

Article

Factors Determining ROPO Behaviors of Travel Agencies Customers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Tourist decision-making has been heavily affected by the pandemic crisis, which increases the complexity of the tourism business operations and shakes the foundations of tourism sustainable development. Thus, studying and comprehension of tourists' behaviors, including the purchasing decisions, and incorporating this knowledge into the strategies of tourism companies, has a key importance to the organizations' survival during hard times. The article contains the characteristics of tourist behavior schemes related to decision-making in buying package holidays during COVID-19 crisis. The study was based on analysis of the results of a computer assisted web interview using the CAWI method, conducted among 1502 Poles using the classification tree method (the R statistical package and the RPART library). Research allowed us to identify the four purchase decision-making patterns and to describe four segments of holidaymakers' buying according to these patterns. In the profiling process, nine demographic and social variables were used, including gender, age, education, residence, marital status, number of all household members, minor children in a household, assessment of own financial standing, and professional situation. The results of the analysis confirm the existence of a relationship between (1) the research online purchase offline behavior and the age, the number of children under 18 in the household, and the marital status of the package holidays buyers, (2) the research offline purchase online behavior and the age and the number of children up to 18 in the households of the buyers of tourist packages, (3) the research offline purchase offline behavior and the age, the number of children under 18 in the household, the assessment of the financial situation, and sex of the buyers of tourist packages, and (4) the research offline purchase online behavior and the age and assessment of financial situation of package holidays purchasers.

Keywords: package holiday; tourist decision-making; COVID-19 pandemic; tourist behavior



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1. Introduction

Since 1855, when Thomas Cook organized his first foreign excursion to Europe, package tourism and all-inclusive holidays have been prevalent. Despite many changes, innovations, and new solutions (e.g., low-cost airlines and coaches, shared accommodation and carpooling, online and mobile booking) facilitating individual travel arrangements, the package tour is likely to remain popular among many tourists around the world. In the United Kingdom, the cradle of organized tourism, about 18–20% of travelers take a package holiday each year. Among Europeans this formula of travel is often chosen by Germans (36.4%, in 2019); Austrians (32.3%), Danes (35.5%), and Swedes (30.7%) [1]. Before the COVID-19 pandemic (in the period 2017–2019) on average about 21.5% of Polish tourists organized their trips through travel agents [1]. In 2019, package travel appealed to 528.1 million tourists globally and generated 30% total tourism revenue, making it the second largest segment of the travel and tourism market [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the tourism industry with unprecedented force and on a global scale. The association of travel with spatial mobility and social interaction means that tourism plays a significant role in spreading the virus [2] and amplifies public

health crises [3–5]. For this reason, in 2020, travel was heavily restricted by law. As a consequence of the mobility limitations and the closure of state borders, this was the deepest crisis that affected tourism since World War II. In the first few months of the pandemic (March–June 2020), compared to the same period of the previous year (2019), the decrease in the total number of international trips reached 90% [6]. The number of package holidays users decreased by nearly 59% (2020) in the first year of the pandemic, and by 40.4% in the second year (2021) compared to 2019 [1].

Travelling limitations caused by legal restrictions and/or tourists' concerns, on the one hand, significantly threatened the sustainability of tour operators' functioning and, on the other, prevented many tourists from satisfying their needs which, in turn, may interfere with the effectiveness of resting and result in anxiety and frustration. The decline in the volume of trips, confirmed by official statistics, was also accompanied by changes in tourist behavior. Results of research conducted by Lium et al. [7] indicate the greater value than in the past of such determinants of tourists' choice as accommodation facilities and hygiene protocols and standards, as well as possibilities of keeping a social distance from other customers and minimizing the challenges of longer trips and stays in large, multi-services holiday centers. These changes, in turn, create new challenges for the tourism industry, including tour operators. In the context of the above comments, a study addressing the response of tourism supply and demand entities to the state of the pandemic should be considered a necessary condition in preparing effective strategies for tourism returning to the path of sustainable development.

The reaction of tourists to COVID-19 includes various aspects of tourist behavior, which becomes an absorbing research problem for an increasing number of researchers and studies, e.g., [8–16]. The pandemic most likely also influenced the purchasing behavior of buyers of tourist packages. Before the COVID-19 crisis, researchers noticed a growing share of Internet channels being used when making decisions about the purchase of tourist packages [17–19]. They also observed the ROPO (research online purchase offline) phenomenon, which means a certain part of buyers mixed online and offline channels during decision-making [20–26]. Buyers looked for information about tourist packages on the Internet, whereas they bought them in traditional (brick-and-mortar) travel agencies. The interesting research problem is the identification of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on tourists' decision-making processes in the case of holiday package purchasing. What did the pandemic situation change in the decision-making process of buying tourist packages? In the article, the authors put forward three research questions:

- (1) What channels, online or offline, are used by buyers of tourist packages during the decision-making process?
- (2) What changes occurred in the usage of online and offline channels in the decision-making process by tourist packages buyers during COVID-19 as compared to the situation before the pandemic?
- (3) How are the socio-demographic characteristics of the segments of buyers of tourist packages distinguished based on the use of online and offline channels in the purchase process?

2. COVID-19 and the Decision of Package Holidays Purchase—Literature Review

The literature review conducted for the purposes of the presented research was divided into two parts. In the first part, based on the so-called traditional review, taking into account the most important scientific studies, two categories appearing in the research problem were briefly explained, namely the concept of a tourist package and the concept of the decision-making process of its purchase. Recognizing the essence of these two categories allowed for a better understanding of the studied problem and the subject of the analysis. In the second part, using a more rigorous approach, the existing research on the tourist decision-making process in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic was reviewed. As a result, a research gap was identified, which allowed us to justify the need for conducting the presented research.

According to Medlik [27] (p. 127) a holiday package (also called a packaged holiday, vacation package, package tour) is a combination of two or more elements sold as a single product for an inclusive price, in which the costs of the individual product components are not separately identifiable. This integrated set of complementary tourist services (usually transport and accommodation) is perceived as a holistic offer. The package comprehensively meets the various needs revealed by tourists during their travels. Tourists choose package tours because of their numerous advantages. Perceived higher quality and value for money, lower risk, and higher convenience compared to tourist services purchased separately [28–31] are the most attractive merits of inclusive tours for buyers.

Package holidays belong to the complex products family and require higher engagement of the customers in decision-making processes [32] (p. 155). For this reason, package buyers report a high demand for information. In general, during the decision-making in the buying of package holidays, motivated by needs, tourists search for information about the available products, assess them in the perspective of their preferences and possibilities, and finalize the purchase [33,34]. In the literature, five compulsory sequential stages of the decision-making process are often listed: (1) need recognition, (2) search for information (which is assumed to be very important), (3) evaluation of alternatives (the consumer evaluates attributes and products), (4) purchase, and (5) outcomes (post-purchase evaluation) [35] (p. 23).

At all the stages mentioned above, package travel buyers can use online and offline channels. They obtain information and buy travel packages via the Internet or a traditional travel agency. Almost all shoppers look for travel information online [19,20,36]. From year to year, more and more tourists also finalize their purchases via the Internet. In 2019, 59% of global travel packages (58% in Poland) were purchased online [1]. Statista [1] predicts that in 2027 this number will reach 73% in the world and 90% in the case of Poland. Researchers [20–24] have also identified the phenomenon of the so-called switching channels for booking packages, which means that package buyers can adopt the following four behavior patterns: (1) buyers search for information and buy travel packages online, (2) buyers search for information and buy travel packages in traditional travel agencies (offline), (3) buyers look for information about packages on the Internet and buy in traditional travel agencies (ROPO), and (4) buyers seek for information about packages in traditional travel agencies and buy on the Internet (reversed-ROPO, r-ROPO).

The coronavirus, which affected tourism more than other large sectors of the economy, has generated enormous interest in the scientific community. As a result, hundreds of articles are published presenting research results on various aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, as confirmed by the literature review carried out for this study. As already mentioned, the task of this review is to identify previous studies dedicated to the issue of the impact of the pandemic on the decision-making processes of buyers of tourist packages.

Two of the most recognizable scientific data bases, namely Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), have been used in the research. Data were gathered on 1 February 2023. Research concerned the period 2020–2023. Searches of the articles were carried out systematically, according to the established categorization key, which embraced two categories (items), namely (1) “COVID and tourist decision making” and (2) “COVID and tourism decision making”. The search was narrowed to the articles written in English and Polish only. There were 411 manuscripts chosen in the end (WoS—386, Scopus—25). After limiting the choice of categories to “Hospitality, Leisure, Sport, Tourism”, and careful elimination of the duplicates, this number was reduced to 116 articles, which were finally read. Following steps in the search included analysis of the text, their abstracts, and keywords to search for articles referring to decision-making in regard to the tourist services with the emphasis especially on the purchases of holiday packages.

Analysis of the content of the articles has shown that earlier studies concerned different relationships between the pandemic and tourists’ behavior. Among many other issues, academics considered the impact of COVID-19 on purchase intention and probability continuation of tourist trips during the pandemic (e.g., [10,37]), factors determining the undertaking of tourist

trips [14] and tourists' preference (regarding, for example, the length of stay and daily spending) [38], and food services [39] or accommodation services [40]. Researchers were interested in the impact of COVID-19 on the psyche of the tourist (e.g., [8]), their identity (e.g., [9]), needs, and expectations during and after the pandemic (e.g., [41–43]). Diversity of research issues is very important. The studies concern the behavior of the buyers in the stage before undertaking of the trip, i.e., "the pre-travel stage" (e.g., [11,44]) and during the trip, i.e., "the travel stage" (e.g., [12]), as well as the consequences of the pandemic in tourists' behavior in specific locations (e.g., Andalusia, Spain [45]; Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, China [46]; Guangzhou Hanfu Festival, China [47]) or specific nationalities (e.g., Italians [48], Koreans [49], Algerians [41], and Poles [40]). Most studies (94% analyzed publications) address the issue of perception of the risk of disease and its impact on anxiety, as well as the intentions of tourist to travel, the choice of specific tourism products (holiday cruises, air travel), or the choice of tourist destinations (e.g., [11,12]).

The brief literature review presented above confirms the wide spectrum of problems raised in the previous studies related to the pandemic's impact on the behavior of tourists, their intentions, preferences, and perception of travelling in the conditions of COVID-19.

The literature review simultaneously identified a research gap in the study of the decision-making behavior of holiday package buyers. To the best of our knowledge, merely a few of the analyzed studies addressed the issue of the impact of COVID-19 on the perception of the packages by tourists. Pan et al.'s [50] and Xu, Youn and Lee's [11] studies were devoted to the impact of the pandemic on the intention to use the sea travel packages (cruises), and Ren's [51] research concerned tourists' changing behavior in package tourism, but only from tour operators' perspective.

In the case of the presented study, the authors concentrate their particular attention on two stages of the decision-making process regarding tourist package purchases, i.e., seeking the information as well as the purchase completion. Firstly, the study identifies, which of the information and shopping channels, online or offline, played a dominant role in the mentioned stages of the decision process during the pandemic situation. A hypothesis is put forward in the research that the COVID-19 pandemic, as a life-threatening factor, did indeed modify buyer's patterns in the decision-making process and the decision-making process for the purchase of tourist packages, and it intensified the importance of stationary channels both at the stage of obtaining information about the holiday package and finalizing its purchase. Secondly, the research indicates what social-demographic characteristics of package holiday buyers were of key importance for the use of package purchase patterns during the COVID-19 crisis.

3. Materials and Methods

The research covering purchasers of package holidays and focusing on the problems of travelling during the COVID-19 pandemic was carried out to answer the research question. A questionnaire was the primary survey tool, and the conducted research was a sample-based study performed using an online survey on a nationwide online panel of respondents (CAWI technique; CAWI is an acronym for computer assisted web interview, which means a computer-assisted interview using a website. In other words, it is a method of collecting data and information in which the respondent completes electronic surveys). The study was characterized by a representative distribution of features for the general population of Poles aged 18–64 in terms of gender, age, education, and size of the place of residence.

Among the surveyed 1502 Poles there were representatives of both sexes, and the most numerous age groups were the following age categories: 26–35, 36–45, and 46–60 (25.03%, 21.84%, and 30.84% of respondents, respectively). Among the respondents, married people prevailed (53.06% of responses), as did the respondents with a secondary education (42.21% of respondents). The respondents' households usually consisted of 2 to 4 people (a total of 78.3% of the responses), and every second respondent had minor children in their household. Furthermore, 64.51% of the respondents were working people. The largest group of respondents (59.79%) were the respondents living in cities. More than half of the

respondents assessed their financial situation as average, and less than 3% of them believed that it was very bad.

The study sought to identify the directions of changes in purchasing behaviors regarding package holidays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic threat and the factors determining purchasing behaviors during the pandemic.

To analyze the factors determining the occurrence of four patterns of behavior of package holidays buyers, in addition to the statistical description, the study also used the methods of multidimensional statistical analysis. According to Hair et al. based on the division of multidimensional data analysis methods [52] (p. 13) when examining the dependence of phenomena, if the analysis concerns one explanatory variable, measured on a non-metric scale, one can use, for example, a classification tree method. Classification trees are used to determine the affiliation of cases or objects to classes of a categorical explanatory variable measured on weak scales based on measurements of one or more explanatory variables. Classification tree analysis is currently one of the most commonly used data analysis techniques.

4. Results

The respondents were asked about their procedure regarding both searching for information on package holidays and purchasing them. They indicated the most common way of proceeding, choosing among four patterns, when buying a tourist package before the COVID-19 pandemic (797 respondents) and during it (254 respondents) out of the total of 1502 respondents who declared such a purchase. The table below shows the structure of individual segments of package buyers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 1).

Table 1. Behavior of package holidays buyers (before and during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Behavior of Package Holidays Buyers	Total	
	Number	%
Before COVID-19 pandemic	797	100.0%
I was looking for information about trips on the Internet, but I bought it in a traditional/brick-and-mortar travel agency (research online, purchase offline behavior)	132	16.56%
I was looking for information about trips in a traditional/brick-and-mortar travel agency, but I bought it on the Internet (research offline, purchase online behavior, ROPO)	95	11.92%
I was looking for information about trips and I purchased them in a traditional travel agency (research offline, purchase offline behavior)	41	5.15%
I searched for information about trips and I purchased them on the Internet (research online, purchase online behavior)	529	66.37%
During COVID-19 pandemic	254	100.0%
I was looking for information about trips on the Internet, but I bought it in a traditional/brick-and-mortar travel agency (research online, purchase offline behavior)	78	30.71%
I was looking for information about trips in a traditional/brick-and-mortar travel agency, but I bought it on the Internet (research offline, purchase online behavior, ROPO)	81	31.89%
I was looking for information about trips and I purchased them in a traditional travel agency (research offline, purchase offline behavior)	20	7.87%
I searched for information about trips and I purchased them on the Internet (research online, purchase online behavior)	75	29.53%

Source: authors' compilation based on survey studies.

It turned out that the structure of responses regarding behavioral patterns before and during the pandemic significantly differed. Before the pandemic, i.e., until March 2020, the following could be observed:

- A total of 66.37% of the respondents admitted that they most often followed the research online purchase online scheme;
- A total of 16.56% of respondents most often indicated the research online purchase offline purchase scheme;
- A total of 11.92% of the surveyed people followed the research Offline Purchase Online scheme;
- A total of 5.15% of all respondents were the buyers attached to stationary sellers of tourist events and the research offline purchase offline scheme.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the case of package travel purchases, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of research online purchase online behavior by 36.84 percentage points (to 29.53%), with a significant increase in the percentage of research offline, purchase online behavior by nearly 20 percentage points (up to 31.89%) and research online, purchase offline behavior by 14.15 percentage points (up to 30.71%), with a slight increase in research offline, purchase offline behavior by 2.72 percentage points (up to 7.87%). Therefore, much less often than before the COVID-19 pandemic, the buyers of organized packages transfer the entire purchasing process online, i.e., they both look for information on the offers of travel agencies and make purchases online.

The presented results allow us to conclude that in the face of the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, the behavior of holiday package buyers has changed significantly in the case of research online, purchase online behavior, research offline, purchase online behavior, and research online, purchase offline behavior. The research offline, purchase offline behavior group, on the other hand, was the smallest group both before and during the pandemic and did not show any significant changes in shopping behavior regarding tourist packages.

In order to identify factors determining the choice of one of the purchase patterns, classification trees were estimated using the RPART function in stats package (R Core Team 2022). Based on the data, the sets of classification tree models were built for all four explanatory variables. Among the 254 respondents who answered yes, declaring that they had purchased a package since the start of the studied period, incomplete data were omitted, and 206 observations were included in the final analyses.

In the statistical study of dependence, the following four patterns of purchasing tourist packages during the COVID-19 pandemic, declared by buyers, were adopted as the dependent variable:

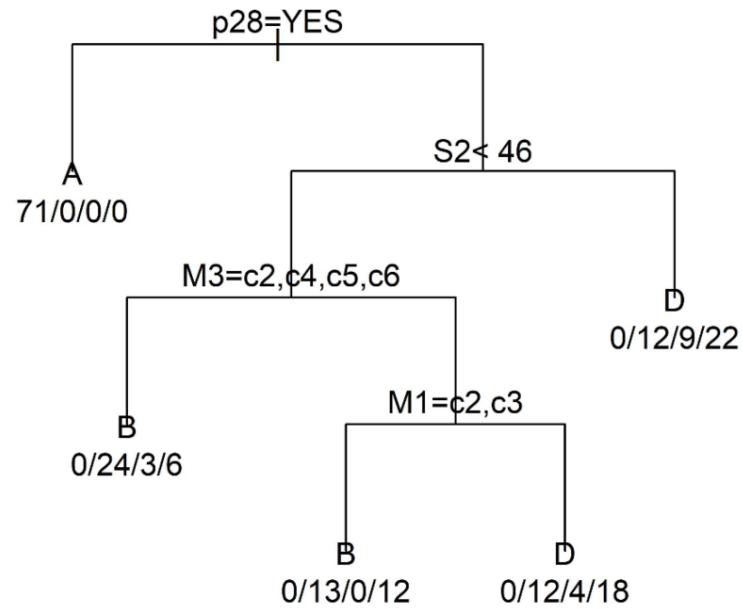
1. Research online purchase offline behavior [Q_28_A];
2. Research offline purchase online behavior [Q_28_B];
3. Research online purchase online behavior [Q_28_C];
4. Research offline purchase offline behavior [Q_28_D].

All the above dependent variables were measured on a nominal scale: [1] yes, [2] no.

The following socio-demographic factors describing holiday packages purchasers were selected as explanatory variables: variable Q_S1—gender (measured on a nominal scale), variable Q_S2—age (measured on an ordinal scale), variable Q_S3—education (measured on an ordinal scale), variable Q_S4—place of residence (measured on a nominal scale), variable Q_M1—marital status (measured on an ordinal scale), variable Q_M2—the number of all household members (measured on an quotient scale), variable Q_M3—number of minor children in the household (measured on quotient scale), variable Q_M4—assessment of own financial situation (measured on an ordinal scale), and variable Q_M5—professional situation (measured on a nominal scale).

The representation of classification trees 1–4 obtained as a result of the procedure is shown in the figure below (Figure 1).

1. Classification tree for the set „Research Online Purchase Offline Behavior”



2. Classification tree for the set „Research Offline Purchase Online Behavior”

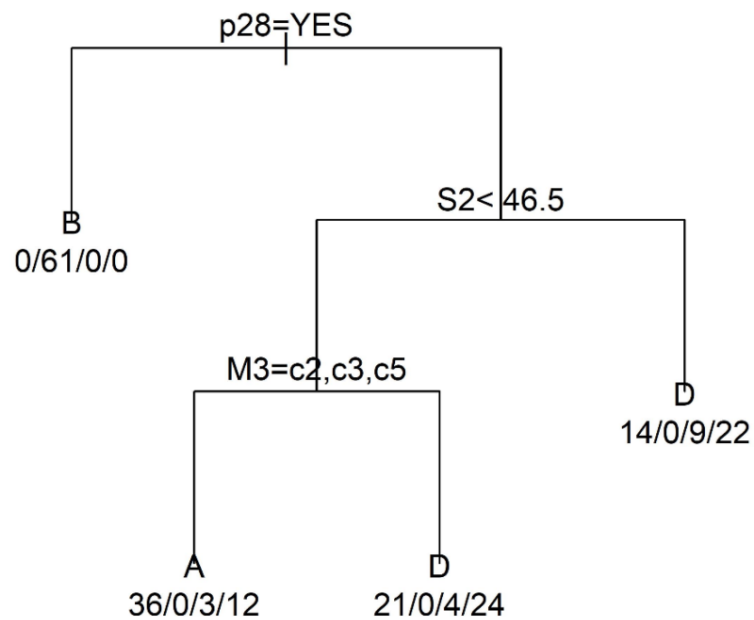
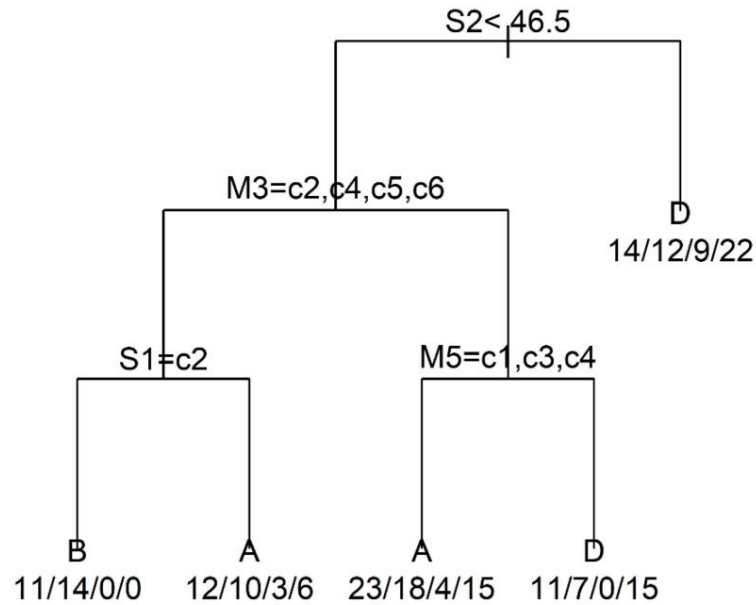


Figure 1. Cont.

3. Classification tree for the set „Research Offline Purchase Offline Behavior”



4. Classification tree for the set „Research Online Purchase Online Behavior”

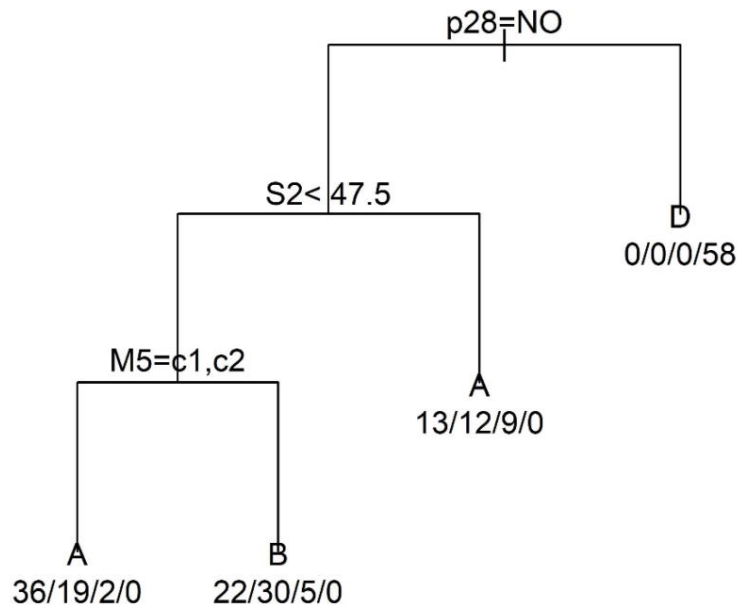


Figure 1. Classification trees for the sets (1) “Research Online Purchase Offline Behavior”, (2) “Research Offline Purchase Online Behavior”, (3) “Research Offline Purchase Offline Behavior”, and (4) “Research Online Purchase Online Behavior”. Source: own elaboration using the R statistical package and the RPART library.

The following lines presented in Figure 2 describe the rules that create the classification tree for the four analyzed sets—individual nodes of the tree (node), the way of dividing the

space (split), the number of observations (n), the size of the measure evaluating diversity (deviance), and the distributions of the dependent variable ROPO in all classes (yval).

1. Classification tree for the set „Research Online Purchase Offline Behavior”

node), split, n, loss, yval, (yprob) * denotes terminal node

```

1) root 206 135 A (0.34466019 0.29611650 0.07766990 0.28155340)
2) p28=YES 71 0 A (1.00000000 0.00000000 0.00000000 0.00000000) *
3) p28=NO 135 74 B (0.00000000 0.45185185 0.11851852 0.42962963)
6) S2< 46 92 43 B (0.00000000 0.53260870 0.07608696 0.39130435)
12) M3=c2,c4,c5,c6 33 9 B (0.00000000 0.72727273 0.09090909 0.18181818) *
13) M3=c1,c3 59 29 D (0.00000000 0.42372881 0.06779661 0.50847458)
26) M1=c2,c3 25 12 B (0.00000000 0.52000000 0.00000000 0.48000000) *
27) M1=c1 34 16 D (0.00000000 0.35294118 0.11764706 0.52941176) *
7) S2>=46 43 21 D (0.00000000 0.27906977 0.20930233 0.51162791) *

```

2. Classification tree for the set „Research Offline Purchase Online Behavior”

node), split, n, loss, yval, (yprob) * denotes terminal node

```

1) root 206 135 A (0.34466019 0.29611650 0.07766990 0.28155340)
2) p28=YES 61 0 B (0.00000000 1.00000000 0.00000000 0.00000000) *
3) p28=NO 145 74 A (0.48965517 0.00000000 0.11034483 0.40000000)
6) S2< 46.5 100 43 A (0.57000000 0.00000000 0.07000000 0.36000000)
12) M3=c2,c3,c5 51 15 A (0.70588235 0.00000000 0.05882353 0.23529412) *
13) M3=c1,c4 49 25 D (0.42857143 0.00000000 0.08163265 0.48979592) *
7) S2>=46.5 45 23 D (0.31111111 0.00000000 0.20000000 0.48888889) *

```

3. Classification tree for the set „Research Offline Purchase Offline Behavior”

node), split, n, loss, yval, (yprob) * denotes terminal node

```

1) root 206 135 A (0.34466019 0.29611650 0.07766990 0.28155340)
2) S2< 46.5 149 92 A (0.38255034 0.32885906 0.04697987 0.24161074)
4) M3=c2,c4,c5,c6 56 32 B (0.41071429 0.42857143 0.05357143 0.10714286)
8) S1=c2 25 11 B (0.44000000 0.56000000 0.00000000 0.00000000) *
9) S1=c1 31 19 A (0.38709677 0.32258065 0.09677419 0.19354839) *
5) M3=c1,c3 93 59 A (0.36559140 0.26881720 0.04301075 0.32258065)
10) M5=c1,c3,c4 60 37 A (0.38333333 0.30000000 0.06666667 0.25000000) *
11) M5=c2,c5 33 18 D (0.33333333 0.21212121 0.00000000 0.45454545) *
3) S2>=46.5 57 35 D (0.24561404 0.21052632 0.15789474 0.38596491) *

```

4. Classification tree for the set „Research Online Purchase Online Behavior”

node), split, n, loss, yval, (yprob) * denotes terminal node

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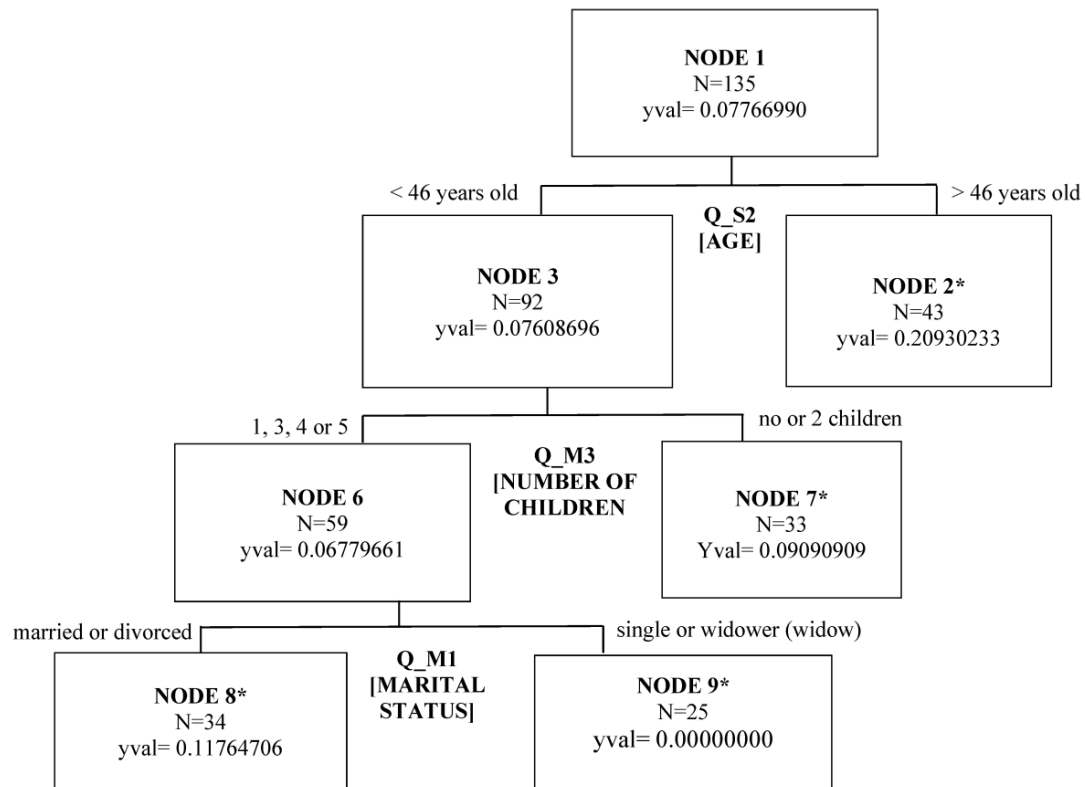
1) root 206 135 A (0.34466019 0.29611650 0.07766990 0.28155340)
2) p28=NO 148 77 A (0.47972973 0.41216216 0.10810811 0.00000000)
4) S2< 47.5 114 56 A (0.50877193 0.42982456 0.06140351 0.00000000)
8) M5=c1,c2 57 21 A (0.63157895 0.33333333 0.03508772 0.00000000) *
9) M5=c3,c4,c5 57 27 B (0.38596491 0.52631579 0.08771930 0.00000000) *
5) S2>=47.5 34 21 A (0.38235294 0.35294118 0.26470588 0.00000000) *
3) p28=YES 58 0 D (0.00000000 0.00000000 0.00000000 1.00000000) *

```

Figure 2. Rules creating classification trees for sets (1) “Research Online Purchase Offline Behavior”, (2) “Research Offline Purchase Online Behavior”, (3) “Research Offline Purchase Offline Behavior”, and (4) “Research Online Purchase Online Behavior”. Source: own elaboration using the R statistical package and the RPART library.

Figure 3 presents synthetic results of the package holidays purchasers' classification according to the four types of behavior class.

“Research Offline Purchase Online Behavior” class



“Research Online Purchase Offline Behavior” class

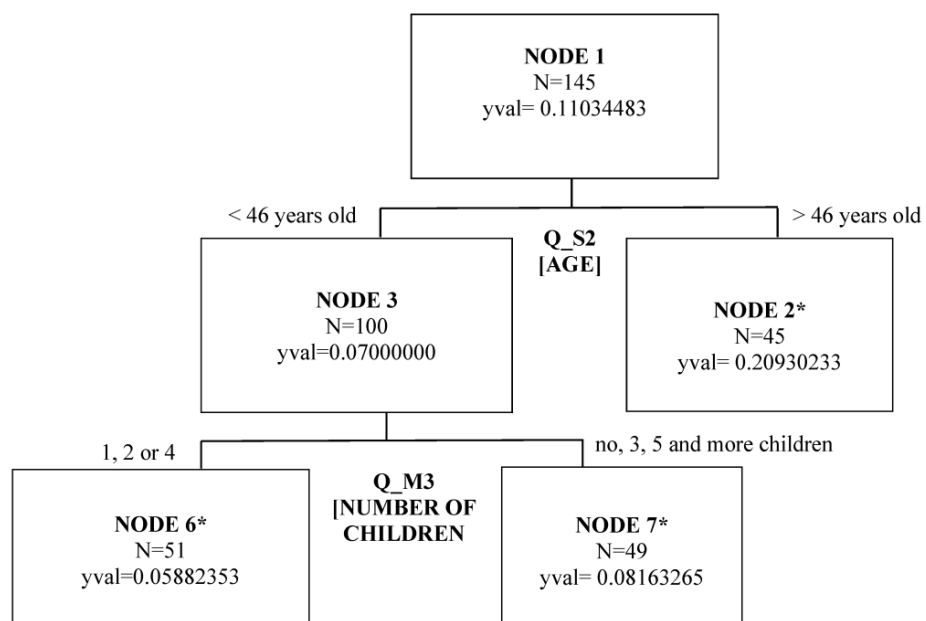


Figure 3. *Cont.*

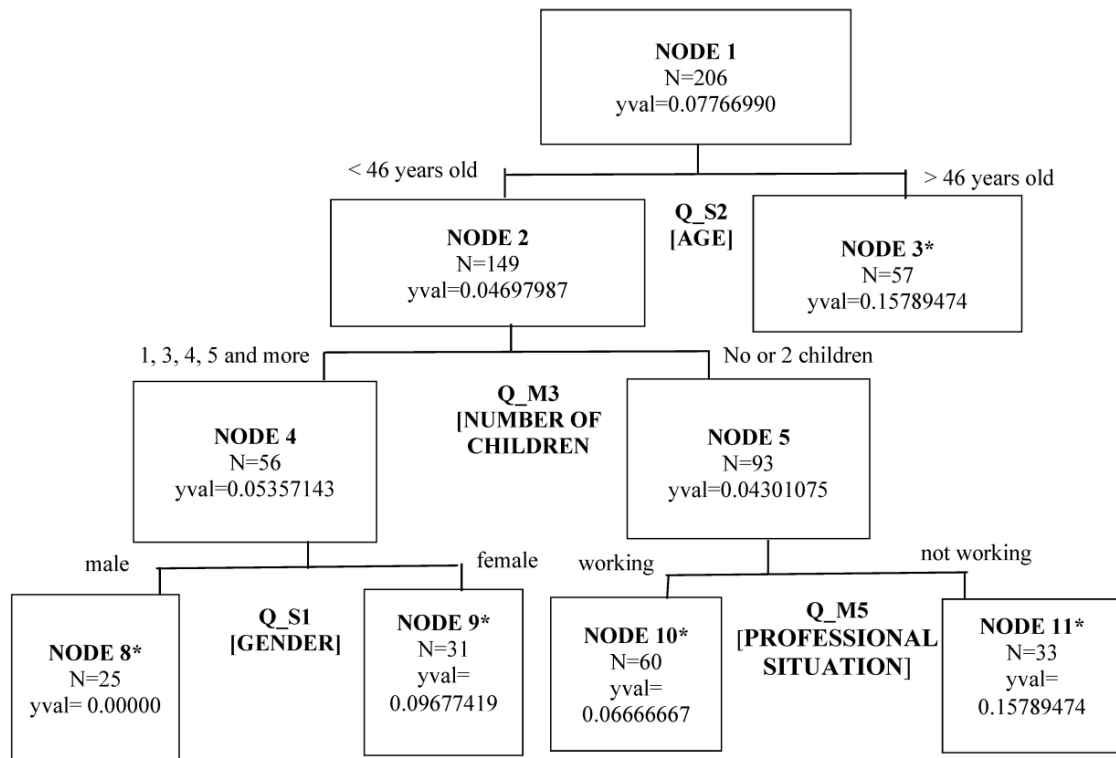
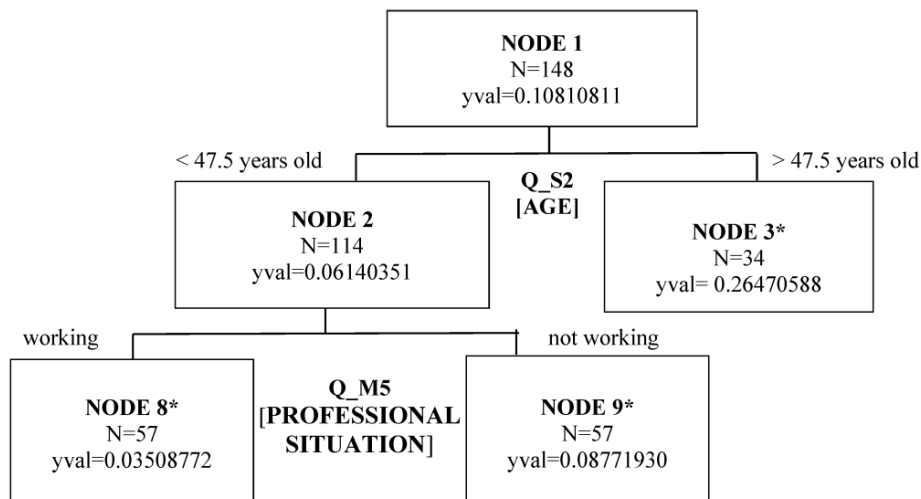
“Research Offline Purchase Offline Behavior” class**“Research Online Purchase Online Behavior” class**

Figure 3. Classification results of holiday packages buyers according to four types of behavior. *—terminal node; N—the number of respondents in a given class; yval—fitted value of the ROPO variable in all classes; MSE—mean square error. Source: authors’ compilation based on survey studies using R package and RPART library.

As presented in Figure 3, the obtained calculations show that the variables located in the upper nodes of individual classification trees have the greatest discriminant value and a key share in defining the division of the examined space into segments (Table 2), i.e.:

- For the “Research Online Purchase Offline Behavior” class, the age of the buyer of tourist services (Q_S2), the number of children under 18 in the household of the buyer of tourist services (Q_M3), and the marital status of the buyer of tourist services (Q_M1) are factors. However, studies have not shown a relationship between this behavior and other socioeconomic factors.
- For “Research Offline Purchase Online Behavior” class, the age of the buyer of tourist services (Q_S2) and the number of children under 18 in the household of the buyer of tourist services (Q_M3) are factors. However, studies have not shown a relationship between this behavior and other socioeconomic factors.
- For “Research Offline Purchase Offline Behavior” class, the age of the buyer of tourist services (Q_S2), the number of children under 18 in the household of the purchaser of travel services (Q_M3), occupational situation (Q_M5), and the gender of purchaser of travel services (Q_S1) are factors. However, studies have not shown a relationship between this behavior and other socioeconomic factors.
- For Research Online Purchase Online Behavior” class, the age of the buyer of tourist services (Q_S2) and professional situation (Q_M5) are factors. However, studies have not shown a relationship between this behavior and other socioeconomic factor.

Table 2. Profiles of four package holidays buyers’ shopping strategies.

Key Explanatory Variables Describing a Package Holiday Buyer	Purchasing Strategies of Travel Agencies Customers during the COVID-19 Pandemic			
	Research Online, Purchase Offline Behavior	Research Offline, Purchase Online Behavior	Research Offline, Purchase Offline Behavior	Research Online, Purchase Online Behavior
Age	Under 46	Under 46	Under 46	Under 47,5
Number of minor children in the household	One, three, four, or five	One, two, or four	One, three, four, five and more	-
Marital status	Married or divorced	-	-	-
Gender	-	-	Women	-
Professional situation	-	-	Working	Working

Source: authors’ compilation based on survey studies using R package and *RPART* library.

Based on Figure 3, it is possible—using the key explanatory variables describing a package holiday buyer of the most important explanatory variables shown in the study—to characterize the profiles of four package holidays buyers’ shopping strategies and present their specificity, which is provided in Table 2 (titled Profiles of four package holidays buyers’ shopping strategies) and Table 3 (titled Characteristics of package holidays buyers for the four shopping strategies).

A detailed description of the distribution of explanatory variables for the individual decision-making schemes on the purchase of tourist packages during the COVID-19 pandemic is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Characteristics of package holidays buyers for the four shopping strategies.

Purchasing Strategies of Travel Agencies Customers during the COVID-19 Pandemic	Key Explanatory Variables	Characteristics of the Respondents
Research Online, Purchase Offline Behavior	Age of the package holiday buyer (Q_S2)	68.15% of respondents who looked for information about trips on the Internet but bought them in a brick-and-mortar travel agency are people under 46 years of age.
	Number of minor children in the household of the package holiday buyer (Q_M3)	64.13% of respondents among people under 46 who looked for information about trips on the Internet but bought them in a brick-and-mortar travel agency are people with minor children (one, three, four, or five) in their household.
	Marital status of the package holiday buyer (Q_M1);	57.63% of respondents among people under 46 with minor children (one, three, four, or five) who searched for information about trips on the Internet but bought them in a brick-and-mortar travel agency are married or divorced.
Research Offline, Purchase Online Behavior	Age of the package holiday buyer (q_s2)	68.97% of respondents who looked for information about trips in a brick-and-mortar travel agency but bought them online were people under 46 years of age.
	Number of minor children in the household of the package holiday buyer (Q_M3)	51% of the respondents under 46 who looked for information about trips in a brick-and-mortar travel agency but bought them online were people with minor children (one, two, or four).
Research Offline, Purchase Offline Behavior	Age of the package holiday buyer (Q_S2)	72.33% of the respondents who both look for information about trips and purchase them in a traditional travel agency are people under 46 years of age.
	Number of minor children in the household of the package holiday buyer (Q_M3)	62.42% of the respondents under 46 who both look for information about trips and purchase them in a traditional travel agency are people without children or who have two.
	Professional situation of the package holiday buyer (Q_M5)	64.52% of respondents under 46 without children or with two children, who both look for information about trips and purchase them in a traditional travel agency, are women.
	Gender of the package holiday buyer (Q_S1)	55.36% of respondents under 46, without children or with two children, who both look for information about trips and purchase them in a traditional travel agency, are working people.
Research Online, Purchase Online Behavior	Age of the package holiday buyer (Q_S2)	77.03% of the respondents who both looked for information about trips and purchased them on the Internet were people under 47.5 years of age.
	Professional situation of the package holiday buyer (Q_M5)	50% of the respondents under 47 who both sought information about trips and purchased them online were working people.

Source: authors' compilation based on survey studies using R package and *RPART* library.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The presented study analyzed the purchasing patterns of tourist package buyers in two periods: before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the pandemic. Significant differences were identified in buyers' use of information and purchasing channels in the decision-making process. Previous studies of other researchers, although not on package purchase decisions, but on tourist behavior in general, also noted a radical change caused by the pandemic [53–55] and an increase in the complexity of tourist behavior [13].

The results of this research indicate the presence of four patterns of decision-making when buying tourist packages during the pandemic, depending on the used combination of the online and offline channels in the following stages: research and the finalization/completion of the purchase. These are (1) research online, purchase online behavior, (2) research offline, purchase offline behavior, (3) research online, purchase offline behavior (ROPO), and (4) research offline, purchase online behavior (reversed-ROPO, r-ROPO). These four buying strategies were used during and before the pandemic [23–26]. The difference, however, lies in the proportion of individual combinations of information and purchasing channels. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic period (data from 2020), the first scheme (online/online) concerned 29.5% of respondents, the second (offline/offline) concerned 7.9%, the third (ROPO) concerned 30.7%, and the fourth (r-ROPO) applied to 31.9%. Concerning the period before the pandemic, (i.e., 2019) the share of behaviors was as follows: (1) 63.4%, (2) 4.3%, ROPO 10.7%, and r-ROPO 21.4%. The figures provided here prove that COVID-19 has significantly changed the purchasing strategies used by tourist package buyers. In the conditions of the pandemic, a much smaller number of tourist package buyers based their decisions on online channels (only 29.5% of the respondents compared to 63.4% of the respondents who in 2019 completed the entire decision-making process online). During the pandemic, however, the percentage of people who visited a brick-and-mortar travel agency at least at one stage of making purchasing decisions (i.e., searching for information and/or finalizing the purchase) increased significantly. More than a third of the respondents in uncertain times sought personal contact with a travel agent.

The abovementioned shifts between information and purchase channels concern the more intensive use of their stationary counterparts in the purchase decision-making process. The systematically increasing dominance of the “search and buy on the Internet” strategy before the pandemic has, therefore, been stopped. The crisis prompts tourists who make decisions to look for the most up-to-date and reliable sources of information, which in their opinion are more controlled [56], verified, and “tangible”. They consider brick-and-mortar travel agencies as such because the Internet is full of data and, in crisis conditions, often provides sensational information; as this data may not be necessarily true, it does not facilitate the selection of information and does not ensure high accuracy of decisions. Thus, tourists remembered the basic competitive advantage of brick-and-mortar travel agencies, i.e., the “human ability to collate, organize and interpret large amounts of data in a way that delivers the best value for the customers” [57] (p. 114). Knowledge and experience, the ability to think logically and distinguish valuable news from fake news means that, in crisis situations characterized by high volatility, the travel agent is perceived by the client as a source of reliable and up-to-date information. The Internet is a “cloud” with a lot of data, and a travel agent is an expert, an advisor with data processed into important information to make the right decision.

The obtained results confirm the development of an omnichannel distribution of products on the tourist market. The ROPO behavior segment, which was the most numerous group of package holidays buyers during the COVID-19 pandemic (31.89%), can be described as tourists who, on the one hand, are willing to take advantage of new solutions in online distribution but, on the other hand, they have to check everything personally to ensure that they make the right and correct decision. This was particularly important when the decision to purchase an organized trip was made during the pandemic, and any doubts regarding the applicable rules, restrictions, or procedures at the destination of travel required consultation with a travel agency.

In the case of the “ROPO behavior” segment, out of the examined socio-demographic factors, only three should be considered significant in profiling buyer segments, namely age, number of children under 18 in the household, and marital status, all of which play an important role in this case. However, such factors as education, number of people in the household, place of residence, or assessment of one’s own financial situation were not significant.

Buyers who looked for information about trips on the Internet but bought packages in a stationary travel agency are people under 46 years of age, with minor children (one, three, four, or five) in their household, and who are married or divorced. A family client understood in this way, in times of a pandemic threat and many months of remote learning or working, had to provide his family members, including underage children, with a safe and secure rest during an organized trip.

6. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The results of our research have important implications both for travel service providers and for researchers. From the economic practice perspective, our findings can support travel agents who are striving to meet their customers' expectations and needs. The situation of uncertainty created by the pandemic is a period in which brick-and-mortar travel agencies can at least partially regain the demand lost due to the development of e-commerce and the growth of online tourist booking. This will require designing appropriate marketing strategies to consolidate customer relationships.

In the theoretical perspective, this study contributes to both marketing theory and consumer behavior theory. It provides knowledge about the response of package holiday buyers to the pandemic—a state previously known only hypothetically. It emphasizes the importance of the health risk perception factor in the purchasing decision process. It draws attention to the role of information provided verbally. It refutes the existing stereotype of online tourist agencies pushing brick-and-mortar travel agencies out of the market. In addition, it directs the attention of researchers towards the somewhat forgotten subject of research, i.e., offline travel agencies.

The presented study is both original and innovative for several reasons:

1. Firstly, it examines the real situation, which means that the respondents described their actual experiences (completed processes) related to making decisions when purchasing tourist packages before and during the pandemic, and not, as in the case of many other studies, only in terms of purchasing intentions in the future.
2. Secondly, the data for both periods (before and during COVID-19) were obtained from the same panel of respondents. Such a research solution has not been identified while reviewing the previous research addressing the pandemic's impact on buyers' behaviors.
3. Thirdly, the research findings based on the data collected from the same panel of respondents allowed for comparing the purchasing patterns in the period before and during the pandemic, while strengthening the reliability and credibility of the comparisons.
4. Fourthly, the ROPO phenomenon in purchasing tourist packages is generally neither a problem noticed nor covered by researchers, despite the fact that it occurs relatively frequently in practice and its analysis can turn out to be highly useful for travel agents.

The research presented in this article is one of the few studies analyzing the decision-making process of purchasers of tourist packages from the perspective of their use of online and offline information channels. The research contributed to a better understanding of tourists' behavior in uncertain times, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The study has high utility because previous research assumptions and insights on tourism may need to be revised during the COVID-19 era [8]. Moreover, studies should be continued because the situation is dynamic. Future tourism recovery will depend on travelers' behavior and their preferences during the decision-making process.

The results of this study contribute to the sustainability issue particularly in the social and economic areas. Knowledge of tourists' behavior supports the recovery of travel companies (here travel agencies) from the pandemic crisis. The research findings also help to better understand the tourist decision-making process in the conditions of uncertainty and higher risk. This allows for a better adjustment of the travel agencies' services to the customers' requirements. Adjusting the service to the expectations of customers contributes to the sustainability of tourism enterprises.

7. Limitations and Further Research

The generalization of research results must be performed with care, as there were several limitations. Firstly, this study included only Polish residents who bought a package holidays before and during the pandemic crisis. Further research replicating our analysis among residents of other countries would be valuable in terms of comparing results. Secondly, the same questionnaire was used to survey travelers' decision behavior in buying package holidays during two periods before and during the pandemic. In this regard, a common method bias can appear. Thirdly, this research was carried on at the end of 2020, and it is highly probable that the results obtained do not correspond to the situation in 2021 or 2022. Fourthly, the research was limited to socio-demographic factors influencing decision-making. Therefore, it is recommended to focus further research on other decision-making factors, and above all on the psychographic characteristics of package holiday buyers, and the impact of these factors on the choice of information source as well as purchasing channels during the decision-making process. Future studies should also take into account variables influencing technology acceptance in the decision-making process of package holiday buyers (i.e., perceived ease of ICT use, perceived risk of ICT use, perceived usefulness of ICT). A comprehensive approach to variables is of key importance in explaining the purchasing behavior of tourists.

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