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Love or hate? Hotels' gay-friendliness and their intention to maintain or diminish the hotel digital service relationship with OTAs

Abstract: This study offers the first analysis of hotel managers' intentions to maintain or diminish a service business relationship with Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) based on an empirical assessment of transaction-specific variables, socio-relational variables and values-related variables (namely, gay-friendliness). Based on 206 questionnaires administered to EU-based hotels, the study suggests that a hotel's intention to maintain seems to be impacted by both the economic dimension and the hotel's self-perceived gay-friendliness. The intention to diminish follows a different path, being mainly motivated by opportunistic and transaction-specific characteristics of the service. Our results suggest that hotels geared toward the LGBT travel market can benefit from being listed on OTAs without suffering brand image drawbacks. Moreover, like is already common in the CSR realm, OTAs should allow hotels to include LGBT-related information and explicitly expand their search engines to target gay-friendly hospitality.

Keywords: *digital business platform, OTA; gay-friendliness; B2B service relationships; TCE*

1. INTRODUCTION

B2B marketing scholars have long had an interest in how business partners develop durable, profitable relational exchanges between business partners (Colm, Ordanini, & Bornemann 2020; Cortez & Johnston, 2017; Lyons & Brennan, 2019; Michel et al., 2019; Pandey et al., 2019; Seo, Kelleher, & Brodie, 2017). Relying on the assumption that preserving interpersonal relationships is key to companies' growth, the literature has mainly focused on the factors that influence the intention to continue a relationship or develop the value exchanged between partners (e.g.,

Colucci & Visentin, 2017; Palmatier et al., 2008; Schmitz et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2011). Against this background, a few recent studies on service B2B relationships have highlighted potentially corrosive aspects (e.g., Cabiddu, Moreno, & Sebastiano, 2019; Pathak et al., 2020; Schmitz et al., 2020; Haenel, Wetzel, & Hammerschmidt, 2019) that can lead businesses to downgrade or diminish some of their B2B relationships (Sarmiento, Marques, & Galan-Ladero, 2019; Skowron & Kristensen, 2012). In this vein, buying managers are placing greater interest in the social interactions of their service relationships (Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia, 2019). This could be of particular relevance in the digital context where, beyond the technical characteristics of the digital interaction and the quality of the service purchased, the provider's ability to deliver a valuable service experience may positively contribute to the relationship (Farmaki & Kladou, 2020; Loux et al., 2020). Unfortunately, even though digital business platforms have proliferated in many industries and B2B firms have incorporated digital marketing into their overall strategies, research on this subject is still at a nascent stage (e.g., Cusumano, Yoffie, & Gawer, 2020; Mariani & Materazzo, 2020; Mariani, Borghi, & Kazakow, 2019; Pandey, Nayal, & Rathore, 2019; Rangaswami et al., 2020).

Thus, the present research investigates a negative relational trajectory for a service digital business-to-business relationship and some of its possible determinants. In particular, this paper aims to answer the following question: What are the factors that influence buying managers' decision to maintain or diminish their business relationship with a digital service provider? To answer this question, we focus on the service business relationship between Online Travel booking Agents (OTAs) and hotels.

As digital business platforms, OTAs play an important role in the tourism and hospitality industry. OTAs have taken a substantial share from traditional booking channels, such as wholesalers and tour operators. They are widely used by consumers to connect with one another,

share reviews, and find information about accommodations and services (Filieri & Mcleay, 2013; Hao, 2020; Loux et al., 2020; Nath, Saha, & Salehi-Sangari, 2019). The resulting user content may help hotels maximize profitability through increased visibility, as well as better tailor their services based on helpful insights into consumers' needs. When using search engines like Google, customers' initial results typically come from booking.com or expedia.com, which represent a sort of duopoly in the OTA industry (Elmas, 2018). Consequently, hotels risk losing up to 60% of their overnight business if they do not have an online presence that is captured by OTAs.

Hotels managers harbor mixed feelings toward their relationships with OTAs. On the one hand, they love the wide reach: Being listed on an OTA engine allows hotels to gain new customers and achieve better visibility. On the other hand, they hate the business model. In fact, three drawbacks underscore a Hotel-OTA relationship: The first is OTAs' commission policies, which can take up to 20% of the reservation price. Second, hotels lose the long-term data equity of their customers when relying on OTAs since they cannot keep a direct relationship with tourists, which affects their ability to deliver a customized hospitality experience. Finally, the hotel-OTA relationship is characterized by digital touchpoints that are usually highly standardized. This aspect can lead to negative attitudes toward the digital service due to the lack of emotional and direct contacts. In fact, recent research has observed that the overall service experience in the B2B context may be positively affected by values-related variables and on customers' ability to publicly express their intrinsic values through the relationship (e.g., Arslanagic-Kalajdzica et al., 2020; Farmaki & Kladou, 2020; Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia, 2019). In this context, there is still an important void in the literature related to the role of LGBT values in B2B relationships (Ginder & Byun, 2015; Roy et al., 2019). While LGBT values have been widely addressed, the consumer perspective has dominated the conversation (e.g., Berezan et al.,

2015; Ersoy, Uca, & Tuzunkan, 2012; Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011; Poria, 2006).

Although gay travelers are recognized as the fastest-growing market in the international travel industry (Ersoy et al., 2012; Tebje, 2006; World Tourism Organization, 2017), OTAs do not provide travelers with personalized filters or specific details about gay-friendly policies, at least so far. This might create confusion for both hotel managers and consumers, as illustrated by these two quotes:

“How do I make known we are LBGT (and Straight) friendly?”

(<https://partner.booking.com/en-gb/community/just-joined-bookingcom/how-do-i-make-known-we-are-lbgt-and-straight-friendly>)

“I must say that when booking online through hotels.com, the word ‘gay’ was not indicated, I only noticed it when the email arrived with the payment confirmation already made. I called hotels.com and confirmed that the gay Hostal Puerta Del Sol is not exclusively for gay couples, but also accepts straight couples. So, no problem.”

(<https://www.expedia.it/Madrid-Hotel-Gay-Hostal-Puerta-Del-sm Sol.h1113650.Informazioni-Hotel>)

As a result, OTAs may prevent hotel managers from sharing their personal values with the target audience and limit their chance to develop a valuable downstream relationship with their final customers.

Faced with the above issues, managers have to balance their priorities and decide whether to maintain or diminish the relationship with an OTA. In this regard, we argue that their future intentions are underpinned by three forces. The first force comes from the transaction-specific characteristics of the business service provided by the OTA, which is consistent with the

Transaction Cost Economics (TCE) literature. The second force comes from the socio-relational dynamics between the hotel and the OTA, which is consistent with the B2B literature. A third, still unexplored force involves the importance of the hotel management's values—in our case, in the LGBT domain (Baak et al., 2016; Farmaki & Kladou, 2020; Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011; Ro & Olson, 2020; Roy et al., 2019; Um, 2012).

By analyzing a novel data set covering 206 hotels, we contribute to the literature on B2B service relationships. First, we add to the debate on the factors that can possibly diminish the exchanged value within the relationship (e.g., Cabiddu et al., 2019; Kolm et al., 2020). Second, we develop and validate two scales accounting for the relevance of managers' personal value in the LGBT domain (namely, LGBT inclusivity and LGBT network). Third, we add to the literature on digital business relationships (e.g., Pandey et al., 2019; Rangaswamy et al., 2020). Fourth, we contribute to the service supply chain literature, which is traditionally detached from the marketing literature (Nath et al., 2019; Svoboda et al., 2020).

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to better understand why a B2B relational trajectory leads to the intention to maintain or diminish, it is necessary to go beyond pricing policies and affiliation costs, which constitute the major focus of B2B marketing research (Loux et al., 2020). A growing body of B2B research suggests that organizational buyers, like individual consumers, are open to psychological differentiation and subjective information (Baack et al., 2016). In this sense, a service provider may appeal to an organizational buyer by helping legitimize said buyer's business decisions (e.g., Baack et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2012). Moreover, various emotional aspects, stemming from the overall service experience, may serve to differentiate customers' perceptions of the transaction and service quality (Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia, 2019). Relatedly, OTAs that emphasize their

service quality should develop more informal and trustworthy relationships to facilitate satisfaction and mutual adjustment (Shen et al., 2020). In fact, research highlights that the service provider's ability to deliver a valuable service experience, beyond the technical characteristics of a digital interaction, might positively contribute to the relationship (Roy et al., 2019). In particular, two components of the service experience reflect the service business relationship between a digital platform and a hotel. First, the emotional dimension of the experience may be affected by customers' ability to disclose their intrinsic values (Arslanagic et al., 2020; Klaus & Maklan, 2012). Even though the CSR literature has widely investigated the relevance of sharing managers' personal values (e.g., Ginder et al., 2019; Morsing & Spence, 2019), little research has focused on the LGBT domain (Farmaki & Kladou, 2020). A second relevant dimension of the service experience is the service provider's ability to positively contribute to a more balanced downstream relationship between the service buyer and its customers (e.g., Farmaki & Kladou, 2020). While OTAs permit hotels to specify their sustainability policies, the inability to specify hotel gay-friendliness information may negatively affect a hotel manager's attitude toward the service relationship with the digital platform.

As a result of these speculations, we propose that a hotel's decision to maintain or diminish a service relationship with an OTA depends on the transaction-specific aspects of the service, the socio-relational characteristics of the business relationship, and the hotel managers' own sense of gay-friendliness. In the following, we develop a set of hypotheses related to these three factors. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework of the study:

- Insert Figure 1 -

2.1. Transaction-specific variables

Traditionally, research from the transaction cost-economic perspective (TCE, e.g., Williamson, 1985, 1991) assumes that actors choose relationships that minimize the transaction costs incurred by the characteristics of the transaction itself (e.g., Colucci & Visentin, 2017; Heide & John, 1990; Li et al., 2013; Loux et al., 2020; Pathak, Ashok, & Tan, 2020; Rangaswamy et al., 2020; Rindfleisch, 2019; Ring & van de Ven, 1992; Shen et al., 2020). In particular, the literature suggests that TCE helps to articulate the optimal governance mode for transactions in a way that allows firms to safeguard assets, adapt to uncertainty, and evaluate the relationship's performance (Rindfleisch et al., 2010). In the tourism and hospitality industry, research indicates that TCE variables are just as important to the hotel-OTA relationship (Li et al., 2018; Loux et al., 2020; Makkonen, Saarikorpi, & Rajala, 2019; Siamagka et al., 2015), with an emphasis on *platform-specific investments* (Siamagka et al., 2015) and *buyer dependence* (Čater & Čater, 2010; Q. Wang et al., 2013).

Transaction costs and the perceived complexity of using OTAs may disrupt the hotel-OTA relationship, leading hotels to transition from a cooperative to a competitive strategy in the multichannel environment (Chang et al., 2019). *Platform-specific investments* include the time and effort needed to train employees to use the online platform (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Siamagka et al., 2015). Meanwhile, *buyer dependence* reflects the hotel's attachment to the OTA, whether in terms of contract-imposed switching costs (Loux et al., 2020) or consumers' reliance on reviews posted on OTAs (Cheng et al., 2017). Previous literature indicates that positive reviews improve consumers' general attitude toward a hotel, which then positively influences their subsequent buying behavior (Ladhari & Michaud, 2015; Loux et al., 2020; Vermeulen & Seegers, 2009). This can lead to a lock-in effect that compels the hotel to maintain the current relationship (Harrison et al., 2012). Thus, we advance that lock-in effects,

related to platform-specific investments and buyer dependence, may influence hotels' decision to maintain or diminish the relationship with OTAs. Formally:

H1: The intention of a hotel's management to maintain the relationship with OTAs (H1a) is negatively affected by platform-specific investments and (H1b) is positively affected by buyer dependence.

H2 The intention of a hotel's management to diminish the relationship with OTAs (H2a) is positively affected by platform-specific investments and (H2b) is negatively affected by buyer dependence.

2.2. Socio-relational variables

Research typically focuses on the transaction-specific attributes of the hotel-OTA relationship (Czakoń & Czernek, 2016; Lacka & Chong, 2016; Loux et al., 2020; Nath, Saha, & Salehi-Sangari, 2019). However, economic actions are not limited to the TCE; they can include efforts to build and maintain social relations that deliver otherwise unobtainable benefits (Geyskens & Steenkamp, 2000; Jap & Anderson, 2007; LaPlaca & Da Silva, 2016; Makkonen, Saarikorpi, & Rajala, 2019; Schmitz et al., 2020; C. Zhang & Li, 2019; J. Z. Zhang, 2020). This is why, in standardized business services, customer service interactions and relational variables also play an important role (Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia 2019). In this vein, scholars agree that B2B relationships are influenced by *satisfaction* (Murphy & Sashi, 2018; Williams et al., 2011; J. Z. Zhang, 2020), *trust* (McEvily, Perrone, & Zaheer, 2003; Shen et al., 2020), *information exchange norms* (Jap & Anderson, 2007; Jap & Ganesan, 2000; Shen et al., 2020) and *goal congruence* between the parties (Jap & Anderson, 2007). We will cover each of these in detail below.

Satisfaction is generally associated with a long-term relationship that positively impacts profitability and customer retention, thereby increasing the likelihood that the partners will maintain or even upgrade the relationship (Chang & Hsu, 2019; Ganesh, Arnold, & Reynolds, 2000; Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia, 2019; Williams et al., 2011). *Trust* is defined as the “willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action” (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 712). A trusting environment may reduce the perceived risk of a relationship and reinforce the partner’s commitment (Colm, Ordanini, & Bornemann, 2020; Czakon & Czernek, 2016; Nath, Saha, & Salehi-Sangari, 2019; Shen et al., 2020; C. Zhang & Li, 2019). To illustrate, Wang et al. (2020) investigated the B2B relationship between the platform Airbnb and its hosts, finding that a service provider who has a high level of trust toward Airbnb will be more likely to continue using the platform over time. *Information exchange norms* govern how parties structure and expand cooperative relationships in order to handle issues and share critical information (Colucci & Visentin, 2017; Jap & Anderson, 2007; Loux et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2019). When combined with trust, information exchange norms may ensure continual mutual adjustment on an informal basis, thereby enabling cooperativeness that complements or substitutes for the functions of formal contracts (e.g., Cabiddu et al., 2019; Shen et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020). Finally, in their analysis of the relationship between hotel owners and their operators, Hodari, Turner, and Sturman (2017) found that greater *goal congruence* is significantly and positively related to hotel performance. This is because goal alignment maximizes operating performance by ensuring higher fees for most operators and greater asset valuations and returns for both partners. These speculations lead to the following hypotheses:

H3: The intention of a hotel's management to maintain the relationship with OTAs is positively affected by (H3a) satisfaction, (H3b) trust, (H3c) information exchange norms, and (H3d) goal congruence.

H4: The intention of a hotel's management to diminish the relationship with OTAs is negatively affected by (H4a) satisfaction, (H4b) trust, (H4c) information exchange norms, and (H4d) goal congruence.

2.3. Gay-friendliness variables

In a B2B service digital relationship, the high standardization and depersonalization of the relationship may be compensated for by allowing buyer managers to express their personal values (Klaus & Maklan, 2012; Kramer, 2017; Nath et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2019). While this topic has been widely investigated in the business ethics and corporate social responsibility streams (Ginder et al., 2019; Morsing & Spence, 2019), there has been less attention to managers' intrinsic values in the gay-friendliness realm.

From a corporate perspective, the term “gay-friendly” would suggest that a company is proactive in respecting and addressing the needs of LGBT consumers and employees (Tuten, 2006). The topic is gaining increasing attention from the managerial literature and has recently become prominent in the tourism and hospitality industry. For instance, Farmaki and Kladou (2020) examined the sources and manifestations of discriminatory practices among Airbnb hosts; the authors suggested that platforms need to offer guidelines as to how hosts should respectfully interact with any guest. Through an analysis of the literature alongside online reports (e.g., UNWTO, 2017), we postulate that there are two main elements characterizing hotel management's self-perceived gay-friendliness: *LGBT inclusivity* and the *LGBT network*.

LGBT inclusivity reflects the general perception that the hotel is an authentic embodiment of LGBT values and that the hotel management respects customers regardless of their sexual orientation, in both their internal policies and external communication. While hotels often openly advertise to LGBT customers on their websites, some gay-friendly hotels positioned in the LGBT travel market do not appear on big online travel platforms (e.g., Booking.com) at all, but only on popular LGBT-oriented travel sites (e.g., Quiirky.com). In addition, while there are several of these inclusive sites, mainstream OTAs do not provide gay travelers with personalized filters nor do they detail hotels' gay-friendly policies. We also know that managers may positively evaluate the legitimization granted by a service provider (e.g., Baack et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2012). Consequently, we argue that a higher degree of LGBT inclusivity among the hotels' management will weaken their attitudes toward big OTAs. Thus, we propose that:

H5: The intention of a hotel's management to maintain the relationship with OTAs is negatively affected by (H5a) the hotel's LGBT inclusivity and by (H5b) the inclusion of the hotel in a gay-friendly network (LGBT network).

Since the actions and opportunities of actors are "embedded in concrete, ongoing systems of social relations" (Granovetter, 1985, p. 487), a company may benefit from the sense of proximity among actors (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Uzzi, 1997). Consistently, studies suggest that travel-related businesses employ experts in the LGBT market to help the company interact with the *LGBT network* in a positive and effective way (Guaracino & Salvato, 2017; Melián-González et al., 2011; Poria, 2006), exploit employee networks to improve visibility and legitimacy (Colgan & McKearney, 2012; Fullerton, 2013), and promote a socially inclusive workforce culture (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017; Ko, Chang, & Wong, 2019). As an example, the Hyatt Hotels have

established HyPride: a Hyatt Employee Network Group for members and supporters of the LGBT community who want to enhance the relationship with all stakeholders who are sensitive to the topic (Arkana, 2015). In doing so, Hyatt seeks to leverage the relational and cognitive dimensions of its *social capital* (e.g., Cappiello, Giordani, & Visentin, 2020; Tsai & Goshal, 1998). Therefore, we speculate that as hotels become more engaged in an *LGBT network*, they become more likely to diminish their relationship with big OTAs. Formally:

H6: The intention of a hotel's management to diminish the relationship with OTAs is positively affected by (H6a) the hotel's LGBT inclusivity and by (H6b) the inclusion of the hotel in a gay-friendly network (LGBT network).

3. METHODOLOGY

We sampled a set of more than 1,000 hotels from 58 cities in northern, southern and eastern Europe based on a purposeful random sample technique (Palinkas et al., 2015). We put particular care into including Mediterranean and summer destination hotels, as well as cities in north and central Europe focused on business and the arts. In order to account for gay-friendly hotels, we also included hotels listed in Patroc.com, Quiiky.com, and Gayfriendlyitaly.com. We designed English, Italian, and Spanish versions of the survey. For each hotel, we identified a key informant, i.e., the person who was most knowledgeable about and experienced with the hotel's relationship with the OTA.

In seeking to understand the factors that influence a hotel's decision to diminish or maintain a relationship with OTAs, we accounted for transaction-specific variables, socio-relational variables, and gay-friendliness variables. As previously stated, we considered two types of transaction-specific variables that have been widely investigated in the B2B literature: *buyer*

dependence (Čater & Čater, 2010; Wang et al., 2013) and *platform-specific investments* (Siamagka et al., 2015). Regarding the socio-relational variables, we used four independent variables: *satisfaction* (Chuang, 2020); *trust* (Shen et al., 2020); *goal congruence* (Jap & Anderson, 2007), and *information exchange norms* (Jap & Anderson, 2007). For each of the independent variables, we used scales validated by previous literature (see Table 2 for inter-item correlation and Cronbach's alpha). To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has provided a scale for measuring gay-friendliness from a manager's perspective. Furthermore, the literature does not offer a definitive measure for the intention to downgrade a B2B service relationship. In particular, the intention to *diminish* is likely to be conceptually different from the intention to *maintain* (Colucci & Visentin, 2017; Schmitz et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2011). Thus, we designed a pre-survey to develop measurement scales for *maintain*, *diminish*, *LGBT inclusivity* and *LGBT network*.

In the first stage of our study, we ran an initial survey in September 2019 as part of an effort to develop the scales for the two *gay-friendliness* variables (*LGBT inclusivity* and *LGBT network*) and the two dependent variables (*maintain* and *diminish*). In the second stage of our analysis, we ran a second survey based on the final questionnaire, which included the two dependent variables, *transaction-specific* variables, *socio-relational* variables, *gay-friendliness* variables, control variables and socio demographics. We ran the second survey in September – October 2019.

Finally, we performed analyses that would support or reject our hypotheses H1-H6. In the following paragraphs, we detail the results of these analyses.

3.1. Pre-questionnaire: developing the gay-friendly and the dependent variables

As a first step, we developed a questionnaire that sought to measure the gay-friendliness (i.e., *LGBT inclusivity* and *LGBT network*) of the hotels' management and their future orientation toward their relationships with OTAs (i.e., *maintain* and *diminish*).

In the first part of the questionnaire, we presented the scales to measure a hotel's intention to diminish or maintain its relationship with OTAs. We used six survey items adapted from existing scales (*long-term orientation* from Yang, Zhou, & Jiang, 2011; *expectation of continuity* from John & Heide, 1990). We included this part at the beginning of the questionnaire to avoid biases (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2003). In the second part of the questionnaire, we included the items for the self-perceived gay-friendliness. Given the lack of scales measuring hotel gay-friendliness, we relied on previous literature (Binnie & Klesse, 2011; Ersoy, Uca, & Tuzunkan, 2012; Larsen, Reed, & Hoffman, 1980; Melián-González, Moreno-Gil, & Araña, 2011; Ro & Olson, 2020) and hotels' online disclosure statements to generate an initial pool of items. We included 29 specifically gay-friendly statements in the questionnaire (e.g., the hotel is located near gay-friendly bars; during check-in, the hotel does not engage in any discrimination toward the clients' sexual orientation) that were measured using a 7-point rating scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree). We also included 14 items on general hotel characteristics to avoid giving respondents the impression of a narrow focus on gay-friendliness and thereby biasing the results. In fact, in a preliminary analysis based on open interviews to a set of 40 randomly selected hoteliers, we registered negative reactions from some participants who refused to answer regarding their inclusivity toward any type of tourists.

Then, we pre-tested the scale with 234 questionnaires distributed to hotels (12% 1- to 2-star hotels; 44% 3-star hotels, 44% 4- to 5-star hotels). First, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) on the dependent items provided two orthogonal factors accounting for the 54% of the variance.

The first factor correctly explains the four items measuring the intention to *diminish* (factor loadings 0.46 – 0.85) and the second factor correctly explains the two items measuring the intention to *maintain* (factor loadings 0.53 – 0.97). The reliability analysis resulted in high Cronbach's alphas (*diminish* $\alpha=.76$; *maintain* = .70).

Second, to develop the gay-friendliness measures, we factor analyzed the independent items. In detail, we calculated an EFA (orthogonal rotation) on the overall covariance structure and defined a tentative set of factors retaining the items with a factor loading above .4; then scales were purified by stepwise omission of the items with the highest Cronbach's alpha if item deleted; this procedure was repeated until no change was suggested from EFA and alpha if item deleted. The final EFA resulted into two factors with 48% of variance explained, retaining 9 items. The first factor correctly accounted for six items measuring hotel managers' *LGBT inclusivity* (factors loadings .45 - .62) and the second factor correctly accounted for three items measuring the *LGBT network* (factor loadings .78 - .92). The reliability analysis resulted in high Cronbach's alphas (*LGBT inclusivity* $\alpha=.74$; *LGBT network* = .89).

3.2. Main survey

In the main survey, we identified 1,270 hotels through a purposeful random sample technique (Palinkas et al., 2015) and obtained 206 complete questionnaires (Category: 11% 1- to 2-star hotels; 27% 3-star hotels; 28% 4- to 5-star hotels; 27% Bed & Breakfast, 7% residences; Country of Origin: 39% Italy, 21% Spain, 13% UK, 9% Germany, 9% Netherlands, and 9% other countries). We found no significant difference in the country of origin ($p(\chi^2=20.676; df=14)=0.11$) and in the category ($p(\chi^2=7.136; df=4)=0.13$) between hotels that did and did not

participate in our survey. The data were gathered from September to October 2019 via either face-to-face or online interviews with key hotel informants.

We implemented a set of preventative measures to mitigate method biases (e.g., Henseler et al., 2015; MacKenzie and Podsakoff, 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2003; Richardson et al., 2009). First, in the questionnaire presentation, we reassured respondents that they would remain anonymous, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that data would only be used for research purposes. Second, we included brief paragraphs between questionnaire pages to cue respondents' attention without influencing their responses as well as to illustrate the scale range. Third, we initially presented the two dependent variables, followed by the independent variables (*transaction-specific*, *socio-relational*, *gay-friendliness*), and finally the control variables and socio-demographics. Finally, we took care to reverse some items and to separate pages in order to reduce information overload and feature fatigue.

Since buying managers may be sensitive to subjective factors that reduce risk and legitimize decisions in a business relationship (Baack et al., 2016; C. Li et al., 2018; Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia, 2019), we controlled for the perceived impact of the OTA affiliation on the hotel's *image* and for the OTA's *reputation* in the overall tourism industry. In fact, hotel management will likely evaluate the relative impact of affiliating with an OTA in terms of the contribution or detriment to its own image and brand (Baack et al., 2016; C. Li et al., 2018; Lacka & Chong, 2016; Loux et al., 2020; Roy, Sreejesh, & Bhatia, 2019; C. Zhang & Li, 2019). For this purpose, we adopted scales that have already been validated in the literature (*image* – Siamagka et al., 2015 and *reputation* – Suh & Houston, 2010).

3.2.1. Dependent Variables

The data of the main survey supports the factorial structure found in the pre-test questionnaire. In particular, the EFA resulted in a two-factor solution that accounted for 51% of total variance (*diminish* factor loadings: 0.43 – 0.86; *maintain* factor loadings: 0.62 – 0.66). A CFA (LISREL 8.80) displayed an adequate fit ($\chi^2= 48.29$, $df=17$; $RMSEA =0.095$, $p(RMSEA<0.05)=0.011$; NFI , $NNFI = 0.93$, CFI , $IFI=0.96$; $SRMR = 0.052$; $GFI = 0.94$; $AGFI = 0.88$). Table 1 reports the survey items, factor loadings and Cronbach's alphas.

- Insert Table 1 –

3.2.2. Independent variables: transaction-specific and socio-relational variables

An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) resulted in a six-factor solution that accounts for 65% of total variance (factor loadings: 0.41 – 0.93). The results of a CFA (LISREL 8.80; Jöreskog & Sörbrom, 2003) showed a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2=300.42$, $df=137$; $RMSEA =0.076$, $p(RMSEA<0.05)=0.0002$; $NFI=0.94$; $NNFI=0.97$; CFI , $IFI =0.97$; $SRMR =0.055$; $GFI =0.87$; $AGFI =0.81$). Table 2 reports the survey items, factor loadings, and Cronbach's alphas.

- Insert Table 2 –

3.2.3. Independent variables: gay-friendliness

The data of the main survey support the factorial structure found in the pre-questionnaire. In particular, the EFA on the finalized data supported a two-factor solution that accounted for 62% of the total variance. We retained eight items defining the *LGBT inclusivity* (5 items, factor loadings: 0.5 – 0.88) and *LGBT network* constructs (3 items, factor loadings: 0.72 – 0.96). *LGBT*

inclusivity includes items related to hotels' attention toward LGBT customers during check-in (e.g., questions related to bed configuration) and their stay, including employees' awareness. *LGBT Network* includes items related to the locations near the hotel that allow gay travelers to enjoy their vacation (e.g., presence of gay-friendly bars). The results of a confirmatory factor analysis (LISREL 8.80; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2003) showed a good fit ($\chi^2 = 32.84$, $df = 16$; RMSEA = .072, $p(\text{RMSEA} < 0.05) = .14$; NFI = .98; NNFI = .98; CFI, IFI = .99; SRMR = .042; GFI = .96; AGFI = .91). Table 3 reports the survey items, factor loadings and Cronbach's alphas.

- Insert Table 3 -

3.2.4. Control variables

Regarding control variables, EFA resulted in a two-factor solution that accounts for 64% of total variance (factor loadings: 0.65 – 0.91). The results of a confirmatory factor analysis (LISREL 8.80; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2003) showed an adequate fit ($\chi^2 = 13.76$, $df = 4$; RMSEA = .11, $p(\text{RMSEA} < 0.05) = .05$; NFI = .97; NNFI = .95; CFI, IFI = .98; SRMR = .040; GFI = .97; AGFI = .90). Table 4 reports the survey items, factor loadings and Cronbach's alphas.

- Insert Table 4 -

In Appendix A, we report the table of correlations of all the factors used, and the summary statistics for dependent and independent variables, including average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), means and standard deviations (SD). Overall, our data display no common method bias.

4. RESULTS

Our hypotheses argue that three groups of independent variables (namely, *transaction-specific*, *socio-relational*, *gay-friendliness*) affect two dependent variables (*diminish*, *maintain*). We also included the effect of control variables (*image* and *reputation*). For each dependent variable, we calculated partial model estimates (Models 1–6) prior to running the full model (Model 7). Partial models include the intercept model, taken as a base model for further comparisons (Model 1), and models using *transaction-specific* (Model 2), *socio-relational* (Model 3), *gay-friendliness* variables (Model 4), *controls* (Model 5) and *transaction-specific*, *socio-relational* and *gay-friendliness* (Model 6) as independent variables.

4.1. Maintain

All models using *maintain* as a dependent variable were significantly different from the intercept model (Model 1), as indicated by the F-statistics tests. Model 7 also differed significantly from sub-models 2–6 (all $P(F) < 1e-03$), indicating that the model with all the independent variables better explains *maintain* than partial models (see Table 5).

- Insert Table 5 -

In the full model (Model 7, Table 5), the coefficients of *buyer dependence* and *platform-specific investments* were statistically significant, indicating that the lower the perceived complexity of using the service and the higher the dependence on the OTA, the more likely that the hotel will maintain its relationship with the OTA. Thus, data support hypothesis H1. These effects are robust in the sub-models (Models 3 and 6, Table 5). We uncovered no significant effect for the *socio-relational* variables, obtaining no support to hypothesis H3. However, Model 2 and Model

6 reported a significant positive effect of *goal congruence*, indicating that a higher congruence between the hotels' and OTA's goals aligns with a higher likelihood of the hotel maintaining the relationship. This effect seems to be only partially overridden by *reputation* (Model 7 and sub-model 5, Table 5), suggesting that the higher the hotel's perception of the OTA's reputation among its own stakeholders, the higher the hotel's likelihood to maintain. Notably, contrary to our expectations, the full model (Model 7, Table 5) reported a significant effect of the two gay-friendliness variables: namely, the higher the hotel's *LGBT inclusivity* and the lower the hotel's engagement in the *LGBT network*, the higher the likelihood of maintaining the relationship with the OTA, obtaining partial support to hypothesis H5.

4.2. Diminish

The results on the intention to *diminish* the relationship with the OTA paint a different picture from that above. All models using *diminish* as the dependent variable were significantly different from the intercept model (Model 1), as indicated by the F-statistics tests. Model 7 also differed significantly from sub-models 2–6 (all $P(F) < 1e-03$), indicating that the model with all the independent variables better explains *diminish* than the partial models (see Table 6).

- Insert Table 6 -

In the full model (Model 7, Table 6), the coefficients of *buyer dependence* and *platform-specific investments* are statistically significant, indicating that the higher the perceived complexity of using the service and the lower the dependence on the OTA, the higher the likelihood that the hotel will diminish its relationship with the OTA. Thus, data support hypothesis H2. These effects are robust in the sub-models (Models 3 and 6, Table 6). No

significant effect emerged for the *socio-relational* and *gay-friendliness* variables, thus data do not support hypotheses H4 and H6. However, Model 2 and Model 6 reported a significant negative effect of *goal congruence*, indicating that the lower the congruence between the hotel's and OTA's goals, the higher the hotel's likelihood to diminish. Notably, this effect seems to be overridden by *reputation* (Model 7 and sub-model 5), indicating that the higher the hotel's perception of the OTA's reputation among its own stakeholders, the lower the hotel's likelihood to diminish.

In Appendix B a joint SEM model with both *maintain* and *diminish* represents a further robustness check and it provides a pattern consistent to the full models (Model 7) of Tables 5-6.

5. DISCUSSION

Regarding the hotel manager's intention to maintain the OTA relationship, our data suggest that hotels need to perceive a tangible economic value (e.g., more reservations) that offsets the transaction-specific costs, in line with the TCE literature (Čater & Čater, 2010; Q. Wang et al., 2013; Simagka et al., 2015). As expected, hotel managers may rely on the OTA's reputation as a proxy for goal congruence, which inclines them to maintain the relationship in line with the socio-relational literature (Suh & Huston, 2010; Roy et al., 2019).

In addition, a hotel's gay-friendliness plays a role in its intention to maintain this relationship (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic et al., 2020; Farmaki & Kladou, 2020; Tuten, 2006). The composition of our sample—encompassing hotels that are highly LGBT-inclusive and some that have no specific LGBT policies—illuminates this result. In fact, contrary to our expectations, we found a positive and significant effect of *LGBT inclusivity* on the intention to maintain the relationship with the OTA, despite the hotels' inability to disclose their intrinsic values in terms of gay-friendliness. This result is consistent with two possible explanations. First, assuming that hotels behave as

rational actors, they could accept hiding their LGBT-friendly statements to exploit the digital relationship with OTAs. Second, it is also possible that hotels may use OTAs as a means of reaching wider target audiences and then communicate their authentic values indirectly (by using their own website) or directly (when welcoming tourists at their place). It seems likely that hotels prefer to maintain congruence between their internal actions and their external communication in their own communication channels rather than on indirect channels.

Relatedly, the overall significance of the *LGBT network* variable points to the spill-over effect within the hotel's community of stakeholders (Borgatti et al., 2003; Cappiello et al., 2020; Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Furthermore, the negative effect of *LGBT network* suggests that OTAs can help hotels reach a larger consumer base regardless of their involvement in the local LGBT community, which aligns with Tuten's (2006) findings that straight consumers react neutrally to gay-friendliness.

In the case of the intention to diminish the relationship with OTAs, opportunistic and transaction-specific characteristics play a potentially corrosive role (Cabiddu et al., 2019; Haenel et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2013). The results suggest that lower *buyer dependence* and higher *platform-specific investments* lead to a higher likelihood of diminishing the hotel presence on OTAs, consistently with the TCE literature and studies on digital platforms (e.g., Čater & Čater, 2010; Loux et al., 2020; Q. Wang et al., 2013; Simagka et al., 2015). In fact, hotels may find that the costs for listing on an OTA may be too high if the business does not seem to depend on the OTA's services or using the platform is overly complex. As a consequence, OTAs need to better justify the technical barriers and high transaction-specific costs of their standardized intermediation service (Loux et al., 2020; Simagka et al., 2015). Additionally, socio-relational aspects play an important role in the hotel-OTA relationship. Namely, when the OTA's *reputation* is included in the model, it overwrites the significant effect of *goal congruence* (Jap &

Anderson, 2007; Suh & Huston, 2010). Interestingly, a strong reputation may shield the relationship from being diminished, despite potentially low satisfaction and trust between the two parties (Roy et al., 2019; Chuang, 2020; Schmitz et al., 2020). It seems that hotels may use the OTA's reputation as a proxy for measuring goal congruence.

Overall, our analyses empirically support the notion that, within a digital hotel-OTA relationship, the intention to diminish is not the mirrored image of the intention to maintain. In fact, the results support that different combinations of transaction-specific variables (i.e., *buyer dependence* and *platform specific investments*), socio-relational variables (i.e., *goal congruence* with the OTA), and gay-friendliness variables (i.e., *LGBT inclusivity*, *LGBT network*) lead to different intentions about whether to diminish or maintain one's presence on OTAs. While the literature has traditionally focused on pricing policies and affiliation costs (Loux et al., 2020; Roy et al., 2019), our study highlights the effect of the overall service experience beyond transaction-specific elements. Specifically, we emphasized the role of personal values in affecting the socio-relational dimension of the B2B relationship (Roy et al., 2019; Schmitz et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we investigated the determinants of the possible outcomes of the relational trajectory of digital service business relationships, with a specific emphasis on the customer perspective. Based on more than 200 observations in the context of the Hotel-OTA relationship, we empirically support a model that incorporates transaction-specific variables, socio-relational variables and gay-friendliness variables in order to understand the hotel managers' intention to maintain or diminish their relationships with OTAs. In the following, we discuss the study's theoretical and managerial implications.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

The contribution of our paper unfolds across four specific aspects.

First, this research contributes to the literature on the corrosive side of buyer-seller relationships (Cabiddu, Moreno, & Sebastiano, 2019; Colm, Ordanini, & Bornemann, 2020; Colucci & Visentin, 2017; Lee et al., 2018; Pathak, Ashok, & Tan, 2020; Williams et al., 2011) by offering theoretical and empirical insights on the motivations that lead buying managers to diminish their digital service business relationships.

Second, we fill a gap in the gay-friendly literature by taking the customer perspective within a B2B relationship. Since we found no attempt in the extant literature to measure managers' individual perception of their gay-friendliness, we developed and validated a new two-factor scale of managers' gay-friendliness, which includes *LGTB inclusivity* (i.e., the hotel's perception of its authentic embodiment of LGBT values) and *LGBT network* (i.e., the hotel's genuine engagement with the local LGBT community).

Third, this study adds to the nascent literature related to digital business platforms in a service B2B context (e.g., Pandey, Nayal, & Rathore, 2019; Rangaswamy et al., 2020). In fact, we offer theoretical insights and empirical support to a previously neglected domain, i.e. the hotel-OTA digital business relationship. Noteworthy, a digital platform, while offering the virtual opportunity to increase a hotel's visibility much more than the traditional communication tools, can also improve the chance to share a manager's personal value with a large audience (Kramer, 2017; Nath et al., 2019). On the one hand, this could be a reason hotels managers should use OTAs and, on the other hand, this is an aspect that OTAs should improve about themselves.

Fourth, we offer a specific contribution to the literature on service supply chains, a field that is usually detached from the marketing literature and typically focused on manufacturing industries

(e.g., Nath, Nachiappan, & Ramanathan, 2019; Svoboda, Minner, & Yao, 2020). Thus, our study provides scholars with new knowledge about relationships within service supply chains (e.g., Baltacioglu et al., 2007).

6.2. Managerial implications

The present study also offers several managerial implications for both hotels and OTAs.

Our results suggest that hotels geared toward the LGBT travel market can benefit from being listed on OTAs without suffering brand image drawbacks. In other words, being on a generalist web travel agency does not threaten a hotel's genuine LGBT engagement, similar to what happens in the CSR domain. Moreover, regardless of a hotel's genuine adherence to the LGBT community, the hotel's staff should embody diversity and open-mindedness in order to welcome and support both LGBT and mainstream tourists, which may mitigate most negative consumer reactions. More broadly, staying on OTAs allows hotels to strategically reach wider target audiences, who may then learn about the hotel management's authentic values by browsing the hotel's digital touchpoints (i.e., its website, social media pages).

Furthermore, by direct booking, hotels have the chance to engage directly with the tourist on an individual level to offer a more personalized experience. As some OTAs block the sharing of their customers' personal information with the hotel, an increased information exchange between the OTAs and the hotel could contribute to improve the loyalty of the hotel's repeat customers.

Moreover, gay-friendly hotels located outside a common LGBT travel destination stand to benefit from staying on the general OTAs.

Regarding OTAs, our study generally suggests that they should enrich their service business relationship with hotels by developing the socio-relational dimension and acting on personal interactions (e.g., improving chatbots, webinars). Moreover, they should enhance their technical

support in order to lower the perceived transaction costs related to platform-specific investments and complexity of use. This could have the twofold effect of differentiating a standard service and creating a relational bond, which would also facilitate a trustworthy and collaborative B2B environment.

Additionally, like is already common in the CSR realm, OTAs should allow hotels to include LGBT-related information and explicitly expand their search engines to target gay-friendly hospitality in order to allow customers to make informed decisions about their bookings. This could increase their access to a potentially high added-value segment of travelers (i.e., LGBT travelers). As a further step, OTAs should add information about the local LGBT community when describing the destination's characteristics and facilities that could satisfy the needs of different audiences.

Since OTAs seek to help hotels deliver a more valuable experience to their customers, the former may be able to create added value by letting hotels specify LGBT-related information. For example, on Valentine's Day, a hotel could offer a welcome pack that is neutral with respect to the couple's sex composition.

Notably, by supporting the relevance of a value-related dimension (i.e., gay-friendliness) on the decision to diminish or maintain, our results may extend to other contexts. For instance, they may apply to hotels that offer a religious experience to their customers (e.g., Buddhism-themed hotels in China; Hung, 2015).

Finally, our results may be relevant for managing other digital service relationships that involve multi-sided platforms in which individuals and organizations can communicate or share personal values.

6.3 Limitations and future research

Despite our study's strengths, we must also acknowledge some limitations.

First, as we used a purposeful sample procedure (Palinkas et al., 2015) and did not include non-EU participants, future studies should analyze different political and cultural contexts.

Second, as we relied on *LGBT inclusivity* and *LGBT network* to account for hotel managers' self perceived gay-friendliness, future studies could use our conceptualization to broaden the focus on LGBT-related values and practices. Third, we did not account for the differences between chains and independent hotels, but doing so could lead to interesting insights. Fourth, as we focused on intentions, future research might better understand hotel-OTA relationships by analyzing what firms actually do, such as the decisions that hotel managers make. On a final note, even though we document the preventative measures to avoid survey biases, possible method biases might still affect our data. Furthermore, we used Harman's one-factor test to support that data are free from common method variance. However, this approach has been recently questioned (Baumgartner, Weijters, and Pieters, 2021). Future research on this methodological point deserves attention.

Moreover, even though this is the first study to investigate the effects of the interplay between transaction-specific, socio-relational and gay-friendliness variables on the relational trajectory of a service digital B2B relationship, we acknowledge that there could be different mediating and/or moderating effect that deserve to be investigated. We encourage future research to identify individual characteristics, cultural traits and organizational aspects that could influence the hotel-OTA relationship. Furthermore, since the present study focused only on direct effects, there would be high value in identifying and empirically supporting a psychological chain of effects that underlies managers' intentions toward a service digital business relationship.

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8

Appendix A

Table A.1. Matrix of correlations

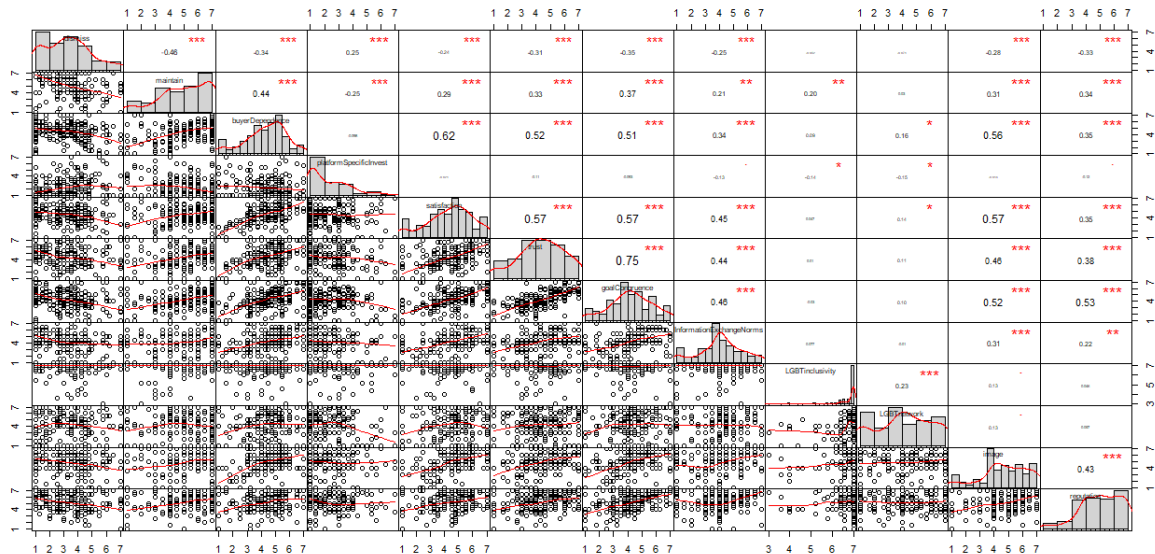


Table A.2. Summary statistics for independent variables

	Buyer dependenc e	Platform specific investme nts	Satisfactio n	Trust	Goal congrue nce	Informat ion exchang e norms	LGBT inclusivity	LGBT network	Image	Reputati on
	1,00									
	-0,10	1,00								
	0,62	-0,02	1,00							
	0,52	-0,11	0,57	1,00						
	0,51	-0,09	0,57	0,75	1,00					
	0,34	-0,13	0,45	0,44	0,46	1,00				
	0,09	-0,14	0,05	0,01	-0,03	0,08	1,00			
	0,16	-0,15	0,14	0,11	0,10	-0,01	0,23	1,00		
	0,56	-0,01	0,57	0,46	0,52	0,31	0,13	0,13	1,00	
	0,35	-0,12	0,35	0,38	0,53	0,22	0,05	0,06	0,43	1,00
Mean	4,36	2,35	4,40	4,38	4,23	4,13	6,69	4,15	4,76	5,07
S.D.	1,43	1,45	1,59	1,61	1,49	1,49	0,70	1,91	1,62	1,44
CR	0,78	0,76	0,89	0,89	0,86	0,79	0,86	0,91	0,66	0,89
AVE	0,47	0,52	0,67	0,73	0,67	0,65	0,57	0,76	0,50	0,74

Table A.3. Summary statistics for dependent variables

	Diminish	Maintain
	1,00	
	-0,46	1,00
Mean	3,30	5,05
s.d.	1,63	1,70
CR	0,78	0,65
AVE	0,48	0,49

Appendix B

Table B.1. Joint SEM model for *Maintain* and *Diminish*:

Independent variable	Maintain			Diminish		
	Estimate	s.e.	t-value	Estimate	s.e.	t-value
Satisfaction	-.10	.17	n.s.	.22	.16	n.s.
Trust	.08	.14	n.s.	-.11	.13	n.s.
Information exchange norms	.05	.14	n.s.	-.28	.14	-2.02**
Goal congruence	-.13	.20	n.s.	-.28	.19	n.s.
Buyer dependence	.76	.25	3.01***	-.60	.23	-2.66**
Platform-specific investments	-.20	.11	-1.88*	.19	.10	1.94*
LGBT inclusivity	.24	.09	2.72***	-.01	.08	n.s.
LGBT network	-.13	.09	n.s.	-.03	.08	n.s.
Image	-.20	.29	n.s.	.05	.26	n.s.
Reputation	.22	.12	1.87*	-.19	.11	n.s.

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. The model was estimated with LISREL 8.80, and path significance is based on t-values (obtained as the estimated value over the standard error, Jöreskog and Sörbrom, 2003; Hayduk, 1996). The estimate shows the model provides a good fit to the data ($\chi^2=980.24$, df=598; RMSEA=.052, p(RMSEA<0.05)=.28; NFI=.91; NNFI, CFI, IFI=.96; SRMR=.058; GFI=.8; AGFI=.76) and explains 59% of the variance of *maintain* and 43% of the variance of *diminish*.