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Analysis of Changes in Shopping Behaviour of Package Holidays Purchasers Caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Purpose: *The study aims to identify the direction of changes in shopping behaviour regarding package holidays caused by the COVID-19.*
Design/Methodology/Approach: *The research on tourists purchasing travel packages during the COVID-19 was quantitative on a nationwide online panel of respondents (N=1502), characterized by a representative distribution for the general population of Poles. Using the contingency table and correspondence analysis, authors identify purchasing behaviour before and during the pandemic.*
Findings: *The research results indicate significant changes in purchasing package holidays process caused by the COVID-19, particularly on the stage of travel planning (including the search for information and the pattern of closing the purchase of tourist packages)-the conducted analysis allowed to distinguish four segments of buyers during the pandemic and to create their profiles.*
Practical Implications: *The knowledge of changes in travel packages purchasing behaviour is essential for travel agencies to design effective marketing strategies.*
Originality/Value: *The originality and value of the research is based on three pillars: (1) timeliness and importance of the research problems for the travel agency sector, (2) lack of knowledge about the purchasing decision-making process during the pandemic threat, (3) the deficit of quantitative research on the role of online purchase channels versus the traditional ones in making these decisions.*

Keywords: *Holiday package, tourist behaviour, tourist decision-making, ROPO, COVID-19 pandemic.*

JEL Codes: *D10, M31, Z31.*

Paper Type: *Research paper.*

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1. Introduction

Several factors significantly affecting tourism have emerged in recent decades. In the presented article, the attention is focused on two of them, the Internet and the epidemic threat. Due to the Internet development, new channels for collecting information and making purchases by tourists have been created. Innovations in distribution had a revolutionary impact on making tourist decisions and on the ways of satisfying tourist needs. The actors in the tourism market faced a huge challenge of implementing Internet technology into their business models or confronting a new competitor – e-commerce. Travel agencies represent one of the tourism sectors particularly affected by the emergence of online networks, especially the travel agents whose activity essence takes direct contact with clients.

The Internet, as an "open," universal, and highly efficient tool for accessing, organizing, and transferring information (Peterson *et al.,* 1997), contributes to the decline in the importance of personal sales in tourism, the consequences of which directly affect travel agents traditionally serving customers in their stationary offices. The reason is that tourists encouraged by the high usability of the Internet channels increasingly purchase online travel products. Statista (2021a) indicates that approx. 65% of revenues from tourism are generated through online channels. Browsing online has become the primary source of travel inspiration for 51% of tourists (Booking.com, 2021). As shown by the numerous studies (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Kim *et al.,* 2007; Xiang *et al.,* 2015), the Internet is currently the most frequently used source of information in the process of planning tourist trips, much more popular than other sources, such as, e.g., the previous experiences of tourists and personal recommendations by relatives/ friends (Rheem, 2012, Xiang *et al.,* 2015). Moreover, the network satisfies the demand for travel information of both online and offline customers (Rondán-Catalunã *et al.,* 2015).

2. Literature Review

When facing the phenomenon of tourist behaviour individualization, manifested by the independent organization of tourist trips and direct booking of individual tourist services as separate products (hotel, transport, meals booked separately), and additionally such individualized behaviour supported by the Internet, the interest in package holidays should be declining. However, this is not the case. Market research confirms that package holidays developed by tour operators, i.e., the packages of complementary tourist services (most often: transport, accommodation, and meals) offered at a flat rate paid in the form of a prepayment, still represent the expected product tourists.

In 2019, this way of meeting tourist needs was chosen by 36.9% of Germans, 34.4% of Austrians, 29.9% of Czechs, 21.7% of Poles, and 19.8% of Britons (Statista, 2021b). In the countries mentioned above, it was most often used by people aged 35-

44 (25.6% of all package holiday purchasers) and aged 45-54 (22.5%). It is a typical tourist product in the case of longer trips abroad and over long distances. In recent years, the annual share of package holidays in the total global revenues from tourism has remained constant and oscillated around 30%, regardless of the total value of these revenues per year (Statista, 2021a). Therefore, it represents a significant segment of the tourism market, worth covering by systematic research.

Like other tourist products (accommodation, transport), the packages of tourist services are increasingly frequently purchased through online channels (via online travel agents/OTAs). In the case of the Europeans, 58% of package holidays were booked online in 2017, 64% in 2020, and 66% in the first half of 2021 (Statista, 2021c). Statista predicts for 2025 that three out of four package holidays will be purchased online. These numbers indicate that despite the undisputed and growing importance of e-commerce in selling package holidays, there is still ample space (¼ of the market) for the traditionally operating intermediaries – travel offices.

While the Internet is a predictable rather than a rapid factor, allowing tourism enterprises to adapt to the new operating conditions, the outbreak of the global epidemic completely surprised both the tourism industry and tourists themselves, leaving no chance for an appropriate response. According to UNWTO (2021), COVID-19, which spread throughout the world in mid-March last year, is responsible for a 70% decrease in the global tourist traffic in 2020 compared to the previous year (2019). Revenues from tourism in January-October 2020 were ten times lower than in 2009 – when the world was affected by the economic crisis. Consequently, there is a global need for swift adaptation of the tourism industry and the reconstruction of pre-pandemic tourism volumes. Tourism providers will have to ensure information to support tourists in planning and executing travel in 2021 and beyond, including the information specific to COVID-19 measures for vacation planning and providing current information about behaviour at the destination. Adaptation processes will require knowledge of tourists' purchasing behaviour and the respective behaviour changes resulting from the pandemic.

The research conducted before the pandemic (Szopiński, 2017; Dudek, Jaremen, and Michalska-Dudek, 2020), showed a phenomenon in the decision-making process while purchasing package holidays. In the source literature, it is referred to as switching (Reddy and Nagarjuna, 2017), i.e., switching over the information and distribution channels to make purchasing decisions (Bieger and Laesser, 2004). It consists of changing sources (suppliers) and media (methods of transfer) of information in planning and making customer purchases.

The decisions made by tourists while purchasing package holidays are rarely impulsive, because they refer to expensive products, being only a promise at the time of purchase (payment), the consumption of which takes place in a limited and therefore precious for people, free time and in a place far from their own safe home. Thus, both the travel and the related decision-making processes require preparation, especially in collecting a sufficient volume of information allowing the customer to feel comfortable and confident. Hence, the clients of tourist services, in making a purchase decision, use not just one but many sources and channels of information, which was observed already in the 1980s by Engel and Blackwell (1982). In the last two decades, the tourist's multi-resource approach to searching for information has primarily supported the Internet. The aforementioned previous studies on tourists' purchasing behaviour in the context of the Internet impact have shown that the following four schemes/patterns of making purchasing decisions, also referred to as consumer purchasing strategies, can be identified:

1. Purchasers look for information in traditional/stationary sources (at a travel agency, directly/by phone at the service provider's premises, etc.), and purchase tourist services there – a behaviour known as Research Offline, Purchase Offline.
2. Purchasers search for information in the Internet resources and purchase tourist services there – behaviour type Research Online, Purchase Online.
3. Purchasers search for information in the Internet resources and purchase in a traditional/stationary way – behaviour Research Online, Purchase Offline (ROPO).
4. Purchasers look for information in traditional/stationary sources and purchase online – Research Offline, Purchase Online (reverse-ROPO).

In the year of the pandemic outbreak, despite the restrictions, and primarily due to their lifting (mainly in the summer) – tourist traffic did not stop entirely. However, as has been mentioned earlier, it was minimal and primarily of national nature. A modern man strongly feels the need to travel, and even in the face of threat, there are individuals ready to risk traveling. Package holidays, as organized products consumed collectively, making their participants much more exposed to the transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, may experience a higher risk of losing customers. The research, even though scarce, does not confirm this fact. In the case of package holidays, the decrease in sales volume was like the one in overall tourism and amounted to 64.1% (Statista, 2021b). An exciting research problem is whether tourists have modified their decision-making processes and in what direction under the influence of the existing risks. The logic of deduction leads to the conclusion that in the event of the virus infection threat, purchasers will tend to minimize direct contacts with others (including the service providers), therefore in such a situation, online booking of package holidays should be much more frequent than previously, i.e., before 2020.

In connection with the above assumptions, the article's primary purpose was to identify the directions of changes in the purchasing decision-making process by the purchasers of holiday packages under the influence of COVID-19. The authors were seeking answers to several research questions:

(1) What kind of changes id tourists make in the way of traveling in 2020?

(2) What percentage of tourists decided to purchase an organized package holiday in the period March-October 2020?
(3) Have they experienced any difficulties in connection with the previously purchased packages, the realisation of which fell during the period of the most severe restrictions – the closure of state borders?
(4) What changes have occurred in the decision-making process to purchase a package holiday during COVID-19 as compared to the situation before the pandemic?

To achieve the research purpose and provide answers to the research questions, a query of the source literature was carried out, and field research was conducted. In the case of secondary sources (i.e., scientific articles), their content was reviewed using the method of an in-depth systematic, quantitative, and qualitative analysis of scientific texts in the adopted research area (in this case, the COVID impact on the decision-making processes of tourist services' purchasers), resulting in capturing the maximum diversity of research approaches (problems, goals, methods) in the analyzed texts. In turn, the methods of descriptive statistics (sample sizes, frequencies) and multidimensional statistical analysis (correspondence analysis and contingency tables) were used to analyze the data from primary sources collected using the indirect survey technique, i.e., computer-assisted web interview (CAWI). The purpose of this analysis was to demonstrate the similarity or difference in the purchasing behaviour of package holiday purchasers before and during the pandemic. Two research hypotheses were put forward:

H1: In view of the COVID-19 pandemic threat, the behaviour of package holiday purchasers has changed significantly, in particular at the stage of planning a trip and making a purchase (so-called the pre-travel stage).
H2: In view of the COVID-19 pandemic threat, the importance of brick-and-mortar travel offices as information and distribution channels in the decision-making process of package holiday purchasers has increased.

3. Discussion

The source literature review on the impact of the pandemic on tourism confirmed the great interest of researchers in this problem. Entering the categorization key ("COVID" and "Tourism") into two scientific databases, considered by the academics as particularly significant, generated the list of 1,912 articles addressing the discussed subject matter (Scopus – 1,091, and Web of Science – 821). The problems covered in these publications are very different and include studies of the supply and the demand side of the tourism market. Scientists are primarily interested in the severity of the pandemic consequences and the post-crisis recovery strategies.

Narrowing the research down to the context of the analyzed COVID-19 impact on the purchasing decision-making processes by tourists (i.e., purchasing behaviour) – the number of articles found in the analyzed databases is significantly decreasing. As a result of using four categorization keys:

1. "COVID" and "Tourist decision making"
2. "COVID" and "Tourism decision making"
3. "COVID" and "Tourist behaviour (u)r"
4. "COVID" and "Tourism behaviour (u)r".

A total of 82 manuscripts were found, and after eliminating the repeating ones, their overall number decreased to 56. The database search process was completed on 15th June 2021.

The analysis of the articles' content showed that the researchers are discussing many aspects related to the correlations between the pandemic and tourist's behaviour. Interesting, although scarce studies address such issues as the tourist's psyche (Kock *et al.*, 2020) and their needs (Madani *et al.*, 2020) during the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 on the tourist's identity (Zhang *et al.*, 2021) and their satisfaction (Hong *et al.*, 2020), the tourist's intentions to visit tourist attractions virtually (Itani, Hollebeek, 2021), the role of non-pharmaceutical interventions on behavioural intention toward cruise travel or travel burnout (Yousaf, 2021) in the intra-pandemic period. The variety of issues is pervasive.

The research concerns both the pre-travel (Xu *et al*., 2021) and travel stage behaviour (Donaire *et al.*, 2021), strictly tourist problems (Pan *et al.*, 2021), as well as the medical or psychological ones (the measure for travel vaccination sentiments/concerns (Adongo *et al.*, 2021), and the effects of pandemics related to tourists' behaviour in specific locations, e.g., Andalusia (Flores-Ruiz *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the most significant number of studies (32.2% of the analyzed publications) raise the issue of the perception of risks resulting from the disease and its influence on the anxiety and intentions of tourists to travel, the choice of specific tourism products (e.g., cruise liner trips, air travel) or the selection of the destination (Donaire *et al.*, 2021). The source literature review confirmed the research gap in analyzing the purchasing behaviour of package holiday purchasers. Apart from the research conducted by Pan *et al.* (2021) and Xu *et al.* (2021), covering the effects of the pandemic in cruise travel, the analyzed studies did not address the problem of COVID-19 impact on the selection of package holidays as a way of meeting tourist needs, nor did they raise the issue of changes in using various information channels and the purchase of tour operators' offers in the process of making decisions by tourists before traveling.

4. Results

The research covering purchasers of tourist services and addressing the problems of traveling before and during the COVID-19 pandemic was carried out to achieve the adopted research goals. A questionnaire containing 28 questions, including demographics, was the primary survey tool. The conducted research was a sample-based study performed using an online survey on a nationwide online panel of respondents (CAWI method). The study was characterized by a representative distribution of features for the general population of Poles aged 18-64 in terms of gender, age, education, and size of the place of residence. The survey was conducted in the period between 4th and 11th November 2020. The surveyed Poles (N=1502) included the representatives of both genders, whereas the most numerous age groups were from 26 to 35, from 36 to 45, and 46 to 60 (30.43%, 25.42%, 24.75% of the respondents, respectively). Most of the respondents were married (53.06% of responses) and graduated from a secondary education level (42.21% of the respondents). The respondents' households consisted, most frequently, of 2 up to 4 people (the total of 78.3% responses), and every second respondent had underage children in their household. 64.51% of the respondents represented working people. The most numerous groups of respondents (59.79 responses) were those living in cities. More than half of the respondents assessed their financial situation as average, and only less than 3% of them stated that it was awful.

The authors were interested in two blocks of problems related to purchasing package holidays in travel agencies. The analysis covered the impact of the pandemic on carrying out the previously planned and purchased package holidays, as well as the direction of changes in buying behaviour regarding package holidays caused by the pandemic situation since March 2020.

The research findings confirm that the situation refers to the COVID-19 pandemic affected tourists traveling in the case of over 70% of the respondents. When asked if the problem related to the COVID-19 exerted an impact on their tourist trips, 46.27% stated it did, and in the case of 25.23%, the response was "rather yes." The respondents indicated that, under the influence of the pandemic, they made changes in their tourist trips, which were primarily manifested by: complete resignation from purchasing package tours (38.95% responses), reducing the number of tourist trips (35.29%), resignation from traveling by public transport in favour of a private car (22.57%), postponing the departure (21.10%) and resignation from air travel (19.91%).

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, more than 20% of the respondents resigned from a previously purchased trip organized by a travel agency. As a result of the resignation, 53.05% of the respondents benefited from the total refund of the journey, 21.22% changed the date of the trip, 13.50% exchanged the journey for a voucher to be used later, and 11.25% took advantage of reimbursement from the Tourist Reimbursement Fund. The survey also revealed that 29.26% of the respondents experienced difficulties in resigning from a package holiday. The most common were as follows, long waiting time for the reimbursement (30.66%), only a partial refund of the amount paid (21.17%), problematic contact with the representatives of a travel agency (18.25%), lack of support in completing the formalities (13.14%) and the necessity of bearing the costs of the resignation (12.41%).

Even though the respondents' tourist activity was significantly reduced, 26.90% of them, despite the pandemic threat, purchased a trip already during the pandemic, i.e., since March 2020. 15.85% referred to purchasing domestic events, whereas 11.05% to purchasing foreign trips. The respondents were asked about the way of proceeding related to searching for information on tourist events and their purchase method. They were asked to define the choice made most frequently regarding four patterns of conduct while making the purchase (both in the case of purchasing tourist events before the COVID-19 pandemic (Q_15, N=797) and during its course (Q_28, N=254):

- I look for the information about tourist events and purchase them only online,
- I look for the information about tourist events and purchase them only in traditional travel agencies,
- I look for information about tourist events online but purchase them in a traditional/stationary travel agency,
- I look for information about tourist events in a traditional/stationary travel agency but purchase them online.

Based on the above behavioural patterns, four segments of purchasers have been identified and referred to as: “Networkers,” “Traditionalists,” “Involved,” and “Misers” (Figure 1). It was compared whether and in what direction the buyers' behaviour who purchased holiday packages both before and during the pandemic has changed (N = 254). They found that the structure of responses referring to behaviour patterns before and during the pandemic was significantly different. Before the pandemic, i.e., until March 2020:

- 63.59% of the respondents admitted they most often follow the Research Online Purchase Online scheme of purchasing – “Networkers”;
- 10.68% of the respondents most often pointed to the Research Online Purchase Offline scheme – “Involved”;
- 21.36% of the respondents constitute a group following the Research Offline Purchase Online pattern – “Misers”;
- 4.37% of all the respondents represent purchasers who are attached to the stationary vendors of tourist events and the Research Offline Purchase Offline purchase scheme – “Traditionalists”.

In turn, in the case of package holidays purchased during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant decline in the percentage of “Networkers” (down to 29.53%) was recorded, along with a simultaneous significant increase in the percentage of “Misers” (up to 31.89%) as well as the “Involved” (up to 30.71%) and a slight increase of the “Traditionalists” (to 7.87%).

Using the classical correspondence analysis (more in Greenacre, 2007; Murtagh, 2005), two variables measured on a nominal scale were analysed: Q_15 (Purchasing procedure before the COVID-19 pandemic) and Q_28 (Purchasing procedure during the COVID-19 pandemic) that indicate belonging to one of the four categories related to the behaviour pattern. The coding of Q_15 and Q_28 variables in both cases includes the following categories: 1. I look for information about tourist events and make the purchase only online, 2. I look for information about tourist events and make the purchase only in traditional travel agencies, 3. I look for information about tourist events online, but I purchase them in a conventional/stationary travel agency, 4. I look for information about tourist events in a traditional/fixed travel agency, but I buy them online.

Figure 1. *The typology of package holidays' buyers (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic)*

<table>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="5">Searching for information about package holidays</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="8">Purchase of package holidays</td><td></td><td colspan="2">Offline</td><td colspan="2">Online</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Offline</td><td colspan="2">"Traditionalists"
Research Offline, Purchase Offline</td><td colspan="2">"Involved"
Research Online, Purchase Offline
(ROPO)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Before The Covid-19 Pandemic</td><td>During The Covid-19 Pandemic</td><td>Before The Covid-19 Pandemic</td><td>During The Covid-19 Pandemic</td></tr>
<tr><td>4.37%</td><td>7.87%</td><td>10.68%</td><td>30.71%</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Online</td><td colspan="2">"Misers"
Research Offline, Purchase Online
(r-ROPO)</td><td colspan="2">"Networkers"
Research Online, Purchase Online</td></tr>
<tr><td>Before The Covid-19 Pandemic</td><td>During The Covid-19 Pandemic</td><td>Before The Covid-19 Pandemic</td><td>During The Covid-19 Pandemic</td></tr>
<tr><td>21.36%</td><td>31.89%</td><td>63.59%</td><td>29.53%</td></tr>
</table>

Source*: Authors' compilation based on survey studies covering package holidays buyers.*

The analysis commenced with generating a contingency table and verifying the hypothesis about the independence of variables. Based on the findings resulting from Fig. 2, the null hypothesis about the autonomy of the verified nominal variables (p"-" value<α) at the significance level α=0.05 should be rejected. Additionally, the information on the strength of the dependence was presented using the C-Pearson contingency coefficient (0.437) and Cramer's V coefficient (0.28), which indicate a moderate relationship.

Figure 2. *Generation the contingency table and verification the hypothesis about independence of variables Q_15 i Q_28*

Q_15/Q_28	INV	MIS	NET	TRAD
INV	11	0	6	5
MIS	13	23	6	2
NET	45	38	43	5
TRAD	2	0	3	4

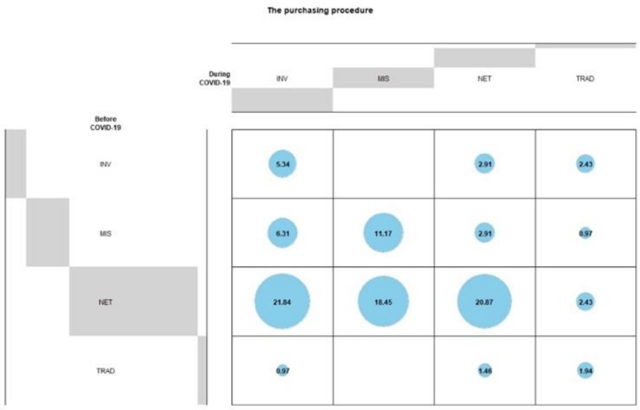
X^2 df P (> X^2)

Likelihood Ratio 47.270 93.4953e-07, Pearson 48.615 91.9597e-07

Phi-Coefficient: NA, Contingency Coeff.: 0.437, Cramer's V: 0.28

Source*: Author's compilation based on survey studies covering package holidays buyers using R package ca.*

Figure 3. *Contingency table for purchasing procedure of package holidays before and during COVID-19 pandemic*



Note: *INV – Involved, MIS – Misers, TRAD – Traditionalists, NET – Networkers*
Source*: Author's compilation based on survey studies covering package holidays buyers using R package FactoMineR.*

The contingency Table presents the data structure about the purchasing behaviour regarding package holidays before and during the pandemic. It is the starting point in measuring the strength of the relationship between two variables. The contingency table showing how the behaviour of package holidays purchasers changed before and during the pandemic is presented in Figure 3.

The next step consisted in carrying out the central part of the correspondence analysis. Its results (Figure 4) present eigenvalues, the rows and columns profiles, and the graphical representation of findings in the form of a two-dimensional perception map. It indicates that the first axis of the new system (the first dimension) dominates, explaining as much as 76.32% of the total inertia. The tables showing the results also contain row and column masses (Mass), representing the edge frequencies, as well as the values of Chi-square distance (ChiDist) measure for each category (on the perception map) from the origin of coordinates which represents the projection center (mean profile). The coordinates of Dim.1 and Dim. 2 points for two new factors were indicated.

Figure 4. *Correspondence analysis results*

Principal inertias (eigenvalues):

	1	2	3
Value	0.180117	0.044892	0.010986
Percentage	76.32%	19.02%	4.66%

Rows:

	INV	MIS	NET	TRAD
Mass	0.106796	0.213592	0.635922	0.043689
ChiDist	0.809049	0.518341	0.167213	1.442611
Inertia	0.069905	0.057387	0.017780	0.090923
Dim. 1	-1.819576	0.909292	0.218086	-3.171941
Dim. 2	-0.282591	1.614586	-0.633944	2.024654

Columns:

	P28_INV	P28_MIS	P28_NET	P28_TRAD
Mass	0.344660	0.296117	0.281553	0.077670
ChiDist	0.177674	0.525204	0.275444	1.253672
Inertia	0.010880	0.081681	0.021361	0.122073
Dim. 1	-0.156792	1.127951	-0.227493	-2.779885
Dim. 2	-0.438539	1.009370	-1.073627	1.989690

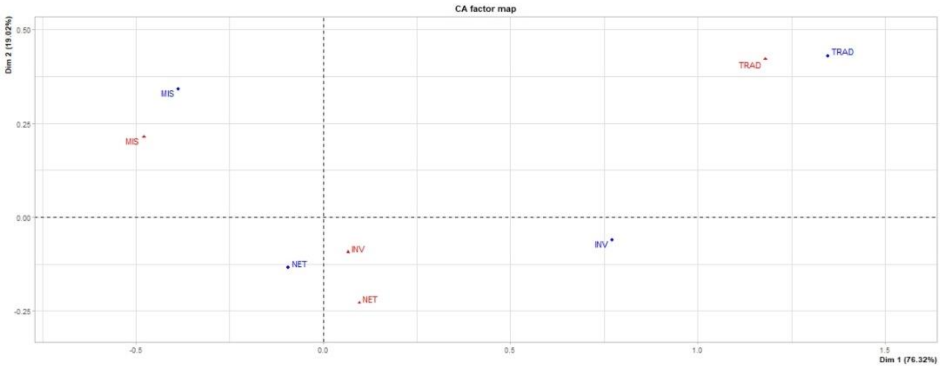
Source: *Author's compilation based on survey studies covering package holidays buyers using R package ca.*

The perception map is the graphical representation of the correspondence analysis (Figure 5).

Considering the location of points on the perception map, it can be concluded as follows:

- major changes were observed in the "Involved" group. The INV point has moved close to the origin of coordinates, confirming that the "Involved" group takes values close to the mean profile and represents the most characteristic behaviour of package holiday purchasers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The "Involved" and the "Networkers" groups got closer to each other in its behaviour,
- the proximity of MIS points (for pre- and during the pandemic categories) and TRAD points (for pre- and during the pandemic categories) demonstrates the relationship between these categories and a slight change in the way package holiday buyers behave in the case of "Misers" and "Traditionalists".

Figure 5. *Perception map – graphical representation of the correspondence analysis results*



Note: *MIS, TRAD, NET, INV – procurement procedures before the COVID-19 pandemic*
MIS, TRAD, NET, INV – procurement procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic
INV – Involved, MIS – Misers, TRAD – Traditionalists, NET - Networkers
Source*: Author's compilation based on survey studies covering package holidays buyers using R package ca.*

5. Conclusions

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has written a new scenario for the functioning of society and the economy. Many scientists recognize that this new order will have a lasting impact on tourism (Villacé-Molinero *et al.*, 2021; Jeon and Yang, 2021, Miao *et al.*, 2021) through changing tourists' behaviour in the planning, purchasing, and realization stages of tourist traps as well as the business models of tourism enterprises and the tourism policy of holiday destinations. The responses of both the industry and tourists to the pandemic are neither clear-cut nor unidirectional.

The decline in the number of trips and, hence, in tourism expenditure is only partly due to the perceived, by the travellers, risks, and concerns of getting infected. The restrictions, flight cancellations, closing national borders, hotels, restaurants, and tourist attractions seem to be more influenced. Currently, the factor that may reduce traveling is the additional expenditure incurred by tourists and related to the need to make tests for the virus presence in the body and invest in other protective measures. This new situation requires to be analyzed systematically. It is dynamic and, simultaneously, does not follow the stereotypical way of thinking. The previously developed scientific concepts fail. The research findings turn out surprising and frequently remain contradictory, e.g., the demand forecasts (Fotiadis *et al.*, 2021), thus opening the "box" with subsequent research questions.

The findings resulting from this study confirm the general downward trend in the number of tourist trips, which also includes package holidays. Among the tourists surveyed in the study, 68.13% fewer people purchased package holidays in 2020, i.e., the first year of the pandemic (till November) comparing to the entire previous year (2019). Similar findings were recorded by the research agency Statista (2021b). In addition, every fifth respondent who purchased a package holiday refrained from making the trip, and approx. 2/5 of the respondents, for the time being, have wholly given up purchasing package holidays.

These findings show how deeply COVID-19 affected the tourism sector (both tour operators and travel agents) and confirm the uncertainty in which they must operate nowadays. As a result of withdrawing from previous contracts to purchase package holidays, tourists experienced various difficulties which, in the future, may negatively impact the general tendency towards using package holidays due to last adverse circumstances. This issue may become an exciting direction for future research; however, it remains only in assumptions so far.

Having in mind specific persistent effects of the pandemic in tourists' behaviour, it would be helpful for the researchers to focus not only on the short-term reactions to COVID-19 but also turn their attention towards analyzing both media- and long-term consequences, which Li has noticed, Nguyen and Coco-Stefaniak (2021) as well as Miao *et al.* (2021).

The research findings allowed obtaining new knowledge about the behaviour patterns of package holidays purchasers and identifying four segments of the market of tourist events, which were given names based on their dominant features. The most numerous categories of purchasers' behaviour specified in the survey (the total of over 92% indications) confirm the tendency for advanced virtualization of purchasers' behaviour in the tourism market. However, much less frequently than before the COVID-19 pandemic, the purchasers of package holidays transfer the entire purchasing process online, so they search for information on travel agencies' offers and make purchases on the Internet. On the other hand, much more often than before the pandemic, they look for information in stationary travel agencies, even if they ultimately make their purchase online, and vice versa, they more often purchase package holidays in standing travel agencies, even if they search for information about the offers on the Internet. The percentage of customers looking for information about tourist events and finalizing their purchases in traditional travel agencies has also slightly increased.

Moreover, the behavioural patterns were compared within the research framework during the pre-travel stage, before, and in the pandemic. This comparison revealed significant differences. While before the pandemic, the dominant behaviour at the scene of planning and purchasing package holidays was seeking information and finalizing transactions online (the "Networkers" segment was the most numerous one – 63.59%), during the pandemic, it declined by half (down to 29.53%), and the dominant position was taken by the "Misers" (collecting information offline and purchasing online, 31.89%, before the pandemic – 21.36%), whereas the "Involved" took the second place (30.71%, before the pandemic – 10.68%). The share of people who both search for information about package holidays and finalize their purchase in brick-and-mortar travel offices have also slightly increased (7.87% during the pandemic). In this way, the growing importance of traditional channels during the pandemic has been revealed. Two-thirds of the respondents who purchased holiday packages during the pandemic used offline channels, either at the stage of collecting information or at the location of making the purchase.

According to the results of the conducted analysis of correspondence, the most characteristic behaviour of package holiday purchasers refers to the group of the "Involved," which can be described as tourists who, on the one hand, are eager to enjoy the benefits of new solutions in the area of distributing tourist services, and on the other, need personal confirmation of the travel agency employees to make sure they are making the right and accurate decision. This is particularly important when the decision to purchase a package holiday is taken during a pandemic. Any doubts regarding the applicable rules, restrictions, or procedures at the destination require consultations at the travel agency.

It is quite a surprising result, especially considering the previous research findings on avoiding personal contact and minimizing personal interactions by tourists (Donaire *et al.,* 2021). In this study, on the contrary, the package holiday purchasers seek personal connection. However, it refers to the interaction with a tourist agency employee rather than another tourist or a destination resident. Therefore, travel agents can play an essential role in reducing the impact of COVID-19 anxiety on the decision-making process about traveling, primarily regarding international tourism. Thus, they should be included in the overall strategies to restore tourists' confidence in controlling risks and behavioural approach focused on reducing travel anxiety mentioned in the studies by Bratić *et al.* (2021).

The research results also allow formulating quite optimistic conclusions regarding the future of brick-and-mortar travel offices, despite the progressing digitization of the tourism industry and the observed virtualization of tourism consumption, the risks related to the COVID-19 virus highlighted the demand for traditional travel agencies operating on the market and significantly influenced the individual purchasing behaviour, showing that the stationary points of sale, in the times of the pandemic, play a vital role in selling tourist services.

According to the results of the conducted correspondence analysis, the most characteristic behaviour of package holiday purchasers refers to the "Involved" group, which can be described as tourists who, on the one hand, enjoy the benefits of new solutions concerning the distribution of tourist services and, on the other, require personal confirmation by the travel agency employees, to make sure they are taking a right and sound decision. They want to remain confident of not risking their health or life and that the trip will be possible after they complete all the due formalities. This is particularly important when deciding to purchase a package holiday during the pandemic, and any doubts regarding the applicable rules, restrictions, or procedures at the destination require a consultation at the travel agency.

The behaviour of the "Involved" group representatives is confirmed by the development of the omnichannel distribution for tourist products and non-linear tourist marketing observed in recent years. The entities operating in the tourism market must adopt diverse communication and marketing strategies to meet tourists' expectations, who frequently prefer various information methods over the distribution channels of the offered services.

Travel agencies need to focus on redefining their role and adapting their activities to customer requirements while designing their marketing strategies, especially during and after the crisis, considering their specific needs, including those resulting from traveling "with COVID-19 in the background". The increased anxiety connected with traveling results in changing the typical tourist behaviour related to the travel itself and the processes of making purchasing decisions. Understanding the intentions of tourists and the current travel motivators as well as the factors influencing their behaviour at both pre-travel and travel stages constitutes the foundation for developing appropriate communications addressed to the purchasers by travel agencies and is crucial for:

- designing activities related to full, up-to-date and reliable communication and content marketing,
- optimization and adaptation of online content facilitating direct contact with the travel agency employees,
- substantive preparation of the staff for serving customers from the “Involved” group (educated, empathic, having up-to-date information and competent staff),
- optimization of the distribution channels by selecting the location of customer service points with the potential for developing long-term relationships between purchasers and sellers of tourist offers.

Like every study the presented one has certain limitations. In this case, it concerns the geographic scope of the research covering the Polish population, which prevents making broader generalizations of the research findings and, at the same time, provides grounds for conducting further studies in other cultural circles, with particular emphasis on these nations where package holidays are trendy (e.g., the Germans, Austrians, Czechs or the British). The research findings should also be extended by an in-depth analysis of the factors determining the behaviour change towards the offline one.

In summary, the presented research is an addition to the existing set of studies on the relationship between COVID-19 and tourist behaviour, revealing a new – not addressed so far – line of research regarding the impact of the pandemic on making the decisions about purchasing package holidays. The study provides empirical evidence for the occurring significant changes in an unexpected direction – the increasing importance of traditional information and distribution channels, thus confirming the advantage of interpersonal contacts, primarily in times of crises and dynamic development of the situation.

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