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**THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON THE EVOLUTION OF MARKETING
STRATEGIES OF TOURISM INTERMEDIARIES**

SUMMARY

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2. CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Today's tourism is profoundly influenced by technological progress and digitalisation, which has led to several significant transformations in the industry. One of the fundamental aspects of this metamorphosis is the phenomenon of disintermediation, which has reshaped the way tourists access and purchase tourism services. The rise of internet and mobile technology has created new opportunities for tourists to search, compare and book tourism services directly from the suppliers. Mobile apps, online booking platforms and search engines have become key tools in the travel process, giving tourists quick and easy access to relevant information, options, and reviews.

In this context, the role of intermediaries in tourism may seem redundant, especially the role of traditional travel agencies, which used to promote and sell their tourism services through direct sales, often conducted in face-to-face meetings with consumers. The position of these intermediaries in the distribution channel has been, and continues to be, doubted by many. However, travel agencies have demonstrated remarkable resilience over time in the face of challenges that have emerged, including competition from online travel agencies and various travel booking platforms. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has left its mark on their operations, forcing them to adapt and find innovative solutions to maintain their businesses in a fully digital world, where consumers are constantly connected to the internet and mobile technologies.

Concerned about the resilience of travel agencies in Romania in the face of digitally savvy consumers of tourism services, the author sought to identify, through this study, the current state of their digitalization and the obstacles encountered in this process. This topic became more challenging in the context of changing tourist behaviour as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and, especially, with the emergence of a new generation of tourists, the digital natives, who have totally different characteristics from other existing generations.

Therefore, in the light of these motivations, the doctoral thesis focused on researching two key aspects: tourism consumption trends in the digital era and the current degree of digitization of the main tourism intermediaries in Romania, namely travel agencies. The aim of this research was to develop and substantiate marketing strategies that would strengthen the position of travel agencies in the online environment and, at the same time, respond to the demands and preferences of tourism consumers in the digital age.

3. TOPIC OF THE THESIS AND ITS FIELD OF STUDY

The doctoral thesis falls into the fundamental field of Social Sciences, specifically the branch of Economics, in the field of Marketing. The theme of the thesis is the analysis and investigation of the influence of technology on the change and development of marketing strategies used by the main intermediaries in tourism, namely travel agencies in Romania.

In the digital era, the development of digital capabilities among intermediaries in the tourism industry is essential to remain competitive and to offer services that align with consumers' needs and preferences. From providing online booking options to digital marketing and efficient data management, digital competencies are becoming increasingly crucial in this fast-changing industry. The advantages brought by technology and the internet today are evident and have a profound impact

on traditional models of selling tourism products. Technological expansion has changed the competition between direct travel providers and intermediaries, with the latter having to find solutions to align with online platforms to strengthen relationships with their customers.

Although tourism companies were already concerned about digitalization, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that this approach is imperative (*Pricope (Vancia)* and Băltescu, 2021). According to a study conducted by McKinsey & Company (2021), the tourism industry experienced a significant acceleration in the process of digitalization due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This acceleration led to a growth equivalent to five years in terms of adopting digital technology in tourism businesses.

The digital marketing approach has become a normality for tourism companies, so, regardless of their place in the distribution channel, intermediaries, both traditional and those who operate exclusively online, have had to adopt tools and techniques specific to the development of technology. This approach enables them to attract and engage tech-savvy consumers who use technology at all stages of their travel journey, from planning to post-trip experiences. While many intermediaries seemed to have found their place in the distribution chain amidst past disruptive factors, such as internet development, social media platforms, and mobile technology, the present, and especially the future, reveal that the things does not stop there. Emerging technologies like Blockchain, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the Metaverse pose as the next challenges that intermediaries in tourism must confront to solidify their position in the competitive tourism market. Embracing and integrating these cutting-edge technologies will be crucial for intermediaries to stay relevant and thrive in the ever-evolving landscape of the tourism industry.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE THESIS

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to determine the level of digitalization among the main tourism intermediaries in Romania, namely travel agencies, with the purpose of developing and substantiating marketing strategies to adapt them to the needs and expectations of tourists in the digital era. The general objective of this study is to identify travel trends, particularly concerning organization, among consumers of tourism services in the digital age. Additionally, the research aims to evaluate the level of digitalization among the major intermediaries present in the Romanian market, specifically travel agencies, to meet the needs and expectations of today's tourists.

The specific objectives are derived from the general objective of the research and are further defined at both theoretical and operational levels. From a theoretical point of view, the author set the following specific objectives: (1) to clarify theoretical aspects about key intermediaries in the tourism industry and their position in the distribution channel; (2) to identify the impact of technology on tourism intermediaries; (3) to highlight the importance of tourism consumers in the process of creating tourism experiences in the digital age.

At the operational level, the author set the following specific objectives: (1) to determine travel trends following the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) to identify the travel behaviour of the new generation of tourists, the digital natives; (3) to determine the level of digitisation of travel agencies in Romania, together with

the benefits and obstacles encountered in this process; (4) to develop and substantiate strategic options for travel agencies in Romania to attract and engage tourists in the digital age.

5. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The doctoral thesis is structured into six chapters as follows. The first chapter aims to provide a theoretical foundation about key intermediaries in the tourism industry, their position in the distribution channel, and the clarification of concepts associated with the term "intermediation," such as "disintermediation" and "reintermediation," which have emerged due to the impact of technology on them.

In the second chapter, the current state of knowledge regarding the impact of technology on tourism intermediaries is presented. This chapter examines the disruptive factors that have affected tourism intermediaries over time and analyses the current and future perspectives of this sector in the context of the accelerated development of advanced technologies, such as Blockchain, AI, and the Metaverse. Additionally, this chapter includes information about how intermediaries have adapted and responded to technological progress, how their business models have been affected, and how new opportunities and challenges have emerged.

The third chapter focused on highlighting the implications that consumers of tourism services have in the process of creating tourism experiences in the digital age, with direct effects on the activities of tourism intermediaries. This chapter also presents some critical aspects of this phenomenon.

Chapter four contains two marketing research studies, one based on secondary data, and one qualitative using the focus group interview method, which were designed to provide an up-to-date perspective on travel trends, resulting on the one hand from the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the other hand from the entry into the market of a new generation of tourists, namely the digital natives. Thus, through these studies, this chapter contributes to shaping the context of ongoing changes in the approach to marketing strategies of tourism intermediaries and provides a solid basis for the further development of the doctoral thesis.

Chapter five continued the series of research that contributed to fulfilling the purpose of this thesis. It encompasses four studies, which focused on travel agencies in Romania. The first study is qualitative in nature and aimed to investigate how digital technology has influenced the marketing strategies used by travel agencies in Romania to attract and engage customers. The second research was based on an analysis of social media metrics and aimed to evaluate the presence of Romanian travel agencies on social media platforms. The third study employed observation method and sought to highlight the use of digital technologies by travel agencies at a traditional event, such as a travel fair. The fourth research within this chapter was conducted through a survey and aimed to identify the current state of digitalization among travel agencies in Romania, regardless of their size and type, to create a comprehensive picture of the sector.

In the last chapter of the thesis, the author formulated a series of marketing strategies for travel agencies in Romania, based on the information presented in the previous chapters, but especially on the results obtained from the marketing research. The purpose of these strategies is to strengthen the online presence of travel agencies in Romania. Following this chapter, the general conclusions of the

doctoral thesis were presented, providing a concise overview of all the topics addressed. Finally, the paper included the author's personal contributions and future research directions.

6. METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In order to achieve the purpose and objectives of the doctoral thesis, the author conducted six marketing research based on both primary and secondary data. The first research was qualitative and focused on analysing the behaviour of Generation Z, the new generation of tourists, regarding vacation planning and their attitudes towards future travel. Studies indicate that tourists from this generation will have a significant impact on the tourism industry (European Travel Commission, 2020) due to being digital natives and using technology throughout all stages of their travel (Possamai, 2022). The main objectives of this research were: (1) to identify the ways in which Generation Z organise their vacations; (2) to explore the factors behind their vacation choices; (3) to investigate the main sources of information they use in relation to their vacations; (4) to identify the distribution channels used to purchase vacations; (5) to assess the importance of social media during travel for Generation Z; (6) to assess the extent to which advanced technologies may influence Generation Z's tourism consumption behaviour in the future. To obtain primary information from some members of Generation Z, it was considered that the most appropriate qualitative research method to achieve the set objectives was the *focus group interview*. This method is based on the group dynamics theory, where a small group represents a collection of interdependent individuals with intense interactions (Constantin and Tecău, 2013). It allows for interaction on multiple levels - both among respondents and between the researcher and respondents (Brunt et al., 2017), thus adding value to the research.

The focus group discussions conducted in this qualitative study were based on a semi-structured interview guide, which included specific open-ended questions tailored to this type of research, aimed at eliciting opinions and viewpoints from the participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). The questions were designed and structured around five themes based on the relevant literature. The purpose of these questions was to keep the discussions focused on the research topic.

In order to create a comprehensive understanding of the researched topic, the use of one of the projective techniques, specifically the "sentence completion" method, was deemed beneficial. At the end of the interview, participants were given 10 minutes to complete sentences related to the topic. The content of the sentence completions provided by the participants was collected and stored in a Microsoft Word file to facilitate access and create a word cloud, a kind of weighted list to visualize textual data (Jin, 2017), in which the font size represents the frequency of occurrence of each word in the analysed text (Padmanandam et al., 2021). To generate the word cloud, the webQDA program was utilized.

The discussions took place in early March 2023, with each interview lasting approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes in total. The interviews were structured as follows: preamble - 5 minutes, introductions - 3 minutes, an introduction to the research topic - 10 minutes, topic discussions - between 10-12 minutes each, and the projective technique at the end - 10 minutes (Malhotra, 2004). The interviews were moderated by the author of the doctoral thesis. One week prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the location, time, and general theme of the research.

The two sessions of focus group began with the emphasis on good practice rules, ensuring that all participants felt comfortable and free to express their opinions. Participants were adequately informed that the discussions would be audio-recorded to ensure an accurate transcription. Explicit consent was obtained from each participant regarding the use of information solely for research purposes related to the study. Additionally, rigorous attention was given to protecting the confidentiality of the data. During the discussions, the role of the moderator was limited to guiding the conversations, refraining from expressing personal judgments that could have influenced the participants' opinions. Participants were actively encouraged to engage in all discussions and freely express their beliefs without any restrictions, with assurance that their opinions and experiences were equally important in achieving the research objectives. However, not all respondents contributed equally, with some participants merely expressing agreement or disagreement regarding certain themes and sub-themes of the research.

The audio-recorded discussions were transcribed and analysed using the content analysis method (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). The transcription of the discussions underwent an analysis to identify the most relevant content in line with the research objectives. The content analysis process was initiated by conducting a detailed familiarisation stage, which involved a carefully listening to the recorded discussions and reading the corresponding transcripts (Rabiee, 2004). In this stage, responses were grouped by each participant to facilitate a vertical analysis, specific to content analysis. Subsequently, a meticulous analysis of each intervention was conducted to categorize them into the main themes. Finally, the information provided by the participants was systematically coded and standardized in accordance with the research objectives. Expressions conveying similar meanings, regardless of linguistic variations or temporal appearance, were included in the same response category. The results of the coding process were integrated into a comprehensive content analysis table, detailed in the doctoral thesis.

The second research study was based on the use of *secondary data* and aimed to highlight changes in consumer behaviour regarding tourism services caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes led to new travel trends that persisted even after the pandemic period (Toubes et al., 2021). The research objective was, therefore, to identify travel trends following the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve the research goal, the author conducted a content analysis based on secondary data, using publicly available information from the world's largest online travel agencies. The secondary data used for this research were collected between January 27, 2022, and February 3, 2022, from various online sources (official websites and press releases) using the Google search engine. The research topic was explored using keywords such as "trends," "recovery," "travel," "pandemic," and "COVID-19," written in the English language, extracted from the analysis of specialized literature related to the researched topic, combined with the names of each agency included in the sample.

The next four research studies included in the doctoral thesis focused on the main intermediaries in Romanian tourism, namely travel agencies. The first study in this series was qualitative and aimed to investigate the impact of digital technology on the marketing strategies used by some of the largest Romanian travel agencies, particularly those engaged in organizing travel. The research examined how these agencies attract and engage customers in the context of digital technology advancements. It also aimed to identify the attitudes of representatives towards the future of this sector in the tourism

industry. The research objectives were as follows: (1) to identify the measures adopted by Romanian tour operators in the process of transition from a traditional to a digital approach in order to attract and engage customers; (2) to determine the level of use of advanced technologies by Romanian tour operators; (3) to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Romanian tour operators in terms of accelerating the process of digitisation of the company; (4) to determine the attitudes of representatives of Romanian tour operators regarding the future of this sector. As the study was designed as exploratory in nature, the author did not consider it necessary to formulate hypotheses, as the research served to outline the objectives and hypotheses of the quantitative research subsequently carried out by the author. To achieve the objectives, the author contacted the top 40 travel agencies engaged in travel organization in Romania, based on the number of employees they had at the end of 2021. The list of agencies was extracted from the website www.topfirme.com (Topfirme, 2021) using the selection criterion of CAEN code 7912, specific to the domain of activity for travel agencies with "tour-operating" activity. Out of these, six representatives, who hold managerial positions within the travel agencies agreed to participate in the study. The experience of the study participants in the tourism field ranged from 8 to 36 years. The interviews were conducted between February 16 and March 15, 2023.

The chosen method for the qualitative research was the *pencil-and-paper in-depth interview*. This method involves using a list of key topics, and each topic is explored through a set of questions (Constantin and Tecău, 2013). The author developed the topics and set of questions to obtain comprehensive answers to all research questions, thus ensuring the fulfilment of the established objectives. The responses were analysed using content analysis. The transcription of the discussions was subjected to analysis to identify the most relevant content in line with the research objectives. The content analysis process began with a thorough familiarization stage, which involved carefully rereading the participants' responses. Subsequently, the author meticulously analysed each individual response, noting those that contributed to achieving the objectives of this study. Finally, the information provided by the participants was systematically coded and standardized in accordance with the research objectives. Words and expressions that conveyed similar meanings, regardless of linguistic variations or temporal occurrences, were grouped into the same response category. The results of the coding process were incorporated into a comprehensive content analysis table, which is presented in detail in the doctoral thesis.

The second research was based on the *analysis of social media metrics*, and its purpose was to evaluate the presence of Romanian travel agencies on social media platforms. The objectives of the research were as follows: 1) to evaluate the presence of the travel agencies participating in the study on the most popular social media platforms in Romania; (2) to evaluate the activity of the travel agencies participating in the study on the social media platforms on which they are present; (3) to identify those social media platforms that bring the travel agencies participating in the study the highest level of engagement from their audience; (4) to determine the level of interest of the travel agencies participating in the study in increasing their visibility on the social media pages on which they are present. To achieve the mentioned objectives, the author conducted a comprehensive analysis of the Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok pages of 10 Romanian travel agencies that appeared on the first page of Google search results when using the keywords "Romanian travel agencies" during the period

from November 1, 2022, to December 31, 2022. The choice of these three platforms was based on statistics provided by Datareportal (Kemp, 2023) regarding the preferences and most frequently used social media platforms by Romanians. Various social media metrics were examined, such as the number of followers or fans, the number of posts, reactions, comments, and shares, as well as the total number of people who viewed the content on all three mentioned platforms during the period from January 1, 2022, to January 31, 2022. For objective three, which involves a comparative analysis to determine the level of interest in increasing visibility on social media pages, indicators from the period from January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2022, were also examined.

In addition, to achieve the objective number two, the author calculated based on the social media metrics mentioned above, the fan engagement rate per post and the engagement rate per post of the total number of users who viewed the content on all three platforms during the period analysed. The formulas used to calculate these indicators for each platform can be found in Table 1.

Tabelul 1. Calculation formulas for average engagement rate per post by fans and by reach

Average engagement rate per post by fans/followers	Average engagement rate per post by reach*
<p>For Facebook</p> $\frac{(\text{reactions}+\text{comments}+\text{shares})/\text{posts}}{\text{number of fans}} \times 100$	<p>For Facebook</p> $\frac{(\text{reactions}+\text{comments}+\text{shares})/\text{posts}}{\text{reach}} \times 100$
<p>For Instagram</p> $\frac{(\text{likes}+\text{comments})/\text{posts}}{\text{number of followers}} \times 100$	<p>For Instagram</p> $\frac{(\text{likes}+\text{comments})/\text{posts}}{\text{reach}} \times 100$
<p>For TikTok**</p>	<p>For TikTok</p> $\frac{(\text{likes}+\text{comments}+\text{shares})/\text{videos}}{\text{reach}} \times 100$

Source: (Gogolan Diana, 2022)

*Reach measures how many users saw the content.

**Because of the features of the TikTok platform, the relevant measure of engagement rate is is not the follower base but the number of views.

The full analysis of the social media numerical indicators can be found in the doctoral thesis. This analysis was made possible thanks to the Socialinsider platform, which serves as a tool for social media analysis, reporting, and comparison (Socialinsider, 2023). The author had access to this platform for a period of two months, from November 15, 2022, to January 15, 2023.

The third research, focused on travel agencies, utilized the *method of observation*. For this, the author took into consideration the Romanian Tourism Fair (TTR), spring edition, held from 23rd to 26th February 2023, at the B2 Pavilion of the Romexpo Exhibition Centre in Bucharest. The main objective of this research was to determine the extent to which Romanian travel agencies embrace technology during a traditional event like a tourism fair. The specific goals of this research were as follows: (1) to identify the travel agencies present at TTR, spring edition 2023; (2) to determine the level of use of

digital technologies in the exhibition booth of travel agencies present at TTR, spring edition 2023. As the study was exploratory in nature, the author did not formulate any hypotheses beforehand.

Observation is a complex research method because it often involves the researcher assuming various roles and using a diverse set of techniques, including the utilization of all five senses, to gather data. Despite the level of involvement with the study group, the researcher must always maintain their primary role as an observer and remain sufficiently objective to collect information and analyse data relevant to the research problem (Baker, 2006).

To achieve the research objectives, the researcher chose to use covert discrete, discrete observation without informing the target group about the reason for their presence (Brunt et al., 2017). This was possible because the tourism fair took place in a public location, Pavilion B2 of the Romexpo Exhibition Centre in Bucharest, where access was open and free. The observation occurred on two out of the four days of the tourism fair, specifically on Friday, February 24, and Saturday, February 25, 2023. To fulfil the first objective, the researcher assessed the participant list for the spring 2023 edition of the Travel and Tourism Fair (TTR), displayed at the entrance of the pavilion. From there, they extracted the names of the participating travel agencies. Then the researcher drew up a document in which he noted their names and information about the services offered and destinations promoted at the fair. For the accomplishment of the second objective, the researcher made multiple visits to each stand of the travel agencies present at the spring 2023 edition of TTR. During the visits, the researcher recorded observations regarding the use of digital technologies in each exhibition booth, including how they were implemented, and the level of interactivity offered to the visitors.

The latest marketing research is quantitative in nature and complements the qualitative research presented earlier. Its purpose is to determine the degree of adoption of digital technologies by travel agencies in Romania in their operations and, at the same time, to identify the attitudes of their representatives towards emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the Metaverse. The information obtained from the research has made a significant contribution to achieving the aim of the doctoral thesis in shaping marketing strategies for the innovation and development of travel agencies in Romania in the digital era. Based on the previously mentioned main purpose of the research, the following objectives were established: (1) to determine the level of interest of Romanian travel agencies regarding the adoption of digital technologies in their activity; (2) to identify the main digital tools and techniques used by Romanian travel agencies in order to engage and attract consumers of tourism services; (3) to identify the main strategies through which Romanian travel agencies ensure their visibility to consumers of tourism services; (4) to identify the main benefits and obstacles brought by the use of digital technologies to Romanian travel agencies; (5) to determine the level of use of advanced technologies by Romanian travel agencies, as well as their intentions to implement them in the future; (6) to identify attitudes regarding the effects of advanced technologies on the future of travel agencies; (7) to identify links between the characteristics of travel agencies participating in the study and various research variables.

This marketing research has a descriptive nature and is based on the use of the *survey method*. Primary data were obtained through a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions measured using different types of scales: nominal, interval, and ordinal. Before the questionnaire was distributed to the research

population, it was pre-sampled among 10 randomly selected travel agencies in Romania. At the end of the pretest, one of the questions of characterization of the researched population, which concerned the turnover, was eliminated, since the Romanian legislation allows travel agencies to count in the turnover either the commission or the total income (Law 227/2015, art. 311 and art. 286). Thus, it turned out that the question was inappropriate, as its values were not comparable. Also at this stage, all issues related to the understanding and interpretation of the questions were clarified.

The research population was made up of licensed travel agencies in Romania. According to the information provided by the website of the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism there were, on 17.03.2023, 2561 licensed travel agencies, which presented the following structure according to the activity: 43.38% were organising travel agencies, 34.52% intermediate, 12.3% intermediate online and 9.8% online organisers (MAT, 2023a).

The sample size determination started from the sampling error, which leads to a range of values that the parameter can take at the level of the population under investigation (Constantin and Tecău, 2013). Therefore, the sample size, denoted as "n", was calculated using Cochran's formula for a 95% confidence interval, which is commonly used in marketing research. Thus, a significance level $\alpha = 0.05$ is obtained. For this level of significance, the corresponding "z" value extracted from the standard normal distribution table, is 1.96. The maximum possible standard deviation was considered when the percentage of affirmative responses equals the percentage of negative responses (50x50). The result obtained was $n = 384$. Considering that the surveyed population is relatively small, and the calculated sample represents more than 5% of the total population, the sample size was adjusted, resulting in $n = 334$.

For collecting primary data, the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method was chosen. This decision was made for two reasons. The first reason is related to the limitations regarding the researcher's financial and time resources. The second reason is linked to the advantages that this method offers (Staniszewska, 2013), such as respondents' ability to choose the opportune moment to complete the questionnaire, eliminating the possibility of being influenced by an interviewer, ensuring anonymity, and the ease with which data can be extracted in an accessible format for processing, thus avoiding human errors that may occur during manual data entry.

The process was followed by the random selection of the 334 travel agencies to be included in the sample using the mechanical step method. The researcher had access to the complete list of email addresses of the surveyed population, and through these, the selected travel agencies were invited to participate in the study. However, considering the high non-response rate, the researcher opted to send the questionnaire to the entire target population (Veal, 2017), thus trying to build a sample with a satisfactory volume. This, however, led to the use of a non-random sampling method, namely voluntary sampling. The message inviting them to participate in the study was accompanied by a direct link to the page containing the questionnaire to be completed.

To establish the sample, three solicitation requests to complete the questionnaire were sent at intervals of approximately one week between 7 April and 9 May 2023. Despite the researcher's efforts to elicit a substantial number of responses, only 264 valid responses were received, yielding a response rate of 10.3%.

7. MAIN RESEARCH FINDINGS

The marketing research in this doctoral thesis focused on aspects related to tourism consumption trends in the digital era, as well as on determining the current state of digitisation, specific to technological transformations, in the activities of the main tourism intermediaries in Romania, namely travel agencies. Finally, based on the results, marketing strategies were developed to help them strengthen their position in the online environment, in order to meet the needs and preferences of tourism consumers in the digital era. Thus, research among Generation Z consumers of tourism services has yielded valuable insights regarding how they organize their vacations and their attitudes on future travels. Their use of social media platforms and influencers as sources of travel research and inspiration, as well as their power to become impactful individuals themselves by sharing photo and video content on social media from their own vacations, were the basis for shaping the strategic social media marketing options proposed by the author in the final chapter of this paper.

The travel trends following the COVID-19 pandemic, identified in one of the studies in this paper, were as follows: tourists' preference for bookings with flexible cancellation policies, purchasing last minute vacations, choosing destinations and locations where safety and health measures are appreciated, opting for shorter stays, and shifting towards more sustainable tourism. These findings have managerial implications concerning strategies related to the marketed services on one hand, and on the other hand, in terms of how these conditions and information are displayed transparently and easily accessible to customers. In support of this idea, the marketing strategy outlined in the last chapter of the paper, which involves the creation of an integrated digital platform for travel agencies, was outlined.

The first study focusing on travel agencies in Romania consisted of a qualitative research and concentrated on the largest travel agencies. The results highlighted valuable insights regarding their journey from traditional to digital and identified their main concerns about the future. The research highlighted the main benefits and obstacles brought to them by the evolution of communication and information technology, as well as the main specific digital marketing tools and techniques used by them to attract and engage the tourism consumer. Among the main benefits brought by technological advancements for the participating agencies were mentioned: the reduction of processing time for specific transactions and the ability to offer products and services rapidly and in a modern way. As for the obstacles faced by these agencies, the most common ones were long time to development and implementation of digital technologies, the high costs of their implementation and the lack of skilled labour. Regarding the tools used to attract and engage customers, they mentioned the following as the top choices: the website, email, and the social media platform Facebook. The primary reasons for using these tools were market developments and changes in consumer behaviour. Although they are moving towards the use of specific digital marketing tools, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, the participating travel agencies mentioned that they have not completely excluded traditional marketing instruments, such as participating in press trips and info trips, direct customer relations in physical travel agency offices, and advertising spots on radio and TV. Therefore, they can be considered as benefiting from the opportunities of both approaches.

To analyze the current state of the usage and integration of advanced technologies, the research focused on questions regarding artificial intelligence and virtual reality. The responses from representatives of the participating travel agencies demonstrated that these technologies have not been a priority, at least up until now. However, the respondents do not appear to be overly concerned about their rapid progress, believing that they will be able to adapt as needed. The real threats they perceive are related to political instability, a potential economic crisis, and especially the lack of qualified human resources in the industry.

According to the research that investigated the activity of Romanian travel agencies on social media, the results indicate that out of the three popular platforms among Romanians, Facebook is the platform on which these agencies post the most content. However, the research results show that Instagram and TikTok have a greater impact on online users than Facebook.

The third research has greatly contributed to establishing the current state of digitisation of travel agencies in Romania. It focused mainly on identifying the use of technology by travel agencies at a classic travel fair event. It was observed that the layout of the participating travel agencies' stands was mainly based on classical methods of attracting clients, with small insertions of digital technologies. However, the participation of a small number of agencies in such an event shows that Romanian travel agencies rely more on the relationship they have with their clients online.

The latest research conducted for the doctoral thesis revealed a comprehensive perspective on the level of adoption of digital technologies among travel agencies in Romania. The study involved 264 travel agencies, representing more than 10% of the total research population, and provides a relevant perspective on this topic. The majority of travel agencies are interested in the level of digitisation of their company and consider online presence very important. They are also familiar and use specific digital marketing tools such as website, email, social media platforms. Travel blogs and mobile marketing specific tools less nominated. However, it was noted that about 47% of the travel agencies participating in the survey did not integrate online booking systems into their websites that would allow their customers direct access to their tourism products and services. Among the most frequently cited reasons for this were the high costs of implementing digital technologies and the rapid changes in this direction. Another interesting result of the research is that the agencies surveyed had a neutral opinion about the effects of advanced digital technologies such as AI and Metaverse on their business in the future.

The results of the research conducted among travel agencies highlighted their current state of digitisation and the challenges they face in this process. It also gave an insight into the attitudes of their representatives towards emerging advanced technologies such as AI and Metaverse. These results, together with those derived from research among tourism consumers, led to the final aim of the doctoral thesis, namely the development and substantiation of marketing strategies for travel agencies in Romania, with the main objective of attracting and engaging tourists in the digital age. A series of specific strategic options for social media marketing were proposed, given the significant impact that social media platforms have on distribution in the tourism industry. Today's travellers search for and discover attractive destinations mostly on social media platforms, so managing them correctly is vital to attract new consumers in any tourism business. Travel agencies can benefit

significantly from their active and intelligent presence on social media platforms. Their rich portfolio of tourism services, together with their specialised professionals, give them a competitive advantage in this dynamic digital environment, allowing them to expand their business and successfully attract new consumers.

Research results on Romanian travel agencies show that they are adopting digital technologies to a significant level, and most of them are also interested in digitising their image. However, it was observed that Romanian travel agencies tend to use the Facebook platform in order to strengthen their social media marketing strategies. In order to be able to enforce current social media strategies such as "digital storytelling", "live streaming" and "influencer marketing", recently identified in the literature, Romanian travel agencies should first of all increase and/or strengthen their presence on other platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc. Through a proper management of social media platforms and digital campaigns, they could strengthen their online presence, gain consumer trust, and attract new customers. Effective use of these platforms can allow agencies to increase their visibility, communicate directly with potential clients, provide personalised support, and thus generate higher levels of sales. Consequently, the author proposes some strategic options from the latest trends identified in the literature and mentioned above, adapted to travel agencies. All these proposals aim to strengthen the online presence of travel agencies and to attract those consumers of tourism services who use technology and the internet before, during and after the trip.

1) Strategic options related to digital storytelling:

The first proposal involves creating personal stories from the travel representatives' journeys. They can produce narrative journals (written or video) about their own experiences, both positive and negative, from their vacations. This approach aims to "sensitize" consumers by offering them an authentic and sincere perspective on destinations and experiences they can encounter at those locations.

The second proposal entails encouraging customers to share their travel experiences, photographs, and stories through social media posts or by using a dedicated hashtag, specifically associated with the travel agency. This way, the stories of ordinary people can potentially attract other consumers, fostering a sense of authenticity and building trust in the agency's offerings.

2) Strategic options related to live streaming:

Regarding strategic options related to the "live streaming" tool provided by social media platforms, the first proposal involves conducting live presentations of tourist destinations and accommodations when travel agency representatives participate in knowledge-based info trips to these locations. This action could attract a significant number of followers who are intrigued by the virtual tour they experience, thereby stimulating their interest in contacting the agency for potential vacation bookings at those destinations.

The second proposal entails organizing "question and answer" sessions. Travel agency representatives can schedule live sessions on social media platforms, where they are present and can respond to interested individuals' inquiries regarding specific products and services they offer.

By utilizing live streaming, travel agencies can establish a more direct and interactive connection with their audience. This approach provides an opportunity to showcase destinations in real-time, address potential customers' concerns and questions promptly, and ultimately enhance the agency's reputation as a reliable and accessible source for travel-related information and services.

3) Strategic options related to influencer marketing:

Travel influencers are seen as the result of advances in technology, especially social media platforms. They explore the world, capturing authentic moments from their vacations using digital cameras or smartphones, and then package these experiences into compelling stories to share with their social media communities. For travel agencies, collaborating with such influential individuals presents an opportunity to increase their visibility on social media.

Another option would be to "transform" their own tourists into influencers. Travel agency can establish partnerships with their own customers, encouraging them to post content from their vacations on their platforms, showcasing the experiences they had through the agency. By encouraging their customers to share their travel experiences on social media, the agency can benefit from authentic content. This user-generated content not only provides potential clients with real-life testimonials but also helps increase the agency's visibility through word-of-mouth marketing. As travellers share their positive experiences and memorable moments, it can attract new customers who resonate with the content and trust the recommendations coming from their peers.

These strategic options are just a few proposals for travel agencies in Romania, the potential of social media platforms being very high. Focusing on implementing well-defined strategies on social media platforms would prepare travel agencies to attract the new wave of Generation Z tourists. The research carried out in this paper on this generation revealed that they frequently use social media platforms in researching and planning their trips.

In addition, the author proposed the development of an integrated digital platform for travel agencies, for which he also created a marketing programme. This platform aims to include the following elements:

(1) Advanced booking system. It should, on the one hand, enable travel agencies to perform searches across all B2B platforms provided by their collaborating travel suppliers, displaying all details related to the offered services. On the other hand, it should offer an accessible and user-friendly interface for the agencies' customers to use.

(2) Invoicing and settlement system. In the next step, after making a confirmed reservation, the platform should provide the option to issue invoices to the clients and, subsequently, receive invoices from the suppliers for settlement purposes.

(3) Personalized user profiles. Each client of the travel agency could create their own account with personal information and consent for data processing. Additionally, they could provide details about their travel interests and preferences. The agency would use this information to tailor the travel offers more accurately according to each client's preferences, thus providing personalized deals.

(4) Transparent rating and review system. This system would allow the agency's clients to share their travel experiences and provide feedback to the travel agency. This way, a community based on trust would be created, and information would circulate from one client to another, making the decision-making process more straightforward. The moderation and acceptance of reviews would be managed by the travel agency to prevent false or malicious reviews regarding certain tourism services. Additionally, travel agencies could respond to feedback, strengthening their relationship with customers. Moreover, this system would help address negative reviews by offering transparent solutions.

(5) Integration of advanced technologies. (a) Virtual tours in 360 degrees or with VR goggles would allow customers to explore destinations during the vacation planning phase. (b) Augmented reality could provide customers with information about sights, restaurant menus or information about different cultural events. (c) By integrating IoT customers could adjust their needs during the trip in real time.

This project aims to strengthen the relationship between consumers of tourism services and Romanian travel agencies by facilitating their interaction within the integrated digital platform. The direct beneficiaries of this project are all travel agencies in Romania, regardless of their type (organizers or intermediaries). Indirectly, all customers of these travel agencies who adopt and utilize the integrated digital platform will also benefit from its implementation.

8. PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

This doctoral thesis was developed with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the impact of technology on intermediaries in the tourism industry. The study involved a deep analysis of the situation of the main tourism intermediaries in Romania, namely travel agencies, and the specific actions they have taken to maintain their position in the value chain of distribution in the context of an ever-evolving digital world. One of the key components influencing tourism intermediaries is the behaviour of tourists in the digital era. With technological advancements and increased internet accessibility, modern tourists have become more familiar with using digital platforms for searching, booking, and planning their travels. Thus, the novelty of this research consists in "confronting" consumers of tourism services in the digital era with the major tourism intermediaries, namely travel agencies. The position of these intermediaries in the distribution channel has been and continues to be questioned by many voices, and this study aimed to develop and substantiate marketing strategies applicable to travel agencies. The purpose of these strategies is to address the needs and expectations of consumers in the digital era, ensuring that travel agencies remain relevant and competitive in the market. The following sections will present the author's personal contributions that have led to the development of knowledge and understanding of the topic addressed in this doctoral thesis.

In the first chapter, specific concepts related to tourism distribution were analysed and interpreted in a distinctive manner, primarily based on books and articles written by authors with significant contributions in the specialized literature. These sources were carefully examined and synthesized to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the terms relevant to the researched topic.

In chapter two, the current state of knowledge regarding the impact of technology on tourism intermediaries was analysed. The author synthesized the information in an original manner, combining sources from specialized articles and papers presented at international conferences from reputable databases such as Science Direct, Scopus, Elsevier, Web of Science, and Springer. Additionally, the findings from well-known companies conducting research in the tourism industry, such as Phocuswright and Skift, were also integrated into the analysis. Similarly, Chapter three followed the same style and aimed to analyse the involvement of consumers of tourism services in the value creation process of the tourist experience in the digital era. Both chapters served as the theoretical and practical foundation for the subsequent chapters of the doctoral thesis.

To achieve the aim of this thesis, the author conducted a series of original marketing research studies while adhering to specific methodological rigor. The first research involved conducting a focus group interview with 20 students from Generation Z who had undertaken at least one tourist trip within the 12 months before the study. The second research aimed to identify travel trends following the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing secondary data from the results of the top 11 largest online travel agencies in the world. The results of these research studies led to the identification of new trends in tourist consumption in the digital era, partly attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact and partly attributed to the emergence of a new generation of tourists - the digital natives. These findings served as valuable insights in understanding the changing behaviour of modern tourists and the implications it holds for travel agencies in the digital landscape. The combination of primary and secondary research provided a solid basis for the subsequent chapters of the doctoral thesis. The series of personal contributions continued through marketing research focusing on travel agencies, the primary intermediaries present in the Romanian tourism market. The first study in this series involved conducting interviews with six representatives from some of the largest tour operators in Romania. The second research focused on evaluating the social media presence of ten well-known Romanian travel agencies analysing specific social media metrics. The third research undertaken aimed to determine the extent of technology utilization by travel agencies at a traditional tourism fair event, using observation as the method. The last research involved conducting a survey among 264 travel agencies in Romania to determine the level of digital technology adoption in the sector. Another significant contribution of the author was the final chapter, which outlined strategic options for travel agencies in Romania, based on all the analyses and research mentioned above. Specific social media marketing strategies were proposed, considering the significant impact of social media platforms on distribution in the tourism industry. In addition to these strategies, the author proposed the development of an integrated digital platform for travel agencies, for which a marketing program was created. In conclusion, this doctoral thesis stands out due to its novelty, complexity, practicality, and applicability of the results obtained in the economic environment of the tourism industry. It provides valuable insights into the impact of technology on intermediaries in the tourism industry and offers strategic recommendations to enhance the performance and competitiveness of travel agencies in Romania.

The research results, which formed the basis of the doctoral thesis, were disseminated through the author's participation in international scientific conferences, as well as through the publication of findings in specialized scientific journals indexed in international databases (ISI/BDI).

9. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

"Tourism is a dynamic industry" is a commonly used expression in the specialized literature, indicating that there will always be issues and opportunities that require in-depth investigations. The author of this doctoral thesis observed this throughout the entire research period. In the year 2020, many studies focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the industry; however, currently, research is targeting emerging technologies that could bring new changes in consumer behaviour regarding tourism services. Hence, industry players, especially tourism intermediaries, must keep pace with these changes to strengthen their position in the market.

Regarding this thesis, each research conducted by the author has led to new research directions, which are presented below. The qualitative study among Generation Z regarding the analysis of travel behaviour and their attitudes towards the future of tourism has outlined the following research directions:

- to continue the study by carrying out a quantitative marketing research with a representative number of respondents that would allow extrapolation to the total population of Generation Z in Romania.
- extending the above study to the other generations capable of travelling, Baby-Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y. This allows comparisons to be made between the travel behaviour of the four generations.
- conducting a marketing research to explore the behaviour of Generation Z tourists in several countries and comparing them, thus providing insight into how national culture and other factors influence the behaviour of young tourists;
- conducting an experimental study in which members of the Romanian Generation Z use virtual reality glasses to explore a destination they have previously visited conventionally. This would involve obtaining immediate feedback and impressions from the virtual experience, which will be compared to those given about the destination before the virtual exploration. This approach could provide valuable insights into the impact of virtual reality on the evaluation of travel destinations among this demographic group.

As a result of the qualitative study among Romanian tour operators the author identified the following research directions:

- conducting a qualitative marketing research among employees of large travel agencies in Romania, which will have the main purpose of identifying the role of the travel agent in the digital age.
- conducting a case study among "tour-operator" agencies in Romania to highlight their role and importance in the tourism ecosystem.

The study based on the analysis of social media metrics among travel agencies in Romania led to the following research direction:

- conducting a content analysis of social media posts of Romanian travel agencies.

The observation-based study on the use of technology at a classic travel fair event also outlined an idea for future research:

- to continue the observational study on the same topic at the next two tourism fairs in Romania, the autumn 2023 edition and the spring 2024 edition.

The quantitative research conducted among travel agencies in Romania led to the following research directions:

- conducting a quantitative marketing research among travel agency clients in Romania. This would aim to identify the reasons why they choose to work with travel agencies and to draw up a profile of the tourist who chooses this method of booking their vacations.
- conducting a quantitative marketing research among travel agency employees to identify their views and attitudes on the future of the profession in the context of emerging technologies.
- conducting a qualitative marketing research among technology service providers for travel companies to identify the main obstacles encountered in dealing with travel agencies.

Recently, other tourism intermediaries, mentioned in the first chapter of the PhD thesis, namely Destination Management Organisations (DMOs), also benefit from a legal framework in the Romanian market (MAT, 2023b). On 16.02.2023, the Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism issued the opinion for the establishment of the first DMO in Romania (MAT, 2023c). On 17.05.2023, 10 more such organisations were already approved. Given the novelty of this topic, the author did not undertake research among them for obvious reasons, mainly related to time resources. In addition, the author considers that they need some time to "settle in" on the tourism market in order to undertake research on their activities, and especially research on the strategies they apply to justify their position on the Romanian tourism market in the digital age. Thus, these remained as future research directions. Specifically, the author considers the following research directions:

- conducting a qualitative marketing research among representatives of the DMOs to highlight their importance in the tourism circuit in the digital age.
- conducting a qualitative marketing research on the impact of DMOs on the development of sustainable tourism in Romania.
- conducting a qualitative marketing research to explore the ways in which DMOs manage to adapt their marketing strategies to emerging trends in the tourism industry.

The research proposals mentioned above do not claim to be completely exhaustive, as in an era in which technology is advancing at an extraordinary speed, there is a wide range of possibilities for researching the relationship between consumers of tourism services and intermediaries in the tourism industry

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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

A. Papers in Web of Science indexed journals

1. **Pricope Vancia, A. P.**, Băltescu, C. A., Brătucu, G., Tecău, A. S., Chiţu, I. B., & Duguleană, L. (2023). Examining the Disruptive Potential of Generation Z Tourists on the Travel Industry in the Digital Age. *Sustainability*, 15(11), 8756 (*Impact factor: 3.9*(2022)); <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15118756>.

B. Papers in BDI indexed publications

2. **Pricope (Vancia), A. P.**, & Băltescu, C. A. (2021). The Covid-19 Pandemic: An Accelerator of Digitalisation in Tourism. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov. Series V: Economic Sciences*, 19-26; <https://doi.org/10.31926/but.es.2021.14.63.2.2>.

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C. Participation in international conferences

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