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## Finnish Tourists' Responsible Travel Intentions in Times of COVID-19: Implications for Travel Intermediaries

**Abstract:** *Tourists are more acutely aware of their environmental, socio-cultural and economic responsibility towards a destination when on holidays and this has fuelled in the need for sustainability to be incorporated as important component of their trip. This change in customer behaviour, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, requires travel intermediaries to find alternative ways of creating value for their customers beyond good service and staff expertise. This research investigates the significance of responsible travel for Finnish tourists when booking with travel intermediaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using an online questionnaire, data was collected from 1,096 Finnish travellers to understand their perceptions towards responsible travel during the pandemic and the implications for travel intermediaries. The results revealed that responsibility was an important feature of Finnish travellers purchasing decisions. This research can support travel intermediaries in understanding how to develop and market sustainable and responsible tourism products, which contribute to the longevity of the tourism industry.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism, Responsible Tourism, Travel Intermediation, Finns' Tourist Behaviour

### 1 Introduction

Disintermediation resulted in travel intermediaries specialising and possessing knowledge in unique holiday experiences (Dolnicar & Laesser, 2007; Lawton & Page, 1997). Sustainable tourism is a critical area where intermediaries can become knowledge experts as this is becoming an important criterion for the purchase of travel (Ritalahti, 2021). However, the sustainable tourism product is multifaceted and encompasses many elements with information not always being easily available. For example, when booking travel, it is not only about the mode of transport and number of miles to the destination but also the transport provider and their responsibility practices which a tourist might consider. Tourists are therefore likely to turn to travel intermediaries to help them manage this level of complexity to support their decision-making. Furthermore, by focusing on sustainable travel, tour operators can play an important role in positively influencing tourist behaviours by encouraging participation in more responsible forms of tourism (Budeanu, 2007; Tepelus, 2005). Hence, these intermediaries have the potential to influence the sustainable development of tourism through the way they market, promote, sell, and form relationship with suppliers (Mossaz & Coghlan, 2017).

In Hong Kong, McKercher and Prideaux (2014) found that travel agents were hesitant in comprehending sustainable tourism. Mossaz and Coghlan (2017) interviewed specialised travel agents in South Africa and found that whilst these

agents had an implied influence in conserving tourism, several factors prevented them from giving a full consideration to this when selling to tourists. A common feature of customer decision-making is the booking of tourism services but the literature is not always clear if tourists want to engage in more sustainable behaviours (Budeanu, 2007; Fairweather et al., 2005).

In Finland, the number of high street travel agencies dropped to almost zero due to the dramatic changes in the travel intermediation system resulting from the Internet. Tourists primarily purchase their trips and packages online, and the need of consultation from travel experts decreased (Ritalahti, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic added to the severe challenges these intermediaries already faced due to numerous lockdowns and worldwide travel restrictions. According to the Association of Finnish Travel Industry (SMAL), Finnish travel intermediaries' sales dropped to about 15 % from the pre-pandemic time (Mäki-Fränti, 2021). Finnish travel intermediaries are at a juncture where they must consider strategies for their future business survival and growth. The pandemic raised the discussion of the importance and necessity of travel and its impacts on global warming but it has also offered the opportunity for travel intermediaries to review how they create value for their customers by understanding what now matters to them. Therefore, this chapter investigates the importance of responsibility for Finnish tourists when booking their holidays with travel intermediaries.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 *The Impact of COVID-19 on Travel Intermediaries*

COVID-19 has changed the travel and tourism industry and further future changes are expected in travel intermediation including e.g. travel agencies and tour operators (Bononi, 2020). The European Travel Agents' and Tour Operators' Associations (ECTAA) with its partner organisations all around the world sent a strong demand that governments should agree an aligned and synchronised response to the industry. The response should include clear vaccine and testing standards, easing entry restrictions for fully vaccinated travellers, and providing the needed economic relief to the travel intermediation sector that has already suffered consequences of travel restrictions introduced by the pandemic for too long. The value of travel intermediators in today's world is in understanding the intense complexity of the wide travel and tourism industry. This is more vital now than ever as consumers also try to recover from the pandemic with certainty and confidence (ECTAA, 2021).

The recuperation from the pandemic for outbound travel expenditure including travel intermediaries' sales is still difficult to define. Euromonitor International (2021) emphasises that the schedule of the recovery is difficult to forecast. The outbound expenditure might reach the pre-crises level at the earliest in three years by 2024, but the worst-case scenario is expected to be in six years by 2027. Leisure travel will reach the 2019 level before business travel and package holidays will be popular in Europe after the pandemic. Online meeting tools like

Zoom and Microsoft Teams have replaced business travel. Thus, the urgent need to travel for business could be postponed (Euromonitor International, 2021).

As the pandemic has been a global phenomenon, it has also affected the Finnish travel intermediation sector since spring 2020. According to Mäki-Fränti (2021), the sales of Finnish travel intermediaries dropped almost 90 % from July 2019 to July 2021. However, in August and September 2021 the sales started to rise as tour operators started their flight series to Mediterranean destinations. Furthermore, the demand for trips for autumn and winter seasons was high. Yet, Finns were more interested in European destinations than long-haul destinations (Haukkamaa, 2021). The increased flight supply with still modest demand causes last minute sales with surprisingly low prices. However, this was supposed not to last long (Raeste, 2021). The rising demand and interest in international travel also affects the employment of the experts working in the travel intermediation sector. The share of employed experts has risen from April 2020's 17 % to July 2021's 44 %. Most of the experts have been full-time or part-time suspended during the pandemic, but the number of redundancies has been very low (Mäki-Fränti, 2021). Like in any other country, domestic travel was popular in Finland in 2020 and 2021, as international travel was not recommended and due to the lack of travel packages and flights (Mäki-Fränti, 2021).

The World Travel & Tourism Council (2020) states that people are interested in travelling but need travel experts who can inform them about safe services. Thus, consumers are looking for the human connection to get support in safety issues and quarantine restrictions. Lehtinen (2021) reports that even though fully vaccinated people can travel quite freely in Europe, they ask for more precise information about documents needed when travelling and the use of masks in the destination. Consumers will remain more cautious than earlier when travelling despite the vaccines. The consideration of consumers' request for information about health safety and security is an obvious part of travel intermediaries' responsible business. The further development of online services in travel intermediation is important, but the human interaction cannot be neglected. It is easy to state that the successful future in travel intermediation is to communicate with consumers and adapt to their travel wants in the post COVID-19 world (Raeste, 2021).

According to the report of Euromonitor International (2021) commissioned by ECTAA, leisure tourism will recover faster from the pandemic than business tourism. Especially, package holidays are expected to remain popular in Europe. Package holidays bring to their customer more security for example in the form of insurances that can cover costs of repatriation and knowledge of health-related issues in destinations.

Romagosa (2020) states that the COVID-19 pandemic will change our mobility, socialisation and consumption models including leisure activities such as travelling. The pre-pandemic concern over the sustainability of tourism has strengthened during it. Sustainability can become a tool for recovery in tourism industry after the pandemic and its lockdowns. In this context, sustainability

can also mean quality experiences based on local natural and cultural resources. Destinations and companies surviving the pandemic must re-think what sustainability means when tourists start to return. Moreover, they must understand possible changes in tourist behaviour, which might focus on sustainability and sustainable products and services.

#### 2.2 Sustainable Travel Intentions

Whilst the body of literature on sustainable tourism is advanced, the tourism industry is still grappling with its operationalisation (Ali, 2021). Tourism generates about 8 % of world's carbon emissions with transportation being responsible for 50 % of industry's totals emissions (Sustainable Travel International, 2022). According to UNWTO (2021) sustainability poses several challenges for the tourism industry such as increasing energy and water consumption, rising CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, scarcity of resources, managing food demand in the destination, declining biodiversity, climate change and extreme weather conditions. To ensure the longevity of the industry, tourism organisations, like travel intermediaries, have an important role in contributing to the industry's sustainability actions. However, the business case for sustainability is usually driven by customers' behaviour.

Tourist destinations recognise 'sustainable tourists' as the most lucrative visitors because their impact on the environment is less and they are likely to spend more (Nickerson et al., 2016; Pulido-Fernández & López-Sánchez, 2016). According to Holmes et al. (2021), some tourists might be more inclined to travel to destinations that are more sustainable and pay a higher price and engage in activities, which preserve the natural and socio-cultural environments. These tourists have higher income and education levels (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2016; Ramchurjee & Suresha, 2015) and feel a stronger moral obligation (Dolnicar, 2010) and environmental identity (Teeroovengadam, 2019) towards protecting the environment. The literature has identified that customers who express concern about the environment will be more oriented towards purchasing green products (Paul et al., 2016) with a higher premium (Teeroovengadam, 2019).

The recognition of such positive tourist intentions discussed above does not always translate into sustainable travel behaviours. Juvan and Dolnicar (2016, p. 86) conclude that tourists are in general environment-friendly and whilst they have no interest to have a negative impact, their behaviour does not always follow their well-intended pre-travel plans. For example, tourists are aware of the climate change and their contribution to it, but this awareness does not always change their approach to travelling (Antimova et al., 2012). Doran et al. (2016) stated that one reason for this behaviour gap when purchasing a trip and travelling is that travel decisions are made in private when the social visibility is close to zero. It appears that sustainable travel options can be sensitive to changes when the social visibility is higher. Juvan and Dolnicar (2016, pp. 80–85) list six groups that explain their real behaviour as the following:

1. Denial of consequences – it is not that bad
2. Downward comparison – it could be worse
3. Denial of responsibility – it is not my responsibility
4. Denial of control – I would like to, BUT ...
5. Exception handling – vacations are an exception
6. Compensation through benefits – actually, I am doing more good than bad

The challenges of the pandemic combined with the proposed shifts in sustainable travel purchase intentions requires that Finnish travel intermediaries comprehend their customers' perception of this topic as they re-adjust their businesses for the future.

### 3 Method

The data for this chapter was collected through an online questionnaire distributed to the customers of the Association of Finnish Travel Industry (SMAL). This questionnaire was administered during the period of 24 April until 9 May 2021, about one year after the beginning of the pandemic. The aim of the questionnaire was to understand if the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the intention towards responsible travel behaviour of customers of Finnish travel intermediaries.

SMAL (2021) is an association of about 190 travel agencies, tour operators and incoming agencies and 110 other industry stakeholders like transportation companies, accommodation providers, international travel intermediaries, educational institutions, consultants, media, and technology companies. The total sales of SMAL's member companies in 2019 was over 2 billion euro that covered about 95 % of Finland's travel intermediary sales. The members employed in the same year about 2,500 people both in Finland and abroad.

An online questionnaire was selected as the method to collect empirical data because SMAL and its working group on responsible tourism wanted to acquire a large data set from a wide population as quickly as possible. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions to allow respondents to provide more detailed answers. SMAL distributed the survey to its members, and they were asked to forward it to their customers. A total of 1,096 valid responses were returned. As the focus of this research is on the perceptions of the clients of the Finnish travel intermediaries, the results presented below are a qualitative analysis as the open questions were specifically designed to enabled detailed responses. Questionnaires are typically associated with quantitative research methods. However, SMAL was interested in obtaining data representing the opinions and insights of wide-ranging customers and this approach increased the reach of the project to respondents. The replies to open-ended questions made the qualitative analysis a better tool to describe results to reach the aims of the study.

## 4 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 *Perception of Responsible Travel of Finnish Travel Intermediaries Customers during COVID-19*

The respondents of the survey were clients of Finnish travel intermediaries, or to be more exact, the members of their online platforms and social media channels. The results of the questionnaire identified that 'responsibility' would be more of a consideration in Finns' future travel choices than before the pandemic with 73 % of respondents stating this. These findings about Finnish tourists align to the previous research which explains that the COVID-19 has resulted in changes in travel attitudes (Eichelberger et al; 2021; Gössling et al., 2021) perhaps signalling a change towards more responsible tourist behaviour. Examining the findings more in depth, almost one fourth of the sample indicated that the social, environmental and/or political aspects of the destination and the services of the supplier would be important factors for them to consider when making travel choices.. These results highlight that supplier must demonstrate that they are adopting responsible practices and communicate them to prospective tourists.

Here, travel intermediaries can create value by supporting destinations and local suppliers in developing their green credentials but also providing this information in a readily accessible format for the tourists to support their decision-making. According to Ramagosa (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic will change travel behaviour like any other consumption behaviour, and it has strengthened the concern of sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic may have caused a shift in sustainable holiday bookings, and the travel choices identify tourists being open to responsible tourism (Budeanu, 2007). Also, Finnish tourists have re-thought how they consider sustainability in their holiday purchases.

### 4.2 *Finnish Travel Intermediaries' Customers' Purchasing of Travel Products*

The questionnaire results indicated that almost 90 % of the respondents felt that conservation of the local culture is important when travelling. Over 80 % thought that purchasing local services and products are essential whilst 80 % of participants emphasised the importance of the destination countries' equality, human and children's rights. These results were also echoed in further results as respondents were asked to choose the top three factors of responsibility they would consider when making travel decisions. The factors selected were:

1. Preservation of local culture
2. Children's rights, purchasing of local services and products, equality and human rights and
3. Garbage disposal and circulation.

The behaviour of tourists at the destination has an impact on the well-being of the local community (Budeanu, 2007). These findings show that Finns are concerned about their socio-cultural impacts on the host destination by respect-

ing local culture, ensuring fair rights and how they disposed of waste (Dias et al., 2021). Travel intermediaries can use this knowledge to leverage destinations to develop their sustainability concepts by showing the relevance to the tourists decision-making process.

#### *4.3 Further Expectations of Travel Intermediaries Post-COVID-19*

In addition to understanding the responsibility of the customers of Finnish travel intermediaries, SMAL and its members were interested in the customers' expectations of travel intermediaries after COVID-19 due to the industry's slow recovery. The most important one was that intermediaries would create circumstances for safe travel again. The pandemic has caused tourism customers to prioritise health safety concerns (Jiang & Wen, 2020). According to Bononi (2020), travel intermediation has changed during the pandemic. ECTAA (2021) emphasised that governments all over the world should give tourism industry clear guidelines to ease travelling and make it safer. The World Travel & Tourism Council (2020) states that there is a need of travel experts to have the correct information on safe services and support in safety issues like quarantine restrictions. Some of the ways Finnish tourists expected these intermediaries to meet these expectations were by keeping flexible terms of agreement and the price level reasonable (17 % of respondents) and being open and transparent in their communication about the health situation in the destinations with agile reaction to changes (16 %). Furthermore, some respondents expect a wide destination supply to be available like it was before the pandemic (16 %).

## **5 Conclusions**

This chapter provides insights into Finnish tourists' responsible travel intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows a change in the mindset of Finnish tourists to being more responsible when travelling abroad. These findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on changes in tourists' behaviour resulting from a crisis and highlighting the importance of sustainability and responsibility as a mega-trend. It also signals that radical challenges to the tourism system (such as tourism coming to a halt) can provide the stimulus for growing awareness and creating positive changes.

Travel intermediaries' role has changed in the last two decades due to the Internet and it is a new channel for more flexible travel purchasing. New platforms and forums also allow access to the wide highway of information including shared peer-to-peer content. Good service and friendly experts do not anymore fill the needs of sophisticated customers who have much more travel experience than before. Yet, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a new interest in travel intermediaries due to the plethora of fast changing lockdowns and travel restrictions in almost every country of the world. This chapter demonstrates that creating a niche about the provision and sale of responsible travel options can be advantageous for travel intermediaries. The findings also show that tourists seek out proof for responsible behaviours from suppliers. Therefore, the expectation is that experts working as travel intermediaries will have



all the needed information. This presents another opportunity for them to create value for the tourist in the way the information is presented to support responsible decision-making.

This research focused on intentions rather than the actual travel behaviour. Juvan and Dolnicar (2016) state that in general, tourists appreciate the environment and do not want to have negative impacts on it, but the actual behaviour does not always align to intended plans. Therefore, given the complexity of the pandemic, it is difficult to determine how this will be achieved in the post-pandemic world. Future research can focus on tourist behaviour pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip to understand intention vs. realised intentions. The post-trip aspect is important in investigating the longer-term impacts of tourists' responsible behaviours in their everyday lives hence contributing to wider sustainability concerns.

From the Finnish perspective, there are some key questions for the industry to consider. Such questions revolved around what is the next step in tourists' purchasing and consumer behaviour in Finland and outbound destinations? The findings also point to a move towards ethical thinking as Finns showed concern about human, workers', and children's rights. This can propel a discussion about the Finnish travel industry's role in ensuring decent working conditions in the tourism industry. This is not easy to tackle but it can become an area where the Finnish travel industry takes a lead.

This chapter is based on a questionnaire whose data was analysed more qualitatively due to the nature of the research aim. Future research can undertake quantitative driven research to measure and test travel intentions. Furthermore, SMAL and its members were interested in a holistic picture of the customer insights rather than causal relationships. It is evident that sustainability and responsibility will become key priorities for travel intermediaries if actual demand matches intention.

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