



Faculty of Economics, Administration and Business
The Human and Social Sciences Doctoral School (HSSDS)

DOCTORAL THESIS

BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

The role of a tourism agency manager's education and experience in the context of the company's adoption of market adaptation strategies

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATOR:

Prof. univ. dr. habilit. Gina-Ionela BUTNARU

PhD CANDIDATE:

Maria-Magdalena MAFTEI

SUCEAVA COUNTY, ROMANIA, 2024



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KEYWORDS

Education, experience, human capital, entrepreneur, manager, tourism specialists, small and medium-sized firms, market adaptation, market adaptation strategies, tourism, travel agencies, tourists, customers, customer satisfaction, performance.

INTRODUCTION

In any activity, the current existing problems and the methods used to solve them include previous results and efforts under various conditions (Schumpeter, 1972). Schumpeter suggests that analyzing these enables the identification of efforts with positive effects, the implementation of these efforts, and the goal. In the current economic context, Bianchi (2018) proposes a return to the truth expressed in the eighteenth century in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, which argues that the wealth of nations is based on two key factors such as: the way in which skills are organized and the employment rate (Smith, 1973). Smith also emphasizes that in order to be able to compare the wealth of nations it is necessary to take into account the size and characteristics of territory and climate (Kamarck, 1976).

Organizational survival and economic growth in a dynamic environment involves the possession and continuous adaptation of specialized knowledge (Salvato, 2004) in order to respond to market changes through appropriate strategies (Hadjielias et al., 2021). Ulman et al. (2021) identified education as one of the main components of human well-being, and Simonet (2010) noted that adaptation has its conceptual origin in evolutionary theory and can be observed when it is the result of constant growth. The current growth theory explains economic growth as being generated by knowledge, and the main factors involved are human capital and technological progress (Juan & Kexin, 2022).

The title chosen for the doctoral thesis is *The role of a tourism agency manager's education and experience in the context of the company's adoption of market adaptation strategies*. It reflects the intention to study through doctoral research the knowledge on the level of education and experience specific to entrepreneurs and managers of travel agencies in the context of adopting strategies for adapting the firm to the market. Thus, they will be analyzed from the perspective of entrepreneurs and managers of travel agencies, tourism specialists and tourists, customers and non-customers of travel agencies.

Many studies have confirmed a positive influence of tourism on economic growth (Aydin, 2022; Scarlett, 2021). One of the most important benefits of the tourism sector in a country's economy is that it can make a significant contribution in attracting foreign currency inflows with a positive effect on the national balance of payments (Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism, 2022; Banca D'Italia, 2021; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998).

Travel agencies are the linking point for all types of activities in the tourism industry (Castellacci, 2008). Small agencies with less than 49 employees account for approximately 60% of all travel agencies, generating 16% of total industry revenue, with a value added to cost factor of 17% and 4% of total employees in the tourism industry (European Commission, 2024).

Given the analyzed context, it was found that there are few specific studies in the field of tourism (Zopiatis et al., 2021; Vaduva et al., 2020). Large database research in tourism is focused on the consumer and pays little attention to organization and entrepreneurship research (Lyu et al., 2022). Although human capital (Chen & Guo, 2023) and innovation have a major impact on the success of firms in the market (Samad, 2022), the analysis of the impact of these factors on the management of travel agencies in the North-East Region of Romania and the Marche Region of Italy is unclear and requires further investigation. According to the authors, the theorizing remains weak in most of the research, which allows for future research directions in the field of tourism and hospitality.

The motivation for the research stems from the passion to promote internationally the values of the North-East Region of Romania and the Marche Region of Italy, the belief that tourism business management can contribute to job creation and increase the income of the

local population, and to the continuation of the studies in the field of tourism business management started in 2018.

The main motivation arose from the need to identify the level of education, the level of experience and the skills required by an entrepreneur and/or travel agency manager to enable him/her to choose the optimal strategies to adapt the company to the market in a difficult and evolving context, marked by the digital technology footprint.

From a theoretical point of view, the research presents the role of the entrepreneur and manager in travel agencies by building a picture of the level of education, the level of experience, the strategic behavior adopted and the performance of the firm.

The results obtained from tourism studies are important for tourism specialists and managers who use this type of data to improve their planning and organizational activities (Tatarusanu et al., 2019).

From a practical point of view, the research advises young travel enthusiasts on how to build a solid professional career in the tourism industry as managers or entrepreneurs, thus contributing to the economic growth and development.

At the same time, entrepreneurs and travel agency managers need to make full use of their accumulated knowledge and previous experience when deciding on strategies for adapting their business to the market. The role of each stakeholder in the firm, built up over time and backed by reputation and professional status, must be considered in decision-making.

The research objectives were shaped by the need to find solutions to the situations faced by firms in the tourism industry in an increasingly dynamic and turbulent environment (Badulescu et al., 2024). The difficulties and challenges for firms in the process of market adaptation were identified by Sarta et al. (2020). Their study highlights three levels of analysis of the firm's market adaptation process: internal (resources, behaviors and relationships), external (market and environment) and institutional. According to Marchiori et al. (2022) human capital competences and experiences support firms' differentiation in the market, and education generates change and innovation leading to improved performance.

The *research problem* stems from the need to identify the specific entrepreneurial and managerial profile of tourism agencies in order to recommend to the new generations of young people the educational programs and ways of developing experience in the tourism industry specific and necessary for personal development and economic growth.

At the same time, the research problem stems from the need of the society to initiate and develop entrepreneurial activities. Therefore, there is a need to make known the entrepreneurial and managerial profile correlated with the organizational behavior found in the adoption of strategies that allow the firm to adapt to the market. These aspects make it necessary to identify the educational programs and ways of gaining experience that build the entrepreneurial and managerial profile in the tourism industry of individuals currently involved in university studies that can be theoretically and practically prepared for this field.

Entrepreneurship is a form of alternative activity in the labor market that provides secure and stable employment (Brînză et al., 2022), being considered a *process* in which the *educated and experienced individual* in a given field declares entrepreneurial intention, discovers and identifies opportunities that he/she decides to exploit (Wach, 2014), and then adopts strategies to adapt the firm to the market (Cullen & De Angelis, 2021).

The manager, whether or not he/she is also an entrepreneur, founder or shareholder (Nistoreanu et al., 2004) is an employee of the firm in the management department where he/she carries out planning, organization, management and control.

In undertaking this research study it is important to answer the question:

What is the role of the education and experience of the travel agency manager in the context of the adoption of strategies used to adapt the firm to the market?

The aim of the research is to contribute to the field-specific literature in the tourism industry, providing theoretical and empirical evidence regarding the role of education and experience of the entrepreneur and manager of a travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market.

The purpose of the research is to identify the level of education and the level of experience of the entrepreneur and manager of a travel agency based on socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, nationality, level of education, pre-university field of study, university field(s) of study, foreign languages known, training programs in the tourism industry, holding a tourism patent, work experience (years), experience in the field of tourism (years), entrepreneurial and managerial experience in the travel agency (years), professional status of the participants in the study. These characteristics were correlated with the organizational behavior of the entrepreneur and manager of a travel agency necessary in the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market. The profile of the entrepreneur and the manager of a travel agency and the adopted market adaptation strategies enabled the firm to adapt to the market and achieve performance.

Next, the profile of the travel agencies active on the current market was made, identifying the types of travel agencies taking into account the following criteria: the way of operation, the way of organization of travel agencies, the age or average length of presence on the market of travel agencies, the size of travel agencies, the number of employees, the growth rate of travel agencies by the number of employed persons with university education in the last 5 years.

In order to achieve the proposed goal, the paper will include both a theoretical study based on specialized literature and an empirical study carried out by administering a questionnaire applied to entrepreneurs and managers active in the tourism market, a questionnaire applied to specialists and a questionnaire applied to tourists, clients and non-clients of travel agencies. The research design was based on the establishment of the research objectives correlated with the research purpose, the identification of the variables and the subsequent construction of the questions and items in the questionnaire.

The *overall objective* of the research is to identify the role of the entrepreneur and the manager in the travel agency through an analysis of the level of education and an analysis of the level of experience of the entrepreneur and the manager in the context of the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market and the firm's performance.

The *specific objectives* of research refer to:

(O1) Identify, through literature review and bibliometric analysis, the role of the entrepreneur and the travel agency manager in the management and adaptation of the firm to the market;

(O2) Identify the entrepreneurial and managerial profile based on the analysis of the correlation between education and the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market;

(O3) Identify the entrepreneurial and managerial profile based on the analysis of the correlation between experience and the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market;

(O4) Analyze the influence of the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market on the firm's adaptation to the market;

(O5) Analyze the influence of the profile of employees in a travel agency on the firm's adaptation to the market;

(O6) Analyze the influence of the profile of employees in a travel agency on the firm's performance (customer satisfaction);

(O7) To develop conclusions, recommendations and practical proposals based on the results of applied research on the role of the manager in the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market.

The fundamental hypothesis of the research is that there is a relationship between the level of education and experience of the entrepreneur and/or manager of a travel agency and the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market.

The working hypotheses proposed for this research are:

- H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between education and the adoption of firm-market adaptation strategies.
- H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between experience and strategy adoption adapting the firm to the market.
- H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between firm-market fit and adoption of firm-market fit strategies.
- H4: Employee profile influences the firm's adaptation to the market.
- H5: Employee profile influences firm performance (customer satisfaction).

Table 1. Relationship between specific research objectives and research hypotheses and analysis

Specific research objectives	Research hypotheses and analysis
(O1) Identify, through literature review and bibliometric analysis, the role of the entrepreneur and the travel agency manager in the management and adaptation of the firm to the market;	Literature review Bibliometric analysis
(O2) To identify the entrepreneurial and managerial profile based on the analysis of the correlation between education and the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market;	H1 There is a statistically significant relationship between education and the adoption of firm-market adaptation strategies.
(O3) Identify the entrepreneurial and managerial profile based on the analysis of the correlation between experience and the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market;	H2 There is a statistically significant relationship between experience and the adoption of firm-market adaptation strategies.
(O4) Analysis of the influence of the adoption of market adaptation strategies on the firm's market adaptation	H3 There is a statistically significant relationship between firm-market fit and adoption of firm-market fit strategies.
(O5) Analyze the influence of the profile of employees in a travel agency on the firm's adaptation to the market;	H4 Employee profile influences the firm's adaptation to the market.
(O6) Analyze the influence of the profile of employees in a travel agency on the firm's performance (customer satisfaction);	H5 Employee profile influences firm performance (customer satisfaction).
(O7) To develop conclusions, recommendations and practical proposals based on the results of applied research on the role of the manager in the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market.	Conclusions Recommendations Proposals

Source: author

The specific research objectives are related to the activities or working hypotheses and are presented in Table 1. Therefore, the research has six objectives aimed at the field-related specific literature analysis and empirical research and one objective aimed at developing conclusions, recommendations and proposals based on the obtained results on the role of education and experience of a travel agency manager in the context of adopting strategies for adapting the firm to the market.

Concerning the research methodology, the complexity of the topic determined the use of the triangular method by conducting a mixed qualitative and quantitative research on the opinions of entrepreneurs and/or managers of travel agencies, tourism industry specialists and tourists, clients and non-clients of travel agencies. The semi-structured questionnaire was used as a research instrument. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms.

For the final qualitative research, the opinions of the research participants (9 entrepreneurs and/or managers, 18 specialists and 226 tourists, clients and non-clients of travel agencies) were analyzed on the basis of the data entered in NVivo, a software program for analyzing qualitative data. Following data processing, coding according to theme-specific items, information was generated for each of the categories specified above.

The final quantitative research was carried out by means of a semi-structured questionnaire survey previously addressed to tourists, customers of travel agencies. The questionnaire included specific closed-ended questions to elicit and analyze their opinions regarding the education and experience of the entrepreneur and/or manager in the context of adopting strategies to adapt the firm to the market. The collected data corresponding to the validation criteria were entered into the SPSS program, a software for statistical analysis of quantitative data.

BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE CHAPTERS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

In order to achieve the aim and objectives proposed in this research, the PhD thesis was structured in two parts and six chapters. Among these, three chapters were allocated to literature review and three chapters aimed at presenting the applied research, research methodology and related results. The last component of the elaborated paper was allocated to conclusions and recommendations, limitations and future research directions. Furthermore, the paper also includes, within its structure, an introductory part, a list of tables and figures, bibliography and appendices.

The **first part** of the doctoral thesis deals with the *state of knowledge in the field of research under review*. In this part, a systematic literature review and two bibliometric analyses were carried out, based on which it is possible to observe the role of education and experience of the entrepreneur and the manager of the travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market.

The **first chapter** entitled *The entrepreneurial and managerial role in tourism* aims to conceptualize the specific notions of entrepreneurial activity and the entrepreneurial and managerial profile. The content of this chapter deals objectively with the terminology aspects of the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship, the role of entrepreneurship in the tourism industry, the firm's resources and human capital, the role of the entrepreneur and manager in the firm's adaptation to the market. The exploration of the entrepreneurial and managerial role aims to highlight the specific profile of the entrepreneur and manager of a travel agency.

The entrepreneur has the central role in the economy (Dioguardi, 2010; Schumpeter, 1972). According to the Irish economist banker Richard Cantillon, the entrepreneur aims to maximize profit by successfully satisfying customers, takes risks, and is the force that regulates the market economy (Thornton, 2019). Nowadays, the entrepreneur makes decisions, acts persistently to accomplish goals that generate performance (Zanca, 2021), generates innovations, is open to the new, is adaptive (Pattinson & Cunningham, 2022), develops a unique business that is different from others, seizes market opportunities (Buswari et al, 2024), monitors the firm, looks for opportunities, identifies potential challenges, makes more informed strategic decisions, takes advantage of market opportunities (Lippert, 2024).

The manager may or may not also have the status of entrepreneur/founder/shareholder (Nistoreanu et al., 2004). The position of manager is associated with a large number of roles (Tap, 2020) such as the interpersonal role, the informational role and the decision-making role (Carauș, 2016). The manager's responsibility within the firm is found in the role he/she constructs at the individual level, in the role he/she plays at the team level and in his/her contribution to the firm through the role at the organizational level (Lin et al., 2021).

Also, the decision-making responsibility of an entrepreneur and/or manager is associated with competencies in the following areas: legal, professional (managerial, economic, financial, marketing, sales, etc.), cultural, social and moral (Tap, 2020; Nistoreanu, 2004).

In the **second chapter**, *Specific education and experience of the entrepreneur and manager in tourism*, the specific education and experience of the entrepreneur and manager in the tourism industry were analyzed, with a descriptive analysis of the evolution of studies on this topic. In this chapter the following topics were dealt with: education in tourism, experience in tourism, the link between education, experience and adaptation of the firm to the market, the link between education, experience and customer satisfaction. In this chapter, a systematic

review of the scientific literature, a bibliometric analysis on the role of human capital in tourism in the context of the adoption of strategies for the adaptation of the firm to the market and a bibliometric analysis on the role of the entrepreneur and the manager in tourism were carried out.

The *Tourism education* subchapter aims to conceptualize the dimensions explored in this research on general education, specific education, entrepreneurship education, education for entrepreneurs and organizational learning.

Education in general is considered to be one of the most important factors of economic (Li & Chuan, 2012) and social growth (Beata et al., 2021). *Specific education* started with an orientation towards supporting the economy, business and its quantitative growth. Today, knowledge comes from other disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology, geography and anthropology. The tourism industry requires knowledge of natural resources, socio-cultural resources, and man-made resources, as well as it requires the creation of relationships between host and guests (Airey, 2024).

Entrepreneurship education refers to the stage before starting to work in a firm, preparing people to be responsible and enterprising individuals, to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to achieve the goals they have set themselves (European Commission, 2016). Among these, personal competences are of particular importance such as self-confidence and determination. Other important competences are language skills, managerial skills, marketing skills, knowledge related to the use of new technologies and administrative skills (European Union, 2015).

In the tourism industry, there is a need for entrepreneurs who possess vision, innovation and creativity (Kallmuenzer et al., 2019; Zorrilla Calvo et al., 2020).

Education for entrepreneurs involves the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills, which can be enhanced and developed through continuing education once individuals begin to be employed in the tourism sector. Continuing education in this area involves regular attendance of business formation courses, leadership and entrepreneurship training courses, courses on operating systems and applications, courses on decision making and management (Español et al., 2021).

The sub-chapter *Experience in tourism* aims to conceptualize the dimensions explored in this research: general experience, specific experience, explicit experience (knowledge) and implicit experience.

Professional development in the tourism industry is dependent on the knowledge acquired from different departments and/or companies in the sector, and it is desirable or even necessary to try different professional positions in order to collect relevant experiences (Cassel et al., 2017).

Tourism-specific experience is found in the intrinsic characteristics of the people employed such as talent, sensitivity, patience, politeness, interpersonal skills and how such characteristics tend to be more valued than tourism education (Carvalho et al., 2018).

Tacit experience/knowledge is developed through personal experience and interaction (Malerba, 2002) and includes "mental correlations, intuitions, hypotheses, hunches and intuitive reactions. Tacit knowledge is difficult to express and formalize, and difficult to share. *Explicit experience/knowledge* is expressed in words or numbers, can be shared formally and systematically in the form of data, specifications, manuals, drawings, audio and video recordings, computer programs, etc." (Neşţian, 2007).

The subchapter *Firm's adaptation to the market* conceptualizes the phenomenon of firm's adaptation to the market, identifies market adaptation strategies common to all firms, innovative market adaptation strategies and strategies specific to the tourism industry.

The strategic adaptation of firms starts from the desire to create a better, moral future with value for the firm and shareholders on the one hand, and on the other hand it aims for the well-

being of its customers, the community (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2021), and citizens (Kaplan & Norton, 2004). The firm manages its ability to adapt to new market changes by learning based on previous experiences (Maftei & Butnaru, 2023; Araújo et al., 2021).

The firm's market adaptation strategies are the key to achieving long-term competitive and performance advantages (Havlovska et al., 2020).

Among these strategies, innovative firm-market adaptation strategies (Eurostat, 2018; Eurostat, 2010) have been identified such as: improving existing goods or services, introducing new goods or services, low prices, high quality, a wide range of goods or services, one or a small number of key goods/services, standardized goods or services, customer-specific solutions, satisfying established customer groups, identifying and reaching new customer groups, including international ones, improving existing organizational processes, introducing new organizational processes, new business models, establishing close and stable links with key partners, seeking new collaborative partners.

Performance is the sum of the results obtained (good, optimal or mediocre) by adopting a certain behavior. In business management, performance is mainly associated with profit, customer satisfaction and the level of education and experience of human capital (Maftei & Butnaru, 2023).

The *Customer satisfaction* sub-chapter aims to understand the need for staff training in order to satisfy the company's customers and the importance of training tourists and/or customers to understand the level of satisfaction perceived by evaluating the tourist services purchased and consumed.

The results of a business depend on satisfied customers (Drucker et al., 2015; Drucker et al., 2015; Levitt, 2006) and having customers who bring in other customers (Tuten & Solomon, 2020). The education and experience of the firm's staff have a strong influence on the relationship with its experienced and less experienced customers (Brush & Soutar, 2022). They also contribute to more efficient decision-making and affect the productivity of the entrepreneur (Millán et al., 2014).

The different roles adopted by the entrepreneur and/or manager in tourism affect tourists' satisfaction with the quality of service. Thus, during the process of interaction with tourists, the performance of the entrepreneur and/or manager of a travel agency influences the image of the travel agency, the loyalty of the customer who advertises directly ("word of mouth") and will return to purchase other products. Therefore, their role determines the competitiveness of the travel agency (Tsaour & Teng, 2017).

Tourists became aware of the responsibility and importance of the benefits of their behavior on the community and environment of the tourist destination (Joo et al., 2019). The education level of consumers can shape the demand function for the entrepreneur's output (Millán et al., 2014). An entrepreneur's performance is positively affected by the education level of the population (Brînză et al., 2022). Consumer behavior is influenced by factors such as individual consumer characteristics (socio-demographic, psychological, cultural, previous experience) and group characteristics of the consumer (Godovykh & Tasci, 2020).

The first bibliometric analysis on *The role of human capital education and experience in tourism in the context of the adoption of firm-market adaptation strategies* has identified the main themes of discussion in recent years. Therefore, an approach centered on sustainable development is the aim of a firm in any sector for market adaptation and performance. Sustainable development is a way forward for firms as a strategic direction that can be constantly improved.

Formal education, specific education, business education, entrepreneurship education are important components of education, together with education for sustainable development, with an important social impact.

Employment, whether as dependent employment, self-employment or entrepreneurship, generates work experience, industry-specific experience or entrepreneurial experience. Employment in a country thus contributes to the sustainable development of that country.

Entrepreneurs play a significant role in adopting strategies to adapt the firm to the market and their business performance influences the introduction of innovations, contributes to customer satisfaction and ensures a higher quality of life for individuals.

The second bibliometric analysis on the *Role of the entrepreneur and manager in tourism* highlighted the research themes present in the literature in various countries interested in this topic.

It was found that the entrepreneur has an important decision-making, informational and interpersonal role, and therefore has and is developing continuous training in business administration, business development, tourism, marketing, management, entrepreneurship.

Social impact and sustainable development are objectives that the entrepreneur must consider in running and managing the business.

The adoption of strategies for adapting the company to the market involves continuous research of local and international markets in order to identify new customer segments, new tourism products and services, identification of new business partners.

Emerging tourism markets such as China and proposals for new tourism products and services, such as specialized cycling holidays or specialized holidays on local oenology and gastronomy are opportunities that entrepreneurs are implementing, thus contributing to the promotion of local cultural heritage, rural areas, with a strong social impact on the communities involved.

Following the literature review and bibliometric analysis, the research hypotheses underlying the empirical research included in this study were presented in the subchapter *Linking the literature to research hypotheses*.

The **third chapter**, *Analyzing the profile of human capital in travel agencies*, describes the context in which human capital operates in travel agencies. The focus was on defining and classifying travel agencies, identifying how travel agencies operate and are organized, and exploring the profile of human capital in accordance with the specific requirements of the activities carried out in travel agencies.

In the first subchapter *Definition and classification of travel agencies*, the concepts of travel agencies have been clarified according to the Romanian and Italian legislation, and according to the European classification of travel agencies NACE (French acronym for „Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community”) specified in our country's legislation by the CAEN codes (Romanian acronym for „Classification of Activities in the National Economy”) and in the Italian legislation by the ATECO codes (Classification of Economic Activities in Italy 2007).

In the subchapter *Functioning and organization of travel agencies*, the criteria for the authorization and functioning of travel agencies were analyzed and the concepts of travel license and travel patent were defined. Thus, the tourist license is the document issued by the public institution responsible for tourism on the basis of the application and standardized declaration of the economic operator, accompanied by the required complete documentation. The tourism patent is issued by the public institution responsible for tourism on the basis of the application and the completed standardized declaration of the natural person applying for the tourism patent, accompanied by the complete required documentation.

In the subchapter *Exploring the profile of human capital in accordance with the specific requirements of the activities carried out in travel agencies*, a synthesis was made on the level of education, level of experience and skills required by the entrepreneur, tourism manager,

travel agent, tour guide, transportation/ticketing agent, and other categories of employees specific to travel agencies.

The **second part** of the doctoral thesis, entitled *Applied research*, was dedicated to empirical research carried out on a group of entrepreneurs and managers of tourism agencies, tourism specialists (professors teaching subjects, courses in entrepreneurship and tourism, representatives of associations specialized in the tourism industry and representatives of tourist information and promotion centers, tourism consultants and business management consultants) and clients and non-clients of tourism agencies.

Chapter four, presents *the Theoretical design of the research*. Therefore, a theoretical grounding of the research, based on specific literature reviews, as well as a description of the stages and methods of scientific research have been made. The empirical research methods were also described, the research area included in the analysis was established, and the main directions of due professional ethics to be taken into account during the research were presented.

Chapter Five, *Construction, pre-testing and validation of research instruments* presents the research methodology used in the pre-testing phase. Thus, the aim was to obtain the information necessary to understand the context of human capital specific to travel agencies and to calculate the representative sample of the target group for the final research stage. Thus, the following steps were followed: construction of the questionnaire, endorsement of the questionnaire, identification of the degree of interest shown by the respondents towards the research topic, pre-testing or application of the questionnaire in the preliminary stage, knowledge of the context regarding the respondents, inventory of the problems encountered, centralization of the questions and answers obtained, coding the questions and answers obtained, formulating and testing the research hypotheses, statistical analysis of the data, producing an improved questionnaire as a result of the pre-testing, drawing up the final questionnaire, establishing the sample of the total population included in the analysis, presenting and discussing the results of the preliminary stage of the research.

The subchapter *Methodology used in the pre-testing phase* presents the steps involved in the realization and administration of the final research instrument, i.e. the semi-structured questionnaire.

The subchapter *Questionnaire construction* presents the organization of the activities related to the construction of the questionnaires in order to administer them to entrepreneurs and managers, specialists and tourists. The participants at this stage were: the PhD candidate, the oversight committee and the respondents, in order to ensure proper functionality.

In the preliminary stage, the entrepreneurial and managerial profile of the 10 entrepreneurs and travel agency managers was developed. Thus, this profile was identified on the basis of the analysis of the correlation between the education of the entrepreneur and manager, their experience, as well as the specific competences in the tourism industry regarding the adaptation of the firm to the market.

Entrepreneurs and managers in tourism in the North-East Region of Romania are of both genders, female and male, with an average age between 41 and 50 years old and of Romanian nationality. They have an education level predominantly EQF level 7 (Master's degree), have 11-20 years of work experience, and 11-20 years of experience in the tourism industry, while the average entrepreneurial and managerial experience is between 6-10 years. All entrepreneurs and managers surveyed are English speakers. In general, other foreign languages known are French, Italian and Spanish. Also, all entrepreneurs and managers participating in the survey hold a tourism patent.

Entrepreneurs and managers in tourism in the Marche Region of Italy are female, with an average age between 41 and 50 years and are of Italian nationality. The entrepreneur and manager of a travel agency has an education level predominantly EQF level 7 (Master's degree), has more than 20 years of work experience, and 11-20 years of experience in the tourism industry, while the average entrepreneurial and managerial experience is between 0-5 years. All entrepreneurs and managers participating in the study are English speakers. In general, other foreign languages known are French and Spanish. Two of the entrepreneurs and managers participating in the study are holders of the technical director of travel agency certificate, one entrepreneur/manager does not hold the technical director of travel agency certificate, but runs the family tourism business.

According to the European Classification of Travel Agencies (NACE), 60% of the entrepreneurs and managers of travel agencies respondents are part of a travel agency with organizational activity, 20% of the respondents are part of a travel agency with intermediary activity and 20% of the respondents are part of a travel agency with other types of reservation and tourist assistance services. According to the way in which sales in travel agencies are organized (physical on-site sales, online sales) 80% of the entrepreneurs and managers of travel agencies respondents practice mixed sales and 20% of the respondents practice online sales only. The age of travel agencies in the two countries ranges from 3 to 24 years. By number of employees, travel agencies are small (0-9 employees).

Next, the profile of tourism specialists participating in the preliminary stage (11 persons) was analyzed.

In the North-East Region of Romania, 7 specialists participated, including 4 respondents with professional status as teachers, 1 respondent with professional status as coordinator of tourist information center, 1 respondent with professional status as vice-president of tourism association, 1 respondent with professional status as a researcher gr. II. Of these, 4 respondents were female and 3 respondents were male. 4 respondents were aged between 41-50 years, 2 respondents were aged between 31-40 years and 1 respondent was aged between 51-60 years. All study participants are of Romanian nationality. Also, all participants in the preliminary pre-testing phase from the North-East Region of Romania have completed university level studies: 4 respondents have post-doctoral studies, 2 respondents have master's studies and 1 respondent has doctoral studies. The respondents' areas of specialization are: Economics - Trade, Tourism and Services, Business Administration, Public Relations, Tourism, Economics, Economics, Marketing, Geography, Economics - Tourism and Services. All study participants from the North-East Region of Romania are proficient in English. Other languages known are French and Italian. The survey respondents have a predominant work experience between 21-30 years. Also, 2 respondents have more than 20 years of experience in tourism, 3 respondents have 11-20 years of experience and 2 respondents have 5-10 years of experience. 3 respondents of the study hold tourism patent while 4 respondents of the study do not hold tourism patent.

In the Marche Region of Italy, 4 professionals of Italian nationality participated in the study, of which 1 respondent was a teacher, 1 respondent was a business consultant and 2 respondents were tourism consultants. 3 respondents were male and 1 respondent was female. The participants in the preliminary pre-testing phase from the Marche Region of Italy had completed studies as follows: technical institute with specialization in economics, undergraduate university courses with specialization in economics and master's university courses with specialization in marketing. The study participants from the Marche Region of Italy are fluent in English (100%), only 1 respondent is fluent in French (25%). 25% of the study respondents have work experience between 21-30 years and 75% between 31-40 years. There were 2 respondents (50%) with more than 20 years experience in tourism, and 2 respondents (50%) with less than 5 years experience. None of the Italian specialist respondents participating in the survey are qualified as a travel agency technical manager.

The data collected on the socio-demographic characteristics of the tourist respondents (83 persons) allowed to outline the profile of the tourist, client of the travel agency in the North-East Region of Romania and the profile of the tourist, client of the travel agency in the Marche Region of Italy.

The consumer of tourist services through travel agencies in the North-East Region of Romania is female (63%) and male (37%), aged between 18-30 years, with high school and university education, and English proficient. It is a travel consumer, going on vacation once a year (44%), 2-3 times a year (45%) and more than 4 times a year (11%), mainly purchasing tourist services such as accommodation, transportation, car rental or other services. The number of overnight stays is 2-3 nights for 45% of respondents, and 4-7 nights for 43% of respondents. The consumer of air transport services opts for 1-2 flights per year (61%) and 3-5 flights per year (32%). The consumer of car rental services opts for 1-2 rentals per year (79%), 3-5 rentals per year (12%) and more than 6 rentals per year (9%). They use travel agency services for hotel bookings (25%) and for booking tour guide services (25%). The stated purpose of travel is mainly for rest and recreation, but also for attending conferences, scientific events and for business. The preferred mode of travel is with the family. The level of satisfaction expressed as a customer of the travel agency is positive when evaluating the tourist services purchased.

The consumer of tourist services through travel agencies in the Marche Region of Italy is female (65%) and male (35%), aged between 41-50 years, with technical, professional and university degrees, and English proficiency. It is a travel consumer, goes on vacation once a year (50%), 2-3 times a year (40%) and more than 4 times a year (10%), mainly purchases tourist accommodation and transportation services. The number of overnight stays is 2-3 nights for 25% of respondents, and between 4-7 nights for 75% of respondents. The consumer of air transportation services opts for 1-2 flights per year (88%) and for more than 6 flights per year (13%). The consumer of car rental services opts for 1-2 rentals per year (75%) and for 3-5 rentals per year (25%). He/she uses travel agency services for hotel reservations (30%) and for reservations of tour guide services (30%). The stated purpose of the trip is mainly for rest and recreation. The preferred mode of travel is with the family. The level of satisfaction expressed as a customer of the travel agency is positive when evaluating the tourist services purchased.

The subchapter *Validation of the research instruments* presents the analysis of the problems encountered in the preliminary stage, the centralization of questions and answers, the coding of questions and answers, the formulation and testing of hypotheses, the statistical analysis of the data, the realization of an improved questionnaire in accordance with the objectives of the research methodology and the presentation of the final questionnaire.

In the subchapter on *Establishing the final sample of respondents*, the criteria for establishing the sample and the formula for calculating the sample were presented.

The subchapter *Results of the preliminary research phase* presents the following conclusions:

- the entrepreneurs, managers and specialists surveyed believe that understanding the latest market requirements is very important for the development and growth of the travel agencies in which they operate;

- the theme of the research was received with interest by all respondents, who felt that the current level of services purchased through travel agencies is decreasing and that investment and more effort is needed to attract and develop the available human capital. The quality of human capital determined by education and experience in the tourism industry creates the necessary prerequisites for offering better services and specialized services to adapt to the market through differentiation and to attract new customers, including international ones;

- there were some difficulties in accessing respondents during this period of the summer season, which is characterized by an intense tourist activity (tourists take time for rest and

recreation, and tour operators have the responsibility to provide them with services that correspond to their wishes).

The preliminary quantitative research led to an understanding of the role of the entrepreneur and the manager of a travel agency from the perspective of the tourist respondents, customers of the travel agency. Thus, the main roles that characterize the entrepreneur and manager in tourism were identified: decision-making, informational and interpersonal.

The informational and interpersonal behavior pattern of the entrepreneur and manager in tourism was measured by the level of education and experience as seen from the perspective of the tourists, customers of travel agencies. The behavior pattern of the entrepreneur and manager at the decision-making level was measured by the dimensions aimed at the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market.

These roles affect the performance of the travel agency, as measured by tourists' sense of satisfaction with the quality of services purchased (Hwang et al., 2023) and consequently the firm's market adaptation.

However, in order to understand which are the elements that can influence the level of satisfaction of tourists and the adaptability of the firm to the market, the consumption behavior of tourists, customers of travel agencies, was analyzed in a first stage.

Subsequently, two-dimensional comparative analyses were carried out to identify significant effects between the perceptions of respondents from the North-East Region of Romania and the Marche Region of Italy regarding the level of education and experience of the tourism entrepreneur and manager, the importance of the tourism entrepreneur and manager for tourists and the satisfaction of the tourist customers with the purchased tourism services. It was observed that there were no significant differences between the perceptions of the tourists participating in the study from the two countries. The results obtained confirm the secondary hypotheses related to hypothesis H4 (H4_a and H4_f), in which the education of the entrepreneur and manager influence the firm's adaptation to the market and the secondary hypotheses related to hypothesis H5 (H5_e), in which the profile of the entrepreneur and manager influence the firm's performance.

Comparative means analyses were conducted to identify similarities and significant differences between the views of respondents from the North-East Region of Romania and the Marche Region of Italy on the dimensions of adapting a travel agency to the market and the competences needed by employees in a travel agency identified in the literature. Therefore, there were no significant differences between the means of the two groups of respondents and the important dimensions of adapting a travel agency to the market and the key competences needed by employees in a travel agency were identified.

Subsequently, Spearman Correlation analyses were performed to measure the strength of association or relationship between the level of education of the tourism entrepreneur and manager and the adoption of the firm's market adaptation strategies; between the level of experience of the tourism entrepreneur and manager and the adoption of the firm's market adaptation strategies; between the firm's market adaptation and the adoption of the firm's market adaptation strategies; between the consumption of tourism services purchased through travel agencies and the country of residence of the tourists. The best Spearman coefficient values were recorded for the correlation between entrepreneur's education and manager's education with the adoption of market adaptation strategy on human capital development (0.567; 0.544) indicating a positive average relationship between variables; between entrepreneur experience and manager experience with the adoption of market adaptation strategy on human capital development (0.552; 0.543), indicating a positive average relationship between variables. There is a relationship between the consumption of tourism services purchased through travel agencies and tourists' country of residence (0.372), indicating a weak positive relationship between the variables.

Next, 2 multiple regression analyses were conducted analyzing the effect of independent variables on dependent variables. In the first case, employee profile influences the firm's adaptation to the market. The dependent variable is the firm's adaptation to the market. The independent variables are entrepreneur's education, manager's education, entrepreneur's experience, manager's experience, employee's education, employee's experience. The regression equation for firm-market adaptation from the preliminary research has predictive effect for entrepreneur education (0.022) and employee education (0.420), with significance level $p < 0.05$. In the second case, employee profile influences customer satisfaction. The dependent variable is customer satisfaction. The independent variables are entrepreneur's education, manager's education, entrepreneur's experience, manager's experience, employee's education, employee's experience. The regression equation for customer satisfaction from the preliminary research has predictive effect for manager's experience level (0.477) with significance level $p < 0.05$.

Chapter Six, *Final results of applied research* presents the final version of the application and analysis of the dimensions of the study. This chapter highlights the achievement of the empirical research purpose and objectives. The qualitative analyses found in this part of the paper aim at interpreting the opinions of all categories of respondents (entrepreneurs and managers, tourism specialists and tourists customers and non-customers) from the perspective of their experiences, beliefs and behaviors. The quantitative analyses in this part of the paper aim at measuring the internal consistency of the constructs, measuring the correlations between the variables using Spearman Rho correlations and multiple regression analysis.

The subchapter *Methodology used in the final research phase* presents the analysis of the perception of the role of the education and experience of the manager of a travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market, carried out through a mixed method. The choice of the mixed qualitative and quantitative research on the semi-structured questionnaire model is justified by its use in probing in depth the perceptions of the role of the entrepreneur/manager in the context of the adoption of the firm's market adaptation strategies. The final research consisted in the organization of activities for the administration of the enhanced semi-structured questionnaires for entrepreneurs and managers, specialists and tourists.

The subchapter *Establishing the representative sample of respondents* for the final stage took into account the results obtained in the pre-testing stage. First, it was verified that the firm resources represented by the quality of human capital in travel agencies and the strategies adopted by them in their effort to achieve superior performance through tourist/customer satisfaction are similar in the two research areas. Secondly, it was taken into account that the travel agency market is predominantly small firms with few employees and the respondents are very busy in their daily tasks in the summer season while tourists are on vacation.

The information identified in the literature on sample sizes for qualitative research and on sample sizes for quantitative research was taken into account. Respecting the identified criteria, the qualitative research targeted a sample of entrepreneurs and/or managers and specialists from Romania, while the quantitative research targeted a sample of tourists, customers and non-customers from the North-East Region of Romania.

It also considered the time constraint on data collection in the final stage concentrated between May-July 2024. Consequently, the response rate is considered to be in line with the characteristics of the respondents.

The *final qualitative research* subchapter led to the understanding of the role of a travel agency manager from the perspective of entrepreneur and manager respondents, specialist respondents and tourist respondents.

The decision-makers in travel agencies in the context of adopting market adaptation strategies were identified by the respondents. Thus, the owner, the travel manager and the employees have to participate together in the adoption of market adaptation strategies in order to work as a team. In the travel agency, the entrepreneur also has other roles within the firm.

Nine entrepreneurs and/or travel agency managers from the North-East Region of Romania participated in the survey. Thus 44% of the respondents are tourism managers. All the entrepreneurs surveyed hold a tourism patent.

Respondents consider the role of the education and experience of a travel agency's entrepreneur to be important in terms of decision-making, informational and interpersonal. The entrepreneur positively influences the choice of strategies to adapt the firm to the market. The entrepreneur manages to develop excellent relationships and networks at local, regional, national and international levels, attracting customers including from international markets. Education and experience provide a solid foundation of skills, knowledge and abilities that positively influence the choice of market adaptation strategies given the complexity of current and emerging markets (climate, geopolitical issues, conflicts, etc.).

Respondents consider the role of a travel agency manager to be very important in the adoption and implementation of strategies from a decision-making, informational and interpersonal point of view. His/her legal, professional, cultural, social and moral responsibilities enable the smooth running of the whole activity of the travel agency.

The role of the entrepreneur and manager in tourism affects the performance of the travel agency, as measured by their sense of satisfaction with the overall performance of the firm (financial and non-financial). The responses recorded indicate a positive correlation between the level of education and experience of entrepreneurs and managers and the performance of the firm, with the satisfaction of the respondents being predominantly positive. The non-financial performance of the firm is rated as much better than the financial results.

The entrepreneurial and managerial profile in a travel agency was identified on the basis of analyzing the correlation between the education of the entrepreneur and manager, the experience of the entrepreneur and manager, the specific competences in the tourism industry and the adaptation of the firm to the market. Entrepreneurs and managers in tourism are of both genders, female and male, with an average age between 41 and 50 years. The entrepreneur and manager of a travel agency is predominantly educated to EQF level 7 (Master's degree), with more than 20 years of work experience and an average of 13 years of experience in the tourism industry, while the average entrepreneurial and/or managerial experience is 8 years. Pre-university fields of study are: electrical engineering, philology, geography, public administration, economics-administration, mathematics-physics, social sciences, accounting, classical high school, scientific high school. The university fields of study are: economics, geography tourism and tourism and hotel management, tourism, marketing, psychology, economics – finance and banking, history, natural sciences. The foundation training programs in the tourism industry are: tourism agent/local guide, national guide, trainer, manager in tourism activity, specializations for the promotion of cultural/historical heritage, environmentalist tour guide, tour manager (group leader). All of the managers interviewed are English speakers. In general, other languages known are French, Italian and Spanish. 100% of the interviewed managers hold a tourism patent.

In conclusion, the education of a manager in a travel agency, in addition to the entrepreneur, requires education in tourism through higher education and professional qualification courses in tourism leading to the tourism certificate/patent, continuing education specialized in tourism and other areas such as management, sales, marketing, psychology, negotiation, human resources, legislation.

Tourist respondents consider that the education of employees in travel agencies requires first of all theoretical knowledge in the fields of geography, history, sales, marketing, human

resources and last but not least knowledge of how to protect the environment. Important areas considered by tourists are communication, knowledge of foreign languages and geography, which confirms the interpersonal and informational role of the entrepreneur and manager.

Entrepreneurs and/or managers respondents and tourism specialists respondents consider that the most important skills needed to run a travel agency are customer problem solving, communication and knowledge of ethics. Tourist respondents consider that the most important competences needed to run the activities of the travel agency are creative thinking, efficiency and calmness in crisis situations, decision making ability, listening skills and knowledge of the tourism sector, which confirms the decision-making role of the entrepreneur and manager in a travel agency.

The profile of the travel agency was identified based on the analysis of the following socio-demographic data of the firms: type of travel agency, mode of organization of the travel agency, age or seniority of the firm (years), size of the firm (number of employees), number of persons employed with university education in the last 5 years. Thus, there were 89% of travel agencies with organization activity and 11% of travel agencies with intermediation activity; according to the way of organizing the sale of tourism products and services, 78% of travel agencies with mixed sales and 22% of travel agencies with online sales only; according to the age of the firm on the market, travel agencies have an average age of 10 years; there were small travel agencies with 0 - 9 employees (89%) and a single agency with 10 - 49 employees (11%). The entrepreneurs and managers of travel agencies participating in the study mentioned that the number of people employed with a university degree in the last 5 years averaged 3 individuals.

The study was attended by 18 tourism industry specialists of Romanian nationality (teachers who teach subjects, modules and/or courses in entrepreneurship and tourism, representatives of associations specialized in the tourism industry and representatives of tourism information and promotion centers, tourism experts). 77% of the specialists have the professional status of a teacher, 1 respondent has the professional status of a researcher gr. II professional status, 1 respondent has the professional status of tourism information center coordinator, 1 respondent has the professional status of vice-president of tourism association, 1 respondent has the professional status of tourism expert. All respondents are proficient in English. Some of the respondents also have knowledge of French, Italian, Spanish. One respondent is proficient in Chinese. 67% of the expert respondents are female and 33% of the respondents are male. 22% of the respondents are aged 51 - 60 years, 56% are aged 41 - 50 years, and 5% are aged 31 - 40 years.

The professionals, participating in the final stage of the study, have a university degree: 39% have a post-doctoral degree, 33% have a PhD, 22% have a Master's degree and 6% of the respondents have a Bachelor's degree. They have work experience between 21-30 years in 44% and work experience between 11-20 years in 39%, 1 respondent has work experience between 31-40 years (6%) and 2 respondents have work experience between 0-10 years (11%). There were 5 respondents (28%) with more than 20 years of experience in tourism, 5 respondents (28%) with 11-20 years of experience, 3 respondents (16%) with 5-10 years of experience in tourism and 5 respondents (28%) with less than 5 years of experience in tourism. The entrepreneurial intention of the specialists was measured by holding the tourism patent: 7 respondents (39%) participating in this study hold the tourism patent, while 11 respondents (61%) participating in this study do not hold the tourism patent.

The courses and modules taught by the professional respondents with teaching status are categorized as follows: Business Administration in Tourism, Agrotourism/Local Gastronomic Spots, Creation and Marketing of Tourism Products, Business Communication and Negotiation, Communication, Marketing and Public Relations in Tourism, Accounting, Applied Research in the Service Market, Business Economics, Tourism Economics, Business Ethics and Sustainability, Interpretation of Cultural Heritage, Management, Management of tourism

activities, Marketing, Tourism marketing, Methodology of scientific work, Market research methods and techniques, Organization of events, Tourism planning and arrangement, Statistics, Hotel and restaurant technology, Tourist heritage, Tourist guide techniques.

The areas of specialization of specialist respondents are: Business Administration, Economics, Economics - Trade, Tourism and Services, Finance, Geography, Management, Marketing, Marketing, Public Relations, Rural Tourism/Agrotourism, Tourism and Regional Development.

In the final stage, the profile of the tourist in the North-East Region of Romania was outlined. The consumer of tourist services through travel agencies comes from urban areas, mainly from Iasi county, is female (65%) and male (35%), aged between 18-30 years old, unmarried, with a net monthly income under 2100 ron (420 Euro equivalent), and is proficient in English. He is a consumer of travel, goes on vacation at least once a year, mainly purchases tourist services of accommodation, stays, transportation and circuits. The level of satisfaction expressed by him as a customer of the travel agency is positive when evaluating the tourist services purchased.

In terms of the predominant organizational learning model in travel agencies that leads to performance, all three categories of respondents consider that the most important direction of organizational learning is based on tacit experience from interaction (customers, employees, partners, etc.).

The results confirm previous studies (Kallmuenzer et al., 2021) on the need to accumulate skills, knowledge, entrepreneurial and/or managerial experience in the tourism industry for market adaptation and performance.

The *final quantitative research* subchapter was aimed at understanding the role of a travel agency manager from the perspective of respondents who are tourist customers of travel agencies. Of the total 226 respondents, 41% (92 respondents) have purchased tourism services through travel agencies in the last two years. Among these, there were 75 respondents from the North-East Region of Romania who purchased tourist services through travel agencies in the last two years.

Statistical analyses, internal consistency tests, the Spearman Rho correlation coefficient analysis and multiple regression analysis were performed. Descriptive statistics were carried out in order to highlight gender, place of residence, marital status, income, foreign languages known in order to identify the tourism consumption behavior of travel agency customers.

First, the results of this study show that education and experience have an influence on the firm's market adaptation, being positively correlated with the adoption of market adaptation strategies oriented to human capital development. Thus, hypotheses H1 and H2 are validated.

Second, a positive correlation was observed between firm-market adaptation and the adoption of firm-market adaptation strategies. Among these, strong correlations were identified between the adoption of the strategy focused on establishing close and stable ties with key partners and the strategy focused on developing the human capital of the travel agency; strong correlation between the adoption of the strategy focused on customer safety and the strategy focused on promoting the travel agency; strong correlation between the adoption of the strategy focused on establishing close and stable ties with key partners and the strategy focused on customer safety. A positive correlation is observed between the firm's adaptation to the market and the firm's orientation towards high quality strategy, with $p > 0.05$, therefore the secondary hypothesis H3_a is not confirmed. We thus validate hypothesis H3 with the secondary hypotheses H3_b, H3_c, H3_d, H3_e, H3_f, H3_g, H3_h being confirmed.

Third, multiple regression analyses were conducted to analyze the effect of the influence of employee profile on the firm's market adaptation and customer satisfaction. Employee profile was represented by entrepreneur's education, manager's education, entrepreneur's experience, manager's experience, employee's education, employee's experience. The regression equation

for firm-market adaptation has predictive effect for entrepreneur education and employee experience. Therefore, hypotheses H4 (H4_a and H4_f) are validated. The regression equation for customer satisfaction has predictive effect for manager experience level. Hence, hypothesis H5 (H5_e) is validated.

Entrepreneurship in the tourism industry in Romania brings into focus the behavior of the entrepreneur and manager who select and combine all relevant factors for the realization of quality services in optimal conditions of activity in order to achieve performance (Brunner-Sperdin & Peters, 2005). Among these factors, the quality of human capital formed through education and experience determines over time the adoption of strategies for adapting to the market in each context.

The performance of a business depends on satisfied customers (Tuten & Solomon, 2020; Drucker et al., 2015; Levitt, 2006). In a growing international tourism market, Romania's North-East Development Region relies mainly on domestic tourism. The region is an important source of national outbound tourists who require support and advice on holiday destinations, and travel agencies have a key role to play in this. They face difficulties generated by the evolution of digital technology and the changing consumer behavior that increasingly decides based on the information available online (Maftei & Butnaru, 2023).

In conclusion, the education and experience of the company's staff has a strong influence in the relationship with its customers (Brush & Soutar, 2022) and contributes to the efficiency of the decision-making process by influencing the productivity of the entrepreneur (Millán et al., 2014).

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, PROFESSIONAL ETHICS, LIMITS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION

Final conclusions

The results of the research showed that the opinions of entrepreneurs and managers, the perceptions of specialists and the perceptions of tourists are intertwined, with the participants having a good overview of what the market demands in the tourism industry mean.

Analyzing the results obtained through the mixed research, it was concluded that the entrepreneurs and/or managers and specialists to whom the questionnaire was administered believe that the role of education, the role of experience, understanding the requirements of tourists, customers or non-customers of travel agencies in the context of adopting strategies for adapting the firm to the market is very important for the development and growth of travel agencies, which shows that the topic of the research was received with interest from entrepreneurs and managers, specialists, but also from tourists.

Entrepreneurs and managers see a need for continuous training in the tourism industry, with more than 20 years of work experience, 11-20 years of experience in the tourism industry and an average of 8 years of entrepreneurial and/or managerial experience.

An entrepreneur and manager's education and experience are the result of continually accessing sources of knowledge and are essential for career advancement, personal development and contributing to the development of the industry in which they work. Experiential learning or internships are a mandatory element in contemporary education, which contribute to the training of future generations of entrepreneurs and/or managers.

Continuing education in the tourism industry entails regular participation in business, leadership and entrepreneurship training courses, operating systems and applications courses, decision-making and management courses. It is also necessary for the entrepreneur and manager to adapt to changes in related fields such as digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI). Academic training programs and practical training programs for entrepreneurs and/or managers are necessary for business survival and growth of firms in the tourism industry. Entrepreneurship education contributes to the knowledge of strategies to adapt the firm to the market.

Experience is based on people's intellectual, affective and practical characteristics. Experience is found in passions, it unfolds in space and time, it is a moving force that brings about transformation.

Tourists considered that the most important skills needed for employees in the tourism industry were creative thinking, efficiency and calmness in crisis situations, critical decision making capacity, listening skills and knowledge of the tourism sector/field.

The study aimed to identify the role of the education and experience of the manager of a travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies to adapt the firm to the market, which led to an approach based on which to emphasize that the education and experience of the entrepreneur and/or manager can be a predictor for the firm's adaptation to the market and performance.

The entrepreneurial and managerial profile is created by the education and experience of each individual throughout his/her career and by the organizational behavior adopted through the market adaptation strategies implemented.

Entrepreneurship is a form of economic activity that generates jobs and mobilizes human and financial capital. The entrepreneur or founder of the firm plays a central role in the process of adapting the firm to the market, together with its managers and employees.

Firms use blended strategies of accessing knowledge sources and organizational learning that lead to performance improvement based on the two learning models (STI model - *Science, Technology and Innovation* and DUI model - *Doing, Using and Interacting*). Thus, the most appropriate model in the tourism industry is based on interaction.

Experience in tourism is based on the tacit knowledge acquired by human capital through practical experience in the industry, on category of tourism services and on individual regions. Active entrepreneurs and managers can transfer knowledge to employees through practical workshops to solve real business problems identified.

Intercultural communication skills and knowledge of international languages, particularly English, are of great importance in business management and especially in business management in the tourism industry.

The tourism industry needs entrepreneurs and managers with vision, creativity and the ability to innovate. For today's entrepreneurs and managers, the strategic adaptation of the organization is a necessity that starts from a moral motivation in its relationship with its shareholders, its relationship with its customers and its relationship with the community.

Contributions of doctoral research

The presented doctoral thesis reflects a constant and sustained effort made during the four years of doctoral studies. For the elaboration of this work I followed the guidance provided by the doctoral coordinator prof. univ. dr. habilit. Gina Ionela Butnaru and the members of the guidance committee which was formed by Mrs. prof. univ. dr. habilit. Viorica Chirilă, Mrs. scientific researcher. I. dr. habilit. Alina-Petronela Marin-Haller and Mrs. conf. univ. dr. Mirela Ștefănică.

The analyzed studies present information on the aspects that build entrepreneurial and managerial profile in other industries and in the tourism industry. Considering the fact that the literature offers little information on the subject - the role of the education and experience of the manager of a travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market - we consider that this doctoral thesis contributes with relevant and scientifically validated information that will improve the vision of the entrepreneurial and managerial profile specific to entrepreneurs and/or managers of travel agencies.

Among the important theoretical contributions are: the analysis of the concept of education, the analysis of the concept of experience, the analysis of the strategies of adaptation of the firm to the market, the analysis of the concept of performance (financial performance and non-financial performance), the analysis of the role of education and experience of the entrepreneur and the manager of the travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies of adaptation of the firm to the market in the areas researched.

During the course of this research, a literature review was conducted, complemented by two bibliometric analyses using the qualitative research software VOSviewer. Using it, articles collected from the widely accepted Scopus database in the scientific research environment were analyzed ([Menon et al., 2021](#)).

The resulting relationships were pursued on the two proposed directions "The role of education and experience of human capital in tourism in the context of adopting strategies to adapt the firm to the market" and "The role of the entrepreneur and manager in tourism".

In the first bibliometric analysis, the entrepreneur was identified as the focal point of business management in the tourism industry. Also, employment, whether as dependent employment, self-employment or entrepreneurship, generates work experience, industry-specific experience or entrepreneurial experience, and employment in a country thus contributes to the sustainable development of that country. Entrepreneurs play a significant role in adopting strategies to adapt the firm to the market, and their business performance influences

the introduction of innovations, contributes to customer satisfaction and ensures a high quality of life for individuals.

In the second bibliometric analysis, a longitudinal visualization map was generated with the labels of the countries that have published articles on the topic researched in the PhD thesis. An increasing trend of interest on this topic was observed also in Romania. The research analyzed by bibliometric analysis identified education, experience and skills of human capital employed in tourism as predictors of tourism performance. Long-term adaptation strategies of firms aim at social impact in their communities and regions, making the difference between tourism destinations at the local level and tourism destinations at the global level. The last decade has also witnessed a shift from a focus on the financial performance of tourism industry firms to a non-financial performance based on sustainable development, quality of life of stakeholders, including tourism employees and local communities.

From a theoretical point of view, the research presents the role of the entrepreneur and the manager in travel agencies by building a picture of the level of education, level of experience, strategic behavior adopted and the firm's performance. Travel agencies are generally small sized businesses and have limited financial resources to adopt important market adaptation strategies. The results suggest that by relying on internal resources, developing internal resources, as well as obtaining new external resources, travel agencies could partially address these challenges by positively influencing performance.

Research on firm-market adaptation decision making has emphasized the importance of accumulating education and experience. However, there are studies that focus on the benefits of accumulated knowledge and experience without taking into account the costs involved for human capital formation (Mu & Jiang, 2024).

The endorsement of the questionnaire by the guiding committee and the application of the questionnaire to tourism industry specialists, entrepreneurs and managers allowed to identify a high degree of interest in the research topic.

The first issue considered was that there is little research on the work of tourism firms, and basic aspects of their operation and organization are often ignored. Currently, research in the field of tourism is focused on innovation, technology, sustainability. This study therefore fills these gaps.

The second aspect of interest was the practical usefulness of the results for travel agency employees and young people interested in building a career in the tourism industry. Most of the time, they consider that a passion for travel is enough to be able to work as an employee or entrepreneur in this sector. Tenacity, continuous experience in tourism-specific companies, continuous knowledge of tourist destinations, consumer behavior and technology, availability of financial resources are mandatory conditions that develop over many years.

The third aspect concerns the affective and financial value attributed to the years of general and specialized training and formative experience of tourism staff in the service of tourists, whether customers or non-customers, which is reflected in their level of satisfaction and loyalty. Technological developments over the last decade, large databases, artificial intelligence and the emergence of online booking platforms are all factors contributing to the decline in these values.

The research tools developed were considered complex and complete, allowing an accurate assessment of the variables investigated, contributing to obtaining valuable results.

The comments recorded on the research topic in the preliminary stage were similar in both research areas, which confirms the importance of knowing the language and culture of the interviewees (Butaru, 2022), in this case Italian language and culture.

The practical contribution of this research stands out for the timeliness of the information presented, based on real, concrete, practical aspects, obtained on the basis of data analysis generated thru the aggregation of the semi-structured questionnaires employed.

From a practical point of view, the application of mixed methods research (qualitative and quantitative) has meant that some of the inherent limitations associated with one research method can be offset by the advantages of the other. One of the advantages of mixed methods research was that it allowed words, pictures and description to be used to give meaning to numbers, while numbers were used to give precision to words, pictures and descriptions. Another advantage of mixed-method research is that it is based on meanings obtained from the perspective of specialists as respondents (Runcan, 2023).

The doctoral thesis is a practical contribution for entrepreneurs and/or managers of tourism agencies, for specialists in the field and for future generations of graduates as employees in the tourism industry. The research topic studied in this doctoral thesis is highly topical, which is why it was desired to identify the correlations between education, experience, firm's adaptation to the market and performance. Therefore, the usefulness of continuous training of entrepreneurs and/or managers was demonstrated.

Entrepreneurs and/or travel agency managers will be able to take decisions on strategies for adapting the business to the market through the opportunity offered by the knowledge gained and previous experience. The role of each stakeholder in the firm built up over time and supported by reputation and professional status must be considered in decision-making. Empirical evidence shows that education and experience positively influence the firm's market adaptation and overall firm performance.

Knowledge of these aspects allows specialists in the educational environment to train the necessary skills of a future entrepreneur and / or manager who works or intends to work in the tourism industry, encouraging and facilitating the development of new businesses in the evolution of their career, thus contributing to economic growth and development.

Professional ethics in research

The methodology applied in the empirical research involved the use of data collection tools that underpin the decision-making system in firms, thus raising issues of professional ethics that are mandatory to be taken into account.

The research involved the collection and processing of personal data provided by entrepreneurs and managers, specialists and tourists in Romania and Italy. Data collection was carried out in compliance with the provisions of European legislation and with the provisions of Romanian and Italian legislation on the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy in the electronic communications sector.

The questionnaires administered in the PhD thesis research have in the introduction explanations regarding the confidentiality of the data provided, anonymity and voluntary participation in completing the questionnaire. The information provided by the study participants, without reference to their names, has been used for the intended purpose of this doctoral thesis and will be used for future publication of articles at conferences, in scientific journals/journals or books.

Limitations of doctoral research

The limitations of the study refer to the high proportion of articles available online in terms of literature. It should be emphasized that most publications currently offer this possibility of access and therefore this option does not significantly influence the research results. Nevertheless, the data presented contribute to the general understanding of the concepts described in the study.

Limited time and financial resources made it difficult to contact entrepreneurs, managers and to identify tourists who frequently purchase travel services through travel agencies, which led to self-selection of respondents. It was also taken into account that the travel agency market is dominated by small firms with few employees and that respondents are very busy in their daily tasks in the summer season while tourists are on vacation, resulting in small comparison groups, but which were considered appropriate for the research stage.

Other errors may arise from the researcher's subjective interpretation of respondents' answers, from the sampling resulting from the final stage of the research, while statistical hypothesis testing was conducted under conditions of assumed risk.

Future directions for action related to doctoral research

A first research direction could be the replication of this doctoral thesis research. The replication of the research is opportune because it could be followed whether the results obtained could be confirmed or not. Future research requires the integration or elimination of certain dimensions related to the research instruments used in order to highlight the entrepreneurial and managerial profile specific to travel agencies.

The literature review included in this doctoral thesis forms the basis for future research on firm-market adaptation strategies and sources of education and experience in tourism through specific bibliometric methods. Therefore, the second research direction resulting from the findings of the two bibliometric analyses concerns the education of entrepreneurs and/or managers on sustainable development, in addition to the continuous development of the types of education identified during the research.

Another research direction is to carry out additional comparative and quantitative research on a larger scale in order to enrich the preliminary research. This will add value to the present analysis.

For an advanced qualitative research it would be interesting to expand the sample of entrepreneurs and/or managers and specialists at local, national, European and even global level in order to be able to identify the role of education and experience of the entrepreneur and/or manager of a travel agency in the context of the adoption of strategies for adapting the firm to the market in relation to cultural, economic and social aspects.

At the same time, it may be considered useful to conduct future mixed research on the competences of all types of employees in travel agencies from the perspective of entrepreneurs and/or managers and specialists. Future research should focus on the effects of the roles of the entrepreneur and/or manager on the firm's financial performance.

In conclusion, the doctoral thesis provides an up-to-date tourism industry snapshot of the role of education and experience specific to the employees of travel agencies at the present time based on a longitudinal research, from a theoretical point of view (for a thorough knowledge of them), and on a mixed research, from an entrepreneurial and/or managerial perspective, from the perspective of tourism specialists and from the perspective of tourists customers and/or non-customers of travel agencies.

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Resource websites:

Site oficial e-nformation: <https://www.e-nformation.ro/>
 Site oficial Google Academic <https://scholar.google.com/scholar/>
 Site oficial NVivo: <https://help-nv.qsrinternational.com/>
 Site oficial ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/>
 Site oficial SPSS: <https://www.ibm.com/products/spss-statistics>
 Site oficial VOSviewer: <https://www.vosviewer.com/>



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