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# How the COVID-19 Pandemic Impacted Tourism and Tourist Behaviour. A Perspective on Typologies of New Consumers

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ABSTRACT

Research on consumer behaviour revealed that it is susceptible to changes and transformations during periods of crisis, with the magnitude and nature of the changes being influenced by the particularities of the crises. The tourism industry was one of the most severely affected industries during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. The pandemic caused disruptions in the activity and determined transformations both within the organizations in the field and in the behavior of tourists. However, as in other crisis situations, tourism proved its resilience, adapting to the new conditions and recording a strong return once the pandemic crisis ended. Nonetheless, the behavior of consumers of tourist services has undergone changes, some of them profound and potentially long-lasting. This article aims to highlight the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the behavior of consumers of tourist services and to identify a series of consumer typologies in the post-pandemic era, through the analysis of quantitative data resulting from a direct research. A cluster analysis was applied to the sample that was the object of the research, which allowed the identification of several behavioral typologies of tourist services consumers following the Covid-19 pandemic.



## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic took the world by surprise and abruptly impacted all sectors of the economy, while reshaping behaviours. Few sectors were impacted as hard as the tourism sector, with basically the entire industry being brought to an abrupt halt. And although tourism is recognized as having an incredible recovery capacity, the magnitude and duration of the pandemic crisis brought about fears of long-lasting impact on the industry (Sigala, 2020).

The first and most obvious impact was related to the disruption of tourism activity (Lončarić et al., 2022), which led to uncertainty related to jobs and job loss (Škare et al., 2021, Miloș & Moraru, 2023).

Besides businesses and workers in the industry, the pandemic had a huge impact on host communities as well (Zhang et al., 2021; Weidmann et al., 2022). UNWTO reported enormous economic impacts, estimating a loss of up to 1.2 Trillon USD in export from tourism - international visitors' spending (UNWTO, 2021).

At the same time, it is important to observe that the pandemic did not only impact the industry, but also tourists, who had to adapt to the new conditions and adjust their travel plans accordingly. There is a variety of studies that deal with the behaviour of consumers of tourist services and with the transformations brought by the COVID-19 pandemic; a new direction of research in this field has practically been opened. Some authors, such as Kock et al., 2020, even regard the pandemic crisis as having the potential to determine a paradigm shift in research dedicated to tourist behaviour.

Several studies have already been dedicated to the analysis of behavioural changes caused by the pandemic in different countries and regions (Zenker & Kock, 2020; Chebli & Ben Said, 2020; Toubes et al., 2021; Chan, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Mary &Pour, 2022), as well as in Romania (Morar et al., 2021; Linca and Toma, 2021; Popescu, 2021; Dumitru, 2022; Matei, 2021; Mazilu et al., 2023; Baba et al., 2020; Cretu et al., 2021; Moncea et al., 2023).

In this article, we aim to analyse the influence of the pandemic on tourist behaviour, considering its major impact on the advent of new types of consumers more attentive to health hazards and hygiene measures. The

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article includes the following sections - a review of the effects of the pandemic on the behaviour of Romanian tourists, the research methodology and the results obtained, as well as a section of conclusions.

## 2. The impact of the pandemic on tourism and tourist behaviour

The magnitude of the pandemic crisis, its nature as a global health crisis, as well as the unprecedented measures that were enforced virtually all around the world, lockdowns, and travel restrictions severely impacted the tourism industry and determined behavioural changes.

Chebli & Ben Said (2020) revealed a set of behavioural transformations caused by the pandemic, such as the intention to choose a less popular destination, avoid group travel, preoccupation for sanitary conditions, or an increased interest to opt for travel insurance.

Perić et al. (2021) investigated the impact of risk perception on travel intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia and identified several categories of perceived risk with impact on travel intentions, namely, health, psychological, financial, destination, and travel risk. Their results revealed that risk perception had a negative effect on travel intentions and that travel risk impacts negatively the intentions to travel abroad, but the health risk has a positive impact on the intention to travel abroad, which means that the respondents considered traveling abroad entailed a lower health risk.

Terzić et al. (2022), focusing on a large sample of European respondents, identified four categories of tourists, function of their attitude toward risk. They concluded that European tourists were crisis-tolerant, maintaining strong travel intentions amid pandemic concerns and travel restrictions.

Irawan et al. (2021) focused on travel related behavioural changes in Indonesia at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. They analysed the impact of attitudes, descriptive norms, protective behaviour, as well as pre-pandemic frequency of travel on behavioural changes interlinked with ICT use. They showed that descriptive norms had a positive effect on the frequency of travel during the pandemic. Considering the socio-demographic characteristics as well, their results revealed that gender influenced traveling patterns, with male subjects traveling more often than female, both before and during the pandemic.

Magano et al. (2021) focused on determining psychological factors shaping the perceived impact of the pandemic on travel and used a variety of psychological instruments to assess the impact of COVID-19. Their results indicated that fear and perceived risk explain the impact of COVID-19 on travel.

Mirzaei et al. (2021) focused on the changes induced by the pandemic in the travel behaviour in Iran and revealed that health and safety play an important role, with hygiene and disinfection of tourism facilities becoming motivator factors. At the same time, they observed a preference for shorter stays and for using tourism agents for bookings.

Wen et al. (2021) analysed the potential changes in the travel behaviour of Chinese citizens and concluded that certain travellers' consumption patterns would lose their attractiveness, given the advent of new forms of tourism, such as slow or smart tourism.

Bratić et al. (2021) in a study conducted in Serbia in 2020 concluded that the perceived risk associated with the pandemic led to growing travel anxiety, inducing changes in the typical travel behaviour.

Sánchez-Pérez et al. (2021) conducted a study on behavioural changes due to COVID-19 in Spain and highlighted a series of expected tendencies such as a preference for local and individual holidays, an increased attention paid to insurance, a diminished use of public transport and shared services.

Moya Calderon et al. (2022) focused on tourist behaviour during the COVID-19 crisis in Costa Rica and revealed that safety and security in travel were two factors of utmost importance in the travel decision making process. Moreover, the respondents expressed their preference for nature-based tourism and protected areas tourism.

Li et al. (2020) provided as insight on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on post-pandemic tourist planned behaviour in correlation with the consequences for the recovery of tourism after the pandemic. They observed the intention to use less the public transport and instead travel by car. Another finding was related to the length of the planned holidays, revealing, in general, shorter stays.

At global level studies have highlighted a notable decrease in tourist traffic as a result of the disruptive effects of the pandemic, and Romania made no exception.

According to the data provided by The World Bank and CEIC, from 2015 to 2019, the outbound tourism of Romania was on an ascending path, surpassing 23 million departures in 2019 (World Bank, 2023). In 2020, the indicator dropped to less than half, to below 10 million (Figure 2).

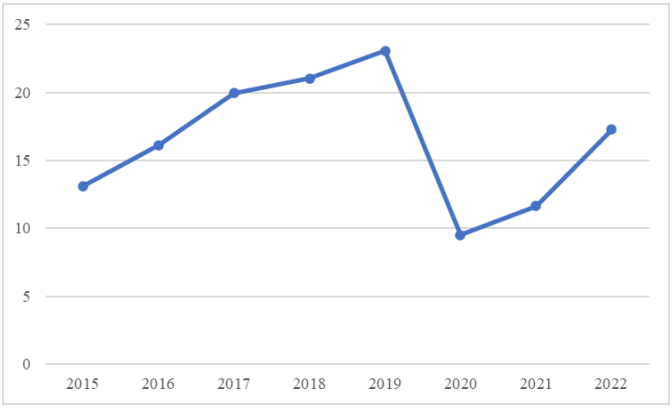


**Figure 1. Romanian tourism - Departures 2015 – 2022 (millions)**

*Source: The World Bank (2023), https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators#*
*CEIC, 2023, https://insights.ceicdata.com/series/274278302_SR5263420, https://insights.ceicdata.com/series/274293602_SR5265234.*
*UNWTO (2023), https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/key-tourism-statistics*

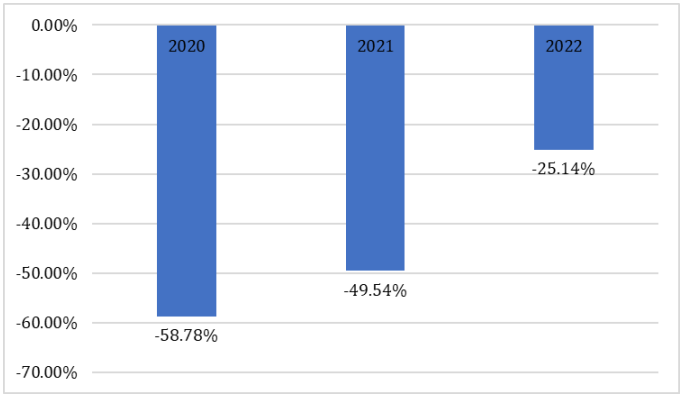


**Figure 2. Romanian tourism - Departures variations 2020-2022 vs. 2019**

*Source: The World Bank (2023), https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators#*
*CEIC, 2023, https://insights.ceicdata.com/series/274278302_SR5263420, https://insights.ceicdata.com/series/274293602_SR5265234.*
*UNWTO (2023), https://www.unwto.org/tourism-statistics/key-tourism-statistics*

The arrivals in tourist accommodation establishments increased constantly as well until 2019, reaching 13.37 million arrivals (Statista, 2023) (Figure 3). The COVID-19 outbreak put an end to the constant growth registered up to 2019, so that in 2020 an obvious decline brought arrivals in tourist accommodation establishments down to around 6 million (a decrease of over 50%) (Statista, 2023) (Figure 4).

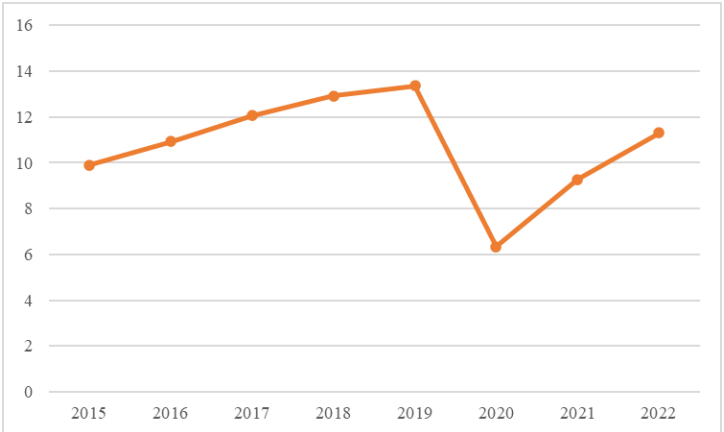


**Figure 3. Romanian tourism - Arrivals in tourist accommodation establishments 2015-2022 (millions)**

*Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/413253/number-of-arrivals-spent-in-short-stay-accommodation-in-romania/*

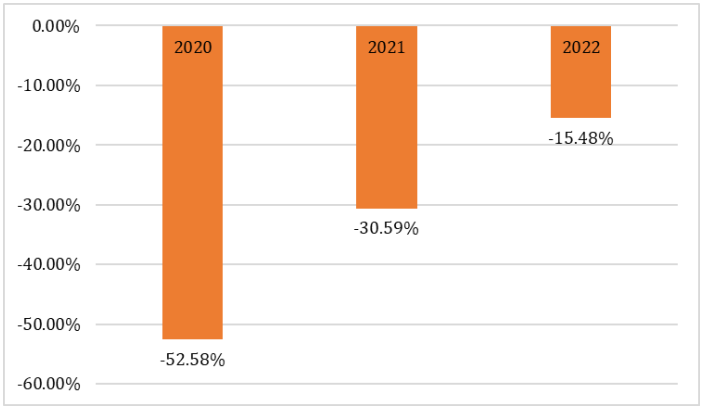


**Figure 4. Romanian tourism - Arrivals in tourist accommodation establishments variations 2020-2022 vs. 2019**

*Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/413253/number-of-arrivals-spent-in-short-stay-accommodation-in-romania/*

It was only natural, given the specific manifestation of the crisis as a health threat, that the general human behaviour and the behaviour related to tourism and travel would go through a series of transformations.

Adding to the growing amount of international research related to behavioural changes, there have also been published articles focusing on behavioural changes identified in various studies on Romanian tourists. Thus, it was identified as a first consequence, the propensity to choose domestic destinations for safety reasons (Morar et al., 2021) and/or to support local entrepreneurs (Linca and Toma, 2021a, p. 469; Popescu, 2021; Dumitru, 2022). The attention paid to safety due to the health threat brought about even the willingness to pay more for increased measures (Dumitru, 2022, Popescu, 2021). The duration of the stay was also affected (Dumitru, 2022; Linca and Toma, 2021b, p. 357). The tendency to return to nature (Linca and Toma, 2021a, p. 469) or to rural areas (Matei, 2021; Mazilu et al., 2023) was also observed. The studies carried out highlighted a much more pronounced orientation of Romanian tourist services consumers towards digitalization, as well as towards the discovery of new places to visit, but also towards a potential involvement in the development of sustainable tourism (Baba et al., 2020, Cretu et al., 2021, Moncea et al., 2023). However, to our knowledge, none of the previously published studies on Romanian tourist behaviour focused on behavioural changes related to the attention paid to hygiene, disinfection, and social distancing during visits.

As it can be seen also in figures 1 and 3 above, tourism has proved its resilience once again, with the indicators returning to a growing path. As for the behavioural changes induced by the pandemic it remains to be determined whether they are lasting or not. As it was also observed during previous crises, it is expected that at least some of these changes may linger in the short to medium term after the end of the pandemic.

## 3. Research methodology

In order to achieve the main objective of this article, namely, to highlight, post-pandemic, the changes induced in tourist behaviour related to the attention paid to hygiene, disinfection, and social distancing during visits, direct descriptive research was carried out.

Starting from the questionnaire of Chebli & Ben Said (2020), a series of test-retest type questions were added with the aim of identifying the particularities of the consumption behaviours of the subjects before the pandemic and post-pandemic. Thus, between March and May 2022, the questionnaire transposed into Google Forms was distributed online, through social networks. A 5-point Likert scale was used, each answer being assigned a score between 1 and 5 (where 1 corresponds to the option "totally disagree" and 5 to the option "totally agree").

To determine the sample size, the formula of Daniel & Cross (2013) was used, starting from the total adult population of Constanta County. Thus, a sample of 384 resulted, where $z_\alpha$ = 1.96, which corresponds to a confidence level of 95%, $e$ = 0.05 margin of error and $p$ = 0.5 the probability of obtaining an affirmative answer to the question. At the end of the research period, 408 responses were obtained, and from these 384 were extracted based on the first in-first out principle in order to ensure a proportional representation according to the age criterion.

To achieve the research objectives, a cluster analysis was performed, using the Two-Step algorithm, employing IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. The Two-Step algorithm was used because it allowed using both categorical and continuous variables.

## 4. Results and discussion

From a socio-demographic point of view, the sample has the following particularities.

62.5% of respondents are female.

Regarding the educational status, 39.32% completed bachelor's degree studies and 37.24% post university studies, while the rest were elementary or secondary/high school graduates.

From the point of view of socio-professional status, 61.2% are employed, 9.1% students, 5.5% entrepreneurs, 20.3% pensioners, 3.4% homemakers.

The age distribution of the sample is as follows: 8.1% between 18-25 years, 16.9% between 26-35 years, 20.1% 36-45 years, 34.1% 46-64 years, 20.8% over 65 years.

The average monthly net income per family member is as follows: below 1500 lei (8.3%), 1501-2500 lei (18.5%), 2501-3500 lei (26.6%), 3501-4500 lei (21.1%), 4501-5500 lei (9.9%), 5501-6500 lei (3.1%), over 6501 lei (12.5%).

In order to identify some typologies of consumers of tourist services as a result of the effects of the Covid pandemic on consumer behaviour, a cluster analysis was applied, using the Two-Step algorithm. A series of categorical variables were used (age, income, socio-professional status and educational status) as well as a series of continuous variables that expressed the post-pandemic attitude on aspects related to hygiene, disinfection, and distancing (the importance given to hygiene and disinfection in the spaces of accommodation, the importance given to hygiene and disinfection in public food spaces, the importance given to hygiene and disinfection in tourist leisure units, the importance of observing social distancing rules during the visit).

Following the application of the Two-Step cluster analysis, three clusters resulted (Cluster 1, n=78; Cluster 2, n=101; Cluster 3, n=205). The cluster quality was fair, based on a silhouette coefficient of cohesion and separation of 0.2. The size of the smallest cluster was 20.3% and the size of the largest one was 53.4%. The ratio of sizes was 2.63.

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics within clusters**

| Cluster / Variables | **Cluster 1 (20.3%)** | **Cluster 2 (26.3%)** | **Cluster 3 (53.4%)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age | >65 (87%) | <45 (68%) | 46-64 (47%) |
| Studies | Bachelor's degree (64%) | Post-university degree (51%) | Post-university degree (44%) |
| Professional status | Pensioneers (100%) | Employed (49%)<br>Students (30%)<br>Entrepreneurs (21%) | Employed (90%) |
| Income | 2501-3500 Lei (55%) | >6501 Lei (34%) | 3501-4500 (28%) |

*Source: authors' calculations*

**Cluster 1**

The respondents in this cluster declared a very high preoccupation for hygiene and disinfection of accommodation spaces (average score 4.69), food outlets (average score 4.73), entertainment outlets (average score 4.73), as well as a very high importance to social distancing during the visit (average score 4.51).

**Cluster 2**

The second cluster is composed of respondents from all age categories, but mostly below 45 years old, post-university graduates, employed, but also students or entrepreneurs. They declared above the average monthly net income, with more than a third of them declaring net monthly income of over 6501 lei. The respondents in this cluster manifested below average preoccupation for hygiene and disinfection of tourist related facilities following the pandemic (hygiene and disinfection of accommodation spaces - average score 2.44, food outlets - average score 2.43, entertainment outlets - average score 2.34, importance of social distancing during the visit - average score 2.51).

**Cluster 3**

The third cluster is composed mainly of employees, aged below 64, the majority being aged 46-64 (47.3%). The respondents in this cluster were secondary/high school graduates, bachelor's degree graduates, and post university graduates; the most numerous were the post-university graduates (44.4%). They reported different categories of income, the most representative being the category with an average monthly net income between 3501-4500 (27.8%). These respondents stated a high to very high preoccupation for hygiene and disinfection of accommodation spaces - average score 4.21, food outlets - average score 4.23, entertainment outlets - average score 4.22, and a medium-high importance of social distancing during the visit - average score 3.93.

## 5. Conclusions

Tourism was one of the most affected industries during the Covid pandemic crisis, with tourist activity largely disrupted and with significant consequences on both businesses and tourist behaviour.

As we have already observed from previous crises, tourism seems to exhibit an impressive recovery potential, with the activity picking up at an accelerated pace following crisis events. Tourism did not make an exception this time around either, as we are witnessing its post-pandemic recovery. However, given the severity of the pandemic crisis impact, we have observed important changes in tourist behaviour.

Therefore, the focus of our research was to investigate the extent up to which the pandemic crisis influenced tourist behaviour as far as their attitudes on aspects related to hygiene, disinfection, and distancing were concerned.

As a results of the research we conducted, we identified three types of tourist services consumers – a category of consumers very preoccupied with hygiene and disinfection of accommodation spaces, food and entertainment outlets, as well as social distancing during the visit, mostly elderly pensioneers; a second category opposite to the first, exhibiting below average preoccupation with hygiene, disinfection, and social distancing during visits, young people, employed, students, or entrepreneurs; and a third category exhibiting above the average preoccupation for hygiene, disinfection, and social distancing during the visit, mostly middle-aged employees.

Considering the impact and the consequences of the pandemic on consumer behaviour in general and on tourist services consumers in particular, it remains to be observed, perhaps as a future research direction, whether these changes are lasting or transitory.

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