

## **Tourist Services Consumer Behavior. Specific and Perspective Elements in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper aims at a brief review of the main elements of specificity of the behavior of the Romanian consumer of tourist services in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, as well as the x-ray of the effects felt after the relaxation of measures at national level. In this context, the identification of the elements that will be perpetuated at the level of the behavior of the consumer of tourist services after the passage of this turning point is an extremely important element in aligning the business in this field to the market requirements. The study was based on quantitative methods of marketing research and aimed to identify the main elements of influence on the decision to travel for tourism in a pandemic, as well as the decision to choose a tourist destination consumer of tourist services from Constanta country after the lift of the restrictions, so far.*

**Key words:** consumer behavior, tourist consumption, tourist destination, preference, tourist services.  
**J.E.L. classification:** M31, M30.

### **1. Introduction**

The change of preferences and behavior of consumers was a very important factor in the overall evolution of the Romanian tourism sector in the period from 2020 to 2021. Statistics published by National Institute of Statistics for 2020 showed decreases of 44.4% in July 2020 compared to July 2019 in tourist arrivals and 44.7% in departures. The same is true for foreign tourists.

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the elements that materialize in changes on the behavior of consumers of tourism services in Constanța, Romania, in the digital age, since the Covid-19 pandemic burst.

The events associated with the pandemic, which led to an increase in social distance and the complete closure of national borders, had effects not only on the territorial level, but also on the economic situation of the regions. However, all the events of macroeconomic level had reverberations at individual level, imprinting the behavior of each person, as a result of the transformations crossed at bio-psycho-social level, because under the light of negative feelings and contradictory experiences these events forced individuals to change, mentally and implicitly when it comes to approaching purchasing decisions. These changes have had unmistakable behavioral effects. From buying caused by panic for strictly necessary products to postponing vacations indefinitely - we find a wide range of seemingly irrational behaviors. But all have in the substratum, beyond economic and health reasons, human and experiential psychological peculiarities.

Behavioral changes in terms of tourist consumption were also identified in Romania and their effects were highlighted, as expected, in the indicators of tourist consumption (Statista, 2021), the number of tourist arrivals in our country decreasing in 2020 below number of arrivals since 2006.

The flexible measurement of the variables that influence the consumer of tourist services, leads to the concretization of the marketing decisions of the bidders, these being focused on the stimulation of the consumption following the study of the consumer behavior (Morariu & Pizmaş, 2001).

The importance of approaching this topic is given by the practical applications of knowing the particularities of consumption in Romanian tourism, so that companies in the field to align with the advanced requirements of tourists (Guleria, 2016).

I consider that the novelty of the topic consists in its approach not only from an economic perspective, but also from a psycho-social perspective, both in relation to demographic elements with economic impact and in relation to the defining personality traits of consumers of tourist services questioned, following the influences exerted throughout the life cycle of the tourist product and service.

## **2. Literature review**

As Cohen et al. (2013) showed, consumer behavior in tourism remains one of the most researched segments of tourism marketing, this area of research being often described by the use of the terms "travel behavior" or "tourism behavior" (Cohen et al., 2013).

From the point of view of the approach from a psychological perspective Vascon L. et al. (2021) conducts a comprehensive content analysis of two major constructs directly related to tourism behaviors - involvement and emotions, as an important issue for integrated tourism experiences, drawing on the idea that consumer behavior in tourism should focus more on tourism behavior, treating the relationship between involvement and emotions from a longitudinal perspective.

The study conducted by Nawijn and Biran (2018) highlighted the aspect that negative emotionality contributes to eudemonic experiences through effects on different types of meanings in life. As part of their consumer experience, tourists are often confronted with negative emotions (Knobloch et al., 2017).

On the other hand, in terms of the division of tourists into explorers versus planners, as the study by Alvarez and Asugman (2006) showed, individuals can be differentiated according to vacation planning and their perception of information sources.

According to Buhalis (2020), technology-enhanced tourism experiences are increasingly facilitating tourists in co-creating value at all stages of the journey (Neuhofer et al., 2014; Fotis et al., 2011). In this context, through the action of smart media, there is inevitably a transformation of industry structures, processes and practices, with a disruptive impact on service innovation, strategy, management, marketing and competitiveness of all involved (Buhalis, 2020).

According to Batista et al. (2021), the Internet influences the behavior of tourism consumers throughout the travel cycle as follows: in the pre-consumption stage, motivations and decision-making are strongly influenced by online sources, the behavior of co-creation of value is influenced by the Internet during the last two stages of the travel cycle, with evidence suggesting that loyalty is influenced during the consumption and post-consumption phases.

The European Commission has argued for the need to impose travel restrictions to slow the spread of Coronavirus and protect the health and well-being of all Europeans (European Commission, 2020-2021). These travel restrictions and the pandemic context have led to a decline in global tourism with an impact on all sub-branches.

Johan de Vos 's (2020) assumptions that due to social distancing, the demand for travel could decrease due to working from home, the implementation of e-learning and the low number of public activities and events, came true during the two years of pandemic. The inclination of people towards the predominant development of activities at home with family members or close friends and lock - downs have materialized in the obvious trend of decreasing tourist traffic (Johan de Vos, 2020).

Signs of easy recovery were detected only in the second half of 2021 (Knezevic et al. 2021).

## **3. Research methodology**

### **Sampling techniques**

Determining the sample size in order to ensure representativeness was done using the formula of the authors Daniel & Cross (2013), starting from the Statistics of the County Directorate of Statistics Constanța, taking into account the number of adults over 263,001 people (in 2019), score  $z_{\alpha} = 1.96$ , which corresponds to a 95% confidence level,  $e = 0.05$  margin error and  $p = .5$  probability of obtaining an affirmative answer to the question. A sample of 384 people was thus obtained. The application of the questionnaire took place between March and May 2022. A number of 384 respondents out of the 408 who responded to the invitation and met the selection criteria

(legal age stated in the questionnaire, Romanian citizenship and domicile in Constanța County), were selected according to the "first come, first served" method (Moraru A.D. 2021).

The aim was to ensure representativeness by respecting the structure of the sample according to the age criterion - established according to statistics published by the National Institute of Statistics (18-25 years - 8%; 26-35 years - 17%; 36-45 years - 20%; 46- 65 years - 34%; over 66 years - 21%).

### Research tools

The study was based on quantitative methods of marketing research, the tool used in this study being the questionnaire. A number of two tools, one of which has already been tested but applied to another population (Chebli & Ben Said, 2020) and one pilot, were pooled in an electronic questionnaire using Google Forms and distributed to respondents via electronic media - email, WhatsApp and social networks (Facebook). The answers were rated on the Likert scale with points from 1-5, obtaining individualized values for each statement in the questionnaire applied.

The characteristics of the sample are presented in table 1:

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample

Age							
	18 -25 years	26 -35 years	36-45 years	46 - 64 years	over 65 years		
%	8	17	20	34	21		
Gender		Residence environment		Parent status acquired in the pandemic			
	Male	Female	Rural	Urban	Yes	Not	
%	37.5	62.5	16.1	83.9	3.6	96.4	
Average monthly net income per family member							
	under 1500 lei	1501-2500 lei	2501-3500 lei	3501-4500 lei	4501-5500 lei	5501-6500 lei	higher than 6501 lei
%	8.3	18.5	26.6	21.1	9.9	3.1	12.5
Marital status							
	Single	Married	Widower	Divorced			
%	19.3	63.3	9.6	7.8			
Educational status							
	Elementary education	Secondary education	Higher education	Postgraduate studies			
%	1.6	21.9	39.3	37.2			

Source: own processing according to the results of the questionnaire

**Four hypotheses** have been advanced:

H<sub>1</sub>: It is assumed that there is a significant difference in preferences according to gender, at the level of tourist services consumers from Constanța country, in terms of nearby and remote tourist destinations or abroad, during the pandemic and after the lifting of restrictions related to it.

H<sub>2</sub>: It is assumed that there is a significant difference in preferences among consumers of tourism services from Constanța, depending on parental status, as they preferred family travel or small groups travel during the pandemic and subsequent lifting of restrictions related to it.

H<sub>3</sub>: It is assumed an increase in the preference of Constanța consumers of tourist services to destinations that allow ensuring the conditions of social distancing and hygiene in the locations visited during the pandemic and subsequent lifting of restrictions related to it, depending on the average monthly net income per family member.

H<sub>4</sub>: It is assumed that there is a correlation between the average monthly net income level and consumer preferences for the use of modern means of booking tourist travel.

#### 4. Findings

SPSS Statistics version 26 was used in the hypothesis testing, the initial data processing, filtering and coding of values being performed in Microsoft Excel 2019.

The testing of the statistical hypotheses revealed findings as follows.

In testing **hypothesis 1**, since the distribution obtained is non-normal, the non-parametric U Mann-Whitney test was used, obtaining the coefficients Sig. 0.015 and respectively, 0.00, which shows that the null hypothesis, that there are no significant differences in gender preferences during the pandemic and at the time of the application of the questionnaire (after lifting all restrictions related to it) in the choice of destinations tourist attractions, is rejected (table no. 2).

*Table no. 2. Summary of hypothesis 1 testing*

	The null hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of answers for the statement "Covid-19 Pandemic led me to choose destinations close to home" is the same within the "Gender" category.	Independent-Samples U Mann-Whitney And Test	.015	The null hypothesis is rejected.
2	The distribution of answers to the statement "I currently prefer to choose tourist destinations close to home" is the same within the "Gender" category	Independent-Samples U Mann-Whitney And Test	.000	The null hypothesis is rejected.

Asymptotic meanings are displayed. The significance level is .050.

Source: own processing according to the results of the questionnaire

According to the tests performed, these differences exist and are also supported by the specialized literature, as we will show in the discussion part.

For the test of **hypothesis 2**, since the obtained distribution is a non-normal one, the non-parametric Kruskal -Wallis test was used, obtaining the coefficients Sig. between 0.000 and 0.026 in all four assertions tested, therefore with a value lower than the significance threshold. This highlights the fact that the null hypothesis - that there are no significant differences in parental status in terms of preferences for family or small group travel, during the pandemic and after lifting any restrictions related to it, is rejected (Table no. 3).

*Table no. 3. Summary of hypothesis 2 testing*

	The null hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	The distribution of answers to the statement "Generally choose child-friendly locations" is the same as in the "Parent status" category.	Independent-Samples Kruskal - Wallis Test	.026	The null hypothesis is rejected.
2	The distribution of answers to the statement "Covid-19 pandemic caused me to travel with my family" is the same as in the "Parent status" category.	Independent-Samples Kruskal - Wallis Test	.000	The null hypothesis is rejected.
3	The distribution of answers for the Covid-19 pandemic caused me to travel in small groups is the same in the "Parent Status" category.	Independent-Samples Kruskal - Wallis Test	.000	The null hypothesis is rejected.
4	The distribution of answers for the statement "Covid-19 pandemic led me to choose child-friendly locations" is the same in the "Parent status" category.	Independent-Samples Kruskal - Wallis Test	.021	The null hypothesis is rejected.

Asymptotic meanings are displayed. The significance level is .050.

Source: own processing according to the results of the questionnaire

Practically, the statistical differences between the two situations - the general situation and the crisis manifested during the pandemic are confirmed on the studied group: both the choice of child-friendly locations as a general situation, and family trips, respectively in small groups in pandemic, as a special situation, with significant differences in mean and standard deviation of responses

from respondents, regardless of respondents' parental status, these choices being influenced by parental status.

In testing **hypothesis 3**, since the distribution obtained is non-normal, the non-parametric Kruskal -Wallis test was used, obtaining the coefficient Sig. 0.01 for only one of the three statements tested (a value below the significance threshold). The value obtained highlights the fact that the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences depending on the average monthly net income per family member in terms of preferences to pay more for a safer destination in terms of hygiene, is rejected. For the general situation and that related to the post-pandemic period, in which restrictions of any kind have been lifted, the null hypothesis is retained, in the sense that it is no longer given as much importance to hygiene, safety and public health as in the pandemic context, and the statistical differences obtained are not significant between the respondents in the tested sample in terms of attitude towards hygiene depending of net income (Table no. 4).

Table no. 4. Summary of hypothesis 3 testing

	The null hypothesis	Test	Sig.	Decision
1	Distribution of answers to the statement "In general I prefer to pay more for a safer destination in terms of hygiene (accommodation, meals, leisure)" is the same in the category "Average monthly net income per family member"	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.093	The null hypothesis is retained.
2	Distribution of answers to the statement "Covid-19 pandemic made me prefer to pay more for a safer destination in terms of hygiene (accommodation, meals, leisure)" is the same in the category "Average monthly net income per family member"	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.001	The null hypothesis is rejected.
3	The distribution of answers to the statement "I currently choose hotels and restaurants that focus on hygiene and public health" is the same in the "Average monthly net income per family member" category.	Independent-Samples Kruskal-Wallis Test	.097	The null hypothesis is retained.
Asymptotic meanings are displayed. The significance level is .050.				
Source: own processing according to the results of the questionnaire				

In testing **hypothesis 4** we started from the distribution test for the five selected statements and we found that like the other variables tested and its distribution is non-normal. As the 4-th is a correlation hypothesis, the Spearman correlation coefficient was calculated, the test results included in table no. 5, highlighting correlations at the significance threshold of 0.01 between the level of net revenues realized and consumers' preference over online travel reservations and payments for tourism purposes, but not compared to the virtual tours prior to the planned trip.

Table no. 5. Summary of hypothesis 4 testing

Correlated variable		VMLMF *	PGRPO **	PGDCFV ***	PADCFV ****	PAROS *****	PAPOS *****
Spearman's rho	VMLMF *	1,000	.274 **	.041	.028	.070	.167 **
	Correlation Coefficient						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.423	.586	.172	.001
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
	PGRPO **	.274 **	1,000	.246 **	.294 **	.648 **	.616 **
	Correlation Coefficient						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
	PGDCFV ***	.041	.246 **	1,000	.722 **	.247 **	.218 **
	Correlation Coefficient						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.423	.000	.	.000	.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
	PADCFV ****	.028	.294 **	.722 **	1,000	.427 **	.386 **
	Correlation Coefficient						

PAROS *****	Sig. (2-tailed)	.586	.000	.000	.	.000	.000
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
	Correlation	.070	.648 **	.247 **	.427 **	1,000	.712 **
	Coefficient						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.172	.000	.000	.000	.	.000
PAPOS *****	N	384	384	384	384	384	384
	Correlation	.167 **	.616 **	.218 **	.386 **	.712 **	1,000
	Coefficient						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.000	.000	.000	.
	N	384	384	384	384	384	384

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: own processing according to the results of the questionnaire.

Where, the meaning of the acronyms used to encode the abbreviated variables is as follows:

VMLMF \* represents "Average monthly net income per family member"

PGRPO \*\* represents "General Preference for Online Booking and Payment of Stays"

PGDCFV \*\*\* represents "General preference for destinations / places with which the consumer has become familiar with virtual tours".

PADCFV \*\*\*\* represents "Current preference for destinations / places with which the consumer has become familiar with virtual tours".

PAROS \*\*\*\*\* stands for "Current Preference for Online Booking of Stays".

PAPOS \*\*\*\*\* stands for "Current Preference for Online Payments for Stays".

In conclusion, the fourth hypothesis was partially confirmed by highlighting the correlation between the average monthly net income per family member (VMLMF) and the general preference for online booking and payment of stays (PGRPO), as well as between VMLMF and current preference for online payments for stays (PAPOS).

## 5. Discussions

In support of the first hypotheses regarding gender differences in terms of tourism consumption, we can consider the fact that they are discussed at length in the literature. According to Henderson (1994), accepting the importance of gender as a factor in influencing social life has the potential to contribute to a "better understanding of tourism and leisure behavior" (Henderson, 1994).

According to Rosenbloom (1987), the characteristics of travel patterns are related to economic variables; women who have low-skilled jobs and low wages, to maintain economically rational behavior, will travel less. However, in the case of salary increases, their behavior will be closer to that of males, resulting in only a series of short-term differences, which fade with the disappearance of economic and professional disadvantages (Rosenbloom, 1987).

There are opinions that show that women's travel characteristics are closely linked to the roles and responsibilities that they accept in the home and in the society. There is a growing body of empirical work that suggests that women in all socioeconomic groups have different travel patterns because they have accepted a variety of household and childcare responsibilities that men with comparable backgrounds do not take (Rosenbloom, 1987).

A study conducted by the authors Henley and Soutar highlighted, in tourism marketing, the need to consider the different targeting of males and females in the presentation of information on tourist destinations promoted (Henley and Soutar, 1998).

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, a study conducted by Carballo et. al. (2022), highlighted the moderating effect of gender on the theoretical relationships between risk perception and on the one hand the image of the destination, and on the other hand behavioral intentions, proving in the studied context a higher risk perception in females than in male, depending on the type of risk and the elements characterizing the destination (Carballo et al., 2022).

In support of the second hypothesis, with regard to family travel in the context of the pandemic, the WHO warned in August 2021 that they "continue to be risky and complicated in many parts of the world" (WHO, 2021), highlighting in a pandemic context the avoidance of crowded places, tight and enclosed spaces with poor ventilation, keeping distance and wearing protective masks

(WHO, 2021), measures equally addressed to members of the whole family. The travel recommendation for families with children includes a number of additional measures aimed primarily at minors, which adults need to consider, without somehow banning such travel, where there are no restrictions in this regard due to pandemic outbreaks.

On the other hand, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, their involvement in leisure activities is essential to their harmonious development (Yoo *et al.*, 2022). The study undertaken by Yoo *et al.* emphasized that providing pandemic leisure opportunities through online applications has the potential to facilitate the involvement of children with disabilities and their families during the pandemic period, which is fundamental as benefits in maintaining their physical and mental well-being (Yoo *et al.*, 2022).

In support of the results obtained in hypothesis number three we mention the studies of the authors Weill *et al.* (2020), which showed that there was a significant decrease in the human circulation in the pandemic in the richer areas, manifesting an reverse situation in this context, resulting in the increase of the social distance according to income: the rich areas becoming smaller mobility, while poorer areas had become more mobile, a context in which social distance has been reduced in lower-income communities (Weill *et al.*, 2020).

Another study conducted by Konak (2022) highlighted the fact that tourists' perception of the hygiene and safety of the tourist location predicted travel anxiety related to the pandemic, which in turn had negative effects on travel intention (Konak, 2021).

Study undertaken by Rahman *et al.* (2021) confirms the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on travel risk and on the perceptions of its management by tourism services consumers, significantly associating distribution channels, transport models, service delivery, avoidance of overcrowded destinations, hygiene and safety of tourist destinations with risk management (Rahman *et al.*, 2021).

With regard to the fourth hypothesis with its sub-hypotheses, specialized literary studies reveal a general link between the level of consumer income and the amounts allocated by them to tourist trips. A large number of empirical studies conducted in recent decades have developed the role of revenues and prices on fluctuations in international tourism demand (Nguyen, 2021).

Otherwise, Zhang (2020) drew attention to the possibility of "stimulating the tourist consumption of residents by increasing the level of income of residents and establishing holiday welfare policies " offering, at the beginning of the pandemic, to the tourism industry the possibility of development in the context of economic growth (Zhang, 2020).

In their study, Djeri *et al.* (2014) highlighted the lack of impact on the first phase of the decision-making process regarding the selection of the tourist destination (awareness of the need) by the level of income, in contrast to the strong impact on the other phases of the decision-making process (Djeri *et al.*, 2014).

On the other hand, a study conducted by Almeida *et al.* (2019) identified the elements related to the consumer's appetite for the use of online payments to tourism service providers and highlighted the fact that the main conditions for the perception of tourists are the age and the number of trips made before enrollment in the study (Almeida *et al.*, 2019).

## 6. Conclusions

According to Kinkzel and Müller, in 2022, the Covid-19 pandemic proved to have a major impact on the selection process by the tourism consumer of its destination. This has led, in the context of the pandemic, to a decrease in the number of trips, with their number decreasing in frequency and in addition decreasing in duration (Kinczel & Müller, 2022).

Intentions to buy tourism products and services have been significantly influenced by the global panic caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. There have certainly been changes in travel habits, starting with the preference for group travel, which has been lower, with the level of uncertainty tending to be reduced by taking out travel insurance. Also, attention to hygiene and health conditions at the level of the chosen destination have become decisive factors in choosing the tourist destination.

Finally, we consider that through this paper we aimed to lay the foundation stone in creating the portrait of tourism consumer of the Romanian citizen residing in Constanța County, with the

aim of creating in the future a model for promoting local tourist destinations among Romanian consumers.

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