

CURRENT TRENDS AND INFLUENCING FACTORS IN TOURIST CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

Tourist consumption behavior is an extremely important pre-pandemic growth indicator, as it shows the global scale of the tourism phenomenon and its macroeconomic implications. In this context, tourism naturally becomes the testing ground for the acceleration of digitalization processes. The approach is an integrated one, highlighting the interaction between economic rationality, socio-cultural influences, the emotional dimension of the tourist experience and the impact of new digital technologies in the consumer decision-making process. The contemporary tourist benefits from extensive access to information, uses online platforms and mobile applications for planning and booking trips and adopts an increasingly autonomous behavior, oriented towards comparison, personalization and optimization of the value-cost ratio.

The paper highlights the transition from classic, organized and standardized tourism to flexible forms of do-it-yourself travel, in which authentic experience, sustainability and self-development occupy a central place. Tourist consumption behavior is analyzed both as a rational and informative process and as a social and cultural phenomenon, in which identity, status and group membership significantly influence consumption choices. The study also highlights the determining role of social networks, user-generated content and emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, augmented reality and virtual reality, in shaping tourist perceptions and satisfaction.

In conclusion, tourism consumption behavior is emerging as a complex, dynamic and adaptive process, located at the intersection of economy, culture and technology, requiring flexible strategies from tourism service providers, focused on a deep understanding of the motivations and expectations of the modern consumer.

Key words: *Tourist consumption behavior, Digitalization, Tourist platforms and social networks, Tourist trends.*

JEL Classification: *D12, L83.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The passage of tourism through a pandemic of unprecedented scale, with catastrophic short-term effects on society and mobility, could have signified either “the end of tourism” as it was traditionally known or, alternatively, a process of structural realignment toward a far more versatile model, better adapted to contemporary business perspectives within the hospitality and travel industry (Walkmann et al., p.163).

The recovery of international tourism flows to their pre-pandemic 2019 levels now established as benchmark values for the upcoming decade began in 2023. It is estimated that 1.4 billion international tourist arrivals (overnight stays) were recorded worldwide in 2024, representing an 11% increase compared to the previous year, which corresponds to an absolute growth of approximately 140 million tourists (WTBS, 2025, p.3).

Within this context, tourist consumption behavior has acquired new dimensions. Generational shifts, the growing emphasis on sustainable and ecological tourism, the perception of travel as a personal experience aimed at self-discovery and self-development, the influence of emerging societal and group norms, and, most notably, the impact of digitalization in tourism have collectively driven significant changes in tourist behavior. Furthermore, the emergence and rapid expansion of digital platforms, social media networks, and advanced information transmission technologies have led to an increased personalization of tourists' consumption preferences.

Classical tourism, characteristic of the 1990-2000 period, was defined by organized, mass tourism, delivered primarily through travel agencies, predominantly in All-Inclusive formats, and constrained by substantial technological limitations. Tourists obtained information through brochures, leaflets, and television, while bookings were made in person at agency offices, through sales agents, or by

telephone. The most sought-after destinations were located in Europe (Spain, France, Italy, and Greece), while in Romania, tourism demand was concentrated mainly along the Black Sea coast and in spa resorts. Tourism demand was symmetrically focused on the summer and winter seasons.

By contrast, modern tourism is increasingly based on semi-organized travel and “DIY travel” with tourists largely selecting their destinations independently through applications such as Booking,

Airbnb, and Skyscanner. While European destinations continue to dominate preferences, locations in Asia, the Americas, and Africa are increasingly perceived as destinations imbued with mysticism, where tourists seek not only relaxation but also authentic local, natural, and cultural experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced new safety standards in tourism, with travel combined with remote work emerging as one of the most significant developments of the past decade.

Table 1. Differences in consumption typologies between classical and modern tourism

Typology	Classical Tourism	Modern Tourism (post-pandemic)
Seasonality	Predominantly summer - winter	Year-round
Organization	Primarily through travel agencies, mass tourism, All-inclusive systems	Individualized tourism, travel combined with work (remote work)
Technology	Use of brochures, leaflets, catalogues, traditional media (TV/radio), and sales agents	Extensive use of digital technologies, AI, online platforms, and augmented reality
Motivation	Relaxation; social status	New cultural experiences, self-learning and personal development
Accessibility	Certain limitations (visa requirements, limited information, developing transport infrastructure)	High and global accessibility
Destinations	Predominantly European, mainly urban and coastal	Diversified destinations across Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas; rural, sustainable, and alternative tourism forms

Within a broader framework, the consumer decision-making process equally applicable to tourism consumers can be defined as the set of processes “through which individuals and groups select, purchase, use, and dispose of goods, services, ideas, or experiences in order to satisfy their needs and desires” (Kotler, 2016, p.131).

This study is structured around a clearly defined set of research objectives, designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of tourist consumption behavior.

O1. Analyzing tourist consumption behavior from the perspective of economic rationality and the consumer decision-making process;

O2. Identifying social, cultural and symbolic influences on tourist consumption behavior;

O3. Assess the impact of digitalization and online platforms on the decision-making process and tourism experience.

The theme focuses on transforming the tourist into an informed and connected consumer through the use of booking platforms, social networks, and online reviews, which restructure information search, increase transparency, and intensify indirect social influence.

II. FACTORS INFLUENCING TOURISM CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOR

Defined as “the totality of actions, attitudes, and decisions that characterize the process of purchasing, using products/services, and discontinuing their use” (Cătoi, 2009, p.32), tourism consumption behavior is influenced by the complexity of international trends, digital environments, and cultural models. Easy access to information and international products reshapes perceptions of value and stimulates a desire for novelty and diversity in consumption behavior (Kotabe and Helsen, 2017, p.204), ultimately contributing to the redefinition of identity.

The specialized literature identifies several types of tourist consumption behavior, structured as follows:

a. Consumption Behavior as a Rational and Informational Process

In this perspective, the consumer is viewed as a rational actor, capable of making decisions based on accurate and relevant information or personal objectives, rather than being driven by impulses or emotions. Rational Choice Theory, developed in the social sciences and economics, assumes that consumers including tourists act to maximize the utility of their choices, taking into account budget constraints and

personal preferences. As Becker (1976, p.5) argues, “the combined assumptions of maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences, used relentlessly and unflinchingly, form the heart of the economic approach.”

The Engel – Blackwell - Miniard (EBM) model, grounded in the decision-making process, highlights that tourism consumers go through multiple rational stages when making choices. “Consumers are active information processors who adapt their decisions based on prior experiences and external feedback” (Engel et al., 1995). Accordingly, tourists sequentially pass through stages such as problem recognition, information search and source evaluation (internet, recommendations, advertising, trusted individuals’ experiences), evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase satisfaction or cognitive dissonance.

To simplify complex decisions, tourism consumers rely on cognitive strategies such as price heuristics assuming higher-priced products are superior or brand heuristics trusting well-known brands. Such purchasing decisions are influenced by how information is organized, stored, and retrieved from consumer memory (Bettman, 1979, pp.139–144).

The digital era and the digitalization of services have transformed tourism purchasing into an increasingly rational process. The emergence of platforms such as Booking, Expedia, and Kayak enables effortless online price comparison and the evaluation of user reviews as trust indicators. According to Nielsen (2015, p.7), over 70% of consumers read reviews before making a purchase decision, perceiving them as a significant source of trust.

Although rationality remains a dominant pattern in consumer choice, Kahneman and Tversky (1979, p.268) demonstrated that individuals are subject to cognitive biases, often preferring risk avoidance even when potential benefits are greater. The so-called “anchoring effect,” whereby an initial price influences perceived value, leads individuals to interpret gain-related decisions as inherently risky.

b. Consumption Behavior as a Social and Cultural Phenomenon

Tourism consumption behavior must be analyzed not only through individual choices but also within a broader socio-cultural framework. Values, identity, and social status within a group are reflected in the consumption choices individuals make. Baudrillard (1970, p.114) defines consumption as an active and collective behavior, a constraint, a sum of decisions, and ultimately an investment, emphasizing its role in group integration and social control.

The symbolic meaning of goods and services consumed by tourists contributes to the construction of social status and perceived individual identity within a “fetishist logic” of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970, pp.76–77). This predetermined process, characteristic

of certain social categories, is closely associated with conspicuous consumption, whereby individuals purchase expensive goods to signal status a phenomenon theorized by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen (1899, p.57) argued that “expenditure on consumption is often directed not toward needs, but toward the impression it makes on others.”

Moreover, tourism consumption can also be understood through an emotional lens, as a form of self-regulation. Through the nature of the goods and services they acquire, individuals select products that help regulate and express affective states, such as stress relief or the need for belonging (Kahle et al., 2020, pp.146–159).

c. Consumption Behavior as a Personal and Emotional Experience

Tourism consumption as a personal and emotional experience offers tourists unique encounters, with technological development acting as a key driver of tourism evolution. Globally, at least 22% of tourism services are booked via internet-connected devices, implying substantial data traffic and resource consumption.

This trend necessitates that tourism managers increasingly rely on Big Data and data-driven analytics. Such tools enable brands to personalize guest experiences and, through targeted marketing, foster customer loyalty. Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) technologies allow consumers to “try before they book,” while data collected from previous interactions facilitate the delivery of highly personalized experiences. Algorithms can recommend products previously desired, experienced, or positively reviewed on social media platforms.

Recent studies indicate that digital technologies have enabled deeper connections between consumers and products, leading to amplified emotional experiences in which products are perceived as extensions of personal identity (Smith and Johnson, 2022, pp.112–130). In this context, consumption becomes an extension of the digitized self.

Consequently, the emergence of targeted advertising has fundamentally transformed tourism product selection. The collection and analysis of user data preferably at group level has become indispensable in contemporary tourism businesses. Advertisers utilize these data to predict which advertisements will be relevant to consumers, ranging from relatively simple search engine marketing (SEM) techniques to sophisticated AI-driven campaigns. These mechanisms are designed not necessarily to guide tourists toward what they desire, but rather toward what marketers promote and recommend.

d. Consumption Behavior as a Globalized Phenomenon

Tourism consumption behavior as a globalized phenomenon has redefined market dynamics and traditional approaches through the acceleration and

cross-border circulation of goods, services, and information. Among tourism consumers, increasingly intense processes of homogenization and diversification are observed, reflecting the pressure exerted by change on established standards.

The internet, rapid connectivity through smartphones and laptops, and social media platforms facilitate the near-instantaneous transfer of cultural and economic trends. At the same time, the free movement of goods, the expansion of international brands, technological revolutions, and media platforms promote cosmopolitan standards of quality and commercial management often described as the "McDonaldization" of consumption (Ritzer, 2011, p.119).

Nevertheless, access to international products and standards does not eliminate cultural identity but rather appears to reinvent it (Kotabe and Helsen, 2017, p.204). However, potential adverse effects cannot be ignored. The homogenization of lifestyles risks diluting local traditions and, in some cases, generating frustration. The fear that authenticity may be lost under the pressure of new influences (Tomlinson, 1999, p.70) fuels cultural anxiety and intensifies intergenerational conflict.

III. TOURISM CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOUR IN THE ERA OF DIGITALIZATION

Technology and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have substantially changed the way consumers perceive and choose tourist destinations. Tourism service providers have had to adapt to the new requirements, to understand more deeply what motivates tourists, in order to be able to offer them experiences that are as close as possible to expectations.

Consumer behavior in tourism involves decisions regarding the allocation of time and money resources in a leisure context, being influenced by a series of complex variables (Middleton, 1994, p.10), variables that must be viewed from both an economic and psychological, social and cultural point of view.

The mix of motivations, perceptions and attitudes underlie most tourism decisions. It represents those psychological factors that determine the tourist to travel to escape from the daily routine, to discover new places or to enrich their general culture (Crompton, 1979, p.409). This combination explains why, for example, some people prefer city breaks, while others prefer adventures in nature. The desire to visit a tourist destination goes beyond personal motivations or suggestions offered, perception playing an essential role in choosing a holiday destination. Ultimately, the decision made is determined to a greater extent by perceptions than by objective reality (Kotler et al., 2017, p.673). In this context, a promotion campaign well adapted to the cultural and behavioral specifics of the target audience, with favorable reviews from the

online environment can transform a relatively unknown location into a top tourist attraction.

The acquisition of tourism expertise leads to the formation of a clear-cut attitude of consumers towards certain locations or types of services. If the experiences are positive, the tourist will approach future trips with more confidence and enthusiasm, while also showing a greater openness to new experiences and destinations. On the other hand, an unpleasant event or situation leads to a more skeptical, reserved approach, subsequently, tourists even tending to orient themselves towards trips/stays that are more carefully verified and confirmed with very high reviews and ratings on Booking. As such, tourists who have extensive experience in the online environment tend to be much more critical and demanding. They develop their own evaluation criteria, based on multiple comparisons, thus becoming a special category of consumers, difficult to impress, but extremely valuable for the overall development of tourism services. Over time, they will become the most trusted prescribers. The influence of tourists' previous experiences must be taken seriously and considered one of the fundamental criteria of customer-oriented tourism strategies.

Equally, the **socio-cultural environment** is also an important factor in travel decisions, and tourist choices reflect deeply internalized cultural norms (Goodall, 1991, p.65). While in deeply religious countries we encounter a predominantly militant tourism, in more secular countries the emphasis is on fun and relaxation. Recommendations received from close people – circle of friends, family, colleagues – are often more convincing than the best marketing campaigns. This trust is born from the affective relationship between the sender and the receiver, people being prone to give credit rather to trusted people who give honest and disinterested advice. "Word-of-mouth" type recommendations have a significant impact on tourists' perceptions, these being considered more reliable than information from official sources (Gretzel and Yoo, 2008, p.48).

In the case of planned holidays, which involve heterogeneous groups in terms of age, the family plays an essential role because the opinion of the parents or the life partner makes the decision seem to be a collective one. Last but not least, the aspects related to the divergences of opinion in the decision-making stage are also relevant. If in the inspiration and exploration phase, the recommendations of friends are extremely valuable, in the final, decision-making phase, online reviews or consulting prescribers/experts can weigh enormously in choosing the best offer (Bronner and De Hoog, 2011, p.726).

Often, financial reality slows down or can obstruct the materialization of travel desires. The available **economic factors** influence not only the chosen destination but also the length of stay, the type of accommodation and the activities included. Thus, many companies come with discounts that sensitize and reorient the decisions of consumers of tourist services.

In fact, price sensitivity characterizes much of the behavior of the modern consumer in tourism (Moutinho, 2000, p.67). Early Booking or Last-Minute reservations are increasingly sought after in light of the discounts offered.

A relevant example of the influence of prices in choosing a destination is that associated with the Roccaroso ski resort in Italy, which was stormed by tens of thousands of tourists after a TikTok campaign supported by influencers, but also by some of the national travel agencies that promoted one-day packages at prices of 20, maximum 30 Euros (www.runnersworld.com).

Currency fluctuations, combined with high inflation, are another macroeconomic issue that can influence tourists' travel decisions. A weak national currency can make holidays abroad too expensive. This can lead to an increase in domestic tourism, but it mainly supports incoming tourism.

From a **socio-cultural and demographic** point of view, destinations that offer adventure and affordable prices will be targeted with predilection by teenagers to the detriment of couples past their prime, 35-50 years old, who will be attracted to a greater extent by integrated tourist services under the All-Inclusive umbrella / packages that include half board, cultural-religious tourism or medical tourism.

Demographic variations determine not only the preferred types of tourism, but also different consumption behaviors (Swarbrooke and Horner, 2007, p.90). Thus, in the case of young people (students and pupils), modest accommodation units - hotels, hostels, guesthouses - of a maximum of 2-3 stars or parashelters structures such as cabins or campsites, will be important options when choosing a travel destination. At the same time, people with a flexible work schedule or retirees will be more tempted to look for and will even opt for classic accommodation units available during the periods of the year when there are larger pre- or post-season discounts (May - June, September - October).

The redefinition of young tourists' consumption behavior has taken on new dimensions with the development of technological factors. In an increasingly technological tourism landscape, online booking platforms and reviews provided by other tourists are becoming main landmarks in planning a trip. The Internet has transferred the power of information from the supplier to the consumer, allowing tourists to quickly access comparable information about destinations, prices and services (Kotler et al., 2017, p.332), thus decreasing the level of tolerance for uncertainty and increasing the margin for organizing and prioritizing activities. The increase in portability in the cases of gadgets (smartphones, laptops, tablets, smartwatches) has contributed to the increase in users' desire to benefit from offers, tourist guides or real-time assistance as quickly as possible and from anywhere, which has led the hospitality and travel industry to adapt its services to offer fast and intuitive

mobile solutions. All of this has caused content on social media, blogs, vlogs or review sites, coupled with a series of tourism applications dedicated to tourist traffic, to massively influence the purchasing decisions of consumers of tourism services.

According to InterGlobe, 50% of travelers under 40 use social media as their main source of inspiration for travel planning. In contrast, people over 65 are less influenced by online reviews. A TripAdvisor report indicates that only 6.5% of respondents over 65 consult the platform and post travel reviews, suggesting a much lower use of online review platforms for this age group (www.tripadvisor.com). Also, a study published in the Journal of Vacation Marketing highlights that (dis)trust in some destinations is deeply influenced by online reviews and plays a significant role in the manifestation of travel intentions. Regarding the environment of origin (urban/rural), some researchers (ScholarWorks) suggest that the differences in online travel planning between urban/rural users are significant, but do not significantly determine different content for online reviews.

The current global context makes tourism one of the most receptive and, at the same time, sensitive branches to social and technological changes. Concurrently with the explosion of information and communication technologies, and especially social networks, the way in which tourism services are delivered, promoted and consumed has changed almost radically, from choosing a destination to the way in which service providers are interacted with.

All aspects of the business environment now integrate increasingly laborious technological structures based on smart applications and AI. Augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) today add a new layer of experience: before going on vacation, a user can virtually "visit" the hotel or the destination city (Tussyadiah et al., 2018, p.54). These technologies are no longer the domain of the future – they are already here and are being used with increasing frequency.

Even though the connection between tourism and technology is not a recent phenomenon, the intensity of changes since the dawn of the third millennium has been simply dizzying. E-Tourism seen as the digitization of the entire tourism value chain (Buhalis 2003, p.7) has forced companies to invest heavily in their own websites, online platforms and CRM systems.

Platforms such as Booking.com or Airbnb have practically redrawn the tourism landscape, limiting the activity of traditional travel agencies. Tourists prefer to use meta-search engines and aggregators – social platforms for planning (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010, p.180), to the detriment of classic information channels.

Today, tourism trends are created on social networks, which also facilitate the exchange of content generated by tourists. The mirror of modern tourism has become: TikTok, Instagram and, increasingly, Facebook, which have eclipsed travel agencies that

have had much more difficulty adapting to the new realities imposed by technology. A simple hashtag (#wanderlust, #travelgram) can propel an unknown destination to the top of global preferences, while the power of online communities has become an essential factor in the success (or failure) of a destination.

Mobile technology and tourism applications are now an absolute necessity (Law et al., 2015, p.602) which challenges hotels and travel agencies to continuously adapt. For example, many hotels offer online check-in, eliminating the need for classic interaction at the reception. Chatbots also take customer questions in real time, and personalized offers are delivered as a package, automatically, based on digitally detected preferences.

The growing reliance on online reviews also comes with the risk of manipulation, both with the help of technology that generates fake reviews in the “very good” category and from tourists who can sometimes issue clearly biased opinions or provide truncated information due to ignorance, inattention or lack of objectivity. A hot topic, even if partially regulated at least at EU level, is the protection of personal data. These modern platforms collect, more or less legally, complete information about users (identity documents, bank accounts, consumer preferences, location at a given time, etc.), and these extremely valuable resources (personal data that says a lot about the needs and personality of consumers of tourism services) can end up being used for purposes completely different from those for which they were collected.

Looking to the future, the predictions are both exciting and challenging. Artificial intelligence,

blockchain and the metaverse will no longer be novelties, but common tools in planning (WTO, 2024, p.9) and spending free time, including holidays.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Current tourist consumption behavior can no longer be interpreted exclusively through the prism of classical economic criteria, but must be analyzed as a multidimensional phenomenon, in which decision-making rationality combines with emotional, social and cultural factors. Digitalization, easy access to information and the influence of online communities have transformed the tourist into an active market actor, capable of comparing, evaluating and co-creating tourist experiences. Thus, tourist consumption becomes a form of expression of personal identity, values and individual aspirations, going beyond the simple satisfaction of the need for recreation.

At the same time, the conclusions highlight the need for the tourism industry to continuously adapt to new consumer behavioral patterns. Emerging technologies, personalization of offers and responsible management of personal data are becoming key elements for the competitiveness of destinations and service providers. In the future, success in tourism will depend on the ability of industry players to integrate technological innovation with a deep understanding of the human dimensions of consumption, within a sustainable and ethical framework that meets both the demands of the global market and the expectations of the contemporary tourist.

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