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CURRENT TRENDS IN SPA, HOTEL AND TOURISM

„ Searching for a future direction in tourism “

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„ Searching for a future direction in tourism “

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IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHANGES IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN PURCHASING LEISURE PRODUCTS

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Abstract: *The Covid-19 pandemic was a major adverse event that significantly changed the business environment. The research into effects of COVID-19 pandemic has provided many significant findings with drastic implications for societies worldwide. This paper strives to contribute to current pool of knowledge by providing information on how Slovak consumers changed their behavior during the pandemic and soon after its conclusion in relation to purchasing leisure products. The main aim of the research was to document consumer behavior changes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic with special focus on leisure products. The data used in this research is based on a survey that collected opinions and experiences of 987 consumers during various pandemic years enabling comparison with pre-pandemic situation, as well as different stages of the pandemic. Two hypotheses were formulated to direct the research. The findings indicate major changes in purchasing leisure products, however these changes manifested themselves differently throughout various years of the pandemic. Most consumers in every age group decrease the number of products that they bought during the pandemic. The biggest decrease can be observed in the age group of consumers ages between 30 and 39 years old since up to 60.91% of consumers decreased the number of products they bought during the pandemic. This change was more significant in 2021 and 2022. Furthermore, this research provides information on how different segments of consumers reacted and adapted their behavior. More than 40% of people between 30 and 39 years old made changes in buying leisure products during the pandemic. When asked to provide the reason for this behavior, up to 92% of consumers stated the pandemic itself. Fear as a possible source of influence was explored and based on research findings rejected.*

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic. Consumer behavior. Leisure products.

Introduction

The research into effects of Covid-19 pandemic has provided many significant findings with drastic implications for societies worldwide. Such drastic changes created a new reality that many of the entrepreneurs had to face. Tourism and selling of leisure activities products and services were the industries that were impacted the most during the pandemic. Data shows that up to 87.62% of enterprises was affected by the pandemic (Tsui et al., 2021; Sacramento, 2024).

The state of society during the pandemic years generated an atmosphere of dread and even repression as perceived by some consumers. Individuals were no longer free to decide when to go to the store or even which store to visit, as many countries implemented lockdown policies or containment zones. Consequently, people visited shops less frequently and prioritized stores located near their homes or workplaces. As numerous recent research findings indicate, this situation compelled consumers to focus more on planning their shopping, leading to significant changes in consumer behavior (Li et al., 2024; My and Tung, 2023). Two distinct yet interrelated influences drove these changes. The first group of factors was linked to the pandemic itself and the measures taken by governments to mitigate its effects. The second group of factors was internal, based on how individual consumers perceived the pandemic's

impact on their lives. These factors were associated with the levels of fear of health risks or economic risks related to the pandemic's adverse effects on global economies. People feared for their health, the health of their loved ones, and often their livelihoods, as the pandemic significantly affected many economic sectors, such as tourism and other service industries. Therefore, people were both compelled and motivated to alter their shopping habits, as demonstrated by various indicators such as the frequency of shop visits or even their choice of stores (Rakitovac and Urosevic, 2023).

However, the situation was different in tourism industry. Many of the hotels, restaurants and other similar enterprises were partially or completely closed. The ban of traveling made it pretty much impossible for airlines to operate under normal conditions. Since people were unable to spend their vacations by traveling to different places, it would be natural to expect a decrease in their expenses on leisure activities and related products.

There's a lot of data on how the enterprises faced this crisis and how they dealt with it. However, what is lacking from the current pool of knowledge are the opinions of consumers who also had to change their habits and shopping patterns during the pandemic. Their response to changes in the business environment has not yet been properly explored. Therefore, this paper strives to contribute to current pool of knowledge by providing information on how Slovak consumers changed their behavior during the pandemic and soon after its conclusion in relation to purchasing leisure products.

1. Literature review

Consumer behavior is a complex phenomenon that is very difficult to understand and even more challenging to properly describe. However, the concept of consumer behavior is crucial for modern marketing. Several studies have incorporated the factors that influence the consumer behaviors (Dixit et al., 2019; Durmaz et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024; Gnoth et al., 2009). The influence of these factors is unique on different individual consumers depending on their gender, age and other socio-economic factors. This research also took this fact under consideration and hypothesis was formulated to explore the consumer behavior changes depending on age of consumers.

Several adverse events have already occurred in 21st century. All these events had a severe impact on society including the consumers. The earthquake and following tsunami that damaged the Fukushima nuclear power plant resulted in significant decreased the demand for food products produced in the impacted region (Reiher, 2017; Aruga and Wakamatsu, 2018). Covid-19 pandemic was the most severe disease pandemic in 21st century. Its negative impacts have still not been overcome in economies almost 2 years after the conclusion of the pandemic (Niewczas-Dobrowolska et al., 2024; Tudoran et al., 2024). Tourism sector was especially impacted. Wolak-Tuzimek and Maráková (2024) and Huang et al. (2022) discovered that the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed various obstacles and restrictions for the tourism and hospitality industry. Furthermore, Okamuro et al. (2022) explore the impacts of anti-contagion policies on demand of leisure products. An increase in consumers' risk aversion of buying leisure products was also an accompanying phenomenon. Wells et al. (2023) explored the temporal and social challenges within the pandemic and their different implications on consumer's decisions. Niewczas-Dobrowolska et al. (2024) discovered that the most common changes in consumer shopping behavior caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in Poland were frequency of purchases, their number of products purchased and place of purchase. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected consumer behavior so much that new trends were introduced by enterprises to overcome the negative impacts. Gastaldello et al. (2024) examined the behavior of consumers toward virtual experiences. Kim et al. (2023) discovered higher demand for accommodation in private apartments in comparison to hotels. On the other hand, consumers

were found to be less likely to choose sharing economy products under pandemic conditions. During the pandemic, cleanliness is considered more important than location when people choose Airbnb accommodation.

Evidence in the current pool of knowledge on consumer behavior changes during the Covid-19 pandemic are not united on how the consumers altered the amount of product they bought during the pandemic in comparison to pre-pandemic situation. Several studies show that consumers increase the amounts of products they bought especially in the early stages of the pandemic (Ali et al., 2022; Durmaz et al., 2022). On the other hand, there is evidence on the contrary. Several researchers discovered that consumers turned more towards sustainable consumption during the pandemic and decreased the number of products they bought (Gastaldello et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022). This evidence is also supported by the research that was conducted in the initial stages of the pandemic which explode the assumption that the measurements taken by the government to contain the spread of the virus would result in smaller quantities of products bought by consumers (Streimikiene et al., 2021). Based on these contradictory trends this research study also aims to provide evidence on how the situation was in context of Slovak consumers.

Accompanying phenomenon to pandemic was an increase of fear in societies. Cakirkaya and Kocyigit (2024) and Ali et al. (2022) discovered that panic buying occurred during the Covid-19, however Luc and Hoang (2023) proved that this phenomenon was significant only during the early stages of the pandemic. Fear is a state of mind that deteriorates the ability of mind to make decisions objectively (Stylidis et al., 2024). Therefore, this research also focused on exploring the effects of fear on decisions of consumers to either buy or not buy leisure products during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Methodology

The aim of the research was to document consumer behavior changes during and after the Covid-19 pandemic with special focus on leisure products. This aim was fulfilled by exploring data based on the empirical study conducted as a part of the research project. A questionnaire was used to collect data from up to 987 consumers in the Slovak Republic. The data collection period was between 2020 up to 2023. As a result, a representative sample file of base file was created. The whole Slovak adult population was selected as base file. Age of consumers was selected as the criterion of verifying its representativeness. Chi-square test was used to verify and confirm its representativeness. Figure1 shows the distribution of consumers from sample file based on their age.

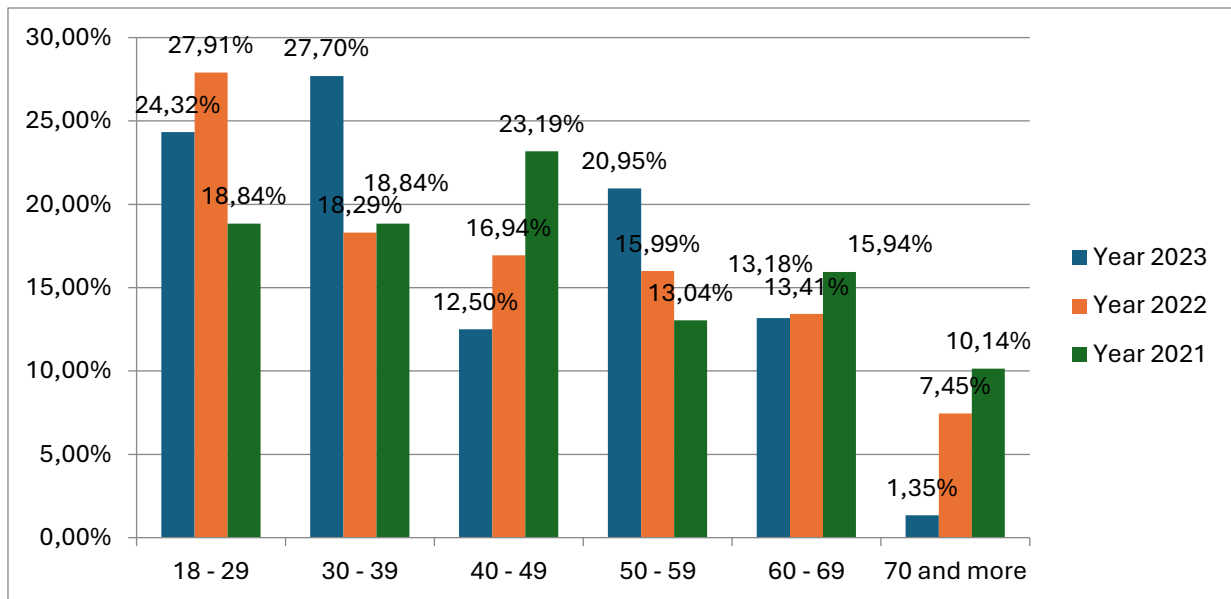


Figure 1 Sample file

Source: Own elaboration.

Two hypotheses were formulated to direct this research. Both hypotheses address a critical issue of this research, and their verification will contribute to current pool of knowledge on impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on business environment. The hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H1: There are significant differences in how consumers of different ages have changed the quantities of leisure products purchased during the Covid-19 pandemic.

H2: Fear was a significant factor influencing consumers in their decisions to buy or not to buy leisure products during the pandemic.

Statistic tests are used to verify the hypotheses, specifically the binomial test and Spearman's Rho coefficient that were used in similar empirical research studies (Salisu et al., 2021; Koçak et al., 2023; Kunjuran, 2023).

3. Results

The aim of this research is to explore consumer behavior changes that occur during the pandemic in the Slovak Republic in with special interests in leisure products. One of the first assumptions that were created during the pandemic was the fact that consumers decreased the number of products they bought. However, our research shows that this was not the case. It is true that some consumers decreased the number of products they bought, however, it is clear that there was not the case for throughout the whole spectrum of consumers. Figure 2 shows how the consumers of different ages reacted to pandemic in different years of its occurrence based on the age of consumers. According to the data shown in Figure 2, it is possible to conclude that most consumers in every age group decrease the number of products that they bought during the pandemic. The biggest decrease can be observed in the age group of consumers ages between 30 and 39 years old since up to 60.91% of consumers decreased the number of products they bought during the pandemic. On the other hand, consumer's older than 70 years old equally didn't change the number of products they bought or decreased it. However, almost 21% of these consumers increased the number of products they bought. This result is the highest from all age groups.

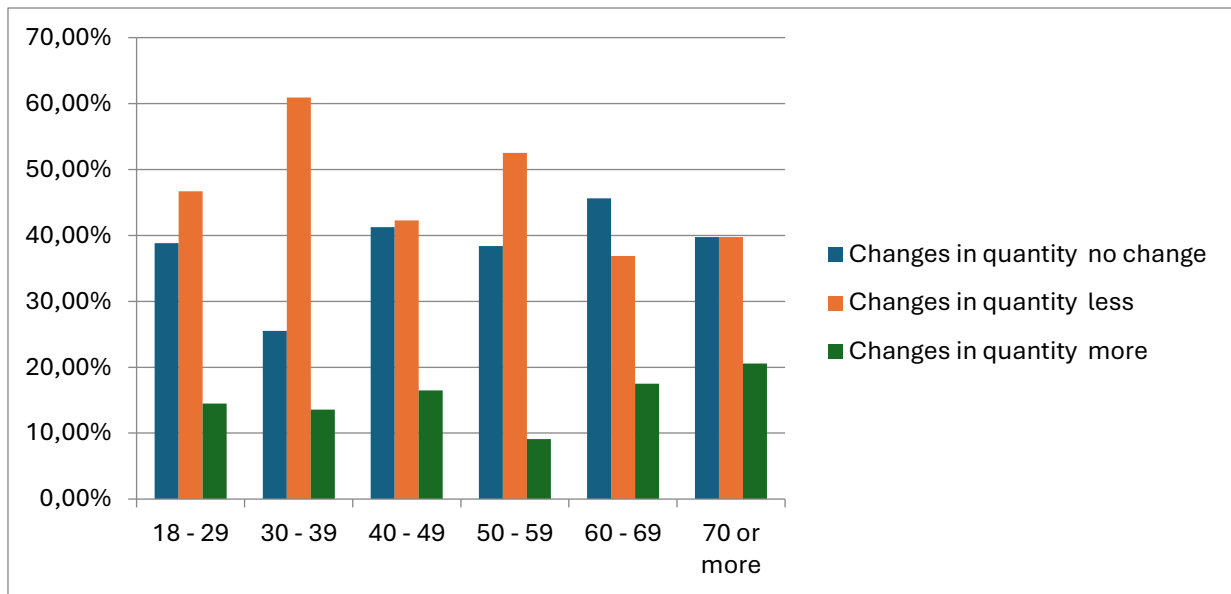


Figure 2 Changes in the quantity of purchased products

Source: Own elaboration.

Changes in the amount of purchased products, however, don't completely reflect on the reality in all sectors of the economy. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate what types of products were bought more and what types of products were bought less. Figure 3 shows the differences in types of products they bought depending on the age of consumer. According to the data, daily consumption products were the ones where the differences between and during the pandemic were the highest. This difference is significant especially for older consumers. The data also shows that approximately 20% of all consumers made changes in buying leisure products. However, this percentage is not equal in all age categories. By grouping the consumers by age and it's possible to ascertain the differences between some groups of consumers. While less than 20% of consumers older than 60 years old only made changes in buying these types of products and services, this share was significantly higher in younger groups of consumers. More than 40% of people between 30 and 39 years old made changes in buying leisure products during the pandemic. When asked to provide the reason why they changed the quantities of leisure products bought during the pandemic, up to 92% of consumers stated the pandemic itself. Only 12% of consumers indicated the changes in prices as the main reason.

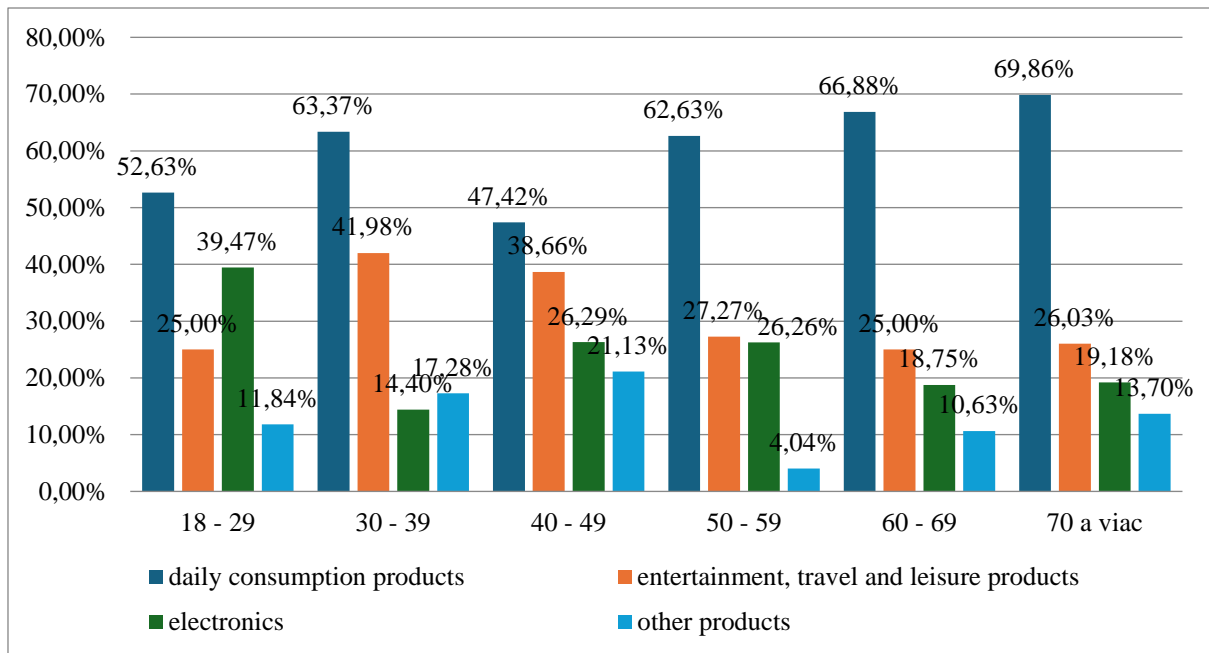


Figure 3 Change in the amount of purchased different types of products based on age
Source: Own elaboration.

A hypothesis was also formulated to explore this phenomenon. Hypothesis H1 focused on exploring whether there are significant differences in how consumers of different ages have changed the quantities of leisure products purchased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Verifying this assumption proposes the premise of correlated relationship between age of consumers and changes in quantity of leisure products purchased. Spearman's Rho index was used to verify this hypothesis. The coefficient was calculated at the level 0.679 which indicates medium strong indirect relationship. This finding indicates that the older the consumer is, less likely he or she is to change the quantity of purchased leisure products. Since the strength of the relationship is higher than low, it is possible to ascertain that this relationship is significant. Therefore, we can confirm the hypothesis H1.

Furthermore, it is interesting to investigate this issue based on the year of pandemic. Figure 4 shows the differences between individual years of pandemic. Two opposite trends can be observed. Firstly, we can observe a significant decrease in the percentage of those who bought less leisure products during the researched period. From 53.62% in 2021 this share decreased to 35.14% in 2023. On the other hand, the share of those who increased the amounts of leisure products they bought slightly rose during the observed period. These findings clearly show that there were differences during the different years of pandemic on how the consumers perceived its impacts.

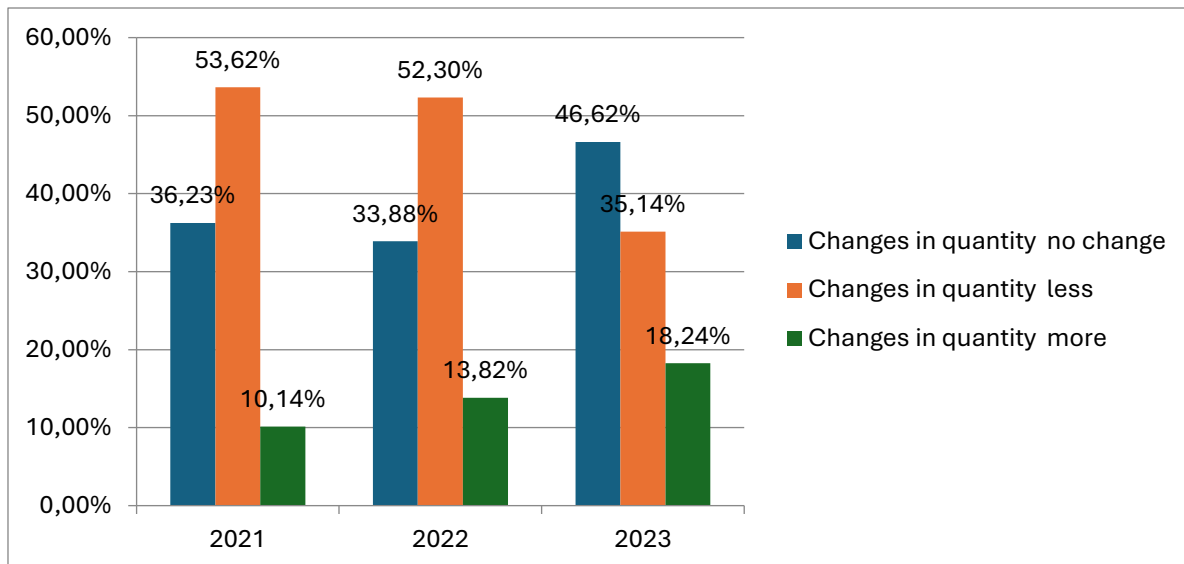


Figure 4 Change in the amount of purchased leisure products based on year of pandemic
Source: Own elaboration.

Hypothesis H2 was formulated to explore the possibilities that fear was a significant factor influencing consumers in their decisions to buy or not to buy leisure products during the pandemic. Since there are different types of fear that consumers could possibly experience during the pandemic, this issue was explored in relation to different possibilities of fear sources. Figure 5 shows data on changes in the amount of leisure products purchased and the degree of different forms of fear that consumers felt or did not feel as significant. Left part of the chart shows those consumers who changed the quantity of leisure products they bought during the pandemic and on the right are those who didn't. And the first look at the data, it is obvious that the differences between those who change the number of products they bought and those who didn't are not very significant. The only small difference that can be observed is in the last statement. Since Hypothesis H2 assumed that fear would be the significant factor influencing the decision to either buy or not to buy leisure products, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. Clearly, the results of descriptive statistics are enough to confirm that this assumption was wrong. Therefore, it is necessary to conclude that other factors influenced consumers more significantly in their decisions when purchasing leisure products during the pandemic.

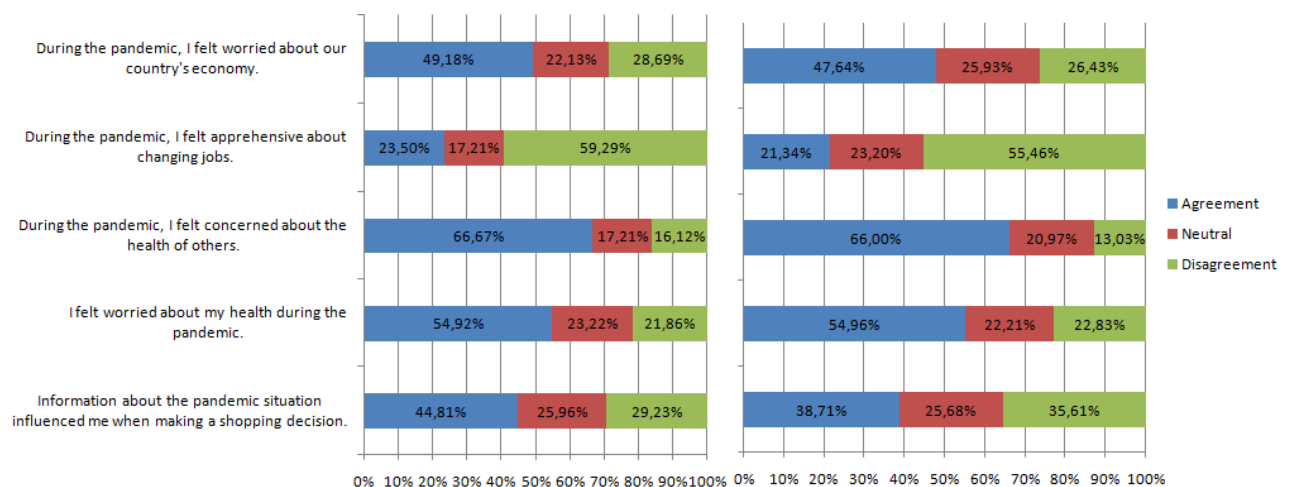


Figure 5 The influence of fear on changes in purchased leisure products
Source: Own elaboration.

Firstly, the influence of information about the pandemic on the purchased quantities of products was examined. Nearly half of all consumers consider this information important when making decisions. The percentage is slightly higher for those who changed the amount of leisure products they bought. Moreover, the share of those who did not consider this information important, nor did they incorporate it into their decision making was slightly lower in this category of consumers.

The most obvious sources of fear during any pandemic are the health concerns. This research focused not only on the fear concerning the health of consumer himself or herself, but also the fear for health of family members. It is interesting to discover that consumers were more concerned for the health of their family members than of their own.

Since the pandemic also brought on economic crisis, several organizations had to decrease the number of employees. Therefore, there was also the fear of losing employment during the pandemic. Nearly a quarter of consumers felt this fear during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the findings show that this was the least important fear of all the explored factors.

Lastly, this research also explored the possibility of fearing for the national economy during the pandemic and its relation to changes in quantity of leisure products bought. There's a slight difference that can be observed between the two researched categories of consumers. It was discovered that those who did change the amount of leisure products they bought were more affected by their concern for the national economy. However, the difference in comparison to the other consumers is only less than 2%.

Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic created an unprecedented situation in our societies. Governments, organizations, enterprises and regular people had to face challenges they had never even predicted could happen. Dealing with these challenges was a complex process that brought on new innovations. As a result, societies have changed and therefore consumers have also changed. The findings of this research clearly show that consumers altered their shopping habits during the pandemic. As whole these changes underline a socio-economic transformation in attitudes and beliefs.

Tourism industry was among the most affected by this major crisis (Gössling et al., 2021). Year 2022 was especially difficult according to these research findings as well as other similar research studies (Oliveira et al., 2023; Subadra and Hughes, 2022). According to the findings of this research the amount of leisure products significantly decreased in the Slovak republic, especially among younger consumers. However, this was not a unique situation. Strouhal et al. (2024) and Munjal (2023) provided evidence on similar cases in other countries. Therefore, it is safe to assume that this was a worldwide problem. This has raised an obvious challenge for tourism enterprises to recover their customers by provided targeted strategies.

Furthermore, this research proved that even though fear played a significant role in influencing consumer behavior, its impacts on the number of products bought by the consumers was not so significant. Other factors had more influence on consumer behavior during the pandemic. Similar findings can be found in other research studies on the subject (Chen et al., 2024; Pongsakornrunsilp et al., 2022; Stankov et al., 2022).

Many enterprises, especially in the tourism industry, struggled very much during the pandemic to stay afloat. Some of them managed to do so and emerged from this experience even more resilient than before. However, the whole industry needs new strategies to deal with possible new threats in the future. More pronounced thinking in system context should be applied. Consumers emerged from the pandemic years with new needs and desires that the enterprises in tourism industry need to address. Even though pandemic brought on new innovations and accelerated the technological process of development, not only the enterprises

have changed, but also their customers have become more knowledgeable and more demanding. Therefore, the pandemic can also be treated as a lesson for what the future could hold in store for all enterprises and their customers.

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