NORBERT GRISZBACHER

BACK TO THE NATURE AND TRAVELLING OFF THE BEATEN PATH? – THE EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT EXAMINATION OF 'NEW' DESTINATION CHOICES AND TRAVEL DECISIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

HÍV A TERMÉSZET, AVAGY MENEKÜLÉS A CIVILIZÁCIÓBÓL? – 'ÚJ' DESZTINÁCIÓK ÉS UTAZÁSI DÖNTÉSEK EXPLICIT ÉS IMPLICIT VIZSGÁLATA A COVID-19 PANDÉMIA ÁRNYÉKÁBAN

Despite occasional shocks, tourism, as one of the world's largest industries, has undergone rapid evolution in the last decades. Nonetheless, the industry has been shocked by the recent COVID-19 outbreak, and it is still unclear how the tourist psyche has changed and what the aftermath will be. This study presents an innovative explicit-implicit approach to examine how the pandemic-induced (re)connection with nature influences travel and destination choices. Based on the findings, respondents explicitly and implicitly reported a favourable perception of natural destinations amid the pandemic. Consequently, the author can observe an increase in the popularity of natural sites, along with a corresponding surge in the frequency of nature visits, particularly among women and individuals with less committed or no relationships. Key values were identified as the driving forces behind this trend, including serenity, uniqueness, safety, closeness, and discovery, which can be considered crucial factors in shaping the future of sustainable tourism.

Keywords: **COVID-19, tourism, travel, destination choices, neuromarketing, implicit association test (IAT)**

A turizmus, mint a világ egyik legnagyobb iparága, az elmúlt évtizedekben az átmeneti sokkok ellenére jelentős fejlődésen ment keresztül, azonban az eddig példátlan COVID-19 krízis a turisztikai szektor szereplőit is soha nem látott kihívások elé állította. Bár mára a vírust látszólag sikerült maga mögött hagynia a világnak, hosszú távú (pszichés) következményei többnyire a mai napig tisztázatlanok. Jelen tanulmány egy innovatív explicit-implicit megközelítést alkalmazva vizsgálja a pandémia óta reneszánszát élő természetjárás jelenségét az utazási és desztinációválasztási döntéseink függvényében. A kapott explicit és implicit eredmények is rámutatnak, hogy a járványhelyzet hozzájárult egy általános preferencia kialakulásához a félreesőbb, természetes úti célok iránt. Ezzel összefüggésben a kutatás során egyszerre volt megfigyelhető a természetes attrakciók népszerűségének és a természetlátogatás gyakoriságának növekedése, különösen a nők és a kevésbé elkötelezettek vagy kapcsolat nélküliek körében. A megfigyelt trendek mozgatórugóiként a következő motívumok voltak azonosíthatóak: nyugalom, egyediség, biztonság, elérhetőség és felfedezés, amelyek az eredmények alapján kulcsszerepet játszhatnak a jövő fenntartható turizmusának alakulásában.

Kulcsszavak: **COVID-19, turizmus, utazás, desztinációválasztás, neuromarketing, implicit asszociációs teszt (IAT)**

Author/Szerző:
Norbert Griszbacher[a] (norbert.griszbacher@uni-corvinus.hu) research and teaching assistant

[a]Corvinus University of Budapest (Budapesti Corvinus Egyetem) Hungary (Magyarország)

> *"In times of crisis, the natural world is a source of both joy and solace.*
> *The natural world produces the comfort that can come from nothing else."*
> Sir David Attenborough

Tourism as we think of it today has not always existed, but humans have always been on the move. Even though we can say that travel is in our genes from the early nomadic hunter-gatherer times, travelling habits and motivations are constantly changing and reshaping throughout history based on the characteristics of each historic era (Zuelow, 2015). These decades we are witnessing a nearly continuous growth of the travel and tourism industry, which is heavily linked to the advancements in the transportation and ICT sectors among others, making our world feel like a 'global village' by bringing even the furthest destinations within reach, where our leisure and business opportunities are not limited by time and space anymore (Maditinos & Vassiliadis, 2008). Nowadays, tourism as a system is characterized by strong interconnectedness and complexity (Del Chiappa et al., 2021), by operating in symbiotic relationships with many industries and regions, their fate becomes intertwined with each other.

Recently, an unprecedented event has shocked the entire world called the coronavirus (COVID-19) disease, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 virus (SARS-CoV-2) according to the World Health Organisation's report (WHO, 2023). The virus was first discovered in December 2019, in Wuhan, China, and from the epicentre it spread across the world within months due to the features of globalization and modern mass tourism (Galvani et al., 2020; Raffay, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Felkai, 2021), which led the WHO to announce a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and to declare the outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Despite several studies have underlined that in the 21th century a small number of countries already have experienced disease outbreaks like SARS, MERS, Ebola, H1N1 or Zika (Folinas & Metaxas, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Matiza & Kruger, 2021; Škare et al., 2021), COVID-19 has rapidly infected more than 200 countries (WHO, 2023), creating a global unparalleled crisis.

The pandemic has caused profound and long-term structural and transformational changes in governments, the global economy, the health systems, and social life (Folinas & Metaxas, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Altuntas & Gok, 2021; Fotiadis et al., 2021). The virus and the protective measures introduced to stop the rampaging pandemic had a powerful and varied impact on the tourism and hospitality industries, and at the end the entire system shut down for long months (Gössling et al., 2020; Zenker & Kock 2020). Resultingly, based upon the early calculations of Škare et al. (2021), the global damages in the tourism sector will exceed the losses of all previous epidemic estimates. A series of recent research has indicated that since during the COVID-19 intensive times international travel was rendered almost impossible by the pandemic, the tourism stakeholders has turned their attention to domestic and nearby markets to ensure the industry's survival and ultimately a gradual recovery (Altuntas & Gok, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Volgger et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Michalkó et al., 2022; Matiza,

2022; OECD, 2022). Under these circumstances, a new trend has started emerging as cross-border, mass tourism was almost completely impossible: a domestic, mostly local form of tourism with minimized travel and physical contact has appeared, involving off the beaten path and natural destinations (Bae & Chang, 2020; Raffay, 2020; UNWTO, 2021; Wen et al., 2021).

Even though with vaccination the virus situation greatly improved worldwide (UNWTO, 2021), it is not known to this day when we can completely leave its effects behind us. As we can see, several researchers are now involved in Covid-19 research gap-spotting and/or already finishing off various case studies, yet the future of the industry is surrounded by many questions. This study presents a new approach for examining travel – destination choices by comparing consumer attitudes given towards off the beaten path, natural and popular, city-based destinations using a combination of explicit and implicit methods. In addition, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying phenomena, a cross-border approach was adopted, and the research was conducted in Romania and Hungary parallel, thereby adding another dimension to the investigation for comparative purposes. As such, this paper responds to the call for COVID-19 tourism research that delves deeper into the "*underlying relationships*", rather than providing "*obvious and purely descriptive*" information (Zenker & Kock, 2020, p. 1).

## Tourism and the COVID-19 nightmare

Tourism by nature revolves around travelling and gaining valuable experiences through the interaction of people and places, usually in a safe and secure environment (Galvani et al., 2020; Raffay, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Therefore, the industry is particularly sensitive when one of these welfare elements is at risk. Although past crises have brought out the challenges and distinctive vulnerability of the modern tourism industry (Galvani et al., 2020), due to their smaller scale, they were frequently not fully addressed or resolved.

A virus turning upside down our world

Unquestionably the recent COVID-19 crisis has taken an unprecedented scale, it has affected over 90% of the world's population (Gössling et al., 2020), amongst others, on account of "*planetary time-space compression*" (Galvani, et al., 2020, p. 1). The already fragile-proven tourism and hospitality industry were fundamentally shaken by the virus and its wide-ranging effects on mobility and social interaction. As a serious health crisis, the impact of COVID-19 on tourism varies across space and time, and in addition to its toll on human health, it has a devastating and far-reaching economic impact on a global scale ("*butterfly effect*" – Del Chiappa et al., 2021).

As illustrated by Figure 1, the virus and the COVID-related travel restrictions had crippled the international tourism and hospitality industry with a serious decline of international tourist arrivals by 74% in 2020. In addition to regulating international travel, as part of the efforts to

control the virus, further country-specific measures have been introduced worldwide, following the guidelines of the World Health Organization and the UN World Tourism Organization. The list included rules on hygiene, social distancing, and mask-wearing, as well as restrictions on leaving home, limiting, or banning mass gatherings, and restricting certain 'non-essential' activities in the service sector. Under these circumstances, the projected 3-4% global tourism growth for 2020 has experienced a significant shift, resulting in a 20-30% pandemic-induced decline instead, making it the biggest downturn in history (Sigala, 2020; Fotiadis et al., 2021).
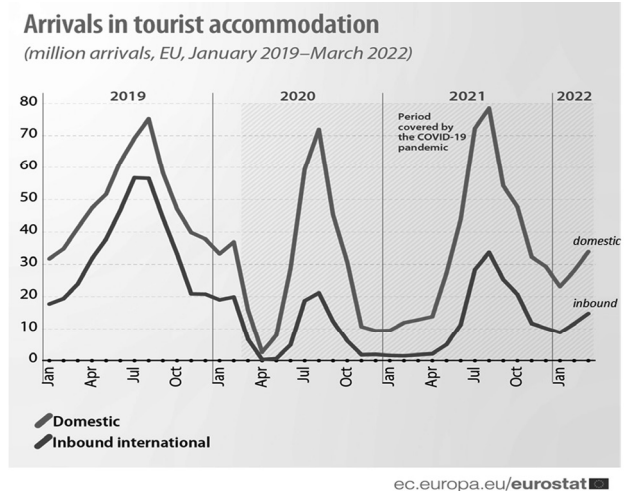
Figure 1

The impact of COVID-19 on international tourist arrivals (millions)
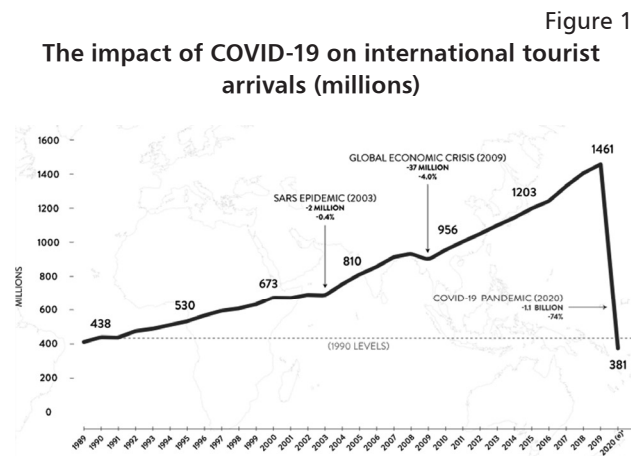
Source: UNWTO (2021)

With a drop of 87%, the decline in the tourism industry has remained severe at the beginning of 2021, raising further questions about how this situation will shape the future, which remains life-and-death for many (industries) but uncertain (UNWTO, 2021). During the years, the general uncertainty, stress, and fear generated by the suddenly changing infection rates combined with the successive restrictions and relaxations caused further uncertainty, increased levels of anxiety and hectic conditions (Golets et al., 2020), affecting both the demand and the supply side (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Keller et al., 2022). Even if there are some exceptions to the general trend of risk aversion in tourism (see, for example, Neuburger & Egger's (2020) *"Relaxed"* or Matiza & Kruger's (2021) *"Dogmatic"* group), originally, tourists tend to be risk averse. A threat in one destination raises the perceived risks (and cost) of the travel experience, leading to a shift towards a destination deemed safer (Sönmez, 1998). Given that international travel was at a high-risk category this period, many viewed domestic travel as a risk-free substitute (see Figure 2).

According to Matiza & Kruger (2021), perceived risk is closely tied to the arousal of fear, anxiety, and other negative psychosocial impacts. Thus, in addition to the physical (health) risks, the characteristics and high transmissibility of the COVID-19 virus may also trigger further psychological and social risk related concerns. This also implies that despite the WHO declaring the end of the global health emergency on May 5th, 2023, the cognitive

and affective impacts of the virus could still be long-lasting and severe.

Figure 2

The impact of COVID-19 on inbound and outbound arrivals at tourist accommodation establishments (EU-27)

Source: Eurostat (n.d.)

Back to 'normal' or heading towards a whole new world?

Even though we are writing 2023 now, and as displayed in Figure 2, our travel patterns have mostly returned to pre-pandemic levels as the world appears to be finally emerging from the nightmare of the pandemic (Eurostat, n.d.), we still bear the consequences of the pandemic on both social and individual levels. The World Tourism Organization's forecast appears to strengthen this assumption, with 63% of experts predicting that the tourism sector will not achieve a full recovery until 2024 (UNWTO, 2021), so it might be still premature to make any definitive conclusions about the total (economic) impact of the pandemic or a complete COVID-19 rebound.

As claimed by Michalkó et al. (2022), people currently have three contrasting 'baselines' in their mind, acting as a starting point for every decision: (1) pre-COVID norms, (2) co-COVID norms, and (3) post-COVID norms, we tend to react to present situations with an answer formulated upon a combination of these three value sets. While most of us are longing for the past, pre-covid times and norms, consciously or unconsciously, for people who lost more during the COVID-19 years the co-COVID norms will inevitably determine the upcoming years, affecting both physical and psychological risk perceptions. This experience has the potential to act as both a deterrent and a driving force for traveling (Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022), but in the long run, it is likely to result in more careful and sensible choices (Golets et al., 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Matiza & Kruger, 2021).

At present, it appears evident that even COVID-19 and all virus-related restrictions combined could not completely eradicate the urge to travel as people have an

almost instinctive, deep-rooted need to occasionally leave their ordinary living and working environment (Raffay, 2020; Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022). Nevertheless, as Felkai (2021, p. 44) emphasized, "*Travel will not be the same as before the pandemic*", the old processes accelerated by the pandemic and the newly emerging trends have already become part of our consciousness and daily lives. The question is what we will do with these possibilities when the tourism industry rises from its ashes, but one thing is quite certain: "*The Covid-19 pandemic has put an end to the tourism we knew before*" (Keller et al., 2022, p. 28). The UNWTO's report (2021) spotlighted that there are six major trends that have emerged in the shadow of the pandemic, but to this day it remains uncertain whether they are temporary or permanent metamorphoses:

- closer: tourists prefer 'staycations' or destinations close to home,
- new concerns: the importance of health & safety measures and cancellation policies rising,
- get away: growing demand for road trips, nature, and rural tourism due to travel limitations and the quest for open-air experiences,
- last minute: the volatility of pandemic-related events and travel restrictions have led to an increase in last-minute decisions and bookings,
- young travellers more resilient: younger age groups have reported a stronger rebound in travel compared to other segments,
- more responsible: a growing trend among travellers to prioritize creating a positive impact on local communities and seeking authentic experiences.

Correspondingly, there is a growing body of literature in different fields (e.g., ecosystem services, public health, marketing, and tourism) implying that recently people have renewed their attention in visiting blue-green spaces (e.g., urban parks, woodlands, rivers, mountains, and the coast), with (re)discovering their outstanding and irreplaceable functions in terms of health and well-being. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine measures that have led to the closure of many facilities and people confined within four walls, the way people engage with their environment has unavoidably changed (ONS, 2021; Pouso et al., 2021). This led to a surge in demand for any available escape options from 'solitary home confinement' mentally and physically, hence the appeal of available green-blue (open) spaces has been amplified. The possibly underlying phenomenon is that while 'home' is normally acknowledged as a restorative environment, due to the COVID-19 crisis and the closure of schools, as well as the rise of tele-work, the restorative potential of home might have been compromised (Pouso et al., 2021). Recent discoveries demonstrate that contact with nature can yield numerous intangible advantages and serve as a shield against the adverse effects of lockdown restrictions. Aside from the physical benefits of engaging in outdoor activities during lockdown, studies have shown that spending time in nature (blue-green spaces), can lower the chances of experiencing depression and anxiety symptoms amid

the COVID-19 pandemic (Day, 2020; Derks et al., 2020; Ugolini et al., 2020; Korpilo et al., 2021; Lu et al., 2021; Venter et al., 2021; De Meo et al., 2023). This mostly explains why we are experiencing a boom in nature visits – people spending more time in nature and visiting nature more often – as "*COVID-19 forcing people out*" (Derks et al., 2020, p. 2) and people are "*escaping to nature*", since it is an innate human instinct to seek refuge in nature when faced with hostile conditions (Lu et al., 2021).

In this context, urban and peri-urban green and blue spaces served as both a sanctuary and a means of resilience, offering a space for physical activity, socializing in alternative ways, and promoting overall well-being. The professionals have also noticed a new set of visitors to natural areas worldwide, consisting mainly of young people and families with children who are willing to travel even longer distances in search of 'COVID-safe' green-blue spaces (Derks et al., 2020; Ugolini et al., 2020; Korpilo et al., 2021). As De Meo et al. (2023) noted, the pandemic had the greatest psychological impact on young people, losing all forms of socialising opportunities which are critical at an early age. Under this stress, they started to seek for relief and a sense of connection with the outside world, and finally turned to nature, which can be seen as a substitution behaviour as other pastimes were limited (Day, 2020; Derks et al., 2020).

It is worth mentioning that finding ourselves in nature is not an entirely new phenomenon, the topic has received increasing attention even in the years preceding COVID-19, thanks to the overgrowth of mass tourism (Csapó & Végi, 2021; Michalkó et al., 2022; OECD, 2022), which encouraged the emergence of alternative forms of tourism (Altuntas & Gok, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Volgger et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Matiza, 2022). As Michalkó et al. (2022) highlighted, alternative tourism practices had already been developing in parallel with mass tourism even before COVID-19, where the centre of attention shifted from the masses to individuals, and services tailored to their needs, with a special focus on uniqueness, personalized experiences, and a deeper connection with the environment. In resonance with the UNWTO report (2021), these old-new phenomena include, for example, trips with a special focus on health and wellbeing encompassing wellness and medical-health tourism, as well as a desire to reconnect with nature through active tourism activities (e.g., cycling, hiking, and nature walks), while also promoting ecotourism (Bae & Chang, 2020; Raffay, 2020; Seraphin & Dosquet, 2020; Benkhard, 2021; Csapó & Végi, 2021; ONS, 2021).

It is to be noted that due to the dynamic nature of shocks like COVID-19, pandemic-induced behaviour changes are unlikely to remain constant as the crisis situation evolves (Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022; Talwar et al., 2022): the negative influence of perceived risk on travel intentions can escalate rapidly, but it may also be a temporary phenomenon that dissipates quickly once lockdown restrictions are lifted. Additionally, as Venter et al. (2021) emphasized, there is limited knowledge about customer perceptions, attitudes,

and intentions in response to the pandemic. Besides, most of the existing ones are derived from cross-sectional studies, considering the 'new reality' as coexisting with the pandemic, rather than as an evolving or post-pandemic phenomenon (Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022). Consequently, it remains unclear whether these patterns are short-term responses or are likely to continue due to shifts in personal risk perception, social norms, and acclimation to new environments. To address the above outlined gaps, this paper is built around the following research questions:

RQ1.: Has COVID-19 permanently rewritten the tourists' connection with nature?

RQ2.: What are the primary forces that drive people to travel differently than before?

RQ3.: Can any segments be identified that are less/more impacted by this phenomenon?

Research design and methodology

Implicit measurements

The use of neuromarketing in tourism research is a recent phenomenon, it can be seen as a response to the ever-growing complexity of the modern consumer world and unprecedented challenges like COVID-19. As per Royo-Vela & Varga (2022), the methods and approaches employed in academic and market research are perpetually developing, and neuromarketing is a prime example of this evolution. The integration of neuroscientific techniques such as fMRI, EEG, and eye-tracking has empowered researchers to address previously unattainable inquiries, thereby unlocking fresh perspectives and methodologies in marketing and tourism. The incorporation of neuroscience into the realm of social sciences has expanded horizons and introduced novel perspectives and methodologies (Moral-Moral, 2021; Boz & Koç, 2022; Bülbül, 2022; Gaafar & Al-Romeedy, 2022; Royo-Vela & Varga, 2022).

The Implicit Association Test (IAT – Greenwald et al., 1998) is perhaps the most popular implicit research instrument that can indirectly probe psychological constructs through automatic associations between evaluative dimensions and attitude objects (Greenwald et al., 1998; 2003). IAT has been widely adopted in many fields, as beyond the frequently emphasized benefits like good consistency, predictive power, and flexibility (Gregg et al., 2013; Bar-Anan & Nosek, 2014), it is deemed to be free of response bias, as respondents are unaware that they are reporting their attitudes towards the targets during the pairing task (Maison et al., 2004).

While there has been a growing trend in tourism literature to use visual stimuli as a basis for experimentation

Table 1

The Nature vs City IAT in Qualtrics

Block sequence (trials)	Task description	Task instructions («left 'E' – right 'I'»)	Sample stimuli
1 (20)	Initial target-concept discrimination	«Nature / City»	*Plitvice Lakes National Park – Pula Arena (Croatia)* *Lake Balaton – Zalakaros Thermal Spa (Hungary)* *Dobšinská Ice Cave – winter Košice (Slovakia)* *Vršac vineyard – Belgrade (Serbia)* *Piatra Secuiului – Oradea (Romania)* *...* *(pictures appearing 1 by 1 in the middle)*
2 (20)	Associated attribute discrimination	«Pleasant / Unpleasant»	*Charming – Grotesque* *Memorable – Forgettable* *Special – Commonplace* *Healthy – Sick* *Safe – Dangerous* *Peaceful – Stressful* *Beautiful – Ugly* *Joyful – Melancholic* *Exciting – Monotonous* *Sustainable – Futureless* *(words appearing 1 by 1 in the middle)*
3 (20)	Initial combined task	«Nature+Pleasant / City+Unpleasant»	*either images (Nature/City) or words (Pleasant/Unpleasant) appearing in the middle randomly*
4 (40)	Repeated combined task	«Nature+Pleasant / City+Unpleasant»	*same as Block3*
5 (40)	Reversed target-concept discrimination	«City / Nature»	*same as Block1, but reversed concept*
6 (20)	Reversed combined task	«City+Pleasant / Nature+Unpleasant»	*either images (Nature/City) or words (Pleasant/Unpleasant) appearing in the middle randomly (reversed concept)*
7 (40)	Repeated reversed combined task	«City+Pleasant / Nature+Unpleasant»	*same as Block6*

Source: own elaboration (Qualtrics)

(e.g., Bastiaansen et al., 2016; Joyner et al., 2018), to the author's knowledge, no study has applied IAT to forecast consumer behaviour and decision-making in this field. Using Qualtrics.com as a platform, the participants were administered a survey-based Implicit Association Test that involved comparing stimuli sets representing human-made attractions with high population density ('City') with more secluded and peaceful alternatives ('Nature') along the dimensions of pleasantness and unpleasantness (Table 1).

Table 1 gives an overview of the IAT process: each stage started with a practice block (Block1-2-5) to allow respondents to learn the principles (to rapidly (and correctly) categorize the stimuli that is repeatedly appearing in the middle based on the assigned tasks, using the E key for the left-side category or the I key for the right-side category) before taking the actual quiz (Block3-4-6-7). The response times were measured of the participants in the highlighted blocks, from which their preferences could be determined by using the so-called D-score algorithm proposed by Greenwald et al. (2003). It is based on the theory that if the image of nature and the pleasant category are

strongly connected, the respondents should respond faster if they must give the same answer on these two terms, which position was randomly assigned (then reversed) at each case by Qualtrics to counterbalance any distortion effects may arising from a left/right position (Carpenter et al., 2019; Fuduric et al., 2022; Griszbacher et al., 2022a; 2022b).

Explicit measures

As the usage of implicit measurements is more of an addition to, rather than a replacement for conventional market research techniques (Royo-Vela & Varga, 2022), enhancing the understanding obtained through the simultaneous collection of data, the nature/pleasant IAT was expanded by incorporating an explicit survey designed as follows:

- self-reported behaviour reporting: travel and destination preferences in general,
- affect part: evaluation of the importance of the target categories before COVID-19 and since COVID-19 ('Nature' vs. 'City' using bipolar and Likert-scales),
- demographic variable questions.

Table 2

Sample descriptive

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	HUNGARY (n=374)		ROMANIA (n=61)		TOTAL		
		n	%	n	%	n	%	Travel impact (1-5)
Gender	Male	113	30%	18	30%	131	30%	4.00
	Female	261	70%	43	70%	304	70%	4.29
Age	under 23	131	35%	23	38%	154	36%	4.34
	23-28	177	47%	29	48%	206	47%	4.19
	above 28	66	18%	9	15%	75	16%	3.96
Place of living	Village	35	9%	9	15%	44	12%	3.95
	Smaller city	82	22%	23	38%	105	30%	4.17
	Bigger City	86	23%	27	44%	113	34%	4.28
	Capital	171	46%	2	3%	173	25%	4.24
Education	High school	93	25%	13	21%	106	23%	4.19
	Vo-tech / Gymnasium	71	19%	2	3%	73	11%	4.23
	Bachelor (uni)	149	40%	31	51%	180	45%	4.28
	Master's (uni)	58	16%	14	23%	72	19%	4.03
	Doctoral (uni)	3	1%	1	2%	4	1%	4.00
Marital status	Single	142	38%	29	48%	171	43%	4.26
	Relationship	192	51%	25	41%	217	46%	4.19
	Married	37	10%	5	8%	42	9%	4.02
	Divorced	2	1%	2	3%	4	2%	4.50
	Widowed	1	0.3%	-	-	1	0.3%	5.00
Employment	Student	175	47%	26	43%	201	45%	4.20
	Employed	136	36%	22	36%	158	36%	4.06
	Part-time employed	41	11%	8	13%	49	12%	4.55
	Self-employed	18	5%	2	3%	20	4%	4.35
	Retired	1	0.3%	-	-	1	0.3%	4.00
	Unemployed	3	1%	3	5%	6	3%	4.83

Source: own elaboration (SPSS)

To comply with COVID-19 restrictions and satisfy the requirements of the exploratory research, the data collection was conducted online during the period from May 2021 to May 2022. Initially, the test was made available to multiple online communities that shared a common interest in travel. Afterwards, the participants further disseminated it to individuals who had similar interests, following a technique referred to as snowball sampling. By utilizing this method, it was easier to locate and connect with individuals who had an interest in travelling amid the pandemic with limited research resources (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Heckathorn, 1997; Baltar & Brunet, 2012).

Analysis and results

Descriptive analysis was performed to examine the sample profile of the survey. The final sample (n=435) included 374 (85.98%) Hungarian and 61 (14.02%) Romanian hodophiles (travel-lovers). Table 2 provides the detailed demographic description of the sample:

The sample composition was presumably influenced by the requirements of the IAT (Qualtrics) and the online data collection method, having a predominantly young, female population with a university degree. It is worth noting that this finding is aligned with recent observations made in Hungary across different domains using IAT (Fuduric et al., 2022; Griszbacher et al., 2022a; 2022b). Nonetheless, the effort can be considered as successful to reach a group of young travellers (Travel impact AVG_x=4.24, measured on a 1-5 Likert scale), whose daily habits (i.e., travelling) were heavily influenced by the pandemic.

Next, travel characteristics was measured by ranking tasks, Likert scales and bipolar scales. The motives (values) under consideration were derived from the literature, taking the most trustworthy official report on Covid-19/Tourism as a guideline (UNWTO, 2021).

During the analysis, it became apparent that people across borders shared a consensus on the priority of certain factors while engaging in travel activities (Table 3): the top four values were the emotions and experiences associated with the travel (1), safety (2), the overall atmosphere (3), and prices (4). Additionally, there was a unanimous agreement on the least principal factor, with the degree of urbanization being ranked last (16) in most cases.

With the intention to discover how people perceived these factors and which category ('City' or 'Nature') they associated them with, they were also asked to evaluate these items (where it made sense) on a Nature/City scale (-2 for nature-like, 0 for neutral, +2 for city-like):

As Figure 3 suggests, people associated most of the key dimensions with Nature. The case of 'Safety' proved to be an intriguing one, as participants linked it to urban areas, and this was the sole prominent contrast observed among the countries (HUNx=-0.01 and ROx=0.48). The reason for this phenomenon could be cultural, but also attributed to the severity of the pandemic, which made it difficult for people to decide in this category, meanwhile individuals typically associate their home (i.e., city) with a sense of security (Pouso et al., 2021). A similar explanation may also apply to the next section, where it is observed that while most statements ended up within the green 'natural' zone, individuals still tend to exhibit a slight preference

Table 3

Main travel motivators

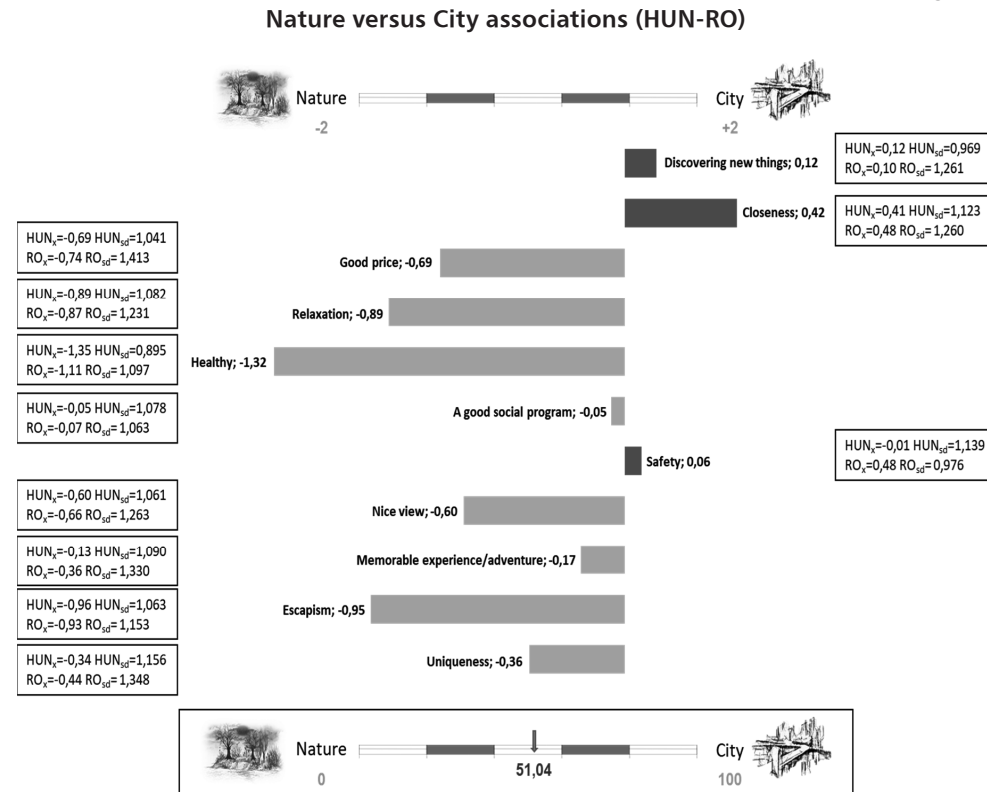| Rank	VALUES The importance of ___ (ranking items 1-16) *	TOTAL (n=435)		HUNGARY (n=374)		ROMANIA (n=61)	
		Avg rank	Std. Dev	Avg rank	Std. Dev	Avg rank	Std. Dev
1	*Positive feelings-experiences*	3.78	3.328	3.96	3.398	2.72	2.647
2	*Safety*	4.23	3.074	4.22	3.041	4.31	3.299
3	*Atmosphere*	4.91	3.132	5.00	3.176	4.33	2.797
4	*Price*	5.75	3.569	5.70	3.626	6.10	3.208
5	*Local infrastructure*	7.23	3.129	7.11	3.107	7.97	3.194
6	*Escapism/Relaxation*	7.33	3.734	7.46	3.706	6.51	3.828
7	*Discover new things*	7.51	3.843	7.61	3.813	6.85	3.991
8	*Location (close/far)*	8.78	4.173	8.58	4.198	9.98	3.836
9	*Culture and history*	8.99	4.689	8.88	4.789	9.66	3.991
10	*Health-Fit factors*	10.03	4.065	10.03	4.077	9.98	4.023
11	*Social interactions*	10.42	3.465	10.60	3.393	9.31	3.722
12	*Unique events*	10.53	3.535	10.66	3.509	9.75	3.622
13	*Climate*	10.59	4.786	10.30	4.834	12.34	4.098
14	*Available information*	10.68	4.205	10.60	4.227	11.20	4.061
15	*Fame/Reputation*	12.17	3.265	12.23	3.311	11.82	2.969
16	*Degree of urbanization*	13.08	2.895	13.06	2.944	13.16	2.590

The displayed item order (1-16) was randomized each case to avoid any distorting effects

Source: own elaboration (SPSS)

for destinations located in urban areas (HUN_x= 51.09, RO_x= 50.75, overall score=51.04, measured on a 0-100 Nature/City scale).

travel motives. As per Pearson & Mundform (2010), the 435 respondents formed a satisfactory sample size for conducting Principal components analysis (PCA). Following the data adequacy verification, PCA with varimax rotation method was employed to discover latent variables that affect travel and destination preferences in the context of the pandemic (Table 4). Ultimately, all the prerequisites were deemed to satisfy the criteria levels (min. 50% of Total Variance Explained, 0.60 for KMO, 0.70 for α – Hair et al., 2014; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019), verifying the results.

As Table 4 shows, the 14 items were categorized into 5 factors (using the Eigenvalue > 1 rule), where the communality values surpassed 0.25, and the factor weights were also above the recommended 0.4.

As part of an attempt to create a socio-demographic profile of the travellers, ANOVA analysis was conducted. Once the necessary conditions for the test have been met, group memberships of age (Buzz F=5.990 p=0.003, Comfort & Luxury F=3.000 p=0.051, Quality

Figure 3

Nature versus City associations (HUN-RO)

Source: own elaboration (SPSS)

At the final stage, the respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with 14 statements using five-point Likert-scales that revolved around destination values and

Table 4

Results of principal components analysis with varimax rotation*

FACTORS	ITEMS	LOADINGS
BUZZ	Nightlife and entertainment are important factors	0.784
	I am looking for spiritul. buzzing (sometimes crowded) places	0.759
	I travel to visit those „trendy" places that others visited or want to visit	0.696
ESCAPISM	I prefer far away exotic destinations more than closer ones	0.767
	Different climates offer new opportunities	0.639
	On my places-to-be-visited list there are more peaceful nature-inspired places than human-made	0.597
	Sometimes I need to make a trip to escape from the world	0.455
INTELLECTUAL GROWTH	Discovering new things is one of the main motives of travelling	0.813
	I am interested in cultural. historic places where I can grow intellectually	0.801
COMFORT & LUXURY	Travelling is some kind of luxury – living through a magical adventure (that many cannot afford)	0.778
	Travelling – holidays are categories where I usually pay more for the comfort to be guaranteed	0.540
	Mostly I choose to spend the holidays more actively	-0.408
QUALITY EXPERIENCES	Spending quality time with friends/family is an important part of travelling	0.696
	Re-living and re-visiting „old" experiences – places are main engines of travelling	0.593

*total variance explained=54.996%. KMO=0.734

Source: own elaboration (SPSS)

experiences F=3.803 p=0.023), employment (Buzz F=3.132 p=0.045), marital status (Buzz F=6.283 p=0.002), and place of living (Intellectual growth F=8.228 p=0.000) proved to be a predictor of the factor powers (see Table 5).

attributes (e.g., target category (Nature) + positive images = positive D-score, as demonstrated by Figure 4).

The histogram above displays the D-scores of the respondents, where positive scores are indicating associa-

Table 5

Travel values (factors) per socio-demographic profiles

FACTOR	GROUP	N	AVG (X)	GR.	N	AVG (X)	GR.	N	AVG (X)
BUZZ	*student*	201	0.14	*single*	171	0.13	*<23*	154	0.16
	partly-employed	49	0.01	*relationship*	217	0.00	*23-28*	206	-0.01
	employed	158	-0.13	*married*	42	-0.47	*28<*	75	-0.32
INTELLECTUAL GROWTH	*village*	44	-0.62						
	small city	105	-0.07						
	bigger city	113	0.01						
	capital	173	0.19						
COMFORT & LUXUS	*<23*	154	0.11						
	23-28	206	0.00						
	28<	75	-0.23						
QUALITY EXPERIENCES	*<23*	154	0.12						
	23-28	206	0.00						
	28<	75	-0.26						

Source: own elaboration (SPSS)

A notable observation was that as employment status, relationship seriousness, and age categories levelled up, the strength of the 'Buzz' factor diminished. There also appears to be a relationship between the size of one's place of residence and the emphasis placed on 'Intellectual growth', with larger settlements indicating greater prestige. It was also interesting to see that the weight of 'Comfort & Luxury', and 'Quality experiences' factors exhibit a declining trend with advancing age.

Figure 4

Histogram of the D-scores from IAT (HUN-RO)

N	437
D-score mean	**0,28669**
D-score SD	0,43706
t-test	13,71241
Error rate	0,0769
Timeout rate	0,00076
p-value	0,00001
95% CI	0,2456 0,32778
Reliability*	0,87071

(*: Estimated internal consistency based on split-half with Spearman-Brown correction)

Source: own elaboration (iatgen.org/SPSS)

During the implicit part the IAT exhibited a low drop-out rate, with only 17 out of 454 participants excluded ($M_{timeout\ rate}$<0.00076 $M_{error\ rate}$=0.0769). The D-score obtained from the IAT is derived from the participants' response times and reflects their overall speed in answering the IAT questions. In our case, this means whether 'Nature' or 'City' images were easier (quicker) to associate with the positive
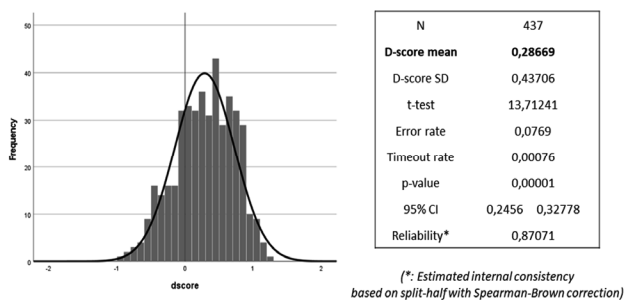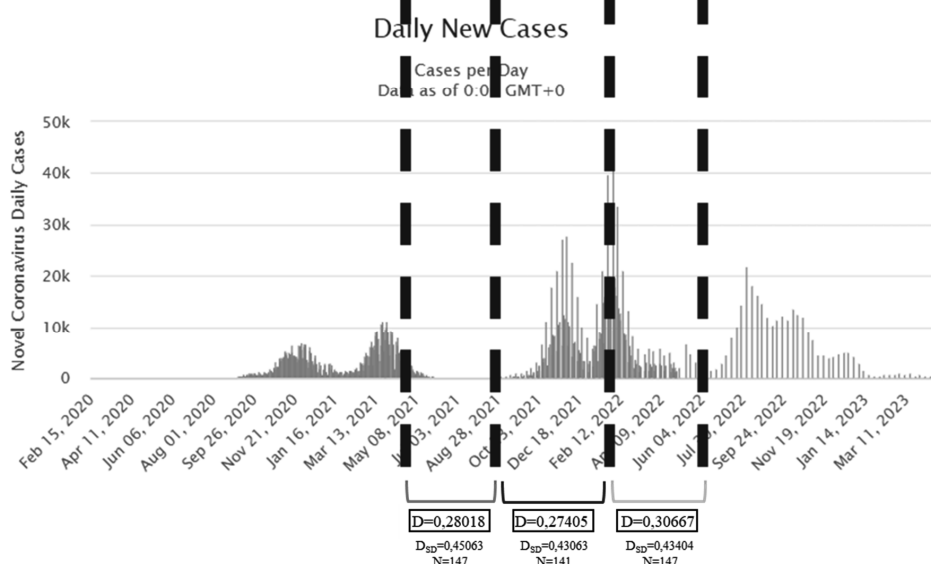
tions with pleasantness and negative scores with unpleasantness. The implicit findings reveal a positive overall D-score (0.28669), interpreted as leaning towards nature and pleasant dimensions, in other words, the natural stimuli were more easily linked with the pleasant dimension. This nature-positive trend was visible both in the case of Hungary (D-score=0.29844 D_{SD}=0.43814) and Romania (D-score=0.21788 D_{SD}=0.43314).

Given the similar COVID-19 characteristics of the two countries, an effort was made to compare the D-scores across different stages of the pandemic. Although the average D-score result was strongly positive during the most severe Covid period (D-score=0.27405 D_{SD}= 0.43063 n=141 reported between 01/09/2021 and 28/02/2022 – highlighted with dark colour at the bottom of Figure 5), there appears to be no relationship between the intensity of Covid-19 and the D-scores.

Further analysis identified key values that formed the basis of the nature-city comparison, and thus resonate with the D-scores. These values included Uniqueness (Pearson's R=-0.119 p=0.013), Safety (Pearson's R=-0.192 p=0.000), Closeness (Pearson's R=-0.097 p=0.043) and Discovering new things (Pearson's R=-0.107 p=0.025), meaning that individuals who received more natural (negative) scores at these dimensions (Figure 3) are likely achieved higher (more positive) D-scores. In addition, a link between the D-groups and the 'Buzz' factor (Pearson's R=-0.100 p=0.038) was established, evincing that individuals who pursue natural experiences are less likely to have a strong preference for a buzzing atmosphere.

Figure 5

The comparison of the D-scores and COVID-19 daily cases
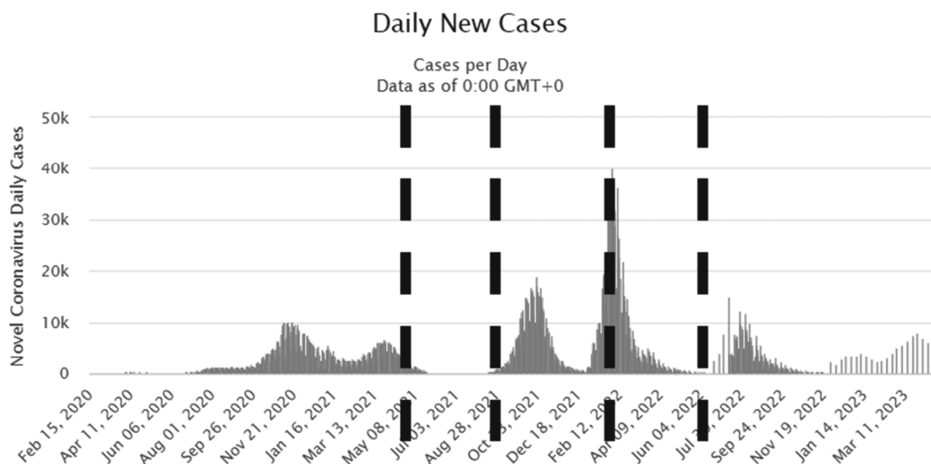
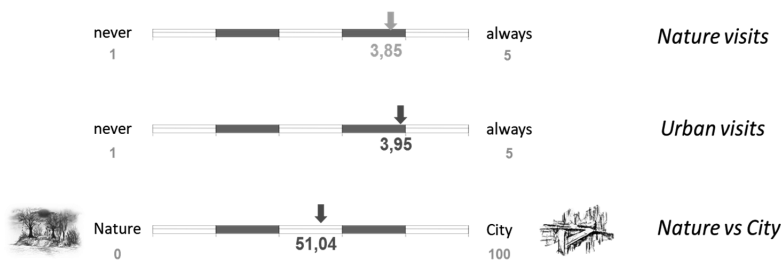*Source: worldometers.info (2023) extended by the author's own results*

The implicit findings are consistent with the explicit ones, as respondents appear to prioritize spending more time in nature. As visible in Figure 6, this is supported by the results from both countries, indicating a favouritism towards nature in case of nature/city visit frequency (Nature: pre-covid HUN_x=3.85 RO_x=3.87 vs. since-covid HUN_x=3.98 RO_x=4.00, City: pre-covid HUN_x= 3.98 RO_x= 3.92 vs. since-covid HUN_x= 3.75 RO_x= 3.67) and destination choices (Nature/City pre-covid HUN_x=51.09, RO_x=50.75 vs. since-covid HUN_x=37.62 RO_x=35.59).

The nature/pleasant D-scores correlate with the following explicit statements of destination choices before and after the outbreak of the pandemic, finding a weak positive correlation with remote – nature ones and inverse with mass – urban ones:
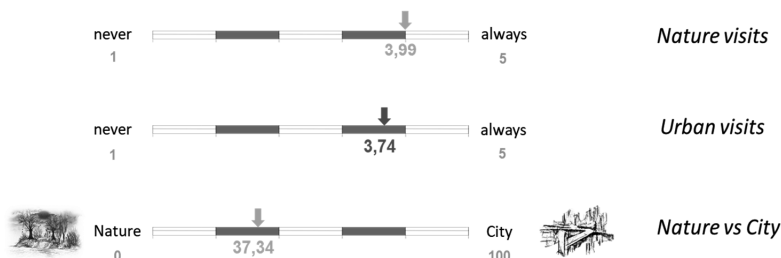
- Pre-pandemic natural visit frequency (Pearson's R=0.196 p=0.000),
- Pre-pandemic urban visit frequency (Pearson's R=-0.103 p=0.032),
- I prefer City in general (vs Nature) (Pearson's R=-0.249 p=0.000),
- Usually, I am looking for hidden gems (vs popular places) (Pearson's R=0.118 p=0.014),
- Since the pandemic I am looking for hidden gems (vs popular places) (Pearson's R=0.102 p=0.034),
- Since the pandemic I prefer City (vs Nature) (Pearson's R=-0.160 p=0.001),
- Since the pandemic natural visit frequency (Pearson's R=0.226 p=0.000),
- Since the pandemic urban visit frequency (Pearson's R=-0.132 p=0.006).

Figure 6

Changes in nature visits since the pandemic (HUN-RO)

Before the pandemic...

never 1	3,85	always 5	*Nature visits*
never 1	3,95	always 5	*Urban visits*
Nature 0	51,04	City 100	*Nature vs City*

Since the pandemic...

never 1	3,99	always 5	*Nature visits*
never 1	3,74	always 5	*Urban visits*
Nature 0	37,34	City 100	*Nature vs City*

Source: own elaboration (SPSS)

In the search for the characteristics of the Nature enthusiasts, the D-scores were sorted into the following groupings: (1) 'city lovers' $-2 \leq$ D-score<-1 (zero cases – Figure 4); (2) 'rather city' $-1 \leq$ D-score<0; (3) 'rather nature' $0<$ D-score$\leq+1$; (4) 'nature lovers' $+1<$ D-score$\leq+2$. Cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to figure out whether any demographic variable is significantly related to the D-score classification. As a result, gender (Pearson Chi^2=5.060 Cramer's V=0.108 p=0.080) and marital status (Pearson Chi^2=38.900 Cramer's V=0.211 p=0.000) were discovered as being significantly related to the D-score profile, with females and individuals in less committed or no relationships finding themselves in higher (more positive) D-score classes.

Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This paper addresses the void in tourism research pertaining to the aftereffects of the COVID-era, as the intricate and fragile nature of the tourism industry, which comprise the interplay of economic, political, social, cultural, and ecological dimensions, foregrounds the importance of research in this field. Furthermore, this reinforces the literature review's notion that tourism research must conform to the latest trends in behavioural sciences to acquire modern perspectives on consumer behaviour (Moral-Moral, 2021; Boz & Koç, 2022; Bülbül, 2022; Gaafar & Al-Romeedy, 2022). Following this logic, this study contributes to the extant literature by (1) introducing IAT to the field of tourism research and (2) adding a new depth to the previous COVID-knowledge by explicitly and implicitly evaluating the dynamic nature of COVID-19.

Additionally, for managers, the study offers guidance for developing sustainable nature-driven marketing strategies by highlighting the demand for peaceful, enjoyable, and individualistic novel experiences in response to the over-growing mass tourism and the pandemic-shock.

The explicit analysis found evidence that when it comes to comparing distinct destinations, 'Nature' (more remote natural area) is associated with most of the key dimensions (affordable, relaxing, healthy, socialising, great view, memorable experience, escapism, and uniqueness), while 'City' (densely populated urban space) only scored higher in a few categories (discovery, closeness, plus safety in Romania). As the most significant result, the research findings reveal that individuals in both countries tend to evaluate 'Nature' more pleasant than 'City', not just explicitly but also implicitly. The newfound learning suggests that COVID-19 is having a lasting impact on our connection with nature as even when the virus situation was improving in 2022, individuals still experienced a heightened connection to the pleasant and natural dimensions (RQ1). Following earlier works, this result proves that the pandemic has accelerated the rise of alternative forms of tourism with nature in the centre (Altuntas & Gok, 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Volgger et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021; Matiza, 2022; Michalkó et al., 2022). In search of the factors driving the observed trend, the correlation of explicit and implicit measures signalled a positive connection between more remote, natural sites and a pleasant (travel) experience in terms of serenity (anti-buzz), uniqueness, safety, closeness, and discovery (RQ2).

With the aim of better understanding the impacted parties by this phenomenon (RQ3), two relationships were discovered between D-classes and sociological charac-

teristics: (1) women and (2) individuals in non-serious or no relationships reported feeling a stronger affinity for nature. According to the literature, during the pandemic women often associate spending time in nature with healthy – family activities and a sense of safety – security, whereas those seeking social connectedness could have viewed blue-green spaces during this time as their sole opportunity for socialization (Day, 2020; Derks et al., 2020; Korpilo et al., 2021; Venter et al., 2021; De Meo et al., 2023). The fact that there was no other observable relationship between the respondents' demographic variables and the D-score-based Nature visitor classes corroborates the conclusions of Dogramadjieva & Terziyska (2022) that there is no agreement among studies on the attributes of tourists who demonstrate resilience to the COVID-19 crisis.

While there was no apparent link between the implicit scores and the severity of the pandemic, both Hungarians and Romanians have explicitly expressed a shift in their destination preferences towards natural, blue-green spaces since the onset of the pandemic, which has also a relatively weak but positive correlation with the D-scores. This natural tendency is in line with previous findings in this area (Derks et al., 2020; Ugolini et al., 2020; Korpilo et al., 2021; De Meo et al., 2023 among others). Evidently, all parties involved in the tourism industry, including business owners, academics, and policymakers, should recognize the potential for positive change that this situation presents and begin prioritizing sustainable tourism practices with a particular emphasis on utilizing blue-green spaces. The increasing popularity of natural sites makes it necessary to reassess the requirements for infrastructure and visitor management tools, considering demographic profiles, consumption patterns, destination accessibility, mobility, and transportation among others, while also being mindful of the importance of preserving natural resources and supporting local communities.

The study showcased the applicability of IAT as a non-invasive unconscious technique in addressing present-day tourism challenges, such as COVID-19 and leaning towards nature-based experiences (RQ1-2-3). Consistent with prior IAT research, the findings suggest that despite a weak correlation observed in this instance, implicit and explicit measures are closely aligned and congruent (i.e., indicating a natural preference HUN-RO), making this revolutionary combination more effective (reliable) to measure consumer attitudes and preferences (Fuduric et al., 2022; Griszbacher et al., 2022a; 2022b). Consequently, these findings can provide a firm foundation for future discussions; however, it is essential to recognize the limitations of the current study. The IAT only enabled us to compare associations between 'Nature' and 'City' on a scale of pleasantness to unpleasantness, thus the results offer only a limited understanding of the connection between nature and travel intentions in the shadow of the pandemic. Yet, the biggest unanswered question pertains to the aftermath of the pandemic: will our COVID-19 memories eventually fade, and we revert to a "*pre-COVID normal*" (Michalkó et al., 2022), or will the impact be profound enough to necessitate a "*past-COVID (new) normal*" that we must learn to live with? Until more comprehensive longitudinal studies are conducted that considers the dynamic nature of shocks like the pandemic (Dogramadjieva & Terziyska, 2022), the question of what the future holds will remain unanswered. Future research could utilize a larger sample size and include participants from more countries (with non-identical COVID-19 characteristics) to validate the measures and address the limitations of the online data collection method of the study. Although this study does not provide a definitive answer to the future question(s), it made some major contributions to the literature and tourism practice, stimulated further research in this field by raising valuable questions, while also offering a new tool for measuring consumer (i.e., tourist) attitudes.

> *"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,*
> *There is a rapture on the lonely shore,*
> *There is society where none intrudes,*
> *By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:*
> *I love not Man the less, but Nature more"*
> George Gordon Byron

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