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Understanding Romanian Generational Preferences and Travel Decision-Making When Choosing a Rural Destination

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered consumer behavior and reshaped the tourism industry, particularly impacting travel destination choices. Pre-pandemic, travelers prioritized experiences and adventure, often overlooking health and safety concerns. However, during and after the pandemic, health, hygiene, and the COVID-19 situation emerged as crucial factors in choosing a rural destination, alongside economic considerations. The current study analyzed the tourists' preferences in the North-West development region of Romania when choosing a rural destination. An online survey was conducted, and 563 questionnaires were validated in the end. The principal component analysis used to analyze the collected data led to a two-factor solution: "sanitary and administrative" and "economic and social". Comparative analysis based on age showed significant differences in education, income, and family composition between Generation Y and Generation Z. Preferences for domestic destinations and participation in festivals were higher among Generation Z, while interest in international travel was comparable between the generations. These findings provide insights into the evolving travel behaviors and preferences of different age groups in the wake of the pandemic.

Keywords: rural tourism; tourists' preferences; Generation Z; Generation Y; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Tourism represents an essential aspect of modern life, being a complex and dynamic activity that has evolved significantly in recent decades, with major implications for the economy, society, and culture. Tourism is not limited to leisure or business travel but also serves as a means of learning about and exploring other cultures and social communities.

The elimination of geographical and cultural barriers has led to an increase in tourism worldwide. The World Tourism Organization highlights the continuous growth in the number of tourists, a fact attributed to the significant diversification of the industry in recent years [1]. This growth is also due to the multitude of options available to tourists, with offers becoming increasingly complex, thus attracting a more diverse range of consumers [2,3].

Tourism choices are influenced by a number of factors, both internal (such as personal needs and consumption habits) and external (including destination image, prestige, socio-economic elements, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and marketing strategies) [4]. The global development of tourism is notably shaped by overarching forces like globalization and the continuous evolution of information technologies [5]. Generational factors have been observed as important influences on tourism preferences and

behaviors, with technology significantly impacting the views of younger tourists on travel destinations [6–8].

Understanding these consumer preferences is crucial, particularly for younger generations, who significantly influence various industries. These groups, characterized by distinct attitudes, values, and behaviors, wield significant influence on various industries. As key drivers of economic activity, the preferences of Generations Y and Z shape trends, redefine brand expectations, and fuel innovation [7,9].

Generation Y, also known as Millennials, encompasses individuals born between 1980 and 1995. They have the highest education rate, with over 60% possessing a bachelor's degree. When it comes to tourism, they search for unique and personalized experiences that are ecologically sustainable, supporting local communities and cultural diversity, but are also attracted to adventure [10]. They are willing to pay more to experience unique and authentic things because they have the necessary income to do so.

Generation Z comprises individuals born between 1996 and 2012 and is also known as the Founders Generation, Post-Millennials, or iGeneration. Generation Z is often interested in tourist experiences that are interactive, personalized, and allow them to share their experiences on their preferred social platforms. Their preferences regarding tourism services revolve around unique, authentic, and Instagrammable experiences. They seek innovative services and are always on the lookout for major events or spectacular landscapes [11]. They often opt for thematic, educational, or volunteer trips that enable them to learn and connect with other cultures and communities. They are frequently interested in eco-friendly and sustainable travel that minimizes environmental impact and supports local communities [12]. However, being raised in the digital era, Generation Z members seek tourism services that offer easy access to technology, such as mobile applications to plan and manage their trips [13].

They are highly informed because they conduct extensive research and weigh their options before purchasing goods or services. They always seek the best deal and prefer purchasing through social media compared to other generations [7,9].

In the last few years, the multifaceted aspects impacting tourism preferences and behaviors, particularly among young individuals, have become ever more present. Technology is woven into travel experiences, and understanding the significance of aligning marketing strategies and tourism services with the modern preferences of the youth is crucial for major shareholders in this field [14,15].

The aim of the current research was to identify the factors that influence Romanian tourists' decisions about choosing a rural destination in the context of COVID-19. The objectives of this manuscript were to determine if there are significant differences between the perceptions of the factors analyzed in choosing a rural destination towards Gen Z and Gen Y and to determine if there are any other demographic characteristics that influence the perception of the analyzed factors.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Travel Behavior of Gen Y and Z Tourists in the Context of the Pandemic

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, various industries have been significantly impacted by changes in consumer behavior regarding the main factors considered in the process of decision-making [16]. The pandemic, together with these changes, has significantly reshaped the tourism industry and travel destinations. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers often based their travel destination choices on factors such as popular tourist attractions, cultural experiences, and adventure opportunities. The emphasis was typically on creating memorable experiences and exploring new places without significant concerns about health and safety. Travelers were more likely to prioritize crowded tourist spots, city centers, and events [17].

However, when it comes to the decisions leading to choosing a travel destination, consumer behavior has shifted significantly during and after the pandemic. Thus, several important aspects taken into account by travelers were health and hygiene and the

COVID-19 situation in and around their considered destination [18–20]. Similar to the pre-pandemic period, economic factors are still playing an important role in decision-making, partly due to the economic uncertainties the population was subjected to during the pandemic [18–21].

In the context of these evolving consumer behaviors, Generations Y and Z have emerged as key players in reshaping the travel landscape post-COVID-19, especially since they make up a growing percentage of the total population and, consequently, tourist numbers [22]. Although both generations share certain similarities in their travel behavior, differences rooted in their unique historical contexts and formative experiences also shape their preferences. Before the pandemic, studies underlined the preferences of both generations when it comes to travel, with both being motivated by gaining new experiences and paying attention to the overall cost of the journey [23,24].

To this extent, tourism worldwide has abruptly decreased after the outbreak of the pandemic, as a consequence of lockdown measures and sanitary as well as economic concerns from travelers. Research conducted in the first period of the pandemic has shown a shift towards nature-oriented tourism and a decrease in popularity for crowded places and popular destinations, with consumers choosing their personal vehicles as the preferred means of transportation while simultaneously opting for short-term and short-distance trips [25–27]. These trends have also been observed in tourists belonging to the Y and Z generations from across the world. In the Czech Republic, a study analyzing the impact of COVID-19 at its outbreak and after one year on the travel behavior and concerns of Generation Z concluded that travelers have become more aware of the health-associated risks over the one-year period [25]. Moreover, Generation Z preferred individual trips and accommodation, admitting that the pandemic and lack of travel have significantly impacted their quality of life while making them more conscious of the sanitary concerns and pandemic-related safety measures implemented at their destination of choice [13].

A large survey conducted on Generations Y and Z showed increased fears in both generations when it comes to the sanitary aspects of traveling during the pandemic [28]. Most respondents admitted being anxious about contracting the virus during travel (20% for Gen Z and 17% for Gen Y) or being quarantined at their return home (16% for Gen Z and 13% for Gen Y). Additionally, other reported fears were flights being cancelled, transmitting the disease at their return home, and being denied access to a country [5]. When it comes to the economic aspect of the trip, Generation Z was more likely to pay more for a trip to a destination without COVID-19 restrictions or significant risk, compared with Generation Y (58% vs. 25%) [28].

Moreover, Gen Y also has a tendency to take additional precautions when it comes to traveling, with a study conducted in the UK revealing that 44% of Millennials would book their destination via a travel agent as a safety measure against unexpected events [29]. However, a later study conducted on Serbian Generations Y and Z showed that most respondents preferred to organize their trips on their own, with the percentage of Generation Z members being greater than that of the Millennials [30]. Younger respondents were also more likely to agree to pay an additional fee for COVID-19 tests in order to avoid quarantine and be able to travel freely, compared to older tourists [29]. Moreover, Generation Z paid more attention to flexible purchase terms, such as COVID-19 insurance or the possibility of receiving a full refund in case the pandemic situation became unpredicted [31].

A study conducted by the European Trade Commission analyzed the travel trends and behaviors of Generation Z [22]. The main reasons why the respondents chose a European destination were tied to economical and sanitary aspects, such as value-for-money destinations (47%), availability of cheap flights (45%), safe and secure destinations (42%), and finding cheap accommodation easily (32%) [22]. These findings were later confirmed by another study comparing the factors influencing the decision-making process of Generations Y and Z [32]. Research showed that both categories were somewhat equally concerned about the travel destination being safe, having an adequate quality of service, being affordable, and being budget-friendly. Discrepancies were revealed in terms of other

aspects, with Generation Z being more preoccupied with the economic conditions of the country/region they were visiting, the social life of the local population, and the provided entertainment facilities compared with respondents from Generation Y [32].

The pandemic has changed the preferences of tourists, orienting them towards tourism activities in nature, with a reduced impact on the environment compared to traditional tourist hotspots [33]. The preference for practicing sustainable, environmentally friendly tourism in domestic travel was observed among Generations Y and Z [34].

Furthermore, the following questions arise: which are the factors that influence Romanian tourists when choosing a rural destination? Are there any significant differences between Generation Y and Generation Z?

2.2. Rural Tourism through the Eyes of Gen Y and Z

In the context of the pandemic, rural tourism destinations have seen a surge in popularity in recent years, recorded among members of Generations Y and Z as well [35,36]. Factors tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as health and safety concerns, crowded spaces, remote work, and social isolation, have led more and more tourists towards rural areas [37,38].

Research investigating this phenomenon has pointed out several key aspects and factors important to deciding to travel to rural destinations, which reflect the characteristics of Generations Y and Z. Particular experiences and activities tied to various cultural, gastronomical, and cultural features appeal to the desire of Generations Y and Z for unique and authentic experiences [39,40]. These generations also pay significant attention to sustainable travel habits, and supporting local communities plays an important role in their travel habits [35–37].

Nevertheless, as the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, it seemed that the travel trends developed during the pandemic and the changes it brought were likely to stay, as rural tourism continues to develop at a steady pace while attracting a diverse base of tourists. This prompts the stakeholders in the industry to diversify their offers. Additionally, investing in infrastructure improvements, conservation efforts, and cultural preservation projects can enhance the appeal of rural destinations while ensuring their long-term viability. Implementing policies that promote responsible tourism practices, such as ecotourism certifications and sustainability standards, can help safeguard the natural and cultural resources that attract visitors to rural areas.

While previous studies have examined the travel behaviors of these generations, few have focused specifically on rural tourism destinations or considered the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature by investigating how the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the priorities and preferences of Generations Y and Z in the tourism sector. By exploring the impact of health and safety concerns, the desire for outdoor experiences, and the shift towards sustainable tourism practices, this research sheds light on the changing landscape of travel behavior in response to global crises and offers practical insights for stakeholders in the tourism industry.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Area

The current research was in the North-West development region of Romania, known for its potential for rural tourism. An analysis conducted on the domestic tourism of Romania revealed that in 2019, of the total number of domestic tourist arrivals in Romania, 15.2% were in the North-West development region of Romania. The regions that recorded the largest number of arrivals were the Centre region and the South-East region. The Centre region of Romania is well known for its cultural, historical, and rural tourism, while the South-East region includes the seaside area. Regarding the number of domestic tourists who arrived in agritourist guesthouses from rural areas, it was observed that 20.8%

(244,284 tourists) out of 1,171,790 domestic tourists' arrivals were in the North-West development region, with an average length of stay of 2 days (Table 1) [41].

Table 1. Overview of Romanian domestic tourism.

Development Region	Total Tourist Arrivals (Number)	Tourist Arrivals in Agritourist Guesthouses (Number)	Average Length of Stay in Agritourist Guesthouses (Days)
North-West	1,494,798	244,284	2.00
Centre	2,645,097	379,473	2.05
North-East	1,197,264	212,653	1.93
South-East	1,782,430	80,105	2.11
South-Muntenia	943,004	91,466	1.70
Bucuresti-Ilfov	1,012,914	3652	1.18
South-West Oltenia	748,697	90,180	2.07
West	9,824,204	69,977	1.81
Total	1,494,798	1,171,790	1.85

3.2. Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

To achieve the aim of the current research, an online survey was conducted among residents of the North-West development region of Romania, older than 18 years, from May to October 2020. The collected data could be divided into three main categories: (i) sanitary conditions (8 items); (ii) economic aspects (4 items); and (iii) socio-demographic characteristics. To identify to what extent the sanitary conditions and the economic factors influence respondents desire to choose a rural tourism destination during the 2021 summer season, the 12 items were evaluated on a type 5 Likert scale, where 1 means not important at all and 5 means very important. A pilot study was conducted on 35 respondents in order to check the reliability of the items evaluated on a five-point Likert scale. Field experts verified the questionnaire to ensure content validity [42]. The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit tourists from the research area. The sample size was validated based on post hoc power analysis using G*power 3.1.9.4 (effect size 0.15, significance level 0.05, power 95%) [43]. A filter question related to the residency county was added in order to select the respondents.

3.3. Sample Characteristics

A total of 563 surveys were validated and analyzed. Of the total number of respondents, 32% were represented by residents from Generation Z, while 68% were from Generation Y. The analysis of the socio-demographic profile revealed that in general, the respondents were female (67.2%), with a university degree (77.8%), and with children under 18 years of age (52.5%) (Table 2).

Table 2. Socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

Characteristics	Variable	Frequencies (%)
Gender	Female	392 (67.2%)
	Male	171 (32.8%)
Education	High school	125 (22.2%)
	University degree	438 (77.8%)
Income (RON/month)	<4500	239 (42.4%)
	>4500	324 (57.6%)
Children under 18 years	Yes	296 (52.5%)
	No	267 (47.5%)

3.4. Data Analysis

Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was run to reduce the dimensionality of the 12 items used to determine the factors that influence respondents' decisions on choosing a rural destination. Factors with eigenvalues higher than 1 and items with factor loadings above 0.4 were retrained, convergent validity being confirmed [44].

Principal component analysis (PCA) is a method of data reduction where the components are determined by considering all the variance of the observed variables, with this variance fully reflected in the solution [45]. This is accomplished by transforming a new set of variables that are uncorrelated and ordered in such a way that the initial few components explain most of the variance [46]. Cronbach's alpha (α) for the entire scale was 0.884, indicating good internal consistency for the overall set of items. Harman's single-factor test was utilized to confirm the existence of common method bias [47]. The first single factor in the unrotated factor matrix explained 44.7% of the variance, below the suggested 50% threshold, indicating that the common method bias is not a concern for the collected data and results of this study. Cross-tabulation and Pearson's χ^2 statistics were employed to delineate the socio-demographic characteristics of two groups (Z generation and Y generation), considering factors such as gender, education, monthly income, children in the house, preferences for a domestic destination, preferences for an international destination, and the existence of different festivals.

4. Results

4.1. Factors Affecting the Decision-Making Process

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy for the data was 0.893, which is considered quite high. This suggests that the data are suitable for conducting principal component analysis (PCA). A KMO value close to 1 indicates that the patterns of correlation are strong enough for PCA to be effective. Additionally, Bartlett's test of sphericity is statistically significant, with an approximate chi-square value of 2901.207 for 66 degrees of freedom and a *p*-value < 0.05. This indicates that there are significant correlations among the variables in the dataset, further supporting the appropriateness of using PCA. Both the high KMO measure and the significant Bartlett's test suggest that principal component analysis can be a meaningful approach for reducing the dimensionality of the data while retaining important information. The principal component analysis led to a two-component solution, explaining 55.4% of the variance (Table 3).

Table 3. Principal component analysis.

Eigenvalue	Variance %	Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Mean	SD
5.365	34.978	Sanitary and administrative α = 0.881 Mean = 4.05 SD = 0.798	Sanitary measures in the accommodation units (S1)	0.811	4.11	0.964
			Pandemic situation (S2)	0.776	4.25	0.948
			COVID-19 insurance (S3)	0.724	4.00	1.051
			Self-isolation at return (S4)	0.714	4.25	1.019
			COVID-19 test (S5)	0.690	4.04	1.115
			Sanitary and safety measures at the destination (S6)	0.668	4.16	0.920
			Visa requirements (S7)	0.650	3.84	1.095
			Health condition (S8)	0.593	4.21	0.961
1.293	20.503	Economic and social α = 0.727 Mean = 3.56 SD = 0.879	Working schedule (E1)	0.803	3.53	1.240
			Expenses (E2)	0.792	3.80	1.044
			Income (E3)	0.763	3.66	1.095
			Special offers (E4)	0.438	3.58	1.097
Total variance %	55.481	α = 0.884				

The first component comprised eight items and was named "sanitary and administrative". This component explains 34.9% of the variance and has a mean of 4.05 ± 0.798, indicating that this factor is quite important in their decision-making process on choosing a tourist destination for the next season. It was noticed that the pandemic situation (S2) (4.25 ± 0.948), self-isolation at return (S4) (4.25 ± 1.019), and health condition (S3) (4.21 ± 0.961) were the most important aspects in their decision-making process. The aspects related to sanitary and safety measures in the destination (S6) (4.16 ± 0.960) and the sanitary measures in the accommodation units (S1) (4.11 ± 0.964) were not neglected.

The second component, named "economic and social", comprised four items and explained 20.5% of the variance. It was noticed that the most important aspects were the expenses (travel, accommodation, food, beverage, etc.) (E2) (3.80 ± 1.044) and the income level (E3) (3.66 ± 1.095). The existence of special offers and discounts are also factors that may affect the decision-making process (3.58 ± 1.097).

The Cronbach's alpha values for both sets of factors are relatively high, indicating good internal consistency or reliability among the items within each factor. Sanitary factors have an α of 0.881, indicating high internal consistency among the variables within this component, and economic factors have an α of 0.727, indicating slightly lower but still acceptable internal consistency among the variables within this component.

4.2. Gen Z vs. Gen Y: A Comparative Look

Subsequently, the respondents were grouped based on their age: Generation Z and Generation Y. A comparative analysis regarding the socio-demographic profile was run. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of gender ($p > 0.05$). However, it was noticed that the group representing Generation Y is more educated; 88.8% of the members have a university degree ($p < 0.05$). Statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were noticed for the income and presence of children under 18 years of age in the families. The Generation Z group is mainly represented by females (65.5%), with a monthly income below RON 4200 (60%), and no children (57.8%). The Generation Y group is represented mainly by females (71.5%); they have a higher monthly income (65.8% above RON 4200), and in 57.2% of the cases, they also have children (Table 4).

To determine their travel behavior, their preferences for choosing a domestic or international destination that offers the possibility to participate in fairs or different festivals were tested. The results indicated that the Z generation prefers domestic destinations (70.6%) compared with the Y generation (50.4%), with the differences being statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The existence of different fairs and festivals represents an attraction factor to visit a certain destination for 52.3% of the respondents from the Z generation, compared with 35.0% of the respondents from the Y generation ($p < 0.05$). The attraction for an international destination is quite the same for both groups, around 57% ($p > 0.05$).

Furthermore, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was utilized to determine the presence of significant differences among perceptions about the factors that influence the decision-making process between the two generational groups. A *p*-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant (Table 5). The results indicated that the Y generation is more preoccupied with sanitary aspects compared (4.17 ± 0.689) with the Z generation (3.96 ± 0.848), with the differences being statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Regarding the economic and social component, there were no noticeable statistically significant differences between the two generations ($p > 0.05$). Subsequently, since significant differences in terms of education, income, and children in the house between the two generations were found, a comparative analysis of respondents' perceptions of the two factors was run based on the Mann–Whitney U test. The results indicated statistically significant differences in the case of the "sanitary and administrative" factor for all the education and income characteristics ($p < 0.05$), while for the factor "economic and social", just for the variable income, the difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). There were no statistically significant differences between the group with children and the group without children regarding attitude towards the two analyzed factors ($p > 0.05$). The results pointed out that the respondents who were more

educated (4.18 ± 0.652) and with higher income (4.23 ± 0.658) were more preoccupied with the sanitary and administrative factors during the decision-making process of visiting a rural destination. As the level of income increased, the respondents were less worried about aspects related to the "economic and social" factor ($p > 0.05$).

Table 4. Comparing Gen Z and Gen Y.

Characteristics	Z Generation Frequency (Percent) (*n* = 180, 32.0%)	Y Generation Frequency (Percent) (*n* = 383, 68.0%)	*p*-Value
Gender			
Female	118 (65.5%)	274 (71.5%)	>0.05
Male	62 (34.5%)	109 (38.5%)	
Education			
High school	82 (45.5%)	43 (11.2%)	<0.05
University degree	98 (54.6%)	340 (88.8%)	
Income (RON/month)			
<4200	108 (60.0%)	131 (34.2%)	<0.05
>4200	72 (40.0%)	252 (65.8%)	
Children			
No	104 (57.8%)	163 (42.6%)	<0.05
Yes	76 (42.2%)	220 (57.4%)	
Domestic destination			
No	53 (29.4%)	190 (49.6%)	<0.05
Yes	127 (70.6%)	193 (50.4%)	
International destination			
No	77 (42.7%)	164 (42.8%)	>0.05
Yes	103 (57.3%)	219 (57.2%)	
Existence of festivals and fairs			
No	86 (47.7%)	249 (65.0%)	<0.05
Yes	94 (52.3%)	134 (35.0%)	

Table 5. Comparative analysis of perceptions between the two groups.

Variable	Sanitary and Administrative	Economic and Social
Generation		
Z generation	3.96 ± 0.848	3.68 ± 0.830
Y generations	4.17 ± 0.689	3.63 ± 0.872
p-value	*p* < 0.05	*p* > 0.05
Education		
High school	3.83 ± 0.973	3.54 ± 0.877
University degree	4.18 ± 0.652	3.67 ± 0.852
p-value	*p* < 0.05	*p* > 0.05
Income		
<4200	3.93 ± 0.828	3.73 ± 0.842
>4200	4.23 ± 0.658	3.58 ± 0.866
p-value	*p* < 0.05	*p* < 0.05
Children		
No	4.09 ± 0.705	3.66 ± 0.823
Yes	4.12 ± 0.787	3.63 ± 890
p-value	*p* > 0.05	*p* > 0.05

5. Discussion

This paper analyzed the factors influencing Romanian residents from the North-West development region belonging to Generations Y and Z in the decision-making process to choose a rural destination for the 2021 summer season. Concerns about sanitation emerged as crucial during this period, driven by factors such as the local pandemic situation, individual health conditions, and the implementation of sanitary measures in destinations. Interestingly, the younger Z generation appeared to exhibit less concern about sanitation compared to their predecessors, the Y generation, similar to previous studies [29]. This difference may be attributed to the Z generation's preference for domestic destinations, where stringent sanitary measures such as COVID-19 testing and self-isolation are often not obligatory.

When it comes to the socio-economic profiles of the two generations, members of the Z generation earned significantly less than their Y generation counterparts, which might influence them to pay increased attention to the cost of their holiday. To this extent, a large multinational study of the European Trade Commission also revealed that the members of the Z generation are keen on saving money on their trips, either by cheap flights, accommodation, or overall lower spending in their travel destination [22]. With lower average incomes compared to older generations, Gen Z individuals often prioritize travel destinations that are nearby and more accessible, with recent studies showing that most Gen Z individuals traveling regularly do not come from high-income households [48]. As a result, Gen Z travelers exhibit a propensity towards destinations within a shorter distance from their homes, allowing for easier and more affordable travel experiences. This preference for nearby destinations not only reflects their financial realities but also aligns with their desire for convenience and the opportunity to explore diverse experiences within their immediate surroundings.

Moreover, these findings were later confirmed in a study conducted on Generations Y and Z participants regarding the hypothetical attendance of a music festival by being shown pictures of the event [49]. A good value for the paid money, as well as personal safety, standard hygiene, and cleanliness of the overall festival and infrastructure, ranked highest among the factors influencing the decision to attend the festival [49]. Further research on this matter has shown that members of Generation Z were willing to pay more for additional security measures against COVID-19 when traveling during the pandemic [50].

A notable shift in travel preferences between Generation Z and Y was observed, particularly regarding domestic travel. Unlike their predecessors, Generation Z displays a stronger preference for exploring domestic destinations rather than venturing abroad [51]. There are a number of reasons why Generation Z travels domestically rather than abroad, such as economic concerns, environmental issues, and a desire for real experiences near home. Interestingly, individuals without children and younger tourists tend to be less concerned about hygiene standards during travel, prioritizing novel experiences over luxury accommodations [52,53]. In contrast to Generation Y, who takes a more circumspect approach, Generation Z may be more ready to compromise on strict hygienic standards, which may explain why they favor domestic travel. This pattern shows how age disparities and shifting social norms are influencing the dynamics of travel behavior. Understanding Generation Z's unique objectives and preferences is crucial for stakeholders hoping to serve this quickly growing consumer segment as it continues to exert influence on the travel industry.

Also, the Z generation is more attracted by the existence of cultural events such as local festivals, underscoring their desire for new experiences. Through involvement in local festivals and cultural events, Generation Z has a clear predisposition towards cultural immersion and experiential travel. Twenge et al. [54] indicate that Generation Z values experiences over material belongings, looking for genuine and significant interactions that support identity formation and personal growth. According to a Pew Research Center research study [55], which emphasized the significance of singular experiences in influencing this generation's travel preferences, this tendency is consistent with their need for

novelty and adventure. Local celebrations of cultural history and traditions, known for their vibrant celebrations, present a chance for Generation Z tourists to interact directly with a variety of communities and discover new cultures and foods [56]. The digital era has made it easier for people to learn about these kinds of events, which means that Generation Z may find and attend festivals that align with their values and interests [57]. Because of this, Generation Z's innate desire to seek out genuine and enriching experiences has led to the emergence of cultural events as a prominent factor affecting travel selections [58]. This generation is more interested in experiential tourism, and in this instance, the younger generation's travel tastes and behaviors are greatly influenced by cultural immersion and the desire to take part in local festivities. Cultural gatherings and regional celebrations act as stimulants for Generation Z visitors, satisfying their curiosity about novel experiences and fostering a more profound comprehension of other cultures worldwide. When it comes to the motivations leading to the decision to attend a festival or event, the expected attractions, as well as socialization and spending time both with friends and other groups, have ranked highest among the factors influencing Generation Z [59]. Additionally, the overall feeling and atmosphere at the festival also played an important role, while the perceived popularity of the festival was given less importance [59]. A particular sector seeing significant growth over the last few years is represented by active sports tourism, with more and more members of the Z generation taking an increased interest in it [60]. This further underlines the need and desire of this generation for intense and unique experiences.

Being a generation strongly interconnected through various social media platforms, the internet, and travel sites or blogs plays an important role in the decision-making process of Generation Z when it comes to choosing a travel destination. Thus, when it comes to new travel ideas and planning trips, websites, either official or specialized in travel reviews, along with social media platforms and blogs, represent the main sources of inspiration for Generation Z [22,61].

Economic aspects are also important factors that influence the decision to travel; however, there were no statistically significant differences between the Z generation and the Y generation.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant shifts in consumer behavior and preferences within the tourism industry, impacting the decision-making process for choosing a tourism destination and travel behavior. Prioritizing health, hygiene, and safety measures has become essential for tourists, alongside economic considerations. Generations Y and Z have emerged as key players in shaping post-pandemic travel landscapes, displaying distinct preferences and behaviors influenced by their unique historical contexts and formative experiences.

The results of this research conducted in the North-West development region of Romania highlight the two main factors affecting the decision-making process when choosing a rural destination during 2021: "sanitary and administrative" and "economic and social". This study pointed out the dynamic nature of tourists' behavior, particularly due to unexpected factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the importance of understanding socio-economic factors, generational differences, and the perceived security and safety risks in the decision-making process when choosing a destination. These are valuable data for future product development strategies in order to develop a competitive tourism destination by customizing unique experiences to meet each generation's preferences, such as offering flexible booking options for Generation Z and emphasizing experiential travel for Generation Y. This study fills a gap in previous research by examining how the travel preferences of Generations Y and Z in rural tourism destinations have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the impact of health and safety concerns, the desire for outdoor experiences, and the shift towards sustainable tourism practices. This research sheds light on the evolving travel behavior in response to global crises and provides practical insights for stakeholders in the tourism industry.

This study is not without limitations. This study mainly focuses on rural tourism destinations, which may limit the generalization of the findings to other types of tourism destinations. At the same time, this study focused on sanitary and economic factors, neglecting other factors such as cultural, environmental, and personal factors, which could also play a significant role and be analyzed during future research. This study utilized an online survey, which may introduce selection bias since respondents who have access to the internet and are comfortable with online technology are more likely to participate.

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