

THE YOUNG TRAVELLERS BEHAVIOUR FACING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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***Abstract:** On January 29, 2020, at the Ministry of Internal Affairs took place the meeting of the Technical-Scientific Support Group on the management of highly contagious diseases on the territory of Romania, following the declaration of emergency state for public health with international impact due to the new Coronavirus. On March 16, 2020, it was decided to suspend the serving and consumption activity in restaurants, hotels, cafes, and public establishments. Their activity was able to continue with home delivery or other activities, that do not involve customers on the premises. For the first time in 30 years, tourism stopped. The state of emergency closed down the tourism activity and nobody knew for how long. The following months were tense and hard to manage with pressure from the employers' organizations in the tourism sector to get back to normal as soon as possible. Thus, in that restricted period it was opportune to carry out a research on the travel preferences of young travellers in Romania. Between April 27, 2020, and May 24, 2020, a marketing questionnaire was conducted within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, alongside students from the Faculty of Business and Tourism, to investigate the behaviour of young tourism consumers facing the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample size was 384 respondents, of which 47.4% were aged between 18-20 years, 35.7% were aged between 21-23 years and 16.9% between 24-26 years. Regarding the gender of the respondents, 61.5% were women and 38.5% men. As study level, 90.3% bachelor's degree, 8.9% master's degree, and 0.8% doctorate. The results showed that 78.4% of the respondents intended to spend their holidays in the country, only 21.6% abroad, and 63.7% intended to go on holiday as soon as the self-isolation measures were raised. As means of transport used to get to the holiday destination, 78% opted for the personal car, and the main forms of tourism desired were adventure tourism (42.6%) and family vacation (39.6%). As it can be seen, young travellers do not give up holidays in 2020, except these will be made in isolated places, for a shorter period and with great care for social distancing rules.*

Keywords: *youth tourism, Covid-19, hotels, travel, tourists' arrivals*

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Introduction

Most of the young travellers (15 to 29) of today come from two generational cohorts: generation Y, born between the early 1980s and 2000 and better known as “millennials,” and generation Z, born after 2000. Roughly 50% of millennial and gen Z travellers are travelling for the purpose of holidays, but the other 50% are undertaking experiential travel such as work abroad, language study, higher education, au pairing, and volunteering. These experiential youth travellers generally stay longer and spend more (Tourism Business Frontiers, 2006, Youth Travel Matters, 2008, OECD, 2020).

Young travellers represent 23% of international arrivals, representing 336 million travellers, 333 billion \$ in tourism receipts and 2,867 € average trip spend (WYSE, 2021).

Internships, language immersion courses, study abroad semesters and many other travels based educational and cultural exchange programmes have adapted for virtual environments due to COVID-19.

Globally, the majority of respondents expect that a recovery for their business will begin within the first half of 2021, however, there is a sizeable group who do not expect things to improve until 2022 (12%) or until a vaccine is available (13%).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a very fast and drastic impact on the Romanian hotel sector. According to (Cushman & Wakefield, 2020) 64% of the hotel industry respondents felt instantly the impact of the pandemic, from the last week of February when the first case of COVID-19 infection in Romania was confirmed. Following the declaration of the state emergency, on March 14, the number of affected hoteliers increased to 98% in the third week of March, reaching 100% in April.

As the demand from foreign tourists collapsed, the occupancy rate of hotels in Romania decreased rapidly reaching a single percentage, resulting in a significant decrease in revenues. The decrease in demand led to an average loss of 25.0 € per room per day in April 2020, indicating a decline of 178% over the same period last year. The hotel sector went through a turbulent period in the first half of 2020, registering in this period an occupancy rate of 26% in Romania and a RevPAR (Revenue per available room) of 17 €, representing a decrease of 66.1% compared to the first half of 2019.

As a result of government measures to temporarily close borders and ban meetings, the vast majority of hotels in Romania have been closed. Thus, 75% of hotels in Romania were closed at the end of March. With the reduction of restrictions, many hotels are starting to reopen, but there are still 2% of hotels that intend to open only in the next few years.

To cope with this unforeseen crisis, hoteliers have taken drastic measures to reduce their costs, including redundancies, and about 29% of the workforce has already been laid off. Given that the situation has not improved significantly, urgent help is needed to avoid a greater impact on the hotel workforce.

We know the offer adapts depending on the demand that dictates prices, services, and attractive forms of tourism desired by potential tourists. Young travellers are the bravest and have a sense of adventure and drive into the unknown. In an uncertain situation, they are the first to try. Thus, in that restricted period it was opportune to carry out a research on the travel preferences of young travellers in Romania. Between April 27, 2020, and May 24, 2020, a marketing questionnaire was conducted within the Bucharest University of Economic Studies,

alongside students from the Faculty of Business and Tourism, to investigate the behaviour of young tourism consumers facing the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample size was 384 respondents, of which 47.4% were aged between 18-20 years, 35.7% were aged between 21-23 years and 16.9% between 24-26 years. Regarding the gender of the respondents, 61.5% were women and 38.5% men. As study level, 90.3% bachelor's degree, 8.9% master's degree, and 0.8% doctorate. The results showed that 78.4% of the respondents intended to spend their holidays in the country, only 21.6% abroad, and 63.7% intended to go on holiday as soon as the self-isolation measures were raised. As means of transport used to get to the holiday destination, 78% opted for the personal car, and the main forms of tourism desired were adventure tourism (42.6%) and family vacation (39.6%). As it can be seen, young travellers do not give up holidays in 2020, except these will be made in isolated places, for a shorter period and with great care for social distancing rules.

Literature review

Young travellers' preferences, motivations, and needs are studied in this research article. The unique and fast-changing travel interests of the millennial and Generation Z markets have been analysed by many authors, among which: Pechlaner (2014); Horak and Weber (2000), Olsen et al. (2020), Vlaschenko et al. (2000), Udovkina et al. (2020), Kamolidinova (2020), Caber et al. (2020), Lee (2020).

Young people's holidays are increasingly recognized as an important segment of the world tourism market. Young people travel to isolated destinations, to avoid crowded cities, stay longer, make friends with locals, are inclined to explore the unknown. As a part of the Millennial Generation, young people are rapidly adapting to new technologies and mastering technological connection devices from anywhere on the planet. They communicate in real time with the entire planet through a single holiday post on social-media networks. The travel experience accumulates through holidays or study abroad programs.

Travel and tourism were an industry growing faster than global GDP. In 2019, the youth travel segment generated tourism receipts for destinations worth approximately USD 330 billion. Twenty-three percent of the world's international arrivals were young travellers under the age of 30.

Young travellers are vital to the travel industry and travel is imperative to a connected, open and peaceful world. In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis that it has brought upon our industry, UNWTO is concerned about the future of youth and student travel.

Findings from WYSE Travel Confederation's COVID-19 business impact survey indicate travel businesses are anticipating a 30% drop in business for this year. Based on this, the estimated decline in receipts for the youth travel industry could equate to 87 billion euros in 2020.

In fact, youth tourism has become one of the most important growth segments of international tourism, accounting for more than 23% of the over 1 billion tourists traveling internationally each year. Youth travellers stimulate the prosperity and development of local communities, intensify friendly relations with host populations, and take care of environmental protection and sustainable development.

Students and young travellers are full of ideas and plans for the future, but limited by modest income.

With travellers ages 15 to 29 accounting for an estimated 23% of all international tourist arrivals in 2019, many countries and destinations consider this form of tourism, as young people often travel longer and stay more than older tourists.

Youth tourists have a unique character on the tourist market defined by the spirit of adventure, the ease in creating connections and friends, the use of boarding schools and all social-media applications, the desire to discover new cultures and always learn something new.

The estimations of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) were for youth tourism are the following: by 2020 almost 370 million youth travellers will account for a total spend of over 400 billion USD.

Youth markets are resilient, which means when the times get tough, the youth keep travelling, as what happens during this period. A WYSE Travel Confederation survey on young travellers highlighted the fact regarding the 2014 Ebola virus, this global health scare has little impact on young travellers travel plan.

The demand for tourist accommodation services in Romania has crucially changed in 2020 compared to 2019 due to COVID-19.

Table no. 1

The evolution of the arrivals of tourists accommodated in the structure of tourists' reception in Romania monthly

Months	Year 2019	Year 2020	Evolution index	Change (%)
February	758826	724445	0.955	-4.53
March	800361	242105	0.302	-69.75
April	885822	16855	0.019	-98.10
May	1103937	34569	0.031	-96.87
June	1308897	333950	0.255	-74.49
July	1651335	917778	0.556	-44.42
August	1869383	1301411	0.696	-30.38

Source: Calculations made by the author using the information from the National Statistics Institute, 2021

Within the accommodation units in Romania, there were arrivals of tourists decreasing in the months of 2020 compared to the months of 2019. Thus, the largest decrease in tourist arrivals was registered in April 2020, namely -98.10% compared to April 2019, following May 2019 with a decrease in tourist arrivals in accommodation in Romania of -96.87%. Not even the months of the highest tourist season, June, July and, August recorded increases, but the decreases continued compared to the same months of 2019. Thus, the decrease in tourist arrivals in accommodations in Romania was 74.49% for June 2020 compared to June 2019, 44.42% for July 2020 compared to July 2019 and 30.38% for August 2020 compared to August 2019. The revival will be slow and with concrete help from government authorities who have to support hoteliers with financial aid.

The pandemic situation has a colossal impact on the hotel industry. If in the past generic services were enough, now hotels need to capitalize on the resources and systems they have in order to retain their customers. Hotel technology plays an extremely important role in both the comfort of the people accommodated and their safety in a pandemic context.

Research methodology

The research methodology was based on a research questionnaire structured on 18 closed questions, three of which were demographic questions (age, gender, studies) and 15 questions that answered the objective of the research, namely the behaviour of young tourism consumers faced by the COVID-19 pandemic. A number of 384 valid questionnaires were completed applying the sampling method $n = t^2 * p(1-p) / \Delta\phi^2$. For a coefficient t of 1.96 which corresponds to a probability of guaranteeing 95% results and an acceptable limit error of 5%, the sample size is 384 questionnaires.

The incomplete questionnaires were excluded from the research and a total of 384 valid questionnaires remained. The research questionnaire could be accessed at the address created on <https://docs.google.com/forms/>. Everything was done online, and the questionnaire operators were Year 2 students at the Business Administration in Tourism specialization. The period for collecting answers was April 27, 2020-24 May 2020. Out of the total number of people, the maximum share is represented by people aged 18-20, the percentage being 47.4%. The average share is represented by people aged between 21-23 years with a percentage of 35.7%, and the lowest share will be attributed to people aged 24-26, because their percentage is 16.9% from the total community. Out of the total respondents, 61.5% is the percentage of females, and 38.5% is the percentage of males. Out of the total number of interviewees, the maximum share is represented by persons with undergraduate studies, the percentage being 90.3%. The average share is represented by people with master's degree with a percentage of 8.9%, and the lowest share will be assigned to people with a doctorate, because their percentage represents 0.8% of the total community.

Results and discussions

Regarding the intention of the respondents to go on vacation, 245 people (their share being 63.7%) claim that as soon as the self-isolation measures are lifted, they will go on vacation, while the remaining 139 people (with a share of 36.3%) do not intend to go on holiday in 2020. Although they are young, they have a reservation regarding a vacation. The courageous and enterprising spirit of young people is also noticeable in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when about 64% of youth travellers say they will go on vacation in 2020 immediately after the restrictions are lifted.

From the perspective of ensuring the conditions of hygiene and social distancing by Romanian hoteliers, most respondents claim that they trust hoteliers (their number being 211 people, with a share of 55%), and the remaining 173 people (share 45%) do not trust. Young people may or may not trust the way in which Romanian hoteliers do their duty in hygiene rules and respect for social distancing. Opinions are halfway, in the sense that 56% of respondents trust hoteliers 45% do not. The latter will search accommodation in rented villas, tourist pensions, tourist chalets to avoid hotel accommodation.

Most of the respondents (196 people; 51%) estimate that their next vacation will be in three months, the next category chooses to go on vacation in a year (24.1%). Also, 18.3% will travel in 6 months, and the remaining 6.6% estimate that in a month they will be able to have their first vacation in 2020.

Regarding the traveling preferences in the country compared to spending a holiday abroad, 301 people (78.4%) opt for a vacation in the country, and 83 people (21.6%) opt for a vacation abroad.

Regarding the holiday destination the answers were diverse, as they could choose plenty destinations, the Romanian coast (201 people; 52.4%) and the mountains (198 persons, 51.5%) are the preferred destinations for tourists. Also, their preferences inclined towards rural areas, eco (49 persons, 12.7%) or a spa (24 people, 6.25%).

Respondents claim that, for the most part, they are willing to allocate a budget of between 500-1000 euros (251 people; 65.4%) to a holiday. Also, 91 people (23.8%) choose the options with amounts between 1000-1500 euros, 30 people choose 1500-2000 euros, and only 12 people are willing to allocate a budget of more than 2000 euros.

The preferred means of transport for tourists, which they will use on vacation is the personal car (300 people opt for this choice; 78.1%). Also, 77 people (20%) are willing to travel by plane, and 7 people (1.8%) choose the train as a means of transport.

After lifting the Covid-19 restrictions, 204 people (with a share of 53.2%) will opt for breakfast, while 124 people (32.4%) opt for a full board, and the remaining 56 people (14.6%) will choose half board when staying at the hotel.

As a form of accommodation, tourist pensions are the choice of the majority of respondents (171 people; 44.5%), followed by rented apartments (94 people; 24.5%). The cottages were the choice of 74 people (19.3%), the villas were the choice of 21 people (5.5%), and the hotels of 13 people (3.38%), and for camping they opted for 11 people (2.82%).

Holidays on your own or with the help of travel agencies? The answer of the young travellers was: 85% of them choose to plan their next vacation themselves (326 people traveling on their own), while 15% of them (58 people) will work with a travel agency.

Regarding the duration of the vacation, 183 people (47.6%) choose the 3-5 days option, 148 people (38.5%) opt for a week, and 53 people (13.8%) choose a 1-2 days' vacation.

Out of the total of the respondents, for this variant of the question the choices were multiple, the respondents could tick several options, 238 people (62%) opt for a vacation with friends, and for 199 people (51.8%) will be with family members.

Respondents also choose to travel with friends and family. Instead, there are 11 people who choose to go on holiday alone (3%), and 16 people opt for a vacation with colleagues (4.4%).

Out of the total respondents, 164 people opt for adventure tourism (42.6%) during the holidays, while 152 people (39.6%) choose a family vacation, 68 people (17.7%) choose eco - tourism practiced in the mountain area on mountain paths.

All this represented the travel preferences of young travellers for 2020, their ideas, opinions, desires and preferences exactly in April-May, months of emergency in which everything was closed, in a situation they have never experienced before.

Conclusions

Protecting tourists by establishing safety rules will encourage youth travellers to stick to their travel preferences. Youth tourism is a certain and real way to recover tourism activity in Romania, as it was observed from the research, young people will travel in times of historical pandemics, and will always be a segment that strengthens tourism resilience over time.

The most important information from the research shows the following: 63.7% of youth travellers say that as soon as self-isolation measures are lifted they will go on vacation, 78.4% of young people will go on holiday in the country, 65.4 % of youth travellers will allocate a budget for the holiday between 500-1000 Euro and will stay between 3-5 days in the preferred holiday destination (47.6% of the total respondents), 85% of young people choose to plan their next vacation themselves. Out of the total respondents, 164 people opt for adventure tourism (42.6%) during the holidays, while 152 people (39.6%) choose a family vacation, 68 people (17.7%) choose eco-tourism practiced in the mountain area on mountain paths.

Restoring travellers' confidence is a key priority, and will be crucial to recovery. However, it is also one of the biggest challenges for tourism. Travellers must be notified when it is safe to travel.

Domestic tourism is expected to benefit, as tourists prefer to visit destinations in their own country. Tourist's confidence has been affected by the crisis and continuing uncertainty. This can lead to a decrease in tourism demand and consumption, which continues long after the initial shock. Tourist's behaviour will be influenced by the evolution of the crisis, as well as by the long-term trends of consumers that are reshaping the way people travel. This may include the emergence of new niches and market segments, as well as a greater focus on safety protocols and contactless travel experiences. Safety and hygiene have become key factors in selecting tourist destinations and activities. People are likely to prefer "private solutions" when traveling, avoiding large meetings and giving priority to private means of transport, which can have a negative impact on the environment.

The digitization of tourism services is expected to continue accelerating, including greater use of automation, contactless payments and services, virtual experiences, providing real-time information. Youth markets tend to be less volatile than the tourism market as a whole. Figures from the WYSE Youth Travel Industry Monitor of 2020 and 2021 indicated that although the youth travel sector was affected by the Covid-19 and the global financial crisis, it had declined less and recovered faster than mainstream tourism.

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