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DOMESTIC LEISURE TOURISM DESTINATION CHOICE AND WHO DO WE TRUST—THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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Abstract: Destination marketing and branding are key factors that considerably influence the destination choices for both domestic and international visitors. Understanding the dynamics of how tourists select which destination to visit is crucial for destination planners, tourism organizations, and businesses. This is particularly so in the context of domestic tourism, in which it is imperative to study the factors that influence consumer choices and more specifically, the factors that influence domestic destination choices. This paper explores the influence of different information sources when choosing a destination in the context of the domestic tourism market in Bulgaria. The study is based on the data collected from a national representative survey (N = 1,003) which utilizes a two-staged random sample stratified by districts and the residence place type. The findings suggest that the most influential information source for destination choice for domestic visitors is the opinions/suggestions of friends and relatives. This is the case for all age groups, regardless of their gender, marital status, number of children, education levels, income, or place of residence. The findings of the study provide valuable insights into the existent literature on domestic tourism and destination marketing. Although particularly focused on the unique dynamics of domestic tourism in Bulgaria, the findings of the study can be useful to tourism stakeholders at destinations with a developed domestic market, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: domestic tourism; electronic word of mouth destination choice; destination choice; consumer preferences; Bulgaria

1. Introduction

In a world defined by an ever-increasing number of goods and services, destination managers and planners are faced with an increasingly challenging task to attract and retain visitors. Destination competitiveness involves many factors that make a destination appealing and successful. Marketing and branding a destination are crucially important—a recognizable and compelling destination brand is the key to attracting the desired target audience and differentiating itself from its competitors (Camilleri, 2024; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Most

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importantly, it is one of the factors that considerably influence destination choices and preferences.

The destination choice decision-making process is broadly understood as a combination of stages that individuals go through when selecting a destination to visit for leisure purposes. The stages involved typically include recognition of a need to travel, information search, evaluation of alternatives, decision-making, booking and reservation, and post-trip evaluation (Camilleri, 2024; Crompton, 1979a). It is essential to acknowledge that the process is not static, and tourists often revisit certain stages based on various factors such as changing circumstances as well as marketing campaigns, cultural trends, events, and others (Utari et al., 2024). The widespread popularity of Internet and online travel information and booking websites has contributed to the increased importance of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) which is now considered a major influence on the destination decision-making process (Armutcu et al., 2023; Chen & Law, 2016; Kanje et al., 2020).

Understanding the dynamics of the destination decision-making process is crucial for destinations, tourism organizations, and businesses to address the evolving needs and wants of tourists. Further, it is imperative to study what influences consumer choices and, more specifically, the factors that influence destination choices. In the context of Bulgaria, domestic tourism has a long history dating back to pre-1989 recreational activities and state-funded holidays (Ivanov, 2017). During the widespread of COVID-19 pandemic, domestic holidays were preferred and the number of tourists travelling within their home countries expanded worldwide. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the study of Ivanova et al. (2021) on the travel intentions of Bulgarian tourists in the post-pandemic world has established that domestic tourism is the most popular choice of the majority of tourists studied. Despite the emerging number of studies, there is lack of research on consumer preferences and most importantly, the influences that shape those perceptions. There is still a need for more research and data to fully understand the preferences, motivations, and travel behavior of domestic tourists in Bulgaria.

This paper explores the influence of print media, digital media, online travel information and booking platforms (e.g., TripAdvisor and Booking.com), and word of mouth (WOM), including the influence of friends and relatives. The aim of the study is to explore how all of those different information sources influence the destination choice decision-making process for the domestic tourism market in Bulgaria.

2. Literature review

The choice of a tourist destination is a set of decisions that are impacted by various factors. Comprehending the array of elements that mold this process is crucial for scholars and professionals in the tourism domain. This review of the existing literature seeks to critically examine prior research on destination choices, offering a thorough summary of the primary factors that influence individuals' destination choices.

2.1. Domestic tourism

Domestic tourism generally refers to travel within the borders of one's own country for leisure, recreation, business, or other purposes. It plays a major part in the economic development of many countries, contributing to job creation, infrastructure development, and increased sense of belonging and place attachment (Robinson et al., 2020).

Understanding the dynamics of domestic tourism is crucial for destination managers and planners, particularly at places with traditions at domestic stays and in-country travel. A key element of domestic tourism is its ability to promote regional development by dispersing tourism spending beyond urban areas to countryside and smaller towns, thereby reducing economic disparities (Canh & Thanh, 2020).

One key aspect of domestic tourism is its resilience to external factors such as global economic downturns or political instability. Unlike international tourism, which can be heavily influenced by external events, domestic tourism tends to be more stable and less susceptible to sudden disruptions. This makes it a reliable source of revenue for tourism-dependent economies. During the post-COVID-19 recovery, many destinations successfully promoted and developed domestic tourism to revive their tourism industries (Arbulú et al., 2021; Falk et al., 2022; Gudkov, 2022; Moya Calderón et al., 2022).

In the context of Bulgaria, domestic tourism has gained prominence in recent years, driven by factors such as improved infrastructure, marketing efforts, and the growing popularity of local destinations among Bulgarians. Most domestic trips are for leisure and recreation purposes and in 2018–2019 the overall number of those trips exceeded 6.5 million. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many tourists preferred domestic holidays due to border closures, and domestic tourism has expanded in many countries worldwide. According to UN Tourism (n.d.), almost one third of all the countries closed their borders to non-nationals. During the pandemic domestic tourism showed a decline to almost 4.5 million trips in 2020, but in the following years, domestic tourism recovered and in 2022 it reached the pre-pandemic values. (UN Tourism, 2023). According to Dogramadjieva (2022), during the pandemic, the development of domestic tourism has been stimulated mainly by the imposed restrictions on travel abroad than by health risks or a specific desire to explore the country. After the health crisis, almost 15% more of Bulgarians chose to travel within the country, and trips abroad decreased significantly (Kazandzhieva, 2022). Despite the emergence of previous studies, there is scarcity of papers focused explicitly on domestic tourism in Eastern Europe and Bulgaria in particular. Some previous studies (Dogramadjieva 2022; Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022; Varadzhakova et al., 2021) have focused on travel motivations and intentions to travel in general in the specific context of COVID-19.

2.2. Destination choice

Early theorists on consumption behavior such as Gorman (1957) and Lancaster (1966) introduced the characteristic framework that defines goods as a set of characteristics and attributes. This is particularly true for the service industries, and tourism in particular, where tourism destinations are perceived as products comprised of different attributes, amenities, and services (Cronjé & du Plessis, 2020; Genc & Temizkan, 2023; Stabler et al., 2009). Tourists make a decision on which destination to visit based on the selected criteria as a part of a complex decision-making process widely referred to as “destination choice”.

In broader terms, destination choice is defined as a process tourists go through when selecting a destination for holiday, education, or business-related purposes (Crompton, 1979a). As a process, it is a conscious and complex set of decisions influenced by a number of internal and external factors such as individual characteristics, social factors, cultural attributes, local and national economic conditions, and environmental factors (Bilynets et al., 2023; Decrop, 2010; Karl et al., 2020 Verma et al., 2023). Understanding the myriad of factors that contribute

to destination choice is essential for destination managers and planners, destination marketing organizations and tourism and hospitality businesses (Camilleri, 2024). By catering to the diverse preferences of tourists, destinations can more efficiently and effectively position themselves to attract specific target markets and provide meaningful travel experiences.

There are many notable contributions seeking to provide a theoretical foundation of the destination choice process. Early theories on destination choice taking a micro-perspective approach have focused on personality factors that influence the decision-making process. By focusing on micro-level factors, we gain insights into the specific cognitive and emotional processes that drive individual tourists. Dann (1977, 1981) and Crompton (1979b) emphasize the intricate relationship between psychological factors and travel choices. Crompton (1979b) identifies push factors as the desire to escape or seek adventure and pull factors such as local attractions and amenities. This framework, influential in understanding tourist behavior, is expanded upon by Gutman's Means-End model (Gutman, 1982), linking personal attributes, values, and destination preferences. Notable studies applying this model include those by Klenosky et al. (1993) and Sun et al. (2022). Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior ([TPB], Ajzen, 1985) further examines personal attributes, intentions, and values in destination choices, with research by Ajzen and Driver (1992), Kaplan et al. (2015), and Soliman (2021) highlighting its impact. TPB identifies three key drivers: attitudes toward a destination, perceived norms, and behavioral control. These theories collectively illuminate the psychological and decision-making mechanisms shaping tourist behaviors and destination selections. On the other hand, at a macro level, destination choice is the process tourists go through when selecting a destination from a range of alternatives (Decrop & Snelders, 2005). Examples of theories focusing on the macro-perspective include the Tourist Area Life Cycle (TALC) Model (Butler, 1980), The Destination Competitiveness Model (DCM; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), and the Tourist Area Destination Evolutionary Framework (TADE; Ioannides & Debbage, 1998). The TALC model explores the evolutionary stages of destination development and provides a macro-level perspective on how destination development may impact tourist destination preferences. The DCM focuses on factors such as destination amenities, tourist infrastructure and superstructure, government policies, and destination image. The TADE framework considers the much broader economic, political, and social forces that can influence the development of tourism.

The academic studies on destination choices highlights the complexity of the tourism destination decision-making process. The destination choice is a complex cognitive, behavioral, and psychological process. The complexity comes from the notion that tourism destinations are more than just places to visit and explore or places where tourists go to buy a set of products and services. Instead, destinations are socially constructed spaces that attract tourists offering leisure and recreational, mostly hedonistic activities. This is also well demonstrated with empirical findings from previous studies that suggest a number of factors that can influence destination choices. Karl and Schmude (2017) highlight the importance of perceived safety and security and report that destination choices are very much affected by tourists' individual and rather subjective risk perceptions. Pan et al. (2021), Tham et al. (2020) point out about the notable influence of social media while Lee and Tussyadiah (2012) argue that familiarity with a destination also has a role to play in destination choices. Overall, previous studies have highlighted a number of factors which can potentially influence destination choices. Most studies tend to focus on travel motivations as a whole with a lack of focus on domestic tourism and what influences tourists' preferences of a destination.

2.3. WOM and eWOM

In the context of tourism, WOM can be understood as a form of communication where tourists share their experience (e.g., information, opinions, and recommendations) about products and services consumed. It is widely considered as a powerful marketing tool which relies on personal and interpersonal communication, influencing consumer perceptions, and decisions (Silverman, 2001). In tourism, WOM is referred to the process of sharing information, recommendations, and opinions related to destinations, accommodation providers, visitor attractions, etc. WOM is essential in understanding the influences on tourists' decisions, particularly about destination choice (Confente, 2015). WOM can occur through personal conversations (for example, with friends and relatives) and social interactions. However, with the rise of the Internet, information technologies, and digital media, WOM can also occur through digital platforms, including social media, online reviews, and travel forums. eWOM is widely understood as comments, statements, and opinions expressed by potential, current, or previous users of a product or service (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). In tourism, and more specifically, tourism marketing, eWOM serves a dual purpose. On one hand, eWOM is used for gathering information, such as amenities, access, accommodation providers, etc. On the other hand, it provides valuable recommendations, opinions, and feedback gathered from first-hand tourist experience (Park, Lee, & Han, 2007). As Chu and Kim (2011) explain, eWOM has three main uses. "Opinion giving" is understood as comments, opinions, and impressions provided by a knowledgeable person with previous experience, whereas "opinion seeking" involves all questions, queries, and uncertainties sought by potential visitors and those who may need help with destination-specific matters. Lastly, "opinion passing" is the process that takes place when opinions are forwarded from others with related experience.

In this section, we emphasized the intricate nature of decision-making in tourism destinations. As demonstrated, selecting a destination involves intricate cognitive, behavioral, and psychological processes. This complexity arises from the understanding that tourism destinations are not merely locations to visit or goods and services to purchase. Rather, they are socially constructed environments that entice tourists with opportunities for leisure, recreation, and primarily hedonistic experiences.

It is important to acknowledge that WOM and eWOM are key influencers in the destination choice decision-making process. Friends and relatives are considered as trusted sources of information, and their preferences often carry a much higher level of credibility than other forms of marketing. Understanding the influence of friends and relatives in tourism destination choice decision-making is essential for tourism researchers, industry practitioners, and policymakers. Additionally, exploring the impact of various information sources, such as online reviews, social media, and WOM, on the formation of destination image in the context of modern tourism landscapes presents an exciting avenue for future scholarly exploration.

3. Methodology

The following analyses, concerning the influence of the information sources on the domestic leisure tourism choice in Bulgaria, is based on the empirical findings of a nation-wide survey using a two-staged cluster sample stratified by the residence place type (district center, city, town, and rural) and the 28 Bulgarian districts (NUTS 3 level classification). The election zones, used as first-

stage clusters, are designated key voting low level geographical areas established to facilitate citizen access to polling locations. The territory of Bulgaria is divided into approximately 12,500 election zones. These are further distributed (stratified) by 84 strata formed by crossing of the Bulgarian districts and residence place type. The first-stage cluster distribution is done proportionally to the size of each stratum defined by the number of its population.

After the distribution of approximately 100 election zones by strata, each one of them (the first-stage clusters) is randomly selected. At the next stage the secondary clusters, or second-stage clusters, are randomly selected within each already sampled election zone at the previous stage. The second-stage clusters are the Bulgarian private households, six of which are randomly selected in each of the first-stage clusters. Approximately 500 private households (2.1 persons per household on average) have been surveyed in 76 settlements. All the survey participants are 18+ years old from the sampled households and surveyed using personal interviews executed by 71 professional interviewers. Data were collected by using an online questionnaire (TAPI) programmed in the open-source platform (LimeSurvey) during the period 18 April – 14 May 2023. The total of 1,003 full records (successful interviews) have been documented and the average interview time is 24 minutes. The overall response rate is approximately 83%. The distribution of the respondents by their main demographic characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the survey respondents by main demographic characteristics

Characteristic		Share (%)	Number of respondents
		100.0%	1,003
Sex	Female	52.7%	529
	Male	47.3%	474
Age	18–24	6.5%	65
	25–34	13.9%	139
	35–44	16.8%	169
	45–54	20.1%	202
	55–64	20.6%	207
	65+	22.0%	221
	Primary and lower	4.7%	47
Education	Secondary	58.8%	590
	Higher	36.5%	366
	Single	16.1%	161
Marital status	Widower/Widow	10.2%	102
	Divorced	8.4%	84
	Married	53.0%	532
	Cohabiting	12.4%	124
Children (up to 18 years old)	No children	49.0%	491
	1 child	31.5%	316
	2 children	19.0%	191
	3 or more children	0.5%	5

Note: Data from nation-wide representative survey questionnaire.

The main difficulties in conducting the survey were the item non-response and some complex question formulations. The difficulties were overcome by the help of the highly trained interviewers who were of immense help in providing assistance and further explanations to the respondents.

The initial part of our research was focused on identifying the influence of various information sources on the decision-making process. After we have established the key ones (Table 2), we formulated two hypotheses to check for any differences by gender, marital status, presence of children in the household, average monthly income per household member and residence place type:

H₁: Overall, concerning the information sources there were no significant differences by gender, marital status, presence of children in the household, average monthly income per household member, and residence place type.

H₂: Significant differences were present by age, education, employment status and region when the respondents evaluated the information sources influence.

In order to analyze the interaction between the main sample characteristics (sex, age, education, residence place type, region, etc.) and the Bulgarian leisure tourism choice specifics concerning the influence of the different information sources (print media, Internet sites, specialized tourism platforms, etc.), the authors have used a number of statistical analytical methods, including descriptive statistics, hypothesis testing (at 5% significance level), independent samples Mann-Whitney *U*-test, and independent samples Kruskal-Wallis test. The data analysis has been executed using IBM SPSS (version 29). The statistical methods used for the analyses in this article are defined by the specifics of the questionnaire used. Since all variables are measured at the nominal and ordinal scales, these impose the usage of the non-parametric tests already mentioned. The questionnaire was designed by the authors and was elaborately tested to ensure its consistency, reliability, and validity. Table 2 presents the variables, questions, and the scales used for the statistical analyses in this article.

Table 2. Variables, questions, and the scales used for the statistical analyses (survey questionnaire extract)

Variable	Question	Measurement scale
Q3	To what extent do the following sources of information influence your opinion when choosing a leisure place in Bulgaria on the scale: from 1—to a very small extent to 7—to a very large extent? Sub-questions: print media, electronic media, internet sites, specialized online tourism platforms, opinion of relatives/ friends	Ordinal
D1	D1. What is your sex?	Nominal
D2	D2. How old are you?	Ratio (recoded in groups)
D3	D3. What level of education do you have?	Ordinal
D4	D4. What is your marital status?	Nominal
D5	D5. Do you have children under 18?	Ordinal
D6	D6. What is your form of employment?	Nominal
D7	D7. What is the approximate average monthly income of a member of your household?	Ordinal
D8	D8. What type of residence place do you live in?	Nominal
D9	D9. What district do you live in?	Nominal in NUTS3 (recoded in NUTS2)

Note: Data from nation-wide representative survey questionnaire.

The hypothesis testing in this article is done by the following stages:

Stage 1: Stating the hypotheses. For each test, the null hypothesis states that there is no significant difference between the groups formed by the factor (e.g., sex) concerning the

information sources. The alternative hypothesis states that there is significant difference between the groups formed by the factor (e.g., sex) concerning the information sources.

Stage 2: Performing statistical tests on the data collected using the abovementioned statistical tests.

Stage 3: Decision making according to the test results. The decision for each hypothesis testing is based on the comparison of the test statistic p -value with the significance level of 5%. If the p -value is smaller than significance level, the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis. Otherwise, we have failed to reject the null hypothesis.

The main limitations of the present study regard the usage of questions that are measured at the nominal and ordinal scales, which in turn limits the usage of “more powerful” statistical methods such as regression analysis for example, which usually require variables measured at the interval or ratio scale and normal distribution. Although the sample size and its structure are sufficient for the purposes of this study, a larger sample size would be more adequate in future studies in order to provide better accuracy.

4. Results

Although the presence of numerous modern information sources in today's digital era (including Internet sites, online platforms, etc.), and some traditional ones (including print media, radio, and TV), the opinion of the relatives and friends (5.65) is still the main factor that influences the decision-making process concerning the leisure tourism destination consideration. The data analysis reveals that print media is the factor with the least influence (2.51). In general, digital media and the Internet have similar scores. On the other hand, popular platforms for online bookings and shared such as Airbnb and Booking.com have considerable influence in the decision-making process (4.07) and rank second among all factors.

Both females (5.75) and males (5.55) trust most the opinion of relatives and friends when choosing a destination for domestic tourism. Comparing the information sources only, the females (5.75) are significantly more influenced ($p = .021 < .05$) by the opinion of the relatives/friends than the male respondents (5.55).

All age groups trust most the opinion of relatives and friends when choosing a domestic tourism destination. The highest value is shown for the age groups 25–44 (5.88) and 18–24 (5.86). The lowest value of this factor is shown in the group 65+. The second most influential factor in all age groups is the specialized online booking platforms, and Internet sites remain the third in terms of importance. The print media is the least influential, but they have the highest influence for the age group 55–64 (2.71). Statistically speaking, there is significant difference between age groups concerning the information sources for electronic media, internet sites, and specialized online tourism platforms, where the null hypothesis is rejected.

In terms of education level, we also found out that the opinion of friends and relatives has the greatest importance when choosing a destination for domestic tourists. This statement is valid for all the respondents, regardless of their education. The weakest influence as a source of information among all educational groups is again, print media. Print media have the greatest influence on people with primary or lower education (2.80), although from a statistical point of view, there is no significant difference between educational levels concerning print media and the null hypothesis is retained. Electronic media is the most significant for people with higher education (3.75). The same statement is also valid for the Internet sites where trust in them among people with higher education is

significantly higher (4.51) than among those with no degree (2.97). Similar findings are observed regarding specialized online tourism platforms. As we mentioned before, the opinion of friends and relatives is the most crucial factor when the respondents choose a destination for domestic leisure tourism. The results for the tourists with higher (5.88) and respectively primary and lower education (5.86) are almost the same.

The opinion of friends and relatives regarding the choice of a destination for domestic holiday tourism also remains the most significant in the analysis of the respondents depending on their marital status. Statistically, there is no significant difference between marital statuses concerning the information sources like print media, electronic media, and opinion of friends and relatives. However, it can be noted that print media still have the greatest influence on the surveyed widows and widowers (2.83), and the electronic media on the single (3.62). In the case of Internet sites and specialized online tourist platforms, the null hypothesis is rejected, which means that there is a significant difference between marital statuses concerning these information sources. Internet sites are of greatest importance when choosing a destination for domestic tourism for cohabiting respondents (4.50). They matter least to widows and widowers (2.73). Specialized online tourism platforms have the greatest impact on singles (4.73) and the least impact on widows and widowers (2.65).

Considering the presence of children in the household of the respondents, the opinion of relatives and friends has the greatest influence, too, when choosing a destination for domestic leisure tourism. Print media have the lowest influence on families with three or more children (1.80), and the highest influence on families without children (2.55). Concerning electronic media, the highest impact is on families with one child (3.64) and lowest on those with three and more children (2.60). Internet sites influence mostly the domestic leisure tourism destination choice of families with two children (4.41) and less influence the families with three and more children (3.00). Specialized online tourism platforms have the greatest impact on the choice of families with two children (4.80) and lowest on these with three or more children (2.20). Most influenced by the opinion of friends and relatives are the families with three or more children (7.00).

Regardless of the respondents' employment status, the opinion of the relatives and friends turns out to be key "influencer". The most significant is the influence of this information source on the choice of a domestic leisure tourism destination among freelancers (5.95). It matters the least for the unemployed (5.13). Regarding the electronic media, internet sites, and specialized online tourism platforms, the null hypothesis is rejected, which shows no significant difference between employment statuses concerning these sources. The electronic media has the greatest influence on students (3.85) and the lowest on retired and housewives (2.99). The same are the conclusions for internet sites and specialized online tourism platforms.

Statistically, there is no significant difference in terms of income groups concerning the print, electronic media, and the opinion of friends and relatives, and respectively the null hypothesis is retained. Concerning the Internet sites and specialized online tourism platforms, null hypothesis is rejected, which means there is significant difference between income groups related to these information sources. The people with an average monthly income per household member of EUR 1,001 and over are more influenced by internet sites in their decision to choose domestic leisure tourism destination. This information source has the lowest influence has on the

respondents with average monthly income per household member up to EUR 250. The impact of specialized online tourism platforms is the same as of the internet sites.

In terms of place of residence, there is no significant difference at 5% significance level between residence place types concerning print, electronic media, internet sites, and opinion of friends and relatives as information sources, and null hypothesis is retained. The null hypothesis is rejected for specialized online tourism platforms, which means there is significant difference at 5% significance level between residence place types concerning this information source. The highest impact the specialized online tourism platforms have is on people living in the capital (5.80) and the district centers (5.72) and lower on those living in rural areas. As an overview, the data show that the opinion of friends and relatives is the most important and relevant information source regarding domestic leisure tourism destination choice, never mind the residence place type of the respondents. The least valuable information source is print media for all respondents regardless of their place of residence.

Considering the region where respondents reside, the null hypothesis states that there is no significant difference between regions concerning the information sources. The null hypothesis is rejected for all information sources and this fact means there is significant difference. The opinion of friends and relatives has the greatest importance when choosing a destination for domestic leisure tourism for people living in the South-Central region (6.05) and the lowest importance for those residing in the North-Central region (5.13). The lowest effect on the choice of domestic leisure tourism destination is print media. People living in the Southeast region (3.08) are the most influenced by print media and the least influenced are those in the Southwest region (1.86). Electronic media influences most the choice of domestic leisure tourism destination of the residents in Northwest region (4.10) and has the lowest impact on people in Southwest region (4.10). Internet sites influence most the decision about domestic tourism destination choice of the respondents in Northeast region (4.10) and the least on the people living in South Central region (3.50). Specialized online tourism platforms have greater impact on respondents residing in Southeast region (4.58) and the lowest influence on those living in Northeast region (3.63).

5. Discussion

Marketing communication is gradually divided into two main types: personal and mass communication (Ashfaq et al., 2022). Mass communication includes print media and digital media and the Internet (including social media)—all different tools which can contribute toward the promotion and popularization of tourist destinations. Internet sites and specialized tourism platforms (e.g., Trip Advisor) offer different options for providing feedback, including various instruments to rank and score separate products/services destinations have on an offer, including accommodation, food and beverage outlets, tours, visitor attractions, and landmarks, etc. The value of these platforms has been documented by the ever-increasing number of users and reviews provided, but when it comes to destination branding and marketing, and most specifically, the decision-making process for choosing a destination to visit, personal communication, and personal recommendations have been proven to be crucially important.

The findings of this research demonstrate that friends and relatives have the most significant role in WOM marketing. Despite the ever-expanding role of information technologies and internet, friend and relatives are the most significant influencers over

destination choices among the domestic tourists in Bulgaria. Personal recommendations and references have proven to be the most significant factors in all the analyses conducted.

As it was shown in the results, there are no significant differences between males and females in terms of the influence of print media, electronic media, and the Internet sources of information on the leisure tourism destination choice. Also, there are no significant differences between different age groups and the influence of print media and opinion of friends and relatives. Print media have the lowest influence on domestic leisure tourism destination choice in all the age groups. The opinion of friends and relatives turns out to be of the greatest importance when choosing a destination for domestic leisure tourism in all the age groups. The rest of the information sources remain after the opinion of friends and relatives. The electronic media is closer to the print media, as a source with little to no influence regardless of the age group of the respondents. The educational status of the respondents also turns out to be irrelevant in relation to the opinion of relatives and friends when it comes to choosing a destination for domestic tourism. For all of them, it is the most influential source of information. Differences are observed with regards to specialized online tourism platforms and Internet sites. They have the greatest impact on the opinion of people with higher education and the least on the less educated. Marital status is another factor that is not statistically significant regarding the influential information sources about domestic leisure tourism destination choice. For all the respondents, regardless of their marital status, the opinion of relatives and friends is the most important, and the influence of the print media is the least important. Statistically speaking, there is no significant difference between children's presence concerning the print media, electronic media and opinion of friends and relatives as information sources. Of the information sources, the print media has the weakest influence irrespective of the employment status of the interviewed and the most influential is the opinion of friends and relatives. Statistically, there is no significant difference between employment statuses concerning the print media. The same conclusion is valid for the opinion of friends and relatives as an information source. In terms of average monthly income per household member, the lowest impact over the domestic leisure tourism destination choice is related to the print media and the highest is the opinion of friends and relatives. The most influencing information source according to the data is the opinion of relatives and friends, regardless of the region the respondents reside.

The results indicate that the sources of information influencing the choice of destination for domestic leisure tourism are not affected by the social and demographic characteristics of the respondents. Therefore, the Discussion section focuses on the overall impact of different types of information sources, rather than their relationship with the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

This study draw similarities with previous studies and reports internationally. A study conducted by Nielsen's Trust in 2021 and distributed in 56 countries in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, Middle East/Africa, North America, and Latin America revealed that 86% of all respondents mostly trust personal recommendations from friends and relatives (Nielsen, 2021). On the other hand, the study demonstrates that the role of print media and digital media is minor and insufficiently influences tourists' preferences and destination choices. Similar findings have been reported by Ashfaq et al. (2022) in the city of Peshawar, Pakistan. The findings from a sample of 323 tourists reveal that WOM and more specifically, the influence of friends and relatives, is the most important decision-making factor. In a similar

fashion, Jacobsen and Munar (2012) report similar findings from their research in Mallorca (Spain). They found out that WOM, Internet, and personal experiences are most important when tourists visit well-known summer holiday destinations. Gursoy et al. (2018) also discuss the influence of various information sources in the destination selection process. Their study, based on Sardinia (Italy), established that online review sites (e.g., Trip Advisor) and friends and family suggestions are the main influences on how tourists form their destination preferences. The conclusion of their study is that friends and family are the most influential source of information for domestic travelers which is consistent with the findings of our study.

On the contrary, Fernández-Cavia et al. (2020) reported that the key factor for domestic visitors in Spain is the internet. According to their study, the internet is the prime influence in terms of destination choice and among the most important ones during various stages of the trip (before, during, and after). Friends and relatives' opinions are the second most influential factor in terms of destination choice and not even a factor during the other stages of the trip.

In conclusion, there are many factors that influence the destination choice among tourists and travelers. Those factors depend on the level of familiarity to the destination, but the most influential ones are the recommendations of friends and relatives and online review sites. It is noteworthy to say that in a constantly developing eWOM, the recommendations of friends and relatives still remain a key factor for destination choice.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the influence of various information sources when choosing a destination and identify the most influential ones for the domestic tourism market in Bulgaria. The results of the research can be useful to academia and industry, particularly with regards to destination marketing, advertising, and promotion of Bulgaria as a tourism destination for domestic visitors.

The outcomes of this research can benefit the main stakeholders of tourism in Bulgaria, particularly the businesses and destination planners dealing with destination branding and marketing. The socio-demographic profile of the study respondents and the influences in the decision-making process can be particularly useful instruments for promotional campaigns, marketing strategies, and PR initiatives. The results of the study suggest that more is needed to develop a positive destination image, and to improve the quality of services related to marketing, advertising, and eWOM. The best way to improve the destination image is to invest more in creating a marketing strategy with a major online presence. This is largely due to the findings that the opinions of friends and relatives and eWOM are the major influences in the destination choice decision-making process.

The scope of this study is fairly limited and only includes a sample of households in Bulgaria. There is a lack of previous studies on the topic, which makes it difficult to track trends regarding the information sources influencing the choice of destination for domestic leisure tourism. Similar nation-wide representative studies in other countries have not been found in the scientific literature, making adequate comparison challenging. This limitation is precisely the premise for further collaborative research with scholars from neighboring countries focusing on the choice of destination for domestic leisure tourism. It will be beneficial, for example, to study the profile of domestic visitors and their destination choices for neighboring countries (e.g., Serbia, Romania) and compare/contrast the influences on destination choices. On the other hand, this study highlights another research gap related to

the Bulgarian tourism market, which could be developed in future studies. Since Internet sources of information rank second after the opinions of friends and acquaintances, a more in-depth study of them would be particularly relevant given the digital world we live in. As the present study is part of a broader survey on domestic leisure tourism, the emphasis is not placed on the variety of internet-based information sources. However, conducting a study to compare the variety of internet-based information sources and their influence on destination choices could be beneficial to both destination planners and marketers not only in Bulgaria but for any developing country with a growing domestic tourism market.

The findings of this study also suggest a number of avenues for further research. Firstly, future studies should explore further how eWOM shares and influences domestic tourists' destination choices, including the mechanisms through which opinions and suggestions from friends and relatives impacts decision-making processes. Secondly, from a destination marketing perspective, future research can be focused on the effectiveness of different destination marketing and branding strategies in leveraging eWOM to attracting domestic tourists.

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