

ONLINE TRAVEL INSPIRATION UNDER THE INFLUENCE  
OF COVID-19 CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF RISK:  
INVESTIGATING ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES.

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## **Abstract**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism among many sectors, has been negatively affected. Can tourism be encouraged and sustained through digital solutions? This research focuses on some important antecedents of online travel inspiration, as well as some key outcomes. A survey with a sample of 249 individuals reveals that while openness to experience and desire and/or intent to visit a destination do not affect online travel inspiration associated with a specific destination, travel risk perception and previous visit to that destination are key determinant factors. In addition, this study shows that people's online travel inspiration affects their emotions, willingness to participate in online co-creation experiences and behavioral intentions to interact with an online platform that offers an alternative to physical travelling. The main contribution of this study is the examination of the construct "online travel inspiration" during a time of crisis, such as the COVID 19 outbreak, while it also offers suggestions to practitioners in the tourism field regarding the creation of inspirational activities online.

### **Keywords:**

Online Travel Inspiration, Travel Risk Perception, Tourism, Covid-19

## **Introduction**

Tourism is a globally large industry that employed 330 million in 2019 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019), and the digital transformation in tourism has begun years ago. The so-called Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), augmented and virtual reality, location-based services and block chain technologies are some of the sector's key tools which have facilitated its entrance to the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, an era defined by digitalization. But the digital transformation is also obvious through simpler, everyday means, like social media. Social networking sites have undoubtedly altered "the way tourism experiences are planned, consumed, evaluated and marketed" (Gretzel, 2018, p.1).

Being a sector with massive dimensions, tourism is at the same time particularly vulnerable to exogenous, uncontrollable forces. Economic crises, terrorism, epidemics, military conflicts, and environmental issues are some of those threatening for the tourism industry factors (Aramberri & Butler, 2004). In the first months of 2020, Covid-19 occurred and disrupted the way tourism businesses and destinations work, imposing new rules and conditions.

The swift technological developments that is the Zeitgeist of our era, has also equipped mankind with valuable tools, such as the IoT, 5G networks and AI, to name a few, that can help address Covid-19 related issues (Ting, Carin, Dzau, & Wong, 2020).

As Yang, Zhang, and Chen (2020) recently confirmed, outbreaks of infectious diseases like Covid-19 upset the development of the tourism sector, since people reduce or even completely avoid traveling. For this reason, since January 2020 the globe experiences a rapid shift from largely growing tourism flows to significantly lower ones, and despite the removal of travel bans, fear and uncertainty seem to dampen people's willingness to travel.

In this peculiar context, digital communication plays a vital role in connecting people with destinations and travel experiences. Along with technological advancement, destinations around the world began creating their own platforms (Zhang, Gordon, Buhalis & Ding, 2017), providing potential visitors with useful information and material, as well as customized content that helps them build their own tourism experiences and transforms consumers into "prosumers", as they actively produce and consume experiences (Dredge, Phi, Mahadevan, Meehan, & Popescu, 2018). This has allowed people to be inspired and dream of destinations they cannot physically visit, as well as helping them stay in touch with their favorite places, without leaving the comfort of their homes, during the pandemic (Tsiros, 2020).

It would be of great interest to examine what antecedents may lead to Online Travel Inspiration, and how that form of inspiration may affect conative, cognitive and behavioral outcomes, firstly because, Online Travel Inspiration is a new addition to the literature, that involves the aspects of digital means and the tourism industry, having the important concept of inspiration as its basis. Also, the main variable and its antecedents and consequences offer valuable insights for professionals in the digital marketing and tourism industry, during these uncertain times for the industry.

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

### **Online Travel Inspiration**

Inspiration is perceived as the motivational state that drives individuals to transmute new ideas into actions (Dai, Wang and Kirillova, 2022; Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick and Maruskin, 2014). Others define it as "*a customer's temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of marketing-induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal*" (Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017, p. 129). However, this psychological conceptualization of inspiration is too general (Dai et al. 2022)

and tourism is a special consumption context, in which the experience itself is the core product (Dai et al. 2022), as well as diverging from traditional consumption patterns based on problem-solving and utilitarian functionalities, it involves pursuing “fantasies, feelings, and fun” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 135). Therefore travel inspiration is defined here as the individual’s temporary motivational state to pursue fantasies and emotions, that translates a travel-related stimulus to the essential search of travel-relevant consumption goals. It is also assumed that online travel inspiration can both be deemed as an antecedent variable to motivation in the travelling and hospitality related processes, as well as an outcome, triggered by travel-related content.

Cunha (2019) supports this assumption, by identifying inspiration as the very first stage of a tourist’s journey, with post-travel phase being the last one. Introducing the online travel inspiration in this context in the COVID-19 era, it most likely will be seen as the first stage before realization.

Within the tourism industry, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) rely on digital means for the destination marketing during the last few years (Hays, Page, Buhalis, 2013; Mariani, Felice, Mura, 2016). Destination marketing is about differentiating a place from others and making it appear more attractive, for the purpose of developing tourist activity (Quinn, 2013). Oliveira and Panyik (2014) showed that digital channels offer the valuable opportunity to DMOs to be more effective in their destination marketing and build their branding strategies online, with the help of their audiences and their meaningful content, allowing them not having to spend too much money. Plus, ICT enable people to access tourism experiences independent of their location (Bethapudi, 2013). Giannopoulos and Mavragani (2011) postulated that ONTS (Official National Tourism Sites) are leaders in using ICT, and emphasis is placed on the websites’ characteristics of visual appearance, quality/ variety of information, ease of use, interactivity, but also personalization. This is even more important now, that the globe faces serious economic problems due to Covid-19.

Apart from social media, mobile apps are on the rise, having the power to influence tourist behaviors (Kim & Kim, 2017), and to benefit people’s travel experiences by providing them with information, social connection, sense of safety and so on (Wang, Fesenmaier, & Park, 2012). Especially younger people use them throughout all stages of their tourism journey, from inspiration to post-travel phase (Cunha, 2019). A variety of marketing campaigns based on personalization can reinforce this view, including the very successful “No need to fly- Around the world in Germany” campaign, launched in 2018.

Online interactive platforms can also influence the first phase of a customer’s journey in tourism and evoke travel inspiration. Neuhofer, Buhalis, and Ladkin (2014) presented the example of a platform named *PixMeAway*, a search engine that responds to people’s increasing need for experiences that has been observed in the last decades (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In this platform, attractive visuals, personalized suggestions, and high interactivity inspire potential travelers and help them find their ideal destination.

Researchers (Izogo et. Al, 2020; Böttger et.al, 2017) agree that customer inspiration is a new concept in marketing, that needs more research to reveal interrelations and better understand this concept.

### **Travel Risk Perception**

Naturally, it is expected that Covid-19 highly influences people’s cognitive behavior, namely their perceptions, as it happens usually with crises and risky situations (Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Wen, Huimin, & Kavanaugh, 2005; Cahyanto, Wiblishauser, Pennington-Gray, & Schroeder, 2016). According to Yang and Nair (2014), perceived risk refers to a known probability, that determines human behavior and influences intentions and attitudes (Dillard,

Ferrer, Ubel & Fagerlin, 2012). Nazneen, Hong & Din (2020) found that people's concerns over hygiene and safety have been increased, and that social media reinforce worries related to the novel coronavirus, whereas Giancarlo, Ayako, and Kiyoshi (2020) proved the importance of Covid-19 as a factor of travel behavior change.

Perceived risk in tourism can be defined as the perception of the probability to get exposed to beyond acceptable danger that can eventually affect travel decisions (Chew & Jahari, 2014). Tourism is a sector that is vulnerable to increased risk perceptions, as its main characteristics are perishability, intangibility, inseparability, and variability (Grönroos, 1990) and it is very prone to be influenced by external factors. Obviously, health and well-being is one of the most important travel risk categories (Simpson & Sigua, 2008).

Based on the literature, the first potential antecedent to consider is travel risk perception, which is affected by Covid-19 (Nazneen et al., 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020), and has the power to lead to behavioral change (e.g. Giancarlo et al., 2020). It would be useful to examine if it is a factor that affects people's travel inspiration, the first step in the tourism consumption process. Therefore we postulate that *H1: Travel risk perception affects online travel inspiration.*

### **Openness to Experience**

Personality, being a distinctive individual characteristic that affects uses of media (Rubin, 1993), consists of the following Big Five characteristics: Agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience (McCrae, Costa, Del Pilar, Rolland, & Parker, 1998). Openness to experience is, according to Islam, Rahman, and Hollebeek (2017) "an individual's readiness to accept novelty or new ideas" (p.512) and influences online CE.

Linking this to the context of online consumer behavior, openness to experience, along with extraversion, are positively related to heavier use of social media applications, as highly open people seek novelty and stimuli that excite their curiosity, so they appreciate various online activities (Correa et al., 2010; Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010), while Marbach, Lages and Nunan (2016) agreed that the personality trait of openness to experience is positively related to online engagement.

Böttger et al. (2017) suggest a conceptual framework, according to which, source characteristics (how inspirational the promotional source is) and individual characteristics, such as one's openness to experience, are the two key factors that affect a person's inspiration as a customer. They also suggested that customer inspiration has emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral consequences, and it has been found that it influences inspiration (Thrash & Elliot, 2003; Böttger et al., 2017).

Based on the above: *H2: An individual's openness to experience affects online travel inspiration.*

### **Previous Travel Experience at a Destination, Intent, and Desire to Visit the Destination**

Hsu and Crotts (2006), for instance, have used the following segmentation to examine the travel tendencies of mainland Chinese residents: Previous travel experience at a destination, intent, and desire to visit the destination. They state that identifying and targeting previous visitors is beneficial from a marketing point of view, while monitoring people's intentions is also crucial, as it is the best way to predict behaviors. Additionally, Jiménez

Barreto, Rubio, and Campo Martínez (2018) have suggested that previous physical experiences at a destination do influence users' online experiences.

The threefold of *previous visit*, *desire*, and *intent to visit* a destination could affect users' online travel inspiration; Individuals' previous experience at a destination is related to their online experience (Jiménez-Barreto et. al, 2018), to their influence by tourism marketing actions (Choe et.al, 2014) and their interest towards the destination (Milman and Pizman, 1995). For example, visitors' desire to attend a festival affected their behavioral intentions (Song, You, Reisinger, Lee, & Lee, 2014), therefore, visitors' desire to visit the destination could affect their online travel inspiration. Since Hsu and Crofts (2006) included intention to visit the destination in their study and it is found that desire and intention are closely related (Koo et.al, 2016), intention to visit the destination will also be incorporated. Therefore, *H3: Online travel inspiration about a destination is affected by previous visit intention, desire to visit and previous visit to that destination.*

### **Emotions**

Emotion can be defined as a psychological state or a feeling (Plutchik, 1980) and they have a great value as far as tourism experiences are concerned, as they have a powerful effect on people's post-consumption behaviors, such as their intention to recommend or their satisfaction (Gnoth, 1997).

Online experiences in general (e.g. Zhang et.al, 2017), and inspiration in a brand-customer context (Böttger et.al, 2017), are found to lead to emotional consequences so it is expected that the same will apply in terms of online travel inspiration.

Therefore, *H4: Online travel inspiration affects individuals' emotions about the destination.*

### **Willingness to Participate in Online Co-Creation Experiences**

Co-creation implies that the consumer becomes an active participant and creator of the experience instead of being a passive recipient of information (Morgan, Elbe, & Curiel, 2009). Consumers have started placing value on the experiences that are co-created by different actors (Plé, 2015). Thus, the value of a product or service is now subjectively perceived by every customer, so it becomes value-in-context (Plé, 2015).

According to Assiouras et al. (2019), co-production is valuable for tourism, as it has a twofold importance: Firstly, it can increase re-visit intentions, but it can also lead to positive customer citizenship behavior, such as favorable feedback and advocacy. Plus, because tourism now operates as an ecosystem with different actors who have distinctive roles and co-creation is highly valued, synergies to confront global challenges, like the pandemic we are going through, can be fostered (Giannopoulos, Skourtis, Kalliga, Dontas-Chrysis, & Paschalidis, 2020). Lastly, it has been found that there is a direct relationship between a website's quality, users' attitudes toward the website and their willingness to participate in online co-creation experiences (Jiménez-Barreto & Campo-Martínez, 2017).

Individuals' willingness to participate in online co-creation experiences, which is a frequently studied outcome of people's experience in online platforms (Elsharnouby and Mahrous, 2015), and a valuable construct in the field of tourism (Assiouras et.al), could potentially be affected by online travel inspiration. So, *H5: Online travel inspiration affects individuals' willingness to co-create*

## Behavioral intentions

Behaviors are also researched in relation to traveling and online means. Chen and Tsai (2007) highlight that tourist behaviors include the selection of a destination, future evaluations, and behavioral intentions. Behavioral intentions are viewed as “the causal antecedents of corresponding behavior” according to the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 2012, p. 450). Chen and Tsai (2007) clarify that behavioral intentions refer to intentions to revisit a place or recommend it to others. In alignment with this statement, Chen and Chen (2010) present some categories of behavioral intentions in the tourism field and they mention the intention to revisit a destination, to recommend or share positive comments about it with others. It is, thus, clear that behavioral intentions can take distinctive forms and depend on the context. As Hsu and Crotts (2006) mention, intention is “an individual’s expectation about his/her behavior in a given setting” (p.280), so it is again clear that the context plays indeed an important role.

Elements such as users’ satisfaction (Chen & Chen, 2010), trust (Gu, Lee & Suh, 2009) or destination image (Chen & Tsai, 2007) play a role in the formation of behavioral intentions, and it is useful to now examine online travel inspiration instead. Taking into account the online nature of the experience, behavioral intentions relevant to the platform rather than the actual destination are to be evaluated in particular.

H6: Online travel inspiration affects individuals’ intentions to (re)visit the destination.

## METHODOLOGY

To test the above six (6) hypotheses a survey was employed, with a sample of 249 participants (157 female, 89 male, 1 binary and 2 did not reveal their gender), that were recruited through social media networking platforms and were asked to complete a questionnaire relating to the use of an online inspiration platform for a tourist destination.

The online travel inspiration ten-item scale used in this study, is the one by Böttger et.al (2017) ( $\alpha=0,949$ ). Travel risk perception was measured with a 11-item scale by Nazneen et.al (2020) ( $\alpha=0,887$ ). Openness to experience Lee and Ashton (2018) ( $\alpha= 0.840$ ). Respondents’ previous visits, intent or/and desire to visit Greece were binary scales, following the example of Hsu and Crotts (2006). The emotional outcomes a 12-item semantic-differential scale was used (Ruiz-Mafe et.al, 2018) ( $\alpha=910$ ). For willingness to participate in online co-creation experiences , a 3-item scale ( $\alpha=0,901$ ) was used (Jiménez-Barreto & Campo-Martínez, 2018). Intentions to visit/revisit the destination was measured by Gu et.al’s (2009) 3-item scale ( $\alpha=0.922$ ).

The questionnaire ended with the questions regarding demographics. The response anchors for the Likert-type scales ranged from 1 (= Strongly disagree) to 7 (=Strongly agree).

## RESULTS

A simple linear regression was used to test if **travel risk perception** significantly predicts **travel inspiration**. The regression equation for predicting online travel inspiration based on travel risk perception is: Online travel inspiration= (0.152 x Travel risk perception) + 4,168. The regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0,23$ ,  $F(1, 245) = 5,839$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ). It was found that travel risk perception significantly predicted travel inspiration.

A simple linear regression was used to test if **openness to experience** significantly predicts **travel inspiration**, giving a result with no statistical significance ( $\beta = 0.202$ ,  $p = 0.112$ ).

Independent samples t-tests were performed to evaluate if desire, and intent to visit a country affect are an antecedent of **travel inspiration**, without producing any statistically significant results. There was no significant effect for whether participants desired to visit the country or not,  $t(80) = 0,082$ ,  $p = .0,935$ , despite people, who desired to visit ( $M = 5,0125$ ,  $SD = 1,07$ ) attaining higher scores than individuals who didn't desire to visit ( $M = 4,95$ ,  $SD = 0,49$ ). Similarly, there was no significant effect for whether participants intended to visit the country or not,  $t(80) = 0,361$ ,  $p = .0,719$ , despite people, who intended to visit ( $M = 5,02$ ,  $SD = 1,08$ ) attaining higher scores than individuals who didn't intend to visit ( $M = 4,87$ ,  $SD = 0,94$ ). Another independent t-test was performed to examine if a respondent's previous visit to the country led to a different level of travel inspiration compared to people who hadn't visited the country before, revealing that people who hadn't visited the country before, were more inspired by the online platform providing online travel experience ( $M = 5,72$ ,  $SD = 0,52$ ) compared to the participants who had visited the country before ( $M = 4,84$ ,  $SD = 1,09$ ), demonstrating significantly higher online travel inspiration scores  $t(80) = -3,122$ ,  $p = .003$ .

A simple linear regression was used to test if **travel inspiration** significantly predicts **willingness to co-create**. The regression equation for predicting willingness to co-create based on travel inspiration is: willingness to co-create =  $(0.714 \times \text{Travel Inspiration}) + 0,662$ . The regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0,370$ ,  $F(1, 245) = 144,112$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) revealing that travel inspiration significantly predicted individuals' willingness to co-create.

Another simple linear regression was used to test if **travel inspiration** significantly predicts **positive emotional outcomes** towards the destination. The regression equation for predicting emotions based on travel inspiration is: Emotions =  $(0.526 \times \text{Travel Inspiration}) + 2,588$ . The regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0,423$ ,  $F(1, 245) = 179,682$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). It was found that travel inspiration significantly predicted positive emotional outcomes towards the destination.

Finally, a simple linear regression was used to test if **travel inspiration** significantly predicts **intentions to (re)visit** the destination. The regression equation for predicting intentions to (re)visit based on travel inspiration is: intentions to (re)visit =  $(0.738 \times \text{Travel Inspiration}) + 0,904$ . The regression was statistically significant ( $R^2 = 0,418$ ,  $F(1, 245) = 175,800$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). It was found that travel inspiration significantly predicted intentions to (re)visit the destination.

## CONCLUSIONS and DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of this research the first hypothesis is accepted, which is in par with the literature, indicating that travel risk perception related to Covid-19 highly influences attitudes and behaviors towards traveling (Nazneen et. al, 2020; Giancarlo et.al, 2020). Plus, the link between travel risk perception and travel motivation has also been established, in the study of Jia et.al (2018).

As for the second hypothesis, that openness to experience affects online travel inspiration, the result was not the expected. Knowing that openness to experience is a factor that influences online Consumer Engagement (Islam et.al (2017), a variable that presents similarities with online travel inspiration and that openness to experience is positively related to the desire to explore new things (McCrae & Costa, 1991), it was expected that openness would also affect inspiration.

Findings further showed that people's previous visit to the country affected online travel inspiration. Jiménez- Barreto et.al (2018) have shown that previous physical experience at a destination is closely related to users' online experience, whereas Hsu and Crotts (2006) found that it was an influential factor for the variables under study, so there was a high



possibility that it could be an influential factor for online travel inspiration as well. This finding supports preceding research in similar contexts.

The outcomes of online travel inspiration extend previous studies: online travel inspiration leads to more positive emotions about the destination. The importance of emotional outcomes of tourism experiences (Gnoth, 1997), and their effect on sharing travel experiences online (Yan et.al, 2018) has been previously supported, extending this further to include the construct of online travel inspiration and experiences. Also, willingness to participate in online co-creation experiences is another consequence of online travel inspiration. This significantly extends the current body of knowledge, as willingness to co-create has been only associated with design and quality features (Jiménez-Barreto & Campo-Martínez, 2017; Elsharnouby & Mahrous, 2015). Finally, the intention to (re)visit the destination can be predicted by the online travel inspiration and this could be potentially attributed to reasons, such as the value and satisfaction tourists receive are key influential factors for behavioral intentions (Chen & Chen, 2010), while Chen and Tsai (2007) have shown that destination image affects behavioral intentions. Online travel inspiration is now another factor to consider as an antecedent of behavioral intentions. To sum up, this study confirms the part of the conceptual model that focuses on online travel inspiration and its consequences and reveals the need for more research on its antecedents.

## **Statement of Key Contributions**

The key contributions of this research is the gain of a deeper understanding of a new, yet highly pertinent construct in the field of tourism marketing and consumer behavior, considering the dearth of research on online travel inspiration, or online inspiration and travel inspiration, particularly during a time of fear and uncertainty on the part of the consumer of tourism services and goods, and the overall dire impact this pandemic has had on the tourism industry. More specifically the revelation that travel risk perception significantly predicts online travel inspiration and the fact that there is a positive relationship between the two constructs, indicates that individuals that are more fearful of the dangers and risks associated with traveling can be inspired through the use of online platforms. This extends current knowledge that restricted tourism marketing communication recommendations to people with higher tolerance for risk, such as novelty seekers (Lepp & Gibson, 2003) to how to target consumer groups that are not prone to take risks. Furthermore, this research indicates that new visitors of a tourist destination are more likely to show higher online travel inspiration levels, leading to more positive behavioral, attitudinal and affective outcomes, which further guides relevant-decision making. Finally, the outcomes of positive feelings towards the destination, intention to (re)visit it and willingness to co-create, solidify the positive effect of online travel inspiration as a tool to overcome the negative effects of COVID-19 and potentially the effects risk-related situations (such as the situation in Ukraine), particularly among non-risk-taking individuals, such as families, elderly, vulnerable groups etc.

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