

SANITATION AND HYGIENE AS FACTORS FOR CHOOSING A PLACE TO STAY: PERCEPTIONS OF THE BULGARIAN TOURISTS

This is a pre-publication version of Naumov, N., Varadzhakova, D. & Naydenov, A. (2020). Sanitation and hygiene as factors for choosing a place to stay: Perceptions of the Bulgarian tourists. *Anatolia*, DOI: 10.1080/13032917.2020.1771742

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13032917.2020.1771742>

INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a relatively unknown disease was detected in the city of Wuhan, the capital of the Chinese Hubei province. Identified as a new respiratory virus and largely defined as a novel type of coronavirus (Huang et al., 2020), what is known as SARS-CoV-2 but commonly referred as COVID-19, has spread worldwide with unprecedented speed and infection rate. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a global health emergency on 30th January 2020 which further escalated to a worldwide global pandemic declared on 11th March 2020. At the time of writing in mid-May 2020, around 4.5 million infections had been reported with nearly 300, 000 cases with a fatal outcome (John Hopkins University, 2020).

Although the world has previously been exposed to notable epidemics/pandemics such as Ebola, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Zika (Buheji & Ahmed, 2020), none of them has had such a notorious and holistic impact on the world's economy and society. The OECD and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have already warned that the overall economic impact is expected to be substantially higher than global financial crisis in 2008 (Hunt, 2020). The tourism industry has been one of the hardest hit by the disruption from the COVID-19 with the imposed restrictions on both international and domestic travel, and the immediate closure of hotels, restaurants and visitor attractions. According to UNWTO (2020), the industry is expected to decline by 20-30% with an anticipated loss of around US\$300-450 billion. As WHO currently "does not recommend any travel or trade restriction based on the current information available" (WHO, 2020), the tourism as we know it has disappeared and 'overtourism' (Milano, Cheer & Novelli, 2019) has become 'non-tourism at all'. As Niewiadomski (2020) points out, the world is now experiencing a 'de-globalization' with around 90% of the world's population subject to a certain level of travel restrictions, imposed home-stay lockdowns or arrival quarantines (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020).

As Novelli et al. (2018) argue, there is a limited academic scholarship on health-related crisis and their impact on the tourism industry, particularly in the developing world. Despite the notable and timely appearance of many studies focused on COVID-19 and tourism, the majority of them are conceptual in nature and more focused on the 'transformation' of tourism from a

range of social science perspectives (see for example, Ateljevic, 2020; Brouder, 2020; Cheer, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Nepal, 2020; Prideaux, Thompson. & Pabel, 2020). Our paper focuses on another crucial dimension of the post COVID-19 era – the importance of safety, sanitation and hygiene in the context of tourism and hospitality and more specifically, sanitation measures as a decision-making factor for choosing an accommodation provider and willingness of the tourists to use their own sanitation products to ensure a good personal hygiene.

METHODOLOGY

Our research takes a quantitative approach in order to explore the importance of sanitation and willingness of the Bulgarian tourists to use their own sanitation products. The main research instrument is a self-administered survey which was distributed online from 13th April to 20th April 2020 to Bulgarian respondents aged 18+. In total, 656 anonymous responses were recorded and the sample covers the variety of the main population demographics such as gender, age, place of residence and education. The survey was distributed in Bulgarian and consisted of three main sections: introduction to the research aim and objectives, the main section with eleven closed-ended questions and a concluding section with seven questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Most of the questions required a single answer but some of them permitted multiple answers, too. One third of the questions were measured on the ordinal scale, one question (age of the respondent) on the ratio scale and the rest of the variables were nominal.

The survey data have been processed using SPSS (ver. 26), including: the recoding of text answers, the scale definition, the verbatim coding of the open-ended questions, the data validation, the syntax programming, the frequency and cross tabulation. The tabulations were presented in absolute values and percentages in order to provide the basis for the further analyses and conclusions.

RESULTS

It is important to note that the travel intentions and preferences of Bulgarian tourists about the cleanliness and sanitation in accommodation establishments are researched at the beginning of the second month of emergency state in Bulgaria. Our results indicate that 42,1% of the respondents believe the peak of the outbreak is yet to come in Bulgaria and 40,5% are not sure if the peak has already been reached or not.

A relatively high percent of respondents have indicated that they would prefer the comfort of staying at a family-owned (second home) apartment for their forthcoming holidays. This is largely consistent with the current state of emergency and motivated by the absence of clear legislative policy about the expected norms of sanitation and cleanliness. Interestingly, the second preference is 4/5-star hotels, an option largely preferred by the respondents aged between 25-34 (45%) whereas 41.6% of the same aged group have given a preference to second homes.

The results also indicate another potentially interesting finding: a preference is given to guest houses than chain-branded hotels. 22.4% of the respondents would prefer to stay at a guest house and 18.8% would choose a branded property. Airbnb apartments, which are not so popular amongst Bulgarian population in general, would attract only 12.5% of the respondents. There is a gradual consistency in terms of age groups and gender (see Table 1).

	All respondents	Age				
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+
Accommodation at own property	47.9%	51.4%	41.6%	46.7%	51.1%	54.5%
4/5* hotel	31.6%	31.9%	45.0%	29.3%	25.0%	22.8%
Guest house	22.4%	20.8%	26.2%	21.1%	25.0%	18.8%
Chain-branded hotels	18.8%	23.6%	24.2%	20.2%	13.0%	8.9%
Airbnb	12.5%	12.5%	10.1%	15.3%	10.9%	10.9%
1/2/3* hotels	9.0%	8.3%	11.4%	9.9%	4.3%	7.9%
Camping /caravan/campervan/tent	1.5%	0.0%	2.0%	2.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Other	1.2%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	1.1%	3.0%
Nowhere	1.8%	1.4%	2.7%	2.1%	2.2%	0.0%

Table.1 Accommodation place where to stay during vacation in 2020 regarding the trust in sanitary safety

The results also indicate that the sanitation and cleanliness at the accommodation establishments are key point of the tourists' preferences. More than 50% of the respondents plan to 'definitely' or 'more likely' use their own disinfectants to clean the guest rooms and bathrooms in their accommodation establishments. The women are more distrustful and 36,5% of them would clean their own guest rooms. 28% of the male respondents are concerned about cleanliness and would use additional sanitation. The age group of 55+ is the dominant group here with 45,5% of our them expressing that they would 'definitely' will use additional disinfectants. They are followed by the age group of 18-24 years with 38,9%. The results of our research do not demonstrate any correlation between the education level, the occupancy and the family status of the respondents and the use of additional disinfectants in the accommodation places.

CONCLUSION

Our research indicate that Bulgarian tourists do not generally trust the sanitation measures and

cleanliness at rented places and there is an overall agreement that family-owned apartments and second homes would provide the best hygiene and sanitation comfort.

The high preference of the respondents to seek accommodation at guest houses rather than at chain-branded hotels could be motivated by their overall intention to spend their holidays in 2020 in Bulgaria (61,4%) and to visit the Bulgarian Black Sea coast (50,9%) where there is not so many international hotel chains. The other possible conclusion is that the guest houses are an expected to be less crowded than hotels and would thus provide a safer environment. The high percent of respondents who are willing to use additional disinfectants demonstrate the need of national and international standards of disinfections and sanitation at the accommodation establishments. Further empirical research is needed to explore the perception of tourists at a global scale as sanitation and hygiene are expected to become critical factors in the foreseeable future of tourism and hospitality.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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