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The Impact of Online Presence on Loyalty: A Quantitative Study in the Context of Urban Tourism

Plamen Yankov [1]

[1] Department of Marketing, University of Economics-Varna, Bulgaria, yankov.plamen@ue-varna.bg

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Abstract

Online presence is widely recognized as a strategic factor in digital marketing, particularly in the context of urban tourism. However, its direct impact on customer loyalty has not been extensively tested using structural modeling approaches. This study investigates the relationship between online presence and customer loyalty through a quantitative approach. A questionnaire survey was conducted among 235 managers and owners of accommodation properties operating in urban tourism destinations. The data were analyzed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), applying the Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimation method, suitable for ordinal data. The CFA results confirmed good model fit and construct reliability. Commonly reported model fit indices—such as χ^2/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR—met or exceeded the recommended thresholds, indicating acceptable model fit. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant and exceeded commonly accepted thresholds, supporting good construct validity. SEM analysis showed that online presence has a statistically significant and positive effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.619$, $p < 0.001$). The findings provide empirical support for the effect of online presence on customer loyalty in the urban tourism sector. The validated model demonstrates the applicability of structural equation modeling with ordinal data in tourism research and underscores the strategic importance of digital visibility.

Key words:
Urban tourism, online presence, loyalty, CFA, SEM, JASP.

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1. Introduction

In the context of digital transformation, online presence is essential for companies in the tourism sector. It serves as a channel for visibility, communication, and trust. Its importance is growing with the development of digital consumer habits. This is especially evident in urban tourism. This subsector is characterized by high competition, short-term stays and an intense need for online orientation. This is where online presence often determines the customer's choice.

Customer loyalty is a strategic indicator of sustainability and profitability in the sector. However, research on the impact of online presence on loyalty in urban contexts remains limited. The aim of this study is to empirically investigate whether the online presence of accommodation has a significant impact on customer loyalty.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Online presence

Online presence is an essential part of the digital strategy of accommodation establishments (Kazandzhieva & Santana, 2019). For owners and managers, it is a way to reach potential guests, build trust and present the property through digital channels (Karetsos & Ntaliani, 2021). The hotel's website, social media profiles and participation in booking platforms build the initial perception of the property and often predetermine the customer's choice (Amin et al., 2021). A strong online presence supports the decision-making process and increases customer engagement even before the actual visit (Kathuria & Kaurav, 2023).

To measure online presence, an adapted scale was used, based on validated sources from previous studies in tourism and digital marketing (e.g. Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). In short, indicators include (1) having your own website with visual and textual content, (2) presence on online booking platforms and (3) metasearch engines, (4) social media activity, (5) managing user comments, and (6) running online advertising campaigns. The measuring tool is specified in Annex 1. The responses were collected through a 5-point Likert scale, in which respondents assessed the extent to which they agreed that these actions contribute to building the online presence of the tourist site they manage. As is standard for the 5-point Likert scale, lower values indicate disagreement and a less perceived online presence, while higher values reflect strong agreement with the statements and, accordingly, a stronger digital positioning of the object, according to the respondent.

While these studies confirm the importance of online presence, some critiques should be noted. For example, several authors highlight that digital visibility alone may not lead to loyalty unless supported by service quality and personalization (Cheunkamon et al., 2022; Zollo et al., 2022). Furthermore, many SEM-based studies overlook endogeneity or reciprocal causality, which could affect the strength and direction of these relationships. The present study aims to address this by focusing on managers' perceptions but acknowledges that triangulation with consumer data is necessary in future research.

2.2. Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty is among the most significant marketing effects (Kehayova-Stoycheva, 2008). From the point of view of property owners and managers, it is perceived as customer re-engagement – expressed through repeated bookings, positive feedback and recommendations to other potential guests. Loyal customers are considered a strategic resource, as they reduce marketing costs and at the same time increase the brand's reputation through electronic and verbal advertising (Teichmann, 2021). In the conditions of strong competition in urban tourism, retaining already attracted customers by building loyalty is a priority managerial focus.

To measure consumer loyalty, an adapted scale was used, based on existing and validated tools from previous research in the field of hospitality and tourism (Bowen & Chen, 2001)(Kandampully et al., 2018)(Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). The scale includes four indicators aimed at actions and practices through which managers perceive the loyalty of their guests: (1) maintaining a program to incentivize subsequent

bookings (e.g. discounts, points, tier programs); (2) the ability to customize the program according to the preferences of guests; (3) encouraging guests to leave positive online reviews as part of the user experience; and (4) effective response to complaints received. All statements are rated on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 means "strongly disagree" and 5 means "strongly agree". Higher values indicate a stronger commitment to practices related to building and maintaining customer loyalty.

To support the choice of methodological approach, a systematic review of the scientific literature in the Scopus database was carried out in order to track the use of structural modeling with equations (SEM) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in studies related to tourism, online presence and loyalty. The keywords "tourism", "online presence", "loyalty", "SEM" and "CFA" were used in the search, and a time limit was applied – only articles published after 2010, in order to focus on modern empirical research.

As a result of the search, 318 scientific publications were identified that meet the set criteria. Table 1 below presents selected examples from the literature in which SEM has been used to analyse relevant topics in tourism. The table includes information about authors and year of publication, purpose of the study, method used, context of the application, as well as the main conclusions from each analysis. The presented examples serve as evidence of the applicability and validity of SEM in similar research contexts, which further strengthens the methodological framework of the current study.

Table 1

Selected SEM-Based Studies Related to Online Presence and Customer Loyalty in Tourism

Authors	Title	Year	Research Aim	Metho-dology	Key Findings
Zollo L.; Rialti R.; Marrucci A.; Ciappei C.	How do museums foster loyalty in tech-savvy visitors? The role of social media and digital experience	2022	To explore how museums build loyalty among tech-savvy visitors using digital tools.	SEM	Digital engagement fosters loyalty through experiential value.
Phromlert C.; Deebhijarn S.; Sornsaruht P.	How website quality, e-service quality, e-satisfaction, and social value affect poshtel e-loyalty in Thailand	2019	To examine the impact of website quality, e-service quality, satisfaction and trust on e-loyalty.	SEM	E-loyalty is influenced by online satisfaction and trust.
Cheunkamon E.; Jomnonkwao S.; Ratanavaraha V.	Impacts of Tourist Loyalty on Service Providers: Examining the Role of the Service Quality of Tourism Supply Chains, Tourism Logistics, Commitment, Satisfaction, and Trust	2022	To analyze how tourist loyalty impacts service providers and destination marketing strategies.	SEM	Loyalty boosts marketing and service effectiveness.
Moudud-Ul-Huq S.; Akter R.; Mahmud M.S.; Hasan N.	Impact of customer relationship management on tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and retention: Saint Martin's Island	2021	To explore how smart tourism perceptions affect destination loyalty.	SEM	Smart experiences drive satisfaction and loyalty.
Ridolloh R.; Munizu M.; Alam S.; Umar F.; Alkanan O.M.T.	Influence of service quality, destination facilities, destination image, and satisfaction on tourist loyalty in Pasar Lama Chinatown, Tangerang City	2024	To study how social media brand experience affects customer engagement and loyalty.	SEM	Brand experience via social media increases engagement and brand loyalty.

Source: own research in Scopus; The full list is given as a link in the Appendix 2

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the thematic focus of the existing literature, an additional analysis of the content has been carried out. For this purpose, specialized software VOSviewer is used, designed for visualization and processing of bibliographic data. A total of 1382 authors' keywords were extracted through it, indicated in the analyzed 318 articles. For a more precise analysis, keywords are selected that are repeated 5 or more times. Their total number includes 63 terms. A deductive thematic analysis based on predefined categories related to the two main factors in this study – loyalty and online presence – was applied to them. The most relevant terms that reflect the frequency and thematic focus of the publications are identified. Table 2 provides a summary of some of them for clarity and focus, while the full list is available in the annex.

Table 2

Summary of Thematically Relevant Keywords from the Author's Analysis

id	keyword	occurrences	total link strength	Connect with an online presence	Relationship with loyalty
1235	tourist destination	44	256	TRUE	FALSE
693	loyalty	66	181	FALSE	TRUE
1250	tourist satisfaction	35	149	FALSE	TRUE
306	Destination Loyalty	48	136	FALSE	TRUE
867	perception	22	124	TRUE	FALSE
301	destination image	39	119	TRUE	FALSE
1245	tourist loyalty	25	91	FALSE	TRUE
865	perceived value	16	53	TRUE	FALSE
108	brand loyalty	17	47	FALSE	TRUE
1081	social media	6	29	TRUE	FALSE

Source: author's research

These observations confirm the relevance of the analytical approach chosen in this study and provide an empirical and methodological justification for the use of SEM and CFA. Such an approach allows you to test both measurement and structural models, which is especially useful when working with abstract constructions such as "online presence" and "loyalty".

The results of this desk study reveal that structural modeling with equations (SEM) is a widely used research method in the field of tourism. It is most often applied in the analysis of behavioral characteristics and consumer perceptions such as satisfaction, loyalty and perceived quality, which emphasizes its methodological applicability and justifies its choice in the present work. The method is used both in the study of the impact of digital channels and online presence, as well as in the assessment of complex relationships between latent variables related to the behavior of tourists in an urban environment.

Based on the observations made and a review of the relevant literature, the main research hypothesis is formulated.

H1: Online presence has a positive impact on loyalty in the context of urban tourism.

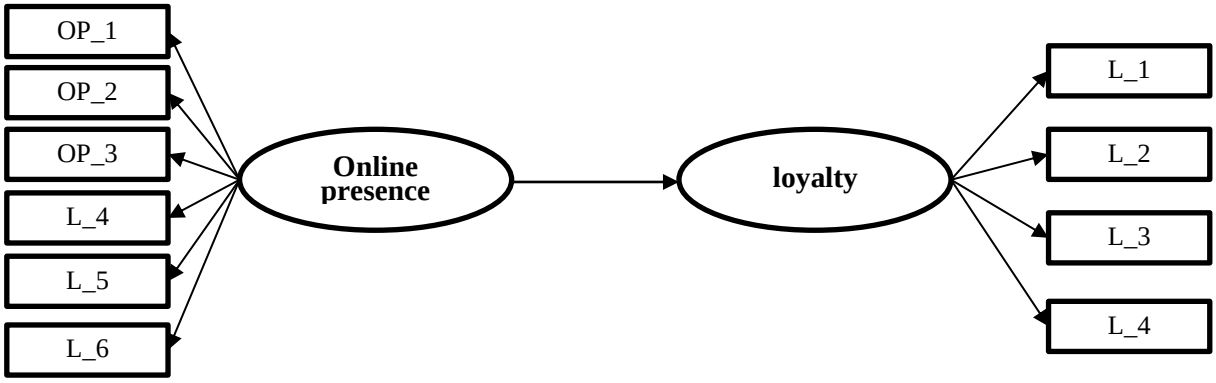


Fig. 1. The Proposed Model of the Impact of Online Presence on Loyalty in the Context of Urban Tourism;
Source: Developed by the author as part of the proposed model.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Measurement of variables

Methodologically, the application of structural modelling with equations (SEM) follows a series of validated steps that include an evaluation of the measurement and structural model (Spirtes et al., 1998). Confirmation Factor Analysis (CFA) represents an initial and mandatory stage in SEM, as it serves to confirm the validity and reliability of the measurement structure. In the present study, the computational procedures are implemented using the JASP software. Among its main advantages are its intuitive interface, ease of operation, and the ability to process categorical data.

A detailed description of the Confirmation Factor Analysis (CFA) procedure is already present in many authoritative manuals and sources (e.g. Brown, 2015; Harrington, 2009; Hoyle, 2023; Kline, 2016). Therefore, this study does not examine the method in full depth, but focuses only on the main stages of its application, tailored to the specifics of the software used (JASP) (Rogers, 2024). In this regard, this study briefly examines several key elements of the process – the substantive validity of the measuring tool, construct validity of latent variables and the methodological choice of a DWLS evaluator used in the analysis.

In continuation of the above, one of the key methodological choices when conducting CFA, and then SEM, is the selection of an appropriate evaluator. In the present study, the method of diagonally weighted least squares (DWLS) was used, which is particularly suitable for the analysis of categorical data and Likert scales (DiStefano & and Morgan, 2014).

HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio) is a modern and sensitive indicator for assessing discriminant validity between latent constructs (Nawanir et al., 2019). The method is especially recommended for categorical data analyses and the use of an estimation method such as DWLS, as applied in the present study. According to Henseler et al., (2016), values below 0.85 (or 0.90 in a looser interpretation) indicate that the constructs are conceptually different. In the JASP, this index is included as a standard option for evaluating discriminant validity (Nawanir et al., 2019). In parallel, JASP calculates the internal reliability of latent variables using the McDonald coefficient (ω), which is appropriate for CFA and SEM with categorical data and DWLS estimation method (Mikoska et al., 2022).

3.2. Characteristics of the sample

The data is collected through an online survey sent via emails extracted from the register of accommodations. A total of 235 valid answers were received from representatives of tourist sites in Varna, Burgas and Dobrich. The measuring tool includes two constructs – "Online Presence" and "Loyalty".

The validation of the questionnaire represents a key element of good scientific practice and contributes directly to the reliability of the study's results. To assess the content validity of the scale, a Content Validity

Index (CVI) was calculated. The evaluation involved five experts—three university professors and two practitioners from the tourism sector. The average CVI value for the construct "loyalty" was 0.92, exceeding the commonly recommended threshold of 0.80 (Lynn, 1986) thereby confirming the adequacy and relevance of the items used to measure the construct.

The demographic characteristics and sample profile include basic parameters such as location, type of site and online communication tools used. The survey was conducted in the period July 15 – September 15, 2024 and was sent to 1150 accommodation establishments. Publicly available email addresses and telephone numbers were used, and distribution was carried out by e-mail. 235 completed questionnaires were received, which represents a response rate of 20%. The majority of respondents are from the city of Varna (143), followed by Burgas (86) and Dobrich (6). The most commonly represented are guest suites (127) and guest rooms (64), as well as family hotels (15) and hotels (18). Less represented are guest houses (5), hostels (4) and boarding houses (2). In terms of digital channels used, 97% of respondents indicate that they use online travel platforms (OTAs) as their main channel for visibility and bookings. Website optimization is used by only 2%, and paid online ads – only 1%. 76% of properties do not use any paid digital ads. Regarding investments in digital marketing, 98% of respondents indicate that they spend between 21-30% of their annual revenue, while only 2% invest between 11-20%. All participants in the study share that between 61–80% of their bookings are generated through OTA intermediaries such as Booking.com, Airbnb, Expedia, etc. It is noteworthy that only hotels maintain their own website, while in the other categories the main and often the only channel remains the Booking platform.

4. CFA Results

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) confirm the reliability and validity of the applied measurement model.

The HTMT value between the latent constructs "Online Presence" and "Loyalty" is 0.641, which is well below the critical limit of 0.85. This indicates the presence of discriminant validity between the constructions. Additionally, the values of the McDonald's ω coefficient are 0.84 for "Online Presence" and 0.87 for "Loyalty", confirming good internal reliability for both constructs.

Table 3

Results of HTMT analysis to assess discriminant validity

Factor	Online presence	Loyalty
Online presence	x	
Loyalty	0,641	x

Source: Results from HTMT analysis performed in JASP by the author.

The composite reliability (CR) for "Online Presence" and "Loyalty" is 0.84 and 0.87, respectively, while the average extracted variance (AVE) exceeds 0.50 for both constructs.

Table 4

Criteria for achieving composite reliability

Factor	McDonald's (ω)	AVE
Online presence	0.91	0.64
Loyalty	0.88	0.58

Source: Computed by the author with CFA/SEM estimation in JASP.

Factor loads exceed recommended minimums.

Table 5

Factor weights of observables.

Factor	Indicator	Std. Est. (ger)	p-value	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value
Loyalty	L_1	0.745	< .001	0.426	0.025	17.070
	L_2	0.546	< .001	0.297	0.037	7.996
	L_3	0.786	< .001	0.461	0.027	17.084
	L_4	0.917	< .001	0.503	0.027	18.319
Online presence	A P_1	0.711	< .001	0.476	0.027	17.897
	A P_2	0.656	< .001	0.421	0.025	16.947
	A P_3	0.826	< .001	0.622	0.032	19.203
	A P_4	0.867	< .001	0.683	0.034	20.018
	A P_5	0.777	< .001	0.637	0.034	18.620
	A P_6	0.895	< .001	0.610	0.031	19.840

Source: Computed by the author with CFA/SEM estimation in JASP.

One of the observable L_2 variables of the latent variable "loyalty" showed a factor load of 0.55, which is below the recommended threshold of 0.60 (Hair et al., 2019). The relatively low factor loading of indicator L_2, which relates to the personalization of loyalty programs, may reflect its limited application in the Bulgarian urban tourism context. This could suggest that small-scale accommodation providers do not prioritize or effectively implement customized loyalty initiatives, possibly due to resource constraints or lack of digital tools. Therefore, it is excluded from the final measurement model in order to improve the validity of the construct.

The figure below presents a visualization of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), including the latent variables (circles) and their respective observed indicators (rectangles), as well as the standardized factor loads between them.

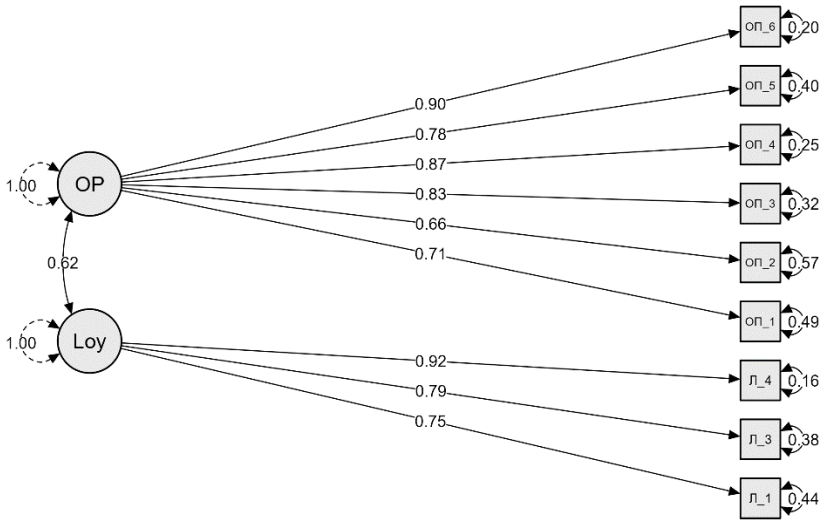


Fig. 2. CFA Model of the Measurement Structure
Source: Developed by the author as part of the proposed model.

The CFA confirms the validity of the measurement model. All factor weights are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and exceed the threshold of 0.60.

The assessment of the model was carried out using standard suitability criteria, the values of which are in accordance with the recommended thresholds. The criteria are presented in the table below.

Table 6

Model Fit Indices and Recommended Thresholds for CFA

Model adequacy criteria	Established value	Recommended values
χ^2/df	0,61	<2.5
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	1.0	>0.90
Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA)	0.000	
RMSEA p-value	1.0	
Standardized root mean square residual (SRMR)	0.045	
Goodness of fit index (GFI)	0.994	>0.90
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	1.00	>0.90
Bentler-Bonett Non-normed Fit Index (NNFI)	1.0	>0.90
Bentler-Bonett Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.989	>0.75–0.80
Parsimony Normed Fit Index (PNFI)	0.716	>0.75–0.80
Bollen's Relative Fit Index (RFI)	0.986	>0.90
Bollen's Incremental Fit Index (IFI)	1.0	>0.90
Relative Noncentrality Index (RNI)	1.0	>0.90

Source: Author's calculations based on confirmatory factor analysis performed in JASP.

5. SEM Results

This item presents the results of the structural model. The emphasis is placed on the values of path coefficients between latent variables, as well as on the statistical significance of these relationships. The measurement part of the model – including reliability, factor weights and confirmation of constructs – has already been discussed in the previous section dedicated to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This includes confirming good internal consistency and validity of the constructs, which allows the focus here to be placed entirely on structural relationships and hypotheses. For this reason, only the actual structural relationships between the latent constructs that address the test of the research hypothesis are reported here.

A statistically significant positive relationship between online presence and loyalty was found. The standardized regression coefficient was **$\beta = 0.619$**, indicating a **moderate to strong effect**. The association was significant at a significance level **$p < 0.001$**, indicating that a higher online presence was associated with a higher degree of loyalty among tourism users in the urban context.

Table 7

Regression coefficient for the effect size

Predictor	Outcome	Standardized estimate	p-value	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
ON	Loy	0.618	< .001	0.509	0.729

Source: Computed by the author with SEM estimation in JASP.

The confidence interval at 95% for the standardized coefficient is [0.509; 0.729], which further confirms the reliability of the established relationship.

Figure 3 visualizes the structure of the studied model (SEM), including the latent variables "online presence" and "loyalty", as well as their observable indicators.

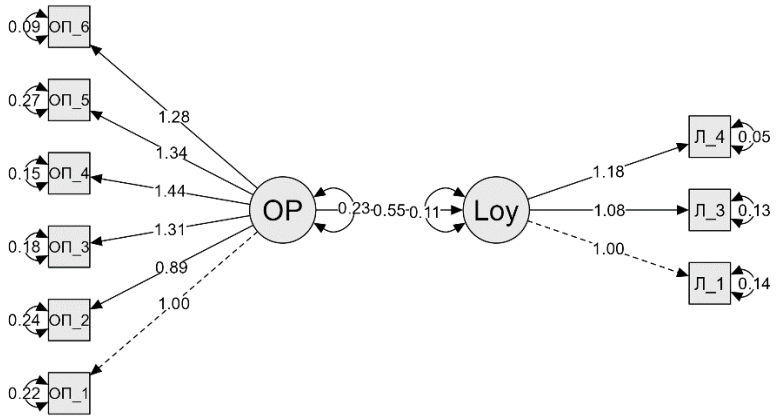


Fig. 3. SEM model of the study
Source: Computed by the author with SEM estimation in JASP.

Figure 3 illustrates the complete configuration of structural modeling with equations based on empirical data.

6. Discussion

The findings confirm the positive relationship between online presence and loyalty, aligning with previous research (Amin et al., 2021; Rather & Hollebeek, 2019). However, this study contributes by quantifying the relationship using structural modeling in the under-researched context of Bulgarian urban tourism. Unlike many prior studies, which focus on consumer perceptions, this research captures the managerial perspective, providing insights into how loyalty is actively cultivated. Importantly, while a significant effect was found, the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal inference. It is plausible that loyal guests, through repeated interactions, also encourage better digital presence—suggesting a bidirectional relationship. Furthermore, factors such as customer satisfaction may mediate or moderate this effect, which opens avenues for future studies.

From a practical standpoint, the results suggest that not all aspects of online presence contribute equally to loyalty. Descriptive data indicate that systematic management of online reviews and social media activity is rare among respondents, yet these actions are known to enhance customer engagement. Managers are encouraged to prioritize authentic content, timely responsiveness to guest feedback, and consistent digital communication strategies. OTA platforms remain dominant, but overreliance may hinder long-term brand building. Investments in a branded website or personalized loyalty schemes—though underused—could offer a competitive advantage.

7. Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between digital presence and customer behavior by empirically testing this relationship for the first time in the context of urban tourism in Bulgaria. The findings demonstrate that online presence is a significant predictor of customer loyalty. The research provides robust empirical evidence supporting this association, utilizing a methodological framework based on confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) with ordinal data.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, the data were collected exclusively from accommodation providers—owners and managers—which does not allow for direct generalization of the

findings to end users (tourists). Second, the geographic scope is limited to three regions in Bulgaria—Varna, Burgas, and Dobrich—which constrains the external validity of the results. Additionally, the scales used were adapted from existing studies and not originally developed specifically for the Bulgarian urban tourism context.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating the perspective of tourists and extending the model to other types of destinations—such as rural, cultural, or wellness tourism. This would allow for comparative analysis and deeper testing of the structural relationships in varying contexts.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study advances current knowledge by empirically validating the role of online presence as a strategic antecedent of loyalty, using SEM with ordinal data, thus contributing to the methodological advancement in tourism research.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Demographic questions

On the territory of which city does the accommodation you manage operate:

- Varna
- Burgas
- Dobrich

What class is the property you manage?

- Hotel
- Family hotel
- Hostel
- Pension
- Guest House
- Guest Apartment
- Guest Room

Which of the following digital marketing activities do you most often use to promote your managed property?

- Maintaining an account with online travel agencies (OTAs) (e.g. Booking.com, Expedia)
- Own Website Optimization (SEO)
- Paid advertising (PPC campaigns, e.g. Google Ads)
- Social media marketing (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok)
- Affiliate marketing
- Influencer Marketing
- I do not use any of the above activities

Please choose the ratio between the annual expenditure on digital marketing activities and the revenue from bookings on an annual basis?

- 1-10%
- 11-20%
- 21-30%
- 31-40%
- over 41%

What is the approximate share of different booking sources for the property you manage?

Platform	0 - 20%	21 - 40%	41 - 60%	61 - 80%	81 - 100%
Direct bookings (without intermediaries)					
Bookings through OTAs and intermediaries (e.g. Booking.com; Airbnb; Expedia, etc.)					
Bookings through collective shopping sites (e.g. Grabo; Grupovo.bg, etc.)					

Bookings via social networks (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, etc.)					

Structural equation block

INSTRUCTIONS: For each statement, please select the option that best reflects your level of agreement:

1 – Strongly disagree
2 – Somewhat disagree
3 – Neither agree nor disagree
4 – Somewhat agree
5 – Strongly agree

Online Presence **Measures**	**Evaluation**				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Availability of your own website (or blog) with clear content and high-quality and authentic photographs;					
Having a current profile in at least one online travel agency such as Booking/Airbnb/Expedia, etc.					
Presence of a profile in at least one metasearch engine aggregator of tourist sites such as Tripadvisor/Trivago/Google Hotels, etc.					
An active business profile of the property on at least one social media platform such as YouTube/Facebook/TikTok, etc., as well as systematic publication of engaging content					
Responding in time to all publicly available online comments, regardless of their mood - positive or negative					
Conducting different types of paid advertising campaigns on different online platforms;					

Loyalty

Please indicate to what extent you agree that the above statements are important for building and maintaining **customer loyalty** among past guests to the property you manage

Measures of **consumer loyalty**	**Evaluation**				
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Maintaining a program to incentivize subsequent bookings (discounts, points, levels, etc.) among already past guests					
Ability to adapt the loyalty program to individual preferences on the part of guests.					
Encouraging satisfied guests to leave positive online comments as part of their user experience.					
Taking an effective solution whenever a follow-up complaint is received from a guest.					

Annex 2

Auxiliary address files:
Csv 318 articles:
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/4k5y75azqdrftkyjvagqb/scopus_318_articles.csv?rlkey=tizndzohzn3w38ier5sb6yvya&st=15hzi3hl&dl=0
Key words – 63
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/3il1ox8elt2k0a5pvgisr/key_words_analysis_63_with-5-counts-of-1382-kw.csv?rlkey=hw91wff926a4maz305shrxc64&st=q14aaquh&dl=0
Survey data sem 235
https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/gd6z3b19rkv6qlo3bmkic/data_PhD_article.csv?rlkey=mzserh1j576a3831ws7p8lbjr&st=rw2bxfbf&dl=0