RESEARCH ON THE PRE-TRAVEL BEHAVIOR OF THE BULGARIAN TRAVELERS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This research paper explores and discusses the behavior of the Bulgarian non-organized travelers concerning their travel destination and accommodation choices before the pandemic period. Another study goal of the paper is to identify the typical segment profiles of the Bulgarian travelers. The main research method was a content analysis of the information from the open-ended questions to the members of a closed Bulgarian group "Travelling in the world" in Facebook. The survey sample consists of 164 travelors who responded on a voluntary basis to questions related to their pre-travel behavior. Additional primary information was derived from the comments of the group members about their travel behavior. The study identified 3 main segments among the Bulgarian travelers with different pre-travel behavior called by the authors "Comfort Travelers", "Adventurers" and "Travelers around". The final part of the paper includes conclusions from the study about the Bulgarian travelers' behavior on behalf of destination and accommodation choice before the pandemia and some practical suggestions to the hoteliers about using more in-depth surveys with travelers and content marketing for attracting and retaining guests.

Introduction.

While 2 centuries ago tourism was quite an elitist activity and travelers were only representatives of the emerging bourgeoisie and members of aristocratic families in Europe (Cohen, 1979b), nowadays, due to the diversity of destinations, prices and modes of transport, travel representatives of different strata of societies. International tourism is becoming more and more a mass phenomenon in various forms, the cycle is turning, which in turn leads again to a more diverse offer of travel opportunities. At the same time, during the last decade, with the development of information technology, an interesting phenomenon has been observed, namely an increase in the share of tourists in international scope who organize all components of their trip themselves without using tourist intermediaries - transport, transfer, overnight stays, food and sightseeing and any additional services. But despite the progress of the Internet at the beginning of the 21st century, tourists until 2004-2005 year i.e. until the beginning of the onslaught of social networks and online booking platforms, still rely on the mediation of classical intermediaries - tour operators and travel agents (Kracht & Wang, 2010; Gursoy & Umbreit 2004). Gradually, the situation is changing, and social networks, through which the traditional word-of-mouth advertising in tourism from other

people- friends, relatives, and colleagues already passes, are increasingly being included in online information channels.

It is no coincidence that a great deal of research in the last decade has focused on related with the social media topics like the topics about "virtual communities" (Illum, Ivanov & Liang, 2010), social network positions in search engines (Xiang & Gretzel 2010), adaptation of social networks to national markets (Gretzel, Kang, & Lee 2008) and influence of social networks on destination branding strategies (Munar, 2011).

Since every trip is a type of socio-cultural experience, the American researcher Graburn has some reason to propose the concept of distinguishing between "ordinary" and "sacred" time as it relates to tourism (Graburn, 1989). While the concept of "ordinary, prosaic" according to Graburn refers to everyday life, then again, according to him, the time of the tourist journey is "extraordinary, unusual" and in this sense it is "sacred" (Graburn, ibid.). In fact, Durkheim was the first to propose the idea that "tourists prepare for their vacation as pilgrims prepare for what is to come worship' (Durkheim, 1964). The search for information is an important activity in planning and preparing a trip abroad because of the importance of the decision and for this reason already in the 80s and 90s there are many studies dedicated to this activity and they study internationally what information and on what issues related to travel is most commonly sought (Schul & Crompton 1983; van Raaij 1986; Fodness & Murray 1997; 1999; Vogt & Fesenmaier 1998; Gursoy & Umbreit 2004). From this point of view, it is interesting to study how Bulgarian tourists prepare their tourist trips, and since the mass tourist – user of organized trips is much more studied, it is more interesting for us at the given moment how the individual tourist in Bulgaria prepares his trips. which rarely uses package holidays.

The Bulgarian travelers, like citizens of other European countries, also increase their trips abroad, although predominantly to closer destinations than citizens of Western European countries. Since the majority of traveling Bulgarians use organized vacations with tourist packages - all inclusive, half board, as well as organized excursion tours, the question arises of how those who mostly organize their trips by themselves choose their destinations and accommodation and what information and reservation channels they use them.

The present article is an attempt to investigate the behavior of Bulgarian travelers" i.e. people addicted to travel from the point of view of their approach when choosing a destination and when choosing a means of shelter, as well as to outline the typical profile of Bulgarians traveling to foreign destinations several times a year, mainly to get to know other cultures and natural attractions, as well and for relaxation.

Methodology of the study.

The main method used for the the study is content analysis of information from open-ended questions asked to a closed Bulgarian group of "travelers" on Facebook, analysis of information from the profiles of respondents from this network, as well as other profiles of active people from the group on the question of which countries and continents are the most visited by the group of "the travelers".

The total number of the sample of persons studied is 164 people, and its structure is as follows: the sample of the personally submitted answers is of the random sampling type, according to the respondents, and the number of persons is a total of 81 - thirty-one answers from which were received directly on the site under the questions and fifty-two answers were received in the messenger and on the author's email from the persons who have it. The other part of 83 people are active users on the group's Facebook page with many posts and comments, and their behavior has been studied through the information they provide regarding the information channels used when choosing a destination, as well as the channels used when choosing a means of shelter.

Results and discussion.

Socio-demographic profile of the respondents and preferred destinations.

According to the analysis of the information in the profiles of the respondents, 53.1% of the persons live in Bulgaria, and 46.9% are currently established abroad - mainly in Western and Central Europe. The predominant part of them were at least 3-4 times a year on a trip, holiday or organized excursion abroad lasting more than 5-6 days, with most trips to more distant destinations: Asia - Middle and Far East, Latin America, USA and less often Africa. Regarding the indicator "education" about 58% of the respondents have higher education in various fields - mainly economic and

humanitarian professions and less are from the field of engineering sciences and information technologies. Slightly more than half indicated that they were married or in a relationship, the others did not indicate marital status. Regarding the age structure of the sample of respondents, the analysis of the data from their profiles shows that 11.1% are under 30 years old, 35.9% are in the age group 31-40 years, 19% are between 41 and 50 years old, 25% are over 50 years old, and for 9% there is no information about their age. Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of Bulgarian travel enthusiasts, namely 2/3, are in the age groups up to 50 years, i.e. young people and those in their prime, with just over half being the age groups up to 50 years, i.e. young people and those in their prime, with just over half being women.

One of the main tasks of the present study is to find out what is the behavior of travelers in terms of choosing a destination and means of shelter. The question of whether there are any significant differences in the behavior of young and older travelers and in the behavior of women and men in these matters is also interesting. The two specific questions that were asked of travelers are the following:

Which information sources do you use when deciding to choose a destination?

Which information sources do you use when making a decision to choose an accommodation facility?

Preferred information sources when choosing a destination.

The summarized results of the content analysis show that the Top 5 sources of information are Trip advisor, Travel guides and travelogues, Travel blogs and interest communities, The Lonely Planet channel and catalogs of travel agencies and tour operators.

The leader in this ranking is definitely Trip advisor - 46.6% of the sample travelers and the interesting thing in this case is that this is a site with a main function for booking accommodation in 179 countries, but since it has a lot of information and comments about the individual countries visited, it is used by our travelers in the first place when choosing a destination. When booking nights on this site, tourists pay a fee of 8 to 16% for the majority of bookings, and accommodation owners pay only a 3% booking fee and no registration fee. At the same time, they must respond within 24 hours to the inquiry from the system whether they accept the guests, and the clients themselves can contact the shelter facility before finalizing the reservation. Offering 300,000 accommodation properties, the site registers 38 million visitors per month5, but it offers many more services outside of accommodation than other booking platforms, which was also noted by some of the survey respondents, and this contributes greatly to its preference when deciding on destination choice. This system owns Holiday Lettings, Niumba, FlipKey, Vacation Home Rentals, and House Trip as well. Trip Advisor provides the opportunity to send reviews and opinions to tourists and, accordingly, to the accommodation facility within 14 days of using the service. The system does not verify the identity of the guest, which is obviously approved by the customers.

The survey data show that the most significant differences in the preferences of travelers depending on gender are observed only in the channels Trip advisor and Travel guides and travelogues: women prefer Trip advisor - 60.8%, and men prefer the second channel - 61.6%. With the other channels of information, there are no drastic differences between men and women - they are within 2 to 5%, although slightly more women prefer the blogs and catalogues of tour agents and tour operators, and men give preference more to comments and opinions of "travelers" outside of advertising information in specialized portals.

Blogs about travel, destinations and journeys are gaining more and more popularity and in the current survey they are in third place - 34.9% of the respondents in terms of usage (see Table 1) and in all probability the trend will continue. The content analysis of the profiles of these travelers in the social network indicates that these are mostly young people - up to 40 years old, mostly with higher education - married and single, and approximately 30% of them live abroad. There are about 50 Bulgarian travel blogs in Internet with almost half of them publishing information, visual material and advice on near and far destinations abroad.

The content analysis of the opinions and answers given by travelers who use blogs for their trips abroad showed preferences for 5 of the Bulgarian travel blogs, and all of them have approximately the same share of preferences - between 18 and 22%, so that there is no singles out a

clear blog leader in the frequent flyer community. However, the blogs of andrey-andreev.com and sunshine.bg were mentioned most often, and two of the blogs are clearly targeted at solo travelers[1].

It is noteworthy that only a small number of travelers - less than 5% of all users indicate that they use foreign blogs - on the mini-blogging platform Twitter (now X), namely the National Geographic blog - @natgeotraveler and @501places. Other information sources that are indicated as used by the respondents have a share of 13.0 to 20.0% and they are:

1. Google: 19.6%
2. Instagram, Pinterest: 17.4%
3. Booking.com: 15.1%
4. Books on tourist topics - 12.8%

As the results in Tab. 1, the Lonely Planet channel, which offers intriguing visual information about nature and tourism, is fourth in use - slightly less than 1/3 of the "travelers" who responded.

The share of those who indicated "the catalogs of travel agencies and tour operators" as a source is the smallest - about 1/5 of the "travelers" (see Table 1). Outside the top 5 is another information channel, namely "comments and opinions of other travelers, but outside the specialized sites" - 15.9% i.e. it is the analogue of the so-called "word of mouth" in the pre-social media era, which has always been a powerful source of information. These results show that people who travel abroad often during the year with the aim of a combination of a short vacation, and getting to know new places and cultures, definitely do not use the classic approach when choosing a vacation destination or when choosing a destination for an excursion - only 1/5 of them study the catalogs and websites of tour operators and travel agents. Therefore, the research shows that the approach of travelers today is definitely oriented towards online platforms and social networks and the content generated by other people - mostly strangers, with the same interest in travel, and adventure and experiences. This fits into the general trend of travelers in the 21st century who share their impressions of destinations on social networks - over 68 million Internet users worldwide comment and recommend products and services online (Bughin., Chui M. & Manyika, 2010).

Behavior of travelers when choosing accommodation facilities.

The content analysis of respondents' answers regarding their approach to choosing a means of shelter during travel shows a definite preference for online booking platforms - primarily Booking.com and Airbnb.com, but also other booking systems (see Table 1). Until 12-15 years ago, the predominant sources of information about possible accommodation were tour operator catalogs, hotel websites, and to a lesser extent, recommendations from friends.

As the data in Table 1 shows, there has been a significant change in frequent flyer accommodation behavior over the past decade compared to previous periods, and namely change in the weights of the different channels.

While travelers at that time mainly trusted information from travel agencies and tour operators (Fodness & Murray 1999; Gursoy & Umbriet 2004; Bieger & Laesser 2004) and recommendations from relatives and acquaintances (so-called word by mouth), modern people addicted to travel prefer to trust reservation systems where there are ratings and reviews of other strangers with similar interests and preferences.

The current survey indicates that slightly less than half of the surveyed persons (see Table 1) use the booking.com system - mainly for Europe and the USA. Booking.com was launched in 1996 in Amsterdam and offers accommodation in more than 5.4 million properties in 228 countries. by not deducting a fee from the customers of the shelter facility. Within a month, the site has more than 40 million visitors, but a significant part of them also look for flights and other services on the site7. Owners of hotels, houses and rooms - registered on Booking.com pay a 3% credit card fee and a 15% booking fee, but do not pay a registration fee8. This site does not allow hosts to negotiate with prospective clients before the booking is finalized. Their system for reviews and rating the shelters themselves is a bit different from other systems incl. and from that of Airbnb. To be able to make a comment, a review on the site, the person must have made a reservation and consumed the reservation,

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[1] Most of the bloggers in Bulgaria are united in an association called ASTOM (Association of the owners of travel online media) , which seeks to build ethical and professional standards among the owners of travel sites and blogs in Bulgaria - www.actom.bg

and Booking.com always verifies the customer before publishing the review, so that there are no abuses in the service of direct competitors of the object. In addition to hotels, Booking.com also offers apartment and house rentals, and the site's network includes Priceline, Kayak and Agoda. Of all the information sources, only booking.com shows a more significant difference in its use by women and men - the share of women is much larger than that of men (see Table 1).

At the same time, in the present study, it is noticeable that the Airbnb platform has also become very popular among Bulgarian travelers, with almost 40% of respondents indicating that they use it regularly (see Table 1). This result is not surprising as globally Airbnb has been gaining serious popularity in the last 5 years.

According to a 2018 study, the share of those accommodated through Airbnb (P2P accommodation) amounts to 7% of the global supply of accommodation (Bakker & Twining-Ward, L., 2018). More and more travelers prefer it mainly because of the favorable prices. But this platform provides even closer contact between host and guest and gives the opportunity to build long-term relationships between the two parties. It has been indicated by travelers that the Airbnb platform is used the most, especially in more expensive ones such as Reykjavik, Copenhagen, Stockholm, etc., which makes the trip cheaper. But one of the big disadvantages of this site is that the payment for the nights is already made when the reservation is made, while booking.com has other options. In addition, the study of secondary information shows that there are many opinions of international travelers that there are also risks when using Airbnb.com: location in dangerous areas of the city, a large discrepancy between the photo material on the site and the actual condition of the object, etc. (Rosenblit, 2019).

Table 1. Preferred channels for information about bookings of accommodation facilities.

Information channels used for bookings of accommodation	(%)*		
	All	men	women
Booking.com	44.3	39.9	60.1
Airbnb	39.6	58.6	41.4
Agoda.com, Hostelworld.com, Hotels.com, Budgetplaces.com	34.9	45.9	54.1
Der Tour and Meiers	23.3	47.4	52.6
Recommendations of friends, and colleagues in social media	18.6	50.4	49.6
Web sites of hotels	14.0	46.6	53.4

*The amount of the percentages upon the columns is more than 100% as there were more than 1 answer possible.

Airbnb is one of the largest short-term accommodation rental platforms, with around 500,000 bookings per month. The system offers more than 4 million properties, there is no fee to register as a member of the site and to use a credit card, and the booking fee is 3%, so it is easy to understand why Airbnb is so popular. At the same time, travelers are charged a service fee of 0-19% of the total amount for the stay. Both parties - guests and hosts - can leave opinions within 14 days from the end of the stay, i.e. leaving the property (the check out). In fact, many of the hosts live in the property and only rent it out when they are away for professional reasons or on vacation away from home. The site also offers many unusual places to stay, such as wooden houses with gardens, campers, and even family castles. A large part of the Bulgarian travelers using Airbnb obviously belong to the typical target segment of the system, namely persons who are looking for comfortable, sometimes quite spacious places to stay, but at affordable prices and in most cases in urban areas.

In third place, according to pointed preferences, are positioned in the survey several other online accommodation booking platforms- Agoda.com, Hostelworld.com, Hotels.com, and Budgetplaces.com, which are indicated by a total of 34.9% of individual respondents. As for Agoda, there are many similarities with Booking.com, as well as some other booking sites, but in fact Agoda and Booking.com share the same parent company, Priceline. The main difference between the two systems is the business model. Booking.com uses the "agency model", which means that it simply moves its customers to the hotels they want from the portfolio that the system offers. Agoda uses a combined agent and merchant model. For more exotic destinations, the websites of two tour operators - Der Tour and Meiers - are also used for reservations by a little under 1/4 of all respondents. Hotel

websites have the smallest share as a preferred channel with the share of their users being 14.0% of all, and this is in contrast to their use 20 years ago, when they were the main source of information about hotel offerings (O'Connor & Murphy,2008; Aziz, Radzi, Zahari & Ahmad, 2011; Amrahi. & Radzi 2014). Due to the huge volume of information accumulated on the world wide web, hotels should use Internet mining of information, which would help them to identify potential guests, satisfied and dissatisfied current customers who have commented on other sites and portals outside their website and booking platforms.

Although traveler's segmentation information is derived from unstructured qualitative data rather than cluster analysis, we identified 3 main segments among Bulgarian travelers to foreign destinations (based on several criteria).

Table 2. Segmentation of Bulgarian travelers.

Segments	Characteristics of the segments
Segment 1: **„Comfortably travelling"**	Fans of Europe and USA predominantly in the age Group of of 40-65 years, predominantly families, mostly using booking.com, agoda and hotels.com, almost half of which currently living in other countries in Europe - Western and Central, and the other part living in Bulgaria.
Segment 2: **"Adventurer"**	Fans of more remote and exotic destinations in Asia, Latin America and Africa, in the age rabge 25-45 years, more often single, mostly using Airbnb (so-called budget accommodation), booking.com, hostel world, agoda; about 60% of them live abroad and organize the trips themselves and generally with adventure attitude.
Segment 3: **"Travellers to neighbor countries"**	This is a more mixed group depending on age – very Young and not married, but also over 50 years old, predominantly married and traveling to closer destinat5ions -Greece, Turkey, Romania, Cyprus by using travel agents in most cases.

Limitations of the study.

The main limitation of the survey is the small sample size of respondents who directly answered the questions asked. But at the same time, these respondents are some of the most frequent travelers and some of the most active in commenting on recommendations, tips and destination specifics. For this reason, the research ensures a high degree of reliability of the information and gives a real picture of the profile and behavior of modern Bulgarians addicted to international travel. Due to the fact that the information is not representative, it cannot be extrapolated to the whole target population and it is not possible to estimate how big the 3 segments are. In a future survey the sample must be a bigger probability sample in order to obtain representative results.

Conclusions.

The current study reveals that modern Bulgarian travelers are mostly with higher education, most often aged 30-50 and with a slight preponderance of married people, with approximately gender parity. Their preferred destinations are the more distant ones: Asia - Middle and Far East, Latin America, and less often Africa and the USA, but also shorter trips to European destinations. The summarized information from the current qualitative data study outlined 3 main segments among Bulgarian travelers to foreign destinations, namely: "comfort travelers", "adventurers" and "nearby travelers".

The research suggests that the approach of today's travelers is пuch more flexible and we would say creative - despite the many sources, definitely oriented towards social networks and content generated by other people with the same interest in travel, adventures and experiences. Therefore, in the field of tourist trips, predominantly through self-organization, content marketing through social networks is gaining more and more speed at the expense of classic advertising channels having more weight until the end of the 20th century. This should be taken into account

by tour operators and travel agents, who should work more and more actively in social networks and provide more and more useful information through all modern marketing and technical approaches for attracting and retaining clients.

In addition, hotels and destinations should use Internet data mining, which would help them identify potential visitors, satisfied and dissatisfied current users, and proven local guests who have commented on other sites and portals outside their website and reservation systems. platforms which would help them improve their marketing strategies. In addition hotels must conduct in-depth research on the traveler's behavior from the 3 main segments in order to identify the most deep and hidden motivation for their choice. The accommodation facilities including the small ones must offer not just accommodation but memorable experiences which will bring the guests back.

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