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TOURIST BEHAVIOR IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS: THE ROLE OF SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

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Abstract

Understanding consumer behavior in the tourism sector is crucial for the success of tourism organizations and the development of effective marketing strategies. Examining how consumers make decisions regarding tourism products enables better understanding of their needs and preferences. The research aims to analyze consumer behavior during the decision-making process in tourism, specifically analyzing behavior across different socio-demographic segments. The empirical analysis was conducted on a sample of 237 respondents using primary data processed in the statistical software SPSS. The results indicate that consumer behavior related to researching and purchasing package holidays, visiting tourist destinations, and loyalty toward travel agencies differs across socio-demographic segments. These findings suggest that it is highly important for organizations in the tourism sector to recognize the specific behavioral patterns of different consumer segments and to adjust their marketing and business strategies accordingly.

Key Words: *consumer behavior, tourism, decision-making, socio-demographic segments*

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Introduction

Consumer behavior in tourism is shaped by a broad set of economic, demographic, psychological, sociological, and political factors that are

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essential for developing effective marketing strategies (Tomić et al., 2019). A comprehensive understanding of how consumers perceive, learn, and make travel decisions, as well as how their motivations, attitudes, personality traits, and social influences shape their travel behavior, is necessary (Moutinho, 1987). In this context, demographic factors are particularly important, as tourism market development highly depends on identifying demographic challenges and transformations in society (Nikitina & Vorontsova, 2015). Hence, in tourism research, authors often segment consumers according to socio-demographic characteristics to better understand their behavior. Accordingly, numerous studies use age (Li et al., 2013; Tomić et al., 2019; Nicolau et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pallas et al., 2024), gender (Lin et al., 2014; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021; Cheng et al., 2024), family structure or stage (Kattiyapornpong & Miller, 2009; Shuai et al., 2022; Mihai et al., 2023), income (Birdir, 2015; Correia et al., 2015; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018; Lee et al., 2025), education (Djeri et al., 2017; De Cicco et al., 2024; Mihai et al., 2023), or nationality (Jensen, 2006; Thrane & Farstad, 2012; De Cicco et al., 2024) as segmentation criteria for tourists. In addition, previous research emphasizes that an examination of demographic characteristics is crucial for understanding sustainable tourist behavior (Dobre et al., 2024; Saltık & Akova, 2026), highlighting the broader relevance of such analyses beyond traditional tourism marketing perspectives.

Previous research on tourist behavior often relies on simplified two-stage or single-choice models, which are insufficient to capture the complexity of tourist decision behavior. Emerging studies hence emphasize observing sequential and dynamic phases, including pre-decision, active decision, and post-decision stages, which remain under-examined in empirical research (Nicolau et al., 2020). Furthermore, socio-demographic factors are shown to influence these stages differently, highlighting the need to take into account variations in consumer behavior across consumer segments (Mihai et al., 2023). Accordingly, the paper examines tourist behavior in the decision-making process across socio-demographic segments, focusing on researching and purchasing package holidays, visiting tourist destinations, and loyalty toward travel agencies in relation to gender, age, and education. The paper is structured as follows: after the introductory section, a literature review on decision-making across different consumer segments in tourism is presented, followed by the research methodology and sample description, the presentation and discussion of results, and finally the conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Literature review

Previous studies emphasize the importance of socio-demographic characteristics in shaping consumer behavior in tourism (Aziz et al., 2018). Within this context, age emerges as a particularly relevant segmentation variable. In line with this, Rodríguez-Pallas et al. (2024) show that younger tourists prefer international destinations, whereas older tourists are more inclined toward domestic destinations. Tomić et al. (2019) further show that consumers of different ages exhibit varying preferences for activities at tourist destinations. The study by Li et al. (2013) highlights that different American generations vary in their preferences regarding information sources, past destination visitation, future destination choices, destination evaluation criteria, and travel activity preferences. Further, Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil (2018) concluded that older tourists are more likely to demonstrate loyalty toward a destination or even multiple destinations simultaneously, while younger tourists are more oriented toward novelty seeking as they prefer exploring new places. Alongside age, gender is an important socio-demographic variable influencing consumer behavior in tourism (Rodríguez-Pallas et al., 2024). In this regard, Cheng et al. (2024) indicate that both genders exhibit similar attitudes and preferences toward travel vlogs as information sources, while differences appear in information searching habits and trust in information sources. Rodríguez-Pallas et al. (2024) find that women favor new destinations while men prefer relaxation travel. On the other hand, Lin et al. (2014) report no significant gender differences in destination decision-making. In addition to age and gender, education emerges as a significant socio-demographic factor influencing tourist behavior. Starting from the assumption that tourists' educational level may affect their preferences, information-seeking behavior, decision-making process, and destination selection, Djeri et al. (2017) identified differences among tourists with different educational levels across four stages of the decision-making process, namely information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation. De Cicco et al. (2024) further suggest that education influences tourists' engagement patterns, with lower-educated tourists being more active in online information seeking and social media interaction, while higher-educated tourists show greater involvement in onsite activities. Regarding selecting a destination, Mihai et al. (2023) found that tourists with a university degree are more attentive to the destination image, unique destination characteristics, and service quality as key determinants of choosing travel destinations.

Research methodology

Primary data necessary to conduct the empirical research were collected through an online survey administered to 237 respondents from Kragujevac. The questionnaire included 3 demographic questions and 10 statements measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The sample was segmented by gender, age, and education. Out of 237 respondents, 133 (56.1%) were female and 104 (43.9%) male. Regarding age, 109 (46%) were aged 18–35, 94 (36.7%) were 36–55, and 34 (14.3%) were 56 or older. In terms of education, 80 (33.8%) had secondary education, 48 (20.3%) had undergraduate studies, and 109 (46%) had a graduate degree.

Reliability analysis was performed to assess the internal consistency of the measurement items, while t-test and one-way ANOVA, post hoc Scheffé tests were used to examine differences in consumer behavior across socio-demographic segments in the tourism decision-making process.

Research results and discussion

In the first step of the analysis, variable reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Reliability analysis*

Variable	Cronbach's alpha
Researching and purchasing package holidays	0.702
Visiting tourist destinations	0.704
Loyalty toward travel agencies	0.927

Source: *Authors*

According to the results, it can be concluded that all variables consist of statements that meet the required level of internal consistency of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978).

Following the reliability analysis, differences in consumer behavior across socio-demographic segments were examined. Age-based differences were analyzed using an independent samples t-test (Table 2).

Based on the results, differences between female and male respondents were identified in relation to researching and purchasing package holidays

as well as loyalty toward travel agencies, while no differences were found in visiting tourist destinations. Specifically, women are more likely to inform themselves about package holidays and to purchase them through travel agencies, which is also reflected in higher loyalty. In contrast, both genders show similar behavior regarding visiting tourist destinations.

Table 2: *Independent samples t-test (segmentation criterion: gender)*

Variable	Mean		St. deviation		Sig 2 tailed
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Researching and purchasing package holidays	4.60	4.30	1.28	1.18	0.067
Visiting tourist destinations	3.89	3.81	1.24	1.29	0.613
Loyalty toward travel agencies	5.30	4.94	1.61	1.58	0.091

Source: *Authors*

The next segmentation was performed based on the respondents' age using one-way ANOVA, post hoc Scheffe test (Table 3).

Table 3: *One-way ANOVA, post hoc Scheffe test (segmentation criterion: age)*

Variable	Sig 2 tailed	Post hoc Scheffe	
		Groups	Mean
Researching and purchasing package holidays	0.008	2	4.24
		3	5.01
Visiting tourist destinations	0.000	1	3.79
		3	4.65
		2	3.66
		3	4.65
Loyalty toward travel agencies	0.002	1	5.11
		3	5.98
		2	4.87
		3	5.98

Source: *Authors*

When it comes to age, differences were identified across all observed stages of the decision-making process. Compared to respondents aged 36–55 (Group 2), respondents aged 56 or above (Group 3) are more likely to inform themselves about package holidays and purchase them when well informed, often through travel agencies. In addition, compared to

both younger groups (Group 1 and Group 2), the oldest show a higher tendency to visit familiar destinations and hotels, choose organized package tours, and visit multiple destinations during a trip. Finally, they exhibit the highest level of loyalty toward travel agencies compared to the other two groups.

The last segmentation was performed according to the respondents' education level, using one-way ANOVA, post hoc Scheffe test (Table 4).

Table 4: *One-way ANOVA, post hoc Scheffe test (segmentation criterion: education)*

Variable	Sig 2 tailed	Post hoc Scheffe	
		Groups	Mean
Researching and purchasing package holidays	0.013	1	4.19
		3	4.71
Visiting tourist destinations	0.065	2	4.24
		3	3.75
Loyalty toward travel agencies	0.013	1	4.63
		2	5.44
		1	4.63
		3	5.38

Source: *Authors*

According to the obtained results, respondents with different education levels exhibit different behavior when making decisions regarding tourist products. Compared to respondents with secondary education (Group 1), respondents with graduate degree (Group 3) are more likely to seek information about package holidays and purchase them when well informed, often through travel agencies. In comparison with respondents with graduate degree (Group 3), respondents with undergraduate studies (Group 2) show more positive attitudes toward visiting familiar destinations and hotels, choosing organized package tours, and visiting multiple destinations during a trip. Regarding loyalty, respondents with undergraduate studies (Group 2) and graduate degree (Group 3) are more likely to recommend and repurchase from the same travel agency compared to respondents with secondary education (Group 1).

Conclusion

The study examined whether socio-demographic segments differ in their decision-making behaviour regarding tourism products. The results show

that consumers with different socio-demographic characteristics behave differently in this process. Gender differences were found in researching and purchasing package holidays and in loyalty toward travel agencies, which is consistent with previous research (Cheng et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pallas et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2014), while no differences were observed in visiting tourist destinations, a finding also reported by Lin et al. (2014). Furthermore, consumers of different age behave differently across all observed stages of the decision-making process, confirming the findings of prior research (Li et al., 2013; Tomić et al., 2019; Almeida-Santana & Moreno-Gil, 2018; Rodríguez-Pallas et al., 2024). Regarding education, lower-educated consumers are more likely to inform themselves about package holidays, whereas higher-educated consumers tend to choose familiar packages and show greater loyalty toward travel agencies, which is consistent with previous research (Djeri et al., 2017; De Ciccio et al., 2024; Mihai et al., 2023).

The research has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the findings contribute to a better understanding of consumer behavior during the tourism decision-making process across different socio-demographic groups. They may also serve as a basis for future research examining the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and sustainable tourism behavior (Rojo-Ramos et al., 2021). Practically, the results can help travel agencies adapt their marketing strategies to the characteristics of their target consumers. In addition, travel agencies can direct their strategies toward specific stages of the decision-making process to achieve a stronger and more desired influence on consumer behavior. The results indicate that travel agencies should consider differences in information search, purchasing behavior, destination and hotel preferences, and loyalty across consumers of different gender, age, and education. This enables more effective market segmentation and the development of tailored marketing strategies in the tourism sector.

The study has several limitations, including a small sample size and a narrow geographic scope, which limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, it does not cover all stages of the consumer decision-making process and includes only a limited set of socio-demographic variables (gender, age, and education). Future research should address these limitations by using larger and more geographically diverse sample, examining all phases of the decision-making process, and incorporating additional socio-demographic factors such as income, nationality, or

family structure. Further studies may also explore the link between socio-demographic characteristics and sustainable tourism behavior.

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