

# WORD OF MOUTH IN TOURISM - A SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

In spite of the efforts of tourism marketers to encourage consumers to revisit particular tourist destinations, other factors contribute to this decision-making process. In this way, recommendations from family members and friends are considered to be trustful source of information in the process of choosing a tourist destination. Regardless of whether or not they have visited a tourist destination themselves, consumers recommend it to their family members and friends. This study represents an analysis of consumers' socio-demographic characteristics (gender, age, education) differentiating between those who recommend, those who intend to recommend and those who do not. The aim of the paper is to point to the existence of differences of consumers in tourist destination decision making, according to socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample included 250 respondents from the territory of the Province of Vojvodina. In order to test proposed hypothesis statistical methods such as t test for independent samples and ANOVA were used. Key results of this research can be summarised as respondents in the sample do not show statistically significant differences in terms of demographic characteristics – gender, age and education level by any form of interpersonal behaviour and word-of-mouth communication in the process of choosing a tourist destination.

**KEY WORDS:** word of mouth, recommendations, tourism, decision making process.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The dynamic and turbulent marketing environment where the economic, political and general social role of consumer changes has caused companies to accept the fact that consumer choice and decision is a social process, which does not depend only on the action of marketing mix instruments, but that this complex process is chiefly determined by interactions and relations, individual or group, between consumers themselves through the form of word-of-mouth communication.

Modern marketing theory forwards the claim that marketing revolves, no longer dominantly around commercial advertising, personalized sale and promotion in general, but rather around interpersonal mouth-to-mouth communication generated by consumers themselves.

On the other hand, for several decades now, world economy is characterised by domination of service sector in comparison with production sector in the structure of GNP, due to which the current state is referred to as service economy and service society. One of the most important segments of such world economy, where intangible services dominate over material products is tourism – movement of people/consumers away from their place of residence, with accompanying consumption.

The need to explore tourist practices scientifically is fully obvious, as it causes numerous previously unknown phenomena, processes and events. It is certain that one of the most significant one is emergence of the new contemporary consumer, i.e. tourist service user, characterised by sophistication, demanding nature, awareness and networking with other consumers. Flow of information on impressions and experiences, i.e. assessment of quality of tourist offer of a tourist destination and amiability and professionalism of employees, is extremely fast and credible, being unburdened by material interest of those sharing their experiences with other tourist. Competition is increasingly high, as not only

countries and destinations compete with other, but also culture, value system, tradition, lifestyle and everything else that a contemporary consumer-tourist can evaluate and expect at a given moment.

The above reasons determine that this research unifies the demographic determinants influencing consumer behaviour, word-of-mouth consumer communication, which is the determining factor influencing the purchase decision, all of it one of the most important and growing service economy sector – tourism. In this sense, the aim of the paper is to point to the existence of differences in recommendations – word-of-mouth consumer communication for purchasing tourist services according to socio-demographic characteristics of respondents.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism as such has an exceptional significance for all national economies of the world, because it provides them with significant income, contributes to the development of the entire economy and implies opening new jobs and growth in employment and standard of living. It is especially important to note that tourism has no limiting factors, in the sense of customs duties, transportation and other logistic costs burdening the international exchange of goods, i.e. material products. At the same time, one of the dominant characteristics of the contemporary business setting is the dramatic decline of consumers' confidence in all forms of advertising and marketing communication in general, so that they increasingly turn to information sources that do not have this commercial dimension, above all, to friends and family. Interpersonal word of mouth communication has a greater impact on creating opinions of consumers to products and services in comparison with other forms of communication.

How high is the significance of tourism for national, regional, but also global economy is best illustrated by the following data (Stanković, Marić, 2007):

- Almost 300 million people around the world work in tourism sectors, and out of a total of 100 employees in a national economy, 15 people are employed in Austria, 12 in Greece, 11 in Spain, 9 in Switzerland;
- Revenues from tourism amount to 1.5 billion a day in the world, and have a tendency of growth;
- Estimates say that tourists will account for 14% of world population by 2030, with a growing trend unparalleled in any industry in the world.

Tourism is a global phenomenon of marked quantitative, qualitative and special expansion despite growing political instability in the world and current climatic changes. In addition to this, it is also important to emphasise the following aggravating factors influencing development of tourism (Milenković, 2007) and reflecting to the crucial fact – changes in consumer behaviour factors of users of tourist services.

- Turbulent technological progress and development of science and its application in practice have a dual impact – both on the development of contents of tourist offer and tourist service product, as well as on changes in preferences, attitudes, expectations and total consumer demand from the tourism sectors, as well as their feeling of satisfaction. The result of the action of these factors is that the adaptation of tourist offer lags behind consumer preferences and expectations.
- Development and general presence in daily life and operation of information and communication technologies transfers the so-called negotiation power from service organizations to consumers, where the latter create their own communication channels and exchange impressions, attitudes and advice in the form of word-of-mouth communication, thus displacing official marketing communication channels with the market.
- Viewed globally, primarily in terms of world population growth, demographic changes change the rules of the game to a large extent and shape new demands placed before tourism as an industry.

For some time now, the phenomenon of word-of-mouth communication represents one of the main research areas of marketing theory and practice, dealt with by the leading authorities of not only marketing, but also sociology and psychology. Johann Arndt (1967, p. 291) was one of the first researchers into word-of-mouth communication and its impact on consumer behaviour, primarily in the innovation dissemination process. This author characterises interpersonal communication as “oral face-to-face communication between the recipient and the communicator, accepted by the recipients as an informal information source, i.e. without any connection to product, service or brand”. Hanna and Wozniak (2009, p. 457) define it as “personal communication between individuals, where one of them has the role of message recipient, where the other has the role of message source, i.e. sender, which is regarded as non-commercial, and refers to products, services or brands”. Michael Solomon (2011, p. 332) defines interpersonal communication as

“transmission of information on products and services from one individual to another”. If consumers hear positive impressions about a product from their friends, acquaintances, there are higher outlooks that they will buy and accept the offered product and service (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, 2002). Interpersonal communication is defined as “messages and information on a company, its credibility, trust in it, the company’s business manners, offer and quality of its products and services, exchanged in communication between individuals” (Gronroos, 2004, p. 269). As services are his primary area of research, when writing about interpersonal communication, Gronroos views it in the context of relations between consumers, i.e. connects it with the area of relationship marketing, and points out that consumers’ dedication to generated interpersonal communication lies in the base of it, as well as their long-term experiences with the company’s products and services. Such word-of-mouth communication reflects the nature and value of consumer perceptions of consumers’ relation to the company’s offer and employees, as well as their psychologically pleasant or unpleasant experience of these relationships. Depending on the strength and type of relationship, the intensity and direction of word-of-mouth communication will depend as well, so that it has two additional dimensions of observation – psychological and social. Mowen is one of the first ones who defines interpersonal communication as “messages exchanged face to face between exchange partners (1993, 551). The same author belongs to the group of theoreticians who believe that negative word-of-mouth communication is stronger, more frequent and efficient than positive and that this type of communication between consumers is the starting point of the basic need to receive and convey sender and recipient information.

Omnipresence and determining impact of word-of-mouth communication also found its place in research into the area of tourism. Murphy, Mascardo and Benckendorff (2007) highlight that information obtain by way of word-of-mouth is one of the most important information sources influencing the choice of tourist destination. The results of their research confirm their assumption about conditioning of characteristics of tourist consumers with the use and effect of WOM. Still, the authors emphasize that there is no strong correlation between the image of a tourist destination and use of WOM, but the impact of WOM on tourist behaviour is more than evident. A similar conclusion is found in Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan (2008), who also propose a conceptual model containing sources, correcting variables and motives for seeking and spreading WOM, pointing out the difference between electronic and traditional WOM. Quality of tourist offer is the critical factor that causes the feeling of satisfaction of tourists which, in most cases, but not always, results in WOM – the greater the feeling of satisfaction, the higher the probability that this satisfaction will be conveyed to other potential tourists (Fakhayran et al., 2014); White, 2010). Confente (2015) makes an overview of research into WOM in the area of tourism, and points out that 92% of consumers worldwide have more confidence in WOM, i.e. recommendations of friends and family members than in traditional marketing messages sent to them by companies. Baggio et al. (2009) research and compare influences of advertising and WOM in the area of tourism and strive to model the influence of WOM on tourist behaviour. The authors conclude that WOM is far more effective than commercial marketing, and that this influence depends directly proportionately on the degree of cohesion of the observed group of potential tourists-consumers. Jalilvand et al. (2013) set the directions for further research in the sense of possible correlation between the type of tourist travel, life cycle phase of individuals and their families, cultural specificities of tourist and destination, motive of travel etc., and generating and disseminating WOM.

One of the interesting, most recent studies is presented by Wu Shu Fen (2017), who emphasises that WOM basically represents spreading and sharing tourists’ personal experience, and as such, influences and shapes the demands of the tourist market. Due to such reasons, the primary task of marketing in the area of tourism should be complete understanding of the functioning and influence of WOM on consumers’ trust and behaviour, as well as the brand of the tourist destination or enterprise. The research she conducted prove statistically correlation between WOM and reliability of the tourist brand, and between WOM and brand intention, comprising consumers’ trust in the brand, with significant roles of demographic variables in the analysis.

Filieri and McLeay (2013.) ascertain that online recommendations of users of tourist services and visitors of tourist destinations decisively influence the choice of the latter, and direct their research on discovering factors influencing higher recognition of these recommendations. The authors discover and conclude that the rang of product, accuracy of information, value added that the information possesses or not, significance of information and permanence of information represent strong predictors of accepting online recommendations of other tourists regarding the tourist offers and destinations. The results of their research imply that consumer with high level of engagement accept both central (quality of information) and peripheral (product ranks) routes when processing information received by way of online recommendations of other consumers.

Gellerstedt and Arvemo (2019.) conducted very interesting research into the strength of the influence of two different forms of word-of-mouth communication – online recommendation of other consumers and offline recommendation of close friends, which are in minority. The authors discover that online recommendations are important in initial consideration of choice of destination and hotel, especially the most recent online recommendations, and conclude

that the personal recommendation of a good friend has a higher influence on the choice of the hotel than most online recommendations of other tourists whether word-of-mouth recommendation by friends is positive and negative.

Marić, Tomić and Leković (2018) do research into the effects of word-of-mouth communication in electronic form on the choice of tourist destination and arrangements of the slow tourism, where they identify that commercialization of slow tourism must be based on modern information and communication technologies, as the decision and choice of destination and offer of any form of tourism today is made predominantly by way of eWoM through the Internet, almost regardless of the tourists are females or males.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the paper is to point to the existence of differences of consumers in purchases according to socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. To this purpose, empirical research was conducted covering an adequate sample of 250 respondents of different genders, age and education levels (the stratification of the sample) from the area of AP Vojvodina. The survey conducted in order to confirm or reject the hypotheses set uses a research method in the form of structured personal communication, i.e. questionnaire, whose dissemination and response retrieval was conducted predominantly through the internet and personally. The survey of respondents included in the sample was conducted in the period from January to June 2019. The overview of socio-demographic characteristics of respondents is given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (n=250)

Socio-demographic characteristics		Number of respondents (n)	Structure (%)
Gender	Male	65	26,0
	Female	185	74,0
Age	up to 30y	212	84,8
	31-45y	30	12,0
	46-65y	8	3,2
	+65y	-	-
Education	Elementary education	-	-
	Secondary education	79	31,6
	Higher and high education	171	68,4

Source: Authors' calculation

Viewing the structure of the sample, it can be established that female respondents dominate (74%). A significant share of respondents included in the sample is up to 30 years old (84.8%), whereas the number of those belonging to the age group from 46 to 65 (3.2%) is the lowest. The majority of respondents has higher and high education (68.4%), while a minor number of respondents (31.6%) has secondary education.

By means of a Likert scale for every statement measuring consumers' recommendations for purchase, the respondents expressed their agreement of 1 to 5 (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – somewhat disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – somewhat agree, 5 – strongly agree). The total scale was obtained as a sum of results of each individual statements, so that the total result was divided by the number of statements (13). Minimum, maximum, mean value, standard deviation and variance were used for obtaining descriptive statistical indicators of consumers' purchase recommendations (Table 2). The range of obtained results is from 2.46 to 4.54, whereas the average value of consumers' recommendation for purchase is 3.75. The result of examining the normality of distribution on the basis of Komogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk's test point that the assumption of normality of distribution is not confirmed, i.e. the size of significance is lower than 0.05, requiring the application of non-parametric statistical techniques.

**Table 2.** Descriptive indicators of consumers' purchase recommendations

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	Shapiro-Wilk
Consumer recommendations for purchase	250	2.46	4.54	3.75	0.420	0.177	0.003	0.001

Source: Authors' calculation, SPSS exit table

Based on the analysis theoretical background and set research goals, the following hypotheses were proposed:

$H_1$ : There is no statistically difference in purchase recommendations between respondents of different genders.

$H_2$ : There is no statistically difference in purchase recommendations between respondents of different ages.

$H_3$ : There is no statistically difference in purchase recommendations between respondents of different education levels.

Testing the first and the third hypothesis was enabled by application of Man-Whitney U test, whereas testing the second hypothesis was performed by application of Kruskal-Wallis test. Statistical software in which the data was processed and proposed hypotheses were tested is IBM SPSS version 21.

#### 4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Determination of statistically significant difference in consumers' purchase recommendations in relation to respondents' gender (male and female) was investigated by means of Man-Whitney U test, as a non-parametric alternative of t-test of independent samples (Table 3). The amount of probability (p) needs to be lower than the required borderline value of 0.05, in order to regard the result of Z approximation as statistically significant.

**Table 3.** Test statistics<sup>a</sup>

	Consumers' purchase recommendations	Respondents' gender	Number of cases	Mean rank value	Median
Man-Whitney U test	5696,5	Male	65	120,64	3,77
Wilcoxon	7841,5				
Z	-,631	Female	185	127,21	3,77
Significance (p)	,528				

<sup>a</sup> Independent variable: Respondents' gender

Source: Authors' calculation, SPSS exit table

Man-Whitney U test did not discover a statistically significant difference in consumers' purchase recommendations between male (Md = 3.77, n=65) and female respondents (Md = 3.77, n=185), U = 5696.5, z = -0.631, p = 0.528 > 0.05. Having reviewed the mean rank values of the group, it is obvious that consumers' purchase recommendations are equal in male and female respondents. This is also proved by median value, i.e. male respondents have an equal median of results like female respondents. It can therefore be concluded that the proposed assumption  $H_1$  is **accepted**, i.e. **there is no statistically difference in purchase recommendations between respondents of different genders**.

Determination of statistically significant difference in consumers' purchase recommendations in relation to respondents' age was investigated by means of Kruskal-Wallis test (Table 4), as a non-parametric alternative to one-factor analysis of variance of different groups. Kruskal-Wallis test us used for comparing results of continuous random variable – consumer recommendations for three or more age groups (up to 30 years of age, 31-45, 46-65). When the significance level is lower

than 0.05, it can be concluded that the difference in obtained values of the continuous random variable between groups is significant (Coakes, 2013, p. 202). In this case, accompanying research is applied which, in most case include transforming results into ranks, and comparing values of ranks and medians (Green, Salking, 2014, p. 410) (Table 4)

**Table 4.** Kruskal-Wallis test<sup>a</sup>

	Consumers' purchase recommendations	Respondents' age	Number of cases	Mean rank value	Median
Chi square	1,229	Up to 30 y	212	125,32	3,77
Degree of freedom	2	31-45 y	30	119,83	3,73
Significance (p)	,541	46-65 y	8	151,56	3,92

<sup>a</sup> Independent variable: Age of respondents

Source: Authors' calculation, SPSS exit table

Kruskal-Wallis test did not discover a statistically significant difference in consumers' purchase recommendations between three age groups of (Gp<sub>1</sub>, n = 212: up to 30 years, Gp<sub>2</sub>, n = 30: 31-45 years, Gp<sub>3</sub>, n = 8: 46-65 years),  $\chi^2$  (2, n=250) = 1,229, p = 0,541 > 0.05. Consumer purchase recommendations are represented in all analysed age groups. It can therefore be concluded that proposed assumption **H<sub>2</sub> is accepted**, i.e. **there is no statistically difference in purchase recommendations between respondents of different ages**.

Determination of statistically significant difference in consumers' purchase recommendations in relation to respondents' education levels (secondary, higher and high education) was investigated by means of Man-Whitney U test, as a non-parametric alternative of t-test of independent samples (Table 5). The amount of probability (p) needs to be lower than the required borderline value of 0.05, in order to regard the result of Z approximation as statistically significant.

**Table 5.** Test statistics<sup>a</sup>

	Consumers' purchase recommendations	Respondents' education level	Number of cases	Mean rank value	Median
Man-Whitney U test	6053,5	Secondary education	79	116,63	3,77
Wilcoxon	9213,5				
Z	-1,321	Higher and high education	171	129,60	3,77
Significance (p)	,186				

<sup>a</sup> Independent variable: Respondents' education level

Source: Authors' calculation, SPSS exit table

Man-Whitney U test did not discover a statistically significant difference in consumers' purchase recommendations between respondents with secondary education level (Md = 3.77, n=79) and respondents with higher and high education level (Md = 3.77, n=171) U = 6053.5, z = -1.321, p = 0,186 > 0.05. Having reviewed the mean rank values of the group, it is obvious that consumers' purchase recommendations are equal for respondents with secondary and respondents with higher and high education. It can therefore be concluded that proposed assumption **H<sub>3</sub> is accepted**, i.e. **there is no statistically difference in purchase recommendations between respondents of different education levels**.

## 5. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The limitations of the completed research could be reduced to the fact that making general conclusions based on a single study is not completely reliable, regardless of the sample size and the structure of instrument. The basic shortcoming of the sample relies in the proportion of its size (250) to the size of the basic set – around 2 million inhabitants in the province of Vojvodina.

One of the dominant characteristics of the contemporary business environment is a dramatic decline in consumers' confidence in all forms of commercial advertising and marketing communication in general. Consumers, therefore increasingly turn to information sources that do not have this commercial dimension, first of all, friends and family. The latest marketing research on markets of developed countries have shown that word-of-mouth communication has a higher impact on creating consumer attitudes to products and services and purchase intentions in comparison with other forms of communication. It is believed that eight of ten decision made in purchasing are the consequence, i.e. result of somebody's informal recommendation and advice. Research into the phenomenon of word-of-mouth communication in the tourism sectors for the needs of this paper, appreciating all limitations in terms of representativity of the sample, and the type and number of applied methods of statistic processing, was conducted with the aim to do a socio-demographic analysis of this phenomenon, and confirm the above through the following:

The vast majority of the respondents in the sample spread their experience of tourist destinations and offer to other persons from their surroundings and those that they do not know personally through word-of-mouth communication only when they feel extremely high satisfaction levels or when they experienced great dissatisfaction and disappointment.

Most respondents possess a direct experience of purchase of tourist arrangements and choices of destination and hotel, which is a consequence of word of mouth communication based on recommendations of other consumers directly or electronically through recommendations and assessments on websites, but also giving up purchases predominantly based on criticisms other consumers primarily they have or might have heard.

The majority of respondents will very rarely opt for choosing and purchasing a tourist arrangement if there is negative word-of-mouth communication about, but the majority of respondents still rely more on their own experience and knowledge when making purchase decisions.

The majority of respondents in the sample are more active when they spread positive word-of-mouth communication as a consequence of high satisfaction than when they spread negative word-of-mouth communication as consequence of great disappointment.

The majority of respondents both seek word-of-mouth recommendations related to certain tourist destinations and arrangements and leave and disseminate them after visiting them.

Respondents in the sample do not show statistically significant differences in terms of demographic characteristics – gender, age and education level by any form of interpersonal behaviour and word-of-mouth communication manifested by word-of-mouth communication.

Word-of-mouth communication represents a general phenomenon characteristic of all levels of education, ages and genders, thus confirming its dominant influence on consumer behaviour and their purchase decisions. This omnipresence and strength of word-of-mouth communication can be explained by the essential nature of man and his need to communicate.

Organizations in the tourism sectors must regard word-of-mouth as a general principle and try to incorporate it into their marketing plans and activities with the use of contemporary information and communication technologies and abundance of information exchange, primarily through virtual social networks, blogs, forums and various other communication platforms. Still, one needs to be aware that high-quality tourist product with supremely qualified and dedicated service staff, foundation of generating and disseminating positive recommendation through word-of-mouth, thus raising both effectiveness and efficiency of marketing operations, and the tourist destinations differentiates itself in relation to its competitors with its offer.

In the future, tourism as a sector must accept and serve new, contemporary and sophisticated clients who form their demands and expectations very clearly, and who articulate, express and spread their satisfaction or disappointment even more clearly and strongly. Future research in this field should be defined in order to support marketing theory and practice with more information what are the consumer's types or groups with most interpersonal interaction and word of mouth communication, are there any differences between the main drivers of that kind of communication, and what is the impact level of word of mouth on business success in tourism sector.

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## USMENA PREDAJA U TURIZMU – SOCIO-DEMOGRAFSKA ANALIZA

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### SAŽETAK

Unatoč naporima marketinških eksperata u sektoru turizma u cilju poticanja turista-potrošača da ponovo posjete određenu turističku destinaciju, na tu njihovu odluku o kupovini utječu brojni drugi faktori. U tom smislu, preporuke članova obitelji i prijatelja se smatraju kao najpouzdaniji izvor informacija u procesu odluke i izbora turističke destinacije. Bez obzira jesu li tu turističku destinaciju doista posjetili ili nisu, potrošači često daju komentare i preporuke svojim članovima obitelji i svojim prijateljima. Ova istraživačka studija predstavlja analizu postojanja različitosti socio-demografskih karakteristika - spol, starost, obrazovanje kod turista - potrošača koji daju, namjeravaju dati, i koji ne daju preporuke, odnosno analizu razlika u preporukama potrošača prema socio-demografskim karakteristikama ispitanika. Uzorak istraživanja čini 250 ispitanika s područja Autonomne pokrajine Vojvodine. Sa ciljem da se testiraju predložene istraživačke hipoteze korištene su statističke metode kao što su t - test nezavisnih uzoraka i analiza varijance - ANOVA.

**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:** preporuke, turizam, proces donošenja odluke.