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Psychological Resilience and Perceived Invulnerability—Critical Factors in Assessing Perceived Risk Related to Travel and Tourism-Related Behaviors of Generation Z

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Abstract: Psychological theory often reminds us that the best predictor of an individual's future behavior is their prior behavior. Then, the pandemic happened in 2020, and at least for travel behavior and tourism consumption, everything seemed to change, stressing the importance of re-evaluating predictors. In the present study, we aimed to compare the history of travel behavior and tourism consumption with the predicted travel behavior of students coming from Generation Z, along with intrapersonal characteristics influencing risk perception, like psychological resilience and perceived invulnerability. The findings revealed that the pandemic changed the attitude towards travel for tourism-related purposes in both positive and negative directions, restructuring the attitude towards travel for the majority and also revealing many new prospective travelers. Psychological resilience was a significant variable that differentiated the respondents who changed their attitude towards tourism from those who remained consistent in their non-travel behavior and students who planned to travel more during the pandemic. Although subsamples also differed in the mean value of perceived invulnerability, the variable did not prove statistically significant. Almost 50% of the students predicting that they will travel abroad for non-tourism-related purposes in the future year were students who had not traveled abroad before the pandemic.

Keywords: Generation Z; psychological resilience; travel risk assessment; tourism behavior; invulnerability perception; COVID-19-response literature

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1. Introduction

As was expected for an economic sector highly sensitive to crisis and epidemiological risks, the research literature on the effects of the perceived threat of SARS-CoV-2 (and the actual COVID-19 pandemic) on the tourism industry grew significantly. In the beginning, tourism research changed dramatically in two ways: The phenomenon under study changed, and the way we study it also changed. The phases of the pandemic (the lockdown/state of emergency in many countries, the alert state, and the adjustment and reorganization to a long-term planned lifestyle phase) considerably and periodically changed both the consumer's attitude towards leisure activities and tourism and the governments' official positions. The attitude towards tourism changed in a very short time. During the lockdown phase, it was considered completely unnecessary (and forbidden for epidemiologic safety reasons), leading to the cancellation of all planned leisure trips and some tourism-related services. During the reorganization phase, tourism was seen as a solution that supported mental health. During this later phase, the perception of safety and the fear of contamination shifted, driven by the need to escape the lockdown-limited lifestyle. As

information about how the virus was spreading became available and the psychological effects of the lockdown were understood, the post-lockdown attitude towards leisure and freedom of movement changed significantly. In some subcultures and social groups, this shift was somewhat similar to the post-war social life explosion, minus direct physical contact. Travel for holiday purposes resumed sooner than initially predicted (starting from the 2020 summer season), but the recovery process to prior levels will be long and difficult.

The Response Literature and the Reorganization of Tourism Research

In the first phase of the pandemic (*the response phase*), the limitations imposed on mobility and direct contact resulted in a limited range of available methodologies and collaborative designs used in empirical research. Further, we call this research phase *the response tourism literature*. In this first phase (corresponding to the estimated data collection phase ranging from February to May 2020), the majority of studies based on empirical data used online surveys or online panel experiments. Due to the research limitations of the lockdown phase, these studies focused on how tourism consumers perceived the threat of COVID-19 and changed their travel and tourism-related consumption behavior. Another characteristic of this research period was that most studies focused on regional impact analyses (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020).

Kock et al. (2020, "Introduction", p. 1) appreciated the descriptive response literature because "such research is simply confirming what is already known: that the pandemic is wrecking the tourism industry all over the globe". Indeed, the majority of studies assessing changes in attitudes and the impact of the pandemic on travel behaviors focused on the impact of the fear of COVID-19 contamination and related independent variables on various economic changes and tourism-consumption dependent variables (Table 1).

Table 1. A meta-analysis of the response-phase literature on COVID-19's impact on tourism activities.

Independent Variables Measured	Dependent Variables Measured	Phase of the Pandemic	Design/Method/ Tool	Theoretical Background	Authors/Year
(Level of) threat of COVID-19; the salience of COVID-19; residents' perceptions of the risks posed by tourism activity; organizational resilience of hospitality businesses; CSR practices; organizational response to COVID-19	Preference for private dining restaurants Preference for private dining tables/rooms	April–May	Experiment/ regression analysis online panel	Behavioral inhibition system theory, the contagion effect, the crisis management theory	(Kim & Lee, 2020)
	Willingness to pay to reduce public health social costs		Triple-bounded dichotomous-choice contingent valuation method		(Qiu et al., 2020)
	Perceived job security of senior managers, job commitment, perceived job security, and organizational commitment	April–May	Quantitative survey, partial least squares (PLS), path modelling		(Filimonau et al., 2020)
Overall impacts of the pandemic, financial impacts, and uncertainty	Multi-business and multi-channels, product design and investment preferences, digital and intelligent transformation, and market reshuffle (hotel industry)			COVID-19 pandemic management framework	(Hao et al., 2020)
		May–June	Inductive approach qualitative research	Theory of resilience	(Alonso et al., 2020)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Independent Variables Measured	Dependent Variables Measured	Phase of the Pandemic	Design/Method/ Tool	Theoretical Background	Authors/Year
Non-differentiated COVID-19 pandemic impact Rise in number of COVID-19 cases Non-differentiated COVID-19 pandemic impact Rise in business video-conferencing during COVID-19	Perceptions of the short-term impacts of the pandemic on hosting practice and of the long-term impacts of the pandemic on the P2P accommodation	May–June	Semi-structured interviews P2P, accommodation hosts, thematic analysis (using NVIVO)		(Farmaki et al., 2021)
	Continued deterioration of the labor market; non-salaried workers in the food/drink and leisure/entertainment sectors	March–April	Regression analysis, modelling		(Huang et al., 2020)
	Air freight data, flight supply data, global traffic	April	Data mining on available seat kilometers, analysis based on OAG Schedules		(Suau-Sanchez et al., 2020)
	Airfare loss, estimated job and GDP losses, estimated loss in ticketing	Jan–Mar	Data mining		(Iacus et al., 2020)
Non-differentiated COVID-19 pandemic impact	Travel perception on Trip Advisor, travel insurance	Dec–March	Natural language processing (NLP), text mining, link analysis		(Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020)
Non-differentiated COVID-19 pandemic impact	Flight demand: rate of return regulation increases as average cost increases. Price-cap regulation: cap is fixed and charges are not increased. Light-handed regulation				(Forsyth et al., 2020)

Soon after, as we entered the reorganization phase of the pandemic (but also of the tourism research methodology), an increasing volume of theoretical knowledge followed. This new wave brought the constructive "post-traumatic-growth" attitude in the tourism literature. On the one hand, scholars urged the call to see and use the pandemic as a transformative opportunity (Mair, 2020). On the other hand, the role of tourism research goes beyond measuring and predicting tourism impacts (Gössling et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). Sigala (2020) stressed the importance of "embedding, adapting, reflecting and expanding the theoretical lenses and perspectives of a much greater plurality of disciplines and constructs to guide and implement research" (Sigala, 2020, p. 314), building on previous calls for inter-disciplinary (Wen et al., 2020) and multi-disciplinary research (Gössling et al., 2020).

As expected in these conditions (during a crisis where future tourism dynamics depend on a change in the behavior of the "bread and butter" of the industry), the interdisciplinary tourism literature on consumer (risk) perception and behavior suddenly re-entered the main stage. However, prior to 2020, a great volume of studies on tourists' perceptions and behavior was published on the "sunny side" of the tourism business, like beach and recreational tourism (Malaescu, 2021). A considerably less voluminous amount of literature has been dedicated to risk perception, fear-related changes in travel behavior, and the respective modeling of the travel decision-making process.

As the pandemic progressed and research flourished, research on the perceived risk of traveling focused on how the perceived risk induced behavioral modifications on choices regarding the local means of transportation (Y. Wang et al., 2024) rather than a focus on

the tourism destination or the actual decision to travel. Other studies focused on a specific segment of tourists' behavioral modification, like the perceived risk of COVID-19 infection, which negatively affects hotel-staying intention (Teng et al., 2023). The studies focusing on how the risk of infection impacted travel intention focused on identifying the moderators (social distance—spatial and temporal) of the effect of risk perceptions on travel intentions (Fuchs et al., 2024). The attempt to standardize an instrument for COVID-19 risk perception with respect to travel destinations came relatively late (Zaman et al., 2022). Akritidis et al. (2023) measured travel-related risk-taking willingness and risk perceptions using the health/safety items from the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking (DOSPERT) scale.

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic, toned-down research on the perceived risk in a tourism destination firstly monitored what the post-pandemic era brings in terms of travel risk perception (Abdullah et al., 2024); secondly, it reconnected with the non-pandemic-related literature on perceived risks in a destination and refocused on other sources of information influencing perceived risks, like influencers. Here, studies identified a gap in the literature (Ameen et al., 2023a, 2023b).

Based on the theoretical framework of D. Lapsley et al. (2006), Hill et al. (2012), and J.-L. Wang et al. (2015), we selected psychological resilience and perceived invulnerability as relevant individual psychological characteristics for the travel decision-making process. We retained psychological resilience as a relevant personal resource and coping mechanism and perceived invulnerability as a moderator that downplays the perceived risk of contamination and severe manifestations of COVID-19. Our research question explores whether these variables could explain the different outcomes of the decision-making process when students assessed the risk of traveling during the pandemic and decided whether to travel. More generally, we are interested in how perceived risks influence travel-related decision-making and what factors sustain consistency in travel decisions and behavior.

2. Literature Review

Based on a factorial analysis of seven risk variables (financial, psychological, physical, social, time, satisfaction, and equipment risk), Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) proposed a taxonomy of tourists in three main categories. They distinguished the Place Risk group (which included respondents perceiving vacations to be fairly risky in general and their most recent trip destination as very risky); the Functional Risk group (perceiving higher physical and equipment risk), and the Neutral Risk group—the most robust group (perceiving less risk). Lepp and Gibson (2003) also used seven types of perceived risks relative to a destination, including health, political instability, terrorism, strange food, cultural barriers, a nation's political and religious dogma, and crime.

Initial studies on perceived health risks in tourism destinations were concerned with the perceived risk of HIV infection in tourism destinations with high HIV rates (Cossens & Gin, 2008). Chien et al. (2017) proposed a model of health risk perception, offering insight into how tourists assess their vulnerability to disease and how they limit infection risk. General epidemiological risks and health risks were taken under consideration under the label "wealth" by several studies (Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Chien et al., 2017; J. Wang et al., 2019).

In Chien et al.'s (2017) model, travel (health) risk perception mediates the impact of antecedents, like worry, perceived control, and sensation seeking, on protective behavior (as a behavioral output of attitude). As worry exacerbates vulnerability (Chien et al., 2017), perceived invulnerability as a pre-existing personal trait might play an important role as a perceived coping resource in the decision to travel. J. Wang et al. (2019) suggested that threat and coping appraisals could indirectly enhance (through motivation for protection) tourists' travel behaviors.

2.1. Psychological Resilience and Perceived Invulnerability in the Context of Tourism During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Soon after the COVID-19 pandemic started, research in various domains refocused on the psychological characteristics of individuals, as part of their cognitive and emotional response to the pandemic, as antecedents of their mental representations, attitudes, and behavior. Psychological resilience, in particular, has not only been studied in clinical psychology as a distinct mediator of mental health (J.-L. Wang et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2020) but also in work and organizational psychology and the management literature as part of the construct of psychological capital.

2.1.1. Psychological Resilience

Richardson (2002) proposed the following definition for resilience: "the motivational force within everyone that drives them to pursue wisdom, self-actualization, and altruism and to be in harmony with a spiritual source of strength" (Richardson, 2002, pp. 309, 313). At the same time, resilience is characterized as an ability to bounce back and focus on goals and success (Richardson, 2002).

Particularly of interest to both the exposure to the risk of contamination while traveling and the present study is the conceptualization of resilience in relation to risk exposure as "a process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, or avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks" (J.-L. Wang et al., 2015, p. 354). Based on this view of resilience as neutralizing the negative effect of risk exposure on mental health through a compensatory mechanism, Yang et al. (2020) emphasized the role of resilience in the case of traumatic COVID-19-related events that affect adolescents. Previous empirical findings of Olsson et al. (2003), confirmed by Yang et al. (2020) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic response, revealed that the psychological resilience of adolescents seemed to play an important role as a protective mechanism during adverse events, enabling them to cope and adapt.

Yang et al. (2020) also proposed a model for resilience in which individuals' psychological assets and resources were considered to play a protective or compensatory role in helping youth be resilient against the harmful effects of adversity. J. Wang et al.'s (2019) theoretical support for the coping appraisal of health risk in a particular travel context also sustains the hypothesis that perceived coping resources are relevant in the travel decision-making process. Elements such as better resources, perceived mastery of successfully bouncing from adverse events, and better coping skills could constitute a robust base for perceiving international travel as less risky, hence maintaining the previous travel behavior. A similar perspective on resilience that stressed the perceived skills was presented earlier by Luthans (2002)—they viewed psychological resiliency as people's coping skills when facing obstacles, negative situations, or just uncertainty.

2.1.2. Perceived Invulnerability

Perceived invulnerability is a construct that has attained considerable consensus among scholars as a salient trait in adolescents. D. Lapsley et al. (2006) showed that perceived invulnerability is associated with positive aspects of adolescent mental health (D. Lapsley et al., 2006) and a predictor for mastery and coping (Hill et al., 2012). In this line of thought, on the one hand, superior medical knowledge, better communication skills in a foreign language, and the optimum physical health of young people could be perceived as personal resources that likely lead to prophylaxis, a less aggressive manifestation of an illness, and the certainty of being able to access necessary healthcare in a foreign country in the case of contamination. On the other hand, the illusion of invulnerability would downplay the probability of SARS-CoV-2 contamination and the severity of the illness.

The empirical data used by J.-L. Wang et al. (2015) emerged from the adolescents of Generation Z—who also are the main target group in our study. Previous empirical findings of Olsson et al. (2003), confirmed by Yang et al. (2020) in the context of the SARS-CoV 2 pandemic response, revealed that the psychological resilience of adolescents seemed to play an important role as a protective mechanism during adverse events in the particular case of adolescents, enabling them to cope and adapt. Without empirical evidence on emerging adults, we consider late adolescents as a proxy, mainly because the adolescents in the studies of the last half of this decade are precisely Gen Zers.

Richardson (2002) summed up the theoretical progress in three stages in his extremely popular theoretical work on resilience and resiliency theory. The primary phase consists of the quest for the identification of resilient qualities (through phenomenological identification of developmental assets and protective factors), and the second wave focuses on the process of acquiring resilience (which "described resiliency as a disruptive and reintegrative process for accessing resilient qualities"). The third wave is "the postmodern and multidisciplinary view of resilience, which is the force that drives a person to grow through adversity and disruptions" (Richardson, 2002, p. 307). Our theoretical framework is grounded in the third wave of his multidisciplinary approach, where we see resilience as the perceived personal history of successfully bouncing from adverse events and functional, rapid, and efficient psycho-emotional reorganization during perceived riskier and challenging periods and events. Such a perceived history of resilience, following the mastery strategy postulate of self-motivation and successful prediction of future performance, could constitute the primary basis for individual travel decision-making processes, which allows Gen Z to make positive predictions regarding their capacity to cope with the risk of COVID-19 contamination during travel and maintain their anterior travel behavior.

2.2. Generation Z Pre-Trip Take on Travel and the Pandemic

In 2020, Generation Z entered full speed into the consumer and marketer preoccupation arena, the labor market, and the travel industry. Some authors even predicted that they would be the most active players in the 2020 tourism market (Monaco, 2018); therefore, research interest followed. Born in the year 1995 and after according to some authors (Chhetri et al., 2014; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019) and from 1996 (Monaco, 2018) or 1997 onwards according to others (Gharzai et al., 2020), Generation Z proved their distinctiveness regarding their approach to learning (Fong et al., 2019; Shatto & Erwin, 2017; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019), working (Gharzai et al., 2020), and travel (Expedia, 2017; Monaco, 2018; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). They are expected to differ from other generations regarding their attitude and behavior relative to the pandemic. This latter hypothesis still needs to be tested. What we know so far is that their different approach is expected because they are highly computer-literate, hyper-connected, and collaborative, with an aptitude for visual and electronic communication and being independent learners, active problem solvers, and advocates for social justice (Monaco, 2018; Gharzai et al., 2020).

In respect to traveling, Expedia 2017 reported that Generation Z relies on advice when choosing a destination, and they look for more activities (...) and "a once in a lifetime experience" (as genuine experiential seekers do) for bucket list experiences and trips with friends (the highest score among all consumer generations). The social valence of their tourism consumption, as well as socialization, shared experience, and conviviality, is confirmed by other studies (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Monaco, 2018). Monaco (2018, p. 11) mentioned their propensity to see tourism as "a social and cultural experience that encourages socialization and identity construction, giving new meaning to their choices as tourists". However, it is precisely this social function of tourism consumption that

was most affected during the pandemic for Gen Z; moreover, they were affected by the measures taken in order to limit the spread of the virus and the safe consumption of tourism services. In terms of insight into the decision-making process, Mignon (2003) emphasized the tendency of Gen Z to make last-minute decisions when searching for opportunities, and they also had a tendency towards word-of-mouth recommendations and the use of low-cost services. In his study on both Millennial and Gen Z travel characteristics in an Italian context, Monaco (2018) revealed that Gen Z does not only rely on reviews and pre-trip informal information, but, contrary to Millennials (who also consult reviews but are less inclined to write reviews), they also play a proactive role. They are responsible for generating online content that influences the online image of destinations and services. Their information "is often considered more reliable than that provided by tour operators or suppliers of goods and services" (Monaco, 2018, p. 10). Also, Generation Z and Millennials decide between two or more destinations when first deciding to take a trip, and they are the most open to destination inspiration (Expedia, 2017). This flexibility in setting their evoked set of destinations during the decision-making process gave them more options in the unusual tourism contexts of the pandemic. In terms of the sources of information, Gen Z relies more on online tools (websites, forums, and blogs) compared to Millennials, who rely on more face-to-face interactions (friends and colleagues) (Monaco, 2018). This means the current online infodemic (Sigala, 2020) can robustly impact Gen Z's perceived travel risk in specific destinations.

During the pandemic, a voluminous body of research was released on the psychological impact of lockdowns on Generation Z, especially students—since they are highly computer-literate and, hence, easy to reach (Fu et al., 2021; Dhar et al., 2021; Husky et al., 2021; Odriozola-González et al., 2020). These studies showed anxiety and depression symptoms in around half of the surveyed subjects. Students were an extremely popular group who were surveyed during the confinement. We have substantial quantitative evidence that anxiety and depression were the main emotional symptoms reported: In China (sample: 89,588, among which 36,865 students), 41.1% reported anxiety symptoms (Fu et al., 2021); in Bangladesh, 44.59% suffered from severe anxiety (sample: 15,543) (Dhar et al., 2021); in France, similar observations were reported (Husky et al., 2021). In another observation, 21% of the 2530 students surveyed in Spain reported moderate to highly severe scores of anxiety, depression, and stress during the first two weeks of confinement, and 50% of them experienced moderate to severe impacts due to the outbreak (Odriozola-González et al., 2020). Moreover, in the general population samples, distress was associated with risk factors like being in a younger age group ($\leq$40 years) and being female (Xiong et al., 2020). However, it seems that high levels of anxiety and stress are a well-known trait of Gen Z—prior to 2020, studies also reported that Generation Z individuals felt profoundly anxious and distrustful (Hertz, 2016).

However, since the pandemic started, considerably fewer studies focused on the behavior and perceptions of Generation Z. Among these studies were Deckman et al. (2020), who measured attitudes about the impact of COVID-19 on personal health, financial and job concerns, and voting intentions. Gharzai et al. (2020) found several explanations for the limited behavioral changes observed in Millennials and Gen Z: "the lack of a centralized response, dismissal of early concerns" (Gharzai et al., 2020, p. 2). Before 2020, studies also reported that Generation Z felt profoundly anxious and distrustful (Hertz, 2016). Pinhey and Iverson (1994) found that Japanese tourists aged 25–36 with higher financial wealth were less likely to feel unsafe.

Apart from the relative scarcity of studies taking into consideration personal psychological factors in health risk perception and the travel decision-making process, even fewer provide underpinning empiric data to support the theoretical model (Chien et al., 2017;

J. Wang et al., 2019; Kock et al., 2020). As far as we know, tourism research studies do not consider personal psychological factors, such as tourists' psychological resilience or invulnerability perception, which became relevant in the context of the new pandemic (Table 1). Studies on previous pandemics urged for new determinants and a new approach: "While the pandemic will reshuffle taken-for-granted determinants of tourism as we know it, a crucial shift is likely to occur in tourists' psyche (. . .) some tourists' psyches will likely settle on a new equilibrium. While the full impact on the tourist psyche cannot reliably be at this point, its eventual implications for tourism may be of seismic proportions". (Kock et al., 2020, non-paginated).

Empirical data regarding changes in perceptions and travel behavior in Generation Z also seem to be absent, although it is largely accepted in the tourism literature that Gen Z has salient particularities (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Robinson & Schänzel, 2019; Monaco, 2018; Gharzai et al., 2020). This is another issue that this present study aims to address. Based on the previous theoretical underpinnings of D. Lapsley et al. (2006), Hill et al. (2012), and J.-L. Wang et al. (2015), we selected psychological resilience and perceived invulnerability as relevant individual psychological characteristics of the travel decision-making process. We retain psychological resilience as a relevant perceived personal resource, and we view coping mechanisms and perceived invulnerability as moderators for downplaying the perceived risk of contamination and the severe manifestation of COVID-19.

3. Materials and Methods

The present exploratory study is part of more complex research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mobility, travel behavior, and residential status in Cluj-Napoca, the second-largest higher education center in Romania. For the travel section of the survey, we used closed-type and 7-point Likert-scale items, and we used filtering and the tailored path available in the Question Pro Research Platform.

3.1. Sample

We used a convenience sample of 263 students enrolled in different universities in Cluj Napoca, obtained out of 534 questionnaires completed in the Question Pro Research Platform (ID 7430023); this was used in order to examine the targeted population in the period between the beginning of July and the end of August 2020 (1085 people viewed the survey according to the final QP Report). The Question Pro Platform reported a 60.16% dropout rate relative to an average time to complete the survey of 7 min. After eliminating the questionnaires with a sequence no. of > 1 from the automatically generated database, we obtained 379 results. After a second and a third round of robustness examination (different IDs but same demographics and missing data), we obtained 263 valid questionnaires.

3.2. Instrument and Variables

We assessed the structure of domestic/outbound travel; outbound flights; domestic tourism history of travel; outbound tourism history; frequency of tourism-related travel; type of previous tourism trips; previous planning behavior; and use of travel agents vs. self-booking relative to accommodation arrangements and flights, etc. We kept the same variables for the projection of travel and tourism behavior in the future. We also used the same length of time (12 months) for the quantitative assessment of previous travel behavior (the year 2019) and future travel behavior, asking subjects to estimate, based on what information they had about the pandemic at the moment of the survey (see Figure 1 for a pandemic timeline of the research context), their future number of trips and predicted travel behavior from July 2020 to June 2021. We also measured personal factors like psychological resilience and invulnerability perception. Due to the non-clinical nature of the study, we

used three global items from the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008): *I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times, I have a hard time making it through stressful events* (reversed scored), and *I usually come through unexpected difficult times with little trouble*. We chose Smith et al.'s (2008) scale, particularly for its proposed intent to assess the ability to bounce back or recover from stress (Smith et al., 2008), which we consider relevant for the perception of risk and coping resources during travel. Smith et al.'s (2008) study, which proposed a brief version of the resilience-scale (BRS) instrument, showed that the instrument was reliable and could be used to measure unitary constructs, which, considering the previously mentioned meta-construct conceptualizations, is relevant to the present study.

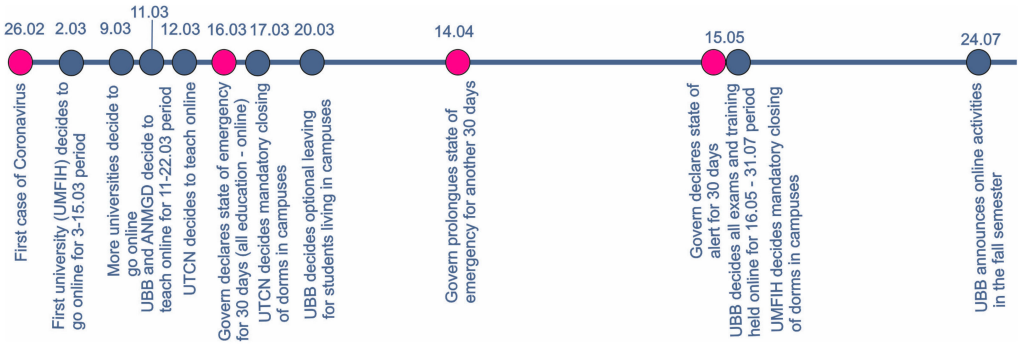


Figure 1. A timeline of the national and local relevant restrictive measures of academic life from February to July 2020 for the Cluj-Napoca University Center (Romania).

We considered the conceptualization of resilience and the instrument proposed by Smith et al. (2008) as relevant to the present study for carrying out measurements based on a three-fold argumentation. First, we consider resilience as relevant to the perception of risk and coping resources during travel due to its unitary process-oriented definition ("resilience as the ability to bounce back or recover from stress"). Second, the fact that Smith et al.'s instrument was conceived to provide unique and important information about people's ability to cope with health-related stressors (Smith et al., 2008, p. 194) makes it applicable to our study. The third and most important point is the instrument's positive correlation with social relations—the social valence of tourism of Generation Z is highly regarded—and negative correlation with the adverse effects (anxiety and depression) reported in Generation Z both during COVID-19 and also previously (Hertz, 2016; Fong et al., 2019). In the context of perceived health-related risks, we assume that the instrument will discriminate between the subsamples of those who are prone to maintaining their prior travel behavior and those who are not.

We used a similar selection of 3 relevant global items from the Adolescent Invulnerability Scale (Duggan et al., 2000 with structure and factors' modifications by D. K. Lapsley & Duggan, 2001): *Nothing can harm me* (from the subscale *General Invulnerability*), *safety rules do not apply to me*, and *taking safety precautions is far more important to other people than it is to me* (from *Danger Invulnerability*). Later studies proved that these registered a higher loading index on the above-mentioned subscales (D. K. Lapsley & Duggan, 2001), which we consider relevant for the type of danger tourists face when traveling during a pandemic. As students transition from their adolescent developmental phase and enter the adult-emergent phase, they do not necessarily move beyond this developmental threshold in respect to perceived invulnerability. Their invulnerability perception trait is reported mainly as a common characteristic of the adolescence phase. Moreover, according to our knowledge, there is no other psychological construct pertaining to the self-perception of physical invulnerability for the emergent adulthood phase, so we considered adolescent invulnerability perception as a proxy for the invulnerability perception of students at the bachelor's level.

Apart from the quantitative assessment of perception dynamics regarding various aspects of travel and tourism consumption, we ran an inter-group comparative analysis for the average value of the variables between various groups with homogeneous perceptions and travel behaviors. When we found inter-group differences between the mean value of the psychological variables, we tested for the significance of the difference using Student's *t* test.

4. Results and Discussion

Initially, we assessed essential aspects of students' travel behavior for 12 months (the year 2019) as a baseline for the pre-pandemic behavior. This baseline was compared with predicted travel behavior and tourism consumption after the first wave of the pandemic (July 2020–July 2021). Comparing past behavior with predicted behavior, we found a high degree of inconsistency (Figures 2 and 3). Expecting that the COVID-19 pandemic would be responsible for the lack of consistency in tourists' travel behavior and consumption seems like an understatement. Most studies in 2020 expected a negative dynamic in various tourism sectors (Kock et al., 2020; Suau-Sanchez et al., 2020; Iacus et al., 2020). Our sample showed that the pandemic changed attitudes regarding travel and prospective tourism consumption for many respondents in both directions and not just in negative dynamics—it simply changed students' perspectives on traveling. In general, 23% of students who did not travel in 2019 planned to travel abroad the following year regardless of the pandemic's restrictions (prospective new outbound tourists). Among the students who traveled abroad one or two times in 2019, 41% decided to renounce traveling in the next year (a radical negative inconsistency). The same decision applied to students traveling 3 to 5 trips in 2019, where 57% said that they would not travel in 2020–2021 (Figure 2).

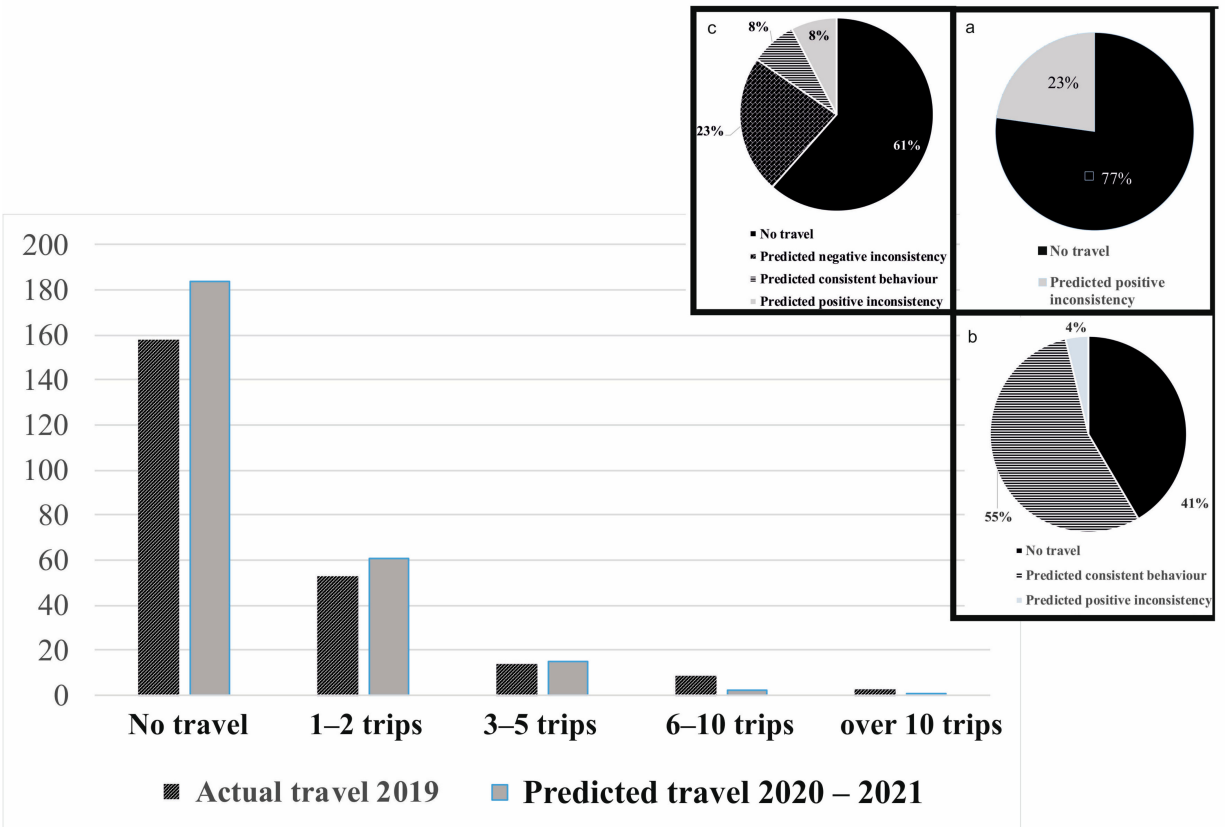


Figure 2. The dynamics of students' attitudes concerning outbound travel between the year 2019 and the period June 2020–June 2021: (**a**) structure of the predicted attitude of students not traveling in 2019; (**b**) structure of the predicted attitude of students taking 1–2 international trips in 2019; (**c**) structure of the predicted attitude of students taking 3–5 international trips in 2019.

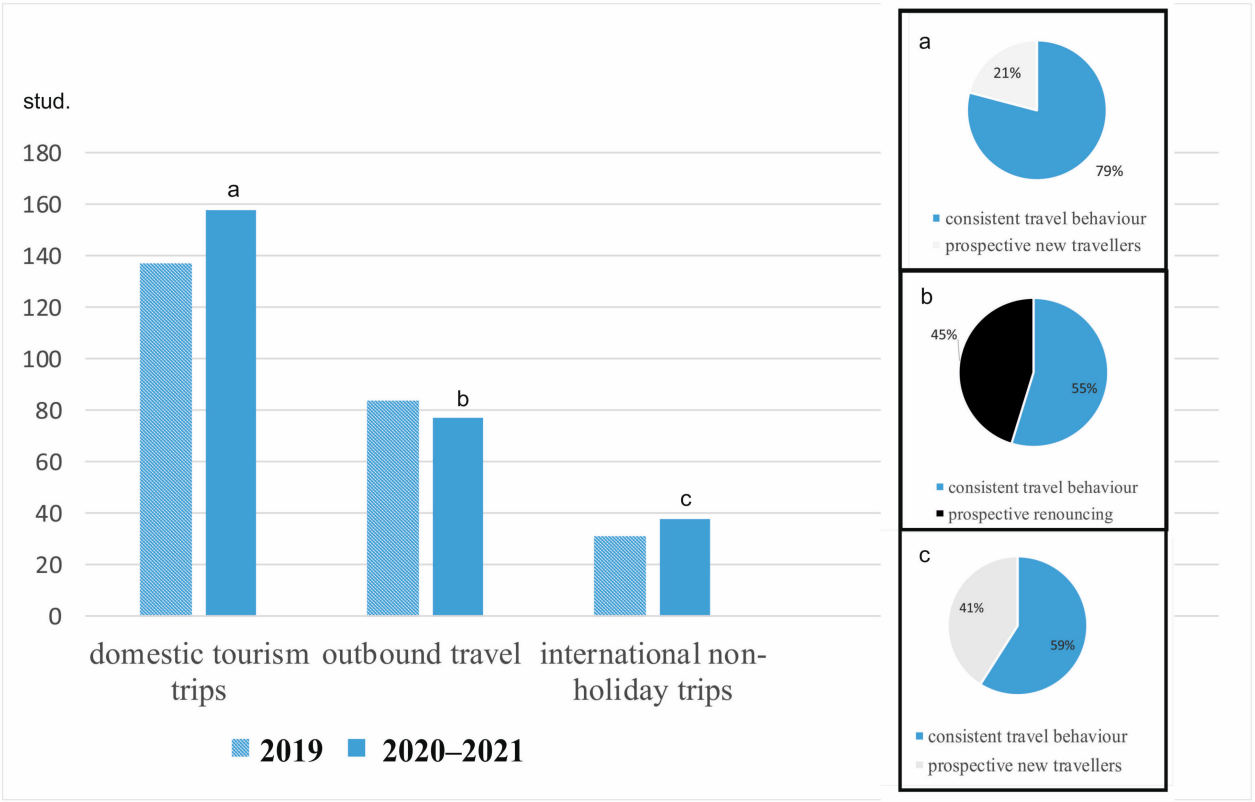


Figure 3. The change in attitude towards domestic tourism, outbound tourism, and non-tourism-related international travel of students between the year 2019 and June 2020–June 2021: (**a**) structure of prospective domestic travelers; (**b**) structure of prospective outbound travelers; (**c**) structure of students planning to travel internationally for non-holiday purposes.

The results revealed that the consistency in overall travel behavior was more prominent in the case of students who had fewer trips abroad (1–2 trips/year) than the ones traveling more frequently; as expected, this was also the case for students who did not travel abroad in 2019 (77%).

While the inconsistency in those renouncing travel could be explained by the uncommon situation created by the pandemic, the inconsistency of those who declared that they increased the number of planned trips is surprising. This output is characteristic of the group of students traveling for tourism purposes, as well as for the group of students traveling for non-tourism-related purposes. Almost 50% of the students predicting that they would travel abroad for non-tourism-related purposes in the following year were students who had not traveled abroad for non-tourism-related purposes in 2019 (Figure 3).

In order to find if the difference in means between groups could be considered significant, we ran a *t*-test for independent groups, and the differences proved significant at the 0.01 threshold of probability with respect to the difference in means in the case of PR but not for IP. The difference of 1.84 (out of a 7-point scale) of the mean PR, in favor of students from the PIT subsample, reflects that students who planned to travel more in the year following the pandemic register a higher PR score, and the difference in score could not be determined by chance but by a distinctive difference in the mean PR value. In the IP case, however, we could not reject H0 (the difference can still be obtained by chance). Along with using a shorter version of the instrument, another possible explanation for the less significant difference in mean IP values between the subgroups could be the lesser relevance of invulnerability perception as a personal factor once individuals transition from adolescence to adulthood.

The same difference emerged in the average value of the psychological factor scores between the subsample of students who did not travel in 2019 and those who consistently did not intend to travel in the following year (consistent non-travel—CNT and PIT (Table 2)).

Table 2. Descriptive statistical indices for Levene's test between consistent travelling, inconsistent travelling, and non-travelling subsamples.

Variables	Group	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Er. Mean	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		*t*-Test for Equality of Means		
							t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
IP	CTNA	2.9524	1.75526	0.38303	0.929	0.339	−0.777	65	0.440
IP	CTA	3.2826	1.54755	0.22817					
PR	CTNA	3.4827	1.53365	0.13717	0.758	0.385	−2.776	73.642	
PR	CTA	4.2754	1.69866	0.25045					
PR	NIC	3.0296	1.54695	0.23061					
PR	PIT	4.8780	1.39991	0.21863	0.017	0.896	−5.817	83.99	0.000
IP	NIC	2.8000	1.22968	0.18331	0.941	0.335	−1.067	75.877	0.290
IP	PIT	3.1111	1.41697	0.22690					
PR	CNT	3.1429	1.46124	0.27615	0.453	0.503	−7.924	79.732	0.000
PR	PIT	4.8780	1.39991	0.21863					
IP	CNT	2.4878	1.26293	0.19724	2.775	0.101	−1.005	39.442	0.007
IP	PIT	2.8746	1.61820	0.33031					
PR	CDTB	3.4827	1.53365	0.13717	0.758	0.385	−2.776	73.642	0.007
PR	CATB	4.2754	1.69866	0.25045					

The PIT group registered, once more, higher average values in PR and IP compared to CNT students. However, the *t*-test for independent groups and the differences proved to be significant at the 0.01 threshold of probability for the difference in means in the case of PR but not for IP.

We looked for differences in psychological variables, like the invulnerability perception (IP) and psychological resilience (PR) of the subjects, between the subgroups of students consistently traveling in Romania and those traveling abroad. Comparing the means of the subgroup of students presenting a consistent attitude towards traveling domestically (CDTB is represented by students who traveled in 2019 in Romania and those who planned to travel in the following year in Romania) to the subsample of students presenting a consistent attitude towards traveling abroad (CATB is represented by students who traveled abroad in 2019 and who planned to travel abroad in the following year), we noticed a significant difference in the level of psychological resilience for the second group (Table 2). In order to determine if the difference in means between the groups could be considered significant, we ran a *t*-test for independent groups, and the differences proved to be significant at the 0.01 threshold of probability for the difference in means in the case of PR. The difference of 0.79 (out of a 7 points scale) in the PR group's means, which was in favor of CATB, reflects the fact that students who planned to maintain their behavior of traveling abroad in the following year during the pandemic registered a higher PR score, and the difference in the score could not be determined by chance but by a distinctive difference in PR value.

Besides the overall change in travel behavior before and during the pandemic, one of the main research problems we were interested in was the presence of consistency in the behaviors of traveling and booking tourism services. At first glance, the travel behavior and tourism consumption of the surveyed students were changing in an expected way during the pandemic. First, the number of planned trips decreased. Of the students spending holidays (longer than 4 days) abroad, only 44.7% planned to continue their holiday travel behavior for the following year. Another behavioral change was observed with respect to the length of stay when abroad—a stated preference for shorter visits abroad in the prospective 12 months was more noticeable than in 2019 (Figure 4). The total amount of holidays (longer than 4 days) predicted for the following year decreased by 28.3%, and the number of students declaring that they intend to take weekend breaks abroad slightly increased (but not enough to account for the total decrease in the prospective and more extended vacation dynamics). However, when comparing past behavior to future/predicted behavior between the subgroups, we found a high degree of inconsistency (Figures 2–4) in travel behavior and tourism consumption. In this respect, we noticed one interesting effect of the pandemic on the prospect of outbound travel behavior: It significantly changed attitudes towards traveling for many respondents in both directions: negative and positive. This was observed not only in the negative dynamics—it simply changed students' perspectives on traveling. The analysis returned the same kind of inconsistency for other subgroups as well. Although the volume of students planning to travel by plane in 2020–2021 seemed unchanged compared to those who traveled in 2019 (Figure 4), almost 50% were students who did not travel by plane in 2019 (prospective new travelers).

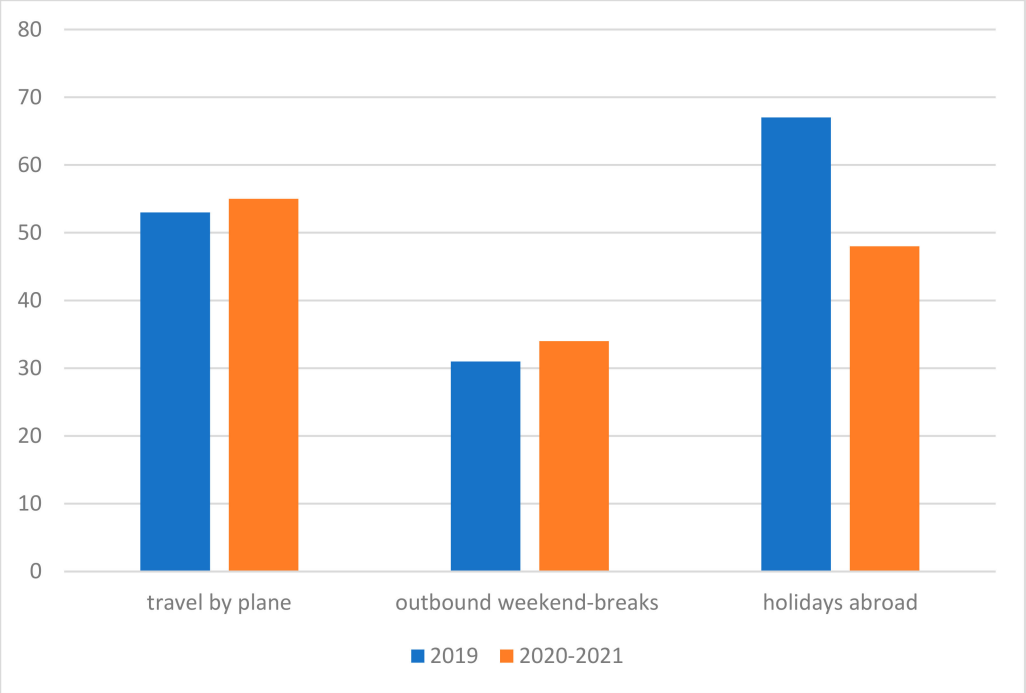


Figure 4. The predicted change in travel behavior and tourism consumption type between the year 2019 and June 2020–June 2021.

In the same way, although the total number of students who spent weekends abroad in 2019 and planned to do so again the following year seemed to be slightly unchanged (Figure 4), half of those who planned such trips did not actually travel abroad in 2019 (prospective new tourists). The same holds for spending holidays abroad. Of the students

spending holidays (longer than 4 days) abroad in 2019, only 44.7% planned to do the same in the following 12 months.

Besides the overall change in travel behavior before and during the pandemic, one of the main research problems we were interested in was the presence of consistency in the behavior of traveling and booking tourism services. At first glance, the travel behavior and tourism consumption of surveyed students changed in an expected way during the pandemic. First, the number of planned trips decreased. Of the students spending holidays (longer than 4 days) abroad, only 44.7% planned to travel the next year. Another behavioral change was related to the length of stays—the stated preference for shorter visits abroad in the prospective 12 months was noticeable compared to 2019 (Figure 4). The total amount of holidays (longer than 4 days) predicted for the following year decreased by 28.3%, and the number of students declaring that they intend to take weekend breaks abroad slightly increased (but not enough to account for the total decrease in the prospective longer vacation dynamics). However, when comparing past behavior with future/predicted behavior between the subgroups, we found a high degree of inconsistency (Figures 2–4) in both travel behavior and tourism consumption. In this respect, we noticed one interesting effect of the pandemic on the prospect of outbound travel behavior: It greatly changed the attitude towards travelling for a large number of respondents in both negative and positive directions, and not just in the negative dynamics—it simply changed students' perspectives on travelling. The analysis returned the same kind of inconsistency for other subgroups as well. Although the volume of students planning to travel by plane in 2020–2021 seemed to be unchanged, compared to those who travelled in 2019 (Figure 4), almost 50% were students who did not travel by plane in 2019 (prospective new travelers). In the same way, although the total number of students who spent weekends abroad in 2019 and planned to do so again in the following year seemed to be slightly unchanged (Figure 4), half of those who planned such trips did not actually travel abroad in 2019 (prospective new tourists). The same holds true for spending holidays abroad. Of the students spending holidays (longer than 4 days) abroad in 2019, only 44.7% planned to travel abroad again in the following 12 months.

Two-thirds of the students who traveled abroad for non-tourism-related purposes will maintain their behavior in the future year.

In light of these findings, although previous experience with travel and tourism services, in general, might be a general underlying factor explaining or sustaining an attitude towards traveling, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, previous experiences with travel or tourism services were not salient factors for explaining preferences for traveling in the future. The role of previous experience with a specific travel service in the case of the perceived risk of COVID-19 contamination is different from previous experiences with a destination in the case of terrorism risk, where previous experiences were a predictor of consistency (e.g., not avoiding certain areas perceived as affected) (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

Analyzing the independent subsamples of students consistent in their non-traveling-abroad attitude (and behavior in 2019 and prospect for 2020–2021) (CNTA) and the ones consistent in their travel abroad attitude (CTA), we noticed a difference in means in favor of IP and PR for the group that is consistent in their attitude to travel abroad (Table 2). The students who traveled abroad in 2019 and who planned to travel the following year registered a higher mean in invulnerability perception and psychological resilience. However, the *t*-test for independent groups revealed that the differences were not significant at the 0.05 threshold of probability (Table 2).

Our results also showed that students who continue to self-book their transportation have greater psychological resilience and an illusion of invulnerability than students who

renounced self-booking and used travel agencies for their travel arrangements. The tests showed that in the case of psychological resilience, there is also a significant chance that this particular trait could explain the difference in attitudes. Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) proposed a hypothesis stating that tourists who are more inclined to take riskier holidays are the least inclined to use travel agents for pre-travel arrangements because they are confident in their risk-handling behavior when using travel information sources. However, the authors collected no data on the psychological traits of those tourists. Our study empirically supports Roehl and Fesenmaier's (1992) hypothesis.

Moreover, our results, in general, are consistent with J. Wang et al.'s (2019) and Luthans's (2002) perspective in that coping appraisal relative to health risks in a travel context and the perceived resources of coping are relevant in travel decision-making. The more self-resilient and better equipped tourists perceive themselves to be with respect to coping mechanisms, the more inclined they will be to travel more, or they will be more inclined to maintain previous travel behavior prior to the pandemic. Better coping skills and psychological resilience as a result of successfully bouncing back from previous adverse events could constitute a robust basis for perceiving international travel as less risky during pandemics, hence maintaining or increasing prior travel behavior. Empirical data in the present study regarding the students' projected amount of traveling were collected in July–August 2020, before any news of the successful release of COVID-19 vaccines was announced. Therefore, we have reasons to firmly believe that the optimistic projection of their travel behavior was entirely the result of their own take on traveling during pandemics and not on the likelihood of an accessible vaccine.

Set in a tourism context, the present study also supports the model that states that the assets and resources of individuals could indeed play a protective role in helping youth be resilient against the adverse effects of adversity (J.-L. Wang et al., 2015). It also sustains the authors' particular model of psychological resilience, which consists of overcoming the adverse effects of risk exposure.

No matter which generation, the students, relative to a specific ratio, saw and seized opportunities with respect to every challenge. In 2020, some tourism services became pricier due to the pandemic (implementing social distancing resulted in a decrease in clients compared to before, and the cost of safety measures should be absorbed). However, there is no doubt that some destinations that depend heavily on tourism for subsistence lowered their prices to attract tourists. Many students perceived this as a big opportunity. Moreover, apart from their systematic illusion of invulnerability and the contextual view that they had better immune resiliency to the virus than any other generation, in the case of Gen Z, there has always been a different perspective with respect to discovering the world. Where other generations of tourists saw danger (resulting in an abrupt decrease in demand), the younger generations saw opportunity and excitement (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). This might be perceived as a big opportunity by many students. Apart from the generally different take on life, in the particular case of Gen Z, we might recall the fact that for them, traveling extensively for knowledge and not just for experiences (Robinson & Schänzel, 2019; Haddouche & Salomone, 2018; Shatto & Erwin, 2017) is a unique signature. They view tourism as a valuable tool for constructing their identities (Larsen & Urry, 2006; Monaco, 2018) and seeking empowerment (Haddouche & Salomone, 2018). This is why we think that it will probably take more than a pandemic to stop 300 million Gen Zers from traveling (UNWTO, 2010) or to block such essential drivers of tourism.

These results provide empirical evidence, along with an assessment of psychological traits, to support Roehl and Fesenmaier's (1992) hypothesis, supporting the idea that tourists who are more inclined towards riskier holidays are the least inclined to use travel agents for pre-travel arrangements because they are confident in their risk-handling be-

havior. Moreover, our results, in general, are consistent with J. Wang et al.'s (2019) and Luthans's (2002) perspective that coping appraisal relative to health risks in a travel context and perceived coping resources are relevant in travel decision-making. The more self-resilient and better equipped tourists perceive themselves to be with respect to coping mechanisms, the more inclined they are to travel or maintain previous travel behavior during a pandemic. Better coping skills and psychological resilience, operationalized as previous mastery of successfully bouncing back from adverse events, could constitute a robust basis for perceiving international travel as less risky during pandemics, hence maintaining or increasing prior travel behavior. Empirical data in the present study regarding students' projected traveling were collected in July–August 2020 before any news of the successful release of COVID-19 vaccines was announced. Therefore, we have reasons to believe that the optimistic projection of their travel behavior was entirely a result of their take on traveling during pandemics, and not of the likelihood of an accessible vaccine.

Reversely, at the other end of the continuum, students with lower scores of psychological resilience declared that they would travel less than before or not at all during the pandemic. Because international travel involves face-to-face contact with many people, some destinations will be considered safer than others if they are in countries with lower contamination rates. This output of risk assessment in pandemics is consistent with Sönmez and Graefe's (1998) findings regarding terrorist risks. They showed that past international travel experience and perceived risks and safety were significant predictors of the intention to travel to or avoid specific destinations. However, in the context of the pandemic, our study did not confirm their idea that experience will increase the likelihood of traveling in certain areas rather than avoiding certain risky areas, as is the case with terrorism. This could be simply because terrorist risks are mainly localized, and the COVID-19 risk is perceived as being widespread.

5. Conclusions

Although there is no question about the fact that, in the first phase, the pandemic might wreak havoc on the tourism industry all over the globe, our study supports the hypothesis that Gen Z students could have a different take on traveling during a pandemic. Our findings lead to further exploration of the idea that for Gen Z, there will not be a significant change in the volume of tourism trips, but there will be changes in their structure and approach. Consistency in travel behavior was more prominent in the case of students who had fewer trips abroad (1–2 trips/year) and students who did not travel in the previous year. Twenty-three percent of students who did not travel in 2019 planned to travel in the following year (both traveling for tourism and non-tourism purposes). Moreover, 41% of students who travelled in the previous year decided to renounce traveling in the next year (57% of the students traveling 3 to 5 trips in 2019 said that they would not travel).

We found that students with more outstanding psychological resilience and invulnerability perception scores, two psychological traits comprising personal coping resources, planned to travel more extensively during the pandemic than in 2019. However, while the psychological resilience tests proved to be statistically significant, in the case of invulnerability perception, the tests showed that the difference in the means between subsamples could still be a result of chance. The results also showed that students who continue to self-book their transportation have greater psychological resilience and the illusion of invulnerability than students who renounced self-booking and used travel agencies for their travel arrangements. The tests showed that in the case of psychological resilience, there is also a significant chance that this particular trait could explain differences in attitudes. Future studies should explore the motivation behind the change in attitude among students who did not travel in 2019 but planned to do so in the following year.

This is the first exploratory research study examining the role of psychological resilience and perceived invulnerability in assessing the perceived risk related to travel and tourism behaviors among Generation Z. The present study has several limitations, including the use of a convenience sample of students enrolled in Cluj-Napoca. Future studies should consider replicating the assessment of psychological resilience and perceived invulnerability across different generations of consumers and exploring different types of risks, such as those associated with war-affected destinations like Ukraine, Syria, etc.

Although not reaching statistical significance in this study, the concept of perceived invulnerability requires further investigation within tourism contexts, particularly in relation to risk assessment and decision-making. More testing is needed to provide a definitive answer regarding its role. Additionally, refining the age range of participants could improve the results. Since perceived invulnerability is a characteristic present during adolescence, studying it in emerging adults by focusing on Bachelor's degree students could increase its relevance in decision-making.

Business owners from tourism destinations perceived as problematic in terms of travel risks, especially those involved in special interest tourism, could benefit from targeting not only customers with higher sensation-seeking levels but also Generation Z customers with higher psychological resilience and perceived invulnerability. Fortunately, the presence of influencers and digital ambassadors in sensation-seeking tourism makes finding the right marketing channels to communicate with these customers much easier today.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are openly available in researcher personal drive at https://drive.google.com/drive/home, last accessed on 2 January 2025.

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