

The Impact of Greece as a Safe Tourism Destination (STD) in Tourist Psychology: Evidence from Spain

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the effect that the image of a place, in our case Greece, can have as a STD in the decision-making process for Spanish tourists' who will take summer holidays in 2020, amid covid19 pandemic. Data collected between 15th of June and 31st of July after the first wave of Covid-19 outbreak, when the Greek authorities promoted Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination to attract tourists. Results indicate that Spanish tourist consider Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination. The successful management of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to other countries and the low rates of Covid-19 cases strongly correlated to the image of Greece as a STD.

Keywords: Health Safety; Tourist Psychology; STD; Covid19; Research

Introduction

Tourism, Covid-19 Outbreak And Destinations' Health Safety

On 31 December 2019, China's authorities reported to the WHO a pneumonia caused by a new virus. This new disease, coronavirus COVID-19, originated in China's city Wuhan was largely disregarded by the authorities of other countries despite the reports of its rapid dispersion [1]. According to WHO [2], coronavirus COVID-19 is an infectious disease that primarily infects the lungs of humans. It mostly affects kids, old aged people and people suffering with cardiovascular disease, cancer, respiratory disease, diabetes etc. The virus is spread in two main ways: through contact with infected people when they cough or sneeze and by touching surfaces that have the virus on it and then touches their eyes or mouth [3]. The virus spread quickly and on 11 March 2020 COVID-19, cases reported in 146 countries and WHO declared it as a pandemic. Without a vaccine or a specific antiviral treatment, the daily growing number of COVID19 cases in many countries obligated their authorities to implement non-pharmaceutical measures such as closing restaurants, bars, hotels and travel restrictions, border closure and even to implement general lockdown.

All those necessary health measures have led on the collapse of the tourism chain. Flights canceled, airlines, hotels and restaurants closed and were on the verge of bankruptcy due to lack of clients and liquidity. Governments had to subsidize with state money all these companies and their employees. In fact, global tourism over the last twenty years has faced different health crises such as the SARS (2003) and the MERS (2015) outbreaks. None of them, not even the 2008 economic crisis, has dramatically affected the growth of the tourism sector (Figure 1) such as the coronavirus COVID-19 [1]. As of 31 July 2020, over 17 million COVID-19 confirmed cases and over 660,000 deaths were reported in 213 countries [2]. The panic among the public created by the spreading of COVID-19 pandemic in combination with the travel restriction, affected tourism and travel sector the most [3]. According to UNWTO [4], on the Q1 2020 22% and the current scenarios point to declines of 58% to 78% for 2020 decreased arrivals (Figure 2). Nowadays, many countries are in the phase of reopening their economies. They have reopened schools and businesses and they try to restart their tourism economy in local scale and in limited international scale [1].

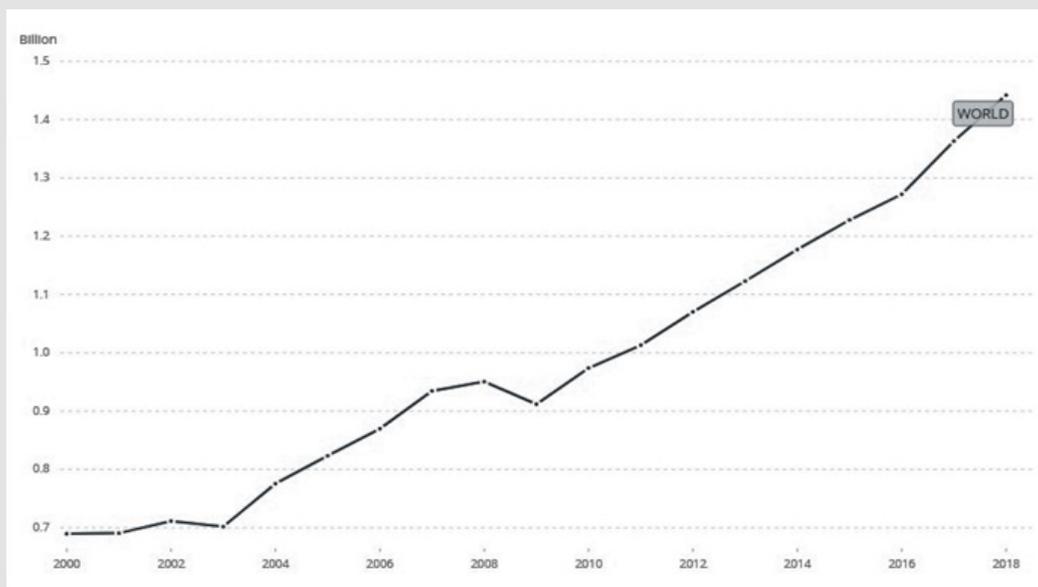


Figure 1: Tourism arrivals worldwide 2000-2018 [23].

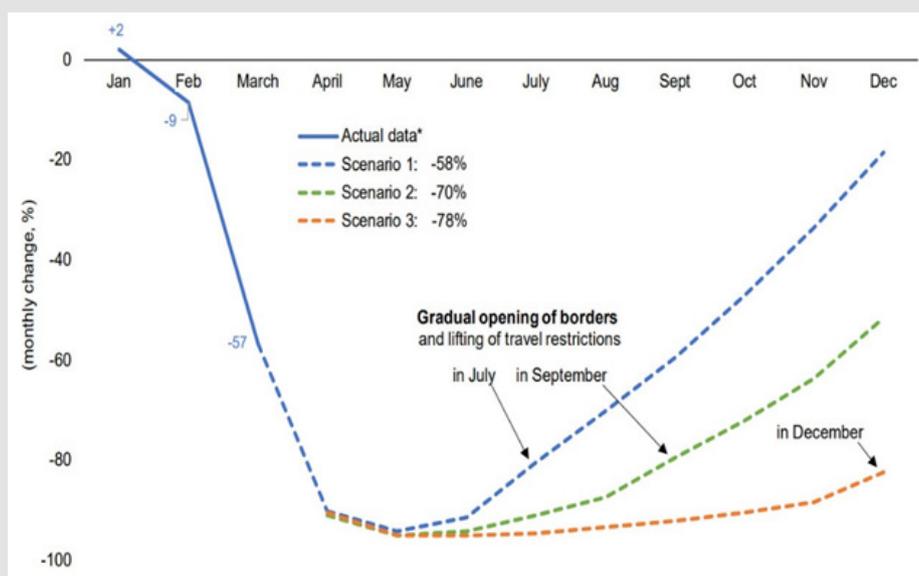


Figure 2: International tourism arrivals in 2020: UNWTO’s scenarios [4].

To avoid all the negative impacts of the COVID19 outbreak [5], many destinations focus on tourism like business-as-usual [1]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed tourists’ perspective and awareness of safety and cleanliness issues [6]. The perceived health risk factors and the risk of contagious diseases influence the image of health destinations [7] and negative impression of the destination can be developed if the tourist feels unsafe [8]. Today the slogan “Safety sells in tourism” is more important than ever in the tourism and travel industry [9] and for this reason, many destinations have been promoted as Safe Tourist Destinations (STD) in order to attract tourists. According to Neuburger & Egger

[10] tourism industry has to focus on reducing tourists’ travel risk perception to bounce back quickly once the threat of COVID-19 decreases. Tourists can form reasonable safety expectations only when they have access to accurate and reliable information about the destination [11]. Thus, destinations have to communicate all the health cover and safety measures to ensure that tourists will feel safe. The purpose of the present study is to examine the factors that influence Greece’s perceptions as a Safe Tourist Destination in the decision-making process for potential tourists from Spain, who will take summer holidays in 2020, amid Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 in Spain

According to the Ministry of Health, Consumption and Social Welfare [12], the following graphic shows the number of daily deaths caused by Covid-19 in Spain from March 1st to July 31st of 2020. At the end of July, the total number of deaths from Covid-19 in Spain reached the figure of 28,443 people. The daily death toll remained above 700 during the period from March 20th to April 10th. Within the five months period shown below, April is the period with the highest mortality, with 16,162 deaths. The number of

deaths drops considerably from the second half of May, registering less than 100 deaths a day. The month with the lowest incidence is June, due to the delayed effect of the nationwide lockdown issued on March 15th figure 3. Although the Covid-19 has spread globally, it has not impacted all countries equally. Spain has been one of the countries in the world most affected by the coronavirus, both due to the number of infected, deaths and the collapse of health resources. It has also been one with the strictest lockdown and isolation measures, including the prohibition for children to go out during the state of alarm[13].

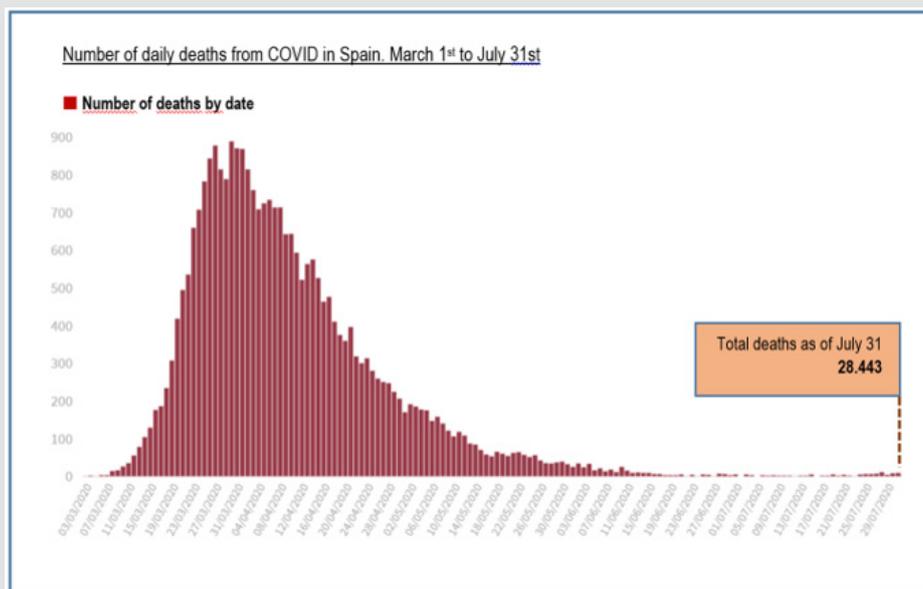


Figure 3: The situation of daily deaths from Covid-19 in Spain [25].

The experiences lived during the pandemic include different sources of stress for the population [14]. Previous studies carried out in stressful situations and emergencies make it possible to define which are the most significant variables of the psychological impact on people: fear of infection, not being able to cover basic needs, not having information and clear guidelines for action, feelings of frustration, anger and boredom [15] or the presence of economic problems [16]. According to RodriguezRey et al. [17], those who suffer the most are women, young people, and those who consider themselves as a risk-population group. These authors strongly recommend to listen to the urgent call made by some European governments to look for a united approach to deal with the upcoming economic recession if we want to prevent a long-lasting psychological suffering for the Spanish society and people in other countries under similar circumstances. The Covid-19 pandemic is not over yet and the psychological effects related to this health crisis [18] are likely to have long lasting consequences after the pandemic is under control, which should be considered in future longitudinal studies [15].

Research Method

To explore Greece's perceptions as a Safe Tourist Destination this study conducted in Spanish tourists. In Greece, the first Covid-19 case reported on 26 February. The quarantine period in Greece lasted until May 4 when Greek authorities started the first phase of economy's restarting. The restarting of the tourism sector started on June 1 focusing on domestic tourism and on June 15, the first foreign tourists arrived in Greece. On July 31, over 4,000 cases and 203 deaths from the COVID-19 reported in Greece [2]. It has commonly accepted that Greece has succeeded in preventing the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak. In contrast, the dispersion of Covid-19 disease in Spain, as mentioned above, was rapid and on 25 March, the death toll surpassed that of mainland China, and only that of Italy was higher. As of 31 July 2020, almost 290,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases and over 28,500 reported in Spain [2]. Thus, it is interesting to examine Spaniards' perception, who were among those who suffered the most from the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, regarding Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination. For this study, data collected between 15 June and 31 July 2020 using an online questionnaire developed in Spanish. Finally, 400 completely

filled questionnaires used for analysis. The study focuses on Spanish tourists' perceptions regarding Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination which was measured using a 7-point Likert scale (1=Not at all and 7 = To an extremely high extent). The measure items regarding the

factors that influence tourists perception about Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination were measured in a 7-point Likert scale with 1= less important and 7 = most important. All items taken from previous studies [1,19-22].

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1: Socio-Demographics profile of responders (N=400).

n	Category	Distribution
Gender	Male	170 (42.5%)
	Female	230 (57.5%)
Age	18 – 24	82 (20.5%)
	25 – 34	104 (26%)
	35 – 49	121 (30.3%)
	50 – 65	56 (14%)
	>65	37 (9.3%)
Education	Primary School	7 (1.8%)
	High School	137 (34.3%)
	Graduate Degree	182 (45.5%)
	Postgraduate Degree	74 (18.5%)
Marital Status	Single	180 (45%)
	Married	76 (19%)
	Divorced	70 (17.5%)
	Married with children	74 (18.5%)
	Annual Household Income	< 10.000 €
10.001 - 15.000 €		20 (5%)
15.001 – 20.000 €		112 (28%)
20.001 – 30.000 €		158 (39.5%)
30.001 – 45.000 €		50 (12.5%)
> 45.001 €		35 (8.8%)
Main Period of vacation	April /May	47 (11.8%)
	June / July	77 (19.3%)
	August	124 (31%)
	September / October	126 (31.5%)
	Winter	26 (6.5%)
Days of staying	Less than 5	12 (3%)
	5 – 10	282 (70.5%)
	11 – 15	58 (14.5%)
	More than 15	48 (12%)
Sick from Covid-19 virus	Yes	21 (5.3%)
	No	379 (94.8%)
Member of family or friend get sick	Yes	212 (53%)
	No	188 (47%)

Note: The percentages rounded up to one decimal point. Therefore, the percentage may not add to 100.0 because of rounding errors.

To process the descriptive statistics on the collected data and assess the demographic profile of the sample SPSS version 21.0 applied. With respect to the gender, 57.5% were female responders. 56.3% of the responders were between 25 – 49 years old and 45.5%

had a graduate degree. The majority of the responders (45.0%) were singles and 39.5% had 20,001 – 30,000€ personal annual income. Main period of responders' vacation is between August and October (62.5%) and their stay period in the tourist destination is

between 5 to 10 days (70.5%). It is essential to mention that 94.8% did not sick from Covid-19 virus, but 53% had a member of their family who gets sick. Table 1 outlines all the main sociodemographic characteristics of the responders.

Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination

The study’s results confirm that Spanish tourists mind Greece as a health safe destination. Figure 4 indicates that 72.3% of Spanish tourist consider Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination. According to the mean score of each factor, for the Spaniards, the “consciousness and discipline of the citizen with the rules and regulations”, “the highly trained medical and nursing professionals” and the “commitment on maintaining an unaffected brand name in terms of safety” considered the most significant factors that name Greece

a Safe Tourist Destination. On the other hand, the less significant factors are their “prior travel experiences in Greece” and “how safe one can be under the COVID-19 circumstances” and “the access to information and advertising campaigns about how safe is to travel to Greece”. Table 2 indicate the means score results for the factors that name Greece a safe destination. However, the results indicate that that Greece’s image as a Safe Tourist Destination is strongly correlated (values greater than .7) with the factors of “Successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic compared with other countries” and the “Low rates of coronavirus infection across the country”. In contrast, there are no correlations between the image of STD and factors, which related to the trust in the implementation of health protocols by businesses or C-level tourism professionals or with the highly trained medical and nursing professionals.

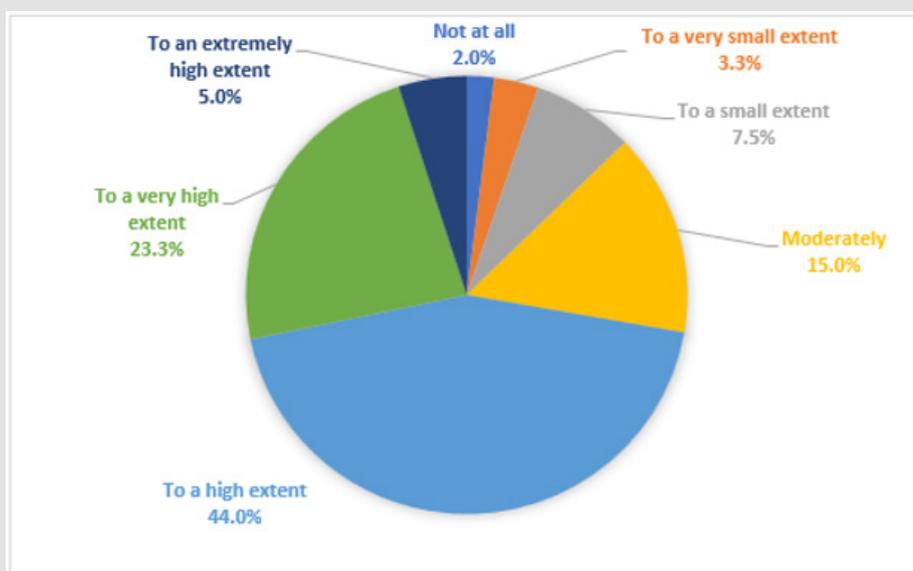


Figure 4: Greece as a Safe Tourist Destination (Spaniards perceptions).

Table 2: Factors that name Greece a safe tourist destination.

Factor	Mean	SD	Pearson Correlation to “Greece a Safe Tourist Destination”
Cx2. Successful management of the COVID-19 pandemic compared with other countries	5.140	1.0622	.781**
Cx3. Low rates of coronavirus infection across the country	5.085	1.0101	.710**
Cx4. Low coronavirus death rate across the country	5.130	1.0372	.633**
Cx5. Well-developed health care system and infrastructure across country	4.945	1.0511	.414**
Cx6. Highly trained medical and nursing professionals	5.303	1.1131	.397**
Cx7. Consciousness and discipline of the citizens as to the compliance with rules and regulations	5.383	1.0974	.399**
Cx8. Safe, well-organized and modern tourism infrastructure	5.120	1.0115	.467**
Cx9. Trust in the implementation of health protocols by business	4.910	1.1068	.398**
Cx10. Trust in the implementation of health protocols by C-level tourism executives and professionals	4.983	1.0630	.382**
Cx11. Trust in the implementation of health protocols by means of transport and transport infrastructure	4.893	1.0648	.362**
Cx12. Locating travel destinations in the country, reporting zero cases of COVID-19	4.973	.9946	.486**

Cx13. Trust in good cooperation between business and health care system	4.838	1.1703	.422**
Cx14. Trust in good cooperation between business and the general secretariat for civil protection	4.743	1.1682	.438**
Cx15. Greece is a safe European country in full compliance with the health protocols set out in the European Union	4.700	1.1372	.463**
Cx16. In Greece one can combine safe travel experience with unique moments and unforgettable vacation experiences	5.230	1.0955	.622*
Cx17. Advertising Campaigns and information I had access to about how safe it is to travel to Greece	4.520	1.2840	.426**
Cx18. I've been to Greece before and I know firsthand that I can be safe even under COVID-19 circumstances	4.343	1.5333	.526**
Cx19. Greece is a top travel destination globally, committed to maintain its brand name unaffected this year as well as in terms of safety	5.248	1.1509	.540**
Cx20. Trust in the safety and precautionary measures introduced by the Greek Government concerning tourism business sector	4.785	1.1300	.433**
Cx21. Trust in the policies and measures concerning tourism introduced by the European Union	4.620	1.1997	.500**

Note:**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study is the first attempt to investigate Greece's image as a Safe Tourist Destination amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the factors that affect it. The result indicates that Greece, after the successful management of the first wave of the Covid-19 outbreak, considered a Safe Tourist Destination for international tourists, in our case Spaniards. In health crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic tourism sector is affected the most [1] because tourism supply and demand decline dramatically [23]. Providing health safe destinations' environment may attract tourists because they feel less fear and anxiety for their health. An important factor that can be used by destinations to promote safety is social media [24,25]. According to the findings, Greece, as a Safe Tourist Destination, should use and promote the successful management of the Covid-19 outbreak compared with other countries, especially with those with the same characteristics and the low rates of coronavirus infections across the country to attract more tourists. Further, the Greek authorities and the tourism businesses must be ready to manage tourists' high flow in the high season. The image of a Safe Tourist Destination can easily change because it is related to the country's numbers of Covid-19 cases. Dramatically increasing numbers of Covid-19 cases could damage this image, which can lead to dissatisfied tourists that their expectations did not meet.

Despite contributing to the knowledge regarding the destinations' health safety image towards the Covid-19 pandemic, this study has several limitations. We must mention that questionnaires collected in a period (15th June – 31st July) that tourist flows in several destinations were limited and there was no evidence about the impacts on the coronavirus contagion after the travel bans period. In addition, the results based on the perceptions of Spanish tourists toward Greece. A wider cross-border research on Greece's image as a Safe Tourist Destination suggested so the result could be generalized. Future research could also focus on

tourists' psychology and their perceptions regarding destinations, and how health safety, on the differences in the tourists' decision-making process, between safe health destinations and destination with high numbers of Covid-19 cases. Finally, research could focus on the tourists' preferences on the on-site experiences and their overall satisfaction regarding all the health safety measures.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) reported no potential conflict of interest.

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