

Article

Development Trends and Potential in the Field of Virtual Tourism after the COVID-19 Pandemic: Generation Z Example

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Abstract: Until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual tourism was not as popular as during its duration in 2021, when traveling in the real world was not possible due to social isolation and forced quarantine. In response to the lockdown and the lack of freedom of movement around the world, tourists decided to travel in cyberspace during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way only, and without leaving home, could they visit tourist attractions, watch museum exhibitions, participate in various media events and take virtual walks. After the “unfreezing” of tourism, the time has now come to adapt tourism to the post-pandemic normality. The aim of the paper is to discover whether the new trend of online tourism that developed during the pandemic will stay with us forever and how it will evolve, especially for Generation Z, who are just entering the labor market but who, at the same time, will determine the future of tourism soon. The research results show that as the pandemic restrictions disappear, the need to experience various forms of tourism in places previously viewed in cyberspace (virtually), occurs among the representatives of Generation Z. Thus, virtual tourism is a form that precedes and complements a real journey. The qualitative method was chosen for the research conducted in Poland. The research was carried out in 2022. A total of 40 focus groups of 7 people each (N = 280) participated in the research. They consisted of Generation Z representatives born after 1995; the oldest of them will be 27 in 2022. In parallel, the method of in-depth individual interviews was used in the research. In order to reach the participants, a non-random sample was chosen using the “snowball” method. In total, 100 people took part in the in-depth individual interview. The two-track research allowed to obtain a total sample of N = 380.

Keywords: virtual tourism; Generation Z; new trends in tourism



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1. Introduction

Although researchers have been pointing to the development of technology as an important trend in tourism for years [1], virtual tourism was not of great interest to researchers before the outbreak of the pandemic. In practice, it was not the most popular form of travel either. This is confirmed by the words of the researchers who wrote that: “particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual reality tourism (VRT), a form of digitally-driven albeit unconventional ex-situ touristic travel, has attracted the attention of multiple stakeholders in the sector. However, consumers’ perceptions of and motivations to use VRT as a sustainable solution for touristic activities are yet not fully understood” [2]. It was perceived as a substitute for an authentic tourist experience and a complement to it. Tourists preferred to travel in the real world. The Internet was used primarily to find information about tourist offers, which made it much easier to decide whether it was worth going to a given destination or to book travel and tourist services, as well as to share travel experiences. In tourism, the Internet is not only used to obtain information, but also to purchase tourist products and services. Due to the development of e-technology, tourists can use mobile phones and smartphones with internet connection

in order to use mobile guides, i.e., mobile phone applications installed with operating systems or simply downloaded applications from online stores. Audio guides are available as applications or MP3 files that can be listened to on many devices. The need for cultural consumption of Internet users is satisfied by virtual museums “without walls,” which follow the spirit of the times. They either take the form of a website of a given stationary institution, presenting digitized collections, or are the units without a permanent location, existing across borders thanks to the Internet. Exploring the world via the Internet is also facilitated by live broadcasts. It is also possible to watch panoramic presentations of the world’s most famous monuments. A new quality in tourism is introduced by VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) technologies, which allow tourists to move to a given location and familiarize themselves with what it offers via the virtual world. After putting on special goggles connected to a computer, console or smartphone, the human mind begins to perceive a different reality than its surroundings. The main elements in VR goggles are two screens (or one, divided into two parts), which display similar images, curved through special lenses. Images are perceived by the human brain as three-dimensional. VR goggles can have their own, permanently integrated display or allow the user to place a smartphone into them, which then acts as a display. Due to VR technology, and specifically thanks to special sensors, such as accelerometers, gyroscopes, magnetometers and various types of controllers, we also have the ability to perform specific actions inside the world we are watching. AR (augmented reality) technology, which mixes digital reality with the world in which we are physically present, also has an undoubted future. Images from the real world are recorded by the camera and synchronized with computer graphics and 3D animations. Unlike virtual reality, which immerses the user in a three-dimensional simulation, augmented reality seamlessly combines two parallel orders.

Thanks to the Internet, tourists could also transfer their tourist experiences to the post-liminal phase of the journey, which occurs already after returning home. This is because symbolic Internet communication (images and sounds) allows one to rescue unique travel atmosphere from oblivion. This is facilitated by such activities as, for example, posting photos and videos from the trips on YouTube or using instant messengers for voice and video calls. The fact is that virtual reality (VR) offers tourists many useful applications that deserve more attention from researchers and professionals working in tourism. In 2010, six areas of tourism in which VR may prove particularly valuable were indicated. They included spheres of planning and management, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility and heritage protection [3]. Today, we know that the seventh area in which virtual reality functions the best is a crisis situation related to forced isolation and social distancing, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to note that, from the point of view of terminology, virtual tourism does not meet the basic criterion of the definition of tourism proposed by the United Nations World Tourism Organization. This is because it takes place without leaving one’s own home. According to the UNWTO definition, any migration, in order to be considered tourism, must be accompanied by movement and be performed outside the place of permanent residence [4]. Therefore, many researchers question the legitimacy of using the attribution of virtual reality in relation to the very concept of tourism. According to the definition, virtual tourism means “all the activities of people who, for cognitive or entertainment purposes, immerse themselves in a virtual reality in order to experience the illusion of changing the place of their everyday surrounding”. Understood in this way, virtual tourism allows the user not only to move almost anywhere without having to leave the house, but also to visit areas and objects that are impossible to visit in reality [5]. Virtual tourism is synonymously referred to as e-tourism, virtual tourism, digital tourism or smart tourism.

Nowadays, there is a clear change in the scientific approach to the issue of virtual tourism, as is proven in our literature review. More and more researchers are starting to be interested in this phenomenon. This results from the fact that during the pandemic crisis, many people around the world took advantage of the online form of tourism experience. The development of virtual tourism has been accelerated due to the lockdown in many

countries. Tourists who could not go on a real journey and wanted to satisfy their needs to explore the world had only the possibility of exploring the world in cyberspace. In this way exclusively, they could see tourist attractions, watch museum exhibitions, participate in various media events and take virtual walks without leaving home.

After the “unfreezing” of tourism, the time has now come to adapt tourism’s offer to post-pandemic normality. Therefore, questions arise as to whether the new trend of online tourism, which developed during the pandemic, will stay with us forever, or if it only took the form of growth during forced social isolation? Will cultural, virtual tourism become an alternative and/or an equivalent form of tourism, especially for Generation Z? Generation Z are just entering the labor market and, what is important, will determine the future of tourism and the tourist economy. It is known that Generation Z consists of people for whom navigating the world of modern technologies is not a challenge, but part of everyday life. This is because they have come to live in a fully digitized world. They are also not afraid of traveling and meeting new people. These are the people born between 1995 and 2012. Their distinguishing feature is that they show a particularly developed ability to navigate the online and offline world. They also demonstrate an intuitive ability to operate applications and rely on online communication. Research has shown that Generation Z may be addicted to computer games. At the same time, however, this is mainly influenced by factors such as their age, gender, level of education, the number of digital game platforms they use as well as social activity. What is more, the characteristics of the parents (such as the level of education and occupational status), as well as the characteristics of the family as a whole, including household income, the total number of children in the family and having a playing area around house, play an important role [6].

Research on the future of virtual tourism in relation to Generation Z has not been conducted so far. This paper is filling that research gap. The authors of the paper have made an attempt to answer the fundamental question of what the effects of the development of virtual tourism in the analyzed period are, and whether they will take the form of permanent trends.

The paper consists of five parts. After the introduction, there is a literature review which shows that it was the media and virtual reality created in the network (in the form of interactive audiovisual materials including virtual exhibitions, walks and trips) that offered a chance to survive the pandemic crisis. Next, there is a description of the research methodology that the authors of this paper applied in order to conduct qualitative research. The research was conducted in Poland on students belonging to Generation Z. The final part of the paper contains conclusions and recommendations resulting from the conducted research.

2. Literature Review

Research shows that the effects of COVID-19 have been harmful for all tourist destinations [7]. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has caused changes in the global tourism economy [8]. Researchers emphasize that the serious crisis of COVID-19 also had “dramatic impact on work in tourism”. COVID-19’s disruption had a catastrophic impact on tourism [9]. The pandemic has changed the conditions for the functioning and development of entire tourist regions and modern cities with a developed tourist function. Many of them, in a very short period of time, moved from the stage of excessive developments in tourism (over-tourism) to the stage of extinction of tourism (no-tourism). A domestic tourist, mainly a one-day tourist, became the main consumer of tourism, especially in 2021, while international traffic has practically decreased to zero. Domestic trips of one or several days prevailed on a global scale. The crisis in the sphere of tourism assumed a cascading character; it translated into negative effects not only in all sectors of the tourism economy, but also in many industries related to them, e.g., in complementary services. According to statistics, the crisis affected about 100 million workplaces in tourism around the world [10]. It also influenced the change in behavior [11].

Among the market branches affected by COVID-19, the largest losses were recorded in the hotel industry and short-term rental services, gastronomy, urban tourist transport, guide services and congress and conference services. The lack of stability of working conditions in tourism triggered the process of employees moving to other sectors [12]. For example, in Scotland, changes in tourism restrictions and behavior in 2021 led to a reduction in tourism spending by 54.3% (compared to pre-pandemic levels), which translated into a reduction in gross domestic product by 1.76% (or £2.42 GBP.4 billion), in absolute terms, in 2017 prices, and threatened 100,000 workplaces throughout the whole economy. It is not surprising that food and beverage services and accommodation have been the main sectors of employment decline, but the negative effects on employment have been observed across all sectors of the economy.

The most important sectors for the employment fall are, perhaps unsurprisingly, food and beverages services and accommodation. However, negative effects are felt on employment across all sectors of the economy [13]. Therefore, during the lockdown, the governments of individual countries affected by the pandemic focused (to a greater or lesser extent) on providing financial support and protecting workplaces. Scientific research on real-world tourism, both during and after the lockdown, has brought specific solutions for policy makers and government agencies to help deal with crises in the future [14].

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the inhabitants of the entire world have a strong need to practice cultural tourism in its various forms. In response to the lockdown and the related restrictions, but primarily due to the large restrictions on tourist traffic and the lack of free movement around the world, tourists opted for travel in cyberspace. In this way, scientific predictions regarding changes in consumer behavior as a result of COVID-19 have been confirmed. They stated that, due to mobility restrictions, visits to facilities based on VR would be a viable alternative that would allow sites with tourist attractions to maintain their revenue stream during the pandemic [15].

However, this new quality of the tourist experience of the world and the future of virtual tourism have not been fully explored [16], although the role of the Internet in management and entrepreneurship has been emphasized [17,18].

From the behavioral side, the primary factors that influence the intention to use virtual tours continuously (such as dominance, pleasure and excitement) were examined. The study specifically focused on the effects of ubiquity, telepresence, vividness, interactivity and congruence of background music on users' feelings of pleasure, dominance and arousal. The effects of these factors on word of mouth and continuous usage intention were also examined [19]. Currently, in the post-pandemic reality, tourists prefer developed places and are ready to pay higher prices for accommodation. The desire for compensatory consumption (proximal defense) and the pursuit of self-worth (distal defense) explain the psychological mechanism behind these observations. Tourists came to favor developed destinations and were willing to pay more expensive room rates following the pandemic [20].

There are many studies on the use of information and digital technologies in the tourism of the future, which is synonymously referred to as e-tourism, virtual tourism, digital tourism or smart tourism. Researchers highlight the importance of smartphones, augmented reality, virtual reality, big data and AI/ML (artificial intelligence/machine learning). However, there is a lack of discoveries regarding the development and scope of use of virtual cultural tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the prospects for building its potential and development for the future, especially in relation to Generation Z, who grew up in a fully digitized society. Yet, as research shows, it is the media that are key to shaping the discourse with respect to the future perception of work in tourism [8]. A comprehensive review of papers on virtual tourism published between 2000–2021 offers a conceptual framework within which to unfold the future research directions [21].

Studies aimed at forecasting the future trends for foreign tourist arrivals and foreign exchange earnings and enabling formulating models to predict the future trends based on the COVID-19 parameters, vaccinations and stringency index are present in the literature [22]. Among the model studies, the research that tested a conceptual model concerning the

usage of VR in tourism through the lenses of the extended technology acceptance model (TAM) during the COVID-19 pandemic deserves attention. The premise was that, in this context, people would prefer less risky experiences and perceive VR as a substitute for traditional travel, and thus the desire to use VR in tourism increased under the influence of COVID-19 [23].

In Poland, Barbara Pabian has studied virtual tourism, which is governed by the laws of cyberspace, but also of actual reality. She emphasized that virtual trips do not require somatic effort or the effort of overcoming physical space, but need emotional involvement and internal effort related to finding information. They allow for saving money while moving to interesting places in the world. Thanks to virtual tourism, we can see the tourist attractions of the world, including dangerous places and those that are closed to visitors; as was the case, for example, during the growth phase of the COVID-19 pandemic [24]. Adam Pawlicz discussed the impact and main problems of using information technology in the activities of tourist enterprises. He also presented the history of IT solutions in the aviation, hotel and tour operators' sectors [25]. Bogdan Włodarczyk tried to define the distinguishing features of e-tourism. He indicated that it is a source of a collection of images about the areas of potential tourist activity, created on the basis of secondary, external sources, which are not direct experiences of tourists [26].

3. Research Method

The research applied the qualitative method because the qualitative approach allows us to recognize how people create the world around them, what they do or what happens to them [27]. The authors adopted the principle of conducting research of an a posteriori (empirical) character in close correlation with theoretical thinking while recognizing the studied sociocultural reality as a system (structure) of interrelated elements. The analysis of qualitative data, as recommended by the researchers, was built into the very situation of the interviews. This means that when interviews were conducted, attempts were made in order to make usage of so-called: "recurring interpretation" by sending meanings back to the respondent and thus giving them a chance to confirm and specify them. This form allows immediate confirmation or denial of the researcher's interpretation [28]. Authors were aware that the interviewees might give longer answers and deviate from the topic; therefore, already at the research planning stage, they focused not only on setting the date and place of the meeting, but also on spending a lot of time for interviews. This was especially the case with focus group interviews. The longest interview lasted 1.5 h and the shortest 48 min. The basic information on the conducted survey is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Basic information on the survey conducted.

Specification	Characteristic
Research methodology	- The analysis of tourism journals, websites, descriptive analysis, empirical research method: Focus Group Interview (FDI) partially categorized and individual interviews.
Sample selection	- Targeted selection
Sample size	(a) Focus groups numbers 40, 7 people each—a total of 280 young people (students). (b) Individual interviews numbering 100 Total number of interviews N = 380
Time scope	- 2022

Source: own elaboration.

The paper focuses on the development of virtual tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of the latest phenomena and trends that can be observed at this time. The basic research methodology includes the analysis of the literature on the subject and specialist press, desk research, the method of descriptive analysis and focus group research, using the method of partially specified, focused group interviews (FGI), as well in-depth individual interviews. The choice of the focus group interview (FGI) method was determined by its specific advantages, including:

1. Great freedom of conducting the interview by the moderator, which allows for any order questions asked and for additional questions if they are needed to expand the respondent's statement.
2. The possibility of making observations about the respondents' reactions to the questions asked [29,30].

The research was conducted in 2022. The opinions collected during the discussion, in which there were a total of 40 focus groups of 7 people each ($N = 280$), were led by a moderator who guided the conversation using a specially prepared list of questions. Thanks to this, it was possible to standardize the data obtained on the same topic, while giving the interviewer the opportunity to maneuver (choosing the form of conducting the interview, the order in which questions were asked, developing threads, etc.) when conducting the interviews. The selection of the target group was considered representative due to its specific characteristics:

- a. Young age (Generation Z)—born after 1995—the oldest of them will turn 27 in 2022—so they have been familiar with the new technology since their birth. Generation Z play a key role in the development of virtual tourism; it is a natural living environment of existence for them;
- b. No problems with the use of modern mobile devices (smartphones, laptops, etc.);
- c. Having permanent access to the Internet;
- d. The ability to search and navigate in virtual reality, and thus no problems with virtual communication;
- e. Significant participation in discussions on forums or social media [31–33].

During the focus group interviews, there were people who declared a deeper recognition of the studied phenomenon, who willingly indicated a person/people from their closest environment (other students), participating in virtual tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic and currently. On this basis, the method of in-depth individual interviews was used as a parallel method in the research. Individual interviews consisted of face-to-face conversations between the researcher and the respondents. Their goal was to obtain detailed, in-depth opinions and information from students who are representatives of Generation Z and thus meet the mentioned criteria for sample selection. Individual interviews were conducted in order to better understand the essence of things, to obtain information that would be difficult to obtain using other methods such as, for example, a survey. Extending the research with individual interviews was decided because the undoubted advantage of this method is the lack of negative influence on the part of the group, which may occur in group interviews. Conformism or dominance of some people in the group may have a destructive impact on the others. These were semi-structured interviews in which the starting point was a list of open questions. At the same time, however, the interviewer allowed himself to discard some questions and to generate new ones during the conversation. The point was to get to know the degree of understanding the essence of virtual tourism, as well as the opinions and attitudes of the interviewees regarding participation in virtual tourism, i.e., their motives and attitudes, and finally to determine the optimal level of possible changes in the field of the social phenomenon under study. The subject of research in the framework of individual interviews was a group of one hundred students born after 1995, attending universities in Upper Silesia, indicated by the participants of the focus groups. Among them, there were 67 women and 33 men. Thus, women accounted for 67% of the respondents in this group. The students were considered

a representative group, deliberately selected in terms of a strictly defined age criterion and fulfilment of the criterion of active participation in virtual tourism. The youngest surveyed person was 20 years old, and the oldest person was 28 years old (at the time of the interviews). Most often, however, the surveyed people were over 22 years old (74% of the population). In order to reach their participants, a non-random sampling was applied using the “snowball” method. After each subsequent interview, the moderator asked the respondent to indicate a friend with whom they could conduct an interview on the same topic. In total, 100 people participated in the in-depth individual interviews. The dual-track research allowed for obtaining a total sample of $N = 380$.

In the context of the adopted methodological and substantive assumptions, research issues were expressed in the form of questions. The main problem of the research was therefore expressed in the form of question: *What are the effects of the development of virtual tourism in the analyzed period and will they take the form of permanent trends?* The main problem was specified by detailed issues, which took the form of the following specific questions:

- a. Do the interviewees know the concept of virtual tourism?
- b. What ways and forms of participation in virtual tourism did the interviewees try during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- c. What factors increased their motivation to participate in virtual tourism?
- d. What emotional factors were of the greatest importance for the participants of virtual tourism?
- e. What are the reasons for participating in virtual tourism and what impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on this choice?
- f. Do the interviewees intend to continue participating in virtual tourism after the pandemic?
- g. Do the interviewees intend to participate in tourism in the real world after the pandemic?
- h. What opportunities and threats does the development of virtual tourism bring to the tourism industry?

Since the research was not conclusive, but only explanatory, its order and direction were determined from beginning to the end by the formulated research problem and the accompanying research questions. In the study hypotheses have not been formulated and verified due to the qualitative nature of the research. The research was based on an interpretive paradigm associated with inductive reasoning. Therefore, throughout the research, there were no formulating and verifying hypotheses because of the study's qualitative nature based on the interpretative paradigm related to inductive reasoning. The initial hypotheses are not adopted, as a hypothesis is the result of analysis and the results of the interviews are the effects of social experience; they have an explanatory rather than a conclusive character [34,35]. At the same time, the authors assumed that the conducted qualitative research will be an introduction to quantitative research in the future, providing the basis for formulating research hypotheses that will be verified during further stages of quantitative research in order to deepen and better understand the results obtained in the research.

Major results of the analyses allowed for:

- (a) Recognizing the opinions of young people concerning the development of virtual tourism, i.e., those of people who use mobile devices on a daily basis and exploit the potential of modern information and communication technologies;
- (b) Obtaining an answer to the question: what are the effects of the development of virtual tourism in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic and do they take the form of permanent trends?

4. Empirical Results

The first question of the interview was to determine whether the respondents understand the notion of virtual tourism. Each of the respondents declares familiarity with the researched concept, which confirms the previously mentioned characteristics of Generation Z. Determining the answer to the above question allowed us to raise the problem of ways and forms of participation in virtual tourism, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Ways and forms of participation in virtual tourism most frequently indicated by the respondents.

Ways and Forms of Participation in Virtual Tourism	
Google Street View	- Photos, videos from trips, 3D tours.
Online guided tours	- Museums, galleries, cities, etc.
Multimedia Mobile Guidebooks	- Text descriptions, stories, photos and audio tracks.
Using Airbnb service	- Getting to know the culture and art of selected tourist destinations (countries, regions, etc.); - Renting accommodation via the website services; - Access to many tourist attractions on the Internet.
360° cameras in VR glasses	- Taking virtual walks in which there is an opportunity to sightsee selected places, see the facility/room which one intends to book or learn about the biggest attractions in the area

Source: own elaboration.

The obtained data shows that young people most often declare four forms of activity in virtual tourism, with the largest number of respondents (nearly half of the group) using the opportunities offered by the Google Street View platform, thanks to which they most often watch photos, travel videos as well as 3D tours. This allows them to visit distant destinations via mobile applications or websites. On-line guided tours, in other words, virtual tours (e.g., of galleries, museums, cities, etc.), which somewhat refer to another form, i.e., mobile multimedia guides, are another popular form of participation in virtual tourism in this group. Thanks to the applications contained in the interactive guide, the interviewees have the opportunity to find accommodation, a restaurant, a shop, a cinema, a theater or another tourist attraction. As the respondents emphasized, the function of creating and remembering their own excursion routes as well as the possibility of using ready-made suggestions is extremely useful in the case of the described tool. GPS system with glocalization built into the guide is very important in this case. Additionally, a large group of people also declare using the offer of the Airbnb portal, where one can join interactive live sessions. Participation in them allows young people to learn about the culture and art of specific tourist destinations but also, as they claim, to rent accommodation through the website or provide themselves with the access to other attractions that can be obtained via the Internet. The above-mentioned forms of activity in virtual tourism are complemented by exploring tourist attractions using 360° cameras in VR glasses. The respondents explained that they allowed them to move to a given location and get to know its offer through an extraordinary virtual world. Thanks to this, they can feel the atmosphere of the place, see all of its advantages and disadvantages.

Another issue raised in the interview concerned the key factors that increase the respondents' motivation to participate in virtual tourism. The obtained data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Factors that increase motivation to participate in virtual tourism.

Factors Increasing the Motivation to Participate in Virtual Tourism		
1. The opportunity to see with one's own eyes what a given destination, facility or tourist attraction looks like without incurring costs.	2. Reducing security concerns during the pandemic.	3. No need to plan and organize travel (e.g., transport, meals, accommodation, etc.).

Source: own case study.

Three of the most important factors appeared in the group of the most frequently indicated answers. First of all, the opportunity to see with one's own eyes what a given destination, facility or tourist attraction looks like without incurring any costs. The respondents emphasized that before the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, real visits to many places of interest to them was unattainable. The respondents indicated the reduction of security concerns during the pandemic as the second important factor. In addition, it was mentioned that participation in virtual tourism depends on many other factors, such as the level of social awareness in the sphere of the forms and opportunities offered by virtual tourism as well as the access to the Internet and the ability to use a laptop, smartphone or computer.

In the next step, an attempt was made to identify the factors of an emotional nature that are of greatest importance for the participants of virtual tourism—Table 4.

Table 4. Factors of the greatest emotional importance for the surveyed virtual tourism participants.

Emotional Factors of Virtual Tourism Participants			
Creating groups and building virtual bonds	Satisfaction with the ability to use the potential of mobile devices and the Internet to meet one's own tourist needs	No physical travel fatigue and no fear of getting lost in a given place	Satisfaction with quick and easy access to tourist destinations and attractions

Source: own case study.

The factors of an emotional nature indicated by the interviewees largely result from the fact that they are aware of their belonging to a virtual community in which groups are created and bonds are built. Remaining in mutual interaction, they communicate with each other in order to satisfy virtual tourism needs. The predispositions of this group resulting from their belonging to the Generation Z make its representatives feel satisfaction resulting from the ability to use the potential of mobile devices and the Internet, which will not only enable fast and easy access to tourist offers, but also perform a valuable information function. Among other important factors of an emotional nature, the interviewees also mentioned the lack of physical travel fatigue and the fear of getting lost in a given destination [35].

Another important issue raised in the interview concerned the reasons for participating in virtual tourism, which aimed to determine what impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on this choice. The information obtained in this respect is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. The most important reasons for participating in virtual tourism in the respondents' opinion.

Reasons for Participating in Virtual Tourism			
Limited ability to move	Fear of contracting the virus	COVID-19 pandemic	Concern for your own health

Source: own case study.

All of the reasons for participating in virtual tourism mentioned by the interviewees are related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, although the interviewees often expressed their satisfaction with participating in virtual tourism and the related benefits, including safety (in terms of health and other travel-related factors), time saving, convenience, etc., they feel pandemic fatigue and the need to return to traditional forms of travel. This is well reflected in the following statements: (i) “... I feel tired of the current situation, the burdens resulting from distance learning and limited contact with the environment, I am looking forward to the end of the pandemic to be able to experience traditional forms of traveling again”; (ii) “... I am trying to get used to a new reality using the opportunities offered by virtual tourism, however, I feel an irresistible need to return to traditional forms of travel, I feel tired due to the ongoing pandemic”

(iii) “... I have the impression that I live in a very isolated place, I dream of making a real trip, so I am waiting and hoping for a quick end to the pandemic”.

In an attempt to assess the development and trends in virtual tourism, the respondents were asked about the opportunities and threats that, in their opinion, this type of tourism poses to the tourism industry. Opportunities for the development of virtual tourism are seen by the respondents primarily in the area of promotion and marketing, which can adequately motivate more people to use the available forms of virtual tourism. This can be proved by the following interviewee’s statement: “...I believe that the area of promotion and marketing can be an important tool of motivation to use the wide range of virtual tourism.” The second opportunity for the development of virtual tourism most frequently mentioned in the interviews is confirmed by the following statements: “... in my opinion, the opportunities for the development of virtual tourism are related to the benefit of using virtual reality to compensate for the lack of the possibility to travel.” When it comes to threats, in the opinion of most people, virtual tourism does not pose a threat to the tourism industry at the moment. This is confirmed by the statements of many of the interviewees, i.e., (i): “... at present, I do not see any threats to the tourism industry arising from the development of virtual tourism”; (ii) “...I believe that virtual tourism does not pose a threat to the tourism industry”; (iii) “... the development of virtual tourism is, in my opinion, only a response to the travel restrictions caused by the pandemic, so it is only a temporary solution that does not threaten the tourism industry in any way.” Although the interviewees positively assess their experiences related to various forms of virtual tourism, they cannot imagine replacing a real journey with virtual reality. Therefore, from the perspective of the tourism industry, it has only a complementary character in the opinion of all of the respondents.

The behavior caused by participation in virtual tourism and declared by the interviewees in the next question of the interview constitutes a positive trend in the opinion of the authors of the research. The interviewees indicate that there is a relationship between virtual journeys and planning real travels. This is confirmed by the following statements: (i) “...during the pandemic, I often used virtual travels, many of them strongly motivated me to visit them in real life whenever possible”; (ii) “... me and my friends have already started planning a real trip to one of the places I saw during the pandemic in the virtual world”; (iii); “... the virtual tourism I experienced allowed me to see interesting tourist trails, I have already visited one of them, the next one is yet to come.” This means that virtual tourism is an inspiration to travel in the real world in many cases.

The last issue raised in the interview was to determine whether the respondents intend to continue to participate in virtual tourism after the pandemic. Most of them declare that they will continue being active in virtual travel experience, even though there is already a possibility of real travelling. When asking the interviewees where this attitude comes from, they most often answered in a similar way and indicated the important role of virtual tourism, consisting in the initial monitoring of destinations or tourist facilities of interest in order to avoid possible surprise or disappointment later during the actual visit. This is confirmed by such statements as: (i) “... I have long dreamed of taking advantage of some form of extreme tourism, but it was always accompanied by a lot of concerns and fear of the unknown. Thanks to the virtual experience of mountain kayaking, my fears of danger disappeared, thanks to which I planned this year’s vacation, as I had dreamed before”; (ii) “...I believe that virtual viewing of a given place related to the planned trip is a great way to get to know it in advance, allowing you to avoid unnecessary disappointments.”

It is important, from the point of view of this study, to note that many of the interviewees state that after the end of the pandemic, they do not intend to give up participating in virtual tourism.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The most important conclusions from the research are as follows:

- In addition to the six areas of tourism indicated in the literature in which VR may prove particularly valuable, i.e., planning and management, marketing, entertainment,

education, accessibility and heritage protection, the seventh area is a crisis situation related to the need to maintain social distance or forced isolation, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic;

- In crisis situations where isolation occurs or social distancing must be maintained, there is a clear increase in interest in virtual tourism. This is due to the fact that it provides emotions and unforgettable experiences, just like in actual reality, as well as allowing for collecting impressions and experiencing the illusion of exciting adventures;
- The surveyed representatives of Generation Z declare that as the pandemic restrictions disappear, they want to simultaneously experience various forms of tourism (both virtual and real-world) to places previously viewed in cyberspace. Thus, virtual tourism is a form that precedes and complements a real journey;
- As the pandemic restrictions will fade, alongside traveling in the real world, tourists will continue to travel with the usage of virtual reality. Therefore, various marketing and promotional activities should be undertaken on the Internet in order to highlight the attractiveness of tourist destinations and encourage the use of tourist services.

The authors of this paper agree with the researchers that humanizing tourism experience with virtual and augmented reality has gained traction; however, fragmented literature delimits the holistic view [36]. Therefore, they undertook research, formulating the main problem, which brings the following question: *What are the effects of the development of virtual tourism in the analyzed period and will they take the form of permanent trends among representatives of Generation Z?*

The information obtained from the interviews made it possible to see a specific direction of changes observed in the behavior of the interviewees (participants in virtual tourism), which is a consequence of the changes taking place in their environment under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research enriches the existing literature on the tourism economy.

Using empirical, qualitative research, the mechanism of increased interest in the virtual world on the part of e-tourists from Generation Z was explained, while both repeating the previous research and providing an original input. It is the research finding that, in addition to the six areas of tourism indicated in the literature in which VR may prove particularly valuable, i.e., planning and management, marketing, entertainment, education, accessibility and heritage preservation, the seventh area is a crisis situation related to forced isolation, as exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic [3].

The researchers' thesis that any isolated environment can benefit from the use of virtual reality has also been confirmed. We agree with the researchers that in the case of a limited environment, such as a sanitary crisis, the virtual world becomes an actual solution for dealing with the situation only when it is perceived as useful and easy to use [20].

The results of the research revealed no difficulties in the recognition and indication of available forms and ways of participating in virtual tourism in the case of the Generation Z. The representatives of this group have no problems using VR to satisfy their tourist needs. This finding suggests that in a limited environment such as a pandemic, virtual tourism becomes a real solution to deal with a pandemic situation. In crisis situations related to forced isolation or social distancing, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a clear increase in interest in virtual tourism. This is due to the fact that virtual tourism, just like traditional tourism in real life, provides emotions and unforgettable experiences, as well as allowing for collecting impressions that are a substitute for, and an illusion of, exciting adventures. However, according to the respondents, as the pandemic restrictions fade, there is a desire and need to simultaneously experience various forms of tourism in the real world. People who have used virtual travel have already started planning the actual trip to the place they saw in the virtual world. This means that virtual tourism can be an inspiration to travel in the real world. The interviewees declare that they will continue to participate in virtual tourism, as well as in its traditional form, i.e., in reality. The respondents declare that they will continue to use virtual tourism intensively. It is our research finding that this will be a lasting trend. This creates the need to undertake actions

in the sphere of marketing to promote tourist attractions. There is also a need for a scientific overview and paying attention to both the positive aspects and the threats that may be experienced by a tourist moving in cyberspace. There is also a need to redefine the very concept of virtual cultural tourism and to indicate the directions of its further development.

6. Limitations

Due to the fact that the conducted qualitative research was explanatory and not conclusive in nature, it did not allow the authors to make generalizations in terms of the research problem (e.g., in relation to other age groups or regions/countries). Therefore, despite the theoretical and practical implications of this research, there are some limitations that need to be addressed, e.g., those which pertain to cultural differences, the attitudes of representatives of other generations to digitization, the impact of wealth on e-tourists' decisions, etc. In addition, our data was collected in Poland, thus offering a limited representation of the potential dynamics of using the Internet to explore the world virtually in a post-pandemic situation. Therefore, we recommend undertaking further empirical research related to the issues raised in other countries.

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