

Sociodemographic Drivers of Memorable City Breaks: Evidence from Tourists in Serbia

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Abstract

City breaks have emerged as one of the most popular and rapidly growing travel segments. As competition in this market intensifies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to stand out, prompting destinations to innovate and improve their offerings. Many cities continue to prioritize classic tourism goods and services, ignoring travelers' growing desire for distinctive and memorable experiences. Individuals may perceive travel experiences differently based on their personal and demographic background. However, the relationship between tourists' sociodemographic traits and the memorability of their experiences remains understudied. Therefore, this study addresses a gap in the literature by evaluating the memorability of city breaks and directly examining the impact of tourists' sociodemographic characteristics on these memorable experiences. The research was carried out among 614 international tourists in three Serbian cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš) from December 2021 to June 2022. The data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (descriptive statistics, T-test, correlation analysis, and ANOVA test). Hedonism, local culture, and refreshment stood out as the most memorable aspects of a city break trip. The results further revealed that gender, age, marital status, income, and travel companions significantly shape memorable experiences. These findings add to the current body of knowledge on this subject and can help DMOs better understand market trends, improve visitor experiences, and strengthen their tourism capacities.

Keywords: memorable tourism experience; city break; sociodemographic characteristics; tourists; Serbia

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Introduction

City or urban tourism is defined as journeys undertaken by travelers to urban areas or places characterized by high population density (UNWTO, 2023). A city break is a specific form of vacation that involves a short leisure trip to a single town or city, without any overnight stays at alternative locations during the journey (Trew, Cockerell, 2002). Cities are a popular travel choice among tourists, but despite their widespread appeal, these destinations face major challenges (Vujičić et al., 2020; Kovačić et al., 2019). As tourist behavior and expectations continue to evolve, it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet their needs and differentiate in a competitive market. Many cities still primarily focus on providing traditional tourism services and products, overlooking the growing demand for unique, distinctive, and memorable experiences (Kim et al., 2012b).

Research suggests that individual perceptions of travel experiences vary according to personal background and demographics (Azevedo, 2010; Uysal et al., 2012; Šagovnović, Kovačić, 2020). Nevertheless, knowledge on this topic remains limited, particularly in the context of memorable tourism experiences. Only a few scholars (Dahanayake et al., 2024; Ye et al., 2025) have provided some insights into the relationship between tourists' sociodemographic traits and memorable experiences, but the contexts and samples of these studies differ considerably. To date, no studies have specifically investigated this link within the context of city break tourism. Therefore, this study seeks to address the gap by examining (1) the memorability of tourism experiences in city break destinations and (2) the influence of tourists' sociodemographic characteristics on these experiences. The study was conducted among international tourists in three Serbian cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš), major hubs for urban tourism in the country. Belgrade and Novi Sad are the leading and two most popular tourist destinations in Serbia, while Niš is the country's third most visited city. According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, city breaks are among the priority tourism products in the country, especially in the aforementioned cities, which attract an increasing number of visitors each year (Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications, 2016). Moreover, Milačić (2024) underlines the importance of city tourism in providing a long-term competitive advantage to this sector of the Serbian economy.

Nowadays, when many urban destinations provide similar activities, attractions, products, and services, it is imperative to innovate and create offerings that fulfill the tourists' expectations while simultaneously delivering memorable experiences. These experiences are critical for enhancing destination competitiveness, fostering tourist satisfaction, and influencing future travel decisions. In this context, the study's findings can help DMOs gain valuable insights into the behavior of tourists from different demographic backgrounds, allowing them to tailor strategies that not only improve visitor experiences but also increase the destinations' overall competitiveness.

Literature Review

The idea behind memorable tourism experience (MTE) is to provide tourists experiences they will remember for a very long time. It is a complex phenomenon that encompasses visitors' emotional and subjective responses (Kladou, Mavragani, 2015) and incorporates key moments of their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts at the destination (Kim et al., 2012a). MTEs are considered the most significant and critical events that tourists selectively recall from their trips

(Hosseini et al., 2021). These are long-lasting experiences derived from a variety of on-site activities and are essential for the success of tourism products and services (Chen et al., 2020). In particular, the concept of MTE has been considered highly effective in enhancing destination competitiveness and a key factor influencing future traveler behavior and loyalty (Zhang et al., 2018; Hosseini et al., 2021).

Kim et al. (2012a) emphasize that people who find tourism experiences memorable tend to remember them through seven key experiential components: hedonism, novelty, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, and involvement. Hedonism implies engaging in enjoyable and exciting experiences during travel. Novelty captures the uniqueness and memorability of certain moments, often involving encounters with new and distinctive activities or environments. Local culture highlights the positive perception of the host culture, friendly interactions with local residents, and immersive opportunities to experience the local way of life. Refreshment refers to feelings of renewal and relaxation, such as stress relief, escape from everyday routines, and an improved emotional state after the trip. Meaningfulness is related to acquiring personal significance on a trip, experiencing something meaningful to oneself, and increasing self-awareness. Involvement denotes a traveler's active participation in their tourism experience, including visiting favorite sites and engaging with desired activities and attractions. Lastly, knowledge involves experiencing new cultures, learning something new, and improving one's skills (Kim et al., 2012a).

The perception and interpretation of a travel experience is often shaped by the visitor's sociodemographic background (Castaño-Prieto et al., 2024). Regarding memorable experiences, Tung and Ritchie (2011) argue that memory formation and recall are not formal processes but rather influenced by an individual's demographic background. Additionally, scholars (Chandralal, Valenzuela, 2013) point out that the value of memorable dimensions varies according to the tourist's demographic traits and call for more research into the influence of visitor demographics on MTEs (Chandralal et al., 2015). However, understanding the direct relation between travelers' sociodemographic characteristics and memorable experiences is pretty scarce. To the best of our knowledge, only a few researchers have examined this link to date, including Ye et al. (2025) in heritage tourism and Dahanayake et al. (2024) in wellness tourism. As a result, the topic remains underexplored. While tourists' sociodemographic profiles have been associated with destination choice (Almeida, 2020) and travel motivation in urban settings (Vujičić et al., 2025), their role in shaping memorable experiences in city break tourism has been largely neglected. Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap, advance the existing body of literature, and gain insights that could be useful for both academic research and practical application.

Methods and data

Instrument

To assess the memorable experiences and explore how tourists' sociodemographic characteristics affect them, a two-part questionnaire was developed and distributed to tourists. The first part focused on respondents' sociodemographic traits (gender, age, education, employment status, marital status, income) and information regarding their traveling companions. The second part measured memorable tourism experience using the scale developed by Kim et al. (2012a). It consists of 24 statements designed to assess the following seven dimensions:

hedonism, novelty, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, and involvement. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with all the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1- strongly disagree; 5- strongly agree).

Procedure

The research was carried out in three of Serbia's biggest and most popular urban centers: Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš. The research was conducted among foreign tourists from December 2021 to June 2022. Respondents were approached mostly in accommodation facilities, with the assistance of staff and researchers. They completed the questionnaire on the spot using the traditional paper-and-pencil method. Each participant was informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary and anonymous nature of their participation, and the use of data exclusively for scientific purposes. The collected data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS software. For the research purposes, descriptive statistical analysis, T-test, correlation analysis, and ANOVA test were applied.

Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 614 international tourists, distributed across the cities as follows: 304 in Belgrade, 207 in Novi Sad, and 103 in Nis. Two important criteria were used to select the participants: (1) they had to be foreign visitors (not Serbian citizens) and (2) be older than 18 years. The sampling approach used in this study is convenience sampling, which includes people who are most easily accessible. Since the sample was collected largely during the epidemic when traveler numbers were restricted, this method was considered to be the most appropriate.

Results

Respondents' sociodemographic characteristics

The respondents' sociodemographic characteristics are shown in Table 1. The study sample included more female than male participants. Respondents were between 18 and 85 years old, with an average age of 36. Most of the respondents were highly educated. The largest percentage of participants were employed, with nearly half earning an average monthly income. The majority of respondents were married, and the proportion of singles and couples was comparable. Regarding travel companions, answers were diverse, but most respondents traveled to Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš with friends.

Table 1. Respondents' sociodemographic characteristics (*n*=614)

Gender		Age	
Male	39.4%	Average age	36.19
Female	60.6%	Std. deviation	10.91
		Age range	18–85
Education		Marital status	
Primary	1.6%	Married	34.7%
Secondary	14.3%	In a relationship	28.0%
Bachelors	34.7%	Single	31.6%

Masters	37.9%	Divorced	4.7%
PhD	11.4%	Widowed	1.0%
Employment status		Income*	
Employed	78.0%	Below average	15.3%
Unemployed	7.2%	Average	48.0%
Student	10.9%	Above average	36.6%
Retiree	3.9%		
Travel companions			
Family	18.7%	Colleague(s)	8.5%
Partner	21.5%	Alone	23.1%
Friend(s)	27.0%	Other	1.1%

*Average monthly income in the respondent's country of origin

Descriptive statistics and measurement validity

Prior to analyzing the influence of tourists' socio-demographic profiles on MTEs, the initial step was to assess the memorability of city break experiences. First, descriptive statistics for the MTE scale were performed, along with an evaluation of its reliability and validity. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for each variable was greater than the recommended value of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978), indicating the instrument's reliability (Table 2). The construct's validity was also checked by testing the convergent validity. Convergent validity refers to how two measures that should be related in theory are related in practice. It exists when item-to-factor loadings are significant and when the AVE score is greater than 0.50 while the composite reliability is greater than 0.60 (Huang et al., 2013; Fornell, Larcker, 1981). An AVE exceeding 0.40 is acceptable when the CR surpasses 0.60. The results showed that all tested dimensions had an AVE greater than 0.40 and a CR greater than 0.60.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and measurement model validity

MTE	Mean	St. deviation	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR
Hedonism (4 items)	4.27	.697	.797	0.47	0.78
Novelty (4 items)	3.90	.888	.833	0.47	0.78
Local culture (3 items)	4.23	.730	.738	0.54	0.78
Refreshment (4 items)	4.10	.776	.810	0.53	0.82
Meaningfulness (3 items)	3.84	.950	.838	0.58	0.80
Knowledge (3 items)	3.69	.804	.708	0.45	0.71
Involvement (3 items)	3.96	.883	.702	0.44	0.70

To evaluate memorable city break experiences, the mean values of seven experiential dimensions were examined (Table 2). Hedonism received the highest rating among experience dimensions, followed by local culture and refreshment, indicating a strong emotional and sensory component of the experience. Lower ratings were recorded for involvement and novelty, while the lowest mean values were for the dimensions of knowledge and meaningfulness.

T-test

The initial test intended to assess the influence of tourists' sociodemographic characteristics on memorable experiences was the independent samples T-test. It was applied to compare responses between male and female respondents. The results, presented in Table 3, show statistically significant differences in three MTE factors, indicating that women experienced higher degrees of hedonism, refreshment, and involvement on their trip compared to men.

Table 3. *T-test results*

Factors	Mean		T-value
	Male (n=242)	Female (n=372)	
Hedonism	4.12	4.37	-4.314*
Refreshment	4.01	4.16	-2.269*
Involvement	3.84	4.05	-3.151*

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Correlation analysis

The age-related disparities in respondents' perceptions of the tourist experience were further investigated. Accordingly, a correlation analysis was carried out to investigate these differences. The results showed the presence of correlation with only one factor (hedonism), which was negative. It suggests that the older the respondents, the less they perceive and remember hedonism as an experiential component ($r = -.118^{**}$; $p < 0.01$).

Anova test

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to investigate statistically significant relationships between dependent and independent variables. The dependent variables in this study are MTE variables (hedonism, novelty, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, and involvement), whereas the independent variables are education level, marital status, employment status, income, and travel companions. The findings demonstrated statistically significant differences in perceptions of experiences based on three sociodemographic characteristics (marital status, income, travel companions), but no significant differences in education level or employment status.

The results showed that travelers' marital status significantly affects their memorable experience, specifically the components of hedonism and refreshment. To determine which groups differed, an LSD post hoc test was applied (1- single, 2- in a relationship, 3- married, 4- divorced, 5- widowed). It revealed that respondents in a relationship experienced more hedonic aspects of travel than singles and widowers, while divorcees showed a higher level of refreshment compared to singles. Widowers, in contrast, had lower scores for this dimension. The highest scores for the refreshment dimension were recorded among divorced respondents.

Table 4. ANOVA test results

		F - value	LSD post hoc
Marital status	Hedonism	2.622*	2 > 1, 5
	Refreshment	3.536*	4 > 1; 5 < 1, 2, 3, 4
Income	Hedonism	4.718*	2 < 1, 3
	Meaningfulness	3.272*	2 < 3
Travel companion	Refreshment	6.741*	5 < 1, 3 4 < 1, 2, 3, 5
	Involvement	2.878*	1, 3 > 4, 5

Note: * $p < 0.05$

The next sociodemographic variable that influences memorable experiences is income, which is classified into three categories: 1- below average, 2- average and 3- above average. The findings revealed that income levels influence two memorable dimensions: hedonism and meaningfulness (Table 4). The LSD post hoc test indicated that respondents with lower and higher incomes reported more hedonic experiences than those with average incomes. Individuals with above-average incomes had more meaningful experiences than those with average incomes.

The ANOVA test also demonstrated that tourist travel companions influence their perceptions of memorable city break experiences (Table 4). This variable consists of six categories: 1- family, 2- partner, 3- friend(s), 4- colleague(s), 5- alone, and 6- other, but the last category was excluded from this analysis. The LSD post hoc test shows that the sense of involvement and refreshment during the trip changes greatly depending on who people travel with. Tourists who traveled alone found the trip more refreshing than those who were accompanied by family and friends, while those who traveled with colleagues reported the lowest value on this dimension. The findings also revealed that respondents who traveled with family or friends were more involved in the tourism experience than those who traveled alone or with colleagues. These results highlight the significant role of the social context of travel in influencing various aspects of a memorable tourist experience.

Discussion

The present study sought to investigate memorable tourism experiences in city break destinations and explore the role of travelers' sociodemographic characteristics in shaping such experiences. The study initially confirmed that city break destinations like Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš, can offer memorable experiences to their visitors. The hedonistic component stood out the most, which is also one of the most prevalent reasons for choosing urban destinations (Almeida, 2020). Other prominent memorable aspects include opportunities to closely experience local culture, as well as moments of relaxation and escape from daily routines. The dimensions of involvement and novelty have slightly lower scores, which may indicate that, while travelers value engagement with new experiences, they may not prioritize these factors as aspects of enjoyment and leisure in their travels, or that the destination may not provide adequate offerings to emphasize these experiential components more. Lastly, meaningful-

ness and knowledge were the least memorable elements of a city break experience. This could be related to the nature of short city trips, which, due to their limited duration and intensity of engagement, may reduce opportunities for in-depth learning or self-reflection, leading to a decreased sense of meaning and knowledge gain (Iskhakova et al., 2023). Moreover, city break tourists tend to prioritize and seek relaxation and escapism, while motivations related to learning and self-improvement are less prominent (Chi, Phuong, 2022). However, innovations in urban tourism design and interpretation may increase tourists' engagement with the educational and meaningful components of travel, resulting in more enriching and memorable experiences. One approach could be to incorporate smart tourism technology, which has proven to be an effective tool for fostering memorable experiences in museums (Yang, Zhang, 2022). It has also been demonstrated that the use of virtual and augmented reality enhances memorable experiences in a variety of settings (Leung et al., 2022; Li, Jiang, 2023; Jiang et al., 2023; Balakrishnan et al., 2024), which may serve as a solution for destinations that struggle to generate and deliver experiences that visitors will remember.

The results further confirmed that tourists' sociodemographic characteristics, including gender, age, marital status, income, and travel companions, have an impact on the memorability of their tourism experience. The most dominant experiential dimensions under their influence are hedonism, refreshment, involvement, and meaningfulness.

Previous research has shown that individuals of different genders may perceive experiences differently (Sthapit, Coudounaris, 2018; Shabnam et al., 2022). This study revealed that ratings for the memorable aspects of hedonism, refreshment, and involvement were more pronounced among women than men. Therefore, women appear to be more inclined to look for exciting, hedonistic, and refreshing experiences, as well as to actively engage in travel-related activities. Davies et al. (2017) found that women prefer hedonism more than men, i.e., they seek fun, excitement, and pleasure. When it comes to refreshment, it may be argued that since women frequently generate more stress in their lives (Matud, 2004), they may have a stronger desire to relax during trip and escape from daily routines. Short vacations have been shown to improve individuals' stress levels and well-being (Blank et al., 2018), which also applies to city breaks. Prior studies (Vespestad, Mehmetoglu, 2015; Dubey et al., 2018) likewise indicate that women tend to prioritize travel motives such as mental rest, relaxation, participation in physical activities and escape from everyday responsibilities. Regarding involvement, these findings are consistent with those of Vespestad and Mehmetoglu (2015), who discovered that women are more likely to participate in tourism activities during the trip.

The second sociodemographic factor influencing MTEs is tourists' age. Differences were found only in the experiential dimension of hedonism, implying that respondents' enjoyment of new experiences, level of excitement and thrill, and level of participation in trip activities all tend to decrease with age. LeFebvre and Huta (2021) proposed that hedonic motivation varies with age, indicating a decline in the pursuit of pleasure, satisfaction, and fun after the age of thirty. Thus, it can be concluded that younger respondents tend to prefer and report more hedonic experiences, which is not surprising. Younger tourists are generally curious, eager to seek excitement, and motivated to try new things on vacation, which is well supported by the extensive and diverse offerings typically found in city break destinations.

Marital status has also been shown to shape MTEs. The results indicate that respondents in a relationship are more likely to have hedonistic experiences during a city break trip compared to singles and widowers. Having a partner's support may make individuals more open to novel and exciting activities at the destination. Furthermore, divorced individuals are more inclined to perceive the city break experience as refreshing than those who are single. Divorce

is considered one of the most challenging life events, often accompanied by intense emotions such as stress, tension, sadness, and anger (Scott et al., 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that tourists in this life stage may seek to escape their daily routines through travel, relieve stress and improve their emotional well-being. In contrast, widowed respondents were the least likely to perceive visits to city destinations as refreshing.

Income, measured as average monthly earnings, also appears to influence tourists' memorable experiences. The findings show that individuals with both lower and higher incomes reported more hedonistic experiences compared to those with average incomes. This suggests that experience in city destinations can be enjoyable and exciting for visitors across the income spectrum. Furthermore, travelers with above-average incomes found their experiences as more meaningful than those with average incomes. This can be explained by the assumption that individuals with greater financial security are more likely to look for experiences that contribute to their personal growth and development.

Regarding travel companions, it was found that people who traveled alone found their city break experience as more refreshing than those who were accompanied by family and friends. Freedom and flexibility are among the primary reasons why people choose solo travel (Yang, 2021). Traveling alone allows individuals to fully disconnect from their daily lives, including the social circles that they are typically surrounded by. On the contrary, respondents who traveled with colleagues had less refreshing city break experiences than all other groups. Since trips with coworkers are usually for professional purposes, these experiences fail to provide the same level of escape from stress and daily routine. Additionally, tourists who traveled with family or friends were more engaged in the tourist experience than those who traveled alone or with colleagues. This could be due to additional support provided by family and friends, allowing for greater freedom to explore and participate in various activities compared to those traveling alone or with colleagues.

Conclusion

The results of this research revealed that the most memorable aspects of the city break experience are hedonism, local culture, and refreshment. Nevertheless, there remains potential for enhancement in other areas. Additionally, tourists' sociodemographic characteristics that shape memorable city break experiences are gender, age, marital status, income, and travel companions, while education level and employment status did not show statistically significant differences.

This study contributes to the theory of MTEs in several ways. First, it broadens the understanding of the factors that shape memorable tourism experiences, which is still under-researched. Focusing on the city break destinations, it reveals how the dynamic and multi-functional urban environment influences MTE perceptions and formation. Furthermore, the research results expand the existing knowledge and provide new insights on the relationship between travelers' sociodemographic characteristics and memorable experiences. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to directly explore the impact of tourists' sociodemographic variables on MTEs in an urban study context, as there have only been two studies in the literature that have addressed this link, but in heritage and wellness tourism.

This study also provides DMOs with valuable insights into how tourists with different sociodemographic backgrounds experience a memorable time, what their preferences are, and what they remember most about their city break trip. Understanding these distinctions enables

tourism providers to design more targeted and inclusive experiences, enhancing the chances of providing memorable experiences for all. Men, for instance, gave lower ratings for involvement, which suggests that women's preferences appear to be better aligned with the present offerings in the selected city break destinations, allowing for greater participation in the experience. However, in order to attract male visitors, provide them with a memorable experience, and engage them more, city centers should offer activities that appeal to male interests. In this regard, decision-makers should develop tailored strategies to highlight and to enhance specific experiential elements for distinct visitor groups. Additionally, advertising efforts could be customized to emphasize particular experiential aspects based on the demographic profile of the target tourists.

The present study has few limitations. The research focused exclusively on city break tourism which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other types of travel, such as coastal, rural, or long-haul destinations. Future research should explore different tourism contexts and broader tourist segments to validate and extend these results. Furthermore, the data collection was carried out during the pandemic period, which may have influenced tourist behavior and activities at the location and thus the research outcomes. Finally, although foreign tourists were included, the sample may not be completely representative of all nationalities and cultures. Future research could include a more diverse sample to explore the impact of cultural differences on the perception of memorable experiences.

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