

ARE THE HABITS AND BEHAVIORS OF TOURISTS FROM THE COVID-19 PERIOD MAINTAINED AFTER THE END OF THE PANDEMIC?

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Abstract: *The research carried out in this paper has highlighted the changes in the behavior of tourists during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Using the sociological survey, the questionnaire as a tool, the research aimed at revealing to what extent the behavioral changes of tourists from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic were preserved after the end of the epidemic. It was found that some tourist behaviors became ingrained in their routines, while others began to diminish as pandemic-related restrictions eased. Some behaviors might have long-term impacts on the tourism industry, including potential changes in travel preferences or in the demand for certain types of accommodations. The results proved a significant contribution to understanding how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced long-term tourist habits in the post-pandemic world.*

Keywords: *tourism, pandemic, COVID-19, travel, habits*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the tourism industry globally, with travel restrictions, lockdown and health concerns disrupting travel plans and the entire tourism ecosystem. The losses have been significant, and the impact of the pandemic on international tourism was expected to be longer than in other industries. Globally, spending by local tourists decreased by 45%, while spending for foreign tourists recorded an unprecedented 69.4% decrease. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) Report prepared in collaboration with Oxford Economics, in 2020, the tourism industry suffered substantial losses, estimated at between \$4.5 and \$4.7 trillion [1]. Its contribution to global GDP decreased significantly by 49.1%, from 10.6% to 5.5%, and a number of 62 million jobs were lost, representing a decrease of 18.5% [12].

According to the 2020 edition of WTO's World Tourism Barometer, the almost total isolation imposed in response to the pandemic led to a 98% decrease in the number of international tourists in May 2020, compared to 2019. The barometer also shows a 56% decrease from year to year in tourist arrivals between January and May. This translates into a decline of 300 million tourists and a loss of \$320 billion in international tourism revenues - more than three times the loss of international tourist revenues during the 2009 global economic crisis [19,20]. The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the tourism industry, which is considered vital to the economies of many nations and a key driver of economic growth [9]. When travel is limited, the tourism industry comes to a halt, resulting in no financial gains for commercial tourism companies, tourism-related organizations, and other entities dependent on tourism [2]. Studies during the pandemic showed that no return to pre-pandemic levels was expected before 2024 or even later [20].

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have also had an important negative impact on tourism and related business in Romania. For example, Romanian travel agencies reported a decrease of up to 90% compared to previous years. The Alliance for Tourism, Romania expressed the view that, although the contribution of tourism to Romania's GDP recorded a significant decline in 2020, with appropriate measures, this decline could be overcome by 2025 [21]. The number of foreign tourists in Romania recorded a significant decrease of 60.8%, while departures of Romanian tourists abroad decreased by 58.8%

compared to the previous year [14,22,23]. The main effects of the pandemic in the hospitality industry were: decline in sales, temporary suspension of activity, redundancies, restrictions in activity, delays in paying suppliers, closure of firms [5,14].

The Covid-19 pandemic has also caused major changes in tourist consumption patterns that were expected to persist in the medium term. These changes are a combination of several trends, such as an increased preference for low tourist density destinations, away from large cities, with more outdoor activities and contact with nature, the use of private vehicles, or a reduction in business travel and an increase in wellness tourism, to destinations where people can spend more time and more money on self-care, wellness and stress relief [6]. COVID-19 has also reduced over tourism, due to the decrease in international tourist arrivals and encouraged domestic tourism and fostering interaction among residents in popular nature destinations [15]. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has practically locked down and dampened world economy with immediate effect on tourism related businesses [7].

Studies during and after the pandemic have identified the following changes in the consumer behavior of tourists: people would avoid traveling in groups and being surrounded by other groups of people, the attention of the general public would be drawn to hygiene and health problems, there would be a confrontation with a concerned clientele, which is why the hosts will have to further improve their hygiene conditions [3,8,16], preference for accommodation in smaller spaces, last minute holidays, preference for specialized tourism advice, from experienced agents or agents [13], the raising of awareness regarding sustainability [1]. Tourists would also be more cautious about travel expenses and more informed before their next trip [3] the length of stay being influenced as well [10]. The pandemic period has determined also significant changes regarding consumer behavior surrounding food, people becoming more concerned about their health and waste reduction [4,11].

Other forecasts regarding the post-pandemic period anticipated that tourists would most likely avoid high distance tourist destinations, contributing to the more intense development of domestic tourism; the price of international air tickets could rise as a result of the reduction in tourist demand due to the low number of passengers; the average duration of cruises would decrease as well as the number of travelers; hotels would undergo transformations due to significant investments in contactless technologies and increased hygiene standards; important sporting events (Olympic Games, World Championships etc.) or festivals (Oktoberfest, St. Patrick's Day, Tomorrowland etc.) would suffer changes in order to avoid overcrowding and due to the changes in sanitary regulations. [7,17]

As a result of these assumptions, the present study looks at the extent to which tourist habits and consumer behavior are currently influenced by the pandemic period. Our aim was also to highlight tourists' choices and preferences before the outbreak of the pandemic and to identify what behaviors persisted in the post-pandemic period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individual habits and behaviors in the tourism industry, a review of the existing literature on these effects was carried out. Furthermore, this was aimed to see what initial estimates specialists have made of the patterns that will persist after the pandemic. This research is a qualitative research using questionnaire survey and content analysis. A self-administered questionnaire was used as the survey instrument. This choice made it possible to interview a large number of people while covering a large geographical area.

The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out between September and October 2023 via the internet, mainly through social networks and specialty websites. The questionnaire itself included 28 different types of questions such as: single-answer questions, multiple-answer questions and open-ended questions. A 5-point rating scale was also implemented, where 1 represents total disagreement, while 5 indicates total agreement. Participants were asked to rate the level of importance according to their own opinions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Almost 74% of the responses were received from Cluj county, 20% from all over Romania. In addition, 6% were from European and non-European countries.

The demographic analysis of the data collected from our questionnaire reveals a detailed picture of the group of respondents according to their age. The data was collected and structured to provide a deeper understanding of the distribution of responses by age. The average age of respondents is approximately 41.5 years. A significant increase in the number of respondents in the 18-34 age category is observed, indicating a greater representation of this demographic group.

The survey results highlight a difference in the gender distribution among participants, with a significantly higher presence of the female gender, representing 65% of the total participants, compared to only 35% male gender.

It was found that 47% of tourists travelled occasionally (2-3 times a year), 27% travelled frequently (more than 5-6 times a year), 21% rarely travelled and the remaining 5% did not travel.

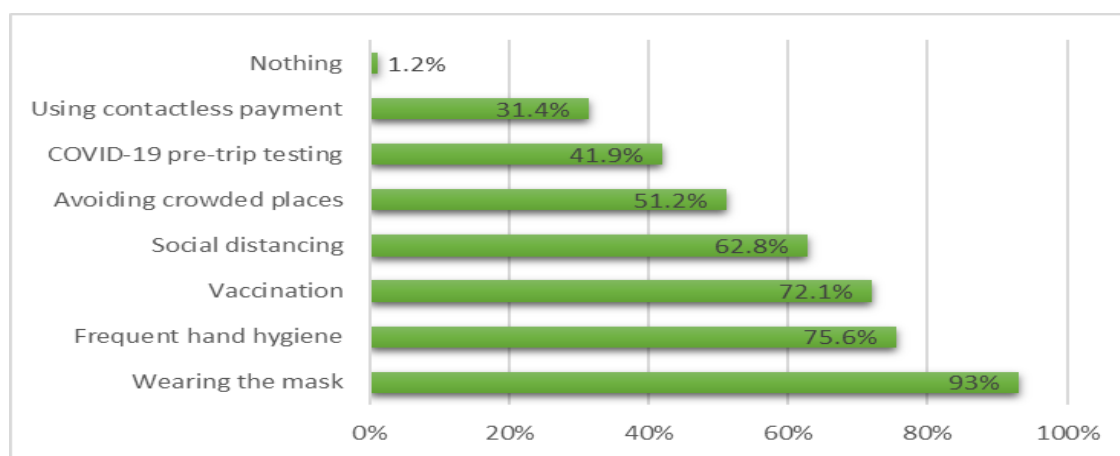


Figure 1. Travel safety measures taken from the beginning to the end of the pandemic

Significant attention has been paid to the safety measures that tourists consider when travelling. After a detailed analysis of the data, a top 3 ranking of tourists' preferences and behaviors in terms of safety measures was revealed. These top choices are represented by the following percentages: wearing a mask with a rate of 93%, frequent hand hygiene - 75.6% and vaccination with a rate of 72.1%. (Figure 1)

The analysis related to the types of tourist destinations people visited before and after the pandemic outbreak is based on a sample of 86 responses collected. The results suggest that, in general, tourists' preferences did not change significantly, considering the post-pandemic context.

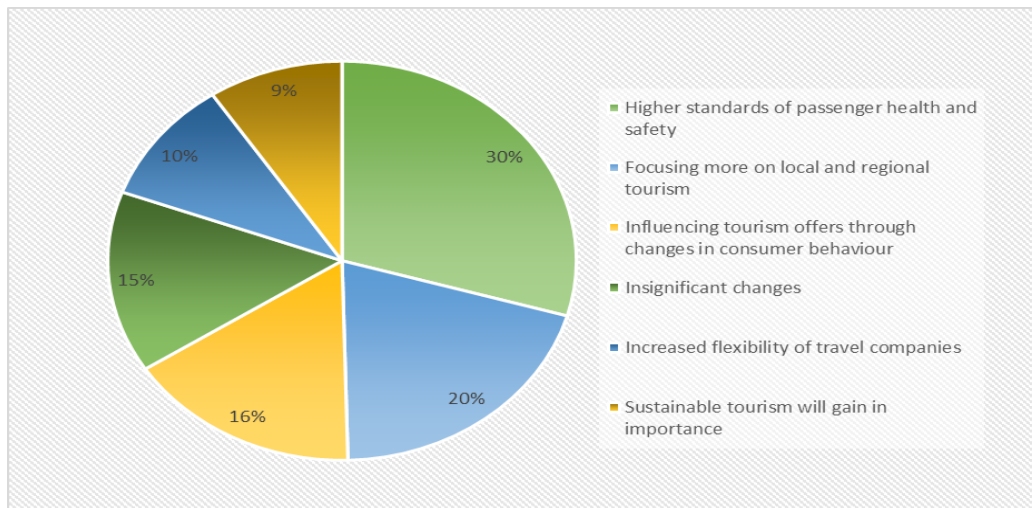


Figure 2. How the tourism industry will evolve in the post-pandemic

Response analysis reveals some key issues related to tourists' expectations of the post-pandemic tourism industry. These expectations are significant for the industry as they can influence future development strategies and investments. Health and safety at the forefront (29%), with tourists clearly placing a major emphasis on health and safety during their travels. This is a direct consequence of the striking experiences related to the pandemic. Local and regional tourism (20%) is a trend reflecting the fact that many tourists have discovered or rediscovered the attractiveness of local and regional destinations during the pandemic. According to the responses given, sustainability of tourism will not be as important (9%). (Figure 2)

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the travel decisions and choices of the majority of tourists as shown by 73% of them who felt that the pandemic was a significant obstacle to their choice of destination or travel experience. As for the other part of the sample (27%) who were not influenced by the pandemic, this may indicate that they continued to travel or plan their trips despite the difficult conditions created by the pandemic.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, booking policies have changed considerably among tourists in terms of more cautious planning, flexible cancellation options, reliance on travel insurance and also shorter turnaround times. Overall, these changes have the potential to ensure a more satisfying and safer experience for tourists in the post-pandemic environment, and tourism industry operators need to be more attentive to tourists' needs and expectations.

About half of tourists (50%) consulted government health websites for information on travel safety and COVID-19 guidelines. At the same time, around a fifth (22%) were influenced by social media, using online platforms to access information and learn about other travellers' experiences. A significant percentage (16%) also preferred to use travel apps to research and find up-to-date information about their destinations. In addition, around 12% of travellers relied on the real-life knowledge and experiences of friends and family to get information and advice about their trips.

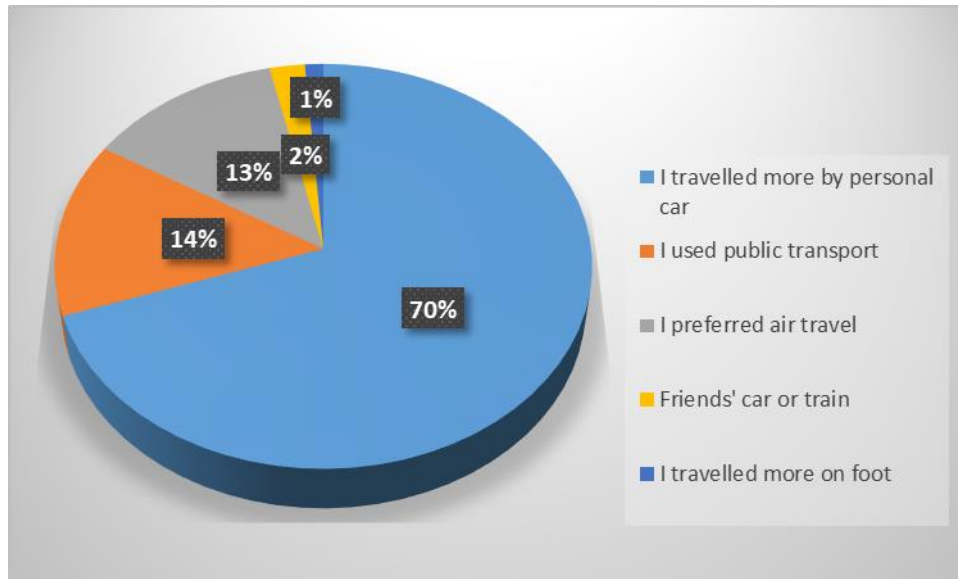


Figure 3. Transport choices during the pandemic

This analysis reveals the transport preferences of tourists during the pandemic and shows that there is a variety of options used. The use of a personal vehicle was the most common option, possibly for reasons related to safety and personal control during travel. Public transport and air travel remained important options for other tourists, despite restrictions and safety concerns. Less conventional options, such as train, friends' car or walking, were preferred by a smaller number of tourists, but remain significant options for those who sought less conventional experiences or tailored their trips to suit their circumstances. (Figure 3)

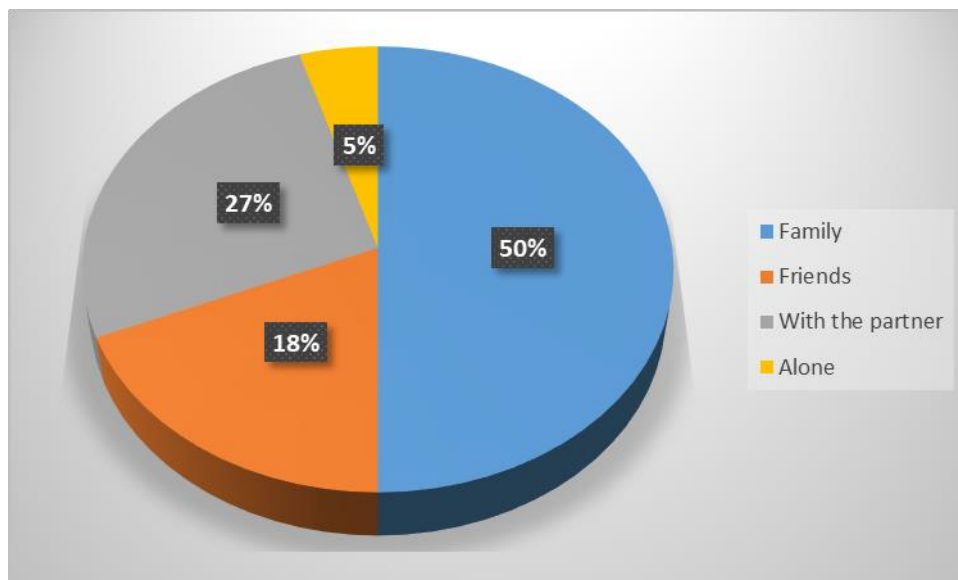


Figure 4. Travel partner choices during the pandemic

In addition, when it comes to choosing travel partners, most tourists opted to celebrate holidays and travel with family (50%), while 27% preferred to travel with their partner, 18% chose to spend time with friends on trips, and 5% chose to travel alone. (Figure 4)

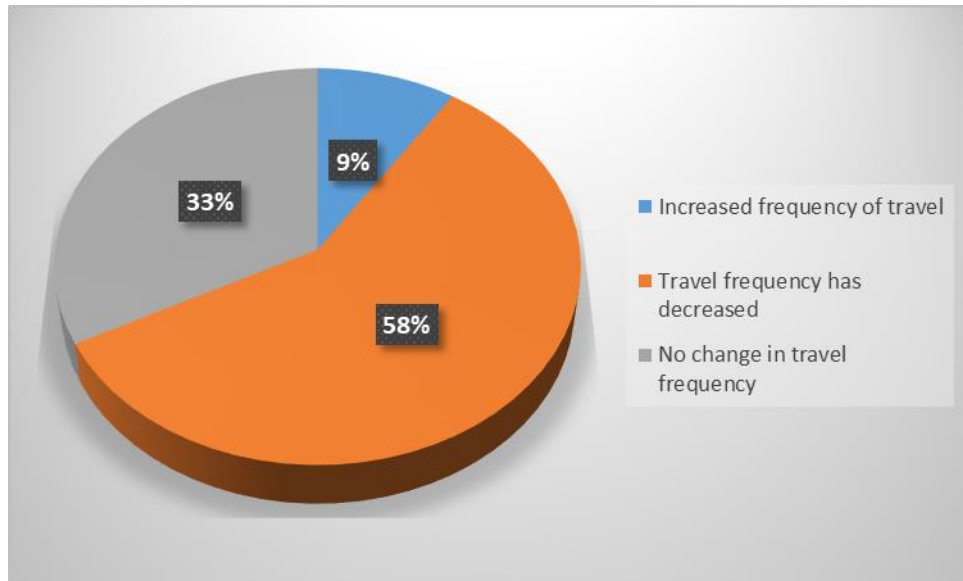


Figure 5. How the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your travel frequency?

According to 58% of participants, travel has seen a significant reduction in frequency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, while 33% believe there has been no change in travel frequency. Also 9% of respondents say they have seen an increase in travel frequency. (Figure 5)

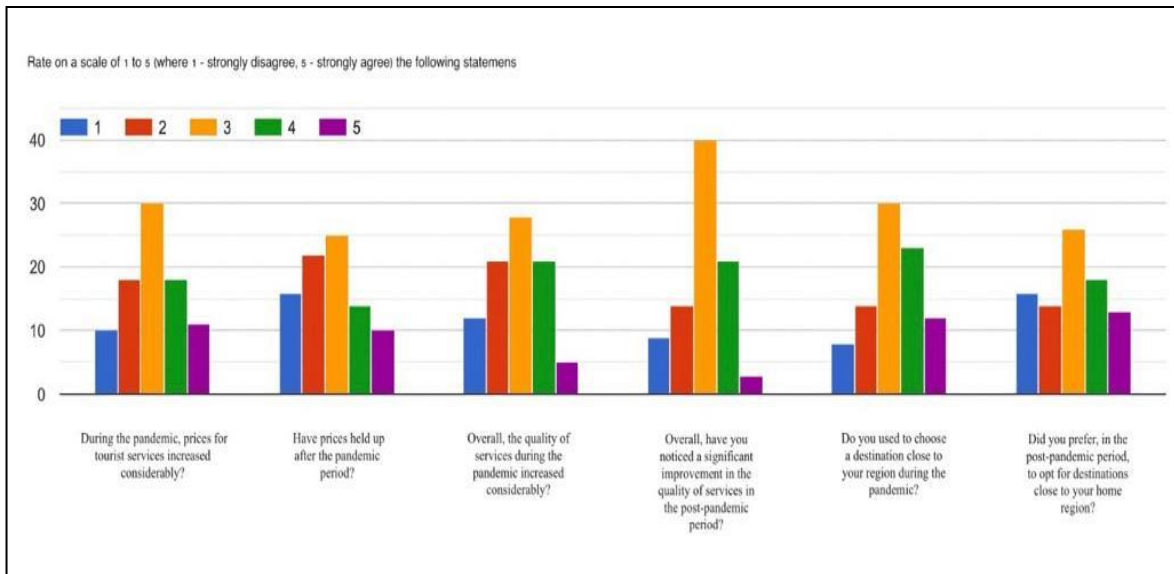


Figure 6. Opinion of tourists on prices, service quality and distance preferences in choosing a travel destination during and after the pandemic

As follows, the study will focus on a scale containing different questions on price, service quality and distance preference when choosing a travel destination. The analysis reveals that the majority of votes were expressed as neutral. In other words, the pandemic did not have a very obvious or significant impact on these specific aspects of their travel decisions. (Figure 6)

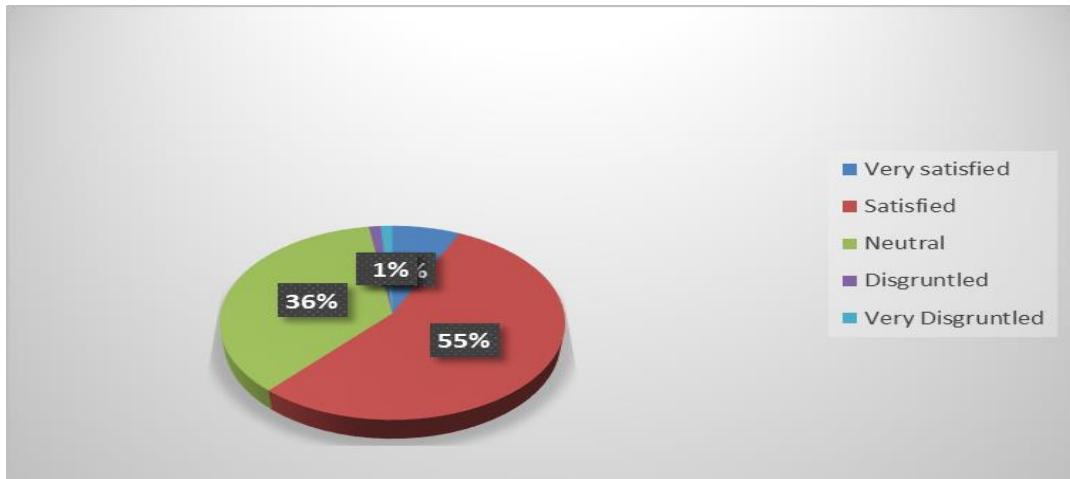


Figure 7. Perceptions of the tourism industry's efforts to ensure safety during the pandemic

Regarding tourists' perception of the efforts made by the tourism industry for safety during the pandemic, out of the total responses, 55% were satisfied, 36% remained neutral, 7% expressed a high level of satisfaction, while 2% were dissatisfied. (Figure 7)

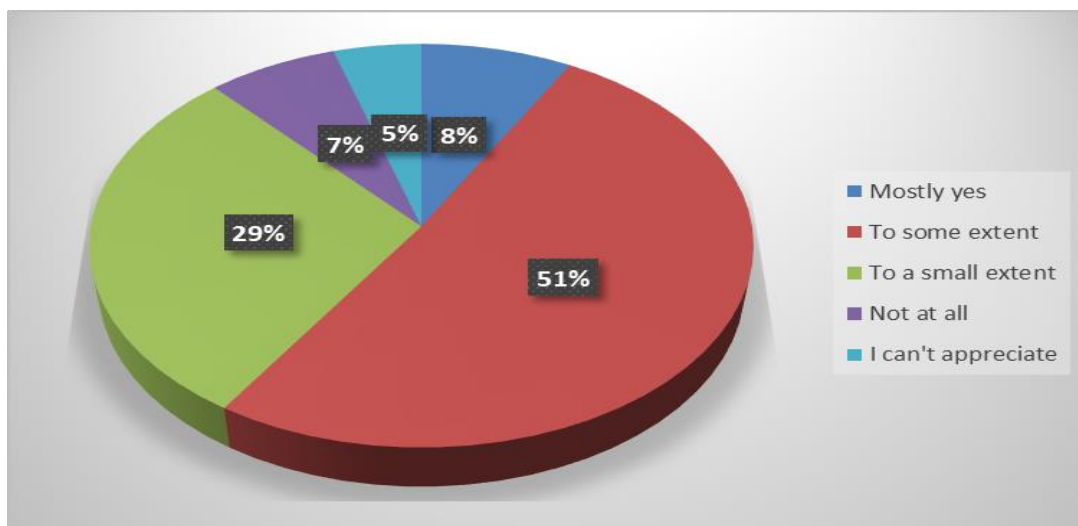


Figure 8. Do you consider that the changes to the tourism industry to ensure safety during the pandemic are still in place today?

The final conclusion of the tourists was that the changes related to safety in the tourism industry after the pandemic largely persist today. Only a small fraction of tourists disagree with this statement. Specifically, 51% of them indicated that these changes persist to some extent, while 29% indicated that these changes are present to a small extent. Also, 8% stated that these changes are very evident, while 7% did not notice any change. In addition, 5% of respondents were unable to make a judgement on this aspect. (Figure 8)

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the travel decisions and choices of the majority of tourists, with 73% perceiving the pandemic as a significant obstacle in their choice of destination or travel experience.

In terms of accommodation preferences, the analysis suggests that these have not changed significantly in the post-pandemic context. Tourists continued to opt mostly for travelling with family, partner, friends or travelling alone.

The pandemic led to a significant decrease in travel frequency for a significant proportion of respondents, while others did not observe significant changes in this respect.

In terms of the tourism industry's efforts to ensure post-pandemic safety, the majority of respondents said they were satisfied or neutral, but a smaller percentage said they were dissatisfied. These findings provide a detailed picture of how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced tourist preferences and behaviour, and how the tourism industry has responded to these changes. This information can be valuable for developing future tourism industry strategies and understanding tourist expectations in the post-pandemic environment.

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