

# A Short-Term Marketing Plan to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19 on Armenia's Tourism Industry



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# A short-term Marketing Plan to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19 on Armenia's Tourism Industry

An Interactive Qualifying Project Report Submitted to the faculty of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science in cooperation with the State Tourism Committee of the Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Armenia.

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact within the Armenian tourism sector. The temporary travel ban has affected other sectors of the economy as well. Most businesses have ceased operations, and many will fail if no action is taken. To create a short-term tourism recovery plan, we conducted interviews with tourism experts, analyzed our survey results, and reviewed scholarly works to generate recommendations for the State Tourism Committee to recover from this pandemic and boost the Armenian economy overall.

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## **Executive Summary**

### ***Introduction***

One of the most successful ways for a country to create more jobs is to focus on establishing a thriving tourism sector. There is an incredible variety of tourism foci; whether it be cultural, culinary, religious, ecotourism, or more, a government must look at its domestic resources in order to create a successful tourism campaign. Despite the efforts of the State Tourism Committee, the Armenian tourism sector is not operating at its full potential and their prospective revenues are lower when compared to other countries. The current COVID-19 pandemic has also had major negative impacts on the Armenian tourism industry and its economy overall. Businesses are temporarily closed and individuals are under a stay-at-home order. To rectify this situation, we have been tasked with creating a short-term marketing plan that will promote Armenia as a tourist destination in the aftermath of this pandemic. Through this project, we determined how to best advertise and increase tourist visitation once the government deems it is safe.

### ***Methods***

In order to achieve our goal of a short-term recovery plan, we completed the following objectives:

1. Create elements of a short-term marketing plan for Armenia's tourism industry
2. Determine the best path for potential crisis mitigation through expert interviews
3. Consult with experts and our sponsor to create a list of FAQs and revise the official Armenia travel website, [armenia.travel](http://armenia.travel), to become more tourist friendly
4. Create elements of a social media campaign for the current COVID-19 crisis in Armenia.

We analyzed other countries that have experienced a crisis that had resulted in a negative impact on the travel industry. Then we determined the countries that are most comparable to Armenia and evaluated their tourism plans post-crisis. By conducting expert interviews, we were able to gain insight into the interviewees' expertise, what effect they personally saw on their field, and what they predicted would occur in the future in reference to the tourism sector. The questions focused on how these experts personally dealt with COVID-19 in their business or industry and what they believed the industry as a whole should be doing. When analyzing the results of a survey about tourism, we learned about respondent's opinions regarding travel after the pandemic, the precautions they will take to feel safe when traveling, and their interest in the different types of tourism. Moving on, we revised the Armenia Travel website to propose possible solutions to attract more tourists and improve user experience. To that end, we also edited and increased the FAQs to have them better serve the needs of a potential traveler. We also analyzed scholarly works and other tourism campaigns via social media to determine key

criteria of a social media campaign. Utilizing these elements, we finalized our social media and marketing recommendations to our sponsor.

### ***Results***

For our first objective, we analyzed the plans that other countries had enacted during times of crisis like the current lockdown and we developed four ideas. At first, we did a series of website revisions that addressed potential questions or concerns that travelers might have. These questions ranged from safety concerns answering how safe Armenia is as a whole, to hotels best suited for travelers with children, to must-see sites in Armenia. In addition to these revisions, Egypt's successful "Something Old, Something New" event could be replicated in Armenia to bridge the gap between the old monuments and the new modern society to get more information about the country out on a global scale.

For our second objective, we conducted a series of expert interviews and found a possible path for potential crisis mitigation. We saw that some of the experts had similar opinions about actions that should be taken. The first opinion was that domestic tourism should be a focus because it will likely be the first form of travel to restart after travel restrictions become less restrictive. This is likely to happen because restrictions will be lifted within countries before they reopen their borders to the rest of the world. The second opinion was that a large amount of travel will happen immediately after the lockdown has ended. The last opinion was that future bookings should stay open for the businesses that are capable of doing so, due to the presumed increase in travel following travel restrictions being lifted. We found that these could be a good source of future revenue because interested travelers still sign up for these experiences.

As for our third objective, once the document with expanded FAQs was ready, we discussed and edited the information we had with our sponsor. The full list of FAQs is available as supplementary materials to the report. As for the website revisions, we analyzed the homepage, reviewed different links to see how they work, skimmed the visual aspects of the website, checked the homepage content for accuracy, and developed recommendations.

For our final objective, we found that key objectives of a tourism campaign include: Increasing awareness of the destination, reaching global publicity, encouraging visitors to plan their journey, strengthening the destination image as a favorite destination, and targeting a specific market (Kiráľová, 2015). While adhering to these objectives, it was essential that all content within a tourism campaign via social media was interactive and provided opportunities for meaningful engagement with potential tourists and other social media users (11 Digital Marketing, 2015)

## ***Recommendations***

Many of the experts we interviewed had similar ideas of how to help Armenia recover and we have condensed these into a few recommendations. The State Tourism Committee should focus on domestic travel recovery first. Even though historically Armenia does not have a large amount of domestic tourism, the sites that experience domestic tourism are likely to be the first to open when the pandemic starts to ramp down. We have discussed with experts how the businesses they were involved with were doing and some had closed their future bookings because of the unknown status of travel restrictions. We propose that advertisements of these offerings should be made because there will be a large interest in travel immediately after the quarantine restrictions are over.

Tourism infrastructure also needs to be improved, because the amount of transportation between villages lack in number and availability. We recommend that some form of easy transportation for people looking to travel has been available like marshrutkas or hop-on hop-off busses. This allowed for more access to tourism sites outside of Yerevan and helped promote more domestic travel within Armenia.

We recommend distributing the FAQs through different social media channels, in this case, Facebook and Instagram, to make that information available to a broader audience as opposed to merely website visitors. Additionally, having had periodic live Q&A sessions with the social media followers had not only boosted and solidified their engagement but also served as a way of generating ideas for more FAQ's.

As for the website, it is certainly an advantage to have it in foreign languages. However, while working on website edits, we spotted a lack of Armenian among language options. We recommend translating the website into Armenian as well since the information should be available to the Armenian audience as domestic travelers.

Upon completing our final objective, we proposed the usage of different social media challenges and internet trends to our sponsor in order to raise awareness about Armenia as a popular tourist destination among foreigners. Our group recommended revisions on a motivational film, ideas for Facebook live shows, and hashtags and taglines to supplement the State Tourism Committee's current tourism campaign. Many of the hashtags and taglines we recommended included words "Armenia" and "travel," which would allow our sponsor to reach a greater audience.

## ***Conclusion***

Most of our recommendations were made exclusively for the tourism industry, yet the methodologies we used could be applied to other sectors of the economy as well. Thus, by completing this project we contributed to the economic development of the country as a whole. The widely-used marketing tools we recommended enrich the visual experience, help reach out to the clients on a personal level, and increase public engagement. We believe that our suggestions to the State Tourism Committee will cause an increase in knowledge of the tourism offerings in Armenia as well as building a sense of trust or expectation for the visitors.

We hope that the State Tourism Committee continues to implement our suggestions and we expect that these changes make information more easily accessible for travelers while further developing the tourism industry in Armenia.

## 2. Introduction

One of the most successful ways for a country to create more jobs is to set a foundation for a thriving tourism sector. In fact, the tourism industry is reported to “...generate one out of ten jobs worldwide” and creates “one in five” new jobs across the globe (Farr, 2018). However, there is an incredible variety of tourism foci whether it be culture, culinary, religious, or ecotourism. A government should consider its domestic resources to create a successful tourism campaign. Despite the efforts of the State Tourism Committee of the Ministry of Economy, the Armenian tourism sector is not operating at its full potential. There are currently issues with the Armenian tourism industry's reputation and reach. For this reason, Armenia's perspective revenues are lower when compared to other countries.

The current COVID-19 global pandemic has also had major negative impacts on the Armenian tourism industry and the Armenian economy overall. Businesses are temporarily closed, and individuals must stay home. During this time, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinian announced that his “...government would allocate at least 150 billion dram (almost \$300 million) to support the economy and limit the impact of the pandemic” (Rfe/rl, 2020). In a global response, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has also announced the availability of \$50 billion for countries that are members of the fund, including Armenia (OECD, 2016). Despite these packages, businesses are still going to be negatively impacted by their lack of customer base – none more so than the tourism sector.

In order to help address this situation, we created a short-term marketing plan that will promote Armenia as a tourist destination in the aftermath of COVID-19. The State Tourism Committee has already conducted extensive research to understand the country's position on a global scale and to identify key factors affecting the tourism sector. By taking this study into account, we determined how to best advertise and increase tourist visitation once the government deems it safe to travel. We also collected our own data through online resources and interviews. We consulted with the State Tourism Committee and other experts to generate strategic ideas for the future plan. Then, we aggregated data collected from the interviews and used it to develop recommendations for the State Tourism Committee on how to best mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. By producing detailed recommendations for our sponsor, we ensured they had the necessary tools to host international tourists once the borders reopen.

### **3. Background**

#### **3.1 Major Impacts on Armenian tourism**

The tourism industry can have a major impact on a country's economy and environment, given that tourists contribute to sales, profits, an increase in employment rate, tax revenue, and income within a particular area. The most direct effects occur within industry sectors such as lodging, restaurants, transportation, amusement and entertainment, and retail. However, tourism often affects the entirety of a country's economy as a result of secondary effects. These secondary effects can range from anything to the businesses supplying products to a tourism-related business to household spending of employees working within the tourism industry (Stynes, n.d). The impacts of those secondary effects on a country's capital are expressed through an increased contribution to income and standard of living, employment opportunities, improved investment, development and infrastructure spending, and enhanced public utility infrastructure (Davtyan, 2016).

In the aftermath of the global pandemic, the reignition of the tourism industry and tourism-related businesses can help an economy recover. The pandemic has exacerbated many of the challenges that Armenia's tourism industry faced. Traveling abroad has slowed down dramatically and the country has had a recent decline in tourist numbers into the country which is a trend that is likely to continue. A State of Emergency was declared, and all non-essential businesses are temporarily closed (Armenia extends, 2020). Citizens are not allowed to leave the country with the exception of cargo transport drivers (Staff, 2020). Individuals are not allowed to leave their homes without proper documentation of a valid reason. The lack of cash flow and income to the tourism industry and tourism-related businesses will be detrimental to their success. The effects of the pandemic are entirely unprecedented. Therefore, many of the smaller, family-owned businesses are at high risk of collapse as a result of the temporary closings. Likewise, Armenia's already subpar tourism infrastructure will also hinder its industry's ability to recover.

#### **3.2 Nature Tourism**

Armenia boasts a plethora of tourism offerings, mainly adventure and cultural tourism, along with sites representing a rich cultural history. Armenia is a 3,500-year-old country situated in between Europe and Asia, bordered by Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, and Georgia. The most notable attraction is its capital, Yerevan, with a "...city centre known for its unique architectural masterpieces, cozy cafés, restaurants, and beautiful parks" (Jenkins, 2020). For more outdoor-loving travelers there is the Selim Pass which was once part of the Silk Road connecting Europe to the East. This pass climbs the Vardenyets Mountains and leads to Lake Sevan, the largest lake in Armenia. In the same vein, the cave town of Khndzoresk, which until the 20th

century, was the largest town in Eastern Armenia. This town exists as a destination for those not faint of heart. To enter the town, visitors must cross a “160-meter long suspension bridge” built by locals in 2012 (Uge, 2014). Conversely, the spa town of Jermuk exists for those looking for a relaxing getaway complete with mineral waters, thermal springs, and a waterfall. Finally, the Shikahogh State Reserve located in Southern Armenia is “considered to be the wealth of...the whole world” (Kristine, 2020) due to the presence of rare species of plants and animals.

On the slope of Mount Aragats, Byurakan Astrophysical Observatory continues to be another major tourist attraction spot in Armenia. The observatory was founded in 1946 by Viktor Hambardzumyan, and it was especially active during Soviet times (Byurakan Astrophysical Observatory, 2017). Today, Byurakan Observatory also welcomes tourists under its roof through special tours offered by multiple travel providers.

Another nature tourism offering in Armenia is the Khosrov Forest State Reserve as illustrated in Figure 1 (United Nations, 2010). This site was established in 1958 and is currently located in the province of Ararat, nearby the Ararat valley, near the mountains of Geghama, Yeranos, and Yerakh (About us, n.d.). This park is home to more than half the flora of Armenia, with 1,849 plant species, as well as the brown bear, Armenian mouflon, and Caucasian leopard. There also exists the “Symphony of Stones” monument, which is a natural formation of rock resembling a massive pipe organ. The Vahagn and Astghik Waterfalls also attract visitors to this park (Khosrov Forest, n.d). Yet another park that tourists can visit is the Dilijan National Park, home to “rare diversity, meadow-forests landscapes, [and] separate ecosystems” (Dilijan National Park, 2019). Located near the Dilijan city, this national park became a protected area in 1958 to preserve the park’s natural flora and fauna. There are 977 species of plants, 40 of which are rare. There are also 40 species of mammals and 150 species of birds. This park also includes the Haghartsin Monastery complex that includes the following for churches: Saint Grigor, Saint Astvatsatsin, Saint Katoghike, and Saint Stephanos.



**Figure 1:** *Khosrov Forest State Reserve* (United Nations, 2010)

### 3.3 Religious Tourism Sites

As a country full of historical monuments and a rich cultural legacy, Armenia is considered to be an open-air museum at the crossroads of the east and west. It was the first country to adopt Christianity as a state religion which explains the manifold of churches and monasteries all over the country, some of which are included in UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Haghpatavank or Haghpat monastery in Lori province, founded in the tenth century is one of few examples of its age (Sawe, 2019). It is a combination of religious and vernacular architecture typical to the Caucasus region and is, therefore, a popular sight among visitors, especially those interested in the history of the country. Another site a few hours' drive outside of the capital truly worth the travel time is the Tatev Monastery which can be reached by a cable-car that holds a Guinness World Record for the longest cable car in the world. Construction on the Tatev Monastery began in the ninth century and was built on "a large basalt plateau overlooking the Vorotan gorge, the largest gorge in Armenia" (Billock, 2017).

Etchmiadzin, the mother church of the Armenian apostolic church, is another UNESCO World Heritage Site and is also widely known as a pilgrimage destination that artfully combines the Armenian medieval architecture and its historiography with Western European architecture (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2000). According to Josef Strzygowski, a number of European architectural pieces such as Germigny-des-Prés in France were influenced by Etchmiadzin (Strzygowski, 1904).

Geghard has an enhanced protection status as a UNESCO World Heritage site. As seen in Figure 2, it illustrates Armenian medieval architecture at its best through monasteries, tombs, and churches built into the rocks, some of which are dated to the fourth century ((Delso, 2016). It is a well-preserved example of a rock-cut site, dwelling in an area of relatively high seismic activity and active touristic flow (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2000).





**Figure 2:** *Geghard Monastery* (Delso, 2016)

### 3.4 Culinary Tourism

“Armenian delicacies offer the sensation of gourmet heaven” (Gordon, 2018). The traditional cuisine has features from both Europe and Asia and is considered one of the oldest ones in the Caucasus region. The origins of the culinary heritage of Armenia are as ancient as its history. The traditional bread, lavash, is the beauty and a staple of the Armenian food system. Being made in round holes dug in the ground, it has a unique baking technique that attracts travelers. Lavash was even added to “the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list in 2014” (Armenia Travel, 2019). Dolma, Mante, Choereg, Gata, Baklava, Boreg, Jengyalov Hats, and other dishes are a must to try, not to mention the wine and brandy or cognac. Armenia won the reward of legally calling it’s product a cognac at the Universal Expo of Paris. Selected as the best brandy during blind judging, Armenian cognac was also Churchill’s favorite. Local wineries and vineyards are worth special attention, given that Yerevan exceeds any other city in terms of brandy distillers per capita in the whole world (Micallef, 2018). Yerevan Wine Days usually take place in May on Saryan street. The event is accompanied by live music and dances along with the reviving of wine traditions featuring cheese and wine producers all over the country. This and other previously mentioned festivals are a perfect wrap up of an Armenian adventure for country visitors regardless of the purpose of travel.

Among popular restaurants to experience the entire palette of the Armenian and Caucasian cuisine are Lavash, Tumanyan Khinkali, Tavern Yerevan, Sherep, Vinograd, and others. Some of these even have open kitchens and allow visitors to follow the cooking processes of a large selection of traditional dishes (Armenia Travel, 2019). To combine the overall experience of foods and beverages, one has to visit at least one of the local festivals to experience Armenian hospitality at its highest. The list of annual festivals includes but is not

limited to Wine days in Armenia, Gata fest, Dolma fest, Tea and coffee festival, Watermelon festival, etc. (Kocharyan, 2020).

### **3.5 Adventure Tourism**

Armenia's tourism industry houses a plethora of tourism offerings, including adventure tourism, among the several categories of tourism that exist. With the rich selection of attractions and sights Armenia offers, it seems difficult to focus on just one type of tourism to market to potential travelers. In order to draw a new, younger demographic to Armenia, adventure tourism has the greatest potential for success. Although the focus of our project is not solely this type of tourism, it is the most attractive for a youth market and, therefore, should be mentioned. Adventure tourism is defined as "a trip that includes at least two of the following three elements: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion", which can be used to further cater to the desired target crowd.

In essence, adventure tourism is about fully immersing oneself in a foreign country or environment while being physically active or doing a physical activity such as hiking, rock climbing, swimming, or similar activities. Young generations commonly referred to as Millennials and Gen Z have coined the term "FOMO" or the "Fear Of Missing Out" which "...[stems] from the fear of being left behind when one's friends are having more fun [and] Millennials are constantly looking for the next big adventure" (Franchina, 2018). This "FOMO" could be used in order to entice the younger generations to Armenia by creating an image of a country brimming with excitement that could feel near impossible to resist. In the same way that for London pubs, the Queen, and Big Ben come to mind, Armenia must create a firm image that makes potential travelers have a desperate yearning to see the country.

Armenia's adventure tourism offerings include a multitude of amusement, water, and adventure parks for travelers to visit. However, none of these parks are as well-known as Yell Extreme Park as seen in Figure 3 (Shreveport-Bossier Convention, 2013), located in the heart of the Yenoqavan Mountains, which offers zip-lining, a rope park, horseback riding, paintball, off-roading, rock climbing, and paragliding. Additionally, according to the park's website, "new activities are being added to the list of previous ones" (Paruyryan, n.d.).



**Figure 3:** *Yell Extreme Park* (Source: Shreveport-Bossier Convention, 2013)

### **3.6 Target Audience**

Tourism in Armenia has historically attracted older people. As a result, we are targeting the younger generation of travelers due to State Tourism Committee's research findings that indicate that this demographic is most desirable to increase within the tourism industry. The Millennial generation is classified as people from 24 to 35 years old. When targeting this group to increase tourism, online marketing is a very effective tool. A high proportion of Millennials say that a good online marketing campaign can convince them to go to a destination (Sofronov, 2018). Millennials also account for close to 20% of the current travel market and this is expected to grow after more Millennials reach a financial and career level and where they can afford to travel more (Sofronov, 2018). By 2030, the net worth of Millennials is expected to increase by more than five times and in the United States alone they are set to inherit more than \$68 trillion (Kelly, 2019). This means that in the future this generation is going to be able to spend even more money on non-essentials such as travel and leisure activities.

Millennials' mindset may differ from previous generations' mindset in regard to traveling and spending money. With the emergence of social media and the rise of influencers, younger people are more likely to see travel as a marker of social status than previous generations (Siegel, 2018). Millennials and the younger generations are also more likely than older generations to choose to gain experiences, including travel, over physical wealth and goods. This is very important to us because this could allow us to increase the number of Millennial travelers in Armenia by advertising to them and showing what Armenia has to offer specially because after the COVID-19 outbreak is over they will be the most likely to travel again.

### **3.7 Past Initiatives**

In 2019, an IQP team was also working in the tourism sector in Armenia. Their project was to make Armenia more accessible to the average traveler by developing a smartphone

application. This team saw an issue with the information available to tourists using the internet to plan trips and when visiting sites and sought a way to condense all available information in one place. They did this with the Smart Itinerary app. This app targets the same audience as our project because they were specifically targeting millennials (Snyder, B. J., Ornstein, H. M., Jay, O. W., & Wirkala, R. D., 2019). While the student-made app does not appear to have been published, another app called Armenia Guide is similar and achieves all the same goals set out by the student group. Along with the Armenia Guide there are many others that specialize with traveling in Armenia. Some examples of these are Yerevan Events, Hike Armenia, Localz, Spyrur, and Other Yerevan (10 Armenia Mobile Apps, n.d). These apps all set out to achieve different tasks but their main focus shares the goal of making traveling and finding information about traveling more easily available to everyone visiting Armenia.

### **3.8 Challenges to Tourism Growth in Armenia**

Restrictions to Armenia's tourism growth fall under four categories: Awareness, access, experience, and environment. The first challenge to industry growth is a lack of awareness of Armenia as a desirable tourist destination. As a result, Armenia does not meet its full potential for tourism growth. Current branding within the global market does not sufficiently showcase the value of this country's tourism offerings, which contributes to this unawareness and often incorrect impressions of Armenia. There is a distinct lack of diversity in the different marketing platforms, particularly business-to-business marketing channels such as travel agents and agencies (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020). As a result, Armenia loses out on the exposure to target markets, which correlates directly to their inability to boost revenue.

Another primary challenge to tourism in Armenia is the lack of infrastructure, which also limits its growth. The relatively new government structures and lack of resources allocated to this industry sector are also a detriment. For example, Georgia, a neighboring country, commits 6.9% of its annual budget on tourism in comparison to Armenia at 4.7%, and as a result, is expected to attract four times the number of visitors at 8.7 million arrivals as of 2019. To be more specific, one of Armenia's neighbors, Georgia, spends approximately 6m GEL (\$2.1m) a year to promote the country in Russia (Morrison, 2019). In total, Georgia spent 17m GEL (\$5.96m) on advertising in 2019 (Morrison, 2019). This is compared to Armenia's budget of around \$250,000 for tourism promotion and marketing (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020). Georgia also gets significantly more visitors, having surpassed 8 million tourist visits per year in 2018, compared to Armenia's 1.6 million tourists. While Armenia and Georgia are neighboring countries, due to Georgia having a higher budget, they are able to entice more tourists per year with measures Armenia does not have the resources for.

Limited physical access is another major issue that prevents Armenia's tourism industry from advancing success. This challenge is mainly due to a lack of airport and road infrastructure. Many airlines are hesitant to establish direct routes to Armenia due to low-profit expectations. These expectations stem from the inability by airlines to utilize Yerevan as a hub for airplane maintenance or crew housing and fluctuation of passenger numbers on existing flights. Additionally, many travelers find it difficult to reach the country via land. There are limited options for border crossings since 80% of Armenia's land borders are closed (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020). Although 42% of travelers in a 2019 survey marked having a strong interest in traveling in this region, political tensions limit connection to Turkey and Azerbaijan (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020).

Additionally, there are many issues that detract from the overall experience that Armenia has to offer its tourists and decrease the likelihood of satisfaction, many of which include poor road quality and transportation, limited accommodation, poor management of sites, limited travel resources, and lack of skilled personnel in key tourism industries. For one, road quality remains a primary detriment to the tourist experience in Armenia. According to a 2019 Spotlight Survey, tourists cite that limited road maintenance and winding roads are a major point of frustration for travelers (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020). In terms of housing accommodation, only 13 hotels in the country officially rank to international standards set by the International Organization for Standardization, which often leads to disappointed tourists who are not receiving a standard of quality they expect. The International Organization Standard Certification is an "independent, third-party verification that creates documents that provide requirements, specifications, guidelines or characteristics that can be used consistently to ensure that materials, products, processes, and services are fit for their purpose" (Standards, 2019). Although most tourists are satisfied by the current options, some are dissatisfied due to a mismatch in expectation of accommodation based upon payment and previous travel experiences. On another note, research by the State Tourism Committee of Armenia has cited that preservation of historical sites and site maintenance has begun to deteriorate in the past decade, indicating a lack of tourism product, upkeep, innovation, and diversification (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020). Likewise, there has been some frustration from tourists as a result of pollution and degradation of Armenia's natural land areas. Additionally, tourists often find there are too few activities to take part in within each site they visit and are unaware of the activities that do exist. Furthermore, the language barrier between tourists and Armenians also derogate from the overall experience. A lack of specialized training is also an issue as Armenia's food and wine sectors both require a high degree of specialization in order to make an impression on global tourists (Strategy for the Growth of Armenia's Tourism Sector, 2020).

### **3.9 Project Statement**

Armenia has a large number of tourism sites and offerings available to travelers that are not well known. Assisting in creating a tourism marketing plan would vastly increase awareness of these sites and offers, and further advance the economy. The scope of this project therefore consists of research culminating in a short-term plan to help mitigate the effects of COVID-19. Along with this plan, we will be creating marketing materials such as a list of FAQs to go on Armenia's official tourism website and a promotional video to be distributed by the State Tourism Committee via key marketing channels. The stakeholders, along with our sponsor, are the businesses and people whose income is supported by the tourism industry in Armenia. While COVID-19 is still running its course, this industry may not survive without government intervention. Stimulus packages from the government must be paired with a plan to immediately go into effect in order to begin negating the effects of this pandemic. The goal of this short-term marketing plan is to provide the State Tourism Committee with specific recommendations to help the tourism industry recover and, more importantly, grow stronger once the pandemic ends.

## **4. Methodology**

Our goal is to create a short-term marketing plan to help Armenia's tourism industry recover and grow after the disastrous effects of COVID-19. In order to achieve our goal, we completed the following objectives:

1. Create elements of a short-term marketing plan for Armenia's tourism industry
2. Determine the best path for potential crisis mitigation through expert interviews
3. Consult with experts and our sponsor to create a list of FAQs and revise the official Armenia travel website, [armenia.travel](http://armenia.travel), to become more tourist friendly
4. Create elements of a social media campaign for the current COVID-19 crisis in Armenia.

We analyzed other countries that have experienced a crisis resulting in a negative impact on the travel industry. Then we determined the countries most comparable to Armenia and evaluated their tourism plans post-crisis. By reviewing expert interviews and the results of a survey about tourism we distributed, we gained insight into the interviewees expertise, what effect they personally saw on their field, and what they predicted would occur in the future in reference to the tourism sector. The questions focused on how these experts personally dealt with COVID-19 in their business or industry and what they believed the industry as a whole should be doing. We revised the Armenia Travel website to propose possible solutions to attract more tourists and improve user experience. Additionally, we edited and increased the FAQs to have them better serve the needs of a potential traveler. Besides, we analyzed scholarly works and other tourism campaigns via social media to determine key criteria of a social media campaign. Then utilizing these elements, we finalized our social media and marketing recommendations to our sponsor.

### **4.1 Elements of a Short-Term Marketing Plan for Crisis Mitigation**

The first objective was to analyze the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Armenia's economy and in doing so, come up with specific elements of a short-term marketing plan for crisis mitigation. To best understand how a plan was formulated for when the crisis ends, other countries that have gone through similar ordeals were analyzed by looking at their past tourism initiatives after they had gone through a crisis of similar economic magnitude. Countries best suited to guide Armenia to success after the pandemic ends include Egypt and Tunisia. While they themselves had not gone through a past epidemic, civil unrest and revolution had similar impacts on tourism and the country's economy. Egypt's revolution "...started with marches, demonstrations, and civil resistance on January 25 [2011]" (Egypt Revolution, 2016) and ended 18 days later on February 11 when the President announced he "would resign...handing over power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces" (Egypt Revolution, 2016). Tunisia, on the other hand, started their revolution on December 18, 2010 and lasted until January 14, 2011.

Both countries had put intense focus on their tourism departments once the revolutions had ended and had made a more than successful economic comeback. For instance, Tunisia had a visitor arrival loss of about 49% in 2011 but post revolution, a growth of 56% arrivals or 737,387 tourists visiting Tunisia in 2019 (CEIC Data, 2019). Between 2010 and 2011, Egypt's arrivals had decreased from 14.7 million to 9.844 million (CEIC, 2019); however, due to Egypt devaluing its currency (Cario, 2016) and terrorist attacks in 2016, the tourist industry took a hard hit and dropped to 5.3 million new arrivals. Yet, with aggressive marketing, Egypt more than doubled the low of 2016 to have an average total of 11.3 million new arrivals for the year (Coffey, 2020). We reviewed these countries' past tourism plans and finally created elements of a plan that can go into effect as soon as possible to negate the effects of COVID-19 on the Armenian economy.

#### **4.2 Potential Crisis Mitigation**

We turned to expert advice for actions that can be taken during and shortly after the pandemic. The experts we interviewed were suggested by both our advisors at WPI and AUA in addition to our sponsor at the State Tourism Committee. The questions we asked these experts shaped the plans we formed as a group and have the potential to influence the actions the State Tourism Committee takes. For the interviews we followed the guidelines in the paper *A methodological guide to using and reporting on interviews in conservation science research*. This paper outlines what a “good” question for an interview with experts looks like and the processes that should be taken when formulating the questions. An example of a “good” question are questions that experts will answer in detail and about which they will feel comfortable sharing information while not breaking any ethics or social conventions (Young et al., 2018). Most of the interviews were not structured rigidly but we focused on questions that allowed us to gain insight into the interviewees expertise and what they see happening currently and what they predict will occur in the future in reference to the tourism sector. The questions focus on how these experts are personally dealing with COVID-19 in their business or industry and how they believe the industry as a whole should be doing.

We also received interview transcripts and conclusions conducted by Armine Israyelyan, a tourism expert for the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). She interviewed the Tourism Armenia Association, the Armenian Tourism Federation, the Armenian Guides Guild, the Adventure Tourism Association of Armenia, the B&B Association, and the Restaurant Association. These are interviewees to whom we did not have easy access. The questions that she asked were similar to the questions we asked during our interviews, however, she focused more on the businesses and financial side of the impacts of COVID-19.

Using experts' answers, we were able to more accurately gauge the impact of COVID-19 in Armenia and how we should formulate our short-term plan for action after the pandemic is



over. This information allowed us to be more accurate with the actions and short-term plans for recovery we formulated for the State Tourism Committee.

To supplement these interviews, we created a survey that was distributed to a population of mainly WPI students and faculty. Our results were skewed in this way because it was disseminated via a WPI faculty email alias and word of mouth by our group. This dealt with travel post COVID-19 pandemic and was used to gauge how willing the general population was and how long they would want to wait before traveling. It also addresses how many people have heard of and are willing to travel to Armenia. This information supplemented the knowledge we gained from the expert interviews by allowing us to determine when and why the general public will travel again. We aggregated these data into an easy to digest format by charting age versus their responses to how likely they are to travel in the future as well as their knowledge about Armenia to more accurately tell the State Tourism Committee on whom they should be focusing their effort.

### **4.3 FAQs and Website Revision**

In our third objective, we focused on the list of FAQs and revisions of the Armenia Travel website to make it more tourist-friendly and thus draw more visitors in. We received a list of FAQs from our sponsor and edited them for accuracy and cohesion in a shared Google Doc. However, while working on that document, we realized that the list could be expanded even more, given the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions and possible tourist precautions once borders reopen. To that end, we tasked ourselves with online research to understand a potential visitor's needs and wants better, and to update the list to make it as relevant to current global events as possible. We carefully analyzed various FAQs on other Armenian tourist agencies' websites such as One Way Tour, Just Dilijan It, Hyur Service, and Caucasus Holiday to find common trends and address the questions not included in the existing list. We put all of our ideas as a separate section in the same shared document and edited those collectively before sharing it with our sponsor.

As a team, we also reviewed the homepage of the State Tourism Committee's website, Armenia.Travel, to come up with possible suggestions and feedback in order to provide a better user experience. By the same principle, we used a shared Google document to put all of our ideas together, edit those, and share the results with the State Tourism Committee's PR team. In this regard, we generated ideas by looking at other websites and reading articles about the biggest web trends in 2020. We compared the overall readability, the visual appearance of the text, fonts and lettering, spaces, animation, design, images and layouts with tourism websites such as New Zealand, Go to Bermuda, Namibia Tourism, Explore St. Louis, which not only inspired us but also helped propose more creative solutions. The homepage links were also checked to see

whether they led to their correct pages and if they didn't, they were added to our feedback and suggestions list.

These changes, along with the FAQs, were to polish the website as a primary resource for potential visitors. By keeping the website updated, we are offering support tools so that tourists can be prepared to travel safely and plan their trips efficiently while using this information.

#### **4.4 Elements of a Social Media Presence**

In order to complete our final objective, we investigated successful tourism campaigns via social media. We examined peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, blog posts, and specific social media campaigns in order to apply our findings to specific tasks given to us by the State Tourism Committee and an overall social media strategy. Once that research was complete, we compared all of our suggested social media hashtags, posts, challenges to the key aspects of a successful social media presence for tourism marketing. The key aspects were: increasing awareness of the destination, reaching global publicity, encouraging visitors to plan their journey, strengthening the destination image as a favorite destination, and targeting a specific market (Királ'ová, 2015). We verified that our ideas adhered to these key elements further discussed in the next section of our report. Then, we compared these elements to our ideas by ensuring that all of our ideas made a conscious effort in reaching a global market and adhered to the brand we attempted to help create for Armenia. For example, we suggested the hashtag “#HeritageArmenia” which portrays to the audience the image of Armenia as a destination rich in culture and history. However, we found that meeting all of the criteria listed was not completely necessary for every idea, tag, post, or challenge suggestions, as our criteria may not have been applicable for that idea.

We also worked on alternatives for live performances on Facebook proposed by the State Tourism Committee to entertain citizens while they are isolated in their homes. We consulted with our sponsors to find appropriate entertainers for these live performances. All of this correspondence was completed through Zoom meetings with our team and our sponsor. We researched and proposed famous and accessible hosts and then compiled a list in order to present to our sponsors who then provided approval and feedback so that we could further curate that list. In addition, we provided input on a pre-existing script written by our sponsor's public relations team, which was designed to raise spirits and hope for the future during this time of quarantine. They sent us the preliminary draft of the script prior to filming and production, which our team then reviewed and provided appropriate feedback. The next draft given to us took into consideration our edits, and we gave our final feedback to the State Tourism Committee. Our edits and revisions focused on the accompanying visual imagery, clarity, and precision of language, and the overall message conveyed to the audience.

## 5. Results

Our results section includes analysis of countries comparable to Armenia in regards to their tourism industry and elements of a short-term marketing plan. We have also discussed expert interviews conducted and the results of a survey about tourism our team created. We have also mentioned website revisions and a list of official FAQs for the Armenia Travel website. Lastly, we discussed how we've created elements of a social media presence for the Armenian tourism industry.

### 5.1 Elements of a Short-Term Marketing Plan for Crisis Mitigation

Our first objective was to compare the current pandemic's effect on Armenian tourism to tragedies that have befallen other countries, which resulted in similar impacts. While the countries used for comparison had not gone through a recent pandemic, they experienced major political upheaval which made the country too dangerous to visit for a period of time. These countries, as mentioned in the Methodology, are Egypt and Tunisia.

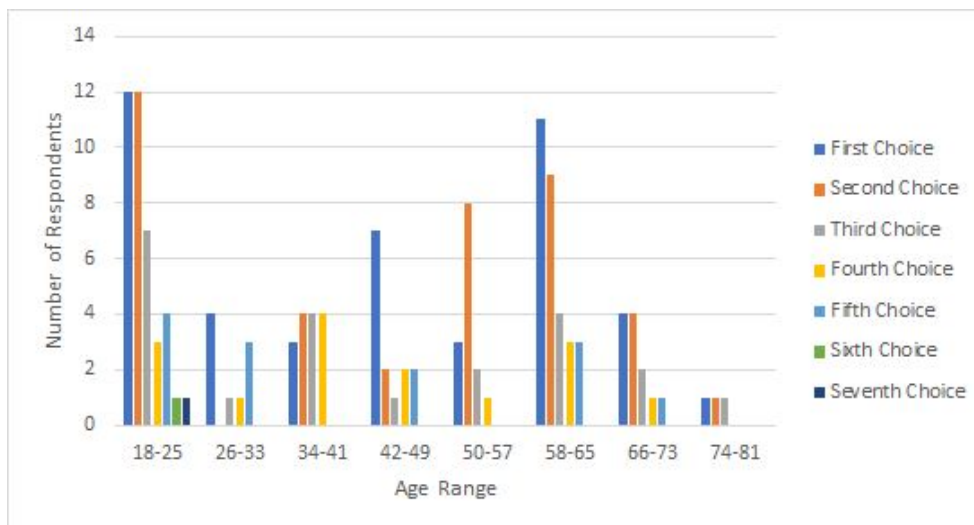
Once the Arab Spring protests calmed, Egypt focused on a total rebranding, starting the initiative with an event titled "Eternal Light. Something Old, Something New" (Reda, 2018). The rebranding was kicked off with an event at the Egypt Museum to showcase new works of art in contrast to historic relics. The event was described as allowing attendees "...[to] see how the backdrop of ancient Egyptian artifacts [imbued] the modern and contemporary works with deeper resonance" (Egyptian, 2017). By creating a first step that connected the old Egypt (reminiscent of pyramids and pharaohs) with the new modern Egypt, the exhibit displayed to the world that the country "...[continued] to play a crucial role in artistic and cultural life" (Egyptian, 2017). Once Egypt was established as a country beginning its revival of the tourism industry post-Arab Spring, other measures were taken to entice tourists to consider Egypt as a travel destination. In addition to "...reducing levies for airlines and tour operators" Egypt had also focused intensely on "security reforms, [spending] millions of dollars on upgrading security at its airports...[and] publicized the high profile visits [of celebrities]" (Dahir, 2017).

Other focuses were "...through social media platforms and social media influencers and bloggers, international tourism campaigns and travel Expos" (Reda, 2018) in addition to making Egypt a safer and more welcoming place for tourists overall. Armenia should implement some of the initiatives starting with a FAQ page on their website to answer questions potential visitors may have; such as safety concerns, recommendations for families, and cuisine information for visitors with food allergies. In a post-pandemic world Armenia should consider these increased security measures, especially for incoming travelers who could be sick and spread the disease within the country. Additionally, to truly signify that Armenia has opened its borders and entice new travelers to the country, a large-scale event may want to be considered. Whether it be an art exhibition as Egypt did with "Something Old, Something New" remains undecided for now, but

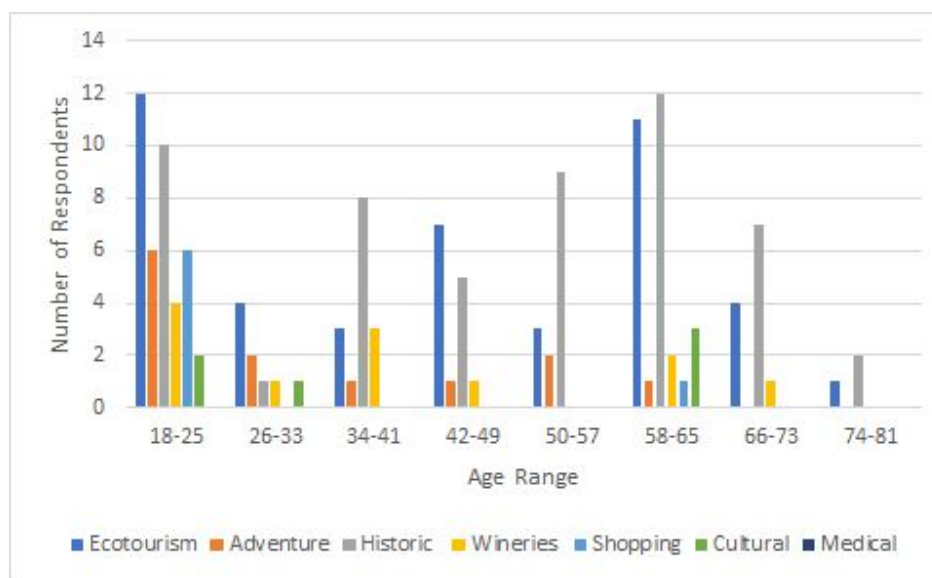
organizing an event for the arts could be beneficial to spark interest in the country. Other ideas Armenia could adopt from Egypt include diversifying their targets to have a tourist base from far more countries than their current focus. Egypt had focused on spreading their reach as far as possible and, unfortunately, with so many Armenian businesses losing money by the day, a far larger net must be cast in order to bring in revenue once the country is ready from a variety of countries.

Once the Arab Spring protests ended in Tunisia, tourism strategies needed a reboot to recover the economy since Tunisia is “...one of those countries which tourism is a main plank of the economy” (Noureddine, 2017). The first move by the newly democratic country was to improve the current hotel and hospitality infrastructure. By both updating the old hotels and the organizational system, many new job opportunities were created. This move was a two-fold economic boost for the country that could be borrowed by Armenia not as instituting hotels, but checking over the existing infrastructure to see what weak points exist in the system. The other plan Tunisians used was a “...communication campaign.... channeled through high-credibility media to change the attitudes of tourists” (Noureddine, 2017). However, it must be noted that after Tunisia had completed these efforts to redo their tourist infrastructure and was on the path to healing their economy, a series of terrorist attacks by ISIL occurred in 2015 which caused tourism to stop overnight where the first attack killed 38 tourists at a beach in Sousse (Historic Timeline, n.d.).

As displayed in Figure 4, there were dramatically more responses for the 18-25 year old range whereas ages such as 26-33 and 74-81 had far lower numbers. Quite unfairly, this skewed the results to tip for ecotourism to be recorded as the group most ages would rank as their first choice. However, even with the unequal age distribution, ecotourism was by far the first choice in most age ranges with the exception of 34-41 and 50-57 year olds. But even here, ecotourism ranked as the second choice. While some more niche tourism types should be advertised dependent on social media platforms used by different age groups, ecotourism should be displayed on platforms all groups readily access. This could be on websites such as YouTube, cable television, or popular Armenian websites.



**Figure 4:** *Number of Respondents for Ecotourism vs Age*



**Figure 5:** *Highest Ranked Tourism Type vs Age Range*

The majority of the figure above depict the same result: most potential tourists prefer eco- and historic tourism in regards to Armenia. Ecotourism tourism works to conserve natural habitats and their wildlife while historic tourism includes seeing monasteries or relics from the past to understand how the world was in years before the potential tourist was born. However, for one age group adventure tourism, or trips designed to thrill and raise one's heart rate, is the second most enticing type of tourism (26-33 year old range).

## 5.2 Potential Crisis Mitigation

Our second objective was to seek the opinions and advice from experts in the tourism field to generate strategic ideas and recommendations in order to help the tourism sector recover. In particular, we focused on experts who are in Armenia or have had past experiences working in the country. This allowed us to give the most accurate recommendations to the State Tourism Committee and helped them make plans to help tourism businesses during this crisis.

In our interviews, one main point multiple experts shared is that one of the first target audiences to focus on for marketing should be domestic travelers within Armenia due to this demographic being the first to start traveling in large numbers again. Once countries start recovering, they are most likely to reopen travel within their borders first while the rest of the world continues to deal with COVID-19 cases. Additionally, international travelers might be wary of travel to less familiar places. This severely impacts tourism around the world because most places with large tourism sectors rely mainly on international travelers. Jason Sohigian, the former CEO of the Armenia Tree Project, was one of many experts who mentioned this. He says that international tourists should know what tourism offerings are available in Armenia so they can more accurately plan and know what to expect when they arrive. He also agreed with multiple other experts, saying that the tourism infrastructure needs to be improved for tourists to feel safe in order for them to travel in large numbers.

Another insight that we gained during our interviews is that tourism related businesses were exceptionally impacted by COVID-19. With all the flights in and out of Armenia canceled as well as the borders being closed, the tourism industry basically closed overnight. According to Megan Starr, a travel blogger and the co-founder of Absolute Armenia blog, people who had been employed as tourism guides or otherwise involved in the tourism sector have moved to other jobs, oftentimes food delivery jobs. This could have a negative impact on the industry as a whole because some of these trained individuals might not return to the tourism sector once this pandemic is over. This could lead to a lack of skilled workers in the workforce in the near future. As a result, we will have to recommend trying to secure these existing workers for future employment. Setting up training to assist the hiring of new employees for these businesses involved in the tourism industry is another avenue that employers can pursue to help replenish the workforce. This will help Armenia's tourism sector to recover as fast as possible.

Albert Poghosyan, CEO of 360stories, a website where users can view tourism sites in 360 degrees, has seen a large increase in website traffic during this pandemic. They have seen eight times the number of visitors and 20 times the total page views. The total data used by the website went from 100 gigabytes in February to over 500 gigabytes in March. On the other hand, the website makes its money from selling bookings and experiences at the locations that the website displays. Over several months they had zero bookings but experienced a large increase

in web traffic. 360stories believes that this is the result of a large number of visitors coming to the site to try and fantasize about travel with no intentions of actually traveling. This source of income has completely closed. This could be from multiple reasons most of which directly relate to uncertainty from the COVID-19 pandemic. People could be less likely to book trips in advance if they don't know for certain that they will be able to travel. People who visit the website could also just be bored during this crisis and are using the website to look at destinations that they have no desire to go to when the travel bans are over.

Other experts raised different and unique concerns about their specific businesses. Constantine Orbelian, who is the Artistic Director at the Yerevan Opera Theatre in Yerevan, brought up the point that for people in the arts profession, taking a few months off means months of make-up work and training. He also mentioned that people in the arts have everything booked for four to five years out and have their income planned that far in advance as well. Not having any income for a long period of time, like we are seeing now, can really put these performers in a tough spot as they have very little to no safety net. He also has concerns about how places like concert halls and opera houses can't function with social distancing norms. The people on stage cannot adhere to them and the common spaces and seating inside these buildings are very tight and don't have the required space for social distancing between people. Along with this, he stated that people go to these places for the experience. If they were to host these events online, he believes that some of the "magic" of the experience will be lost. However, if these venues were to post some of their backlogs, if they have one, online it could drive future sales as more people are exposed to the experiences previously offered.

Vardan Mktrchyan who is the Artistic Director of Gabriel Sundukyan National Academic Theatre had the idea to send out a survey that was specifically formatted and directed at Armenian audiences to find what would be the most popular shows and what people are specifically wanting from their local theaters. This would be used to tailor shows to fit what most people would be wanting to see.

Zarmine Zeitounstian, a former chair at the Tourism Committee and a lecturer at the American University of Armenia, reconfirmed points made by other experts. She said that Armenia should start aggressively marketing and promoting Armenia now to help with tourism figures in the future as well as suggesting that there should be a focus on domestic tourism. She also suggests that in order to promote domestic tourism there should be a series of workshops of some sort in several regions and villages in order to spur travel and domestic tourism as soon as the travel restrictions are lifted.

Marci Koltonuk said that the business in which she is employed, Vaya Adventures, were not experiencing a lot of cancelations from customers but they were seeing a lot of rescheduling and that they believe that there will be an explosion of travel after the restrictions are lifted.

Marci suggested that businesses keep bookings open so that they have a source of income available. She also suggested that countries and businesses should distribute knowledge about their destinations and offerings in order to further build interest in travel. In a similar vein of thought, David Hoffman, who is well known for his webseries *David's Been Here*, says that there should be a way for tourists to know how to keep safe while abroad. He specifically mentions sanitization methods like bathrooms and hand sanitizer stations for use during the pandemic as well as after. He does not elaborate on how this should be accomplished but it could be distributed with the information Marci mentioned.

Armine Israyelyan conducted her own interviews and sent the responses she gathered back to our group. She interviewed the Tourism Armenia Association, the Armenian Tourism Federation, the Armenian Guides Guild, the Adventure Tourism Association of Armenia, the B&B Association, and the Restaurant Association. All of these associations and businesses were seeing similar effects from the lockdown. They all saw an 80-90% percent reduction in revenues, very high turnover for employees, and all of them said that a cancelation of events or loss of bookings was affecting their business. A lot of these associations also said that they were shifting their focus to marketing activities from normal business operations.

Our group also developed a survey to send out to predominantly WPI students and faculty to learn the popular opinion about traveling in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This survey was conducted to give a glimpse as to why specifically Americans may or may not want to travel during the pandemic and will help our sponsor tailor their marketing strategy, if they choose to pursue Americans as a target audience. Additionally, our survey had 137 total respondents and, while the results are not 100% conclusive, they still suggest possible courses of action that corroborate the recommendations we receive from expert interviews.

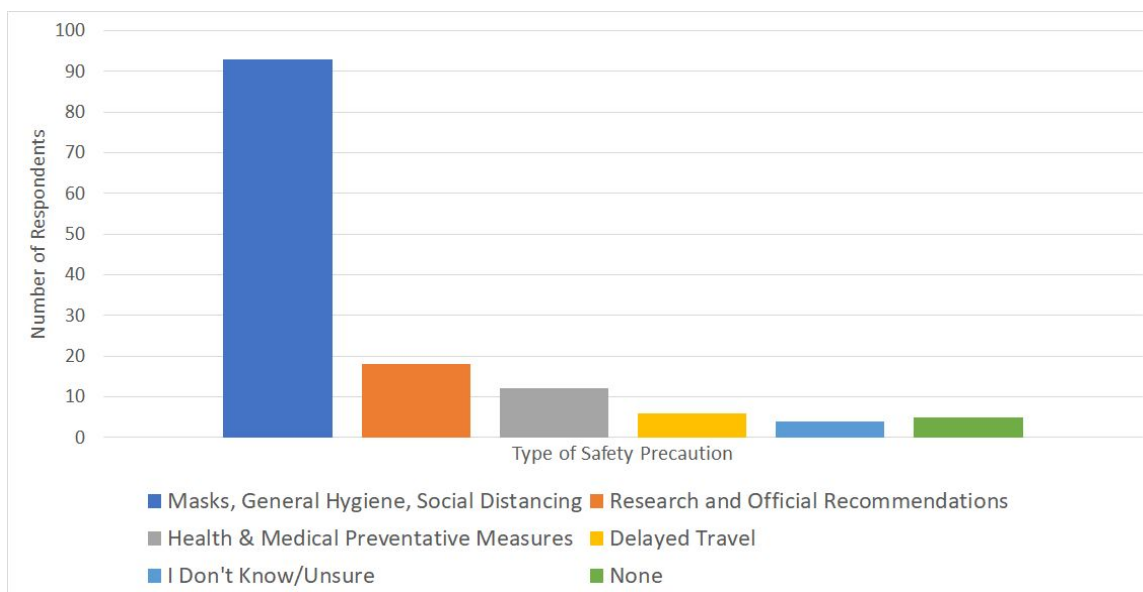
After aggregating this data, we found that respondents from all age groups collectively opted to not travel until months following the pandemic. More specifically, just over half of the 18-25 and 26-33 respondents chose that they would travel either immediately after or weeks after the pandemic ends (Figure 6). These are the groups that the State Tourism Committee should more aggressively target with marketing because they are the most likely to travel. Our survey had a skewed age distribution. A majority of the respondents were either in the 18-25 age bracket or the 58-65 age bracket, with a smaller number of respondents for the other age brackets. As said before in all brackets the majority of responses were to travel months after the pandemic. In most of these there was a significant number of responses of waiting to travel a year or more after the pandemic. This could be a concern for the tourism industry as if a significant number of people wait that long after the travel restrictions are lifted to travel, then tourism recovery could take an extended period of time.





**Figure 6:** *Willingness to Travel post-Coronavirus by Age Range*

After aggregating this data, we found that respondents from all age groups collectively opted to not travel until months following the pandemic. More specifically, just over half of the 18-25 and 26-33 respondents chose that they would travel either immediately after or weeks after the pandemic ends (Figure 6). These are the groups that the State Tourism Committee should more aggressively target with marketing because they are the most likely to travel. Our survey had a skewed age distribution. A majority of the respondents were either in the 18-25 age bracket or the 58-65 age bracket, with a smaller number of respondents for the other age brackets. As said before in all brackets the majority of responses were to travel months after the pandemic. In most of these there was a significant number of responses of waiting to travel a year or more after the pandemic. This could be a concern for the tourism industry as if a significant number of people wait that long after the travel restrictions are lifted to travel, then tourism recovery could take an extended period of time.



**Figure 7:** *Number of Respondents and the Travel Precautions Post-Pandemic*

As earlier mentioned in our expert interviews, tourism infrastructure needs to be improved to help tourists feel safe when traveling following the pandemic. One major area that needed an update to set potential tourists' minds at ease was in sanitation. Particularly at historic sites such as the monasteries, there were no places for tourists to wash their hands until they arrived back in the city. For the Armenia Tree Project, or ATP, this issue was a major area of possible injury because they had tourists out digging in the soil, interacting with trees or other surfaces that could have wildlife feces or diseases, and then possibly touching their faces or open cuts before they managed to find a sanitation area. As illustrated in the figure below, by far the highest concern for post-pandemic travel is readily available masks, general hygiene equipment, and measures for social distancing. At far lower numbers come research and official recommendations, which include following Centers for Disease Control or government recommendations, or personal research via a destination's official website or the media. With even fewer numbers is the health and medical preventative measures category with responses such as increasing health insurance, testing for the virus and waiting for a vaccine, delayed travel, then unsure of measures to take or none at all.

### 5.3 FAQs and Website Revision

Once we organized our FAQs and website suggestions into a Google document, we shared them with Gayane Ayvazyan and Grace Jerejian. We discussed the results and solutions our team suggested during our sponsor meeting. Please, find our FAQs in a supplementary document.

When discussing the questions with the committee, we found that some of the questions that might interest international travelers were not covered on the website deliberately. As a result, our sponsor advised us not to include any LGBTQ-related questions and focus on other topics instead. Even though we think there can be visitors of different orientations who will need guidance as to which places are LGBTQ-friendly in Armenia and how they might be treated in the Armenian society, our sponsor explained that Armenia is a conservative country. It turned out that the State Tourism Committee had not addressed these and similar questions before intentionally, knowing that those individuals would not be accepted in Armenia. Therefore, following our sponsor's advice, we took that information out. The State Tourism Committee welcomed the rest of the questions and the edits of the previous FAQs they had sent to us earlier. Consequently, the results of our work were communicated to the IT department for publishing purposes.

As for the website revisions, we analyzed the homepage, as requested by our sponsor Gayane. We went over different links to see how they work, skimmed the visual aspects of the website, checked the homepage content for accuracy and came up with recommendations that we discussed with Gayane and Grace. However, they will be elaborated on our recommendations section.

#### **5.4 Elements of a Social Media Presence**

Our final objective is to determine key elements of a social media presence to our sponsor. To complete this objective, we examined sources regarding how to create a successful campaign. As a result of our research, we have found that key objectives of a tourism campaign include: increasing awareness of the destination, reaching global publicity, encouraging visitors to plan their journey, strengthening the destination image as a favorite destination, and targeting a specific market (Kiráľová, 2015). While adhering to these objectives, it is essential that all content within a tourism campaign via social media is interactive and provides opportunities for meaningful engagement with potential tourists and other social media users (11 Digital Marketing, 2015).

Increasing or creating awareness about a destination is pivotal to a successful campaign. Therefore, leveraging social media can put Armenia on the map as a destination worth visiting for its unique tourism offerings. Along the same lines, it is important that the campaign aims to reach a global scale, or to tailor content and make that content accessible to all potential tourists, even those outside a target demographic. When encouraging tourists to plan vacations to a destination, there are four stages of the travel customer journey that can be used for marketing in the tourism sector: dreaming, planning, booking, and experiencing (11 Digital Marketing, 2015). Marketing professionals need to target potential tourists at every stage. For example, Armenia offers a variety of historic and cultural sites to tourists. Our sponsor may very well promote this

information to influence potential tourists into choosing a tour, advise the best time for booking, and highlight the ease of the booking process.

In curating content for this type of campaign, marketing professionals are asserting a specific image of this destination in the mind of potential customers or tourists. One of the most successful methods for achieving a favorable destination image and increasing awareness is leveraging user-generated content. Many successful campaigns, including *The Ultimate Thailand Explorers* and *Date a Hot Scot*, resulted in more views and meaningful interactions (Alžbeta, 2014). These examples both leveraged social media competitions, which remain a successful method for increasing visibility. In the former, five teams were given the opportunity to win a free six-day holiday exploring one of Thailand's top destinations. As a result, these teams shared their experience on the internet via videos, pictures, stories on several social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Alžbeta, 2014).

When marketing to a target audience, it is important to keep in mind these specific points. In the case of our sponsor, our proposed strategies are targeted towards millennials and domestic tourists. However, the State Tourism Committee should keep specificity and empathy in mind when curating content for this campaign. For example, if we know that we are targeting young adults, we know this includes people under 25 who are likely unmarried and most likely to be involved in adventure tourism, so focusing their marketing strategy on this niche would prove beneficial. Therefore, we should address other attributes that make up this demographic in order to more accurately target this group. Additionally, our sponsor should maintain the perspective of potential tourists within the target demographic, which aids in the development of a profile of this target customer, informing every marketing decision thereafter (11 Digital Marketing, 2015).

Marketing professionals should also leverage all aspects of social media: meaningful engagement, visual media, and paid ad campaigns. It is significant for our sponsor to be prepared to have those meaningful interactions with their online audience through discussion, replying to comments, answering any questions, and offering exemplary customer service. These positive exchanges may influence another individual into a potential tourist. Social media has allowed the opportunity for creativity, so our sponsor should utilize videos, Instagram, and Facebook live stories, photographs, and other visual media to their advantage on all social media networks and the official Armenia tourism website (11 Digital Marketing, 2015).

## **6. Recommendations**

As a result of the research our team has conducted, we have suggested the following recommendations to our sponsor to aid in the recovery of the Armenian tourism industry post-coronavirus pandemic. We have developed key elements of a marketing plan, marketing strategies and suggestions for infrastructure improvements, website revisions, a list of FAQs, and key elements of a social media presence.

### **6.1 Elements of a Short-Term Marketing Plan for Crisis Mitigation**

The elements of a marketing plan are defined as the following eight steps: business goals, marketing goals, target audiences, messaging, strategy, tactics, budget, timing, and roles (Lavinsky, 2013). We focused on marketing goals, target audiences, and messaging. Marketing goals are realistic goals created to both fit within the specific timeline of a seven week project and work within the resources of our group, such as contacts from our sponsor and advisors. Our goal was to create a crisis mitigation and recovery plan for Armenia's tourism economy. In order to do this, past tourism plans must be analyzed from Egypt, Tunisia, and other countries who have gone through a crisis that affected tourism not mentioned in this paper. An event to display the arts will increase interest in that sector in addition to teaching people who might know very little, if anything about Armenia. Increasing knowledge about why Armenia is an interesting country worth making a bucket list destination is the first step to repairing the tourism economy. Tunisia's work with updating their tourist infrastructure to work on their hotels, transportation services, and overall organizational system for tourist resources in the country should be highly taken into consideration. While Armenia's hotels were far from being in the state of disrepair that Tunisia's were, additional training to prepare the hospitality sector for post-pandemic travel should have been considered. When training taxi drivers, hotel workers, and other members of the hospitality business interacting with tourists, they should learn common phrases in different languages. Persian (Farsi), for example, is the official language of Iran which directly borders Armenia.

Highlights of the plan we created include completing interviews with experts to gain knowledge of experts' experiences with events similar to COVID-19, if any, and what they personally would recommend, increasing a social media presence, and updating the Armenia tourism website, all of which are explained in greater detail later in this report. In reference to the expert interviews, we were specifically looking to see the background of the interviewee's to establish credibility for the recommendations that Armenia should take to help their tourism economy recover from the negative effects of the pandemic. Our team recommended a variety of slogans that adhere to Armenia's target brand as a travel destination. Armenia is host to a plethora of nature and adventure based tourism sites, so we decided to highlight this fact in many of our slogans. For example, we created slogans such as, "Get your wings, fly the hills", "Get

lost in Armenia”, and “Adventure awaits you”. To elaborate, the first tagline emphasizes the chance to paraglide in this country, which appeals to our target demographic who are young adults. The latter two also hint at the ability to encompass oneself in the lush forests, parks and other nature-centric attractions that Armenia has to offer. We also created slogans that speak of the rich history and culture of Armenia including “History at your fingertips”, “Your Year Wine”, “Where traditions meet” and “Historic treasures”. Many of these slogans can be used to promote historic events or places in Armenia on various social media platforms. “Your YereWine” and similar taglines can be used specifically to promote Yerevan Wine Days and the wine culture in Armenia. This work laid the foundation for a recovery plan to assist the tourism and travel industry’s recovery once social distancing has ended.

Target audiences focused on the ages of potential future tourists to create an advertising campaign with the specific ranges in mind to cater towards them. In a Qualtrics survey sent out by our group, a variety of ages answered with their preferred type of tourism, or what activities they would come to a country take part in, to allow us to understand the average age a certain type of tourism (whether adventure, medical, historical, or other types of tourism) would be attractive to that specific age group. Notably, out of 137 responses, over half the responses (72) stated that months after isolation orders have ended, they would be willing to travel. The second most popular response with 30 responses was the choice to travel weeks after the isolation orders have been lifted.

Messaging is also an incredibly important part of any marketing plan. This term encompasses establishing a brand position, creating slogans or a tagline for the project, and promoting the brand. Essentially, messaging includes the Facebook live chats, hashtags, and social media challenges created by our group and the Armenian government. Any campaign to make a cause, in this case, tourism in Armenia, more visible falls under this umbrella. Arguably the most important part of this crisis mitigation and recovery plan was advertising Armenia on a world wide scale during a time where everyone wants nothing more than to go outside or travel. In order for this project and indeed, the recovery of the tourism sector in Armenia to be successful, emphasis must be put on these advertisements during this time to sway potential travelers to visit Armenia.

## **6.2 Potential Crisis Mitigation**

We gathered information from our expert interviews that can be used to help Armenia’s tourism sector recover more quickly from the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the experts had similar ideas of how to help Armenia recover and we have condensed these into several recommendations. Our first recommendation is that the State Tourism Committee should focus on domestic travel recovery first. Even though historically Armenia has not had a large amount of domestic tourism, these outlets of tourism and revenue will be the first to open when the

pandemic starts to ramp down. The businesses that rely on tourism and travel to survive have seen very little, if any, business in the past few months, and in order for a lot of them to survive they need people scheduling trips with them. When the lockdowns are lifted the businesses that have advanced bookings will bring in more revenue than companies that don't as well as help other businesses, like museums and opera houses, who will gain from having more visitors.

This ties into our next recommendation, aggressive marketing, which, if done correctly, could lead to more bookings. In order to spur the recovery of travel and tourism, an aggressive marketing campaign is necessary. We recommend that the Tourism Committee keep making marketing material like the video created during our time with them which was about staying strong during the pandemic. Videos in this same format with more tourist friendly messaging should be used as content to spark interest in travel as well as direct interested travelers to the armenia.travel website so they can learn more about traveling to Armenia. This is the website set up by the State Tourism Committee and serves as a general landing page for people who want to know more about Armenia. Along with this the State Tourism Committee should work with the multitude of smartphone apps tailored for travel in Armenia. These include Yerevan Events, Hike Armenia, Localz, Spyur, and Other Yerevan. These apps will serve as a low-cost, efficient method of distributing tailored knowledge about Armenia to people who have an interest in visiting. We hope that with increased knowledge and understanding of what Armenia has to offer we can see a real world increase in booking figures. We also recommend that tourism sites and providers should keep their bookings open for late this year and early next year as a way for travelers to solidify their plans as well as creating a cash flow for these businesses. Some businesses we have discussed with experts had closed their future bookings because of the unknown status of travel restrictions. They should advertise these offerings in preparation for a large interest in travel immediately after the quarantine restrictions are over. However, a survey regarding interest in travel after quarantine was sent out by this group to gather information and while we did receive 140 responses, due to the locations of the group members and the networks they had a connection to, the results are skewed by way of location. In other words, as three of the members live in the United States and one in Armenia, the majority of people taking the survey are based in one of the two locations.

Our last recommendation for this objective is that tourism infrastructure needs to be improved. Transportation between villages is currently lacking as expressed by experts in our interviews. We recommend that some form of easy transportation for people looking to travel be available such as marshrutka or hop-on hop-off busses. This will allow for more access to tourism sites outside of Yerevan and promote more domestic travel. We advise the use of marshrutkas in particular because of the low cost, ease of running, and the low cost to travelers as well as having the capability to travel far outside of Yerevan. Actions that promote domestic travel will be very beneficial. Another type of infrastructure that needs to be improved is the number and cleanliness of sanitation facilities. With the COVID-19 crisis in mind, many tourists

may see the lack of clean, accessible bathroom facilities as a large barrier and inadequate or nonexistent facilities may affect their decision to travel to certain destinations or even Armenia as a whole. By increasing the availability of these facilities, we believe that tourists will be more willing to visit and spend time in Armenia.

### **6.3 FAQs and Website Recommendations**

We recommend that the State Tourism Committee expands the FAQs as they go to keep up with the tourist flow once the pandemic is over. Considering the predictions of the tourist experts discussed earlier, there is a high likelihood that at some point after the pandemic, the tourism industry will not only grow but will also diversify because of new routes from low-cost airlines. In other words, Armenia will expect more tourists from Europe. One way to keep up with the changing industry is to always interact with potential visitors to get a more profound grasp of their needs and wants. Thus, we recommend distributing the FAQs through different social media channels, in this respect, Facebook and Instagram, to make that information available to a broader audience as opposed to merely website visitors. Additionally, having periodic live Q&A sessions with Facebook followers of the State Tourism Committee will not only boost and solidify their engagement but will also serve as a method for generating ideas for future FAQs.

Finally, we envision the incorporation of individual FAQs into social media as stories or separate posts by also having the link to the website that follows the caption *to learn more*. In this case, if the visitor has even more questions after reading the post or the story with a specific FAQ, they can proceed to the official website and find more answers there. The frequency of these posts depends on audience engagement, which needs to be analyzed first. However, the State Tourism Committee might want to start with a couple of posts/stories per week, just like they did with #ArmeniaTalks live interviews and then adjust the frequency based on Facebook statistics of audience engagement.

As for the website, it is certainly an advantage to have it in foreign languages. However, while working on website edits, we spotted a lack of Armenian among language options. We recommend translating the website into Armenian as well since the information should be available to the Armenian audience as domestic travelers.

Another thing the State Tourism Committee might want to do is to move the COVID-19 banner to the top instead of having it in the middle. One needs to scroll through the webpage to notice it. Most websites have it at the top, which catches attention immediately and is visible even if the visitor decides not to scroll further. Along the same line, we noticed that the annual events calendar does not work, which needs to be fixed by the IT team. Likewise, the Nature and



Wildlife subpage takes the viewer back to the homepage. These issues were communicated to the State Tourism Committee representatives to make sure they would be addressed.

While exploring the Armenia Travel website, we noticed that the contact information is both on the top and at the bottom. Usually, most websites have it in one place. So, we recommended having the contact information with the respective icons at the bottom only not to make it seem repetitive.

Usually, blogs or articles attract more readers when they are structured in a magazine-style format. In that regard, we looked at the AUA admissions website as an example, where the text is formatted so that it does not take up much space while leaving the content unaffected by the formatting differences. So, our last suggestion is virtually squeezing the text to make it more compact and easy-to-read on a multitude of devices and platforms.

Our last suggestion in this section is a well-known practice among digital marketers. Hosting guest bloggers who already have a solid position and reputation will bring more visitors to the website. The practice of guest blogging differs from hiring individual bloggers in so far as a guest blogger is invited in exchange for another host agency blogger writing for the invited company's or individual's website. In a way, guest blogging is a writing exchange practice where both sides benefit in terms of new audiences or the readers of the other representative. Megan Starr, the founder of Absolute Armenia, can be an excellent resource since she has been in the blogging industry for years and may be able to help connect our sponsor with other bloggers writing in the same niche, which in this case, is tourism or Armenia. One possible contact we found is the Adventurous Kate blog run by a travel enthusiast who has also visited Armenia recently. We recommend reaching out to her and those with similar expertise to gain more insight on how to organize effective guest blogging so that it meets the expectations of the Travel Armenia website visitors and motivates them even more.

#### **6.4 Elements of a Social Media Presence**

Upon completing our final objective, we proposed the usage of different social media challenges and internet trends to our sponsor to raise awareness about Armenia as a popular tourist destination among foreigners. Our group recommended revisions on a motivational film, ideas for Facebook live shows, and hashtags and taglines to supplement the State Tourism Committee's current tourism campaign, which are included as supplementary materials. Our recommendations for the taglines, also known as slogans, were described in a previous section, so the hashtags, Facebook live shows, internet challenges, and revisions on a motivational film, will be discussed here. Finally, we discussed the overall importance of leveraging user generated content, such as these challenges, and social media platforms to strengthen our destination image in the effort to a global audience for our sponsor's campaign.

The social media presence recommendations deals with the Facebook live talks that happened during quarantine, sponsored by the State Tourism Committee to increase knowledge about Armenia and its prominent figures, was just the first step of this social media campaign. Suggestions for hashtags such as #liveArmenia, #ArmeniaMania, #DreamArmenia, #NewOld, and #doyoutravel were all suggested to create a familiar campaign these talks would fall under. For example, a Why Armenia? challenge could fall under #DreamArmenia to create an identity easily searchable and easy to remember for potential tourists. This challenge in particular dealt with tourists and locals posting pictures of Armenia and describing their favorite memory from their vacation or home. Other suggestions for shows were a series which features prominent Armenian musicians teaching different instruments to maintain interest in Armenia and peak interest in local bands. Story Armenia was recommended for historians or writers to do a Facebook live night where they would talk about interesting sites or popular books they had written and the sites that inspired them. Finally, Hello, Armenia! was created with Constantine Orbelian in mind where he could appear on the show and talk about his work. This included his favorite shows directed or stories about backstage to give listeners an unique insight into a side of shows they may not know about. Other guests for this series could include political figures, fashion designers, or other prominent members of Armenian society. There is a similar style of talk known as Fireside Chats in Armenia, which is the basis of this idea.

As for our recommendations for internet challenges, we suggested the #BookinAdvance challenge. We recognized that the COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented and unpredictable; however, people may participate by sharing via social media the sites they want to visit, therefore, maintaining a more positive perspective about the tourism industry for the future. Going into greater detail about our revisions for the State Tourism Committee's motivational video, our major critiques included showing each camera shot for a longer period of time to create a greater sense of cohesion and softening the overall tone of the video. Our sponsor's original script was intense and overly emotional and, therefore, our team found that the "less is more" approach in terms of phrasing would make the video more impactful.

On a broader note, our team stressed the importance of implementing user-generated content, regardless of whatever form that may take. To elaborate, Millennials are more likely to use Instagram over other social media sites (Chen, 2020). A possible reason for this is due to Instagram being particularly good at displaying pictures of the places tourists have visited. By 'showing off' their travels, this target audience could have a major impact on the places they visit. They could raise awareness of the offerings that Armenia has to offer in a unique way that has the possibility of having a wide viewing audience. Additionally, we have found that potential tourists more easily trust the testimonials of past visitors of the destination and there is an increase in the visibility of content when it is shared amongst tourists themselves. According to Instagram, as of September of 2018 there were more than 500 million daily users of the platform

and more than 1 billion unique users per month (Instagram for Business, n.d.). We recommended leveraging Instagram's large user base and advertising platform as well as other social media sites in our marketing plan allowing us to target our specific audience more effectively.

## 7. Conclusion

The implications of our project exist predominantly in the short term and address a variety of factors related to the negative impact of the pandemic on the economy, especially in the tourism sector. Our recommendations will contribute to an influx of tourists following the pandemic, which in turn will increase cash flow and boost tourism-related businesses. Although most of our recommendations are made exclusively for the tourism industry, the methodologies we used can be applied to other sectors of the economy as well. For instance, the social media elements, the promotional video, and Facebook Live talks can be conducted in the field of medicine, agriculture, and information technology alike. As widely-used marketing tools, they enrich the visual experience, help reach out to clients on a personal level, and increase public engagement. We believe that our suggestions to the State Tourism Committee will cause an increase in knowledge in the tourism offerings in Armenia as well as build a sense of trust or expectation for visitors.

However, the development of the tourism industry in Armenia also affects other sectors, such as the restaurant industry, transportation, and wildlife protection. Thus, by working on this project, we are contributing to the economic development of the country as a whole. We hope that the State Tourism Committee takes our suggestions into account when drafting a recovery plan. We expect that these changes will make information more easily accessible for travelers, and as a result, they may be more likely to travel to Armenia. Our project also has the potential for continuation with future Interactive Qualifying Projects. We provided short-term recommendations for Armenia's tourism industry recovery; however, there is still much to be done regarding improving the tourism sector long after the pandemic and allowing this industry to reach its fullest potential.

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