

BEHAVIOURAL IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON ROMANIAN TOURISTS?

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Abstract

The tourism industry has been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, both from a social and from an economic perspective. Despite showing signs of resilience, the negative repercussions on tourism-related activities have been serious, the hospitality industry proving to be the most sensitive in the face of the sanitary and economic crises which started more than a year ago. Even though the full (and cumulative) impact of the events which shaped the current global situation cannot be quantified without a high degree of uncertainty, the negative effects are visible in the economies of many countries, around the world, at microeconomic, macroeconomic and behavioural levels (for businesses and individuals). Usually, such economic, social, sanitary crises or other extreme circumstances (terrorism, natural disasters) trigger a change in the behaviour of tourists, the differences being dependent on region, country, etc. Thus, given the current economic and social context, this paper focuses on the behavioural change of the Romanian tourists. The practical purpose of this research is to show the agents working in the tourism industry on which aspects to focus more and how to diversify their offer based on the change in demand specific to the "new normal". The most recent research conducted by experts has shown that the pandemic has negative effects on travel intention for multiple reasons, among them being the selectivity in choosing the destination based on criteria such as the increased need for hygiene and healthcare conditions, for travel insurance, etc.

Keywords: *tourist consumer's behavior, tourist's attitude, covid-19 pandemic, quantitative analysis, managerial implications*

JEL Classification: *M2, J63*

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1. Introduction

Tourism represents an important industry for any country's economy through its contribution to GDP, jobs creation, and consumers' demand, so all parties involved must adapt to their needs. However, tourism is one of the most vulnerable sectors due to natural or man-made crises and disasters. (Pforr & Hosie, 2008)

The crisis in the field of tourism means any unforeseen event that may impede the normal operation of the business and which may negatively influence the confidence of tourists in a particular tourist destination. Recently, tourism has experienced crises ranging from natural disasters (volcanic eruptions, tsunamis) to man-made disasters: terrorist attacks, health crises (SARS), but nevertheless, this industry has managed to recover. According to COMCEC (COMCEC, 2017) tourism crises are divided into five categories: in the first category we find the environmental crisis that includes man-made events, but also extreme meteorological and geological incidents that cannot be controlled and anticipated. The second category includes social and political crises, such as terrorist acts, wars, political imbalances, while the third consists of economic crisis - the most recent is the 2008 one. The fourth kind is the technological crisis that can affect tourism to the same extent. Health crises include hygiene issues, food poisoning, epidemics such as SARS, Ebola and currently COVID-19, which have affected the global population for a long time.

2. Literature review

Consumer behavior involves ideas, decisions, activities, or experiences that meet their needs and desires (Cohen, et al., 2013). Consumer behavior is a frequently researched topic in the field of tourism and marketing, with terms "tourist behavior" and "travel behavior". Tourist behavior (Wachyuni &

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Kusumaningrum, 2020) is essential to analyze for the tourism business and for its sustainability. Tourist behavior can be analyzed based on socio-demographic factors (age, education, personal values), specific factors (tourist resources, services and facilities, accessibility of the destination) and situational factors, which include weather events, health and socio-political crises.

Tourist behavior derives from a number of internal and external factors - attitudes, motivations, intentions, respectively security, economic and cultural environment, personal values, affinity groups (family, friends, colleagues, etc.) that can help or affect the perception of tourists for a journey. (Andrades, et al., 2015) The external factor due to the lack of security in the event of a health crisis may lead to changes in tourism behavior for most consumers compared to the habit they had before the pandemic, according to the authors in this study. According to the European Commission (The European Commission, 2020), the Covid-19 crisis has implications for consumer behavior and choices regarding tourism. The election is based on economic and psychological factors. Regarding the economic factors, the basis of the influence on the choices and the tourist behavior are the reduction of incomes, the increase of unemployment or the reduction of working hours. Regarding the psychological factors, it is related to the fear of contamination, the treatment, the conditions and the preferences for the tourist destination and the desire to travel. Studies carried out by the European Commission following the health crisis have shown that this situation has led to changes in consumer patterns. The changes have been observed in the short term, but experts expect that they will persist in both the medium and long term. Research has shown that changes in consumer behavior will be reflected in particular in the desire to travel and the preferences for certain destinations that meet essential conditions for the current situation. The criteria underlying the preferences are the sanitary conditions and the destinations with low tourist density. Changes may also be made to the duration of travel, which may be shorter and more frequent, and travel by personal means of transport. Business tourism is more affected than leisure tourism due to the fact that teleworking replaced office work during the pandemic, and this produced changes in the business model, the relationship with customers and the organization of work.

Other studies that looked at tourist behavior (Chebli & Said, 2020) referred to their intentions to avoid group travelling and, during the season, to pay more attention to health services at the host destination, and to reduce spending.

3. Methodology

The objective of the research is to identify the changes in attitude and behavior of Romanian tourism consumers, following the new economic and social context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to answer the research's objective and the questions, a series of general hypotheses have been defined, starting from the specialized literature (Gössling, et al., 2020) and based on the particular characteristics of the Romanian tourism:

H1: Tourists will plan to travel closer to the residence.

H2: Tourists will choose to shorten their holiday stay.

H3: Tourists will choose, more than ever, as a means of transport, road transport and especially their own cars.

H5: Tourists are willing to pay more to stay in locations that have taken extra precautions.

H6: Travel decisions are influenced by the number of cases.

H7: Tourists will travel to Romania more than before, in order to support Romanian tourism and local entrepreneurs.

Statistical assumptions:

1) H0: Respondents in the age group 40-55 and over 55 do not prefer road transport.

H1: Respondents in the age group 40-55 and over 55 prefer road transport.

2) H0: Older people are no more affected by the rate of illness than younger people.

H1: Older people are more affected by the rate of illness than younger people.

In order to achieve the objective of the paper and to test the general and statistical hypotheses, a quantitative research was carried out by the survey method, using as a tool the self-administered questionnaire.

The questionnaire included 20 closed-ended questions, measuring the research variables on the nominal scale with single or multiple answer and ordinal, likert scale or semantic differential. The questions were factual and opinion, as follows:

- Questions 1-16 focus on the attitude and behavior of tourism consumers in the current situation;
- Questions from 16-20 characterize the profile of the respondents.

The survey was conducted between March and April 2021, on a sample of 106 people. Sampling was non-probabilistic, and the results are indicative. The questionnaire was uploaded to the Google forms platform, and for viewing and completing it was distributed through a social networks link, by email and by messaging applications.

The questionnaire was based on interdisciplinary works, taking into account aspects of behavior, but also perception and attitude, based on the elements of the relationship tourism - health crisis.

The sample and structure of the respondents are presented in the following table:

Table no. 1 Respondent structure

1. Gender	%	Number of respondents	4. Occupation	%	Number of respondents
Male	35.8	38	Student	15.1	16
Female	64.2	68	Master	29.2	31
2. Age category			Employed in the public sector	14.2	15
18-25 years	60.4	64	Employed in the private sector	34.9	37
26-39 years	23.6	25	Entrepreneur	5.7	6
40-55 years	12.3	13			
over 55 years	3.8	4	Self employed	0.9	1
3. Recently completed studies					
High school / Vocational school	10.4	11			
Post-secondary education	2.8	3			
Undergraduate studies	57.5	61			
Masters	28.3	30			
Other postgraduate studies	0.9	1			

Source: made by the author based on research results using SPSS

As it can be seen in the table above, most of the respondents to the questionnaire were female representing a percentage of 64.2% of the total and were mostly in the age segment 18-25 years. Also, 57.5% of the total participants in the questionnaire have a bachelor's degree as a last level and out of the 106 respondents, they are mostly employed in the private system (34.9%), then they are master students (29.2%) and employees in the public sector (14.2%).

4. Results and discussion

The first objective of the study was to identify how the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the way respondents travelled. Thus, following the analysis, it was found that 5.66% have not been on any trip since the beginning of the pandemic, the same percentage was recorded for trips only abroad. 24.53% traveled both in Romania and abroad, and 64.15% in the country.

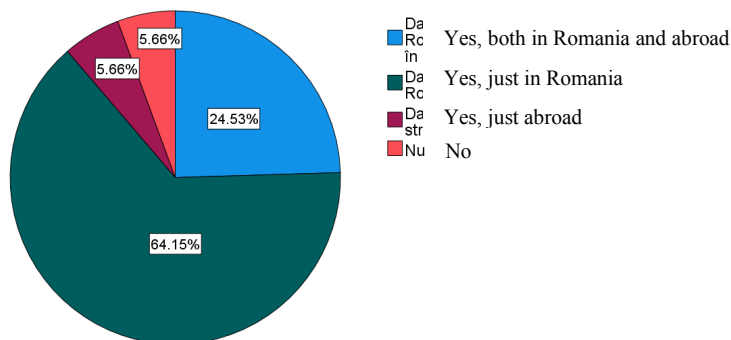


Fig. no. 1 Domestic and international tourism consumption since the beginning of the pandemic
 Source: made by the author based on research results using SPSS

Analyzing the duration of the stay, a decrease can be observed during the pandemic, so the percentage of 5-7 days stay decreases from 50% to 22.6%, and that of 1-4 days stay increases from 37.74% to 50.94% for the group of 106 people analyzed. This may be a consequence of the restrictions imposed at certain times of the year and in certain locations. Thus, we can say that the hypothesis "Tourists will be inclined to shorten the duration of their holiday stay" proves true.

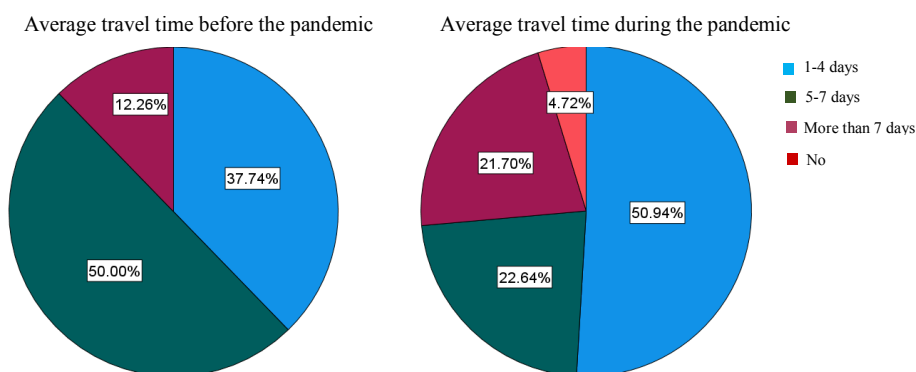


Fig. no. 2 Comparative diagram of the average travel time before / during the pandemic
 Source: made by the author, based on research using SPSS

The second goal is to identify whether the pandemic has changed the way people move.

Table no. 2 Distribution of transportation use before and after the pandemic

		Male				Female			
		18-25 years	26-39 years	40-55 years	Over 55 years	18-25 years	26-39 years	40-55 years	Over 55 years
Means of transport before the pandemic	railway	4	0	0	0	8	2	0	0
	road	5	9	8	3	31	3	4	1
	aerial	1	6	1	0	15	4	0	0
	naval	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Means of transport during the pandemic	railway	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0
	road	6	10	9	3	49	7	4	1
	aerial	1	5	0	0	3	2	0	0
	naval	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: made by the author, based on research using SPSS

As it can be seen in the table above, regardless of gender and age group, they have on average chosen to use road transport, specifically personal car to the detriment of other means of transport. Thus, road transport has a significant increase from 60.37% to 83.96%, while rail transport has a decrease of 64.29%

compared to the option they had before the pandemic. This verifies the hypothesis "Tourists will choose more than ever as a means of transport, road transport and especially their own cars".

In addition, through a statistical Chi square test, the existence of a statistically significant relationship between the choice of tourists for a particular means of transport during the pandemic (rail transport, road transport, air transport and maritime transport) and the age segment of the respondents was tested.

Table no. 3 Chi square test of means of transport during the pandemic

Variables	The age segment		
	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig
Means of transport during the pandemic	18.127	9	0.034

Source: made by the author, based on research results using SPSS

Because $p=0,034$ is less than the 0.05 threshold, in this case the test is rejected, so there is a significant relationship between the mode of transport chosen during the pandemic and the age group of the respondents. Thus, by analyzing the cross-tabulation between the age category and the preferred means of transport during the pandemic, we can say that "respondents in the age group 40-55 and over 55 prefer road transport". This is demonstrated by the analysis of the difference between the actual value obtained from the questionnaire and the predicted value which in the case of the 40-55 age group is 10.9 and 3.4 for the over 55 age category.

Regarding the influence of the decision to make a trip to a certain location by the rate of illness in that area, the majority of respondents (36.8%) believe that this influences their choice to a "large extent", which verifies the hypothesis: "Travel decisions are influenced by the number of cases". We can also make an analysis of the level of influence by the disease rate relative to the age segment of the respondents, starting from the following hypotheses:

- The null hypothesis H_0 : Older people are no more affected by the rate of illness than younger people.
- Alternative hypothesis H_1 : Older people are more affected by the rate of illness than younger people.

Table no. 4 One-way ANOVA statistical test on the influence of the disease rate on the choice of location

Variables	Age category				
	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Influence location choice of disease rate	9.493	3	3.164	3.318	0.23

Source: made by the author, based on research results using SPSS

For this, the One-Way ANOVA test has been applied, from which it resulted that the F value of the test is 3.318, higher than the critical value and the critical probability value Sig. 0.023 is lower than the significant threshold of 0.05, all of this led to the conclusion that the infection rate influences different age groups.

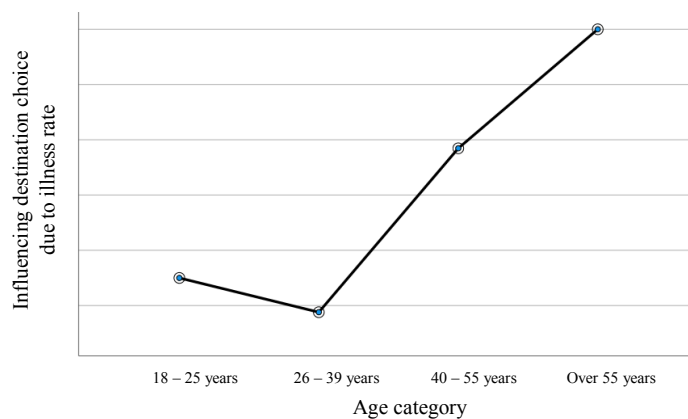


Fig. no. 3 Distribution of the influence of the choice of destination on the rate of illness according to age
 Source: made by the author, based on research results using SPSS

The graph above proves that the null hypothesis H_0 : “Older people are more affected by the rate of illness than younger people” is not valid.

Assuming that: “Tourists are willing to pay more to stay in locations that have taken extra precautions”, following the questionnaire which was based on grades 1 to 5, grade 3 obtained a percentage of 34.9%, grade 4 a percentage of 30.2% and grade 5 a percentage of 28.3%. Following this result, we can say that the hypothesis stated above is true.

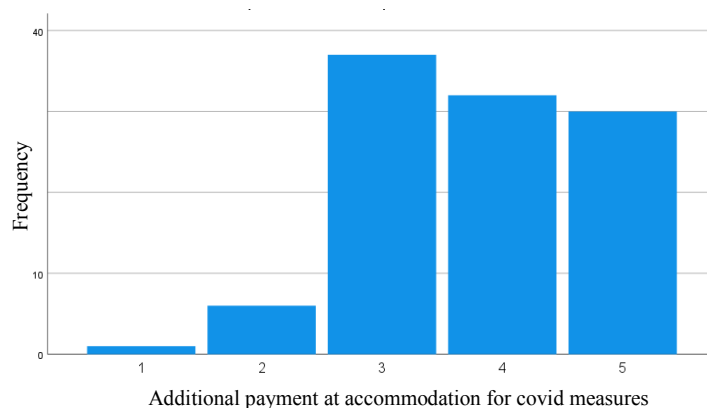


Fig. no. 4 Willingness to accept payment of additional fees for protection measures in accommodation units

Source: made by the author, based on research results using SPSS

Regarding the criteria for choosing the future holiday destinations, the questionnaire showed that the main criterion is "information on the situation of the pandemic in the destination town" (with an average of 3.94), followed by "avoiding public transport" (average 3.91) and "choosing a lesser-known destination" (average 3.62). The criterion that supports "choosing a destination close to residence" has an average of 2.52, obtaining a percentage of 45.1% in the "very small" and "small" votes, so the hypothesis "Tourists will intend to travel more close to the residence" is rejected.

Table no. 5 Criteria for choosing a holiday destination in the future

	Choosing a destination near the residence	Choosing a lesser known destination	Avoid traveling by public transport	Information on the situation of the pandemic	Purchase full travel insurance
Average	2.52	3.62	3.91	3.94	2.98

Source: made by the author, based on research results using SPSS

To be able to confirm the hypothesis “Tourists will travel to Romania more than before, in order to support Romanian tourism and local entrepreneurs” we can analyze their answers in levels from 1 to 5. Thus, we obtain an average of 3.99 answers, which means that 74.6% opted for "sure" and "very sure".

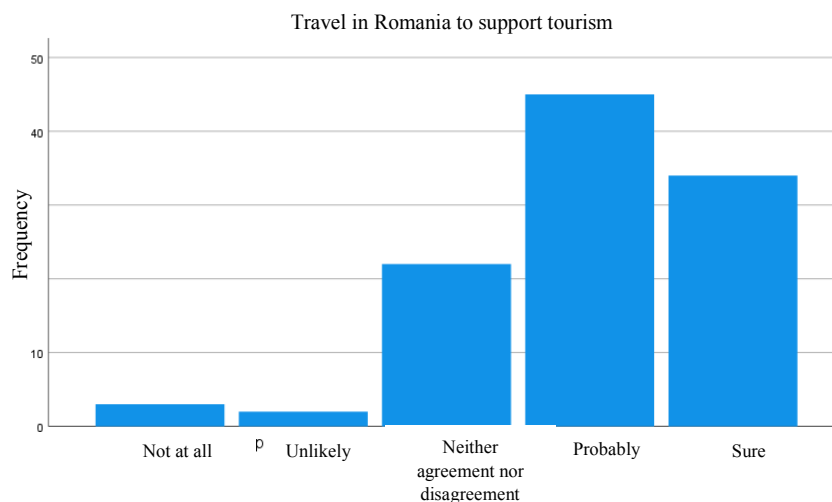


Fig. no. 5 Travel attitude in support of Romanian tourism
Source: made by the author, based on research results using SPSS

5. Conclusions

Following this research, changes in the attitude and behavior of tourists were identified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have affected the way Romanian tourists plan their vacations, in the length of stay, in choosing the modes of transport, but also in the factors and criteria that influence their decisions. There was also a willingness to pay more for increased security measures, but also to travel on Romanian territory to help domestic tourism.

Following the analysis of the answers, the general hypotheses issued on the basis of the studied specialized works and the particularities of the Romanian tourism were tested, and it was concluded that the first hypothesis formulated: „Tourists will plan to travel closer to the residence” is not confirmed, but all the others referring to the shortening of the length of stay on holiday, to the choice of road transportation more than any other type of transport, to the additional payment for additional protection measures, to the influence of the number of cases on travel decisions and with the intention of travelling more to Romania in support of domestic tourism were verified and confirmed.

For the validation of statistical hypotheses, two tests have been performed. One aimed at demonstrating a significant relationship between the chosen means of transport and the age group to which the respondents belonged, thus confirming the hypothesis that „Respondents in the age group 40-55 and over 55 prefer road transport” and another aimed at testing the existence of a significant relationship in the different way in which age categories are influenced by the rate of infection. Thus, the hypothesis was confirmed: “Older people are more affected by the rate of illness than younger people”.

The usefulness and implications of research. The novelty of the research is provided by the application on a sample of Romanian tourists, and the applicability of the research is essential for Romanian managers in the field, who must adapt the offer of tourist services to the new requirements of the market. Given the new context generated by the pandemic, tour operators can take advantage of the opportunity created, by taking into consideration the fact that tourists who usually prefer foreign tourist destinations can now choose to remain in Romania, considering that the current situation forcing them, to a certain extent, to travel shorter distances, closer to their place of residence, by personal car. Thus, by providing adequate services and attention to safety and security requirements, operators can build long-term customer loyalty.

Limits and future directions of research. The limits of the research are determined by the non-probabilistic sampling and the small number of respondents who participated in the survey, due to the pilot study character of the paper. As future directions of research, the results of the pilot study can be tested on representative samples and the analysis of consumption behavior by associating with variables of perception and attitude.

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