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# MASTER THESIS

TRAVEL RISK PERCEPTIONS AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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## Abstract

With an increasing global trend of student mobility, and a valuable market for the Universities and national economies, there has been an emerging body of research into the students- related travel and leisure behaviors. Even though over the past decade the tourism industry has recognized the opportunity for attracting this new tourist market, few research has been conducted to explore the international students' travel behavior in accordance to their risk perceptions. The literature on the subject suggested previously that traveler and trip characteristics should be examined in connection with perceived risks due to the fact that it might have an influence on the type of perceived risk and that it can help create a more targeted mitigation strategy in relation to the perceived risks. Additionally, most of the past research has been conducted with leisure travelers from specific countries and very few with international students as a group.

The current study attempts to fill a gap in the literature and explore the way that the travel risk perceptions of the international students from AAU, are influenced by their individual characteristics (country of origin, gender, age) and trip characteristics (destination of choice, past travel experiences). The research will be conducted as a comparison between Eastern European students and Western European students. Finally, by attempting to identify the underlying risk perceptions of the targeted groups, potential traveling barriers could be mitigated.

An investigation of the theoretical implications has been conducted from a quantitative perspective. A survey with 150 validated responses has been conducted in order to identify the way that the individual characteristics and trip characteristics has an influence on the perceived travel risks, as well as investigating whether or not there is a difference in risk perceptions between two different groups of international students. The two separately investigated groups were Eastern European students and Western European students, both studying at Aalborg University.

The findings confirmed previous studies and literature, meaning that both aspects of the travelers' characteristics and trip characteristics seem to have a certain influence on the perceived risks of the respondents. According to the generated data, it is clear that overall, the Eastern European group of respondents expressed more travel risk-perceptions than the Western European group, especially in the "human-induced risks" category and in the "financial and

health” category. Furthermore, the Western European group had overall less risk-perception factors, with a concern regarding the lack of new experience, which is related to the category of “social-psychological risks”, while the Eastern European sample group has expressed many concerns towards financial, performance and facilities of the destination, as well as health and hygiene factors. Lastly, another matter investigated within this project was the impact of the current pandemic, COVID-19, on the perceived travel risks of the respondents. With unprecedented travel restrictions all over the world as a safety measurements, it was important to include this aspect within the project and investigate its impact on the international students’ travel risk perceptions.

The results of this project contribute to the understanding of the travel behavior and intentions of the Eastern and Western European students from Aalborg University. The connection between risk perceptions and its influence on travelling of the international students, has revealed the direct impact on the destination choice of respondents. By identifying an anticipating the destination choice and travel behavior of the students, tourism organizations such as DMO’s and travel agents could use the information and implemented in a strategy that mitigates the barriers of travel intentions.

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## Introduction

Nowadays' trend regarding the global student mobility has developed a highly competitive environment for universities to attract international students (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Since the beginning of 1975, there has been a continuous increase in the number of international students at a global scale and according to UNESCO (2009), one in five higher education students are estimated to be studying outside their home country. According to Böhm, et al. (2002), it is expected that by 2025, at least 7.2 million students will choose to study at a foreign institution offering higher education. Furthermore, the tourism literature highlights the importance of young travelers (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002) which tend to be frequent travelers (Richards and Wilson, 2004), seeking novelty (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2017) and therefore making them look for new experiences, which are usually found in foreign travel destinations.

Due to the substantial scale of the international students market worldwide, there is an emerging body of research into student-related travel and leisure behaviors (e.g. Babin & Kim, 2001; Brown, 2009; Glover, 2011; Kim et al., 2006; Michael et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2009). In the last ten years, the tourism industry has acknowledged a good opportunity for attracting a new tourist market whilst the strong growth and resilience of the international higher education, however, limited research has been done to learn more about the students' travel behavior related to their risk perception (Glover, 2011; Ritchie, 2009).

Over the past decades, the theory of perceived risk has been investigated as part of the consumer behavior literature and has been defined as "a consumer's perception of the overall negativity of a course of actions based upon an assessment of the possible negative outcomes and the likelihood that those outcomes will occur" (Mowen & Minor, 1998, p. 176). Therefore, if a destination is perceived as too risky to visit, the trip will not be realized even though there has been some past similar experience (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998; Han, 2005; Kozak, Crotts & Law, 2007; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009). Past investigations on the theory of perceived risk have revealed the complexity of the subject, consisting of various elements such as physical aspects and psychological aspects (Fuchs and Reichel, 2004).

However, the majority of the past studies have focused either on travelers' characteristics (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008) or trip characteristics (Sönmez et al., 2006), while failing to emerge both aspects. Furthermore, the majority of the tourism researchers have focused on the impact of

perceived risk on either destination choice or travel behavior and few studies have been exploring the phenomenon in a defined category of the population such as the international students (Mansfeld, 2006; Reichel et. al. 2007). Besides investigating some of their health and safety perceptions, not much has been researched in this target group, as for example, exploring the impact that their characteristics and trip characteristics have on their risk perceptions. Yet, it is suggested that by understanding both traveler and trip characteristics, alongside with the perceived risks of an individual (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011), would decrease the traveling barriers that one might set for himself as well as anticipating an individual's travel behavior and choice of destination (Sönmez et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that at the moment, the tourism sector is facing a major crisis due to the outbreak of Coronavirus in the beginning of the year 2020, formally known as 2019-nCoV. Travel restrictions have been imposed all over the world as a safety measurement such as flights and public events being cancelled among other actions of precautions (WEF, 2020). Gloria Guevera, the president of the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), announced the devastating long-term economic impacts on the sector (WTTC, 2020). Besides the financial impact of the pandemic, the process of decision- making process in travel and tourism is also challenged by uncertainty and risk-perception factors (Neuburger and Egger, 2020). In the process of decision-making, risk perceptions such as financial, physical, health, social, time and psychological, play a role in the travellers' ultimate decision to travel or not, as well as the destination choice and trip characteristics (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005; TM, 2020). Again, a risk is defined as "any consciously or non-consciously controlled behaviour with a perceived uncertainty about its outcome" (Pizam et. al., 2004; p. 252). In the tourism academia, the researches have targeted the perception of travellers in regards to risk-taking and the way that these have an impact on the willingness of tourists, when ultimately observing to what extent they would accept several perceived negative risks and still make the decision to travel (Silva et. al., 2010).

Concluding on the current pandemic crisis, there is no doubt that the international students in Denmark are concerned regarding the global travel uncertainty in the world, not being able to see their family and friends from their home country or other parts of the world in order to mitigate possible feelings of loneliness and cope with other needs that could be met by traveling.

## Problem Formulation

With an increasing global trend of student mobility, and a valuable market for the universities and national economies, there has been an emerging body of research into the students- related travel and leisure behaviors (Babin and Kim, 2001; Brown, 2009; Glover, 2011; Kim et al., 2006; Michael et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2009; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Even though over the past decade the tourism industry has recognized the opportunity for attracting this new tourist market, few research has been conducted to explore the international students' travel behavior in accordance to their risk perceptions. Furthermore, understanding both travelers' and trip characteristics and the perceived risks that come along has been recognized to decrease potential traveling barriers of an individual (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; ; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Seddighi et al., 2001; Chew and Jahari, 2014).

Nonetheless, a preponderance of the tourism researchers have focused on the impact of perceived risk on either destination choice or travel behavior, without a focus on a specific travel experience of a defined context (Mansfeld, 2006; Reichel et. al. 2007). Apart from investigating some of the international student' health and safety perceptions, not much has been researched in this area as for example exploring the impact of their individual characteristics and trip characteristics on their risk perceptions. Understanding the wide range of students' risk perception influencing factors has been suggested as beneficial when mitigating travel barriers and predicting choice of destination (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Carballo et.al., 2017; , Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun, 2017).

Additionally, it has been identified the fact that international university students have different travel motives and behaviors compared to the domestic university students and it is believed that due to their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, as well as the juvenile age, young students might be exposed to greater traveling risk (Reichel, et.al. 2007).

In the context of a global pandemic, the travel mobility is now restricted and any trip can now represent a risk-taking decision, where individuals are constantly evaluating and balancing the perceived risks of a trip versus the perceived benefits (WEF, 2020). The international students might be one of the most affected groups of individuals by the restrictions and uncertainty of travelling to see their friends and families, confronted with the unknown in a new society, maybe for the first time away from their loved ones (Redden, 2020).



Denmark is ranked as one of the top five countries in Europe that offers English taught university programs and since 2013, the number of international students in Denmark has almost doubled in just a few years, reaching 34,030 international students in 2017 (Monitor, 2018). The Aalborg University (AAU), in Denmark, is ranking as one of the best and most acknowledge international universities in the world and in the recent years, AAU has been in the top 2% of the world's 17.000 universities (StudyEU, 2020). From Bachelor degrees, to Master degrees and PHD's in all kind of subjects, AAU University welcomes around 3000 international students every year (AAU, 2020). Therefore, it can be concluded that the international student market in Denmark is a flourishing one and offers a good research opportunity.

**As a result of the existing academic studies on the topic, the objective of this research paper is to address the gap in the literature and explore the way that the travel risk perceptions of the international students from AAU, are influenced by their individual characteristics ( country of origin, gender, age) and trip characteristics (destination of choice, past travel experiences). More specifically, the research aims to analyze and compare the overall travel risks perceived by the Eastern European students and those of the Western European students. Finally, by attempting to identify the underlying risk perceptions of the targeted group, potential traveling barriers could be mitigated.**

Therefore, a study will be conducted in order to explore the above mentioned problem formulation. A quantitative survey based research is intended to be used, created based upon previous validated studies and literature on travel risk perceptions outlined in the "Literature Review" section of this project. The gathering of data will be done among a specific niche of international students, more specifically, the respondents need to be either from an Eastern or Western European country and they need to have the intention to travel within the next six months, either domestically or internationally. The reasons for these particular selections will be further elaborated within the methodology section. Nevertheless, the problem formulation is explored by formulating the following research questions (RQ):

**RQ 1:** Are the socio- demographics of international university students influencing their travel risk perceptions?

**RQ 2:** Is past travel experience and repeat visitation to a specific destination influencing the type of travel risk perceived by international university students?

**RQ 3:** Is choice of destination a factor that affects the travel risk perceptions of international university students?

**RQ 4:** Is the current Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic situation influencing the type of perceived travel risk?

## Literature Review

Within this chapter, several concepts and theoretical frameworks in relation with the global mobility of international university students and traveling risk- perception will be discussed. The connection of all mentioned elements within the following section of this project will be visually presented towards the readers, in the end of the discussion.

### Defining international students

Despite the global phenomenon of the international student market, there are numerous overlapping and inconsistent definitions of “international students”. However, the most widely accepted definition for the concept is the one provided by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Since 2015, UNESCO, together with OECD and EUROSTAT, the EU’s statistical office, have agreed upon the definition of **“internationally mobile students”**: **“An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin.”** (UNESCO, 2015). The definition highlights the unique characteristic of the group that comes to a foreign country for education purpose, enrolled in a tertiary degree or higher and therefore, the length of the stay is estimated between one and up to seven years (UNESCO, 2015).

There are two other common definitions of the international students group, specifically **“foreign students”** and **“credit- mobile students”**. “Foreign students” are considered non-citizens that are enrolled in a higher education degree. These might arrive and stay independently or have migrated because of their parents decision to move to the country and therefore are considered 1.5- generation immigrants. On the other hand, “credit- mobile students” are considered those that are exchange students in different programs such as the European Erasmus program. This group of

students remain enrolled in their home-country current education, while receiving credits from the temporary foreign educational institution (UNESCO, 2015).

Within this research project, the definition of “internationally mobile students” will be adopted when conducting the study and when choosing references. Hence, the study will only focus on international students in Denmark that are enrolled in either a Bachelor degree, Master degree or in a PhD, at Aalborg University. Furthermore, along the project the term “international students” will be used most preponderantly as it is normally used in the academic literature when investigating aspects of this target group.

### International students travel behaviors

In less than two decades, the international students market in the higher education has more than doubled at a global scale. From only two million international students in 1998 to five million in 2016, while it is expected to rise up to eight million by 2025 (OECD, 2018). Hence, due to the meaningful scale of this specific market, there has been an increased attention from the tourism academia towards investigating the study traveling phenomenon (Glover, 2011). Furthermore, there has also been an emerging body of research into international student-related travel and leisure behaviors (e.g. Babin & Kim, 2001; Brown, 2009; Glover, 2011; Kim et al., 2006; Michael et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2009). There are some studies which have investigated different travel behaviors and motivations such as destination images and preferences (Glover, 2011; Kim et. al., 2006), travel motives (Thrane, 2008; Xu et. al., 2009), satisfaction and value perception (Babin & Kim, 2001), market segmentation (Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003), information searching (Glover, 2011).

Some previous studies have identified the differences in travel motives and behaviors between domestic students and international students. International students were found to value relaxation, exploring the new country of residence and its landmarks, shopping and sightseeing, along with engaging with the local culture through food experiences (Ryan & Zhang, 2006). Their counterparts, the domestic students, were found to have a preference towards the nightlife, sex opportunities, entertainment and the possibility of making friends (Patrick et.al., 2011). When it comes to the motivation of traveling, international students choose to travel in order to explore the new environment or to mitigate the effects of loneliness as an outcome of being away from family and good friends (Marginson et.al, 2010). The length of the trip duration and repetition of such

activity was also found to vary from the domestic students, which tend to travel more often and engage in unguided tours, to the international students which tend to be away for fewer days and in safer destinations (Ritchie, 2003).

Young university student travelers are usually characterized as individuals under 24 years old, with a limited budget and flexible time (Hunter-Jones et.al., 2007). They tend to travel independent from organized groups, with the strong motives of create experiences for themselves as well as exploring other cultures (Richards & Wilson, 2004). They are also seeking novelty in their travels and often use informal sources of information instead of brochures and magazines of speciality (Field, 1999). However, according to Promsivapallop and Kannaovakun (2017), the young student travellers prefer novel destinations only if they do not perceive it risky. Nevertheless, it is believed that due to their perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, as well as the juvenile age, young students might be exposed to greater traveling risk. This group tend to be less familiar with the cultural practices or crime hotspots, as well as natural occurring disasters of a destination (Reichel, et.al. 2007).

While these above mentioned studies have identified different travel behaviors between domestic and international students, the results appear to be of limited applicability when attempting to understand the different travel activities of international students and the underlying travel behavior (Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003). It was suggested that further research is needed, research which explores the connections between travel behaviors and individuals' characteristics such as nationality (Kim and Jogaratnam, 2003; Payne, 2009), gender (Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003; Michael et al., 2004; Shoham et al., 2004), age (Kim and Jogaratnam, 2003; Michael et.al., 2004; Payne, 2009), marital status ( Kim and Jogaratnam, 2003; Michael et.al., 2004; Shoham et al., 2004) , source of financial support (Kim and Jogaratnam, 2003; Shoham et al., 2004) , level of education (Glover, 2011; Payne 2009), current university and length of residency (Glover, 2011; Kim and Jogaratnam, 2003).

One study conducted on 409 international postgraduate students studying in five Malaysian research universities, has revealed that the demographics of international students are closely related to their travel behaviors (Varasteh, et.al., 2014). Travel activities and preferences such as travel party, travel purpose, preferred accommodation, length of travel and leisure and touring

activities, etc., were found to be strongly influenced by age gender, marital status, nationality, level of study and source of finance.

Even though there are some preliminary insights into the travel behaviors of international students, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the samples on which they are conducted is rather limited and on a narrow range of nationalities.

Therefore, the present study aims at contributing to the current rather limited tourism academia of international students. As mentioned above, there is a gap among current studies when it comes to understanding the underlying travel behavior of international students. While it is suggested that further research exploring the connections between travel behaviors and individuals' characteristics is needed, the current research paper will tackle one possible underlying aspect of the underlying travel behavior, namely traveling risk- perceptions. As previously mentioned, the international students market is significant and has a profitable potential for the tourism field, hence the author of this paper believes that such study could benefit tourism stakeholders.

#### International students as touristic segment

While one in five international travelers are students, the international students have been declared the fastest growing travel niche. Their motivation and curiosity to explore the world and the diverse cultures, the different people and languages, as well as the desire to use travel experiences as a stress reliever before returning to the study environment, has made this segment one of the fastest growing traveling group (Phau et al., 2009). According to UNESCO (2009), one in five higher education students are estimated to be studying outside their home country. According to Böhm, et al. (2002), it is expected that by 2025, at least 7.2 million students will choose to study at a foreign institution offering higher education. In Denmark, there were 34,030 international students in 2017, with an increase of over 42%, from 23,950 in 2013 and the country is ranked as one of the top five countries in Europe that offer English taught university programs (Monitor, 2018). Hence, the evident extension of the international students group over the past years suggests that there might be an important market opportunity for the tourism field.

One of the arguments used for encapsulating international students as respondents within the tourism studies, is that they could be categorized both as international or domestic tourists,

when visiting the host country of their studies (Payne, 2009). Furthermore, it is implied that international students tend to have long travels to tourist destinations that are both inside of the host country and outside of it, while the amounts of their return to the home country are limited during the study period (Payne, 2009). For the above mentioned reasons and not only, the tourism literature has categorized students as tourist in the country of study as “educational tourism” (Payne, 2009). One appealing characteristic of the international students group is that they tend to be repeat visitors and the benefits of attracting repeat visitors have been well acknowledged before in the tourism literature (Weaver, 2002). It is suggested that international students act as advocates for the destination and therefore will bring along friends and relatives from the country of origin.

The economic impact for host countries due to the educational tourism is undoubtable and there is a good opportunity for tourism representatives to actively collaborate with educational institutions and positively target international students for tourism-related businesses (Michael et.al., 2004).

#### Generational aspects of the international students and their tourism consumption

As previously mentioned, university students are normally characterized as individuals under 24 years old (Hunter-Jones et.al., 2007), therefore, due to the fact that the respondents of the survey will be young adults, a generational analysis is necessary in order to have an idea about their characteristics and tourism consumption patterns. While the majority of respondents of the current study are individuals between the age of 18 and 34 years old, they could be categorized as millennials or generation Y (OECD, 2018). There are slightly different views when it comes to the range of years in which Millennials were born, but within this study, the OECD report will be used, which states that Millennials are those born in the early 1980s to the mid- 1990s. It is suggested that the Millennial generation travel more than any other generation and that they rank touristic activities on the top of their priority (OECD, 2018). It is believed that once their income will increase, so will be their traveling recurrence. At the moment, a research conducted by Cavagnaro et. al. (2018) estimates that European Millennials take four to five trips per year, which makes them a considerable economic force in the tourism industry. Another study conducted by ITB World Travel Trends 2018-2019 (2019) reckon that that the Millennial generation accounts for 40 percent of Europe’s outbound travel, characterizing them as the largest age group for international travels.

It is argued that in spite of being a large group of very distinct individuals, based on their different life stages, career and available income, the European Millennials tend to share common behaviours and values (Visit Scotland, 2017). These common characteristics were shaped based on two major events that they have shared along the years, namely the internet and smartphone revolutions (KPMG, 2017). It is suggested that Generation Y is a digital native and that technology plays a key role in their daily life, always connected through smartphones, social media or other internet based tech. Another common characteristic among this generation is the predisposition to choose experiences versus over possessions (Şchiopu et al., 2016), signalling the ways in which they prefer to spend their income (OECD, 2018).

Furthermore, a study based on content analysis of up- to-date academic publications and tourism industry reports has identified four tourism micro-trends of the European Millennial generation. These micro-trends are the followings: creative tourism, off- the- beaten- track tourism, alternative accommodation and fully digital tourism. Moreover, I will briefly describe these identified trends in order to have an initial background picture of the respondents of this study, which might later help interpret the results. First of all, as identified above, millennials prefer to build experiences a live a meaningful and happy life. They are seen as open- minded travellers, who are eager to discover the world independently and freely. As a result of these characteristics, the micro-trend of “creative tourism” has been identified, distinguished as a travel behaviour that entails to proactively plan personalized experiences that fits each tourists’ traits and lifestyle. Compared to other generations, millennials prefer to travel independent from group travels and pre-planned package tours (OECD, 2018). Secondly, millennials tend to choose less popular destination, in the hope of finding “authenticity”. This preference has led to the trend of “off-the-beaten-track” tourism and might also have the intention of promoting aspects of sustainability. By visiting places that suffer from “under-tourism”, the young travellers might contribute to the local economies and support small-local owned businesses (Şchiopu et al., 2016). Thirdly, in the search for authentic experiences, millennials have developed the trend of sharing economy by choosing “alternative accommodations”. They are a social generation and therefore prefer to spend more time in the common areas of an accommodation place, rather than inside the individual rooms (OECD, 2018). This allows them to connect with other travellers, with locals and experience unique and authentic experiences. Such predisposition has led to the creation of what we now know as

Airbnb, glamping sites and chic hostels (Visit Scotland, 2017). Lastly, due to the fact that millennial generation is a digital native generation, the tourism experience has been transformed in a “fully digital tourism” experience. This particular generation gets inspiration from travel blogs and social media, while planning their trips based on the content of these social platforms (OECD, 2018). Hence, many tourism businesses had to transform their business models and adapt to the new demands.

While some of the younger respondents might now be part of Generation Z (born in the late 1990s), it is worth mentioning some of their characteristics and tourism consumption behaviour as well. Looking in the academia, it is suggested that Generation Z tends to have similar behaviours to the Generation Y/Millennials. Generation Z seem to be open- minded travellers, with a preference of creating their own unique and authentic experiences, while adopting a fully digital lifestyle (Haddouche and Salomone, 2018). Hence, as far as current studies concern on the matter, it looks like Gen Y and Gen Z have common consumption behaviours and characteristics.

#### Travel Risk Perceptions and its importance in the research field of tourism

While tourism is frequently perceived as a consumer activity, the possible risk, like in any other consumer based industry, is that the products or services provided will not meet the expectations of tourists (An and Fu 2005). The concept of “risk” has been first developed in 1989 by the United Nations and right after, the tourism risk was defined and understood as the combination of two dimensions which are “the possibility that tourists subject to various unfortunate on a trip or a tourist destination” (Tsaur et al. 1997) and “tourists cannot determine the consequences or negative results after making travel decisions” (Chen et al. 2009).

Over the past years, there has been an increased attention from individuals towards travel risks and safety. Tourism risk perceptions have been suggested to represent a quantitative assessment of the overall tourism security. In the tourism research field, destination characteristics, risk perception, and traveler characteristics have gotten particular attention since they have been often considered key variables in predicting travel behavior (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Han, 2005). Nevertheless, destination risk perception of tourists has been found to be directly linked to the tourist purchase intention.



A risk is often described as the possibility of losing something valuable or as the possibility of something negative happening at a certain moment in time, usually regarded in the future (Martin & Priest, 1986; Law & Prideaux, 2005). Along the way, there have been identified two major risk categories which are absolute risk and perceived risk. The absolute risk is assessed by designated security organizations or individuals that implement security guidelines in order to minimize risks (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). On the other hand, perceived risk is a consumer's perception of uncertainty or negativity towards an activity and ultimately observing to what extent they would accept several perceived negative risks and still make the decision to execute the activity (Silva et. al., 2010). Within this research paper, the focus of the investigation will gravitate around the perceived risk of international students travellers.

Within the tourism academia, the traveller's perceived risk has been investigated in several contexts. It is suggested that travellers take decisions based on their perception of reality rather than reality itself (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Therefore, perceived risks of an individual has an influence on the travel behaviour and destination choice (Reichel et. al., 2007). Furthermore, the consumer buying behaviour literature has brought to light more aspects of this phenomenon. It was identified that the level of a travellers' perceived risk is directly related to their intention to reduce the perceived risk and increase the level of rationalism in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, if the consumer perceives a risk beyond their accepted level of tolerance, they will take every action in their power to reduce that specific risk (Blackwell et. al., 2006). Some examples of identified risk reduction methods include choosing a brand or an activity that has been more widely advertised and so they perceive it as more familiar and safe or requiring more detailed information about the product or activity that they intend to consume (Byzalov & Shachar, 2004).

The early researchers of travellers' risk perceptions were Cook and McCleary (1983) which have investigated aspects like time and budget risk, as well as cognitive and distance aspects. Later on, Roehl & Fesenmajier (1992) and Sönmez & Grafe (1998) have elaborated on previous research and have come up with the most common risk categories found in the tourism sector which are the followings: financial risk, functional risk, physical risk, social risk, psychological risk, satisfaction risk, time loss risk, health, political uncertainty and terrorism. Despite the different categorization attempts, no official model to investigate an individual's perceived travel risk has been accepted (Fuchs & Reichel, 2006). Consequently, in order to frame this research, six main categories of

traveller's perceived risks will be considered. The six dimensions chosen for this study are compiled based on all the previous academic attempts of risk categorization, where some authors divided the risks in five, six or seven categories. Han (2005) argued that "some earlier found dimensions may either measure the same construct, or can be put into one construct". Therefore, by synthesizing all previous categorizations, the author has come up with six risk- perception categories.

#### Physical

Physical risk perception is defined as the possibility of physical danger, injury or illness while travelling (Roehl & Fesenmajer, 1992; Sönmez & Grafe, 1998). There are several types of physical risks determined in the academia: health issues (Lawton & Page, 1997), harassment and crime (Kozak, 2007; Pizam 1999), terrorism (Sönmez & Grafe, 1998) and political instability (Seddighi et al., 2001). Furthermore, it is suggested that these categories could be further broken down in subcategories such as perceived risk of contagious diseases (Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009), food poison and other food related concerns (Larsen, Ogaard, & Brun, 2011), attitudes towards drinking (Sönmez et al., 2006), and drug consumption behaviour (Uriely & Belhassen, 2006).

#### Psychological

Psychological risk is defined as the possibility that the vacation will not reflect the tourists' personality or self-image (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). It is suggested that the potential risk of embarrassment or loss of self-esteem plays an important role in this category of perceived risk. Previous studies have examined tourist' psychological stress level when measured in different scenarios and it was suggested that aspects such as unavailability of suitable accommodation, holiday cancellation, unsatisfying meals, are leading to high levels of stress (Eitzinger & Wiedemann, 2007). Moreover, when considering the travellers' psychological risk perception towards a destination's holiday image, several aspects contributing to the perception were the following: linguistic and cultural barriers or challenges (Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009), environmental atmosphere (Aschauer, 2010), traffic jams and over crowdedness (Reichel et. al., 2007).

#### Social

Social Risk is defined as the possibility that the vacation will affect others' opinion of the tourist or that the planned vacation will not meet the expectations of the individuals joining the vacation (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Previous studies have attempted to measure both the self-image of the traveller in the eyes of the citizens and local communities (Aschauer, 2010), as well as

the way that the traveller's circle of friends and family might perceive the trip. It was concluded that there is a possibility that other tourists might be recognized as strangers, disturbing factors or competitors (Pearce, 2005), and therefore a social risk could be established.

#### Performance

Performance risk is defined as the possibility that a trip will not bring satisfaction (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Previously, performance risk was also recognized as functional risk, and it was defined as the possibility that mechanical, organisational or equipment problems might occur during the trip. This category of perceived risk can be easily measured by evaluating aspects such as travel value, landscape, attractions, environment, accessibility and infrastructure, as well as relaxation and entertainment opportunities (Reichel et. al., 2007; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992).

#### Financial

Financial risk is defined as the possibility that the vacation will not deliver the value compared to the money spent, or the possibility that the invested money in the trip, will be lost (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Roehl & Fesenmaier (1992) have identified three categories of this perceived risk: unexpected extra expenses, impact of the current financial situation and the destination being perceived as more expensive than other alternative destinations. Another aspect identified as concerning for travellers is the possibility of having too much or extra to the cost of the initial tourism product or service (Simpson and Siguaw, 2008).

#### Time

Time risk is defined as the possibility that the vacation is a loss of time or that the overall process of the trip will be time consuming (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Some factors that were found to be taken into consideration when evaluating time risk perceptions were the followings: cost of the time planning and preparing the trip, the time spent in the return from the trip and cost of overall time losses invested in the trip (Gallarza and Gil Saura, 2006).

Concluding on this concept, based on the subjective evaluation of a risk threatening situation, risk perceptions can influence an individual's behaviour and consumption choices. By attempting to understand how risk is being perceived based on individual's characteristics, social structure, beliefs and past experiences, barriers of traveling could be mitigated. The outcome of such knowledge can potentially benefit the tourism field by predicting consumption behaviour, as

well as benefiting the tourists by reducing possible feeling of fear or anxiety. There are eight key studies on the travel risk perceptions and all of them show the multidimensionality aspect of such theory. Identified risk perception factors vary from three to eight main categories and the studies have been conducted mainly on developed countries such as Australia, United States of America and Israel. Nevertheless, while several studies have focused on target groups such as students or international backpackers, limited studies have conducted such research on international students. Hence, this gap in the literature, will be addressed with this research paper that will explore the underlying risk perceptions of the international students from Aalborg University, in the traveling context.

### The risk perceptions in different tourist groups

As identified in the above table, both travelers' characteristics and trip characteristics can influence the risk perceptions of an individual. A considerable body of literature suggests that the category and priority of risk factors vary according to the individuals and their specific traits, being influenced by a variety of factors such as the nationality or country of origin of the individual, past travel experiences, demographic characteristics and overall lifestyle (Pizam et.al., 2004; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). By understanding the way that risk perceptions fluctuate based on group differences, travel could be encouraged by developing targeted communication that adjust risk perceptions.

#### Country of origin

While tourism researchers were conducting studies in which risk perception factors among tourists with different nationalities were compared, it was suggested that the country of origin is an influential factor towards an individuals' risk perception. There were individual studies conducted on specific context and situation. One of such studies was conducted among German versus Japanese tourists and it revealed the fact that the German travelers were more risk-acceptant than the Japanese group (Money & Crofts, 2003). Another study concluded that compared to the United Kingdom, Canada and Greece, United States, Hong Kong, and Australia perceived more travel risks than the first group of nationalities (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006). Furthermore, when evaluating the primary travel risk perception in several Asian countries such as China, Malaysia and Singapore, the results revealed that these groups tend to be concerned about terrorist attacks, natural

disasters and infection diseases (Kozak et. al., 2007). When investigating groups from Latin America region, it was found that Mexican travelers are more likely to be concerned about health aspects and overall well-being at the destination (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008). As it can be seen from the tourism academia, the nationality or country of origin of an individual can have an influence on the perceived travel risks. Hence, this research project will explore and seek to understand the connection between the international students' nationality and the influence on their traveling risk-perceptions.

#### Past travel experiences and repeat visitation

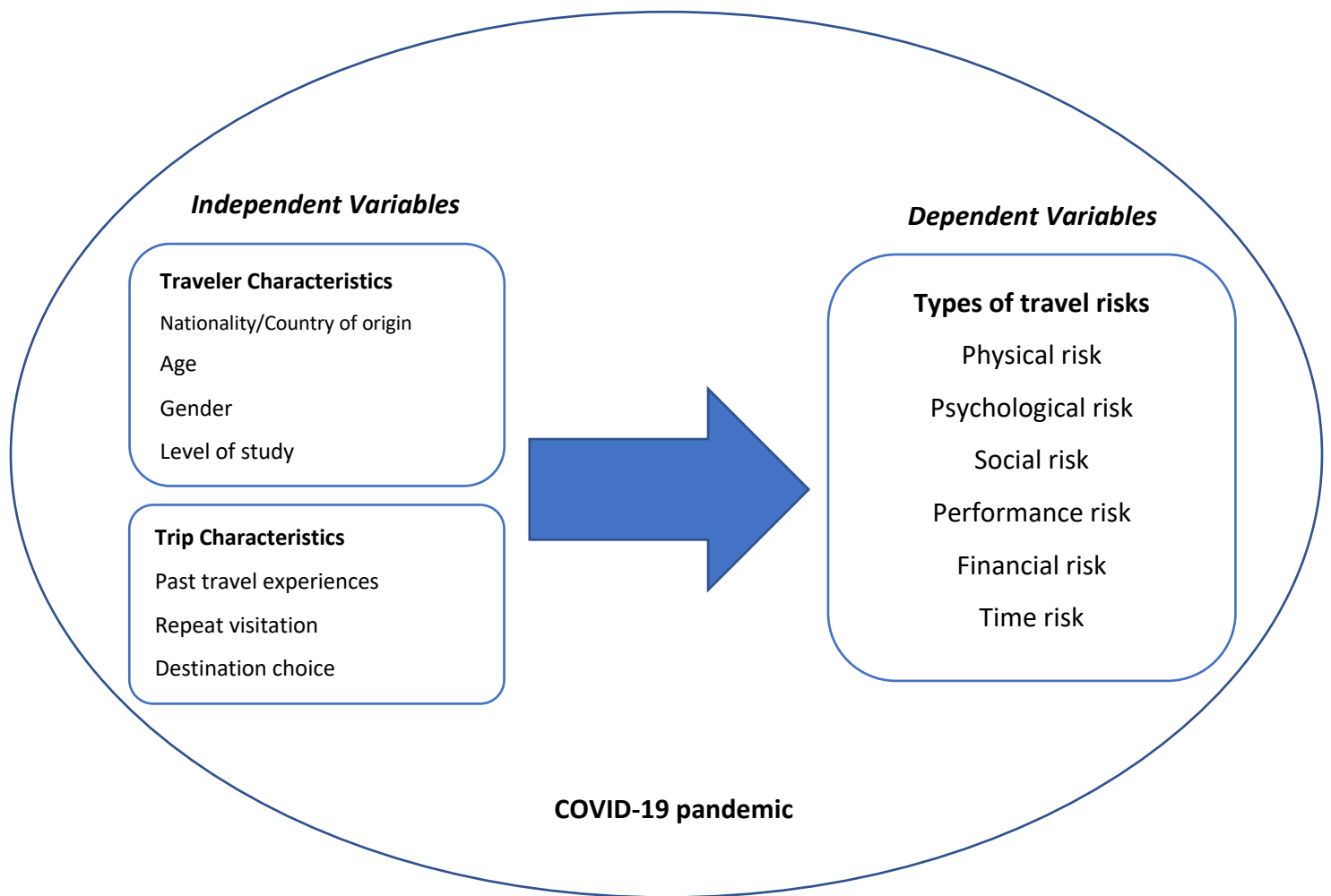
The tourism academia has identified another factor which appears to influence an individuals' travel risk perceptions, namely previous experience. Several researchers have determined the fact that past travel experiences has the potential to reduce perceived risks of the travelers (Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). While less experienced tourists were prone to express concerns regarding terrorism, food safety and health, the more experienced tourists tended to express concerns in the sociocultural category, psychological factors when dealing with self-esteem or problem solving (Pearce 1996, Lepp & Gibson, 2003). Furthermore, some other studies concluded that the more inexperience a traveler is, the more likely is to perceive additional financial risks and performance risks, as well as being more likely to change travel plans when confronting potential difficulties (Reichel et. al., 2007). Nonetheless, travel experience was suggested to play an important role in creating awareness of the world around us and encouraging knowledge of potential risks which might positively influence travel intentions (Sharifpour et. al., 2013).

#### Choice of destination

The selection of the vacation destination was another factor that was found to affect a tourist' perceived risks. In a study conducted with respondents evaluating fifty tourism destinations, Australia, Sweden, Switzerland, Canada and New Zealand were considered the five safest countries in the world (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). When asked to categorize destination countries according to the stability of the political stage, Europe, New Zealand and Australia were found the most stable, as opposed to Libya, Somalia, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Furthermore, destinations were categorized in terms of higher perceived risks of natural disasters in Asia and North America, or in terms of riskier outbreak of infectious diseases in developing countries (Kozak

et. al., 2007). Nevertheless, even researches conducted on experienced backpacker travelers showed concerns towards visiting countries where there are perceived risks of political instability (Hunter-Jones et. al., 2007). Hence, this current research study will explore the connection between destination choice and their influence on perceived traveling risks among the international students from Aalborg University.

In order to have a better understanding of the connections discussed in the literature review regarding the individuals' and trip characteristics in relation to perceived travel risks, a conceptual framework will be displayed. First of all, we have the Independent variables of the theoretical concept of travel-risk perceptions, which are composed of the "Traveler Characteristics" and "Trip Characteristics". Within this research paper, four traveler characteristics are being evaluated: area/countries of origin, age, gender and level of study. Regarding the trip characteristics factors, they have been selected from the tourism academia, from previous studies that have concluded that these three aspects (past travel experience, repeat visitation and choice of destination) have a degree of influence on an individuals' perceived travel risks. According to the literature review, the two independent variables are suggested to have a certain influence on the travel risks factors perceived by an individual, which in this framework is entitled as the "Dependent Variables". Within the present research paper, the below displayed six categories of travel risks will be evaluated. Finally, due to the current global pandemic, the study will take into consideration the possible influence of the new living environment norms. The author will conduct the study with the new changes in mind and will attempt to evaluate whether the COVID-19 pandemic has an impact on the perceived travel risk.



*Figure 1: Conceptual Framework*

## Philosophy of science and Methodology

For every researcher and research, philosophy of science and methodology are important considerations before starting the research process. Therefore, within the following chapter of this research project, several concepts will be established such as the paradigm, the research design and data collection techniques, as well as the survey guide.

### Ontological and Epistemological considerations

To begin with, it is important to mention the approached perspective used to collect and interpret the data used throughout this research project. In order to offer the reader a holistic picture of the way that knowledge is perceived by the author, the philosophical assumption needs to be described (Crotty M., 1998). Nevertheless, in order for the research paper to be theoretically engaged and reliable, the ontological and epistemological consideration will be stated, followed by the research paradigm.

Ontology is the study preoccupied with the nature of social entities. It aims to establish whether social entities should be considered objective (reality being perceived as external from the social entities involved in the actions) or subjective (reality being perceived as constructed by the individuals, their perceptions and actions) (Crotty M., 1998).

Epistemology is the study preoccupied with “the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be-knower and what can be known” Guba & Lincon (1994). In other words, epistemology is preoccupied with the theory of knowledge, its nature and many forms. The theory evaluates whether the reality is seen as subjective and there is a need to analyze and compare the differences between social entities or universal, believing that knowledge could be analyzed separately and the researcher needs to stay away from the social entities (Crotty M, 1998).

The paradigm adopted throughout the research project is a result of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the author. For the purpose of this study, reality is perceived as external and objective from the social entities involved in the actions. The study is done with the help of a pre-constructed survey questions which limits the freedom of subjectivity from the respondents, due to the fact that the author intends to reach an objective knowledge of the investigated subject. In this way, the results can be more easily compared between the two groups of international students, which is the purpose of the study.

A clear research topic was identified together with appropriate research questions, and through a structural and controlled approach, the research will be conducted accordingly. The author will keep distance from the research objective and will use statistical figures to confirm knowledge. More specifically, interaction with the research participants will be minimal. The researcher will interact with the participants only by distributing the survey on the online platforms and help with technicalities if the respondents are facing any challenges. To conclude, the positivist paradigm will be used in order to conduct the research mentioned in the problem formulation chapter. This study is therefore characterized by a highly structured data collection method with a large sample.

### Data Collection

The data collection process of a study represents a fundamental part for the purpose of the investigated research problem. Data collection is the process of collecting the relevant sources in order to explore the research problem. Nevertheless, the collection of data needs to be handled



with extra care and attention in order to ensure validity and reliability of the outcome (Mason and McBride, 2014).

Data collection methods can be divided into two categories such as primary data collection and secondary data collection. Primary data is collected by the researcher himself/herself, as a result of their interaction with the social entities associated with the researched topic subject. The most common instruments that can be used for gathering this type of data are surveys, interviews and observations. The preference for using such methods is that the researcher believes that the insight gathered in such way, is the closest to the truth. Furthermore, the other category for collecting data is called secondary data. This means that the researcher interprets data that has already been gathered by other authors. This type of data is usually considered less reliable due to subjectivity and possible outdatedness (Mason and McBride, 2014).

Within this study, primary data collection methods are being used, more precisely, a quantitative data collection method. This method works with large number of respondents which facilitates the gathering of a big volume of responses and therefore it can be used to represent a particular group of the population. Moreover, the gathered data from the survey is eventually presented through graphs and numerical statistics (Mason and McBride, 2014). For this research project, a quantitative survey is being utilized in order to explore whether or not traveler's characteristics and trip characteristics have any impact on the perceived traveling risk perceptions.

There are a few reasons why the survey is used as the unique tool for this research project. First of all, the present research project goal is to investigate the risk- perception of international students from AAU, from specific countries of origin. Therefore, it is intended to obtain a sufficient sample that is representative for the population of interest. Of course that it is not feasible to collect data from the entire population of interest, but a subset of the population sample is used in order to find tendencies that could be representative for the entire population. In the present research project, the numbers of the entire target group that is intended to study are the following: 1.056 of international students from Eastern European countries at AAU and 770 of international students from Western European countries. These numbers are from 2019, based on the statistics provided on the Aalborg University's official website (University, 2020). Therefore, in order to reduce the likelihood of biased samples and for the results to be as representative for the population as possible, the following measures will be adopted: the sample of the population is randomly chosen

so that each member has an equal chance of being chosen; the sample size will aim to be as large as possible in order to reduce the likelihood of sampling errors and increase the chance of reflecting the target population. The challenges faced in the trial of representing the population as accurate as possible could be related to the fact that the gender percentage is unknown, as well as the specific countries of the two European regions. Therefore, aiming for high amount of respondents seems to be the only way to ensure unbiased results.

On the other hand, the majority of the previous studies conducted on travel risk- perceptions are conducted in a quantitative manner and therefore it is intended to keep this present research in the same manner, in order to have some points of reference and comparisons (Reichel et. al, 2007). This research project aims to answer the research questions, formulated in the problem formulation, created based previous studies which were conducted at large scales, representing different nationalities, genders or educational level. Hence, the same approach will be taken but on a different target group, the Eastern and Western European students from AAU.

### The survey

As mentioned in the “Data Collection” chapter, a survey will be used as the tool that generates reliable primary data for this particular research project. The following chapter will elaborate on the design and objective of the survey, as well as other connected matters that are being considered important.

To begin with, a survey within this project is understood as an objective and flexible tool for collecting data, designed as a structured format of questions that aims at collecting quantitative data. Additionally, surveys usually require large amount of time for the process of design and development, while being careful to formulate questions that are clear for the respondents (Walliman, 2011). In the particular case of this study’s survey, the questions were priority tested among friends and colleagues. In this way, once the survey was out for the targeted respondents, the formulation of the questions were formulated as well as possible and therefore receive accurate answers. Whilst designing a survey tends to be challenging for the authors, the advantages of such data collection tool are significant. Due to the minimal influence from the researcher, it is argued that surveys have a better chance at delivering honest replies from the respondents (Walliman, 2011). In this particular situation, the researcher is influencing the selected questions and options

of answer, but does not get personally involved in the collection of data, as for example, leading the respondents to answer in a certain way. For this particular survey design, challenges were encountered in relation with finding the adequate structure and questions for the matter of “perceived traveling risks”, which is broadly viewed as subjective to everyone’s interpretations. Additionally, incorporating the matter of present COVID-19 pandemic throughout the survey in order to evaluate its overall impact on the answers was also challenging when creating a functional survey.

Moving onto the structure of the survey, the questionnaire is composed of three main parts in that are in direct connection with the literature and an initial preliminary question part. The completion time is estimated to take between 5 and 15 minutes. The format of the questionnaire has been designed to be a closed one, exception being the question in the second part of the questionnaire, when the respondents are asked to state the location of their next planned trip. A closed-question survey format is characterized by having only pre-loaded answers from where respondents can make a choice (Walliman, 2011). There are a few reasons why the survey is mainly based on closed ended questions. Firstly, this method is particularly needed when conducted demographic studies. The present study aims to evaluate specific aspects of travel risk- perceptions among a particular group of people and more importantly, the research questions formulated based on previous studies, include the influence of socio-demographics of the respondents. Therefore, the data gathered could be easily quantified and the researcher can study the relation between socio-demographics of the selected population and the associated travel risk- perceptions by easily categorizing the respondents. Additionally, the fact that such questions are easy to code makes them particularly useful when trying to prove the statistical significance of a survey’s results. Another reason for using closed- ended questions within the survey is because of its effectiveness when trying to compare results among users. In this particular case, the researcher is trying to compare the results from the eastern European students versus western European students from AAU. However, on a critical note, the use of closed-ended questions requires a very good understanding of the researched subject, otherwise questions that do not properly reflect the research’s purpose could provide erroneous information.

As previously mentioned, there are two categories of questions: eliminatory and non-eliminatory questions. Therefore, before proceeding to the main three part of the questionnaire,

the respondent will go through up to 4 eliminatory questions. These questions will ensure that the respondent is the right fit for the purpose of the study. The first eliminatory question is addressed in regards to the General Data Protection law (GDPR). The respondent must agree with the collection and processing of personal data, according to the law and regulation in force, otherwise, the respondent will be automatically rejected from the further completion of the survey. The second eliminatory question want to ensure that the respondent is a student studying at Aalborg University (AAU), since this is the target group of the study. If they are not a student from AAU, the survey will once again automatically disconnect the respondent from the survey. The third eliminatory question is related to whether or not the respondent is from either an Eastern or Western European country. Due to the fact that investigating more regions of provenience or countries would have been extremely time consuming and difficult to analyze, the research will take into consideration these two geographical regions which will be later compared and analyze according to the literature on traveler's socio-demographic characteristics as an influential factor for the travel risk perceptions. The narrowing down of the researched areas of origins was done by taking into consideration the reports from AAU that state that the top two regions of international students studying at AAU are from Eastern Europe with a number of 1.056 students, followed by Western Europe with a number of 770 students, in 2019 (University, 2020). The fourth and last eliminatory question is in regards to whether they plan to take a trip in the next 6 months, due to the purpose of the study of gathering actual data.

Following the eliminatory questions comes the three main parts of the survey, with questions that are no longer eliminatory, and are displayed to the individuals which answered according to the initial conditions of the survey. The first part of the survey aims at gathering knowledge about the respondents, which according to the purpose of the study, will represent the traveler's characteristics. There will be four questions asking about their gender, age, geographical area of origin and level of study. The age group categories were divided according to the most commonly used age groups in most of the surveys and for the project's interest, three age groups option are available: 18-24 years old, 25-34 years old and 35+ years old. According to the literature review, a student is normally considered an individual between 18 and 24 years old (Hunter-Jones et.al., 2007), however, due to the fact that there is also the option for being a student enrolled in a Phd program, the age category options have been extended. In regards to the geographical area of

origin they will be asked to choose from either eastern or western Europe, whereas in regards to the level of study they have the possibility to choose from either Bachelor, Master or PhD programs. The options for the level of study were decided based on the offers that Aalborg University has for their students, as well as based on the theoretic considerations of the “internationally mobile students”, defined in the literature review chapter. Furthermore, the second part of the survey focuses on the trip characteristics, more specifically, on three main aspects as follow: past travel experience of the traveler/respondent, location of the next planned trip and whether or not the next planned trip would be a repeat visit or not. The first section with the past travel experience of the respondent contains four questions as follow: the first question asks the respondent how many times a year he or she usually travels and there will be five options of answer in order to keep the answers organized and easy to analyze later. The second question requires the respondent to give information about the typical length of a trip that he or she takes. There are again three options of answer in order to keep the responses clear and easy to evaluate. Nevertheless, the last two questions ask the traveler/respondent if he or she have ever traveled outside of their home country and outside of the continent, in this case outside of Europe.

The first two part of the survey, the traveler’s characteristics and trip characteristics, represent the independent variables of this research, which according to the academia, it is suggested to have a certain influence over the perceived travel risks. Both aspects, either the individual’s unique traits and characteristics or his/ hers experience with traveling, were argued to have the potential to either reduce or increase perceived risks of a traveler (Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

The third and final part of the survey investigates the risk perceptions of the respondent, based on the considered travel destination. There will be five themes referring to each of the risk perception categories identified in the literature review chapter of the project. The themes for this part of the survey are the followings: Human- induced risks, Social- psychological risks, Financial risks and Health risks. For each of this risk perception categories, there will be several aspect of the perceived risks that will need to be evaluated. The respondent will have to rate the extent to which they worry about the perceived travel risk factors on a five point scale also called “Likert scale”, ranging from 1 “not at all worried” to 5 “very worried”. Such evaluating method is suggested to be easier for respondents to understand, while reducing the frustration level of respondents and

increasing the response rate and quality. Additionally, this particular scale will be used due to its high reliability of measuring perceptions, which is one of the main goals within this project. In comparison to the binary questions, which can only give “yes” or “no” type of answers, the Likert scale allows the collection of a more detailed feedback. This evaluating method could make a difference when trying to pin-point the areas that need improvement or support. Furthermore, for each of the evaluated risk factor, an additional question about the impact of Covid-19 will be addressed, aiming to find out if the current pandemic situation has an influence on their evaluation of the particular risk.

Finally, the survey will be mostly distributed via social media platform such as Facebook. More specifically, the survey will be distributed on the following Facebook groups: “Aalborg Students” (4.1K members), “International Aalborg”(5.6 K members), “International students in Copenhagen” (19K members), “AAU Tourism 2019-2021” (26 members). The reasons why the survey will be distribute through these groups are the followings. First of all because of the relevance of the project’s target group, which is international students from AAU. As can be seen from the title of the Facebook groups, the members should be composed of mostly international students. In order to be specific on who I would like to take part in the survey, I have wrote a short description where I mention the fact that only International students from Aalborg University can take part in the study. Furthermore, another reason for choosing to distribute the survey on these groups is the large amount of members and the possibility for reaching a large amount of respondents in a short period of time. Last but not least, the electronic survey distribution is a safer way of collecting data, taking into consideration the current Covid-19 pandemic recommendation of keeping 2 meter distance between individuals. If this challenge would not exist, being present on the AAU campus with a tablet where people could complete the survey would have been another option of collecting data. By distributing the survey through these social media platforms, there are a couple of risks such as being ignored and not receiving answers, as well as not being completely sure if the respondents are the intended target group or there are just curious individuals who want to try out the survey out of curiosity or lack of attention and disrupt the results. Finally, it is important to mention that the survey was first handed out on the social platforms on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, and the collection of data ended on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November.

## Methods of data analysis

Before proceeding with the analysis it is necessary to mention the methods that will be used in order to analyze the data generated by the survey. Due to the fact that this study is based on a quantitative research, it is necessary to have an analysis method that helps to simplify the large amount of data . Therefore, one of the most appropriate methods is the descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics method will be used to provide a summary of the sample and measures. Nevertheless, the data will be summarized with the help of visual graphs and tables, which will help readers understand the meaning of the analyzed data.

## Delimitations

Delimitations are defined as a specific set of choices by the researcher which describe the borderline of the study. More specifically, the delimitation chapter within a research project is meant to explain to the reader the reason why a set of decisions has been made and the way it influences the actual study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019).

The delimitations within this research project can be identified both within the survey and within the literature review chapter. Firstly, the project has a clear target group for the research, thus being the international students from Aalborg University. Therefore, no other groups of individuals can be included in the research. Secondly, there is a delimitation regarding the geographical area of provenience of the student. The international student could only participate if he or she comes from either from an Eastern or Western country from Europe. This delimitation has been decided in order to make the final analysis easier to compare and evaluate. Since the research project is done by only one author, there is a certain time and space limitation that needs to be considered. Thirdly, in order for the study to be relevant and have fresh perspectives from respondents, there has been another delimitation implemented, namely, allowing to take part of the research, only the respondents that plan to travel in the next 6 months. Lastly, there has been a clear theoretical delimitation of this paper in regards with the factors that influence the travel risk perceptions of the individual. This paper only aims at investigating whether or not, traveler's characteristics and trip characteristics have a certain influence on the travel risk perception of the individual.

## Data Analysis

Within the following chapter of the research project, the focus will be on analyzing the findings of the designed survey. The findings will be discussed and analyzed in relation with the academic implications elaborated in the “Literature Review” chapter. The data analysis section intends to provide a descriptive data analysis of the finding from the survey.

## Survey Analysis

The survey of this study project has been designed in order to investigate the subject of travel risk perceptions among international students from Aalborg University, in relation with their personal background characteristics and past travel experience. Additionally, the theoretical aspects of the survey as well as design implications and limitations can be found in the “Literature review” and “Methodology” chapters of this project paper. Furthermore, the structure of this following analysis chapter will be presented. The analysis of the collected survey data will be divided into three sub-chapters, which is in accordance to the actual structure of the distributed survey. Therefore, the three data analysis sub-chapters start with “traveler characteristics” of the respondents, “trip characteristics” and lastly, the “risk-perceptions based on considered destination”. Along the analysis, comparisons will be formulated between the data from the “Western European” group of respondents and “Eastern European” group of respondents, since the main goal of the study is to investigate whether the traveler characteristics has an influence over the perceived travel risks. Moreover, the data will be compared to previous findings from other studies and theories, which were discussed in the “literature review” chapter.

Lastly, it is important to mention that the total number of respondents was 183 individuals. However, after the four eliminatory questions designed to ensure the right target group for the study, 150 responses were validated. Hence, the final survey results are based on 150 respondent from both Western and Eastern European countries. From the 150 respondents, 90 individuals are from an Eastern European country, while 60 individuals are from a Western European country. Taking into consideration that there are 1056 Eastern European students studying at AAU and 770 Western European students, the margin of error and sampling confidence can be calculated. With a combined population size of 1826 individuals and 150 valid sample size, the confidence level of the presented results is of 99%, while the margin of error is 10%. To be more specific, the confidence



level represents the probability that the sample accurately reflects the attitudes of the population, while the margin of error represents the range/percentage that the responses of the population might deviate from the sampled individuals (SurveyMonkey, 2020).

### Traveler Characteristics

The starting chapter of the survey after the eliminatory questions is in regards with the travelers characteristics, meaning their country of origin, gender, age and level of study.

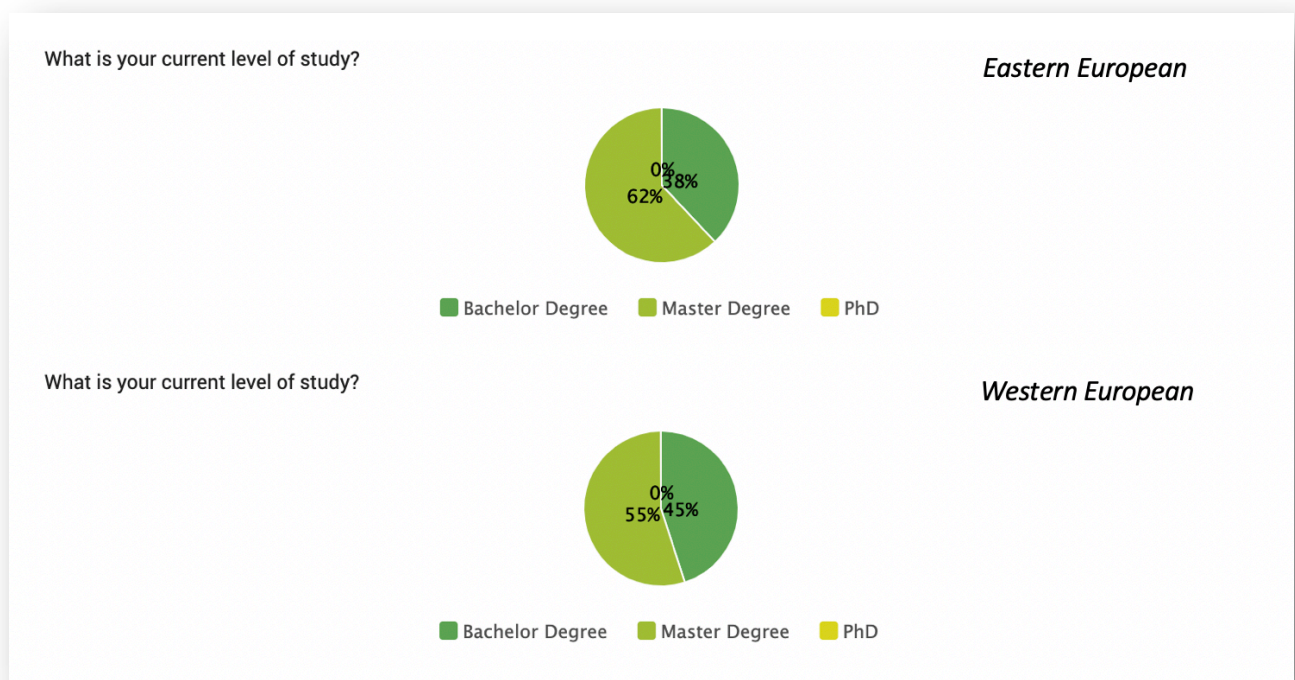
The first question was in regards with the country of origin, where the respondents had to choose between the two options of Eastern European country or Western European country. The results show that 49% of the respondents are from a Western European country, while 59% are from an Eastern European country. Since the number of the Eastern parts of Europe students is higher than the number of the students from Western parts of Europe, the proportion of the number of respondents seems logic.

The following question of this part of the survey is in connection with the gender of the respondents. The majority of respondents in both populations sample are females. This means that the overall results of the survey could be influenced by the predominant female gender, which according to some studies, can have different traveling risk-perceptions than the males (Wu et. al., 2001; Kim & Jogaratnam, 2003; Lepp & Gibson; 2003; An and Fu, 2005; Reichel et. al., 2007; Adam, 2015). According to these studies, it is suggested that overall, women's sensibility for travel risks is slightly higher than that of men. Therefore, it should be kept in mind that the end results of this study might be strongly influenced by the gender dominance of respondents and that it might represent more women's perceptions than those of men.

Next in the survey, there is a question regarding the age of the respondents. Once again the percentages from the two population samples are similar, with the predominant age group of individuals between the ages of 18 to 24 years old, with a percentage of 62% in the Eastern European group and 65% in the Western European group. This age group is followed by the segment of individuals between the ages of 25 and 34 years old, with a percentage of 36%, respectively 35%. Within the sample group of respondents from Eastern European countries, there is a 2% of individuals aged 35 years old or higher. Depending on when the individuals have started their current study program, the predominant age group seems to be an average of 24 years old, which can be considered representative for the international students population, if the definition of

Hunter-Jones et. al. (2007) is being taken into consideration. According to the authors, university students are usually individuals under 24 years old.

Nevertheless, the traveler characteristics question part ends by a question regarding the level of study of the respondents. The respondents could choose from a Bachelor Degree, a Master Degree or a PhD degree option. In both sample of respondents, the majority are engaged in a Master degree program, with a dominant percentage of 62% of Eastern European students and 55% of Western European students. This category is shortly followed by the students engaged in a Bachelor degree program, with 38%, respectively 45%. As it can be deduced, none of the respondents are PhD students. As suggested in previous studies (Glover, 2011; Payne 2009), the level of study of an individual could have an influence over the perceived travel risks and the intensity of each perception. For example, one study conducted on women travelers found that the higher level of education, the more frequent contact with media and the higher the class status, the level of their risk perception is stronger (Ahmad et. al., 2015).



*Figure 2: Survey results*

Additionally, the inclusion of this aspect was suggested to be needed when trying to have a deeper understanding of traveler's behavior and tourism consumption choices. Hence, when interpreting the data, it should be kept in mind that the results are rather relevant for international students with a high level of education, the majority of them already completing a bachelor education.

#### Trip Characteristics

The next set of questions within the survey was intended to gather information about the respondent's next trip characteristics and overall travel experience. Therefore, the first question of this section is addressed in regards to the number of times that the respondents usually travel per year. Also, once again, the respondents had several choices of answers to select from. The results show a noticeable difference between the Eastern European (EE) students' responses and those of the Western European (WE) students. Overall, the respondents from the WE countries seem to travel more often yearly, with a 50%-50% choice of traveling between 2-4 times a year and 5+ times a year. No students from this regional category has selected the options of traveling once a year or not at all. On the other side, the Eastern European group of respondents predominantly travel between 2 to 4 times a year with 64% of respondents, 26% of the respondents take around 5+ trips a year, and 10% say they usually travel once a year. These results will serve later in the analysis, when the travel risk perceptions of each of the two categories of respondents will be evaluated. It was suggested in the literature that less experienced tourists are prone to different risk perceptions than those that are more experienced. More precisely the travelers with less traveling experiences were expressing concerns in regards to food safety and health, financial and performance risks. On the other hand, the more experienced tourists were expressing concerns regarding socio-cultural risk perceptions category or psychological aspects that deal with self-esteem or problem solving (Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

Furthermore, the second question of this part of the questionnaire aimed at finding out the length of a typical travel of the respondents. The results show that both categories of students sample tend to travel between 3 to 7 days per trip on an average. Additionally, in both cases this predominant choice of length of stay is followed by the 7+ days per trip. Only a few respondents have selected the option of a weekend in both sample groups. These results fall right into the outcome of the study conducted by Cavagnaro et. al. (2018), which estimates that European

Millennials take four to five trips per year, making them a major economic force in the tourism industry.

The following two questions from the “past travel experience” chapter of the survey are asking whether or not the respondent has traveled outside of their home-country and outside of the European continent. While both Eastern European students group and Western European students group everyone has traveled outside of their home-country, in the question where individuals are asked about traveling outside the continent, the answers are significantly different. According to the results, 85% of the Western European students have traveled outside of the European continent compared to 51% of the Eastern European students. The extra travel experience outside of the continent of origin might play a role in the choice of perceived travel risks as it was mentioned in the theory that was previously brought up (Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

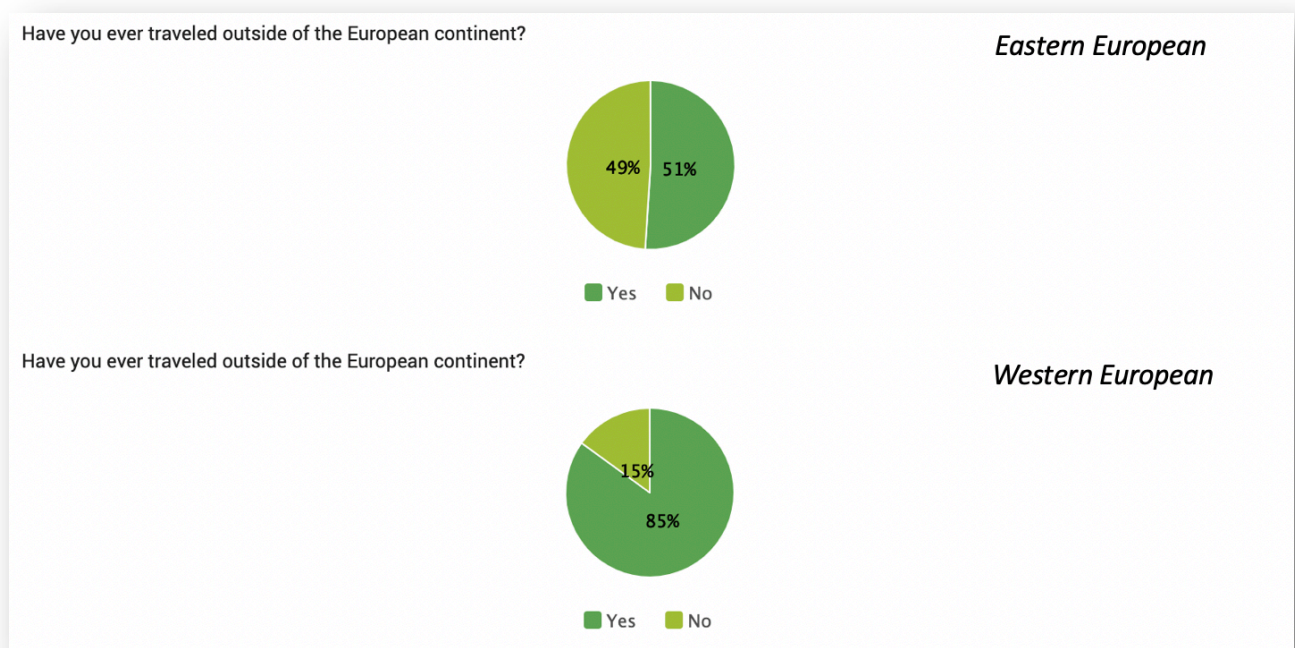


Figure 3: Survey results

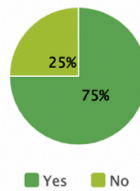
The last interrelated questions within this section of the survey intends to find out the next planned trip of the respondents, whether the trip choice has been affected by the current pandemic situation and lastly, if the planned trip would be a repeat visit.

First of all, some tendencies in the choices of the next trip destination could be observed in both groups of respondents, and moreover, assumptions of their choice of destination could be formulated. The similarity between the two sample groups is that the majority of the respondents are planning a trip to which they have been before and also, the choice of destination has been impacted by the current pandemic situation of Covid-19. Furthermore, it can be observed that a majority of the students from Eastern Europe, that responded to the survey, are planning a trip to Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, followed by Czech Republic. Taking into consideration the choice of destination and the fact that the majorities are revisit trips, it could be assumed that the students are planning a trip to either their home country or to an area that they are familiar with. Similarly, the Western European students respondents, mainly choose to travel in the proximity of Denmark, like Norway and Sweden (11%), or to the Western European countries which might coincide to be their home countries, like Netherlands (11%), Germany(6%), France(6%), taking into consideration the high percentage of repeat visitation of the same destination.

The fact that the respondents are travelling to a familiar territory in most cases might have an influence on the tourist' perceived risks and therefore, when interpreting the data from the next chapter of the survey, this aspect of destination choice will be referenced to.

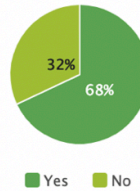
<b><i>Next planned trip of Eastern European respondents</i></b>	<b><i>Results in percentage</i></b>
<b>Romania</b>	<b>15%</b>
<b>Hungary</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Slovakia</b>	<b>7%</b>
<b>Czech Republic, Spain</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>UK, Poland, Denmark, Latvia, Portugal, France, Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Croatia, Norway.</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Sweden, Bulgaria, India, Turkey, Belgium, Estonia, Peru, Italy, Thailand.</b>	<b>2%</b>

Does the Covid-19 pandemic have an impact on the choice of your next planned trip?



*Eastern European*

Would the planned trip be a repeat visit?



*Figure 4: Survey results*

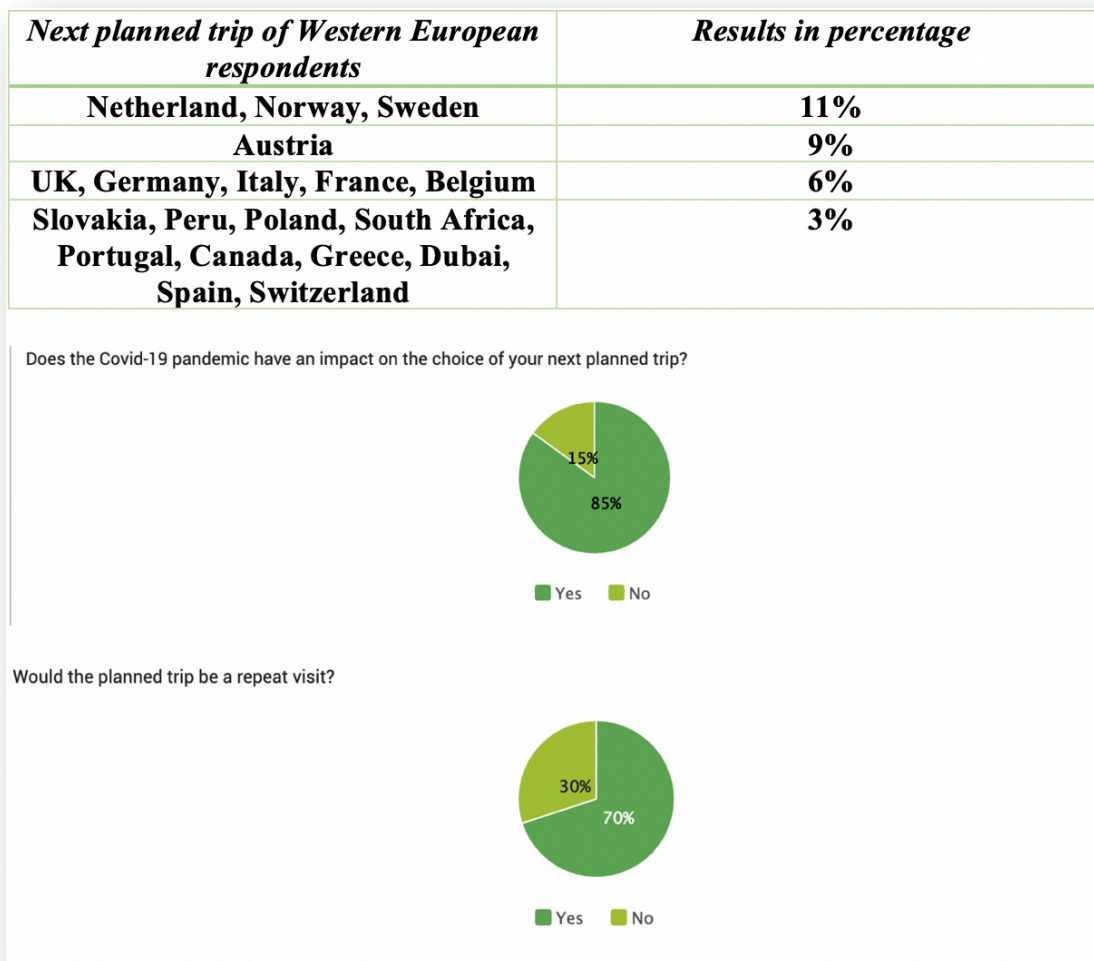


Figure 5: Survey results

#### Risk perceptions based on considered destination

This last part of the survey intends to evaluate the risk-perceptions of respondents, associated with their next planned trip. The data will be displayed in the form of tables, where the sub-structured questions and results from the questionnaire will be presented and summarized. Within this part of analysis, it is finally possible to identify whether or not the traveler and trip characteristics have an influence on the perceived risks. It is important to mention, that in order to make the data easy to analyze, colors have been used as a coding system. Therefore, the green color is used for when the majority of the sampled population is “not at all worried” about a risk-perception factor, the red color is used when more than half of the sampled population is overall



worried about one of the factors, and blue color is used to highlight when the answer of one of the evaluated risk factors is affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic situation.

#### *Human- induced risks*

Starting with the human induced risks, this sections contains seven risk perception factors that the respondents had to evaluate. The two tables showing the responses of the Eastern European students and Western European students will be inserted below.

By looking at the two tables below, envisioning the evaluation of human-induced risks from both sampled groups, it can easily be noticed an opposition of colors. Out of seven evaluated factors within this category, for the Eastern European group, two out of seven risks are evaluated as “not at all worried” by the majority of the population. These factors that are not at all worrying for the respondents are “security of accommodation” and “natural disasters” The rest of the risk factors are seen as worrying for most of the population. What it’s interesting with these “worrying results” is that they were all positively rated as “answer affected by COVID-19”. While the red squared could be explained by the current pandemic, the green squares could be related to the choice of destination. It was identified before, that the next planned trip of the Eastern European students is actually a country from Eastern Europe, meaning that it’s either their home country or at least a familiar destination for them. Therefore, the “not at all worried” response for “security of accommodation” could be related to the fact that they will visit friends and family, or that they feel confident that they can easily find accommodation given any scenario.

On the other hand, the Western European group of students has only two risk of factors evaluates as worrying, which are “Be rejected to get on board” and “Travel partner’s safety”. Both of these worrying risk factors are assessed as “answer affected by the COVID-19”. Taking into consideration the global pandemic, the current changing and unclear traveling restrictions could be the reason for the student’s concerns, as well as the virus which can affect themselves or their friends. The rest of five human- induced risk factors were evaluated as “not at all worried”, the answers not being affected by the pandemic.

Overall, in this category of risk- perceptions, the Eastern European group of students have more travel-risk perceptions than the Western European group. Furthermore, the numerous risk perceptions of the EE group, could be linked to the destination of choice. The fact that they are worried to some extent of the performance of transportation and the WE are not, could be



directly related to the fact that Eastern European countries are known for being less organized in terms of transportation and tourist facilities. So, given the fact of the student's Eastern European country of origin and destination of choice, it is obvious that they are aware of their countries' weaknesses and therefore worrying that these aspect could go wrong during their trip.

<b>Human induced risks</b> <i>(Eastern European)</i>	<b>Not at all worried</b>	<b>Somewhat worried</b>	<b>Worried</b>	<b>Very worried</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Answer affected by COVID-19</b>
<b>Security of accommodation</b>	<b>52%</b>	30%	6%	0%	13%	<b>61% NO</b>
<b>Unacceptable tourist facilities</b>	28%	<b>24%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>2%</b>	35%	<b>50-50%</b>
<b>Miss the public transport</b>	25%	<b>32%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>2%</b>	25%	<b>57% YES</b>
<b>Transportation performance</b>	25%	<b>30%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>6%</b>	11%	<b>66% YES</b>
<b>Be rejected to get on aboard</b>	11%	<b>40%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>9%</b>	13%	<b>92% YES</b>
<b>Natural disasters</b>	<b>74%</b>	8%	9%	0%	9%	<b>91% NO</b>
<b>Travel partners' safety</b>	38%	<b>15%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>4%</b>	21%	<b>55% YES</b>

<b>Human induced risks</b> <i>(Western European)</i>	<b>Not at all worried</b>	<b>Somewhat worried</b>	<b>Worried</b>	<b>Very worried</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Answer affected by COVID-19</b>
<b>Security of accommodation</b>	<b>69%</b>	21%	0%	3%	8%	<b>62% NO</b>
<b>Unacceptable tourist facilities</b>	<b>76%</b>	8%	0%	3%	13%	<b>79% NO</b>
<b>Miss the public transport</b>	<b>53%</b>	13%	8%	0%	26%	<b>58% NO</b>
<b>Transportation performance</b>	<b>71%</b>	8%	11%	0%	11%	<b>76% NO</b>
<b>Be rejected to get on aboard</b>	21%	<b>42%</b>	8%	0%	29%	<b>79% YES</b>
<b>Natural disasters</b>	<b>87%</b>	11%	0%	3%	0%	<b>92% NO</b>
<b>Travel partners' safety</b>	21%	<b>42%</b>	11%	3%	24%	<b>79% YES</b>

Figure 6 & 7: Evaluated risk perceptions

### *Social- psychological risks*

The second category of risk- perceptions is that of social- psychological risks, with five risk factors evaluated by the respondents. Looking at the two tables, the results are not very different from one group to another. Each of the sampled groups has evaluated just one risk as worrying; for the EE group being “losing valuable time”, influenced by the pandemic, while for the WE group being the “lack of new experiences”, which is also influenced by the current pandemic. The fact that neither of the student groups showcases strong worries towards the social-psychological category of perceived risks, might be due to the fact that they currently live in an international environment in Denmark, within the AAU University. They are exposed to different cultural situations every day, which might help mitigate ones perceived social risks such as “cultural diversity of the place”. Additionally, this results might be also influenced by their choice of destination. As mentioned previously, the students are mostly planning to travel to familiar destinations, which can explain the mild degree of perceived socio-psychological risks.

<b>Social- Psychological risks (Eastern European)</b>	<b>Not at all worried</b>	<b>Somewhat worried</b>	<b>Worried</b>	<b>Very worried</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Answer affected by COVID- 19</b>
<b>Cultural diversity of the destination</b>	<b>74%</b>	11%	2%	0%	13%	<b>87% NO</b>
<b>Value for money</b>	<b>45%</b>	25%	6%	4%	21%	<b>58% NO</b>
<b>Inconsistent experience with brochure/internet images</b>	<b>56%</b>	10%	10 %	2%	23%	<b>83% NO</b>
<b>Lack of new experiences</b>	<b>42%</b>	23%	15%	8%	12%	<b>56% NO</b>
<b>Takes too much time (losing valuable time)</b>	25%	<b>33%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>4%</b>	8%	<b>56% YES</b>

<b>Social-Psychological risks</b> <i>(Western European)</i>	<b>Not at all worried</b>	<b>Somewhat worried</b>	<b>Worried</b>	<b>Very worried</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Answer affected by COVID-19</b>
<b>Cultural diversity of the destination</b>	<b>87%</b>	8%	0%	0%	5%	<b>NO 95%</b>
<b>Value for money</b>	<b>53%</b>	13%	0%	0%	34%	<b>NO 63%</b>
<b>Inconsistent experience with brochure/internet images</b>	<b>51%</b>	19%	0%	0%	30%	<b>NO 59%</b>
<b>Lack of new experiences</b>	36%	<b>33%</b>	<b>6%</b>	0%	25%	<b>64% YES</b>
<b>Takes too much time (losing valuable time)</b>	39%	28%	0%	0%	33%	<b>58% YES</b>

*Figure 8 & 9: Evaluated risk perceptions*

#### *Financial risks and Health risks*

The last two risk perception categories from the survey were in regards to financial and health risks. Out of five risks, three for financial risks and 2 for health risks, the Eastern European group appears again to express more concerns than the Western European group. Out of five risk-factors, the EE student group evaluates four risks as concerning to a certain level, while the WE student group, only one concerning factor of risk.

In first table, it can be noticed that the only factor that is not worrying for this sample group is the “High cost of food and beverages”, which can be related to the choice of the destination. Eastern European countries are less expensive than both Nordic countries or Western countries. So, if the students are already used to the prices in Denmark, it is normal not to be worried of the high cost of food and beverages in those countries. Furthermore, the rest of the highly perceived risks in both financial and health category, are linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the respondent’s evaluation.

In the second table, it can be observed that the sample group of Western European students are expressing concerns only in relation to health factors, “getting sick”, due to the

current pandemic as can be seen in their answer with 97% saying that the answer is influenced by COVID-19.

Overall, within this categories of risk-perception factors regarding traveling, the Eastern European sample of respondents express more concerns towards the financial and health risks compared to the Western European group of students. These results seem to be in accordance to the study case of Pearce (2006), Reichel et.al. (2007) and Lepp& Gibson (2003), where they concluded that less experienced tourists were prone to express concerns regarding food safety and health, as well as additional perceived financial risks. In the beginning of the survey, it was identified that the Eastern European sample group travels slightly less than the Western European group, and that there are also less individuals in the EE group that traveled outside of the European continent. Therefore, the results from the above mentioned studies seem to be in accordance with this present study conducted on the Eastern and Western students from Aalborg University.

<b>Financial risks</b> <i>(Eastern European)</i>	<b>Not at all worried</b>	<b>Somewhat worried</b>	<b>Worried</b>	<b>Very worried</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Answer affected by COVID-19</b>
<b>Impact on financial situation</b>	22%	<b>25%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>8%</b>	12%	<b>67% YES</b>
<b>High cost of food and beverages</b>	<b>57%</b>	14%	6%	6%	18%	<b>78% NO</b>
<b>Unexpected extra expenses</b>	14%	<b>43%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>8%</b>	6%	<b>76% YES</b>
<b>Health risks</b>						
<b>Getting sick</b>	8%	<b>20%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>20%</b>	2%	<b>88% YES</b>
<b>Food hygiene and safety</b>	20%	<b>27%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>10%</b>	12%	<b>65% YES</b>

<b>Financial risks</b> <i>(Western European)</i>	<b>Not at all worried</b>	<b>Somewhat worried</b>	<b>Worried</b>	<b>Very worried</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Answer affected by COVID-19</b>
<b>Impact on financial situation</b>	<b>89%</b>	0%	0%	3%	8%	<b>92% NO</b>
<b>High cost of food and beverages</b>	<b>78%</b>	6%	3%	0%	14%	<b>92%</b>
<b>Unexpected extra expenses</b>	<b>56%</b>	16%	3%	0%	25%	<b>67% NO</b>
<b>Health risks</b>						
<b>Getting sick</b>	3%	<b>64%</b>	22%	3%	8%	<b>97% YES</b>
<b>Food hygiene and safety</b>	<b>50%</b>	14%	3%	3%	31%	<b>50-50%</b>

Figure 10 & 11: Evaluated risk perceptions

To conclude, the findings of the survey have been presented in a descriptive manner, with the help of tables and charts. Some distinguishable patterns among the respondents have been identified and furthermore, the findings will be discussed in relation to the literature review and the research questions formulated in the beginning of this project.

## Discussion

Within this chapter of the project, matters from literature review and data analysis will be discussed and elaborated in connection with the problem formulation and the purpose of the study.

First of all, it was suggested by some academic implications that nowadays, the global student mobility is receiving an increased attention from the tourism industry and researchers, due to the substantial scale of the international students market worldwide (e.g. Babin & Kim, 2001; Brown, 2009; Glover, 2011; Kim et al., 2006; Michael et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2009). Despite the acknowledgment for a good opportunity in attracting this new tourism market, limited research has been conducted in order to discover student's travel behavior related to their risk

perceptions (Glover, 2011). Therefore, this increased attention towards students as a valuable tourism market and the lack of information among this group, has served as a premise for this study project.

Secondly, the theoretical background of “travel risk perceptions” has been chosen in order to understand the barriers that the international students might have in relation to traveling, with the ultimate goal of understanding the underlying travel behavior, what could affect their intention towards traveling and more importantly, to mitigate those barriers . In the tourism research field, trip characteristics, risk perception, and traveler characteristics have gotten particular attention since they have been often considered key variables in predicting travel behavior (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Han, 2005). Additionally, destination risk perception of tourists has been found to be directly linked to the tourist purchase intention. Nevertheless, a considerable body of tourism literature suggests that the category and priority of risk factors are highly influenced by each individual’s demographic traits, together with past travel experiences, and trip characteristics (Pizam et.al., 2004; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992).

Academic implications and past tourism studies agreed upon the fact that the country of origin is an influential factor towards an individual’s risk perception. When investigating individuals from different nationalities, past studies concluded that depending on the country of origin, some nationalities were more risk- acceptant than others (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2006). Also, the perceived risks were different from one group to another (Kozak et. al., 2007). Therefore, the first research question (RQ1) formulated within the problem formulation was “Are socio- demographics of international university students influencing their travel risk perceptions?”. Within this study, similar implications emerged. Overall, the Eastern European group of respondents expressed more travel risk-perceptions than the Western European group, especially in the “human-induced risks” category and in the “financial and health” category.

Further implication were made in regards to the fact that past travel experiences and repeat visitation have the potential to reduce perceived risks (Kozak et al., 2007; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). It was suggested that the kind of perceived risk was directly related to the touristic experience of the traveler. Therefore, past studies identified that experienced travelers were mostly concerned about sociocultural and psychological factors, while less experienced travelers were expressing concerns towards health and food safety, as well as



financial and performance risks (Reichel. et.al, 2007, Sharifpour et.al., 2013). Hence, the second research question (RQ2) of the study was the following: “Is past travel experience and repeat visitation to a specific destination influencing the type of travel risk perceived by international university students?”. According to the results of the survey, the Western European (WE) group of respondents travel slightly more often on a yearly basis than the Eastern European (EE) group, while also having far more travels outside of the European continent than the EE group. These results indicate an extra level of travel experience in the WE group of respondents and can support the previous findings. According to the data of the study, the Western European group had overall less risk-perception factors, with a concern regarding the lack of new experience, which is related to the category of social-psychological risk perceptions. On the other hand, the Eastern European sample group has expressed many concerns towards financial, performance and facilities of the destination, as well as health and hygiene factors.

The next theoretical implication was in regards to the choice of destination, which is suggested that the choice of destination (the next planned trip) influences the tourist’ perceived risk. Previous explorative studies could conclude that travelers can easily categorize destinations as safe or not according to the perceived political stability and other factors. Similar studies were conducted in the past, evaluating the level of perceived risk factors in connection to the continent or country of origin of the sampled groups (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). Therefore, the third research question (RQ3) formulated in the beginning of the project was “Is choice of destination a factor that affects the travel risk perceptions of international university students?”. As previously mentioned, the tendency of choice destination among the two sampled groups is closely connected with their area/countries of origin. Hence, the next trip of the Eastern European respondents will mostly be in a country located in Eastern Europe, while the Western European respondents will next travel in either a Nordic country or a Western European country. These results could be connected to the response of “not at all worried” regarding “security of accommodation”, which could be related to the fact that they will visit friends and family, or that they feel confident that they can easily find accommodation given any scenario. Furthermore, the Eastern European group expressed perceive more risks related to tourism facilities and transportation performance than the Western European group, which could indicate the awareness of the countries’ weaknesses. Nevertheless, the fact that none of the groups expresses

concerns regarding cultural diversity of the destination, could be another indicator of the fact that they are familiar of the destinations and thus they do not associate such risk-perceptions to this specific travel.

The fourth and final research question and intention of the study project was intended to explore whether or not the current Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic situation influences the type of perceived travel risk. As it can be seen in the data analysis chapter, all the perceived-risk factors predominantly evaluated as worrying by the respondents, were also expressed to be positively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

## Conclusion

International education has become economically important for the tourism industry, however, despite its significant growth as a target market, limited research has been carried out regarding the travel behavior of international students. Previous studies have evaluated the relationship between students' travel preferences and studying abroad, the cultural impact on their travel preferences, student' motives of choosing a destination and the impact of perceived value on students' travel preferences. Little attention has been given towards investigating the university students' perceived travel risks, beyond the matters of health and safety. Even so, barriers to travel are known to influence destination choice, hence it is suggested that a comprehensive picture of this subject would be significant for mitigating travel barriers (Glover, 2011; Ritchie, 2009, Carballo et. al., 2017).

Furthermore, it was demonstrated along previous researches that risk-perceptions is a complex and multidimensional subject. Most of the past research has been conducted with leisure travelers from one country and very few with international students. Moreover, the literature on the subject suggested previously that traveler and trip characteristics should be examined in connection with perceived risks due to the fact that it might have an influence on the type of perceived risk and that it can help create a more targeted mitigation strategy in relation to the perceived risks (Fuchs & Reichel, 2011; Carballo et.al., 2017; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Seddighi et al., 2001).

Taking into consideration the above academic implications, this project aimed to contribute to this gap in the tourism field. The problem formulation gravitated around exploring



the way that the travel risk perceptions of the Eastern and Western European students from AAU are influenced by their individual characteristics and trip characteristics. The two groups were studied separately and then the results were compared in order to see the differences and similitudes. Therefore, an investigation of the theoretical implications has been conducted from a quantitative perspective, with the help of a survey that gathered 150 validated responses.

The results of the survey confirmed previous studies and literature, meaning that both aspects of the travelers' characteristics and trip characteristics seem to have a certain influence on the perceived risks of the respondents. According to the generated data, it is clear that overall, the Eastern European group of respondents expressed more travel risk-perceptions than the Western European group, especially in the "human-induced risks" category and in the "financial and health" category. Furthermore, the Western European group had overall less risk-perception factors, with a concern regarding the lack of new experience, which is related to the category of social-psychological risk perceptions, while the Eastern European sample group has expressed many concerns towards financial, performance and facilities of the destination, as well as health and hygiene factors. Additionally, the choice of destination was in both groups directly related to their geographical area of origin, and the fact that none of the groups expresses concerns regarding cultural diversity of the destination, could be another indicator of the fact that they are familiar of the destinations and thus they do not associate such risk-perceptions to this specific travel. Thus it can be implied that the trip characteristics is influencing the perceived travel risk.

Additionally, another matter investigated within this project was the impact of the current pandemic, COVID-19, on the perceived travel risks of the respondents. With unprecedented travel restrictions all over the world as a safety measurements, it was important to include this aspect within the project and investigate its impact on the international students' travel risk perceptions. As expected, all risk factors that were evaluated as worrying for the respondents, were also evaluated as "answer affected by COVID-19".

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the study and results. The study is not representative to the whole population of the Eastern and Western European countries, but could be considered representative for the international students studying at Aalborg University, from these distinct European regions. Also, more than half of the respondents

were females, and as seen in the literature review as well, women tend to have more-risk perceptions than men, meaning that the results could also be influenced by this imbalance.

The results of this project contribute to the understanding of the travel behavior and intentions of the Eastern and Western European students from Aalborg University. The connection between risk perceptions and its influence on travelling of the international students, has revealed the direct impact on the destination choice of respondents, which is in accordance with the study of Sönmez and Graefe (1998). By identifying an anticipating the destination choice and travel behavior of the students, tourism organizations such as DMO's and travel agents could use the information and implemented in a strategy that mitigates the barriers of travel intentions. As identified in the results of the survey, the Western and Eastern European students tend to choose ,as the next travel destination, a place that they have been to before and that is either around Denmark or an Eastern European country which represents a safe choice of travel. All answers of choice destination and risk- perception evaluation have been influenced by the present pandemic. Therefore, such information could be used by tourism organizations to create travel packages that are specifically targeted to these groups' needs and intentions. Nevertheless, this study can help tourism organizations understand the fact that in order to influence travel intentions in relation to risk perceptions, one must understand its connection to each individuals background and therefore use different marketing strategies for each similar group of individuals.

As for future topics in relation with the current study could be the role of knowledge and how it shapes risk perceptions and protective behavior, or what role does the history of a nation play in the perceived risks of an individual in a touristic environment. Moreover, scholars should consider investigating the topic from a qualitative point of view as well. This will first of all ensure that the respondents know exactly what is being explored. Secondly, the researcher would have a better understanding whether the respondent refers to risk per se or feelings such as fear, worry or thrill. Nevertheless, it is worth investigating the way in which a risk perception schema could be created in order to generalize, transfer, compare and utilize results from different study groups.

Concluding, it is hoped that this project has contributed in some small way to the literature of international university students and their traveling risk perception. Hopefully this study can serve as an inspiration for going even deeper into the subject and investigate related matters.

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## Appendix

### Survey Template

#### **Preliminary questions:**

- Do you agree with the GDPR guidelines?
- Are you an international student from AAU?
- Are you from a Eastern or Western country of Europe?
- Do you intend to take a domestic or international travel within the next 6 months?

#### **Part I - Traveler Characteristics**

- **Geographical Region** (Where are you from?)
- **Gender** (What is your gender?)
- **Age** (What is your age?)
- **Level of Study** (What is your current level of study?)

#### **Part II – Trip Characteristics**

##### **1) Past travel experience**

- How many times a year do you usually travel? (I don't, once a year, between 2-4 trips a year, 5+ trips a year):
- How long is a typical travel trip for you? (1 overnight, a weekend, between 3-7 days, more than 7 days)
- Have you ever traveled outside of your home country?
- Have you ever traveled outside of the European continent?

##### **2) Location of the next planned trip**

- Please indicate the country of your next planned trip: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?

##### **3) Would the planned trip be a repeat visit? (Yes/No)**

#### **Part III – Risk perceptions based on considered destination**

\*Rating the extent to which they worry about the 6 risk- dimension factors on a five point scale ranging from 1 “not at all worried” to 5 “very worried”.

**1) Human induced risks** ( human induced-risks, service quality, natural disasters and car accidents)

- Security of accommodation: Does Covid-19 have an impact on this answer?
- Unacceptable tourist facilities: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Miss the public transport: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Transportation performance: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Be rejected to get on aboard: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Natural disasters: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Travel partners' safety: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer? (To what level does Corona have an impact on this? )

**2) Social- psychological risks**

- Cultural diversity
- Value for money: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Inconsistent experience with brochure/internet images: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Lack of new experience: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Takes too much time (losing valuable time): Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?

**3) Financial risks**

- Impact on financial situation: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- High cost of food and beverages: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Unexpected extra expenses: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?

**4) Health risks**

- Get sick: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?
- Food hygiene and safety: Does Covid-19 has an impact on this answer?