NEVIANA KRASTEVA
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Bulgaria

DESISLAVA ALEXOVA
International Business School, Sofia, Bulgaria

BASED ON GAMIFICATION AND OBSERVATION POSITIVE ONLINE DESTINATION EXPERIENCE (ODE) SURVEY FOR BULGARIA

Abstract:

Despite the ongoing scholarly debate on technology-driven tourism experiences, research on pre-travel online destination experiences (ODEs) is still in its infancy, and theoretical knowledge about the nature of ODEs is limited. In particular, a suitable instrument is lacking to measure to evaluate the value of the pre-travel experience on destination websites The present study applies a methodology to evaluate the pre-travel ODE of destination websites. In order to control non-incentive factors influencing ODE, while ensuring a high degree of personal relevance regarding the presented topic and destinations, the sample was composed of a homogeneous group, namely millennials (25–35 years old) living in Bulgaria with an affinity for vacation and an interest in traveling to at least one of the selected sample destinations. The narrowing of the sample to Bulgarian millennials is based on the fact that this target group has a strong preference for travel and online activities (Ketter 2021) and uses destination websites more often than average for inspiration or information before traveling (Godovykh M, Tasci AD (2020)). Several aspects guided the selection of target websites. Destinations should provide many natural and/or cultural attractions, making them potentially interesting for the target group. The combination of different destination categories (city, nation, region) should show that the scale is applicable regardless of destination scope. However, based on the experience marketing perspective, the most important selection criteria were experience design and website quality. The report presents the results of this study.

Keywords:

Gamification, Online destination experiences, Pre-travel

JEL Classification: M30, Z00, Z10

Overview

Despite the ongoing scholarly debate on technology-driven tourism experiences, research on pre-travel online destination experiences (ODEs) is still in its infancy, and theoretical knowledge about the nature of ODEs is limited. In particular, a suitable instrument is lacking for measurement to evaluate the value of pre-travel experience on destination websites This study applies a methodology to evaluate the pre-travel ODE of destination websites based on two previous studies. In order to control non-incentive factors influencing ODE, while ensuring a high degree of personal relevance regarding the presented topic and destinations, the sample was composed of a homogeneous group, namely millennials (25–35 years old) living in Bulgaria with an affinity for vacation and an interest in traveling to at least one of the selected sample destinations. The narrowing of the sample to Bulgarian millennials is based on the fact that this target group has a strong preference for travel and online activities (Ketter 2021) and uses destination websites more often than average for inspiration or information before traveling (Godovykh M, Tasci AD (2020).

Several aspects guided the selection of target websites. Destinations should provide many natural and/or cultural attractions, making them potentially interesting for the target group. The combination of different destination categories (city, nation, region) should show that the scale is applicable regardless of destination scope. However, based on the experience marketing perspective, the most important selection criteria were experience design and website quality. Previous research has shown that the application of photos and videos as well as high-quality content (e.g., sensory or narrative descriptions) positively influences pre-consumption image development and emotions (Björk 2010; Gretzel and Fesenmaier 2003; Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2020).; Lee et al. 2019; Lee and Gretzel 2012). Guided by these principles, we aimed to select: three websites with no empirical design elements (i.e. purely informational websites) as a control group (See Fig. 1.)

Figure 1. The first type of purely informative sites

Website of Gorna Malina
https://tourism.gornamalina.eu
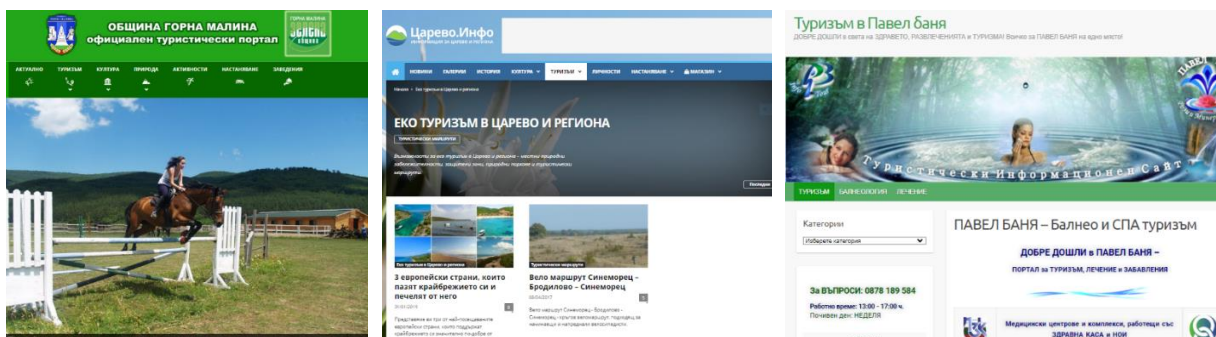
Website of Tsarevo
https://www.tsarevo.info/

Website of Pavel Banya
https://tourism-pavelbanya.info/

Three municipalities in Bulgaria have been selected with different orientations, which offer different types of experiences. Municipality of Gorna Malina, which is a suburban destination near the city of Sofia and became known as the first green municipality in Bulgaria, offering eco-art experiences; the municipality of Tsarevo, which is a popular sea destination and part of its territory is within the Strandzha Nature Park, and the municipality of Pavel Banya, which is known for its healing mineral waters, is a destination for spa and health tourism. The sites are purely informative, with sufficient data on the sights and tourism in the region and have a version only in Bulgarian.

Three websites with only a few empirical design elements (eg small photos, no moving images). (See Fig. 2.)

Figure 2. Second type of user-oriented sites with large pictures and videos

| Website of Sofia | Website of Veliko Tarnovo | Website of Botevgrad |
| https://www.visitsofia.bg/en/ | http://www.velikoturnovo.info/en | http://www.visitbotevgrad.com/ |

The tourist website of Sofia - the capital of Bulgaria, which is very rich in information, including large and high-quality photos and videos, was chosen; the old capital of Bulgaria - Veliko Tarnovo, which is mainly profiled for cultural tourism and also has a rich audio-visual content, as well as the smaller municipality of Botevgrad, which is located near Sofia and is promoted under the slogan "Botevgrad - an adventure at the crossroads" . Only the website of the Botevgrad municipality does not have an English version, but it is rich in interesting content and has different types of videos - related to adventure events, cultural and natural phenomena, etc. Three websites containing a higher degree of experiential design elements (ie sensory/emotional elements such as large images, videos or sensory descriptions). Perceptions of website quality in terms of aesthetics or design, usefulness, ease of use, trust, and interactivity influence the destination experience (Jiménez-Barreto et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2018).

Aesthetics or design and interactivity are directly related to experiential design, while trust is highly subjective and difficult to control; thus, we aimed to select websites with solid parmeters

for usefulness (relevant content) and ease of use (easy navigation). A preliminary selection of websites based on these criteria and the experience gained in two previous studies (which are still under peer review) was evaluated with respect to the aforementioned aspects by the research team. Screenshots of the websites are shown in Fig. 3.

Figure 3. Third type of sites with a high degree of empirical design

Website of Vratsa
https://openvratsa.bg/en/
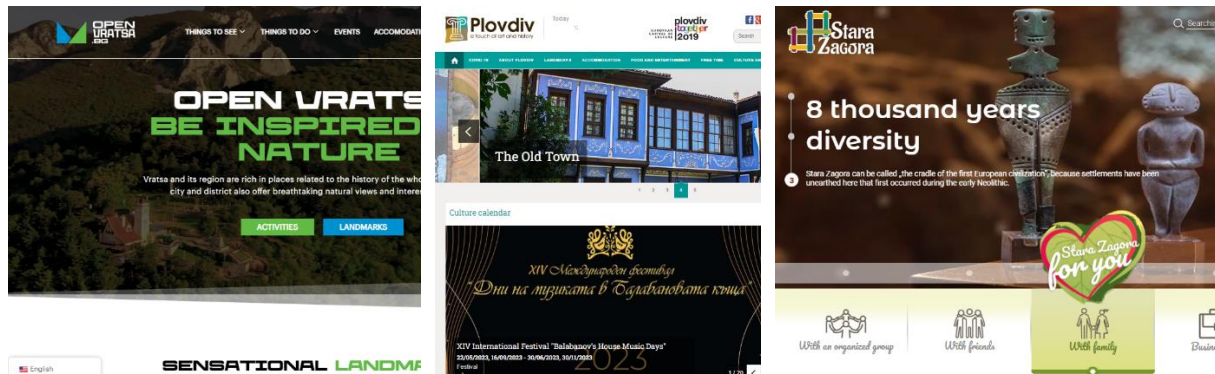
Website of Plovdiv
https://www.visitplovdiv.com/en

Website of Stara Zagora
https://visitstarazagora.bg/en

Here again, a municipality near Sofia - Vratsa has been selected, which offers opportunities for ecological, adventure and extreme tourism in the Vrachan Balkan Natural Park, as well as culturally oriented tours and visits to historical sights. The other two municipalities are larger and again the main focus is cultural tourism. These are Plovdiv, which was the European Capital of Culture for 2019, and Stara Zagora, which is known for tourist sites of Thracian culture and finds from the Neolithic era. All three websites are highly experiential in design and have a strong emotional impact.

Based on the empirical marketing perspective, we tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Websites that implement experiential elements generate higher ODE values on both dimensions (See conceptual model Fig 4) compared to a website without experiential design.

H2: This effect becomes greater depending on the level of applied marketing.

Figure 4. Conceptual model of websites that implement empirical elements and generate higher ODE values (based on Kochling A., Lohmann M., Assessing pre-travel online destination experience values of destination websites: scale development and validation Information Technology & Tourism volume 24, (2022))
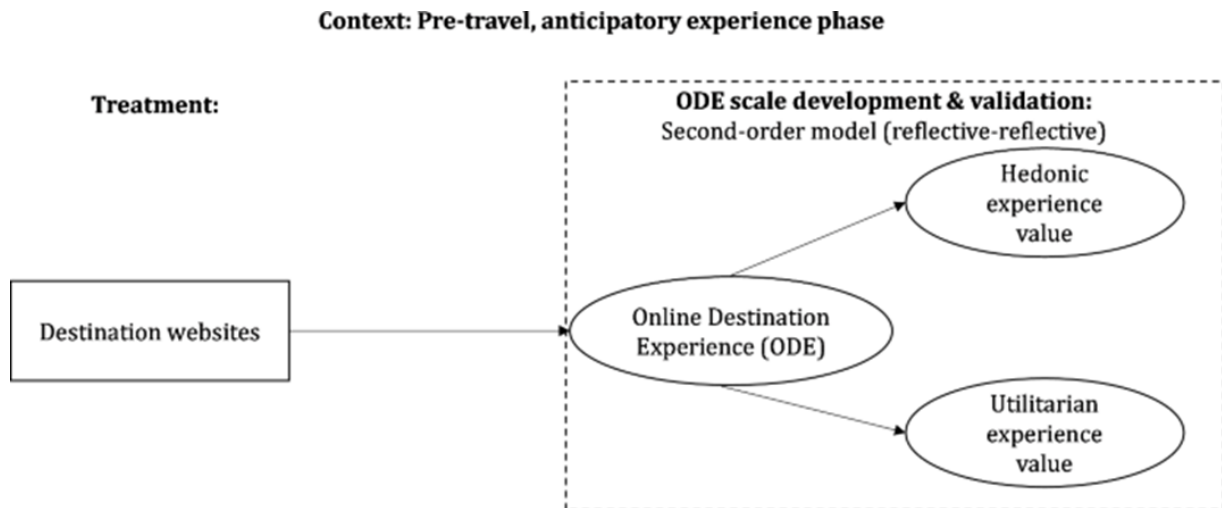
For the purpose of the study, we developed a survey of 30 questions grouped into three main areas (ODE, emotional destination experience and web design characteristics) to be applied separately to each of the nine websites. One of the objectives of the study was to compare the results of the three types of websites and to estimate the ODE, and the other was to look for certain nuances that affect each of the websites grouped in the same category (same type) and thus to make a more accurate and precise analysis. A 5-point Likert scale was used to evaluate each of the criteria, with values ranging from 1 - I do not agree at all to 5 - I completely agree.

The strictly profiled sample made it difficult for the mass distribution of the survey, which turned out to be too voluminous for users, who, on the one hand, had the task of looking at nine separate sites in advance, and on the other hand, evaluating each of them in detail according to 30 different criteria, some of which with very weak nuances of differentiation in the questions. The time-consuming nature of the task and the high concentration of attention caused an additional difficulty, and not all respondents provided answers for all nine sites.

The survey was distributed only on paper with instructions to explicitly indicate which site the completed questionnaire refers to and thus avoid confusion of responses or their automatic generation in a common database for several sites. This specificity required manual processing of the results and further burdened the research process. The total volume of variations is also too voluminous - 270 (30 questions for 9 sites). This made it difficult to generate graphs and charts to be included in the scientific paper. For this reason, in Table 1. only the survey card with the summarized results from each type of web sites is presented, and then a detailed analysis is made separately. (See Table 1)

Table 1. ODE Evaluation Survey, Emotional Impact, and Design of Selected Websites and Summary Results for Each Website Type

Online Destination Experience (ODE)*	Evaluation criteria	Likert scale		
		1st type	2nd type	3rd type
	The destination stimulated my senses.	3.2	4.3	4.7
	I could really feel the holiday experience.	2.8	3.6	4.5
	The destination looked very stimulating.	2.3	3.9	4.8
	I had positive feelings about the destination.	3	4.7	4.9
	I imagined how good I would feel during a visit to the destination.	3.9	4.6	4.8
	The destination touched me emotionally.	2.3	3.7	4.4
	My interest was aroused to learn even more about the destination.	3.5	4.3	4.5
	I became very curious about the destination.	2.8	3.6	4.7
	The destination seemed very interesting to me.	3	3.8	4.9
	The destination looked great.	2.9	4.1	4.8
	I could imagine the destination very well spatially (location of sights, surroundings, etc.). The website is constructed with a lot of emotion.	2.6	3.9	4.8
	I now have a much more concrete picture of the destination (location of attractions, surroundings, etc.).	3.5	4.6	4.9
	I have discovered where I could do which activities.	2.4	3.5	4.6
	I was able to put myself very well into the travel experience on site.	3.6	4.1	4.5
	I would like to tell friends and acquaintances about a holiday spent in the destination.	3.2	3.7	4.8
	I would very much like to share my experiences in the destination with family or friends afterwards.	3.8	4.2	4.4
	I think I could experience a lot in the destination.	3.5	3.8	4.1
	I would love to explore the destination with family or friends.	4	4.3	4.9
	It really made me want to visit the destination.	3.3	3.5	4.4
	I would like to start my holiday there right away.	2.9	3.1	3.6
	I would rather not go there. (control item)	2	1	1
Destination Emotional	A trip to the destination would make me feel good.	3.5	4.6	5.9

Experience (Zhang et al. 2018)	A trip to the destination would make me feel enthusiastic.			
WQ: Aesthetics***	The design of the website looks nice.	3	4.5	5
WQ: Usefulness*** WQ: Trust***	The website is useful for my travel decision. The website looks trustworthy	3.9	4.7	4.9
WQ: Ease of Use****	The categories on the website are well organized.	3.7	4.4	4.8
WQ: Interactivity	The website has interactive features (e.g. commenting on content) that meet my needs.	3	4.3	4.6
Perceived Experiential Design (Manipulation Check)	The website is very much focused on experiencing the destination before the trip.	4.1	4.5	4.8
	The publishers of the website want to make browsing an experience.	3.8	4.6	4.8

The analysis of the detailed and summarized results allows us, with a certain degree of expert judgment, to confirm the scientific research hypotheses, but at the same time to set ourselves the task of improving the design and the way of conducting the study.

In the first type - purely informative sites (Gorna Malina: https://tourism.gornamalina.eu, Tsarevo: https://www.tsarevo.info/eko-turizam/, Pavel Banya: https://tourism-pavelbanya.info /) the answers are relatively diverse. Part of the respondents gave weaker to neutral evaluations, while another part expressed relatively good satisfaction. The positive impact on the senses and provoking interest in the destination is stronger than the emotional impact. It is more difficult for users to discover what activities to do when visiting the destination, as the texts are mostly geographically or historically oriented and descriptive, rather than targeting users and their needs.

This conclusion is also confirmed by the higher ratings regarding obtaining a more specific idea about the destination. The weakest is the desire of visitors to start their vacation in the destination, although they would visit with family and friends. This is observed even in the answers for the municipality of Pavel Banya, which is a balneological resort of local importance. These conclusions are also confirmed by the answers to the questions related to the design of the specific website.

Low to neutral ratings for the sites' design, the way the individual categories are organized, and the lack of focus on the experience. However, all three websites receive average to high ratings for reliability and usefulness.

The main findings for the first type of sites can be summarized as follows:

- weak emotional impact, which is due to the design and weak user orientation of the site;
- descriptive texts provide information and intrigue visitors to show curiosity and interest and visit the destination, but not to the point of choosing it for their vacation;
- the sites are informative and useful, but not experience-oriented and do not stimulate the senses enough.

For the second type of websites, which have large pictures and videos and are user-oriented (Sofia: https://www.visitsofia.bg/en/, Veliko Turnovo http://www.velikoturnovo.info/en, Botevgrad: http:/ /www.visitbotevgrad.com/), those of Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo stand out with relatively higher ratings than the Botevgrad site, which is similar in content, but the individual categories are poorly organized, with more subcategories and the need for more than two click to reach the desired information. Most likely, more users do not make enough effort and are left with the impression that there is little information or they do not reach the individual components: photo gallery, videos and digitized maps of the individual tourist sites and routes.

The evaluations at the Botevgrad site vary between neutral and high, while at the Sofia and V. Tarnovo sites the evaluations are high and very high. In all three destinations, the site does not achieve sufficient stimulation of the senses and emotional impact. The municipalities of Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo predispose to a vacation experience, while Botevgrad does not. Unlike the first type of sites, all three sites here give a much better spatial idea of the destination and of the activities that can be done during the tourists' stay.

The design of second-type sites and their functionality were rated much higher, with scores approaching those of third-type sites. All this also corresponds with the assessments that the sites are focused on experiences. Positive feelings towards the destination were achieved, and only on the site for Botevgrad the answers were that the destination is not stimulating enough and users do not have the necessary motivation to spend their vacation there.

For the third type of websites, which have a high degree of empirical design (Vratsa: https://openvratsa.bg/en/, Plovdiv: http://www.visitplovdiv.com/en, Stara Zagora: https://visitstarazagora .bg/) almost only the highest ratings prevail, with the Vratsa site being the highest rated, which is distinguished by a more innovative design, a high degree of empiricism and a strong user orientation. However, not all respondents can imagine how well they will feel when visiting the respective destinations.

The emotional impact at the Plovdiv and Stara Zagora sites is less pronounced than at the Vratsa site. Here, however, the cognitive element gives way to the emotional one, and not all respondents answered that they got a more concrete idea of the destination. As for sharing

experiences, again not everyone would do it enthusiastically. Also, not everyone is provoked to visit the respective destination. Design and functionality are top rated everywhere.

In conclusion, the following conclusions can be summarized:

- Part of the respondents who are more critical put mostly 2-3 on the first type of sites and 4-5 on the second and third, with different nuances of opinions regarding the various questions and evaluation criteria;

- Another part of them give high marks on some components and on the first type of sites, as well as lower marks on some of the components on the second and third type of sites;

- In the first type of sites, Pavel Banya's site is rated a little lower compared to the sites of G. Malina and Tsarevo, but the nuances are quite weak;

- In the second type of websites, Veliko Tarnovo's site is rated slightly higher than Sofia's, which again we tend to report is mostly due to the organization of individual categories and subcategories and the ease with which browsing is done . On the Botevgrad site, it is the browsing that becomes the most difficult, and this prevents users from looking for more information on it, thus not reaching a large part of it.

- Regarding the sites of the third type, the curious thing is that Plovdiv, which was the European capital of culture in 2019 and which is the most developed as a tourist destination, has a less attractive site than Vratsa and Stara Zagora. The emotional impact caused by the Stara Zagora site also contributes to high ratings regarding the focus on the experience, incentive to visit the destination, etc., but not to the same extent as the innovative and original site of Vratsa.

We take into account the mistakes we made in the design of the research and its conduct - small group of respondents, not online, difficult to process and summarize data, ambiguous conclusions, outlined trends, we can conclude the need to improve the design and methodology and conduct it again.

References

GODOVYKH M., TASCI A. D. (2020) Customer experience in tourism: A review of definitions, components, and measurements. Tourism Manage Perspect 35 (July)

GRETZEL U., FESENMAIER D. R. (2003) Experience-based internet marketing: An exploratory study of sensory experiences associated with pleasure travel to the Midwest United States. In: FREW AJ, HITZ M., O'CONNOR P. (eds) Information and communication technologies in tourism 2003, vol 20. Springer Vienna, pp 49–57

JIMÉNEZ-BARRETO J., RUBIO N., CAMPO MARTÍNEZ S. (2019) The online destination brand experience: Development of a sensorial-cognitive-conative model. Int J Tourism Res 21(2)

JIMÉNEZ-BARRETO J., RUBIO N., CAMPO S. (2020) Destination brand authenticity: What an experiential simulacrum! A multigroup analysis of its antecedents and outcomes through official online platforms. Tour Manag 77(104022):1–19.

KETTER E. (2021) Millennial travel: Tourism micro-trends of European Generation Y. J Tourism Futures 7(2)

KOCHLING A., Lohmann M., Assessing pre-travel online destination experience values of destination websites: scale development and validation *Information Technology & Tourism* volume 24, (2022)

LEE W., GRETZEL U. (2012) Designing persuasive destination websites: A mental imagery processing perspective. Tour Manag 33(5)

ZHANG H., GORDON S., BUHALIS D., DING X. (2018) Experience value cocreation on destination online platforms. J Travel Res 57(8)