

SUSTAINABILITY AS A DETERMINANT OF TOURIST PREFERENCES: THE CASE OF BULGARIA

Olga MANCHEVA-ALI ^{1*}, Tsvetanka GEORGIEVA-TRIFONOVA ²

¹ “St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo, Faculty of Economics, Department of Tourism, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria; o.mancheva@ts.uni-vt.bg (O.M.A.)

² “St. Cyril and St. Methodius” University of Veliko Tarnovo, Faculty of Mathematics and Informatics, Department of Information Technologies, Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria; cv.georgieva@live.uni-vt.bg (T.G.T.)

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Abstract: The study aims to examine the attitudes of Bulgarian tourists towards the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable tourism and to identify the factors that determine which dimension of sustainability they consider most important when choosing a travel destination. Against the backdrop of growing global environmental challenges and the evolving expectations of modern travellers, understanding the psychological drivers of tourist choices has become crucial for destination management. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire with 163 valid responses from Bulgarian tourists with varying travel habits and demographic profiles. The analytical framework employed descriptive statistics, Pearson’s χ^2 test and the Kruskal-Wallis test to analyse demographic characteristics, attitudes and the relationship between sustainability preferences and behavioural patterns. The empirical findings show that traditional demographic and behavioural characteristics (such as age, employment status, or travel frequency) do not significantly influence which sustainability aspect respondents prioritise. Instead, specific psychological attitudes and value-driven behaviours play a decisive role. Notably, an active interest in consuming local products, a declared willingness to pay a premium for ecological services, and strong support for green initiatives are the primary determinants of sustainable destination choice. Among the three pillars of sustainability, environmental attitudes are most strongly expressed and prioritised by the respondents, while social and economic dimensions are recognised but less prominent and are often perceived as secondary. The study concludes that sustainable tourism among Bulgarian tourists is perceived very positively at a conceptual level but is applied selectively in practice, revealing a notable attitude–behaviour gap. The results highlight the critical importance of psychological and value-based drivers in modern tourism. Consequently, the findings suggest that policymakers and destination managers must implement targeted marketing communication, visible green infrastructure, and educational initiatives to bridge the gap between pro-environmental intentions and actual sustainable behaviour. Aligning tourism offerings with these deeper psychological motivations is essential for fostering a genuinely sustainable tourism model and enhancing the competitiveness of Bulgaria as a destination.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, tourist attitudes, destination choice, environmental behaviour, value orientations, sustainable practices, behavioural patterns, Bulgaria

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainable tourism is regarded as a key instrument for achieving a balance between economic development, the protection of natural resources and the social well-being of local communities. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the concept of sustainability has evolved not only as a managerial model but also as a personal value and attitude among tourists. In the context of increasing environmental challenges and rising social sensitivity, destination choice is increasingly shaped by inner beliefs, moral considerations and a desire for responsible travel.

Despite the growing interest in sustainable tourism, Bulgarian academic literature offers limited and mostly outdated empirical studies that examine the role of personal psychological attitudes in the choice of sustainable destinations. Most existing research focuses on policies, certification processes or the attitudes of businesses rather than the behaviour of individual tourists. Although sustainable policies and green practices are widely promoted in the tourism industry, tourist behaviour is often influenced by psychological factors such as attitudes, perceptions, personal values and the level of individual engagement. The role of digitalisation in shaping tourist behaviour, the growing sensitivity to climate change and the shift in consumer expectations are contributing to the emergence of a new type of tourist who makes decisions based on ethical, emotional and value-driven motives. The psychology of choice in tourism is therefore essential for understanding destination preferences, perceptions of sustainability and the likelihood of adopting specific sustainable practices. This study examines the relationship between attitudes and perceptions towards sustainable tourism, behavioural choices and the challenges tourists face when making decisions. It relies on empirical data from an

* Corresponding author

<http://gtg.webhost.uoradea.ro/>

online survey among Bulgarian tourists to identify the factors that have the strongest influence on perceiving sustainability as an important element of destination choice. The aim of the study is to identify the factors that determine respondents' preferences for different aspects of sustainable tourism, with a focus on personal attitudes, demographic characteristics and behavioural patterns. The study links individual attitudes to the leading aspect of sustainability that tourists consider most important, revealing which factors play a real role in choosing sustainable tourism practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sustainable tourism is increasingly examined through the lens of psychological and socio-value factors that shape tourist decision-making. Research from the past two decades confirms that tourists' attitudes and beliefs play a leading role in decisions related to sustainability; however, positive attitudes toward environmental protection do not always translate into actual behaviour (Wut et al., 2023). The authors propose a new framework in which sustainable attitudes and intentions act as mediators of sustainable tourist behaviour, while direct and indirect factors also influence this relationship.

Elements such as service quality, risk perception and moral licensing function as moderators that determine the extent to which attitudes align with behaviour. Recent empirical work extends this perspective by integrating environmental knowledge and climate change-related risk perceptions as background factors that shape attitudes and norms, thus indirectly strengthening or weakening sustainable intentions in tourism. Studies based on extended TPB models of green hotel purchase intentions show that in-group social norms and perceived climate risk significantly reinforce the translation of pro-environmental attitudes into actual booking behaviour for certified "green" hotels (Araújo et al., 2025).

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) remains one of the most widely used models, yet many authors point out its limitations and the need to integrate additional approaches. TPB focuses mainly on individual cognitive determinants such as attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control, but this may be insufficient because tourist behaviour is strongly affected by emotions, momentary states, habits, unconscious influences and intuitive processes. In their critical review of TPB applications in tourism, Esfandiar & Hadinejad (2026) argue that the model has become dominant but systematically neglects affective processes, habitual behaviour and dual-process (automatic vs. deliberate) mechanisms that shape real travel decisions. The review recommends combining TPB with value-based, identity-based and emotion-focused approaches, as well as with experimental designs, biometric tools and neuroscientific methods, in order to better capture unconscious and intuitive aspects of tourist decision-making. Similar concerns are echoed in a recently proposed metacognitive framework, which contends that sustainable tourism behaviour research relies too heavily on cognitive models such as TPB and calls for integrating theories from developmental and experimental cognitive psychology and neuroscience to account for reflective awareness and control over one's own thought processes (Hadinejad et al., 2026). In the same vein, a recent editorial on behavioural theories in tourism argues that dominant behavioural models, including TPB, often oversimplify real-world decision-making and should be complemented by dual-process, affective, and neuroscience-informed approaches to provide a more realistic account of tourist behaviour (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2026).

One of the most examined phenomena is the attitude-behaviour gap and the intention-behaviour gap. Juvan & Dolnicar (2014) show that even tourists with high environmental awareness often do not adopt sustainable practices while travelling, relying instead on cognitive justifications such as "I am on holiday" or "my contribution is too small". The authors explain this gap through mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance and the lack of social norms that support pro-environmental behaviour, highlighting the mismatch between attitudes, beliefs and intentions on the one hand and actual behaviour on the other. More recent studies explicitly confirm this inconsistency in the context of green travel, showing that positive attitudes towards sustainable transport modes do not automatically translate into green travel behaviour and that different "types" of attitude-behaviour constellations can be empirically distinguished.

Fu (2025) demonstrates that travellers' motivations moderate the gap: when tourists are particularly concerned about the environmental and social benefits of transport modes, both negative attitudes towards cars and favourable attitudes towards sustainable options are more likely to result in actual green travel behaviour, whereas in low-motivation contexts attitudes remain largely declarative. Contemporary models such as VBN (Values-Beliefs-Norms) and its extension VIP (Value-Identity-Personal Norms) emphasise value orientations and personal norms as drivers of pro-environmental behaviour (Luong et al., 2024; Alashiq et al., 2025).

According to these models, tourists with strong biospheric and altruistic values are more likely to choose sustainable destinations, even when this requires compromises in comfort or price. Psychological identification with the role of a responsible tourist emerges as a key predictor of real environmental behaviour. Recent applications of the VBN and VIP frameworks in ecotourism demonstrate that biospheric values and pro-environmental self-identity shape strong personal norms, which in turn directly predict intentions to choose low-impact destinations and nature-based activities.

These findings support the view that tourism choices are embedded in broader moral and identity narratives, where seeing oneself as a "responsible tourist" is as important as cognitive evaluations of costs and benefits. (Al Mamun et al., 2025). Recent applications of value-based models in tourism show that biospheric and altruistic values, together with green consumption values, increase tourists' willingness to sacrifice comfort or money for environmental protection at destinations, especially in coastal areas (Inprasertkul et al., 2025).

From the perspective of behavioural economics, several studies explore tourists' willingness to pay more for "green" services. Damigos (2023) shows that consumers are willing to pay a 4-6% premium for hotels with environmental certifications when they perceive the benefit as personal or social. This finding is relevant for hotel operators, as the transition to sustainable practices requires significant investment and leads to increased operational costs. Recent work on Generation Z and green hospitality shows that awareness of environmental consequences and personal moral

obligation substantially increase both the intention to choose eco-certified hotels and the willingness to pay a price premium for them. At the same time, studies in the hospitality sector indicate that eco-friendly marketing strategies are most effective when they appeal to green consumption values and pro-environmental self-identity, which together strengthen the felt obligation to act in environmentally responsible ways (Zhang et al., 2025).

Despite the leading importance of internal psychological attitudes, many authors emphasise that sustainable behaviour rarely develops solely on the basis of personal convictions. Social expectations, information availability, infrastructural conditions and the experiential context complement and moderate tourists' motivations.

Actual behaviour most often emerges through the interaction between internal and external factors. Recent behavioural-science work on tourism confirms that cognitive, social and infrastructural "choice environments" can either facilitate or obstruct the translation of pro-environmental attitudes into actual behaviour, for example through default options, choice architecture and timely information provision. Reports by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2023) on behavioural science for sustainable tourism show that interventions targeting both individual motivations and external conditions – such as social norms, policy signals and the design of tourism services are more effective in closing the intention–action gap than measures focused solely on raising awareness.

In a broader context, the factors influencing the choice of sustainable destinations are commonly grouped into internal (psychological, value-based, motivational) and external (social, informational, economic, infrastructural). According to Janchai & Suvittawat (2025), perceptions of low-carbon tourism and destination image significantly shape visitors' intentions. At the same time Passafaro & Vecchione (2022) underline that effective sustainability policies should address the emotional aspects of behaviour such as pride, guilt and moral satisfaction which act as psychological catalysts. Recent studies on eco-conscious tourists show that green marketing messages that communicate concrete environmental benefits and moral meaning can trigger emotions such as pride and moral satisfaction, thereby reinforcing tourists' pro-environmental self-identity and increasing the likelihood of eco-conscious actions in hospitality settings.

In parallel, destination-level research suggests that place attachment and eco-destination image jointly influence behavioural intentions, with emotional bonds to the place acting as an important psychological amplifier of pro-environmental norms (Zhang et al., 2025). The reviewed literature outlines that the choice of sustainable tourism is the result of an interplay between values, social norms and personal beliefs, moderated by marketing signals and the experiential context. Systematising these theoretical perspectives highlights that attitudes and values are among the strongest predictors of sustainable behaviour, while demographic characteristics often have secondary explanatory power. This observation provides the conceptual basis for the present study, which examines these relationships in the Bulgarian context. Integrating psychological models with empirical data from real travel behaviour is therefore an essential step toward understanding and encouraging sustainable tourist practices.

Recent publications on the Bulgarian tourism sector indicate a growing emphasis on eco-friendly and wellness-oriented products, with spa and mountain resorts increasingly adopting green practices such as renewable energy, local sourcing and waste minimisation in response to changing tourist expectations (Bardukova, 2024).

At policy level, Bulgaria has joined European initiatives for sustainable tourism and is developing national charters and strategies that mirror global trends towards greener, more culturally rooted and year-round tourism offerings, which provides a relevant institutional backdrop for analysing tourists' values and behaviour in the Bulgarian context (Ministry of Environment and Water, 2024; European Commission, 2024).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the objectives of the study, an author-designed questionnaire containing 163 responses from participants in Bulgaria was analysed. The survey was conducted between March and May 2025, and participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous.

1. Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire includes seven main thematic blocks of questions (T1–T7), as follows:

- T1–T5 describe demographic and behavioural characteristics: employment status, age, travel frequency, type of trips, and previous experience with sustainable tourism services;
- T6 contains 26 statements measuring attitudes towards sustainable tourism using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 – "strongly disagree" to 5 – "strongly agree");
- T7 identifies which aspect of sustainability (social, economic or environmental) the respondent considers most important when choosing a tourist destination.

2. Research approach

The research approach includes the following steps:

A. Descriptive statistics

Used to summarise the demographic characteristics and general trends in attitudes towards sustainable tourism.

B. Pearson's χ^2 test (Chi-square test)

Employed to determine the statistical significance of the relationships between the selected sustainability indicator (T7) and the demographic and behavioural variables (T1–T5). The aim is to determine whether personal and social characteristics have a statistically significant influence on the perception of sustainable tourism.

C. Kruskal–Wallis test

Used to analyse differences between the T7 groups in relation to the evaluations of the T6 statements. This non-parametric test makes it possible to identify which statements most clearly differentiate respondents according to their preference for the social, economic, or environmental dimension of sustainability.

D. Visualisation of results

Implemented through charts and tables that present significant relationships and allow a more intuitive interpretation of respondent profiles according to their dominant sustainability aspect.

3. Limitations of the study

This study has two main limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The first limitation concerns the size and composition of the sample, which do not allow for full representativeness of the Bulgarian tourist population. The second limitation relates to the online format of the survey, which may restrict the participation of certain age or social groups. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into how individual attitudes shape perceptions of sustainability in tourism. The results contribute meaningfully to future academic research on the behavioural dimensions of sustainable tourism and provide practical implications for the management and development of tourist destinations in line with the principles of sustainable development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section represents the main results from the analysis of respondents' attitudes and preferences regarding sustainable tourism.

Descriptive statistics: The descriptive analysis aims to outline the main characteristics of the sample and the general trends in participants' attitudes towards sustainable tourism.

The average age of respondents is approximately 37 years. The largest proportion belongs to the 18–29 age group (36.42%), followed by the 41–50 group (26.54%) and the 30–40 group (19.14%). Most participants are both employed and studying (40.12%), followed by those who are employed only (39.51%), studying only (17.90%), and unemployed (2.47%).

Regarding travel behaviour, 52.47% of respondents travel 2–3 times per year, 24.69% almost every month, 12.35% once a year, 9.26% once every 1–2 years, and 1.23% every weekend. The most preferred types of trips are those lasting up to one week (51.85%) and weekend trips (42.59%), while fewer participants choose trips of 10 days (3.70%) or longer (1.85%). Approximately 45% of respondents report having already visited a tourism service provider (accommodation or dining) that implements sustainable practices, indicating growing awareness and interest in sustainable forms of tourism.

In terms of attitudes towards sustainable tourism, measured through agreement with 26 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), the highest mean values are associated with statements related to tourists' environmental responsibility and the importance of nature conservation (Figure 1). This suggests that respondents place high importance on the environmental dimension of sustainable tourism. High scores on social and economic statements (e.g., T6.2 and T6.3) also reflect awareness of the role of tourism in supporting local culture and the economy.

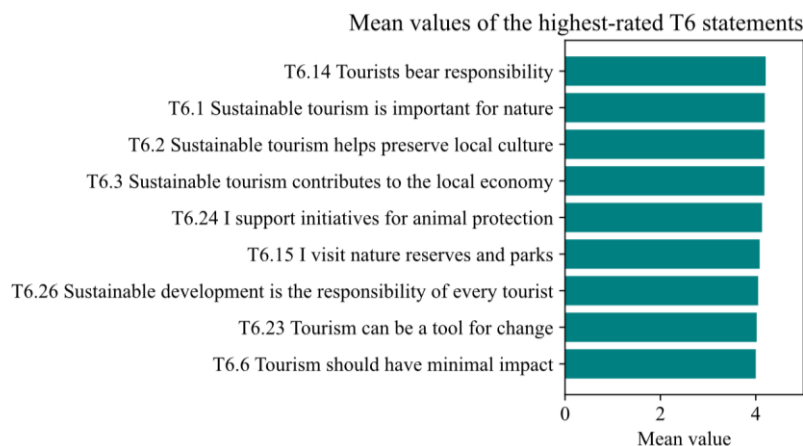


Figure 1. Mean values of the highest-rated statements regarding attitudes towards sustainable tourism (Source: Authors' calculations)

Regarding the question on the most important aspect of sustainable tourism, the social and environmental dimensions emerge as the leading priorities, with 46.91% and 44.44% of respondents identifying them as their top concern, respectively. The economic dimension is considered most important by only 8.64% of participants. These findings suggest that, for most respondents, sustainability is primarily associated with social and environmental considerations, while economic benefits, although still relevant, are secondary.

The descriptive analysis further outlines a profile of young, educated, and active tourists. These results provide a solid foundation for the subsequent stages of the study, which aim to identify the factors shaping perceptions of the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable tourism.

Chi-square test of associations between T7 and the demographic and behavioural variables (T1–T5).

To examine the relationship between preferences for the sustainability aspect (T7) and the demographic and behavioural variables (T1–T5), a χ^2 (Chi-square) test was conducted. The results indicate that none of the variables

reached statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that perceptions of the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainable tourism are not influenced by age, employment status, travel frequency, or previous experience with sustainable tourism services. Table 1 presents the χ^2 statistic values, the corresponding p-values, and Cramer's V as an indicator of the strength of the relationship between T7 and the individual demographic and behavioural variables. The low Cramer's V values indicate that the strength of the associations is weak, which confirms the absence of statistically significant relationships between the examined variables.

Table 1. Chi-square test of associations between sustainability preferences and demographic/behavioural variables (Source: Authors' calculations)

Characteristic	Chi-square statistic	Significance (p-value)	Cramer's V (strength of association)
T1 (employment status)	3.2338	0.7779	0.0999
T2 (age)	7.5963	0.4739	0.1531
T3 (travel frequency)	6.6008	0.5802	0.1427
T4 (type of trips by duration)	5.0669	0.5353	0.1251
T5 (previous experience with sustainable tourism services)	3.9436	0.1392	0.1560

Kruskal-Wallis test for assessing the influence of the T6 statements on T7

To examine how respondents' specific attitudes and preferences influence the leading aspect of sustainable tourism (T7 – social, economic or environmental), a Kruskal-Wallis test was applied for each of the 26 T6 statements. The Kruskal-Wallis test is a non-parametric method that allows comparison of the distributions of a continuous or ordinal variable across more than two groups, without assuming normally distributed data. In our study, the variable is the level of agreement with a given statement (T6), and the groups are the three T7 categories (social, economic and environmental aspect) (Figure 2).

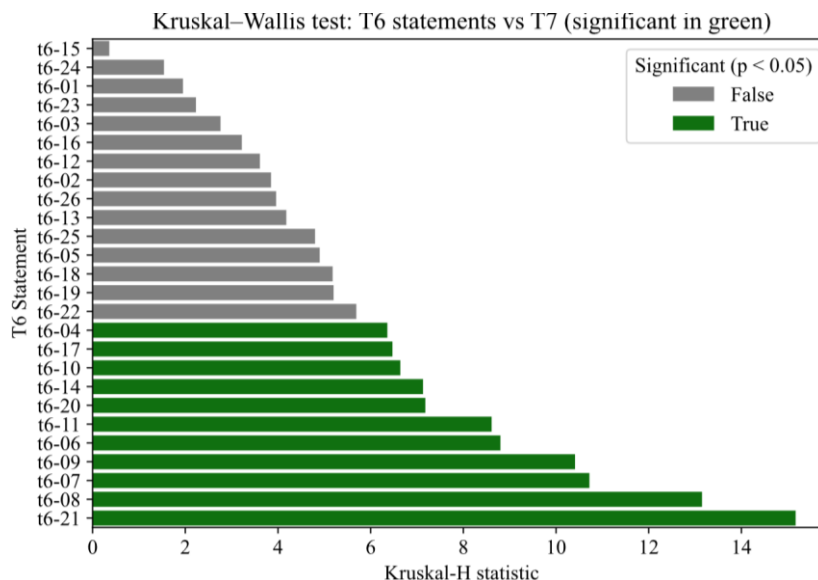


Figure 2. Kruskal-Wallis analysis of the T6 statements in relation to T7 (Source: Authors' calculations)

The results indicate that some T6 statements are statistically significant, meaning that the distribution of responses differs depending on respondents' preference for the social, economic, or environmental dimension of sustainable tourism.

For a clearer and more systematic presentation, Table 2 summarises the T6 statements that exhibit statistically significant differences with respect to the leading sustainability aspect (T7), as identified by the Kruskal-Wallis test.

Table 2. Statistically significant T6 statements with respect to T7 (Kruskal–Wallis test) (Source: Authors' calculations)

No	Code	Statement
1	T6-21	I support destinations that promote the use of renewable energy sources.
2	T6-08	I approve of tourism services that use local and seasonal products.
3	T6-07	I would prefer to pay a little more for services that are environmentally sustainable.
4	T6-09	I choose tourism services that protect nature and reduce waste
5	T6-06	I believe that sustainable tourism can create new employment opportunities in local communities
6	T6-11	I support sustainable development practices in the restaurants I visit.
7	T6-20	I believe that tourists should be informed about sustainable practices in the destinations they visit
8	T6-14	I believe that tourists have a responsibility to minimise their negative impact on the environment in destinations.
9	T6-10	I am interested in local products and services during my trips
10	T6-17	I prefer destinations that actively work to reduce plastic waste
11	T6-04	I choose destinations that strive for sustainable development (e.g., environmental practices, social initiatives, resource conservation such as water and electricity).

From these results, the following summaries can be made:

A. Environmental practices

Statements related to environmental practices (support for destinations with renewable energy sources, recycling, choosing low-carbon transport) show significant differences between groups, with respondents who prioritise the environmental aspect of T7 being more likely to agree with these statements.

B. Social and cultural initiatives

Statements related to social and cultural initiatives (interest in local products, support for cultural and historical sites, tourists' engagement in sustainable practices) are also significant, with respondents who value the social aspect giving higher ratings.

C. Non-significant statements

On the other hand, many statements do not show statistically significant differences ($p \geq 0.05$), meaning that regardless of the leading sustainability aspect, respondents evaluate these statements similarly. These include general attitudes towards the importance of sustainable tourism, interest in educational programmes, sports and volunteering.

These results highlight that certain attitudes and practices are more clearly associated with specific aspects of sustainable tourism, while others are widely accepted by all respondents regardless of their preferences. This knowledge can be useful in developing targeted strategies for sustainable development and communication campaigns in tourism.

DISCUSSION

According to the data from the *Flash Eurobarometer 499* survey on European citizens' attitudes towards sustainable tourism (ST), described by Bassi & Martín (2024), the willingness of European citizens to change their habits in order to support sustainable tourism is most strongly influenced by their socio-demographic characteristics (such as age and gender) and especially by travel frequency. At the country level, more significant differences in attitudes are observed. Bulgaria falls into the category of least prepared countries (in terms of overall readiness for change), with a result of 77% and the lowest share of "green" tourists (Varadzhakova & Naydenov, 2024).

In this context, the present study does not show statistically significant characteristics in the responses related to socio-demographic variables (such as age and gender) and especially travel frequency.

An important question in the adoption of sustainable tourism is which factors influence the choice of destination that enables its practice. In Bulgaria, such up-to-date studies are lacking. According to Naumov et al. (2024), the results of a national representative survey show that the most influential factor for destination choice among domestic tourists is the opinions of friends and relatives. This applies to all age groups, regardless of gender, marital status, and other characteristics.

Although these studies are not focused specifically on the choice of sustainable destinations, they provide a general direction for comparison with the results related to the practice of sustainable tourism among domestic tourists. Unlike these findings, in the present study, the demographic and behavioural characteristics (T1–T5) do not show a statistically significant relationship with preferences for the social, economic or environmental aspect of sustainable tourism.

The Kruskal-Wallis analysis shows that specific behavioural and environmentally oriented attitudes have a significant effect on the perception of the leading aspect of sustainable tourism, while general ideas and values do not lead to differences between the groups. These findings allow the conclusion that marketing and educational strategies for sustainable tourism should focus on concrete initiatives in order to attract different types of tourists.

CONCLUSION

The present article identifies several key results that are relevant to tourists' destination choices. The findings of the conducted study show that among Bulgarian tourists, sustainable tourism is still perceived mainly as a positive idea, but its real dimensions are understood and applied selectively. Demographic and behavioural factors such as age, employment, occupation and travel frequency do not have a statistically significant influence on preferences for the social, economic or environmental aspect of sustainability. This indicates that sustainable attitudes are distributed relatively evenly across different respondent groups and are not determined by their profile.

At the same time, the Kruskal-Wallis analysis shows that specific attitudes and behaviours related to everyday sustainable practices, including interest in local products, willingness to pay a higher price for ecological services and approval of green initiatives, have real significance. Environmental attitudes are the most strongly expressed, whereas the social and economic aspects of sustainability are evaluated less strongly and often remain abstract.

In practice, this means that although most tourists have a positive attitude toward the idea of sustainability, part of them still associate it mainly with environmental protection rather than with broader social and economic dimensions such as support for local communities or fair consumption. Overall, it can be concluded that sustainability in tourism in Bulgaria is in a process of awareness-building and formation as a personal and social value. Tourists show high sensitivity to environmental issues, although their actual behaviour still depends on access to information, financial possibilities and communication about the benefits of sustainable practices.

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