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Degrowth or sustainable growth? Changes in tourism habits after COVID-19

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Abstract:

Purpose of the paper: This study aims at contributing to the debate on the sustainability of post-COVID tourism by exploring the relationships between European tourists' expectations about the long-term effects of the pandemic on their traveling behavior and their intentions to change habits towards a more sustainable tourism experience.

Main Findings: Using data from Eurobarometer, it suggests that European tourists could be roughly clustered in three groups: those that will not change much after the recovery; those showing an avoiding attitude suggesting degrowth; and those revealing an approaching attitude intending to change behaviours and suggesting a more sustainable growth. Avoiders can be targeted by campaigns promoting off-season and/or domestic travel, eliciting the benefits from enjoying less crowded destinations, attractions, and establishments. Seekers may be seduced by claims related to wellness and sustainability, showing the firms' concerns with the environment and the welfare of local communities.

Keywords: Eurobarometer; tourist behaviour; tourism recovery; sustainable tourism; post-COVID tourism

Type of paper: Empirical research with secondary data.

1. Introduction

This study aims at contributing to the debate on post-COVID tourism by exploring the relationships between European tourists' expectations about the long-term effects of the pandemic on their travelling behaviour and their intentions to change habits towards a more sustainable tourism experience. The research output is thus expected not only to assess which travel behaviours will change due to COVID-19 and which habits tourists are more prone to quit to be more sustainable, but also the relationships between these two kinds of attitudes. This knowledge contributes to discuss how a shock involving severe restrictions and intense fears (Miao et al., 2022) may stimulate positive responses favouring sustainable outcomes.

2. Literature review

COVID-19 has been recognized as an opportunity to change the tourism industry for greater sustainability (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2021). After stringent travel limitations in the outbreak of the pandemic, tourism has recovered subject to changes in the business, particularly regarding tourists' preferences for types of accommodation, destination features, and holiday activities.

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For example, research has evinced a shift towards favouring small-scale accommodation (Aiello et al., 2022; Marques et al., 2022), destinations with specific landscape features (Falk et al., 2022), and some rural amenities (Marques et al., 2023). In general, these changes are consistent with the expectation of a more sustainable tourism future (Salem et al., 2023). However, it is not known yet if these changes will have long-term effects in tourism demand (Vogler, 2022) or if those effects will stimulate sustainable tourist behaviour (González-Reverté et al., 2022).

In this context, it is of great relevance studying how attitudinal changes due to COVID-19 may be related to intentions for more sustainable future tourist behaviours. Previous studies used in-depth interviews to show that potential tourists see travel as a means to escape the negativity of COVID-19 and to seek remote, nature-based, uncrowded environments to improve mental well-being (Bhalla et al., 2021); and surveys to assess how environmental concern affects risk perception and intentions to change the choice of destinations and accommodation (González-Reverté et al., 2022). The present study aims at more generalizable results by resorting to large-scale secondary data to relate perceived effects of COVID-19 with intentions to change tourism behaviour post-COVID.

3. Methods

This exploratory study uses secondary data from the Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2022) measuring the attitudes of the residents in the European Union towards tourism. This approach benefits from the availability of a large dataset covering all the 27 EU Member States, at the cost of being bound to a questionnaire designed by a third party uninvolved in the research. During October 2021 25,711 EU citizens, from a sample representing the population aged 15 years and over residing in each Member State, were interviewed via computer-assisted telephone interviewing following contacts generated by random digit dialling methods. This study uses a subsample of 21,272 who used to travel at least once a year before the pandemic.

Descriptive statistics are computed based on post-stratification weighting, since the overall sample is formed by 27 different strata with unequal sampling fractions. The relation between changes due to COVID-19 and intentions of sustainable behaviours is assessed by categorical canonical correlation analysis with optimal scaling (van der Burg et al., 1994). The analyses involve data from Q1 of the questionnaire, asking "What long-term effects, if any, do you expect the COVID-19 pandemic will have on your traveling behaviour?", allowing respondents to mention nine effects; and from Q5, "Are you prepared to change your travel and tourism habits to be more sustainable? If so, in which of the following ways?", listing nine ways.
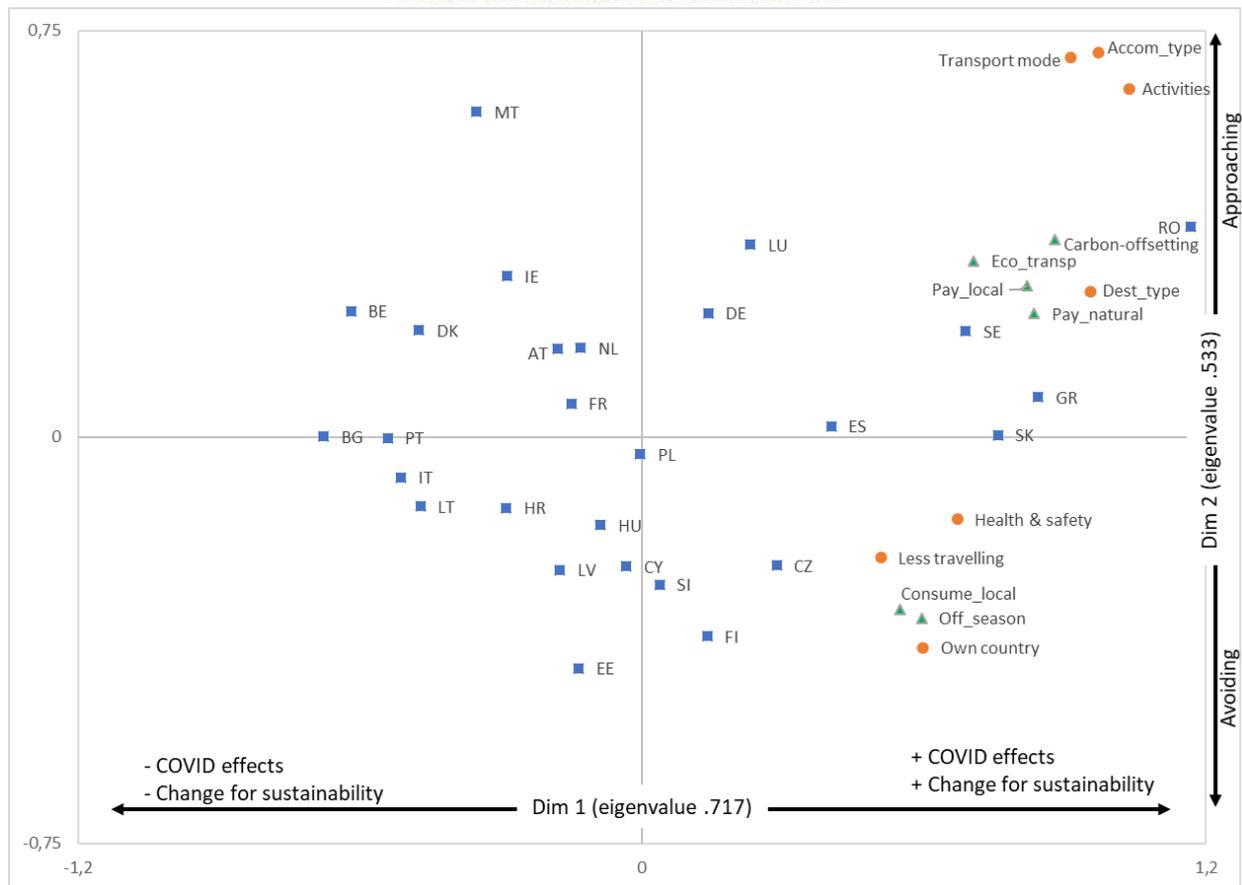
4. Results

One in two EU citizens states that, in the long-term, they will pay more attention for health and safety measures (Table 1). About one in five declares that COVID-19 will impact on the type of destination, sets of activities and modes of transportation they will choose in future holidays. Only one in six discards long-term effects of the pandemic on the traveling behaviour. Regarding the intention to behave in a more sustainable way, six in seven citizens are prepared to change tourism habits. Consume more locally and reducing waste are the more frequently mentioned behaviours, but, in general, each one of the behaviours considered in the questionnaire is intended to be adopted by at least $^1/_3$ of European tourists.

Table 1 - Percentage of respondents mentioning effects of COVID-19 and change in tourism habits

Long-term effects		Change in habits	
Health & safety	51	Consume local products	55
Travel own country	40	Reduce waste	50
Less travelling	39	Travel off season	46
Community impact	28	Less visited destinations	40
Countries	26	Pay to protect natural	35
Destination type	22	Eco transport	34
Activities	20	Carbon-offsetting	33
Transport mode	19	Reduce water	33
Accommodation type	14	Pay to community	32
None	18	No change	14

A correlational analysis allows finding co-occurrences of expected effects, intended changes, and variables of both sets. The exploratory analysis of these co-occurrences may be summarized in the plot shown in Figure 1. The final categorical canonical correlation analysis has dropped two long-term effects and three changes in habits that were close to the centre of the plot, meaning that they were poorly represented by the two-dimensional solution. The remaining variables are quite well represented by the two dimensions, denoting a high degree of similarity in the responses of both expected effects and intended changes. The linear combinations of the long-term effects of COVID-19 and of the intended changes in habits both summarize about 72% of the variation in individual scores in the first dimension, which represents the response (on the right) versus lack of response (on the left).

Figure 1. Centroids of the category "mentioned" for each variable and of object scores for the Member States

The same kind of linear combinations explain about 53% of the variation in individual scores in the second dimension, which separates the responses in two distinct quadrants: changes in type of accommodation, mode of transportation, touristic activities, and type of destination, cluster in the upper right, jointly with intentions to be more sustainable by paying more, offsetting carbon emissions and considering the ecological impact in choosing transportation. These variables show a positive attitude, approaching change behaviours. The other group, in the lower right, include degrowth effects, such as traveling less and to closer destinations, worrying about health and safety, traveling off-season and buying local. It is thus a strategy to cope the changing environment by avoiding the negative attributes.

Besides the centroids of the responses to these two sets of variables, Figure 1 also depicts the average object (respondent) scores for each Member State. In average, tourists from countries on the left side of the plot anticipate less effects of COVID-19 on their future travel behaviour and show weaker intentions to change their habits towards more sustainable tourism impacts. Countries on the upper right quadrant have larger proportion of tourists willing to change travel habits not only to cope with possible pandemic outbreaks, but also to have a more sustainable tourism experience. This approaching attitude is more evident in countries such as Romania, Sweden, or Luxembourg. On the other hand, the avoiding attitude of tourists prone to travel less frequently, choosing closer destinations and consuming locally, is more salient in Czechia and Finland, for example.

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5. Discussion

Although this research is exploratory, it unquestionably demonstrates that there is a similarity in European tourists' responses to two different kinds of questions: if they expect long-term effects of COVID-19 on travelling behaviour; and if they are prepared to change tourism habits to be more sustainable. This confirmed similarity allows for speculation about the impact of grief and fear on attitudes and intentions regarding post-COVID tourism behaviours (Crossley, 2020; Miao et al., 2022). However, further research is needed to verify if there may be any causal nexus between the effects of COVID-19 and an intention to change post-COVID travel habits or if the similarity in the responses to both sets of questions may be due to a third unmeasured variable.

Another significant result from this study is the emergence of two different forms of response, one based on degrowth, the other bespeaking hope for more sustainable growth. The opposition between approach and avoidance motivation is well-known in studies of tourist behaviour (Marques, 2006), positing that tourists are avoiding some stimuli and looking for different stimuli. This research suggests that a similar opposition regulates response to the need for more sustainable tourism – tour less or look for different kinds of touring.

6. Conclusion

An ongoing debate about post-COVID tourism envisages three different but concurrent and intersecting paths: degrowth, different (and more sustainable) growth, and catching-up uncontrolled growth (Miao et al., 2021; Vogler, 2022). This exploratory study, using data from Eurobarometer, contributes to the discussion by clustering European tourists roughly into three groups: those that will not change much post-COVID; those showing an avoiding attitude indicating degrowth; and those revealing an approaching attitude to change behaviours, signalling the hope for more sustainable growth.

The approaching attitude implies changes in destination choice and therefore could contribute to degrowth in more saturated areas and a more balanced development over the territory. It is, however, a minority attitude among European tourists, which would recommend EU to employ communication resources to convey its benefits to a larger share of citizens. Regarding the tourism industry, there is room to diversify positioning to different segments. Avoiders can be targeted by campaigns promoting off-season and/or domestic travel, eliciting the benefits from enjoying less crowded destinations, attractions, and establishments. Seekers may be seduced by claims related to wellness and sustainability, showing the firms' concerns with the environment and the welfare of local communities. As might be expected, the attributes, benefits, and emotions involved in attracting tourists with the approach attitude must be different for saturated and for emergent destinations.

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