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# Beyond symbolic: the role of tourism ethnocentrism in domestic travel

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## ABSTRACT

As a positive ingroup bias, tourism ethnocentrism (TE) is considered a symbolic reason for travelling that drives tourists to choose domestic destinations as a way of supporting their country and its tourism industry. To provide an additional perspective on TE, through the lens of cognitive dissonance and rationalization, we studied its relationships with other factors that could affect tourists' decision to travel domestically. The study was conducted in Serbia and used structural equation modelling to test these relationships. Our findings indicate that tourism xenophilia and tourism thalassophilia, defined as a preference for seaside summer holidays, do not affect TE and have only a limited negative impact on willingness to travel domestically. Constraints for travelling abroad and increased destination awareness as a consequence of the pandemic positively affect TE, thus questioning its purely symbolic nature and indicating that levels of TE in tourists could change due to external factors.

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tourism

## Introduction


Since affordable air travel has increased the number of available destinations, the ability of domestic destinations to compete against countless international destinations has decreased. Given the benefits that domestic tourism provides to a country, it is important to identify the factors that cause tourists to favour domestic destinations, thus giving them much-needed competitive advantage.

Ethnocentrism, defined most simply as 'favoritism for one's group over outgroups' (Stepchenkova, 2022, p. 1), has been identified as one such factor. In consumer studies, ethnocentrism has been linked to patriotism (Marcoux et al., 1997) and even nationalism (Balabanis et al., 2001). Stepchenkova (2022) concluded that consumer ethnocentrism in tourism has mostly been studied in relation to outgroups and international tourism (e.g. Boukampa et al., 2021; Stepchenkova et al., 2018), by using the Shimp and Sharma's (1987) consumer ethnocentrism scale (CETSCALE) and the Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997) generalized ethnocentrism (GENE) scale.

However, Kock et al. (2019) approached ethnocentrism in tourism as a positive ingroup bias towards one's home country, or more specifically its domestic tourism, and named it tourism ethnocentrism (TE). Tourists express TE through support for the domestic tourism economy by showing active preference for domestic destinations, which then affects their behavioural intentions. Kock et al. (2019) consider TE to be a distinct symbolic reason for destination selection.

Guided by the 'observe the world' approach for developing research ideas (Kock, Assaf, et al., 2020), we identified several phenomena of great importance for domestic tourist behaviour in our

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home country of Serbia. Domestic travel as support for the country (TE), the tendency of Serbians to prioritize travelling abroad and to the seaside, as well as their (un)awareness of domestic destinations are frequently discussed themes in the public discourse on domestic tourism.

International travel constraints in 2020 intensified these issues and caused them to interact. Not being able to conveniently travel abroad made people interested in domestic alternatives more than ever before. These developments made the complicated relationship of Serbian demand with TE simpler. Being ethnocentric suddenly became less difficult, since it required less sacrifice. Since travelling abroad was not convenient and awareness of attractive domestic destinations increased, tourists did not have to give up much by choosing domestic destinations. We argue that TE may be explained as a form of domestic tourism rationalization, which is affected by the observed phenomena.

Described by Freud as a 'defense mechanism' (Kay et al., 2002, p. 1301), rationalization is a strategy of the psychological immune system (Gilbert et al., 1998). To keep their mental comfort and avoid 'an overdose of gloom' (Gilbert et al., 1998, p. 619), people cope with unwanted outcomes by adjusting their preferences, so that the outcomes are perceived as less unwanted.

Rationalization is most frequently explained from the perspective of Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, which is widely used in social sciences to study individual responses to outcomes (Kay et al., 2002). Pointed out as 'probably the most comprehensive theoretical treatment of the specific relation between expectations and evaluations' (Kay et al., 2002, p. 1302), the theory of thought systems (McGuire & McGuire, 1991) proposes different ways in which rationalizations occur.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the role of rationalization in the development of TE, thus offering an additional perspective and complementing the studies that provided proof of its evolutionary origins (Gyimóthy et al., 2022; Kock, Nørfelt, et al., 2020) or its connection to concepts related to patriotism (Lever et al., 2022). To close this research gap, we explore the relationships of TE with selected interconnected factors, which were observed in a domestic tourism context and deemed its potential antecedents – tourism xenophilia (TXI), tourism thalassophilia (TTL), constraints for travelling abroad (CTA) and increased destination awareness (IDA). After presenting the study context and the theoretical framework, we analyse these factors and relationships in the conceptual framework through the lens of cognitive dissonance and thought systems theory. By testing these impacts, we are also exploring the influence of practical factors on TE, therefore 'challenging assumptions' (Kock, Assaf, et al., 2020) regarding its purely symbolic nature. Therefore, our core research question stands as follows: can tourism ethnocentrism, as a symbolic reason for travelling, be explained as a form of rationalization? The secondary aim of this study is to examine the impact of the studied phenomena on willingness to travel domestically (WTD).

Our study contributes to the literature on rationalization of tourist behaviour, in which risk taking and unsuitable behaviour received the majority of attention (e.g. Uriely et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2019). We contribute to the studies of cognitive dissonance of tourists, where changes of travel preferences as a result of cognitive dissonance have only recently been empirically addressed (Karl et al., 2022). Connection between ethnocentrism and cognitive dissonance was not previously explored in tourism research. By approaching TE from the cognitive dissonance perspective, we can provide novel practical implications for DMOs, which will be impactful beyond the pandemic context.

## The study context

Serbian destinations accommodated 1.72 million domestic and 870,000 international tourists in 2021. Domestic tourists also have a dominant role in overnight stays (66% in 2021). Predominant tourist destinations of Serbians are foreign countries. The vast majority (88% in 2021) of 460,000 trips organized by travel agencies are made abroad (SORS, 2022). Todorović and Belij (2019) reported that preference for international destinations is the most important constraint on Serbian tourists' decision to travel domestically, indicating strong xenophilic tendencies.

Serbian demand is predominantly oriented towards coastal tourism. The five most common seaside destination countries were visited by 88% of tourists that travelled abroad via travel agencies in 2021 (SORS, 2022). Since Serbia is landlocked and its citizens assign great importance to seaside holidays, the public assumes that lacking a sea represents the biggest limitation for the development of domestic tourism.

During the last decade, domestic tourism has become a controversial subject in Serbia. Numerous government officials have been making strong pleas to the citizens to choose domestic travel over travelling abroad, citing patriotic and economic reasons for it. Seeing this as a form of intrusion into their tourism choices, many people started to associate domestic tourism with the government, turning it into a politically sensitive issue.

However, during the summer of 2020, traditional seaside destinations of Serbian tourists were off-limits due to closed borders. Since numerous constraints made travelling to the seaside significantly less convenient, many opted for a domestic holiday. People's interest in domestic tourism increased and the media followed with coverage of lesser-known sites, which led to the public's 'discovery' of numerous domestic destinations. This increased destination awareness led to an unusually high visitation to numerous attractions.

## Theoretical framework

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) postulates that inconsistencies between cognitions affect human motivation. People strive towards internal consistency (consonance) of their worldview and try to make this worldview consistent with their actual behaviour. However, when a new piece of knowledge contradicts the existing knowledge, dissonance arises and, since it is uncomfortable, motivates the person to reduce it.

Since dissonance, as well as consonance, occurs between pairs of elements, which represent cognitions, its reduction requires one of the elements to change. Various cognitions may be changed in the process, including opinions and beliefs about one's feelings, behaviour and environment. For example, changing behaviour to align it with a belief results in dissonance reduction. However, if such change is perceived as too difficult, people turn to rationalization and adjust their belief to make it consonant with their current behaviour.

The theory of thought systems (McGuire & McGuire, 1991) addresses the mechanisms behind rationalizations. It proposes that people anticipate events that might affect them and organize their related thoughts into systems that help them cope with the consequences of these events. A thought system consists of events and dimensions on which they are judged. By considering desirability and likelihood as the evaluation dimensions, they propose five coping postulates, including the rationalization postulate.

It states that people cope by aligning their judgments of an event's desirability with their judgments of its likelihood. If an event is perceived as more likely to happen, people tend to perceive it as more desirable (sweet lemon). If an event is perceived as less likely to happen, people's perception of its desirability decreases (sour grapes). This is in line with cognitive dissonance theory, where the perceived value of the chosen alternative increases, while the rejected alternative is considered less worthy (Kay et al., 2002).

## Conceptual framework

### *Tourism ethnocentrism*

Kock et al. (2019, pp. 427–428) defined TE as 'an individual's prescriptive beliefs and felt moral obligation to support the domestic tourism economy'. As a symbolic reason for destination selection, it should not reflect objective criteria, which are usually taken into consideration in the destination-choice process, such as destination attributes and their quality. Kock, Nørfelt, et al. (2020) argued

that TE is a contemporary manifestation of our behavioural immune system, which is based on our ancestors' need to avoid contagious diseases. In that sense, TE is rooted in the need to interact exclusively with ingroup members, which is based on the perception that they are less likely to carry a pathogen and more likely to provide support in cases of infection.

Kock et al. (2019) developed the TE scale, which was established as parsimonious, reliable and valid. Stepchenkova (2022) confirmed that the scale was suitable for domestic tourism research. Kock et al. (2019) established that TE, as a belief that one should support their country's domestic tourism, positively affects tourists' WTD, which is a behavioural outcome. Since their study was conducted in the US before the pandemic, testing of the established relationship between this belief (TE) and one of its behavioural outcomes (WTD) in another context is advised.

Hypothesis 1: Tourism ethnocentrism positively affects willingness to travel domestically.

In addition, previous studies explored the impacts of TE on residents' positive word of mouth and hospitality (Kock et al., 2019), their support for tourism development (Gyimóthy et al., 2022; Kock et al., 2019), destination advocacy (Lever et al., 2022) and attractiveness of domestic and international holidays (Gyimóthy et al., 2022).

Antecedents of TE have received less attention. Previous studies explored the role of perceived COVID-19 infectability (Kock, Nørfelt, et al., 2020), pandemic anxiety (Gyimóthy et al., 2022), destination image and national identification (Lever et al., 2022). We explore the impacts of four additional antecedents.

From the cognitive dissonance perspective (Festinger, 1957), each of these hypothesized relationships exists between pairs of cognitions, which may be consonant or dissonant. To relieve the psychological discomfort, people adjust to one of the opposing beliefs. Based on the study context, we propose that TE is the belief that decreases or increases so that consonance could be achieved.

From the rationalizing perspective (McGuire & McGuire, 1991), participation in domestic tourism represents the event, TE is considered a measure of the event's desirability, while the antecedents indicate the events' likelihood. For example, if an antecedent is positively connected to participation in domestic tourism, the likelihood is considered high. Through rationalization, this leads to higher desirability of participation (higher TE), meaning that the antecedent positively affects TE.

### ***Tourism xenophilia***

Arguably the most prominent examples of early interest of tourism scholars in xenophilia are the studies of Gray (1970) and Plog (1974). Gray's (1970) motive of wanderlust, embodied in leaving the familiar and seeking the different (Crompton, 1979), is widely used among contemporary tourists. In his discussion of psychographic types of tourists, Plog (1974) presents the psychocentric–allocentric continuum. Allocentrics, later relabelled as venturers (Plog, 2001), possess xenophilic features. They are curious, want to explore the world and enjoy the thrill of discovery.

Tourism xenophilia (TXI) is defined as 'individuals' attraction toward the perceived foreignness of destinations' (Nørfelt et al., 2020, p. 1388). This attraction to foreignness is rooted in our evolution, corresponding to the fundamental motive of exploration, which helped our hunter-gatherer ancestors survive in prehistoric times (Kock et al., 2018). As a positive foreign country bias, TXI is embodied in choosing to travel abroad for symbolic reasons that go beyond objective criteria.

Nørfelt et al. (2020) established that TXI positively affects willingness to visit a foreign destination and called for future research to test impacts of TXI in contexts other than the US. The global rise of ethnocentric tendencies in the last decade, partially due to the pandemic, provided a new context for studying xenophilia. Similarly to xenophilic tourists, novelty seekers may find it hard to fulfil their needs while travelling domestically (Kock et al., 2019), since places near home may be seen as too ordinary to provide escape from everyday surroundings (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017). It is possible that novelty-seeking trait negatively affects TE. Being unable to find something perceived as

novel in the home country may negatively influence a novelty seeker's perception of domestic travel as a way in which they could contribute to their country's prosperity.

Building on this, we argue that xenophilic tourists could be less ethnocentric, particularly given the opposing natures of TXI and TE, which represent a positive foreign-country bias and a positive home-country bias. From the cognitive dissonance perspective, TXI and TE are dissonant. We propose that, to achieve consonance, levels of TE decrease in xenophilic tourists. From the thought systems perspective, TXI indicates the likelihood of participation in domestic tourism, while TE indicates the desirability of participation in domestic tourism. Since TXI positively affects willingness to visit a foreign destination, xenophilic tourists are expected to be less likely to partake in domestic tourism, making its desirability lower (sour grapes), resulting in lower TE. This is supported by Nijssen et al. (1999), who reported a negative effect of interest for foreign travel on consumer ethnocentrism.

Hypothesis 2: Tourism xenophilia negatively affects tourism ethnocentrism.

Hypothesis 3: Tourism xenophilia negatively affects willingness to travel domestically.

### ***Tourism thalassophilia***

Williams and Zelinsky (1970, p. 565) discussed a certain heliotropic factor in international tourism as 'a strong southward surge of sun-seeking, cold-shunning tourists'. Beyond the differences in climate, they point out that when a desirable attribute is missing in one country and present in another, tourist flows from the first to the second country are to be expected. Sunlust is a related concept, introduced by Gray (1970) and discussed by Crompton (1979, p. 410) as a 'desire to experience different or better amenities for a specific purpose than are available in the environment in which one normally lives'. Pearce (1987) found empirical support for these considerations by establishing that charter flights in Europe were primarily directed from north to south, particularly towards coastal and insular regions. Global popularity of seaside vacations is linked to the belief that beaches offer best opportunities for rest, recreation and pleasure for diverse segments (Gormsen, 1997). Building on this, we introduce tourism thalassophilia (TTL). Getting its name from the Greek words *thalassa* (sea) and *philia* (love), the concept is used to describe the preference of tourists for seaside summer holidays.

TE pushes people to choose domestic destinations, while some factors, beside TXI, directly or indirectly push people to travel abroad. One such factor could be a preference for a specific type of tourist attraction that does not exist in the home country. For example, landlocked countries cannot offer seaside domestic holidays. In that sense, it is possible that TTL negatively affects TE. Since thalassophilic tourists from landlocked countries have to travel abroad to fulfil their needs, TTL and TE become dissonant. To align their beliefs (TE) to their preferences (TTL), these tourists express less TE. From the rationalizing perspective, low likelihood of participation in domestic tourism, indicated by TTL, decreases the desirability of such event, indicated by TE.

Hypothesis 4: Tourism thalassophilia negatively affects tourism ethnocentrism in a landlocked country.

Hypothesis 5: Tourism thalassophilia negatively affects willingness to travel domestically in a landlocked country.

TXI is a preference for foreignness and, in landlocked countries, TTL implies travelling abroad. What someone perceives as foreign is the thing they lack in their everyday environment, or in this case the seaside. We argue that TTL could be, to some extent, rooted in xenophilic tendencies. The more xenophilic someone is, the stronger their TTL could be. By putting emphasis on the attractiveness of differences between the everyday environment and the destination (Crompton, 1979), the concept of sunlust itself implies that TXI and TTL are related. It may be safely assumed that such related concepts are likely consonant.

Hypothesis 6: Tourism xenophilia positively affects tourism thalassophilia in a landlocked country.

### **Constraints for travelling abroad**

Limitations for travelling are important elements of tourist behaviour, mostly studied through the framework of travel constraints, which originated in leisure studies. Introduced by Crawford and Godbey (1987), the framework was addressed more recently as the hierarchical leisure constraints theory (Godbey et al., 2010).

There are three main types of constraints. Intrapersonal constraints comprise psychological states and personal characteristics of individuals. Interpersonal constraints result from social interactions. Structural constraints intervene between preferences and actual participation. Nyaupane and Andereck (2008) confirmed the existence of three subdimensions within structural constraints – time, financial and place attributes. Other subcategories were addressed in recent studies – social distancing (Shin et al., 2022) and added complications due to the pandemic (Humagain & Singleton, 2021).

Administrative constraints received limited attention in recent literature. Han et al. (2011) established that the expectations of Chinese tourists that visas for South Korea will not be required shortly positively affects their visit intentions. Lai et al. (2013) identified the difficulty of acquiring travel visas as a strong constraint for Chinese tourists when it comes to visiting the US.

Strict conditions for travelling abroad during the pandemic, even between countries whose borders had been virtually nonexistent for decades, showed that constraints related to border crossing are still relevant. We propose that requirements that resemble travel visas (COVID certificates and passenger locator forms), costs of COVID travel insurance and testing represent a new dimension of pandemic-related structural constraints – constraints for travelling abroad (CTA).

Kock et al. (2019, p. 436) pointed out that TE 'exists as an intangible barrier in the minds of tourists', as opposed to explicit travel barriers, such as strict entry regimes into certain countries. Given the discussed definition of intrapersonal constraints, it would be safe to approach TE as an intrapersonal constraint for travelling abroad, since it in fact represents a personal psychological feature that motivates people to travel domestically.

Different constraint dimensions mutually interact and sometimes have a common cause (Godbey et al., 2010). A strong structural constraint, such as a lack of money for an activity, could make a person less interested to partake in it, which is an intrapersonal constraint. Building on this, we argue that CTA (structural constraints) could reinforce TE (intrapersonal constraint for travelling abroad).

Cognitions that travelling abroad is difficult (CTA) and that domestic travel is beneficial to one's country (TE) should be consonant. For example, if a person's perception of CTA is strong and results in their inability to travel abroad, focusing on the positive aspects of domestic travel (such as TE) contributes to their psychological comfort. From the rationalizing perspective, low likelihood of travelling abroad, indicated by CTA, increases the desirability of domestic travel (sweet lemon), indicated by TE.

Further support for our hypotheses is provided by the literature on travel constraint negotiation, which is a process of overcoming a constraint through behavioural and cognitive strategies (Jackson et al., 1993). Either behaviour is changed to enable overcoming, or attitudes are changed to make the constrained action less desirable (rationalization).

We propose that TE develops, to some extent, as a cognitive strategy for the negotiation of CTA. If CTA is perceived as difficult to overcome, travel preferences are adjusted in favour of domestic tourism, which is seen as more favourable through ethnocentric lenses. Humagain and Singleton (2021) reported changes in the aspirations of people who perceived that travelling to remote places during the pandemic is complicated. Karl et al. (2022) reported tourists' attempts to view the constraint and alternative travel forms more positively.

Hypothesis 7: Constraints for travelling abroad positively affect tourism ethnocentrism.

Hypothesis 8: Constraints for travelling abroad positively affect willingness to travel domestically.

### ***Increased destination awareness***

Destination awareness is a component of destination brand equity, well established as the first and a necessary element of destination choice (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007) and defined as 'what someone knows or thinks they know about a destination' (p. 403). It marks the beginning of the learning process about the destination (Huerta-Álvarez et al., 2020). Its impact on visit intentions has been confirmed (Ferns & Walls, 2012).

Aside from advertising, numerous stimuli can increase destination awareness. Appearance in a film or a TV series is a common contemporary stimulus of destination awareness (Araújo Vila et al., 2021). Huerta-Álvarez et al. (2020) established that tourist-generated communication had a stronger impact on destination awareness of emerging destinations than DMO-generated communication. Islam and Rakib (2022) established that social media content affects attitudes towards domestic tourism and the intention to travel domestically.

Restrictions on international travel during the pandemic have prompted tourists to seek alternative domestic destinations, particularly in natural areas. Falk et al. (2022) reported a large increase in domestic tourists in sparsely-populated areas of Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland during the summer of 2020. However, Shahabi Sorman Abadi et al. (2021) established that pandemic-induced xenophobia negatively correlates not only with outbound, but also domestic travel intention.

In our case, increased interest of tourists was accompanied by the interest of the media, which made the public more aware of attractive domestic destinations. We propose that this increased destination awareness (IDA) has a positive effect on WTD. Nijssen et al. (1999) reported that perceived availability of domestic alternatives positively affects consumer ethnocentrism.

According to Moutinho (1987), when new information creates dissonance, tourists adjust their attitudes to make them consistent with the new knowledge. We propose that new information regarding the existence of attractive domestic destinations positively affects TE. For example, a person may think that their country does not offer attractive destinations and therefore perceives that domestic travel as a way of helping the country requires too much sacrifice. However, when they learn of such destinations, this way of helping the country through travel becomes more convenient than previously thought (Figure 1).

Hypothesis 9: Increased destination awareness since the start of the pandemic positively affects tourism ethnocentrism.

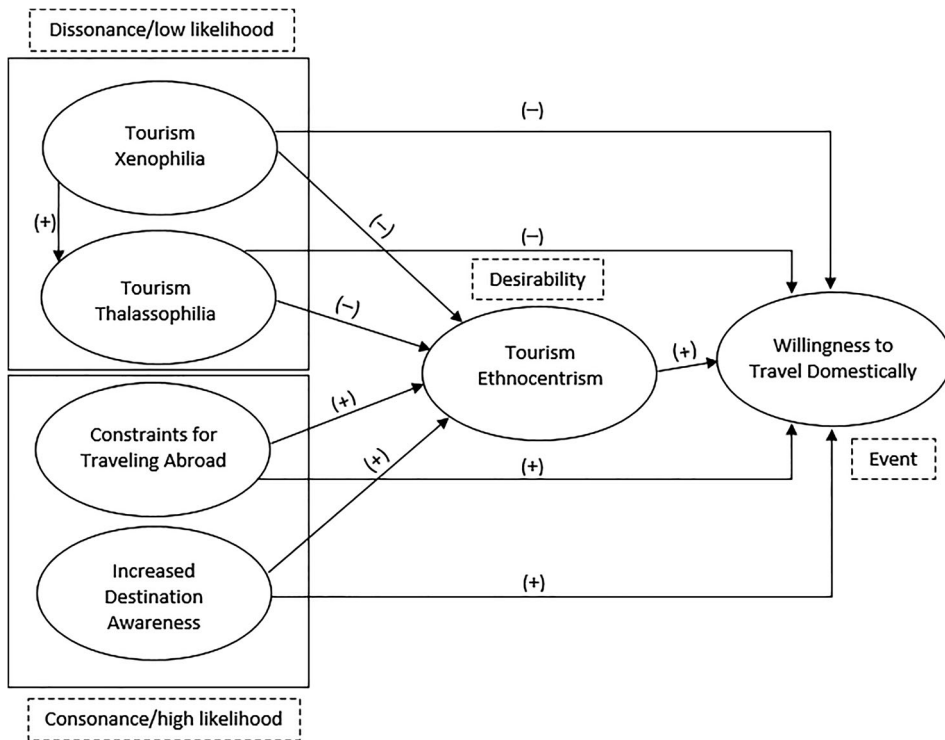
Hypothesis 10: Increased destination awareness since the start of the pandemic positively affects willingness to travel domestically.

## **Method**

### ***Participants and procedures***

Since domestic tourist behaviour is the focus of the study, the data was collected from a sample of 381 Serbian participants through an online questionnaire in June and July 2021 and February 2022. Aside from avoiding direct contact because of COVID-19, convenience sampling and an online questionnaire were used because of the sensitivity of the studied phenomena, related to the controversy surrounding the government's ethnocentric pleas. The perceived similarity between ethnocentrism and nationalism (Stepchenkova, 2022) adds another layer of sensitivity, considering Serbia's role in the Yugoslav Wars. The questionnaire was therefore distributed through social media, including two social media groups (one student and one academic Facebook group). Even online, the sensitivity of the issue came to light. One participant refused to complete the questionnaire, calling it 'tendentious', presumably because of the TE items. However, we acknowledge that online surveying and convenience sampling left our study vulnerable to self-selection bias. To exclude any potential





**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

participants that do not belong to the target population of Serbian residents, we added a question regarding the current country of residence.

## Measures

All items in the study were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree) and all existing scales were modified accordingly. To pre-test the reliability of the measurement scales, two pilot surveys were conducted (24 and 31 participants).

Regarding the TTL scale, the goal was to develop an instrument that would capture how important the seaside is in a person's notion of a quality summer holiday. The first draft of the scale consisted of four items. The first pilot survey showed that the scale was not internally consistent. A new draft of the scale was created and, since the second pilot survey indicated its reliability ( $\alpha = .936$ ), all three items were left in the final version.

Previous studies of factors that affect destination awareness and the observed role of media and social media in the 'discovery' of domestic destination were used as a basis for the development of the IDA scale. The first draft of the scale consisted of five items. After the second pilot survey, one item was deleted to achieve better internal consistency ( $\alpha = .831$ ), leaving the remaining four items in the final version.

The measure of CTA was based on the travel constraints framework and adapted according to the newly-observed category of pandemic-related constraints. Two items were focused on financial constraints – paying for COVID-19 testing and paying for additional COVID-19 insurance, while the remaining two items were related to the necessity of testing and administrative requirements, which was used as an umbrella term for COVID certificates and PLFs. The first pilot survey showed that the scale was reliable ( $\alpha = .761$ ).

WTD was measured with the willingness to visit scale (Kock et al., 2016), which was slightly adapted in relation to the study area. Given that thalassophilia is mostly related to the summer season, that TE is discussed mostly in the context of having a domestic summer holiday, and that initial surge in destination awareness happened during the summer, domestic tourism intention was operationalized as willingness to travel domestically during the summer. It was established as reliable in the first pilot survey ( $\alpha = .863$ ). TE was measured by the scale developed by Kock et al. (2019), which was modified. The item related to the feeling of duty to book a national holiday was deleted, since the authors deemed it unfitting for the study area, in which travel agencies are rarely used for domestic trips. The items were modified to include specific mentions of summer holidays. The reliability of the four-item scale was confirmed in the first pilot survey ( $\alpha = .782$ ). TXI was measured with the scale developed by Nørfelt et al. (2020), which was modified after the first pilot study. The items considering foreign destinations as fascinating and magical were deleted due to low correlation with other items. This resulted in higher reliability ( $\alpha = .827$ ).

### Data analysis

Two software packages were used for data analysis. IBM SPSS 25 was used to pre-test the reliability of the measurement scales, provide descriptive statistics, conduct data screening and EFA, and calculate variation inflation factors.

RStudio, an open-source software based on the R programming language, was used to calculate average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR) and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio, as well as to conduct CFA and CB-SEM in its lavaan package.

### Results

Based on the question regarding the country of residence, we excluded six participants that do not live in Serbia and three that did not answer, leaving a total of 372 viable questionnaires. TXI (4.13), TTL (3.71) and IDA (3.42) were the highest-rated factors, while CTA (2.76), TE (2.52) and WTD (2.20) received the lowest ratings. Low ratings of TE and WTD indicate low likelihood of social desirability bias. The data screening did not detect concerning outlying ratings that have the potential to skew the results. The normal distribution of the data was confirmed by analysing skewness and kurtosis of variables (Supplement 1). To rule out common-method bias (CMB), we conducted Harman's single-factor test through EFA. The total variance extracted by one factor was 30.69%, confirming that the majority of variance could not be explained by a single factor (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For further assessment, CFA was conducted and showed that having one latent variable with all of the items could not fit the data (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Sample size	372
Age (%)	
<30	44.62
30–39	27.15
40–59	21.77
>59	0.80
Gender (%)	
Female	71.77
Male	27.68
Education (%)	
PhD	20.43
Master's degree	20.16
Bachelor's degree	26.88
Primary or secondary school	35.48

### Assessment of the measurement model

Assessment of convergent validity of the constructs indicated that all factor loadings were significant and that all but one item had loadings well above the threshold of .70 (Hair et al., 1998). The remaining item met the less strict criteria of above .60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). All values of AVE and CR were above the thresholds of .50 and .80, respectively (Netemeyer et al., 2003), indicating reliability (Table 2).

The discriminant validity of the scales was tested by using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (1981) and the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio. According to the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square root of each construct's AVE must be higher than the construct's correlations with other latent variables. This criterion of discriminant validity was met (Supplement 2). The HTMT ratio (Supplement 3) was below the threshold of .85 in all cases (Kline, 2011).

### Assessment of the structural model

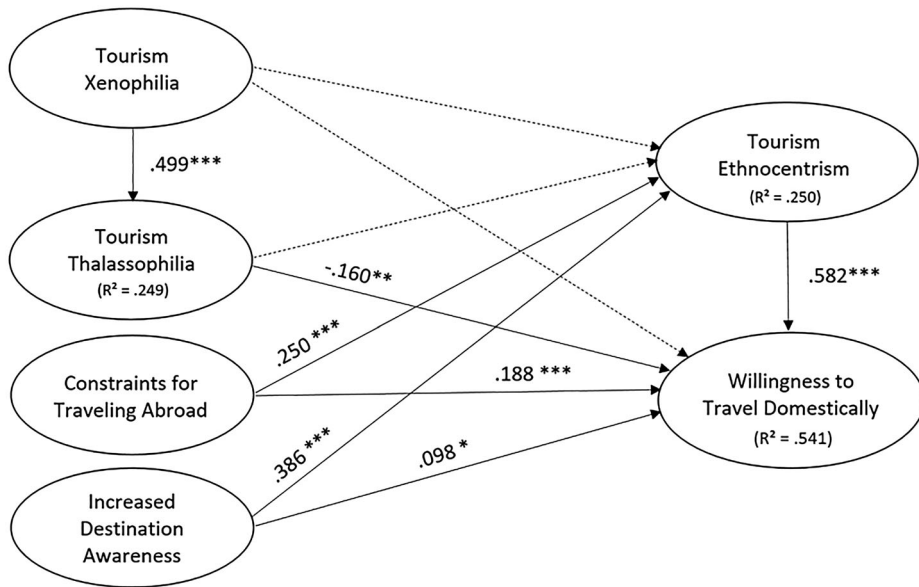
Variation inflation factors (VIF) were all below 2, which is well below the threshold of 3.3 (Caber et al., 2020), thus indicating acceptable collinearity (Supplement 4).

The proposed structural model was tested by using covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) (Figure 2). The obtained data fit the proposed model well ( $\chi^2/df = 2.152$ , CFI = 0.964, TLI = 0.958, NNFI = 0.958, RMSEA = 0.056, SRMR = 0.037).

Based on the established significant direct effects, we were able to confirm six, partially confirm one (both small and borderline significant effect) and reject three hypotheses. By taking into

**Table 2.** Construct properties.

Construct/item	Factor loadings	CR	AVE
<b>Tourism xenophilia (TXI)</b> (adapted from Nørfelt et al., 2020)		.846	.648
1. Foreign destinations awaken my curiosity.	0.763		
2. Foreign destinations incite my spirit of discovery.	0.824		
3. Foreign destinations are exciting for me.	0.827		
<b>Tourism thalassophilia (TTL)</b>		.906	.763
1. For me, summer holiday implies going to the sea.	0.846		
2. I associate an ideal summer holiday with beaches and sea.	0.895		
3. The most beautiful summer holidays are seaside summer holidays.	0.879		
<b>Constraints for travelling abroad (CTA)</b>		.909	.716
1. Paying for COVID-19 testing discourages me from travelling abroad for the summer holiday.	0.824		
2. Paying for additional COVID-19 insurance discourages me from travelling abroad for the summer holiday.	0.878		
3. Compulsory COVID-19 testing discourages me from travelling abroad for the summer holiday.	0.869		
4. Administrative requirements related to COVID-19 discourage me from travelling abroad for the summer holiday.	0.813		
<b>Increased destination awareness (IDA)</b>		.896	.687
1. Since the pandemic started, I have learned of some interesting destinations in Serbia.	0.664		
2. Since the pandemic started, I have discovered some attractive destinations in Serbia through media.	0.835		
3. Since the pandemic started, I have seen photos on social media of destinations in Serbia that I have previously only heard of.	0.865		
4. I am today familiar with more destinations in Serbia than before the pandemic.	0.930		
<b>Tourism ethnocentrism (TE)</b> (adapted from Kock et al., 2019)		.923	.750
1. Serbian citizens should support the Serbian economy by travelling around Serbia this summer.	0.838		
2. Everyone in Serbia should support the Serbian economy this summer by spending their annual leave in Serbia.	0.878		
3. It is now important that Serbian citizens spend their summer holiday in Serbia, thereby supporting their country.	0.879		
4. Serbian citizens should spend this summer in Serbia, thereby securing the jobs of Serbian tourism workers.	0.870		
<b>Willingness to travel domestically (WTD)</b> (adapted from Kock et al., 2016)		.917	.787
1. I intend to spend my summer holiday this year in a Serbian destination.	0.805		
2. I will probably choose a Serbian destination for my summer holiday this year.	0.907		
3. I am going to spend my summer holiday this year in Serbia.	0.944		



**Figure 2.** Structural equation modelling results.

Note: The rejected hypotheses are shown in dashed lines.

**Table 3.** Hypotheses testing.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path coefficient	<i>p</i> -value	Result
H1	TE→WTD	0.582	0.000	Accepted
H2	TXI→TE	-0.010	0.879	Rejected
H3	TXI→WTD	-0.042	0.428	Rejected
	TXI→TTL→WTD	-0.080	0.002	Partially accepted
H4	TTL→TE	-0.080	0.184	Rejected
H5	TTL→WTD	-0.160	0.001	Accepted
H6	TXI→TTL	0.499	0.000	Accepted
H7	CTA→TE	0.250	0.000	Accepted
H8	CTA→WTD	0.188	0.000	Accepted
	CTA→TE→WTD	0.145	0.000	Accepted
	CTA→WTD (total effects)	0.333	0.000	Accepted
H9	IDA→TE	0.386	0.000	Accepted
H10	IDA→WTD	0.098	0.042	Partially accepted
	IDA→TE→WTD	0.225	0.000	Accepted
	IDA→WTD (total effects)	0.323	0.000	Accepted

Note: Hypothesis 3 was accepted only through indirect effects, while hypothesis 10 went from partially accepted to accepted, also through indirect effects.

consideration significant indirect effects, we were able to confirm seven, partially confirm one and reject two hypotheses (Table 3).

For all endogenous variables, coefficients of determination ( $R^2$  values) were examined. The model explained 24.9% of the variance of TTL ( $R^2 = 0.249$ ), 25% of the variance of TE ( $R^2 = 0.250$ ) and 54.1% of the variance of WTD ( $R^2 = 0.541$ ).

## Discussion

The finding that TXI does not affect TE contradicts the report of Nijssen et al. (1999) that interest in foreign travel negatively affects consumer ethnocentrism. Although we proposed that a positive

foreign-country bias (TXI) and a positive home-country bias (TE) could have a negative relationship, our findings show that TXI and TE are not mutually exclusive. The same is established regarding TTL and TE.

The finding that CTA positively affects TE confirms that structural constraints can affect intrapersonal constraints, which was proposed by the hierarchical leisure constraints theory (Godbey et al., 2010). Jackson et al. (1993) suggested that anticipation of a structural constraint decreases the desire to participate, which is in accordance with the theory of thought systems (McGuire & McGuire, 1991). CTA decreases the likelihood of travelling abroad, which then negatively affects the desire to travel abroad and makes it more convenient for tourists to be ethnocentric. From the constraint negotiation perspective, rationalizing the difficulty of travelling abroad as an opportunity to travel domestically, which is also beneficial to the home country, reduces the discomfort caused by the dissonance between one's preferred and actual trip (Karl et al., 2022).

One alternative explanation is found in outgroup negativity, which is connected to ethnocentrism (Stepchenkova, 2022). In that sense, travel barriers set in place by foreign countries, may cause negative sentiment towards outgroups and strengthen a positive home-country bias like TE.

The established strong positive effect of IDA on TE is in accordance with the findings of Nijssen et al. (1999). By establishing that destination awareness affects TE, our study somewhat contradicts the studies of Kock et al. (2019) and Lever et al. (2022), which established that other elements of destination brand equity do not affect TE. This finding indicates that effective brand management can increase TE and provide benefits to domestic tourism.

We explain the relationship between IDA and TE from the cognitive dissonance perspective. Tourists' new cognition that their country has more to offer than they thought before the pandemic causes dissonance and motivates them to make their attitudes towards domestic tourism consistent with this new knowledge (Moutinho, 1987). Doing something good for the country by travelling domestically becomes more convenient, because the activity is now perceived as rational, since the country has attractive destinations. From Festinger's (1957, p. 25) point of view, since the 'extent of loss that must be endured' by choosing domestic travel is now small, 'resistance to change' becomes weak. Our findings indicate that tourists are prone to rationalizing, meaning that promoting specific tourism products as rational choices would be beneficial for domestic tourism marketing.

An alternative explanation would be that increased awareness of attractive domestic destinations made them more patriotic and prouder of their country, which then affected their TE. For example, Cafaro (2010, p. 192) pointed out people that enjoy their country's nature as 'patriots par excellence', while Szromek et al. (2020) reported that the presence of tourists made residents prouder of their city.

The strong positive effect of TE on WTD is in accordance with the findings of Kock et al. (2019). TXI has no direct effect on WTD. This contradicts our expectations, which were based on previous findings (Nørfelt et al., 2020). The established high levels of TXI are in accordance with our assessment that Serbian demand is extremely xenophilic.

The small negative effect of TTL on WTD questions the widely accepted assumption that lacking a sea is the biggest shortcoming of Serbian domestic tourism. Even smaller indirect effect of TXI on WTD further questions the supposed rivalry between domestic and international tourism in Serbia. This indicates the existence of more impactful reasons behind low WTD. Therefore, actual demand-side limitations for domestic tourism development in Serbia should be carefully reassessed.

The findings confirmed that TXI and TTL are consonant. This strong positive effect indicates that preference for seaside holidays of tourists from landlocked countries arises, to some extent, from their preference for foreignness.

CTA affects WTD directly and indirectly, adding up to a strong total effect. This indicates that domestic tourism could still profit from the restrictions of international travel, whereby TE has a confirmed role in this relationship. One explanation for this can be found in the Serbian government's ethnocentric pleas. It is possible that, when faced with CTA, people remember these pleas and use them to rationalize their decision to travel domestically. Our findings are in line with

previous studies (Han et al., 2011), which established that visas, as a similar form of constraints, strongly affect tourist behaviour.

IDA has an extremely small effect on WTD. This positive relationship is in accordance with the findings of Ferns and Walls (2012). However, combined with the indirect effect through TE, a strong total effect is established. This indicates that the learning about destination's existence is not enough. Another factor is required to cause someone to act on that knowledge. Our findings indicate a promising role of TE as one such factor. It is possible that the government's pleas have a role in this relationship as well. For example, when a person discovers an interesting domestic destination, they may see the pleas in a more positive light, since the idea of quality domestic travel now seems as a more realistic alternative to international travel.

## Conclusion

This study furthers our understanding of TE by exploring its relationship with four new antecedents from the perspective of cognitive dissonance and psychological rationalization. In this way, we examine the role of the psychological immune system in the formation of TE and complement the previous studies, which approached it as a contemporary manifestation of the behavioural immune system. In addition to the examination of the relationship between two seemingly opposite positive intergroup biases, our study advances the literature on intergroup biases in tourism by exploring the impact of TXI on two additional outcomes. By exploring the impacts of three practical factors on TE, we questioned its purely symbolic nature. Incorporation of WTD into our research model allowed us to examine the role of five antecedents in the formation of domestic tourism intention and advance the literature on domestic tourist behaviour.

We conclude that TE is not strictly symbolic, given that it is significantly affected by two non-symbolic factors. We argue that these relationships arise from cognitive dissonance, which is caused by perceptions of the two factors and resolved by domestic tourism rationalization through the increase of TE. Therefore, to answer our core research question, we conclude that TE, as a non-strictly symbolic reason for travelling, can to some extent be explained as a form of rationalization.

The introduction of CTA allowed us to contribute to the literature on travel constraints by confirming that structural constraints affect intrapersonal constraints. While previous literature focused on the constraining role of visas on international travel, we provided proof that similar constraints have the added potential to redirect tourist demand towards domestic destinations. We contributed to the literature on destination awareness by introducing IDA and establishing that its impact on WTD becomes strong only when another factor is introduced into the relationship.

## Practical implications

Our novel perspective on TE, which indicates that it increases as a result of rationalization caused by new cognitions, provides valuable practical implications. Since TE is not-strictly symbolic and can be affected by practical factors, we propose that tourism practitioners could increase TE and attract domestic tourists by emphasizing the rationality of choosing domestic destinations.

Since TE significantly contributes to the effects of CTA on WTD, promotional efforts of domestic destinations should combine TE and practical advantages of domestic tourism, such as the absence of border formalities. For example, the Hungarian city of Szeged is a popular day-trip destination for Serbian tourists because of its architecture. However, hours-long wait at the border often ruins these excursions. On the other hand, the Serbian city of Subotica offers similar architecture, but without the border crossing, thus representing a rational ethnocentric alternative. Presenting Subotica as a rational choice that both simplifies the trip by removing the negative impacts of CTA and supports the domestic tourism industry could be one potential strategy of the local DMO.

The established crucial role of TE as the factor that links IDA and WTD could help countries to direct domestic tourist flows better. For example, when promoting lesser-known destinations,

national DMOs should emphasize both the destination's amenities and the benefits for the locals. To capitalize on the increased awareness and actually make people willing to visit the destination, ethnocentric character of the visit should be promoted.

Sudden surges in destination awareness are quite common. The appearance of a destination in a TV show or a famous person's Instagram feed are some examples of it. Beyond the pandemic context, DMOs could use modified versions of IDA to measure the impacts of such surges.

### **Limitations**

The research sample used in our study was obtained through the online distribution of questionnaires on social media. In-person surveying, which was not conducted due to COVID-19 and the sensitivity of the studied issue, would allow us to obtain a less-biased sample. Although the collected data was established to be normally distributed, the sample was moderately skewed in favour of younger and well-educated people (the survey was also conducted among students and academics in two Facebook groups), as well as extremely skewed in favour of women (likely due to self-selection bias). The development of scales for the new constructs did not include a qualitative pilot study. The inclusion of other items that could have been detected through interviews would improve the validity of these scales. Finally, we studied the impacts of TE and its antecedents on general WTD, without considering specific destination types, which would provide additional practical implications.

### **Future research**

This study explored the impacts of TTL on domestic tourist behaviour, since it was conducted in a landlocked country. However, there are other examples of countries that lack certain attraction types. Some countries do not have mountains suitable for winter sports and therefore no domestic ski tourism. In such cases, the development of a tourism orophilia (love for mountains) scale could be beneficial. Other antecedents of TTL should be explored, such as tradition or its role of a status symbol. Finally, Serbian tourism authorities should identify the main factors, which negatively affect WTD, since TXI and TTL only have a minor role in it.

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