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Travel Information's Search, Planning and Purchase of Travel Service: The Bulgarian Tourists Behaviour

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TRAVEL INFORMATION'S SEARCH, PLANNING AND PURCHASE OF TRAVEL SERVICES – THE BULGARIAN TOURISTS BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract: The search and accumulation of information online for the travel purposes follows three different stages: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip. We study the online behavioural patterns before the trip (planning), responsible for the creation of reliable own expectations, obtain ideas and make selection of attractions and places to be visited; evaluation, comparison of alternatives, booking and payment or other transactions to service suppliers. The data are obtained through the standardised questionnaire from 212 tourists in Bulgaria. The research reveals the tourists' attitudes and practices in respect to the Internet as a source of information and a means for booking and buying online tourist products/services. The obtained results contribute to more in-depth understanding of tourist's behavioural patterns of tourist in Bulgaria, practical feedback for suppliers and stakeholders in tourism about the quality of the websites and metasearch engines functionalities.

Key words: travel information search, on line purchase, behavioural pattern, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

The tourist's information search and buying behaviour online is among the most important and research areas and with vital importance for Destination marketing organizations (DMOs), National Tourism Organizations (NTOs), tourism policy makers, suppliers and stakeholders (Lexhagen, 2004; Gretzel et al., 2006; Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Morrison et al., 2001; and others). The understanding of the information search before the trip under the process of planning is shaping the choice of destination, providers, attraction mix and other functional motives. The information search is integral part of decision making for potential travel, for specific travel and for booking/buying (Hyde, 2008). Generally, the information search can be divided into traditional, as described in the suggested taxonomy of Gartner (1993), and online, accessing search engines and different types for websites and social media. The new ICT have played a significant role in shaping the tourist behaviour model, including the information search. The access to almost unlimited sources, type and visual content of information, extended by social media and shared user-generated content (UGC) both from residents, suppliers and travellers is influencing and changing the tourist behaviour (Marine-Roig and Clavé, 2016; Öz, 2015, Munar et al., 2014; Pesonen and Pasanen, 2017).

The search and accumulation of information online for the travel purposes follows three different stages: pre-trip, during-trip, and post-trip (Hjalager and Jensen, 2012). The current paper limits the research on the period that occur before the trip (planning), responsible for the creation of reliable own expectations, selection of attractions and places to be visited, evaluation, comparison of alternatives leading to booking and buying process (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Jun et al., 2012). The research questions are constructed taking into consideration the models of information search and developed by Fodness and Murray (1999), and Pan and Turner (2006). There are different reasons for search of tourism information, but the functional motives are predominant (Gursoy and McCkeary, 2004; Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006; Hyde, 2008). We assume that information search and buying online is determined by tourist's attitude, compatibility, discern risk (Amaro and Duarte, 2015), perceived value and trust on information quality and security (Ponte et al., 2015).

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Although many publications make distinction between use of Internet as a source of information and financial transactions (Wen, 2009; Evanschitzky et al., 2004; Jenny van Doorn et al., 2010) in this paper we approach the behavioural pattern as an entire process - starting form information search, planning, selection of payment method and finalization with purchase of travel services. Therefore, the main goals of this paper is to explore and identify the online behaviour patterns of tourists in respect to the information search, planning and intentions to buy within the Bulgarian context.

2. Data and methods

The conducted research takes into account (1) the main sources of information search; (2) the undertaken amount and type of websites visited; (3) evaluation of inconvenience/discontent and further expectations from the available information online; and (4) comparative analysis between traditional vs online information search and buying pattern.

The research framework excludes considerations such as purpose of travel, stage of travel planning, characteristics of a trip, type of traveller - first time or repeat visitors etc. The purpose of the paper is to investigate and test the information search of local and foreign tourists in Bulgaria by taking into account the most common indicators of model of information search behaviour – attitude, compatibility and perceived risk in Bulgarian context and finalization of the entire process by booking and/or buying online travel services/ products.

The data are obtained through the standardised questionnaire, which was distributed at the Sofia Airport and some hotels mainly in mountain resorts at the end of 2015 and at the beginning of 2016. This period overlaps with the celebration of National students' holidays (8th of December), as well as Christmas holidays, which explains the prevalence of young respondents and students.

Within the current paper we present the main findings from the descriptive analysis of data. The data are not representative, but the descriptive analysis reveals more detailed insight about the tourist information search experience mainly of Bulgarian tourists. It could be considered as a type of mirror of their own online search experience, and also feedback form the quality of the websites and metasearch engines functionalities.

The research areas are covered by thirteen questions, apart from the demographic profile of the respondents. The questionnaire includes questions related to the sources of information influencing the decision to travel and selection of a destination. Special attention is paid on the Internet as a solution for planning and organization of the trip, including available channels for booking and purchase. We asked about the type of websites visited, frequency and main reasons. Based on assumption that behaviour model starts with information search and ends with selection of payment method, a question comparing the traditional way of receiving information, booking and purchase is also included. The last questions evaluate the causes of inconvenience/discontent from the available online tourist information and their expectations.

The sample comprises 212 interviewed tourists, including 12 foreigners. The field work combined the individual responses to the questionnaire, as well as answers collected by the personal interviewer. The majority of the questionnaires are fill out by the respondents, and a small number through face-to-face interviews.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents show that a group aged 18-29 year (69%) predominates, followed by those aged 30-40 (17%), 41-50 years (9%) and over 51 years (5%). The majority of the respondents are relatively young and the possible reasons are the overlap of the study period and holiday season, their openness and readiness to respond a questionnaire. We consider this as a straight of the study based on official statistics (EUROSTAT 2016[3]) stating the individuals actively using Internet for travel and accommodation services are 21%

[3] http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do

aged 25-34, 15% aged 16-24, compared to the average of 13% for all individuals in Bulgaria. A little over 50% of the respondents are with higher education (53%), while the remaining 47% have secondary education. Nearly half of the respondents are students (48%), followed by employees (30%), experts, professionals and managers (17%) and others (pensioners, people engaged at home, etc.) (5%). Of all respondents, 94% are Bulgarian tourists and nearly 6% (a total of 12) – foreigners. Therefore, the data reflect mainly the online behavioural patterns of young and educated part of Bulgarian tourists. Depending on the total monthly income of the household 25% Bulgarian tourists are in the group between 501-800 BGN, 33% - in the group between 801-1400 BGN; other 23% - in the group from 1401 to over 2,000 BGN; and 13% - in the group with incomes below BGN 500 per month. Depending on the total monthly income of a household, foreign tourists are in the two extreme groups - up to 2500 euros (4.4%) and over 5801 euros (1.5%) (1 BGN=1.96 euro).

3. Research findings

Main sources of tourist information search

Two are the main sources of information search that are crucial for respondents' decisions in destination selection - recommendations from friends, relatives and acquaintances (86%) and web sites (69%).Traditional media, such as print ads and brochures, have influenced around ¼ of respondents, tour operators and agents - 21%, TV advertising - 15%, and so on (Table 1).

Table 1 Main sources of information, influencing the travel decision and destination selection (%)

	Yes	No
Recommendations from friends, relatives and acquaintances	86.0	14.0
Internet web sites	68.6	31.4
Printed advertising, brochures and publications	25.6	74.4
Personal advise from travel agent, tour operator	20.8	79.2
TV advertising	14.0	86.0
Printed editions and travel guides	9.2	90.8

For most sources of information there is no significant difference between respondents. The Internet as a source of information is more actively used by people with lower incomes - 81% (on average 69.7% for all); print advertisements are used to a greater extent by persons of other nationality (50%) compared to Bulgarian tourists (24%), while print editions are preferred mainly by age groups 30-40 and 41-50 years (respectively 17% and 22% compared to 9% of average for all), as well as by experts, professionals and managers (25%)[4].

Tourist information search and types of websites visited for planning the trip

The Internet is used not only as source of information, but also as a solution for entire planning and organization of the trip, including for booking and buying tourist products and services by 2/3 of respondents (66%), with significant differences between age, educational and income groups. The respondents aged between 30 and 50 years were more active in this respect (respectively 77% and 72%) compared to those over 51 (30%) (Table 2).

[4] All relationships between the components of the tourist's online behaviour and socio-demographic characteristics are significant at 0.05 level as measured by Cramer's V, but not reported for easier reading of the text.

Table 2 Online purchase of travel services/products by age group (%)

		Age				Total
		18-29	30-40	41-50	Over 51	
Internet as mean for purchase	No	34.7	22.9	27.8	70.0	33.8
	Yes	65.3	77.1	72.2	30.0	66.2
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.197, Approx. Sig. = 0.045

Regarding the education - higher education graduates are more strongly represented (75% respectively) (See Table 3). Considering the income - over 80% of respondents with household incomes over 1401 BGN shop on the Internet compared to 50% of those with income below 500 BGN (Table 3 and 4).

Table 3 Online purchase of travel services / products by level of education (%)

		Education		Total
		Secondary	Higher	
Internet as mean for purchase	No	44.3	24.5	33.8
	Yes	55.7	75.5	66.2
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.209, Approx. Sig. = 0.003

Table 4 Online purchase of travel services/products by level of Income (BGN) (%)

		Household income level (Bulgarians)							Total
		< 500	501-800	801-1100	1101-1400	1401-1700	1701-2000	>2000	
Internet as mean for purchase	No	50.0	46.2	34.3	14.3	15.8	20.0		34.4
	Yes	50.0	53.8	65.7	85.7	84.2	80.0		65.6
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.260, Approx. Sig. = 0.040

More than 1/3 (34%) of the respondents claim that they do not use the Internet for purchase and finalization of the buying process, pointing as the main reasons “Distrust of information and supplier reliability” and “Possible misuse of personal data and card data” (about 64 %). About half of them prefer direct contact or have greater confidence in the staff of the travel agencies and/or tour operators they know and relay on (Table 5).

Table 5 Main reasons for not shopping travel services/products online (%)

	Yes	No
Distrust of information and supplier reliability	63.9	36.1
Possible misuse of personal data and card data	63.7	36.3
Lack of direct contact with travel agency representative	53.2	46.8
Greater confidence in travel agency staff, that I know	50.0	50.0
Less opportunities for tailor made service	42.9	57.1
Bu habit (I use known travel agency service)	29.9	70.1

Directly and actively, 63% of respondents plan their trip online, while 37% say they are not so active (Table 6). Active participants in the online organization of the trip are mostly people with higher education (75% of those with tertiary education compared to 48% of those with secondary education); with a higher professional status (86% of experts, professionals and managers at an average of 54% for all); and with higher incomes (about 90% of the highest earning categories at an average of 61%).

Table 6 Online trip planning (%)

	Yes	No
I do not participate actively in online planning process	35.7	64.3
I participate directly and actively online in the planning process	62.8	37.2

Over the last 12 months, 44% of the respondents did not buy online tourism products, 39% bought 1-2 such products, 12% between 3 and 5 products, and the rest of the respondents who bought such products was very low. Online travel services or tourist products are purchased mainly by tourists with higher education; younger; those with higher incomes; of foreign nationality; and with a higher professional status (Table 7).

Most respondents (31%) visited on average of 3 to 5 sites for their travels, 15% went to over 10 sites and 12% to no one. Persons with a higher professional status, and higher education (Table 8) have visited a greater number of sites to organize their tourist trip than others.

Table 7 Intensity of online shopping of travel services/products during the last 12 months/professional occupation (%)

		Occupations				Total
		Employees	Experts/ professionals/ managers	Student	Pensioners/ employed at home/ others	
Intensity of buying online tourist products during the last 12 months	0	45.0	13.9	50.5	63.6	43.2
	1-2	36.7	36.1	42.4	36.4	39.3
	3-5	11.7	38.9	3.0		11.7
	6-8	1.7		3.0		1.9
	9-10	1.7	11.1	1.0		2.9
	>10	3.3				1.0
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.304, Approx. Sig. = 0.000

Table 8 Average number of visited websites for trip in Bulgaria / Education (%)

		Education		Total
		Secondary	Higher	
Average number of visited web sites	0	12.4	10.9	11.6
	1-2	29.9	10.0	19.3
	3-5	32.0	30.9	31.4
	6-8	16.5	16.4	16.4
	9-10	2.1	10.0	6.3
	>10	7.2	21.8	15.0
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.335, Approx. Sig. = 0.000

Understandably the Bulgarian tourists have used more active Bulgarian sites than foreign tourists, as well as those with higher income. Higher-income individuals also enjoyed foreign sites, as well as foreign tourists (Table 9).

The most commonly used search engines on the Internet are those with a general profile (like Google) (80%), following by destination's website (50%), travel agencies and tour operators (about 46%), while other sites are used by a smaller share of respondents (Table 10).

Table 9 Preferred websites for bookings / nationality (%)

		Nationality		Total
		Bulgarian	Other	
Bulgarian websites	No	15.4	50.0	17.4
	Yes	**84.6**	50.0	82.6
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0
Cramer's V=0.213, Approx. Sig. = 0.002				
Foreign websites	No	72.8	25.0	70.0
	Yes	27.2	**75.0**	30.0
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0
Cramer's V=0.244, Approx. Sig. = 0.000				

Table 10 Type of websites visited for destination selection, booking and purchase of travel services/ products online (%)

	Yes	No
General profile of search engines	79.7	20.3
Destinations 'official websites	49.8	50.2
Tour operator website	46.4	53.6
Travel agency website	45.9	54.1
Web site of final supplier (Hotelier, rent-a-car, airline, etc.)	34.3	65.7
Travelogues and reviews websites (such as TripAdvisor)	28.5	71.5
Online travel agencies (OTA)	19.8	80.2
Metasearch engines and/or websites aggregators (such as Expedia, etc.)	9.7	90.3

Metasearch[5] engines are preferred by larger share of the youngest tourists, and are more popular among respondents with higher education, higher incomes, and higher professional status. While those with secondary education prefer to use travel agency's web sites, those with higher education and from another nationality (Table 11) give priority to travelogues[6] or reviews sites with feedback and recommendations (for free) from other tourists.

Table 11 Preferred travelogues/ review websites from other tourists / Nationality (%)

		Nationality		Total
		Bulgarian	Other	
Travelogues or reviews sites with recommendation from other tourists	No	73.8	33.3	71.5
	Yes	26.2	66.7	28.5
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

Those with a higher professional status and higher-income Bulgarian tourists give more preference to websites of final suppliers. Official destination websites are more actively used by tourists aged 41-50 years compared to the all other respondents. The most booked online is hotel accommodation (66%) and airline tickets (45%). Around 38% of respondents book tourist packages, 35% - another type of tickets and only 6% - car rental (Table 12).

[5] The difference between "metasearch engine" and "fare aggregator" is unclear, though different terms may imply different levels of cooperation between the companies involved.

[6] Travel websites, usually created by individual travellers and hosted by companies that generally provide their information to consumers for free. The content incorporates graphics, photography, maps, and feedback. It's possible to be only reviews based or in combination with possibilities for bookings (such as TripAdvisor, Priceline, Expedia and others).

Table 12 Online booked travel products/products (%)

	Yes	No
Hotel accommodation	65.7	34.3
Airline tickets	44.9	55.1
Tourist package	37.7	62.3
Other tickets (bus, train, etc.)	35.3	64.7
Rent-a-car	5.8	94.2

To a greater extent, online bookings for hotel accommodation make people aged 30-50 years; males; those with higher professional status; while the only significant difference in the 90% confidence interval for online car rental reservations is between Bulgarian and foreign tourists.

The majority of respondents (73%) booked their last tourist product over the phone by paying at the office or by bank transfer. Only 17% made simultaneous online booking and payment to the tour operator/travel agency site or through the online travel agency (OTA) website (15%) (Table 13).

Table 13 Ways of booking and payments of travel services / products (%)

	Yes	No
Booking by the phone and payment in the office or by bank transfer	73.4	26.6
Booking and payment through the travel agency /tour operator website	17.4	82.6
Booking and payment through the websites of OTA	15.0	85.0

Among those who booked the last travel service/ product on the phone, but paid on the spot are the eldest (over 51) and the youngest up to 29; with secondary education; and with a lower social status. The tourist products booked and paid through the travel agency site are made from mostly all university graduates and from foreign nationality. The OTA websites are preferred by persons aged 30-50 years; with higher education; with a higher professional status; of another nationality and by Bulgarian tourists with higher income.

***The evaluation of inconvenience/discontent and expectation from the available tourist information on line*.**

Most respondents (66%) are disappointed with the uncertainty about the accuracy and completeness of the information when selecting a destination and online purchase of a tourist product, followed by those who are not confident about obtaining the best price (50%), or that there is insufficient transparency and clarity on the cancelation policy (45%). All other answers gather around or under 30% from all respondents (Table 14).

Table 14 Main inconveniences/discontent in selecting a destination or buying tourist product online (%)

	Yes	No
Uncertainty about accuracy, punctuality and completeness of information available	65.7	34.3
Lack of confidence of best price	49.8	50.2
Lack of transparency, and clarity about cancellation policy	44.9	55.1
The need for more time for orientation in the proposals	31.4	68.6
The inability to search by personal preferences and criteria	26.1	73.9
I'm totally satisfied	26.1	73.9
Excess and abundancy of information	23.2	76.8

Abundancy of information is among the online inconveniences mostly for tourists of another nationality (Table 15). The lack of clarity and transparency regarding the cancellation policy is identified as problem for older aged tourists (over 51) (Table 16).

Table 15 Main inconvenience/discontent from the online information / nationality (%)

		Nationality		Total
		Bulgarian	Other	
Abundancy of information online	No	79.0	41.7	76.8
	Yes	21.0	58.3	23.2
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.207, Approx. Sig. = 0.003

Table 16 Lack of clarity about cancellation policy / age (%)

		Age				Total
		18-29	30-40	41-50	> 51	
Lack of clarity about cancellation policy	No	50.0	80.0	61.1	30.0	55.1
	Yes	50.0	20.0	38.9	70.0	44.9
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.251, Approx. Sig. = 0.004

Regarding the tourists further expectations the majority of respondents would like to be informed about current events at the visited place (77%), have the opportunity to monitor their trip (63%), and to be informed about tourist products (52%). Sharing the trips in different social media is indicated as very important for almost 1/3 of the respondents (32%) (Table 17).

The respondents with secondary education have a higher share among those who would like to book and buy online (50%) (Table 18).

Table 17 Tourists expectations form the online services (%)

	Yes	No
To be informed about the current events in visited place	76.8	23.2
To monitor my trip (incl. checking, weather prognosis etc.)	63.3	36.7
To be informed about the tourist products	51.7	48.3
To book and buy local products in visited place	43.0	57.0
To book and pay online	40.6	59.4
To share my trip in social medias	32.4	67.6

Table 18 Online booking and payment of tourist products/education (%)

		Education		Total
		Secondary	Higher	
On line booking and payment of tourist products	No	50.5	67.3	59.4
	Yes	49.5	32.7	40.6
Total		100.0	100.0	100.0

Cramer's V=0.170, Approx. Sig.= 0.014

Comparative analysis between traditional and on line information search and buying pattern

The results from the conducted survey about online tourist information search for booking and purchase, asking to rate from 1 "totally disagree" up to 5 "totally agree" in comparison with the traditional way of doing it at travel agency/tour operator office are presented at Table 19.

Table 19 Comparison between online and traditional search of information, including booking and purchase (%)

Answers	Mean
Online is possible to find additional information about the service suppliers	4.14
Convenient and easy booking and purchase process (24 h/7 days)	4.13
Last minute offers available online at very attractive prices	4.10
The time for online booking and shopping is shorter	4.06
Access to information online is much easier	4.04
Online possibility for comparison of process and quality	4.04
The tourist sites and destinations are attractively presented online	4.02
Online are possible virtual visits on the desired places	4.02
Availability of reviews from other travellers	3.95
The searched information online is found faster	3.88
Easier search online	3.83
The positive online experience stimulates online shopping	3.81
Easier and fastest cancellation online	3.76
The positive online experience turn us repeat users	3.76
The variety of online travel products and services is much larger	3.73
Online bookings and shopping more often are subject to price discounts	3.73
Easier communication with suppliers	3.71
Many websites offers special offers for registered customers	3.64
The websites provoke curiosity and imagination	3.61
Larger number of travel services offered online	3.51
The amount of information on tourist websites is greater	3.51
Most of the websites deliver intuitive and fast navigation	3.48
FAQ available online	3.39
The websites allow easier personalization of the services and products	3.39
Online information is better organized and structured	3.38
The online interaction with websites/ portals is more fun	3.31
Most websites offer help for information search	3.26
The options for tailor made customer service online are larger	3.21
Online information is more compete, including price offers	3.17
Online Information is more up-to-date	3.16
The staff if more responsive online	3.12
The satisfaction from online experience is significant	3.00
Online Information is more precise and accurate	2.96
The security of my personal preferences online is guaranteed (not distributed)	2.94
The level of security of online transactions is high	2.68
The security of my personal data is guaranteed	2.60
The responsibility of online travel agency is higher	2.59
The trust in travel agency is higher than in delivered online services	2.57

In general, compared to the traditional way of searching for information, online search, including possibilities for booking and purchase (on-site, at the travel agent's office), online services and search are valued higher. The average values of 32 out of 38 variables are higher than 3 on the 5-degree scale. Lower than 3 but higher than 2.5 are the values of the other 6 variables. Among them is the concerns about the trusted and accuracy of information published on tourist websites (average 2.96). As expected, the other five variables are related to the security of online transactions, personal data, trust and liability of the travel company on the internet (averaging from 2.57 to 2.94).

The highest average values are for the answers to the questions related to the additional information about the suppliers (such as hotel, airport, etc.) and convenience from booking and shopping online (24 hours / 7 days) (4.14 and 4.13). Over 4 are the average values of questions related to the last minute offers at very reasonable prices (4.10) available online. The time waste for online search, including booking and shopping is less (4.06). According to the respondents the tourist websites allow for comparison between prices and quality (4.04), and the access to information on websites is much easier (4.04). Tourist sites and destinations are presented in more attractive way and easier to visualise (create expectations) online (4.02). Online information allows virtual visits and walks to desired locations (4.02). The reviews of other users are often seen on websites and are considered as valuable feedback (3.95).

4. Conclusion

The research reveals the tourists' attitudes and practices in respect to the Internet as a source of information and a means for booking and buying online tourist products. The sample studied is not representative, but the data give more detailed insight about travellers' tourist information search experience.

The findings show that the main sources of information search that are crucial for respondents' decisions in destination selection are the recommendations from friend's relatives (traditional search) and online search. The Internet is used not only as source of information, but also as a solution for entire planning and organization of the trip. About 1/3 of the respondents claim that they do not use the Internet for purchase and finalization of the buying process. The search process includes visit on average of 3 to 5 sites, mainly in Bulgarian language. The most commonly used search engines on the Internet are those with a general profile (like Google) (80%). Most respondents are disappointed with the uncertainty about the accuracy and completeness of the information when selecting a destination and online purchase of a tourist product, followed by those who are not confident that they have received the best price (50%), or that there is insufficient transparency and clarity on the cancelation policy (45%). The comparative analysis of online information search to the traditional search shows that online is more valuated due to the access of additional and detailed information about the suppliers and convenience from booking and shopping online. The obtained results are important and add new perspectives to be taken into account from the tourist suppliers and quality of the websites and metasearch engines functionalities.

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