

Marketing of Tourism Destinations in the Post-Covid Era – Challenges of the New Normal

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented crisis, causing an awkward impact on human life and the world economy. Despite the resilience that tourism has shown in response to previous crises, the depth and breadth of the impact of this pandemic on tourism have brought the sector to an almost total standstill, causing long-term difficulties for most tourist destinations. As the pandemic has evolved, how we live, work, and travel has changed, and demands, expectations, and preferences have become different. But an unprecedented crisis requires unprecedented action. Destination marketing is widely recognized as an essential component of destination management. As a result, the tenets of conventional marketing have been challenged in a struggle to adapt to the new normal. Thus, the objective of this paper is to identify and explore, based on the current literature review and direct survey research, the challenges faced by marketers in tourism destinations in an attempt to counter the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and facilitate the recovery and further sustainable development of the sector.

Key words: marketing, tourist destination, COVID-19, the new normal, sustainable development

J.E.L. classification: M31, Q01, Z32, Z33

1. Introduction

At the start of 2020, the future looked very promising for the tourism sector. People traveled more and more, more often, and over longer distances. The tourism industry has been on the rise for many years. According to the World Tourism and Travel Council, in 2019, tourism had a total contribution of 10.3% to the world GDP generating 330 million jobs. One in ten new jobs has been created in the tourism sector in the last five years. The tourism industry also grew by 3.5% compared to the global economy - 2.5% (WTTC, 2020).

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting blockade of society, an unprecedented crisis in the tourism industry has broken out. The estimates of international organizations (UNWTO, WTTC, and OECD) indicate a decrease of about 70% in international tourism in 2020. In the last two years, the economy was gradually recovering to 2009 levels, and it will take some time to fully recover (UNWTO, 2023)

Tourist destinations (countries, regions, cities, etc.) joined forces in trying to find solutions and strategies to help them face the unprecedented challenges in modern history created by this pandemic. Some destinations were more exposed and affected by this crisis, and as the impact varied from place to place, so will the recovery. The socio-economic impact at the destination level depends on many factors, like the tourism offer, the degree to which businesses and jobs are dependent on tourism, the impact of travel restrictions on tourist flows, the extent to which the restrictions coincide with periods of seasonality, scale, and complexity of business operations, domestic market size, exposure to international source markets, etc. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourists' wishes,

preferences, and behaviors have changed significantly, leading to changes in society-traveler relations that define the new normal.

Destination marketing is widely recognized as an essential component in destination management, an integral part of sustainable development in line with the community's interests, and maintaining the popularity of tourist destinations.

In this paper, we will briefly examine tourism trends and challenges for tourist destination marketers arising from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure their survival, reopening, reinvention, and communication as better places to live and better places to visit.

2. Theoretical background

Destinations are the focus of most tourism activities, so they are the core element of the tourism system and are the most important units of tourism research (Buhalis, 2000; Pike 2004; Wang & Pizam, 2011). According to David Bierman (2003), destinations are countries, regions, or cities marketed as places to visit by tourists.

In general, the destinations are a combination of direct and indirect tourist facilities (e.g. accommodation, catering, transport, recreational facilities, etc.) an extensive selection of natural and cultural tourist attractions (e.g. landscape, monuments, atmosphere) offered to a tourist during a stay in a particular location (Hall, 2008). For economics and marketing, a tourist destination is more than that (Bieger, Beritelli & Laesser, 2009; Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010). Often, tourists perceive a destination as a whole, so this area is often considered not only a "tourist place", but a "tourist product". As a product, the destination is a mixture of tangible and intangible assets. Tangible assets are represented by the local infrastructure, such as hotels, tangible cultural heritage, natural landscapes, etc., and intangible assets are considered services and situations such as safety, stability and security, friendship, political situation, and the atmosphere of a destination. And intangible assets are more dependent on customer behavior and are one of the most important determinants of destination profitability (Swarbrooke și Horner, 2001). In other words, the tourist destination is the central point of the tourism activity. But the destinations are not infinite, neither individual nor collective. It is not possible for every place to be a tourist destination and the destinations themselves cannot receive an unlimited number of tourists.

To attract tourists to a particular destination, the distinctive aspects and strengths of that destination must be highlighted. This is especially crucial when one destination competes with another for the same tourists or visitors. One of the roles of destination marketing is to promote the destination as superior to the alternatives by highlighting the things that make it unique or the elements that make it a must-visit place.

Destination marketing can contribute greatly to sustainable place development, especially for hoteliers, restaurants, transport companies, and other tourism suppliers). Nowadays, destination marketing has become fundamental. Marketing is largely responsible for the number and type of tourists visiting a destination, for the image and awareness among their potential visitors, for ensuring the viability of destinations, and for their contribution to sustainable development.

Sustainable development of tourism in destinations is a difficult task. As stated by Byrd (2007) and Middleton and Haekins (1998), achieving a balance between stakeholders' interests with a vision of the environment of a destination and keeping up with the requirements and expectations requires long-term planning and constant communication between stakeholders. However, destination marketing is now recognized as a pillar of future growth and sustainability of tourist destinations in an increasingly globalized and competitive market. (UNWTO, 2011).

But no matter how efficient the DMOs are, no matter how efficient the management and marketing of some destinations, they were not prepared for the crisis that would start at the beginning of 2020. The unprecedented crisis of the tourism industry was aggravated by the evolution of the health situation, the sector facing stop/start cycles. Despite the tourism industry's proven resilience to previous shocks, the scale of this crisis is having a devastating effect on the sector. By reducing travel restrictions and reopening tourism activities during the summer, domestic tourism has provided a boost to support tourist destinations and industry, continuing to be a key factor in the short- and medium-term recovery, but international tourism remained at a low level. Also, not all destinations or companies have benefited equally from the resumption of tourism due to a large

number of illnesses and associated restrictions or changes in the behavioral patterns of tourism demand.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in the behavior of potential tourism consumers in terms of search, planning, and demand. Added to this is the lack of previous information regarding the response to post-pandemic tourist demand. Little is known about how tourists will perceive travel in the future. In general, studies in the specialized literature on post-crisis tourist behavior refer to destinations in a state of war or terrorist attacks, or natural disasters. Research on health crises has generally considered diseases such as Ebola in Africa, SARS in 2003, or the AH1N1 influenza virus in 2009 (Lau et al. 2005, Lee et al. 2012, Maphanga 2019, Rossello et al. 2017). But none of the health crises created by these viruses can compare to the pandemic that just ended. This affects several usual industry practices, with conventional marketing principles being challenged in a struggle to adapt to new trends.

3. Research methodology

This study focused on obtaining detailed information to identify the main challenges for marketers to ensure tourist destinations' survival, recovery, and sustainable development. Thus, both secondary and primary research was conducted. The desk research was conducted by analyzing the studies and literature that emerged from the beginning of the pandemic on the evolution of the tourism industry, as well as direct research. The direct research consisted of qualitative, semi-open interviews with actors from the Romanian tourism industry and carrying out surveys (questionnaires) among the population. The interviews were a useful tool for gathering more nuanced information on the views, attitudes, and experiences of stakeholders. The interviews were attended by 45 people, representatives of the Romanian tourism industry, as follows: 24 from the hospitality industry, 11 from travel agencies, 4 from culture providers, 3 from marketing and PR, 2 from staff training companies for the industry tourism, and a developer of tourism projects. The questioning of the population aimed to find out the intention to travel for tourism purposes as well as to identify some important aspects and changes in the behavior of potential tourists. The survey was answered by 3,731 adults in Romania (the questionnaire was sent online to 5,500 people). Of the people who provided valid answers, 62.79% were women, and 37.21% were men. Most respondents had a high level of education: 40% - postgraduate studies, 49.58% - higher education, and 10.42% - secondary education. According to the age distribution, most of them were middle-aged adults. Thus: 18-25 years - 8.98%, 26-35 years - 21.98%, 36-45 years - 39.77%, 46-55 years - 21.79%, 56-65 years - 5.2%, and over 65 years - 2.28%.

4. Findings

The impact of the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic is felt on the entire tourism ecosystem, causing serious damage to inbound and outbound tourism, forcing tourist destinations to update their thinking regarding the innovation of marketing practices in the new environment and to reconceptualize the changes in tourist behavior in the new circumstances. Rebuilding destinations will require a combined approach that considers: restoring traveler confidence and stimulating demand through destination safety labels, responsible visitor information, and intensive and ongoing promotional campaigns. Studying and fully understanding the change in tourist demand, building new perceptions of the market, and satisfying new tourist requirements by adapting the form, content, and structure of tourist products will be the key to revitalizing tourist destinations beyond the pandemic.

It has been necessary for many people to change their lifestyles to deal with the outbreak and keep safe. And with these changes and restrictions, consumer travel habits have had to change and will continue to evolve. In these conditions adaptation is the norm as destinations seek to maintain their businesses and retain their consumers. Continuous adaptation to new trends is vital.

According to the results obtained from our research, among these new trends, which are challenges, at the same time, for destination marketing are:

Increased attention to leisure. Although the fear of illness had its say, the fact that most people have been subjected to lockdown, and forced to stay and work from home has given rise to the growing desire to be able to travel again. According to the survey, 84% of the respondents stated they did not change their intention to travel during the pandemic. In Romania, the decrease in tourist traffic during the pandemic was high, but within the limits of the average recorded in the member states of the EU, mainly as a result of the decrease in the number of foreign tourists. In 2020, after a period of harsh restrictions between March and May, their gradual easing determined a similar trajectory of tourist activity as in previous years, although with a considerably lower intensity, recording a 32% decrease between August 2019 and August 2020. In July, for example, in 2021 and 2022, the tourism industry recovered part of the losses recorded, with the number of tourists arriving in accommodation units being approximately 13% lower than in July 2019 (in accordance with the data published by the NIS, 2023). Destination marketers need to constantly analyze this data and adjust their distribution channels and promotional messages.

The evolution of demand. Travelers' preferences and behaviors have shifted to nature, familiar, predictable, reliable, and uncrowded. Various travel restrictions, as well as a reluctance to travel abroad, have increased the demand for domestic tourism, at least for the short- and medium-term.

Thus, 60% of the respondents stated that they spend their vacation in a national destination, 37.5% both in the country and abroad, and 2.5% only abroad.

Regarding the type of destination, the seaside took first place in the travel intention of the participants in the sanding. Given that some respondents intended to undertake more than one trip, multiple responses were accepted. Thus, 54.5% of the respondents were/intended to go to the sea, 53.9% - to the mountains, 22% - to the country, 17% - to visit a city, 12.9% - to a spa, and 7% to a tourist circuit.

Depending on how the trip was organized, 89% travel on their own, and 11% use the services of a travel agency.

Regarding the chosen type of accommodation, 46% of the respondents opted for tourist pensions, 21% - for hotels, 15% - for relatives and friends, 10% for renting spaces, and 8% - for camping.

It is thus observed that both geography and demography play an important role. The coast, the mountains, and the countryside are more popular as destinations that correspond to the need for open space, nature, clean environment. Also, less populated destinations offer more confidence.

In this regard, destination marketing should focus on motivational factors and let new travel behaviors guide the implementation of new strategies that create a more loyal audience.

Safety and hygiene. Safety and hygiene standards have become paramount. This is a vital part of marketing, and destinations need to clarify what their safety and hygiene policies are and what measures are being taken to maintain the safety of both residents and visitors.

According to the survey conducted among the population, safety is the main criterion for choosing the tourist destination for 39.5% of respondents (the other criteria were: previous personal experience - 20.6%; price - 13.5%; attractiveness of the place - 12, 5%, knowledge recommendation - 9%; reputation - 3%, another - 1.9%).

Health and hygiene measures within destinations remain a top priority for consumers around the world. Future travelers are likely to gravitate to destinations that are seen as clean, healthy, and safe.

Indeed, while price still drives bookings, consumers are now equally focused on health and safety. Amadeus survey showed that 47% of global travelers cite a factor related to COVID-19 as the most influential factor in choosing a destination, and two-thirds expect an understanding of the COVID-19 prevention measures in place before booking (Amadeus, 2020).

Thus marketers need to clearly communicate safety measures so that visitors feel safe.

In fact, several interviewees in the hospitality industry acknowledged that health safety protocols have helped to improve guest confidence, as their transparent communication is particularly important. "Our industry needs to do more to inform potential tourists about all the health and safety protocols that have been implemented to restore people's confidence in travel" - a hotel manager interviewed.

Innovation and digitalization. Restrictions to combat the pandemic and restore health security have led to accelerated innovation and integration of new technologies. Against the backdrop of home orders, the adoption and growth of digital consumption, consumers now expect contactless technologies, for example, as a basic precondition for a safe travel experience.

Contactless payments have become an essential element, which has also led to improved check-in and check-out speeds.

The Internet is also the main source of information when it comes to choosing a tourist destination. Thus, 82% of the respondents to our survey declared the Internet among the main sources of information, 47% - relatives and friends, 41% - travel agencies, and 14 media/press. Also, most of the people in the tourism industry participating in the interviews stated that they focused on digital marketing, social media marketing, and e-mail marketing becoming the dominant tactics.

Virtual reality is another major tourism trend that marketers can take full advantage of. Presentation of online tours of the destination, through which potential visitors can explore the inside of the accommodation and/or food units, tourist attractions, etc. It can positively influence the decision to buy the trip and attract undecided consumers. Likewise, augmented reality could provide tourists with virtual maps, details about museums or other abstractions, menus for restaurants, etc.

In the post-pandemic era, the high dependence on online interactions makes consumers expect immediate feedback with unique and personalized products and experiences. Tourist destination marketing must face the transition from empiricism to digitization. It is a need triggered by the development of information technologies such as cloud, AI, and blockchain. According to our survey, 55% of the respondents consider the digital experience very important in choosing the destination and tourist services. In other words, digital transformation and tourism marketing innovation are no longer a choice but a necessity.

Sustainability. While sustainability has been a priority for the tourism industry for some time, it has become even more prominent through the pandemic. Consumers are becoming more aware of their impact on the environment and searching for more sustainable options. The travel hiatus has inspired 83% of global travelers to prioritize sustainable travel in the future (Booking.com, 2021). Therefore, the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic may also be an opportunity. About 50% of the interviewees believe that it is the end of mass tourism. "We can use this unique moment to create a positive tangible impact on destinations, to develop the type of tourism we want to attract" - said a participant in the interview. "The only way to achieve truly sustainable development of tourist destinations is through a concrete and strong partnership between the public sector and the private sector" - says another participant in the interview.

When asked what destination marketers can do to encourage sustainable tourism experiences, the answers of the interviewees were diverse:

- creating and implementing new performance indicators that take into account the quality of tourism rather than its volume;
- putting a greater emphasis on the interest of the locals when carrying out the marketing strategies;
- encouraging and promoting longer stays so that tourists spend as long as possible in the destination;
- the involvement of local businesses and residents is essential, as they are ultimately the most affected and the main beneficiaries;
- hiring staff among the locals, their training would be beneficial both for the development of the local economy and would bring an extra authenticity to the tourist experience;
- orientation towards niche tourism, alternative tourism on the principle, if you want to be respected, respect yourself, the main way to educate tourists to be responsible for the cultural and natural environment of the destination is for it to become self-sustaining, to function responsibly.

Visitors will behave responsibly if sustainability is part of the mentality of the host community and if environmental responsibility is a part of the norm. However, 58% of respondents to our survey consider that there are not enough sustainable travel options, but 63% would like to travel more sustainably in the future. It is clear that the trend towards sustainability is here to stay, with more consumers planning to travel more responsibly and sustainably in the future.

The role of target marketing should be rethought. Destination marketing is often associated with attracting as many tourists as possible. Marketers should rethink their strategies based on what they want to market and how. To give priority to sustainable initiatives, to support local politics by promoting ethical initiatives, collaborating with the local community, and influencing responsible tourism behavior.

5. Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a major impact on societies and the world economy and brings unprecedented challenges to the tourism sector, and in addition, there are opportunities to encourage innovation, develop new marketing strategies, discover new markets, etc.

This study highlighted several trends: despite the fear of illness, people's desire to travel remained unshaken, people rediscovering domestic destinations, less crowded and even unknown destinations; tourists looking for fresh air and space; sanitary safety and hygiene are paramount, hospitality becomes a priority; innovation, digitization, the latest technology, and IT breakthroughs are highly valued by potential consumers, communication, and transparency are very important; sustainability is a real opportunity for destination marketing to focus on the quality of experience rather than attracting large numbers of tourists, to better tourism and for longer periods.

In the context of an accelerating travel recovery, consumers, as well as the public and private sectors, have a responsibility to ensure tourism destinations become more resilient, sustainable, and inclusive. Understanding the changing context, emerging trends, and consumer expectations will support destination managers and communities to adapt and deliver authentic experiences while prioritizing sustainable, inclusive, and resilient growth. The trend is to expand traditional tourist destinations, in the spatial, digital, macro, and micro dimensions. The extended limits of tourist products lead to the imagination of new tourist experiences. In an attempt to adapt to the changes produced by the pandemic, marketers in the field of tourism must look for new opportunities and explore new types of personalized and digitalized products based on the demands of the new generation of consumers and sustainability. The pandemic has drawn attention to the things that really matter, social interaction, and the natural environment. It offers a unique opportunity to redesign destinations to meet the new normal standards, to create sustainable destinations, better to live in, and more attractive to visit.

However, this study also has limitations. Further research is needed on behavioral changes for potential consumers and destinations, in the tourism industry, in general, to be able to draw more vigorous conclusions.

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