

# CHANGES IN THE BEHAVIOUR OF TOURISTS AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. A CREDINGREEN RESEARCH

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## **Abstract:**

*The COVID-19 pandemic left a strong mark on the tourism sector and represents a turning point in its evolution.*

*After the activities were gradually resumed, substantial shifts in both industry practices and tourist behavior were observed. The knowledge of these changes is of strategic importance for the future because they will determine the managerial decisions at the microeconomic level and the trends at the macroeconomic one.*

*The present paper aims to discern the shifts in tourist behavior, as perceived by tourism companies, and to investigate how these changes influenced business decisions. This investigation was conducted as part of the CredinGreen international project– ‘Responding to tourism market changes caused by COVID-19 and the EU Green Deal through micro-credential-certified upskilling of SME tourism managers’. The research addresses the response to tourism market fluctuations generated by the pandemic conditions and the results could enhance the tourism policies and the micro-credential certified upskilling initiatives.*

**Key words:** tourism industry, behaviour of tourists, tourism policy

**JEL classification:** L83, Z30, Z32, Z38, Z39

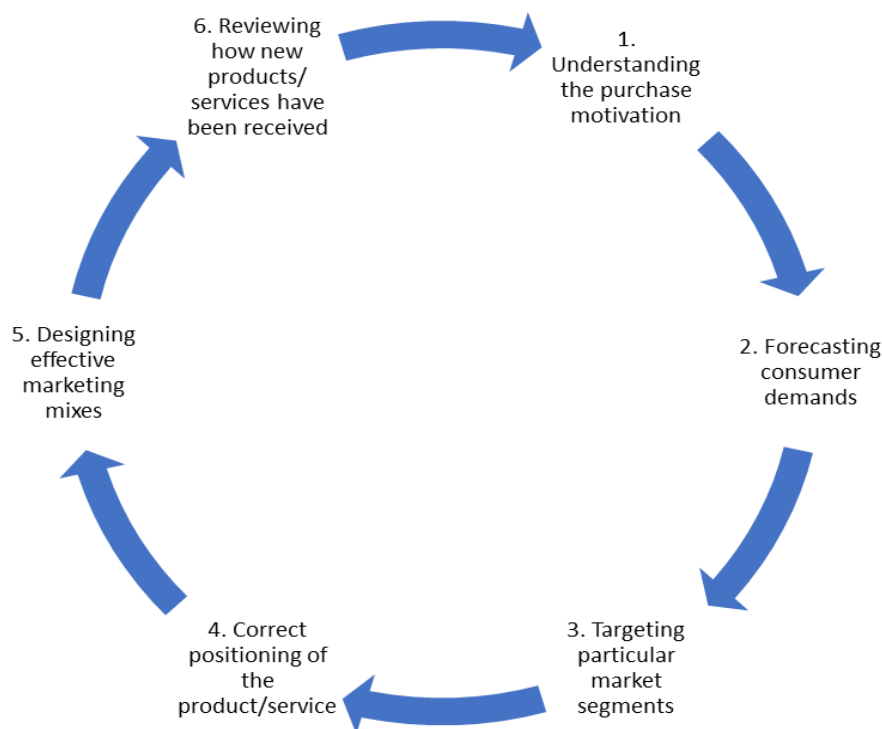
## **1. THE FUNDAMENTS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN TOURISM**

Tourism is one of the most dynamic sectors in developing and developed countries' economies. The richness and wideness of the resources across continents offer boundless opportunities to deliver an array of activities for tourists, enabling them to partake in unforgettable experiences.. However, the pillar of any activity or strategy is knowing the consumers' needs and desires; without this information, no entity in the tourism field will be able to offer proper services and attractions for tourists and will not have a long, profitable business. Client feedback is crucial and shapes tourism providers' strategies, actions, and general behaviour.

The dynamic character of the tourism sector is given especially by the changes in the tourists' behaviour, which is a normal fact, considering the big mutations in the lifestyle, education, earnings, travel conditions, bigger accessibility, longer life, and better well-being of the actual population. These factors and many others, form a complex system of considerations that a tourism manager must address when orchestrating and overseeing present and future activities.

So, it is necessary to investigate the tourist's decision-making process what is he/she looking for in the tourist service, and, if possible, to step forward and anticipate some needs or trends to improve the offer in the future.

Consumer behavior stands as a pivotal element within the marketing process, representing a dual-sided approach. It involves ongoing efforts to gather data and insights into clients' needs and desires while concurrently employing marketing strategies to persuade consumers to invest in a company's products and services. From both directions, there is an informational flux about customs, habits, desires, and needs that must be transformed into strategies and actions inside the company, aiming to provide exactly what the clients expect. The figure below shows a sequence of steps for connecting consumer behaviour with the internal marketing of the company.



**Figure no. 1. Integrating consumer behaviour in company's strategy**

Source: own elaboration with information from Horner S., Swarbrooke J., (2021), `Consumer Behaviour in Tourism` fourth edition, Routledge, Oxon, New York, p. 25, available at [https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781000290790\\_A40689877/preview-9781000290790\\_A40689877.pdf](https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9781000290790_A40689877/preview-9781000290790_A40689877.pdf)

The first step aims to understand why consumers buy a product/service and what benefits are looking for from this act of purchasing; this understanding will lead to the correct design of the goals for short, medium, and long term. The second step is logically connected with the previous one because it deals with the forecast of consumer needs and demands or these are the results of the analysis of purchasing motivations. The first two steps lead to the orientation of the company for certain groups of clients and shape the company's profile. Then, the marketing specialists will select and adapt the techniques and means for the correct positioning of the product/service on the market for sales maximisation and a better position compared with the competitors. At the end, the loop is closed with the analysis of the results, and the cycle is resumed. The sequence of steps presented above respects the PDCA cycle of Demings and leads to a continuous improvement of the integration of consumer behaviour in the organisation's production and marketing strategies (Albu and Ivan, 2012).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

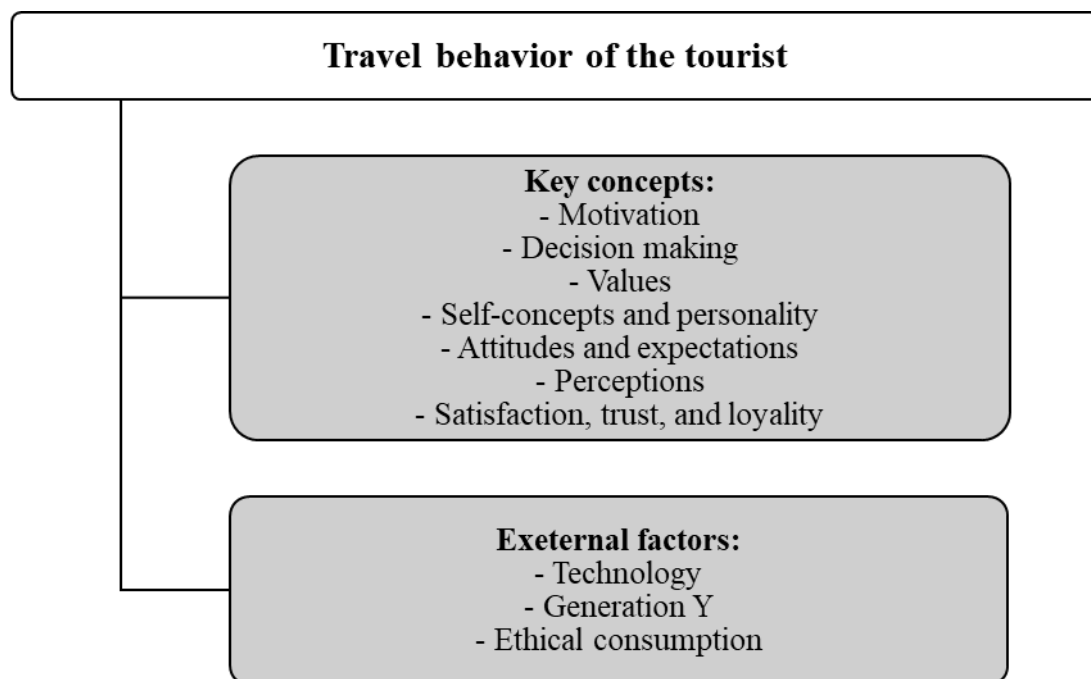
The subject of consumer behaviour holds a significant interest due to its profound impact on fostering successful relationship between companies and their clientele. During the last 35-40 years there has been a big interest in studying consumer behaviour, especially for marketing purposes. The tourism field was the perfect area to study due to the complexity and dynamic of the phenomena and, of course, due to the astonishing evolution of the sector until the COVID-19 pandemic which represented an `earthquake` but, simultaneously, a turning point for future development (Bucaciuc et al, 2020).

According to Solomon and Russel (2017), consumer behaviour represents `the study of the processes involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use, or dispose of products, services, ideas, or experiences to satisfy needs and desires and to define and express their identities`. This definition emphasizes some basic features of consumer behaviour, generally speaking, but also for the tourism industry. Consumer behaviour is considered not only as

individual behaviour, but encompasses group dynamics, particularly in tourism. A very large share of the population goes on vacation with family and friends, the group members sharing similar or closely aligned opinions regarding destinations to visit, activities to carry out, or attractions to include in their vacation itinerary. Another key element of the definition regards the fact that the consumer doesn't buy only products or services, but also experiences, which became crucial in the development of tourism during the last 30-35 years. In almost all types of tourism (like cultural tourism, gastronomic tourism, events tourism, and others), the tourism providers aim to create unforgettable experiences that will transform the tourists into loyal customers and attract new ones. To fulfill this goal, the first step is to know consumer behaviour. The last basic feature of the definition above directly links consumer behaviour with a person's identity, the authors affirming that the behaviour is the expression of the identity. This aspect complicates the study of consumer behaviour because each person is unique and has his/her own identity. However, some patterns synthesize different types of behaviour.

The American Marketing Association gives a different definition of consumer behaviour: *'The dynamic interaction process among emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors is the behavioral basis for human beings to perform the exchange function in life'* (Li and Cao, 2022). The definition goes deeper into the processes that govern the mechanisms of needs and their fulfilment. This different approach is very important for tourism considering that the emotional processes have crucial importance in analysing, selecting, and buying a vacation in a certain tourist destination. The emotional factors always have played a major role in building a connection between the tourists and the destination. Recently, environmental factors have risen their importance and are more and more considered in studies about consumer behaviour.

In their study, Cohen et al (2014) made a detailed analysis of the key concepts and external influences on consumer behaviour, called also tourist behaviour or travel behaviour of the tourist. They split the whole process into three phases: the pre-visit phase, the on-site phase, and the post-visit phase. For each one, there were analysed the external influence factors and the key concept specific to tourist behaviour, aiming to offer useful tools to understand the tourist and to design proper strategies for a certain tourist destination. Figure no. 2 summarises the study's results.



**Figure no. 2. Core elements of the travel behaviour of the tourist**

Source: own elaboration with information from Cohen S.A., Prayag G., Moital M., (2014), *'Consumer behaviour in tourism: Concepts, influences and opportunities'*, *Current Issues in Tourism*, 17:10, 872-909, DOI: 10.1080/13683500.2013.850064, [accessed on the 1.11.2023], available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13683500.2013.850064>

With a large number of key concepts and influencing factors, it is obvious that tourist behaviour is not an easy concept to be described. In the scientific literature, there are several models for consumer behaviour in tourism from which the push-pull approach remains the most used and known. The tourist is pushed to travel by their needs and pulled by the destinations' attractions (Mehmetoglu, 2011). In this model, motivation plays a major role in linking the intrinsic features of the tourists that drive the travel and the extrinsic attractions of the destination that, also, drive the travel. Several studies deal with the push factors and pull factors aiming at their identification and characterisation. According to Kassean and Gassita (2013), the two groups of factors act separately, but because they are targeting the same individual, they join in the final result – the decision to purchase a tourism package. The opinions regarding what are the push and pull factors are different among scholars involved in research in the field. The pull factors are diverse and specific to the destination; the tourist is attracted by the local resources and facilities of a certain destination if these fit with his/her needs and desires. Selection of a destination from a wide variety of offers is a challenging mission, more complicated than selecting a product. Table 1 presents some of these opinions, according to the scientific sources used in this paper.

**Table 1. Push and pull factors for consumer behaviour in tourism**

<b>Push factors</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Pull factors</b>	<b>Source</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ anomie – means the tourist's desire to escape everyday life/routine</li> <li>✓ ego-enhancement – means the status conferred by the travel</li> </ul>	Dann G.M., (1977)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ sunshine</li> <li>✓ relaxed tempo</li> <li>✓ friendly natives</li> </ul>	Dann G.M., (1981)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ escape</li> <li>✓ novelty</li> <li>✓ enhancement of kinship relationships</li> <li>✓ prestige</li> <li>✓ relaxation/hobbies</li> </ul>	Yuan S., McDonald C., (1990)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ budget</li> <li>✓ culture and history</li> <li>✓ ease of travel</li> <li>✓ wilderness</li> <li>✓ cosmopolitan environment</li> <li>✓ facilities</li> <li>✓ hunting</li> </ul>	Yuan S., McDonald C., (1990)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ the desire for escape</li> <li>✓ rest and relaxation</li> <li>✓ prestige</li> <li>✓ regression</li> <li>✓ health and fitness</li> <li>✓ adventure and social interaction</li> <li>✓ enhancement of kinship relationships</li> <li>✓ exploration and evaluation of self</li> <li>✓ excitement</li> </ul>	Crompton J.L., McKay S.L. (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ beaches</li> <li>✓ recreation facilities</li> <li>✓ cultural attractions</li> <li>✓ entertainment</li> <li>✓ natural scenery</li> <li>✓ shopping</li> <li>✓ parks</li> </ul>	McGehee N.G., Murphy L., Uysal M., (1996)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Motivations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ escape</li> <li>✓ rest and relaxation</li> <li>✓ self-esteem</li> <li>✓ prestige</li> <li>✓ health and fitness</li> <li>✓ adventure</li> <li>✓ social interaction</li> <li>✓ benefits</li> <li>✓ interests</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ <b>Socioeconomic and demographic factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ age, gender</li> <li>✓ income, education</li> <li>✓ family life cycle and size</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Uysal M., Li X., Sirakaya-Turk E., (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Destination attributes and type of facilities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ climate</li> <li>✓ history sights</li> <li>✓ scenic beauty</li> <li>✓ sunshine</li> <li>✓ beaches</li> <li>✓ snow</li> <li>✓ cultural events</li> <li>✓ recreational opportunities</li> <li>✓ benefit expectations</li> </ul> </li> <li>✓ <b>Accessibility</b></li> <li>✓ <b>Maintenance and situational factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ safety and security</li> <li>✓ seasonality</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Uysal M., Li X., Sirakaya-Turk E., (2008)

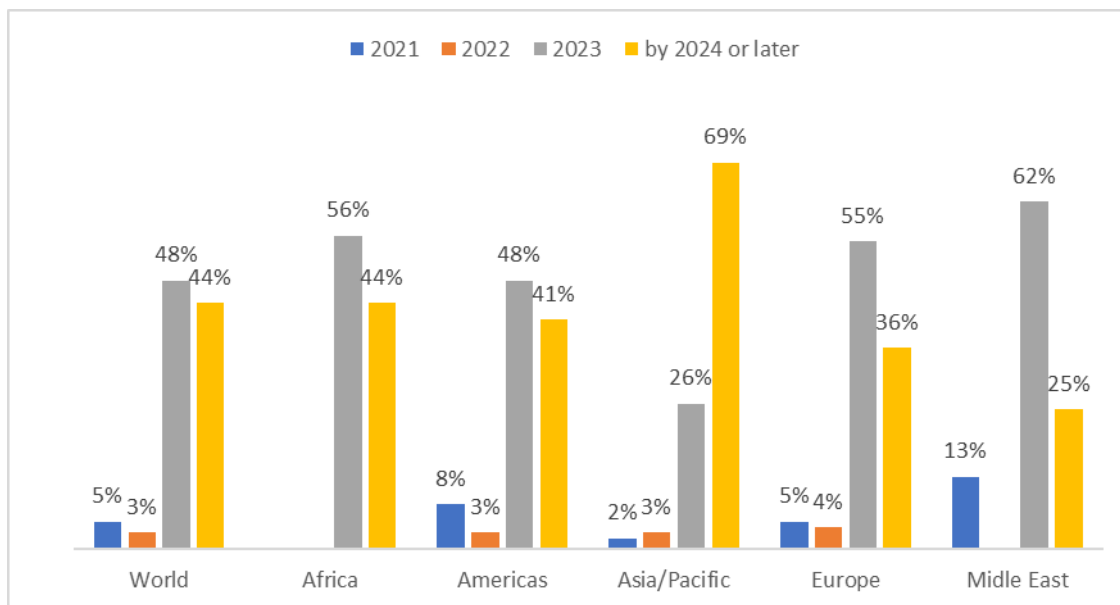
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ race/ethnic group</li> <li>✓ occupation</li> <li>✓ second home ownership</li> <li>✓ <b>Market knowledge</b></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Market image</b></li> <li>✓ already formed positive/negative destination image</li> <li>✓ quality of services</li> <li>✓ quality of facilities</li> </ul>	
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Source: own elaboration

From the table above we can notice that over time the studies became more accurate and the list with push and pull factors grew and included more items considered to influence the consumer behaviour in tourism. We can talk about the sophistication of behaviour according to the fast development of society, greater knowledge of tourists about offers and destinations, and diversification and sophistication of their needs and desires.

The evolutionary picture described above was stopped suddenly by the COVID-19 pandemic which gave a strong blow to the tourism industry and changed the approach regarding a lot of fundamental things in tourism.

Due to the several months of restrictions, the tourism sector was reduced almost to zero; the summer of 2020 showed only timid attempts to retake the activities, but the situation improved in 2021 and continues to improve in the following years. According to UNWTO (2022), the scenario to return to the pre-pandemic levels will take 3-4 years, as it is shown in figure no.3.



**Figure no. 3. Timing to return to pre-pandemic levels**

Source: UNWTO. (2022). World Tourism Barometer. Volume 20 – Issue 2. Retrieved from [https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-03/UNWTO\\_Barom22\\_02\\_March\\_excerpt-1.pdf?U1d1hw2v5Ga4TSml0KQRNbfKpr6mNygA](https://webunwto.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-03/UNWTO_Barom22_02_March_excerpt-1.pdf?U1d1hw2v5Ga4TSml0KQRNbfKpr6mNygA)

But from the very first retake of the travels, it was obvious that changes were necessary to be implemented to ensure the safety conditions for all. Even if the first effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were totally negative on the tourism industry, it became a unique opportunity to introduce profound changes in several directions, including the behaviour of both tourists and tourism service providers. Many scholars stated that it is the moment to reshape the sector, especially regarding the environmental impact on the planet. For example, Gössling et al suggested that it is the moment to shift from mass tourism, based on quantity (big number of tourists, big volume of services) to tourism based on quality. The same opinion has Roxas et al (2021) who affirmed more clearly that the alternative to mass tourism is sustainable tourism.

Changes in traveller behaviour after the COVID-19 pandemic were studied and some common issues were identified regardless of the type of tourism and type of tourist. The primary

and foremost one involves a heightened focus on sanitary conditions and the availability of health services at the destination. Presently, tourists are actively seeking more information and showing an increased inclination to purchase travel insurance compared to previous trends. Regarding the money spent on tourism packages, there is a trend toward more affordable destinations or shortening their stay especially since the COVID-19 pandemic follows the economic crisis and the purchasing power was very affected. One of the best changes in traveller behaviour is the orientation to nature, sustainable tourism, small destinations connected with nature, and less damage to the environment during the holiday. This will raise awareness of the environmental problems caused by the tourism industry and lead to more responsible behaviour in the future (Chebli A., Ben Said F., 2020).

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research developed in this paper is included in the Intellectual Outputs assumed in the European Project *CREDinGREEN - Responding to tourism market changes caused by Covid-19 and the EU Green Deal through micro-credential-certified upskilling of SME tourism managers*, Project Number: 2021-1-DE02-KA220-000029979, co-founded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union. The project aims to provide high-level professional knowledge to tourism managers and propose a recognition system for the knowledge acquired in different formal and non-formal post-graduating education through micro-credentials. During the project implementation, a questionnaire-based survey was applied to all five countries' partners in the project to managers and other employees from the tourism industry. The survey was designed with three blocks. In the first one, we investigated the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on tourism activities, focusing on the behavioural changes of the clients, and how these changes will influence/affect the future organization of the activities. The second block deals with sustainable tourism seen as the best solution for the future development of tourism and the implementation of its principles in day-by-day activities in a tourism entity. The last block deals with the professional preparation of the employees in tourism as a tool to implement the strategies and to reach the goals with economic and ecological benefits (Albu A., State M., Chasovschi C.E., 2022).

This paper discusses the results of Romanian participants in the survey focusing on the first block of questions. The survey was conducted between June and August 2022; we received 55 complete answers from managers and other employees in tourism companies, most of them being SMEs.

The research hypotheses proposed are:

1. Tourists are very preoccupied with their health and safety when going on holiday, more than in the pre-pandemic period.
2. After the pandemic period, tourists less socialise and avoid collective activities.

The sample consisted of 34 women and 20 men; one person did not want to answer this question. In terms of age, 78,2% of respondents are between 30-59 years old, 18,2% are under 29 years old, and 3,6% are over 60 years old. Regarding previous experience in the field of tourism, more than a quarter of participants (25,5%) are between 5-10 years old in the field of activity, while more than a third (34,5%) of them are even over 15 years old. After the position held within the company, approximately 60% of the participants occupy management positions (58,2%), 14,5% are employed in private tourism companies, 10,9% are freelancers, and 7,3% are employed in the field of public administration. By the number of employees in the company, 60% of respondents work in companies that have up to 9 employees, and 29,1% are from companies that have between 10-49 employees. Over 40% of respondents have a bachelor's degree (41,8%), while 43,6% of respondents have a master's degree or even a Ph.D. title.

The participants were asked to assess how serious was the effect of the pandemic on their activity in tourism; as we expected, tourism was very affected by the restrictions imposed for a long period in 2020 and 2021. 49% of the participants affirmed that their business was affected to a great extent, 36% said that they were affected somehow, 11% - barely, and 4% - not at all. We can

conclude that 85% of the companies included in the survey felt the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The next question refers to a general assessment of the changes in tourist behaviour after the activities were re-taken. Changes were noticed to a great extent in the way customers spend their holidays by 41.8% of respondents, while over 45% of respondents said they had noticed some changes. Less than 4% of respondents did not notice concrete changes in the way tourists spend their holidays. Going further, we want to know what these behavioural changes of the tourists are, and we offer several options to choose. The options were elaborated after a study of other scientific papers and studies published during and after the pandemic period and are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Changes in tourists' behaviour (options proposed in the survey)**

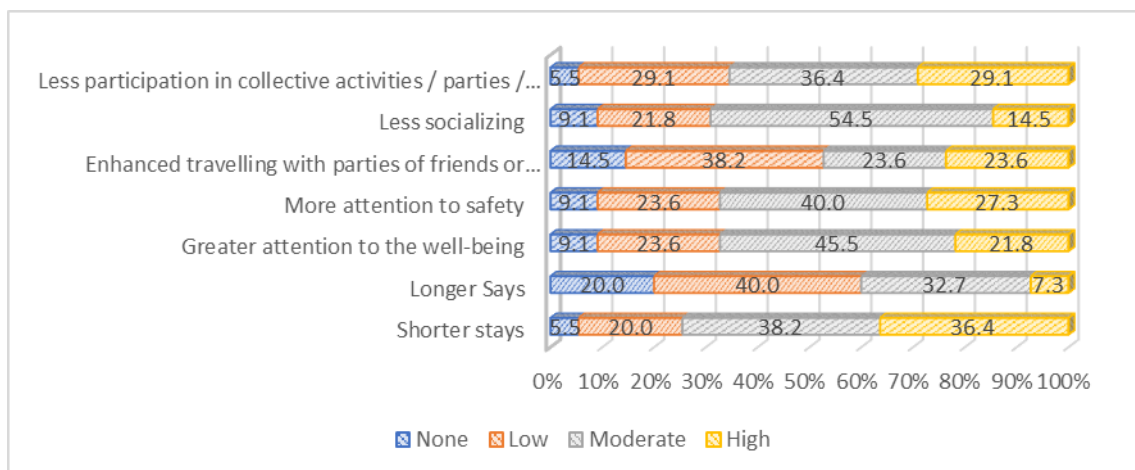
Nr. crt.	Proposed option
1.	The stays are shorter
2.	The stays are longer
3.	Greater attention to health and well-being
4.	More attention to safety
5.	Enhanced traveling with parties of friends or relatives
6.	Less socialising
7.	Less participation in collective activities/parties/events

Source: own elaboration based on the survey results

The participants noticed that the stays were shorter than before (69.09%), while 30.99% remarked that this change seldom or never appeared in their activity. For the second item (The stays are longer) the situation is vice versa, with 53.55% of companies affirming that longer stays are seldom or never happened, while 47.45% saying that they noticed longer stays sometimes or often. We consider these results very connected to the type of tourist activity. While the restaurants were open and had clients, even a smaller number, hotels, and other accommodation facilities were closed and when were re-opened, the clients stayed shorter periods. Regarding the greater attention to health and well-being, the answers were very clearly oriented to a major change in tourism behaviour. From the total of 55 participants, 65.45% noticed that the tourists are paying attention to this aspect more often, and 27.27% considered it to happen sometimes. A similar situation was obtained for the next item – More attention to safety. Here, 58.18% of respondents noticed this preoccupation appeared more often, while 30.91% noticed it sometimes.

The pandemic shifted travel from big groups to smaller ones. It was confirmed by our survey where 54.55% of participants remarked that more often the tourists travelled in small groups, with parties of friends or relatives and 34.55% did it sometimes. The last two items of the question we discuss are focused on socialisation and collective activities. Although we expected more reluctance on the part of tourists, the employees in tourism who participated in our survey didn't confirm this hypothesis. According to their answers, only 27.27% often avoid socialisation and participation in collective activities/ parties/events. The rest of the tourists did this sometimes, seldom, or even never.

Knowing the main changes in tourist behaviour represents only one step. With the same level of importance is to find out how severe were perceived these changes on business. Figure no.4 summarises the answer to the question: *Which of the next changes in customer behaviour has most affected your company? Please rate the answers from "high" to "none"*.



**Figure no. 4. Changes that affected tourism activities**

Source: own elaboration with information from the survey.

From the figure above we can conclude some remarks:

- All the changes in tourist behaviour affected the business with different shares, but none of them is prevalent;
- The highest impact was caused by the shortening of stays, followed by less participation in collective events/activities and more attention to safety. The impact was mainly economic due to the lower number of tourists and overnights, fewer parties and events organized in the tourism facilities, and more expenses to ensure the safety of the clients;
- Regarding the moderate impact, less socialisation is at the top, followed by greater attention to health and well-being, and more attention to safety.

Another question in our survey asked about how the participants forecast the guests' behaviour in the future. According to the answers we received, 27% assume that the behaviour will change in a great extent in the future, 58% consider that will change somehow, and 15% affirm that will change a little. From the list of behavioral changes presented above, the participants were asked to assess which of them will remain in the long term (after the COVID-19 restrictions have been fully lifted). 60% of them considered that Greater attention to health and well-being will characterize consumer behaviour in tourism for the long term, followed by More attention to safety, with 56.36%.

Apart from the national regulations and government guidelines, tourism companies can have and implement their own strategies to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were asked to assess if the tourists expect to find such strategies in tourism facilities. The answer is important for the future goals the companies set and for a better answer to the tourists' expectations and requirements. It confirms the changes in tourist behaviour because 33% of the respondents consider that tourists definitely expect such strategies and measures, and 42% said that they probably will, together it arrives at a value of 75%. For the companies in the field, it is valuable information that should be considered in their future strategies for development and re-launch after the pandemic.

## CONCLUSIONS

From the research undertaken, we found that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected to a certain extent all tourism activities through changes in tourist behaviour, as well as through measures imposed by the authorities. Some of these changes are expected to remain and affect tourism businesses in the future. Companies in the field must take into account and take measures to cope with these changes, which are expected to remain in the long term.

Regarding the hypotheses of our study, we can affirm that the first one is confirmed by the answers resulting from the survey; after the health problems caused by the virus, travelers act more carefully and search for appropriate measures at the tourism facilities that protect their lives and



health. The second hypothesis is partially confirmed by the survey. We expect the tourists to avoid more collective activities, but the reality is different. After a long period of restriction without physical contact and socialization, people want to be together, to do things together, of course respecting the safety rules.

The survey findings were disseminated within the Romanian tourism sector and served as a foundation for special training courses. The programme consists of multiple modules, tailored specifically for managers in the tourism industry.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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