APPLICATION OF THE REPRESENTATIVE STATISTICAL SURVEYS FOR THE PURPOSES OF STUDYING THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DOMESTIC TOURISM IN BULGARIA - ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE PLOVDIV DISTRICT

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Abstract: The main goal of the article is to determine the attitudes of the population of the second largest district in Bulgaria - Plovdiv towards the domestic is to determine the attitudes tourism in the country and the main factors that influence them. The analysis in this article is based on the microdata from a nationally representative survey, using two-staged clustered sample of respondents, stratified by Bulgarian districts and residence place type and the application of statistical methods such as frequency distributions and measures of central tendency (summary statistics). The results show that the residents of Plovdiv district prefer summer vacation tourism much more than winter one, although the practicing of it is relatively rare - 1-2 times a year. The main reasons that hinder more frequent travel in the country are primarily of a financial nature. Decisions on booking accommodation are predominantly based on advice from people already experienced in the field, especially relatives and friends. The availability of public transport in the Plovdiv district is not a strong incentive for use among residents, who prefer traveling domestically by private vehicle. The residents of the district show a much stronger preference for summer vacations at the Bulgarian seaside compared to leisure domestic tourism at mountain winter resorts. Despite the relatively high ratings given by the respondents, the main problems faced by the domestic tourists are: the unreasonably high prices, the poor service, the overbuilding, and the orientation of tourism services primarily towards the foreign market. The conclusion outlines the main measures that need to be taken to overcome negative attitudes, related to improving the quality of service in winter and summer resorts, improving transport infrastructure, strengthening the image of Bulgarian tourism through the main communication channels, etc.

Keywords: population attitudes, domestic tourism, Plovdiv district, representative survey, statistical analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic tourism is of particular importance for the development of Bulgaria as a year-round destination. National Statistical Institute (NSI, 2025) data show that over 60% of the population's tourism travel expenses are for travel within the country. The remaining 40% are distributed as follows: during the summer months, most of them are directed to the economies of Türkiye and Greece, and during the winter months - to Austria, Italy and France. The present paper examines the attitudes of Bulgarians towards domestic tourism for leisure purposes, based on a study conducted in the Plovdiv region. The aim is to determine the reasons for the negative image of summer seaside resorts and winter ski destinations among a part of the population. Most tourism research is based on individual samples, which are not representative. They provide some information and most of them reflect attitudes relatively clearly, but they are not comprehensive and cannot be completely objective due to unclear or limited criteria for selecting respondents. For this reason, the main purpose of this article is to examine the application of nationally representative surveys in the study of attitudes, by presenting a specific study.

CASE STUDY AREA

Plovdiv District is the second most populous district in Bulgaria (633,586 people), with about 75% of its residents living in cities (472,213 people) according to NSI (2025) data as of December 31, 2023. The population of the district center Plovdiv is 325,485 people, which constitutes about 51% of the population in the district. Urbanization is a complex social, economic and demographic process, the essence of which is the concentration of population, production and service activities in cities (Penkova, 2008). The dependence has been established that with increasing technologization of the economy and society, the demand for recreational activities increases (Ivanova, 2018).

The geographical location of the Plovdiv region shows that the cities in the region are equally distant from the Bulgarian and Greek sea coasts. The distance from the center of the region, the city of Plovdiv, to the port of

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Alexandroupolis is about 220 km and takes just over 3 hours, and to Burgas it is about 250 km. and takes about 2.5 hours (Google maps, Direction). On the other hand, the two national ski resorts Pamporovo and Borovets are located in two neighboring districts of Plovdiv – Smolyan and Sofia region, and the popular international ski destination Bansko is only about 150 km away. Inside the district, the wealth of cultural and historical landmarks, the presence of favorable natural resources, the traditions and experience of the local population in offering tourism services provide an opportunity to practice various types of tourism. The territory of the district covers the southern slopes of the Stara Planina Mountains, the Pazardzhik-Plovdiv plain, parts of the Sredna Gora and Rhodope Mountains. According to the Strategy for Integrated and Sustainable Tourism of Plovdiv District 2019-2027, there are conditions to form five more compact spatial zones in which specific combinations of tourism products can be developed:

- Northern belt, which covers the municipalities of Karlovo, Sopot, Brezovo, Rakovski, Kaloyanovo, Hisarya and Maritsa. Main destinations are Karlovo, Sopot, Klisura, Kalofer, Rakovski, Zhitnitsa, Manole, Starosel and Hisarya, as well as parts of the Central Balkan National Park. The belt offers opportunities for mountain, sports, cultural, rural, wine, health and ecotourism.
- Central belt with the center of the municipality of Plovdiv and peripheral parts of the municipalities of Rhodopes and Maritsa. The belt offers opportunities for cultural and historical, festival, business, entertainment and ecotourism.
- Southern belt, formed around the municipalities of Asenovgrad, Kuklen and Lucky with opportunities for the development of religious, pilgrimage, mountain, wine, health and ecotourism.
- Western belt, which encompasses the municipalities of Perushtitsa, Krichim, Stamboliyski, Saedinenie and parts of the Rhodopes municipality. The belt offers opportunities for wine, cultural and ecotourism.
- Eastern belt – on the territory of the municipalities of Parvomay and Sadovo, offering opportunities for agrarian and rural tourism.

Plovdiv district offers also opportunities for slow tourism mostly in destinations as Hisarya, Starosel, Koprvshtitsa, Karlovo, Kalofer, Pavel banya, Velingrad, Tsigov chark, Chepelare, Momchilovtsi, and many small villages in Western Rhodopes. This kind of tourism becomes very popular because of the fast pace of life and the chronic stressors, mostly in the urban areas. The people in their active age try to find ways to cope with stress including the type of tourism they practice. The slow living philosophy is one of these strategies (Varadzhakova, 2017).

Plovdiv District is among the most significant and fastest-growing economic districts in Bulgaria. The latest published NSI (2025) data on the average salary of employees in 2022 of 1,494 leva show that it ranks sixth out of the 28 districts in the country by this indicator (NSI). The average monthly total income of one person is 866 BGN, slightly below the national average of 904 BGN. The district ranks 11th among the other districts. The average pension for the district is 762.52 BGN and is lower than the national average of 784.48 BGN, ranking it 10th among the other districts. These data show that overall, the well-being of the population is good and is around the national average.

On the other hand, Plovdiv district has an excellent transport geographical location. The transport corridor "Orient/East-Mediterranean", part of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), through the "Trakia" motorway passes through the region and connects it to the Black Sea. The total length of the road network is 1020 km, 97% of which is asphalted. The railway network in the region is 324 km long, 285 km of which is electrified. Main railway line No. 1 Kalotina-West - Svilengrad in Plovdiv district has 8 stations, Railway line No. 8 (Plovdiv-Burgas), which is part of transport corridor No. 8 has 6 stations there, and main railway line No. 3 (Sofia(Iliyantsi)-Varna) in the district has 7 stations.

The population of Plovdiv District has equal conditions for practicing both domestic and outbound tourism, which is why the analysis of their attitudes towards both types is important.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Domestic tourism encompasses travel by residents of a country within its borders. Interest in this type of tourism and tourists' attitudes has grown in recent years, especially in the context of global travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Akhter Shareef et al., 2023). Understanding consumer attitudes towards domestic tourism is crucial for all stakeholders seeking to foster sustainable economic and tourism growth, increase satisfaction, and loyalty among domestic tourists and excursionists. They are important for understanding how individuals perceive the world around them and what their behavior is. In tourism, researching consumer attitudes is of key importance, as they directly influence tourist satisfaction (Huang & Hsu, 2009), the selection of a destination (Kim & Kwon, 2018) and indirectly even their future behavior when choosing a destination (Lee, 2009).

Their research is important for better targeting potential customers when developing marketing strategies and tourism policies, for ensuring a pleasant tourist experience, which is essential for the long-term success of destinations (Cetin & Bilgihan, 2015). Provoking an intention to visit a specific tourist destination in the future is a challenge for the tourism business (Ervina & Octaviany, 2022) and is based on the specific attitudes that the potential tourists have.

Attitudes are a construct of social psychology (Wolf et al., 2020) and represent individuals' evaluations, views or predisposition to ideas, people, objects, etc. (Plaza-Mejía et al., 2023). According to Fabrigar et al. (2005), attitudes have a two-node structure. One node is the object of the attitude, and the other is the overall evaluation of the object. The relationship between the two represents the strength of the attitude. The attitude strength shows how important it is for the person (Howe & Krosnick, 2017). According to the tripartite model of attitudes (Rosenberg & Hovland, 1960), also known as ABC model, they have 3 main components: affective, behavioral, and cognitive. The affective or emotional component reflects feelings and emotions towards a given object, product or phenomenon. The behavioral component shows the intentions or actual actions generated by the attitude. The cognitive expresses beliefs, knowledge

and evaluations regarding the object of the attitude (for example, a destination or a tourist product). Attitudes are the result of physically observable or verbal stimuli (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015).

Tourist attitudes vary depending on various factors such as gender, generation, marital status, income, previous travel experience, knowledge of the destination, etc. (Varadzhakova & Naydenov, 2024). When researching attitudes towards a given tourist destination, it is necessary to examine all or at least some of these factors in order to lay the foundations for an adequate tourism policy towards target groups.

Although the topic on the population attitudes towards domestic tourism plays an important role for the building of adequate national tourism strategies and policies, there are a few scientific papers in that field that rely on the statistical analysis of data from representative surveys. Kabuitu et al. (2022) examine how the demographic and travel characteristics of the the domestic tourists influence their purchase decisions and travel choices. The study is based on a structured questionnaire distributed to a random sample of domestic tourists and the data is analyzed using descriptive statistics and Chi-square techniques. The key findings show that the duration of the visit is dependent on the annual income, the number of visits and travel arrangements at the Kenyan Coast are dependent on the age, and the mode of transport is dependent on both age and education. The identification of the preferred local destinations and attractions for the domestic tourist market, depending on demographic and travel characteristics, is crucial in order to increase travel propensity for the sustainability of the industry.

A case study by the OECD (2025) discusses the integration of traditional survey methods (National Visitor Survey) with new data sources like mobile positioning data to measure domestic tourism in Australia. While the article focuses on data sources and methodology, it highlights the importance of the representative surveys for reliable statistical analysis. The latter concerns mainly the benchmarking of the survey results with population data and the comparison of the traditional and the mobility data for validation. The key insights show that the representative surveys remain a cornerstone for measuring attitudes and behaviors in domestic tourism and that the new data sources can complement surveys to improve the granularity and the timeliness. Raykova & Naydenov (2024) in their paper use data from a representative survey with a two-stage random sample stratified by Bulgarian districts and residence type to analyze public attitudes towards domestic tourism on a national level. The methodology includes descriptive analysis, spatial analysis, frequency distributions, and statistical hypothesis testing. Key indicators are practices, frequency, stay duration, non-participation, and satisfaction with domestic tourism, with results highlighting significant regional and demographic differences.

The domestic tourists' perception and attitude towards circularity in Egypt is elaborated in Elsawy (2024). The article investigates the Egyptian domestic tourists' attitudes towards circular economy practices in tourism, using data from a structured online survey targeted at Egyptians with domestic tourism experience. The study examines the relationship between environmental consciousness, demographics, and attitudes towards the circularity, using statistical analysis to reveal the patterns and mediating/moderating effects. The study provides actionable insights for sustainable tourism strategies in developing countries. Other research paper (Parvez & Kashem, 2018) focuses on the young Bangladeshi tourists, utilizing a survey questionnaire adapted from standardized measures and completed by 571 randomly selected respondents from Dhaka. The analysis measures attitudes, travel patterns, and satisfaction levels, employing statistical methods to assess the contribution of young tourists to the domestic tourism sector and to identify the key influencing factors. A working paper of the UN Tourism emphasizes the importance of the household income and expenditure surveys as a rich source for the studying domestic tourism consumption and behavior (UNTourism, 2005). According to the paper these surveys provide representative data on the household travel activity and are considered the most efficient instrument for measuring domestic tourism across countries.

The study also discusses the use of tourism-specific modules within multipurpose household surveys to estimate domestic tourism activity. Gonda (2024) focuses on the study on the gender differences in tourism consumption attitudes in Hungary using a representative online survey of 1,085 respondents aged 15–74. The statistical analysis revealed significant differences in the attitudes and consumption patterns between the males and females, highlighting the value of representative survey data for the understanding of the demographic variations in the domestic tourism attitudes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The analysis in this article is based on the microdata from a nationally representative survey. The latter is executed using two-staged clustered sample stratified by Bulgarian districts and residence place type. The first-stage clusters are the electoral districts and the second-stage ones are the households. The survey unit is a person aged 18+, permanently residing in the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria.

The total sample size for the survey on a national scale is 1003 persons and the sample size of the strata for Plovdiv district equals 101 persons. The survey fieldwork is conducted by 71 interviewers during the spring of 2023 using online-based questionnaire by the means of tablet-assisted personal interviews. The questionnaire is of a structured-type one and includes 9,5 standard pages of survey questions grouped in 6 sections. For the purposes of the analysis in this article only a part of the questions is used, mainly concerning: the general practices for domestic tourism in Bulgaria, practices for winter leisure tourism in the Bulgarian ski resorts and the practices for summer vacation tourism in the Bulgarian seaside resorts.

The statistical analysis of the microdata from the survey comprises the methods of the descriptive statistics. The latter cover: frequency distributions and summary numeric characteristics (such as the average) using data measured on the nominal, ordinal and ratio scales (Field, 2024). The statistical analysis is applied using IBM SPSS ver. 30 and the charts are made by the usage of the Microsoft 365 software.

The methodology steps of the current study can be visualized by the following (Figure 1).
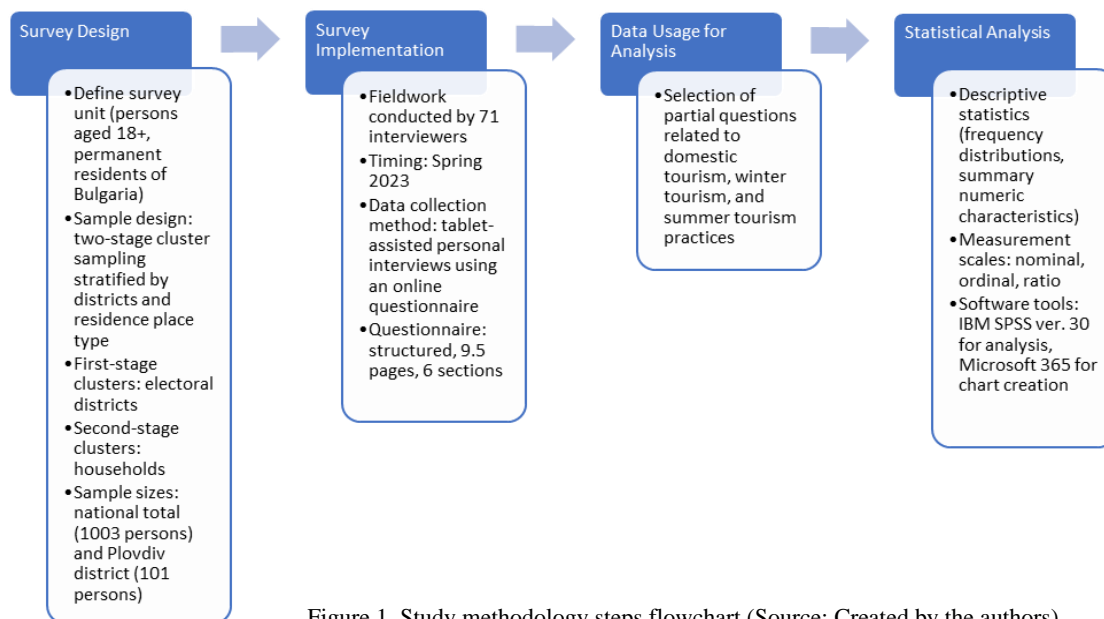
Figure 1. Study methodology steps flowchart (Source: Created by the authors)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of essential importance for the overall understanding of the results from the statistical analysis of the domestic tourism practices of the Plovdiv district residents is the discussion of the specific demographic characteristics of the studied population. The 'profile' of the Plovdiv district respondents, described by the frequency distribution of the studied units by gender, age and education is presented in Figure 2. The results presented in Figure 2 show that male and female respondents are equally represented, a large share (72%) of the residents studied has secondary education and as the age increases more respondents are interviewed. The general practices for the realization of the domestic tourism in Bulgaria by a representative sample of the Plovdiv residents are analysed starting with frequency of the travel for domestic tourism purposes presented by the pie-chart in Figure 3. It is clearly visible that a large share of the respondents (65%) travel in Bulgaria only once a year or even less, approx. ¼ of all respondents (26%) travel several times a year and 8% of the Plovdiv district residents do not travel in Bulgaria at all. The main reason for the inability to travel locally is the lack of financial resources. When the respondents decide to book a place for accommodation, they usually seek for the advice of people who already have some experience in that field (Figure 4).

Figure 2. Demographic characteristics of the studied sample
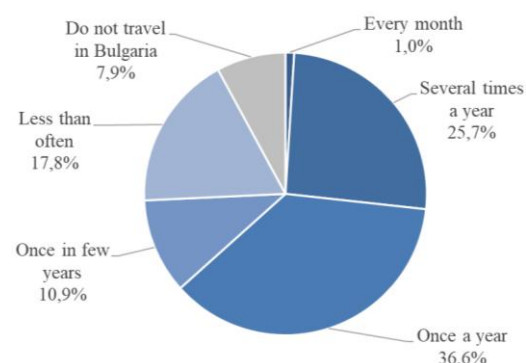(Source: National representative survey data)

Figure 3. Frequency of travel for domestic tourism purposes
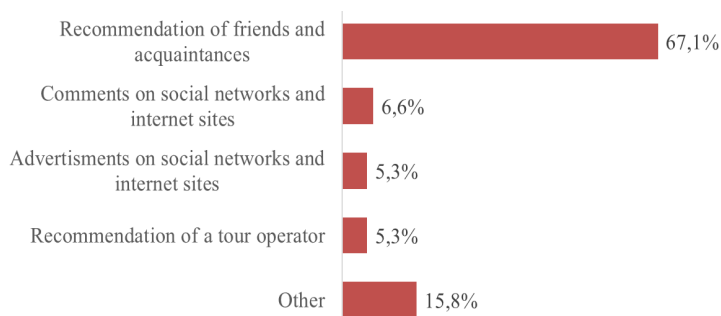(Source: National representative survey data)

Figure 4. Approaches for choosing the accommodation place
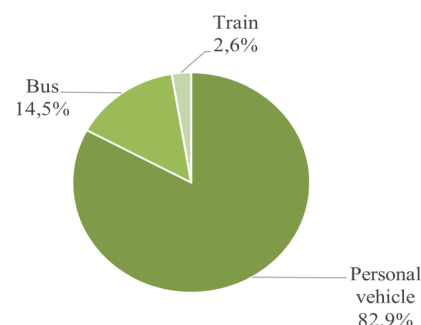(Source: National representative survey data)

Figure 5. Means of transportation
(Source: National representative survey data)

Figure 4 shows evidently that the main 'factor' (67%) in the process of choosing the accommodation place is the recommendations from friends and relatives. The 'modern' means such as social network and internet sites (less than 7%) and recommendations of the tour operators (approx. 5%) are far behind the 'old-fashioned' communications.

Although there are public means of transportation in Bulgaria – buses and railways, the Plovdiv district residents mostly prefer (83%) to visit the places for domestic tourism using their own car (Figure 5).

When respondents from the district of Plovdiv are asked to evaluate the degree of the influence of the main information sources on the domestic tourism practices using the scale: from 1 – To a small degree to 7 – To a great degree, the results 'speak' clearly (Figure 6). To the greatest degree the main 'influencer' on the preferences for the domestic tourism practices is the opinion of the relatives and friends (5,9) and the 'modern' communication channels are far behind it (3,1-3,4). The print media has almost no power (2,1) over the travelling decision process.
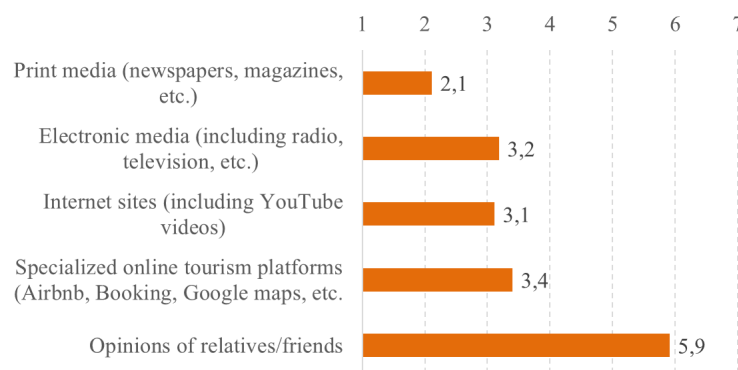

Figure 6. Influence of the main information sources on the domestic tourism practices (Source: National representative survey data)
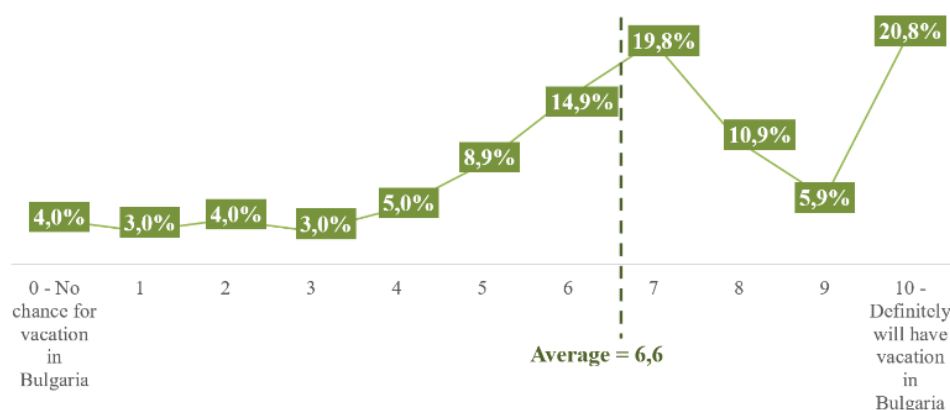

Figure 7. Probability for practicing domestic tourism in the near future (Source: National representative survey data)
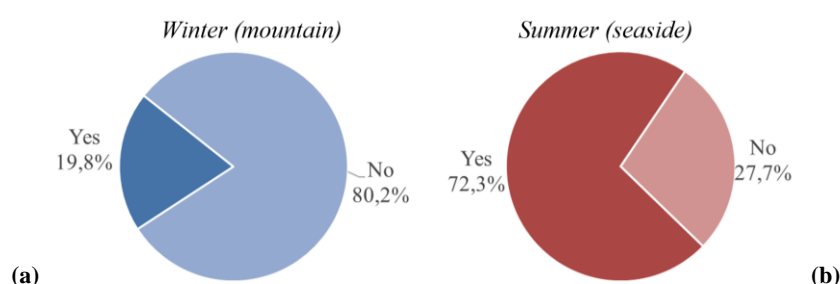

(a) **(b)**

Figure 8. General practices for winter (a) and summer (b) domestic tourism (Source: National representative survey data)

Presumably the 'not-so-great' experience of the local tourists in Bulgaria leads to a tiny rise of probability for practicing domestic tourism in the near future over the middle point of the scale (6,6): from 0 – No chance for vacation in Bulgaria to 10 – Definitely will have a vacation in Bulgaria. The distribution of the Plovdiv respondents by the probability for practicing domestic tourism in the near future is shown in Figure 7.

Discussing the practices of the Plovdiv district respondents for the winter leisure tourism in the Bulgarian ski resorts and the practices for summer vacation tourism in the Bulgarian seaside resorts leads to the following results (Figure 8).

The residents of the Plovdiv district prefer a summer vacation at the Bulgarian seaside (72%) much more in comparison to the leisure domestic tourism at the mountain winter resorts (20%). Not only the Bulgarian seaside is a favourite choice of the Plovdiv district respondents for their summer vacation (Figure 9) but they prefer stay approx. 40% longer at the seaside resorts in Bulgaria (6,1 nights) than the mountain ones (4,3 nights). The evaluation of the touristic resources when practicing the winter and summer domestic tourism by the respondents shows some typical 'features' of the local resorts (Figure 10).
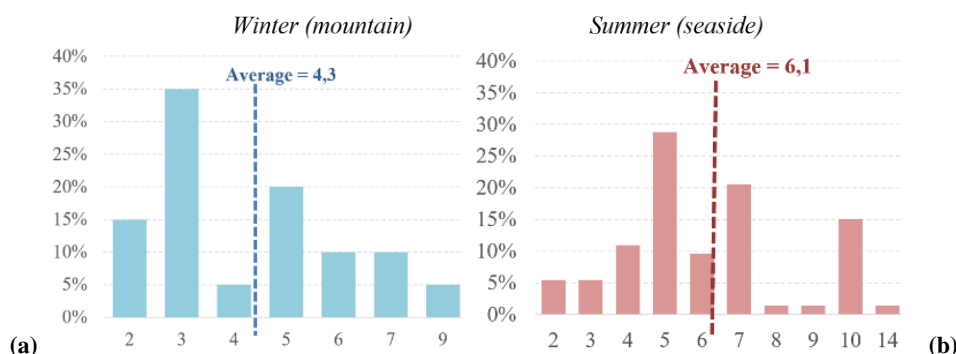
Figure 9. Average length of the stay (number of nights) in a Bulgarian winter (a) and summer (b) resorts (Source: National representative survey data)
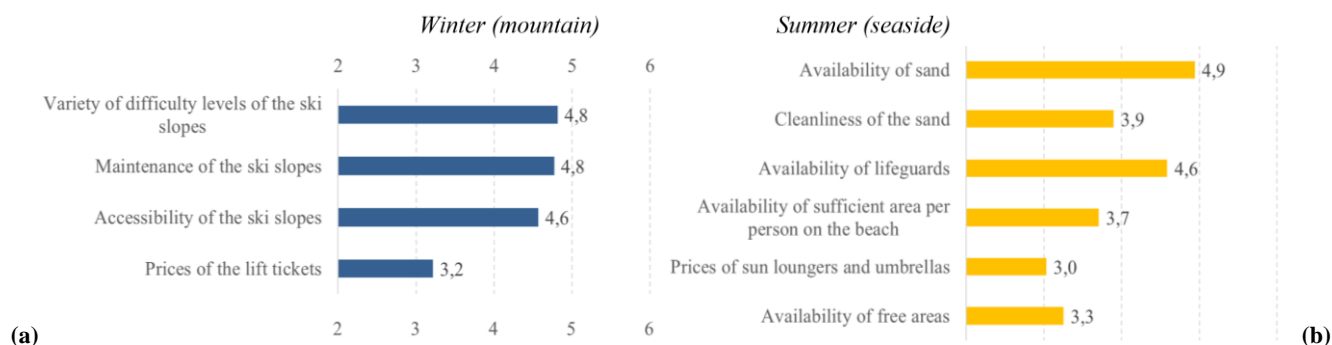

Figure 10. Evaluation of the touristic resources when practicing the winter (a) and summer (b) domestic tourism
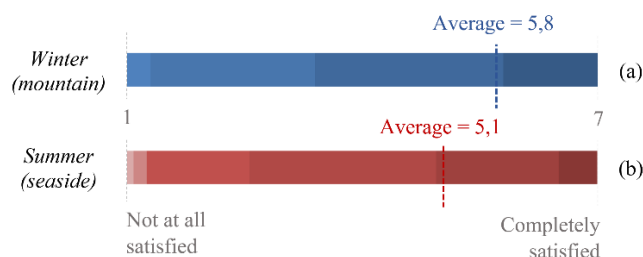(Source: National representative survey data)

Figure 11. Overall level of satisfaction with the winter (a) and summer (b) domestic tourism (Source: National representative survey data)

Figure 10 shows that although the winter resorts offer good conditions for ski sports the prices are quite high. The beaches at the Black seaside are suitable for a summer vacation, but the lounger and umbrella prices and also the beach maintenance can spoil the full relaxation. When the respondents 'summarize' their overall experience at the Bulgarian winter and summer resorts, using the scale: from 1 – Not at all satisfied to 7 – Completely satisfied, the results are not very 'enthusiastic' (Figure 11). Although the obvious preference of the seaside vacation during the summer time, the overall level of satisfaction with domestic tourism at the mountains in the winter (5,8) is higher than the summer vacation at the Black Sea resorts (5,1). However, the overall satisfaction levels are far from the complete satisfaction which should set a starting point in a future discussion of the potential opportunities for making improvements, both in the state policy regarding domestic tourism and in the organization of the vacation process in the accommodation places.

CONCLUSION

The domestic tourism in Bulgaria plays an important role in the country's economy, contributing to the development of regions, increasing employment, generating budget revenues, developing infrastructure, and strengthening local culture and heritage. Most of the residents of the Plovdiv district travel for tourism purposes once a year or less, and the main reason for the inability to travel is the lack of financial resources. The tourists prefer sea summer tourism to all other types, and the average duration of a vacation at the sea is about 6 days.

The main influence on tourists when choosing a specific place to stay is the opinion of their relatives and friends. Other channels such as online tourist platforms and social networks have a significantly lower influence. The domestic tourists prefer their personal vehicles as the main means of transportation when conducting domestic tourism.

The Plovdiv district residents prefer Black Sea resorts because of the attractive natural resources (including the presence of sufficient sandy beaches) and the opportunities for combining sea with other types of tourism. The main "complaints" of domestic tourists are related to the high prices in accommodation and restaurants and entertainment establishments that do not correspond to the quality offered, as well as the pollution of coastal waters and overbuilding. Based on the moderately good impressions from the vacation on the seashore, the tourists are not particularly confident about whether they want to spend their next vacation on our Black Sea coast and whether they would recommend Bulgaria as a seaside destination.

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