

## THE EVOLUTION OF TRAVEL BEHAVIOR IN THE POST-COVID ERA

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### **Abstract**

*In the post-COVID-19 era, the pandemic has radically reconfigured the way people approach travel and their lifestyle. In this context, through this research, we aimed to explore the evolution of individuals' travel behavior in the face of pandemic-induced changes and analyze how these changes influence travel decisions currently and in the future.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, travel behavior, preferences*

**JEL Classification:** *D11, D12, Z32*

### **1.Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic stands out as one of the most formidable challenges confronting the world in the 21st century, exerting pronounced and detrimental effects on the global economy, mortality rates, political landscapes, and the tourism sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic began in December 2019 in the city of Wuhan in Hubei province, China, when a new type of coronavirus, called SARS-CoV-2, was identified as responsible for a series of severe pneumonia cases. Over the following months, the virus rapidly spread worldwide, becoming a global pandemic. The tourism industry, known for its global reach and potential for virus transmission, emerged as one of the earliest sectors directly impacted by the worldwide pandemic response. The implementation of global travel restrictions, a crucial measure to manage the COVID-19 pandemic, led to unparalleled and adverse disruptions in the global tourism economy.

Significant transformations have occurred within the tourism industry in Romania due to the ongoing pandemic. During this difficult period, deep changes have been recorded in travelers' behavior and in how they perceive and choose destinations.

Restrictive measures such as travel restrictions and social distancing have completely reconfigured the way people travel. Tourist flows have redirected towards less crowded and nature-oriented destinations, and preferences for rural tourism have increased.

The hospitality sector, represented by hotels and restaurants, has been profoundly affected by restrictions and temporary closures. Business travel has been strongly influenced, with massive event cancellations and adaptation to new ways of communication and collaboration online.

Consequently, numerous nations enforced restrictions on travel to mitigate the mobility of individuals, particularly from the areas most severely affected. In light of this situation, Polyzos et al. (2020) asserted that the COVID-19 outbreak disrupted all projections for growth in the tourism sector, given the pandemic's impactful consequences on the global economy.

Promoting domestic tourism has become a crucial strategy in an attempt to offset international restrictions and stimulate exploration of local regions. In parallel, the tourism industry has rapidly adapted to the digital environment, offering virtual experiences and adjusting services to keep pace with consumers' behavioral changes.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a significant surge in scientific publications focusing on the impacts of the virus on the tourism sector. Nonetheless, a predominant portion of the current

research on COVID-19 primarily delves into its effects on the tourism industry. This study contributes to the body of knowledge in this field by elucidating how individuals' travel behavior has changed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how these changes continue to evolve in the post-COVID era. Through the collection and analysis of data, our aim is to identify trends, preferences, and influencing factors shaping travel behavior, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the pandemic's impact on the travel industry and the lifestyle of the population.

## 2. Theoretical Considerations

Over the last decade, the impact of epidemic outbreaks on the tourism industry has received considerable momentum given its negative multiplier effect on other supporting industries. As in the recent case of the COVID-19, any epidemic outbreaks may promptly reduce the flow of inbound and outbound tourism due to the decision of tourists not to visit certain geographic regions or destinations and/or government restrictions to stop the spread of the virus. In such a case, epidemic crises may provoke important shifts in demand for certain destinations as travelers may consciously decide not to get exposed to such crises. (Fotiadis, A., et al., 2021).

The tourism industry is, by definition, one of the most vulnerable when it comes to threats related to an economic, military, or medical crisis. Covid-19 has produced dramatic effects for the tourism industry, and Romanian businesses in the sector have not been spared.

According to UNWTO, starting in March 2020, the pandemic caused an unprecedented disruption to tourism, resulting in a massive drop in international travel following a global lockdown and plunge in demand, amid widespread travel restrictions put in place to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

International tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) plunged from 1.5 billion in 2019 to 400 million in 2020, a 72% drop resulting in 1.1 billion fewer international tourists and making 2020 the worst year on record. (<https://www.e-unwto.org/>)

In 2021, according to UNWTO, international tourism recorded a growth of 13%, reaching 458 million arrivals, which is 51 million more than in 2020, but still 69% lower than pre-pandemic levels in 2019 (1.464 billion).

One of the natural consequences of societal psychology affected by crises is the drop in demand for non-essential activities, especially travel and tourism (Senbeto & Hon, 2020).

Tourists' purchasing decisions are significantly influenced by external factors that cannot be controlled either by them or by tourism enterprises. These external factors include aspects such as weather conditions, strikes, military conflicts, and pandemics. Pandemics, in particular, lead tourists to avoid traveling to destinations where there is a high risk of contamination.

But people have the need and desire to travel, resulting in over 1.4 billion domestic travelers in the pre-pandemic period COVID-19 (Bratić, M. et al., 2021). This need and desire for travel, which generated over 1.4 billion domestic travelers in the pre-COVID-19 pandemic period, highlights a complex dynamic between psychological influences and individual aspirations. Despite the negative impact of crises on the demand for non-essential activities, including travel, this impressive figure underscores the resilience and persistent desire of people to explore and experience the world around them.

However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this dynamic has undergone significant changes. Travel restrictions, safety concerns, and changes in consumer behavior have contributed to a substantial shift in how people approach and plan their trips. It is interesting to analyze how these conflicting influences between the intrinsic need for travel and the impact of crises have shaped and continue to shape travelers' behavior in a post-pandemic landscape.

COVID-19 has significantly disrupted tourists' perceptions and plans regarding vacation safety. The risk associated with the pandemic interferes with the normal decision-making process, generating uncertainty and the need for immediate adaptations. Tourists who identify risk before traveling face additional challenges and may feel the need for detailed information to assess their

risks and adjust vacation plans accordingly. Some may even decide to cancel their vacation altogether in the context of a heightened perception of risk.

Existing studies reveal that risks have a significant impact on individuals' travel intentions, both regarding domestic and international destinations. This influence is evidenced in the behavioral changes of tourists who adjust their preferences and choices based on the assessment of risks associated with travel.

Moreover, safety and security have become essential factors in making travel decisions, representing primary reasons for choosing a particular destination. Thus, in the post-COVID landscape, tourists pay increased attention to these aspects, and destinations that manage to provide a safe and secure environment are likely to attract a greater number of travelers.

### 3. Research methodology

The pandemic outbreak of COVID 19 emerged in December 2019 in China and by March 2020 affected the whole world. The result of lockdowns and closures of international and national borders can be seen in the global crisis and disruption within and beyond the tourism industry. (Neuburger L., 2021)

As humanity transitions from the stage of global pandemic to a post-COVID-19 period, a reality with profound transformations in travel behavior and how individuals experience and plan their trips is taking shape. This research aims to provide a detailed analysis of this radical change and to explore deeply the evolution of travel behavior in light of new socio-sanitary contexts.

The main objective of this investigation is to decode how individuals have adapted their travel habits in the face of the global challenges imposed by the pandemic and to highlight how these ongoing changes influence travel decisions in a post-pandemic framework. In seeking a deeper understanding, we will explore the nuances and subtleties of travel behavior, identifying emerging influences, fluctuating preferences, and comfort thresholds in a continuously changing environment.

The analysis of the evolution of travel behavior is not limited to the practical aspects of planning and executing a trip; it also aims to discern underlying meanings and individual motivations. In this process, we will explore the connections between the changes recorded in the travel industry and broader aspects of lifestyle and society in general.

By approaching this research with a comprehensive perspective, we aim not only to document and understand the significant changes in travel behavior but also to provide essential information for adapting the travel industry to new paradigms. We believe that this research will contribute to shaping useful perspectives in shaping the future of travel experiences in the post-COVID-19 world. Ipoteza de la care am pornit în elaborarea acestei cercetări a fost că schimbările semnificative în comportamentul de călătorie al indivizilor înregistrate în perioada post-COVID-19 sunt determinate de impactul direct al pandemiei și al măsurilor asociate.

The main objective of the research is to investigate and understand the changes in individuals' travel behavior in the post-COVID-19 context.

The secondary objectives of the research include:

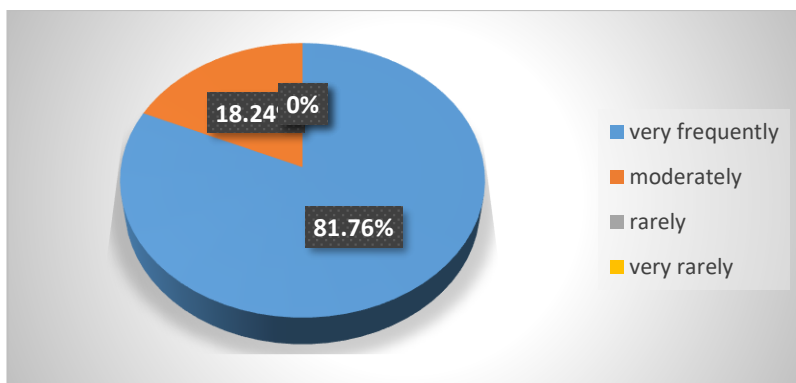
1. Identifying the main trends in travel behavior changes.
2. Assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on travel decisions.
3. Analyzing the factors influencing individual travel decisions.
4. Evaluating perceptions of safety in travel and measures taken for protection.
5. Comparing travel preferences in the pre-COVID and post-COVID periods.
6. Collecting feedback on virtual travel experiences.

### 4. Results

The question focuses on the travel behavior of respondents before the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses indicate that an overwhelming majority (81.76%) of participants were individuals who traveled very frequently, suggesting an active travel lifestyle, whether for business or pleasure.

Individuals with this profile may show interest in exploration and adventure, seeking to discover and experience new places. Additionally, they may develop an extensive network of connections, having the opportunity to interact with people from different backgrounds and cultures.

In contrast, the 18.24% who stated that they traveled moderately represent a smaller but significant group with a moderate level of involvement in travel. They did not travel as often as the majority, but they were still active in this regard. Individuals with this characteristic may travel for a variety of reasons, not necessarily tied to intense professional obligations. Their adaptability to change is moderate, and their interest in exploration and knowledge may be present but not as intense as those who travel very frequently. The presented results highlight the diversity of travel experiences among participants.

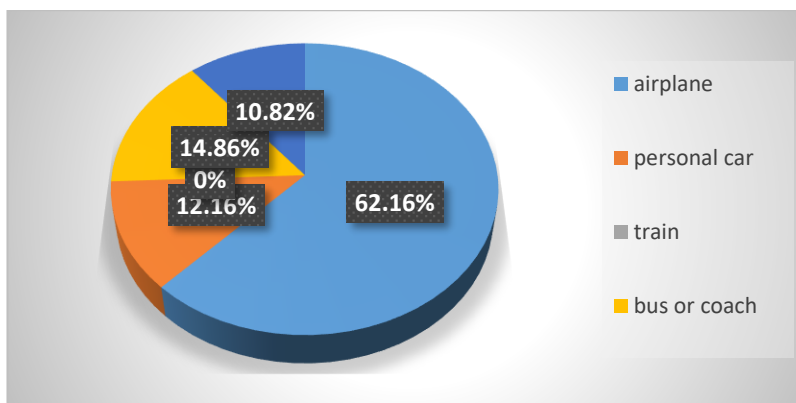


**Figure 1** Travel frequency before the pandemic

Before delving into the detailed travel behavior of individuals, it is crucial to take a look at the diversity of transportation means they used in the pre-pandemic period. Within this analysis, a picture of preferences and individual choices is outlined, highlighting the variations between air travel, personal car trips, bus or coach travels, and other means of transportation.

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of respondents used to travel by plane, according to data showing that 62.16% of them preferred this means of transportation. A smaller percentage, 12.16%, chose to travel by personal car, indicating the preference for independence and flexibility in travels. Additionally, nearly 15% of participants used the bus or coach, indicating a preference for shorter or group travels. The segment of 10.82% who opted for "other means of transportation" highlights the diversity of options, possibly including maritime transport or other less common variants.

These transportation options not only reflect individual choices but also underline the adaptability and diversity of ways in which people planned their trips before the pandemic struck.

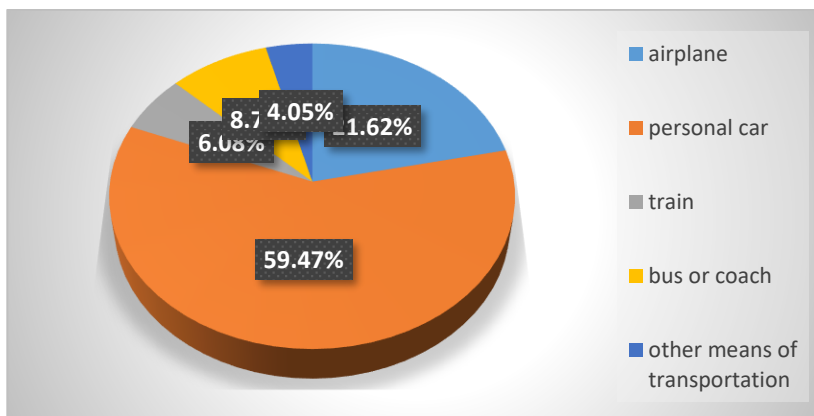


**Figure 2.** The means of transportation used before the pandemic

Regarding current transportation means, we can observe that the personal car is the most used mode of transportation, accounting for approximately 59.47%, followed by air travel, which

represents 21.62%. The use of train, bus/coach, and other means of transportation records lower percentages, namely 6.08%, 8.78%, and 4.05%, respectively.

In a comparative interpretation with the pre-pandemic period, significant changes in transportation preferences could be observed. For example, if before the pandemic air travel was the primary option, in the post-pandemic period, the personal car has become the dominant choice, reflecting a shift in travel behavior in the context of the new realities generated by the pandemic.

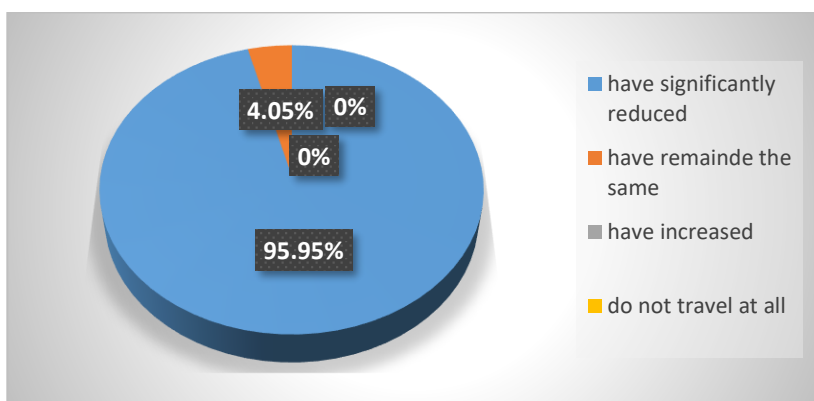


**Figure 3.** The means of transportation used now

Regarding the frequency of travel, the results predominantly indicate a significant reduction in travel, with nearly 96% of respondents reporting a decrease. A small percentage, approximately 4%, states that the frequency of their travels remained unchanged. These data indicate a significant shift in travel behavior in the context of the pandemic and its consequences.

This significant decrease can be associated with multiple factors, including travel restrictions imposed to control the spread of the virus, concerns about personal safety, and changes in working and communication methods, such as increased remote work and the use of technology for virtual meetings.

The information obtained provides insight into how the pandemic has influenced travel behavior and could serve as a basis for understanding how individuals and society as a whole are adapting to the new post-COVID-19 realities.

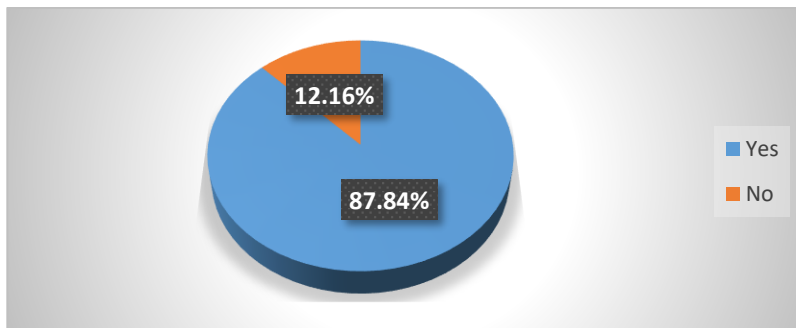


**Figure 4.** The frequency of travel in the post-COVID-19 period

Regarding the evolution of preferences for different destinations or modes of travel compared to the pre-COVID-19 period, the majority of respondents, representing approximately 87.84%, indicated that they had developed different preferences during this period. This suggests a significant change in their tastes and options related to travel or recreational activities in the context of the pandemic's impact.

On the other hand, approximately 12.16% of respondents mentioned that they have not changed their preferences, indicating a continuation of their previous choices or a relative stability regarding preferred destinations or activities.

These results can provide clues as to how the pandemic has influenced how people plan and enjoy their travel or recreational experiences, reflecting significant adaptations to the new conditions and realities.

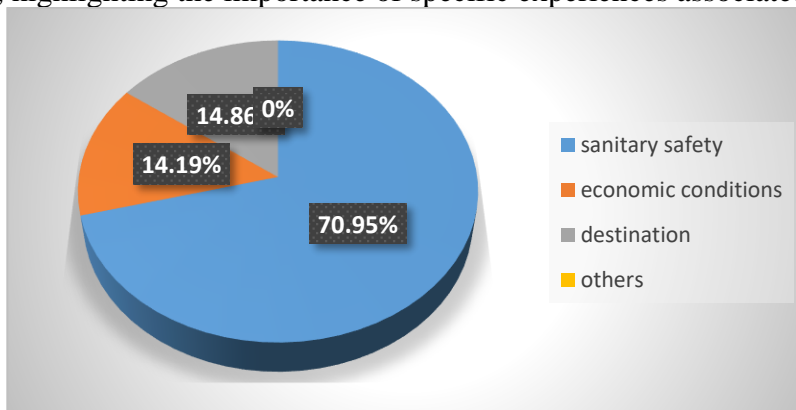


**Figure 5.** The development of preferences for destinations or modes of travel different compared to the pre-COVID-19 period

The next question addresses the current factors influencing respondents' decision to travel. From the provided responses, a picture of their priorities and concerns regarding travel emerges.

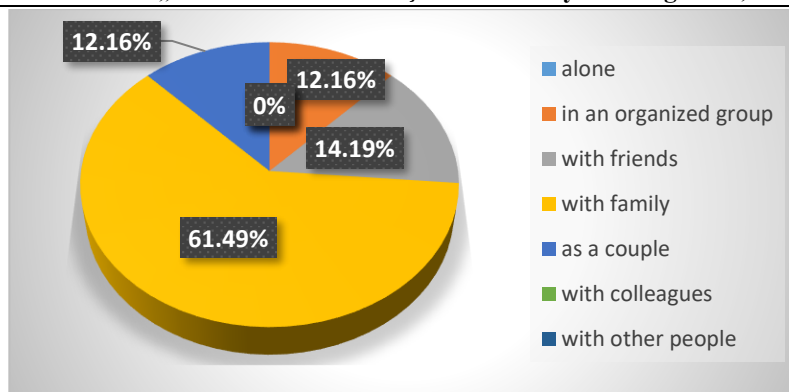
By far, health safety is the predominant factor, with 70.95% of respondents indicating that it significantly influences their decision to travel. This suggests increased attention to health and safety measures in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic conditions and destination are also significant aspects but to a lesser extent. Approximately 14.19% of respondents consider economic conditions as an important factor, indicating sensitivity to financial aspects. At the same time, 14.86% are influenced by destination choice, highlighting the importance of specific experiences associated with places to visit.



**Figure 6.** The factors influencing the decision to travel

When it comes to individual preferences regarding the mode of travel, a significant majority, approximately 61.49%, prefer to travel with family, indicating the importance and enjoyment of experiencing trips with close family members. Additionally, 14.19% choose to travel with friends, suggesting that socialization and shared experiences are essential aspects of the travel process for this segment of respondents. The option "As a couple" and "In an organized group" both account for 12.16%, indicating that there are individuals who prefer to travel as a couple or within an organized group.

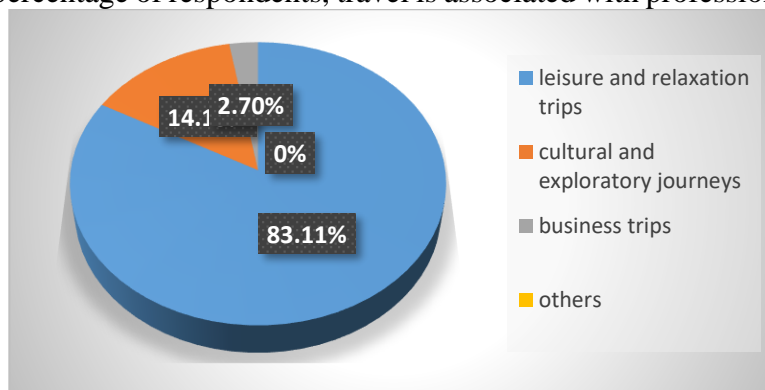


**Figure 7.** The mode of travelling

Regarding individual preferences for types of travel, from the provided responses, it emerges that an overwhelming majority, approximately 83.11%, prefer leisure and relaxation trips. This indicates that for most respondents, the main purpose of travel is to provide a restful and relaxing experience.

Cultural and exploratory travel represents the second most popular option, at approximately 14.19%. This segment of respondents seems to seek rich cultural experiences and be oriented towards exploring new and interesting places.

Business travel occupies a smaller proportion, at approximately 2.70%, suggesting that for a small percentage of respondents, travel is associated with professional obligations and commitments.

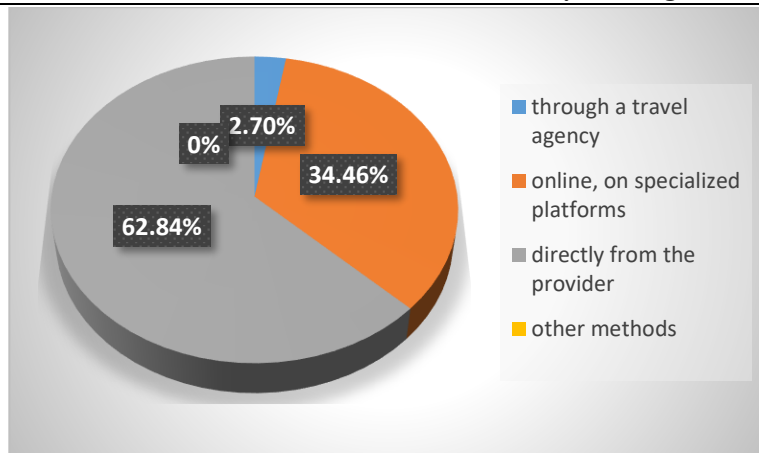


**Figure 8.** The preferred type of travelling

Regarding booking methods, the majority of respondents, approximately 62.84%, choose to organize their vacations through direct contact with providers such as hotels or airlines. This suggests a preference for personal management of travel details, with the possibility of benefiting from direct offers and having greater control over planning.

For a significant percentage, around 34.46%, online booking on specialized platforms is the preferred method. This indicates respondents' adaptability to the digital environment and their use of it to access and compare available offers.

A smaller percentage, approximately 2.70%, choose to book through travel agencies. This segment suggests that a small portion of respondents prefer to utilize the services of an agency for vacation planning and organization.

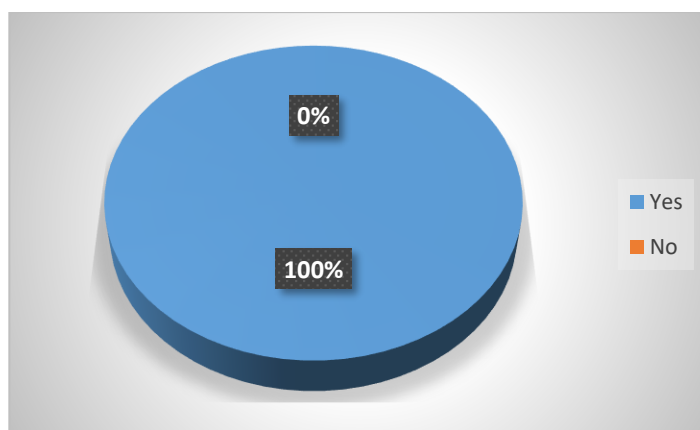


**Figure 9.** Ways of booking vacations

The next question explores how respondents searched for information about travel conditions or restrictions in a destination, with a focus on the use of applications or online platforms for this purpose.

The result indicates a widespread adoption of technology, with 100% of respondents stating that they have used applications or online platforms to inform themselves about travel conditions or restrictions in a specific destination. This level of usage demonstrates a significant reliance on digital resources to obtain updated and relevant information before traveling.

The option "No" was not selected by any respondent, thus highlighting the total absence of those who do not use online technology in this specific context.

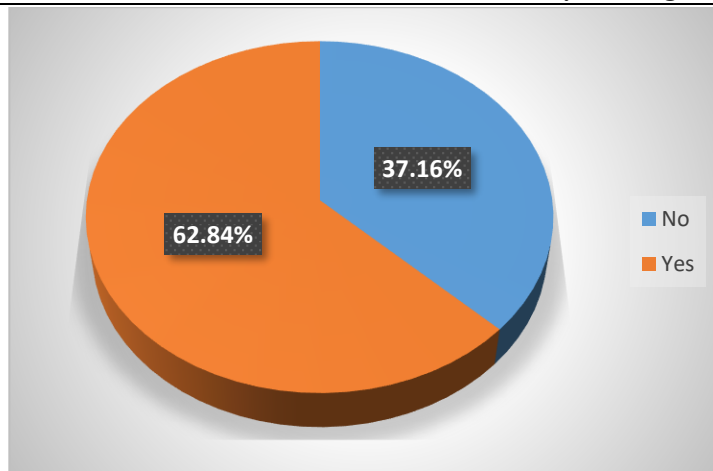


**Figure 10** Using apps or online platforms for travel information

Regarding respondents' experience with exploring or participating in virtual travel during the post-COVID-19 period, the provided responses show a division between those who have had such experiences and those who have not explored or participated in virtual travel.

Approximately 37.16% of respondents answered affirmatively, indicating that they have participated in virtual travel during the post-COVID-19 period. This segment reflects an interest or adaptation to new ways of experiencing places and events through the online environment.

On the other hand, 62.84% of respondents answered negatively, indicating that they have not explored or participated in virtual travel. This higher percentage may suggest a preference for traditional travel experiences or a lack of interest in exploring the virtual environment in this context.

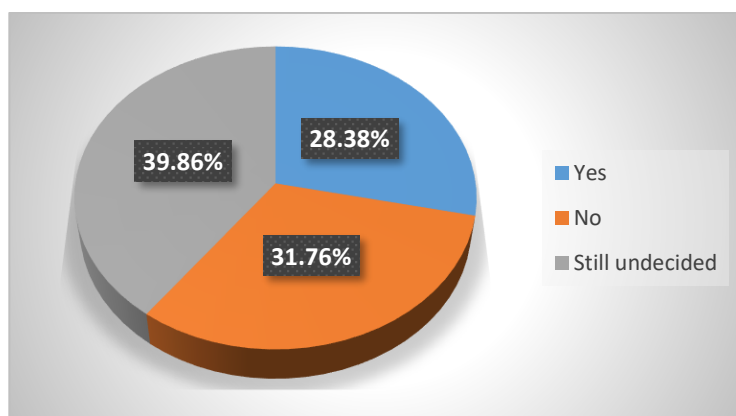


**Figure 11.** Participation in virtual travel experiences in the post-COVID-19 period

Participation in events or social activities in tourist destinations was confirmed by approximately 28.38% of respondents. This figure suggests an openness to reintegrating into social experiences in tourist destinations, indicating a degree of comfort or trust in the security measures adopted.

However, 31.76% of respondents stated that they have not participated in such events or activities. This segment reflects a portion of the population that chooses to remain cautious or continue avoiding social interactions in the post-COVID-19 tourism context.

The majority of respondents, accounting for 39.86%, still hesitate to participate in events or social activities. This significant number indicates a certain level of uncertainty or caution regarding involvement in social situations, suggesting a careful assessment of risks and the evolving situation.

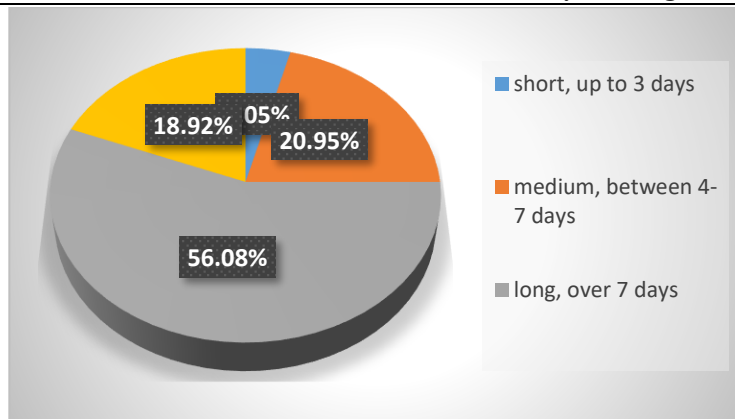


**Figure 11.** Participation in events or social activities in tourist destinations

Survey participants expressed varied preferences regarding the duration of their travels, providing a diversified perspective on how they characterize their travel experiences. The data indicates that a significant majority of respondents opt for long-duration trips, lasting over 7 days, suggesting a preference for extended explorations and prolonged relaxation.

On the other hand, a significant portion of participants prefer medium-duration trips, ranging from 4 to 7 days. This choice may reflect an interest in shorter getaways, suitable for various activities and destinations that can be explored within a more limited timeframe.

Interestingly, approximately 18.92% of respondents characterize the duration of their trips as variable, adapted according to the destination and purpose of the travel. This suggests a flexible approach, with travel decisions influenced by the specific requirements and opportunities of each trip.

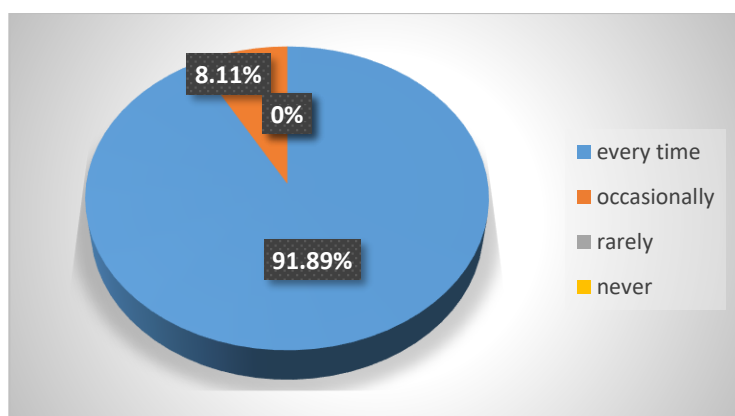


**Figure 12.** The duration of trips

Purchasing travel insurance is essential to ensure a worry-free trip and to manage potential unpleasant situations.

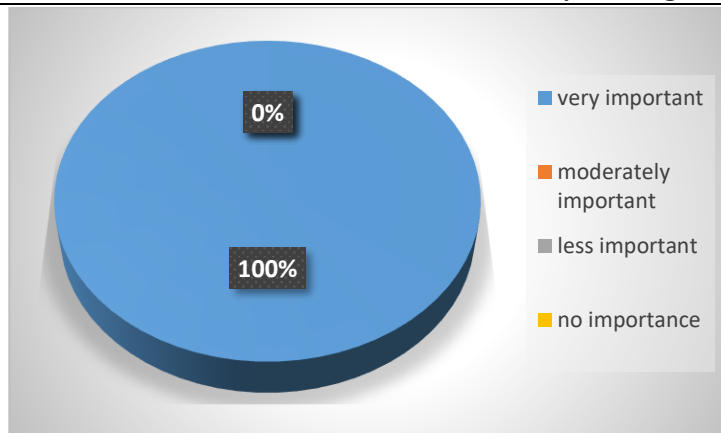
With an overwhelming proportion of approximately 91.89%, the majority of respondents declare that they always choose to purchase travel insurance before going on vacation. This significant percentage suggests an increased attention to safety and financial protection during travels.

The option "Occasionally" recorded a percentage of approximately 8.11%, indicating that there is a minor portion of respondents who choose to purchase travel insurance under certain circumstances or for specific trips.



**Figure 13.** The frequency of purchasing travel insurance

The existence of a flexible cancellation policy is perceived as extremely important by survey participants regarding bookings for travel services such as accommodation or transportation. All respondents indicated that it is "Very important" to benefit from increased flexibility regarding cancellations when making such reservations. This result reflects a significant concern among travelers for adaptability and the ability to adjust travel plans in unforeseen circumstances or last-minute changes. It is evident that a flexible cancellation policy is a crucial factor for travelers when considering booking options.



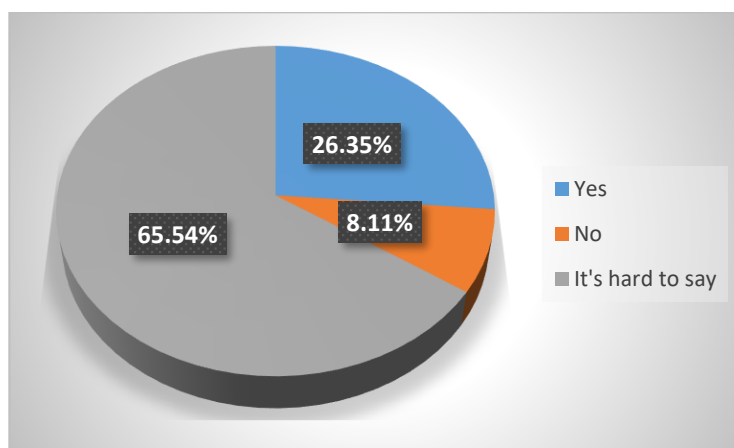
**Figure 14.** The importance of a flexible cancellation policy

Regarding respondents' perception of the sustainability of travel habits adopted in the post-COVID-19 era, the responses provide insight into the degree of confidence or uncertainty regarding the persistence of these changes in how people travel.

Approximately 26.35% of respondents believe that the travel habits adopted in the post-COVID-19 era will become permanent. This perspective suggests that a significant segment believes in a lasting change in how people approach travel, likely as a result of lessons learned from the pandemic experience.

The option "No" was selected by approximately 8.11% of respondents, indicating that a small portion does not see these changes as likely to become permanent. This group may consider these changes temporary and expect a return to previous habits over time.

The majority of respondents, approximately 65.54%, choose the option "It's hard to say." This response reflects uncertainty and complexity in assessing the long-term changes or continuity of travel habits in the future.



**Figure 15.** The sustainability of travel habits adopted in the post-COVID-19 era

## 5. Conclusions

The research reveals a complex panorama of respondents' behaviors and attitudes regarding travel, with a particular focus on the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and adaptations in the post-COVID-19 era.

Before the pandemic, travel frequency was high, with a preference for air transportation. However, after the pandemic, we observe a significant change, with personal vehicles becoming the primary mode of transportation.

Virtual travel has entered the scene as an experience for a significant percentage of respondents, reflecting an adaptation to digital exploration alternatives.

Safety in travel and the importance of insurance covering force majeure situations are unanimously recognized priorities among all respondents.

Regarding behavioral changes in the post-COVID-19 era, there are varied perspectives, with a segment anticipating the persistence of changes and a majority remaining reserved and uncertain.

Regarding participation in social events in post-COVID-19 tourist destinations, there is a diverse range of attitudes, with some participating, others still hesitating, and a significant proportion choosing not to get involved.

The use of technology in obtaining travel information has become universal, with all respondents opting for applications or online platforms.

These conclusions underline the continuous adaptation to the changes brought about by the pandemic, reflecting the complexity of attitudes and behaviors in the field of travel in the current context.

In an ever-changing context, the tourism industry in Romania faces challenges, but also opportunities for innovation and reinvention. It is essential to monitor developments and find creative solutions to revitalize the sector in a post-pandemic environment.

The recovery of the tourism industry from the consequences of the COVID-19 health crisis is unforeseeable and partially depends on the rebound of the global economy (Prideaux et al., 2020).

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