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Contactless habits in the all-new tourism due to COVID-19: A rapid assessment of the views of Russians and Uzbeks

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Abstract

The aim of this pilot study is to develop academic work regarding the future behavior of tourists during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to determine the impact of technology and the wilderness on safe contactless travel. A total of 162 respondents from Russia and Uzbekistan were selected and analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 23 at the end of 2020. Descriptive statistical indicators were calculated, and correlations between participants' characteristics and their openness to new experiences in the tourism industry were analyzed. The findings suggest that tourists consciously prefer contactless interaction, and this behavior pattern is becoming a new social norm, which is likely to persist even when normalcy returns. The pandemic has caused major changes in the perception and use of technology, as well as in the intention of tourists to travel to the wilderness.

Keywords

Tourists' behavior, Contactless travel, Technology, Wilderness, Social distancing, COVID-19

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak is the biggest challenge for the tourism and hospitality sector for 2020 and in the near future. Travel restrictions have been widely imposed in response to the coronavirus worldwide and COVID-19 has become a significant incentive for people to change their travel behavior (Brooks et al., 2020; Galvani et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Ivanova et al., 2020). One of the results of these changes is that people are now strongly trying to avoid interacting with others and going to non-essential travel because of the threat of infection and health risk perceptions (Gössling et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020; Rahimizhian & Irani, 2020).

Earlier, in many cases, different characteristics served as a tool for attracting tourists to a particular destination (Alieva, 2018), now the situation has changed dramatically. One of the ideas that is in spotlight currently due to the pandemic is contactless travel. The travel industry has begun to offer customers a variety of innovative digital solutions that help to maintain social distance with room service and cleaning robots, food/parcel delivery robots, autonomous vehicles, delivery drones, and other robots while traveling (Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2020). On the other hand, the usage of other ICT tools in tourism to ensure convenience and safety is increasing (De La Harpe & Sevenhuysen, 2020; Dragović et al., 2018; Gudkov & Dedkova, 2020). Furthermore, traveling in the wild has become more popular as it helps tourists to maintain a social distance. During lockdowns, humans are flocking to green spaces around the world (Rutz et al., 2020) as intact nature provides such essential elements as air, water, and food and serves as a "natural vaccine" (Paxton, 2020).

This research seeks to build upon academic work regarding the future of tourists' behavior during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to identify the impact of technology and the wilderness on safe contactless travel.

Methodology

The data was collected by the application of an online questionnaire distributed to two groups of people. The first one included respondents from Russia, and the second from Uzbekistan. The questionnaire included two sets of questions: one regarding demographic characteristics of participants, and the other one measuring their perceptions on safety, readiness to travel to mass tourism places, openness to explore new wild destinations, and their interest and evaluations of the application of AI in the tourism industry. The questionnaires were designed in Russian, and then translated into English and Uzbek, in addition, their correspondence to the Russian version was checked.

The data collected was analyzed with the IBM SPSS Statistics 23. The researchers calculated the descriptive statistical measures, analyzed correlations between

participants' characteristics and their openness to new experiences in the tourism industry, and conducted a comparative analysis between respondents from Russia and Uzbekistan.

Results

Out of 162 participants who took part in the survey 39.5% (or 64 people) are currently living in Uzbekistan and 60.5% (98 people) are living in Russia. The majority of our respondents are women (85.2%), and more than half of them (55.6%) are 18-25 years old.

Apart from profiling participants based on their demographic characteristics, we also measured their travel preferences. In particular, we determined that 63.0% of them prefer to travel with family, 24.7% - with friends and only 12.3% alone. Self-management and self-organization of the trip are preferred by 61.7% of participants. According to the information provided, cultural tourism is one of the types selected by the majority of participants (55.6%) as the most practiced one. However, ecotourism or community-based tourism (CBT) that are related with the topic of the present research were chosen by 37.0% and 6.2% respectively.

After analyzing the data collected, we determined the following (Figure 1).

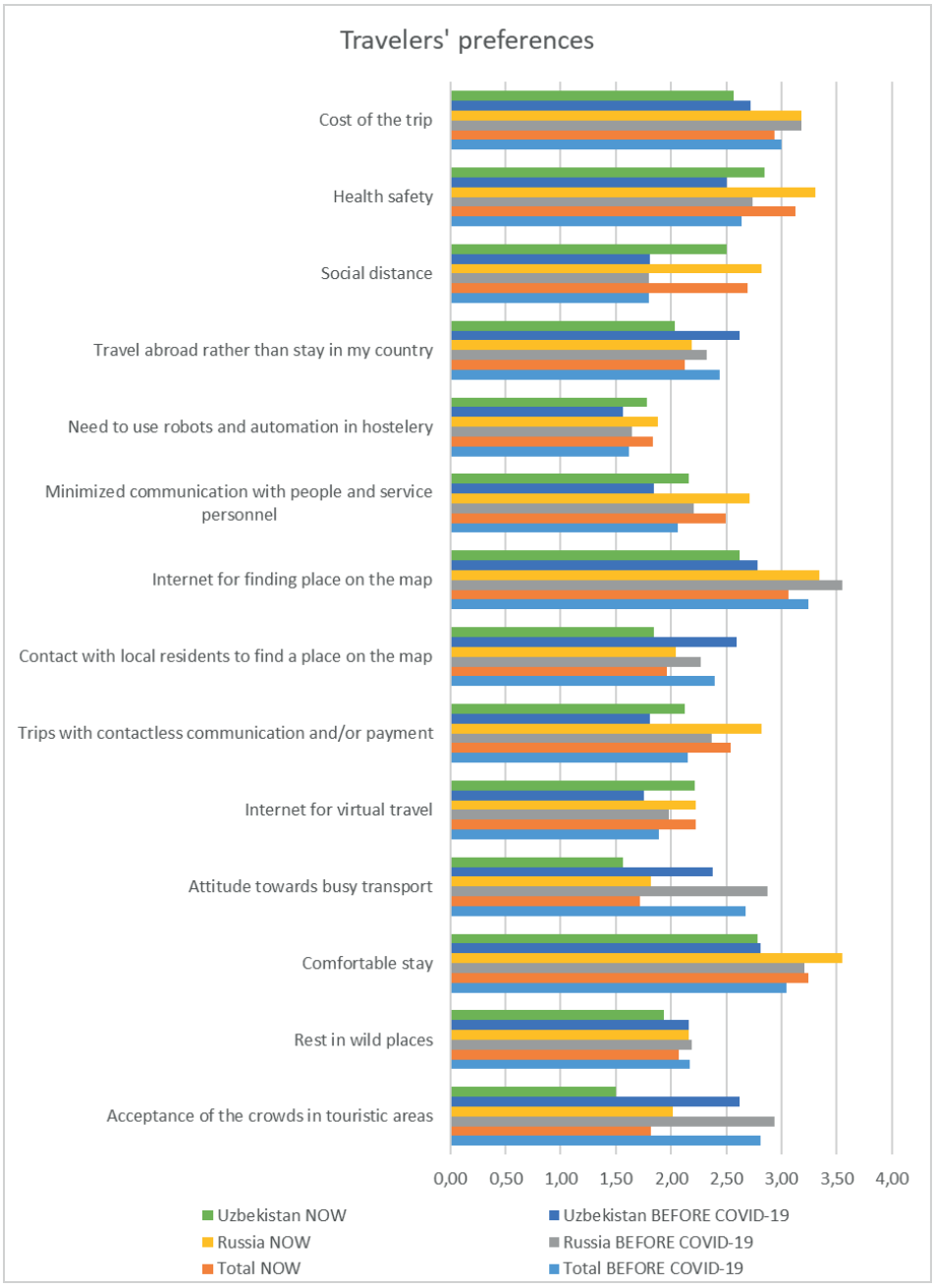

Figure 1. Travelers' preferences on scale from 1 to 4 before COVID-19 outbreak and now

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, people did not use the Internet for virtual travelling, preferring physical trips. However, now the index of this item increased from M=1.89 (SD=1.33) to M=2.22 (SD=1.47), showing an increasing interest of

people towards virtual tours. The other change noticed in terms of people's priorities during the trip is related with the increasing importance of health safety characteristics of the trip in comparison with prioritizing travel costs. If prior to pandemic travelers paid more attention to costs of the trip, now the focus has switched to health safety: M=3.00 (SD=1.14) and M=2.64 (SD=1.11) respectively before COVID-19, and M=2.94 (SD=1.34) and M=3.12 (SD=0.26) now.

The comparison between data collected in Uzbekistan and in Russia shows that the pandemic caused changes in perception and the usage of technology. The willingness to use more contactless payments while travelling increased in the case of Uzbekistan for 0.92, while Russia showed 0.45 points positive change. The usage of robots in tourism is also more welcomed by residents of both countries after the pandemic with 0.22 points increase in Uzbekistan and 0.12 in Russia.

The perceptions of the crowd is also changing due to the pandemic. Respondents from Russia reported an increase of 0.92 in non-willingness to have a crowd around, and those from Uzbekistan are also showing a need to be more isolated from people while travelling, scoring 0.82 higher in that item in comparison with the pre-pandemic situation.

A strong correlation was found between the preferred way of travelling and the desire to opt for "wild" tourism. Tourists choosing CBT and ecotourism scored higher in intention to go to wild places far from crowds both before pandemic and now (M=2.34, SD=1.13; M=3.01, SD=1.30). However, one group of travelers also became interested in this type of tourism in the current moment – those who choose beach tourism showed an increase in these items to M=3.42, SD=1.29.

There is no evidence that any other factor measured in the current study influences tourists' perception of "wild" tourism or usage of AI in touristic sphere.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has already transformed the global tourism industry from "over-tourism" to "no tourism" (Koh, 2020). Tourist behavior patterns are also being transformed after the COVID-19 outbreak (Li et al., 2020).

The present study clearly identified that travel safety for health is becoming an absolute priority now (Ivanova et al., 2020). Taking into consideration the limitations of the study related with the limited number of participants we could not expand the results obtained to the whole population of both countries. However, we were able to determine several trends in tourists' behavior and their preferences. Of course, there is a chance that the pattern changes as time passes, however in the near future we cannot see any potential decline in travel safety prioritizing. Tourists consciously

prefer contactless interaction, and this behavior model is becoming a new social norm. Changes in the physical world only come through changes in the human mind and consciousness (Galvani et al., 2020). These changes are leading people to prioritize the use of technology and artificial intelligence in tourism (Rahimizhian & Irani, 2020). In cases when they are not available, travelers opt for the wilderness to maintain social distance. Our findings will help to deepen knowledge about the transformation of tourists' behavior because of COVID-19 and can become a base for consequent studies in the field.

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