

# Revealing Tourists' Perceptions and Increasing the Likelihood of a Visit

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**Abstract:** - Using the theory of planned behavior, this study looks at the factors that influence people's intentions to visit Croatia in the next five years, focusing on the perceptions of potential tourists from Germany, Austria, and Slovenia, the three most important tourism markets for Croatia (46,7 % of overnight stays in 2022). The study uses a diverse sample of 1200 respondents and employs principal component analysis, ANOVA, and regression analysis. The main results show that the perception of safety, nature and quality, facilities offered, level of education, country of origin, previous visits to Croatia, and frequency of trips abroad play an important role in the intention to travel to Croatia in the next five years. The respondents' attitudes towards sustainability aspects during the trip show nuanced relationships, with pro-environmental behavior having no significant influence, while pro-socio-economic behavior during the trip shows a negative correlation to visit. The research offers valuable perspectives for marketers and policymakers seeking to increase Croatia's attractiveness and competitiveness. It highlights the complex interplay of demographic, perceptual, and experiential factors that influence travel intentions.

**Key-Words:** - Travel intentions; tourists, destination perception; sustainability aspects, likelihood of a visit, Croatia.

Received: May 11, 2024. Revised: September 27, 2024. Accepted: October 27, 2024. Published: November 19, 2024.

## 1 Introduction

Tourism plays a central role in the global economy and contributes significantly to the GDP of many countries. The tourism industry is dynamic and is influenced by changing consumer preferences, global trends, and environmental and social concerns. It is pointed out that due to the increasing competition in the global tourism industry, research into the future behavioral intentions of international travelers is becoming increasingly important in the tourism [1] and has a significant influence on the development of destinations, [2]. Understanding tourists' perceptions and behavior is crucial for destination management as it directly influences the development of effective marketing strategies, policies, and sustainable tourism practices. Therefore, tourists' perceptions of a destination, and their attitudes towards sustainability have become important points of current tourism research.

Tourism is a cornerstone of the Croatian economy and has an extraordinary impact on the overall social and economic development of the country, hence understanding the factors that influence tourists' perceptions is crucial for developing effective marketing strategies and policies. In recent years, Germany, Austria, and

Slovenia have proven to be Croatia's strongest tourism markets. In 2022, Croatia recorded a total of 23,555 overnight stays by German visitors, accounting for 28.6% of total overnight stays in the country. Slovenia followed with 7,470 overnight stays (9.1%) and Austrian tourists contributed 7,440 overnight stays (9.0%), [3]. This study adopts a quantitative research design, utilizing data from surveys from tourists across diverse demographics. One of the aims of the study is to explore tourists' perceptions of Croatia as a tourism destination including the perception of its cultural attractions, natural landscapes, facilities, safety, and the overall attractiveness of the destination. The other aim is to analyze the sustainable behavior intentions of potential tourists from the main Croatian markets during their travels. This includes analyzing tourists' preferences for environmentally friendly practices, supporting local communities, and participating in sustainable activities. The third aim focuses on assessing the intention of tourists visiting Croatia in the next five years based on their socio-demographic characteristics, perceptions, and sustainable behavior.

While there is a growing body of literature on tourism, and the theory of planned behavior model

has been widely used in previous research to examine tourists' travel intentions or behavior, there is a research gap when it comes to fully understanding the complex relationships between tourists' perceptions, sustainable behavior and the likelihood of visiting a destination. This study fills this gap by examining these interlinked aspects. Therefore, this study looks at the Croatian tourism landscape and focuses on uncovering tourists' perceptions and identifying the key factors that influence their intention to visit.

## 2 Theoretical Background

Research uses the theory of planned behavior as a conceptual framework for examining tourists' intentions to visit a particular destination. The theory of planned behavior (TPB) stands out as one of the most commonly used models to explain the emergence of behavioral intentions, [4], [5], [6], [7]. This theoretical framework assumes that the intention or inclination to act is the closest element to a behavior, which means that the intention illustrates the individual's willingness to engage in a certain behavior, [8]. As some authors [9] underlined, behavioral intention refers to the extent to which individuals have consciously formulated plans to engage in or refrain from engaging in a particular behavior in the future, [10]. Due to its ability to predict the intentions of individuals, TPB has found wide application in predicting various intentions in the field of tourism, [11], [12]. Previous research has shown that attitude can be an important factor in predicting, describing, and influencing tourists' behavioral intentions, as found in various studies, [13], [14], like predicting intentions to revisit a destination, [15], [16], predicting pro-environmental behavior, or understanding intentions of residents to support tourism, [17]. It is underlined how in an effort to improve the explanatory capacity of the TPB, some researchers have attempted to incorporate additional variables (i.e. place attachment, authenticity, and destination image) into the TPB framework that are tailored to specific research contexts, [5]. Many researchers have investigated the impact of destination image on various aspects of tourists' decision-making processes, destination preferences, and future behavioral intentions, [18], [19]. However, a consensus has not yet been reached on the factors that determine intentions to visit, as the results obtained are varied and show considerable heterogeneity, [1]. The tourist image of a destination has a significant impact on consumer behavior [20], whereby, as some authors [21] state, a strong, positive image can increase the likelihood that a

destination will be considered and selected when making a travel decision.

The perspective of tourists when developing a sustainable destination is crucial, as marketing often plays a central role in various sustainability initiatives. Nevertheless, the literature has predominantly taken a supply-side approach and adopted the residents' perspective, while neglecting the importance of understanding tourists' perceptions of sustainability attributes, [22]. This study uses the triple bottom line framework to assess the sustainable behavior of tourists. Although few studies focus specifically on behavioral aspects related to tourism or services, research on consumer attitudes shows how individuals behave in relation to sustainability issues and, in particular, environmental concerns, [23]. Sustainable tourism behavior integrates ecological, economic, and socio-cultural factors, [24], [25], [26]. Eco-friendly or pro-environmental behavior in tourism includes the actions that tourists can implement at a destination to safeguard the natural environment, such as controlling water consumption, regulating the use of air conditioning, using towels responsibly, etc. [25], [27]. Pro-economic tourism behavior means that tourists intend to promote local economic growth by financially supporting the local industry, for example by visiting local facilities, buying locally-made products, and supporting the creation and maintenance of local jobs, [28]. Pro-social behavior in tourism refers to tourists' adherence to social norms reflects the social dimension of sustainability and includes actions such as tourists supporting local communities and engaging with locals to gain a deeper understanding of the locals, [25], [29]. To promote more responsible behavior among tourists, it is crucial to understand how tourists perceive sustainability-related destinations' attributes and what importance they attach to these attributes [22] hence, it is necessary to incorporate tourists' attitudes into management systems that formulate sustainable tourism choices, [30].

In view of the preceding theoretical background and the objectives of the study, as well as the fact that the concept of behavioral intention as a dependent variable seems to be of crucial importance when it comes to understanding tourists' choice of destinations and their future motives and behavior, a research question was formulated: What factors can be associated with the intention to visit Croatia?

## 3 Methodology

In the context of this study's aims, data were used from the survey conducted among the residents of three main tourist markets in Croatia (Austria,

Germany, and Slovenia). Data analysis included descriptive statistics, principal component analyzes (PCA), ANOVA, and a regression analysis.

A market research agency was commissioned to conduct a survey on the attitudes of respondents from the most important Croatian tourism markets - Germany, Austria, and Slovenia. The respondents were surveyed in their own countries. The target population included people who had been on holiday outside their own country in the last 5 years. Both people who had already been to Croatia and people who had never been to Croatia took part in the survey. A structured questionnaire in German and Slovenian was used for the survey, which took 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was developed using items from previous studies [31], [32] for the purpose of more comprehensive and larger research conducted as part of the development of the Croatian Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism until 2030. The parts related to important factors for the choice of holiday destination, tourists' perception of the Croatian tourism offer, and their attitudes towards aspects of sustainable behavior on holiday were used in this study.

The research was conducted using the online survey method (Computer Assisted Web

Interviewing - CAWI). Respondents were recruited from an online panel via the CINT platform in the period from 1 July to 10 July 2021. The total sample size is 1,200 respondents, i. e. 400 respondents per market. The sample is quota-based and the fixed quotas represent the population structure of each country by age, gender, and region. During and after the survey, quality control of the completion of the questionnaire was carried out according to the criteria of the duration of the questionnaire and the type of response. Questionnaires that did not pass the quality control were excluded from the sample and the analysis.

An overview of the characteristics of the respondents in the overall sample and broken down by market can be found in Table 1. The gender distribution in the three countries shows a slight female majority overall. In the Austrian sample, women make up 53.0% of the population, while in the Slovenian and German samples, the percentages are similar at 50.7% and 50.4% respectively. Most respondents have a high school diploma or lower (52.7%), while 26.2% of respondents in the total sample had a university degree or higher education level.

Table 1. Respondents' profile

Attribute	Total N = 1200 %	Slovenia N = 400	Germany N = 400	Austria N = 400
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	48,6	49,3	49,6	47,0
Female	51,4	50,7	50,4	53,0
<b>Education</b>				
High school or lower	52,7	51,8	53,5	52,7
College	21,1	17,9	21,3	24,3
University or higher	26,2	30,3	25,3	23,0
<b>Status</b>				
Employed	62,6	65,7	62,3	59,8
Unemployed	6,1	8,4	4,5	5,3
Retired	22,7	16,9	26,8	24,5
Student	5,6	6,4	4,2	6,1
Other	3,0	2,6	2,2	4,2
<b>Monthly income</b>				
Up to €2,000	34,4	50,0	26,0	27,2
€2,001 to €3,500	36,3	35,0	38,8	35,2
€3,501 to €5,000	22,2	11,9	26,7	27,8
€5,001 and above	7,1	3,1	8,5	9,8
<b>Average age</b>	48,6	47,0	50,4	48,5

Furthermore, employed participants predominate in the overall sample (62.2%), although this proportion is slightly higher among participants from Slovenia (65.7%) and slightly lower among Austrians (59.8%). Unemployment is lowest in the Austrian sample (4.5%) and highest in the German sample (8.4%). The proportion of retired people in the total number of participants is 22.7%, which is appropriate given the structure of tourists visiting Croatia. Of the total number of participants, 36.3% have an average monthly income of between €2,001 and €3,500, while 34.4% have an income of up to €2,000. In the group of Slovenian participants, 50% have a monthly income of up to €2,000, while this percentage is 27.2% for the Austrian participants. Of the three markets, the group of Austrians has the highest percentage of people with a monthly income of more than €3,501 (37.6%). The average age of all participants is 48.6 years. The Slovenian participants have an average age of 47 years, the German participants 50.4 years, and the Austrian participants 48.5 years (Table 1).

## 4 Results

This study sheds light on the importance that potential tourists attach to certain elements when choosing a foreign holiday destination. Respondents attach particular importance to value for money (87% consider it important or very important), the quality of the accommodation (86%), the feeling of safety (free from the risk of crime, terrorism - 86%, or illness - 81%) and the hospitality of the local people (81%). This is closely followed by the cleanliness of the beaches (76%), flexibility when booking (71%), and transport links (68%; the proximity of the destination itself is not a decisive factor for most - important for 40% of respondents) as well as the gastronomic offer (local cuisine - 70%; variety of cuisine - 66%). German and Austrian tourists show a greater interest in the gastronomic offer (local cuisine is important for 76% of Germans and 79% of Austrians) in comparison to Slovenians (56%). In addition, 55% of respondents state that the preservation of the environment in the region is an important factor in their choice, while in terms of tourism-related activities, culture and art (45%), shopping (42%), and the availability of organized excursions nearby (38%) follow. German respondents show on average the greatest interest in participating in local activities (42%) and nightlife (35%). Both Germans and Austrians are more interested in shopping (Germans 54%, Austrians 49%) and nautical facilities (34%) compared to

respondents from Slovenia. As expected, young people under 25 show great interest in nightlife (for 56% of them it is an important or very important factor when choosing a holiday destination), the range of events on offer (47%), excursions in the surrounding area (46%) and shopping facilities (51%). Nautical facilities are also important for 38% of young people. Nightlife is also important for young people aged between 25 and 35 (41%), but at this age, the suitability of the destination for children is also important (43%) just as is for respondents between 36 to 45 years old (51%). The results also show that younger respondents (under 45) are more interested in an authentic experience (involvement in the activities of the local population) than older respondents. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that for 56% of respondents with an income of €5,000 or more, culture is an important or very important factor when choosing a destination, as are nautical facilities (41%).

When analyzing respondents' attitudes, particular attention was paid to the importance they attached to the elements of sustainability when traveling. The results show that a large proportion of respondents are sensitized to the environmental and social sustainability aspects. The majority of respondents (65%) expect services to be provided in an environmentally sustainable way in the destination where they are staying, while 62% of respondents tend to spend their money where it stays in the local community and contributes to the improvement of the destination. The results also show that the vast majority (74%) want to be offered local food and drink at their destination whenever possible. In addition, more than half show a deeper interest in the destination, i.e. 58% of them want to understand it and how the locals 'live'. Half (50%) of the respondents are willing to pay more for tourism products and services that have an eco-friendly component and 42% will favor a destination, product, or service that has a sustainability certificate or award when choosing a destination. These findings are somewhat in contrast to those of authors [33] who investigated consumer attitudes and behavior towards environmentally friendly practices in the Indian hospitality industry. Their study found that consumers are more inclined to consume products and services that promote environmentally friendly and sustainable practices, but they are not willing to pay more for such services. On the other hand, some authors [34] found that people are more aware of sustainability concerns and are prepared to pay more for "green" products and services.

Table 2. Results of the principal component analysis – sustainable behavior while travelling

Statements	Component		Mean	SD	Components
	1	2			
When deciding on a purchase, I favor a destination, product, or service that has a sustainability certificate or award (e.g. a beach with a blue flag, a Green Globe certificate, a sustainable destination/hotel...)	0.899		3.72	0.998	Environmental behavior Cronbach's Alpha=0.762 M=3.64 SD=0.626
I am willing to pay more for tourism products and services that have an environmentally friendly component (e.g. reduction of waste, water, and energy consumption)	0.817		3.40	1.014	
I expect services to be provided in an environmentally friendly way at the destination where I am staying	0.690		3.72	0.868	
I want to be offered local food and drink at the destination whenever possible.		0.893	3.97	0.874	Socio-economic behavior Cronbach's Alpha=0.708 M=3.76 SD=0.705
When traveling, I want to understand the destination and 'live' like a local		0.758	3.62	0.912	
When I go on holiday, I prefer to spend my money where it stays in the local community and contribute to improving the destination.		0.622	3.69	0.875	

Note: Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalization; mean values range from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

The first principal component analysis (PCA) with Oblimin rotation was conducted with a set of 6 items and resulted in two components, one for environmental and one for socio-economic behavior while traveling, which explained 65.9% of the total variance of sustainable behavior while traveling (Table 2).

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett test for sphericity is used to assess the factorability of the data. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value, amounting to 0.844, is in the meritorious range, as KMO values between 0.8 and 1.0 indicate adequate sampling, [35]. Bartlett's test of sphericity was 2074.756 with a significance lower than 0.001, indicating that data were suitable for factor analysis, [36]. Cronbach's Alpha for both components is above the threshold value of 0.7, [36] and they are therefore suitable for the following analysis.

One of the aims of this study was to find out how Croatia is perceived as a tourist destination by the residents of its most important tourism markets – Austria, Germany, and Slovenia. The results of the study show that Croatia is perceived as an excellent coastal holiday destination that is well-suited to families. However, in other aspects of its offer, such as offers for young people and sports and recreation, its position appears to be comparatively less strong. Croatia is well positioned in a number of aspects stated by respondents as important when choosing a foreign destination. It is perfectly positioned as a destination with a pleasant climate (80%), clean sea (76%) and excellent beaches (72%). The majority of respondents believe that Croatia has a lot to offer in terms of local gastronomy (69%) and the hospitality

of the local population (68%). Considering the attributes that respondents rate highly when choosing a destination, the attributes of Croatia that are rated quite highly but should be better recognized include safety (rated highly by 66% of respondents), preserved nature (64%), and professional and friendly service (63%).

For the respondents, the most important attributes - value for money and quality of accommodation - are not strong enough in favor of Croatia as a destination according to the results of this study, especially when compared to the above-mentioned and highly rated attributes (pleasant climate, clear sea, and excellent beaches). The value for money is rated highly by 61% of respondents and the quality of accommodation by 60%.

The offer of certain tourist facilities is also not perceived strongly enough. 54% of respondents highly rated cultural heritage and facilities and services for families; entertainment is rated highly by 48% of respondents, facilities for sports and recreation by 39%, and facilities for young people by only 38% of respondents. Finally, the results show that Croatia is primarily perceived as a sea vacation destination (76%) and rarely as a destination for city breaks (23%) or rural tourism (20%).

Second principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted to identify and extract underlying factors from a set of 14 observed variables - in this case, perceptions related to different aspects of Croatia. The PCA resulted in two components whereby the first one was named *Safety, nature, and quality*, and the second one was *Facilities*, which explained 58.49% of the total variance of perceived tourism attributes of Croatia (Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the principal component analysis – respondents' perception of Croatian tourism attributes

Attributes	Component		Mean	SD	Components
	1	2			
The hospitality of the local people	0.819		3.87	0.970	<b>Safety, nature, and quality</b> Cronbach's Alpha=0.902 M=3.90 SD=0.645
Professional and friendly service	0.817		3.77	0.934	
Clean sea	0.792		4.13	0.853	
High-quality accommodation	0.780		3.80	0.892	
Good value for money	0.760		3.77	0.969	
Preserved nature	0.758		3.85	0.878	
Safety and Security	0.746		3.92	0.871	
Pleasant climate	0.687		4.12	0.796	
Excellent beaches	0.608		4.04	0.875	
Cultural heritage	0.437		3.63	0.889	
Facilities and services for young people		0.902	3.40	1.032	<b>Facilities</b> Cronbach's Alpha=0.829 M=3.49 SD=0.786
Sports and recreational facilities		0.823	3.39	0.962	
Facilities and services for families		0.736	3.63	0.954	
Entertainment facilities and services		0.720	3.77	0.696	

Note: Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser normalization; mean values range from 1 - Croatia offers very little, 5 - Croatia offers very much

Table 4. Factors influencing the intention of a visit: Results of a regression analysis

	Coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	1.348	0.321	4.200	0.000		
Age	-0.010	0.002	-4.495	0.000	0.844	1.184
Gender	-0.001	0.065	-.013	0.990	0.955	1.047
Education level	0.083	0.040	2.079	0.038	0.903	1.107
Monthly income	-0.043	0.038	-1.125	0.261	0.855	1.170
Working status	0.021	0.030	.708	0.479	0.923	1.083
Country	-0.158	0.041	-3.860	0.000	0.849	1.178
Environmental aspects	-0.087	0.063	-1.393	0.164	0.698	1.433
Socioeconomic aspects	-0.109	0.055	-1.988	0.047	0.704	1.420
Safety, nature, quality	0.596	0.060	9.864	0.000	0.641	1.561
Facilities	0.186	0.050	3.710	0.000	0.653	1.531
Frequency of trips abroad in the last 5 years	0.167	0.043	3.844	0.000	0.903	1.108
Ever visited Croatia (0=no; 1=yes)	0.694	0.077	8.962	0.000	0.919	1.088

Notes:  $R^2 = 0.310$ ;  $F(12, 869) = 32.510$ ;  $p < 0.001$ . Dependent variable: intention of visiting Croatia in the next 5 years; VIF – variance inflation factors

On the scale which ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 standing for a minimal offer and 5 for an extensive offer, *Safety, nature, and quality* components obtained an average score of 3.90 indicating a generally positive attitude towards aspects such as hospitality of local people, service quality, cleanliness, safety, and security. The slightly lower mean score (3.49) for *Facilities* indicates a moderately positive evaluation of different facilities, including those for young people, sports and recreation, and services for families (Table 3).

In this case, as well, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value is within the defined range, [35]. With a commendable value of 0.930. In addition, Bartlett's test for sphericity yielded a statistically significant chi-square value of 6023.799 ( $p < 0.001$ ).

A reliability test yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.902 for the first component and 0.826 for the second one, which indicates a high internal consistency between the items and is considered satisfactory, [36]. Which is why these components were used in the following regression analysis.

The extent of multicollinearity was assessed using two widely recognized metrics: the "tolerance" value and the "variance inflation factor" (VIF), with very low tolerance values (well below 0.1) or high VIF values (above 10) indicating a strong presence of collinearity, as recommended [36]. According to the results of the regression analysis (Table 4), the model explains 31% of the tourist probability of visiting Croatia in the next five years ( $R^2 = 0.310$ ;  $F(12, 869) = 32.510$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Eight out of twelve variables

were found to be statistically significant predictors of respondents' intention to visit Croatia in the next five years. Among socio-demographic factors, age shows a significant negative relationship, while gender, monthly income, and working status show no statistically significant effect on the intention to visit. Furthermore, results indicate that a higher level of education is associated with a greater tendency to visit.

A country of residence has a statistically significant negative relationship, meaning that participants from certain countries are less likely to visit Croatia. The analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that the probability of visiting Croatia in the next 5 years differs significantly between the respondents from Slovenia, Germany, and Austria. The multiple comparison tests, in particular Tukey HSD, Scheffe, and Games-Howell, were used to analyze and compare the mean differences between the three countries when it comes to visiting Croatia. Slovenian respondents expressed a higher probability than their German and Austrian counterparts, while Austrian respondents expressed a higher intention to visit Croatia than German respondents.

As far as attitudes towards sustainability aspects when traveling are concerned, in contrast to the findings of [37], which showed that environmental concerns have a direct positive influence on consumer behavioral intentions, this study shows that environmentally friendly behavior has no significant relationship with the intention to visit Croatia. On the other hand, pro-socio-economic behavior shows a statistically significant negative relationship, suggesting that respondents who prioritize socio-economic aspects while traveling (i.e. those who want to be offered local food and drink at the destination whenever possible, want to understand the destination and 'live' like a local and prefer to spend my money where it stays in the local community) are less likely to express an intention to visit Croatia in the next five years. Destinations should emphasize the offer of local food to enhance the tourist experience, differentiate the destination, and promote sustainability, [38]. Understanding the nuanced reasons for these relationships may require further qualitative research or a deeper exploration of respondents' attitudes and perceptions. Furthermore, given the dynamic nature of sustainability attitudes, shifts in societal values or changes in destination marketing strategies could potentially alter these relationships over time.

As expected, respondents who have a positive perception of the safety, natural beauty, and overall quality of Croatia as a destination, as well as of the various facilities available in Croatia, are

significantly more likely to express their intention to visit Croatia. These correlations emphasize the importance of well-rated facilities and the role that perceived safety and the attractiveness of nature play in respondents' intentions to travel to Croatia. Many other authors have confirmed the positive correlation between the destination image and visit intention, [2], [6], [9], [39], [40], [41]. The consistent positive correlation between the image of a destination and the intention to visit, which is confirmed by numerous authors, emphasizes the importance of cultivating a positive image for attracting and retaining tourists, i.e., strengthening the efforts of destination management in shaping the perception and influencing the intention of tourists to visit Croatia.

In terms of traveling experience, it was found that respondents with a higher frequency of trips abroad and those who have already visited Croatia show a statistically significant positive relationship with their intention to visit Croatia in the next five years. The results are consistent with previous research [15], where it was found that the intention to revisit is positively influenced by the number of previous visits, just as other researchers [42] showed that a high degree of familiarity with the destination has a positive effect on the intention to choose a destination, [41].

It is important to recognize the diversity of people since traveling motivations can be highly individual and influenced by personal preferences, interests, and lifestyle choices. The specific cultural context, economic conditions, or travel-related opportunities within the population studied could also contribute to the patterns observed. Furthermore, the lack of significance of certain variables does not necessarily mean that they are generally insignificant but emphasizes the complexity of factors influencing travel intentions

## 5 Conclusion

This study shows the complex interplay of demographic, perceptual, and experiential factors that influence the intention to visit Croatia. It explores the perceptions of potential tourists from Germany, Austria, and Slovenia, the three most important markets for the Croatian tourism industry. It focuses on factors influencing their travel intentions over the next five years and aims to provide insight into the attractiveness of Croatia for these key population groups. The importance of the study lies in the nuanced insights that emerge from the statistical analyzes, which provide a basis for evidence-based strategies in destination marketing



and policy development. Therefore, the results are of great importance for destination marketers and policymakers who want to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of Croatia as a tourist destination. The key findings emphasize the positive attributes associated with Croatia as a tourist destination. The country is considered an excellent coastal holiday destination, particularly suitable for families. The positive features include the pleasant climate, clear sea, excellent beaches, local gastronomy, and the hospitality of the local population. Among the most important factors influencing tourists' travel intentions are perceived safety, natural beauty, and overall quality. Furthermore, in addition to demographic factors such as age and country of residence, perceived facilities, and services catering to various demographics such as young people, sports enthusiasts, and families also play a crucial role in attracting visitors. Sustainable consumption and, in this context, sustainable behavior are essential to minimize environmental damage and overcome the challenges of climate change, [43]. Although sustainability considerations play a role, the study shows that respondents who prioritize pro-socio-economic behavior when travelling are less likely to express an intention to visit. Environmental aspects alone do not have a significant influence on the intention to visit. This shows that Croatia must offer and promote as many opportunities as possible to meet the needs of tourists who want to behave as socio-economically as possible when traveling. In this way, the country will be recognized as a destination that meets the needs of local communities while offering its guests a sustainable tourism experience, which in turn will increase their intention to visit. Furthermore, this study on tourists' preferences and perceptions of Croatia as a tourist destination emphasizes the importance of sustainable tourism practices for achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, the results emphasize the importance of environmental sustainability, with 65% of respondents expecting services to be provided in an environmentally responsible manner and 50% willing to pay more for environmentally friendly tourism products. This emphasizes the need for responsible tourism practices that balance economic and social benefits with environmental protection. This is in line with SDG 12, which aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns. In addition, the study's focus on socio-economic aspects, such as the importance of local food and community engagement, supports SDG 8, which aims at decent

work and economic growth, and SDG 11, which focuses on sustainable cities and communities.

While the TPB model has often been used in previous research to examine tourists' travel intentions or behavior, there is a notable lack of studies that apply the theory in the context of tourists' sustainable travel behavior. In this regard, this study extends the application of the TPB to the field of tourism research.

The importance of this study lies in its potential to unravel the intricacies of tourists' perceptions and preferences. As the tourism industry is a major contributor to the Croatian economy, knowledge of the specific needs of tourists from the main tourism markets is of utmost importance. By identifying the factors that influence their decision-making processes, destination marketers and policymakers can develop strategies to improve Croatia's attractiveness and competitiveness in the global tourism market.

The study has some limitations, including the focus on just three markets as well the limitation to a specific period of data collection, and the challenge of generalizing the results to a broader global context. Furthermore, the study relies on self-reports that do not always accurately reflect actual behavior. Future research could explore the reasons for the negative relationship between socioeconomic behavior and intention to visit. In addition, researchers are advised to conduct longitudinal studies, expand the market scope, include qualitative insights, continuously monitor sustainability perceptions, and examine cultural nuances in tourists' preferences. Further qualitative research or the investigation of additional variables could provide a more comprehensive understanding of all these dynamics.

### **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

During the preparation of this work the authors used DeepL Write and InstaText in order to improve the readability and language. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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### **Contribution of Individual Authors to the Creation of a Scientific Article (Ghostwriting Policy)**

The authors equally contributed in the present research, at all stages from the formulation of the problem to the final findings and solution.

### **Sources of Funding for Research Presented in a Scientific Article or Scientific Article Itself**

No funding was received for conducting this study.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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