

Transformative and Safer Experiences on International Academic Tourism in the Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Phase

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The competitiveness and attractiveness of the tourism destinations, emphasized on the Covid-19 pandemic, require not only diversification of products and market segments but also the provision of safer and meaningful experiences capable of empowering tourists to create positive change in their lives and local communities and to encourage emotional and lasting connections with a place. With a significant growth potential over the last decade (OCDE, 2019) but still under-researched (Rodriguez et al., 2012), international academic tourism can be a relevant alternative market segment, particularly in the post-pandemic phase, and a valuable path to building more competitive and diversified touristic destinations in the future. Young people are expected to start traveling sooner, with less frequent severe coronavirus disease than adults (Felsenstein & Hedrich, 2020). Some are still looking for a destination to visit and study abroad (StudyPortal, 2020). In turn, those young students are more likely to be resilient, reduce the seasonality index, help to promote alternative tourist destinations and stimulate innovation, speeding up the digital transformation (UNWTO, 2016). Furthermore, on the second-generation experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), travel will place a premium on experiences that meaningfully transform a consumer (Kirillova et al., 2017) and impact the behavior of travelers by encouraging them to become agents of change in the community (Lean, 2009) and make a positive impact in the world. Also, despite growing interest in transformative travel experience, there is not yet a deep understanding of how it is related to tourist perceived safety, place attachment, and behavioral intentions, in the context of international academic tourism. Thus, based on an extensive literature review and the need for more research on academic tourism, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge of this segment of tourism, especially after a critical time of the Covid-19 pandemic, proposing a conceptual model for future research, focused on the effect of transformative travel experiences (Soulard et al., 2020), tourist perceived safety (Xie et al., 2020) and place attachment (Wang et al., 2019) on international students' behavioral intentions (revisit or recommend intentions), to enhance strong emotional ties and increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of the tourism destinations. Given the lack of research in this context, this study will be firstly exploratory. Therefore, qualitative analysis will be the most appropriate method for gathering data, using focus group interviews. Subsequently, a questionnaire survey will be carried out on international students. In the post-pandemic context, this new focus is critical to design marketing strategies that trigger experience enhancement and destination competitiveness and provide strategic recommendations for tourist destination stakeholders.

Keywords: *Academic Tourism, Future Behavioral Intentions, Perceived Safety, Place Attachment, Transformative Experiences*