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TOURISM COMMUNICATION AND VISIT INTENTION: EVIDENCE FROM A CONTINENTAL DESTINATION IN CROATIA

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Abstract

This study examines how perceptions of tourism communication relate to the intention to visit Požega-Slavonia County, a continental destination in Croatia. Survey responses from 309 people residing outside the county were analysed. Reported exposure to promotional materials was compared between respondents who did and did not plan a tourist visit within the next 12 months. The study also examined whether perceived clarity and relevance of destination messages were associated with respondents' assessment that the communication encouraged them to visit. Promotional exposure did not differ significantly between the two groups. In contrast, clarity and relevance were strongly associated with perceived encouragement to visit. These findings suggest that destination communication should be assessed by the usefulness of its messages as well as their reach. Because the survey was conducted at one point in time, the results do not establish whether communication changed travel plans or led to actual visits.

Keywords: tourism communication; promotional exposure; message clarity; message relevance; visit intention

1. Introduction

Požega-Slavonia County offers a range of tourism products, including nature-based, wine, gastronomic, cultural and event tourism. For potential visitors unfamiliar with the county, accessible and relevant information can help them understand what the destination offers. Promotional materials may increase awareness of the destination, but awareness alone does not necessarily translate into an intention to visit.

The present paper addresses three aspects of this issue. It aims to find out whether people claiming they were exposed to promotion of Požega-Slavonia County would show an increased probability of planning a trip to the county in the next twelve months. Second, it aims to see whether people feeling the communication from the county in relation to tourism was understandable and the messages were relevant, would also feel motivated to visit the county as a result. Both questions relate to two outcomes which are different but interconnected.

It becomes important when considering the communication of a destination. When people notice promotional materials, but their exposure is not associated with visiting, it might be useless to make them more visible. More detailed information about the activities of the destination that are available to visitors or specific messages to their needs are more likely to relate to visitors' reaction to the destination. Survey data can help to find these connections, but it cannot prove the causality between communication and visiting intentions.

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The research will consider responses of the people living outside of Požega-Slavonia County. Such a population is especially valuable in determining the ability of the region to attract tourists from other Croatian counties. The analysis will focus only on several selected questions from the larger survey about the perceptions and experience with the tourism in Požega-Slavonia County. The analysis compares reported promotional exposure between respondents who did and did not plan a visit and examines the associations of message clarity and relevance with perceived encouragement to visit.

2. Literature review

The development of digital communication has completely revolutionized the marketing and image of destinations, functioning simultaneously at the institutional and consumer levels. Institutionally, destination organizations build their digital presence mainly through Destination Management Organizations (DMOs). These institutions are vital components of the digital business environment that work as a crucial connection and mediator within it. The increase in the density of links between diverse actors involved in tourism, and thus the scope and variety of DMOs' connections with ICT actors, is key for integrating the destination within the larger Web environment; the degree of such integration plays a critical role in attracting visitors to their websites [1]. However, the role of DMOs changes depending on the distance of a destination from the notion of a "Smart Destination," implying high heterogeneity among destinations in terms of digital connectivity. Consumers have also confirmed the effectiveness of such marketing efforts. Social media marketing has been proven to have a statistically significant positive effect on destination image, travel intention, and engagement [2]. This phenomenon seems to manifest itself more significantly in short video platforms. According to Widaningsih and Putranto (2025), there is both a direct impact of the credibility of the influencers, quality of the content, and electronic word-of-mouth on the visitors' behavioral reaction, as well as indirect influence through emotional and identity mechanisms such as FoMO and self-identification [3]. Among all these stimuli, content quality proves to be the most significant one, whereas self-identification represents the highest psychological factor. These findings based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model applied to algorithmic short video platforms have practical implications for tourism boards.

Promotional imagery is another important resource in tourism that can influence the emotions and judgments made by tourists concerning a destination. According to Di-Clemente et al. (2022), "destination images still remain an excellent promotional resource as they affect the emotional reactions of young tourists." Moreover, the researchers note that "visual perception through photography is critical in the tourist's evaluation of the destination." Thus, the authors' findings provide the relationship between emotional reactions to promotional images and behavioral intentions, arguing that "it is necessary to create images that evoke conscious positive emotions to achieve better results in behavioral intentions" [4]. The increased popularity of digital marketing also contributes to increasing the reach of tourism destination promotion. According to Ferreira and de Souza (2025), the use of digital marketing, which includes social media, sponsored advertisements, graphics content, and SEO, allows destinations to have access to a larger and more specific audience. Social media networks provide an avenue for destinations to boost their interactions with potential visitors [5]. According to Bangahan et al. (2025), "the strategic use of social proof in platforms like Instagram and Tiktok boosts engagement through building authentic relationships and using user-generated content." This mode of communication affects perception of the destination and the behavior of the visitor [6]. In a study of destination choice in Croatia, Šostar et al. (2026) found that the perceived influence of promotional formats differed among respondents, with word of mouth emerging as the most persuasive source overall [7].

It is crucial for destination management organizations to provide comprehensive and detailed information about the destination through social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, TripAdvisor, and YouTube, according to Laurance et al. (2023). The destination management organizations need to give tourists complete information about destinations, including their addresses, directions, and unique characteristics; however, the YouTube influencers will provide information about the addresses and directions, which will induce the intentions of visitors. It becomes clear that providing comprehensive information about destinations plays an important role in communicating with potential visitors [8]. Hervás-Cortina et al. (2024) point out the importance of online communication in influencing the behavior of tourists because online communication influences the tourists more than any other communication method, including information centres [9].

In applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Prasetyawati et al. (2026) showed that review quality, acting as the central route, has the greatest effect on cognitive destination image, even more than argument quality [10]. This shows how important it is for credible, relevant, and specific reviews online can be for the formation of tourists' perception. Both cognitive and affective destination images positively impact visit intention, with the latter having a greater impact. The study conducted by Qiu, Li, and Choi (2024) indicated that the perceived usefulness and enjoyment of short travel videos have positive impacts on tourists' attitude toward short video platforms (SVPs), which in turn affects attitude toward the destination and eventually travel intention [11]. Thus, it is recommended that DMOs and tourism marketers use videos that are informative and enjoyable to attract tourists via SVPs. Research on gamification in tourism likewise shows that responses to digital tools depend on more than access to them: social influence was associated with adoption, while attitude towards adoption was strongly related to intention to use [12].

Visit intention is seen as a factor shaped by multiple related variables, such as branding efforts, user-generated content (UGC), and destination-specific antecedents. The alignment of the branding communication with the motivating goals of tourists, for example cultural experiences, adventures, or relaxation, has been found to create an increased emotional

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bonding with a particular destination and lead to revisit intention [6]. In other words, emotional bonding because of branding is directly linked to UGC since Aboalganam et al. (2025) have found that UGC has a highly positive influence on destination imagery and tourists' intention to visit a particular destination. Specifically, the mediating role of destination imagery in the relationship between UGC and visit intention was observed. All in all, these findings coincide with the findings of several studies concerning the most important antecedents of (re)visit intention [13]. According to a bibliometric analysis by Gaonkar and Sukthankar (2024), destination image, tourist satisfaction, memorable experience, tourist motivation, and authenticity have been found to be the top antecedents of behavioral intention to revisit culturally motivated destinations. It is suggested that managers and policymakers in the tourism industry consider the role of these factors while designing their destinations [14].

From a theoretical perspective, research in the domain of inland tourism implies that demographics significantly determine tourists' motivations and choice of destinations. According to Egresi and Pop-Răcășan (2025), younger tourists (18-29 years old) pay more attention to sociability with friends, whereas health and well-being-related motivation is stronger among older tourists [15]. The findings suggest the necessity of developing differentiated marketing strategies in favour of tourist segments at continental destinations. An analysis of tourism expenditure across Croatian counties found more moderate fluctuations in inland regions than in coastal counties during the pandemic and subsequent recovery, providing further context for the study of continental destinations. Following the above demographic approach, it should be noted that recent studies of rural destination marketing indicate the pivotal importance of digital marketing in terms of shaping the destination image and tourist behavior [16]. According to Rodrigues et al. (2023), the quality of digital marketing activities determines both the rural destination image and tourists' willingness to visit the destination. Research presented in the DAAAM International Symposium proceedings also highlights the importance of destination brand identity and the communication of distinctive destination characteristics in shaping consumer perceptions. Andrlić et al. (2024) emphasise that effective destination branding requires the identification and communication of relevant attributes that distinguish a destination from its competitors [17]. Positive destination image encourages visitation and contributes to sustainable development of rural territories. It should be noted that professionally organized and executed digital marketing strategy with high-quality content can raise public awareness about rural and inland tourism destinations and generate economic activity through increased interest in such destinations [18].

3. Methodology

This study examines how respondents' assessments of tourism communication relate to their reported plans to visit Požega-Slavonia County, a continental destination in Croatia. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered using Google Forms. The broader survey addressed perceptions of the county and its tourism communication. Five questionnaire items were selected for the present study to examine one difference between respondent groups and two associations between assessments of destination communication.

The questionnaire recorded 440 responses during October 2025. As the research question concerns attracting visitors to the destination, respondents who reported residing in Požega-Slavonia County were excluded from the present analysis (n = 119). Four respondents did not provide their county of residence and could therefore not be assigned to either the resident or non-resident group. This left 317 respondents living outside the county. Eight of them did not answer the question about a planned visit. The final analytical sample consequently comprised 309 respondents with complete answers to all five questions used in this study. The same respondents were included in the descriptive statistics and in all three hypothesis tests. The analytical sample included respondents from all age categories recorded by the questionnaire, including 52 respondents who selected the category "under 18". Age was used to describe the sample and was not included as a variable in the hypothesis tests.

Table 1 describes the 309 respondents included in the analysis. The largest age groups were 31–45 years (24.3%) and 46–60 years (23.9%), while 16.8% of respondents were under 18. Men and women were represented in similar proportions. In terms of education, 69.9% reported undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate education.

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age	Under 18	52	16.8
	18–30	55	17.8
	31–45	75	24.3
	46–60	74	23.9
	61 or older	53	17.2
Gender	Male	156	50.5
	Female	150	48.5
	Other / prefer not to answer	3	1.0
Education	Primary education or less	4	1.3
	Secondary education	89	28.8
	Undergraduate or graduate education	107	34.6
	Postgraduate education	109	35.3

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Table 1. Characteristics of the analytical sample (N = 309)

The proposed research model is presented in Figure 1. The arrows indicate the relationships examined in the analysis; they do not imply that the cross-sectional survey can establish causal effects.

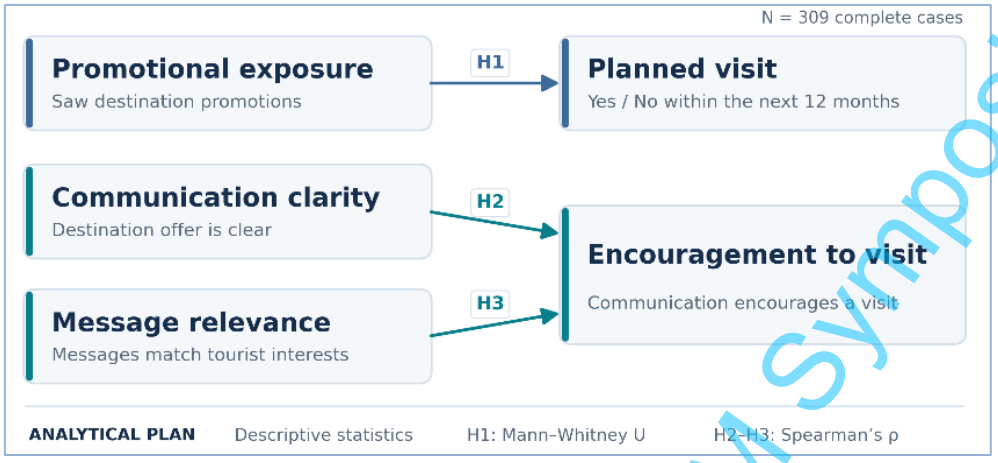

Fig. 1. Proposed relationships between tourism communication and visit-related responses.

The model distinguishes two outcomes. In the case of Hypothesis 1 (H1), the outcome relates to the intention of the respondent to visit Požega-Slavonia County as a tourist in the next 12 months. For Hypotheses 2 (H2) and 3 (H3), the outcome refers to the level of agreement of the respondent with the statement that the tourism communication of the county motivates him/her to visit the place. The second outcome measures the evaluation of the communication by the respondent and not the realization of his/her intentions or visit. The following hypotheses were tested:

- H1: *Respondents reporting greater exposure to promotional materials for Požega-Slavonia County are more likely to report a planned tourist visit within the next 12 months.*
- H2: *Greater perceived clarity of the county's tourism communication is positively associated with the assessment that the communication encourages a visit.*
- H3: *Greater perceived relevance of the county's tourism messages is positively associated with the assessment that the communication encourages a visit.*

Table 2 shows how the questionnaire items were used in the present analysis. The four statements were answered on a five-point agreement scale, where 1 meant strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neither agree nor disagree, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. The question about a planned visit had two response options, Yes and No. Higher scores on the four statements therefore indicate stronger agreement; they should not be interpreted as measured numbers of promotional encounters or visits.

Variable	Questionnaire item	Response format	Use in analysis
Promotional exposure	"I saw promotional materials for Požega-Slavonia County in the past 12 months."	Agreement scale, 1–5	Explanatory item for H1
Planned visit	"Do you plan to visit Požega-Slavonia County as a tourist in the next 12 months?"	Yes / No	Grouping variable for H1
Communication clarity	"The tourism communication of Požega-Slavonia County clearly conveys what the destination offers."	Agreement scale, 1–5	Explanatory item for H2
Message relevance	"The messages are relevant to me as a tourist."	Agreement scale, 1–5	Explanatory item for H3
Perceived encouragement to visit	"The communication encourages my intention to visit."	Agreement scale, 1–5	Outcome item for H2 and H3

Table 2. Questionnaire items and their use in the research model

Descriptive statistics were calculated before carrying out any hypothesis tests. The frequencies and percentages provided the distribution of the responses to each item and the percentage of people who had planned a visit compared to those who had not planned one. Since the agreement responses comprised five ordered categories, medians and the 25th and 75th percentiles were also calculated. For H1, the responses to the promotional exposure question were provided for each of the two groups of people planning a visit and those who had not planned a visit.

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For the evaluation of H1, a two-tailed Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the difference in the ordinal promotional exposure responses of the two independent groups (those planning a visit and those not planning one). The rank-biserial correlation was used to indicate the effect size of the group difference. For H2 and H3, the two-tailed Spearman rank correlation was used to test the direction and strength of the association between each pair of the ordinal agreement responses. Correlation between clarity and relevance was also calculated. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$.

Each communication feature was measured with one question. Thus, the research measures responses to single questions and does not aggregate responses on scales, and therefore internal reliability is not calculated by Cronbach's alpha. All information was collected during one measurement moment and exposure, clarity, relevance, and encouragement to visit were all self-reported. Statistical analysis allows identifying different associations in responses of respondents but does not allow determining whether communication had an influence on travel plans of respondents. Moreover, promotional exposure question covers all types of promotional information and does not indicate which digital medium was used by a respondent to get this information.

4. Results

The analysis included 309 respondents residing outside Požega-Slavonia County who provided complete answers to all questions used in this study. Of these, 170 respondents (55.0%) stated that they planned to visit the county as tourists within the next 12 months, whereas 139 (45.0%) did not.

Table 3 presents responses to the four statements about destination communication. For each statement, respondents indicated their agreement on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Responses were concentrated in the categories of disagreement, neither agreement nor disagreement, and agreement. The median response for all four statements was "neither agree nor disagree".

Statement	Strongly disagree n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Neither agree nor disagree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Strongly agree n (%)
I saw promotional materials for Požega-Slavonia County in the past 12 months.	15 (4.9)	109 (35.3)	84 (27.2)	92 (29.8)	9 (2.9)
Tourism communication clearly conveys what the destination offers.	10 (3.2)	105 (34.0)	92 (29.8)	94 (30.4)	8 (2.6)
The messages are relevant to me as a tourist.	9 (2.9)	103 (33.3)	89 (28.8)	97 (31.4)	11 (3.6)
The communication encourages me to visit.	7 (2.3)	105 (34.0)	88 (28.5)	100 (32.4)	9 (2.9)

Table 3. Responses to statements about destination communication (N = 309)

H1 proposed that respondents who had noticed more promotional materials would be more likely to plan a tourist visit within the next 12 months. Table 4 shows the responses to the promotional exposure statement separately for those who planned a visit and those who did not. In both groups, the median response was neither agree nor disagree. Agreement with the statement was not consistently higher among respondents planning a visit.

Planned visit	n	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Median response
No	139	4	48	39	47	1	Neither agree nor disagree
Yes	170	11	61	45	45	8	Neither agree nor disagree

Table 4. Exposure to promotional materials by planned visit within 12 months

The Mann–Whitney U test confirmed that the difference between the groups was not statistically significant (Table 5). Its effect size was close to zero. H1 was therefore not supported: reported exposure to promotional materials did not distinguish respondents who planned a visit from those who did not.

Comparison	n: planned visit	n: no planned visit	Mann–Whitney U	p-value	Rank-biserial correlation	H1

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Agreement with "I saw promotional materials in the past 12 months"	170	139	12,422	.416	−.051	Not supported

Table 5. Mann–Whitney U test of promotional exposure by planned visit

H2 examined whether respondents who found the destination communication clearer were also more likely to agree that it encouraged them to visit. H3 examined the corresponding relationship for the relevance of the messages. Both relationships were positive and statistically significant. The Spearman correlation between clarity and perceived encouragement to visit was $\rho = .856$, $p < .001$. For message relevance and perceived encouragement to visit, it was $\rho = .876$, $p < .001$. Accordingly, H2 and H3 were supported (Table 6).

Statements compared	n	Spearman's ρ	p-value	Hypothesis
Communication clearly conveys what the destination offers ↔ Communication encourages me to visit	309	.856	< .001	H2 supported
Messages are relevant to me as a tourist ↔ Communication encourages me to visit	309	.876	< .001	H3 supported
Communication clearly conveys what the destination offers ↔ Messages are relevant to me as a tourist	309	.912	< .001	Additional association

Table 6. Spearman correlations between statements about destination communication

Table 6 also shows a very strong positive association between perceived communication clarity and message relevance ($\rho = .912$, $p < .001$). Respondents who considered the communication clear generally also perceived its messages as relevant. Given this substantial overlap, the correlations supporting H2 and H3 should be interpreted as parallel bivariate associations with perceived encouragement to visit, rather than as evidence of independent effects. The small numerical difference between the two coefficients does not establish whether clarity or relevance makes a greater independent contribution to perceived encouragement.

The results also require a distinction between the outcomes examined. H1 used respondents' answer to whether they planned a tourist visit within 12 months. H2 and H3 used their agreement with the statement that communication encouraged them to visit. Strong associations with the latter statement do not, by themselves, demonstrate an association with a reported travel plan or an actual visit.

5. Discussion

There appears to be a noticeable difference between noticing destination advertising and agreeing with its message. The respondents who intended to visit Požega-Slavonia County in the upcoming year did not have any increased exposure to promotional materials as compared to the respondents who had no intention to visit the place. However, the respondents who perceived communications of the county to be clear and relevant agreed much more often that these messages motivated them to visit the area. Both results are related to different phenomena and cannot be considered contradictory since a person may like a promotion without having any travel plans yet.

Non-significant difference in the exposure to promotional materials of two samples does not imply the ineffectiveness of advertisements used. On the contrary, it indicates that, within this sample, agreement with the statement about exposure to promotional materials failed to discriminate between respondents who had and did not have any visit plans. According to McWilliams and Crompton (1997), destination advertising should be judged based on its effects on decision-making, and not only exposure to it [19]. This study's result agrees with the earlier described distinction. Respondents rated their agreement with a statement about seeing promotional materials in the previous 12 months; the analysis did not establish how often they encountered those materials or whether they interacted with them. Therefore, it was possible that one respondent reported exposure without seeing information about their travel interest.

The result of H1 should be understood in connection with research that indicated positive relationships between destination communication and intention to visit the destination. For example, Molinillo et al. (2018) found that destination image and intention to visit depend on the online channel used to access information. They studied a more specific case of information experience compared to the exposure to the message measured in this study [20]. The result does not contradict their results because it deals with exposure to promotion and the intention to visit a certain destination in a binary way (Yes/No).

Another set of studies also cautions about assuming a causal link between more destination information and increased travel intention. Tassiello and Tillotson (2020) found that under certain conditions more subjective knowledge of the destination may mean reduced travel intention [21]. Subjective knowledge is different from the amount of promotion; hence, the result does not represent the same type of evidence as H1. However, the findings show why the lack of a relationship in the current study represents meaningful research finding. The way people respond to destination information depends on their interpretation of the information rather than the sheer exposure.

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The strength of the relationships in H2 and H3 highlights the importance of respondents' evaluations of the communication. According to Chen, Shang, and Li (2014), features of content of travel blogs such as understandability and interest of the reader were related to behavioral intentions through the level of enjoyment experienced when reading the blogs [22]. Even though the current study did not look at use of blogs or enjoyability, the results suggest that perception of the message plays a key role. Those participants who evaluated the communication of Požega-Slavonia County as clear agreed that it motivated travel. The same pattern was found among respondents who regarded the messages as relevant to them.

The results from the relevant measure are consistent with previous literature on quality of online information about tourist destination. As stated by Wang et al. (2023) through a study involving social media users, the relevance of travel information was linked to cognitive reaction to the information and subsequently to destination's conative image [23]. The relationship between attributes of tourism information on social media and development of destination image was also studied by other authors [24]. The above studies are important in giving background to Hypothesis H3 even though the scope is broader compared to one used in the current research survey. The concept of relevance here is measured by whether the county's tourism information was seen by respondents as relevant to them as prospective tourists.

An important consideration in interpreting H2 and H3 is the very strong association between perceived communication clarity and message relevance ($\rho = .912$). As both constructs were measured using single questionnaire items, their relationships with perceived encouragement to visit should be interpreted as parallel bivariate associations rather than independent effects established through multivariable regression. The high correlation suggests substantial overlap in respondents' evaluations of these communication characteristics. Consequently, the findings do not establish the separate explanatory contributions of clarity and relevance, nor do they demonstrate that either characteristic independently influences visit intention. Future research employing validated multi-item scales and multivariable analytical approaches could examine whether these dimensions make distinct contributions to perceived encouragement and subsequent travel intentions.

About destination communications practice, it is clear from the results of the survey that there are two issues that require additional research. The first one is whether promotional material is delivered to potential tourists interested in the experiences being offered by the county. The second issue is whether those experiences are communicated clearly enough for tourists to make their decision. Messages on the themes of nature, wine, food, or culture can be tested with the help of potential tourists before the campaign is launched. It will help find out what messages are perceived by tourists and what ones are relevant for them. Related research on smart tourism technologies found that perceived comfort and convenience had a particularly strong association with satisfaction, suggesting that future tests of destination messages could also examine how easily visitors can use the digital information provided [25].

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, promotional exposure, communication clarity, message relevance and perceived encouragement to visit were measured using single questionnaire items rather than validated multi-item scales. Second, promotional exposure was self-reported, and the survey did not identify specific campaigns, communication channels or the frequency of exposure. Third, the cross-sectional research design does not allow causal relationships to be established. Furthermore, H1 examined reported plans to visit within the next 12 months, whereas H2 and H3 examined perceived encouragement to visit. These outcomes are conceptually related but should not be treated as equivalent. Future research could employ experimental or longitudinal designs to examine responses to specific promotional messages and determine whether perceived encouragement is subsequently reflected in travel plans and actual visits.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how tourism communication relates to the intention to visit a continental destination in Croatia. Respondents who planned to visit Požega-Slavonia County within the next 12 months did not report greater exposure to promotional materials than those who did not plan a visit. By contrast, respondents who considered the destination's communication clear and its messages relevant were more likely to agree that the communication encouraged them to visit. The latter finding concerns perceived encouragement, rather than a confirmed travel plan or an actual visit.

The absence of a statistically significant difference in promotional exposure between respondents with and without planned visits does not imply that destination visibility is unimportant. Potential visitors need to become aware of a destination before considering it as a travel option. However, the findings indicate that self-reported promotional exposure did not distinguish between respondents who planned a visit and those who did not. As the survey did not measure the frequency of exposure, the communication channels encountered or respondents' attention to promotional content, further research is needed to understand the relationship between destination visibility and travel intentions.

Connections between clarity and relevance constitute a more concrete set of considerations for destination communication. Information regarding the continental destination is helpful in that it enables the potential visitor to form a mental image of his/her holiday possibilities: what activities are possible, how the holiday would be experienced, who else might benefit from such a holiday, how often it is possible to go, and whether it suits a short holiday or a long vacation plan. Such clarity of descriptions coupled with relevant examples may aid in making the decision. From the point of view of destination organizations, this highlights the need to consider not only the reach but also the substance of messages delivered.

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Several limitations have been found in this study. The results are based on the cross-sectional survey data that has been collected only once during one period; therefore, no causality can be drawn between the clearer and more relevant communication and the changes in visit intentions. The significant correlation is associated with the perception of communication, including encouragement to visit the destination, and not to real tourist behavior. The results are associated with respondents of this survey and should be considered carefully before generalization to other continental destinations.

Future research could examine specific communication channels and message characteristics, particularly their clarity, relevance and usefulness to different tourist segments. Longitudinal studies could also assess whether respondents who report an intention to visit subsequently undertake a trip. Such approaches would provide further insight into how destination communication contributes to tourist interest, travel planning and actual visitation.

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