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TOURIST ACTIVITY OF POLES IN THE ERA OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE LIGHT OF SURVEY RESULTS

KATARZYNA TRYBUŚ-BOROWIECKA

Wroclaw University of Economics and Business, Department of Marketing and Tourism Economy Management

Mailing address: Katarzyna Trybuś, Department of Marketing and Tourism Economy Management, Wroclaw University of Economics and Business, 8 Kochanowskiego Street, 58-500 Jelenia Góra, e-mail: katarzyna.trybus-borowiecka@ue.wroc.pl

Abstract

Introduction. The phenomenon of the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic poses a new challenge for the entire tourism sector in the local, regional, national and international dimension. The aim of the article is to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist activity of Poles. The article will fill the research gap on this topic. ***Material and methods.*** The study was conducted in the period from February till July 2022. 350 randomly selected respondents presenting different age and economic situation took part in it. The study was carried out using a questionnaire containing 27 open and closed questions. ***Results.*** The survey shows that in 2021 most of the respondents traveled for tourism reasons. In 2021, the largest number of people traveled for tourism in July, and slightly less in August, in September and October, respectively. Undoubtedly, these restrictions caused difficulties in traveling for tourism purposes. It was the time of uncertainty and many people decided not to travel for tourism in the first months of the year as they were afraid of more confining restrictions being imposed. ***Conclusions.*** The 2021 tourist season had two different faces. Poles spent the first half of 2021 in re-closure along with the accompanying restrictions. May and June brought about a significant revival in the tourism industry and the so-called revenge travel. Poles set off on a holiday getaway, although in many cases the directions, ways of traveling, expectations and requirements have changed.

Key words: COVID-19, tourism, tourist activity

Introduction

People traveled in the past, are traveling now and will also travel in the future. Every person, regardless of their age, health condition, social status, or economic situation feels the need to travel outside their place of permanent residence for tourism purposes.

The phenomenon of the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic poses a new challenge for the entire tourism sector in the local, regional, national and international dimension. Its consequences can be observed in all sectors of this industry, and also in the countries where tourism contributes significantly to the generated GDP and creates a large number of jobs. The losses incurred by tourism entities in this sector are incredible, and the prospects for returning to the path of redevelopment remain uncertain. This situation creates challenges not only for the tourism sector itself, but also for the governments of individual countries, responsible for reducing the effects of the pandemic on the tourism economy entities. However, it is worth highlighting that in the past, negative events related to economic and social life slowed down, but only temporarily, the pace of the tourist traffic development. It can, therefore, be adopted that also in the event of a pandemic, after it comes to an end, the situation of the tourism sector will improve. It will take longer than in the past, but tourism has the potential for growth.

The purpose of the article is to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist activity of Poles. The article will fill the research gap connected with this subject matter. A diagnostic survey method based on a questionnaire was used in the study. The survey was conducted among Poles living in Poland.

For years, tourist activity has been of interest to researchers both in terms of its domestic and foreign aspect. The research related to tourist activity is frequently focused on the analysis of tourist traffic [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8], as well as the forecasts and nature of participation in tourism [9]. This type of research, which is carried out periodically, includes Spanish studies "Familia tur", German "Reiseanalyse RA", Italian "Le vacanze italiane", Canadian "Travel Activities & Motivation Survey" and the "American Travel Survey" ones [10]. The findings allow for wider and more detailed analyses of this phenomenon [11, 12, 13]. The studies conducted in smaller research centers or individually by particular authors who address this subject matter are also of great value. Many researchers use specific methods and techniques to measure tourist activity [14]. This applies, inter alia, to the studies which analyze the discussed phenomenon over longer periods of time and focus on the selected, detailed issues [10, 15]. Owing to the advanced analyses, attempts are made to develop various theories concerning the presented issues [16, 17, 18, 19, 20]. Many researchers also analyzed the typology of tourists and models of consumer decision-making [21, 22, 23]. So far, these problems have been covered more extensively by, e.g., Alejziak [24], Haukeland [25], Jordon [26].

According to the OECD, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in one of the biggest economic crises since the Great Economic Depression of the 1930s [27]. It has contributed to a slowdown in economic activity around the world [28], a decline in GDP, trade and an increase in unemployment [27, 29]. International organizations, European institutions and a number of foreign authors addressed the problem of consumer behavior in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them studied the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumer behavior in tourism in China, Turkey, Korea and the USA [30, 31, 32, 33,

34]. Duralia [35] analyzed how an individual's perception and approach to risk affects significant changes in their consumer behavior and attempted to identify marketing tools which exert a positive impact on consumers in the socio-economic conditions created by the pandemic. Miao and his team [36] studied tourist behavior after the COVID-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to the development prospects in the post-pandemic period. Z. Palencikova and Z. Lukanska analyzed changes in consumer behavior in tourism, based on the example of Slovakia, after the end of the first wave of the pandemic, throughout the summer season of 2020 [37].

The European Commission Research Center recorded a clear impact of the pandemic on the activity of tourists, and primarily on their willingness to travel.

The spreading of COVID-19 around the world forced many countries to either partially or completely close their borders. This resulted in a significant reduction in the cross-border passenger traffic. According to data provided by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), in 2020 the number of international tourists decreased by 74% compared to 2019. The largest decline in the number of people traveling abroad was recorded in April – by as much as 97% against the same month a year earlier [38].

The purpose of the article is to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist activity of Poles.

The following research hypothesis was adopted in the publication: the COVID-19 pandemic affected the frequency, nature and method of organizing trips for tourist purposes.

The article fills the research gap regarding this subject matter. The study uses the diagnostic survey method based on a survey questionnaire. The study covered Poles living in Poland.

In 2020, the number of trips by Poles, both domestic and foreign, decreased significantly. While in 2018 and 2019, respectively, 20 million and 20.8 million (62 and 64%) people over 15 traveled, in 2020 it was only 14.1 million (43.6 %).

The main reason was, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic (41.5% of indications as a cause), but also financial problems (21.7%), lack of motivation to travel (11.3%), lack of free time (10.4%) and health problems (9.6%).

Material and methods

The survey was conducted from February to July 2022 and the questions concerned the period when certain travel restrictions had already been lifted (2021). Despite the ongoing pandemic, after presenting, e.g., a negative COVID-19 test, it was possible to travel for tourist purposes. To a large extent, vaccinations, which were already generally available in the analyzed period, as well as lifting the quarantine obligation after returning to the country, also contributed to tourist activity. In many cases (depending on the destination), vaccinated persons, when traveling on holiday abroad, were exempted from the obligation to take a SARS-COV-2 virus test after presenting a document confirming vaccination.

The selection of the sample for the study purposes was non-random – the snowball method consisting in recruiting participants by other participants was employed. A total of 350 respondents representing various age groups and economic situations took part in the survey. The study was conducted using a questionnaire including 27 open-ended and closed-ended questions. The questionnaires were distributed directly (38%) – (paper form), and sent electronically (62%). The link to the survey was sent to the respondents by e-mail (the author has a contact database), it was posted on forums, online groups related to tourism and was also provided via social media.

Since the purpose of the study was to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourist activity of Poles, the author decided to additionally analyze the influence of selected personal characteristics of Poles on their tourist engagement. It allowed, inter alia, indicating barriers which either prevent or limit the participation of Poles in tourism.

After conducting a detailed analysis of the research questionnaire, a set of characteristics (variables) characterizing the respondents was defined. Among the features (factors) influencing the respondents' tourist activity, the following were distinguished:

- demographic,
- social,
- economic features.

From the set of questions included in the questionnaire, the ones allowing the description of tourist activity were selected. These questions were approached as dependent variables, whereas the above-mentioned features, describing the population of respondents were referred to as independent variables. Subsequently, the procedure of examining correlations between the dependent variables (i.e. the respondents' characteristics) marked as X symbol and independent variables (i.e. the respondents' characteristics) marked as Z symbol was carried out.

The statistical material collected using the survey method was presented in the form of contingency tables.

Table 1. The contingency table for two variables X and Z

Variable X (variable variants)	Variable Z (variable variants)						Total
	Zw_1	Zw_2	…	Zw_j	…	Zw_k	
Xw_1	n_{11}	n_{12}	…	n_{1j}	…	n_{1k}	$n_{1.}$
Xw_2	n_{21}	n_{22}	…	n_{2j}	…	n_{2k}	$n_{2.}$
…	…	…	…	…	…	…	…
Xw_i	n_{i1}	n_{i2}	…	n_{ij}	…	n_{ik}	$n_{i.}$
…	…	…	…	…	…	…	…
Xw_m	n_{m1}	n_{m2}	…	n_{mj}	…	n_{mk}	n_m
Total	$n_{.1}$	$n_{.2}$	…	$n_{.j}$	…	$n_{.k}$	N

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

The table shows the distributions of the analyzed population for two variables simultaneously, i.e. Z and X. Each cell in the joint distribution informs about the number of nij units corresponding to the specific variants (X_{wi} and Z_{wj}) of both variables. In order to determine the correlation between tourist activity (represented by the individual dependent variables X) and the selected features (variables Z), for the data included in the contingency tables, the chi-square ($\chi 2$) test of independence was conducted to verify the hypothesis that two variables X and Z are independent of the alternative hypothesis about non-independence.

The performed test of independence allowed identifying the occurring dependence between the particular variables. The strength of dependence between the studied variables was determined regarding these correlations in the course of further procedure. For this purpose, Pearson's contingency coefficient for quantitative variables was used taking the following form:

$$\text{C-P} = \sqrt{\frac{\chi 2}{N+\chi 2}} \quad (1)$$

while for descriptive variables, Cramer's V coefficient was applied:

$$V\text{-}C=\sqrt{\frac{\chi^2}{N*min\{K-1;M-1\}}} \quad (2)$$

The values of both coefficients are in the range 0 –1, and the level of dependence is generally defined as follows:
- values lower than 0.30 – weak dependence,
- (0.30 – 0.50) – moderate dependence,
- above 0.50 – strong dependence [39, 40].

The analysis of the collected statistical material and the preliminary assessment of possible correlations between tourist activity and the selected features characterizing the group of respondents allowed selecting the question from the questionnaire which defines the tourist activity of Poles (inter alia, the very fact whether the respondent was a tourism oriented active person in a given period of time).

Table 2. The level of variable X1 correlation with the selected characteristics of the respondents

Research question	Measure of dependence	Gender	Age	Education	Monthly income
Do you engage in any forms of tourism?	Cramer's V coefficient	0.185	0.287	0.267	0.241
	Pearson's contingency coefficient	0.190	0.276	0.258	0.234

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

The findings allow for presenting the following statements:
- In all cases, the level of dependence remains low.
- It is noticeable that while among men a similar share of people practices and does not practice tourism, in the case of women the vast majority of respondents do engage in tourism.
- Taking into account the age of people involved in tourism, it should be emphasized that tourist activity declines with age. In turn, among those who are not active in tourism, this passive approach is almost evenly distributed in all age groups.
- Considering the respondents' level of education, it can be noted that among those who do not engage in tourism, the percentage of inactive people decreases along with the increase in the level of education, whilst among people who are active in tourism, the trend is almost the opposite.
- Referring to the monthly net income, it should be stated that tourist activity is definitely more intense in the higher income groups.

According to the results of the National Population and Housing Census 2021, the population of the Republic of Poland was 38,179.8 thousand people, of whom 51.7% are women and 48.3% are men. A total of 350 respondents (residents of Poland) were covered by the study. It should be noted that the presented research is of preliminary and exploratory nature. The detailed research conducted on a much wider scale, where the sample of respondents is definitely more representative, is still in progress. Women constituted the majority of respondents (350 individuals covered by the survey).

Women prevailed among the respondents. People between 35 and 45 years of age constituted the predominant group. The vast majority of the respondents graduated from the tertiary level education. Most of the respondents lived in cities populated by 20,000 up to 50,000 residents. The monthly income of the respondents' decisive majority exceeded PLN 2,000 (net/person). The detailed data referring to the respondents are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Characteristics of the research sample

Gender	Share (%)
Female	62%
Male	38%
Age	
18-25	9%
26-34	31%
35-45	33%
Over 45	27%
Education	
Tertiary	42%
Bachelor degree	27%
Secondary	27%
Vocational	4%
Monthly income (net)	
Up to PLN 1000	4%
PLN 1000-1500	21%
PLN 1500-2000	33%
Above PLN 2000	42%
Place of residence	
Village	13%
City below 20 thousand residents	25%
City 20-50 thousand residents	36%
City 50-100 thousand residents	15%
City over 100,000 residents	11%

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

Results

The survey shows that in 2021, most of the respondents (71%) traveled for tourism reasons. Only 29% of them did not go anywhere due to lack of financial resources, too high prices of tourist services or the lack of time. Health condition and concerns about health as well as the continuously changing epidemiological situation (including fluctuations related to the changing number of cases) were also listed as the reasons responsible for resigning from traveling for tourism purposes.

In 2021, the largest number of people traveled for tourism in July, and slightly fewer in August, September and October, respectively. It should be noted that the beginning of 2021 was burdened with various types of restrictions related to the pandemic. Undoubtedly, these restrictions caused difficulties in traveling for tourism purposes. It was the time of uncertainty and many people decided not to travel for tourism in the first months of the year as they were afraid of more confining restrictions. In 2022, 74% of the respondents decided to travel for tourism purposes. It is worth emphasizing that a large number of people chose the following months: June, January and February, but the holiday months, i.e. July and August were still the most popular.

Destinations of tourist traveling

Last year, as many as 69% of the surveyed people chose Poland as their final destination (Tab. 4).

Table 4. Destinations of tourist traveling

Specification	2021	2022
Poland	69%	53%
Foreign trips	31%	47%

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

People who decided to rest in Poland went to the Bieszczady Mountains, Mazury Lake District, the cities of Gdańsk, Zakopane, Sopot, Kołobrzeg, Dźwirzyno, Darłowo, Krynica Morska, Kamień Pomorski, Ustka, Mielno, Rabka Zdrój, Jastrzębia Góra and Jastarnia. It means that these people decided mainly to visit the most popular seaside resorts along the Polish coastline, which have been extremely popular among Polish and foreign tourists for a long time.

Approx. 31% of the respondents traveled abroad for tourism purposes in 2021. Their main destinations were: Bulgaria, Turkey, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, Italy, France. Almost all of the above-mentioned countries have been hugely popular among tourists for many years, primarily due to their attractive location, the guarantee of good weather, cultural monuments, hospitality of the local population and the number of attractive and tempting offers for tourists. The affordable price of tourist events also determines the choice of foreign trips.

In 2022, the respondents traveled or intended to go abroad (51%) for tourism purposes, mainly to Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Egypt, Croatia, France, Morocco, Portugal, Germany and Austria. Slightly fewer (49% of the respondents) went for tourism or were planning a vacation in Poland (Kołobrzeg, Zakopane, Sopot, Międzyzdroje, Świnoujście, Jastarnia, Ustka, Mielno, Miastko, Hel, Jastrzębia Góra, Łeba, Szczawnica, Rabka Zdrój, Masuria, Karpacz, Szklarska Poręba).

Travel organization

Each person traveling as a tourist decides about travel arrangements. Table 5 presents the ways of organizing holiday trips by the respondents.

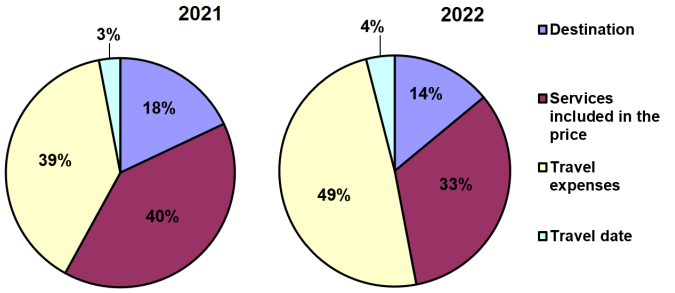
Table 5. The way of travel organization

Specification	2021	2022
Through a travel agency	23%	40%
Trough institutions, centers, foundations	5%	3%
I organize the trip myself	72%	57%

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

In 2021, a significant group of respondents traveled organizing the entire trip on their own (72%), and the rest through a travel agency, organizations, centers or foundations. In 2022, the method of travel organization for tourism purposes slightly changed. A considerable group of respondents used the services of travel agencies, which results from the fact that more people decided to travel abroad. Beyond any doubt, lifting the restrictions related to the pandemic including, e.g., the compulsory quarantine did influence this situation.

The respondents were asked about the criteria they followed when choosing a tourist trip with a travel agency (Fig. 1).



Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

Figure 1. The criteria for selecting a tourist offer in a travel agency

In 2021, people organizing a trip through a travel agency focused mainly on the benefits included in the price (also insurance) (40%), price (last minute) (39%), destination (restrictions imposed in a given country related to the pandemic) (18%). In 2022, the most attention was paid to the price of the trip (49%), the benefits included in the price (33%) and the destination (14%).

The vast majority of respondents (60%) believe that they did not notice the impact of the pandemic on the quality of offers sold by travel agencies; however, because of the pandemic and rising inflation, an increase in the prices of trips and additional services (including air tickets, insurance) has been noticeable. The remaining 40% of the respondents stated that the crisis had a greater or lesser impact on the quality of trips sold by travel agencies (e.g. higher price but worse accommodation and catering compared to previous years).

Purposes of tourist traveling

In 2021, the vast majority of respondents traveled for leisure purposes. Detailed data are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Purposes of tourist traveling

Specification	2021	2022
Leisure	71%	86%
Visiting relatives and friends	14%	4%
Health	1%	0%
Professional or business issues	3%	4%
Shopping	1%	0%
Sightseeing	10%	6%

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

The respondents also traveled to visit relatives, friends, to go sightseeing, shopping and to improve their health.

In 2021, a significant percentage of the respondents focused on leisure, cognitive and recreational tourism, and to a slightly lesser extent on health, pilgrimage, qualified and business tourism. In turn, in 2022, the largest number of respondents chose or intended to choose leisure tourism, followed by recreational, cognitive, pilgrimage types of tourism, as well as health oriented, qualified and business tourism.

Almost 2/3 of the respondents traveled for tourism purposes with their family (both in 2021 and 2022). A considerable group of the respondents traveled with friends, while the rest took a trip alone (this tendency was recorded both in 2021 and 2022).

Frequency and length of tourist traveling

The respondents were asked for their opinion about the frequency and length of tourist traveling. The survey results addressing this issue are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Frequency and length of tourist traveling

Specification		2021	2022
Frequency	Once a year	65%	65%
	Twice a year	32%	32%
	Once a month	3%	3%
	Twice a month	0%	0%
	Several times a month	0%	0%
Length	One day	1%	0%
	Two, three days	19%	23%
	Week	49%	41%
	Two weeks or longer	31%	36%

Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

It turns out that the majority of respondents traveled only once a year (65%), almost half of them, in 2021, took a trip twice (32%), and 3% of the respondents traveled once a month. None of the respondents answered that they traveled more often in 2021. In 2022, the frequency of the respondents' tourist traveling presents a similar nature.

In 2021, approx. half of the respondents went on a weekly trip for tourism purposes (49%). A two-week vacation was chosen by 31% of the respondents, while the remaining people left for one, two or three days for tourism purposes. In 2022, most of the respondents intended to go on a one-week trip for tourism purposes (41%), 36% of them chose or planned to choose a two-week vacation, while the remaining people took or planned to take a 1-, 2- or 3-day trip (23%).

Accommodation and catering facilities

One of the most important elements of tourist traveling is accommodation, and also the place where tourists eat their meals. The related data are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Accommodation and catering facilities used by tourists

Specification		2021	2022
Accommodation facilities	Hotel	36%	41%
	Motel	9%	11%
	Guesthouse	41%	21%
	Campsite	4%	6%
	Travel lodge	3%	5%
	Hostel	0%	0%
	Other (cruise ship, private lodgings, family)	7%	16%
Catering facilities	Self-catering	17%	9%
	Meals at the place of accommodation	44%	55%
	Local eatery	6%	10%
	Fast food bars	6%	6%
	Restaurants	27%	20%

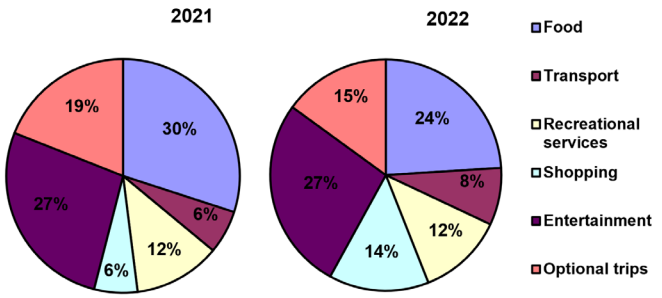
Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

In 2021, almost half of the respondents, during their traveling, stayed in guesthouses (41%), slightly fewer (36% of the respondents) chose a hotel, 9% were accommodated in a motel, and the remaining share of the respondents chose a campsite, a travel lodge, a cruise ship, a stay with a family and a private lodging. In 2022, 41% of the respondents stated that during a tourist trip, they stayed or would stay in a hotel, 21% in a guesthouse, 11% in a motel; the other people chose or would choose private lodging, a campsite, a travel lodge, accommodation with a family or friends.

When it comes to meals during a tourist trip, a considerable group of the respondents takes advantage of food and beverage facilities operating in their place of accommodation. A lot of people also use the catering service offered by the establishments unrelated to their accommodation facility.

The structure of tourists' expenses

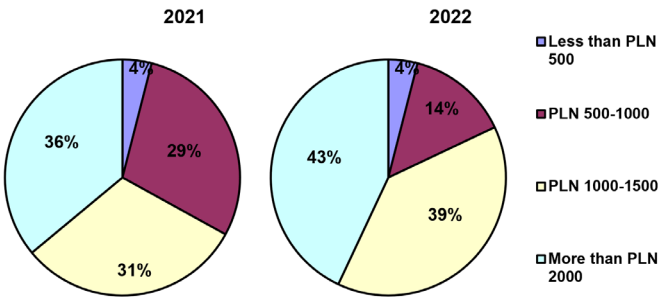
Traveling for tourism purposes incurs certain costs. It is the tourist who decides what to spend the available financial resources on. The structure of expenses is presented in Figure 2.



Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

Figure 2. The structure of tourist expenses (%)

The funds spent on the services related to catering have the largest share in total expenditure. The share of expenditure on entertainment, optional trips and recreational services is also significant.



Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

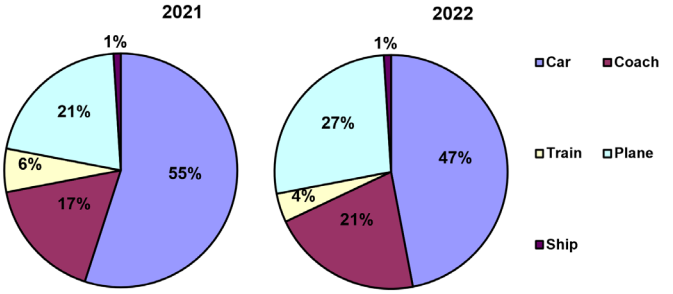
Figure 3. The amounts of financial resources allocated to the realization of tourist traveling

The above figure shows that the majority of respondents spent or would spend over PLN 2000 (net/person) on their tourist traveling.

Ways of traveling to leisure destinations

Choosing the means of transport is a very important element of the entire journey. Its length and comfort depend on

it. Figure 4 shows the means of transport most popular among tourists and also the least frequently used.



Source: author's compilation based on the conducted survey.

Figure 4. Means of transport used by tourists

In 2021, most people traveled by their own car (55%); a plane was chosen by 21% of the respondents, and a coach by 17% of the respondents. In 2022, a decline in the number of people traveling by car (47%) was recorded along with an increase in the number of tourists planning to travel by coach. This certainly results from high costs of fuel.

Discussion

Tourism is one of the most important sectors of the economy and an important employment sector. Tourist activity in relation to specific trips is a process that begins long before a given trip takes place and usually continues for some time after returning.

The coronavirus pandemic has left a deep mark on the entire tourism industry. Huge losses, endangered jobs, changing some preferences in the choice of leisure, are just some of its effects. However, the study conducted by the author clearly shows that the pandemic did not significantly weaken the respondents' passion for travel. After the withdrawal of the restrictions that prevented and hindered travel, the respondents began to travel again for tourist purposes. However, they changed some of their habits related to both the organization of travel and the way of spending time during a tourist trip.

Many authors cited in this article emphasize that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only changed tourism itself as an economic and social phenomenon, most probably permanently, but also influenced further research in this field.

According to the survey, almost 80% of respondents planned trips for tourist purposes, and 60% did not rule out that they would spend more on travel than a year before.

The analysis of research carried out by other researchers and the results of the author's own research showed that the period of the COVID-19 pandemic created new directions of research on tourism, both in the area of conditions for further development of tourism, forms of spending free time, and the impact of future development of tourism.

Conclusions

The 2021 tourist season had two different faces. Poles spent the first half of 2021 in re-closure along with the accompanying restrictions. May and June brought about a significant revival in the tourism industry and the so-called revenge travel. Poles set off on a holiday getaway, although in many cases the directions, ways of traveling, expectations and requirements changed.

The conducted research shows that the vast majority of respondents travel for tourism purposes and do not change their preferences to a significant degree despite the deteriorating economic situation in Poland and Europe. It turns out that the pandemic exerted an influence on the behavior of tourists but these changes, in many cases, result from the recent alterations in respondents' preferences rather than the phenomena related to the pandemic. Tourists still desire to see something different and keep looking for something more attractive.

It turns out that people who did not travel and would not travel for tourism in the recent period, i.e. 2021-2022, notice a correlation between the pandemic and their economic situation. The increasing prices of products and services and the rising interest rates resulting in, e.g., higher installments have a decisive impact on the tourist activity presented by Poles, but also their concerns for the future associated with a greater tendency towards making savings.

The pandemic did not diminish the interest of Poles in exploring new destinations. The Polish society has returned to traveling. Some habits have slightly changed. Bookings are made for shorter stays and less in advance. In 2021, Poles chose domestic destinations, but also traveled to the south of Europe and/or to the Mediterranean countries. Croatia alone received over a million tourists from Poland, which proves the ongoing interest in tourism and the need of traveling for tourism purposes.

The conducted research is a preliminary study. In the future its results will support and contribute to the development of an original research tool allowing for a comprehensive scientific exploration addressing the problems of tourist activity.

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