

## Theoretical Foundations of Marketing Research in Tourist Destinations

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*The current development of most tourist destinations is still determined by the continuing impact of the global pandemic of COVID-19, which in 2020 managed to have an unprecedented negative impact on the global tourism industry, returning it to levels known in the 1990s. According to the World Tourism Organization, the loss of international tourist arrivals is 74% in 2020 compared to the previous 2019. The same year saw a loss of revenue from international tourism of \$1.3 trillion. In these extremely difficult conditions of existence, most of the tourist organizations turn their attention to destination marketing, as the only tool that allows for successful market positioning and preservation of the existing market share. Because of that this paper will present the theoretical foundations of marketing research in order to raise awareness of their ability to provide complete and plain information, leading to motivated decisions for the strategic development of individual tourist destinations.*

**Keywords:** *tourist destinations, marketing research, theoretical foundations*

### Introduction

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has caused an unprecedented economic and social crisis in all spheres of life in modern society, making science a major source of effective proposals for economic and social recovery. It is an indisputable fact that the tourism industry was the most affected sector of the world economy. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2021), "Tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting economies, livelihoods, public services and opportunities on all continents" (UNWO, 2020). In 2020 United Nations World Tourism Organization reports: „-74% loss of international tourist arrivals, international tourism could plunge to levels of 1990s, loss of international tourist arrivals 1 billion, loss in international tourism receipts US \$ 1.3 trillion, Estimated loss in global GDP over US \$ 2 trillion and 100-120 million direct tourism jobs at risk “(UNWO, 2021). The data presented from UNWO really show the extremely negative effect of the pandemic on the development of the modern tourism industry. The current reality shows that this negative impact influence the development of tourist destinations, as one of the most essential elements of tourism worldwide. In this regard analysing the nature and features of modern tourism it is noteworthy that tourist destinations are the places that attract the largest number of actual and potential tourists. “The destination is defined as a geographical area that is perceived by visitors as a unique site with political and legislative framework for tourism marketing and planning” (Ianeva et al. 2021, p. 9). Tourists who prefer specific experiences travel

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to destinations to satisfy their personal desires and interests related to visiting anthropogenic or natural landmarks, participating in various recreational activities and realizing specific personal experiences that form positive emotions from their interaction with the destination and the tourist opportunities it offers. "The mission of each tourist destination should be to attract tourists and to create sustainable livelihoods for local people, contributing in the meantime to the conservation and development of natural, cultural and human resources" (Stankova 2011). It is an indisputable fact that in different periods of their existence, tourist destinations go through different cycles of development, which in turn affects their attractiveness and the way they are perceived by real and potential tourists. Such a negative period took place between 2019 and 2021. „The COVID-19 pandemic has, without doubt, been the biggest, and the most damaging, issue for the tourist industry in the past two years and, not surprisingly, plans, initiatives, and strategies designed to respond to the pandemic, and to support the recovery of the tourism industry“ (Jones 2022, p.10). As a result, it can be rightly argued that maintaining a sustainable positive image in the minds of modern tourists is one of the biggest challenges facing tourism marketing. That is why marketing research occupies an extremely important place in modern tourism, as their main goal is to establish and understand the principles of effective and sustainable interaction between tourists on the one side and tourism organizations functioning and embodying the destination itself.

In today's highly competitive tourism market, the need for accurate, timely and complete information is essential for the management and size of the market share of any destination, whether new or established. It can rightly be argued that marketing research allows tourist destinations to acquire information that will lead to the efficient use of their resources to meet the dynamically changing needs, preferences and interests of modern tourists, as well as to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID 19 pandemic to the development of the global tourism industry. Without the use of marketing research, destinations will not have the necessary information to enable them to strategically effectively positioning, which serves as a basis for creating the necessary competitive advantage. Also, because tourist destinations "have a significant role in stimulating and creating demand and need to know whether their marketing and management efforts are reaching their target markets and whether their targeted customers are responding in the desired way" (Fyall and Leask 2006), which in turn also is a function of marketing research. In this regard, in order to establish the nature, features and specific characteristics of marketing research, it is essential to understand and understand the marketing of the destination. That is why one of the most frequently cited definitions of destination marketing in the 1970s was presented by Wahab et al. (1976), according to which "the management process through which the National Tourists Organizations and/or tourist enterprises identify their selected tourists, actual and potential, communicate with them to ascertain and influence their wishes, needs, motivations, likes and dislikes, on local, regional, national and international levels and to formulate and adapt their tourist products accordingly in view of achieving optimal tourist's satisfaction thereby fulfilling their objectives" (Wahab et al. 1976). Also of interest is the opinion of Murphy et

al. (2000), according to which “destination marketing is then an amalgamation of individual or collective efforts and activities created to form a total experience of a visited place” (Murphy et al. 2000). That’s why “destination marketing has become an integral part of developing and retaining the essence of the tourism macro-product” (Vukonic 1997).

The presented opinions on destination marketing provide an opportunity to establish their essential importance for tourism and the opportunities it provides for the optimal and effective supply of modern products and services that meet market needs and expectations. Understanding the dynamics of the market is essential for the management of the destination and the overall tourist experience it offers. “Hence, destination marketing research may cover almost any exploratory effort by any organization to understand the market, promote the place, or enhance and augment the existing tourism goods and services through positioning strategies that support the sustainability of tourism business” (Muzaffer et al. 2011).

## **Literature Review**

The present study focuses on the theoretical foundations of marketing research of tourist destinations, but it should be noted that in the process of its creation the essence and characteristics of marketing research, tourism marketing, destination marketing and marketing research of a tourist destination are considered. The review of the literature on those subjects shows the existence of a wide variety of different scientific research. Regarding marketing research, the publications of Bagozzi (1994), McDaniel (2018), Bradley (2007), Kent (1999), Juska (2021) and Babin et al. (2020). Regarding tourism marketing, publications of Wahab et al. (1976), Kotler et al. (2021), Fyall and Garrod (2011) and Oelkers (2006). Regarding destination marketing, the publications of Harrill (2005), Wang and Russo (2007), Fyall and Leask (2006). About tourism destination marketing research can be noted the papers of Perdue and Pitegoff (1990), Vukonic (1997), Muzaffer et al. (2011) and Ghiuta (2009). Regarding the valuable Bulgarian developments in the study area, the publications of Anastasova (2013) and Zhelev (1995) can be distinguished. All of the presented scientific publications add value to scientific knowledge and in particular to the present study. At the same time, they provide an opportunity for analysis of the views and theoretical formulations presented from the authors and related to the subject of this paper.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approaches used in the creation of scientific papers are extremely diverse, which significantly complicates the choice of an appropriate set of methods based on the specifics of current research. To achieve the objectives of the present study, a methodological apparatus was used, including a set of methods such as: observation, analogy, comparative analysis and synthesis. In their entirety, they are the subject of an inductive-deductive and systematic approach to issues related to tourism marketing and in particular are aimed at presenting the theoretical

foundations of marketing research on tourist destinations. The general methodological framework is based on a review of the literature on the topic, including searching for and reviewing sources of information, using a multi-attribute approach. The overall logical construction is based on the opinion that each study contributes to the emergence of new conclusions and statements, which in turn lead to new knowledge and opportunities for informed management decisions.

## Results

The process of conducting each marketing research is aimed at collecting data and generating information. Because of that, they can answer a variety of research questions and identify the most effective solutions to the difficulties encountered in the management of tourist destinations. In today's highly competitive tourism market, marketing research of destinations is a continuous process involving a large number of participants - from tourists, through providers of tourism products and services and leads to the administrative management of the destination. In today contemporary conditions and imposed principles of social distance from the emergence of the global pandemic of COVID19, in a highly competitive tourism market, destination marketing research is a continuous process involving a large number of participants - from tourists, through providers of tourism products and services and the administrative management of the territory in which the destination is located is reached. It can be rightly argued that there are two leading goals in terms of destination marketing research: (i) to increase demand for the destination while maintaining a sustainable competitive edge in the minds of actual and potential visitors; and (ii) to facilitate effective destination management" (Muzaffer et al. 2011, p. 103). Therefore, it can be assumed that the main function of destination marketing research is to provide information that will form effective processes aimed at making strategic decisions about the destination's marketing policy and the goals and objectives of its management.

Taking into account the specificity and complex nature of tourist destinations, six main types of research can be identified, which are widely used in marketing research:

1. *Market and customer research*, which are aimed at providing information on the size of markets and market segments, the size of the market share of tourist destinations, specific characteristics, preferences and motivations of tourists, market forecasts, consumer behaviour research etc.
2. *Product studies (including services)* provide information on the opportunities associated with the creation and offering of new tourism products or services, specific characteristics of the products sought, the usefulness of the products and services offered, comparability between products and direct competitors and identification of the specific stage of the life cycle of the specific product or service.
3. *Studies of promotional activities* provide information aimed at selecting and identifying the most effective methods and tools to promote the

product or service, emotional impact on consumers, to select the most appropriate communication channels in a particular marketing campaign, for evaluation of the effectiveness of the conducted marketing campaigns, etc.

4. *Research of the distribution activities*, which should direct the marketing managers to the preferred transport from the target group determined for research; the preferred season for a given tourist activity; which destinations are more attractive for tourists, etc.
5. *The sales research* is aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the methods used, techniques and methods for selling tourism products and services, establishing the preferred consumer methods of payment, establishing customer satisfaction in the purchase process.
6. *The study of the marketing environment* provides complete and accurate information about the marketing environment with its six components: “natural, economic, political, legislative and technological, demographic/ socio-cultural environment” (Ghiuta 2009, p. 2).

Also, in order to reveal the nature and peculiarities of marketing research in relation to tourist destinations, their goals and functions must be taken into account. In this regard, according to Anastasova regarding the goals associated with the assignment or implementation of a marketing study, there are four main groups:

- Through the results of a study to systematize information that will affect a particular consumer audience.
- Create a new or modify or transform an existing product or service in a way that will arouse the interest of a specific target audience.
- Gathering information about the behaviour, preferences and interests of consumers.
- To identify the needs of the organization’s customers who were not met at the time of purchase.

On the other side, the main functions of marketing research also have their diverse nature, but it can be argued that the most important function is related to the ability to informed strategic decisions for the management of the organization. Other features that need to be presented and that play an important role are:

- To carry out continuous communication between the client and the organization to gather up-to-date information about market trends.
- To provide complete and reliable information for strategic management decisions.
- To assist in resolving difficulties related to the management and functioning of the organization.
- To support the creation of new management strategies.

In terms of methodology, according to Middleton (2001) there are ten types of marketing research in tourism and they are grouped as follows:

1. *Continuum research and ad hoc research* are used to obtain information related to certain key variables. Ad hoc research is conducted expeditiously and is aimed at clarifying a specific problem. A typical example in this regard is their use when there is a need to establish a systematic decline in revenue of an office of a particular travel company. On the other side, long-term research is carried out continuously in different time ranges (daily, weekly, monthly). Examples of key variables studied could be the percentage occupancy of hotel rooms in the destination, the volume of tourist products and services sold, etc. It should also be noted that in terms of marketing practice, the presented surveys can be used together. Because most of the marketing research is a mixture of continuous research that aims to identify key market trends and Ad hoc research, which aims to periodically identify specific threats and business opportunities for the tourism organization.

2. *Quantitative and qualitative research*. Of interest in this type of research is the fact that qualitative research focuses on questions such as WHAT, HOW and WHY, while quantitative research answers questions such as WHO, WHERE, WHEN and HOW MUCH.

That is why qualitative research is used to:

- Determining the parameters of the market.
- To present the opinion and attitude of customers to a product or service.
- To establish customer behaviour.
- To clarify the attitude of customers to the brand and the specific organization.

On the other hand, qualitative research has the ability to establish:

- Opportunities in a market.
- Changes in consumer behaviour.
- New markets.

According to Gordham and Langmaid (1988), there are 5 types of information that can be obtained from qualitative research, namely:

- “To define the perceptions and opinions of customers about the market and/or product in order to help competitors understand the relationship between different types of products and/or varieties in each product category from the customer’s point of view rather than from the point of view of the manufacturer.
- To segment the market in relation to the product or its brands, namely psychographic segmentation. That is, in terms of lifestyle.
- To choose the dimensions, the characteristics that vary between the different varieties of the brand, the criteria and the emotional settings.

This is necessary because more and more emotional beliefs and attitudes come into play in the process of making purchasing decisions - whether they are decisions of companies or individual customers.

- To better understand the purchasing decision-making process and/or customer consumption pattern.
- To generate hypotheses” (Gorden and Langmaid 1988).

Analyzing the nature of qualitative research can be deduced their important role determined by their ability to clarify the issues to be studied and the research parameters that need to be determined to achieve a complete and reliable study.

According to Anastasova (2015), qualitative research can be divided into four main groups:

- Studies of the initial study of the problem.
- Diagnostic tests.
- Evaluation research.
- Development research.

On the other hand, Kent’s opinion is of interest, according to which “the validity of information in qualitative research depends on the following factors:

- Data quality - accuracy, comprehensiveness, relevance to the problem of data collected from individuals or groups of individuals.
- The status of the results of quality techniques - their reliability, truthfulness, possibility of generalization, i.e., the degree to which they can be defined as scientific” (Kent 1993, p. 125).

It can be said that the main purpose of quantitative methods is to gather sufficient information on public attitudes and preferences, which is later analyzed by statistical methods. Quantitative testing means such testing in which the numerical values obtained can be measured. Quantitative research is always based on structured questionnaires, which ask each respondent to answer the same questions, and individual variations are not possible. Quantitative methods are most often used to characterize some basic signs of motivation. They also use sampling methods, which are used in connection with the reduction of time and costs to achieve research goals. The obtained results are presented in quantitative measures, such as ratings, evaluation, etc.

3. *Primary research and secondary research.* Primary research is carried out in cases where the desired data are collected directly from the surveyors, using methods such as observation, experiment and market research. Secondary research focuses on the use of information gathered through other studies or references, often for purposes other than those related to the particular study, and which may be used by the organization for the purposes of its research process. For example, all published sources, including data from statistical institutes and organizations such as Eurostat, or information found, through the use of the Internet and through surveys of certain tourist associations, etc.

4. *Omnibus research and collective research.* Due to the large scale of the tourism market, large market research companies sell their own research to a range of interested smaller tourism organizations. Such research is known as the omnibus because it is potentially open to all users. “The principle is that a particular research marketing agency works for multiple clients, each of whom orders, pays and is the sole owner of the information about the variables of interest included in one research tool (questionnaire, diary, survey, etc.)” (Tsonev 2013, p. 9). On the other hand, the collective surveys are similar to the omnibus surveys, but their implementation is carried out by a group of clients who share the costs of conducting the survey itself, taking into account the number of questions asked.

Omnibus and collective research allows for full-fledged low-cost research due to the possibility of sharing the costs of their implementation. That is why this type of research is preferred by small companies, for which the costs allocated to special research are often burdensome for the budget.

5. *Consumer and distributor research.* User-level research is based on the use of user panels. In this type of research, the separate panels are based on a representative sample consisting of individuals or households within a particular country, who on their own consent keep a complete record of their purchases for a specific period of time. The purpose of these studies is to accumulate information that will answer the question of what exactly the surveyed customers buy. Dedicated panels have the ability to generate information to be used in making strategically important decisions for the future activities of the organization. In this regard, Parti (1999) classifies the analysis of data from these studies into three groups:

- An analysis of trends is prepared, which is based on periodic surveys, for example every month or every three months, and which reveals the dynamics of the market and the activity of the main brands.
- Preparation of an analysis focused on the characteristics of determining customer behavior.
- Preparation of an analysis of the research aimed at the typical types of customer behavior and the impact of the marketing environment on them.

Distributor-level surveys are used less in the tourism market and in particular for tourist destinations, as they focus mainly on the trend in the fight for reservations, marketing activities of the organization operating in the destination and others.

With regard to the tourist construction, three other types of marketing research are impressive, creating an opportunity to assess the success and value of the policy or implemented programs in connection with the development of tourist destinations.

1. *Descriptive research*, they are widespread in tourism because of their ability to provide information about new trends in practice and to effectively identify changes in nature and phenomena. Descriptive research can provide information on specific activities or destinations that



have not been thoroughly studied to date. As tourism is a new field of study, there is a requirement for a territorial map.

2. *Explicit research* makes it possible to explain the observed trends through the use of descriptive research. This type of research examines causal relationships. Once the cause is identified and analyzed, the information obtained can be used to create different types and ranges of forecasts.
3. *Evaluation research*, this type of research is aimed at establishing an assessment of the success or effectiveness of the policies and strategies used. Giving a certain numerical value allows for a quick analysis of the success of the implemented strategy or policy, which in turn leads to effective management decisions.

Analysing the specifics of marketing research of tourist destinations in terms of their strategic orientation, two main types are identified according to Azar (Azar and Tumanov 1998, p. 45).

- Research aimed at discovering new opportunities.
- Research aimed at using the newly discovered opportunities.

The first type may include product studies, segmentation studies, motivation studies, image studies and price studies. The second type includes all studies related to advertising and distribution channels used to carry out the activities of the organization.

It is essential for any marketing research not to create a program that represents the “theoretical, methodological and organizational framework of marketing research” (Желев 2012, p. 118). Research programs are generally divided into three types:

- *Formulative research programs* that focus on research aimed at identifying the most effective available management or research problems, to formulate research hypotheses; identify different lines of action; to generate ideas and proposals for specific actions, etc. In this type of program, the main methods of communication are in-depth interviews, group discussions, talks with experts, secondary data processing.
- *Descriptive research programs*. “They seek to describe and quantify the variables of interest to them, such as market penetration, market shares, levels of consumer loyalty, brand awareness, and more. The descriptive program is applied to structured research problems and precisely formulated hypotheses” (Tsonev 2013, p. 101). This type of program answers six main questions:
  - Who: Who are the loyal buyers of the brand? Who gave it up?
  - What: what do consumers prefer in one case or another that influences their choices?

- How much: How often do you buy the product? Quantity of the product that is bought with one standard purchase.
  - Where: Where do buyers prefer to make purchases? Where is the consumption made?
  - When: When are purchases planned? When are they actually performed?
  - How: How do users make suggestions? How do consumers express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction?
- *Experimental (causal) research programs.* They are used in establishing and studying causal relationships between the phenomena of interest to us. They provide answers to important questions such as: which variables are causes and which are consequences in order to logically explain the causal relationships.

Establishing the nature and features of the theoretical foundations of marketing research in tourist destinations, some new trends must be presented, having all the necessary characteristics to become an integral part of current and future theoretical basis of marketing research in tourism and in particular tourist destinations.

The ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19 has led to far-reaching changes in the way of life of modern society, which in turn has affected many socio-economic sectors. In this regard, the dynamic development of digital technologies has led to the emergence of new marketing approaches, methods, techniques and ways to conduct marketing research. Some of them are in fact the application of new or innovative technologies to the research tools established over the years.

The dynamic development of information and communication technologies in recent years has allowed the collection, processing and analysis of large data sets to be done in an extremely easy way through the Internet and technologies based on artificial intelligence. That is why some of the modern marketing research that is widely applicable to tourist destinations are:

- *Mobile methods of marketing research:* modern smartphones, tablets, smart watches and high-tech computers allow access to a large amount of information indefinitely. The ubiquity of these digital devices has made them a preferred platform for many companies, due to the ability to quickly access the minds of many modern users. That is why marketing research has focused on using much of the digital technology known so far to meet the challenges posed by the highly competitive tourism market. For example, specialized marketing research that focuses on the selection of a particular market segment may use technologies that conduct localized research (through the location of the user determined by mobile phone). Also, “the use of user location information enables marketers to gather detailed information through mobile phones about consumer behavior, enabling them to better understand consumer habits, lifestyles and preferences” (Anastasova 2015).

- *Virtual shopping*: this method is performed by conducting an experiment representing a virtual simulation of a store, which simulates and explores the customers shopping experience. This method gives effective results in conducting marketing research focused mainly on the location of the offered, the interior of the store, packaging and merchandising. The positive side of the method is the re-creation of a real situation that will predispose clients to their normal reactions, thus achieving maximum reliability of the study.
- *Biometric research techniques*: they are aimed at measuring and establishing physical reactions formed under the influence of various external stimuli such as videos, advertisements, internet banners etc. The specificity of the method is the high reliability of the information received due to the formation of natural reactions from customers, which otherwise they would not show. Examples of biometric research techniques include measuring heart rate, respiration rate, eye movement, brain activity etc.
- *Marketing research through social networks*: it is an indisputable fact that various social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, Instagram are dominant in the global Internet. That is why modern marketers are focusing their efforts on finding ways, means and methods through which to use modern digital technologies for the needs of marketing research. The opportunities provided by this type of research are related to market research of the social networks themselves and the implementation of marketing research based on information from social networks.

## Conclusions

The ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19 has completely changed the principles, methods and techniques that define the well-known tourism industry. Marketing, and in particular its research, has become a major tool for combating competition and gaining a sustainable market share for many tourism organizations, which in turn determine the appearance of modern tourist destinations. Much of the marketing research of tourist destinations aims to reveal the social, economic and psychological motives determining the behavior of modern tourists, as well as the ability of individual destinations to create an environment that offers a full tourist experience determined by the satisfaction of specific desires, preferences and needs.

Also, this type of research has the opportunity, through collected data and analyzed information to identify trends and future prospects characterizing the behavior of individual market segments. In this regard, it is extremely important for tourist destinations to establish the overall set of processes, principles, models and good practices that determine the functioning of the modern tourism industry and model the preferences and interests of real and potential tourists. „In the face of the continuing unpredictability of the future of the COVID-19 pandemic, planning for the recovery of the tourism sector, poses a complex series of challenges“ (Jones, 2022 p.15). It is noteworthy that tourist destinations are greatly influenced

by the political and economic environment, social and cultural differences and characteristics, environmental environment, management practices and government regulations. That is why the proper planning and conduct of marketing research of destinations can provide information that will be the basis of their strategic management.

It can be rightly argued that the foundations of modern marketing and in particular marketing research will always be the same, but with the change in the marketing environment determined mainly by the increasing use of digital technologies, “the most important thing is how the fundamental postulates of marketing are activated, supplemented and applied” (Anastasova 2013, p. 8)

Analysing the possibilities and applications of marketing research in terms of tourist destinations and their effectiveness in overcoming the challenges facing the tourism industry from the global pandemic of COVID 19, it can be reasonably suggested that they should be focused not only on demand issues, but they also focus on supply, as only the synergy between them will lead to the supply of a quality and sustainable tourism product. Also, marketing research must be based on sound theoretical foundations that provide the necessary scientific knowledge and good practices, creating the necessary competitive advantage and market success of the destination.

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