

REVIEW

by Valeri Stoilov Stoyanov, doctor of sciences, professor in
professional direction 3.2. Psychology

about a dissertation on:

"FACTORS FOR FORMING CONSUMER ATTITUDES WHEN CHOOSING A TOURIST PRODUCT"

for the awarding of an educational and scientific degree "doctor" in a
professional direction 3.2. Psychology (Social Psychology),

of Sonia Yordanova Stefanova

Varna

2022

I. General presentation of the dissertation work, topicality of the topic and research results.

The problem area of the dissertation research is undeniably relevant and the scientific findings in it would enable the identification of consumer attitudes and preferences of tourists for the consumption of specific tourist services. In addition to purely scientific value, such studies have a high practical value related to the possibility of improving the effective management of processes and activities in tourism, including production and supply of tourism products and services, management of human resources in tourism and strategic management of the tourism organization, as well as development of tourist destinations and products. Doctoral student Sonia Stefanova has convincingly argued the topicality of the topic in the introduction of the dissertation development, and it is evident from it that there is a deep understanding of the systemic nature of the problem and its relationship with both psychology and the practice of tourism management on a regional and organizational scale.

The doctoral student presents the relevance of the researched issues through several aspects. The first is related to the influence of socio-psychological and individual-psychological factors on the needs of people and contractors in tourism. Maintaining the competitiveness of tourism in our country, with the avalanche-like increase in the variety of goods and services offered and, in connection with them, the needs of people, requires specific efforts of scientists and experts from practice, in order to develop services and specific destinations, as well as to specific audiences are targeted in the marketing and advertising process.

Second, each product choice is also a deep experience, a kind of realization of aspirations and desires, consumer preferences and constantly individualized consumer taste. The study of consumer behavior is not such a new issue, but given the development of technology, infrastructure, people's awareness, etc., we increasingly need a clearer differentiation of the factors that influence it. The topic of consumer preferences continues to excite experts from practice and researchers, because both of them realize that with a change in the material prerequisites of life, new needs and expectations are formed. The higher level of education and awareness of modern tourists motivates them to seek new and varied experiences, but also raises their expectations and requires additional efforts to satisfy their needs on the part of tourism companies. In this regard, PhD student Sonia Stefanova finds the role of psychology and the possibilities of its methodology and research methods for researching the prerequisites of consumer behavior of tourists and related attitudes, expectations, needs, prejudices and requirements.

On this basis, the object, subject, goals and tasks of the research are logically and sustainably defined.

"The subject of the study are the socio-psychological factors, determining the processes and mechanisms for forming attitudes, needs and consumer behavior when choosing a tourist product, including specific destination" (p. 12).

The objectives of the research are related to "...identifying the socio-psychological factors influencing consumer attitudes and mediating consumer behavior for choosing a destination", as well as identifying "...the main determinants determining consumer behavior in the process of making a decision and making a choice when purchasing tourist product" (p. 13). The PhD student also aims, as a result of the research and especially of empirical research work, to outline

"...the limits of applicability in practice and opportunities for further development of the research problem" (p. 13). The objectives are decomposed logically into 8 research tasks.

The main thesis that Sonya Stefanova puts forward is based on the following assumption: "Knowing consumer attitudes, taking into account consumer preferences, understanding the socio-psychological factors determining consumer behavior and deriving a model of consumer behavior are crucial conditions, both for long-term success and improving the competitiveness of tourist enterprises in modern conditions, as well as to increase the efficiency of the tourist service as a whole." (p. 14).

The dissertation has a volume of 237 pages, excluding the appendices, and structurally it consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and appendices. The bibliographic reference contains 232 cited sources, of which 107 are in Cyrillic and the rest are in English.

The first chapter "Theoretical foundations of the study of consumer attitudes when choosing a tourist product" is developed in two paragraphs - "Essence and conceptual framework of the construct "attitude" and "Consumer attitudes and consumer behavior in tourism".

In the first paragraph, the essence of the attitudes is clarified. An in-depth analysis of the essence of attitudes is offered, both in the leading Western schools and in the well-known Russian and Georgian schools in our country. The positions of a number of Bulgarian researchers are also presented. The doctoral candidate rightly concludes that "modern Western social psychologists offer less complex and more easily operationalized concepts of attitudes, but even among them there is no unified opinion about the essence of attitudes" (p. 20). Sonia Stefanova concludes the analysis with presentation of one's own understanding of attitudes, namely "...attitude is a reflection of the totality of assessments that a person attributes to people, groups and objects in the social world. Attitude formation involves making a decision about liking–disliking or approval–disapproval of the attitude object" (p. 24). Here, however, we should add that the attitude, in addition to inciting a decision, also presupposes a corresponding behavior.

After presenting the essence of attitudes as a mental phenomenon, Sonia Stefanova, bearing in mind the goals of the dissertation research, analyzes the explanatory possibilities of theories that refer to the consistency of constructs (in this case, attitudes) from the point of view of their applicability to research in the field of consumption: Haider's cognitive balance theory; Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance; Sheriff and Hovland's social judgment theory and Behm's self-perception theory.

What these theories have in common is that they provide insight into the fact that people value and strive to maintain harmony among their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and are motivated to maintain uniformity among these elements. These theories make it possible to better understand consumer behavior, the formation and change of people's attitudes. From the point of view of the dissertation research, the doctoral student rightly notes that it is essential to the way in which the so-called "attitude object" will be evaluated, how it relates to the other attitudes that the user has already formed. This staging is important for building the model of the doctoral student's own research, as well as for creating a perspective of marketing and advertising strategies in tourism.

In this paragraph, an analysis is also made of the relationship between the needs of the individual and his behavior, also through the prism of the needs of the doctoral student to create his own model for empirical research.

Ultimately, consumer behavior is analyzed as a type of social human behavior. It is an expression of the culture and social relations in which users are involved. "Consumer behavior is not a simple set of actions and deeds. It is also conditioned by psychological attitudes and individual experience, which allows to predict its development in different situations, and creating certain conditions, to be regulated in the desired direction." (p. 53).

In the second paragraph, an in-depth analysis of the interrelationships between consumer attitudes and consumer behavior is made. Special emphasis in the paragraph are the factors related to the formation and change of consumer attitudes, respectively to consumer behavior. Factors that influence the formation of consumer attitudes have been analyzed, such as: needs and motivation; abilities and knowledge; beliefs; self-concept; culture; social economic factors; social role, social status and social norms; demographic characteristics.

The theoretical part of the dissertation showed the competence of the doctoral student to analyze concepts and models in the subject area of the dissertation research and to present a reasoned personal position, and the in-depth operationalization of the concepts is a serious prerequisite for creating a logical and more comprehensive model of the studied phenomenon.

In the second chapter "Design of the empirical study of consumer attitudes towards the choice of a tourist destination" the model, the purpose, the tasks, the hypotheses, the methodological toolkit, the procedure for collecting empirical information and the used sample of researched persons, of the doctoral student's own empirical study, are presented.

In the proposed model of the doctoral student's own empirical research, successfully presented and graphically, the idea of the influence of motivation, attitudes, the "subjective norm" and the perception of control, on the intentions of users (as a mediator) and on their behavior is laid. "Subjective norm" means social pressure and the influence of the closest and most important people for the user. A "subjective norm" is a type of influence that can promote or deter future intentions.

The purpose of the study is to identify relationships and "...role of factors influencing attitudes in realizing the intention to choose a tourist product (tourist destination)..." (p. 102). The objective is decomposed into five adequate tasks.

The main research question to which the doctoral student seeks an answer is: "what is the role of socio-psychological factors in forming consumer attitudes when choosing a tourist product (tourist destination)." (p. 103).

On the basis of the methodological model of the empirical research, two main assumptions were formulated, presented in four private hypotheses. It is expected that: the reference groups exert value-expressive and informational influence on consumer decisions for choosing a tourist destination; factors such as age, marital status, number of children, are expected to have a bearing on the choice of a package of services and a tourism destination; social status and social roles are expected to influence preferences, frequency of visits and attitudes towards destination characteristics; perceived self-efficacy is a factor hypothesized to determine the choice of a tourist destination.

Overall, I find the hypotheses substantial, substantial, and empirically testable.

A sample of Bulgarian, Russian, English, German and French tourists was used to collect empirical information.

For the purposes of the empirical research, a battery of methods was created, which includes: a survey, a personal questionnaire and a structured interview.

The survey was created by the doctoral student and structurally includes four parts. Through the first part, information is collected on specific characteristics of tourist products, which are a priority for consumers and would affect the quality of the vacation. Through the second part, information is obtained about the preferred duration of the holiday, the price, the sources of influence for the choice, as well as about socio-demographic characteristics - age, gender, education, family status. In the third part, 10 attributes and 17 resort villages from the Southern Black Sea coast of Bulgaria are described. Respondents are asked, on a scale of 1 to 10, to rate the characteristics of their chosen recreation area. The fourth part is the generalized self-efficacy scale of Schwarzer et al., adapted Bulgarian version, where the original factor structure is repeated.

The structured interview contains 13 questions that partially match the questions from the questionnaire. The aim is to provide an opportunity to 'triangulate' the results.

The collection of empirical information was carried out in the months of July, August and September 2019, as well as in the months of July and August 2020. A total of 316 respondents (294 respondents and 22 interviewees) of five nationalities participated in the study.

Adequate statistical filters were used for processing the empirical information - descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, dispersion analysis, factor analysis and cluster analysis. The statistical package IBM SPSS Statistics was used for statistical processing of the empirical information.

In the third chapter "Analysis of the results of the empirical study of attitudes when choosing a tourist product (tourist destination)", the results of the empirical study and their analysis are presented.

Empirical information and statistical analyzes are presented in a series of tables. Detailed and comprehensive qualitative analyzes have been made, related to the established hypotheses. For each hypothesis, detailed information is given on how far it is confirmed/rejected.

From the results, it is clear that a key factor in making decisions about choosing a destination are attributes of the places visited, such as: "Peace and security"; "Food Quality"; "Quality of Service"; "Natural and climatic features" and "Proximity to beach and sea". Attributes such as: "Low price" exert a less significant influence on consumer choice; "Opportunity for healing procedures"; "Attractions and entertainment programs"; "Cultural-Historical Monuments" and "Authentic Folklore".

The information sources that most significantly influence the choice of a recreation destination among the studied population are: "Internet"; "Friends, colleagues, relatives" and "Spouse". The factors "Television and radio" and "Employees/subordinates" have a weaker influence.

A high frequency of visits to tourist destinations, an object of interest for the doctoral student, is revealed in the studied population. More than 40% visited the destination more than once.

The high degree of satisfaction of local and foreign tourists with tourist services, forms attitudes for repeat visits in the future.

Through one-factor variance analysis, it was revealed that reference groups do not have a value-expressive and informational influence on consumer decisions for choosing a tourist destination. The doctoral student explains this with a hypothesis of a combined influence of different reference groups and other factors, which is probably specific in each individual case.

A detailed profile of the studied population was also made according to the factors of gender, age, education, marital status, presence of children.

A weak but significant correlation was revealed between the factors "Generalized self-efficacy" and "Realized intention" (Pearson's coefficient - 0.167). Obviously, other factors have a stronger impact on the choice and realization of intentions related to visiting a tourist destination.

The results of a one-factor variance analysis show that only the variable "age" has an effect on the realized intention ($p \leq 0.05$). Factors such as marital status, presence and number of children do not influence the individual when choosing and using tourist services.

Through factor analysis, three latent factors (motivators) were extracted for tourists when deciding to consume a specific product. Three latent factors were also extracted as predictors of realized intentions. They are analyzed in details.

Through the factor analysis, which has been precisely carried out, the explanatory possibilities for understanding the motivation and the factors that condition it for choosing a destination and tourist service packages are expanded. These findings have a practical application value and can be directly transferred into the practice of marketing and advertising experts and the management of tourism companies.

Through a cluster analysis of tourists' preferences regarding the main attributes of destinations, two clusters of tourists were extracted.

The first group consists of tourists for whom quality service, delicious food, preserved nature in the destination, tranquility and personal safety as well as easy access to the beach and the sea. This cluster includes tourists for whom the main thing is the possibility of a peaceful, comfortable vacation. These are mostly family tourists with children.

In the case of the second group, the leading factors for choosing a destination are the variety of cultural and historical sights and the possibility of viewing them, authentic experiences obtained from the past with local folklore and culture, as well as the practice of restorative tourism to strengthen physical and mental health.

Based on a cluster analysis, a number of differences in the preferences of the representatives of the different five nationalities were also identified.

The scientific findings in Sonia Stefanova's dissertation research are a serious base of knowledge that can be successfully used to prepare a typology of tourists related to individual-demographic, personal and cultural characteristics, classification of individual target groups, as well as codification of tourist services.

In general, the empirical research is precisely planned and conducted, based on an adequate, own model for the doctoral student and a developed battery of tools for collecting empirical information. The collected empirical information is precisely processed and analyzed. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions were received, in a significant field of psychological knowledge, with the possibility of transfer in practice.

The abstract fully and correctly reflects the achievements of the dissertation work. The results of the dissertation research have been presented and discussed at various scientific forums, and there are publications in journals from the NACID Reference List. The review of the publications shows that PhD student Sonia Stefanova meets the minimum national requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree "Doctor", field of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional direction 3.2. Psychology, according to the Appendix to Art. 1a, para. 1 of the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria.

II. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions

The results of the dissertation research provide a basis for formulating the following scientific and scientific-applied contributions:

1. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of theoretical models in psychology for the study of consumer attitudes and behavior in people and of the doctoral student's own model for empirical research, factors that condition attitudes and the choice of tourist products and destinations have been identified.

The model has theoretical and practical value and it enriches the possibilities for the study of consumer attitudes in tourism.

2. The results of the doctoral student's own empirical research create prerequisites for the transfer of knowledge for the preparation of a typology of tourists related to socio-psychological and individual-demographic characteristics, their classification into different target groups and codification of tourist services and resources.

3. A comparative-cultural analysis was made and the preferences and leading factors that determined the choice of tourist services along our Southern Black Sea coast among tourists coming from five cultural contexts were differentiated. This creates an opportunity, through application of the results in practice, to increase the quality of the offered tourist products and services and to achieve a better compliance with the requirements of the tourists.

4. A clustering of the target groups forming the market environment was carried out, thanks to which the strategic marketing policy of the tourism companies would be improved in the long term, as well as their competitiveness.

At the moment, I have no information and I have not detected any plagiarism by PhD student Sonia Yordanova Stefanova.

I have no comments related to the quality of the quantitative and qualitative analyzes of the acquired empirical information within the framework of the doctoral student's own research.

As a recommendation, I would note, when developing the theoretical part, to analyze models that are most directly related to the research objectives. In the present study, the theoretical part can be compressed without compromising its quality. This in no way changes my categorically positive assessment of the dissertation development, but is simply a glimpse into the future research work of the PhD student.

III. Conclusion

The presented dissertation work is a complete and up-to-date study in a significant area of psychological knowledge, with a monographic character. My rating for it is positive. The scientific contributions are of a theoretical and applied-practical nature. This gives me reason to recommend to the respected members of the scientific jury to vote for awarding Sonia Yordanova Stefanova the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional field 3.2. Psychology (Social Psychology).

10/10/2022

city of Varna

Reviewer:

Prof. D.Sc. Valery Stoyanov