ECONOMIC COMPETITIVENESS IN THE TOURISM SECTOR: AN EVALUATION OF GLOBAL TOURIST PREFERENCES

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Abstract: This research investigates the evolving dynamics of global tourist preferences and consumer behavior in the post-pandemic era, with a particular focus on identifying the key factors influencing destination choices. The study compares tourist preferences across three popular destinations – Spain, Italy, and Thailand – by analyzing statistical data and reviews from tourists in these countries. The findings highlight significant variations in the ways that economic, cultural, and safety concerns shape travel decisions. Economic factors such as income levels, travel costs, and service availability are shown to play a crucial role in destination selection, with tourists increasingly becoming sensitive to price fluctuations. The study also emphasizes the growing importance of safety, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many tourists prioritizing destinations that offer clear health protocols and measures to ensure their well-being. Furthermore, the research reveals a rising demand for environmentally conscious travel, with a focus on destinations that promote sustainability and eco-friendly practices. Social media also emerges as a pivotal tool influencing trip planning, with a notable 72% of tourists indicating its impact on their destination choices. The research suggests that tourism businesses must adapt to these shifting consumer demands by enhancing safety measures, adopting digital technologies, and emphasizing sustainability in their offerings. The results provide valuable insights for tourism experts seeking to navigate the post-pandemic landscape and enhance the competitiveness of their destinations on the global market.

Keywords: service quality, changes in consumer behaviour, post-pandemic market, environmental practices, travel safety

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INTRODUCTION

Economic competitiveness in the tourism sector is becoming increasingly relevant in the context of globalisation and rapidly changing tourist preferences. Tourism makes a significant contribution to the economic development of countries, creating jobs and ensuring the inflow of foreign currency (Stryzhak, 2022). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2019), tourism accounted for 10% of global GDP in 2019 and provided around 330 million jobs. In response to the growing demands of tourists for service quality, a diversity of offerings, and sustainable travel, countries must adapt their offerings. This research aims to analyse the factors that influence the choice of tourist destinations, helping countries improve their competitiveness on the international stage, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery.

Global changes such as climate fluctuations, political instability, and economic crises significantly affect tourist preferences. Countries heavily dependent on tourism face serious challenges, such as changes in travel routes and a decline in tourist numbers (Ioakimidis & Triantafillos, 2023). For example, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries saw a sharp decline in tourist flows, leading to economic losses and the closure of businesses (Harchandani & Shome, 2021). In particular, Refaat & Arafa (2022) looked at how Saudi tourists' travel intentions and behaviours were affected by international travel restrictions, such as those put in place during the COVID-19 epidemic. They concluded that travel limitations significantly influenced the destinations and travel habits of individuals. With few options for where to go, tourists favoured places that provided better health and safety precautions, less congested surroundings, and simpler access to local facilities. Additionally, they started giving preference to locations that were nearer to their homes or had fewer restrictions on admission, like direct flights. Building on this, the current study investigates how these changes in consumer behaviour continue to impact traveller choices, paying special attention to the role of digital engagement, health and safety concerns, and environmental sustainability. Transnational organisations, such as international tourism associations, play an important role in monitoring these threats and providing recommendations for overcoming them.

Research by Bhatia (2016) emphasises the need to adapt tourism infrastructure to changing conditions, including the implementation of new safety and hygiene standards to regain tourists' trust. Additionally, the study confirms the importance of increasing the resilience of tourist destinations in the face of global challenges. Analysing personal preferences and how they affect the choice of vacation places is a crucial part of researching tourism behaviour. The

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optimisation of tourist destination selection using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) and fuzzy AHP was investigated by Jewpanya et al. (2025), who emphasised how individual preferences determine personalised tourism decisions. This idea highlights how crucial it is to comprehend how travellers rank different aspects of a place, including service quality, cultural experiences, and environmental sustainability, when making decisions. Ramadhani et al. (2024) further explored tourism behaviour by examining tourists' perceptions and mobility patterns in Bali's top-rated destinations. According to their proposal, travellers' perceptions of the physical surroundings also influence their choice of location. The new study expands on this by incorporating technological, cultural, and economic aspects as well as by highlighting sustainability and safety as crucial components affecting traveller behaviour in the wake of the epidemic.

International organisations, particularly the UNWTO (2024), have actively worked to develop cooperation between countries in the tourism sector. Their influence on national tourism policies is reflected in the development of strategies aimed at improving tourist safety and service quality. Research conducted by Benaraba et al. (2022) demonstrates how coordinated actions by countries, supported by such organisations, contribute to more effective responses to challenges in the tourism sector. Budgetary programmes and initiatives, such as the Network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism (NECSTouR) (2019), help countries restore their tourism sectors after crises by providing resources and best practices for sustainable development. Current trends in tourism include the use of digital technologies, a focus on sustainable development, and safety (Işık et al., 2025). The introduction of smart technologies, such as mobile booking apps, tourist flow management systems, and virtual tours, is becoming an important element in the competition for competitiveness. Research by Hor (2021) shows that countries actively using these technologies are able to attract more tourists and ensure their safety. Moreover, sustainability is becoming a key aspect in shaping tourism offerings, which involves not only environmental protection but also support for local communities. Studies also indicate that the introduction of green practices in the tourism industry can significantly increase its appeal to environmentally conscious tourists. Similar to this, Bratić et al. (2025) investigated how sustainability and Industry 4.0 are changing the travel industry, highlighting the part that digital technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data are playing in changing the travel scene. According to their research, technological developments allow for more individualised, effective, and environmentally friendly travel experiences, which raise a destination's appeal and competitiveness. The current research builds on their work by integrating these technical advancements with more general socioeconomic trends, emphasising the ways in which digital technology and sustainability practices affect traveller behaviour and destination selection.

Cuomo et al. (2022) highlighted how customer preferences affect the hospitality industry's competitiveness, especially in the years following the pandemic. They saw an increase in the need for individualised experiences, emphasising that travellers are looking for places that fit their unique expectations and values. The present study takes this further by integrating personalised tourism into a more comprehensive framework and taking into account how global destination competitiveness is impacted by elements like technology use and sustainability. Li et al. (2025) investigated how visitor behaviour and spatial features relate to rural tourism, emphasising how a destination's physical features – like its natural scenery, infrastructure, and accessibility – influence travellers' choices. According to their research, tourists are especially sensitive to environmental aspects when travelling to rural areas since they are looking for places that provide peace, genuine local experiences, and convenient access to the outdoors. Building on this notion, the current study examines how these spatial features interact with economic variables like cost and service accessibility as well as how they are impacted by new developments in digital engagement and sustainable tourism. The current study aims to fill a significant research gap by integrating multiple factors that influence tourist destination choices, including economic conditions, cultural preferences, technological advancements, and sustainability practices, within the context of post-pandemic recovery. Although earlier research has looked at individual preferences, spatial features, and how technology influences traveller behaviour independently, little of it has combined these elements into a cohesive framework. Furthermore, it has not been well investigated how global issues have affected changes in tourist preferences, particularly with regard to safety, digital interaction, and environmental sustainability. This study expands on earlier research by investigating the ways in which these many elements interact to impact destination competitiveness, providing a more comprehensive knowledge of the changing dynamics in international tourism.

The aim of this research is to analyse the economic competitiveness of the tourism sector by evaluating global tourist preferences and identifying the key factors that influence tourists' choice of destinations. The research question of this study is what are the key factors influencing the choice of tourist destinations in the post-pandemic world, and how do these factors relate to economic competitiveness in the tourism sector. As part of this analysis, the following tasks were undertaken: to analyse the impact of economic factors, such as income levels, travel costs, and service availability, on the choice of tourist destinations; to examine the role of cultural and social factors, such as traditions, language, and hospitality, in shaping tourist preferences; and to assess the impact of modern technologies, including online booking and the use of social networks, on tourists' decisions when choosing destinations and services.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted between 2021 and 2023, allowing for the consideration of relevant changes in tourist preferences and behaviour following the COVID-19 pandemic. Three countries were selected for the study: Spain, Italy, and Thailand, which are popular tourist destinations. For the analysis, documents and reports from these countries were used, as well as data from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and national tourism agencies. The primary sources of information included annual reports on global tourism trends, such as the "World Tourism Barometer" (UNWTO, 2024); data on international tourists and their preferences in Spain (National Institute of Statistics, 2024); reports on tourist flows and traveller preferences in Italy (Italian National Tourism Board, 2024); and statistics and studies concerning

tourist flows and preferences in Thailand (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023). These sources provided insights into tourist flows, preferences, and factors influencing destination choices, enabling a more comprehensive analysis.

Descriptive and comparative statistical methods were employed in the study to analyse the collected data. Descriptive statistics, such as means, percentages, and frequency distributions, were employed to summarise and describe the key characteristics of the data, such as the distribution of tourist preferences across different destinations and demographic groups. These statistics helped in identifying the most significant factors, such as service quality, safety, and sustainability, that influence decision-making. Comparative statistical methods, including t-tests and ANOVA, were used to compare tourist preferences across various groups, such as age, income level, and region of residence. This allowed for the identification of significant differences in preferences between different demographic groups and provided deeper insights into how various factors interact in shaping tourist behaviour. These groups were formed based on data collected by UNWTO. The compared variables included economic factors such as income levels, travel costs, and service availability; cultural factors like traditions, language, and hospitality; and modern factors such as the use of digital technologies and social media engagement.

All statistical calculations were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Furthermore, an analysis of online reviews and comments from tourists on popular platforms such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com was conducted. A total of 500 reviews were selected based on different destinations, accommodation conditions, services (such as tours, transport, and restaurant service), attractions, safety levels, cleanliness, and the atmosphere of the location. Both positive and negative feedbacks were included from tourists with different demographic backgrounds. The reviews were analysed using a content analysis methodology, which involved a thorough coding procedure to find recurrent themes and patterns. First, the reviews were grouped according to cultural experiences, accessibility, safety, service quality, and sustainability. In order to have a better understanding of the main factors driving traveller destination selections, each review was then scrutinised for particular insights pertaining to these issues. The goal of this investigation was to present a thorough understanding of how travellers evaluate various facets of their trips and how these impressions influence their choices for subsequent travel destinations. The interpretation of the results was carried out using a contextual approach, which considers the impact of external factors such as economic conditions, cultural differences, and global trends. This approach not only identified the most significant factors for tourists but also provided insights into how these factors interact to shape overall preferences. Additionally, the results were compared with existing theoretical models and studies in the field of tourism, enabling the identification of discrepancies in the understanding of tourist behaviour and the factors influencing destination choices, as well as facilitating interpretation from different perspectives.

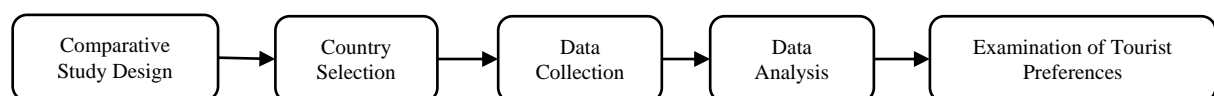The methodology steps are described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The methodology steps of the study (Source: compiled by the authors)

RESULTS
Economic Factors Influencing the Choice of Tourist Destinations

The study identified a relationship between economic conditions and tourist preferences. Income level, as one of the key factors, significantly influences the choice of a tourist destination. According to UNWTO (2024) data, countries offering a wide range of pricing categories for tourism services have shown an increase in visitor numbers. Spain attracts 83 million international tourists annually due to its diverse offerings, ranging from budget to luxury services. Analysis of UNWTO (2024) data revealed that among tourists with above-average incomes, 57% tend to choose exclusive travel packages, indicating a clear link between income level and destination preferences (Figure 2).
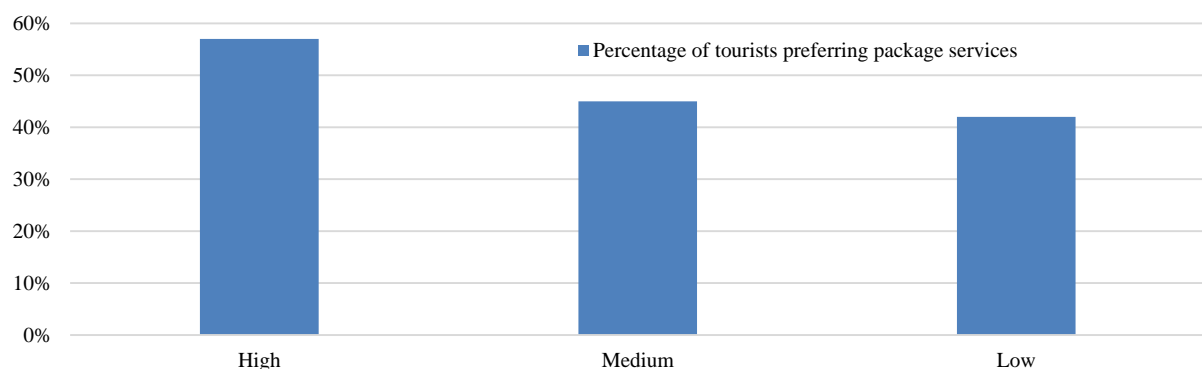

Figure 2. The impact of income level on tourist destination choice (Source: compiled by
the authors based on Sinha and Nair (2020), United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024)

For a deeper understanding of income level's impact on destination choice, aspects such as geographical income distribution can be considered. Different regions within countries may have varying income levels, influencing tourist preferences (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2020). For example, residents of Northern Europe may have higher incomes and thus

more frequently opt for expensive destinations. Moreover, tourists can be categorised based on income level, allowing for a better understanding of the services they seek and what attracts them to specific countries. The data in Figure 2 highlight how income levels directly influence tourists' destination choices and their preferences for travel packages, which in turn can inform how destinations and tourism businesses tailor their offerings. The strong preference for exclusive travel packages among high-income tourists indicates a demand for more personalised, high-end experiences, which may include luxury accommodations, private tours, and specialised services. Medium-income travellers are typically more price-sensitive than high-income travellers, even though they still lean towards slightly more opulent products. Despite being less expensive, their desire for exclusive packages suggests that they might be looking for a compromise between price and quality. On the other hand, low-income travellers are more concerned with affordable travel, which frequently consists of accessible locations, affordable lodging, and mass tourism options. These travellers are probably more cost conscious. Thus, they tend to choose locations that offer value through cheaper rates or all-inclusive packages. The significance of comprehending the tourism market's income-based segmentation is highlighted by the interdependence of these trends. In order to satisfy the varying tastes of various income brackets, tourist destinations that cater to a wide spectrum of travellers must balance their offers.

The cost of travel, including expenses for transport, accommodation, food, and excursions, also significantly affects destination choice. High transport costs can limit options for tourists. For instance, rising airfares during economic instability may discourage long-distance travel in favour of closer and more affordable destinations. It is important to note that travel costs are not solely determined by airfare prices. Other factors influencing overall travel expenses include seasonality. Airfare and accommodation costs can vary significantly depending on the season.

For example, during peak seasons (summer holidays, public holidays), prices often increase. Additionally, tourists who choose package deals can save on overall expenses, making such offers more attractive (Figure 3).
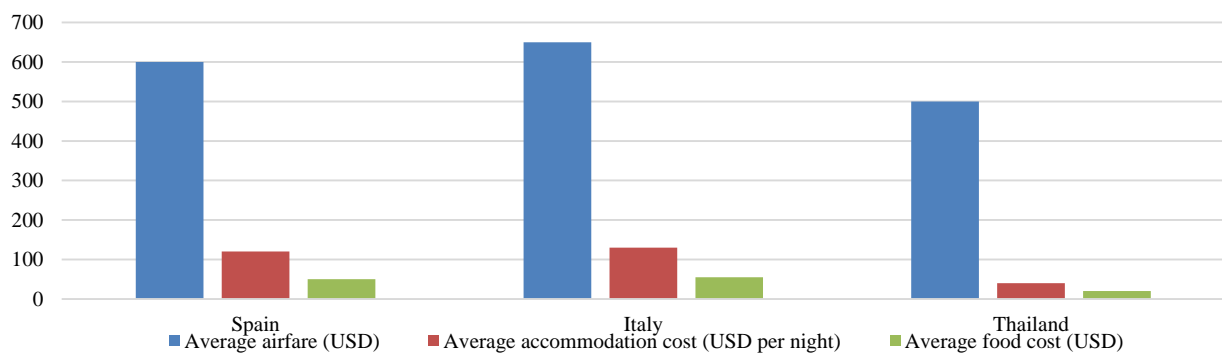

Figure 3. Average travel costs per person to selected countries (2023)
(Source: compiled by the authors based on United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024)

The information in Figure 3 demonstrates notable variations in these locations' overall affordability, which is crucial for comprehending how travel expenses influence travellers' choices. Due to their higher total travel expenses, Spain and Italy can draw more affluent travellers or those prepared to shell out more for exceptional experiences, cultural landmarks, and famous sights. Thailand, on the other hand, is a desirable choice for tourists on a tight budget because of its comparatively low prices. Thailand is a competitive location for budget-conscious tourists because of its affordability.

The availability of services at a tourist destination is also crucial in shaping preferences. This includes both physical accessibility and the availability of necessary services. The ability to reach a destination quickly (availability of direct flights, developed transport infrastructure) can be a decisive factor. Key aspects of accessibility include infrastructure. A well-developed transport network (railways, buses) and the availability of local transport services, such as taxis and car-sharing services, enhance the attractiveness of a destination. Service quality also plays an essential role. A high level of service, including the presence of information centres and tourist assistance, affects overall perceptions of accessibility (Table 1).

Table 1. Accessibility of transport services by country (Source: compiled
by the authors based on United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024)

Country	Number of international airports	Availability of local transport (yes/no)	Accessibility rating
Spain	47	Yes	8.5
Italy	39	Yes	8.0
Thailand	38	Yes	7.5

These trends highlight how crucial transport accessibility is in determining traveller preferences. Spain is a more connected and convenient travel destination, especially for foreign visitors, as evidenced by its greater number of international airports and high accessibility ranking. Travellers who value ease, speedy access, and a variety of transportation alternatives while selecting a vacation are likely to find this appealing. Even though Italy has a few fewer international airports than Spain, it nonetheless has strong accessibility and connection. Thailand is the least accessible country overall, despite having a comparable number of international airports to Italy. The somewhat lower accessibility rating might be a sign of difficulties like lengthier domestic travel times, fewer frequent transit options, or logistical obstacles that could put off some tourists. The accessibility of transport services is an important factor for tourists when selecting a destination. Spain, with the highest

number of international airports and a high accessibility rating, is the most attractive option among the studied countries. Italy and Thailand also offer good conditions, though their ratings are slightly lower, which may influence tourist choices.

Cultural and Social Factors Influencing Destination Choices

The second important aspect of the study was the influence of cultural factors on the choice of tourist destinations. An analysis of online reviews on platforms such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com revealed that 65 % of tourists consider local traditions and culture as key elements when selecting a destination. Italy, renowned for its cultural heritage, attracts tourists seeking authentic experiences. According to the Italian National Tourism Board report (2024), 68% of tourists choose this country specifically for its cultural attractions, such as historic cities, museums, and gastronomic festivals. For a deeper understanding of cultural influence, aspects such as cultural differences can be examined.

Different cultures have their unique traditions and customs, which can significantly impact destination choices. For instance, tourists may be interested in gastronomic tourism, exploring local cuisines. Authentic experiences are also crucial. The presence of unique cultural events (festivals, exhibitions) can enhance a destination's appeal. In their study, Zacharya et al. (2022) highlight those tourists increasingly seek "authentic" experiences, such as participating in local celebrations. Table 2 presents data on the popularity of cultural events in Spain, Italy, and Thailand, indicating the percentage of tourists interested in attending these events in each country.

Table 2. Cultural events in the studied countries (Source: compiled by the authors based on Tham et al. (2019), United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024)

Country	Popular Cultural Events	Percentage of Tourists Interested in Cultural Events
Spain	Flamenco, Feria de Abril, La Tomatina	70%
Italy	Venetian Carnival, Sanremo Festival	75%
Thailand	Songkran, Loy Krathong	65%

The data presented reflect the significant role that cultural experiences play in shaping tourists' destination choices. Italy and Spain stand out for the higher levels of participation in cultural events, indicating that their marketing strategies should highlight these characteristics to attract tourists interested in cultural heritage, even though all three nations gain from cultural tourism. Thailand, on the other hand, can try to balance its cultural offerings with other types of tourism, such as nature-based or affordable experiences, in order to appeal to a wider audience, even though it also benefits from cultural events.

Thailand also demonstrates growing interest due to its unique cultural events and festivals. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (2003), the number of tourists attending cultural events increased by 30% compared to previous years. Festivals such as Songkran (Thai New Year) and Loy Krathong attract numerous tourists eager for unique cultural experiences. Social factors, such as language and hospitality levels, also play a crucial role in shaping tourism preferences. Tourists are more likely to choose destinations where they can communicate in a familiar language or where English is widely spoken (Mukanov et al., 2018). Additional aspects influencing social factors include hospitality. A high level of hospitality can be a decisive factor in destination selection. For example, the friendliness of locals willing to help and guide visitors creates a positive impression on tourists. Social media also influences the perception of cultural factors. The impact of social media on the perception of cultural aspects is becoming increasingly significant (Kassymbekova et al., 2025). Tourists share their experiences and recommendations, shaping public opinion about destinations.

Another crucial aspect is the impact of safety levels and political stability in different countries on destination choices. In the context of global uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, studies conducted by UNWTO (2024) show that 70% of tourists consider safety a key factor when choosing a travel destination. These findings emphasise the importance of ensuring safe travel conditions in times of global instability. Data from the Global Peace Index (2024) indicate that countries with high safety levels, such as Spain and Italy, demonstrate stable growth in tourist flows. Specifically, Spain, with a high safety index, attracted 10% more tourists in 2023 compared to 2022 (Table 3).

Table 3. Safety levels and tourist flows (Source: compiled by the authors based on United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024)

Country	Safety Index	Tourist Flows 2023 (million)
Spain	1.5	83
Italy	1.8	58
Thailand	2.2	38

These trends highlight the complex relationship between safety and tourist flows. With a top safety rating of 1.5 and a significant volume of visitors, Spain shows that many travellers, especially those who are worried about their own wellbeing while travelling, place a high value on safety. The high safety index reflects Spain's stable political environment and effective public safety measures, which likely contribute to its strong appeal among international travellers. Italy's safety index of 1.8 still draws a sizable number of visitors, but its lower rating than Spain may suggest that other elements, like historical landmarks, cultural attractions, and service quality, are more important to the country's allure as a travel destination. Despite having the lowest safety ranking, Thailand still manages to pull a sizable number of tourists.

Therefore, Thailand's popularity among travellers shows that considerations other than safety, like price, ease of access, and distinctive attractions, are just as crucial when choosing a location. The safety level is an important indicator affecting tourist flows. Spain, with the lowest safety index and the highest number of tourists in 2023, demonstrates that safety is not always the primary factor in destination choice. Italy and Thailand, despite having a higher safety index, see lower tourist flows, which may be attributed to other factors such as cultural offerings and service accessibility.

The Influence of Modern Technologies and Long-Term Trends

Modern technologies also have a significant impact on the selection of tourist destinations and services. In recent years, there has been a rise in the use of online booking platforms and social media, which have changed the approach to travel planning. According to UNWTO research (2024), more than 70% of tourists use online platforms to book hotels and services, enabling them to compare prices and conditions quickly and conveniently. This also allows travellers to find special offers and discounts, making travel more accessible to a wider audience. Platforms such as Booking.com and Airbnb are gaining popularity among travellers, transforming the tourism industry landscape. They provide an opportunity not only to find accommodation but also to read reviews from other tourists, influencing travel decisions. Social media plays a crucial role in shaping tourist preferences. Tourists often explore destinations through Instagram, Facebook, and other platforms, allowing them to see real experiences shared by other travellers. About 60% of respondents in a UNWTO survey stated that social media influenced their destination choice. These findings underscore the significance of social networks as an information source for modern travellers (Figure 4).
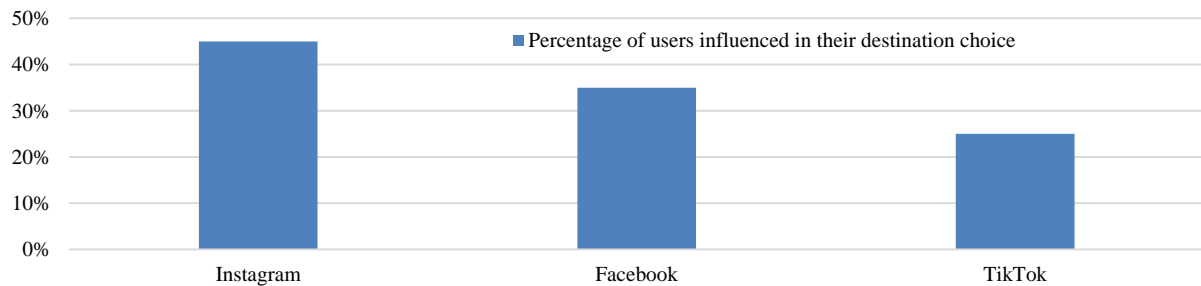

Figure 4. Influence of social media on destination choice (Source: compiled by the authors based on United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2024)

The presented data indicate that social media is an increasingly powerful tool in influencing tourist decisions, but the type of content and platform matters. Instagram is a vital tool for locations to promote their appeal through aesthetics and lifestyle photography because of its visual-centric nature, which inspires travellers by exhibiting destination photos, experiences, and user-generated content (Zamyatina et al., 2021). This emphasises how crucial it is for travel marketers to develop visually appealing campaigns and use influencers to increase the allure of destinations. Facebook is still a popular travel network, but Instagram has a little more sway. This may be due to Facebook's tendency to be less visually focused and more text-based, which can turn off travellers looking for ideas through pictures and videos. Despite its growing appeal among younger audiences, TikTok has the least influence, which is indicative of the platform's relative novelty in the travel industry. Longer-form content or well-chosen photo-based platforms like Instagram may have a greater influence on destination choice than TikTok's shorter, more dynamic videos. Long-term trends in tourist behaviour indicate that travellers are becoming more aware and discerning. For example, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted perceptions of safety and health, now considered priorities when selected a destination. Tourists value not only comfort but also safety and the sustainability of the tourism industry (But et al., 2023). Key trends include sustainable tourism, increasing interest in ecotourism, and sustainable practices such as using renewable energy sources, minimising waste, supporting local communities, and conserving natural resources. These approaches help reduce the negative impact of tourism on the environment and promote more responsible resource consumption. Tourists seek ways to minimise their environmental footprint (Ostapenko & Bryantsev, 2023). The digitalisation of services is becoming increasingly important, allowing tourists to access information and services anytime, anywhere. Personalisation of offers is also gaining relevance, as travellers expect a more tailored approach, including recommendations based on their interests and behaviour.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered tourist habits and preferences (Zatsepina & Pruss, 2023). Considering new realities, such as the need to adhere to safety measures, tourists are paying closer attention to health and safety levels in destination countries. Many now seek destinations offering not only entertainment but also safety guarantees. This has led to growing interest in domestic tourism and easily accessible locations, becoming a critical factor in destination choices. Moreover, travel formats that minimise contact with large crowds, such as road trips and camping, have gained popularity. There is an increasing interest in natural and rural destinations, where tourists can avoid mass gatherings (Zhansagimova et al., 2022). For example, national parks and reserves, such as Khao Sok National Park in Thailand, are becoming more popular among travellers seeking tranquillity and connection with nature (Chongbut & Chapman, 2021). This also highlights the importance of infrastructure development in lesser-visited locations to ensure comfort and safety for tourists. Tourism has a significant impact on national economies, creating jobs and contributing to GDP (An et al., 2024). For instance, in Spain, tourism constitutes a substantial part of the economy, providing millions of jobs in hospitality, restaurants, transportation, and other related industries (Bento & Pereira, 2014). However, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a sharp decline in tourist flows, negatively affecting these economies. The decrease in tourists also led to the closure of many small and medium-sized businesses dependent on tourism activity. The recovery of the tourism industry will be a priority for governments, potentially involving subsidies for the hospitality sector, tax reductions on tourism services, and local attraction promotions. Long-term investments in infrastructure and marketing campaigns can aid in the recovery and growth of tourist flows (Shtal et al., 2023).

Social media plays a key role in shaping tourist preferences. The influence of bloggers and social media personalities on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok has become significant. Tourists increasingly seek inspiration and travel

recommendations on social media, where they can view real experiences shared by other travellers. Visual content, such as photos and videos, greatly impacts destinations' perception, emphasising the importance of utilising social platforms to attract customers (Didenko, 2024). More than 60% of tourists surveyed in a study by Wąsowicz-Zaborek (2019) stated that social media information influenced their destination choice. This highlights the crucial role of social networks as a key element in the marketing strategies of tourism companies, allowing them to tailor their approaches to consumer preferences and trends in the travel industry. Sustainable tourism is becoming an important factor in choosing travel destinations. Tourists are paying increasing attention to their trips' environmental and social impact. This includes an interest in local initiatives aimed at protecting the environment and supporting local communities. Travellers seek eco-friendly accommodations and local products, contributing to the development of sustainable tourism and ecotourism, particularly in countries like Thailand.

In response to the growing interest in sustainability, many tourism companies are developing programs to minimise their environmental impact. This may include the use of renewable energy sources, waste management, and recycling programs. For example, in Thailand, some resorts are beginning to adopt sustainable development principles by offering eco-friendly services and conservation programs for local flora and fauna. There is also a growing interest in volunteer tourism, where travellers participate in environmental conservation projects or support local communities (Wisansing, 2019). With the rising popularity of short-term rentals such as Airbnb and unique accommodation formats like glamping, tourists are becoming more selective in their choice of lodging. Many travellers prefer unique and authentic experiences that cannot be found in traditional hotels (Shtal et al., 2024; Karyy et al., 2025). This creates new opportunities for local entrepreneurs and fosters the development of new forms of tourism, such as agritourism and ecotourism. In particular, many young travellers seek alternative options such as hostels and boutique hotels that offer more personalised and unique services. This trend also encourages hotels to adapt by offering creative and unconventional lodging options, such as treehouses or eco-friendly hotels.

The tourism industry has adapted to new challenges posed by the pandemic by implementing technologies to enhance safety. This includes contactless check-in, the use of mobile apps for managing bookings, and the introduction of hygiene measures. Travel companies have also started offering more flexible booking conditions to attract customers concerned about potential travel disruptions. Measures such as process automation and the use of technology to create a safer environment are becoming industry standards. These measures may also include biometric identification and other technologies that streamline the check-in and boarding process. Additionally, companies are utilising technology to provide a more personalised experience for their customers, including recommendations based on past trips and preferences.

Cross-cultural differences influence the choice of travel destinations. Tourists from different countries may have varying expectations and preferences, reflecting their cultural backgrounds and economic situations. For example, tourists from Northern Europe may prefer active and adventure tourism, while those from Southern countries may seek a more relaxing beach holiday. This diversity of preferences underscores the need to tailor marketing strategies to different target audiences. It is also important to consider that cultural differences can affect service perceptions and expectations, requiring tourism companies to have a deeper understanding of different cultural contexts. This may involve adapting services to cultural preferences, such as food, communication styles, and customer service expectations.

Global challenges such as climate change and economic crises can significantly impact the tourism industry and traveller preferences (Issayeva et al., 2024). Climate changes may alter the accessibility of certain destinations, which in turn affects vacation choices. Tourists increasingly seek destinations that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability and environmental protection. For instance, countries actively working to reduce their carbon footprint and protect the environment are becoming more attractive to eco-conscious travellers. This also encourages governments and tourism companies to develop strategies for adapting to climate change and its consequences. It is expected that sustainable tourism will play an increasingly important role in shaping travel flows in the future.

New and emerging tourist destinations, such as lesser-known regions of Spain, Italy, and Thailand, may gain popularity in the future. Governments of these countries can promote their lesser-known locations through marketing campaigns and initiatives focused on sustainable tourism, helping attract travellers looking for unique and authentic experiences. For example, in Spain, regions such as Castilla-La Mancha and Asturias are actively developing their tourism offerings, as noted by Akhtar et al. (2021). In Italy, interest is growing in less-visited regions such as Umbria and Marche, which boast rich culture and stunning natural landscapes. In Thailand, in addition to well-known resorts, tourists are increasingly exploring northern areas like Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, which offer unique cultural and natural experiences. Governments may also consider creating special tourist routes that allow travellers to better understand local culture and traditions.

These additional findings highlight that understanding the dynamics of tourist preferences requires a comprehensive approach, considering various factors, including economic conditions, cultural characteristics, and social changes. Tourism companies and governments must adapt their strategies based on these insights to remain competitive in the global tourism market. Prospective areas for further research may include a deeper examination of the impact of modern trends, such as climate change and technological innovations, on the tourism industry and traveller preferences.

Thus, the study of factors influencing the choice of travel destinations in Spain, Italy, and Thailand underscores the importance of a comprehensive approach to assessing economic competitiveness in the tourism sector. Understanding tourist preferences and the factors influencing their choices will allow countries to adjust their strategies and offer more attractive conditions for travellers. These findings can serve as a foundation for further research and the development of effective measures aimed at meeting the needs of modern tourists and strengthening countries' positions in the global tourism market.

It is essential to continue monitoring changes in tourist behaviour and adapting marketing and customer service approaches to meet new demands and expectations. Given the constant changes and challenges faced by the tourism industry, the ability to adapt and innovate will determine the success and resilience of companies in this sector.

Modern tourists increasingly consider the environmental aspects of their trips (Ostapenko et al., 2023). With the growing interest in sustainable tourism, many travellers seek destinations that actively work toward environmental conservation. As a result, places offering eco-friendly accommodation options and proactive conservation measures are becoming more attractive. For example, resorts that use solar energy, implement waste recycling programs, and support local ecosystem preservation initiatives can attract eco-conscious travellers. Equally important are psychological factors that influence travel destination choices. For instance, stress and anxiety from daily life may drive people to seek solitude and peaceful retreats. This has contributed to the growing interest in ecotourism and agritourism, where travellers can enjoy nature and escape urban life. Psychological aspects also include the desire for self-expression and unique experiences, making unconventional tourism formats, such as volunteer tourism, particularly appealing. Cultural differences among tourists from different world regions also significantly influence destination choices. For example, tourists from East Asian countries may have completely different preferences and expectations compared to those from Western Europe. This aspect requires further analysis, as understanding cultural nuances can help develop more effective marketing strategies. Cross-cultural studies can identify which service elements and leisure activities are most valued by different cultural groups.

From a technological perspective, the use of mobile applications and online platforms for trip planning has become standard for most travellers. The convenience and accessibility of online information enable travellers to make more informed decisions. It is also important to note that many tourists now expect companies to use technology to enhance their experience. This may include artificial intelligence for personalised travel recommendations and virtual reality for previewing destinations.

Research may also explore the prospects for the tourism industry in the post-pandemic period. It is anticipated that in the future, travel companies will focus on offers that align with new traveller demands and expectations. For example, the growing interest in medical and wellness tourism could become an essential part of many companies' strategies.

Additionally, attention should be given to how international events, such as the Olympic Games or exhibitions, influence tourist flows. Such events can attract large numbers of tourists and create additional business opportunities. Thus, expanding this research allows for a more comprehensive view of the tourism industry. Understanding the dynamics of tourist preferences and the factors influencing destination choices is key to successfully adapting the strategies of tourism companies and governments. This knowledge will enable countries to not only maintain but also strengthen their positions in the global tourism market by offering more attractive conditions for travellers. It is crucial for the tourism industry to continue adapting to changes in traveller behaviour and expectations while implementing innovations and sustainable practices. This will contribute not only to post-pandemic recovery but also to the long-term success and sustainable development of the tourism sector in the future.

DISCUSSION

During the conducted research, important data were obtained regarding global tourist preferences and changes in tourist behaviour caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that tourists increasingly seek unique and authentic experiences, while safety and service quality remain key factors when choosing a destination. These findings are significant for the tourism industry and can be used to develop new strategies that align with modern requirements.

One of the conclusions of this study is that, according to 65% of reviews on websites left by tourists from various regions with different travel style preferences, safety was highlighted as an important factor when selecting a travel destination. This confirms the findings of other studies, such as the work of Guaita Martinez (2020), which also emphasises that safety is one of the key factors influencing tourist choices in the post-pandemic world. However, unlike the obtained data, the study by Cheer et al. (2021) showed that only 50% of respondents paid attention to safety, which may be due to differences in research methods or context. Furthermore, their study demonstrated that for 40% of participants, safety was a less important factor, indicating differences in the perception of safety depending on the type of travel, such as business trips versus leisure travel.

Additionally, tourists paid significant attention to service quality – 58% of reviews highlighted its importance. This aligns with the findings of the study by Rianty et al. (2022), which states that high-quality service is a decisive factor in attracting tourists, especially given the intense competition in the tourism market. Conversely, the study by Henok (2021) revealed that only 45% of respondents considered service quality important, indicating potential differences in perception among various groups of tourists. Moreover, the research by Croes et al. (2021) showed that only 38% of respondents identified service quality as a key factor, suggesting that some tourists prioritise price over quality. Additionally, their study confirmed that 55% of participants regarded service quality as a secondary factor, highlighting regional differences in perception.

Another important aspect identified in the study is the growing interest in ecological and sustainable tourism. The results indicated that 70% of tourists prefer environmentally friendly destinations and support local communities. This is consistent with the conclusions of the study by Lee & Yen (2024), which states that an environmentally conscious approach is becoming an important factor in choosing a tourist destination. However, the research by Anis et al. (2023) found that only 55% of respondents considered ecological aspects. Moreover, their study demonstrated that only 40% of respondents viewed sustainability as a crucial criterion for destination selection, highlighting the need for further exploration of this issue. The study by Praprom & Laipaporn (2023) also confirmed that 65% of respondents do not consider ecological aspects when choosing a destination, emphasising the existing gap between awareness and actual

It is also noteworthy that 55% of tourists changed their usual routes and opted for less popular destinations (UNWTO, 2024), which presents opportunities for the development of new tourist routes. This is confirmed by research conducted by Zelenko (2021), which highlights that after the pandemic, many tourists began seeking less crowded places for recreation.

At the same time, the study by Stavrinoudis (2019) showed that the majority of respondents still prefer well-known tourist destinations, indicating differences in motivation and perception of safety.

Data analysis also showed that 60% of tourists prefer using online platforms to organise their trips, confirming the findings of the study by Abrham (2020), which notes that digitalisation of tourism services is becoming a significant trend. The research by Hashim et al. (2019) found that only 45% of respondents used online services for booking, emphasising the need for further study to understand the factors influencing tourist choices. Liao & Chuang (2020) showed that only 35% of respondents prefer using mobile applications, highlighting the gap between expectations and actual technology usage.

Another significant aspect of this research is the impact of economic stability on tourist preferences. It was found that a high standard of living and infrastructure availability directly influence the demand for tourism services. This aligns with studies conducted by Bazazo & Qaddhat (2022), which indicate that countries with developed economies and high living standards attract more tourists. However, the study by Slashcheva (2020) showed that in some cases, economic stability is not a decisive factor in destination choice, as many tourists prioritise unique cultural experiences. Furthermore, the research indicated that 70% of respondents choose destinations based on the availability of cultural events rather than economic stability. The studies by Benjamin et al. (2020), Ianioglo & Rissanen (2020) also showed that most tourists do not associate economic stability with destination selection, emphasising the need for further exploration of this aspect. Additionally, the research demonstrated that 65% of respondents consider economic stability an important factor when choosing a destination, highlighting the need for an in-depth analysis of different tourism market segments.

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping tourist preferences. This aligns with studies that emphasise the growing influence of social media on destination choice. Conversely, the study by Baena & Cerviño (2024) showed that for 60% of respondents, traditional information sources such as travel guides and recommendations from friends remain more significant, indicating the need for a comprehensive marketing approach. The results of this study highlight the importance of adapting tourism companies to modern requirements and changes in consumer behaviour. Sustainable and eco-friendly tourism, high-quality services, safety, and the use of technology are key factors determining the competitiveness of countries and companies in the tourism market. Notably, despite the high interest in ecological aspects, there is a significant gap between awareness and actual tourist preferences, requiring attention from the tourism industry.

CONCLUSIONS

This study focuses on important aspects that affect traveller choices in Spain, Italy, and Thailand, which helps to comprehend worldwide visitor preferences in the post-pandemic age. Notably, the comparative study of these nations shows notable variations in the ways that cultural influences, economic considerations, and safety concerns influence traveller choices. High-income tourists, for instance, are more inclined to choose luxury travel packages, especially in Spain, whereas tourists on a tight budget are more likely to choose less expensive locations, such as Thailand. Furthermore, it was constantly noted that safety and service quality are becoming increasingly important in all nations, with 70% of tourists citing safety as their top concern. The research also highlights how important digital interactions are becoming.

A startling 72% of respondents said social media had a significant impact on their trip planning, highlighting the need for travel agencies to make effective use of these channels. This underscores the importance of an active presence on social media for tourism companies to engage effectively with potential clients. These observations provide fresh viewpoints on how travel destinations might improve their competitiveness by modifying their products to satisfy changing customer needs. The results indicate that the key to drawing in contemporary visitors will be incorporating sustainability into travel experiences and placing a strong emphasis on internet accessibility. By integrating several elements into a coherent framework, this study provides a more thorough understanding of the shifting dynamics in international tourism.

Despite the extensive data, the study has its limitations. First of all, the sample of respondents was limited to certain regions, which may not fully reflect global trends. Future research could expand the sample to include more diverse regions, ensuring a broader representation of global tourist trends. It should also be borne in mind that the survey results may be influenced by subjective factors such as the personal preferences of the participants. To mitigate this, using mixed-method approaches, such as qualitative interviews, could reduce the impact of subjective factors and provide deeper insights into personal preferences. In addition, possible fluctuations in the economic situation and changing travel regulations may also influence the results. To address this, longitudinal studies or time-series analysis could be employed to track changes over time and capture the evolving nature of tourist behaviour.

Future research could also investigate the influence of cultural factors on the choice of destinations, which can help to create more targeted marketing campaigns. Finally, further research into changes in tourist behaviour will help to identify new trends and preferences, enabling tourism companies to remain competitive in the face of global challenges. This, in turn, will ensure sustainable development of the tourism industry in the long term.

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