

## Article

# An Empirical Assessment of Students' Tourist Preferences during the COVID-19 Pandemic from a Gender Perspective: Evidence from Poland

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this research is to reveal the tourist preferences of students during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on differences between genders. This study was carried out in January 2021 and relied on the CAWI technique with a questionnaire distributed on social media. The snowball method was used to reach a wider audience. Valid questionnaires were retrieved from 870 respondents, primarily women (66.8%). The results demonstrate that tourist activity was witnessed despite the pandemic, but it differed between men and women. The latter travelled more often and for longer periods, and they chose August and September from the summer months. Although most travelling students sought active recreation, female students more frequently decided to be less active or opted for passive leisure during their stays. Unlike men, women sought safety and therefore mostly opted for individual apartments or hotels; staying with family or friends was a much less popular scenario for them, primarily because they feared it could expose their loved ones to the virus. For the whole group covered by the survey, sanitary and epidemiological restrictions, the reduced availability of attractions in tourist destinations, and increased prices were the main inconveniences that they faced when travelling in 2020.

**Keywords:** tourism; tourism demand; consumer behavior; preferences; gender; academic youth; COVID-19



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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is among the sectors particularly affected by the restrictions related to the COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, especially the social distancing and enhanced sanitary measures [1–3]. Additionally, it was impacted by factors characteristic of periods of increased economic uncertainty (i.e., reduced demand for services) and by different kinds of administrative restrictions, which prevented potential tourists from freely traveling [4,5]. As a state of epidemic emergency was declared in Poland on 14 March 2020, countrywide restrictions were imposed on activities related to accommodation and tourism facilities, short-stay accommodation services, and spa resorts [6], bringing the Polish tourism industry to a near-complete halt [7]. Both time and effort are required to restructure the economic resources dented by the prolonged absence of income and to overcome the deadlock. The above is true for both the service providers active in this industry and potential customers. The study presented in this paper focuses on one group of buyers of tourist services, i.e.,

students, viewed as a social group at the first stage of maturity who demonstrate characteristics, opinions, and behaviors specific to their age. From the perspective of tourist activity, their key characteristics are independence, individuality, and social activity, as well as geographic and technological mobility, but also time (holidays) and economic (income) restrictions [7].

It should be added that, in the face of striving for sustainable development of the economy, individual tourism, especially that focused on environmentally valuable areas, plays a special role. It is also associated with reducing the negative environmental and social effects of mass leisure activities (e.g., organized trips) [8]. Sustainable tourism means to practice traveling in a way that not only respects the environment but also supports local communities and guarantees a fair distribution of benefits. It seems that it is a form that is especially chosen by young people, including students, who are widely recognized as one of the social groups involved in activities that preserve the natural environment for future generations.

Having the above in mind, the purpose of this study was defined as determining students' tourist preferences deriving from the COVID-19 experience, with a particular focus on the decisive role of gender in related decision making. Based on a review of previous research, we found that there is not enough work on the impact of gender and students' interactions on tourist preferences, let alone COVID-19. Unquestionably, since the COVID-19 outbreak, the question of gender differences among tourists around the world affecting travel behavior, especially in terms of the choice of destinations and companions, has drawn the attention of researchers from sundry countries [9–11]. Nonetheless, there is a lack of research on factors causing uncomfortable during travel and expectations in terms of epidemiological safety when travelling for tourist purposes, including the impact of gender. Bearing in mind that Poland is the biggest and most populated European Union Member among the Central and Eastern European countries, that research gap needs to be bridged.

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How much were the students interested in tourist trips during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what discouraged them from traveling?
2. What were the reasons and destinations of student trips in 2020?
3. What were the students' preferences regarding the time and duration of and desired company for a trip during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. What kind of accommodation facilities did the students choose, and what is their feedback on the levels of sanitary and epidemiological safety they saw there?
5. What pandemic-related factors made the students feel uncomfortable when traveling, and what epidemiological safety measures did they expect?

All of the above were analyzed in the context of the respondents' gender. In the research, based on a review of the literature on the subject [12,13], the following research assumptions were adopted, subjecting them to empirical verification:

- Women in the face of a threat/situation of uncertainty adopt more conservative attitudes than men (shifting the center of gravity of decisions to health prevention and family well-being), which also applies to the use of tourist services.
- Women in the face of a threat/situation of uncertainty focus on savings to ensure the future wealth of their family, which, e.g., translates into a lower inclination to take tourist trips, shortening their time away and affecting the way in which they choose company.

The theoretical part analyzes tourist destinations as a subject of consumer choice. It addresses demographic aspects as a factor in tourism choices and preferences. Also discussed is the students' behavior in the context of risks presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The third part explains the methodological aspects of this study, and the fourth discusses the findings.

## 2. Tourist Destinations as a Subject of Consumer Choice

Social sciences have for many years analyzed buyers' behaviors and market decisions. The descriptions of these processes laid the grounds for a number of theories, including the law of diminishing marginal utility, the homo economicus model, the opportunity cost theory, the ratchet effect, Giffen's paradox, the network effect, the Pareto principle, Engel's law, the price elasticity of demand, speculative bubbles, the substitution effect, and the Veblen effect [14,15]. Today, the development of research tools (including experiments, observations, and brain examination methods) gradually adds to the knowledge of drivers of consumer behavior, as illustrated, for instance, by the findings of behavioral economics, which seeks to explain what humans do through the prism of their social preferences, heuristics, and norms and through a deeper insight into human biological inclinations [16].

In the context of social sciences, consumer behavior is usually defined as all activities related to accessing, using, and controlling goods and services, together with the decisions that precede and condition these activities [17,18]. In broader terms, consumer behavior is viewed as a dynamic interaction between affection, cognition, behavior, and the environment through which humans pursue the interchangeable aspects of their lives [19]. As a science, economics seeks to determine the way consumers use their resources, how they view the alternative ways of addressing their needs, and how they make decisions to maximize satisfaction.

Tourism is a form of active leisure and a multidimensional process combining several aspects of human life, i.e., psychological, social, cultural, geographical, and economic aspects [20,21]. It has become an important part of modern living, an indicator of being modern, and a status symbol in today's society while also being viewed as a condition for staying healthy [22]. According to WTO, tourism encompasses all activities that entail the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment, for less than a year, for any main purpose (business, leisure, or other personal purpose) other than to be employed by a resident entity in the country or place visited [23]. The three common traits of tourism activities are usually defined as follows [24]:

- People traveling between two or more locations, i.e., between their place of origin and a destination;
- The duration of traveling (it is a temporary process);
- The purpose of traveling.

A tourism activity is a process that starts before leaving home, continues even after returning home, and is primarily manifested in practicing tourism itself [25]. It also involves choosing a destination and a purpose for the trip. The tourism destination, i.e., the place visited by a tourist, is of key importance in making the decision to go on a trip, and it is sometimes even defined as the main goal of the trip [26,27].

Traveling behaviors and destination choices are driven by specific motives and, most of all, by tourists' needs [28]. These needs are unlimited; they lay at the core of consumer choices and trigger the motivation to take steps aimed at addressing them [29]. In tourism, just like in other domains of human activity, these needs differ in nature and are determined by multiple factors [30]:

- Demographics: age, gender, education, financial status, and family lifecycle stage;
- Economics: income, price, products, place of sale, and advertising;
- Social and cultural factors: family, opinion leaders, and reference groups;
- Psychology: motives, needs, beliefs, and attitudes.

Other important determinants of consumer choice in tourism include the political situation and legal and environmental aspects, such as natural and ecological factors [31].

### 2.1. Demographics as a Factor behind Tourist Choices

As mentioned above, demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, financial status, and family lifecycle stage, represent an important group of factors affecting the decisions on how an individual addresses their tourist needs [32]. Today, they also

provide a basis for segmenting the tourism market [33]. However, at the same time, it should be noted that they are largely correlated with economic factors [34]. From that point of view, a significant segment of the tourism market is that of services dedicated to young people, including students, despite them having relatively low levels of disposable income [35]. Also, students usually do not have many commitments (dependent children or spouses), which makes them more willing to travel. Their inclination is additionally boosted by how the student lifestyle is perceived by society, peer pressure, and parental expectations [36]. Over the last couple of years, student tourism has grown to become one of the fastest developing segments of international tourism. Its growth translated into tremendous social and economic opportunities for local communities, because the traveling youth stimulate local tourism businesses, get involved in closer social relationships with their hosts, and support environmental protection [37].

Selected characteristics of women's and men's purchasing decisions are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Selected characteristics of women's and men's behavior affecting the choice of a tourist service.

Decisions and Behaviors	
Women	Men
In addition to work, caring for home and family	Priority for professional work, then interests and passions
Adoption of the "we" perspective, care for the common good	Adoption of the "I" perspective, low concern for the common good
It takes time to make purchasing decisions	Fast purchasing decisions (predetermined time)
Expecting partnership treatment	Expecting serious treatment
Dialogue as the basis of communication	Competition, effort, and challenge as the basis of communication
Large number of diverse requirements	Small number of strictly defined requirements
Conscious decision making with a large role of full information	Conscious decision making with a large role of own experience
Growing interest in using the Internet and social media	Very technically advanced group of buyers using the Internet and social media
Price as an important selection factor	Technical parameters as an important selection factor
Shopping is a very important part of life	Shopping is usually treated instrumentally

Source: own study based on [38–42].

Another major demographic factor affecting tourism choices, in addition to age and education, is gender [43]. Some authors even go as far as claiming that all aspects of development and activity related to tourism are a representation of intergender relationships [44]. Gender, just like culture, makes people inclined to engage in specific market behaviors. As research shows, women account for nearly three-quarters of the audience of total mass marketing communications and make ca. 90% of purchasing decisions [45]. As a consequence, more and more businesses take these differences into account in their marketing activities [38]. Gender makes a difference in what consumers expect from specific consumer goods (including tourism products), and it is the reason for offering products intended for male or female use only [46]. Customer behaviors also vary depending on gender—for instance, women pay more attention to how a product looks, how it is priced, and whether it is trendy, whereas men tend to focus on the brand and technical specifications. These differences also play a significant role in choosing the shopping place [47].

Other demographic characteristics of importance to tourism preferences include social and professional status (the higher the status of an individual, the more responsibilities they have, and, thus, they are guided by different criteria in how they spend their free time), education level (the higher the education, the greater the awareness and knowledge of a

healthy lifestyle, of the role of tourism, and of adverse consequences of not being engaged in it), and financial status (translating into the capacity to finance a trip). Emphasis is increasingly often placed on one more demographic factor that affects tourism preferences, namely, customer age. Children and youth depend on their parents and follow the current trends or patterns learned in their families. Conversely, the tourism activities of adults (including students) depend on their lifestyle, health condition, financial capacity, and how much they know of preventive healthcare. Also, there is yet another factor at play, i.e., the amount of free time (e.g., having a heavy workload means having less time to spend on tourism activities). Tourist preferences are also impacted by one's family situation, i.e., the fact of having or not having a family, especially children.

In their research, the authors focused on a particular group of buyers of tourism services, i.e., students, defined as people enrolled in first-, second-, or long-cycle university programs. In view of the demographic features mentioned above, this group demonstrates several outstanding characteristics from the perspective of their activity in the market for tourism services, including independent decision making, individualism, considerable social activity, and geographic and technological mobility (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Characteristics of students' tourism activities.

Characteristics	Meaning	Impact on Tourism Activity
independence	a strong need for independence explained by them reaching the adult age and being no longer under parental control	a strong need for independence explained by them reaching the adult age and being no longer under parental control
individuality	ability to pursue their own plans and goals in accordance with their beliefs	the tourism activities that they engage in are strictly related to their own personality; people who like to discover new places will opt for sightseeing; strict believers will be interested in religious tourism; adrenaline and extreme sports lovers will choose specialized tourism services
social activity	being part of and acting within social groups, building a network of relationships using social media	group traveling is way to make tourism trips even more attractive; social activities also include exchanging recommendations between or inside groups
geographic mobility	is characteristic of the young generation and refers to the ability to rapidly change locations	mobility is what allows university students to engage in tourism activities using their own vehicles or public transport
telecommunication mobility	fast and easy communications and access to information thanks to ICTs	young people easily learn technological innovations; being online at any time and any place means that they are able to immediately access information on tourism offerings, attractions, prices, and transport connections and book accommodation and tickets
time constraints	due to their particularities, the group are restricted in their ability to engage in tourism activities	students usually go on tourist trips during summer, winter, and bank holidays and weekends
financial constraints	the group's specific time organization provides them with a limited capacity to earn money	the tourism activities that they engage in are constrained by the availability of funds, wealth of their families, and capacity to access other funding streams for their holidays

Source: own compilation based on [48].

These characteristics make students an interesting group of customers who sellers try to reach through different channels [49].

## 2.2. COVID-19 Pandemic as a Risk Affecting Students' Behavior

In tourism, consumer decisions are often made at a certain level of risk, which is related to how an individual views the uncertainty and negative consequences of purchasing a product or service. Potential tourists compare alternative destinations by analyzing the perceived costs and benefits. Also, just like other consumers, they are interested in minimizing the risks (which is a factor in maximizing the quality of traveling) [50]. From that point of view, the perception of security is both a major advantage and a determinant of travel decisions. Indeed, rather than actual risks, it is the way in which security is perceived that affects tourists' decisions to avoid risk (improve security) or not visit a specific destination (avoid threats) [51]. Hence, tourists choose a destination based on an individual perception of its attributes, including risk-related aspects [52]. The literature provides numerous examples of such activities [53]:

- People who experienced a natural disaster are usually more risk-averse than others; following the pandemic, people will probably become less inclined to incur risks;
- External events, such as epidemics and terrorist attacks, can have a major impact on how people perceive risks and on their attitude towards a destination; hence, personal security is of utmost importance to tourists;
- Destinations viewed as dangerous are usually not attractive to travelers.

People started to attach greater importance to how they perceive risks and security in 2020–2022, when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out and reached peak levels. Although the memory of it is slowly fading away, it indisputably had a tremendous impact on social changes around the globe, and it resulted in the redefinition of many attitudes and behaviors. The solutions designed to mitigate the spreading of the pandemic—from the mandate to wear masks to frequent hand washing, reorganization of the functioning of certain industries, the restriction of public events, the closing of borders, or the imposition of lockdown as the most radical intervention in civil life—resulted in changes in some behavioral aspects [54], left an imprint on people's minds, and, therefore, changed the attitudes and behavior of the youth [55,56].

In March 2020, the universities and their students, teachers, and all administrative staff went online because of the restrictions that were then in place. In some extreme cases, the universities temporarily suspended their activity. However, most of them continued teaching on Web platforms (MS Teams, Zoom, ClickMeeting, etc.). The suspension of intramural classes and the mandate of social distancing were the reasons why a large number of students decided to go back to their family homes. This made it considerably more difficult, if not temporarily impossible, for them to maintain direct contact with their peers or to get involved in university life. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic affected one more socially important aspect of living a young life; i.e., it restricted the students' ability to access the labor market and, thus, to earn additional money. During the pandemic, many workplaces previously open to students (especially in the catering sector) were either closed or significantly restricted in their operations. According to estimations, in Poland, nearly one-third of economically active persons aged up to 24 worked in the sectors most severely affected by the lockdown [57]. Being unable to earn additional money during their studies and fearing that their parents might lose their jobs played a major role in reorienting the purchasing decisions of a number of Polish students. Papers addressing that problem claim that, on a global basis, one out of six persons aged below 25 lost their jobs solely because of the crisis triggered by the pandemic [57].

In accordance with what the economists estimated in the report "Corona generation. Growing up in a pandemic" [58], the consequences of the pandemic experienced by young people will cost the whole world USD 1.7 trillion [59]. This is the combined effect of factors such as reducing the quality of education; the scourge of mental problems experienced by the youth as a consequence of the pandemic; and—most of all—reducing the young people's opportunities in the labor market because of the smaller number of jobs and the smaller capacity to build professional experience during studies. The report also estimates

that, in the future, today's young generation will earn over 6 percent less money due to the consequences of the pandemic [58].

The pandemic also had an impact on the behavior of young consumers [60]. With regard to social impact instruments, an important role was played by regulations designed to promote solidarity and the sense of responsibility for the good of the community. They successfully replaced the prolonged fear management measures, which, in addition to desired behaviors, caused a number of negative psychological and social effects (including deterioration in the mental health of part of society and reluctance to follow the guidelines) [55].

The subjective perceptions of the risk (of contracting COVID-19) and of how an individual can effectively protect themselves against the threat are major factors in making decisions on how to spend free time, for instance. Thus, the following mechanism is triggered: the higher the perceived risk and the smaller the perceived power of having an impact, the faster the development of an aversive attitude [55]. In practice, this makes individuals choose holiday destinations located away from large cities and opt for individual accommodation or places with a small risk of coming into contact with other people, etc.

### 3. Materials and Methods

The population covered in this study is constituted by young university students who were actively involved in tourism prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research relied on a diagnostic survey, and it used a questionnaire technique. The link to the questionnaire was distributed through social media (dedicated Facebook and Instagram topic groups). The recruitment also used the snowball approach [61–63], which allowed for a significantly wider audience to be reached. The reason for employing that technique is the fact that it enables access to a large group of people to retrieve the desired information. The respondents recruited using Facebook and Instagram were also asked to forward the invitation to this study to other active tourists from the student community through various social media. In view of the way the link to the questionnaire was distributed, the study can be assumed to have followed a purposive sampling procedure. Indeed, the authors sought to reach only students with a strong background in tourism activities. The study was carried out with the Webankieta.pl site in January 2021. Before proceeding to the target procedure, the authors performed a pilot study with a small group of respondents, which allowed them to refine the research tool.

Determining the size of the sample is of crucial importance in every study. Considering that Poland has over 1.2 million university students, the following formula was used to calculate it:

$$n = \frac{P(1 - P)}{\frac{e^2}{Z_{\alpha/2}^2} + \frac{P(1-P)}{N}} \quad (1)$$

where  $n$  is the sample size,  $e$  is the permissible error,  $N$  is the population size,  $Z_{\alpha/2}$  is the value resulting from the confidence interval used (for a 95% confidence level,  $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$ ), and  $P$  is the estimated proportion in the population (usually, this is set to  $P = 50\%$ ).  $P$  is the estimated expected proportion of the population covered in this study. As the proportion in the student population was unknown, the least favorable assumption was made, namely, that  $P = 50\%$ , because, at that  $P$  level, the product  $P(1 - P)$  reaches the maximum value.

The survey covered 870 respondents from 33 Polish tertiary education establishments, which means that the maximum measurement error was 3.32% (at  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). This resulted in obtaining a cross-cutting sample. Moreover, bearing in mind the importance of its size, it can be concluded that the findings presented in Section 4 are of a significant cognitive and practical value.

The data collected during the study were subjected to a statistical analysis with the use of STATISTICA 13.3. The following non-parametric statistical procedures were employed in order to assess the differences in the characteristics considered between women and

men: Pearson's chi-squared test of independence, the Mann–Whitney U test, and the Wald–Wolfowitz runs test. The results were deemed significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

The survey questionnaire included 21 questions split into 4 thematic sections. The first was intended to identify people who did not go on any tourist trip in 2020 and to determine the reasons behind it. The second allowed for the description of the tourism trips together with accompanying behaviors and preferences (including the destination, goals, duration, frequency, preferred company, accommodation type, and ways of addressing catering needs). The third section focused on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the following: the way that the students pursued their tourism plans; how they viewed the security status of different accommodation facilities; the measures taken by accommodation facilities to improve security; and the sources of inconvenience during a trip in the pandemic era. The last section of the questionnaire was about the respondents' characteristics. The questions were formulated using the expert method (by the authors). We were also inspired by other studies on similar topics. The questionnaire included single- and multiple-choice questions and used 4- and 5-point Likert scales.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The survey was administered to 870 students of Polish tertiary education establishments. Most of them were women (66.8%); men accounted for 33.2%. Although the members of the sample differed in age (from 17 to 48 years), people aged up to 20 prevailed, and the median age was 21 (because the sample was composed of students). Most interviewees (nearly 66%) lived in cities. The majority of them were Polish people (93.0%), with Ukrainians and Belarusians being the other largest nationality groups. The interviewees viewed their financial situation as quite satisfactory. Most of them (nearly 56%) believed it to be good or very good (with the latter option being indicated slightly more frequently by men). Over one-third considered it to be average. Table 3 presents the details of the sample as a whole and split by gender.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of the respondents.

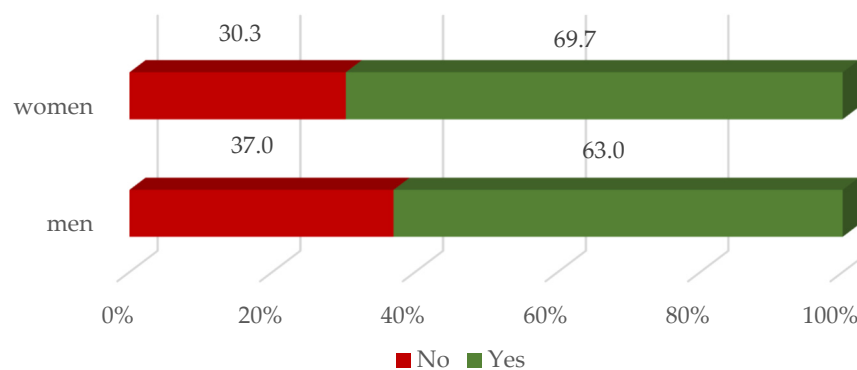
	Total n = 870	Women n = 581	Men n = 289
Age			
min	17	17	17
max	48	48	41
mean	21.5	21.5	21.5
median	21	20	21
kurtosis	21.0	20.8	9.7
skewness	3.8	4.0	2.3
Place of residence [%]			
village	34.4	34.6	34.0
city (up to 50,000)	15.8	14.0	19.3
city (50,000–100,000)	7.3	8.2	5.7
city (over 100,000)	42.5	43.2	41.0
Assessing your own financial situation [%]			
very good	12.8	13.8	10.7
good	43.1	41.1	47.1
average	35.7	36.8	33.6
poor	7.5	7.4	7.6
extremely poor	0.9	0.9	1.0

Source: own study.

Despite the tourism sector facing a series of restrictions and constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviewees demonstrated quite high levels of tourism activity in the study period. Indeed, 67.5% of them took at least one tourism trip with an overnight



stay in 2020. This could largely result from the group having already established strong habits for tourism in the pre-pandemic era. However, the levels of tourism activity differed between genders (Figure 1). Pearson's chi-squared test of independence confirmed that gender had a statistically significant impact on whether an individual engaged in tourism ( $\chi^2 = 3.98, p = 0.046$ ). It should be noted that, in the study period, male students were less inclined (by nearly 5 percentage points) than their female peers to go on a tourist trip. As indicated by other authors, gender is also a factor of importance in other purchasing decisions made during a tourist trip [64–66].



**Figure 1.** Participation of interviewees in tourist trips with at least one overnight stay in 2020 [%]. Source: own study.

An important part of this study consisted of exploring the reasons that prevented or discouraged the respondents from going on a tourist trip in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data shown in Table 4 suggest that the key reasons for not engaging in tourism were the declaration of a state of pandemic emergency and the fear of becoming infected with the coronavirus. The lack of time and the responsibilities related to studying and working also proved to be significant barriers. These reasons were cited by comparable numbers of male and female students.

**Table 4.** Reasons that prevented and discouraged the respondents from going on a tourist trip in 2020 (from 1 “not important at all” to 4 “extremely important”).

Reasons for Not Engaging in Tourism	Women	Men
Current pandemic, fear of becoming infected with the coronavirus	3.15	3.12
Lack of time	2.67	2.65
Professional responsibilities	2.50	2.47
Lack of funds to finance the trip	2.43	2.10
Inability to stay in the preferred accommodation facility in a defined time slot	2.35	2.05
Problems in organizing the trip	2.31	2.23
Domestic responsibilities	2.27	2.07
Absence of an adequate offering	2.15	2.07
Unwillingness and no need to travel	2.12	2.21
Place of residence as the preferred option for holidaymaking	2.10	2.17
Not having company	2.09	2.04
Inability to travel due to ill health	1.62	1.41

Source: own study.

The following barriers played a greater role for women: not having enough funds to finance the trip; problems in organizing the trip; and the inability to stay in the preferred accommodation facility in the defined time slot. Moreover, as much more women are housekeepers, family responsibilities were a stronger factor preventing them from traveling. In this context, it is interesting to note that men more frequently than women opted for spending holidays in their place of residence, and they demonstrated a smaller need and less willingness to travel.

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a significant impact on a number of life aspects of the affected communities, including on tourism. Due to different control measures (e.g., mandatory tests or quarantine), traveling became more difficult and expensive. This made the restrictions on traveling more obvious to potential tourists [67–69]. The constraints on the freedom to move, quarantines for people crossing borders, and changes to the functioning of tourism facilities also forced tourists to revise their plans (often to a considerable extent) and to pick another destination or other traveling dates. As a specific group of tourism service buyers, students slightly deviated from that pattern. Some of them said that they did not make traveling plans much in advance (and took account of the current situation in making their decisions), and, therefore, the pandemic did not have such a great impact on them. A large number of interviewees opted for a domestic destination instead of traveling abroad for reasons that include the often mandatory quarantine (both when entering another country and after coming back home) and the way in which the restrictions and constraints were introduced (usually from one day to the next, which could be an unpleasant surprise both to those about to travel abroad and to those about to return) (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way the interviewees pursued their traveling plans in 2020 [%].

	Women	Men
I did not plan my travel that much in advance, and I adjusted my decisions to the current situation	33.6	46.2
I wanted to travel abroad but I decided to pick a domestic holiday destination	34.3	23.1
I postponed my travel to a slightly later date, hoping that the pandemic situation will improve/come under control	25.4	24.2
I wanted to spend my holidays in a popular Polish resort but due to security concerns, I chose another domestic destination which is less popular yet safer	9.1	11.0
I wanted to spend my holidays in a popular international resort but opted for a less popular destination (still abroad)	7.2	4.9
I wanted to spend my holidays in Poland but ultimately went abroad because domestic destinations became too crowded, and thus less safe	1.2	2.2

The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

In this context, it should be noted that male respondents admitted significantly more frequently (by 12 percentage points) to not having planned their holidays much in advance and having adjusted their decisions to the current pandemic situation. Conversely, female interviewees much more willingly (by more than 11 percentage points) decided to spend their holidays in Poland despite having previously planned to travel abroad. Also, a slightly higher percentage of women decided to postpone their travel a bit, hoping that the pandemic situation might come under control.

The study accessed information on the respondents' destinations and frequency of travels (Table 6), and it was found that domestic destinations (usually visited once or twice a year) strongly prevailed in both male and female students' replies. The above is

corroborated in studies by other authors, suggesting that tourists, irrespective of gender, demonstrate a greater interest in visiting domestic and local destinations than in traveling abroad. Also, nearby destinations can be viewed by tourists as less risky in the context of an uncertain global environment [11,70].

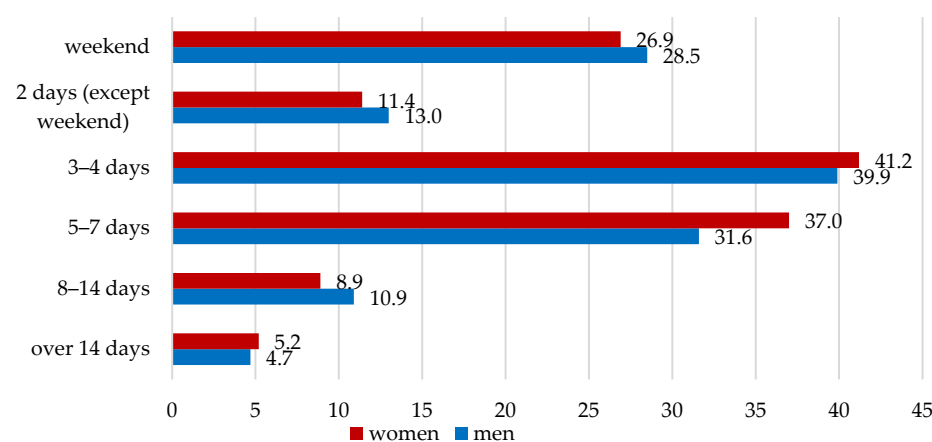
**Table 6.** Numbers and destinations of tourism trips taken by the respondents in 2020.

	Trip Type	Number of Trips						Mean
		None	One	Two	Three	Four	Five or More	
		%						
Women	domestic	3.2	31.1	30.9	17.8	5.9	11.1	3.25
	international	72.4	18.5	5.4	2.5	0.5	0.7	1.42
Men	domestic	3.6	39.4	28.0	17.1	5.7	6.2	3.01
	international	75.2	17.6	5.2	0.5	1.0	0.5	1.36

Source: own study.

Note that women were a bit more engaged in tourism: compared to men, they reported a slightly higher average number of trips (both domestic and international). Interestingly, a large number (five or more) of domestic trips within a year was much more frequent in women.

When it comes to duration, 3–4-day and 5–7-day trips were the most common options for the whole group of respondents. Also, they willingly took weekend trips (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Duration of tourist trips taken by the interviewees in 2020 [%]. The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

In this case, the difference between genders was not that significant. It should be noted however that women opted for 5–7-day trips much more frequently than men. Irrespective of gender, only a small group of respondents took longer trips (especially over two weeks) and short trips on working days.

When discussing the duration of trips, the way it was impacted by the pandemic also needs to be mentioned. Most interviewees (especially men, 7 percentage points more frequently than women) said that it was consistent with what they had planned. A large number of respondents (irrespective of gender) also indicated that they did not plan their trips much in advance in view of the prevailing unstable conditions (Table 7).

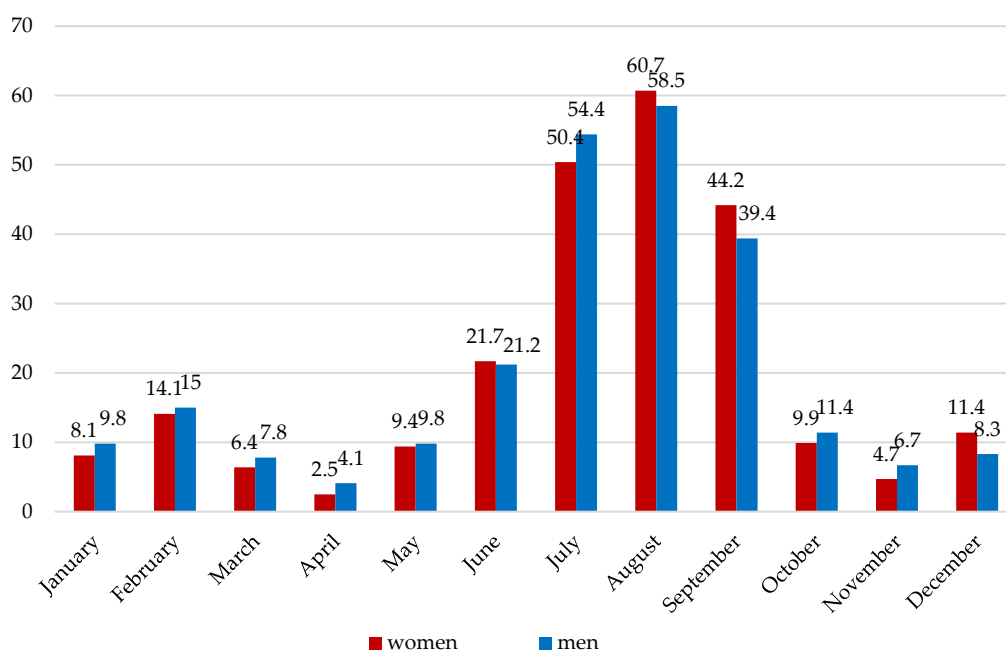
**Table 7.** Impact of the pandemic on the duration of tourist trips in 2020 [%].

	Women	Men
As initially planned	29.4	36.8
I did not plan my trip much in advance	26.7	27.5
Shorter than initially planned	28.6	23.3
My trip was split into several shorter ones because of the pandemic	7.2	7.3
Longer than initially planned	2.7	1.0
Difficult to say	11.1	10.4

The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

Ca. one-quarter of respondents (however, women by over 5 percentage points more frequently than men) shortened their previously planned trip because of the pandemic. The changing framework of pandemic restrictions and constraints, together with the introduction of new ones, could also be a contributing factor.

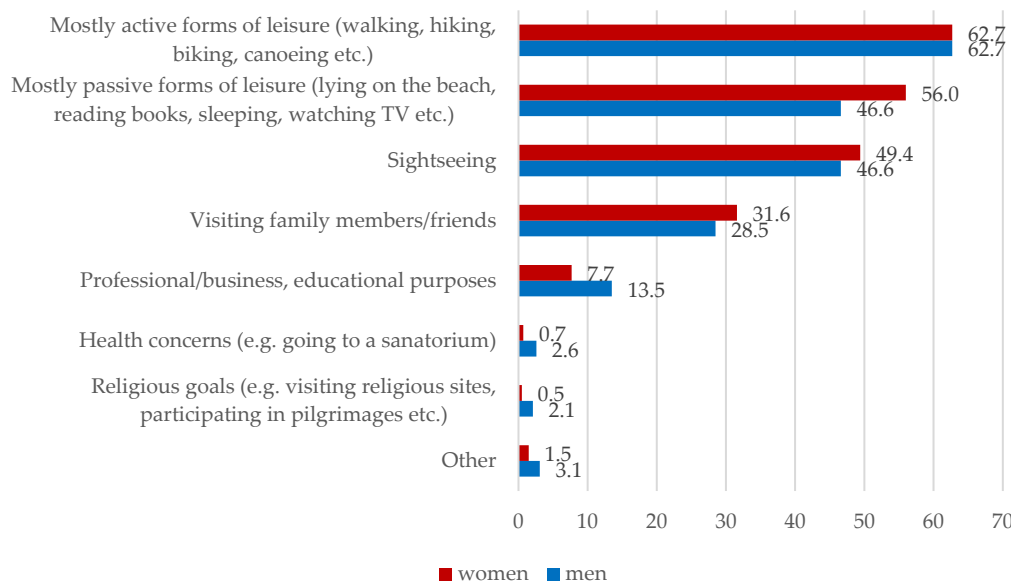
Usually, the respondents took their tourism trips during summer months. Due to the nature of the group surveyed (students), the respondents also demonstrated high levels of tourism activity in September, a holiday month for universities. The smallest number of trips were taken in April (Figure 3). This can certainly be explained by the fact that the pandemic emergency was declared in mid-March 2020 and entailed a number of restrictions, including those with a severe impact on the tourism sector.



**Figure 3.** Tourist trips taken by the interviewees in 2020 split by month [%]. The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

From a gender perspective, women proved to be slightly more interested in making trips in August and September (although this was only a minor difference of no more than 5 percentage points).

Broadly defined leisure was the prevailing goal of students' trips in the period under analysis. Both male and female interviewees showed an identical preference for active forms of leisure. However, women prevailed in the group who preferred passive ways of spending their free time (nearly 10 percentage points more than men) (Figure 4).



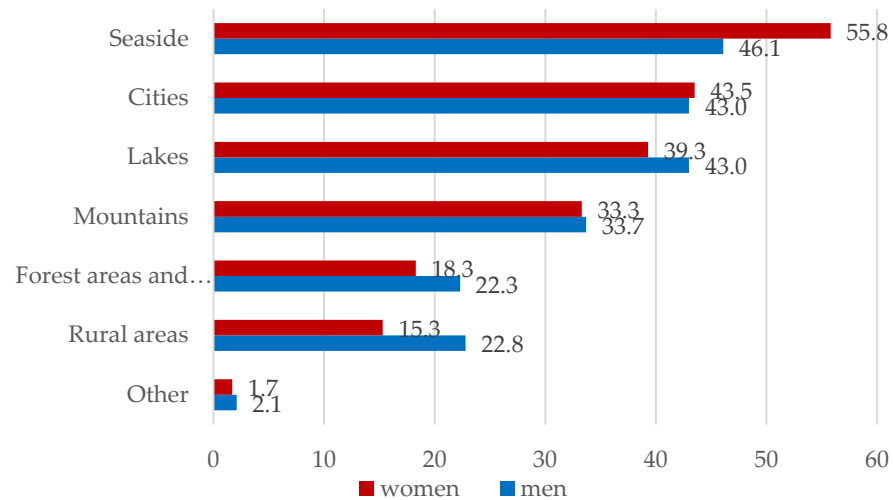
**Figure 4.** Goals of the respondents' tourist trips in 2020 [%]. The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

Other frequent goals of traveling (indicated by a slightly greater percentage of women) included sightseeing and visiting family members or friends. It needs to be assumed, however, that both of these categories would be more frequent if not for the pandemic. Indeed, at that time, access to many tourist attractions was severely—if not entirely—restricted, and people minimized contact with each other due to contagion risks. In turn, pure entertainment (parties and concerts) was the most common goal in the “other” category.

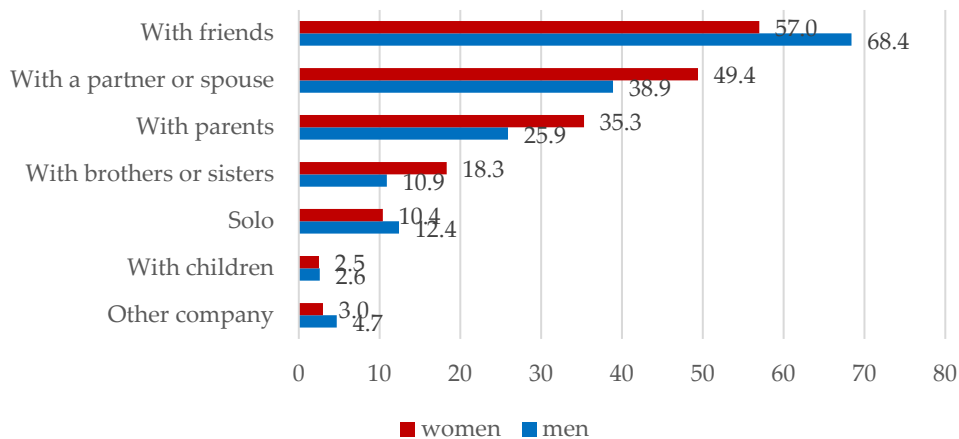
There was a relationship between the goals and the destination of a trip. As also noted by other researchers [71,72], most respondents traveled to attractive locations rich in natural values (seaside, lakelands, and mountains). Such destinations provide perfect conditions for both active and passive forms of leisure (Figure 5). It should be noted that the seaside was much more popular with women; this could be related to the fact that female respondents were the ones who much more frequently opted for passive forms of leisure (e.g., laying on the beach) (Figure 4). This also can be explained by women demonstrating lower levels of physical activity in their free time [73] and being less interested in sports and active recreation [74]. Interestingly, men were more willing to travel to forest areas, valuable natural areas, and rural areas. However, it seems difficult to rationally relate that fact to the male respondents' preferred traveling goals.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, frequent destinations indicated by the interviewees also included cities, which, due a high concentration of anthropogenic values, were visited to learn something new (sightseeing). In turn, rural areas attracted slightly less interest from the respondents. Their advantage, as identified in a number of studies, consists of offering a quiet and calm place to stay [75–80], which is not necessarily something young people expect from a tourism destination. Also, this is in contradiction with what was observed in a study by Huertas [81], who demonstrated that, during the pandemic, tourists preferred visiting less crowded places in order to avoid physical interaction with other travelers and, thus, to make sure that they kept a suitable distance from people.

This study also analyzed the form of the trips (solo vs. with an accompanying person). Most respondents traveled with a friend, partner, or spouse (Figure 6), which seems perfectly reasonable for this group. Indeed, as also emphasized by other researchers [82], being a university student often helps making many friends and involves high levels of social activity. It should be noted however that the preferred company differed between the genders. Women much more often traveled with a partner or spouse, which might be explained by their need to feel secure. Also, they were more often accompanied by family members, probably due to similar reasons.



**Figure 5.** Destination of the respondents' tourist trips in 2020 [%]. The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.



**Figure 6.** Persons who accompanied the respondents during their tourist trips in 2020 [%]. The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

Conversely, men preferred traveling with friends. The fact of having come into contact a larger group of non-family members could make them reluctant to spend time with their loved ones (e.g., during a trip) because of the risk of infecting them with the virus that they caught from their friends. This was also an important argument for a number of tourists when choosing an accommodation facility to stay in during the pandemic. Staying overnight with family or friends was not a popular option because of the risk of accidental contagion [83], and it was viewed as an unsafe behavior due to close relationships with the hosts [80]. In the whole sample of respondents, parents generally represented a small share of accompanying persons. This is probably due to the fact that 2020 was a time when people strongly feared infecting their relatives with the coronavirus (for instance, because there was no vaccine). Therefore, students who often lived away from their family home did not want to go there and put their loved ones at risk of contagion. This was similar during Easter 2020—many students stayed in dormitories or rented rooms instead of visiting their family home for the very reason of fearing that they might spread the virus [84,85].

The pandemic also contributed to changes in the preferred types of accommodation facilities: the respondents chose hotels, holidays resorts, apartments (picked much more frequently by women), rooms, holiday homes, and chalets. A large number of interviewees also relied on the generosity of relatives and friends who offered them accommodation. This meant an opportunity to save some money, which could have acted as an encouraging factor (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Accommodation facilities that the respondents stayed in and how safe they were in the context of the ongoing pandemic in 2020 (from 1 “most unsafe” to 5 “most safe”).

	Women		Men		Wald–Wolfowitz Runs Test	
	Use [%]	Safety Rating	Use [%]	Safety Rating	Z	p
Hotel or holiday resort	34.3	3.66	36.3	3.76	−1.920	0.055
Rented apartment	37.0	4.30	29.0	4.21	−1.864	0.062
Staying overnight with family or friends	31.6	4.15	29.0	4.27	−1.120	0.263
Holiday home/chalet	27.7	4.10	24.4	4.16	−1.665	0.096
Private accommodation (rented room)	16.3	3.65	18.1	3.84	−1.712	0.087
Guesthouse	12.8	3.37	13.5	3.53	−1.450	0.147
Camping (own tent, own mobile home)	10.1	3.94	8.8	3.72	−1.088	0.276
Own chalet/second home	8.1	4.72	11.4	4.68	−6.777	0.000 *
Wild camping, e.g., in a tent or mobile home	6.2	3.67	7.3	3.66	−0.913	0.361
Agritourism farm	3.0	3.39	5.2	3.33	−2.768	0.006 *

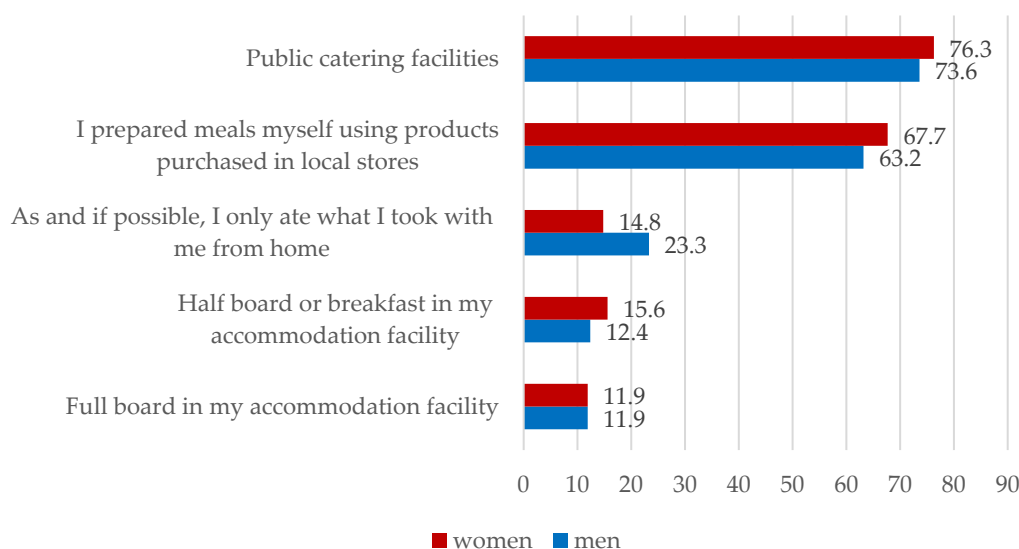
\*  $p < 0.05$ . Source: own study.

It is worth noting that the most popular facilities (hotels and holiday resorts) were not at all viewed as safe (an average score of 3.69 on a scale of 1 to 5). However, their popularity could be due to them being largely available and offering relatively high-quality and high-standard services. The question could arise as to why camping in the wild (e.g., in a tent or mobile home) was viewed as very unsafe, even though it could be seen to be a truly safe option because of the significant isolation from other people. However, as corroborated in research by other authors [1,86,87], wild camping means poor sanitary and hygienic conditions (which are of crucial importance in preventing contagion). This could be the reason behind the relatively low safety scores.

As shown by the Wald–Wolfowitz test (at  $p < 0.05$ ), there was a significant difference between the genders in how they viewed the safety of staying in agritourism farms and in their own holiday home or second home. It should be noted however that agritourism accommodation was not a popular option among the students covered in this study, just like it was the case for other groups of tourists during the pandemic [79,80,83].

In addition to accommodation, the analysis of the students’ tourism preferences also covered catering services. This study found that, for most of the population, a tourist trip means carefree relaxation and breaking away from daily routine. It therefore comes as no surprise that the respondents preferred eating in different kinds of catering facilities. Nevertheless, probably because of the intent to save some money and to restrict interactions with other people, the students (mostly women) prepared meals themselves using products purchased in local stores. The way in which the respondents addressed their catering needs is presented in Figure 7.

Men were particularly inclined to take the easy way out (much more frequently than women, a difference of 8.5 percentage points), as, and if possible, they only ate prepared meals that they took with them from home.



**Figure 7.** The way in which the respondents addressed their catering needs during tourist trips in 2020 [%]. The respondents could pick more than one answer. Source: own study.

Other aspects addressed in this study were pandemic-related factors that caused inconvenience and annoyance during tourist trips. Indeed, it should be noted that the pandemic was clearly not an optimum time to engage in tourism. The presence of the virus contributed to numerous restrictions and had an impact on many aspects of life, including tourism, often making it less comfortable to go on a tourist trip. The respondents found the following to be of key importance:

- Inconvenience resulting from the introduction of sanitary and epidemic restrictions in tourism facilities,
- Smaller number of attractions in the towns that they visited,
- Increased prices of tourism services.

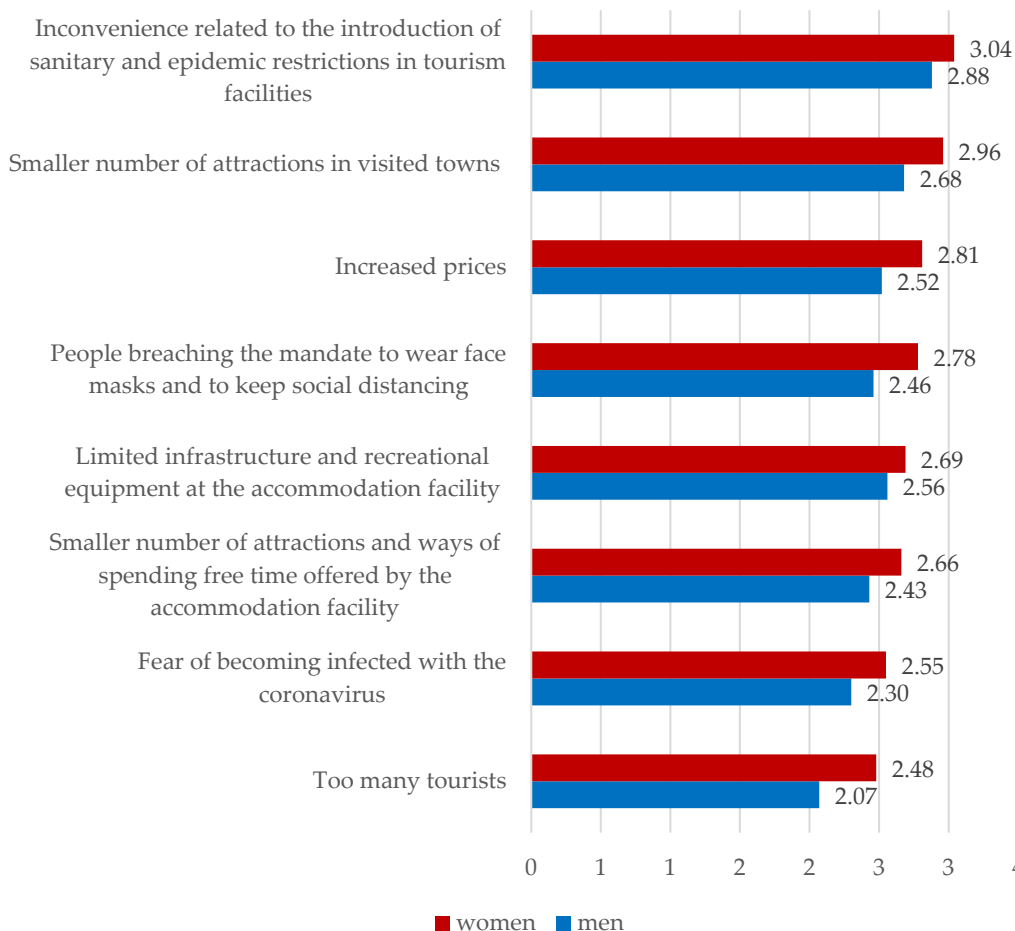
The behavior of people breaching orders to wear face masks and to keep social distancing proved to be another inconvenience; this could have been driven by what is referred to as “pandemic fatigue” or just by pure ignorance [88–90]. Interestingly, the fear of contracting the coronavirus was identified as one of the least important impediments, probably because of the respondents being young people and enjoying a relatively good health status. Further still, it is assumed that they demonstrated great caution and awareness in making their trips, as indicated by them being generally opposed to breaching the mandate to wear face masks and to keep social distancing (Figure 8).

In that context, it should be noted that only two factors of inconvenience were not statistically affected by the respondents’ gender (based on the Mann–Whitney U test), namely, inconvenience related to the introduction of sanitary and epidemic restrictions in tourism facilities, and limited infrastructure and recreational equipment at the accommodation facility (Table 9).

During the pandemic, accommodation providers (just like many other public venues) were bound by a number of obligations and constraints. Furthermore, the owners implemented different solutions on their own initiative to additionally protect their guests and mitigate the risk of getting infected with the coronavirus. This study made an attempt to explore such measures implemented in the facilities visited by the respondents, and it also asked about the potential organizational procedures that should be put in place to minimize the risk of contagion (Table 10). As the most frequent measures, the respondents listed the hosts providing hand sanitizers and liquids for disinfecting equipment and common spaces. Interestingly, both of these activities were less often noticed and indicated by men. Also, nearly 30% of students (mostly men) pointed to the restriction on the maximum number of tourists staying overnight and to the strict obligation for the guests and the personnel



to wear face masks. Regrettably, almost one-fifth of the interviewees (with a vast majority of men) believed no preventive measures were taken by the hosts in the accommodation facility that they stayed in.



**Figure 8.** Pandemic-related factors that caused inconvenience to the respondents and disrupted their tourist trips in 2020 (from 1 “not important at all” to 4 “extremely important”). Source: own study.

**Table 9.** Mann–Whitney U test results.

Pandemic Related Factors	Sum of Ranks Women	Sum of Ranks Men	U	Z	p
Inconvenience related to the introduction of sanitary and epidemic restrictions in tourism facilities	116,266.0	46,469.0	31,244.0	1.771	0.076
Smaller number of attractions in tourism facilities	111,284.5	41,343.5	27,147.5	2.963	0.003 *
Increased prices	102,901.5	37,813.5	25,093.5	2.724	0.006 *
People breaching the mandate to wear face masks and to keep social distancing	110,287.5	41,237.5	27,209.5	2.784	0.005 *
Limited infrastructure and recreational equipment at the accommodation facility	93,659.5	39,210.5	26,490.5	1.161	0.246
Smaller number of attractions and ways of spending free time offered by the accommodation facility	92,350.5	37,444.5	24,724.5	2.016	0.044 *
Fear of becoming infected with the coronavirus	115,670.0	43,660.0	28,782.0	2.767	0.006 *
Too many tourists	106,006.0	37,374.0	24,008.0	3.834	0.000 *

\*  $p < 0.05$ . Source: own study.

**Table 10.** Measures that the respondents believe were or should be implemented to ensure a safer stay in accommodation facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic [%].

	Women		Men	
	Was in Place	Should Be in Place	Was in Place	Should Be in Place
Generally available hand sanitizers	65.4	77.3	58.5	65.8
Disinfection of equipment and common spaces (tables, handles, etc.)	63.0	82.0	58.5	67.9
Restricting the maximum number of tourists staying overnight	29.4	44.7	29.0	35.2
Strict obligation for the guests and the personnel to wear face masks	24.7	47.9	31.1	45.6
Reminding the applicable rules where needed	22.7	40.2	27.5	39.9
Changing the way the meals are served	19.8	31.4	15.5	23.3
Having a hygienic safety certificate	5.2	22.0	10.4	19.7
I believe no measures were taken/no measures were needed	17.3	5.9	24.9	15.5

Source: own study.

Worryingly, 9% of respondents—much more men than women (a difference of nearly 10 percentage points)—said that they do not see the need for taking any measures aimed at ensuring a safer stay and minimizing the risk of infection with the coronavirus. Such an attitude might be explained by the respondents being young people less vulnerable to severe illness and resulting complications.

## 5. Conclusions

The authors believe that their paper adds important value to research on the tourism preferences of young university students during the pandemic, with particular focus on gender as a determinant of tourism activities and behaviors. In doing so, it bridges the existing gap in the literature on the subject. The survey allowed for the questions asked earlier to be answered:

1. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic restricted the tourism activity of the respondents in this study, even though they had a strong background in traveling regularly. The study shows that nearly one-third of interviewees did not go on any tourist trip in 2020. The decision to cancel travel plans was more often made by male respondents. The main reason for not traveling was fearing the consequences of the pandemic, especially contracting the coronavirus or infecting their loved ones. Other causes cited by the respondents included a lack of time; responsibilities related to studying and working; and a lack of financial resources. Another finding is that, during the pandemic, men were less forward-looking in their tourism plans than women, and they adjusted their decisions to the then-current situation. In turn, when women found themselves unable to travel abroad as previously planned, they took a domestic holiday.
2. Faced with administrative restrictions on traveling (including on international tourist trips), the students covered in this study chose domestic destinations, irrespective of gender. The traveling destinations were related to active or passive forms of leisure planned by the respondents. Men (who opted more often for active ways of relaxing) chose mountains, whereas women (showing a preference for passive leisure) went to the seaside.
3. Because of their specific status, the group of tourists covered in this study mostly traveled in the summer season. Men preferred traveling in July, while women preferred travelling in August and September. The survey also suggested that female stu-

- dents more often opted for longer stays, which is indirectly related to their preferred company (relatives or spouse/partner).
4. The fear of accidental infection and the fact of complying with the restrictions imposed to make traveling safer had an effect on the choice of accommodation facilities by the group surveyed. The respondents preferred hotels, holiday resorts, and apartments (with women showing a particular interest in the latter). At the same time—despite these choices—hotels and holiday resorts were viewed as being two of the least safe options in the context of the ongoing pandemic. There was less interest in private accommodation and in staying with family or friends (as the respondents feared that they might infect their loved ones with the virus).
  5. Although the COVID-19 pandemic in itself was an inconvenience to travelers, and the accompanying regulations (including the sanitary and epidemiological restrictions) were an obstacle to tourist trips in 2020, other causes of discomfort included the smaller number of attractions in the visited towns, the increased prices of tourism services, and people who ignored the requirement to wear face masks and keep social distancing. Women paid much more attention to these factors and, much more often than men, pointed to the deficiencies in the measures implemented to make accommodation facilities safer.

Despite its local scope (being restricted to one country), this study is of considerable cognitive value and bridges the gap in research on the tourism preferences of students in crisis situations (since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic can definitely be viewed as such). Also, it emphasizes the role of gender as a determinant of decisions on how to address one's needs for tourism services.

The results of our research can provide important information for managers of entities operating in the tourism industry, especially in the context of creating a competitive advantage, the source of which is the provision of services that satisfy customers and the constant striving to increase their loyalty. Such activities are possible after constructing an appropriate offer, i.e., in line with the expectations of customers. Our research can provide an important clue in this regard. Moreover, it is consistent with a broader research framework focused on the purchasing behaviors of Generation Z. This is reflected in a number of ways, including the method of contacting the respondents, i.e., the use of social media (Facebook and Instagram).

This research has some limitations. The sample size was quite large (870 people), but the method of its selection (although it seems optimal to us) does not allow the results to be generalized to all students in Poland. Moreover, the fact that this research was carried out in one country makes it impossible to apply its results to the academic youth of other Central European countries. In subsequent research, we would like to overcome these limitations and conduct in-depth research in the international context of this region. Because students (Generation Z) constitute an important (and constantly growing) segment of the tourism market, such research may prove to be extremely valuable and useful for the broadly understood tourism economy.

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