Covid-19 Influence on The Digitalization of Travel Agencies' Training Policy

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Info Articles	Abstract
	Objective: The article authors aim to make an extensive review of the current literature to clarify the conceptual apparatus and the difference between travel agencies and their users, as well as to trace the extent to which digitalization supports the communication between them from the COVID -19 transformation opportunities impact. To achieve this, the authors will first look at why and how COVID-19 can be an opportunity for transformation, discussing the circumstances and issues which are raised by the pandemic. **Methodology:** The article authors use a questionnaire to show in percentage terms the extent to which digitalization transforms and whether it improves communication between stakeholders. This type of research is the most widespread, because the feedback from the respondents can be assessed the fastest and to measure their satisfaction with the services in all areas of tourism, but especially in terms of tourist communication. The popularity of this method is due on the one hand to the different forms of conducting a survey (classic questionnaire, graphic questionnaire, mobile application), as well as the variety of means by which the method can be applied (electronic survey, paper survey, telephone survey). Surveys are widely recognizable among consumers, and they are generally open and willing to answer questions, especially if they are popular, attractively designed, time-consuming and easy to complete. The survey is among the methods that are suitable for constant, daily receiving feedback and measuring satisfaction. In order the survey to be effective, the authors of the article make an electronic version in which the risk of making a statistical error that would divert or change the rate of regression or decline is reduced. The survey was successfully conducted due to the current topic of the article and the motivation of the respondents. Correctly filled in questionnaires are 100 in number and they include not only travel agents but also their long-term users, the results are illustrated in the form of graphs, cakes, and are calculated in percentage so that one can confirm from the hypotheses that the authors set at the beginning of the study. **Results:** The article will also look at the main impacts, behaviors and experiences by three major tourism stakeholders (tourism demand, supply and destination management organizations and politicians) during the three phases of COVID-19 (response, recovery and reset). **Implication**: In this way, this article identifies the basic values, institutions and suggestions which the tourism industry and the scientific community must challenge and break in order to advance and zero the boundaries of research and practice. This provides an overview of the type and scale of tourism impacts and the COVID-19 implications in the tourism field.

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 (declared as a pandemic by the WHO, March 12, 2020) has a significant impact on global economic, political, socio-cultural systems. Health communication strategies and measures (e.g. social distancing, travel and mobility prohibitions, community blocking, stay-at-home campaigns, self or compulsory quarantine, congestion reduction) have stopped global travel, tourism and leisure. As a highly vulnerable industry to numerous environmental, political, socio-economic risks, tourism has become accustomed and has become resilient to recovery (Novelli, Gussing Burgess, Jones, & Ritchie, 2018) from various crises and outbreaks (e.g., terrorism, earthquakes, Ebola)., TORS, Zika). However, the nature unprecedented circumstances and impacts of COVID-19 shows the signs that this crisis is not only different but may have profound and long-term structural and transformational changes in tourism such as socio-economic activity and industry.

In fact, this global and enormous scale, multidimensional and interconnected impacts challenging current values and systems leading to a global recession and depression are the most distinctive features of this pandemic.

The COVID-19 impact on tourism will be uneven in the space and time, and in addition to the human tool, estimates show a huge and international economic impact: international tourist arrivals are estimated to fall to 78%, leading to a loss of $ 1.2 trillion from tourism export earnings and 120 million direct redundancies in tourism, a sevenfold impact from 11th September and the biggest drop in history (UNWTO, 2020). As one of the most important global employers (1 in 10 jobs are directly related to tourism, UNWTO, 2020) and the main contributor to GDP for several countries, tourism and COVID-19 are the epicenter of all international discussions and economies.

Within the thriving industry discussions and tourism and COVID-19 research, there is a unanimous invocation to see and use the pandemic as an opportunity for transformation (Mair, 2020). The industry must not only recover, but also rethink and reform the next normal and economic order, while researchers must not use COVID-19 solely as another context to replicate existing knowledge to measure and forecast the impact of tourism (Gössling, Scott , & Hall, 2020; Hall, Scott and Gossling, 2020). Although, such studies are important for pandemic management, they do not increase knowledge and / or take the industry a step further. In addition, due to the interrelated socio-cultural, economic, psychological and political impacts of COVID-19 on such a scale, unforeseen trajectories are instead expected historical trends and the predictable strength of "old" explanatory models may not work. In addition, there is sufficient evidence to argue that both the tourism industry and research have matured well, providing sufficient knowledge on how to study and effectively: (1) design and implement recovery and response strategies in crisis (e.g., McKercher & Chon, 2004); (2) building resilience to deal with future crises (Hall, Prayag, & Amore, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The authors of the article give a brief retrospective of the basic theoretical concepts in this field - "tourism" and "travel" which are synonymous and are often used to carry out activities related to recreation, but they have a different meaning. The generally accepted definition by the academic community of the term "Travel" is a word that implies moving from one point to another for a specific purpose, be it work or any other. The term 'tourism', on the other hand, implies travel from one point to another, but includes residence for a certain period or includes several trips to certain destinations, which takes place outside the usual place of residence. "Every type of tourism is a trip, but not every trip is a type of tourism" This predetermines the difference between the two concepts. A person may be sent on business to a certain destination, which may have various attractions, historical sites, lakes, but his main task is work. Such a person is defined as a "potential tourist" (Velikova, Elenita, Kaleychev, Svetoslav (2016) Introduction in tourism pp. 19-22.)

There is one peculiarity in the field of the tourism industry - for the most part the tourist product reaches the end user through intermediaries. In their turn, form a distribution channel that aims to transform goods, services, experiences and also from one form that would not be attractive to consumers, to another that they would prefer. Unlike other industries in tourism, the enterprises connecting the site (tourist place) and the subject (tourist) are part of the tourist industry. The active functioning of the considered economic entities on the tourist market is a consequence of the massification of tourism and the intensive relations between supply and demand on the tourist market. The need for intermediaries in tourism is determined by:

• The territorial remoteness and remoteness between the demand and supply of tourist services;
• Lack of market transparency;
• Lack of sufficient time, real opportunities and accumulated experience on the part of the

majority of users;

      • Need for advance booking due to limited capacity;

      • Immobility, etc. "Spatial and temporal fortification" of the tourist service.

This need `has an objective in nature and can be met only in an organized manner with strict consideration and real combination of economic interests of different participants in market relations. (Neshkov, Marin. Travel agency and transport in tourism, Varna, 2007, p.12)

Travel intermediaries can be divided into two main types in the difference of their activity - tour operator, abbreviated tour operator and travel agent, abbreviated travel agent.

After a brief theoretical review of scientific authors such as M. Coltmant, M. Neshkov, M. Yaneva and others and considering the basic definitions and set features of tourism activities, for the needs of current research, the authors define the travel agent as a "business unit (natural or legal person") mainly intermediary activity, which is realized by paying commissions for the sale of package services ("Produced" by the tour operator or single trips, use of leisure time, tourism, etc.)

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH METHODS

According to the mentioned theoretical and conceptual framework and based on the study's problem, questions and objectives, our hypotheses are placed as follows:

Hypotheses (1): The COVID-19 consequences build a barrier and mistrust between consumers and travel agents in the last two years and do not provide tourists with the opportunity to freely express their views on the Bulgarian tourism business and actively use complaints as a source of information to improve service or product.

Hypotheses (2): Successful digital communication from the impact of COVID-19 creates conditions and opportunities for improving the presentation of products and services that enhance the image of the tourism business in Bulgaria.

FINDINGS

The tourism industry has become one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy worldwide. It is identified as a key factor in developing countries and as a key element in shaping socio - economic progress. (Lam, Jason M.S., Tan, Seng Huat, Oh, Yit Leng (2013) Exploring Internet influence towards travel satisfaction, 1-3.) Much of the rapid development of the tourism sector is due to several key factors, namely higher income of the population, increased use of free time, decreasing travel costs, easy access to tourist destinations, digitalization of tourist services, etc. In the last few years, the unprecedented epidemiological situation has confronted the tourism industry, both in Bulgaria and worldwide, with one of its biggest crises. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council and their survey of 185 countries and 25 world regions in 2020. Employed in the field of tourism are about 272 million people, compared to 2019, where they were about 334 million, which shows a decline in jobs by nearly 62 million people. Before 2019 the tourism industry accounts for 10.4% of global GDP, while in 2020. the percentage drops to 5.5, which is nearly 50% drop caused by COVID 19. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, the total loss to the tourism industry in one year was $ 4.5 trillion. This crisis has set a huge start for a shift in the tourism industry towards sustainable tourism and crisis management. During one of the worst crises for the tourism industry in the last 20 years, in addition to threats, many opportunities were opened to create preconditions for the development of the tourism product and ways to reach end users. Undoubtedly, the incredible speed of new events, technological changes and non - human circumstances, such as the COVID - 19 pandemic, have made society and the tourism industry better able to cope with the challenges unknown to them. (Sharma et al., 2020) / P. Sharma, T.Y. Leung, R.P. Kingshott, N.S. Davcik, S. CardinaliManaging uncertainty during a global pandemic: an international business perspective J. Bus. Res., 116 (2020), pp. 188-192 /. The role of technology and digitalization in supporting a number of countries, industries, organizations and even social contacts is becoming vital for future development.

The digitalisation has had a major impact on the tourism product and the tourism industry as a whole since the 1990s. Rapid development in this sector and innovation create preconditions for the creation of new business models, which allow a large part of the end users to have easier access to information and choice. The huge variety of electronically based tourist sites and entities has led to a change in the marketing policy of presentation of tourist products and increase their sales. This puts tourism as a leading e-commerce industry.

Undoubtedly, if travel agents want to be competitive, they must accept the possibilities of digitalisation and the role of technological development. Industry 4.0 is a revolution that brings with it an unlimited number of opportunities. Defined as a trend for automation, data exchange and production of

technologies, including robotic ones and artificial intelligence, travel agents must undoubtedly change their course of development. Smart technologies play a huge role in the social life of the end user of the tourism industry and this trend will continue to develop and the use of technology will become an integral part of our lives.

Travel agencies must continue to follow the innovations and trends of the dynamic tourism market and the desires of the end user, which are related to facilitating the accessibility of the desired tourism product. In recent years and especially after the influence of COVID-19, the main trends that are followed by consumers stand out. Travel agents are increasingly resorting to the possibilities of mobile applications (applications) which provide a huge opportunity to characterize the end user and determine his desired products. Through mobile devices, the user can fully plan their trip - booking a hotel in the desired destination until a time for a guided tour, and even opening the hotel room via your mobile phone.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and chatbots are also used in the tourism industry. In most cases, chatbots are used by travel companies for faster and easier communication with the end user through pre-programmed artificial intelligence. There are two main types of chatbots - audio and text. The advantages of chatbots is the opportunity they give to travel companies to communicate with an unlimited number of end users for various types of issues - related to reservations, upcoming weather forecast, local attractions and more.

Reporting consumer ratings through various platforms on the Internet has a huge impact on the demand and supply of various tourism products. This method motivates the business to pay attention to every detail and the quality of the offered products undoubtedly increases. On the other hand, the end user has the opportunity to research in advance the desired destination and obtain information that would help in choosing the desired product.

The limitations which are caused by COVID-19 and the rapid development of digital technologies have set new notions for a virtual tour. Despite its first appearance in 1994, over the years virtual reality has become increasingly popular among tourist users. In recent years, due to the huge restrictions on travel, tourists have increasingly resorted to the possibilities of virtual reality. Many travel agents are vying to ensure their safety, employees, customers, brand image and liquidity, so they made virtual tours of their sites, and in addition to the 360-degree tour, some included text fields and some audio descriptions of the sites.

This has allowed tourist users to reach long distances through virtual walks that provide emotions and adventures different from the standard ones so far and could attract more tourists.

One thing is for sure - the change in business models is happening extremely fast and the main reason for this is technological progress and high levels of digitalization. New opportunities open up every day and the number of new technologies produced grows with each passing day. The tourism industry fails to fully implement all the possibilities of current technological progress and digitalization. Tourism needs to embrace digitalisation quickly if it is to be sustainable. Business models and investments in travel agents must be focused on new technological opportunities.

The industry transformation of COVID-19 following effects should help the industry to rethink and implement a human-oriented and responsible environment for sustainability and well-being. Therefore, mobile applications (for accommodation, check-out, room keys, mobile payments, bookings-purchases), self-service kiosks, in-room entertainment and e-shopping technologies in the destination (eg virtual reality for virtual visits to destination museums, attractions and destinations , movies), robots (reception and concierge services, food delivery museums), websites with activated artificial intelligence and a chat box for communication and customer service, digital payments (eg digital wallets, paypal, credit cards). In addition, the new operational environment imposed by the COVID-19 measures requires companies to adopt new technologies and applications to ensure crowd management and the number of people gathered in public places (eg airports, shopping malls, museums, restaurants, hotels), human disinfectors and hand disinfection equipment, applications for identification and management of human health identity and profiles.

As a result, COVID-19 has led to greater government intervention in the functioning and activities of the tourism industry. The government has also become a much bigger player in the tourism economy (for example, the renationalisation of airlines and other travel companies and tourism infrastructure such as airports). This is very unique as previous crises have generated research and institutional interest, but they have not had an impact on policy, especially in tourism (Hall et al., 2020).

However, systems theory and crisis management argue that crises must be considered collectively. COVID-19 seems to have raised political, geopolitical and managerial issues that will need to use frameworks and concepts from these disciplines to enlighten such research.

For the purposes of the study for the current article, the research team has developed its own survey, which includes questions aimed at examining the attitudes of both consumers and employees of travel agencies towards the digitalization of communication policy in tourism. The survey reached 100

respondents, with over 65% of the participants being employed in the field of tourism. The main target groups of people who participated in the survey are respectively - 70% aged between 18 and 30 years. and 24% between the ages of 31 and 40. The outlined age groups will clearly show the attitudes of the generations directly involved in the fourth technological revolution, as direct users of the capabilities of digital devices and digital communication, both in tourism and socially. point.
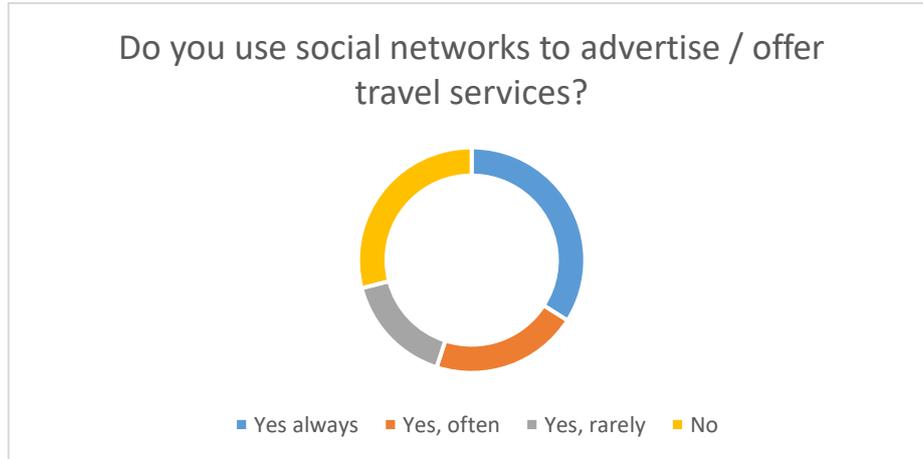

Figure 1

After reviewing the questionnaires, the authors of the current article notice a growing trend in the use of social networks as a source of information and an opportunity for marketing tools for travel agencies. As can be seen in Fig. 1, in general, the users of social networks as an opportunity to offer tourist services are 71%, distributed respectively in different frequencies, as can be seen in the figure.
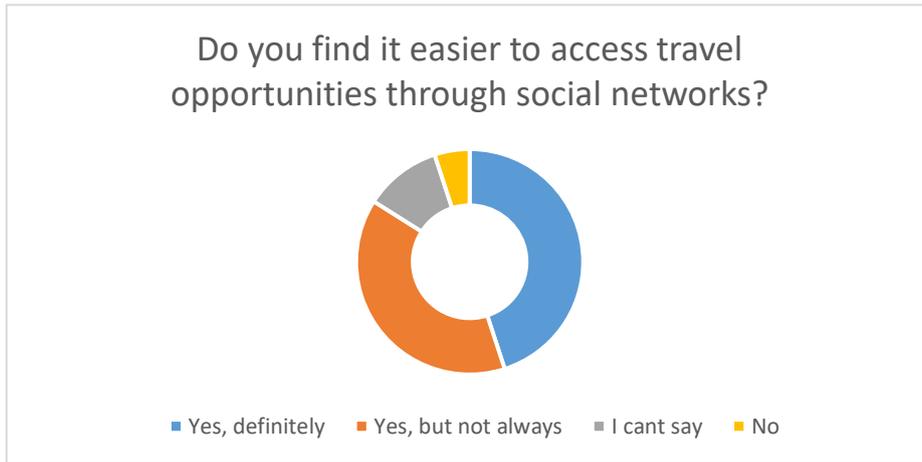
Figure 2

Almost all respondents find social networks as a way to reach travel opportunities with only 1% of respondents answering negatively. This is due to the age groups outlined earlier and digital devices that have become part of people's lives. The figure shows the clear impact of digitalization on tourism demand, which will be reflected in the demand from travel users to travel agencies.
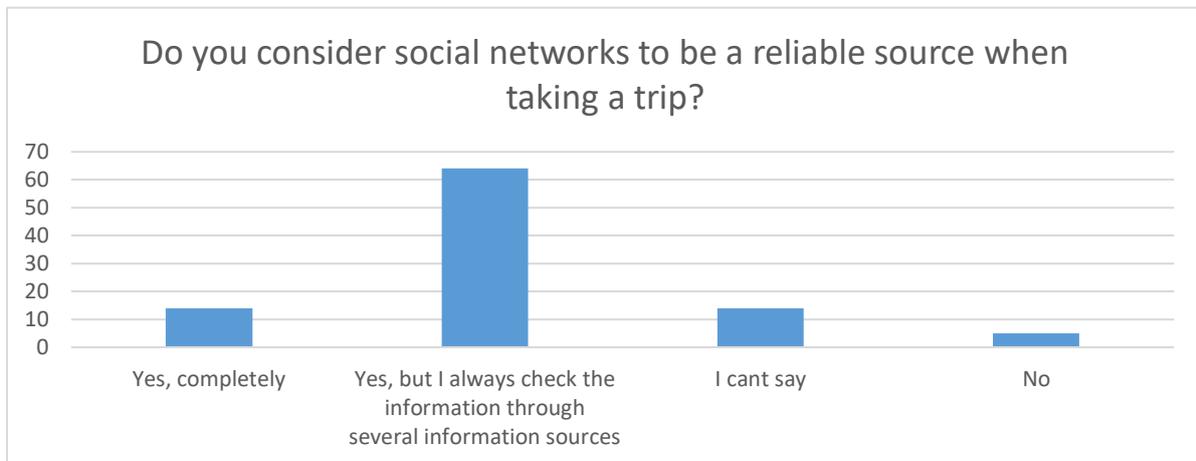

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows that social media is a reliable source, but you need to check the information in several different sources. This is more due to the low control of fake news in Bulgaria. The media is one of the last places in the EU for media freedom. Respondents find it difficult to distinguish between real offers for tourist products.
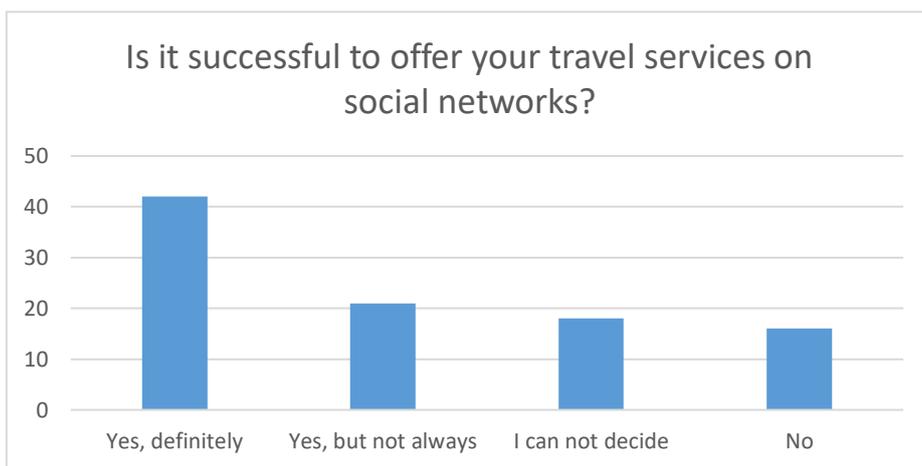
Figure 4

The attached figure 4 clearly shows the opinion of travel agencies on the services offered on social networks. It can be clearly seen that a total of 63% consider the successful implementation of tourist services on social networks, distributed in different strengths of confirmation. 18% cannot judge whether reaching the end user is a success, and 16% completely deny that their placement on social media services is a success. This, according to the authors, is due to the fact that for some travel agencies and end users it is difficult to transform from offline to online services.
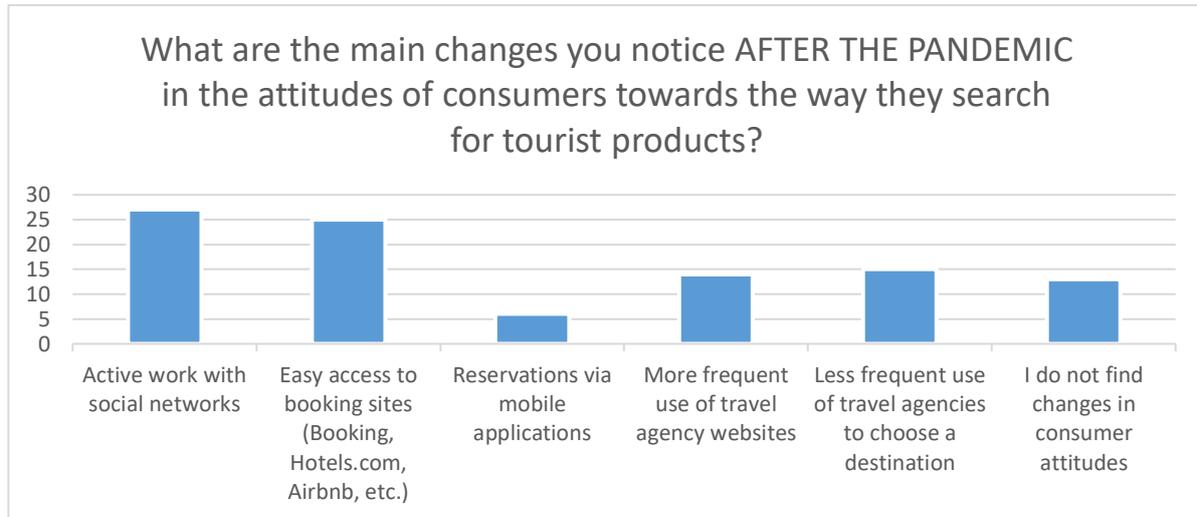

Figure 5

This study aims to find out the extent of the change in the communication policy of travel agencies and the attitudes of travel consumers towards the products offered and the way they present themselves through the new digital opportunities. The results of it show changes in agencies and high levels of digitalization. Many tourists are starting to plan their tourist trips through social networks, online booking sites, websites and more. digital opportunities, which must completely change the understanding of travel agencies' necessary levels of digitalization in order to reach end users as successfully as possible. Consumer attitudes consumers after KOVID 19 is a clear sign of a necessary change in the presentation of tourism products by travel agencies. After the sharp introduction of distance communication, tourist users realize the need for easy access to choose their travel products.

Something very important is related to the flow of information that reaches the end users after the surveys. The results of Figure 3 reveal that 14% of people consider social networks to be a reliable source, and 64% check the information through several information sources, which reveals the need for well-positioned in various digital platforms, but also quality service to be reflected in them.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

COVID-19 has led to many socio-cultural, economic and psychological impacts on various tourism stakeholders, some of which will remain for years. Although studies examining the reality of impacts, forecasting tourism demand and benchmarking good and best practices are very useful and contextually interesting for assessing the impact of COVID-19 on different geographical sectors and stakeholders. Digitalization offers to expand our knowledge of crisis management, as well as to potentiate the pandemic's potential to expand the challenges facing the tourism industry.

This article purpose has to inspire tourism scientists to consider and use COVID-19 as a transformational opportunity to reform their thinking when designing and conducting research, and for tourism institutions to change their standards and indicators to motivate and evaluate purpose, role and impact. of research in the field of tourism. In addition, crises also accelerate technological innovation and change (Colombo, Piva, Quas and Rossi-Lamastra, 2016). However, they should not be seen as inevitable, indisputable and impossible to reshape and readjust in order to serve real needs and significant values.

The analysis is not exhaustive with regard to COVID-19 impacts while the impacts may not be the same for all participants from the same group of tourism stakeholders. For example, COVID-19 has different impacts on travel agents based on their characteristics, such as the nature of the travel sector (intermediaries, event transport organizers, type of accommodation or attraction provider), their size, location, management and ownership style. Similarly, highly diverse tourist demand (e.g., leisure and business travel, group and independent tourists, tourists with special interests such as religious, gay and

lesbian, corporate travelers) also means that the different impacts and consequences of COVID-19 are expected and deserve to be explored for different market segments. COVID-19 tourism research should not only reveal such differentiated impacts of COVID-19 but should also provide an enriched explanatory force on the roots of such differences with the scope for anticipating and / or testing any suggestions on how to deal with any inequalities and shortcomings that may be caused to different groups of tourism stakeholders.

The current paradigms and trends of this `causal link` of employment in tourism (due to the forthcoming economic recession and higher operating costs of tourism companies) are expected to continue and strengthen, COVID-19 tourism research needs to urgently explore the problems of employees' psychological, mental and physical health, commitment, working conditions (e.g., remote work, virtual teams and virtual leadership) and other human resources problems in the context of COVID-19. For example, traditional incentives for leadership, recruitment, management, and motivation may not inspire, engage, motivate, and attract employees who have recalibrated their personal values and priorities during the COVID-19 block and remote work.

The COVID-19 impact on tourism employment puts additional pressure on tourism education, which is severely affected by the pandemic. In addition to the virtualization of teaching and learning processes tourism students and graduates must also deal with the interruption of internships in industry, staff recruitment and questionable career paths. Tourism programs and universities face reduced student admissions, industry and government sponsorship and research funding. Tourism researchers need to find new ways and sources to conduct research aimed at social distancing, respect for communication issues and the privacy of COVID-19 stakeholders.

The research team makes the following recommendations to improve communication with stakeholders:

1. Travel agencies should focus on actively positioning their travel products on different digital platforms:
- Active website;
- Work with social networks
- Positioning services in reservation sites
- Creating mobile applications
- Blogs, etc.;

2. Active work with people who form opinions on social networks (influencers), which will allow easy access to the already created audience.

3. Travel agents must keep their audience on social networks and digital platforms through up-to-date information that is easily accessible to the end user, who in turn always prefers timely and useful information when embarking on their journey.

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