

Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic State on Decision to Travel

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted global tourism, causing an unprecedented decline in international travel due to restrictions, safety concerns, and economic uncertainty. Government in most countries imposed border closures, quarantine mandates, and flight suspensions in compliance with lockdowns and restricted movement measures to curb the spread of the virus. While the literature demonstrates substantial empirical evidence that reports the effect of the pandemic on the tourism sector, the impact on travel decisions post-pandemic has not been well documented.

This study analyzed secondary data from the reports of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), spanning 2017 to 2024, to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international travel decisions. Trends in tourist arrivals, regional recovery patterns, tourism receipts, and the role of digital technology in shaping post-pandemic travel behaviors were analyzed.

Findings reveal that global tourism arrivals at pre-pandemic levels grew steadily from 1.3 billion at 70.7% in 2017, to 1.5 billion at 74.6% in 2019, and experienced a sharp decline in 2020. However, a gradual recovery followed up to 1.4 billion at 72.8% as of 2024. The Middle East, Africa, and Europe showed the strongest rebounds by 2024.

Key factors contributing to recovery include easing travel restrictions, economic affordability, strategic investments in tourism infrastructure, and the widespread adoption of digital technology. The implication of these findings is that while international tourism has nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels, traveler behavior might have shifted permanently with an emphasis on health security, digital convenience, and sustainable travel choices. The study concludes that there is a need for adaptive policies and resilient tourism strategies to sustain long-term industry growth.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; International Tourism; Travel Decision

Introduction

In the modern world, travel serves various purposes, including education, leisure, business, and personal development [1]. Traveling is a fundamental aspect of tourism that also allows individuals to experience diverse cultures, network with foreign counterparts, and develop adaptability [1, 2]. Research has also shown that traveling contributes to economic development by boosting tourism, creating employment, and facilitating international development [2, 3].

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), as of 2019, there were 1.5 billion recorded international tourist arrivals worldwide [4]. The report also shows that in 2018, China, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Russia, Canada, South Korea, and Italy were the top ten countries with the highest expenditure on tourism [4, 5]. In Africa, the top ten African countries visited were Morocco, South Africa, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Togo, Cabo Verde, Reunion, Madagascar, and Seychelles. Meanwhile, the United States, Spain, and France recorded the top three highest revenues from international tourism in the previous year [5, 6].

In the years before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global tourism sector experienced steady growth, driven by increasing disposable incomes, improved transportation infrastructure, and the rise of digital platforms [6, 7]. International tourist arrivals grew consistently as the UNWTO reported record numbers year after year [5, 6, 8]. Technological innovations in travel planning and digital payment solutions were recorded as major factors of growth in the tourist industry [8, 9]. Popular destinations, particularly in Europe and Asia, benefited from strong demand while emerging markets in Africa and Latin America gained traction [4, 8-10]. Tourism was a major economic driver, contributing significantly to employment in many countries and the GDP at the national and global levels [9, 11].

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on international travel and the tourism sector, which brought the global movement to an unprecedented halt. Governments worldwide imposed strict lockdowns, travel bans, and quarantine measures to curb the virus's spread, leading to a sharp decline in international tourist arrivals [4, 7-11]. Airlines, hotels, and travel agencies suffered massive financial losses, with many businesses completely shutting down or downsized due to reduced demand [8, 12]. The hospitality industry, including restaurants, cruise lines, and tour operators, faced severe disruptions, as travelers canceled trips and leisure activities ceased [9,13]. Major global events, such as the Tokyo Olympics; initially scheduled for 2020, were postponed and later held without spectators, which further dampened the tourism economy [13-15].

Some key Interventions and adaptive strategies enabled the industry to rapidly adopt digital technology innovations to address health and safety concerns [15, 16]. These technologies enable contactless check-ins, QR-coded menus, virtual tours, and digital health passports [17]. Many of these innovations have also altered the tourist experience and created new service delivery models post-pandemic [18, 19]. Moreover, several governments implemented stimulus packages, tax reliefs, and grants to sustain the tourism industry [20]. In some cases, travel corridors and vaccine-based entry requirements were introduced to revive international tourism safely [21]. In addition, the widespread vaccination roll-out, followed by the lifting of travel restrictions, and more coordinated and clearer information on travel protocols, showed a promising recovery in international tourism [21,22].

Despite these interventions, controversies and debates in post-pandemic relating to vaccine inequalities and travel freedom have been recorded [23, 24]. There is the opinion that the global disparities in vaccine access have led to unequal recovery in tourism [25]. While developed nations reopened their borders, many developing countries struggled with declining inbound tourism due to travel bans and vaccine passport requirements [26, 27]. Furthermore, the use of digital health passports and tracking apps has raised several ethical concerns about data privacy [28, 29]. Tourists are now more aware and sometimes wary of surveillance technologies used in the name of public health [30,31].

Notwithstanding, the survival of most companies in the tourism sector has been explained through the lenses of crisis and resilience theory, which examines how the tourism industry absorbs shocks, adapts, and recovers from crises [32]. Despite the global tourism crisis that grounded international travel, some business organizations in the industry demonstrated resilience [33, 34]. Many companies leveraged digital innovations to provide alternative tourism experiences and project domestic tourism [35]. Conversely, trends in increased demand for nature-based tourism and private accommodation choices including Airbnb over large hotels have been explained using the principles of risk perception and behavioral theory [36]. Moreover, the push-pull motivation theory, which is traditionally used to understand travel motivation, gained new relevance post-pandemic [37]. Push factors such as the desire for escape and relaxation became stronger after long lockdowns, but pull factors such as destination safety, and health protocols now heavily influence destination choice [37, 38].

Meanwhile, several studies in the literature have demonstrated in-depth analysis of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism industry however; there is a notable dearth of studies that investigated travel decisions post-pandemic. In addition, other factors contributing to the recovery in global tourist arrivals aside lifting of travel bans and massive vaccinations have not been sufficiently documented. Thus, there is a clear knowledge gap due to the paucity of empirical information that provides a comprehensive understanding of how travel-related experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped travel behavior post-pandemic.

Against this backdrop, the paper analyzed the impact of covid-19 pandemic state on the decision to travel post-pandemic. The purpose is to provide valuable insights into shifts in post-pandemic travel behavior, preferences, and restrictions. The key objectives of this study were to:

- Analyze the trend in international tourist arrivals between 2017 and 2024;
- Examine the difference in tourist arrivals between the pre-pandemic period (2017 to 2019) and the post-pandemic period (2021-2024); and
- Interrogate how the COVID-19 pandemic experience has shaped travel behavior post-pandemic.

Materials and Methods

Secondary data on global travel trends was gathered from eight (8) annual publications by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) between 2017 and 2024. The method involved a review of the selected publications and the mining of published statistical data on key indicators (i.e., international tourist arrivals, tourism share in total exports, Average receipts per arrival, and traveler confidence levels). Then descriptive statistical tools on the SPSS software version 30 were utilized to perform trend analysis to examine fluctuations in travel patterns before, during, and after the pandemic. Furthermore, descriptive analysis was further conducted to identify regional variations and assess the recovery trajectories across different tourism markets. In addition, qualitative insights from UNWTO policy recommendations and expert commentaries were integrated to contextualize the findings and provide a comprehensive evaluation of how the pandemic influenced global travel behavior post-pandemic.

Results

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the top ten (10) countries visited between 2017 and 2019 were France, Spain, the USA, China, Italy, Turkey, Mexico, Germany, Thailand, and the United Kingdom with over 600 million travelers, generating high GDP for the respective countries. The top ten African countries visited around the same period (2017 and 2019) were Morocco, South Africa, Tunisia, Zimbabwe, Mauritius, Togo, Cabo Verde, Reunion Island, Madagascar, and Seychelles respectively.

Trends in international tourism show that before the pandemic; between 2017 to 2019, records of international tourist arrivals revealed a steady growth, showing that in 2017, there were about 1.3 billion tourist arrivals documented at 70.7%. In 2018, the records show that 1.4 billion tourist arrivals were documented at 72.8%. As of 2019, the UNWTO recorded 1.5 billion tourist arrivals at 74.6%. In 2020, the records revealed a sharp reduction in international tourist arrivals with only 381 million arrivals at 25.4% (a difference of -49.2%) compared to the 2019 benchmark figures. Though an improvement was recorded in 2021, showing 595 million tourist arrivals at 39.7%, there was a deficit of -34.9% compared to the 2019 benchmark figures. In 2022, tourist arrivals increased to 963 million representing 64.2% however, this was below the 2019 peak figures by -10.4%. In 2023, there was a further recovery in tourist arrivals recorded as 975 million at 65%, but this was also below the 2019 reference by -9.6%. By the end of 2024, international tourist arrivals recovered up to 1.4 billion at 72.8%, similar to 2018 but slightly lower with -1.6% than the 2019 benchmark (see appendix Table 1 & Figure 1).

International tourism recovery across continents revealed that the Middle East, Europe, and Africa experienced the strongest recovery results as of 2024. Compared to the 2019 benchmark, the Middle East recorded 95 million post-pandemic arrivals, indicating the strongest-performing region. The record was 32% above pre-pandemic levels, and 1% higher than 2023. The African continent recorded 74 million post-pandemic international tourist arrivals, which was 7% more arrivals than in 2019, and 12% more than in 2023. Europe recorded 747 million international arrivals in 2024 above 1% of the 2019 records, and 5% above 2023. The American continent recorded 213 million post-pandemic tourist arrivals, recovering 97% from pre-pandemic arrivals, but -3% about the 2019 level however, the Caribbean and Central America exceeded the 2019 levels. The American continent experienced a 7% recovery as of 2024 compared to 2023. Asia and the Pacific experienced a rapid recovery of 316 million post-pandemic tourist arrivals in 2024, which was 87% of pre-pandemic levels, an improvement from 66% at the end of 2023. Cumulatively, between 2023 and 2024, international arrivals increased to 78 million, indicating a recovery of 33% by the end of 2024 (see appendix Table 2).

As of 2024, total exports from tourism; including passenger transport reached a record 1.9 trillion USD, about 4% more than the pre-pandemic 2019 figure of 1.6 trillion. Several destinations reported outstanding growth in international tourism receipts towards the end of 2024. These include Kuwait 232%, El Salvador 206%, Saudi Arabia 148%, Albania 136%, Serbia 98%, Republic of Moldova 86%, and Canada 70%, in their local currencies. The top five world tourism earners that experienced huge growth levels in 2024 also included the United Kingdom 40%, Spain 36%, France 27%, and Italy 23% (see appendix Table 3). Results of international tourism expenditure reflected the same trend with India recording the highest tourism expenditure of 81%, Germany, and the United Kingdom both recorded 36% respectively, the United States recorded 34%, Italy 25%, and France 11%.

Discussion

The findings highlight the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global tourism, particularly in 2020 when international tourist arrivals plummeted to 381 million, representing only 25.4% of the 2019 figures [5]. This is in line with previous findings that underscore a drastic decline due to widespread travel restrictions, lockdown measures, and health concerns that severely disrupted international mobility [5, 39]. The steep drop of -49.2% from 2019 suggests that the fear of infection, government-imposed travel bans, and the economic impact of the pandemic collectively influenced individuals' decisions to avoid international travel. Early reports noted that these factors affected leisure travel and disrupted business, medical, and educational tourism [5, 25, 40, 41], which led to severe consequences for global economies that rely heavily on tourism revenue.

The gradual recovery in 2021 and 2022, although notable, suggests that while travel restrictions began easing and vaccination programs were rolled out, traveler confidence remained fragile. The 595 million arrivals recorded in 2021, though an improvement from 2020, were still 34.9% below 2019 levels, indicating that travelers were still hesitant. This finding corroborates previ-

ous reports about the influence of the resurfaced Omicron virus variants in slowing down international travel recovery [42, 43]. In addition, previous findings also observed that the fluctuated travel policies, and financial constraints were key factors of slow recovery in many countries [44, 45]. By 2022, a more substantial recovery was evident, with tourist arrivals reaching 963 million, but the fact that figures were still 10.4% below pre-pandemic levels implies that full recovery was hindered by public safety concerns. This finding contrasts a previous report that attributed the slow recovery to the financial repercussions of the global economic downturn [46].

In 2023, the recorded 975 million arrivals at 65% of pre-pandemic levels further reinforced the idea that the tourism industry was steadily bouncing back, yet faced challenges. Some existing articles reported that despite increased confidence in travel, some regions were still dealing with post-pandemic economic strain, high inflation, and the restructuring of the airline and hospitality industries, which affected affordability and accessibility [4, 25, 47, 48]. Recent findings also noted that the slow return to 2019 levels implies that while many people were eager to resume travel, the residual effect of the pandemic, such as the new normal in health screening, was a major concern [48, 49]. In addition, the changing work dynamics, which increased remote opportunities and altered priorities, continued to influence travel decisions [50].

By 2024, with tourist arrivals reaching 1.4 billion (72.8%), close to 2018 levels but still slightly lower (-1.6%) than 2019 was evident that while global tourism has largely rebounded, the pandemic has left lasting effects on travel behavior. This finding agrees with some authors who found that the persistence of some safety protocols, increased preference for domestic and regional travel, and shifts in traveler expectations reflected a transformed tourism landscape [51, 52]. While people have regained confidence in international travel, the industry must adapt to new expectations. Enhanced health security measures, flexible booking policies, and a greater emphasis on sustainable tourism to accommodate post-pandemic travel behaviors have been suggested [53].

In terms of continent-wise performance, one possible reason for the strong recovery in international tourism in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe could be the strategic investment in tourism infrastructure and marketing efforts. Findings revealed that the Middle East particularly, has aggressively expanded its tourism sector through mega-events such as Expo 2020 in Dubai and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, attracting a large influx of visitors [54]. Governments in the region have also implemented favorable visa policies and airline expansions to enhance accessibility [55]. Similarly, African nations have leveraged cultural tourism, eco-tourism, and safari destinations to attract travelers [9, 30], while European countries have focused on promoting heritage tourism, festival tourism, and ease of travel within the Schengen Zone to boost arrivals [32].

Another factor contributing to the tourism rebound in these regions could be the relatively faster and more consistent relaxation of travel restrictions compared to other parts of the world. Many European countries and the Middle East reopened their borders earlier than other regions, implementing flexible COVID-19 policies to encourage travelers [32, 56]. Many African countries also benefitted from fewer prolonged lockdowns and a strong emphasis on nature-based and adventure tourism [56, 57]. This attracted travelers seeking open spaces and reduced crowd density post-pandemic [57]. Also, the ability of most countries to adjust policies in response to global travel demand and ease of entry significantly influenced the recovery rate in these continents [25, 36, 58].

In addition, the significant growth in international tourism receipts in 2024 could be attributed to the increased demand for travel, driven by pent-up demand after the pandemic and the expansion of tourism offerings in key destinations. A recent finding revealed that countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have heavily invested in tourism infrastructure, luxury experiences, and global marketing campaigns to attract visitors [59]. Moreover, the surge in business travel, cultural tourism, and major international events has contributed to the rapid increase in tourism spending. Another key factor is the depreciation of local currencies in some destinations, such as Serbia, Moldova, and El Salvador [36, 60], which made these countries more affordable for international tourists, thereby boosting visitor numbers and overall spending. Previous reports also show that top

tourism earners including the UK, Spain, and France benefitted from strong intra-European travel, premium tourism experiences, and increased long-haul visitors seeking cultural and leisure experiences in historically popular destinations [4, 25, 60].

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technology to shape travel experiences and behaviors. These technologies are transforming how people plan, book, and experience tourism. Contactless services, digital health passports, and mobile check-ins are some examples that have become essential to ensure safety and convenience, and reduce physical interactions [42, 43]. Today, the wide use of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics enables personalized travel recommendations and helps travelers make informed decisions based on real-time information [60]. Virtual reality and augmented reality (VR/AR) also gained prominence, allowing potential tourists to explore destinations remotely before booking [60, 61]. Also, social media and digital marketing have played a crucial role in rebuilding traveler confidence, as destinations leveraged online platforms to showcase safety measures and attractions [61, 62].

Post-pandemic, these digital innovations have become permanent fixtures in the tourism industry because experience has shown that they make travel more seamless, accessible, and tailored to individual preferences [62].

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant lasting impact on travel decisions. The pandemic initially caused an unprecedented decline in international tourism due to health concerns, travel restrictions, and economic uncertainty. However, the gradual recovery in tourist arrivals, international tourism receipts, and regional travel patterns underscores the resilience of the industry in meeting the evolving preferences of travelers. In addition, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies that have reshaped traveler behavior toward safety-conscious and flexible planning. This further influenced the economic strategies of tourism-dependent nations. However, while international tourism has largely rebounded by 2024, the pandemic has permanently altered the way people make travel decisions, including travel behaviors.

Appendix

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals between 2017 and 2024

Year	Tourist Arrivals	Percentage (%)
2017	1.3 billion	70.7%
2018	1.4 billion	72.8%
2019	1.5 billion	74.6%
2020	381 million	25.4%
2021	595 million	39.7%
2022	963 million	64.2%
2023	975 million	65%
2024	1.4 billion	72.8%

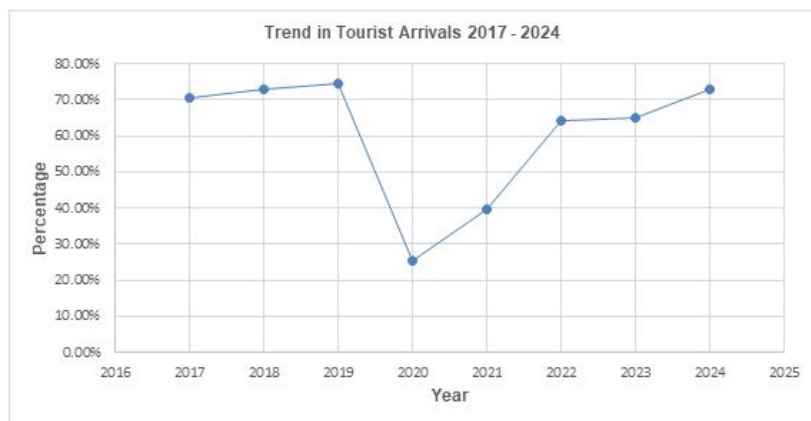


Figure 1: Graph showing trends in international tourist arrivals between 2017 and 2024

Table 2: International tourism recovery across continents 2024

Continent	Recovery	Percentage	Compared to 2019
Middle East	95 million	32%	Above 2019
Africa	74 million	7%	Above 2019
Europe	747 million	5%	Above 2019
America	213 million	97%	Below 2019
Asia Pacific	316 million	87%	Below 2019

Table 3: Tourist Destinations with Outstanding Growth in International Receipts 2024

S/N	Destination	Growth (%)
1	Kuwait	232%
2	El Salvador	206%
3	Saudi Arabia	148%
4	Albania	136%,
5	Serbia	98%,
6	Republic of Moldova	86%,
7	Canada	70%,

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