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**Research on Potential Markets for Incoming Tourism in  
Bulgaria by Specialized Types of Tourism**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The objectives of the study presented in the current paper are related to establishing the possibilities for offering package holidays and combined programs for specialized types of tourism in Bulgaria. Distinguished for the questionnaire study are three specialized types of tourism, considered as among the most appropriate for the implementation of strategies for returning tourists back at the destination, in the conditions of crisis on the international tourism market, namely – MICE, health (spa and wellness) and leisure tourism. The tasks of the research are related to the ascertainment of the business identification and the image of the specialized types of tourism, offered in Bulgaria for the foreign market, as well as the analysis of potential consumers of the proposed package products. Object of research are package holidays for specialized types of tourism in Bulgaria. The study examines some of the leading tour operators in Spain and Italy, offering package holidays for outbound tourism in Bulgaria.*

**Keywords:** MICE tourism, health, leisure, incoming

## Introduction

The significance of the present study is related to the definition of competitive tourism products, representing Bulgaria on the foreign market, which aims at improving the product offer in specialized types of tourism, as well as differentiating the offer in this area. We consider that competitive products in the specialised tourism sectors are integrated products, satisfying more than one motive, offered both by the tour operator and by the establishments/hotels themselves. An integrated product refers to the combination of two types of tourism that are not popular in a similar form to date, for example, MICE and health, MICE and leisure, etc. Based on the sensory marketing and organoleptic approach, new components of the tourism package need to be exploited, as well as to steer the accommodation in a new development direction. In order to attract tourists to destinations, in view of the current market environment, elements of the tour are sought that create experiences and memories for them.

It can be argued that it is the offering of additional services and facilities for tourists' leisure and entertainment experiences that form the attractiveness of tourism products nowadays and are the next form in the course of the historical development of tourism.

In the specific conjuncture of the tourism market, it is now necessary to look for added value to the main tourism product of tour operators that creates a feeling linked specifically to destination-specific products. Such a concept for the formation of specialised tourism products can be applied through the methods of **sensory marketing**. It is the idea of using certain flavours of food, wine and other typical local cuisine to create associations and prerequisites for the attractiveness of a destination. Sensory marketing can be particularly relevant and applicable in the context of travel and tourism. When consumers travel and visit more or less famous places, they often go through so-called "sensory experiences" (experiences that excite the senses) that differ from those in their everyday home environment.

For example, travellers may experience new foods, new surroundings or environments with unfamiliar or different sensory atmospheres, in terms of temperature, scent and sounds (Madzharov, 2020). In the current digitised world, with tourists being increasingly immersed in the digital world (with dramatically increasing time spent in front of screens on phones and other digital devices), basic sensory experiences such as physical touch or smell are more desirable. The use of the senses as a tool to attract tourists to a destination is based on the belief that pleasant sensory associations and surroundings will enhance the user experience. *In response to the current market environment, marketers in the tourism industry need to realise the importance of offering this type of sensory elicitation to tourists and focus their efforts on richer and more encompassing sensory experiences in the destination visited.*

*The functionality of MICE tourism to be combined with other types, is considered in this paper as an opportunity to introduce innovation in the creation of the tourism package, as well as an incentive to satisfy more consumer motives during the tour in the destination.* In order to achieve such a

goal, it is necessary to consider the interrelationships between MICE and other types of tourism.

Another characteristic of business tourism is that it is not only related to the leisure time of the tourist. This type of tourism is out of the context of tourism theory in general, as some of its elements do not correspond to the use of the working time, but are carried out for the purposes of the work. Business travel is a form of tourism that has a greater and deeper impact on a country's economy. Although business meetings are activities that are carried out for a fee, they are equated with tourism in general, as they make use of tourism sites/facilities – accommodation, meals, entertainment, and some services specific to other types of tourism (Georgieva, 2021).

In contrast to the “typical” types of tourists, who choose their own holiday time and place, business travellers choose the time and visited location in accordance with their work commitments. A specific feature distinguishing MICE from the other types of tourism is that it is gaining in importance since it is not influenced by or dependent on the local tourism season. From its early development, this relatively new type of tourism has been accompanied by additional leisure activities for its tourists, such as meals in luxury restaurants and hotels, participation in exhibitions, visits to natural and cultural tourism sites, etc.

In the author's opinion, a new direction related to innovation in tourism is precisely the combination of the satisfaction of at least two consumer motives. Such type of tourism site management may concern the combination of MICE with subspecies of health tourism. As an example, a combination with a wellness centre can be given, which would offer a variety of recreational and beauty treatments, programmes and anti-stress rituals, as well as holistic approaches to achieve physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, professional and social well-being of the individual.

Currently, in today's dynamic world, the business traveller is under stress, strain and the need to combine the time in which they work with opportunities to balance the nervous-mental stress, through treatments, therapies, counselling, services to maintain a good appearance, which is a must in business life (Ianeva, Georgieva, 2018). In this regard, business travel, combining spa and wellness services is directly linked to overcoming the problem of *seasonality of the tourism product*. The availability of good facilities is only one of the conditions for the successful preparation, implementation and completion of a business trip or event.

### **Business Identification of the Destination**

The increase in the travel in recent decades has created challenges for marketers involved in managing tourism destinations. In this regard, there is an increasing competition between destinations on the international tourism market, leading to the development of economic indicators of the countries. While tourists are enjoying the numerous destination opportunities, destination

marketing organisations are finding it increasingly difficult to find ways to differentiate them (Yaneva, 2019). On the other hand, an important circumstance that stimulates the offer of a specific experience by the tourism business is the ever-increasing competition between destinations, especially price competition to attract and retain visitors; the seasonal concentration of tourism consumption in destinations with predominant, mass holiday tourism; the seasonal commitment of skilled labour, a fact that discourages its implementation in the tourism sector (Rakadzhiyska, 2019).

Studies summarize that a greater weight for increasing economic indicators is placed on marketing planning and management integrated into the overall tourism strategy of the destination. *In this regard, we could highlight the formation of business identification of the tourism destination as a method to increase its competitive advantages, through the application of standard, but also modified management models for the development of a tourism area, by creating a strategy and innovative tourism programs.* The external marketing of tourism destinations is a strategy to increase their destination competitive position by identifying and promoting their image. Business identification, as a destination management tool, can facilitate the successful management and promotion of the newly established tourism regions in Bulgaria.

A destination may gain or lose attractiveness as a result of a change in the preferences of tourists related to their travel motives, as a result of marketing campaigns carried out by specialists for other destinations or as a result of exhaustion of the resources with which it attracts tourists. Over time, a destination passes through several stages. The loss of attractiveness of a tourism destination is a prerequisite for the introduction of new opportunities for the development of products from other types of tourism, its repositioning and rebranding, with a view to its sustainable development.

Tourism areas are a key component for the development of tourism products, in terms of the presence of specific natural and anthropogenic resources, infrastructure and superstructure. In order to create attractive image and business identification, a marketing strategy needs to be formed to attract larger tourism flows by specialized types of tourism typical of the destination.

A successful approach can be found through the use of various influencing factors on consumer behaviour such as marketing, advertising and promotional programmes. The effectiveness of marketing and promotional programmes should not only target specific tourism segments, but as part of the strategy, it is also necessary to take specific marketing actions (Mccartney, 2008).

Elements related to building the image and competitive advantage of the destination, such as demand conditions, as part of the strategies and structures of companies, connecting and supporting parts of the business sector and others, provide opportunities for tourism, economic and social development. They also contribute to the local and regional economy through creating jobs and new investment projects. Investments focused on innovative activities, both to build and maintain accommodation and infrastructure and to create sites with innovative products also provide a competitive advantage for the destination (Ianeva, Georgieva, 2021).

*The business identification of tourism areas can also be ensured by assessing the competitive advantages possessed by tour operators. Under the current change in the tourism market conditions, it is necessary to explore opportunities for **repositioning products by specialized types of tourism and to identify innovative market segments** with higher added value, adapted to existing resources, where they could achieve and maintain their competitive advantage. The last could be defined as the characteristics of the specialised products that give them an edge over their immediate closest competitors. For marketers, competitive advantage is those factors associated with various types of product enhancements that arise from consumer demands and may provide an advantage for tour operators offering them over their competitors in other identical markets outside Bulgaria.*

The relative superiority of the hotels offering an innovative product in this case will be the result of their marketing advantage, or so-called external advantage, as opposed to their cost advantage, or so-called internal advantage. The creation of unique products is based on a marketing advantage, the purpose of which is to expand the market (Porter, 1980).

It can be argued that the tourism brand “Bulgaria” is unique for the foreign visitors (German, Polish or Romanian), but it is not identical in all countries. In some countries this brand brings positive and pleasant emotions, while for others it is filled with negativity and denial. In the first case, the brand must be developed and enriched, in the second – repositioned (Aaker, 2008). Further, in case of a positive reaction to the tourism brand “Bulgaria”, it is necessary to identify the emotional and rational reactions of specific sub-brands – tourism areas (Lindstrom, 2006). In the Bulgarian tourism business the most applicable is the “law of promotion” – to build the brand with promotion (Tsonev, 2012).

*When compiling the marketing program with events, the destination marketing organizations need to prioritize highlighting the tourism location and creating an image and style that is unique for it. Effective management of business identification at the corporate and “tourism destination” level leads to a positive corporate image and competitiveness, measurable by corporate success indicators such as consumer demand, market share, profit and other economic indicators.*

*The above statements provide a prerequisite for the development of a marketing program for business identification of tourism regions in Bulgaria.*

*We believe that the formation of the business identification of the tourism destination is directly related to its attractiveness among potential consumers of tourism products, and in particular their motives for travel, as well as the available resources and services offered by the tourist location.*

*Also, stimulating a specific experience for tourists, during their visit, is a way of attracting them back to destinations in the context of a global health crisis. In this respect, offering specific products from tourism areas can stand out as essential to achieve a competitive advantage for destinations.*

The conducted study summarizes that a greater weight for the rise of economic indicators is placed on marketing planning and management integrated into the overall tourism strategy of the destination. In this regard, we

can highlight the formation of **business identification** of the tourism destination as a method to increase its competitive advantages, through the application of standard, but also modified management models for the development of a tourism area, by creating a strategy and program.

In order to diversify tourism areas and products, it is also necessary to make a theoretical justification of the basic concepts related to the experience economy and the leisure industry, which are associated with urban-recreational tourism – the object of study in this paper. The “experience economy” (also called the economy of emotions, the economy of feelings, etc. in different countries and by different authors) is also considered the economy of entertainment by some authors, since the essence of both “economies” is hidden in the question: How to offer feelings and emotions to consumers? This question is of a particular importance for all industries and therefore all companies are trying to find a way to survive in the context of fierce competition in the era of the “new” economy.

**Following the example of the good global practices, it is necessary to highlight distinctive characteristics of the tourism products offered in the country, which can attract potential tourists in the specialized types of tourism selected in the study, which are a priority for Bulgaria are - MICE, health, leisure and others:**

- Business tourism (MICE - meetings, incentive travel, conferences and exhibitions) - arguing that it is the most profitable, year-round and serves the higher class of consumers, with an established facilities of 4- and 5-star hotels in some of the registered tourism areas;
- Health tourism (spa and wellness, balneotherapy and medical tourism) with the types of centres subject to certification, such as spa (med-spa); thalassotherapy; balneo and wellness - arguing that it is a year-round recreational type of tourism; with the presence of valuable specific natural resources in several of the tourism areas (mineral springs successfully exploited for tourism purposes); with an existing 4- and 5-star bed base for its servicing; with the recognition of Bulgaria in terms of this type of tourism product; with opportunities for creating innovative forms of service and developing company standards ensuring high quality. On the basis of health tourism it is possible to attract solvent groups of consumers;
- Urban leisure tourism (experiential tourism - gambling) - in recent years, new products related to tourists’ experiences have found a place in the economy. The modern tourist is not only looking for accommodation, meals and standard cultural attractions that are easily tangible in the digital environment, but is seeking to remember the trip (holiday) through entertainment/experience opportunities (Gaydarov, 2018). In order to reposition Bulgaria’s image as a cheap and mass tourism destination, it is also necessary to develop and promote similar types of specialised tourism products. We believe that one of them could be gambling tourism. In Bulgaria there is a regulatory

framework for attracting gambling tourists; tourism areas with appropriate superstructure. This type of products attracts year-round solvent tourists.

### **Methodology of the Research**

Today tour operators are the most powerful enterprises on the tourism market, which through their activities have a significant impact on its formation and functioning. As an example, we can point out the leading European outgoing tour operators indicating a similar serious impact on the market – the emblematic Thomas Cook (which currently operates as an online agency, changing the distribution model, from the position of digital transformation), Der Touristik (which also has representation in Bulgaria), TUI, Kuoni, Pegas Touristik, Intourist, have found a place on the Bulgarian tourism market. Highlighting some of the leading sending (outbound) tour operators, it is possible to underline the linkage with another distribution and promotion channel typical for tourism, namely the presence of the largest tourism fairs (expos) operating on the emissive territory of the mentioned tour operators, such as the ones in London, Berlin and Moscow. By studying the above-mentioned exchanges and tour operators, as well as the products on offer, new trends in various product offerings can be outlined, on the basis of which conceptual designs for new integrated products can be formed.

Demand studies in specialised tourism are linked to new consumer motives and demands. They are also determined by the new market environment, conditioned by the transformations resulting from digitalisation, social media, the need for a healthy environment and the new motivations related to return to the destination. These are related to the motivation or the leading consumer motives for undertaking a tourist trip; the objective conditions and constraints; the preferences of tourists for the type and mode of use of means of transport; the nature of the destination; the type and category of accommodation and dining facilities; additional options and forms of diversification of the stay, etc. The tour operator's research supports the development of the concept or conceptual design of the business trip. It is the development of a conceptual project that corresponds with the possibilities of creating an integrated business tourism product, linked to the differentiation of product offerings.

The studies are linked to the theme of the tourism package. The results of these studies determine to whom the package should be addressed – according to the interests of potential consumers, as well as what services to include. It can be argued that the supply is highly dependent on the demand (Kaleychev, 2020). For the organizational part, namely the compilation of the package, which involves negotiating and booking special prices and conditions, the tour operator has the opportunity to choose a form of working with contractors that will bring him the greatest convenience and dividends.

Achieving the **research objective** and proving the **research thesis** in the study involves using a range of approaches and methods. Applied are:



- Analysis and synthesis of theoretical concepts and propositions concerning MICE, health and urban-recreational tourism and tour operator's business.
- Induction and deduction of features and specific characteristics of MICE, health and urban-recreational tourism and tour operator's activity.
- Systematic approach to prove the thesis.
- Expert analysis on the interrelationships and dependencies between external environment factors and MICE, health and urban-recreational tourism.
- Survey research to conduct the empirical study.

### **Main Limitations of the Research**

The limitations that are set in the development of the paperwork are:

1. The empirical research is set in time constraints – conducted in October 2020.
2. It cannot be stated with certainty that the sampling method of respondents used in the survey ensures full representativeness of the study.
3. Recent negative trends concerning market conditions are highlighted in the research paper but are not reported as results. The new trends are taken into account when developing a product on specialized types of tourism, which is formed with an emphasis on the experience that brings tourists back to the destinations - culinary, shopping and other types of tourism.
4. The empirical research is limited to a selection of foreign tour operators based on their tourism destinations and specialized products offered.

The **objectives** of the study are related to the identification of opportunities for offering package holidays and combined programs for specialized types of tourism in Bulgaria – MICE, health (spa and wellness) and leisure tourism.

**Tasks** related to the study are:

- Establish the business identification of Bulgaria on the foreign market.
- Identify innovative approaches of tour operators in hotel/destination presentation.
- Identify the types of tourism with which Bulgaria is associated in the foreign market.
- Analysis of consumers of package products for Bulgaria - age, travel motives, etc.

- Identification of the tourism offer in Bulgaria of specialized types of tourism - health, business and leisure, as well as the bases for their conduct - spa and wellness centers, business hotels, etc.

The **object** of the study is package offers for specialized types of tourism in Bulgaria.

The **scope** of the study includes leading foreign tour operators from Spain and Italy, offering package programs in outbound tourism.

The study was conducted in the form of a **questionnaire** targeted at Spanish and Italian tour operators offering outbound tourism packages. The questionnaire designed consists of 22 closed-ended questions. The survey was conducted online, by sending a link via email to respondents, through the kwicksurveys.com platform. 20 surveys were sent and 17 responses were received.

The respondents are travel professionals from Spanish and Italian, that offer outbound tourism programs. Such agencies are Transrutas, Portugal Tours, Halcon Viajes, Halcón y Ecuador Viajes, Catai Tours, LOGITRAVEL, BID Travel, Intrepid Travel, Soletto Travel, Large Minority and others.

The survey of the questionnaire is titled “Package offers and combined programs on inbound business, health (spa and wellness) and leisure tourism”.

The main **areas** in which the survey was developed focused on issues related to:

- The offer of package products for Bulgaria.
- The importance of the characteristics of a destination when developing package programmes for it.
- Advertising presence of Bulgaria in the surveyed country, here we include advertising spots on TV, on the Internet.
- Methods of recruiting partners of foreign tour operators - from the point of view of online rating of a given object/destination, profiles in social networks, web pages, etc.
- Research on potential target segments for the country related to age groups, ability to pay and personal and social interests.
- Recognition of Bulgaria in foreign markets as a destination for health, MICE and urban leisure tourism, and here we also include recognition of the sites that cater for the respective types of tourism in the country.

## **Results of the Research**

The following conclusions can be drawn from the survey:

- The majority of package offers for Bulgaria available on the Spanish and Italian markets are individual and group cultural programmes, combined programmes with neighbouring countries, as well as sea tourism.

- Only half of the respondents had seen advertising of Bulgarian tourism (videos), mainly on the internet.
- Tourism EXPOs are the platforms through which the promotional materials offered by the Ministry of Tourism reach potential foreign partners.
- When selecting a hotel, tourism professionals first research recommendations from local partners in the inbound market, then the hotel's website, as well as reviews, ratings and rankings on feedback sites such as Tripadvisor and Booking.com.
- The most important method of presenting the hotel/tourism destination is social media advertising, also an interactive walk through on the property's website and the use of VR videos.
- The most common method used by professionals to sell travel packages is through social media placement.
- Of the indicators studied, the most significant for tourism professionals is the safety of tourists, followed by the availability of anthropogenic and natural resources in the destination and the health conditions of tourists.
- Tourism professionals indicate cultural tourism as the most recognizable for the country.
- Leading motives of incoming Spanish and Italian tourists to Bulgaria are associated with cultural tourism, as well as health improvement, wellness and spa pleasures.
- Tourists visiting Bulgaria from markets such as Italy and Spain are aged 30+ and travel predominantly on programmes including 3-5 destinations in their planned itinerary.
- Respondents find Bulgaria more as a recognizable destination for health tourism, but do not know the accommodation facilities for this type of tourism in the country.
- Spanish and Italian tourists are not interested in health tourism programmes in Bulgaria.
- Respondents define Bulgaria as an unrecognizable destination for business tourism (MICE) and do not know conference centres in the country to offer to their corporate clients.
- Opportunities for additional services included in a business tourism tour operator's package are day sightseeing tours in the area, entertainment and spa treatments, massages and wellness treatments.
- Bulgaria is not recognizable as a destination for leisure tourism and in this regard, tourism professionals do not know of any sites offering this type of tourism.

## **Conclusion**

The current study is related to the identification of opportunities for offering packages and combined programs for specialized types of tourism in Bulgaria – business, health (spa and wellness) and leisure tourism.

From the results it can be established that the country is not popular on the foreign market with package offers in the studied specialized types of tourism. It is necessary to make recommendations, on the one hand, at the macro level – to the tourism destination management organizations in Bulgaria, which should form marketing policies for image building (rebranding) of the destination on the international tourism markets.

On the other hand, we make recommendations at the micro level – to tour operators regarding the creation of specialized products that satisfy more than one consumer motive in order to attract tourists to the destination.

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## Appendix 1

### QUESTIONNAIRE

#### **Package offers and combined programmes for inbound business, health (spa and wellness) and leisure tourism**

Please indicate your gender:

Male

Female

Please indicate the size of the tourism enterprise you work for:

1-5 employees

5-10 employees

More than 10 employees

1. Do you offer package products for Bulgaria?

No

Yes – please specify

2. Have you seen any promotional videos for Bulgaria on the internet, TV or elsewhere?

No

Yes – please indicate where

3. Have you seen advertising catalogues by type of Bulgaria's products (wine and cuisine, cultural, spa, seaside, etc.) and if yes, do you use them for your tourists?

<https://www.tourism.government.bg/bg/kategorii/informacionni-materiali/broshuri-na-ispanski-ezik>

No

Yes – please indicate where you have found them

4. What methods do you use when researching the hotel/destination you offer to tourists?

Research on the hotel/destination website

Reviews, ratings and rankings on feedback sites – Tripadvisor, booking.com

Social media profiles (Facebook, Instagram)

Recommendations from local partners

Other – please specify

5. Please tick which of the following innovative methods you find important when presenting your hotel/tourist destination online:

VR videos

Interactive tour

Social media advertising (Facebook, Instagram)

Other – please specify

6. Do you use any of the above methods to market your tourism products?

No

Yes – please indicate which ones.

7. Determine the importance of the following features when offering package programmes in a destination. Rate from 1 to 3 the following selection criteria, such as: 1. Not relevant, 2. 1. 3. Essential

Safety of tourists

Health

Availability of natural resources

Availability of anthropogenic resources

Thematic events in the destination - folklore festivals, etc.

Infrastructure of the destination - airport with international flights of low-cost and scheduled airlines

Local cuisine

High-end hotels

Entertainment options in the destination

8. What types of tourism do you associate Bulgaria with?

Nautical

Cultural

Business

Spa and wellness

Religious

Entertainment (visit casinos, bars and restaurants)

Other – please specify.

9. What, in your opinion, are among the top motives for choosing a holiday in Bulgaria?

Health improvement, wellness and spa pleasures

Business – business meetings, conferences, exhibitions, incentive programs

For leisure – visiting gaming halls, bars, restaurants and other venues

Other – please specify

10. What is the average age of tourists willing to travel to Bulgaria?

0-30 yrs.

30-50 yrs.

Over 50 yrs.

11. How many cities would your tourists visit in 1 trip?

1-3

3-5

5-7

Other – please specify

12. Is Bulgaria recognizable as a destination for health tourism (spa, wellness, medical, sports, balneotherapy)?

Yes

No

Other – please specify

13. Are there spa, wellness and health centres in Bulgaria that you would suggest to your tourists?

No

Yes

I don't know them

14. Are your tourists interested in health tourism programs in Bulgaria?

Yes

No

Other – please specify

15. What budget would your tourists spend on a 7-day health tourism package in B?

500 EUR

700-1000 EUR

Over 1000 EUR

16. Is Bulgaria recognizable as a destination for MICE tourism (meetings, incentive, conferences, exhibitions)?

Yes

No

Other – please specify

17. Are there major conference centres and business hotels in Bulgaria that you would offer to your tourists?

No

Yes

I don't know them

18. Are tourists interested in travelling on business in Bulgaria?

Yes

No

Other – please specify

19. When organizing a trip for your corporate client (conference, business meeting, exhibition, incentive), what services would you add to the leisure package for the tourists?

Entertainment - casino, bar, night clubs, wine tasting

Spa therapies, massages and wellness treatments

One-day sightseeing tours



Other – please specify

20. Is Bulgaria recognizable as an entertainment tourism destination (casino, bars, clubs, etc.)?

Yes

No

Other – please specify

21. Are there any casino hotels in Bulgaria that you would suggest to your tourists?

No

Yes

I don't know them

22. Are tourists interested in leisure travel programs in Bulgaria?

Yes

No

Other – please specify