

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNIVERSITIES FOR SOCIETY AND ECONOMY THE EXPERIENCE OF RESEARCHERS FROM THE VISEGRÁD GROUP

edited by Bogusława Drelich-Skulska
Magdalena Sobocińska
Andrea Tomášková



Publishing House of Wrocław University of Economics and Business
Wrocław 2024

Reviewer

Radosław Baran

Copyediting

Elżbieta Macauley, Tim Macauley, Agnieszka Flasińska

Proofreading

Barbara Łopusiewicz

Typesetting

Małgorzata Myszkowska

Cover design

Beata Dębska

The book cover uses images from Adobe Stock

© Copyright by Wrocław University of Economics and Business
Wrocław 2024

Copyright notice is valid until 31 July 2025.

Since 1 August 2025 the publication is available
under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-SA 4.0).
To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.pl>



ISBN 978-83-67899-91-8 (for the paper version)

ISBN 978-83-67899-92-5 (for the electronic version)

DOI: 10.15611/2024.92.5

Quote as: Drelich-Skulska, B., Sobocińska, M., & Tomášková, A. (Eds.). (2024). *The Importance of Universities for Society and Economy. The Experience of Researchers from the Visegrád Group*. Publishing House of Wrocław University of Economics and Business.

Printing: TOTEM



CHAPTER 13

Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed the Way Travel Agencies Clients' Make Decisions?

Daria E. Jaremen
Izabela Michalska-Dudek
Pavλίna Pellešová

Quote as: Jaremen, D. E., Michalska-Dudek, I., & Pellešová, P. (2024). Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Changed the Way Travel Agencies Clients' Make Decisions?. In B. Drelich-Skulska, M. Sobocińska, & A. Tomášková (Eds.), *The Importance of Universities for Society and Economy. The Experience of Researchers from the Vise-grád Group* (pp. 207-216). Publishing House of Wrocław University of Economics and Business.

DOI: [10.15611/2024.92.5.13](https://doi.org/10.15611/2024.92.5.13)

Abstract: The main goal of this chapter was to identify changes in the decision-making process regarding the purchase of package tours in three different periods: before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying these changes will allow both researchers and practitioners to better understand the evolution of consumer behaviour and adapt business strategies to changing market realities. To achieve the research goal, a literature search was conducted and field research was undertaken ($N_{2020} = 1.502$ and $N_{2022} = 1.508$). In the case of secondary sources, the method of content analysis was used in the adopted research area. Descriptive statistics methods were used to analyse data from primary sources collected using the indirect survey technique (CAWI).

Keywords: customer behaviour, package holidays, travel agency, COVID-19 pandemic



13.1. Introduction

In recent years, the most important influence on the functioning of the tourism market was: ICT and the COVID-19 pandemic. The advent of the Internet era revolutionised tourism by developing online distribution channels and providing wide access to information for potential tourists. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the global tourism

industry in an unprecedented way, causing a significant decline in international tourist traffic. Health risk perception is an important aspect of traveling (Chien et al., 2017; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009; Wong & Yeh, 2009), and epidemics have a significantly negative impact on tourists' mental well-being (Abbas et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2019), which in turn influences their travel decisions. This is not only about giving up meeting strongly felt tourist needs, but about changing behaviour in the process of conducting a tourist trip and in the process of making purchase decisions preceding it.

In recent decades, tourism has also undergone significant transformations caused by the dynamic development of ICT technologies (Amaro & Duarte, 2015). As a result, online shopping has become a common practice (Lei & Law, 2019), and nearly 70% of holiday packages are now purchased through online distribution channels (Statista, 2021).

The Internet not only facilitates the finalisation of online purchase and sale transactions as a distribution channel, but also allows the operations to be safely carried out remotely. In the phase of planning a trip and making purchases, the net eliminates the need for direct contact between tourists and employees of travel companies, which was crucial during the pandemic.

13.2. Purchasing Strategies Used by Buyers of Package Holidays

Package holidays, called tourist packages, are complex products that require the deeper involvement of buyers in the decision-making process than in the case of simple products. According to the typology of purchasing decisions (Garbarski et al., 1992, p. 104), purchasing a tourist package is a non-routine/high-consideration decision. In the process of purchasing tourist packages, there is an intense demand for various information, which places packages among the so-called information-intensive goods (Benckendorff et al., 2014; Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011). The described features draw attention to two stages of the purchase process, namely searching for information and choosing the place where the buyer finalises the purchase.

The multi-resource approach to collecting information by tourists (Flavián et al., 2016) has become fully possible thanks to the Internet which itself is a collection of many sources of information, both classic (i.e. opinions, advertising, news, books) and new (such as search engines, social media, blogs) (Dudek et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of the so-called switching (Reddy & Nagarjuna, 2017), i.e. changes in information sources and channels in the process of making decisions applies to purchasing package holidays. A potential buyer changes information

channels (e.g. uses written information, films, oral communications) and collects data from various sources (e.g. visits Internet portals, browses catalogues, asks questions to the seller in a travel agency), mixing online and stationary sources, to ensure choosing the optimal option.

Increasingly, tourists' purchasing behaviour can be described according to the following four patterns:

- Research Offline, Purchase Offline (buyers look for information in stationary sources and also purchase tourist services there),
- Research Online, Purchase Online (buyers look for information in Internet resources and also purchase tourist services there),
- Research Online, Purchase Offline (buyers look for information in online resources and buy in a stationary mode),
- Research Offline, Purchase Online (buyers look for information in stationary sources and make a purchase online).

In the subject literature, these models of behaviour are often called purchasing strategies. They concern buyers combining different sources/suppliers of information and information channels/methods of information transfer (Fodness & Murray, 1997) and switching between them in the purchase decision process (Bieger & Laesser, 2004). The condition for the buyer to use purchasing strategies is to achieve the goal which is to purchase a tourist package that best meets their expectations.

Recognising these strategies is in the interest of tourism service providers, and provides a way to develop more effective marketing strategies, providing them with knowledge on how and where to reach tourists with appropriate information.

Despite the durability of purchasing strategies, they are also characterised by flexibility and are subject to transformation under the influence of various factors, due to which buyers modify their purchasing strategies towards the most optimal ones. Thanks to research on purchasing patterns, it becomes possible to meet the information addressed to tourists by the company with their expectations in terms of the source, channel and content of the message.

This study adopted the thesis that the COVID-19 pandemic, as a threat factor, not only affects tourists' purchasing intentions, but significantly modifies purchasing strategies and the decision-making process itself to purchase tourist packages.



13.3. Purchasing Strategies of Travel Agency Customers in the Period Before, During and After the Pandemic

For the purposes of achieving the research goal, surveys were conducted among purchasers of package holidays regarding the issue of their purchase decision-making process in three contractual periods: before (1), during (2), and after (3) the COVID-19

pandemic. Data for periods (1) and (2) were collected in November 2020, and data for period (3) were collected in June and August 2022. In both research processes, the basic research technique was a CAWI survey, and the tool included a questionnaire. The research was a partial study on research samples of 1502 (November 2020) and 1508 (June-August 2022), selected non-probabilistically, i.e. using the online sampling method from a nationwide, representative panel, made available by the IMAS International research agency.

The research results clearly confirm that the situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the implementation of tourist trips. This applied to both 2020 and 2022, although the distribution of responses was slightly different. In the first year of the pandemic, many more respondents considered this impact to be definite (46.3%), and a year and a half later, the 'definitely yes' category was indicated by 31.8% of respondents. A detailed summary of the research results is presented in Tab. 13.1.

Table 13.1. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourist travel

Has the situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic affected your tourist travel?	2020		2022	
	N = 1502		N = 1508	
	n	%	n	%
Definitely yes	695	46.3	480	31.8
Probably yes	379	25.2	562	37.3
Neither yes nor no	230	15.3	256	17.0
Probably no	79	5.2	131	8.7
Definitely no	110	7.9	79	5.2

Source: own study based on survey results.

Among the changes made in the method of carrying out tourist trips, the respondents most often indicated: limiting the number of tourist trips (39.6% of the responses), carrying out only domestic tourist trips (27.9%) and changing the destination of tourist trips (22.1%).

The study showed that, despite the existing threat, there was a specific group of people who purchased an organized tourist package during the pandemic (Tab. 13.2), but in the first year of the pandemic (2020) a much smaller number of respondents decided to take this type of holiday than a year and a half later. It is worth noting that people declaring the purchase of a holiday package, in both research periods, most often made more than one such journey. The respondents chose both domestic and foreign holidays. In 2020, domestic packages dominated and in 2022, it was the opposite.

The results below confirm that in the face of the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the behaviour of purchasers of package holidays has changed significantly. At that time, tourist packages were purchased less frequently, and buyers limited their trips to domestic trips.

Table 13.2. Shopping package holidays

Package type		2020		2022	
		N = 1502		N = 1508	
		n	%	n	%
Shopping package holidays, including:	yes	254	16.9	984	65.3
	no	1248	83.1	524	34.7
Foreign package holidays	yes	166	11.0	752	49.9
	no	1336	89.0	756	50.1
Domestic package holidays	yes	238	16.0	542	35.9
	no	1264	84.0	966	64.1

Source: own study based on survey results.

Additional insights are provided by the analysis of information sources and online/offline purchase channels. Using the respondents' answers about the behaviour of searching for information about package holidays and how to purchase them, it is possible to indicate various habits and to combine online and stationary sources and channels in one purchasing process, and then distinguish four segments of buyers, under the following names (Dudek et al., 2020):

- 'Involved' (Research Online, Purchase Offline behaviour),
- 'Misers' (Research Offline, Purchase Online behaviour),
- 'Traditionalists' (Research Offline, Purchase Offline behaviour),
- 'Networker' (Research Online, Purchase Online behaviour).

Figure 13.1 shows the structure of behaviour of 'Involved', 'Misers', 'Traditionalists' and 'Networkers', clients of travel agencies before, during and after the pandemic.

While before the pandemic, in the case of most respondents, the entire decision-making process took place online, in the first year of the pandemic this strategy was used only by 29.5% of package buyers, and in 2022 the share of this strategy decreased to 26.3%. During the COVID-19 pandemic, buyers of packaged tourist services most often started the purchasing process in a stationary store, in a travel agency, and finalised their purchases online. However, classic ROPO was a common behaviour. This means that buyers started by searching for information on the Internet and made the purchase in a traditional travel agency. In 2020, compared to 2019, the percentage of people who declared that they both looked for information and bought a package in a stationary store also increased slightly.

However, after the pandemic, compared to 2020, there was a further increase in the share of Research Online and Purchase Offline behaviour. The percentage of Research Offline, Purchase Offline behaviours also increased. At the same time, there was a continuation of declines in the share of Research Offline, Purchase Online behaviour.

Before the pandemic			
		Searching for information about package holidays	
Purchase of package holidays		Offline	Online
	Offline	'Traditionalists' 5.3%	'Involved' 16.6%
	Online	'Misers' 11.9%	'Networkers' 66.4%
During the pandemic			
		Searching for information about package holidays	
Purchase of package holidays		Offline	Online
	Offline	'Traditionalists' 7.9%	'Involved' 30.7%
	Online	'Misers' 31.9%	'Networkers' 29.5%
After the pandemic			
		Searching for information about package holidays	
Purchase of package holidays		Offline	Online
	Offline	'Traditionalists' 10.8%	'Involved' 36.1%
	Online	'Misers' 26.8%	'Networkers' 26.3%

Fig. 13.1. 'Involved', 'Misers', 'Traditionalists' and 'Networkers' before, during and after the pandemic

Source: own study based on survey results.

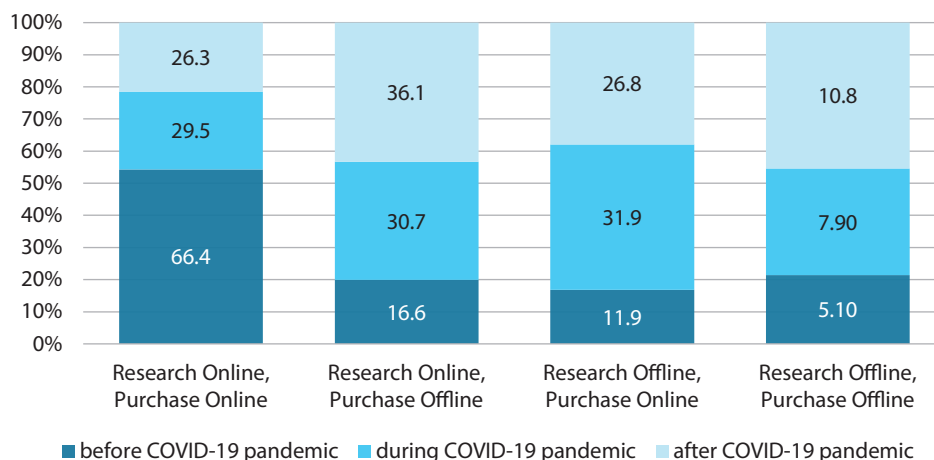


Fig. 13.2. Purchasing strategies of buyers of package holidays before, during and after the pandemic

Source: own study based on survey results.

Taken together, illustrating the evolution of purchasing behaviour before and after the pandemic, a significant change in the share structure of purchasing strategies of purchasers of package holidays can be noted. The share of 'Networkers' decreased by more than half, while the shares of other groups ('Involved', 'Misers' and 'Traditionalists') doubled (Fig. 13.2).

13.4. Conclusions

The conducted research confirmed that in the face of the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the behaviour of travel agency clients has changed significantly, in particular in terms of reducing the frequency of organized holiday packages and limiting them to domestic trips. The results obtained confirm the previously stated thesis about significant changes that occurred in the use of online and offline information and shopping channels by buyers in the process of making decisions about the purchase of package holidays due to the pandemic situation.

In the face of the COVID-19 threat, the importance of stationary travel agencies in this process has increased significantly, and the dominance of the 'search and buy online' strategy from before the pandemic has been broken, and buyers carried out the entire purchasing process online much less often than before the pandemic. The presented results do not differ from the observations made by other researchers. They also observed that the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the decision-making

process in tourism (Larios-Gómez et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2021), tourists' purchasing behaviour changed radically (D. Truong & M. D. Truong, 2022), and consumption patterns significantly shifted (Deya-Tortella, 2022).

Many researchers claim that the effects of the pandemic on tourism will be long-term and even if the health crisis ceases, they will still affect tourists' travel and purchase intentions. During the pandemic, tourists became more demanding and cautious, and the socio-economic and health aspects of the crisis had a significant impact on their purchasing behaviour (Pappas, 2023). When making decisions, they reported a great need for reliable and up-to-date information and looked for more controlled sources (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2022), proven and 'tangible', and in their opinion, such sources were stationary travel agencies. Buyers of package holidays perceive tourist agency employees as guarantors of the truthfulness, reliability and timeliness of the information provided. In a situation of strong uncertainty and even fear of travelling (Bratić et al., 2021), personal contact between the customer and the seller becomes irreplaceable. The significant role of the advisory function played by salespeople in a travel agency was emphasised. The reasons for this situation can be seen in the need to use the services of travel agencies, which, in conditions of pandemic uncertainty, provided tourists with a guarantee of safety and certainty of the trip. In many cases, during the pandemic, organizing a holiday trip through a travel agency guaranteed the certainty of withdrawing from the contract and recovering the money invested in the holiday.

This study offers arguments for the need to operate stationary offices, despite the development of the e-commerce sector in tourism. It seems that tourists' strong belief in the high quality of information provided by employees of stationary travel agencies is an important condition for the existence of a relatively constant demand for their services.

It is important that travel agencies, when designing their development strategies, focus on redefining their role and adapting their activities to customer requirements, taking into account their purchasing behaviour, which is one of the main reasons for the development of omni-channel distribution of tourist products and non-linear tourism marketing observed in recent years. Entities operating on the tourism market must adopt diverse marketing strategies in response to the expectations of tourists, who often prefer different information channels compared to the distribution channels of the services offered.

To sum up, travel agencies must actively respond to changing market trends and customer behaviour by adapting their strategies to customer expectations and analysing data on multi-channel behaviour. Due to the demonstrated stabilisation of the share of online channels in purchasing behaviour, the analysis of multi-channel tourists' behaviour should become particularly important in future research.

The research conducted for the purposes of the presented chapter had its limitations. The study used data collected on a limited sample of Polish customers, and due to cultural differences, the distribution of socio-demographic and economic characteristics describing purchasing strategies may be different in the case of buyers of other nationalities.

Data for the purposes of the presented research were collected for four years, and the development of digital information sources and Internet access devices resulted in the dynamic nature of the studied phenomenon. Therefore, the directions for further research on buyer behaviour patterns should include, among others, determining whether the observed regularities will also persist in subsequent years and identifying factors influencing this phenomenon in the case of buyers of tourist packages.

Despite certain limitations, the empirical results of the presented research highlights several important issues, both theoretical and practical. The authors hope that the obtained results will help travel agencies to better understand customer behaviour and plan marketing instruments more effectively in the Internet age.

References

- Abbas, J., Mubeen, R., Iorember, P. T., Raza, S., & Mamirkulova, G. (2021). Exploring the Impact of Covid-19 on Tourism: Transformational Potential and Implications for a Sustainable Recovery of the Travel and Leisure Industry. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, 2, article 100033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2021.100033>
- Amaro, S. & Duarte, P. (2015). An Integrative Model of Consumers' Intentions to Purchase Travel Online. *Tourism Management*, 46, 64-79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.06.006>
- Benckendorff, P. J., Sheldon, P. J., & Fesenmaier, D. R. (2014). *Tourism Information Technology*. CAB International.
- Bieger, T. & Laesser, C. (2004). Information Sources for Travel Decisions: Toward a Source Process Model. *Journal of Travel Research*, 42 (4), 357-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287504263030>
- Bratić, M., Radivojević, A., Stojiljković, N., Simović, O., Juvan, E., Lesjak, M., & Podovšovnik, E. (2021). Should I Stay or Should I Go? Tourists' COVID-19 Risk Perception and Vacation Behavior Shift. *Sustainability*, 13, article 3573. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13063573>
- Cambra-Fierro, J., Fuentes-Blasco, M., Gao, L. X., Melero-Polo, I., & Trifu, A. (2022). The Influence of Communication in Destination Imagery During COVID-19. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 64, article 102817. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102817>
- Chien, P. M., Sharifpour, M., Ritchie, B. W., & Watson, B. (2017). Travelers' Health Risk Perceptions and Protective Behavior: A Psychological Approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, 56(6), 744-759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004728751666547>
- Deya-Tortella, B., Leoni, V., & Ramos, V. (2022). COVID-led Consumption Displacement: A Longitudinal Analysis of Hotel Booking Patterns. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 107, article 103343. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103343>
- Dudek, A., Jaremen, D. E., & Michalska-Dudek, I. (2020). Socio-economic Factors Determining the ROPO Trend in the Travel Industry. *Tourism Economics*, 26(6), 873-907. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354816619848200>

- Flavián, C., Gurrea, R., & Orús, C. (2016). Choice Confidence in the Webrooming Purchase Process: The Impact of Online Positive Reviews and the Motivation to Touch. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 15(5), 459-476. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1585>
- Fodness, D. & Murray, B. (1997). Tourist Information Search. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24(3), 503-523. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(97\)00009-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(97)00009-1)
- Garbarski, L., Rutkowski, I., & Wrzosek, W. (1992). *Marketing*. Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne.
- Hojeghan, S. B. & Esfangareh, A. N. (2011). Digital Economy and Tourism Impacts, Influences and Challenges. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 19, 308-316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.05.136>
- Larios-Gómez, E., Fischer, L., Peñalosa, M., & Ortega-Vivanco, M. (2021). Purchase Behavior in COVID-19: A Cross Study in Mexico, Colombia, and Ecuador. *Heliyon*, 7(3), article e06468. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06468>
- Lei, S. & Law, R. (2019). Functionality Evaluation of Mobile Hotel Websites in the M-Commerce Era. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 36(6), 665-678. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2019.1624240>
- Pappas, N. (2023). Came and Gone? A Longitudinal Study of the Effects of COVID-19 on Tourism Purchasing Intentions. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 72, article 103269. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103269>
- Reddy, K. V. & Nagarjuna, K. (2017), Research Online Purchase Offline – New Age Trend Among Indian Rational Customers. In *Proceedings of 10th International Conference on Recent Trends in Engineering Science and Management, ICRTESM-17* (pp. 468-472). <http://data.conferenceworld.in/Newton/Index.pdf>
- Rittichainuwat, B. N. & Chakraborty, G. (2009). Perceived Travel Risks Regarding Terrorism and Disease: The Case of Thailand. *Tourism Management*, 30(3), 410-418. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2008.08.001>
- Statista. (2021). *Statista Mobility Market Outlook*. <https://www.statista.com/outlook/mmo/travel-tourism/package-holidays/europe>
- Torres, E. N., Ridderstaat, J., & Wei, W. (2021). Negative Affectivity and People's Return Intentions to Hospitality and Tourism Activities: The Early Stages of COVID-19. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 49, 89-100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2021.08.021>
- Truong, D. & Truong, M. D. (2022). How Do Customers Change Their Purchasing Behaviors During the COVID-19 Pandemic? *Journal of Retailing Consumer Services*, 67, article 102963. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.102963>
- Wang, J., Liu-Lastres, B., Ritchie, B. W., & Mills, D. J. (2019). Travellers' Self-protections Against Health Risks: An Application of the Full Protection Motivation Theory. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 78, article 102743. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2019.102743>
- Wong, J.-Y. & Yeh, C. (2009). Tourist Hesitation in Destination Decision Making. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 36(1), 6-23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2008.09.005>