



Post-Pandemic Tourist Loyalty in Romania: The Role of Health Safety, Comfort, and Authentic Experience

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received July 27, 2026

Accepted August 18, 2026

Available online September 1, 2026

JEL Classification

M31, L83, Z32

Keywords:

post-pandemic tourism, tourist loyalty, perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, facilities and comfort, revisit intention, recommendation behaviour, Romania

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic reconfigured tourists' evaluative criteria by increasing the relevance of health safety, functional comfort, and meaningful experiences in travel-related decision-making. This study examines the influence of perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, and facilities and comfort on tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour in the Romanian post-pandemic tourism context. The research is grounded in service quality theory, tourist loyalty literature, perceived risk perspectives, and experiential tourism research. The empirical analysis uses survey data collected from 419 Romanian tourists with post-pandemic travel experience. Data were analysed through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling using AMOS. The results show that perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, and facilities and comfort each exert positive and statistically significant effects on revisit intention and recommendation behaviour in direct structural models. In the integrated multivariate model, authentic tourism experience, facilities and comfort, and perceived health safety remain the strongest positive predictors of loyalty intentions, while the model explains 58.1% of the variance in revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. The findings indicate that post-pandemic tourist loyalty is not shaped exclusively by satisfaction or risk reduction, but by the combined influence of health-related confidence, functional service quality and authentic experiential value. The study contributes to tourism marketing literature by clarifying the relative importance of safety, comfort and authenticity in loyalty formation after a major health crisis and provides managerial implications for tourism providers and destination management organizations in Romania.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic produced one of the most disruptive transformations in contemporary tourism, affecting not only international mobility and service delivery, but also tourists' psychological expectations, risk perceptions and loyalty mechanisms. Tourism services were particularly exposed to the consequences of the health crisis because they depend on mobility, interpersonal interaction, shared service environments and trust in providers' ability to manage uncertainty. As a result, the post-pandemic tourism market cannot be interpreted as a simple return to pre-pandemic consumption patterns. It reflects a reconfiguration of tourists' expectations around safety, reliability, comfort, flexibility and meaningful experiences.

Tourist loyalty has traditionally been explained through satisfaction, perceived quality, destination image and perceived value. However, the post-pandemic context has expanded the meaning of loyalty by increasing the salience of health safety and by strengthening the role of functional and experiential criteria in service evaluation. Tourists no longer assess destinations and providers only according to hedonic enjoyment or price-quality perceptions. They also evaluate the extent to which tourism organizations provide visible safety standards, reliable facilities, physical and psychological comfort, and authentic experiences that generate emotional and symbolic value.

Romania provides a relevant context for examining these relationships. The Romanian tourism sector, similarly, to other European markets, experienced substantial disruption during the pandemic and later recovery in the post-pandemic period. Domestic tourism gained strategic relevance, while tourists became more attentive to destinations and service providers perceived themselves as safe, comfortable, and capable of offering meaningful experiences. These transformations justify an empirical analysis of the determinants of revisit intention and recommendation behaviour in the Romanian tourism market.

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The present study focuses on three determinants of post-pandemic tourist loyalty: perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, and facilities and comfort. Perceived health safety reflects tourists' evaluation of sanitary protection and hygiene-related confidence. Authentic tourism experience captures the perceived genuineness, cultural relevance and meaningfulness of the tourism experience. Facilities and comfort represent the functional and tangible dimension of the service environment, including infrastructure, amenities, spatial comfort and service convenience.

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort on tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour in Romania. The study addresses the following research question: To what extent do perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, and facilities and comfort contribute to tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour in post-pandemic tourism?

The paper contributes to tourism marketing literature in three ways. First, it integrates safety, comfort and authenticity into a focused explanatory framework of post-pandemic tourist loyalty. Second, it empirically examines both individual and integrated effects of these dimensions on revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. Third, it provides evidence from the Romanian tourism market, offering practical implications for tourism providers and destination management organizations seeking to strengthen loyalty after a major health crisis.

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on post-pandemic tourist loyalty, perceived health safety, authentic tourism experiences, and facilities and comfort. The methods section presents the research design, sample, measures and data analysis procedures. The results section reports the reliability, validity and structural model findings. The discussion interprets the results in relation to the literature, while the conclusions section outlines theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature review

Tourist loyalty is generally conceptualized as a favourable attitudinal and behavioural orientation toward a destination or tourism provider, expressed through revisit intention, recommendation behaviour and resistance to alternative offers. Early loyalty research distinguishes between repeated behaviour and genuine psychological commitment, emphasizing that behavioural repetition alone is insufficient to indicate true loyalty (Dick & Basu, 1994; Oliver, 1999). In tourism, loyalty is commonly operationalized through tourists' intention to revisit and willingness to recommend, because both outcomes reflect future-oriented behavioural commitment and positive word-of-mouth (Chi & Qu, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

In services, loyalty is strongly connected to perceived quality, satisfaction, trust and value. Zeithaml et al. (1996) demonstrated that behavioural intentions such as recommendation and repurchase are important consequences of perceived service quality. Similarly, the SERVQUAL tradition emphasizes the role of reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles in shaping consumer evaluations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Tourism services intensify these mechanisms because they involve high experiential involvement, intangibility, uncertainty and post-consumption evaluation. Consequently, tourists rely not only on objective service attributes, but also on affective and symbolic evaluations when forming loyalty intentions.

The pandemic has added a crisis-sensitive layer to these mechanisms. Tourism research conducted during and after COVID-19 indicates that health risk, safety perceptions, trust, flexibility, digital solutions and destination confidence became central factors in travel decision-making (Bae & Chang, 2021; Gössling et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). These transformations suggest that post-pandemic tourist loyalty must be analysed through a multidimensional framework that combines risk reduction, functional service quality and experiential value.

Perceived health safety refers to tourists' subjective evaluation that a destination or tourism provider can reduce health-related risks and ensure sanitary protection during the service experience. In the post-pandemic context, health safety has become a salient component of perceived service quality and trust. Visible hygiene protocols, transparent communication, crowd management, cleanliness and contact-reducing procedures may reduce perceived vulnerability and increase tourists' willingness to engage with tourism services.

From a marketing perspective, perceived health safety operates as a risk-reduction signal. Services are difficult to evaluate prior to consumption because of intangibility and variability; therefore, safety cues help tourists reduce uncertainty and infer provider reliability. In hospitality and tourism, where service consumption often takes place in shared environments, the perceived ability of providers to control health risks becomes a determinant of confidence and future behavioural intentions. Jiang and Wen (2020) argued that health-related concerns and hygiene assurance became critical elements of hotel marketing and management after COVID-19, while Bae and Chang (2021) showed that COVID-19 risk perception influenced behavioural intention toward tourism alternatives perceived as safer.

Therefore, perceived health safety is expected to increase tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour:

H1. Perceived health safety positively influences tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

Authentic tourism experience refers to the extent to which tourists perceive the experience as genuine, meaningful, locally embedded and connected to cultural, social or natural dimensions of the destination. Authenticity has been central to tourism theory for decades. Wang (1999) distinguished between object-related authenticity and existential authenticity, emphasizing that tourists may seek not only authentic objects or places, but also authentic states of being. In experiential tourism, authenticity contributes to memorability, emotional attachment and perceived value.

The post-pandemic context has reinforced tourists' orientation toward meaningful and personally relevant experiences. After prolonged restrictions, mediated interactions and uncertainty, tourists may attach greater importance to experiences that provide reconnection, identity expression, personal development and cultural contact. Memorable tourism experience research supports this view, showing that experiences characterized by involvement, local culture, novelty and meaningfulness can stimulate destination loyalty (Kim et al., 2012). Chen and Rahman (2018) also found that cultural engagement and memorable tourism experiences are associated with destination loyalty.

Authenticity can influence loyalty through several mechanisms. First, authentic experiences are more likely to be remembered and narrated. Second, they can create emotional attachment to places and providers. Third, they differentiate destinations in competitive markets where functional attributes are increasingly standardized. Fourth, authenticity transforms tourism consumption from a simple service transaction into an experiential and symbolic encounter.

Therefore, tourists who perceive their experience as authentic are more likely to revisit and recommend the destination or provider:

H2. Authentic tourism experience positively influences tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

Facilities and comfort represent the functional and tangible dimension of the tourism service environment. They include infrastructure quality, cleanliness, equipment, amenities, accessibility, accommodation conditions, spatial comfort, digital and physical convenience, and the general ease of using tourism services. Although post-pandemic tourism research has often emphasized risk, safety and digitalization, the tangible and functional service environment remains essential for loyalty formation.

The role of tangibles and the physical service environment has long been recognized in services marketing. Parasuraman et al. (1988) included tangibles as a core dimension of perceived service quality, while Bitner (1992) showed that servicescapes influence both consumers and employees by shaping perceptions, emotions and behavioural responses. In tourism, facilities and comfort are particularly relevant because tourists spend extended time in service environments and evaluate the experience through both functional and affective responses.

Comfort is not limited to luxury. It refers to the extent to which the service environment allows tourists to feel supported, relaxed, safe and free from unnecessary effort. In the post-pandemic context, spaciousness, cleanliness, ventilation, parking availability, digital connectivity, well-maintained facilities and service convenience can communicate provider competence and care. These attributes can reduce uncertainty and increase the probability of favourable behavioural intentions.

Therefore, facilities and comfort are expected to positively influence tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour:

H3. Facilities and comfort positively influence tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

The present study also argues that perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort should be interpreted as complementary determinants of post-pandemic tourist loyalty. Health safety addresses the need for protection and trust. Facilities and comfort address functional quality and service convenience. Authentic tourism experience addresses symbolic, emotional and experiential value. Together, these dimensions offer a more complete explanation of loyalty formation than single-factor models.

A tourist may perceive a destination as safe but not memorable, comfortable but not authentic, or authentic but functionally inadequate. Loyalty is more likely to emerge when tourists perceive the tourism experience as simultaneously safe, comfortable and meaningful.

This integrated logic is consistent with the Stimulus-Organism-Response framework, according to which environmental and experiential stimuli influence internal evaluations and behavioural responses (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), and with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which links attitudes and perceived control to behavioural intentions (Ajzen, 1991).

Therefore, we formulated H4. Perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, and facilities and comfort make significant positive contributions to the explanation of tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour within the post-pandemic loyalty model.

3. Methods

The study employed a quantitative, explanatory and cross-sectional research design. The empirical analysis is derived from a broader mixed-method doctoral research project on post-pandemic consumer behaviour in tourism services. The broader project followed an exploratory sequential logic, including a literature-based conceptualization, a qualitative focus-group stage and a quantitative survey stage. The present article reports the quantitative component relevant to the relationship between perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, facilities and comfort, and revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

Data were collected from Romanian adult tourists who had undertaken at least one tourism trip after the lifting of the main pandemic restrictions. The inclusion criteria were age of at least 18 years and direct post-pandemic tourism experience. This criterion ensured that respondents evaluated tourism services based on actual post-pandemic consumption experience rather than hypothetical travel intention.

The final sample consisted of 419 respondents. Data collection took place between April and June 2025. The questionnaire was implemented online using Google Forms and distributed through digital communities related to travel, thematic groups and professional networks. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling strategy was combined with snowball sampling in order to extend access to respondents actively involved in tourism activities. To reduce the exclusion of individuals with limited digital access, ten paper-based questionnaires were administered face-to-face. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and based on informed consent. No personal identifiers were collected, and responses were processed only at aggregate level.

The measurement instrument included reflective multi-item scales for perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience, facilities and comfort, and revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. Perceived health safety measured tourists' evaluation of sanitary protection, visible hygiene standards and confidence in providers' ability to reduce health-related risks. Authentic tourism experience measured the perceived genuineness, personal relevance, cultural embeddedness and memorability of tourism experiences. Facilities and comfort measured tangible and functional service attributes, including infrastructure, amenities, accessibility and perceived comfort. Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour measured tourists' willingness to return and recommend the tourism provider or destination.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale. The measurement model was assessed through confirmatory factor analysis. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, while convergent validity was assessed through average variance extracted. Structural equation modelling was conducted in AMOS using Maximum Likelihood estimation. Model interpretation followed established recommendations for SEM, with attention to standardized coefficients, statistical significance, explained variance and model fit indicators (Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2023). The analysis included both direct structural models and an integrated multivariate model in which multiple post-pandemic loyalty determinants were estimated simultaneously. For the purpose of this article, the interpretation focuses on perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort.

4. Results

The measurement model supported the reliability and convergent validity of the constructs included in the analysis. Perceived health safety was measured with 11 retained items and obtained an average variance extracted of 0.692, composite reliability of 0.961 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.961. Authentic tourism experience was measured with 12 retained items and obtained an average variance extracted of 0.729, composite reliability of 0.970 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.970. Facilities and comfort was measured with 7 retained items and obtained an average variance extracted of 0.739, composite reliability of 0.952 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.951. Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour was measured with 8 retained items and obtained an average variance extracted of 0.716, composite reliability of 0.953 and Cronbach's alpha of 0.948.

These values exceed conventional thresholds for internal consistency and convergent validity. The high reliability coefficients indicate strong internal coherence of the measurement scales, while the average variance extracted values suggest that each latent construct explains a substantial proportion of the variance of its indicators.

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity of the focal constructs

Construct	Number of retained items	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha
Perceived health safety	11	0.692	0.961	0.961
Authentic tourism experience	12	0.729	0.970	0.970
Facilities and comfort	7	0.739	0.952	0.951
Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	8	0.716	0.953	0.948

The structural results first indicate significant positive direct effects in the individual models. Perceived health safety positively influenced revisit intention and recommendation behaviour, with a

standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 54.7% of the variance in the dependent construct. Therefore, H1 is supported. Authentic tourism experience also had a strong positive effect on revisit intention and recommendation behaviour, with $\beta = 0.768$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 58.9% of the variance. Thus, H2 is supported. Facilities and comfort exerted the strongest direct unipredictive effect, with $\beta = 0.771$, $p < 0.001$, explaining 59.4% of the variance in revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. Therefore, H3 is supported.

Table 2. Direct structural effects of the focal predictors on revisit intention and recommendation behaviour

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standardized coefficient β	Unstandardized coefficient B	p-value	R ²	Decision
H1	Perceived health safety → Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	0.739	0.807	< 0.001	0.547	Supported
H2	Authentic tourism experience → Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	0.768	0.813	< 0.001	0.589	Supported
H3	Facilities and comfort → Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	0.771	0.799	< 0.001	0.594	Supported

The integrated multivariate model included several post-pandemic tourism determinants estimated simultaneously. Within this model, the three focal variables remained the strongest positive predictors of revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. Authentic tourism experience had a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.446$, $p < 0.001$; facilities and comfort had a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.439$, $p < 0.001$; and perceived health safety had a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.382$, $p < 0.001$. The integrated model explained 58.1% of the variance in revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

Table 3. Focal predictors in the integrated multivariate structural model

Relationship	Type of effect	β	B	SE	CR	p-value	R ²
Authentic tourism experience → Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	Direct	0.446	0.359	0.033	10.846	< 0.001	0.581
Facilities and comfort → Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	Direct	0.439	0.342	0.032	10.548	< 0.001	0.581
Perceived health safety → Revisit intention and recommendation behaviour	Direct	0.382	0.313	0.033	9.544	< 0.001	0.581

The findings support H4 in a qualified manner. The results do not indicate that the three focal variables were estimated as the only predictors in an isolated triadic model; rather, they show that, within the broader integrated post-pandemic loyalty model, perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort retain significant positive contributions and represent the strongest explanatory block of revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. This interpretation is methodologically conservative and avoids attributing the full explained variance exclusively to the three focal constructs.

5. Discussion

The results confirm that post-pandemic tourist loyalty in Romania is shaped by a combination of health-related confidence, functional service quality and experiential authenticity. All three focal variables positively influence tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour, both in direct structural models and within the integrated multivariate framework. The strongest direct unipredictive effect belongs to facilities and comfort, followed closely by authentic tourism experience and perceived health safety. In the integrated model, authentic tourism experience becomes the strongest unique predictor, followed by facilities and comfort and perceived health safety. This pattern suggests that, when multiple post-pandemic determinants are considered simultaneously, the experiential and functional dimensions of tourism remain central, while health safety continues to operate as a significant loyalty-supporting mechanism.

The positive effect of perceived health safety supports the argument that sanitary confidence has become part of the post-pandemic definition of tourism service quality. Although the acute phase of the pandemic has passed, tourists continue to evaluate service providers through the lens of health-related assurance, visible hygiene and perceived control. This result is consistent with research showing that perceived health risk and safety concerns influence post-pandemic travel intentions and tourism behaviour (Bae & Chang, 2021; Gössling et al., 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). In services that require physical presence, shared environments and interaction with other people, health safety functions as a trust signal and reduces perceived vulnerability.

The effect of authentic tourism experience is theoretically significant because it shows that post-pandemic tourists are not only risk-averse, but also meaning-oriented. Authenticity contributes to loyalty by increasing memorability, emotional attachment and perceived distinctiveness. This finding is consistent with Wang's (1999) theory of authenticity and with empirical research on memorable tourism experiences and destination loyalty (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Kim et al., 2012). In the Romanian tourism context, authentic experiences may be especially relevant because the country has a diverse cultural, gastronomic and natural heritage that can be transformed into a differentiated value proposition. The results suggest that tourists are more willing to return and recommend when they perceive the experience as genuine, locally embedded and emotionally meaningful.

Facilities and comfort also exert a substantial influence on revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. This confirms that tangible and functional service attributes remain essential in post-pandemic loyalty formation. While the pandemic increased the relevance of safety and digital solutions, tourists still evaluate the tourism experience through the comfort, accessibility and usability of the service environment. The finding is consistent with servicescape theory and service quality literature, according to which physical surroundings and tangible cues shape consumer evaluations and behavioural responses (Bitner, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Zeithaml et al., 1996). In tourism, comfort reduces effort, enhances relaxation and provides the practical foundation through which experiential value can be realized.

The integrated results indicate that the three focal determinants should not be interpreted as competing explanations, but as complementary dimensions of the post-pandemic loyalty process. Perceived health safety addresses the need for confidence and risk reduction. Facilities and comfort address the functional and tangible quality of the service environment. Authentic tourism experience addresses symbolic and emotional value. Together, these dimensions show that tourist loyalty is more likely to emerge when the experience is perceived as safe, comfortable and meaningful.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings extend classical satisfaction-based models of tourist loyalty by incorporating crisis-sensitive and experiential dimensions. The results support the idea that post-pandemic loyalty is not generated solely by satisfaction or by repeated consumption, but by a multidimensional evaluation of safety, service functionality and authenticity. This is consistent with contemporary interpretations of consumer behaviour in crisis and post-crisis contexts, where perceived risk, trust, value and experience interact in shaping behavioural intentions (Sigala, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020).

From a managerial perspective, the findings indicate that Romanian tourism providers should not rely only on promotional incentives or price-based retention strategies. Instead, loyalty strategies should integrate visible safety standards, investment in comfort and facilities, and the design of authentic experiences. Health safety should remain part of the service promise, even when tourists no longer explicitly mention pandemic risk. Comfort should be managed as a functional and psychological resource that reduces uncertainty and supports relaxation. Authenticity should be developed through meaningful local experiences, cultural specificity, genuine storytelling, gastronomy, community interaction and responsible destination interpretation.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the influence of perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort on tourists' revisit intention and recommendation behaviour in the Romanian post-pandemic tourism context. The results support all direct hypotheses. Perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort each exert positive and statistically significant effects on revisit intention and recommendation behaviour. In the integrated multivariate model, the three focal constructs remain the strongest positive predictors, and the overall model explains 58.1% of the variance in tourist loyalty intentions.

The study contributes to tourism marketing literature by showing that post-pandemic tourist loyalty is multidimensional. It is shaped not only by risk reduction or satisfaction, but by the combined influence of health-related confidence, functional comfort and authentic experiential value. The findings suggest that tourists in the post-pandemic period evaluate tourism providers through a complex framework that includes safety, comfort, meaning, reliability and experience quality.

The practical implications are relevant for tourism providers, accommodation units, restaurants, leisure operators and destination management organizations. First, providers should maintain clear and visible hygiene standards, even after the crisis period. Second, investments in facilities, accessibility, cleanliness, digital connectivity and physical comfort remain crucial for loyalty formation. Third, tourism organizations

should develop authentic experiences connected to local culture, nature, gastronomy and community identity. Fourth, destination communication should avoid generic promotional narratives and emphasize coherent value propositions built around safety, comfort and authenticity.

The study has several limitations. First, the research uses a cross-sectional design, which limits causal inference. Second, the sample consists of Romanian tourists, and the findings should be generalized with caution to other cultural or national contexts. Third, the study relies on self-reported perceptions and behavioural intentions rather than observed revisit behaviour. Fourth, the focal variables were interpreted within a broader integrated post-pandemic loyalty model; future studies could estimate a separate triadic model including only perceived health safety, authentic tourism experience and facilities and comfort as predictors of loyalty.

Future research could examine whether the relative importance of health safety declines over time or remains incorporated into tourists' baseline expectations. Comparative studies between domestic and international tourists could clarify whether safety, comfort and authenticity operate differently across market segments. Longitudinal research could also assess whether revisit intention and recommendation behaviour translate into actual loyalty. Finally, future models may integrate mediating variables such as satisfaction, trust, perceived value or place attachment in order to clarify the psychological mechanisms through which safety, comfort and authenticity shape post-pandemic tourist loyalty.

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