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## TOWARDS A SENSE OF MORAL GUILT-FREEING IN CRISIS SITUATIONS: LEARNINGS FROM AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN FRENCH-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND

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*As part of this research, we conducted a qualitative survey based on 54 semi-structured interviews to find out how French-speaking Swiss residents have changed or are willing to modify their tourism behaviors following the Covid-19 sanitary crisis. As well as identifying opportunities for tactical adaptations to tourism packages for short stays in Switzerland or long stays abroad, our survey highlights that the emergence of crises provokes a feeling of moral guiltlessness in the face of major public issues. This result raises the question of the appropriate strategy to adopt by the public authorities in the face of the observed emergence of polycrises.*

### 1. Context and literature

Since the Covid-19 Pandemic, various studies have tried to evaluate its effects on touristic consumption behaviour and tourism. Not a surprise as tourism is known to be a sensitive domain to adverse consequences and risk perceptions arising from disruptive events and the covid-19 pandemic marked one of the most devastating crisis of its industry in the 21st century. Although that the outlook of tourism activity demonstrates a strong resilience, this does not necessarily mean that the pandemic has left no traces and has not changed consumer behaviour in terms of tourism choices.

The vast majority of the literature covering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism industry highlights the pivotal role played by health and safety, highly correlated to risk perception. Ertas and Kirlan-Can (2022), Teeroovengadum et al. (2021), Chebli and Ben Said (2020) and Wen et al. (2020)' studies all pointed out that safety, healthcare and hygiene measures were playing a critical and increasing role in travelers' decision making in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic.

During the onset of the pandemic, the primary and perhaps sole consideration was centered around health and safety. These factors assumed a critical role in trip planning, as they are closely tied to how risks are perceived (Gajic et al., 2021). This is a

well known phenomenon and many studies, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, have recognized infectious diseases as a prevalent concern for prospective travellers when deciding on a destination (see notably Page, 2009). Indeed, generally when a destination is known to have a high incidence of infectious diseases, it tends to deter tourists from visiting those countries. Adequate crisis management enhancing sense of safety (enhanced by top notch medical facilities, see Bhati et al., 2020) and supported by government policies emerged as the primary factors motivating tourists to return to travel post-COVID-19, with some difference in willingness and ability to return to travel depending on factors like past experiences, age and gender. More experienced, male or younger tourists would continue to travel more easily as their risk perception is lower, (on the impact of experience, see recent study by Dryhurst, 2022, on the impact of age, and gender, see recent studies by Ertas and Kirlar-Can, 2022 or Turnsek et al., 2020).

Also and not really surprisingly, domestic tourism was critical as well to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry with new services and products (like pre-arranged visits or bookings) emerging as a way to mitigate the risk of queues and crowds (Sanchez-Canizares et al., 2021). Many individuals chose to prioritize local excursions, if not by obligation due to border closures, at least because opting for shorter distances increased the likelihood of returning home safely in the event of an unexpected and uncontrollable circumstances (Viana-Lora et al, 2021).

Besides the impact of the decision to travel and the choice of the destinations, some studies revealed other changes observed in tourism consumption patterns along the pandemic's evolution. In their study based on semi-structured interviews with highly regarded European travel agents, Aldao et al. (2022) suggest that the pandemic has underscored the importance of seeking serenity and relaxation by venturing out during the pandemic crisis. Although this would not remain as a long-term trend and the desire to travel would gradually diminish fear and anxiety in the minds of tourists. Even crowded spots or destinations would become popular again (with some limitations due to some target of tourists experiencing long lasting pandemic created habits and remaining reluctant to selected crowded tourism areas, see Ramos et. al, 2021).

In the same study, Aldao et al. (2022) confirm the pivotal role of competitive pricing acting as a true driving force in the recovery of tourism activities (on this topic, see also Chebli and Ben Said, 2020). Travelers are generally reluctant to incur additional costs for the enforcement of protocols at their destinations because they perceive it as their own responsibility to adhere to these measures (Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2021).

Another interesting wave of the academic literature has focused on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on sustainability and sustainable development goals (SDG's). In a nutshell, the main conclusion drawn from these various studies is that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on almost all the SDG's, leaving no country unaffected (Martin Blanco et al., 2022). This pandemic undermined the ability of countries to achieve their SDG's with poverty eradication being the most affected (Yuan et al., 2023) and contributed heavily towards the loss of public health gains. This in turn significantly increased the number of people entering extreme poverty (Mejia et al., 2020). As a consequence, the pandemic has posed more significant challenges to the sustainable development of developing countries than of developed countries (Wang and Huan, 2021). As stated by Albreth (2023), the Covid-19 pandemic deepened challenges and opened new fronts where old and unresolved problems met with new problems triggered by the pandemic itself.

Although a link between the pandemic and a slowdown in sustainable development objectives has been clearly established, these studies do not attempt to account for any change in the level of appreciation and priority given at individual level to everyday SD objectives following the pandemic. This is what makes our research paper original and what distinguishes it fundamentally from the studies carried out to date, in addition to the fact that it is based on the results of individual qualitative surveys, which allows a detailed understanding of some of the results presented in this review of the literature.

## 2. Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative survey conducted in Q2/2022 in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. At that time, Swiss residents were free to travel outside Switzerland, but were still facing constraints like the need to be vaccinated or being immune to covid to travel free with some additional difficulties to travel outside of the European countries where the Covid epidemic was still very much alive.

54 semi-directive interviews were conducted with the aim to understand if, how and to what extent the covid crisis impacted consumers in terms of tourism behaviours and decisions. All interview transcripts were then analysed using Nvivo software to synthesize the results.

After a small warm-up to introduce the topic (“Have you recently taken advantage of a weekend to do a tourist activity or holiday?”), the following questions were used as a basis for the interview.

- Have you recently taken advantage of a weekend to do a tourist activity or holiday?
- Where did you go on your last holiday? Why did you choose this destination?
- Where are you thinking of going on your next holiday? Why did you choose this destination?
- Are your choices of destination the same before Covid as they are now? If so, what has changed? Why or why not? What are you looking for that is different? If not, why not?
- What about local tourism? Do you plan to take advantage of tourism opportunities in Switzerland more often? Why or why not? What do you like or dislike about local tourism (in Switzerland)?
- Do you think that our natural environment is likely to suffer from the influx of local visitors? If so, what are the consequences? If not, what makes you sure/convinced that this won't happen?
- Do climate considerations influence your holiday/leisure decisions? if so, how? if not, why not?
- Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't covered yet? Is there anything you'd like to tell us about that's particularly important to you?

In terms of sociodemographic characteristics, the sample was made up of 55% men and 45% women. In terms of age, 33% of those interviewed are under 35, 37% are

between 35 and 44 and 30% are over 44 years old. In terms of family situation, 34% live alone, 66% as a couple and 65% have children.

With respect to the professional occupation, 39% of those surveyed work in the public sector and 61% in the private sector. Finally, in relation to our research subject, 70% of those interviewed had been personally affected by covid or knew someone close to them who had.

### **3. Synthesis of results**

Basically, we can summarize the results of this qualitative survey in 4 main statements about the impact of the sanitary crisis on the tourism behaviour of French-speaking Swiss residents.

#### **3.1 Not ready/willing to make important changes to tourism behaviour**

Generally speaking, what emerges from all the interviews is a strong sense of weariness. We are coming out of a long period marked by periods of more or less strict control, and the vast majority of people interviewed expressed a need to be able to move around without constraints.

What is striking is the almost unanimous response to the question of how the health crisis may have changed people's choices when it comes to tourism. The answer is clear: we shouldn't expect any major changes, either in terms of destinations or the means of transport used. All the people interviewed shared the feeling that they had already made great efforts and were no longer prepared to make any more ("don't ask me to do more efforts, we have already done so many", women 35-44 years old). The return to 'normal' (i.e. the situation before Covid) is just a matter of time ("we'll resume our travel habits as soon as the crisis is over", man, 55-64 years old).

This confirms findings from Aldao et al. (2022) who claim that the early-stage apprehension stemming from the uncertain would slightly evolve into frustration and that travelers would be prepared to proceed with these restrictions as long as the mechanism to do so would be clear and transparent to them. Beyond a certain level of frustration, safety considerations become secondary.

The only concession envisaged relates to short trips (city trips), for which there is a tendency to avoid taking the plane as far as possible (both from the point of view of ease of transport and budget). Although this could also be the reflection that tourists tend to go for more trips by car when faced with the perception of an external danger (Fall and Massey, 2005).

#### **3.2 Towards a shift in public opinion away from environmental and sustainable development considerations**

But this feeling of 'fed up' goes further. The health crisis appears to have reduced the sense of responsibility or guilt among the individuals interviewed when it comes to environmental concerns. They are aware of climate change and environmental issues and continue to incorporate them into their daily lives... but this does not apply to their choice of holiday.

Although most of the respondents confirmed that they were prepared to continue to make efforts daily to contribute to sustainable development and especially environment related objectives, they feel that *“the biggest efforts should be made by businesses and industry since they are the real polluters”* (woman, 35-44 years old). In any case, none of the 54 people surveyed admitted to making more of an effort than before, no doubt because they felt they had already done a great deal since and during the period of the crisis *“We have already done s many efforts, don’t ask us to do more now”* (woman, less than 35 years old)

For many respondents, the pollution problems do not stem from tourist travel but rather from all other types of travel and the over-consumption of cars coupled with the lack of car-sharing. This means that they say they are not prepared to change their travel behaviour, certainly when it comes to long-distance travel. At most, they are prepared to consider making fewer short city trips, but only if it is possible and does not cost more, not for reasons of principle or environmental awareness (“we take our car and not the plane whenever possible for short distance travel or extended week-end stays”, man 35-44 years old). The moral aspect of sustainable development seems to fade into the background when it comes to tourism choices. The environment is not (or is less) a salient attribute. With this in mind, it is not surprising that a recent quantitative study by the Touring Club Suisse (2023) shows that, since 2020, fewer Swiss people than ever before think that travel should be climate friendly.

Such a finding is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, because this parallels a comparative study of public opinion in the United States, Italy and China during Covid-19 pandemic (Sisco et al., 2020) which highlighted that attention to climate change decreased while public concern remained constant. Therefore, one cannot assume that trends in various aspects of environmental public opinion will necessarily align. In the same vein, Kenny (2022) in his study about the changing prioritization of environmental protection in Britain from 1982 to 2019 concluded that environmental priority trends do not consistently coincide with trends in environment salience where the terms salience indicates its significance in people thoughts and minds and is measured whether the environment is regarded as one of the foremost issues confronting the country.

This result is also interesting as it shows that environmental and sustainable development issues more generally take a back seat to a crisis that is seen as urgent. Following Ladi and Tshouras (2020), what distinguishes an urgent from a standard crisis is when the key actors recognize the existentialist threat of the crisis allowing them alternative ways to approach the crisis quickly with room to maneuver. Our result therefore raises the question of the degree of priority that consumers attribute to environmental problems. They are with no doubt aware of the problems of conserving the planet and, by extension, the of human life on earth but it seems that this issue has only a creeping importance in relation to a health crisis such as the one we experienced with the covid-19 pandemic. Such a statement has also been made by Vince (2023) in the frame of the reprioritization of plastic pollution during the covid-19 pandemic. It also goes in the direction of the findings of Marasco et al. (2023) who state, within a framework of finite-pool-of-worry (FPW)<sup>1</sup> studied in 31 European countries between 2012 and 2019, that growing apprehensions about the economy and other sources of distress frequently

<sup>1</sup> The finite-pool-of-worry (FPW) provides a framework to analyse how different sources of concern interact in people’s mind and states that humans have limited resources to worry. As a consequence, when they are worried about one issue they become less worried about other issues.

overshadow concerns for the environment. They claim that, in a hierarchy of worries, anxieties such as economic concerns would typically precede other sources of worry. Hence? environmental concerns would occupy the 'highest' position in the hierarchy of worries, typically emerging after other concerns have already arisen.

### **3.3 Safety becoming a true salient attribute in terms of tourism choices**

But what also emerges regularly from these field interviews is the fact that the health crisis has heightened consumers' awareness of the risks inherent in travel, especially long-haul travel. The fear of being stranded abroad, having to be hospitalized or having to be repatriated were mentioned several times and very frequently by older people or people travelling with young children ("we're still apprehensive about going on holiday because of the problems that can arise if we have health problems there. In some countries, the quality of health care is not optimal, and how to organize repatriation?", men 64+ years old). This indicates that the 'safety' factor can be seen as an increasingly decisive attribute in tourist travel choices.

This confirms the results of Teeroovengadam et al. (2021) who highlight that Covid-19 pandemic related risks are likely to influence travelling intentions and that travelers should ensure their hosts are prioritizing safety, while the hospitality sector must guarantee the implementation of comprehensive measures to safeguard their guests. Similarly, Chebli and Ben Said (2020) and Gajic et al. (2021) also pointed out that healthcare and hygiene would increasingly influence travelers' decision making in the aftermath of the covid-19 pandemic. And based on Wen et al.'s study (2020), the likelihood of trip cancellations appeared to be linked notably to nations with less dependable healthcare systems.

There is therefore clearly an opportunity for tour operators to rethink their comprehensive insurance offering and differentiate it according to travelers' profile. This result confirms findings of Aldao et al. (2022) studies recommending adaptability and flexibility to tour operators by tailoring their offerings to cope with uncertain conditions and changes in mobility restrictions and to align with the anticipated demand, keeping in mind that, at the outbreak of the Covid-19 era, the purchase of travel insurance had drastically increased (on this topic, see Zenker and Kock, 2020; Chebli and Ben Said, 2020). At the very least, to communicate more effectively and transparently as the lack of clarity on this topic is also coming clearly out of this survey.

### **3.4 A chance to re-discover and leverage Swiss tourism but at affordable price**

A result that also came very clearly out of our survey is that this health crisis has had a very marked beneficial effect on local tourism ("this crisis enabled us to discover or rediscover destinations in Switzerland that we hadn't been to for a long time", women, 35-44 years old, 3 kids), a trend that definitely gained popularity as a result of border closures and to facilitate return in the event of major unforeseen circumstances as noted by Lee et al. (2021), Mirzaei et al. (2021) and Viana-Lora et al. (2021). It also seems to have heightened the awareness of the inhabitants of French-speaking Switzerland that they live in a superb country that offers many wonderful opportunities for tourism ("the benefit of this crisis is that it has enabled me to discover some truly magnificent places. Before that, I hadn't had many opportunities to visit the country as a tourist"., man, 25-34 years old). In any case, the health crisis has enabled them to discover or rediscover the opportunities for short breaks within the country, albeit with a very strong downside. Almost all the people questioned said that the cost of short stays in Switzerland was far too high for them and was a barrier to them considering

doing more of this in the future ("the problem with travelling in Switzerland is that it's far too expensive", "Switzerland is a beautiful country but the price of a holiday is exaggerated even for a few days", "I don't think I'll be holidaying in Switzerland again in the future because it's far too expensive for my budget and my family", same statements encountered among all age classes, gender and family situations). This observation is not unique to Switzerland but has been observed in other countries such as Netherlands, Latvia or Cyprus for instance (Aldao et al., 2022). Even people with a second home or direct access via family or friends mentioned this factor, but more with a view to exploring new destinations in Switzerland ("I'd like to visit other parts of Switzerland, but if I have to pay for my own accommodation, it will be really expensive", Women, 25-44 years old, 2 children). Here too, this would seem to be an opportunity for tour operators to exploit by offering short breaks in Switzerland specifically adapted for Swiss residents.

## 4. Conclusion

In the post-COVID-19 era, resilience in the tourism sector has been strongly linked to the way in which the crisis was managed (Ritchie and Jiang, 2019) and both the real and perceived effectiveness of the measures put in place to mitigate its effect. The constant uncertainty caused by this disruptive event has induced changes in behaviour and unstable consumption patterns, as well as adaptive tendencies in an attempt to revive the sector.

In addition to the opportunities identified in terms of tourism offerings for short breaks in Switzerland (work on the packages offered to Swiss residents) and long-haul holidays (work on adequate insurance packages by traveler's profile to offer an appropriate response to the increase in perceived risks), the main lesson to be learned from this survey is linked to the risk of increased guiltlessness with regard to environmental issues and/or issues relating to sustainable development observed in the face of the emergence of the health crisis. Although this is a typical way of adapting to a stressful situation in order to mitigate its impact on well-being, this observation nonetheless invites us to reflect on the potential consequences of the emergence of polycrisis on the behaviour of the citizens of French-speaking Switzerland, particularly in relation to sustainable development issues as a whole.

How will these citizens adapt to protect themselves in the face of various simultaneous crises? Will the greater the sense of crisis and perceived danger, the greater the emotional withdrawal? How can public decision-makers anticipate this risk, bearing in mind that recent surveys have shown that the public in French-speaking Switzerland, although aware of the importance of adopting environmentally friendly behaviour, seem cautious about the real impact of their individual actions and believe that the public authorities must take the lead and provide the right framework for industries/companies to integrate sustainable development into their daily behaviours (see Dubosson et al. 2020).

In accordance with the theory of constraints (see Cox and Schleier, 2010), every complex system or process comprising numerous interconnected activities, possesses a most important constraint, and overall process efficiency can only be enhanced by eliminating (or strongly limiting the impact of) this constraint. A crucial implication of this is that dedicating time to optimizing elements that are not constraints will yield

limited benefits; meaningful progress toward the goal (such as increased profitability) can only be achieved through improvements to the constraint itself.

Are we seeing a sort of transposition of the theory of constraints in the way consumers react to the emergence of simultaneous crises? If so, should we be concerned, and how can we prevent a problem such as sustainable development, whose impact is perceived to be more or less long-term, from being systematically de-prioritized by consumers when they are faced with a crisis whose impact is immediate or very short-term? The paradigm of polycrisis management promises an abundant and fascinating literature.

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