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in the Era of Pandemic

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## Impacts of Covid-19 on the Tourist Perceived Risk: A Conceptual Approach

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic generated an unprecedented global health outbreak and economic crisis. Therefore, and due to the growing attention given to its effects on the tourism sector and the numerous predictions made at micro and macro levels, this study seeks to understand the transformations in tourist consumer behavior caused by the covid-19 pandemic. Thus, based on several assumptions, an explanatory model was built that addresses both the demand side (new consumer preferences) and the supply side (measures and strategies to combat the impacts generated by the perceived risk acquired during the confinement period). The model developed reflects a permanent impact of the Covid-19 crises on the touristic consumer behavior, accelerating the migration to online, with a greater emphasis on safety, hygiene and health, as well as environmental and sustainability awareness.

**Keywords:** Tourism; COVID-19; Impacts; Motivations; Tourist Consumer; Perceived Risk

### Introduction

In the last decades, the tourism sector has been spreading to almost all countries, exhibiting its potential in terms of growth and development of societies. Tourism has become one of the most dynamic economic sectors, considered an engine for job creation (direct, indirect and induced) and for local economic development (Cunha, 2013).

In 2019, the sector was responsible for employing 330 million people worldwide, that is, equivalent to 10.3% of total global employment and one in 10 jobs worldwide. The tourism and travel sector is made up mostly of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and 144 million jobs are provided by the catering and accommodation industry (WTTC, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), being a highly contagious and unknown disease, has had an impact on the tourism industry, since the best way to mitigate its spread is through social isolation. In this sense, and due to the fact that this industry is highly fragmented and diversified, covering several sectors, devastating impacts on the world economy and jobs have emerged (OECD, 2020).

All this, will have impacts not only on the world economy (that are already visible and strong), but essentially long-term changes in consumer behavior, in relation to the form and frequency with which he travels, which in turn will require a redefinition of the tourism offer (Sigala, 2020).

In this perspective, the main objective of the present investigation is to understand these changes in the consumer behavior, analyzing them as new motivations and travel needs, while examining the solutions that the supply side can develop in order to respond to this new demand.

The article is structured as follows: in section 2 there is a review of the literature that presents the current context of the effect of Pandemic Covid-19 on international tourism, and also several factors of risk perception by the consumer are explored; the following section presents the methodology followed, in section 4 the model outlined in order to understand

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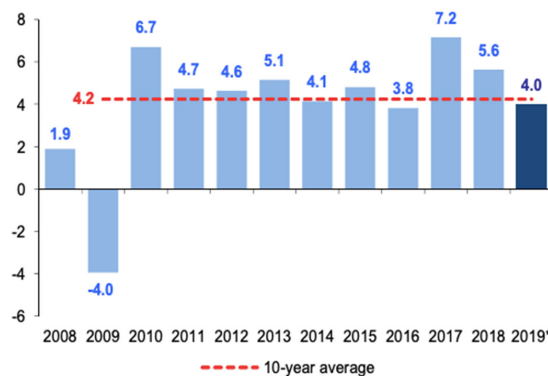
the effects of the risk perceived by the consumer in changing his demand pattern is presented; finally, section 5 summarizes the main features of the article ending this with limitations and suggestions for future research.

## Literature Review

Tourism is responsible for the displacement of thousands of people worldwide who aim to satisfy their needs as visitors to a certain destination. The motivations for traveling are diverse and are directly related to the benefits that tourists can find in the destinations they seek. However, factors such as climate, individual environment, personality, age, economic income and the risk associated with travel have a great influence on the decision to travel and the choice of destination (Nascimento & Santos, 2016; Huber, Milne, & Hyde, 2018). Accordingly Mira (2018), mentions that tourism is a system that links visitors, governments, community, companies, cultures and territories.

### International Tourism

Currently, the tourism sector is arguably one of the largest industries in the world. From the analysis of the official data of the UNWTO World Tourism Organization (2019), it is possible to see that international arrivals have been increasing in the last ten years, as can be seen from figure 1.



**Figure 1: International Tourist Arrivals (%)**

Source UNWTO (2020)

From figure 1, it is quite clear that 2017 was the year that stood out the most in terms of the number of international arrivals (7.2%), which translated into around 1.3 million travelers. In turn, in 2018, international tourist arrivals grew by around 6% over the previous year, generating approximately 1.7 trillion dollars in global export revenues. The number of international tourist arrivals in 2019 increased by 4%, according to the latest data from the WTO's World Tourism Barometer, which represented 1.5 billion arrivals. In 2019, the tourism sector represented around 28.3% of world services exports and 6.8% of total exports. The travel and tourism sector exceeded the growth of the global economy by 2.5%, which ended up representing 10.3% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (WTTC, 2020).

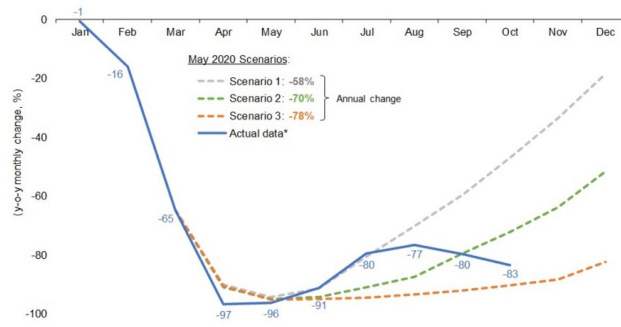
Until 2020, tourism growth continued to outpace global economic growth, which demonstrates its enormous potential to generate development opportunities worldwide, but also its sustainability challenges. International tourism remains the third largest industry in international trade, just behind fuels and chemicals (UNWTO, 2020).

### The impact of COVID-19 on International Tourism

On December 1, 2019, a new case of coronavirus pneumonia (SARS-CoV-2) was detected in Wuhan, Hubei province in China, which later triggered an international public health emergency. This virus, later called COVID-19, was classified as a state of health emergency on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 and on March 11<sup>th</sup> as a pandemic, by the World Health Organization (WHO). As an extremely contagious virus, its expansion has been unstoppable, reaching virtually all countries in the world, affecting millions of people and causing hundreds of thousands of deaths (Huang et al., 2020; Li, Zhang, Liu, Kozak, & Wen, 2020). Due to the fact that it was an unknown disease and, therefore, without available drugs or vaccines to prevent the virus, health authorities have focused their efforts on recommending quarantines and social detachment.

Strategies such as travel bans, mobility and agglomerations, awareness campaigns, mandatory and voluntary quarantine prevented the development and growth of the tourism sector.

In this sense, and since tourism is an industry particularly vulnerable to environmental, political and socio-economic crises and disasters, COVID-19 has generated an unprecedented multidimensional impact and long-term structural changes on a global scale (Sigala, 2020; Novelli, Gussing Burgess, Jones, & Ritchie, 2018). Limited by containment measures, health and hygiene regulations and border closures, the global travel, tourism and hospitality industry are among the sectors most affected by the pandemic and its repercussions are already very visible (Pappas & Glyptou, 2021), as can be seen in figure 2 according to UNWTO data (2020), the first quarter of 2020 saw a 22% decrease in international arrivals globally (57% in March), which translated into a loss in absolute numbers of approximately 67 million arrivals.



**Figure 2: International Tourist Arrivals in 2020**

Source UNWTO (2020)

In the month of June, with the slow opening of business and markets, the tourism sector showed a recovery, however, from the beginning of September it started to decline significantly. Thus, according to the data provided by the WTO (2020), a 72% decrease in international arrivals was confirmed in the first ten months of 2020, resulting in a loss of 900 million international tourists. All of this generated a loss of 1.1 trillion dollars in international revenues. In this sense, the economic losses caused by the pandemic could reach 2 trillion dollars in global GDP, by the end of 2020.

According to the UNWTO (2020), forecasts international arrivals should recover in 2021, together with a large-scale distribution of the vaccines. In this way, traveller's confidence will improve and in turn lift travel restrictions gradually. That said, the recovery is expected to continue in 2022, however international tourism may still take two to four years to return to 2019 levels.

However, the impacts generated by COVID-19 will be unequal in time and space, because as people faced a slower pace, reflected and defined their priorities and social values, new lifestyles and work patterns emerged (Sigala, 2020). In view of all this, profound changes in the behavior of the tourist consumer will be triggered, and new needs and desires will emerge. In this sense, it is up to tourist destinations, companies and organizations responsible for the sector to understand the psychological state of their public in post-pandemic travel and not just predict tourist demand, in order to create conditions capable of responding to that new needs (Zhenga, Luo, & Ritchie, 2021).

### **Perceived Risk**

Tourism is a particularly vulnerable industry, since its activity is largely dependent on external and uncontrollable factors, such as economic and financial crises, natural disasters, political instability and infectious diseases (Cró & Martins, 2017; Ritichie & Jiang, 2019; Okuyama, 2018). In this sense, the impact of COVID-19 in the tourism sector is not only reflected in the reduction of revenues on the supply side, but also on the perceptions of risk on the demand side (Li, Zhang, Liu, Kozak, & Wen, 2020). Safety has always been a key factor in the decision to travel, however the perceptions of risk vary according to the characteristics inherent to each individual. In this context, and according to Featherman and Pavlou (2003), the perceived risk refers to the sensation of consumer uncertainty and the potential negative consequences related to products or services. Thus, in the circumstances currently experienced and caused by the pandemic, the perceived risk can affect the choice of a destination and the travel behavior of tourists.

In the current pandemic scenario, there are several risk perception factors that significantly impact demand and, consequently, tourism supply. Right from the start, the health risk, which according to Han (2005) refers to fear of the

possibility of falling ill, since COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease and subject to social distance, being perceived as a high risk for health, travel, to unknown destinations and interaction with strangers (Liu et al., 2017).

Another dimension of risk is the psychological risk that relates to the anxiety created by the pandemic (missing a flight, being stranded in a hotel, being infected, etc.) (Simpson & Siguaw, 2008).

The social risk can be consider also as part of the perceived risk and it refers to the way in which others will react to a particular tourist purchase, since, in the current context and due to the rules imposed during the pandemic (quarantine, curfew) the decision to travel can be interpreted negatively by friends, family and associates, leading to a potential loss of esteem, respect or friendship (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998).

The social distance and the corresponding restrictions imposed by the government can change the performance of a certain product or service, thus generating fear on the part of the consumer to purchase any product or service, since its "performance" may not be as expected (Khan et al., 2017) generating a performance risk.

Finally the last dimension of the perceived risk is the image risk that can be understood as the general impression that people have of a particular country or destination, and is related to negative publicity or unfounded remorse for a destination. China, in the case of COVID-19, could be a good example, since in the beginning of the pandemic the virus was inadequately labeled by some media as a disease originating in China, generating fear and discrimination and ultimately affecting the choice of tourists (Weng et al., 2020).

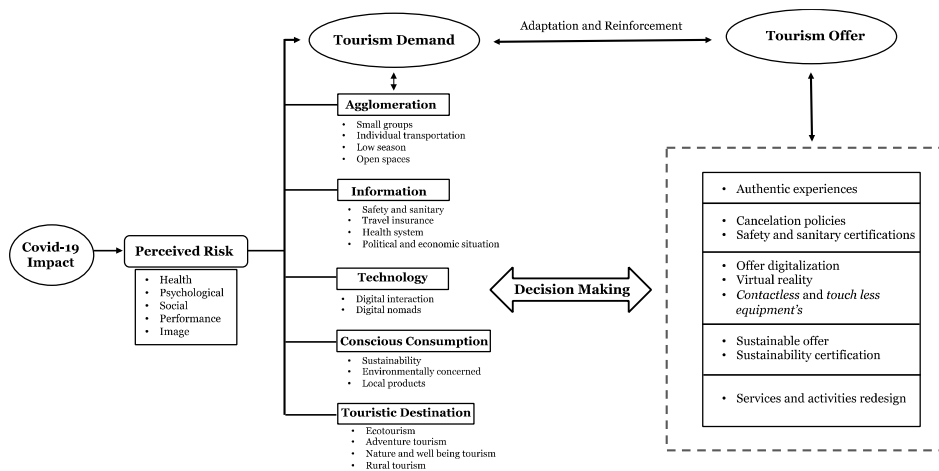
## **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is purely conceptual. More than quantifying variables, it is intended to clarify the influence of risk perception by the tourist consumer caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on their behavior and simultaneously on the tourist offer that is expected to adapt and evolve to respond to the changing needs in demand. Given it's exclusively conceptual and exploratory nature, it was considered appropriate to follow a qualitative methodology to guide the study through the construction of a theoretical model based on the literature review carried out in the previous chapter. The model was developed with two main concerns: to reflect the new motivations and needs of the consumer, while exposing the possible restructuring of the offer to meet the new existing demand. In summary, the proposed explanatory model, portrays the way in which the perception of perceived risk (considering the health, psychological, social, performance and image dimensions), changes consumer behavior and needs, thus requiring the reformulation of the tourist offer, generating value and benefits, in order to assist the traveller's needs.

## **Theoretical Model and Discussion**

### ***Perceived Risk***

The model represented in figure 3, shows the five attributes of risk perception derived from COVID-19 that significantly impact the demand by the tourist consumer and that, as previously mentioned, go through health, psychological, social, performance and image dimensions. In view of the new perception of risk, new habits, needs, demands and behaviors emerged. In accordance with some authors and studies developed by tourist entities (Chebli & Foued, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Borges, 2020; IPDT, 2020; amadeus, 2020; UNWTO, 2020) the main trends in the tourism sector were determined both on the demand and supply side, as can be seen from the model presented (figure 3).



**Figure 3: Research Model about the Covid-19 Impact on the Perceived Risk**

### *Tourism Demand*

The moments experienced during the quarantine and the prophylactic isolation significantly changed people's perspective regarding the agglomerations. Crowded places, mass destinations, group travel, public transport, closed spaces and high season holidays now represent a "threat". In this sense, the demand for less popular destinations, bike rides, trips outside rush hour, the demand for taxis and private transport applications and for direct air connections are expected to increase. The pandemic also highlighted the need for unity among people. For this reason, in the long run tourists will seek enriching experiences in family or in relatively small groups, with unique and educational activities.

Increasingly, tourists express a desire to learn and acquire information about the destination they intend to travel to. Thus, COVID-19 came to reinforce this aspect even more, as the price will no longer be a determining element. Now the tourist will be more attentive to the cleanliness and sanitary hygiene of the establishments and will prioritize safety, opting for slightly more expensive destinations and offers if they can enjoy safer experiences. The same will happen with travel insurance and flexible rates as the tourist will no longer be willing to take risks. It is important to mention that the search for information regarding the political and economic situation and the health system of the destination to which they intend to travel is also seen as a trend.

The internet, technologies and artificial intelligence will be a focal point for decision making. The demand for establishments that offer computers, printers and meeting rooms will increase, as more and more travelers are adopting the attitude of "working anywhere" calling themselves digital nomads. On the other hand, online shopping (e-commerce) will tend to increase even more, reaching a larger number of market segments.

Tourists of the future are more concerned with environmental preservation and will look for alternative destinations if this results in less impact. The pandemic generated more conscious consumption in relation to what you buy and to whom you buy. Exaggerations, waste and unnecessary purchases will not be well regarded by responsible consumers, thus choosing to travel in a more ecological and minimalist way. Tourists are expected to select destinations that promote sustainability practices, as well as local products, in order to support small and medium-sized companies. Given all this, it is expected that nature and well-being tourism will be in the top-of-mind of tourists, as well as adventure tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism. In other words, outdoor activities and non-massified places will be the preferred choice, as these places satisfy the need to visit and experience new cultures, gastronomies and traditions at a slower and safer pace.

### *Tourism Offer*

All expected changes in demand require a redesign of the supply structure in order to respond them. In this context, and as can be seen in Figure 4, it is the responsibility of destinations and tourist organizations to organize themselves with strategies and resources in order to combat the adversities caused by COVID-19. The activities of tourist entities must essentially pass through promoting the feeling of security (health, food, social, etc.). In this sense, cleanliness and hygiene will be essential for the decision making of the traveler. Thus, the offer must acquire certificates that guarantee compliance

with hygiene and safety measures in accordance with the best practices for combating and preventing COVID-19. Human resources should also receive specific training regarding risk protection and prevention measures and the monitoring of compliance with the measures should occur more frequently, in order to transmit security.

Flexibility in canceling reservations may also be a strategy to respond to new needs, as well as digitizing the offer both on the websites themselves and on other platforms (social networks, blogs, review websites, etc.). This trend should happen at all times during the trip (before, during and after). That said, aspects such as online check-in, in hotel establishments and airports, provision of contactless and touchless equipment and creation of a QR Code for reading information may be good practices to face the new circumstances, as the tourist won't accept easily a non digital service when he knows that it is possible to have the same service digitalized. Virtual reality will also be an aspect to be taken into account, both in the hotel sector and in other tourism domains, since this type of technology allows users to "enter" hotels, museums, galleries, restaurants, etc., and live differentiated experiences without move.

The offer of differentiated and authentic experiences and packages, which value the local community, generating real benefits for residents and which prioritize the family, sustainability, well-being and nature must be approaches to be addressed.

In general, the best way to respond to this new segment of tourists is essentially to operate in the appropriated markets, that is, with a greater predisposition to travel. There must be a constant monitoring of the evolution of the pandemic in both the nearby and in the main outgoing markets in order to define the best communication and promotion strategy for tourist destinations and services. In addition, it is considered important to keep digital channels active and to define an articulated strategy between the tourism sector and the health sector.

## Conclusion

The world is facing a global social, economic and health emergency arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The travel and tourism sector suffered an abrupt drop in international demand, due to restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the virus (UNWTO, 2020). In this sense, impacts were generated that are reflected not only in the reduction of revenues on the supply side, but also on the creation of new behaviors, needs and requirements caused by the perceived risk on the demand (Simon, 2009).

Thus, and in accordance with the explanatory model developed, it was possible to conclude that safety and hygiene are key factors influencing the decision to travel. Sustainability, awareness, touchless and contactless technologies are the aspects that define the new tourist demand, as well as nature and wellness tourism, outdoor activities and the search for non-mass destinations. In other words, destinations perceived as safe, including low-density territories, will be at the center of preferences in the coming years of recovery until we reach normalcy.

In this sense, it is important to understand the fear of tourists, in order to obtain sufficient insights for those responsible for tourism to be able to take measures and define strategies, adapted to the new reality and capable of responding quickly to the needs and desires of new consumers without placing them at risk.

## Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The main limitation of this work relies on its purely conceptual nature. Thus, this investigation should be seen as an exploratory reflection exercise, translated into a model of analysis of a reality that involving multiple actors proves to be very complex. The model now proposed therefore lacks a further empirical validation.

As it is a very recent and still unknown topic, there are numerous future research possibilities. However, it is suggested as a future line of research to analyze and define the profile of the new tourist. Assessing whether socio-demographic characteristics influence the risk perception of tourists is also a relevant line for future research. Another study suggestion would be to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the use of digital media, in the tourist context.

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