels on these dimensions, as they prioritize user-friendly website design, secure payment systems, and standardized booking and cancellation processes.

Thus, OTAs may have an advantage over hotel websites even if they do not offer the best price to the guest. The guest may prefer the OTA because it is more trusted, usable, or transparent. Reviews play an important role in this regard. In this context of searching and booking accommodation, consumers rely heavily on reviews and ratings from previous guests, which OTAs use in their search and booking processes [Akhtar et al. \(2022\)](#).

Apart from all these barriers to OTA use, the literature still points out OTA privacy concerns, security concerns and uncertainty with services provided by OTAs. Despite these concerns, the literature suggests OTAs are still attractive because of their overall value proposition. This implies that price is one lever hotels can pull to increase demand, but hotels must reduce friction, build trust and provide a credible and easy booking experience.

This makes it especially difficult for budget hotels that have minimal websites, few payment options, and varying digital communication strategies. Even satisfied hotel customers may prefer to use the OTA again because they are more confident and comfortable with the process [Sahney et al. \(2013\)](#). The proportion of direct bookings thus depends not just on pricing, but also on digital capability and the quality of relationships.

In this sense, OTA dominance is both market power and hotel weakness; the literature suggests that making it less important to depend on OTAs requires hotels to provide a better direct-booking experience as well as to compete on price with OTAs.

7. BUDGET HOTELS AS A DISTINCT CHANNEL-ECONOMICS CASE

For budget hotels, the OTA problem is a very specific one because budget hotels have a relatively low level of ADR, are very price sensitive, have a lower level of product differentiation, and have smaller contribution margins. These features make OTAs particularly useful because they solve the distribution and customer-acquisition problem. But they also make OTAs particularly risky because intermediation costs take up a relatively larger proportion of revenue per room.

Higher-priced hotels benefit from higher brand recognition, customer loyalty programs, an ability to charge a higher average daily rate, and more than offset the OTA commissions. With generally weaker digital and marketing resources, they rely more heavily on OTAs for online demand, have less pricing power, and are more exposed to commission leakage and price pressure.

This duality in the literature is what makes budget hotels special within the channel economies literature. OTAs are not an optional extra to this type of hotel but rather required. Yet that dependence on occupancy can become a double-edged sword for profitability if not properly managed.

Reports produced by the hospitality industry continue to treat midscale and economy hotels as distinct segments of national hotel performance. Even in markets with strong performance, a hotel's performance can vary dramatically by distribution mix, pricing discipline, and their ability to retain customers. Thus generic recommendations around hotel distribution do not serve budget hotels well, which require a more calculated approach to OTAs.

8. THEMATIC SYNTHESIS AND EMERGING CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

The literature review identifies several interconnected themes. The first is that of OTAs as an effective way to create consumer demand for hotels with low brand awareness and little consumer demand. Second, the economic costs of commission payments and reliance on the marketing capabilities of the OTA must be borne by participation in OTAs. Third, co-opetition best explains the hotel-OTA relationship. Fourth, trust, usability, and transparency of reviews also drive the booking channel choice, rather than price alone. Fifth, structural issues, as well as margin sensitivities, are particularly high in the economy hotel segment [Thomas and Harden \(2008\)](#).

All of the above points suggest OTAs' roles and impacts on hotel revenue architectures should be considered strategically and not just in terms of their direct impacts on discoverability, price behavior, customer ownership and the longer-term balance of distribution channels. This suggests channel-economics-based analyzes beyond thinking about distribution just in terms of gross booking analysis.

In addition, this suggests that OTAs may have the least value to hotels at some times (when entering a new market), or with some customers (during low-demand seasons, or when hotels have weak direct booking systems), and, in the long run, they may hurt the hotel chain's profitability if they fail to generate repeat customers who book direct. The question is not whether OTAs are good or bad, but under what conditions they improve or weaken hotel performance [Marshall \(2019\)](#).

It is from this review that a balanced-channel framework can be developed: OTAs can be used to create visibility and stimulate demand, while direct channels can be used to retain customers with repeat purchases at lower costs. Review management, transparent online representation, website usability, and frictionless direct-booking systems become core profitability drivers rather than peripheral marketing activities.

9. RESEARCH GAPS

Another gap that was found in the review is that, while most OTA studies focus on the topic of adoption, consumer intention, platform competition, or broad distribution strategy, very few studies focus on the revenue model. If these comparative studies on the impact of OTA dependence on hotel performance are limited, the actual net economic impact of OTAs on hotel profitability has yet to be determined.

The second gap is the scarcity of research on budget hotels. Even when research has focused on hotels, it has not distinguished between luxury, upscale, midscale,

and economy hotels. The differences in structural features lead to higher channel dependence and commission burden. Hence, research specifically focused on budget hotels is warranted.

A third gap is applied research on net-oriented performance measures. Works studying hotels typically focus on occupancy, average daily rate (ADR), and RevPAR; very few look at channel-adjusted measures. Future research should further investigate net room contribution, channel-adjusted profitability and long-term customer-retention economics, and their impact on the value of an accommodation.

Future empirical research into issues such as direct-booking migration, review-score effects, sponsored OTA placement, and independent versus chain-affiliated budget hotels may provide more understanding into why some hotels are able to take advantage of OTA participation while others may find themselves overly dependent on commissions.

10. DISCUSSION

The studies reviewed in this paper do not demonize OTAs as evil intermediaries, nor do they see them as a panacea for demand. OTAs are valuable depending on this and that context, timing, internal capabilities of the hotel using the OTA and on the scale of the OTA. For budget hotels, OTAs are often critical in achieving digital distribution and first-time customers. However, used without a broader strategy, they may gradually diminish net earnings and erode control over future demand.

The literature is consistent in suggesting that higher occupancy levels alone do not necessarily lead to positive economic outcomes. An increase in occupancy levels through OTA channels can lead to negative economic effects if commission, discounts and leakage of demand to repeat customers is too high. This means that budget hotels should be thinking in terms of contribution and channel mix, not just volume of sales.

Another lesson is that with direct-booking capability, OTAs are great value if used to acquire new guests who are retained through lower-cost channels. The quality of the hotel website, mobile usability, ease of payment options, and efforts to communicate with and engender trust in guests through those channels, are now central to revenue management for budget hotels.

The literature also shows that review scores and the online reputation of the hotel have an economic value, e.g. a better score leads to less discounted rates, higher conversion rates and a more efficient use of OTAs. Therefore, service consistency and review management are part of the channel strategy.

In summary, the review agrees that, in the platform era, hotel revenue management should be integrated across pricing, distribution, reputation, retention and owner customer economics.

11. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the review paper is to analyze the impact of OTAs on the revenue management of budget hotels. Argumentation presented in the literature indicates that OTAs are a dominant force in the electronic hotel business because they can improve visibility, simplify the consumer search process and increase demand. Their function is particularly useful for budget hotels with little brand recognition, direct-booking, or a standalone digital presence.

On the other hand, the studies show that OTA participation has economic costs in terms of commissions, discount pressure and loss of direct customer relationships which lower the firm's current profit and future profit. The concerns around OTA participation are more pronounced for budget hotels as they have lower prices, lower margins and greater sensitivity to distribution costs.

Ultimately, OTAs should not be viewed as mere intermediaries in hotel revenue production, but planned economic actors: their value to hotels derives from hotel management. A balanced framework for managing OTAs may be to use them for demand generation and discoverability, whilst investing more in direct booking channels, review performance and guest retention systems.

The future of revenue management in the budget hotel sector depends not on avoiding OTAs, but rather on using them with discipline, selectivity and planned awareness.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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