

Influence of Risk Perception during COVID-19 on Travel Behavior of German Tourists – An Opportunity for Domestic Tourism?

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The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped many aspects of our lives, with the travel and tourism industry being one of the most affected sectors. Luisa Spriestersbach's master thesis, "Influence of Risk Perception during COVID-19 on Travel Behavior of German Tourists – An Opportunity for Domestic Tourism?", delves into this transformation, focusing on how German tourists adapted their travel behaviors in response to the pandemic. This study is particularly relevant for Finnish readers, as it highlights the potential for domestic tourism to thrive in times of global uncertainty, a concept that resonates with Finland's own tourism dynamics.

Luisa's research provides valuable insights into the shifting preferences of German tourists, emphasizing the increased importance of safety and the growing trend towards sustainable and nature-based tourism. Her findings not only shed light on the immediate impacts of the pandemic but also suggest long-term changes in travel behavior that could influence tourism strategies worldwide. This article presents the findings of Luisa's study of 204 German tourists researching the impact of COVID-19 on travel behavior and destination choice during the pandemic years of 2020 to 2023. It introduces how adaptive behavior, risk perception and individual characteristics influence such vacation decision-making by further examining the role of gender and age in this context. As a result of the research findings, the article defines several learnings of the pandemic and future implications for the tourism industry.

COVID-19 and tourism sector in Germany

COVID-19, which unfolded in early 2020, has led to a global crisis in the tourism sector as it brought along numerous travel restrictions and lockdowns. As a result of such, the international travel industry came to a virtual standstill, leading to an increased importance of domestic travel for various tourism markets especially during the pandemic years. Germany, a country located in the heart of Europe, is a popular vacation destination for both, international as well as domestic travelers. Germans love traveling, in fact, travel is considered one of their most valuable goods, ranking such activity among the citizens' top three consumption priorities. Despite a global pandemic, Germans did not want to fully give up traveling and thus increasingly opted for a domestic travel. In line with that, Germany's market share for domestic travel increased to 45% in the pandemic year of 2020, indicating an increase of 19% compared to the pre-pandemic year of 2019.

Adapting to Crisis: German Tourists' Shift to Domestic Travel

In order to investigate whether domestic tourism acted as a valid alternative for German tourists in times of travel restrictions and closed borders, the research project analyzed the relationship between the respondents' adaptive behavior and their destination choice. The results of such research indicate that respondents who spent their main vacation on domestic trips only during the considered pandemic years, showed higher adaptive behavior scores than those respondents who continued to travel across borders. Such findings indicate that the decision for domestic travel ultimately is a result of protective motivation and risk-reducing behavior in threatening situations such as the coronavirus pandemic.
In addition, risk perception plays a vital role in the vacation decision-making of tourists as it acts as a driving force within such. As part of the study, the respondents' destination choice was examined under the seven travel-specific risks of financial risks, destination risks, travel risks, time risks, health risks, psychological risks and cultural risks. Upon researching the relationship between risk perception on international travel and a domestic travel decision, the study project's results indicate that overall, respondents perceived all seven travel-specific risks to be more present on international travels compared to domestic travels. The findings further indicate that especially for 2020, in which the extent of the pandemic was not clear yet and a lot of fear was prevailing, risks have been perceived specifically high on international travels resulting in German tourists increasingly preferring to travel domestically in an attempt to mitigate risk. As part of this research, the role of gender has further been researched, indicating that females have shown to perceive higher risk levels than their opponent gender on all of the seven travel-specific risks.

Understanding the Influence of Tourist Profiles on Travel Decisions in Pandemic

Times

Researching how tourists' characteristics impact the destination choice of German tourists, the study found that international travel experience has an overall negative impact on a domestic travel decision during the pandemic years. Such findings underline that experienced travelers feel more confident to travel internationally even in times of crisis. While the strength of such negative relationship has shown to vary between the pandemic years, it was most pronounced in 2021. As the pandemic was quite severe in Germany that year, with many travel warnings and lockdowns prevailing, it is assumed that international travel experience plays a greater role under challenging conditions.

Upon researching how perceived vulnerability impacts German tourists' travel decision, the study's findings indicate that individuals perceiving COVID-19 to be serious show higher engagement in protective behaviors by travelling domestically only. Such behavior was specifically demonstrated in 2020 and 2022, which implies that Germans felt less vulnerable in 2021, the year of vaccination, as they perceived the risk of contracting COVID-19 to be rather low. With Omikron, a highly infectious, newly variant making its way to Germany in 2022, Germans felt more vulnerable once again and thus perceived a domestic travel to be less risky. The research further investigated the role of age on perceived vulnerability, for which the findings confirm that Germans above 56 years old overall felt more vulnerable towards COVID-19 than respondents below 56 have felt. Consequently, age was determined a relevant factor among domestic travel decision, as such travelling within borders has shown to be more relevant among older respondents by boosting personal safety.

Promoting Domestic Tourism: Lessons from the Pandemic

Without a doubt, the coronavirus pandemic has posed major challenges to the tourism industry and has led to changes in the travel behavior of German tourists, which in turn has further initiated new trends and transformations within the industry. In order to successfully promote Germany as an attractive travel destination, the industry must accordingly respond to such new trends. Consequently, the research project's results indicate several learnings and practical implications for the tourism sector.

For once, domestic travel was confirmed to be an appropriate and lower-risk alternative for German tourists during the uncertain times of the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, as a result of the pandemic, personal safety has become a basic requirement for travelers. A domestic travel decision is driven by a high need for safety and risk awareness. For the tourism sector, such findings imply that in future times of disruptions, the industry will have to focus even more on safety and protective measures in order to attract especially domestic travelers. Promoting such health-oriented travel offers will help to target vulnerable and older travelers in particular, who have been shown to be very concerned about their personal safety.

In response to reduce risk, German travelers have shown to adapt their travel behavior. They particularly did so by favoring nature-based activities in order to avoid crowds and thus contain the virus. Such nature tourism has become one of the new trends that have emerged from the pandemic, which Germany, due to its

numerous possibilities and activities relevant for nature tourism, is an ideal travel destination for. In addition to this trend towards nature tourism, the industry is further expected to see a trend away from mass tourism towards a more sustainable one. Germany offers various sustainable travel options, from certified accommodation possibilities to climate-friendly transportation with the national railway company ‘Deutsche Bahn’. While such sustainable tourism already is promoted as Germany’s unique selling point within overseas markets, the industry should increasingly promote such sustainable travels among domestic travelers too.

Upon researching the role of demographic differences on destination choice, gender and age have shown to be of great importance. As women and older individuals perceived higher risk levels, domestic tourism turned out to be specifically relevant due to higher perceived safety standards. In terms of the role of age, factors such as no language barrier, less travel stress and more flexibility have shown to attract older travelers to domestic travel. Consequently, it is important for the successful development of the tourism industry to promote the perks and attractiveness of domestic tourism even after the pandemic through targeted offers emphasizing such benefits. By doing so, actors of the tourism industry may inspire travelers of such target group for a long-term domestic destination choice.

Overall, the findings suggest that the industry and its players need to adapt to meet the changing travel behavior of tourists, both in uncertain times like the pandemic and beyond. Due to the volatile nature of the industry, flexibility plays a crucial role for the sector in order to respond quickly to new tourist trends. Thus, the industry must increasingly focus on offering resilient tourism products which remain attractive even in times of crisis by offering differentiated and target group-oriented products to be able to meet the new needs of tourists. As the German tourism market offers ideal conditions to combine the trends of sustainable and nature tourism, it aids to foster domestic tourism to stay as relevant as during the coronavirus years.

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