

# BEING IN THE SOCIAL: A CROSS-GENERATIONAL STUDY ON IDENTITY PROCESSES RELATED TO ROMANIAN TOURISTS

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## Abstract:

*The present paper analyzes the impact of social media platforms on international tourism, focusing on the Romanian tourists. This research is conducted taking into consideration the different generations, especially the Generation X (born 1965-1980), Millennials (born 1981-1995) and Generation Z (born 1996-2012), as well as the three key temporal moments in the travel planning and related decision-making process: before the trip, during the trip, and after the trip. Besides, as the COVID-19 medical crisis has redefined the global tourism industry and tourists' behavior, an analysis of its impact on the Romanian market and tourists was also included.. In order to obtain a certain result, were used different methods that includes both qualitative and quantitative instruments. The research is undertaken in two stages, before COVID-19 outbreak (2018-2020), and during COVID-19, (2020-2021). The results of the research indicate a clear tendency to use social media before the trip, in the information-research stage. Besides, a series of differences, as well as some similarities are identified across generations in terms of social media usage for travel purposes and social media impact on the tourists' travel choices, when comparing Romanian travelers with travelers from other countries of the world.*

**Key words:** COVID-19, Social platforms, International Tourism, Cross-Generational Study

**JEL classification:** A13

## I. INTRODUCTION

Marketing has been applied with a certain delay to the travel and tourism field compared to other domains, as this has not become an important phenomenon until 1970s, when other industries were already mature, but currently “marketing is more than ever the primary focus for management in the globally competitive conditions of the twenty-first century travel and tourism” (Middleton & Clarke, 2012, p. vii). However, some scholars consider that the marketing of travel and tourism is still in a development phase, and constructing an overall understanding of travel and tourism must take into consideration three main points, namely:

- the grand theories of international consumer marketing
- service industry special characteristics
- travel and tourism services particularities

This paper looks into the special characteristics of travel and tourism marketing, the marketing mix for tourism services, as well as measures of competitiveness in the travel and tourism industry.

According to the American Marketing Association (2013), “marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large”, meaning that the core principles of a marketing system are “the attitudes and thought processes of the two parties – buyers and sellers – or users and providers – in an exchange process. Besides a deep understanding of what international marketing generally implies, one must also be aware about the particular characteristics of marketing of services, and more precisely, travel and tourism marketing.

One of the most important aspects of travel and tourism marketing is the development of the so-called “relationship marketing”, “the development of mutually beneficial long-term relationships

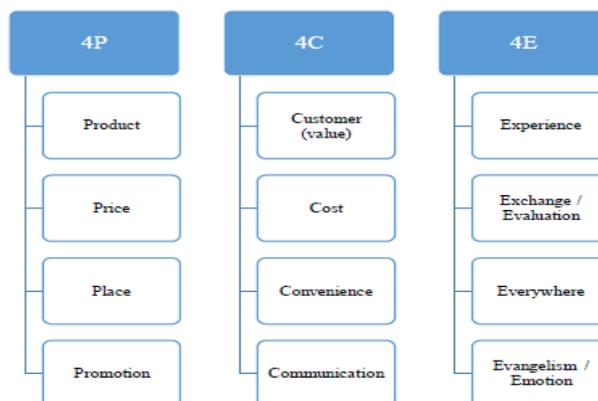
between suppliers and customers” (Bowie & Buttle, 2004, p. 8), as the emotional factor is often more important than the rational one, when it comes to buying touristic products and services. Compared to traditional marketing, marketing for services has additional features that also apply to travel and tourism industry. The unique characteristics that differentiate services from products are intangibility, perishability, inseparability and variability. Additionally, guest satisfaction and quality control, seasonality, high fixed costs, sensitivity to unforeseen, uncontrollable external events, as well as complementarity and the importance of intermediaries on the market represent specific characteristics for the travel and tourism industry (Cooper, 2008)

## II. THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETING OF TRAVEL AND TOURISM

### THE MARKETING MIX FOR TOURISM SERVICES

Quick adaptation to changes in supply and demand may be the key to success for the parties involved in travel and tourism industry. At the same time, this adaptation requires establishing some variables that can help businesses, policy makers or anyone else with an interest in this topic to accomplish the goals set and to measure how these variables can influence the entire activity. Marketing scholars established that these variables should be the so-called “4Ps”, meaning Product, Price, Place, Promotion, to which tourism marketing specialists added the other “3Ps”, People, Process, and Physical evidence. Yet, considering that the original marketing principles related to the 4Ps were rather oriented towards manufacturing and retail, Kotler and Armstrong (1999) suggested that the 4Ps would rather be called the “4Cs”, to reflect the customer orientation that is the core of services marketing: Customer Value, Cost, Convenience and Communication. Further on, in the current experience economy, one is no longer talking about the 4Cs of services marketing either, but the “4Es” came into play: Experience, Exchange/Evaluation, Evangelism/Emotion, Everywhere. The three different models are summarized in Figure 1.1

**Figure no. 1.1. From 4P to 4E in the marketing mix of tourism services**



Source: authors

From the 4Ps model for product marketing to the new 8Ps model of services marketing

On the other hand, despite the fact that the 4Ps Marketing Mix model is widely accepted as a framework for product marketing, given that services have additional, special characteristics (e.g., intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability), Booms and Bitner (1981) suggested the introduction of three additional factors, as extension to the 4Ps framework, namely Process, Physical Evidence and People. Process refers mainly to the systems used by services businesses to deliver their offerings properly, to the flow of activities, number of steps and customer involvement. Considering that services are perishable, cannot be stored for reuse, returned, or inventoried – not purchased airline seats, empty restaurant tables or not occupied rooms cannot be reclaimed-

managing this variable is essential. Physical evidence is related to factors such as employee dress, facility design, equipment, guarantees, or business cards, and allows customers to make judgments on the organization, to set expectations. Last, but not least, “People” concerns both employees and customers. Seeing that in the services industry production and consumption are inseparable and they take place simultaneously, service businesses, and, more often than not, travel and tourism companies depend heavily on the ability of their staff to deliver the services they provide (Kumar, 2010).

Quite recently, the concept of 8Ps<sup>6</sup> for services marketing has emerged. Some researchers claim that the 8th P is Productivity and Quality (also referred to as Performance) (Kar, 2011), since improving quality is a requisite in cost management, and quality is essential for services businesses (especially travel and tourism ones) to differentiate themselves from competition. It is an era of value-driven businesses, of the so-called Marketing 3.0, when “instead of treating people simply as consumers, marketers approach them as whole human beings with minds, hearts, and spirits” (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2010), one of the enablers of this new wave being the rise of social media.

Some other scholars hold out for “Partnership” as the 8th P for Services Marketing (Tan, Ching-Yick Tse & Ling Wong, 2009), also called “cooperative marketing”, and is related to “increasing the reach and impact of marketing efforts” (Freeman & Glazer, 2015). Public and private partnerships in travel and tourism are encouraged and have nowadays become a common practice for companies in this industry, primarily due to severe competition and global economic crisis, besides many other reasons. Elements such as “technologies, resources, abilities, knowledge, networks, products, and services are either merged, exchanged, or integrated among partners for mutual synergy, co-marketing, co-branding, process improvements, effective promotion, effective planning and funding opportunities, competitive advantage, differential power, innovation, more profits, better performance” (Gursoy, Saayman & Sotiriadis, 2015, p. 43), mutual benefits being the final outcome.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM**

With the increasing popularity of Social Media and the growing influence of online content, “nowadays it seems to be indispensable running a business without any online presence” (Schwarzl & Grabowska, 2015, p. 195), especially in travel and tourism sector, as this industry offers “high involvement products [...] less tangible and more differentiated than many other consumers goods”, these characteristics making them more appropriate to be purchased over the Internet (Garín-Muñoz & Pérez-Amaral, 2011), ideas also supported by Javed, Tucková & Jibril (2020, p. 13), who consider that “tourism businesses cannot grow and obtain their due share without a presence and promotion on social media”. Moro and Rita (2018, p. 347) also argues that “it is imperative today that business managers stay up to date on technology, customers and social media, to redirect marketing and business efforts toward customers’ needs and problems”. Plus, the Web has also shifted marketing practices in travel and tourism from a B2C approach to a peer-to-peer model, and a huge on-going increase in customer empowerment can be currently noticed, as customers nowadays have a vast number of online tools and platforms where to share their opinions and influence others. The customer empowerment idea was pioneered by Pires, Stanton and Rita (2006) and also later on supported by an increasing number of researchers (Alamai, Sule & Aliyu, 2020; Labrecque et al., 2013; Whitfield & Webber, 2010). As such, among the most important roles Social Media plays for the industry, it is worth mentioning that it could decrease uncertainty and increase the exchange utility, while also providing tourists a sense of belonging into virtual travel communities through storytelling, a powerful tool for tourism marketing. In the first case, social media may most likely have a direct impact on increasing destination visitation, while in the latter case, it rather contributes to destination brand building in the long run and there might be no immediate increase in tourist visitation (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014).

Hence, in the past years, social media has been recognized as one of the important competitive tools in terms of tourism marketing, with high implications for the whole travel industry, and it is nowadays mandatory for tourism brands to engage with their tourists on real-time Social Media, as roughly 87% of American millennials use Social Media for travel research and use the information gathered through social media for creating their travel plan (Apollo Agency, 2020). Apart from travel research, customer service, social sharing and destination discovery are other arenas where travel brands are feeling the impact of social media. By all means, tourism and hospitality is one of the pioneer industries for the adoption of online reviews as a mean for obtaining customer feedback (Moro & Rita, 2018) and the most recognizable consumer generated content sites are in fact tourism and hospitality-related, such as TripAdvisor, a platform that manages to influence a large number of people in their travel-related decisions. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) considered social media as being collaborative projects, anything from blogs to user generated content communities, social networking sites, to virtual game worlds and virtual social world, but projects that seem to have seven common particularities, namely identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These characteristics refer to the extent to which the consumers (also called users) reveal themselves, their tastes, and personalities (identity), interact with each other (conversations), post, distribute, receive content (sharing), know about others' existence in the community (presence), but also relate to each other's opinions and stories (relationships), be aware of others' social status (reputation), and above all form communities (groups). Besides, due to the uncertainty of tourist services, modern tourists trust more other travelers' opinions using social media and regular consumers are able to increasingly influence other consumers with their own opinions and experiences. Lately, in like manner, travelers no longer rely that much on direct advertising, which tends to focus on the benefits of the destination / place, perhaps even misrepresenting it. Instead, they rather need two-way communication with the destination's representatives (tourism bureaus, marketing agencies etc.), communication that includes compassion, understanding, freedom of speech and emotional expression (Ly & Ly, 2020), platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube being the most commonly used channels through which travel and tourism companies reach the target audiences, as sharing visual elements supplies the highest level of interaction (Yetimoğlu & Uğurlu, 2021) given the complex nature of the industry.

## **INFLUENCER MARKETING IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM**

For a while already, celebrities such as singers, TV and movie stars or sports stars have been employed by brands as influencers to showcase their products or services aiming that these people's fans would turn into potential customers. More recently, with the emergence of social media, new means of connecting with customers more directly and interactively came up and brands actively and increasingly utilize them within their digital marketing strategies.

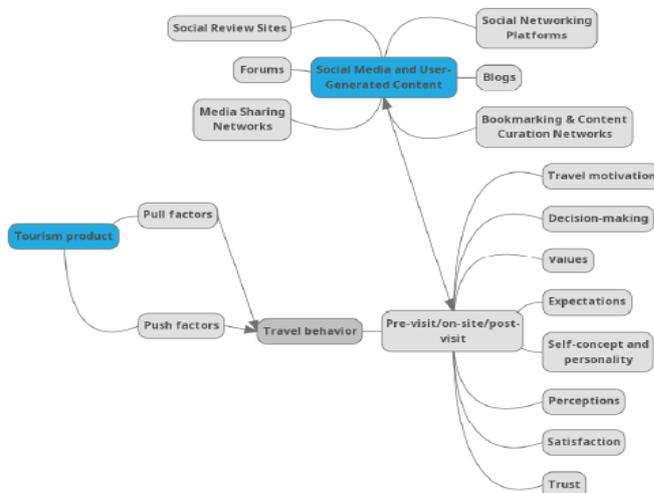
One of the newly born strategies that came up with the internet and technology development and with the rise of social media is usually referred to as "influencer marketing", which can be defined as "a type of marketing that focuses on using key leaders to drive a brand's message to the target customer [...] An influencer is an user of social media, has access to a large audience, can offer them relevant content and can change the customers' behavior or purchase decisions" (Jílková, 2019, p. 57). While social media marketing concentrates on the rise of popularity of the brands, influencer marketing focuses on influencing potential buyers to purchase specific products (Jashi, 2020). In addition, influencer marketing emphasizes on specific individuals rather than on the target market as a whole through the so-called "influencers", who pioneers in this topic define as being independent media, third-party endorses, able to influence attitude of audiences through posts on social media, articles, shorts texts, videos, photos etc. (Freberg, Grahamb, McGaugheyc & Freberg, 2010). Campbell and Grimm (2019) provided a simpler definition of Social Media influencers, stating that they are individuals who post to their social media accounts in exchange for compensation, this compensation taking various forms, from money to free products, services, trips,

or experiences (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). Thus, influencers are simply ordinary people who have built a large community around themselves by providing relevant content for their followers. Some of these content creators made their online page with this specific purpose of becoming influencers, while others did not intent this from the very beginning. They are sharing various information from their personal life and express their opinion on different topics, being frequently perceived as a new type of opinion leaders. They even display similar characteristics with traditional opinion leaders, such as being open to messages, influential and respected among their followers, integrating the position of discussant (MoShi, 2020) or being trusted judges about what is right and fashionable in various niches (Laurell, 2014). Besides, successful influencers have a strong capacity for innovation (Vargas Portillo, 2020) and (supposedly) real experience with products and/or services they are talking about (Uzunoglu & Misci, 2014).

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter defines and clarifies the research objectives and related methods, tools, and techniques of the empirical research. The conceptual map resulted after the literature review inquiry was employed as a starting point to narrow and clarify the objectives of the current research and generate the research questions, as frequently recommended in the literature (Edwards & Fraser, 1983; Novak & Cañas, 2007; Chiou, 2006; Groccia, Alsudairi & Buskist, 2012; Fiorella & Mayer, 2015). For better clarity, the conceptual map included in Chapter 2 (Figure no. 2.8.) is presented again below.

**Figure no. 1.2 Conceptual map regarding the connection between social media and travelers’ behavior**



Source: authors

### METHODS AND INSTRUMENTS USED IN PHASE I OF THE RESEARCH (JULY 2018 – MAY 2020)

July 2018 – May 2020 Phase I (July 2018 – May 2020)		
Research objective	Objective 1: Deepen understanding on the role of social media for international travel-related decisions for tourists belonging to different age generations	Objective 2: Identify similarities and differences regarding the impact that social media has throughout the entire travel planning process on tourists belonging to the four age generations
Research question	What are the factors that influence the	What role does social media play in

	use of social media for international travel planning?		the decision-making process of Romanian tourists travelling abroad?	
Research approach		Qualitative studies		Quantitative studies
Pilot study		Empirical research		Empirical research
Time frame	March 2019	March – May 2020	July 2018	February – May 2020
Research method	Focus group trial on “Social media influence on travel-related decisions”.	Four focus groups on “How is social media influencing travellers’ behaviour throughout the entire travel planning process?”.	Survey 1 on “The role of social media and UGC in Millennials’ travel behavior”.	Survey 2 on “How is the travel planning process shaped by social media sites?”.
Sample	10 students from the International Business and Economics Faculty at ASE Bucharest.	48 Participants belonging to each of the official age generations (12 persons from each age group): Baby boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z.	Random set of 100 Romanian Millennials.	Random sample of 923 active users of Facebook in Romania.
Purpose and reasoning	Additional input in designing the questionnaire and final focus group guide.	Narrow down the conclusions of the literature survey, fill some of the gaps identified, enhance knowledge on the extrinsic stimuli to travel, based on tourists’ age.	Examine the feasibility of the approach, identify weaknesses of the extended research study, finding new hypotheses to be tested.	Assess the impact social media has throughout the entire travel planning process.

Source: Authors

**METHODS AND INSTRUMENTS USED IN PHASE II OF THE RESEARCH, MARCH 2020 – AUGUST 2020**

Phase II (March 2020 – August 2020)		
Research objective	Objective 3: Scrutinize the changes generated by the recent medical crisis in the international travel industry, particularly in the case of the Romanian market and tourists	
Research question	How is COVID-19 influencing tourism industry in Romania?	
Research approach	Qualitative studies	Quantitative studies
Time frame	March - May 2020	July – August 2020
Research method	Four focus groups on “Travel intentions after the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown”.	Survey 3 on “Romanian tourists travel intentions after pandemic-related restrictions are lifted”.
Sample	48 Participants belonging to each of the official age generations (12 persons from each age group): Baby boomers, Generation X, Millennials, Generation Z.	Random sample of 426 active users of Facebook in Romania

Purpose and reasoning	Information update on travelers' behavior in the current context.	Information update on tourists' propensity to travel after the pandemic-related restrictions are eased.
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Source: Authors

The whole research was done in two phases, the main reason for this approach being that the pandemic dramatically changed the tourism industry and what everyone used to know about travel motivations, travel behavior, travel planning or any other travel-related topic was suddenly no longer applicable to the new global context. Thus, further in-depth research was needed on this topic in these extraordinary circumstances.

**Phase I – Social media role and impact for international travel-related decisions throughout the travel planning process. Qualitative and quantitative studies.**

The following subsection deals with the methods and instruments used in Phase I of the research, when the topic of social media role and impact for international travel-related decisions throughout the travel planning process was addressed. In this regard, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were approached and are further depicted.

**Phase I, Qualitative studies: Focus groups on social media influence throughout the entire travel planning process**

- Pilot Study – Focus Group on Social Media influence on travel-related decisions
- Exploratory Focus Group on Social Media influence throughout the entire planning process

Focus groups, an alternative to the traditional structured questionnaires (Jenkins & Harrison, 1990), was found to be suitable for achieving the thesis' qualitative research part's main goal, to explore the role of Social Media for travel-related decisions, because participation in a group is often perceived as magnifying "an individual's wisdom as well as compensate for shortfalls and inexperience" (Threlfall, 1999, p. 102), but also because the discussion in the focus groups is effective in supplying information about what people think, or how they feel, or on the way they act (Freitas, Oliveira, Jenkins & Popjoy, 1998, p. 3). Furthermore, the group interactions tend to create the perspective of multiple realities and different perspectives regarding the same topic of discussion (O'Neill, 2012), thus contributing to identify a range of ideas, that would further enable the author to design valuable quantitative research. Apart from this, another reason for including focus groups in the research was the speed and flexibility associated with this type of inquiry, as there is "generally less preparation required to arrange and execute focus groups [...] results are generally reported sooner and costs are kept to a minimum [...]" (Threlfall, 1999, p. 103). Plus, focus groups allow for casual discussions and the outcomes are easier to be understood and presented (Prince & Davies, 2001).

Given the assumption that social media has a different impact on travelers' choices throughout the entire planning process, four focus groups were conducted in March - May 2020. Each group included 12 different tourists conveniently selected, who share similar characteristics, as advised by Krueger (1994). For this particular case, it was important that the persons in a group belong to a specific generation, are familiar with social media and do travel, either for business or leisure purposes. Furthermore, evidence suggests that mixed gender groups tend to improve the quality of discussions and its outcomes (Freitas, Oliveira, Jenkins & Popjoy, 1998) so additional efforts were made in order to ensure an equilibrium regarding the number of males and females included in the research.

The description of each group interviewed, its composition, the way they were selected, as well as the time, duration, and location where the research was administered are presented in below table.

**Table no. 2.1. Focus groups characteristics: participants' brief description, selection procedure, time, duration and location of the group interviews**

	<b>Group 1</b>		<b>Group 2</b>		<b>Group 3</b>		<b>Group 4</b>	
<b>Description</b>	Generation Z, students born after 1996, active online, who travelled in the past year (2018-2019), regardless the purpose of travel.		Generation Z, people born after 1996, active online, who travelled in the past year (2018-2019), regardless the purpose of travel.		Generation Y/Millennials, people born 1981-1995, active online, who travelled in the past year (2018-2019), regardless the purpose of travel.		Generation X, people born 1965-1980, active online, who travelled in the past year (2018-2019), regardless the purpose of travel.	
<b>No. of persons</b>	10 – 7 females & 3 males		12 - 7 females & 5 males		12 – 6 females & 6 males		12 – 5 females & 7 males	
<b>Selection procedure</b>	Convenient sample, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students at the International Business and Economics Faculty attending a seminar taught by the researcher.		Convenient sample, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year students at the International Business and Economics Faculty attending a seminar taught by the researcher.		Convenient sample, work-colleagues of the researcher.		Random, convenient sample, people from a travel group on Facebook. The researcher posted about the study in that group and asked if anyone was willing to participate. The first 12 persons that met the focus group's criteria were selected. They were then provided with the conference link, time, and date for the study.	
<b>Time</b>	January 15, 2020		March 27, 2020		April 11, 2020		May 5, 2020	
<b>Duration</b>	45 minutes		65 minutes		70 minutes		60 minutes	
<b>Location</b>	A seminar room from ASE Bucharest		Zoom online platform		A meeting room from the office building the researcher worked in			

Source: Authors

All focus groups participants were asked the same set of questions and the answers were recorded using the recorder on the author's smartphone. After the completion of the five meetings, all the discussions were transcribed verbatim and, following Flint and Woodruff's (2001, p. 325) recommendations, efforts were made "to capture a holistic picture of the respondents' stories, followed by part-by-part interpretation of key thoughts throughout each transcript". The debates were free-flowing in each of the cases, even though the author structured them around a set of carefully predetermined questions, the research instrument used in this case to collect the data being represented by the same semi-structured offline/online group interview administered to all the groups analyzed. Yet, even though the questioning was standardized, a certain degree of adaptation regarding the questions' order, as well as some improvisation and rephrasing for a better understanding of the issues in question were involved.

### **Focus group research instrument development and brief description**

The focus group guide and, at the same time, the discussions include seven sections, as follows:

**Section 1 - Introduction.** This part contains a brief presentation of the interviewer and of the focus group process. Participants were informed about the rules they all had to follow and that their answers are recorded. Besides, the author that also acted as a moderator for all the groups, also explained what information she needed to obtain, for what purpose, what is the expected length of the discussion and guaranteed the privacy of the respondents' personal data. The maximum amount of time estimated for this section is 5 minutes.

**Section 2 - The usage of social media in the travel planning process (Phase I).** The questions included in this section investigate aspects of Social Media sites usage during the stages in the travel planning process, before the trip, during the trip and after the trip. The moderator wanted to find out when and how the respondents use Social Media sources throughout the entire decision-making process, what kind of information they are looking for before going on holiday, while on-site and also if and why they use social media after coming back. Approximately 15 minutes were originally allocated for this part.

**Section 3 - The role of social media in the travel planning process (Phase I).** In this section people are asked to summarize the role played by Social Media sites in their travel planning process, whether these user-generated content supplements other information sources or is rather used as the primary piece of knowledge and orientation. Approximately 5 minutes were estimated for this section.

**Section 4 - Social Media importance and trustworthiness (Phase I).** The questions included here are meant to measure the importance and trust travelers have in social media compared to the traditional sources of information, official travel websites, travel brochures, email travel promotions, commercial operators, visitor centers, travel guides etc. Roughly 5 minutes were allocated for this section.

## **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The analyses conducted for understanding the impact of social media on the tourism industry and particularly on travelers' behavior contributed to drawing conclusions that might position the research as an interesting contribution to the field of international marketing in the travel industry, with both theoretical and practical implications that could be useful for the tourism practitioners. The main final conclusions that could be used in formulating various social media strategies for tourism brands active on the Romanian market are the following:

a) Romanian tourists' travel and social media behavior is considerably different from generation to generation in almost all aspects, from propensity to travel to average travel stay, budget, travel booking methods etc., but especially main travel motivations, as follows:

a. Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) are the least likely to travel, but what motivates them is taking care of better health, checking places off their personal bucket lists, and also the need for

some active relaxation. They would usually turn to a travel agency for travel advice and use Facebook mainly for communication, not travel consultancy or inspiration.

b. The Generation X (born 1965-1980) 's propensity to travel is rather medium in the case of Romanian travelers and they would combine travel agencies with do-it-yourself trips. They would usually travel out of the need for change and novelty, seeking active relaxation or for trying different themed trips, such as eco-tourism, wine-tourism, gastronomical tours etc. They generally use Facebook with the main reason to stay updated and in touch with their acquaintances.

c. Romanian Millennials (born 1981-1995) are most likely to travel and their main motivations are stress relieving, cultural immersion and finding very beautiful places, with incredible views, the so-called instagrammable adventures, inspired by what they see in social media. They would usually book the trips by themselves, online. They are also the most active social media users, having at least two social media accounts, usually Facebook and Instagram that they use for communication, experience sharing and inspiration. They not only trust the content posted on the platforms the most among all generations, but they are also content curators.

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