

# Differences between pre- and post-visit perception among Danish tourists towards destination Bulgaria



Written by: Desislava Dimitrova Ninova

Madalina Nicoleta Andrei

Supervised by: Laura James

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## **Abstract**

*This study deals with the pre- and post-visit perception of destination image, which potential tourists as well as actual tourists that visited Bulgaria may have about the country. Using a triangulation method approach, we tried to investigate how Bulgaria is perceived by the two distinct groups of Danish tourists according to nine attributes which influence the destination image perception. This study examined both prior visitors and non-visitor's perceptions among Danish population towards Bulgaria in order to compare the differences they hold towards the destination. Data were collected by using an online survey and by conduction personal as well as expert interviews. The results indicated the post-trip destination image to be more favorable compared to the pre-trip image for some attributes. The results provide insights into destination image formation methods, destination marketing and sources of information.*

**Keywords:** *destination image; pre-visit destination perception; post-visit destination perception; destination Bulgaria*

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*“This thesis became a reality thanks to all of you and your genuine belief in us.”*

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## I. Introduction

During the last decades, tourism managers and researchers have devoted considerable effort to understand how individuals mentally form, store and use destination images (Crompton, 1979; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Dolnicar and Grun (2013) stated that individuals' destination image, is the most frequently topic studied across tourism research. However, "the need for more research is critical to deepen the understanding of the destination image in influencing tourist travel behavior" (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011, p.542).

Different images can be associated with a destination, either positive or negative, images that are hard to change (Brezovec, et al., 2004). And nowadays, as destinations and tourists both are increasing in numbers, with about 200 nations and 2 million destinations from which potential tourists can choose (Balakrishnan, 2008) the competition in the tourism sector is incredibly strong. Hence, in order to attract tourist to a certain destination, marketers and professionals in the field are striving to create a positive destination image as it plays an important role in tourists' travel decision-making process and can influence their behavior towards a certain destination. This problem have been a subject of many previous studies in the field with researchers presenting information that intermediaries influence the visiting intentions of potential tourists, are able to form opinions and shape behaviors (Baloglu and Mangaloglu, 2001; Martin, 2011), therefore, people's visiting decisions are significantly influenced by the tourist destination's image (Echtner and Ritchie, 1991; Chen and Hsu, 2000; Beerli and Martin, 2004; Tasci et al., 2007; Alcaniz et al., 2009).

Even though destination image as a tourism marketing concept has been thoroughly researched, the definition of destination image seems to remain vague (Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Stepcheknova & Morrison, 2008; Tasci et al., 2007). This might be attributable to its complexity and subjectivity (Stepcheknova & Morrison, 2008), consequently leading to its diverse non-holistic measurements (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). On one hand authors defined it as a compilation of beliefs and impressions based on information processing from a variety of sources over time, resulting in an internal mental construct representing attributes of and benefits sought in a

destination (Keller's, 1993). As per Peter and Olson (2003, p. 47), destination image is thus the knowledge held by a tourist of that destination. Once this knowledge is evaluated, it forms destination attitude (Peter & Olson, 2003, p. 47). On the other hand, from a tourism standpoint, Echtner and Ritchie (2003) iterated several definitions of product image and concluded it to be the associative impressions held in tourists' memory of a particular destination attribute holistically.

As already presented, destination image has been understood as "consisting of an individual's mental representation of knowledge (beliefs), feelings, and global impression about . . . destination" (Baloglu and McCleary 1999, p. 870). It is important to be noted that the term destination refers to the location visited by a tourist and may be interpreted as a city (Dadgostar and Isotalo 1995; Opermann 1996), region (Ahmed 1991; Fakeye and Crompton 1991), or country (Chon 1991; Echtner and Ritchie 1993). Therefore, it may be said that tourists may hold images of a place or region of a country, but those images may not truly represent the whole country.

Moreover, it has been posited in the literature that the images held by potential tourists and tourists who have already travelled to a destination are likely to be different (Frias, Rodrigues, & Castaneda, 2008; Sussmann & Unel, 1999). With a few exceptions (e.g. Dann, 1996; Papadimitriou & Gibson, 2008; Yilmaz, Yilmaz, Icigen, Ekin, & Utku, 2009), most tourist destination image studies have focused only on pre-visit images and post-travel images separately, giving an incomplete picture of their dynamism. In this regard the current project will focus to research this gap in the literature as it will focus on comparing the pre and post visiting images held by tourists one destination. More specifically it will have the task to compare the perception of Bulgaria as a travel destination for Danish people before and after their visit to the country. Bulgaria is a country located in the Southeastern Balkan Peninsula. Its territory is 110,910 sq km (approximately 42,800 sq mi) with population of approximately 7.97 million. To the east the country borders the Black Sea and the length of the coastline is 354 km. Bulgaria borders to the South Turkey and Greece, to the Southwest – Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, to the West Serbia and to the North the River Danube serves as most of the border with Romania. As a tourism destination Bulgaria emerged in the international tourism market in the 1960 and

was famous as a 'sun, sea and sand' destination. During the 1970s and 1980s Bulgaria was one of the leading international tourism destinations in Central and Eastern Europe (Koulov and Marinov, 1997). Throughout the following years the tourism in the destination suffered a crisis due to the downfall of the Communist system after 1989 (Hall, 1995). After the crisis the tourism industry did not shifted much, and the industry was still characterized by an over-concentration on the Black Sea coast (Marinov, 2004). Moreover, Bulgaria has a favorable climate and mountains for winter sports. Winter tourism started developing in the 1960s with several resorts and nowadays it's a reason for many tourists to visit the country (BulgariaTravel.org.,2018). However, many more opportunities exist for tourism in Bulgaria such as cultural and heritage tourism, ecotourism, rural tourism, mountaineering and hiking, spa and balneothermal therapy tourism (Bachvarov, 2006; Hall, 1998; Petreas, 2006). As stated by Bachvarov (2006) cultural tourism can be of significant importance for Bulgaria, as the country has rich cultural and historical heritage. For example, even though many countries are known for their cultural attractions, Bulgaria can differentiate itself by focusing on some unique aspects such as Orthodox churches and monasteries. Together with the rich folklore traditions this can serve as an attractive combination to explore the lesser known parts of the country and to diversify Bulgaria's tourism product. In their study Hughes and Allen (2008) used qualitative analysis to evaluate the images of 15 Central and Eastern European countries among British visitors and non-visitors. The two authors were interested in holistic images of the countries and they also asked participants to point out unique attractions, where wine emerged as a unique feature for Bulgaria.

Even tough, the advertising campaigns by the Bulgarian DMO promote multiple attractions with reference to history, culture, ethnic, flora and fauna, ski, sea, etc. (Bulgariatravel.org, 2018), trying to develop the country's opportunities in each of these tourism domains. However, the country's image differs from the desired one and most international tourists tend to choose summer holidays in Bulgaria (Grigorova & Racheva, 2012), which leads to high seasonality and concentrated tourism only in specific parts of the country, which are main problems for Bulgarian tourism pointed out by different authors throughout the years (e.g. Bachvarov, 1997, Goeldner et al., 1999). Even though the high- concentrated seasonality is a main problem, other authors



have researched different obstacles for the country's tourism sector throughout the years. For instance, McCleary and Whitney (1994) conducted a research in order to identify western consumer attitudes toward travel to Central and Eastern European Countries, where they found out that Bulgaria lacked marketing ability, among other issues. Their primary recommendations for Bulgaria was the need to create a plan for image modification and strategies to develop tourism products and improve distribution systems. Hall (2004) also emphasized the importance of creating a brand for countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, he identified specific obstacles, one of which is inadequate funding. In addition, these countries have been associated with lower quality and limited variety of products. Overall it can be concluded that the tourism in the country up to date still differs from the desired one and the overwhelming majority of international tourists tend to choose Bulgaria for their summer vacations only (Grigorova & Racheva, 2012). This leads to different researches, which aimed to indicate the current vision of Bulgaria on the European Tourism Market (for example: Yaneva et al., 2013) and changing the image of the country (Anastasova, L., 2015). Moreover, researches that present the information that destination Bulgaria seems to have an unpleasant image on the European Tourism Market and is often addressed to 'cheap prices' and 'questionable quality' among Europeans (Grigorova & Racheva, 2012).

### **I.1 Problem formulation and purpose**

Despite the theoretical differences (Gartner, 1993; Echter& Ritchie, 2003) studied the evolution of destination image, while other authors compared pre-travel and post-travel destination images (Lim, Chew, Lim & Liu, 2013; Wang & Davidson, 2010; Yilmaz et al., 2009). Fakeye and Crompton (1991), in tracing the image development from organic to induced one and finally to complex image, noted the presence of image differences between first time and repeat visitors. However, their study can be said to be only a sample of the image development as the process was traced in different samples. Wang and Davidson (2010) noted a significant improvement between tourists' pre and post-visit perception of Chinese tourists to Australia, based on a survey of tourists upon experiencing the destination.

The drawback of previous research on the changes in destination image emanates from the fact that most of the research utilized different respondents/sample for pre-post trip image change. This study aims at filling this gap by using the same sample for pre- and post-visit to Bulgaria to ascertain the perceived image changes. The pre-trip destination image refers to the image of a destination held by an arriving tourist and developed thus from different informational sources (organic and induced images). Post-visiting destination image in this study is taken to be the consequential image held by the tourists after experiencing the destination in comparison with the pre-trip image held by the tourist before visiting the destination. The way post-travel image is conceived in this study implies it to be a modified or changed image. Considering the up mentioned information, the following Research question was formed:

***What are the differences between the destination image perceptions for Danish people pre- and post-visiting Bulgaria?***

The purpose of this project is to investigate pre- and post-visit perceptions of destination images of Bulgaria among Danish tourists. As already stated, destination image influences travel decisions prior to visit as well as post visit. Prior visit destination image may influence an individual to visit a destination and post visit destination image may influence repeat visitation and satisfaction (Önder and Marchiori, 2016). Destination image, particularly the pretravel image (Papadimitriou & Gibson, 2008), has been shown to be related to tourist satisfaction (Jenkins, 1999; Sussman & Unel, 1999) as it is the perception prior to the actual experience. Like most researchers in customer satisfaction, Sussman and Unel (1999) argue that destination marketers need to narrow the gap between the pre-travel destination image (related to expectation) and the post-visit image (related to experience in the destination) in order to ensure tourist satisfaction. Papadimitriou and Gibson (2008), comparing the pre- and post-images of Greece, noted the pre-tavel image to be lower than the post-travel image, with the exception of relaxation attributes of Greece. They argue for proper marketing to create pre-travel and post-travel image congruence. From the standpoint of conventional marketing wisdom, the pre-travel image should not be excessively higher than what the destination can actually offer; otherwise, the incongruity will lead to less satisfactory travel experiences, thus lowering the post-travel

image compared with the pre-travel image. On the other hand, if the pre-travel image is very low compared with what the destination has to offer, then the chances of potential tourists choosing to visit that destination are lower (Jani and Hwang, 2011).

Repeat visitors represent a much-desired market segment for many tourism products and destinations (Lau & McKercher, 2004). They tend to stay longer at a destination (Oppermann, 1998), spread positive word of mouth (Oppermann, 2000; Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999), and participate in consumptive activities more intensively (Lehto, O'Leary, & Morrison, 2004). Repeat visitors are also cost-effective as they incur a much lower marketing costs than first-time visitors (Shoemaker & Lewis, 1999).

It is very important to acknowledge that understanding destination perception become significant in tourism market. In tourism industry, tourists having images of tourism destinations is a matter of awareness, because they represent a continuing potential market. To some extent, if a destination has even a negative destination image is better than not to have any image at all. As Pike (2004) stated, the awareness of a tourist destination has an important impact on the purchase decision made by potential tourists and it is claimed that it is a big problem for a place without or with little tourism image to the outside areas. From the perspective of a tourist destination, the first step is to establish and maintain an image to the public, which is preferably to be a positive image. Bosque et al. (in Agapito et al., 2010: 91) find the importance of destination image in affecting the consumer behavior during the pre-visit, during the visit and after the visit, so the destination image forms and changes over time. Many scholars have investigated that destination image affects the behavior of tourists in different time: in the decision-making process of choosing a destination; when comparing the expectations with the actual experience, influencing the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction; during the time of revisiting and word-of-mouth recommendation (Agapito et al., 2010: 91). When it comes to consumer research, the contrast effects are examined as perceptions (measured by the mean ratings of a set of factors or attributes). They are influenced by consumers' expectations and evaluations of the product or service near or from interactions with

their attributes. In the same way, tourists engage in active information searches, develop images, and form expectations or secondary perceptions of the country or a place of interest. Perceptions could change upon visiting and evaluating the selected travel destination (Gunn, 1988; Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). Tourists would develop a refined image resulting from actual contact with and experiences at the destination (Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008). The change in perception can be determined from the primary perception formed after a visit to the destination. On that account, the objective of our project is to assess secondary and primary Danish perceptions formed before and after visiting Bulgaria. We propose to examine the pre- and post-trip perception of Bulgaria by Danish tourists.

Like the others past researches, as pointed out by Beerli and Martin (2004), we also defined and assessed perception as a tourist's overall image of a certain destination. The overall image that an individual has of a tourist destination is influenced by multiple factors, but there is a "lack of a universally accepted, valid and reliable scale for the measurement of image" (Beerli & Martin, 2004, p. 658).

Since destination image can be considered an essential element that is influencing tourists travel behavior, this study aims to investigate tourists' pre- and post-visiting perceptions of the image of Bulgaria. The findings of the study will provide a valuable information both for tourists who want to travel to Bulgaria as well as for tour operators who can use the findings to in order to show a clearer image of Bulgaria to tourists.

Moreover, due to the fact that understanding destination image is necessary for a successful marketing strategy, the findings will provide good information for tourism policy makers in Bulgaria about the perceptions of foreign tourists of Bulgaria in order to see how Bulgaria is perceived by them, in this case by Danish tourists.

## II. Literature review

### II.1 Previous studies

A tourist destination which is associated with a recognizable image and a positive perception among tourist is more likely to be chosen for a future holiday. Moreover, the perceived image of a tourist destination after visiting has an impact on the satisfaction of tourists, their intentions to re-visit and share their impressions and feeling with relatives (word of mouth) (Abdellatif T. et. al., 2015). Abdellatif et. al. (2015) believed that the image shaped after visiting depends also on the credibility of the destination, because it must offer expected experiences that correspond to the image that travelers have built the so-called destination.

In order for image destination to be formed there are more stages which are based on the perceptions of different tourists. Abdellatif T. (2015) considered that there are 3 different stages that are taking place in the construction of a destination image. It is important to distinguish between *a priori* perception (mental construction made by an individual in a place without having a physical connection), *in situ* perception (confronts the perception of tourists from one place to the reality of that place) and the perception of *a posteriori* (shows that the experience of tourists does not end up with the trip, but they consume certain elements in their daily lives) (Abdellatif T. et. al, 2015).

Previous studies considered that the image of a destination as a concept is formed by three interdependencies and different components: cognitive, affective and conative (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Gartner, 1993). Thus, cognitive represents the sum of what is known about a destination; whereas affective express the feelings of an individual towards an object, which can be favorable, unfavorable or neutral. Finally, the conative can be considered as the probability of visiting a destination within a certain period of time. Baloglu and McCleary (1999) added that the emotional image is one of the most influential factors and should be considered more frequently in the promotion of destinations for better efficiency. Moreover, they separate it into two dimensions: *a positive one* (arousing, exciting, enjoyable and relaxing) and *a negative one* (sleeping, dark, unpleasant and painful). These authors suggested the idea of "relative

image" of the destination that can be determined by comparing several competing destinations, which will lead to the identification of the strengths and weaknesses of destinations and to the determination of competitive advantages and distinctive competencies relating to the characteristics of each location over competing sites (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999a, 1999b; Gartner, 1993).

In addition, another factor that is worth mentioning is that the destination image can be also influenced by the actual visit or the direct experience. In this situation, the satisfaction and product quality throughout the travelling experience will influence the last step of the image formation. Weaver et al. (2007) have studied the impact of the variables related to the previous experiences of the trip and travel on the evaluation of the destination where they have examined the relationship between two sets of variables: the first set consists of five variables that are designated as the previous experience of travel (the number of countries visited and the number of countries visited for fun) and the characteristics of the trip (length of stay, number of people in the trip and the trip mode); the second set of variables is called destination evaluation variables (satisfaction, service quality, value and the probability of return (Weaver et al., 2007).

"Destination image is an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations, and intentions toward a destination" (Tasci et al., 2007). In order to create a clearer view of what destination image is more researchers gave different it more attributes. For example, Chi, C. G.Qing, & Qu, H. (2008) classified attributes into nine aspects:

- (1) travel environment (i.e. safe and secure environment, clean and tidy environment, friendly and helpful local people, tranquil & restful atmosphere and pleasant weather);
- (2) natural attractions (i.e. scenic mountain & valleys, scenery & natural attractions, gardens & springs, scenic drive, parks, lakes, rivers, wildlife, caves and underground formations);
- (3) entertainment & events (i.e. shows or exhibitions, cultural events & festivals, quality, fun, western music, nightlife and entertainment);
- (4) historic attractions (i.e. history & heritage and Vintage buildings);

- (5) infrastructure (i.e. restaurants, cuisine, shop facilities and accommodations);
- (6) accessibility (i.e. traffic flow and parking information, parking facilities, access to the area and affordable trolley system);
- (7) relaxation (i.e. spa, soothing the mind and refreshing the body, spiritual rejuvenation);
- (8) outdoor activities (i.e. boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping and hunting, outdoor recreation and golfing);
- (9) price and value (i.e. food, accommodation, good value for money, attractions and activities and good bargain shopping).

Beerli and Martin (2004) stated that the evaluation and analysis of destination image has been the subject of much attention in related academic literature and has made a significant contribution to a broader understanding of tourist behavior as well as of their perceptions towards tourist destinations. According to Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil (2007), there are some different constructs that create the image a person has regarding a destination. They mention five constructs: the destination attractiveness, destination awareness, destination evaluation, destination perception, destination attributes and destination quality. Liesen (2001) classifies the image of a destination into three dimensions. Firstly, he mentioned the socio-cultural amenities such as wonderful cultural traditions, interesting local arts and crafts and Interesting cultural diversity. Second, natural amenities such as: beautiful mountains, outstanding natural wonders, wonderful sightseeing opportunities, and appealing opportunities for exploring wilderness and nature. Lastly, climate attributes interrelation: appealing winter climate, appealing summer climate. As a way of understanding Danes perception towards destination Bulgaria these aspects were also mentioned in the survey as well as in the personal interviews.

As, in this project we will focus on Danish tourists pre- and post-visit perceptions of Bulgaria, in the next paragraph some previous related papers that were arguing about related topics but in

different regions, will be discussed in order to have more in-depth knowledge of the problem the study project is based on.

For example, in 2014 C. Lim, S.L. Chew, J. Lim and J. Liu made a research about destination image of China in connection with pre- and post-visit perception of youth tourists for visiting China as a tourist destination. In order to answer the research question, they used a mixed-mode survey method to collect data, which entailed person administered and online self-administered survey method. They decided to disseminate the survey through the use of social media (namely, Facebook and Twitter) while person-administered surveys were carried out at the Nanyang Technological University, National University of Singapore, and Singapore Management University (C. Lim, S.L. Chew, J. Lim and J. Liu, 2014). The findings of this study stated that destination perception by youth tourists were positively related to the factors under study: price, source of information, infrastructure, safety attractions, social interactions. The purpose of the study was also to analyze the association of the identified factors with secondary/pre-visit perceptions and primary/post-visit perceptions. Tourists' experiences at the destination seemed to be positive and meet their pre-visit expectations. Specifically, the study found that their destination perceptions of China as explained by price, infrastructure, safety, attractions, and social interaction improved significantly after the visit. Other related finding was that the relationships between these factors and destination perception can have important implications for repeat visitation (C. Lim, S.L. Chew, J. Lim and J. Liu, 2014).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark in Bulgaria presented an article about Bulgarian tourism, where they pointed out the strong and weak sides of destination Bulgaria. According to the authors "Bulgaria has become one of the leading tourist destinations in Europe over the last couple of years" (The Danish Embassy, 2014). based on its geographical position, which offers tourist the opportunities of skiing in winter and enjoying the beaches and natural treasures during the summer. The strengths of the country as a tourism destination are connected to the well-developed summer and winter holiday resorts; the good overall tourist packages on a low price; the possibilities for adventure tourism, such as cliff climbing, rafting, paraplaners, etc. As weaknesses of the destination, the authors have pointed out that there is a need for improving



the infrastructure in the country. Also, there is a need of improving the quality of service and a need of building up the image of Bulgaria as offering diverse range of tourist opportunities to attract more tourists from different segments. The bad image of Sunny Beach was presented as a threat to the overall image of the destination Bulgaria. Moreover, the paper states that Danish tourists visit Bulgaria primary because of “how beautiful the Black Sea Coast is, the stunning nature and the vast cultural and historical heritage” (The Danish Embassy, 2014). According to this article, Danish people are aware of the sea vacation opportunities, but also of the natural and cultural richness of Bulgaria. Also, the famous destination spot Sunny Beach is a threat to the overall image of the country, which can lead to fewer tourists visiting Bulgaria. Alternatives to the standard ski/sea vacations, in the face of more adventurous ones are presented as potentially successful way to attract new segments of tourists. During the last seven years, the destination of Sunny Beach has experienced a massive amount of publicity among Danish media world. However, the publicity, has not always been positive as it was mostly concerned with the topic of young Danish tourists partying drunk and without caring about themselves and the others around them. Moreover, the general publicity in Danish media pointed towards a destination that, to a large extent, had become equivalent with a place where young people from the entire Europe travel during the summer to party, drink and enjoy themselves (Mikkelsen T., 2014).

In his Master Thesis, Lubomirov (2017) researched the problem of how destination Bulgaria is perceived among Danes and how could this image and brand association be changed. In order to find out how Danes have built their sense of Bulgaria a pilot study and an online survey with Danish participants was conducted. Among that, several interviews were made with tourism scholars from Bulgarian academic institutions to better understand the management of destination Bulgaria. “The findings of the thesis indicated an existing narrowed perception of the country by Danish people, whilst the efforts of the destination managers aim to inform about multiple exceptional tourism resources in Bulgaria” (Lubomirov, 2017, p.2). The pilot study and surveys results showed that the vast majority of respondents’ associate Bulgaria as a: “cheap”, “Sunny beach”, “drunk people” (Lubomirov, 2017, p.43). Following from the survey, conducted by more than 30 Danes, the author found out that event taught most of the respondents haven’t

been to Bulgaria, they already have built an image of the destination from different sources, such as books, articles, movies, etc. Similarly, from the results of the pilot study, the survey showed that the participants link the destination to attributes, like: “cheap”, “summer”, “Sunny beach”, “drunk people” (Lubomirov, 2017, p.44). In conclusion, Lubomirov acknowledges that when met with the decision to choose Bulgaria as a vacation destination, they would either consider it as a cheap summer destination or “would not count on Bulgaria as a selection, based on the country’s image of a place crowded with drunk adolescents” (Lubomirov, 2017, p.44). The research presents a worrisome picture for destination Bulgaria, as there is a clear gap between what the destination management want to portray and what in reality is perceived by Danish citizens. For instance, the Official Tourism Portal of Bulgaria presents the many different opportunities for tourism in the country – cultural, ecological, sea, mountain/ski, balneology, SPA, Wellness, Adventurous, Rural, Congress, Camping, etc. (BulgariaTravel.org, 2018), but the results of the project concluded that Danish people are only aware of the destination as a sea tourism opportunity for their vacation.

## II.2 Destination image formation

Prior to visit, destination image is a fundamental concept to understand the tourist destination choice (Tham et al., 2013). As recognized in the academic literature, the choice of a particular destination over others is influenced by more positive and stronger destination image (Gartner, 1994).

One of the first researchers to discuss the matter of destination image was C.A. Gunn in early 1970’s. According to a theory, presented by Gunn in 1988, tourists form an image of a tourist destination after undergoing a process which, consists of the following stages: (1) accumulating mental images of the destination, thus forming an organic image; (2) modifying the initial image after more information, thus forming an induced image; (3) deciding to visit the destination; (4) visiting the destination; (5) sharing the destination; (6) returning home, and (7) modifying the image on the experience in the destination (creating a complex image). Based on that, it can be concluded that two types of image can be distinguished - organic and induced. The organic image

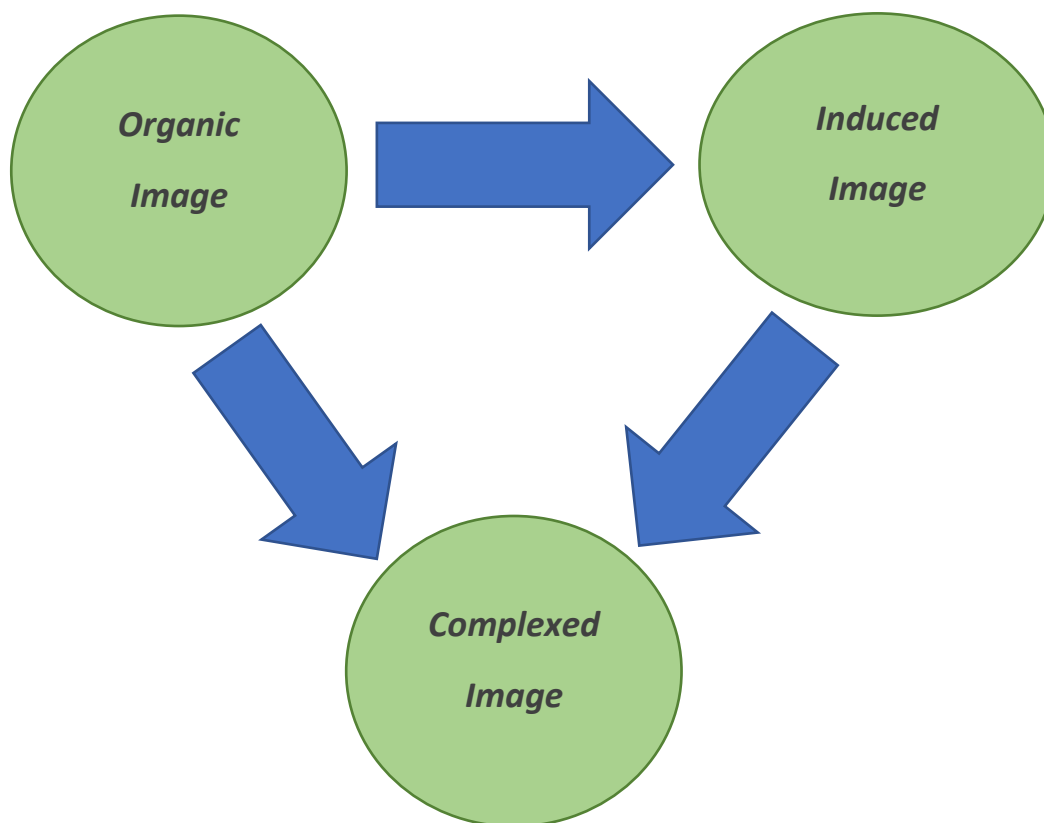
is based on non-commercial sources of information, such as news about the destination in the mass media, information received and opinions of friends and relatives, etc. The induced image is based on commercial sources of information, such as different forms of advertising and information from travel agents and tour operators (Beerli and Martín, 2004).

Therefore, image development depends on many forms of information. However, image is also formed based on an exchange value between the value sought and expected, and the efforts made to get this value (Gunn, 1972). *The induced image* is represented by the image formed by the promotions and communications of the tourism organizations involved in a region. It is naturally true, in this context, that both reference or membership groups and opinion leaders can have a powerful influence on the perception tourists have of a certain destination.

The induced image is loaded with commercial appeal, with the main objective of forming an attractive image of the destination as a way of “selling” and profit from it. Thus, the induced image aims at selling a certain destination to consumers, whether actual and/or potential, making use of marketing tools, such as advertising, sales promotion, merchandising, commercial ads, among others.

Over the years, many authors seem to point to travel agencies as a main information source in the selection of a tourism destination (e.g. Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Gartner, 1993; Gartner & Bachri, 1994; Nolan, 1976). As a reason, they claimed that travel agencies provide not only information, but also advice. Therefore, it is claimed that as long as they provide advices and personal services they will remain one of the main sources of travel distribution (Bennet, 1993; Law et al., 2004). Another reason for the importance of travel agencies in creating an image is pointed out by Buhalis (1998), who states that the information available on the Internet is often chaotic and misleading, mainly due to its immaturity and lack of standardization which may be confusing for people and creating a strong pre-visit image of a destination may be impossible. In conclusion, one can say that tour operators and travel agents are a vital source of information in international tourism and do influence the image of tourism destinations (Frías, Rodríguez and Castañeda, 2008).

By taking into consideration these two levels of formation of destination image and how they are influencing the individual's perception it can be said that they complement each other and merge into a complex image. According to Frochot & Kreziak (2008) believed that in order to form a rather complex image of the destination, an individual need to go through all phases of the formation. As image formation of a tourist destination is highly usable in this thesis it is crucial to have knowledge in what phases the images are formed in order to be able to evaluate the pre- and post-visit perceptions.



*Fig.1 Image formation inspired by Gunn 1972 (Self-made, 2018)*

As already stated Gunn (1988) and Chagas (2008) conceive a third dimension in the process image formation of destination: the "complex" image (Fig.1), which is formed after visiting the tourist destination and trying the product purchased. In the first two stages (induced and organic),

consumers create their image based on external information, whereas in the latter, they enjoy it, forming a more complex and real image.

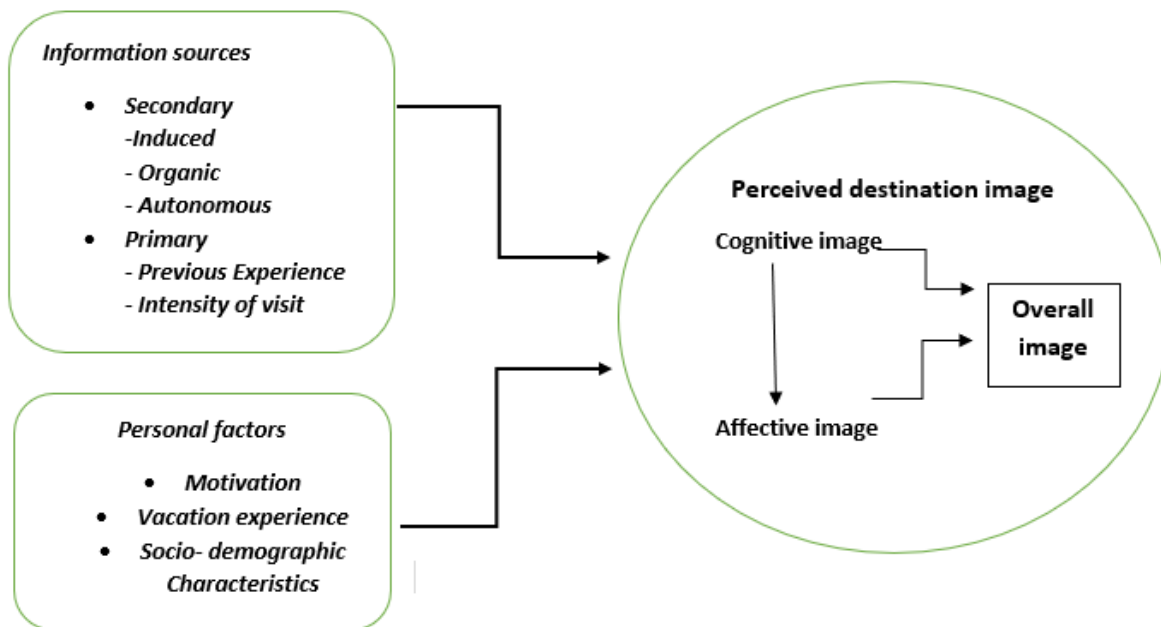
The three dimensions presented above are based on the work of Gunn (1972, 1988) on the seven stages of the tourist experience, presented above. A key point that must be highlighted in this study is the case of an individual who does not have an organic image and is exposed to campaigns that incite purchase of certain locations; that image, which would be called an induced image (Gunn and Bignami, 2002).

Since Gunn (1972) released his theory, the theory of destination image formation has evolved even further. For example, Echtner and Ritchie (1991), stated that every tourist has an image of a destination, without even visiting it or having been exposed to a campaign. So, to develop tourism, it is very important to regularly monitor the images travelers form. This is because the appearance of the motivation factor to take a trip arouses an affective interest in the consumer, forcing him to define a framework of this trip based on personal factors and the set of information collected, beginning the process of image formation (Rodrigues, 2009).

The model based on induced and organic sources is the most used in the analyses of the subject. However, another significant model of image formation of destination is the one carried out by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), based on the relationship between stimulus factors and personal factors. According to the authors, the formation of the image of a destination is influenced by two main forces: stimulus and personal factors. The model has three levels of evaluation: cognitive, affective, and connotative (as previously mentioned), whose determining evaluation criteria are the stimulus and personal factors. Personal factors correspond to psychological characteristics (values, motivation, and personality) and social characteristics (age, education, marital status, etc..) and the stimulus factors correspond to sources of information and prior experience, referred to as external stimuli (Baloglu and McCleary, 1999).

The model was developed in a way that differentiates between first time and repeat tourists for several reasons. To begin with, certain differences may exist between the image perceived by each group of individuals that have an effect on the results. Two, the relationship between

secondary information sources and perceived image can only be analyzed in the case of first-timers since repeat tourists could have difficulty recalling the sources of information used before visiting the place for the first time. Lastly, there may be differences between the two groups in terms of their level of knowledge of the destination and in their motivations, depending on whether they had previously visited the place or not (Beerli A., Martin J., 2004).



*Fig.2 Model of the formation of destination image (Baloglu and McCleary (1999)*

As mentioned before Gunn (1988) and Mansfeld (1992) distinguished two types of images in the secondary image: the organic image (informal image for Mansfeld) that derives from non-commercial information (independent of destination management) and the induced the image (formal image for Mansfeld) with respect to information conveyed by the commercial organization responsible for the destination. Based on this typology, Fakeye and Crompton (1991) developed a path model that illustrates the route taken by tourists in search of information. Thus, these authors explain that a potential tourist has a secondary organic image of a set of destinations (share of mind). Then, based on their motivations and perceptions, they will actively seek information. However, the fact that potential tourists have a strong or a weak

organic image and/ or direct or indirect experience with the tourist destination will influence the amount of information sought and efforts made in this search process. The different alternatives found will be assessed based on the initial organic image, individual experiences and the induced formal image (sent by the organization responsible for the destination). Then the destination visited will develop the primary image that, in turn, will influence the future search process. The same authors also suggest that for a more advantageous promotion of a destination, informational messages should be used in the organic phase of the image, while persuasive messages would be appropriate for the induced phase of the image. During the primary image stage, the authors claim that messages that remind tourists of previous experiences are more beneficial.

More studies related to destination image formation were done after 2000s. Govers and Go (2003) argued that it is difficult for tourists to gain a clear image of a destination without having visited before. In this context, there are three factors that affect their image of a tourist destination: tourism motivations, demographic variables and information about the destination (Echtner and Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999b; Beerli and Martin, 2004). For this last factor - information about the destination - sources of information are magazines, celebrities (opinion leaders), television and the internet, which will ultimately influence the image that potential tourists will have of a tourist destination (Gartner, 1989; Vasudavan and Standing, 1999, Wang and Fesenmaier, 2005; Govers, Go and Kumar, 2007).

In this context, Govers, Go and Kumar (2007) state that the tourist's personality becomes an important factor when choosing the kind of destination to visit (beach, mountain, etc.) and that personality traits influence the differentiation between destinations (Murphy, Moscardo and Benckendorff, 2007). Demographic variables also strongly influence the image tourists have of tourist destinations (Firmino Santos & Carneiro, 2006). Beerli and Martín (2004) report that motivation, socio-demographic variables and experience are important factors for forming the image of a tourist destination. More recently, other authors suggest that psychological factors such as a tourist's motivations and cultural values strongly influence the construction of the image of a tourist destination even before it is visited (San Martín & Rodríguez, 2008).

### **II.3 User-generated content importance**

Nowadays, due to a noticeable increase of the social media sources and their importance in shaping a tourist destination image a closer look should be taken on how the user-generated content is influencing the process of image formation. User-generated content is defined as being an electronic communication phenomenon enabled by Web 2.0, the second generation of web-based services, which allows people to collaborate and share information online (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2008); because of the experiential nature of tourism products for which previous quality cannot be ascertained, word of mouth and, more recently, electronic word of mouth are much relied on by potential tourists in forming images (Cox et al., 2008; Gretzel, Hyan-Yoo, & Purifoy, 2007; Pan et al., 2007). As destination image is developed through a complex process of learning and information sharing (Wenger, 2008) that usually pertains to diverse entities in a destination (Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2001), researchers have to focus on the shared component that can be captured only when tourists communicate with each other in a communication space such as blog forums in order to capture destination image (Dev & Yeong-Hyeon, 2011).

#### **II.3.1 The Concept of word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)**

Studies in tourism have demonstrated the high influence of WOM in the destination image and therefore the destination choice due to its high level of perceived credibility over the induced information sources (Brown and Getz, 2005; Litvin et al., 2008).

Word-of-mouth (WOM) has been explained by different authors as an informal mode of communication about the evaluation of goods and services between consumers who are independent of the marketers (Arndt, 1967; Dichter, 1966). It is considered to be the oldest and, some would argue, the most effective way of gaining awareness (Oxford Dictionary, 2011). Hawkins et al. (2004) explained that WOM communication (WOM) is a process that allows consumers to share information and opinions that direct buyers towards and away from specific products, brands, places, and services.



Looking more closely, numerous studies have identified WOM as a key information source for many travel decisions (Andereck and Caldwell, 1993; Gursoy and Chen, 2000; Wong and Kwong, 2004; Hanlan and Kelly, 2005), where the primary focus has been on recommendations from friends and relatives. As explained by Brown and Reingen (1987) WOM plays an important role in shaping consumers' attitudes and behaviors. Consumers search for information from other consumers to make more informed decisions (Berger, 1988; Jolson and Bushman, 1978). The most relevant other consumers are friends and relatives that can provide information that supports and/or adds to what the consumers already know about the products, services, places, etc. (Deutsch and Gerard, 1955; Lim and Chung, 2011).

The change to electronic information channels has introduced travelers (decision makers) to a much broader and easy-to-access collection of "friends" that may potentially influence decision making (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Therefore, during the years, WOM has also expanded to include eWOM (Litvin et al., 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Several studies present the findings that eWOM is having the same high levels of influence as WOM (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Lee & Youn, 2009; Litvin et al., 2008). eWOM can be defined as WOM that has been disseminated across electronic channels—such as social networking sites, blogs and forums on the Internet, and mobile technologies—where people can interact with one another to comment on places, experiences, products, and services (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Cheung, Luo, Sia, & Chen, 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As such, in many cases (also in this project) the terms social media and eWOM are been used interchangeably because they share the characteristics of user generated content disseminated electronically (Litvin et al., 2008). The role of social media appears to be vital in businesses where word of mouth has a greater impact: especially the services industry such as tourism one (high-risk and intangible-dominant products). The specific nature of services provided by hospitality and travel firms has been a perfect ground for the rapid widespread and use of social media by travelers and consequently by tourism operators (Minazzi R., 2015). Moreover, nowadays increasing numbers of travelers are using the Internet to seek destination information and to conduct transactions online (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, 2008, p.461).

An important role played in forming the destination image is given to travel agencies and operators, according to Chagas (2008), considering also significant as they are a relevant source of information and, consequently, influence the image of destinations, especially with regard to international destinations. An example of the social media implications in shaping the destination image is given by Santos (2013) who studied the influence of communication media on imagery, using a hotel in Brazil as a case study. The hotel chain uses website, travel agency and Facebook as the main communication channel to get to customers. It is found that at the first time, guests get information from word of mouth; also, basically they use online social media, travel agents and websites. Businessmen use primarily travel agents. So, it suggests that the media influence depends on customers' motivation to visit (Santos, 2013). Different authors have utilized a content analysis approach (Stepchenkova, Kilirenko, & Morrison, 2009), specially paying attention to weblogs forums to ascertain destination image in a holistic manner. Pan et al. (2007) also used content analysis to assess tourist opinions and satisfaction through weblog posting for South Carolina, USA. This study affirms the utility of a qualitative approach (i.e. content analysis) over the conventional Likert scale as it provides rich data for the assessment of destination image.

Contrary to baseline and enhanced image perspective, other researchers using the temporal dimension have categorized destination image into pre- and post-travel image (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Frias et al., 2008; Papadimitriou & Gibson, 2008; Yilmaz et al., 2009)

#### II.4 The Role of Image in Tourists' Travel Decision Making Processes

At what point do images influence consumers' selection of a certain destination? Finding answers to this question is necessary to develop effective marketing strategies. Travelers have an image of many destinations and this image affects their decision to travel to that particular place. Destination image is an important notion in evaluating how the tourists select their own destination, thus having a better understanding of tourist's behavior.

The concept of a travel destination image according to Fakeye and Crompton (1991) is that *"images are of paramount importance because they transpose representation of an area into the*

*potential tourist's mind and give him or her a pre-taste of the destination".* This is true because a traveler will be more likely to choose a specific destination based on its image and on what he or she will be discovering.

The decision to buy a trip and the choice between different destinations is a complex process: the image of the destination may influence the consumers in their choice. In fact, thinking for a moment about how a tourist comes to learn about a particular destination that he/she wants to visit, the image of the destination in his/her mind will be an important factor that will influence his/her decision-making process. Therefore, image can be considered a push and a pull factor to motivate people towards a specific destination:

- Image can push people to desire to go on a vacation in a destination.
- Image, as a strategic management tool, can pull people to choose a destination.

Baloglu (1999) proposed a model and hypothesized relationships of visitation intention formation, where perceptual/cognitive evaluations of tourism destinations are determined by variety of information, type of information sources used, and socio-psychological travel motivation. Then, perceptual/cognitive evaluation and socio-psychological travel motivation form together affective evaluation of a destinations. The formation of visitation intention is dependent on the different roles played by the informational, motivational and image elements in the process: image is the major concept to predicting travel behavior.

Tapachai & Waryszak (2000) established a concept based on five value dimensions: functional, social, emotional, epistemic and finally conditional, and one of several of these values generally influence the tourist's decision to explore a specific travel destination. This is what they call a "beneficial image". In their study on Thailand's and the United States' images, based on open-ended questionnaires sent to people who had not visited any of these countries, they actually found that respondents had images present in their minds even when they had not been in a destination. Moreover, even if all the image's five values were important, they each influence tourist behavior with diverse degrees: "not all image attributes have an influence in tourists'

decision-making process". Individuals usually form their own images of a destination based on "the benefit or exchange value" they hope to get from the products and services during the trip.

Croy (2003) says that destination image is crucial and plays many roles in the decision-making process, because all decision-making factors, such as time, money, and family, are based on the image of each destination to satisfy the decision maker's motivation. Also, the familiarity and the complexity of the images held plays a large role in this decision-making process.

As a conclusion, the consumer's decision-making process is complex and it's very difficult to identify the role that image plays and it's not the main factor influencing the choice. But, studies indicate that the image of a destination influences tourist behavior. And the stronger the relationship between the image of the destination and customer needs and desires, the more likely they are to have purchase intentions for that destination (Dimanche, 2003). Also, if the consumer has a strong image of a destination, it will probably have a significant role either for good or for bad, like an example, a strong negative perception would probably mean the destination is not even considered. The image dimensions could be critical in the choice of all potential tourists, especially in those who usually have limited information about the attributes of a destination not previously visited. Finally, following Gartner (1993), there is the conative response to the images held. If the images are the overall mental pictures which result from the cognitive and affective images, they are essentially stereotypes of the destination, which may be positive or negative, and are crucial in the decision-making process by potential tourists as identified earlier. The connotative response as a result of these images might be to visit, to postpone a visit to a later date, or to decide not to visit.

In a study by Li et al. (2010), the relationship between motivation, the image of a tourist destination, and post-travel behavior was analyzed. The authors divided motivations into three categories: "intellectual", connected, for example, with the desire to know the history of the country, to experience different cultures and lifestyles at the destination, to discover the natural environment, to increase knowledge of a place, people, things, etc.; "affiliation", connected with the desire to visit friends and relatives, spending time with the family away from home, doing

things with the whole family, qualitatively improving the time they spend with their children, etc.; and “escape”, connected with the desire to get away from the daily routines of life, to experience adventures, exciting circumstances and fun situations, and to relax and to have time to recuperate from work and daily life. According to Li et al. (2010), there is no direct relationship between motivations and intention to revisit a place, since this relationship is influenced by the image of the tourist destination. The study revealed that the different motivations that drive travel have a direct effect on the image of the tourist destination and an indirect one on the intention to repeat a visit. This is because if the image of the destination during the trip does not satisfy the motivations that have induced the tourist to travel, it generates a global dissatisfaction that results in failure to return to the destination in the future (Li et al., 2010). Particularly, the authors demonstrated that “intellectual” and “affiliation” motivations have a positive influence on the cognitive dimension of the image; while only the “escape” motivation has a positive impact on the affective component of the image.

#### II.4.1 The Role of Destination Image in the Pre-Travel Phase

The success of a tourist destination depends at a higher level on the factors that can influence the decision -making behavior of tourists. An important factor that is influencing tourists’ decision-making behavior and the choice of destination is *destination image* (Assaker, Esposito Vinzi, & O’Connor, 2011; Bigné, Sánchez, & Sánchez, 2001; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Chen et al., 2013; Chi & Qu, 2008; Kozak & Decrop, 2009; Nicoletta & Servidio, 2012; Phillips, Wolfe, Hodur, & Leistritz, 2013; Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002; Tavitiyaman & Qu, 2013). Destinations which have a positive and strong image are more likely to be chosen by tourists (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Tavitiyaman & Qu, 2013; Zahra, 2012) than those with a negative image or without an image at all.

As has repeatedly been shown in many studies (eg. Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Beerli and Martín, 2004) that pre- image formation is influenced by a range of secondary information sources. The different types of information sources can contribute in different ways to the post-visit image depending on the importance which the tourist attaches

to the information provided by the source (Beerli and Martín, 2004). Based on the fact that tourists usually have a limited knowledge of tourism destinations they have not previously visited, images created by the secondary sources of information fulfils an important function as those destinations with strong, positive images have more probability of being chosen by the potential tourists (Pearce, 1982; Woodside and Lysonski, 1989).

An individual's personal characteristics, or internal factors, also affect the formation of an image, since, as Um and Crompton (1990) state, beliefs about the attributes of a destination are formed by individuals being exposed to external stimuli, but the nature of those beliefs will vary depending on the internal factors of the individuals. Therefore, the perceived image will be formed through the image projected by the destination and the individual's own needs, motivations, preferences, and other personal characteristics. In this way, individuals build their own mental picture of the place, which in turn produces their own, personal perceived images (Ashworth and Voogd 1990; Bramwell and Rawding 1996; Gartner 1993). In other words, personal factors refer to internal determinants - the sociodemographic characteristics of the individuals (gender, age, level of education, family lifecycle, social class, place of residence, etc.), as well as those of a psychological nature (motivations, values, personality, lifestyle, etc.). These personal factors affect one's cognitive organization of perceptions, thus also influencing the perceptions of the environment and the resulting image.

As already stated, secondary information sources form the organic image that an individual hold of a destination. Many are examples for those sources, such as relatives and friends, Internet, etc. As one of the vital sources of information, creating a pre-visit perception nowadays is Internet (Social media (Frías, Rodríguez and Castañeda, 2008). The advent of the Internet and the possibility of interacting with the information carried by that new medium has opened up a range of possibilities for investigating the ways in which information processing takes place and the differences in that respect between the Internet and the more traditional media. Currently, researchers' interests centre on describing the range of actions carried out during the process of surfing and interacting with the message (Coyle & Gould, 2002; Peterson & Merino, 2003) as well as the cognitive processes taking place (Schlosser, 2003).

It is important to be noted that, Internet information can be regarded as a variable which reflects the subject's ability to process the information through their own (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), which mean that one person's image may be different from another's and potential tourist researching for information need to be aware of this fact. In this regard, many studies demonstrate that the Internet leads to information overload and disorientation among its users, especially amongst those with little experience of the medium (Ahuja & Webster, 2001; Eveland & Dunwoody, 2001; Tremayne & Dunwoody, 2001). The principal cause of these phenomena is related to the vast quantity of information available on the Internet (Burke, 1997; Chen & Wells, 1999; Ducoffe, 1996).

#### **II.4.2 The Role of Destination Image in the Post-Travel Phase**

In addition to the pre-travel phase, destination image affects both on-travel and post-travel behaviors of tourists (Chen et al., 2013; Tavitiyaman & Qu, 2013). The information acquired through personal experience or by visiting the destination forms the primary image, which may differ from the secondary image. Indeed, some authors, such as Gartner and Hunt (1987), Pearce (1982) and Phelps (1986) point out that when individuals actually visit a place, the image that they form after the visit tends to be more realistic, complex, and different from the one formed through secondary sources of information. The destination image perceived post-visit influences tourist satisfaction and intention to repeat the visit in the future, depending on the destination's capacity to provide experiences that correspond with their needs and fits the image they had of the destination (Court & Lupton, 1997; Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Joppe, Martin, & Waalen, 2001). Moreover, Bigné et al. (2001) concluded that destination image positively influences trip quality, tourist satisfaction, revisit intention and recommend intention. Chen and Tsai (2007) found that destination image has a significant effect on trip quality and behavioral intentions (revisit and recommend intentions). Chi and Qu (2008) concluded that destination image affects both attribute satisfaction and overall satisfaction. Assaker et al. (2011) empirically found that a more favorable destination image will result in higher tourist satisfaction and intention to revisit the destination in the future. Furthermore, Prayag and Ryan (2012)

investigated the relationships between destination image, destination attachment, personal involvement, satisfaction, and loyalty. They concluded that destination image positively affects destination attachment and overall satisfaction. Phillips et al. (2013) also found that destination image directly influences trip perceived value and revisit intention, and it indirectly influences tourist overall satisfaction and intention to recommend. Sun, Chi, and Xu (2013) also found that destination image has a significant and positive impact on trip perceived value and tourist satisfaction.

An important factor influencing the post-visit image based on the personal experience is the intensity of the visit, or, in other words, the extent of an individual's interaction with the place, as they may be exposed to different dimensions of the destination by developing contacts and relationships; when the place is visited, they adopt different behavioral patterns related to the intensity of interaction with the destination; for example, some may devote time to exploring the various attractions on offer in depth, while others may prefer to spend their time relaxing and participating to a lesser extent in the leisure activities available. Therefore, the primary source of information formed by personal experience or visits will influence the perceived image depending on the number of visits and their duration, or on the degree of involvement with the place during the stay (references).

Experience may also influence the post-visit perceived image of the destination, since, as Schreyer, Lime and Williams (1984) suggest, present situations are interpreted in comparison with past experiences, due to the connection between information coming from past experiences and the subjective interpretation of a trip. In the tourism context, past experience may be more important than information obtained from external sources (Mazursky 1989), since individuals tend to place more weight on the former. This is because, when there is past experience, the criteria for decisions are strengthened, while the need to receive information becomes weaker.



### III. Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to describe and discuss the approaches and methods used to investigate the problem formulation of this thesis. The chapter will first be outlining the ontological and epistemological beliefs that helped to guide the research design, data collection and data analysis. This section will be followed by a description and discussion of the research design that was used to gather the necessary data for this project. The data collection will be addressed next, where the three methods used to collect data will be discussed in regard to pros and cons, the design, the sample and the distribution. When the methods are covered, a section will describe how the gathered data was analyzed in order to come to conclusions about the problem formulation. The chapter will finish with first a short section about validity and reliability, before ethical issues are presented.

#### III.1 Theory of science

##### Ontology

To begin with, the ontological element is related to how the reality is seen (Guba, 1990; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). According to Bryman (2012, p.32) ontology represents “... *the question of whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social factors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors.*” Ontology concerns the social phenomena and whether it exists externally to our social influence or the phenomenon itself is a product of social interaction (Bryman, 2012).

In the case of the topic of this thesis it is very important to clarify to what extent, the image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination is created by social actions of human interactions or whether it exists independent from the social actions. Thus, it is rather important to determine the ontological position for this matter. We will be looking at Bulgaria’s image among pre- and post-

Danish visitors and the differences between these perceptions from an ontological position of interpretivism using as a support Bryman's (2012) definition related to this position. It is generally- known "*that social phenomena and their meaning is continually being accomplished by social actors*" (Bryman, 2012, p.33), in other words meaning that multiple realities can coexist because they are created in minds of social actors (Guba, 1990). When it comes to this particular study, the ontology consists in a reality that is socially constructed by all the opinions and interpretations of all the individuals involved in the research, the ontology allows the targeted group to have an individual perception of the reality. There is no absolute trust about the image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination, but there are numerous interpretations of the matter and thus an equal number of ways to investigate the problem. To a large extent, a destination image can be described as having a nature that is often created individually among humans according to their beliefs, ideas and impressions of this particular individual (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993). In other words, two people can easily hold two different images of the same destination due to different beliefs, ideas and impressions about this particular destination (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993). The image change constantly as a cause of human interactions, which act as social factors. In conclusion, it is not an objective reality that exists externally to these social factors. Moreover, this thesis focused on investigating one reality based on different perceptions of Danes' interpretations of Bulgaria as a tourist destination.

### Epistemology

The epistemology of this study is concerned with "*... the relationship between the knower and the known*" (Guba, 1990, p.18). According to Bryman (2012) epistemology implies the considerations of how the social world should be studied. For a researcher is important to establish what is acceptable knowledge of a research and what is not (Saunders, Lewis& Thornhill, 2009). In these conditions, the researcher has to pay attention on how he analyze "real" and tangible objects that are measurable. In this philosophy the researcher is sworn to the laws of natural scientist (Saunders, Lewis& Thornhill, 2009), meaning that the researcher relies only on observable data as being credible. However, the thesis is looking to be under the opposite

influence. The world as we see it is a subjective place where each individual has his own experiences and interpretations.

The data collected and analyzed in this thesis cannot be touched or observed. In this thesis, feeling and attitudes toward Bulgaria's image will be collected and analyzed, clarifying that using an interpretivism approach is the right position to achieve the goal of the thesis. Bryman (2012, p.30) described his universe as *"... predicted upon the view that a strategy is required that respect the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences..."*. Taking this fact into account, it is considered that the participant of this study can have different views of Bulgaria according to their preferences, beliefs and perceptions. As a consequence, this study is strongly connected to the views of Danish tourists without having the intention to discover an *"ultimate truth"*, but to gain a deeper understanding of their attitudes, perception towards Bulgaria as a tourist destination. Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) believed that these social actors have a strong and significant influence on the world. It is important to point out the fact that this understanding will be gained by interpreting the perceptions of the study participants and that the best way to get an insight of this matter is through dialog and interpretation, which will be explained in the methodology section later.

According to Guba (1990) methodology involves the question of which methods are going to be used by the researcher in the data collecting process. The use of different methods is tightly connected and related to the research approaches adopted in this study. Bryman (2012) stated that a positivism approach often, but not always, focus on numbers and tangible entities, why these are often researched through quantitative methods. Opposite to what Bryman (2012) thought, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009), they believed that a positivism approach can be also investigated by using qualitative methods. In regard to this case, it is important to establish and justify what methodological approach will be adopted and it will be explained in the research design section.

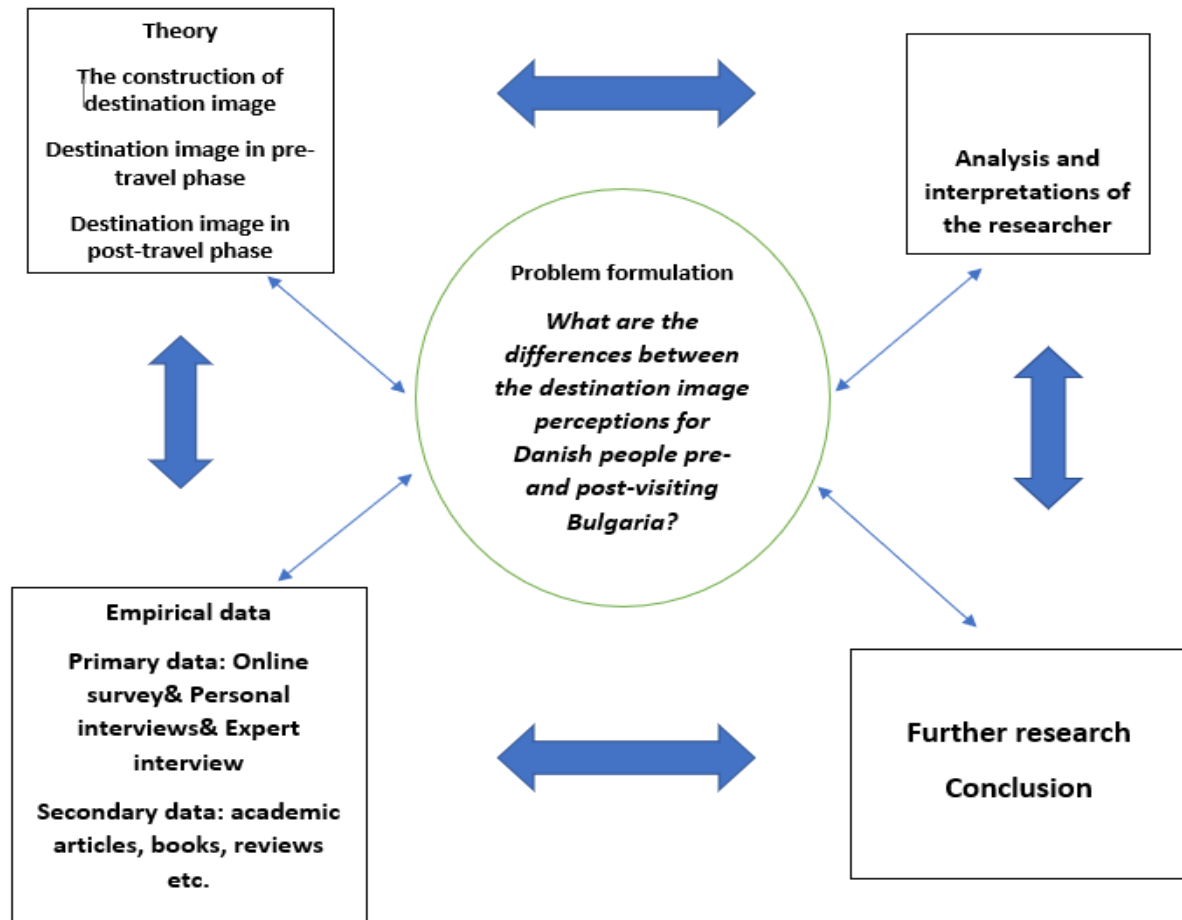


Fig.3 Research approach (self-made, 2018)

### III.2. Research design

The framework of this thesis was a comparative study between two groups of tourists differentiated by their pre- and post- travel perception. It can be said that the research is cross-sectional, as it sought to study how these two groups of Danes tourists differ in attitudes, perceptions and behavior (Veal, 2011). De Vaus (2012) stated that the cross-sectional research design differs from other research designs, in term of how data is collected. Furthermore, data is collected at a particular point in time and, there are no time dimensions related, it is categorizes as measuring difference rather than change (de Vaus, 2012).

As mentioned above, this study is conducted on a basis of a mixed methods study in which Danish people's attitudes, impressions and perception of Bulgaria as a tourist destination are examined. In this particular case it is reflected in the studying of the phenomena of Bulgaria as a tourist destination and how Danes perceived it pre- and post- visit. This definition will be adopted for this research study as we consider it is strongly connected with the purpose of this research.

In order to examine Danes attitudes towards destination Bulgaria a mixed method for data collection was used. Mixed methods research has been widely used and recognized as beneficial by many authors over the years (Bryman, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2005). Mixed methods research can be viewed as an approach which draws upon the strengths and perspectives of each method, recognizing the existence and importance of the physical, natural world as well as the importance of reality and influence of human experience (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Similarly, Tashakkori and Creswell (2007) broadly define mixed methods research as "research in which the investigator collects and analyses data, integrates the findings and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches" (2007, p. 3). Moreover, the method can be used to highlight the similarities and differences between aspects of a phenomenon (Bernardi et al., 2007). Therefore, recognizing the benefits from using mixed methods for collecting data, the following research methods were used: web survey, personal interviews and expert interview in that particular order. Having chosen these specific empirical approaches, in this particular order, provides the research with an extensive set of data that supplement each other, as they all focuses on investigating the problem formulation of the thesis. A triangulation of methods will be used for collecting the empirical data. Triangulating methods ensures that empirical data is conducted from more than one source which enables to cross check the data (Bryman, 2012). Nevertheless, for this particular research is more important that data comes from different sources rather than being cross-checked as the research the research has a qualitative nature. We believe this because it is more valuable to reach a higher level of understanding of the participant's impressions, beliefs towards the destination. This is more likely to achieve by utilizing various sources of gathering data, as in this way the thesis will be provided with different points of view about this particular phenomenon.

### III.3 Data collection

The data collection was realized by using three different methods which will support each other. In the beginning, an online survey was conducted which was rather inflexible, having no possibilities for the researchers to add additional questions based on the answers given by the participants. However, this survey was complemented by personal interviews where additional and follow-up questions were possible. The interviews were conducted after the survey, fact that allowed the researchers to include specific questions based on the answers got from the survey. By doing this it gave the possibility to get a deeper understanding of the attitudes and impressions of the participants. The third method used to gather data was an expert interview with a travel agency which is selling tourists packages to Bulgaria. These three methods will be explained further in the next paragraphs.

#### III.3.1 Survey

The first method chosen for data collection was a web Survey, based on the fact that by using it it's possible to gather several responses simultaneously in a short amount of time, to reach participants who are situated in distant locations, easier access to reach participants who are otherwise difficult to contact, convenience of having the data collection automated (Wright, 2006). Similarly, many authors (DeLeeuw, 2005; Sue & Ritter 2012) explained that web surveys are one of the most popular and effective ways to gather multiple-respondent data and are less costly than other methods and have the ability to reach many respondents in a short time. Cooper (2000) and many other authors researched that using the Internet is increasingly looked at as a means of surveying the public with many possible advantages, such as cost savings associated with eliminating the printing and mailing of survey instruments as well as time and cost savings of having returned survey data already in an electronic format (eg: Yun & Trumbo, 2000; Cobanoglu, Warae, and Morec 2001, Andrews et al., 2003). As any other method, the web Survey has its own disadvantages, some of them may include uncertainty over the validity of the data and sampling issues, and concerns surrounding the design, implementation, and evaluation of an online survey (Andrews et al., 2003, Wright, 2006).

Another important reason for using the web survey method is that the results will suggest what is the general opinion of Danes towards destination Bulgaria pre and post visit. As stated by Holton and Burnett (1997, p.71) “one of the real advantages of quantitative methods is their ability to use smaller groups of people to make inferences about larger groups”. In order to avoid being bias while collecting data and for it to be more reliable, the Survey answers were collected from Danish people of different ages, different social statues, professions, backgrounds, etc. (Creswell, 2014). The general idea behind the first part of the survey was mainly to gather knowledge about basic behavioral information from the participants (e.g. do they travel abroad and how often, preferences in a destination, types of tourism they like to practice, etc.) and following different questions, multiple choices ones based on reading of existing literature and then followed up in interviews, were asked in order to explore the perception about Bulgaria as a tourist destination, by people who have already visited the country and those who haven’t.

Another reason for using the survey as a way of collecting data was because of its ability to gather a high number of respondents (de Vaus, 2012), by reaching more people from the two groups of tourists as well as their perception about Bulgaria as a tourist destination pre- and post-visiting.

Besides the fact that this method allows a larger sample of respondents, the survey only allows for the respondents to answer to a limited number of questions (Veal, 2011). In this way the respondent are not fully allowed to express their own subjective opinion or why they have specific perceptions about the matter in cause. Moreover, the triangulations and the use of qualitative data sources became an asset to address some of the issues mentioned above, it is important to draw attention to the fact that the survey only involved a small portion of the total population (Veal, 2011) and it can therefore not be generalized. As mentioned in the Epistemology section, the purpose was not to find the “*ultimate truth*” and the generalizable one, but to get an overall idea of the possible differences, which could lead to an understanding of what are the pre- and post- visit perception for Danish tourists towards Bulgaria.

It should be noted that the Survey questions were conducted in English, as both of the authors were not familiar with the Danish language and also based on the fact that Denmark is one of the

countries with highest level of spoken English as a foreign language (<http://studyindenmark.dk>). Moreover, into account must be taken the fact, that the survey was not answered by all the participants that it was send to, therefore the 'non-respondents' eventually affected the overall result of the survey, as the number of participants has slightly dropped.

### **Survey Design**

In the beginning, the respondents were presented a short description about the study as a whole, along with the purpose of the survey in particular (for further details, see Appendix 1.1). After this, the survey was divided into three parts: The first part was address to both groups of tourists, who visited as well as to those who did not visit yet the country, and briefly covered the frequency of holidays travelling, the types of holidays the groups are interested in and if they consider Bulgaria as a tourist destination., followed by a 4<sup>th</sup> question in relation in they visit or no the country, the second part covered questions for those that already visited the country; while the last part was addressed for the other group of tourists that did not visit.

The demographic part consisted of question regarding age (closed questions with pre-coded age categories), gender (closed questions with pre-coded categories). In the last question of the survey the respondents were asked to write any comment on the survey topic if they have any.

### **Distribution and Sample**

The survey had a self-administrative format, as only the respondents themselves were involved in answering the questions. This fact had also implications such as the change that the respondents to have difficulties understanding some of the questions addressed, or if they perceived a certain question in a different way than the one intended, then the data would not measure the same things. However, the questions were formulated carefully as a way to avoid ambiguity (Veal, 2011).

According to Veal (2011) it is necessary to find a gathering of the total population in order to minimize biases and to conduct an illustrative research. As a modality of increasing the chances of getting a large number of respondents, as well as to make the analysis process easier, the



survey was created using the online service “Survey Monkey” and was posted online using this service. This was decided by considering the time and place which influence the respondents’ willingness to participate, also by posting it online it was more convenient for the participants as they could answer whenever they feel like (Veal, 2011).

As a way of distributing the survey the Facebook channel was used, considering that many people from both groups are present on social media platforms, including this one, and there is an increase of chances to reach respondents that were representative of both groups. Also, this increased the probability of a biased sample, as some of the respondents were acquaintances, but they were still part of the two groups of tourists’ necessities for conducting the survey. The link to the survey was added together with the description and also people were encouraged to share the post as well, to get more responses from people outside the researchers’ network.

This approach resulted in the survey being distributed 75 times, however only 52 respondents finished it, this could be caused by the length of the survey or how interesting the respondents found the survey. Of the 52 respondents who completed the survey, 11 of them already visited Bulgaria, while the rest of 41 did not visit.

As already mention, this research was not looking for statistical confidence or an *ultimate truth* that could be generalized to the two groups of tourists. On the other hand, the project sought to study the potential differences (or similarities) in perceptions between the two groups of tourists, and in this aspect the two samples were useful, especially when combined with qualitative data sources, as will be described and discussed in the next sections.

### III.3.2 Personal interviews

The second method used for data collection were interviews. Interviews can be explained as: “Asking participants questions in one-on-one or small group setting” (Driscoll, 2011, p.154). They are among the most familiar strategies for collecting qualitative data (DiCicco-Bloom and

Crabtree, 2006). The use of personal interviews within a cross-sectional research design is useful due to the possibility to compare different perceptions.

Moreover, personal semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for conducting data for this project. Personal interviews were chosen based on the knowledge that they allow the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters of the researched problem (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore the personal interviews were semi-structured based on the fact that "they are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee" (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p.315) which is important as it gives the interviewee the opportunity to share more freely and adeptly his/her knowledge and opinion on the asked subject and to let them construct meanings upon their own experience (McCracken, 1988 in Creswell, 2014).

Furthermore, as already presented, in order to gather as much knowledge on the researched topic as possible, interviews were conducted both with a Travel agency selling tours to Bulgaria and also with Danish citizens who have already visited the country. Firstly, personal interviews were conducted with Danish citizens who have already visited Bulgaria in order to better understand if their pre and post visit perception of the country has changed and in which way.

Personal interviews can be tape recorded, of course with the permission of the interviewee. Using a tape recorder has the advantage that the interview report is more accurate than writing out notes. But tape recording also brings with it the danger of not taking any notes during the interview (Opdenakker R., 2006). Taking notes during the interview is important for the interviewer, even if the interview is tape recorded for multiple reasons: first, to check if all the questions have been answered, secondly, in case of malfunctioning of the tape recorder, and lastly, in case of "malfunctioning of the interviewer". Another disadvantage of tape recording the interview is the time a transcription of the tape recording consumes. Bryman (2001) suggests that one hour of tape takes five to six hours to transcribe.

As in face to face interviews implies that interviewer and interviewee directly react to what the other say (Opdenakker R., 2006). This also leads to the advantage that the interviewee is more

spontaneous in his response and does not deliberate too long. But on the other hand, the interviewer has to concentrate much more on the questions that need to be asked and the answers given.

One of the advantages of this interview method is that termination of a personal interview is easy, compared to other interview methods. In the interaction between interviewer and interviewee enough clues can be given that the end of the interview is near, for example by shuffling the papers and turning off the tape recorder. An explicit way to terminate the interview is by thanking the interviewee for cooperation and asking him or her if there are further remarks that might be relevant to the topic or the interview process. This can lead to an emergent of a whole new area of information (Wengraf, 2001).

The interview guide (see Appendix 1.2) for the personal interviews have been structured according to the theoretical framework of this study. By doing so, this ensures that the data extracted from the method is based on the theoretical frames of the research.

### **Distribution and Sample**

Despite the fact that this research is dealing with two potentially large groups, certain issues such as time, geographic location, access and other related issues, had an impact on the selection of participants for the personal interviews. However, the personal interviews were conducted with the same sample of participants who had also filled the survey.

Because of anonymity, the participants of the personal interviews will only be mentioned by their first name. The age and the occupational statuses of the interviewees are mentioned in order to justify the diversity among the interviewees.

- Line (24) – Job seeking
- Kasper (23) – Student
- Daniel (27)- Student
- Brian (34)- IT Network Administrator

- Jakob (31) – Shop Assistant
- Martin (32)- Human Resource Manager
- Rasmus (28)- Family advisor in Aalborg Kommune
- Julie (26)- Administrative employee
- Hanne (43)- Owner of a small business
- Stine (25)- Student

All the participants for the personal interviews are currently situated in the city of Aalborg. Some of the participants are acquaintances to both researchers, while the rest were found in the city of Aalborg. The acquaintances were chosen because they represent the target segment as they were travelling to Bulgaria and the fact that they are not close friends with the researchers means that they have no knowledge about the study and are therefore not biased.

In order to avoid influencing the participants by the knowledge of the researchers, they have not been told about this study beforehand. By doing so, the risk of biases is minimized. The interviewees were told to answer with absolute honesty on the questions addressed. Furthermore, they were told that does not exist a right or a wrong answer in the matter questioned, ensuring that the participant will say what they believe about the topics discussed.

### **III.3.3 Expert interview**

The last method used for data collection was the expert interview and it was chosen for the fact that an expert could provide another perspective the data gathered in the survey and in the personal interviews. The experts of interests were travel agents, considering that they have a lot of expertise in tourism field gained by dealing with different types of tourists. The travel agents are likely to have information about common concerns and how different people act when planning a vacation. The expert agent was chosen because of his special knowledge within the field studied (Long, 2011).

The Interview with Travel agency “Penguin”, selling numerous opportunities for vacationing in Bulgaria was conducted in order for the authors to gather knowledge on the subject from experts, working on the ‘field’ of representing and selling destination Bulgaria to Danes. After conducting the interview with the travel agency, the authors will add more knowledge on the topic and will build up the information gathered from the previous data collection methods – Survey and Interviews. Moreover, the expert’s opinion on how Danes perceive Bulgaria pre and post visit, will confirm or give another perspective to the already build image based on the already collected data from the two previous methods.

The interview guide for the expert interview can be found in Appendix 1.3. Under each heading a number of different questions were addressed, such as *“Are Danish tourists aware of Bulgaria as a travel destination?”*, and follow-up questions, such as *“How does it show?”*, were asked.

As the last two methods used for collecting data were interviews, in the table below the advantages and disadvantages were reviewed (Brown, 2001) as follows:

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
High return rate	Time-consuming
Ewer incomplete answers	Small scale study
Can involve reality	Never 100% anonymous
Controlled answering order	Potential for subconscious bias
Relatively flexible	Potential inconsistencies

*Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages for interviewing (Brown, 2001).*

## **Distribution and Sample**

First, the experts had to be found, selected and be willing to participate in the interviews. The individuals selected for the interviews were purposively selected based on their expertise within the field (Long, 2011) of tourism, especially for the knowledge and understanding for significant issues and concerns due to the frequent involvement with tourists.

A total of 3 travel agencies were contacted via email, where the background for the research was explained, along with a short introduction to the topic and its core purpose, but only one answer was positive. Afterwards, the expert was asked about the possibility of having the researcher come to their office and conduct a short interview with the relevant person in the organization.

The expert that was willing to participate in the interview was the founder of “Penguin Travel” from Copenhagen. With almost 30 years of activity the travel agency has specialized in the field of group- travels both for adults and youngsters, such as senior travels and study trips.

### **III.4 Validity and reliability**

Validity and reliability are two notions used to assess the quality of a study. Validity refers to the extent to which the research represent what it is claiming to be representing, and the term can be divided into external and internal validity (Veal, 2011). When it comes to the external validity is related to the fact whether the findings can be generalized to a larger population, which is often the aim in quantitative research. The internal validity is concerned with how the data represent and measure the characteristics of the topic being studied (Veal, 2011).

This research is largely related to peoples’ attitudes and behavior towards Bulgaria as a tourist destination and in relying on people to provide their own impressions in form of the responses to the survey the two types of interviews. In this case the validity has a key role in regard to the quality and credibility of the research in regard to approaches and designs used to illuminate the problem formulation. In qualitative research validity can be said to come from the richness of the data gathered rather than the sample size (Long, 2011) and therefore the used of mixed methods

was incorporated to clarifying the problem formulation using three diverse sources of information (Long,2015).

Although the 3 methods are not directly measuring the same aspects, they still provide different perspectives contributing to a better understanding of the different perceptions regarding the two groups that were studied. The samples of the survey are the same people from the personal interview which can therefore verify, confirm or elaborate on the survey answers. As, 10 Danes participated both in the survey and the personal interview, the findings can supplement each other. It can be said that without the qualitative data sources, there would be a lot of speculations and assumptions made about the survey findings.

As mentioned above, the external validity is concerned with the findings of a study being applicable beyond the sample being studied (Veal, 2011). Since this research is interpretive and makes use of qualitative methods for data collection, the findings are not likely to be valid for the population as a whole, and do not claim that the findings can be generalized.

Reliability covers the extent to which a research would be the same if it was repeated (Veal, 2011). Again, this project is studying peoples' perceptions and these changes due to pre- and post-visit, people will respond in diverse ways depending on environments and circumstances, and each researcher will understand and interpret the answers differently because of their knowledge, values and experience (Long, 2015). Considering this, it is not likely that a replication of the research will provide the same findings as those of this study. However, to make the research more credible it is important to describe the methods used in detail, make arguments and justifications about the choices made and provide a transparent approach to methodology. This is sustained through the previous sections in this chapter, through the guides which can be found in the appendices.

The survey is providing a transparent research design about how the information was gathered, and how and why the numbers are analyzed and interpreted as they are. This allows the reader, to have a look at the numbers and statistics in case they want to check the data, make re-analysis, provide their own interpretation or even extend the research (Veal, 2011). Also, by analyzing the

quotes from the interviews and their use in describing situations added more qualitative explanations to the survey findings, considering that for both methods were used the same sample.

#### **IV. Analysis and discussions**

In the introduction of this thesis a current situation of Bulgaria as a tourist destination in the context of Danish tourism is given with the purpose of introducing the reader in the matter. In order to get an overview of this case, an analysis will be presented in the following chapter.

Geographically speaking, Bulgaria is situated in the Southern Eastern European region being characterized by warm, stabile and sunny summers and rather cold winters. This climate gives the country more opportunities to offer a broad variety of vacationing possibilities: from sun and sea tourism along the Bulgarian Black Sea coastline to mountain/ sky tourism in the Rhodope or Rila Mountains in the inland of Bulgaria (BulgariaTravel.org, 2018). After a closer look at the webpages from different Danish travel agencies that offer travels to Bulgaria, the most popular type of vacation among Danes is the one related to sea tourism along the Black Sea Coast. Besides this form of tourism, some specialized companies are offering alternatives such as cultural and historical trips, skiing or city breaks in the capital. In order to support this idea, the National Statistical Institute in Bulgaria conclude that more than 90% of Danes visited Bulgaria during the summer, from May to October (NSI,2014).

##### **IV.1 The construction of Bulgaria destination image**

As already presented, the purpose of this project is to compare the pre and post-visiting images of Danish people towards destination Bulgaria. The findings of the project will present if there are differences regarding Danes destination's perception of Bulgaria before and after visiting, which is important knowledge for marketers and practitioners. As presented by different researchers (eg. Papadimitriou and Gibson,2008; Jani and Hwang, 2011), the pre-travel image of a destination should not be excessively higher than what the place has to offer, as it will lead to dissatisfactory during and after the travelling; on the other hand, if the destination has to offer



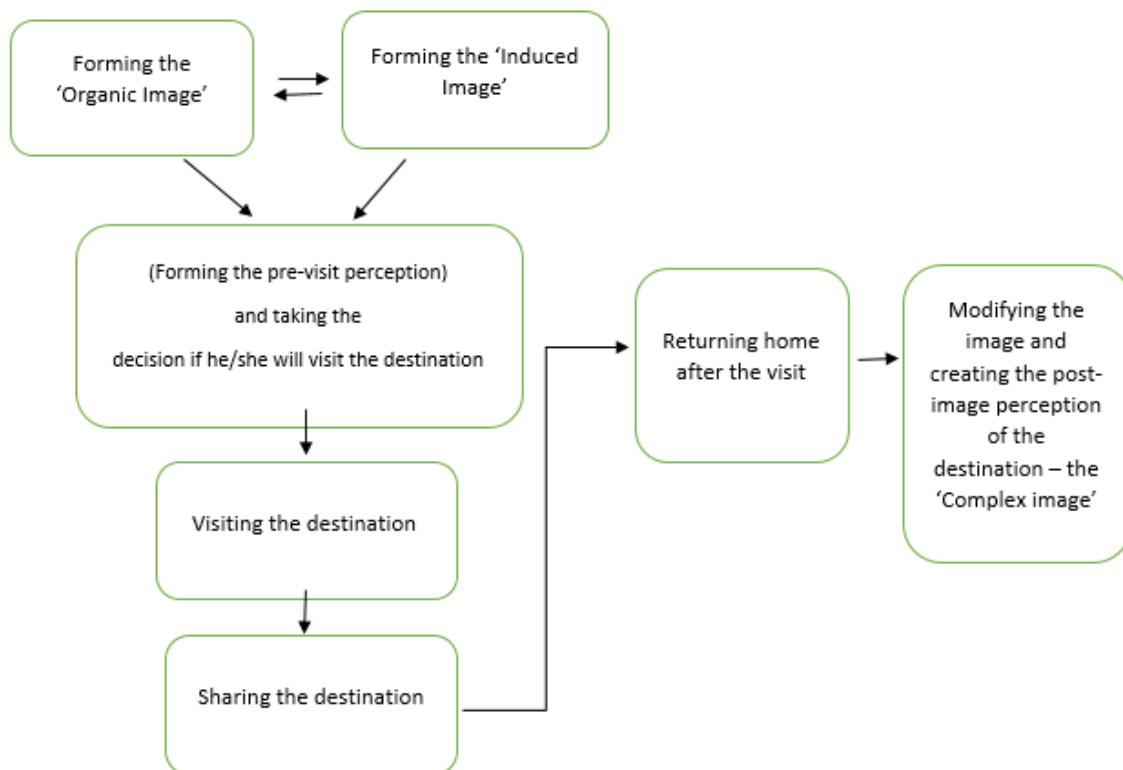
more than what the pre-travel images portray, then the number of potential tourists to the destination may also be lower.

Moreover, it should be noted that image perception is a subjective matter, and each tourist perceive a destination in his/her own way. As presented by Brezovec et al. (2004) one destination can be associated with different images, that can be either positive or negative, which may lead to increase or decrease of visitors to it. Therefore, it is important for practitioners and marketers to constantly research and analyze said images.

As a start of the analyzes, the destination image formation will be explored. The formation image process affects the consumer behavior during the pre-visit, during the visit and after the visit phase; in other words – the destination image forms and changes over time (Agapito et al., 2010, p. 91). In the theory chapter different authors considerations according, the formation of a destination image was taken into consideration. For example, authors (eg. Baloglu and McCleary, 1999; Gartner, 1993) suggested that the image of a destination is formed by three different components: cognitive, affective, and conative. Where the ‘cognitive’ stands for the sum of information known about the destination; the ‘affective’ shows the feelings that an individual hold towards the place; and lastly the ‘conative’ represents the probability of future revisits to the destination. For the analysis of the current project it is important to explain further that the ‘affective’ factor towards the destination may be favorable, unfavorable, or neutral. And it is one of the most influential factors of the overall image construction. Similarly, is one of the first suggestions, given by Gunn (1988), who presented that there are 7 stages that form the tourists image of a destination. First, the tourist forms an ‘organic image’ of the place, by accumulating mental images of it (from secondary sources, such as friends/family, social media, printed media, etc.). Second, the tourist research for more information from commercial sources, like travel agencies, tour operators and marketers and hence, modifies his/her initial thoughts – this forms the ‘induced image’. After the first two stages, the person takes the decision if he/she will visit the destination – third stage. Followed by the fourth one – actual visit. Fifth stage is sharing the destination. Returning home is the next stage and the last one is modifying the image based on all the previous stages. Based on the seven stages, Gunn (1988) has concluded that the overall

'complex' image is formed by the organic and induced, which are complimenting each other. A diagram with the author's interpretation of the model will be presented:

### Destination Image formation diagram

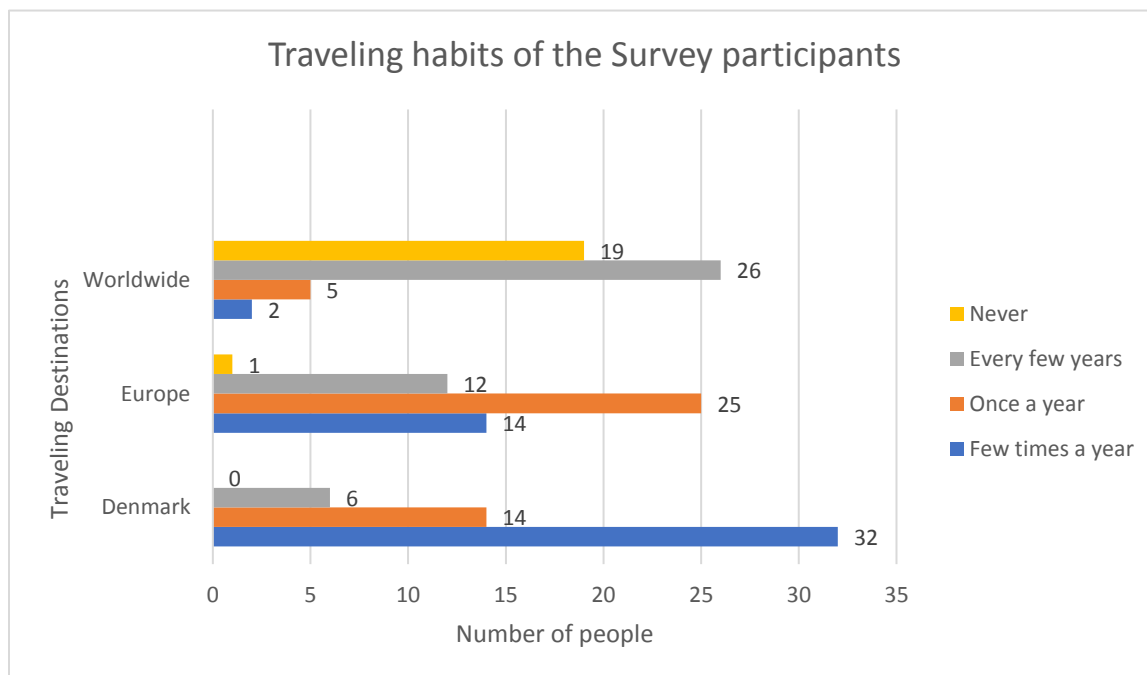


*Fig.4: Destination Image formation. Source: Authors own interpretation based on the model proposed by Gunn (1988).*

Following the up mentioned steps, the image formation of Danish people regarding destination Bulgaria will be examined further. It should be pointed out that the model presented by Gunn (1988) starts from the point where potential tourists are receiving information about the particular place, therefore they are aware of it and are actively researching or receiving information from different sources. This model is not dealing with a 'pre-stage' where tourists are not aware of the potential destination.

Numerous different questions were asked to the participated in the online Survey, personal Interviews, and the Expert Interview in order for the authors to gain knowledge how Danes may be forming their image perception of Bulgaria. It is important, to be stated again that firstly a Survey was filled out by 52 Danes, from which 41 stated that they have not visited the destination yet, while 11 have. Furthermore, personal Interviews were conducted with 10 out of the 11 people who have indicated on the Survey that they visited Bulgaria in the past years. Along with those personal Interviews, an Expert Interview with a travel agency was made, considering the fact that the 'Induced image' of a destination, as explained above, is formed by travel agencies and tour operators. Even more, their experience and knowledge will bring additional information regarding the researched question of this paper.

As an opening question, we asked the participants in the Survey how often they travel and where – in Denmark, in Europe and Worldwide. This question has the purpose to portray a sample of the traveling habits of the participants (Fig.5).



*Fig.5 Chart representing the traveling habits regarding travel destinations according to the Survey participants.*

As the results showed, most of the participants travel domestic (in Denmark) a few times per year. Destinations within Europe are visited mostly once a year, while places outside of Europe are visited ones every few years or have not been explored at all. Therefore, it can be concluded that the majority of the participants of the Survey are visiting places in Europe once a year, meaning that Bulgaria may be a country that is already visited, or it can be a potential destination for the ones that have not visited yet; moreover, it may be a potential place for revisit.

Along with that question, the following one was asked: 'In what type of holiday (activities) are you interested in?', with the purpose to find out what type of activities the participants are interested in and to compare if Bulgaria is a destination that offers those activities. The participants were given the option two chose more than one answer, as during a vacation tourist may participate in numerous activities (Fig.6).

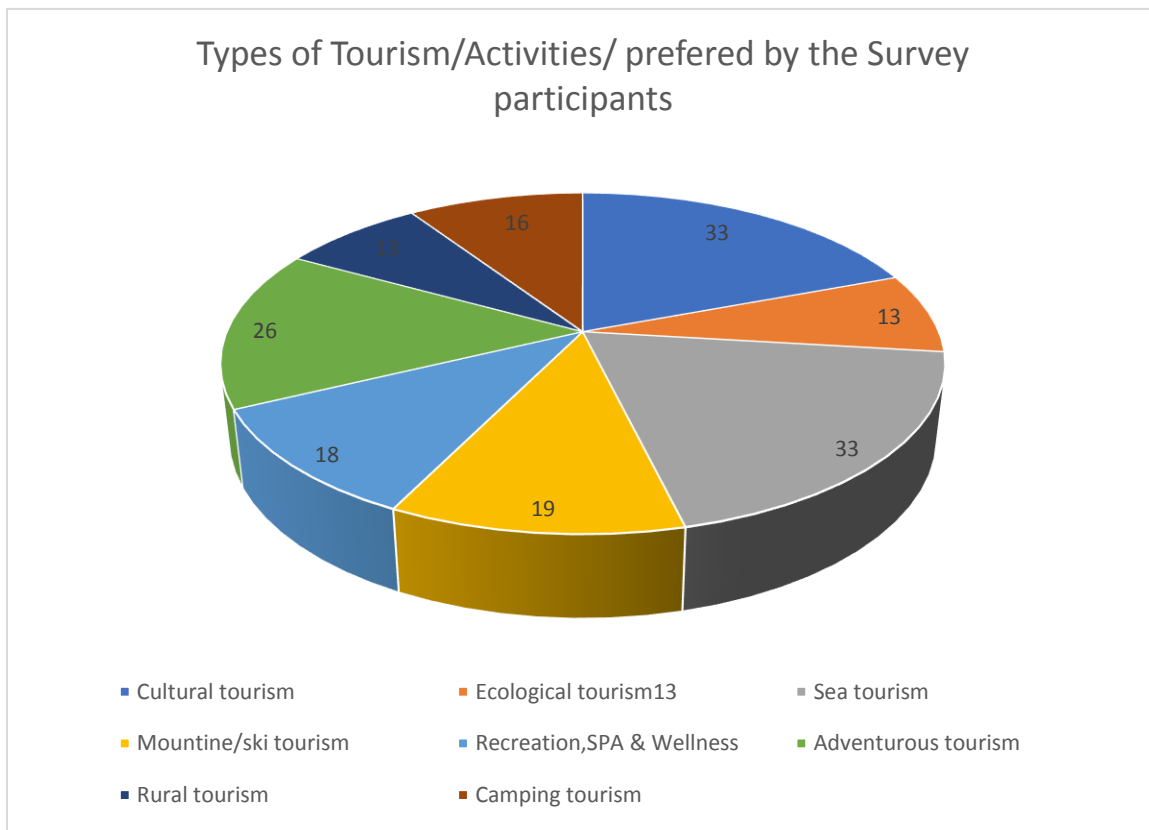


Fig.6 Chart representing the types of tourism (activities) the Survey participants are interested in

The results showed: 'Sea' tourism and 'Cultural' tourism are the two holiday types that most of the Survey respondents chose (33 people for each). Followed by 'Adventurous' tourism (26people), 'Mountain/ski' tourism (19people) and 'Recreation, spa and wellness' tourism (18 people), 'Camping' tourism (16 people). Looking into different marketing sources and previous researches on the topic, it can be concluded that Bulgaria is a destination that offers the types of tourism preferred by the participants (eg. Marinov, 2004; Bachvarov, 2006; BulgariaTravel.org, 2018). Although, as already presented, Bulgaria is mostly famous for its sea tourism (Marinov, 2004; Lubomirov,2017) and often lacks a proper marketing regarding the rest of the up mentioned types of tourism (Bachvaov, 2006; McCleary and Whitney (1994); Lubomirov, 2017). Even more information regarding this fact is presented by The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark in Bulgaria, which states that Danish people are mostly aware of the country as a summer and sea vacation, even though the country has to also offer winter holiday resorts, the possibilities for adventure tourism, such as cliff climbing, rafting, paraplaners, etc. Therefore, it may be said that although the country has the potential to offer different kinds of holidays/ different activities, the Danish tourist may not be aware of them, as they may not be properly marketed.

As the 7 staged method presented by Gunn (1988) will be used to examine how the Danish participants in the Survey have formed their destination image perception of Bulgaria, firstly the formation of the 'organic image' of the destination needs to be explored.

As it was explained already, the first image of a destination is usually formed by secondary sources of information, such as friends and family (word-of-mouth), Internet (electronic word-of-mouth), printed media (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.) and others. In this regard, the Survey respondents were asked to indicate from which sources they got information about Bulgaria and the results showed that both the Danes who have visited and the ones who have not visited, have their primary information from Friends/ Family, which is considered by many researchers to have a very high level of influence and credibility due to the fact that the information comes from familiar sources, which can add new knowledge or support the one that people already have ( Gursoy and Chen, 2000; Wong and Kwong, 2004; Litvin et al., 2008 ). The

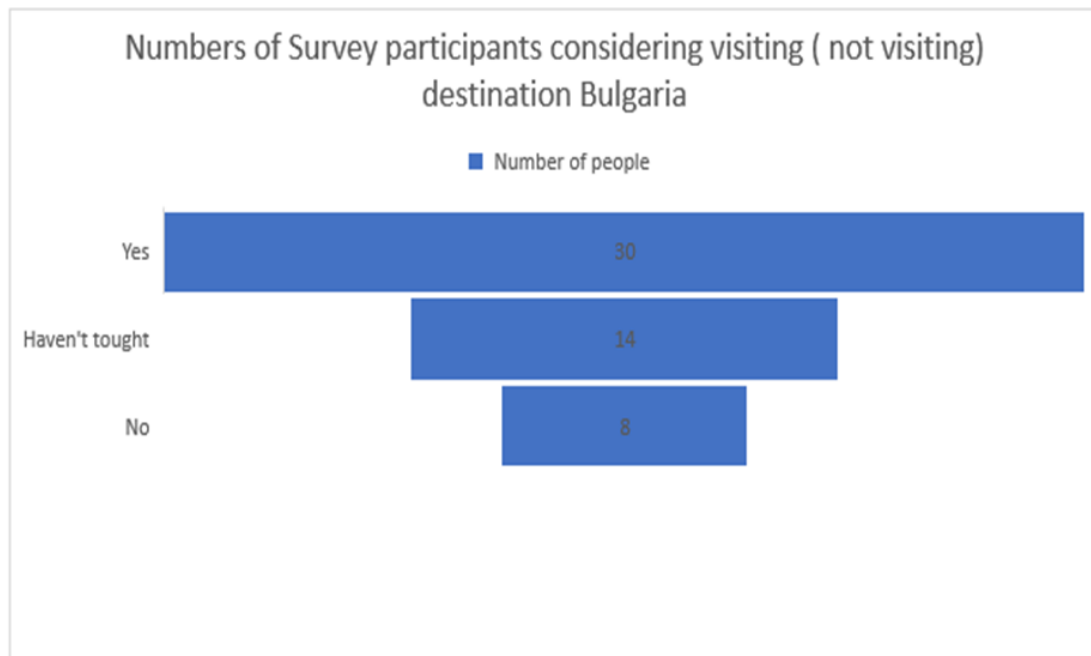
second most popular source is Social media (Internet), which similarly to the previous source examined, have been researched by many authors, which explained that nowadays, this method is having the same high level of influence as word-of-mouth (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Lee & Youn, 2009; Litvin et al., 2008). An interesting fact that can be noticed from the Survey answer is that the Danes who have already visited the country have indicated that 'commercial sources', such as travel agencies are the third most important source of information for them. While people who have not visited have indicated that other sources such as printed media, movies, and the TV show 'Sommer in Sunny beach' stand on third place. While 'commercial sources' was indicated as a last source for them. Therefore, it may be stated that people who have not yet visited the country are not looking for information from commercial sources, while information from such ones is searched by people who have visited it, or in other words who had the intention to visit.

Pursuing information from those sources (the commercial ones) represents the second stage of the image formation model. The image created by those sources is called an 'Induced image' and as explained in the theory chapter, is formed by the promotions and communications of the tourism organizations involved in a region. This image created, is loaded with commercial appeal, with the main objective of forming an attractive image of the destination as a way of "selling" and profit from it. Although those sources of information have the purpose to 'sell' the destination to a potential tourist, it is important to present an 'accurate', 'real' pictures of the destination, in order for the tourists not to get higher or lower expectation of the destination, which may lead to a disappointment in the 'eyes' of the tourist.

Travel agencies, as representative of the commercial sources of information are taking a vital part in the process of selection of a destination for many tourists, as they provide specific information, more in depth information about the destination and even more, they can give personal advices to the potential tourists (e.g. Baloglu & Mangaloglu, 2001; Buhalis, 1998; Gartner, 1993; Gartner & Bachri, 1994; Nolan, 1976). Based on that, an expert Interview with a travel agency 'Penguin' was conducted, in order for the authors to gain more knowledge about the forming of an 'induced' image regarding Bulgaria in Denmark. The expert was asked different

questions regarding their business, regarding Danish tourists and their habits, regarding pre- and post-visit perceptions, etc. Those questions will be fully analyzed further in this chapter.

‘Do you consider Bulgaria as a holiday destination?’ was asked to the Survey participants in order to find out if Danes are interested to visit (revisit), or if they haven’t considered Bulgaria as an option; or if they don’t want to visit Bulgaria at all. According to the method, presented by Gunn, this is the third stage of the image formation, where the person has constructed his/her organic and induced image and based on them, forms one overall image, called the ‘complex’ image. After that he/she needs to make the decision if they will actually visit the potential destination. The participants in the Survey answered as followed (Fig.7):



*Fig.7 Chart representing the desire of the Survey participants to visit destination Bulgaria*

- ‘Yes, I consider Bulgaria as a potential holiday destination’ – 30 people
- I don’t know – 14 people
- ‘No, I don’t consider Bulgaria as a holiday destination’ – 8 people

From those answers, it may be stated that more people (out of the 52 Survey respondents) than not are considering visiting (revisiting) Bulgaria. And a big percentage of the people asked, have

not thought about this opportunity, which means that there is a possibility of them researching about the destination and deciding to visit or not.

Moreover, the participants in the Survey, that have not visited Bulgaria were asked what their image of the country as a tourist destination is. The majority of them have indicated 'Neutral', which means that they don't have an image – positive or negative. On the second place a 'Positive' image was answered. Followed by a small percentage of people indicated 'Negative' and one person stating 'Very negative'.

Along with the people who have not visited Bulgaria, the ones that have visited (11 people) were asked the same question. Clearly, it can be noted that the results, matched the ones from the non-visitors. The answers indicated: Half of the participants have stated that they had a 'Neutral' image of Bulgaria. On the second place stands the 'Positive' image. Negative image was also indicated by the lesser number of people. Not even one person has stated that they have a 'Very positive/negative' image, which may be explained by the fact that the perception up to this moment is constructed based on the information collected by different secondary sources and marketers and not by the person's experience himself/herself. In conclusion it can be stated that the answers from the participants of the Survey suggests that Danes do not have an image of destination Bulgaria. Regarding this conclusion, the paper written by Gover and Go (2003) have presented that for people who have not visited a place themselves is hard to gain an image of a place, as different secondary sources may be confusing and overwhelming. Looking further into the findings, it can be said that not having an image of a destination, may be worse than having a negative image (Pike, 2004) as it means that there is no awareness of the destination and it can be easily 'ignored' while choosing potential holiday destinations from tourists.

The forth step of the Image formation method is the actual visit to the destination. After conducting the Survey and collecting and counting the number of people who have actually visited the country, the authors found out that 11 people, out of the 52 participants have visited Bulgaria. While asked which places (areas) they have visited – all of the 11 Danes have indicated 'beach areas', which, considering the knowledge that Bulgaria is mostly famous as a summer and



sea vacation and also that Danish people know it for those aspects, it may be said that this information was expected. Other places indicated are 'Urban areas' from which Sofia (the capital) and Plovdiv (the second largest city) were pointed out. 'Rural areas' were also indicated. Interesting fact is that Mountain areas were indicated only by one person, who also commented that he was not visiting 'for ski tourism', which considering the fact that the country is known for its 'blooming' ski tourism in the recent years. (Hall, Smith and Marciszewska, 2006; BulgariaTravel.org, 2018).

Next stage of the image formation is related to the experiences that the tourist is experiencing in the destination. At this stage, the activities, the accommodations, and other services that the tourist is experiencing, along with the people he communicates to are all affecting the image perception. As this is stage where the tourist is gaining new information and experiencing the destination by himself/herself, it may be said that at this point he/she is 'agreeing' / 'disagreeing' with the images formed at the pre-visit stage – the cognitive and induced ones.

The tourist is returning home after the visit to the country. At this point he/she is able to reflect and evaluate the experiences he/she had during the visit. They evaluate the overall experience and create an overall post-visit image – a 'complex' image. Following the tourist shares his/her experience, evaluates, and compares and possibly decides if a future return to the destination will happen.

A question was asked to the participants in the Survey that have visited the country: 'After your visit to Bulgaria, share how you perceive the destination?' The answers were quite satisfactory as the majority of the Danes have indicated that they perceive Bulgaria in a 'Positive' or 'Very Positive' way. While only one person has indicated 'Neutral', nobody has stated that they perceive it in a 'Negative' way. Those answers compared to the answers from the pre-visit perception are quite different. While the pre-visit ones were mostly 'Neutral', at that stage, they have changed to mostly 'Positive', which is a sign that the experience have exceeded the expectations (the information perceived by the secondary sources and marketers).

As the image formation can be seen in a way as a 'circular' process, based on the fact that the tourists that have visited the country may become a source of information for new potential tourists, that will build their pre-visit perception based on the images shared, the participants were asked the following question: 'Would you recommend the destination?', to which 10 out of the 11 participants answered with a positive mark, while one didn't. This information is satisfactory, as the majority of the Danes will share a positive information (word-of-mouth / electronic word-of-mouth).

As already stated in the theory chapter, the repeat visitors represent a highly-desired group of tourists, based on the fact that they tend to stay longer, participate in more activities, spread positive information about the destination and are also cost-effective, as the cost for marketing purposes is lower compared to the one needed for first time visitors (Lau & McKercher, 2004; Oppermann, 1998; Oppermann 200; Lehto, O'Leary & Morrison, 2004). Therefore, the tourists were asked if they would consider visiting Bulgaria again. A positive answer was given by 10 people, while one of the tourists have indicated that he/she haven't thought about it.

## **IV.2 Danes perception towards Bulgaria**

As already mentioned in the Literature review destination image can be defined as an interactive system of thoughts, opinions, feelings, visualizations, and intentions toward a destination (Tasci et al., 2007). In order to create a clearer view of what destination image is more researchers gave different it more attributes. For example, Chi, C. G. Qing, & Qu, H. (2008) classified attributes into nine aspects:

- (1) travel environment (i.e. safe and secure environment, clean and tidy environment, friendly and helpful local people, tranquil & restful atmosphere and pleasant weather);
- (2) natural attractions (i.e. scenic mountain & valleys, scenery & natural attractions, gardens & springs, scenic drive, parks, lakes, rivers, wildlife, caves and underground formations);
- (3) entertainment & events (i.e. shows or exhibitions, cultural events & festivals, quality, fun, western music, nightlife and entertainment);

- (4) cultural attractions (i.e. history & heritage and Vintage buildings);
- (5) infrastructure (i.e. restaurants, cuisine, shop facilities and accommodations);
- (6) accessibility (i.e. traffic flow and parking information, parking facilities, access to the area and affordable trolley system);
- (7) relaxation (i.e. spa, soothing the mind and refreshing the body, spiritual rejuvenation);
- (8) outdoor activities (i.e. boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping and hunting, outdoor recreation and golfing);
- (9) price and value (i.e. food, accommodation, good value for money, attractions and activities and good bargain shopping).

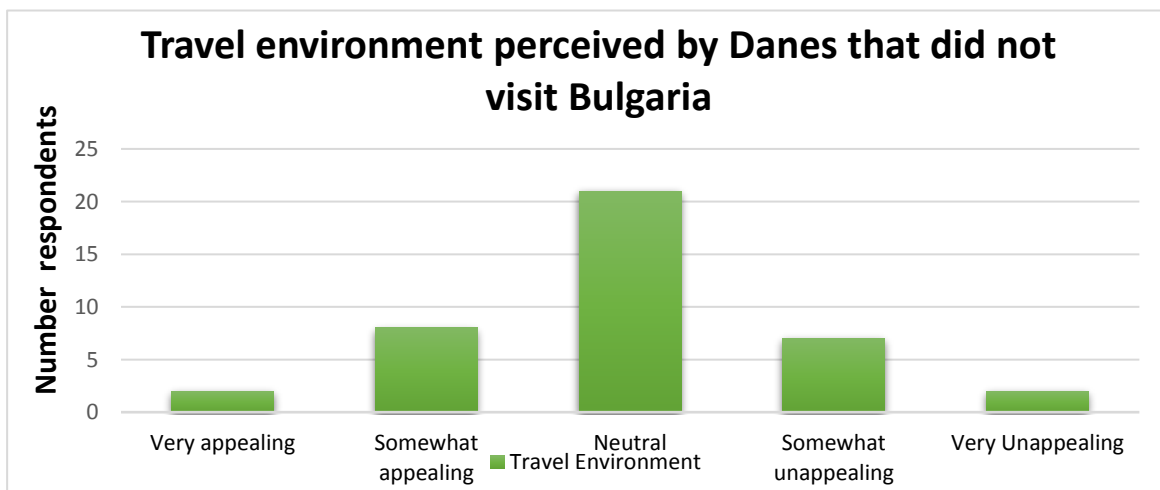
Based on the aspects presented above the researchers decided to divide the analysis into themes according to those nine aspects in order to find the differences or similarities between pre- and post-visit perception for Danish tourists. As presented already, in the survey participated a total of 52 respondents from which a total of 41 have not visited the country yet, while the rest of 11 of them have visited already, and for the interviews were conducted with 10 of those people who visited from the survey.

Considering that for this research there was a discrepancy between the two samples, as tourists that have not visited the country were 41 tourists based on the survey, while only 11 visited according to survey, the researchers decided to divide the analysis in two parts. In the first part, the construction of the destination image of Bulgaria and how Danes perceived Bulgaria as a tourist destination were discussed. The second part contained the analysis and discussion of the nine aspects mentioned in the theory chapter. For a better understanding on the changes that occurred in the two groups perception, the researchers decided to analyze the pre-visit perception by discussing the answers from the survey from the population that have not visited the country, while for the post-visit perception the answers from the personal interviews were discussed according to the nine features mentioned.

## IV.2.1 Pre-visit perception analysis

### 1. Travel environment

The first aspect mentioned was “*travel environment*” which is referring to a safe and secure environment, clean and tidy environment and how friendly and helpful are the local people. As a way of analyzing the differences between pre-and post-visit perceptions among Danish tourists, both groups of tourists were asked about how appealing the aspects are. The majority of survey respondents that did not visited the country already perceived the “*travel environment*” as being *neutral* appealing in their opinion (21 respondents) as can be seen in Fig. 8, suggesting that they do not have a strong image about Bulgaria before they visit. This fact may due to the lack of marketing as mentioned in the Literature Review chapter where McCleary and Whitney (1994) conducted a research to identify western consumer attitudes toward travel to Central and Eastern European Countries, where they found out that Bulgaria lacked marketing ability, among other issues. The authors primary recommendations for Bulgaria was the need to create a plan for image modification and strategies to develop tourism products and improve distribution systems. Furthermore, as Pike (2004) stated, the awareness of a tourist destination has an important impact on the purchase decision made by potential tourists and it is claimed that it is a big problem for a place without or with little tourism image to the outside areas.



*Fig. 8 Travel environment perceived by Danes that did not visited Bulgaria*

## 2. Natural and cultural attractions

According to Henkel et al. (2006) the attractiveness of a destination encourages people to visit and spend time there; therefore, attractiveness has a major influence on determining a tourist's destination choice, feelings and expected behavior. Mayo and Jarvis (1981, p.22) define the notion of destination attractiveness as *"the perceived ability of a destination to deliver individual benefits"*. The natural form and landscape of a destination constitutes the most basic element in attracting tourists to a location (e.g., Murphy et al., 2000; Cracolici and Nijkamp, 2008). Since tourist destinations consist of specific physical, natural and cultural resources that are unique, exceptional and not replaceable (e.g., physiography, social-cultural resources or entrepreneurial spirit), these same factors serve as the underlying basis for their attractiveness (Barney, 1991). As this study aims to research the pre-and post-visit perception towards Bulgaria, is therefore important to analyze tourists' impressions about the natural potential offered by Bulgaria.

As stated by Bachvarov (2006) cultural tourism can be of significant importance for Bulgaria, as the country has rich cultural and historical heritage. For example, even though many countries are known for their cultural attractions, Bulgaria can differentiate itself by focusing on some unique aspects such as Orthodox churches and monasteries. Together with the rich folklore traditions this can serve as an attractive combination to explore the lesser known parts of the country and to diversify Bulgaria's tourism product.

The survey respondents that did not travel to Bulgaria considered that the natural attractions that Bulgaria has to offer, based on their knowledge, to be *"neutral"* (17 respondents) as well as *"somewhat appealing"* (17 respondents), 6 considered the potential as being *"very appealing"*, while only one respondents perceived the aspect as being *"somewhat unappealing"* (Fig. 9).

Also related to Bulgaria's potential, the survey respondents were also asked to rate how they perceived Bulgarian cultural attractions. The majority had a *neutral* impression (15 out of 41), 13 Danes perceived the cultural attractions as being *somewhat appealing*, while 7 considered them as being very appealing for a future holiday, and 6 seen the cultural potential as *somewhat unappealing* (Fig. 9). By analyzing these answers in can be seen that Danes that have not visited Bulgaria are not entirely aware of the natural attractions and the cultural potential existent as taking into account the high number of respondents were "*neutral*" as well as "*somewhat appealing*". This high number of respondents that do not have a strong perception about the natural attraction it can be explain by the fact that before visiting they have a weak image perception about the country in general.

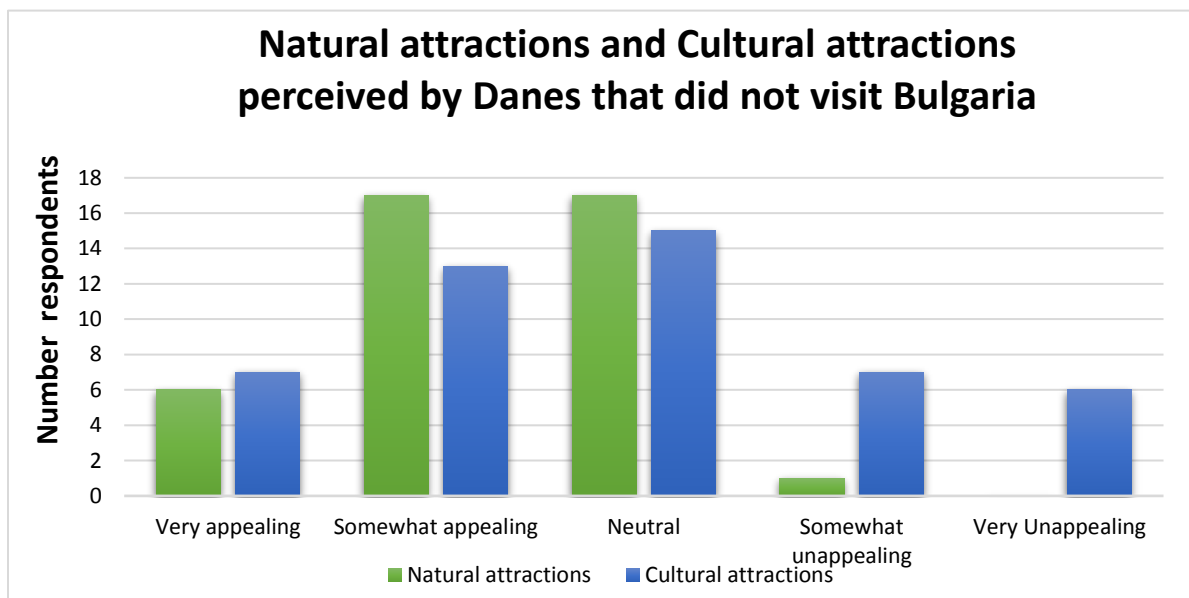


Fig. 9 Natural attractions and Cultural attractions perceived by Danes that did not visited Bulgaria

### 3. Entertainment and events

As experiential and memorable offerings, entertainment creates emotional connections with tourists and thus can be used as a powerful means for attractive differentiation in the market (Pullman and Gross, 2004). In this regards Hall (2004) emphasized the importance of creating a unique brand for countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, he identified specific

obstacles, one of which is inadequate funding. In addition, these countries have been associated with lower quality and limited variety of products.

The survey respondents that did not visited were also asked to rate how they perceive the entertainment and events related to Bulgaria as a tourist destination. The most majority of Danes questioned had a *neutral* opinion regarding the entertainment as 17 picked this answer. The next most common answer was *somewhat appealing* with 10 answers, 7 perceived it as being *somewhat unappealing* (Fig. 10). Considering that destination attractiveness refers to the feelings and opinions of tourists about a destination and its perceived ability to satisfy their needs (Mayo and Jarvis, 1980; Vengesai, 2003) it can be said that Danes perceived the entertainment and the events in a neutral way as they do not know what to expect from a destination that did not travel and do not have enough information as they have a weak image perception towards the country.

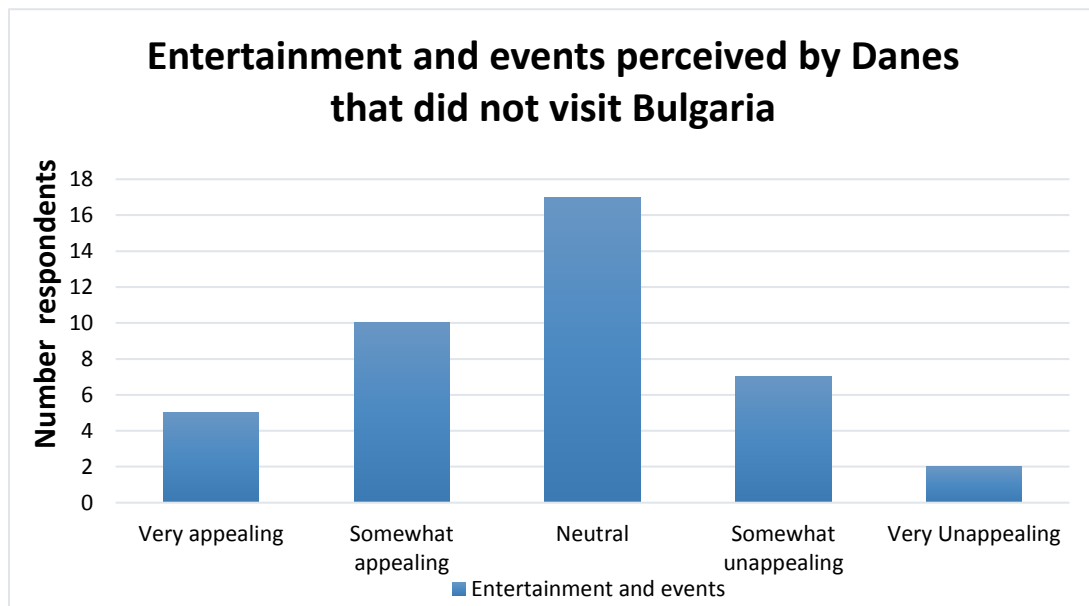


Fig. 10 Entertainment and events perceived by Danes that did not visited Bulgaria

#### 4. Infrastructure

Tourism infrastructure for a destination country refers to its transport system, accommodations, and other support facilities. The general infrastructure of a country can influence how tourists perceive the quality of their trip and their impression of the destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007).

For instance, the availability of infrastructure measures how easily accessible the country's transportation systems are. Good infrastructure facilities are essential for the tourism industry to progress, as it has been shown that the investment in tourism infrastructure and capabilities has contributed to strong performance in the tourism sector (Tan, Kuan, & Wei, 2010). As infrastructure is also an important aspect that need to be considerate while assessing the destination image of a country as it also helps in seeing how tourists perceive a destination based on this aspect. Most of the survey respondents that did not travel to Bulgaria perceived the infrastructure aspect as *somewhat unappealing* (18 answers) and 17 perceived it *neutral*. The rest of the responses were *very unappealing* – 3 answers, *somewhat appealing*- 2 answers and 1- *very appealing* (Fig. 11). Based on these answers it can be seen that Danes, although they not travel to Bulgaria, had a slightly negative perception about the infrastructure aspect, fact that can be interpreted as being a disadvantage for tourism marketers as their country is perceived as having a low quality regarding the infrastructure.



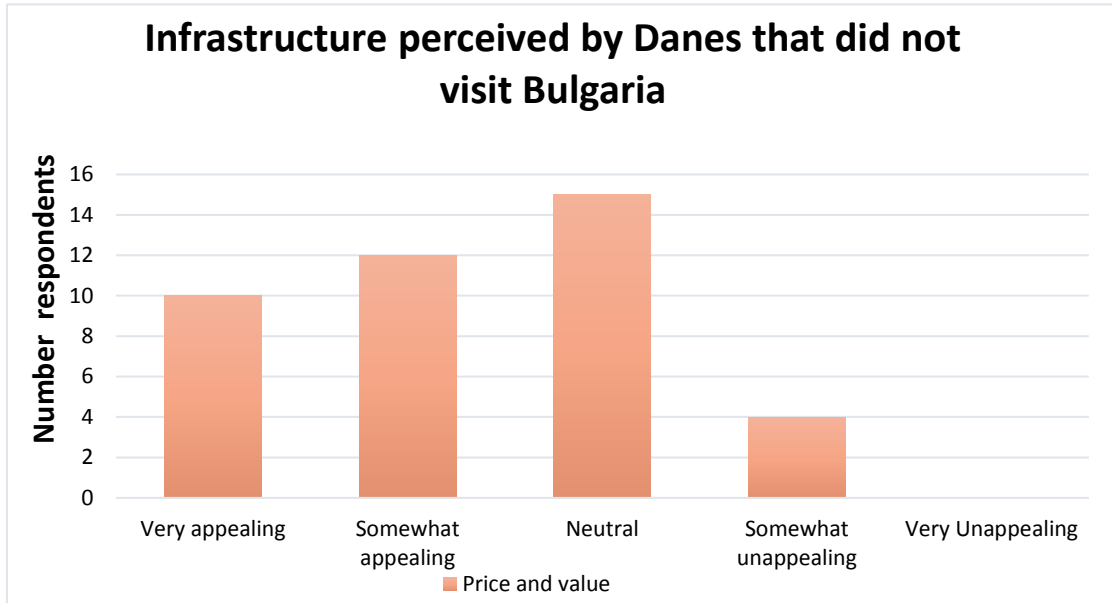
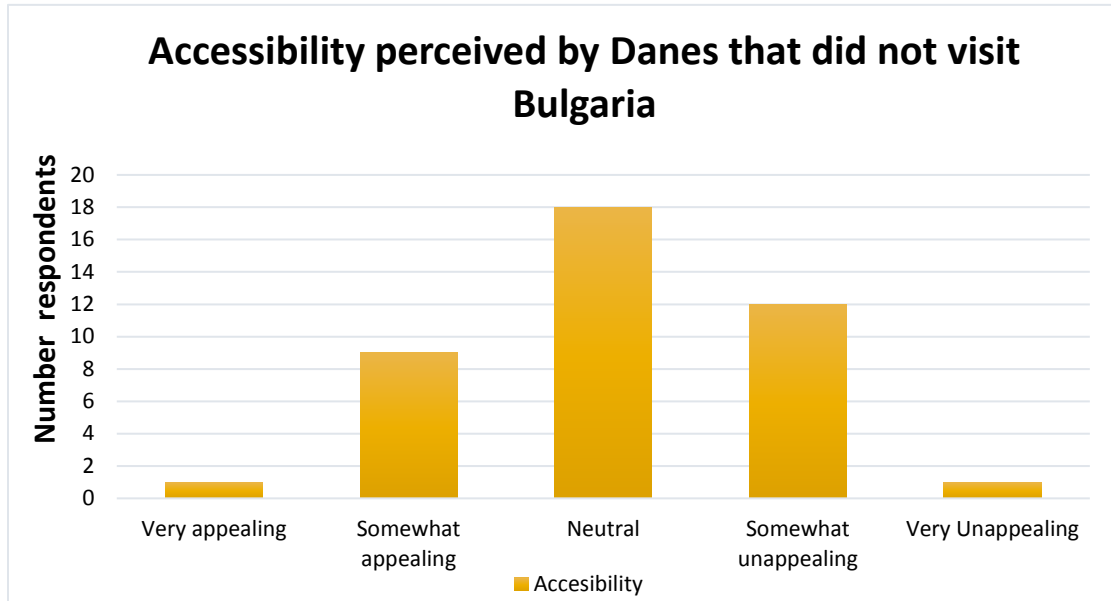


Fig. 11 Infrastructure perceived by Danes that have not visited Bulgaria

## 5. Accessibility

A destination's accessibility (i.e., tourists' relative ease or difficulty in reaching a destination), for instance, has long been recognized as a major driving force of touristic attractiveness (Kim, 1998). Medlik (2003) stated that "In tourism, *accessibility* is a function of distance from centers of population, which constitute tourist markets and of external transport, which enables a destination to be reached. It is measured in terms of the distance travelled, the time taken, or the cost involved." (Medlik, 2003, p. 273). The Danish that did not visited the country, from the survey, were also asked to rate how appealing is accessibility for them in the pre-visit stage.

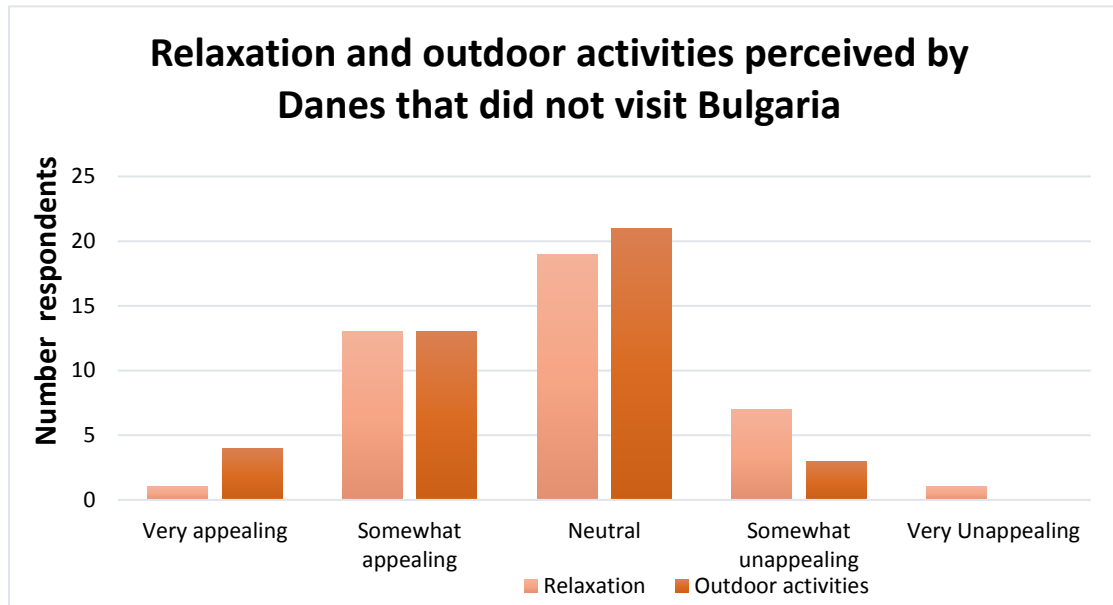
The most Danes believed that this matter is *neutral* (18 respondents), 12 respondents perceive the accessibility as *somewhat unappealing*, 9 answers for *somewhat appealing*, and both *very appealing* and *very unappealing* had one answer each (Fig. 12). The results can be interpreted as Danes that did not travel to Bulgaria are not aware how easy or difficult is to reach the destination. Furthermore, another explanation for these results is the fact that the most of Danes questioned did not think in advance about travelling to Bulgaria for holiday and they thought about situation during the survey.



*Fig. 12 Accessibility perceived by Danes that did not travel to Bulgaria*

## 6. Relaxation and outdoor activities

Stueve et al. (2002) estimated that natural areas, and their closely associated local cultures, and the various related tourist, recreational and leisure activities, contribute around half the total economic activity attributable to the travel and tourism sector. Along with the other aspects mentioned relaxation and outdoor activities are also influencers in forming the destination image which also influence the tourists' perception towards the destination. As being important factors in shaping one's individual perception, the survey respondents that did not visited Bulgaria before were ask how they feel about relaxation and the possible outdoor activities that they can enjoy while travelling to Bulgaria. As in the cases of the aspects discussed above the majority of Danes perceived these two aspects as being *neutral*, 19 respondents for *relaxation*, respectively 21 for *outdoor activities*, proving once again that Danes that did not travel to Bulgaria have a weak image about the country (Fig. 13).



*Fig. 13 Relaxation and outdoor activities perceived by Danes that did not visit Bulgaria*

## 7. Price and Value

The last aspect questioned pre-visit was related to price and value perceptions among Danes towards Bulgaria. The price level of tourism products and services is another attribute associated with destination perception (Awaritefe, 2004; Jayaraman, Ching, & Wooi, 2010; Chen & Tsai, 2007; Albayrak, Caber, & Aksoy, 2010). In other words, it can be said that affordable prices may lead to positive perceptions of a destination.

When destinations are perceived to provide the best value for the money, this implies that they are inexpensive (Kotler & Gertner, 2002) and are regarded positively if they meet tourists' expectations at an affordable price. Similarly, we want to investigate the price factor with items covering the money value of food and beverages (F&B), accommodation, and tourism activities, and its relationship with destination perception. As seen the price and value aspect is also significant in constructing a perception towards a destination. Considering that this study aimed to discuss the differences between pre- and post-visit perception among Danish population towards Bulgaria, the respondents from the survey that have not visited the country were also asked to rate how appealing is the destination in regard to price and value for money. The

majority of the respondents considered the destination *neutral* (15 responses), 12 considered it *somewhat appealing*, 10 *very appealing*, on Danes perceived the aspect as *somewhat unappealing*, while none of the respondents perceived the price and value for money as *very unappealing* (Fig. 14). By analyzing the data, it can be seen that Danes that completed the survey and have not visited Bulgaria, have a slightly good image concerning the price and value, considering Bulgaria as being an affordable country for a holiday.

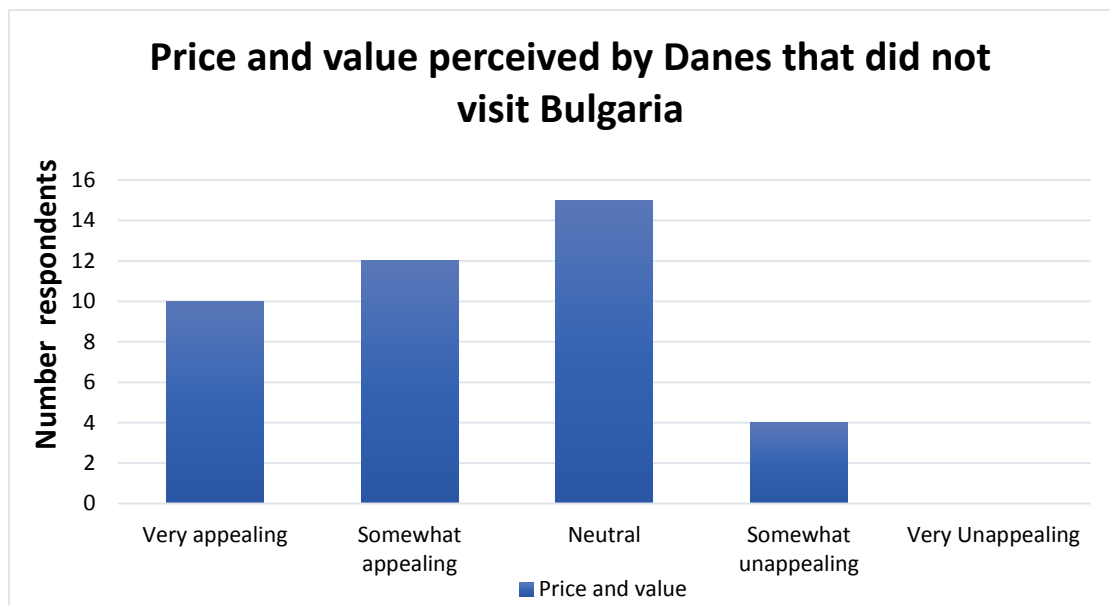


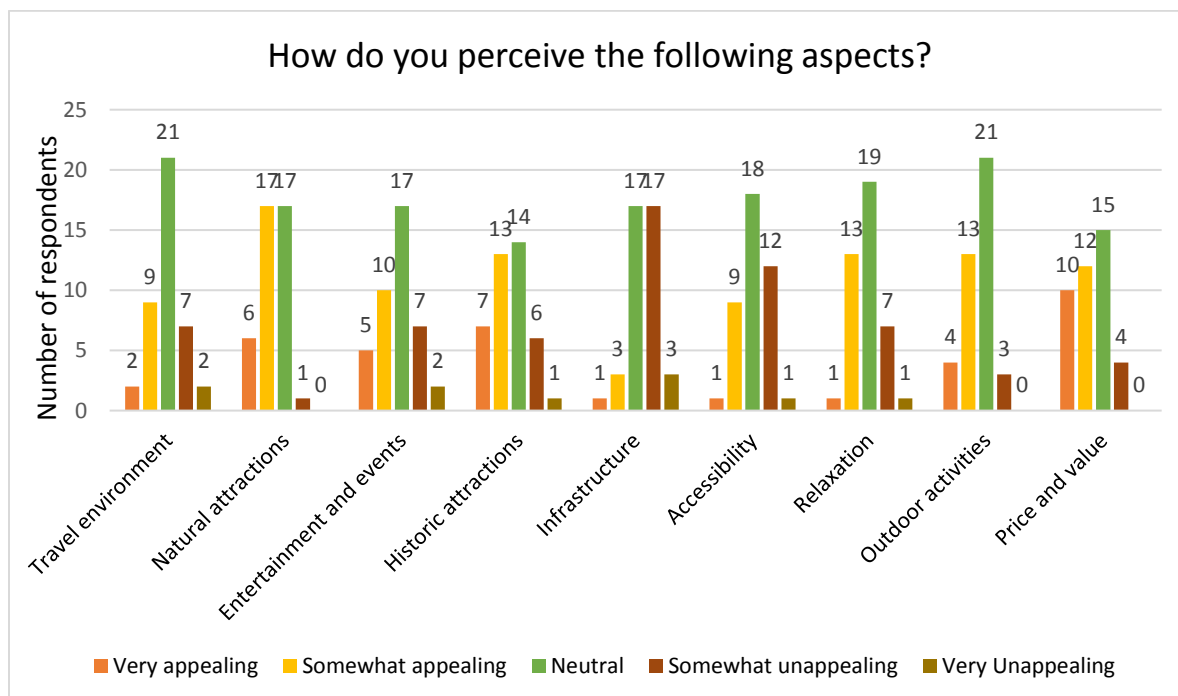
Fig. 14 Price and value perceived by Danes that did not travel to Bulgaria

## Summary

All the aspect mentioned were considered as being neutral in terms of appeal by the majority of respondents that did not visited Bulgaria, fact that supports the idea that Danish tourist do not have a very clear image about Bulgaria destination. Respondents had a very close opinion for “Natural attractions” aspect the score “neutral” and “somewhat appealing” was even between the respondents with 17 answers each considering the natural potential of the country exists. On the other hand, “Infrastructure” aspect scored 18 answers for “somewhat unappealing” suggesting that respondents believed there is room for improvement when it comes to touristic infrastructure.

As seen in the data analysis most Danish have a neutral pre-visit perception towards Bulgaria as a travel destination as they do not have a strong image about the country. As recognized in the academic literature, the choice of a particular destination over others is influenced by more positive and stronger destination image (Gartner, 1994). One example of the importance of having information as well as of having a perception towards a destination is also stated by a survey respondent that did not visited the country, where the respondent acknowledges that *“Bulgaria is definitely on my list of places to visit, but I still need to look further into the planning before I go. After having dealt with the planning, I would have a better understanding of the destination and what appeals/does not appeal to me”*.

The survey respondents that did not visited the country were asked to rate how appealing certain aspects of Bulgarian tourism are. As can be seen in the chart below (Fig.15) Danish people that did not visit yet the country do not have a clear perception prior visiting based on the fact the majority of the aspects mentioned were rated as being neutral perceived.



*Fig. 15 How Danes that did not travel to Bulgaria perceived the mentioned aspects*

As already presented, the Survey was the first method for data collection and it was filled out by 52 Danes, from which 11 people answered that they have visited Bulgaria before. After the Survey, the second method used to gather data was by conducting personal interviews with 10 Danes who already visited and also have filled out the Survey was in order to get a deeper understanding of their post-visit perception.

In the first part of the analysis, the aspects were discussed based on how Danes that did not visited Bulgaria perceive them in order to get a deeper knowledge of pre-visit perception among Danes tourists. Next, the same aspect will be discussed from the perspective of Danes that travel to Bulgaria to see how they perceived the country after they visited it. The information for the first part was based on the survey answers, while for the following part the personal interviews were used as a method for collecting the data for the analysis. As mentioned in the methodology, because of anonymity, the participants of the personal interviews will only be mentioned by their first name. The age and the occupational statuses of the interviewees are mentioned in order to justify the diversity among the interviewees: Line (24) – Job seeking, Kasper (23) – Student, Daniel (27)- Student, Brian (34)- IT Network Administrator, Jakob (31) – Shop Assistant, Martin (32)- Human Resource Manager, Rasmus (28)- Family advisor in Aalborg Kommune, Julie (26)- Administrative employee, Hanne (43)- Owner of a small business, Stine (25)- Student.

#### IV.2.2 Post-visit perception analysis

##### 1. Travel environment

As travel environment refers also to how safe and secure environment is, to how clean and tidy is the environment, how friendly and helpful local people are or how restful the atmosphere is. In order to get more knowledge about how Danes perceived cleanliness, hospitality and safety they were asked during the personal interview to say how they perceived them before visiting as well as if their opinion towards these aspects changed after the actual visit. Regarding the 'cleanliness' the majority of the interviewees have indicated it as being fair or poor. 'The cleanliness was ok for an Eastern European country', *'Not clean enough for a European union country.... for example, Denmark or Netherlands, where you will hardly see garbage on the*

*streets.’, Sadly, I perceive the destination in a negative way regarding the cleanliness. It wasn’t very clean in Sunny beach. You could see trash thrown on the sand on many places”,* were some of the explanation given by the interviewees. In regard to how clean and tidy was the environment all the interviewees had the same perception both pre-visit and post-visit suggesting that they were expecting that the environment not too be very clean, and they had the same impression after their visit. The interviewees were also asked about their pre- and post-travel impressions about how friendly and helpful the local people are. The majority have pointed out that Bulgaria has a fair hospitality towards Danish tourists (4 people). Many of them have also pointed out that it was good (3 people) or even excellent (3 people) The participants presented that ‘people were smiling and welcoming towards me’, ‘locals were friendly’, ‘In major tourist spots, as Sunny beach it was low in my opinion, but in the rural areas, such as the small town Smolyan it was very good’. ‘I was not expecting the locals to be so hospitable and kind... that was a pleasant surprise, that I did not expected before my trip.’

The perception towards the travel environment in Bulgaria has changed before the actual visit from a neutral perception to a slightly positive one considering that most Danes that visited the country rated the travel environment as being *somewhat appealing* and based on their answers from the personal interviews.

## **2. Natural and cultural attractions**

The next two aspects that Danes were asked to talk about during the interviews were related to the natural and cultural attractions. As survey respondents that visited the country and Danes that participated into the personal interviews consists in the same sample, first they were asked in the survey to rate how appealing are for them the nine aspects that influence individual’s perception. Based on the fact that the samples for the population that did not visit the country and the population that visited were uneven, researchers decide to get a deeper understanding regarding Danes post-visit perception. Taking this into account, the nine aspects mentioned were discussed based on the answers from the survey as well as from the personal interviews.

The natural and cultural potential of the country was also rated by Danes that visited the country. Most of them perceived the natural attractions as being very *appealing* (4), *somewhat appealing* (3), *neutral* (3) and *somewhat unappealing* (1). Based on these answers the interviewees were asked to explain why they have a certain perception towards nature after visiting. The most words associated with the natural attractions were “*sea*”, “*mountains*”, “*beautiful*”, “*I was able to marvel at the nature and culture*” suggesting that they have a clearer image towards the destination after visiting. Regarding the cultural attractions, most Danes that visited Bulgaria perceived the cultural attractions as being *somewhat appealing* (5), *very appealing* (3), *neutral* (2) and *somewhat unappealing* (1). Also, they were asked in the interviews to give more details about why they perceive the cultural attractions like described above. Danes associated culture with “*historical buildings*”, “*interesting architecture*” or Bulgaria as being a “*historically rich*” country. A participant in the Interview, explained that his perception changed to positive, as he’s a person with interests towards history and after visiting the country he sees it as “*Eastern European country with very rich ancient history*”. A different one stated: “*My perception changed towards a better one. Nowadays, I perceive it as a country with very welcoming and friendly people.*”

After seeing the pre-visit perception towards the natural and cultural potential of Bulgaria and the post-visit ones there can be noticed some changes. Danes perception changed regarding these aspects from having a neutral post-visit perception which influenced them into having a weak image about the country to a positive post-visit perception where they become more aware of the country natural and cultural attractions which contributes to creating a stronger destination image perception.

Based on the already presented knowledge of how people form their image perception about a destination (Gunn,1988) it may be stated that during the first two stages were people form their organic as well as the induce image (pre-visit stage) they are not introduced about the natural and cultural richness of the country, which changes on the forth step on the image formation model which is the actual visit and the experience by themselves. Therefore, after the visit and returning home (post- visit) they modified the image and create a more clear and complex image



towards Bulgaria tourist destination. In the case of both natural and cultural potential, Danes that visited the country have a more positive image after visiting.

### 3. Entertainment and events

As entertainment and the events create experiential and memorable offerings (Pullman & Gross, 2004), they are also considered influential factors in construction a destination image perception. First interviewees rated how appealing are the event as well as the entertainment associated with Bulgaria after their visit by using the survey answers. The answers were the following: most of Danes that visited Bulgaria considered the aspect as being *somewhat appealing* (7), *very appealing* (2) and *neutral* (2). Considering that the sample for Danes that not visited the country (pre-visit perception) and the sample for those who visited were uneven, researchers decided to use a second method to collect data for post-visiting analysis by conducting personal interviews with the respondents from the survey that visited Bulgaria. In regard to this, one of the interviewee mentioned in his comments about the fact that he went to a rock music festival describing it as “*It was fun*” or “*we enjoyed the atmosphere*”. After his visit he perceived Bulgaria as being “*a good place to visit to enjoy some nice rock music*”.

As Danes situated in the first stage of destination image perception it can be said that Danes perceived the entertainment and the events in a neutral way as they do not know what to expect from a destination that did not travel and do not have enough information as they have a weak image perception towards the country ( pre-visit stage), while those that visited the country have a complex image by completing the last stage of construction of the destination perception (post-visit perception).

### 4. Infrastructure

As general infrastructure of a country can influence how tourists perceive the quality of their trip and their impression of the destination (Chen & Tsai, 2007), it was also an asset for this study to see how Danes that visited Bulgaria perceived the infrastructure destination after their visit. First, the Danes considered it as being *somewhat appealing* (4) or *neutral* (4), while 2 Danes perceived *somewhat unappealing* and one believed infrastructure is *very unappealing*. More information

about infrastructure in the post-visit stage were extracted from the personal interviews where respondents referred both to the touristic infrastructure as well as roads “...in Sofia I saw old, ruining buildings and streets with many potholes and even a few begging people on the streets...”, suggesting that they share similar perceptions towards Danes in the pre-visit stage.

In the pre-visit stage, Danes that did not visited the country perceived the Bulgarian infrastructure as being somewhat unappealing, and in the post-visit stage after their experience Danes that visited had the same perception towards infrastructure as they associate the aspect with words like “old-fashioned buildings”.

## 5. Accessibility

As Danes that did not travel to Bulgaria are not aware how easy or difficult is to reach the destination, when it comes to the post-visit perception about how accessible the country for Danes was, those that traveled had no comments regarding this aspect in the conducted interviews. Based on the answers from the survey Danes that visited Bulgaria perceived accessibility as being somewhat appealing (5) or neutral (4) suggesting that they believed Bulgaria is a relatively easy country to reach for having a holiday.

## 6. Relaxation and outdoor activities

As already presented those aspects hold a great importance to tourist choice of a travel destination (Stueve et al., 2002). According to different authors, Relaxation and Outdoor activities are strongly connected and they refer to activities that are undertaken out of doors in places where tourists can access nature, green areas, water, etc. (e.g. Bell et al., 2007; Cordell et al., 1999; Stueve et al., 2002).

The 11 participants (who have visited Bulgaria) from the Survey were asked to indicate their perception regarding the aspects. The answers were as followed: the majority of the people perceive both aspect mainly as Somehow appealing, followed by people who see them as Very appealing and two people indicated that those aspects are considered to be ‘Neutral’ by them (Fig.16).

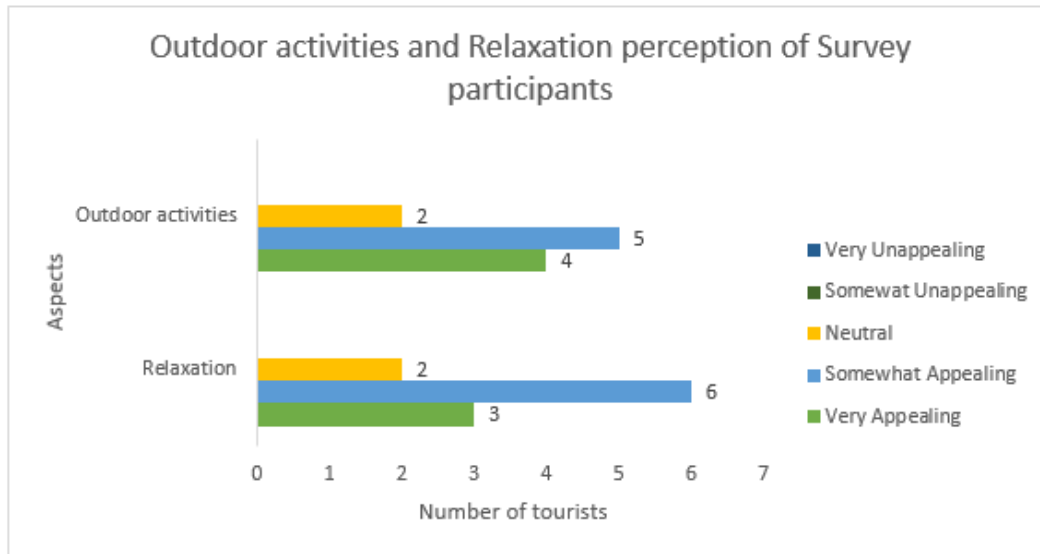


Fig. 16: Chart indicating the perception of Danish Survey respondents (who have visited Bulgaria) towards Outdoor activities and Relaxation aspects.

Therefore, it can be summed up that most of the Danish respondents to the Survey perceive those aspects in a positive way in the post-visit stage of their trips. Not even one person sees them in a negative way, which is important as it might suggest that the destination is able to offer activities/products, etc. (in regard to those two categories) that are satisfactory for the Danish tourists. More detailed explanations were presented from the Danish interviewees to the Personal Interviews. Numerous respondents used the adjective ‘relaxing’ and ‘very relaxing’ to describe how they perceive Bulgaria post-travel. Comments such as: ‘Regarding the relaxation, I see the country as a nice place for it. It was beautiful – sun, beach, nice people, parties...’; ‘I was able to relax and enjoy myself during my trip in Bulgaria. The destination provides with nice sunny weather, beaches, sea to swim in, nice food and cold beer – what else can a person want?’. It can be noted that the respondents connect this aspect with the ‘sun and sea’ opportunities that the destination is offering during the summer. Another respondent commented: *“I was not aware (during the pre-visit stage) of all the things you can do, like having a relaxing SPA or bungee jumping or rafting ...even wine tasting and many more activities. I think Bulgaria is a country that has lots to offer”*. This comment suggests that there might be a lack of information (marketing /WOM/eWOM, etc.) regarding the opportunities the destination has to offer and Danes who are

making their travel destination decision might not consider Bulgaria, as they don't know what to expect there in terms of activities they can practice.

Another interviewee shared that in terms of relaxation he doesn't perceive the destination in a positive (at the post-visit stage) way as: *'I was visiting during the summer, so it was very crowded with people – mostly tourists. This, I did not like, so I was not able to really relax.'* As already stated in the project researchers (e.g. Bachvarov, 1997; Grigorova & Racheva, 2012) have indicated that Bulgarian tourism is characterized with a high seasonality and concentration at the sea during the summer season, which leads to problems for the industry as the example above is indicating.

In conclusion it can be seen that Danes who have not yet visited the country perceive the two aspects mainly in a Neutral way, followed by Somewhat appealing. On the other hand, the ones who have visited shared that their post-visit perception is mainly Somewhat appealing and Very appealing. This differences in the perceptions, as already explained can be due to lack of information about the opportunities the destination has to offer.

## 7. Price and value

Price and value are a vital factor for many tourists while they chose a destination for their holidays. For instance, one of the interviewees of the Personal Interviews, stated that for her the most important factor while choosing a destination is the price needed for the vacation: *'I must say that currently the overall price is my main concern while thinking where to spend my vacations...'*. Similar statements were given by more interviewees, which supports the statement that this aspect is very important for the Danish people while considering Bulgaria as a potential travel destination.

In this regard the post-visit perception of the Danes visited Bulgaria towards this aspect will be examined and a definition of the term Perceived value needs to be made. As a definition for the term, Zeithaml (1988, p. 14) suggests that it can be explained as the consumer's "overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given." Moreover, the perceived value is connected to two dimensions – cognitive (cognitive) and

affective (emotional). Where the cognitive one refers to the rational and economic assessment of value made by tourists, such as quality value and price value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). The affective, or emotional dimension captures the emotions or feelings generated in travelers by tourism, such as emotional value or experiential value. Therefore, the overall perception is based on a combination of both dimensions, which means that it can be seen as a subjective matter (Eid & El-Gohary, 2014; Lee, Bendle, Yoon, & Kim, 2012; Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2007). As stated by Eid & El-Gohary (2014) perceived value is a subjective and dynamic construct that varies across different customers and cultures.

Moreover, it should be noted that the Danes who have visited Bulgaria might have difficulties to give precise information, based on the fact that they visited some months/years ago. Other researchers note this fact also and explained that it is not unusual for a customer to have difficulty remembering the exact price that he/she paid for a product or service. Instead, customers often encode prices in ways that are meaningful to them (Dickson and Sawyer 1985; Zeithaml 1988).

Firstly the 11 participants from the Survey were asked to indicate how they perceive this aspect (appendix 1), to which the answers stated: Very appealing by 6 people, Appealing by 4 people and Neutral by 1 person. Somehow unappealing and Very unappealing were not indicated. Therefore, it can be concluded the people see this aspect of destination Bulgaria in a positive way. In order for the authors to get a deeper understanding of the reasons behind those statements (very appealing, appealing, and neutral) more detailed explanations were gathered during the Personal Interviews. Most Danes described Bulgaria as 'cheap' destination, which was used as a positive description. Description of the destination, such as 'it was very cheap there – especially food and drinks and they were delicious. I love this fact about the country'; 'I will describe Bulgaria as a beautiful country with many cheap places to visit and explore' were given during the interviews. Those statement are important as the people might use them when they are sharing information about their trips to other people (word-of-mouth; electronic word-of-mouth) and might lead to more Danes seen Bulgaria as a potential travel destination. Even more those statements are a sign for a positive post-image perception of the country and might lead to future repeat visitation.

As already presented, the participants from the Survey that have not visited Bulgaria yet, perceived the aspect as mostly Neutral (15 people), followed by somehow appealing (12) and very appealing (10) and somewhat unappealing was chosen by 4 people. Dose results show that many Danes, even without visiting the country see the Value for money in a positive way (22 people who see the destination in a very appealing and somewhat appealing way), but also a big number of the participants in the Survey (10 people) don't know how to perceive the aspect, while a few see it in a negative way. Therefore, event though most of the participants have a positive pre-visit perception regarding the aspect, many of them have a Neutral perception, which is different from the perception of the people who have visited and experienced the destination on their own.

### Summary

As it can be seen from the chart, after the visit, the majority of the tourist that visited Bulgaria seen the different aspects as *Somewhat appealing*. Those results are showing peoples' satisfaction with the destination and it can be said that they are encouraging, as the destination image perceived post-visit may influence repeat visit in the future and positive spread of information about the destination (word-of mouth/ electronic word of mouth) (Chon, 1991; Court & Lupton, 1997; Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Joppe, Martin, & Waalen, 2001).

Again, it needs to be noted that each person has its own views and criteria about each aspect, therefore those results are subjective. Even more, an important fact is that one single person can have many and different images of the tourist destination after the actual visit. As some authors have pointed out when individuals actually visit a place, the image that they form after the visit tends to be more realistic and more complex than the pre-visit one (Pearce, 1982; Phelps, 1986).

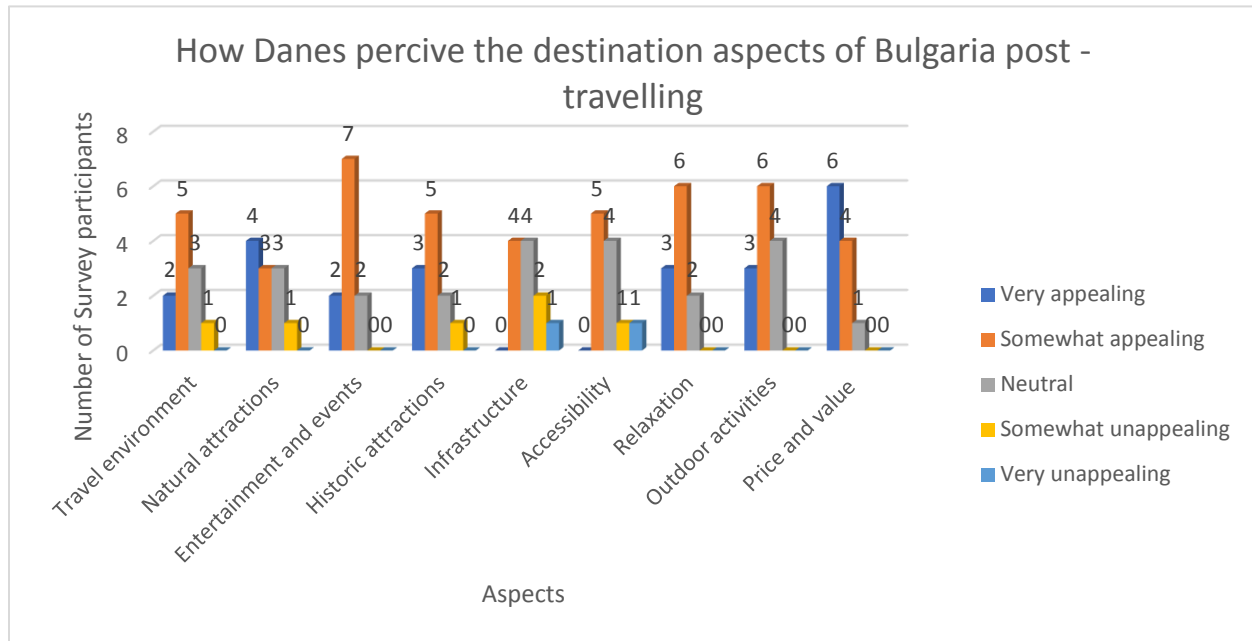


Fig. 17 How Danes that visited Bulgaria perceived the mentioned aspects (survey)

### IV.3 Expert opinion towards destination image

The secondary image sources fulfil three basic functions in destination choice: to minimize the risk that the decision entails, to create an image of the destinations, and to serve as a mechanism for a later justification of the choice (Mansfeld, 1992). In this regard a significant information source as well as a marketing channel influencing destination image and choice, particularly for international destinations, is travel intermediaries such as tour operators and travel agents (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001). Moreover, those travel intermediaries can be considered as a formal as well as social (personal) information source due to their promotional and consultative efforts. In that respect, they contribute to the formation of induced images by the travelers in the active information search process (Gartner, 1993; Gartner & Bachri, 1994).

As previously mentioned, travel agencies are a main information source in the selection of a tourism destination, those is based on many factors, one of which is that they can provide not

only information but also an advice (Baloglu & Mangalolu, 2001; Gartner, 1993; Gartner & Bachri, 1994; Nolan, 1976). For instance, as suggested by Lawton and Page (1997) travel agents are opinion formers for their clients, their images and knowledge about destinations will have a significant impact on potential travelers' vacation decision-making process.

Looking furthermore into the literature it can be noticed that, during the 1990s, different researches showed that first-time travelers mostly rely on professional sources (tour operators, travel agents, etc.) in their information search behavior (Bitner & Booms, 1982; Snepenger, Meged, Snelling & Worral, 1990). But after the emerging of the electronic ways of communication (Internet) many potential tourists are forming their initial perceptions based on information provided there (Wenger, 2008; Gallarza, Saura, & Garcia, 2001). Therefore, many researches have emerged and examined the advantages and disadvantages of the two different information sources. Frías, Rodríguez and Castañeda (2008) researched that destination image is worse when tourists use other sources of information, such as the Internet than when they use exclusively the travel agency, thus confirming the expected effects of information overload. Even more importantly, this effect is moderated by the tourist's message involvement. In this way, in situations of high message involvement, the effects of Internet-induced information overload make themselves. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that commercial sources have the purpose to 'sell' the destination, therefore images presented by them have a commercial purpose and may not be representing the reality entirely.

Keeping that information in mind, the authors conducted an Interview with a travel agency operating on the Danish market and 'selling' vacations to Bulgaria, along other destinations. Following the information given by the expert will be examined in order to help the authors to gain more knowledge and answer the problem formulation of the project.

As the travel agency 'Penguin' was founded in Denmark in 1989 (Penguin Travel, 2018) and is operating since then, we asked them 'if (in their experience) Danish people are aware of destination Bulgaria?'. The answer provided stated that Danes are '*not entirely*' aware of the travel destination Bulgaria. Furthermore, the expert explained this phenomenon with the



statement: *'They may know the basic characteristics of the country regarding its tourism, mostly related to coastal tourism, but they still have not discovered anything further'*. This statement confirms the knowledge that Bulgaria is mostly 'viewed' as a 'Sea and Summer' vacation and relates to the previous analysis that showed the places visited by the 11 Danes, who all have visited 'Beach areas' during their trip to the country. Therefore, as many researchers and practitioners have pointed out during the years, destination Bulgaria lacks marketing abilities, which is a serious problem, that needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, the expert was asked to share his opinion on 'how Danes perceive destination Bulgaria before visiting?'. To this question the expert answered that: *'... Danes perceive Bulgaria mainly as a summer destination, other than that they know it as a "cheap" destination...'*. As the description of the destination as 'cheap' was used also by the Danish respondents, the expert was asked to elaborate more on it. He stated that 'cheap' can be a negative or a positive aspect for the destination. He explained further that some Danes think of 'cheap' *'... in a positive way because they are able to afford longer vacations and stay in higher quality accommodations'*. Moreover, he shared that the prices of food and drinks and of many activities is cheaper than the price in Denmark, which is seen as a positive factor from Danes. On the other hand, the negative view is connected mostly to 'stereotypes' according to the expert, where *'... cheap means not good quality, not safe environment .... '*. In conclusion to this question it can be said that the pre-visit perception of Danes, according to the Travel agency employee is connected to 'Summer destination' and 'Cheap destination'. Which relates to the previous analysis of the Survey and the Personal Interviews with Danes. Moreover, the expert presented the information that people see 'cheap' in different way – negative or positive, which can be seen as a matter of subjectivity and different initial information sources.

After discussing the pre-visit image of the clients of the agency, a following question concerning the overall image (after the experience in the destination) was asked. *'Does the overall image of the destination changes after the visit and in which way?'* To which the interviewee answered that it changes mostly when the tourists 'escape' the popular, touristic spots at the beach areas because *'they know more or less what to expect' from those places*. But if they visit the urban

areas of the country, the expert explained that they *'...are often amazed by the relaxed atmosphere, by the nature. Also, many are amazed by the architectural and cultural richness of some areas of the country', which make the 'satisfied' after the return in Denmark.* As a sum up, the experts explained that satisfaction is based on peoples own 'preferences', which adds to the already presented knowledge regarding the subjectivity of the tourist's perceptions.

The expert was also asked to share if they receive 'feedback' from their clients and is it positive or negative in general, to which he presented that the majority of the clients give a 'positive' feedback after their trip.

Moreover, the following question was asked: *'We researched that a destination image is composed of different aspects, such as Cleanliness in the destination, Hospitality of the local people, Quality of life, Relaxation, Historical attractions, Personal safety. Are there some of those aspects that your clients find different after the trip from before the trip and share in their feedback?'* To which the expert answered: *'We got many positive comments regarding the hospitality of the people. Other than that people don't really know that Bulgaria is very historically and culturally rich, as I mentioned already, which they also point in their feedbacks. Personal safety is sometimes mentioned also in the comments in a negative way.'* When asked to elaborate, the expert explained that, in some cases it might be connected to a bad experience, such as *"stolen personal items of our clients, or lost luggage on the airport/bus stops and other similar situations, which made people see the country as not really safe"*, other times it is a result of the differences between expectations before visiting and the experience during the actual visit, according to the interviewee. Therefore, as already presented it is of a great importance for the pre-visit perception and beliefs to be similar to the reality of the destination, as if they (the pre-visit beliefs) are too high in comparison to the reality of the destination, it often leads to the disappointment of the tourists. (Papadimitriou and Gibson ,2008).

Examining the answers, it may be stated that 'Hospitality' and 'Historical aspects of the country' are the two aspects, which are perceived in a positive way in the post- visit stage, while 'Personal

safety' is perceived in a negative. It can be noted that those answers are similar to some of the answers given by the participants from the interview, but different from others.

'Does your clients express desire to visit the country again after their visit?' was asked to which the answer was positive. In addition, he explained that customers who revisit the country often seek to explore new places (than the places visited during their previous trip) to visit and new activities to participate into.

In conclusion it might be stated that the information presented by the Travel agency representative, confirmed the findings presented by the previous methods (Survey and Personal Interviews with Danish citizens). The interviewee provided the information that Danish people, are still mostly aware of Bulgaria only as a 'Sea and Summer' destination. Regarding the pre-visit perception of the Travel agency clients, the expert presented that Bulgaria is seen as a coastal destination and also as a 'cheap' destination. Moreover, it is a matter of subjectivity of the tourists if they will perceive 'cheap' as a good or bad quality. Regarding the post-visit perception, the agents shared that Danes, perceive some aspects of the destination differently from their pre-visit stage. Those aspects being 'Hospitality of the people', 'Historical aspects of the country' and 'Personal safety'. The first two aspects are perceived in a positive way after the visit, while before the visit the clients were not aware of them – it may be said that they perceived them in a 'Neutral' way before the visit, which confirms the results from the previous two methods of analysis (Survey and Personal Interviews). In a negative way, some of the Danish clients of the Travel agency perceive the aspect 'Personal safety' after the visit, as it might be connected to a personal 'bad' experience within the destination, or it might be a result of too high/different pre-visit expectation. As a main goal for marketers and practitioners is for their clients to be satisfied after their visit to the country and to repeat their visit in the future, the Travel agency confirmed that many Danish clients of the agency express desire to return to the destination in the future. And when a repeat visit actually occurs, Danes are willing to explore new places and forms of tourism of Bulgaria.

## V. Conclusion

The aim of the current project was to research if there are any; and compare the differences of Danish people perception towards Bulgaria in the pre and post visit stage of their travels. Even though the uneven numbers of respondents (pre and post visit) of the Survey did not allow a real comparison, a table will be presented below indicating the perception of the 9 aspects based on the majority of the respondent's answers in order to illustrate the differences between pre and post visiting perception towards destination Bulgaria.

Aspect	Pre-visit Perception of Survey respondents	Post-visit Perception of Survey respondents
Travel Environment	Neutral	Somewhat appealing
Natural attractions	Somewhat appealing/ Neutral	Very appealing
Entertainments and Events	Neutral	Somewhat appealing
Historic attractions	Neutral/Somewhat appealing	Somewhat appealing
Infrastructure	Neutral / Somehow unappealing	Somehow appealing/Neutral
Accessibility	Neutral	Somewhat appealing/ Neutral
Relaxation	Neutral	Somewhat appealing
Outdoor Activities	Neutral	Somewhat appealing
Price and Value	Neutral/ Somewhat appealing	Very appealing

Table 2: Differences between pre-visit and post-visit perception of Danish people (Survey respondents) towards different aspects of destination Bulgaria.

The answers from the Danish Survey Participants of the current project indicated that: most Survey participants indicated that their perception towards many of the aspects is 'Neutral', which changes to 'Somewhat appealing', based on the answers from the Danes who have visited Bulgaria. Those aspects being: Travel Environment, Entertainments and Events, Accessibility, Relaxation, Outdoor Activities. Other aspects stand in the middle between Neutral and Somehow

appealing (even or almost even numbers of respondents indicated both answers), which the people who have visited already indicate as Somewhat appealing (Entertainments and Events) and Very appealing (Natural attractions, Price and Value). Although the respondents who have visited the country, perceive the Infrastructural aspect in no different way. What is important to be mention is the fact that no aspect was described as negative from the Danes after visiting the country. Those answers may give a suggestion of how Danes perceive the country's tourism aspects. Therefore, they might help marketers and researchers see what their marketing strategies are missing, and respectively Danish people are not informed about (regarding tourism aspects).

As the most Danes that answered to the survey and did not visit the country had a neutral perception it is important to created awareness among Danes towards Bulgaria as being a tourist destination. Furthermore, by creating awareness it might also increase the chances as a larger number of Danish people may visit the country. Also, considering the findings from the analysis Danes that visited the country had a clearer image about the country after experiencing their holidays, than those who have not visited yet that had a weak image about Bulgaria in the pre-visit stage of perception. The differences in the perceptions of the destination image attributes between pre-visitors and post-visitors observed in this study reflect findings from some previous studies (e.g. Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). As an example, the perception of Bulgaria having the natural attractions and price& value aspects as being attractive for most of the respondents, while infrastructure was scored not as being somewhat appealing. This should draw attention to the destination managers into a sense of contentment but to improve their infrastructure that will lead into more favorable designation image for Bulgaria.

From a practical point of view, a better understanding of the aspects which influence tourists' pre- and post-visit change in image will help operators from the tourist sector and the public institutions responsible for the commercial management of the destinations to project an image that is as close to reality as possible and to meet the various needs of tourists in general. Particularly, this study can help Bulgarian's DMOs to find a more suitable way of marketing the country for the Danish tourist market. Therefore, the promotion of destination must be based on

a positioning that attracts tourists whose motivations are in line with what the destination offers. Practically, these findings suggest product diversification and improvement in the destination in order for the repeat visitors to experience something new that will lead into continuous destination improvement with subsequent visitations.

The selection of tourism destination, as presented in the literature review chapter, is influenced by the image that a certain destination has in the tourists' minds. Hence, the images held by individuals in the marketplace are essential to a destination's marketing favorable outcome. Tasci, Gartner and Cavusgil (2007) mention that nowadays, the results of tourism image research are used by DMO's to conduct intelligent destination marketing, meaning that important decisions concerning planning, development, positioning and so on depend on these results.

## **V.1 Future research**

The intent of this study was to investigate the pre- and post- visit perception among Danish tourists towards Bulgaria and not to extend the findings to the larger heterogeneous population. Furthermore, the results are not generalizable because of the small sample size used. Nonetheless, similar study can be replicated in the future for other groups of tourists in Europe who are important source markets for Bulgaria, such as Romania, Greece, Turkey, Germany and Serbia. Our study has focused on nine factors used in destination perception studies. The inclusion of other factors applicable in Bulgaria's context should also be considered in future research of destination evaluation. Given that Bulgaria is a vast and diverse country, future research could examine region-specific destination image by including tourist activities related to ecotourism or cultural/heritage tourism. As noted in Fakeye and Crompton (1991) and Weaver, Weber, and McCleary (2007), previous travel experience, the number of visits made to a specific destination and trip duration can have an impact on destination evaluation. These factors should be considered in future research on destination perception.

This study is contributing to the expansion of the existing literature on Danish tourists and Bulgaria's image by examining tourists' pre- and post-visit perception of destination Bulgaria. This research also revealed areas where perceptual changes occurred and offered implications for destination management and marketing. The study raised several issues, which are worth further investigation including a number of areas of low performance such as cleanliness, quality of life as well as personal safety, where needed to be addressed and improved.

Although the inbound Danish market to Bulgaria has been developing strongly in the past, future growth is not guaranteed if Bulgaria does not respond to the intensified competition, the unethical business practices in the market, and the requirements of the Danish tourists.

## V.2 Limitations

An important limitation of the present study is the sample used, namely, only Danish tourists that visited Bulgaria. The focus on the Danish tourists was a stark delimitation, although it helped us to explore certain factors that form the image of potential tourists' as well as tourists that already visited the country. Hence, future research should aim at a broader population and/ or sample size.

Another limitation, which needs be mentioned here, is about the mere identification of the image held by both groups of tourists, that did not visit the country and those who have visited already, and also the identification of the sources, from which respondents' image formation towards the destination was biased. Essentially, the present research highlights the factors, upon which the respondents have expressed their image of Bulgaria, also indicating the major sources, from which they form the destination image.

Despite the study being informative to destination marketers and academia, the study had several limitations that should be considered in extending the study results. Firstly, from the fact that the study was carried in an East-European country, Bulgaria in particular, the image change for the different destination attributes observed, it can be said that this study should not imply that other studies undertaken in different context should be the same. Since destination image

varies with destinations, then logically different results from different destinations might differ from those observed in this study. Moreover, from the fact that destination image varies from time to time for the same destination (Tasci & Holecek, 2007), the results from this study undertaken for the particular period (i.e. 2018) should not imply that the results will hold forever for the country. Future research could be directed towards complimenting this study by extending destination image comparison in other contexts.



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## Appendices

### **Appendix 1.1**

#### **Survey questions**

1.How often do you travel for holiday?

Denmark	Europe	Worldwide
Few times a year	Few times a year	Few times a year
Once a year	Once a year	Once a year
Every few years	Every few years	Every few years
Never	Never	Never

2.In what type of holiday are you interested in?

- \* cultural tourism
- \* ecological tourism
- \* sea tourism
- \* mountain/ sky tourism
- \* balneology, spa& wellness
- \* adventurous tourism
- \* rural tourism
- \* camping tourism

3. Would you consider visiting Bulgaria for the types of tourism mentioned in the previous question?  
Please explain why.

Yes,.....



No,....

4. Do you have a positive or a negative image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination?

\* Positive

\* Negative

\* neutral

5. How do you perceive the followings aspects of visiting Bulgaria for holiday?

Aspects	Very appealing	Somewhat appealing	Neither appealing	Nor unappealing	Somewhat unappealing	Very unappealing
Travel environment						
Natural attractions						
Entertainment& events						
Historic attractions						
Infrastructure						
Accessibility						
Relaxation						
Outdoor activities						
Price& value						

\*travel environment (e.g. safe and secure environment, clean and tidy environment, friendly and helpful local people)

\*natural attractions (scenic mountains, scenery and natural attractions, parks, lakes)

\* entertainment& events (shows, exhibitions, cultural events and festivals, nightlife, entertainment)

\* historic attractions (history and heritage, vintage buildings)

\* infrastructure (restaurants, shop facilities, accommodation)

\* accessibility (traffic flow, parking information, access to areas, affordable public transportation)

\* relaxation (spa, outdoor activities: boating, fishing, hiking, camping, golfing, hunting)

\* price& value (food, accommodation, good value for money, attractions and activities, good bargain shopping).

6. Please rate your overall image of Bulgaria as a tourist destination as scaled below:

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I think Bulgaria offers me nothing as a destination.					
I think Bulgaria has a favorable overall destination image.					
Bulgaria has a unique destination image.					
I think Bulgaria is a popular destination.					

7. On a scale of 1-10 (1- Poor, 10- Excellent) how do you perceive the following aspects of Bulgaria to be rated as:

Cleanliness

Hospitality

Quality of life

Relaxing

Historical

Personal safety

8. Do you consider Bulgaria as a holiday destination for you?

Yes

No

9. Have you visited Bulgaria already?

Yes

No

10. What influenced your image prior to your visit?

- \* friends/ family
- \* travel agencies
- \* social media

11. Did your overall image of Bulgaria changed after the visit? Please explain why.

- \* positive
- \* negative
- \* neutral

12. Please rate your overall image of Bulgaria post-visit:

Aspects	Very appealing	Somewhat appealing	Neither appealing	Nor unappealing	Somewhat unappealing	Very unappealing
Travel environment						
Natural attractions						
Entertainment& events						
Historic attractions						
Infrastructure						
Accessibility						
Relaxation						
Outdoor activities						
Price& value						

13. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

- \*yes
- \* no
- \* haven't thought

14. Would you recommend the destination to your friends/ family?

\* yes

\*no

15. Specify your age:

\* 18-24

\* 25-34

\*35-44

\* 45 +

16. Are you:

Male

Female

17. Please write any comments if you have

## Appendix 1.2

### Personal Interviews Transcript

1. Line

1.Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

Yes, my name is Line and I'm 24 years old, female from Denmark. Currently living in Copenhagen.

2. What is your current occupation?

At the moment I'm unemployed ... I'm a job seeker.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

I must say that currently the overall price is my main concern while thinking where to spend my vacations ... and the price pretty much depend on the location, the further from Denmark – the more expensive. So, price and location.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

Sunny Beach.

- Could you explain more about your answer?

Maybe because I visited it ... and I'm connecting it to my country in a way, because of the TV show and all that. But, I'm not saying it in a negative way, I had a great time there.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

Hmm... hot weather. It was such a nice and sunny weather when I visited. Also, it was very cheap there – especially food and drinks.

6. When did you visit Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited in the summer of 2016 and I was at Sunny beach.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness - Sadly, I perceive the destination in a negative way regarding the cleanliness. It wasn't very clean in Sunny beach. You could see trash thrown on the sand on many places.

- Hospitality - Bulgarian people were extremely nice and welcoming. I am very pleased regarding this aspect.

- Quality of life – I was not able to really understand if it's good or bad. Maybe because Sunny beach was so crowded with tourists from everywhere that are partying and enjoying their holidays that I did not really 'grasp' the normal

lifestyle of Bulgarian people.

- Relaxation – Regarding the relaxation, I see the country as a nice place for it. It was beautiful – sun, beach, nice people, parties .... I was able to relax there.

- Historical - Also positive about the historical attractions. I visited a nice church there that looked very old and I liked it.

- Personal safety – I don't have a negative or positive thought regarding that. During my trip I did not have any problems, but we were a big company, so I was not really scared at all. I don't know how it's going to be if I was alone ....

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

I was not expecting the locals to be so hospitable and kind ... that was a pleasant surprise that I did not expect before my trip. Other than that, nothing made me question my initial thoughts about the country.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

I see the part of Bulgaria which I visited pretty advanced and overall my holiday experience was satisfactory.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said “Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home.”

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I had a negative image, influenced mostly by social media. I was reading these online newspaper articles about Bulgarian people and culture and I can say I did not have a very good impression about the country ...especially because it has a high level of corruption.

Is that the only reason you have this strong negative image towards Bulgaria?

Actually...no. I was watching this TV show “Sommer in Sunny Beach” where they showed young people partying, getting drunk and so on. I can say that I am more a conservative type and I am not into this kind of life.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

As I was saying before... my perception was influenced mostly by social media.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series ‘Sommer in Sunny Beach’ (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

No, but I’ve heard about it from some of my friends.

-What is your attitude towards it? Do you think it’s showing the ‘reality’ of Sunny beach?

Well, as I have never really watched it myself, I can’t really say. From what I heard from my friends, they are showing endless parties and drunk people behaving reckless all the time. What I’ve experienced in Sunny beach is kind of similar, but it was not so reckless. We had parties, and we had drinks, but we also had a relaxing, quite days and nights.

11. Would you consider the destination again?

For now, I don’t plan to visit it. But not because I didn’t like it, but because I like to explore new places. Maybe someday in the future.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

I shared my views and experiences of Sunny beach with my friends and family. I recommend it to young people who want to go on a nice summer vacation to relax and party at the same time. But I would not recommend it to let's say my grandparents .... It's not a place for everybody, as I see it.

## 2. Kasper

1. Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

I'm Kasper and I am a 23 years old male from Aalborg.

2. What is your current occupation?

I am currently a student in Aalborg.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

Hm, the price is important, as I am a student and I have a budget that need to keep in mind.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

It's a picture of Golden sands – the place where I spend most of my vacation in Bulgaria.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

Apart from Golden sands, I remember the Balkan music and the nice people.

- Could you explain us in a few more details about the people – are you talking about the local people or everybody you met at Bulgaria?

Yes, I was talking mainly about the local people, but also the international tourists that I met at Golden sands were very friendly and we had a great time and lots of parties. I really liked the receptionists at the hotel where we were staying – they were locals and were very friendly.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited a few years ago to Golden sands and Sofia.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness - Golden sands was pretty clean. But Sofia was not and the pollution in the air was bad, but I guess for such huge city it is normal. So, I would say that I stand in the middle – I saw both sides.

- Hospitality – as I said, it was good. I'm positive about it.

Can you give us some examples of why you think hospitality was good?

As I told you everybody were nice, especially the hotel employees left a very good impression.

- Quality of life - again Golden sands was ok but in Sofia I saw old, ruining buildings and streets with many potholes and even a few begging people on the streets, so again I don't have a clear opinion about the quality of life.

- Relaxation – I was visiting during the summer, so it was very crowded with people – mostly tourists. This, I did not like, so I was not able to really relax. Next time if I visit Bulgaria for a summer vacation, I will stay at other, smaller cities on the coast and I believe it will be better.

-Historical – Don't have an opinion regarding this aspect. I visited for the beaches and the parties. I was not interested at learning the history of the country and visiting the historical places.

Personal safety – Again, I will say that it was too crowded. People did not respect your personal space on the beach, which made me feel uneasy, unable to relax and in a way scared that somebody will step on me at some point. Other than that, I will mention again the problems with the old buildings and the potholes, which seems dangerous to me.

So, do you see this aspect of the destination in a negative way after your visit?

Yes, I perceive it now, after my visit, as being negative.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

Not really, mainly because I didn't have any expectations. My knowledge of the country was not a lot ... I knew about the Sunny beach situation and I've heard that it's a cheap place to visit.... that's it – I didn't know what to expect.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

I will describe Bulgaria as a beautiful country with many cheap places to visit and explore. But also, as a destination that is somehow unsafe to me. Overall, it a country that worth visiting.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I didn't have a clear image of Bulgaria, so I believe my perception was neutral.



-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

As I didn't know much about the country I can't say that my perception was really influenced by any of those aspect you mentioned.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation )

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

No, I did not.... It's quite old, I think. I heard about it years ago ... don't remember which year it was on TV.

-You say, that you have heard about it. So, could you tell us what is your attitude towards it?

I don't rally have any attitude towards it. I heard about it but decide not to watch it because it's not important for me to know what they are showing. I prefer to go there and explore by myself.

11. Would you consider the destination again?

Yes, I would like to. Because of the Balkan music and the very funny and welcoming people. Although, I will have to pay attention to my safety!

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

Yes, to those of my friends who are willing to enjoy all the pluses and minuses that I mentioned above.

3. Daniel

1.Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

My name is Daniel and I am 27 years old, male.

2. What is your current occupation?

Student at Aalborg University

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

The location is the most important for me. I like to explore new countries, new places, so it's important to choose a new place to visit. Also, it's important to fit the location with the duration of my holiday. For example, if I have more than a week, I travel Europe, it's less than that, I stay in Denmark.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

Definitely Sunny beach. I think a lot of us (Danes) are connecting Bulgaria to it. And I visited it, so I also have the memories from there.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

As a big football fan, I connect the country with Berbatov\*. Also, after the visit I can say that Bulgarian food is so delicious, and I miss it – the Bulgarian yogurt, and the traditional salad 'Shopska' were my favorite.

\*Dimitar Berbatov is a Bulgarian professional footballer. He played for international teams, such as Bayer Leverkusen and Manchester United.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

Visited last summer. Me and some friend travelled to Sunny beach and Sofia.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness – It was relatively clean. The Black sea water was crystal clear, which was the most important for me, as I love to swim. Other than that, I saw some trash here and there, but it was not a problem for me.

- Hospitality - I must say that locals were not very friendly towards us. What made me a negative impression was that, as we visited with a Bulgarian friend, one time the waitress was only speaking Bulgarian, making our friend translate our orders, instead of talking directly to us. I thought it was disrespectful.

- Quality of life - it was not as good as in West Europe. I think here we have a better standard, better quality of life than people in Bulgaria. I learned that they work more hours than us and generally got payed less than the average here, which is sad.

- Relaxation – Very positive. I was able to relax and enjoy myself during my trip in Bulgaria. The destination provided me with nice sunny weather, beach, sea to swim in, nice food and cold beer – what else can a person want?

- Historical – There is a lot to find out about history in Bulgaria. Especially Sofia has numerous cathedrals, churches, and monuments. If a person is interested in those, I recommend the country.

- Personal safety - This aspect of the country was very bad. There were street dogs everywhere, which is very dangerous. Other than that, I was warned by my Bulgarian friend to watch my belongings all the time, because there are thieves.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

Yes, for some of them, but I really did not have a very strong image of the country before my visit. What I was not expecting for sure were all the street dogs... they were dangerous. On the other hand, I was amazed by the historical richness and especially by the cathedrals in Sofia, they were enormous and ancient looking.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

Ehm... I think Sunny Beach was very nice, it was very touristic, and we had nice weather.

According to your words, you had a nice holiday, so do you perceive the destination in a positive or a very positive way?

I would say very positive as I would like to revisit the country.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I did not have any. Before I decided to go to Bulgaria for my summer holiday I did not have a positive or a negative image about the country.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

I asked some of my friends that travelled already, but they had slightly different opinions. It happened the same with the information I found online so I decided not to take them into consideration, so I can have my own perception after my visit.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what

really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

No, I did not....

11. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

Yes, I would like to. Sunny Beach was really great.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

I would recommend sunny beach for a nice summer party holiday.

4. Brian

1. Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

Hello! I'm Brian and I am 34, male.

2. What is your current occupation?

I work as an IT network administrator.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

For me it is location and accommodation first. I take the price later in consideration.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

Ha-ha! I must say that the first one is my girlfriend as she is Bulgarian, after that it's Sunny Beach as we were there on a vacation and it was great.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

As my vacation was in Sunny Beach I connect it with lots of parties and cheap alcohol, but also because of my girlfriend I've experienced many aspects of the culture.

Can you elaborate on these aspects?

For example, my girlfriend showed me different traditions mostly during holidays, like Christmas and Easter.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

We stayed mostly in Sunny Beach, but also visited Sofia, Plovdiv, Nesabar. That was last summer.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness – It was quite clean. I don't remember something in particular to bother me.
- Hospitality - Bulgarians are very warm and friendly and they take good care of their tourists and I was very satisfied.
- Quality of life – I don't have a strong opinion about it as we stayed in a resort in Sunny Beach which was mostly touristic spot and I don't have a vision about how is the quality of life for Bulgarian people.
- Relaxation – Our time in Bulgaria was very relaxing...we enjoyed the sea as well as the parties. Also, Plovdiv and Sofia were great for city-walk and shopping. Therefore, I see Bulgaria as a perfect place for relaxation
- Historical – Yes, this aspect was a surprise for me. We saw some nice museums and churches. Also, we visited Colosseum in Plovdiv which was amazing. I am pleasantly surprised about this and I would love to explore more about this side of the country.
- Personal safety - I didn't experience anything unusual, so I see it as a normal destination regarding safety.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

I had no expectations before I went to Bulgaria, but... after the visit I was left with positive feelings. Everything was good as I already told you. Bulgaria is a perfect place for relaxing vacation, especially during the summer. The people are very welcoming...and... the country is historically rich.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

For me Bulgaria is a beautiful country with nice people that has a well-developed tourism industry, especially on the sea.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

As I said I did not have a strong perception. I just known that is an East European country visited mostly because of the Black Sea.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

Because only a few people I know visited the country... and... I also haven't research much...I did not know a lot about the country.

What was the information that your friends that visited shared with you?

They told me that the Black Sea is nice to visit.

Did your perception change after visiting Bulgaria and getting more knowledge about the destination?

Now I see the destination as a perfect place for holiday, and before I didn't know what to expect.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

Yes, but I saw it recently...after my trip...so I didn't influence my perception in any way.

Do you think the program is showing the "reality" of Sunny Beach?

Not really. Yes, Sunny Beach can be a place for wild parties...but also you can have a relaxing and quiet time there.

11. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

Yes, we planned to visit it very soon with my girlfriend. She would like to show me some mountain areas this time.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

Yes, I would, especially for people who love spending time on the beach and also who have interest in history.

## 5. Jakob

1. Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

My name is Jakob and I am 31 years old, male.

2. What is your current occupation?

I am working as a shop assistant.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

The location and accommodation are most important for me.

Would you explain why these two aspects are important to you?

I like to take few small trips in Europe during the year, so the location matters to me. About the accommodation, I prefer that the place where I am going to stay to be in the proximity of the main attractions of the city.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

Nice, cheap country.... There's not a specific picture of a place, person or something else that I hold... I just remember that it was nice and cheap country.

What do you mean by "nice"?

The weather was perfect, and the food was very good as well as cheap.

5. What do you associate Bulgaria with? Name at least 3 things.

Sunny Beach, cheap, good food.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited two years ago... I've seen Sunny Beach and Sofia.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness – As far as I remember... the streets and the beach were well-maintained, and the sea water was clean.

- Hospitality - People were very friendly and this is what I appreciate about Bulgarian people.

- Quality of life - I can't remember exactly how it was because I travelled two years ago.

- Relaxation – I remember I had a great time and I enjoyed my vacation in Bulgaria very much...laying on the beach and enjoying the water all day is a good way to relax.

- Historical – I had time to visit some of the historical attractions in Sofia, but I didn't visit all of them ... which I regret even today as the one I visited were amazing.

Do you remember what you visited?

Yes... I visited The National Palace of Culture which is an enormous building. I also visited the church Alexander Nevsky.

- Personal safety – Although I was travelling alone I did not experience anything unpleasant, so I think Bulgaria is safe.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

Hmm... Let me think...As I am an open-minded person I perceive every destination as an adventure and try to think out of the box.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

Nice country, with lots of sightseeing's. I had a nice holiday over there.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

European country famous for sea tourism.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

I tried to search information about the country mostly through Internet.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

No, I did not....

11. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

Maybe...in the future. But ... for now I prefer to discover other destinations.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

I would recommend it.

6. Martin

1.Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

I'm Martin and I have 32 years.

2. What is your current occupation?

I work in the Human Resource Department in private company.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

I enjoy practicing different outdoor activities, so it's important for me that the destination can offer those. I also like to go to interesting places in terms of the culture.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?



A destination with great opportunities for water sports.

Can you give us some example of the sports that you practiced?

I tried Jet skiing, scuba diving and wind surfing.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

I think I associate Bulgaria with culture, good food, and good nightlife.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited Bulgaria in august 2017, visiting Sunny Beach and Sofia.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness – In my opinion is was clean enough.
- Hospitality – All the people were incredibly helpful and generous with their time and advice.
- Quality of life –In my opinion people still judge Eastern European countries based on communism stereotypes, but what I experienced during my trip was different. I saw modern skyscrapers and highways, people were nicely dressed and driving good cars, which I perceive as a sign of good quality of life.
- Relaxation – I can say that in general my time spent there was a quality one and very relaxing as I spent most of the time enjoying the sun.
- Historical – As I also visited Sofia I can say I was impressed by the historical buildings from downtown, and how rich in history the country is.
- Personal safety - Hmm... I don't remember having any issues about my safety.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

I expected to be what it was.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

Not to dive into deep, but it was very fun time with lots of great things to see and a lot of fun memories made. The nightlife was also a lot of fun...especially in the are of Sunny Beach.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

It was positive. I tend not to judge before seeing something myself.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

It was already positive. But I knew someone from Bulgaria and hear a lot of stories from her. That also helped draw an image for me.

Did your perception change after visiting Bulgaria and getting more knowledge about the destination?

It definitely stayed positive. It was great, and I would definitely visit again if I get the chance.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

I have not seen it... although I heard about it, but I did not have time to watch at that time.

Do you think the program is showing the "reality" of Sunny Beach?

Sunny Beach definitely is "wild". But it all depends on the people's choices...because... I believe you can "leave your morals" at any place.

11. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

Yes... it was fun, and I had a great time.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

Yes. I'm sure people would have just as much fun as I had. As long as they like going out and spend time on the beach.

7. Rasmus

1. Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

Rasmus ... I have 28 years.

2. What is your current occupation?

Right now, I'm working as a family adviser in Aalborg Kommune.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

I think the most important aspects for me when I am planning a holiday are location and price. For me it doesn't matter the accommodation that much as long as I am travelling to visit discover new places and not to spend too much time in the accommodation.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

The capital...Sofia... I liked the atmosphere of the city and all the activities you can do there. Very nice place.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

I also think about its beautiful nature as well as cheap place and corruption at the same time.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited last year. I've been in Sofia, Smolyan, Plovdiv, Sunny Beach and Nesebar.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness – I was satisfied. It was clean.

- Hospitality -It was ok, I did not have any good or bad situation during my trip.

- Quality of life -Very bad. I saw a big difference between poor and rich. Poor people were begging for money on the streets, while reach were driving fancy cars.

- Relaxation – I had a great time.

- Historical – I visited a couple of interesting places.

- Personal safety – I would say it was better than I expected as nothing happened .

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

Ohhh... definitely Sunny Beach is not as scary and disgusting as I imagined it. But also, Sofia was a big surprise for me...very nice city. I was also noticing poor people begging for money which was very sad, and it ruined the perfect picture of the city a little bit.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

Nice country to visit.

According to your words, you had a nice holiday, so do you perceive the destination in a positive or a very positive way?

I would say positive.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I didn't know much about the country before the actual visit.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

I tried to get some information on social media.

Did your perception change after visiting Bulgaria and getting more knowledge about the destination?

I can say that yes. I decided to go there for second time this year, a lot of places remained unexplored.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

It's disgusting and shows a wrong image of Bulgaria and people tend to associate Sunny Beach image as being the same for the whole country.

11. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

Yes, I fell in love with Smolyan.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

Yes! It's cheap, different and beautiful.

8. Julie

1. Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

My name is Julie and I have 26 years.

2. What is your current occupation?

I'm working as an administrative employee.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

I put time on the first place. First of all, I need to have some free time to travel, after I will think about the location and price.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

I think is cheap alcohol everywhere, As you know here it's pretty expensive but there was so cheap.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

I remember I bought some souvenirs for my friends... cosmetics from roses. I also associate Bulgaria with Black Sea and that it was a little bit unsafe.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited two summers ago. I visited mostly beach areas such as Sunny Beach and Golden Sands and a city break in Sofia.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness - I think it was ok for a Eastern European country.
- Hospitality - I remember locals were very friendly.
- Quality of life – I don't have an opinion about that.
- Relaxation – Overall, I had some great time.
- Historical - I was impressed by the interesting architecture for the historical buildings.

Personal safety – I did not feel that safe... I had to take care of my belongings all the time.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

I didn't expect that the locals were going to be that friendly and willing to help you. The food was delicious, but I will mention again the safety issue, where you should always be aware of your stuff if you don't want to be robbed.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

Bulgaria is an affordable destination where you can find at any time what to do so you won't get bored if you choose it as your next holiday destination.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I had a neutral perception, although I heard both versions, that is unsafe and cheap and also that the beaches are nice, and locals are friendly too.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

Mostly my friends that travelled there and shared with me their stories.

Did your perception change after visiting Bulgaria and getting more knowledge about the destination?

My perception changed towards a better one. Nowadays, I perceive it as a very welcoming country with friendly people.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

It's showing mostly what my friends told me they experienced during their visit.

Do you think the program is showing the "reality" of Sunny Beach?

Partially yes. I believe that is a tv show so in order to attract more viewers it is "normal" to exaggerate on some parts a bit.

Does the program make you wanted to visit Sunny Beach?

I wanted to visit before watching the tv show, but I did not have time.

11. Would you consider the destination again?

Probably yes, because I want also to see the mountain areas. I would like to go hiking there and to enjoy the beautiful landscapes.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

Definitely, overall Bulgaria is a cool destination.

9.Hanne

1.Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

Yes, my name is Hanne and I'm 43 years old, female from Denmark.

2. What is your current occupation?

I'm an owner of a small business.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

Usually I am looking for attractions that the destination is offering and for the price, especially for plane tickets and accommodation.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

Well I know about the roses and Bulgarian yogurt. I associate Bulgaria also with The Seven Rila Lakes as well as the hospitality of the Bulgarian people who were amazingly nice and helpful.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

If I am remembering correctly Bulgaria has a variety of types of tourism as is a diverse country with sea, mountains, mineral springs, caves, big cities, small villages .... everything you can think of is there.... OH! I almost forgot ... the wine and food were amazing too.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

My first trip was a business trip, so I visited only Sofia, but I really liked it, so I visited again a few months later during the summer. I was in Plovdiv then I went to the sea and from there I went to Karlovo (a place famous with its roses) and some small villages. The nature and the weather were amazing, and people were very friendly and helpful.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness - Very clean outside of the popular touristic places, such as Sofia and the sea, where a lot of people are visiting.

- Hospitality - Very positive. Even though some people don't speak other languages except Bulgarian, they will still find a way to help you if needed.

- Quality of life - Considering that the country is not very rich comparing to Denmark or other European countries, I would say that it's still on a positive level. The country is blooming, and I believe it will get better and better. al lifestyle of Bulgarian people.

- Relaxation – Very relaxing places and also places where you can party all day and all night. It depends on you.

- Historical - The country has very rich history. For example, I visited Plovdiv, that is famous with its Coliseum, called The Stadium of Trimontium and was built in the beginning of the 2nd century - amazing place that I recommend to everybody.

- Personal safety - I felt safe during most of my trip. Only i wasn't feeling safe in the sea side during the night but it needs to be considered that a lot of the people there were tourists that were drunk at that time.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

Before I visited I didn't have a clear image of the country, but I imagined a very poor and ... somehow dark and dirty cities. I was not aware of all things you can do - I knew of the sea and mountains and Sofia. I was afraid to travel alone but after my first trip I realized it is fine and safe.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

As I said before, for me Bulgaria can be described as diversity - everything you can imagine you can find it there.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about

Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home.”

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I would say neutral but a little bit more on the negative side...

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

I did not know a lot about the country, mostly because of lack of information and promotions here in Denmark. Also, I didn't know people that have visited Bulgaria at that time, before my first trip. So, I had this wrong perception of all Eastern European countries.

Did your perception change after visiting Bulgaria and getting more knowledge about the destination?

Definitely it changed in a very positive way. From neutral and slightly negative to strongly positive. Even I plan to visit again soon for the 3th time.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series ‘Sommer in Sunny Beach’ (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

Yes, I have seen a little bit of it. I would say that it is very one sided in a way that it only shows one bad, negative place in the country, but Bulgaria has a many, many more places that are completely different.

-What is your attitude towards it? Do you think it’s showing the ‘reality’ of Sunny beach?

Maybe, I don't know - I never visited sunny beach. But the other sea destinations like Varna and Burgas were nice and nothing like the TV is presenting Sunny Beach.

Does the program make you wanted to visit Sunny beach? If yes, why? If not, why not?

Not me, I prefer to visit quiet places and natural attractions. But maybe if I was still in my 20es the place will seem appealing for the amazing parties and all the alcohol.

How does the program “influenced” your visit in Bulgaria?

I avoid the place (Sunny beach) because of this TV show but in general it does not make me love the country any less. But if a person doesn't know a lot of Bulgaria and see this TV show it may make him thing negatively about the country.

11. Would you consider the destination again?

Yes, to visit more places and enjoy the food, drinks and the hospitality.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?



Yes, I recommend it to all Danes. It has a lot to be seen and it is relatively cheap and affordable for us. It is also safe to travel alone or to bring your family.

10. Stine

1. Would you present yourself – what is your name, your gender, and your age?

Hello! I'm Stine and I have 25 years.

2. What is your current occupation?

Right now I'm doing my master at AAU.

3. What is the most important aspect you are taking into consideration when you choose a holiday? (price, location, accommodation.)

The first thing that I do before planning a holiday is to choose a location I would like to visit. Then I make a budget and according to it I will pick the accommodations which I can afford within the budget.

4. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Bulgaria?

Bulgaria is a country with beautiful nature.

5. Apart from your main 'image' of the country, what other things you associate it with?

Hmm... maybe seaside.... Rich history.... Delicious food.

6. When did you visited Bulgaria? Which places did you visit?

I visited in the summer of 2016. I went to Sunny Beach, Rodopi mountains and also in 2017 when I visited Golden Sands and Rila mountains.

7. Can you explain how you perceive the following aspects of the destination, after your visit(s):

- Cleanliness – I think it wasn't clean enough. The street were a bit dirty.
- Hospitality - I remember people were smiling and welcoming.
- Quality of life – I got an impression that the quality of life was ok.
- Relaxation – The services offered at the resorts were on a professional level, especially those from SPA.
- Historical – The buildings architecture was interesting.
- Personal safety - I haven't experienced anything that threatened me.

8. Did you perceive any of those aspects differently before your visit and in which sense?

I thought that I would see a cleaner Bulgaria and also I didn't expect that locals will be so welcoming and helping. I went there with a friend and she knew the best places to show me and for us to stay in, so I was able to relax and to marvel at the nature and culture.

9. A tourist destination image can be described as: 'the sum of the beliefs, thoughts and impression that one person has about that place' (Kotler, 1993). With this in mind, how would you describe Bulgaria's image as a tourist destination with your own words?

Many people have a wrong bad image of Bulgaria from what they have seen on Internet and heard from people, but in reality there are many beautiful places in Bulgaria which a foreigner can visit but there are not so known by the majority of people.

10. Before conducting this interview, we made the online Survey where we asked the participants of their perceptions of the country. One of the respondents said "Many Danes, despite not knowing much about Bulgaria, have an abundance of negative thoughts about the destination. Bulgaria shares a mix of stereotypes, including Sunny beach – where all mortality can be left at home."

- What was your perception of Bulgaria before travelling there?

I didn't really have some kind of perceptions, but just some positive things about it which I have heard before from other people.

-What made you have this perception? For example, your friends, family, social media, etc.

As I said... friends and social media

Did your perception change after visiting Bulgaria and getting more knowledge about the destination?

The travel to Bulgaria only confirmed the positive comments I have been told from friends.

11. Danes perception of Bulgaria is also influenced by social media by broadcasting a TV series 'Sommer in Sunny Beach' (Documentary series following young Danes on holiday abroad, to get a glimpse of what really happens in the hedonistic party town of Sunny beach away from parents and surrounded by temptation)

- Have you seen the TV broadcast?

No... I haven't seen it.

11. Would you consider visiting the destination again?

Yes, I would like to try new places.

12. After your visit to Bulgaria, would you recommend the destination to others (family/friends, etc.)?

I would definitely recommend it because it is a great place to have a holiday and get to know the Bulgarian beauties.

Appendix 1.3

Expert interview Transcript

Thank you for participating in our Master Thesis Project on the topic of:

*What are the differences between the destination image perceptions for Danish people pre and post visiting Bulgaria?*

Your opinion as an expert working on the 'field' of representing and selling destination Bulgaria to Danes is of great importance to us, as it will add more knowledge on the topic. Let's begin with the first question:

1. Could you tell us, in your opinion, are Danes aware of Bulgaria as a travel destination?

In my experience, which is around 30 years, I noticed that Danish tourists are not entirely aware of Bulgaria as a travel destination. They may know the basic characteristics of the country regarding its tourism, mostly related to coastal tourism, but they still have not discovered anything further.

2. In your opinion what is the overall image of Bulgaria among Danes as a travel destination before visiting?

As I already said, Danes perceive Bulgaria mainly as a summer destination, other than that they know it as a "cheap" destination. Based on my clients' experience, I noticed that this can be perceived both in a positive and negative sense.

Can you explain further why Danes have these both perceptions?

Yes. For example, Danes consider it in a positive way because they are able to afford longer vacations and stay in higher quality accommodations. Also, they can be able to afford participating in activities that are more expensive here in Denmark. Food and drinks are also perceived as very cheap by clients.

What about the 'negative' perception?

In a negative way, it is mostly connected to 'stereotypes' that cheap means not good quality, not safe environment .... also, the beach resorts during the summer, can become too overcrowded which sometimes is creating a discomfort for Danish tourists during their trip.

3. Does the overall image of your clients change after the visit and in which way?

Well... yes it does but not always. Most of our clients get a different image of Bulgaria when they visit the countryside areas, because if they go only for a vacation to the beach area, they know more or less what to expect. But, when they visit the countryside they are often amazed by the relaxed atmosphere, by the nature. Also, many are amazed by the architectural and cultural richness of some areas of the country. And when they come back, they are satisfied.'

Do you have some concrete examples?

Hmm... I can't think of a concrete example right now... but that is the general view.

Considering your answer, does it mean, that people who visit only the beach areas don't have positive overall image after their return?

I wouldn't say they don't have a positive 'overall' image, as I said before sometimes those places can be overcrowded, which is seen in a negative way from some of my clients, but others – mostly younger ones, are enjoying it. It depends on the people and their preferences.

4. After visiting the country are you asking your clients for feedback?

Yes, we do!

How would you describe the general impression – is the feedback positive or negative?

It is mostly positive.

5. We researched that a destination image is composed of different aspects, such as Cleanliness in the destination, Hospitality of the local people, Quality of life, Relaxation, Historical attractions, Personal safety. Are there some of those aspects that your clients find different after the trip from before the trip and share in their feedback?

I got many positive comments regarding the hospitality of the people.

Other than that people don't really know that Bulgaria is very historically and culturally rich, as I mentioned already, which they also point in their feedbacks.

Personal safety is sometimes mentioned also in the comments in a negative way.

Could you explain why exactly?

It might be different for people, depends on what they expected and later what they actually experienced. Of course, sometimes we had cases, such as stolen personal items of our clients, or lost luggage on the airport/bus stops and other similar situations, which made people see the country as not really safe.

6. What kind of activities are Danish citizens looking for while planning a trip to Bulgaria?

They mostly plan standard summer holidays. In the recent years, after Sofia was introduced as low-cost (Wizz Air) destination it became a city-break and adventure break destination - opera, concerts, shopping. People are also starting to show interest into mountain walking, horse riding etc.

7. Is there a certain profile of Danes that are looking for vacations in Bulgaria (younger / older; males/ females; single/ married, etc.)?

Families usually chose the standard ski holidays or mostly summer holidays at the Black Sea.

Young Danes tend to prefer sea areas where they can enjoy the sea but also parties. While elder people are interested in culture and festivals, active holidays too.

8. Which places in Bulgaria are popular among Danes – rural areas, beaches, mountains, etc.?

The beach areas are the most popular, mostly the biggest resorts such as Sunny Beach and Golden Sands.

Bansko is also gaining much popularity lately – it's a ski destination.

9. How do you promote tourism destination Bulgaria?

As we are operating on the Danish market, as well as outside of Denmark we use different methods. In Denmark, we use direct marketing methods, such as google ads., social networks.

In my opinion personal contact is the best way to promote Bulgaria, especially for me as a Bulgarian, as I can give my honest opinion and suggestions.

10. What types of trips (activities) to Bulgaria do you offer?

Sea and Ski holidays and cultural trips and events. We also promote adventure travels, like trekking, cycling and horse riding.

11. Does your clients express desire to visit the country again after their visit?

Yes, they do.

Do you have clients who book a second trip with you?

Yes, we do. When they were satisfied with the first one, and they want to visit and explore again. Most of the times they don't visit the same place but opt to explore new places and activities in Bulgaria.

12. Thank you for this interview, would you like to share something more on the topic?

I would like to tell that promoting a destination without any support from the Bulgarian National Tourist Board or Tourism Ministry is a costly business,