

Article

Exploring the Factors Involved in Tourists' Decision-Making and Determinants of Length of Stay

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Abstract: This study aimed at identifying the factors influencing tourists' decisions in choosing their vacation destinations as well as factors influencing their behavior. An online survey was applied to 861 Romanian tourists. The principal component analysis was run to reduce the dimensionality of the 23 items and used to determine the factors that influence tourists' decision in choosing their destination, leading to a four-component solution. The results indicated that aspects related to destination image, destination unique characteristics and the accommodation facilities are more important for women than for the men. Regarding the travel organization factor, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. Families and older tourists with high incomes are positively linked to the length of stay. These insights on the factors influencing tourists' decision-making process are of the utmost importance for managers and overall tourism service providers in the design of marketing and management strategies in accordance to tourists' expectations and needs.

Keywords: tourists; decision-making; key factors; pull motivation; vacation destination



Citation: Mihai, Valentin C., Diana E. Dumitras, Camelia Oroian, Gabriela O. Chiciudean, Felix H. Arion, and Iulia Cristina Mureşan. 2023. Exploring the Factors Involved in Tourists' Decision-Making and Determinants of Length of Stay. *Administrative Sciences* 13: 215. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13100215>

Received: 28 July 2023

Revised: 19 September 2023

Accepted: 28 September 2023

Published: 1 October 2023



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1. Introduction

In the global economic context, tourism has undergone constant development and gained more and more momentum in the plethora of economic sectors (Manzoor et al. 2019). The World Tourism Organization (World Tourism Organization 2023) emphasizes the continuous growth and significant diversification of tourism worldwide (Sethukumari et al. 2021). As tourism evolves, tourist offers become more and more complex. This is due, on the one hand, to the variety and richness of tourist destinations that has prompted a wider range of tourism development areas (Liao and Chuang 2020). On the other hand, the numbers of tourists have grown almost exponentially (Rasool et al. 2021) and led to a boost in their requirements and options for tourist destinations.

The complex process of choosing a travel destination (Pan et al. 2021) involves a group of complex decisions (Gartner 1994) that require time and energy, even though most tourists are comfortable with this process. There are many research studies which have examined various aspects of tourism consumer behavior and decision-making (Horner and Swarbrooke 2020; Ulker-Demirel and Ciftci 2020; Han 2021; Santos et al. 2022; Gordan et al. 2023).

First and foremost, the decision-making process, when selecting a destination, works under the influence of different changeable factors, dependent on tourist needs and habits (internal factors), as well as external factors Kyriakaki et al. (2020). The latter includes external factors influencing the image of a tourist destination: the overall image or prestige of the destination, or such factors as socio-economic changes, natural disasters and marketing communication strategys Komilova et al. (2021).

Therefore, understanding the factors influencing the consumers' decision-making process when choosing their vacation destinations is crucial and central in the research

of academics from various social science fields. The main issues that must be addressed in this context are: understanding tourists' preferences in choosing vacation destinations and identifying and analyzing the factors that may influence their behaviors so that managers and overall tourism service providers design tourism marketing and management strategies in accordance with tourists' expectations and needs. The study also sought to comprehend the relationship between the tourists' identified variables (factors) and their socio-demographic coordinates. Furthermore, the determinants of tourists' length of stay were analyzed. The length of stay has a direct impact on the economy of the destination, and might influence the policy design of the tourist destination. In this context the following questions arise: which are the factors that attract tourists to visit a destination? What are the determinants that influence tourists' length of stay? Finding the answers to these questions might help policy makers and tourism providers to develop sustainable tourist destinations and products to maximize the economic, social and environmental impact of tourism development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Factors Influencing Tourists Decision-Making in Choosing a Destination

Aspects of the factors influencing tourists' behavior and the decision-making process were analyzed in different studies (Santos et al. 2022; Seyidov and Adomaitienė 2016; Hsu et al. 2009; Wei et al. 2019) because the understanding of tourist behavior, travel motivation and their influencing factors is important for tourism companies in order to respond constructively to the demand and aid in the tourist decision-making process (Seyidov and Adomaitienė 2016).

In tourist market research, some authors divide the factors influencing tourists in choosing their vacation destination into demand factors and supply factors. Tourism demand is influenced by such factors as tourists' economic power, monthly income (Seyidov and Adomaitienė 2016), income, GDP per capita, tourists' living costs in substitute destinations (Gidebo 2021), availability of leisure time, personal desires and motivation to travel (Lohmann and Beer 2013). Additionally, price variations in similar destinations and services, transport options, diversity of tourism products, destination image (overall, cognitive, image and conative image) (Afshardoost and Mohammad 2021), destination competitiveness (Stepchenkova and Eales 2011), tourists' safety sense (safety information and concerns, tourism facilities and services, as well as environment, regional culture, and safety information) (Zou and Meng 2020), climate (Goh 2012), weather conditions (Muñoz et al. 2020), climate change (Rosselló-Nadal 2014), among other factors, may affect tourism demand for a particular destination. There are two broad categories that comprise variables that impact destination choice: decision-makers' personal traits and travel characteristics (Hwang et al. 2006). Personal traits include socio-demographic, cognitive and psychological characteristics, whereas travel characteristics encompass all situational factors that make the specific travel experience stand out from the others. For instance, Tan (2020) examines the destination selection process and the extent of tourists' personality influence on their perceived travel constraints (Tan 2020). Qiu et al. (2018) use a cell-system structure to illustrate the process of travel destination choice at a psychological level. In their decision-making process, tourists collect potential destination data and evaluate visit intentions among potential destinations, which are successively compared while information is updated in the process (system) (Qiu et al. 2018). In an empirical application carried out in Spain, Nicolau and Mas (2006) select distance and price as the most important travel characteristics. They reveal that the dissuasive influence of distance and prices on travel destination choice is mediated by motivations, where motivations have a direct (increasing the dissuasive effect) or inverse (reducing the dissuasive effect) moderating effect on distance and price influence (Nicolau and Mas 2006). Using the dynamic panel data technique, Li et al. (2017) analyzed the destination climate and climate difference between home and destination as travel characteristics with a significant influence on tourism demand. Other key travel characteristics analyzed

by researchers are destination infrastructure and support services, destination resources (Michael et al. 2019), destination transport availability and quality (Virkar and Mallya 2018), as well as air pollution (Chen et al. 2017).

2.2. Push Motivators and Pull Motivators

The decision-making process for determining a vacation destination is influenced by a plethora of variable factors, depending on the influence of both internal and external factors (Djeri et al. 2007). Push and pull factors have undergone significant analysis as part of travel motivation studies. They are covered in a subsequent literature review as it is paramount to shed an introductory light on factors influencing tourists in choosing their vacation destination and to emphasize the significance of destination factors. According to López-Sanz et al. (2021), the internal factors (push motivators) that affect tourists are twofold: socio-psychological: self-exploration, escape from routine, self-evaluation, relaxation, improvement of family relationships, and facilitating social relations and cultural (novelty and education) prestige and regression. Hsu et al. (2009), stated that the internal factors consist of four categories: psychological (self-actualization, escape), physical (medical treatment, health and fitness or simply relaxation), social interaction (paying visits to friends/relatives, making new acquaintances), and seeking/exploration (novelty and culture exploitation, adventure, night life and shopping). According to Camilleri (2018), the travel motivators are divided into four categories: physical, cultural, personal, prestige/status. At the same time, analyzing motivational factors, Kotler and Keller (2006) emphasize the crucial influence of social, cultural, personal, and psychological factors. In this respect, even if marketers should consider these factors, they cannot be controlled in consumer-purchasing processes.

In the light of these aspects, our study focuses on the analysis of the influence of external factors, the so-called pull motivators. They are those that, when appropriate, can be influenced by tourism providers in order to adapt their marketing and management approaches for these external factors to influence the tourists' decision in choosing a vacation destination. These aspects have been analyzed in different ways and regions of the globe. Pull factors have become notable and essential for the sustainable appeal to new and repeat tourists. In this context, pull factor characteristics encompass "place" as a tourism product defining a destination (Yiamjanya and Wongleedee 2014).

In this range of pull factors to be analyzed, Hsu et al. (2009) include among the so-called pull motivation relating to external factors, tangible factors and intangible factors. The first set includes transportation, people's friendliness, accommodation facilities, personal and environmental safety and quality, price, cultural and historical resources, shopping, food quality and variety, while the intangible factors encompass the image of destination and expected benefits. There are six common characteristics of tourist destinations which can attract tourists to carry out their activities including: appeal, comfort, accessibility, tourism resources and facilities, as well as transport (Deng et al. 2021). These authors (Deng et al. 2021) highlight the basic elements needed for a tourist destination: housing, transportation, tourism, shopping, food, and entertainment. Tourists' needs and wants should be paramount towards their satisfaction, which can only be achieved by destinations aiming at the highest possible standards (Camilleri 2018). Similarly, other authors identify the features of a tourist destination yielding a potential influence on a tourist's decision, such as place and accessibility, price, safety, security, and political stability (Jariyachamsit et al. 2020). For instance, Yiamjanya and Wongleedee identify a number of pull factors for tourists traveling in their home country or overseas, including weather, culture, natural resources, affordability, diverse attractions, historical or heritage sites and nightlife entertainment, shopping sites (Yiamjanya and Wongleedee 2014). Decision-making for tourist destinations is influenced by destination amenities and infrastructure, environmental and human resources and price (Seyidov and Adomaitienė 2016). The elements of the destination that attract visitors and thus comply with their requirements are categorized into primary elements (physical settings and social/cultural attributes, tourism

activities), followed by secondary ones (such as catering and shopping), and additional elements (tourist accessibility and information). A recent systematic review (Ortaleza and Mangali 2021) of travel destination attributes that influence tourists' decision-making process identifies destination accessibility, attractiveness and overall image, price, amenities, recreation and comfort, as well as safety and security, local cuisine, entertainment, souvenir shops, and human resources. The same study identified the 5As (attributes) for travel destinations, namely accommodation, articulated stories, affordability, accessibility, and attribution.

2.3. Socio-Demographic Characteristics Influencing Tourists Decision-Making Process

A significant role is also played by tourists' socio-demographic characteristics in shaping their preferences and decision-making processes when choosing a travel destination. They comprise several indicators, such as age, gender, marital status, educational level, occupation, and income level with a crucial role in accounting for the difference in lifestyles and travel motivations (Najib et al. 2020). For instance, the determining factors of pull motivators are influenced by family status, as can be seen from the study conducted on families with children and married couples without children in Croatia (Srncic et al. 2016). According to the aforementioned study, accessible prices are the most important elements in choosing a family travel destination, and good value for offers, additional services adapted to children and adequate accommodation facilities. Other factors that could affect tourist choices include destination cleanliness and upkeep, good traffic connections and destination safety. It is important to assess the extent of the influence exerted by these tourist socio-demographic characteristics in the tourist decision-making process for a vacation destination. Thus, the research questions that arise are: what are the most important determinants (pull motivation) of tourists in choosing their destination? Are there differences among tourists in terms of the factors identified along socio-demographic characteristics?

2.4. Determinants of Tourists' Length of Stay

Knowing the determinants of tourists' length of stay constitutes valuable information that helps policy makers to develop future strategies in order to improve destination image, to adapt to tourist demand and attract more visitors. Longer stays are directly linked to higher earnings from tourism activity (Thrane and Farstad 2012) to a more sustainable activity, since tourists have the opportunity to visit more tourist sights, local businesses and are more representative for older travelers (Oklevik et al. 2021). Previous studies analyzed different characteristics that might affect tourists' length of stay. Among them, the most common ones are: gender (Oklevik et al. 2021; Soler et al. 2020), age (Brida and Scuderi 2013; Barros and Machado 2010; Alén et al. 2014), education (Barros and Machado 2010; Gokovali et al. 2007), income (Brida and Scuderi 2013; Peypoch et al. 2012), children (Soler et al. 2020; Bavik et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2018), destination attributes and image (cultural attraction, climate, cultural heritage, etc.) (Brida and Scuderi 2013; Alén et al. 2014). It was noticed that there is a positive correlation between the length of stay and income (Brida and Scuderi 2013; Bavik et al. 2021), age (Brida and Scuderi 2013; Gokovali et al. 2007), children (Soler et al. 2020; Bavik et al. 2021), and attractiveness of the destination in the group (Brida and Scuderi 2013; Gokovali et al. 2007; Bavik et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2018). However, there were cases where the level of education (Gokovali et al. 2007; Martínez-García and Raya 2008), age (older tourists) (Martínez-García and Raya 2008; Barros et al. 2008), destination image and attributes (Peypoch et al. 2012; de Menezes et al. 2008) were negatively correlated to length of stay.

Based on those mentioned above, the following research questions arise: which factors are influencing Romanian tourists' decision-making processes in choosing an internal destination? What influences Romanian tourists' length of stay?

3. Results

3.1. Factors Affecting Decision-Making Process for Visiting a Destination

The principal components analysis was employed on 23 items evaluated by respondents with the aim of identifying the factors that influence their choice regarding the tourism destination. The data is appropriate for the principal components analysis as indicated by the Barlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2 = 10,686.34$, $p < 0.000$) with measure of sampling of 0.940, as it is greater than the critical value of 0.6 (Hair et al. 2012). The analysis led to a four-factor solution explaining 60.89% of the variance. The retained factors for further analysis are presented in Table 1 (eigenvalue > 1 ; factors loading ≥ 0.4). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.933 confirmed the internal consistency of the analyzed items.

The first component "Destination image" (3.86 ± 0.731) comprises eight items and explains 41.56% of the variance (reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.862$). The items refer to destination elements. When opting for a travel destination, the most important aspect for respondents is "Safety and security" (4.36 ± 0.918). At the same time, "Climate conditions" (4.08 ± 0.982) and the availability of information (4.02 ± 0.950) regarding the destination are also important aspects when the respondents decide to visit a destination. Because most of the analyzed factors could be highly impacted by regional climate and climate policy (Gössling and Hall 2006; Scott et al. 2007), climate is considered a pivotal issue for future medium and long-term tourism development (Scott and Steiger 2013). Important factors that contribute to destination image are related to area accessibility (3.82 ± 1.077) and travel cost (3.72 ± 1.060). Tourists are inclined to choose alternative destinations when the transport systems are affected by uncompetitive prices or delay (Prideaux 2020).

The second component "Attractions and entertainment" (3.77 ± 0.773) comprises six items and explains 9.231% of the variance (reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.852$). The items are related to those factors that prolong destination visit and add value to the tourism product. The existence of unique tourist attractions (4.04 ± 0.959) and unique experiences (3.87 ± 1.046) are the main pull factors that influence respondents' choice to visit a destination. Furthermore, elements related to intangible attractions such as hospitality of the local community (3.78 ± 1.031) and existence of cultural attractions (3.76 ± 0.962) are elements influencing tourist decision-making. Additionally, it is also quite important for the respondents to consider aspects related to the possibility to take in the traditions (3.36 ± 1.049), on one hand, and the diversity of the cuisine on the other hand (3.80 ± 0.977). These aspects enhance the idea that the respondents are looking for new and original experiences.

The third component "Services quality" (4.03 ± 0.764) comprises six items and explains 5.616% of the variance (reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.888$). The items relate to accommodation quality (4.34 ± 0.878), price of accommodation (4.10 ± 0.910) and food and beverages (4.02 ± 0.920). In addition, the existence of recreation facilities for the whole family (3.97 ± 0.976), the variety of accommodation facilities (3.99 ± 0.941) and diversity of tourist services (3.73 ± 1.055) are also considered to be quite important in their choice.

The fourth component "Travel organization" (3.36 ± 0.915) explains 4.487% of the variance (reliability coefficient $\alpha = 0.715$) and groups three items related to daily schedule. The fourth component seems to be less important to respondents, compared with the other components. It was observed that study participants are more interested in the possibility of day trips in the surroundings (3.80 ± 1.026), than having a pre-organized daily program (3.24 ± 1.157) or feeling 'at home' (3.22 ± 1.182). It might be concluded that the respondents are flexible and can adapt their daily schedule during the travel to existing circumstances in the destination. Hence, tourists need a greater flexibility and control over their time at destination (Buhalis 2005).

Table 1. Principal component analysis results.

Eigenvalue	Variance (%)	Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Mean	SD
9.559	41.56	Destination image Mean = 3.86 ± 0.731 $\alpha = 0.862$	Availability of destination information	0.723	4.02	0.950
			Climate conditions	0.715	4.08	0.982
			Safety and Security	0.694	4.36	0.918
			Travel cost	0.667	3.72	1.060
			Reviews on specialized websites	0.650	3.79	1.017
			Notoriety of the area	0.599	3.49	1.008
			Friends' recommendations	0.598	3.66	1.042
			Be easily accessible	0.534	3.82	1.077
2.123	9.231	Unique destination characteristics Mean = 3.77 ± 0.773 $\alpha = 0.852$	Hospitality of the local community	0.408	3.78	1.031
			Existence of popular tourist attractions	0.763	4.04	0.959
			Existence of cultural attractions	0.747	3.76	0.962
			Possibility to take part in the traditions and customs of the area	0.730	3.36	1.044
			To have unique experiences	0.708	3.87	1.046
			Diversity of culinary preparations	0.654	3.80	0.977
1.292	5.616	Services quality Mean = 4.03 ± 0.764 $\alpha = 0.888$	Price of accommodation services	0.831	4.10	0.910
			Price of food services	0.794	4.02	0.920
			Variety of accommodation options	0.677	3.94	0.941
			Quality of accommodation services	0.665	4.33	0.878
			Recreation facilities for the whole family	0.461	3.97	0.976
			Great diversity of tourist services	0.435	3.73	1.055
1.032	4.487	Travel organization Mean = 3.36 ± 0.915 $\alpha = 0.715$	Possibility of day trips in the surroundings	0.468	3.80	1.026
			Pre-organization of the daily schedule	0.783	3.24	1.157
			Experiencing the feeling of "home"	0.693	3.22	1.182
Total variance %	60.896	$\alpha = 0.933$				

Subsequently, the association between the socio-demographic characteristics of the sample and the four identified PCA components was analyzed (Table 2). There are statistically significant differences between males and females regarding the perception of "destination image", "attractions and entertainment" and "services quality" ($p < 0.05$). For females, these factors are more important when choosing a destination compared with the

males. Even if the “travel organization” factor is more important for females (3.40 ± 0.874) compared with the males (3.29 ± 0.991), the differences are not statically significant. In terms of age, it was noticed that for the group below 45 years, there are four more important factors compared with the group over 45 years, but with statistically significant differences for the “destination image component” (3.89 ± 0.712 vs. 3.67 ± 0.813) and “services quality” (4.06 ± 0.742 vs. 3.89 ± 0.875) ($p < 0.05$).

Table 2. Association between the socio-demographic characteristics and PCA components.

		F1	F2	F3	F4
Gender	Female	3.93 (0.678)	3.82 (0.705)	4.10 (0.691)	3.40 (0.874)
	Male	3.72 (0.811)	3.67 (0.887)	3.90 (0.877)	3.29 (0.991)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.000 ***	0.013 *	0.001 **	0.123
Age	18–45 years	3.89 (0.712)	3.78 (0.760)	4.06 (0.742)	3.38 (0.912)
	>45 years	3.67 (0.813)	3.66 (0.840)	3.89 (0.875)	3.22 (0.926)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.005 **	0.097	0.043 *	0.067
Education level	High school or less	3.66 (0.924)	3.59 (0.934)	3.86 (0.993)	3.26 (1.055)
	University degree	3.91 (0.657)	3.81 (0.714)	4.08 (0.679)	3.39 (0.871)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.001 **	0.003 **	0.005 **	0.131
Monthly net household income	≤4200 RON	3.82 (0.820)	3.74 (0.861)	3.99 (0.873)	3.43 (0.989)
	>4200 RON	3.88 (0.665)	3.78 (0.708)	4.06 (0.681)	3.32 (0.861)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.265	0.436	0.213	0.081
Children in the household (<18 years)	No	3.88 (0.669)	3.85 (0.728)	4.01 (0.730)	3.36 (0.889)
	Yes	3.84 (0.775)	3.71 (0.801)	4.05 (0.789)	3.36 (0.936)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.499	0.008 **	0.458	0.933
Place of residency	Rural	3.83 (0.791)	3.76 (0.849)	3.96 (0.877)	3.49 (0.970)
	Urban	3.87 (0.711)	3.77 (0.747)	4.06 (0.722)	3.32 (0.894)
	<i>p</i> -value	0.449	0.949	0.165	0.021 *

Significance level: * 5%; ** 1%; *** 0.1%.

Statistically significant differences were noticed regarding education level for the first three components ($p < 0.05$). It seems that participants with a university degree are more attentive to the factors that determine the travel decision-making process.

The income level does not have any significant impact on the perception of the factors that determine the travel decision-making process ($p > 0.05$). By analyzing if the respondents have children in the family, it was noticed that the quality of services is more important to families with children (4.05 ± 0.789 vs. 4.01 ± 0.730), but with no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$).

Regarding the residency level, the “travel organization” factor is more important for people from rural areas (3.49 ± 0.970 vs. 3.32 ± 0.894 , $p > 0.05$).

3.2. Analysis of Determinants of Tourists' Length of Stay

An ordered logit regression was estimated to identify the determinants of trip length (Table 3). The odds of choosing a longer trip are higher when the tourist destination offers more attractions and entertainment opportunities (OR = 1.313, $p < 0.05$). With regard to socio-demographic characteristics, it was found that the chances of choosing longer trips are higher for people older than 45 years (OR = 1.671, $p < 0.01$), for more educated people (OR = 1.871, $p < 0.01$), as well for those who earn more (OR = 1.848, $p < 0.01$). Families with children are also more likely to choose longer trips (OR = 1.479, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3. Ordered logit regression results.

	Dependent Variable: ‘Trip Length’	
	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Odds Ratio
Factor 1: Destination image	−0.140 (0.121)	0.869
Factor 2: Attractions and entertainment	0.271 (0.123) *	1.313
Factor 3: Services’ quality	−0.123 (0.130)	0.884
Factor 4: Travel organization	−0.130 (0.090)	0.877
Age	0.514 (0.187) **	1.671
Income	0.614 (0.140) **	1.848
Gender	0.057 (0.139)	1.058
Education level	0.627 (0.165) **	1.871
Children in the household	0.391 (0.133) **	1.479
Cut point 1	−1.248 (0.439)	
Cut point 2	0.841 (0.438)	
Cut point 3	3.466 (0.456)	
Log likelihood	−984.285	
LR Chi-square (9)	67.79	
Pseudo R-squared	0.033	

Significance level: * 5%; ** 1%.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed at revealing the main influencing factors that affect the decision to choose a tourist destination and to identify the determinants of length of stay. It was shown that several aspects related to destination facilities and environment affect people. When choosing a tourist destination, its image and reputation seem to be key decision factors. A safe place to visit with good reviews and availability of information is preferred, as well as accessible and favorable climate conditions. Such factors define the image and reputation of a destination, which is often more efficiently spread via friends, relatives, and even through people who enjoy sharing their experiences with other individuals. The ‘image’ category relies on how people perceive the visit and on post-visit evaluation (Beerli and Martin 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that the most important factor is destination image, as emphasized by Chaulagain et al. (2019) and Afshardoost and Mohammad (2021), as well, who found that destination image has the greatest impact on future behavior. As regards the safety and security of the destination, respondents rated it as the most important aspect when choosing a destination. People mostly use the internet for information about a tourist destination’s safety and security, but they may also consult friends and family (Chaulagain et al. 2019).

People are more inclined to recommend a place when their own experience was as expected or better than expected. Moreover, some might even develop loyal behavior toward a destination (Králiková et al. 2020), a result that actors in the tourism industry should aim to assure a constant flow of tourists. Králiková et al. (2020) found that the uniqueness of a destination and the friendliness of local communities greatly affect overall satisfaction. Our study is in line with this finding, respondents appreciate destinations with unique experiences and tourist attractions and expect to be welcomed in the local communities. These aspects were defined under the attractions and entertainment factor, which according to Reitsamer and Brunner-Sperdin (2017) support the uniqueness of a destination, and it can create value for tourists (Erislan 2017). Moreover, it can also assist in developing emotional connections and indirectly impact the well-being of tourists throughout their visit (Reitsamer and Brunner-Sperdin 2017).

Additionally, it was found that service quality has an impact on the choice of a tourist destination. The overall satisfaction and the intention of returning to the tourist destination are both impacted by the quality of services provided (Latiff and Imm 2015; Tosun et al. 2015). The findings of the current research revealed that the service quality, the cost

of lodging and meals, and the variety of services influence the decision process. The importance of understanding people's expectations of the quality of services is marked by the challenges faced by tourism service providers. Finding ways to attract tourists and predict their behavior will always be a challenge for tourism service providers (Afshardoost and Mohammad 2021), however, it may be diminished when the right information is available. It is also worth mentioning that the success of businesses depends on the quality of their services and the development of a tourist destination depends on such information (Tosun et al. 2015).

Although not seen as the respondents' primary determining factors, aspects of travel organization were also evident. It was noticed that the length of stay is influenced by the existing attractions and possibilities of entertainment (cultural, local gastronomy, hospitality etc.), confirming previous research findings (Barros et al. 2010).

Recommendations on tourist destinations are dependent on age and gender (Králíková et al. 2020), and on the education level (Beerli and Martin 2004). The findings of the current study confirm this as gender, education, and age were found among the main socio-demographic characteristics that proved to vary among respondents when evaluating the factors that could influence a traveler's decision. However, gender was not linked to the length of stay, similarly to the findings of (Oklevik et al. 2021), while the other socio-demographic characteristics were positively correlated to length of stay, similarly to other research (Soler et al. 2020; Gokovali et al. 2007; Bavik et al. 2021). Older tourists tend to have higher length of stay since they have more spare time (Oklevik et al. 2021; Soler et al. 2020; Alén et al. 2014). The results of this research pointed out that the destination image (climate condition, travel cost, safety in the destination) has no impact on length of stay contrary to the findings of (Oklevik et al. 2021; Barros et al. 2008). Similar findings in the case of the accommodation services quality and travel organization highlight the fact that these factors have no influence on the tourists' length of stay.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Questionnaire Design and Sample Characteristics

In order to identify the determining factors in choosing a tourist destination for the residents in the North-West Development Region of Romania, an online survey was conducted from May to October 2020 among residents older than 18 years. After the specific bibliography analysis, the questionnaire was designed and implemented, and in the end 861 answers were validated. The questionnaire allowed the collection of two main categories of information: (1) socio-demographic characteristics and (2) aspects that influence tourists' decisions in choosing a destination to travel based on a set of 23 items that were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 means not important at all and 5 means very important. The used items were adapted from previous research (Seyidov and Adomaitienė 2016). To assure the reliability of the research instrument, a pilot test on 30 respondents was conducted. Cronbach's alpha test was 0.933, above the recommended value (Hair et al. 1998). The common methods bias was verified by using Harman's single factor test (Fornell and Larcker 1981). The result indicated that the single factor explained 41.56% of the variance, below the suggested threshold of 50%.

The analysis of the respondents' socio-demographic profile was conducted using descriptive statistics (Table 4). The results indicated that the majority of respondents were females (66.70%) aged between 18 and 45 years (85.60%). Analysis of the monthly household income showed that 59.90% of the respondents declared an income higher than 4200 RON, while 57.10% stated that there are children in the family. The place of residency analysis revealed that 75.30% of the participants live in urban areas.

Table 4. Characteristics of the respondents.

Attributes		Percentage of the Sample (%)
Gender	Female	574 (66.7)
	Male	287 (33.3)
Age	18–45 years	737 (85.6)
	>45 years	124 (14.4)
Education level	High school or less	190 (22.1)
	University degree	671 (77.9)
Monthly net household income	≤4200 RON	345 (40.1)
	>4200 RON	516 (59.9)
Children in the household (<18 years)	No	369 (42.9)
	Yes	492 (57.1)
Place of residency	Rural	213 (24.7)
	Urban	648 (75.3)
Length of stay	1–3 days	115 (13.4)
	4–6 days	338 (39.3)
	7–10 days	350 (40.7)
	>10 days	58 (6.7)

Official exchange rate: 1 EURO = 4.8371 RON (2020 annual average rate, Romanian National Bank).

5.2. Analysis Methods

Exploratory analysis based on the principal component analysis (PCA) was employed to reduce the dimensionality of the 23 items used to evaluate the factors that influence destination choice. The retention criterion was based on an eigenvalue higher than 1 and factor loading higher than 0.4 (Hair et al. 1998; Hair et al. 2012). To identify any statistical differences between different groups, a *t*-test was utilized. Skewness and kurtosis values were between the indicated intervals, so the data were considered normally distributed. The ordered logit regression (Green 2002) was performed to examine the effects of factors that influence their choice regarding the tourism destination and socio-demographic data (age, income, gender, level of education, presence of children in the household) on the trip length. The model was chosen due to the ordinal nature of the “trip length” variable.

6. Conclusions

As pointed also by other authors (Beerli and Martin 2004; Hsu et al. 2009; Ortaleza and Mangali 2021), research on this topic is further needed on a regular basis because it provides support to destination marketers and tourism authorities. According to our study, the image and reputation of the place, safety and security, unique experiences, and the friendliness of local communities are the main factors that affect the decision to choose a tourist destination. People are more inclined to recommend a tourist destination when their experience is as expected or better than expected. The uniqueness of a destination and the friendliness of local communities also affect overall satisfaction. Moreover, service quality plays an important role in the decision process, with the cost of lodging and meals, and the variety of services being key factors. The findings of the present study validate that gender, education, and age are key socio-demographic factors that exhibit variation among respondents while evaluating the factors that affect the tourist destination they choose.

Our findings have significant implications for Romanian tourism service providers, enabling them to enhance customer satisfaction, drive business success, and ensure long-term sustainability by developing tourist products that align with the specific requirements of travelers, in order to increase their competitiveness. Furthermore, in order to effectively fulfill the demands and preferences of tourists, managers of tourist destinations may find

these results useful in adapting their marketing and management strategies. Additionally, the current research improves the existing literature, which is quite limited, regarding the factors affecting Romanian tourist decision-making in choosing an internal destination.

By leveraging these insights, destination managers can optimize the overall tourist experience and foster positive visitor perceptions. Regular monitoring and adapting management decisions based on market trends can strengthen the success of the businesses and tourist destinations.

Even though the factors revealed in this study are consistent with the conclusions of other studies, there are some particularities defined mainly by the fact that respondents were asked about their behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, their responses could have been slightly influenced by their emotional state during unusual times. Other limits of the study could be the fact that it is a relatively narrow study, focused mainly on pull motivation and the results might not provide a comprehensive representation of the entire Romanian population, as the study primarily covers a specific development region. While the research focused only on the pull-factors, it provides important information to decision-makers to tailor strategies and offers that respond to the needs and preferences of visitors. To overcome these limitations, future research endeavors could expand the research area, allowing for a deeper exploration of the findings and a broader understanding of the topic.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, V.C.M., D.E.D. and I.C.M.; methodology, D.E.D. and I.C.M.; validation, F.H.A. and G.O.C.; formal analysis, I.C.M. and D.E.D.; investigation, C.O., V.C.M. and G.O.C.; writing—original draft preparation, V.C.M., D.E.D. and I.C.M.; writing—review and editing, V.C.M. and I.C.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, due to the fact that participation was voluntary and that all data were anonymous.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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