

Kristina Afrić Rakitovac / Nataša Urošević

Stakeholders' Perspectives on Post-Pandemic Sustainable Tourism Development – The Case of Vrsar, Croatia

Abstract

This paper presents research focused on the post-pandemic opportunities of special interest tourism development, through the elaboration of the stakeholders' perspectives on the sustainable valorisation of local natural and cultural heritage in the changing global context. The main goal of the research was to analyse the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on key stakeholders' activities and their attitudes towards future sustainable tourism development. The empirical research has been realised in the Municipality of Vrsar, a typical Mediterranean tourist destination characterised by mass tourism and high seasonality. The research was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including a literature review, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders' representatives and a tourists' attitudes survey. The conducted research indicated that the current pandemic could be seen also as an opportunity for all key stakeholders to reflect on the sustainability of the existing tourism practices and develop products which will be more nature-friendly and respond to new needs and expectations of changing tourist demand. The new, more sustainable, post-pandemic model of participatory governance in cultural and tourism development should involve all interested stakeholders, by developing a distinctive offer for special interest tourist segments which could disperse demand in time and space and prolong the tourism season.

Keywords: special interest tourism, sustainable valorisation, stakeholders, post-pandemic tourism, Croatia

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1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic affects all segments of our society and economy. The travel and tourism industry, although mostly resilient to external shocks in the last few decades, has become one of the most affected (Čorak et al., 2020; Škare et al., 2021; Gössling & Schweiggart, 2022). Within just a few months, the global tourism system had moved from over-tourism to non-tourism (Gössling et al., 2021), with a very slow recovery in the second half of 2020. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021), globally in 2020, there was a 73% decline in international arrivals compared to 2019. The largest decline in arrivals occurred in Asia and the Pacific (84%), followed by the Middle East (75%) and Europe (70%). In receipts, the decline is \$1.1 trillion, which is ten times worse than in the 2008 global recession. In 2021 (UNWTO, 2022) there was a slow recovery of international tourism compared to 2020, i.e., international tourist arrivals increased by 3.75%, which is still 72% below the 2019 levels. Besides the pandemic, the UNWTO points out many challenges in the economic environment: oil price hikes, rise in inflation and potential increases in interest rates, high debt levels and continued disruption in international supply chains.

Kristina Afrić Rakitovac, PhD, Full Professor, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Faculty of Economics and Tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković", Pula, Croatia; ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4336-347X>; e-mail: kristina.afric.rakitovac@unipu.hr

Nataša Urošević, PhD, Corresponding author, Associate Professor, Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Faculty of Economics and Tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković", Interdisciplinary Study Programme of Culture and Tourism, Pula, Croatia; ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8026-8987>; e-mail: natasa.urosevic@unipu.hr

The authors of this study assumed that the current pandemic could be seen also as an opportunity for all key stakeholders to reflect on the sustainability of the existing tourism practices and to develop products which will be more nature-friendly and respond to the new needs and expectations of changing tourist demand. The new, more sustainable, post-pandemic model of participatory governance in cultural and tourism development should involve all interested stakeholders, by developing a distinctive offer for special interest tourist segments which could disperse demand in time and space and prolong the tourism season (such as cultural, recreational and eco-tourism).

The purpose of this paper was to explore the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on key stakeholders' activities and their attitudes towards future sustainable tourism development. The research was conducted in the final year of the scientific research project "Archaeological landscape in the sustainable development of cultural tourism in the Municipality of Vršar - ArchaeoCulTour", whose main goal was to analyse the development potential of archaeological heritage through sustainable tourism. The empirical research has been realised in the Municipality of Vršar, a typical Mediterranean tourist destination characterised by mass tourism and high seasonality. The pandemic has affected current tourist activities and opened new development perspectives. The changing business environment imposed the need for relevant data to help policymakers in reflecting on the future of sustainable tourism.

The observed destination is characterised by an abundance of cultural and natural sites, which have not yet been properly valorised, presented and interpreted. The authors assumed that the key prerequisites for choosing a destination in pandemic and post-pandemic conditions are the safety and proximity to the destination and that, in post-pandemic conditions, tourism development should be based on specific, sustainable forms of tourism that could disperse the tourist demand and prolong the tourist season. The research results were compared to the authors' empirical study conducted for the city of Rovinj in the same period (both neighbouring destinations, located along the west coast of Istria, are strategically linked through the co-creation of destination products, events and experiences by the same tourism company). Besides local policymakers, the research results could be relevant for similar Mediterranean destinations with the same sustainability issues and post-pandemic tourism challenges.

2. Literature review

Many studies have analysed the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on travel and tourism in the last two years (Lew et al., 2020; Čorak et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020; Sharma et al., 2021; European Commission [EC], 2021 etc.). Gössling et al. (2021) compared the impacts of COVID-19 to previous epidemics/pandemics and other types of global crises in the period between 2000 and 2015. They found that global tourism has been exposed to a wide range of crises in the past, e.g., the September 11 (2001) terrorist attacks, the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (2003), the 2008/2009 global economic crisis and the outbreak of the Middle Eastern respiratory syndrome (MERS). None of them led to a long-term decline in global tourism development. Only SARS (-0.4%) and the global economic crisis (-4.0%) led to a decline in international arrivals. They conclude that tourism as a system, at least in the observed period, was resilient to external shocks, while the impact of coronavirus is unprecedented. Škare et al. (2021) estimated the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry worldwide by using panel structural vector auto-regression on data from 1995 to 2019 in 185 countries and system dynamic modelling. According to them, since COVID-19 proves that pandemic outbreaks have a much larger destructive impact on the travel and tourism industry than previous studies indicate, tourism managers must carefully assess the effects of epidemics and develop new risk management methods to deal with the crisis.

Binggeli et al. (2020) predict that tourism revenues to 2019 levels may not recover until 2024. An optimistic recovery scenario, combining rapid virus containment and rebounding economies, will see a recovery to 85% of 2019 volumes by 2021 and a full recovery by 2023. Under a pessimistic recovery scenario, 2021

levels can be as low as 60 % of those in 2019, further postponing the recovery. Domestic tourism will return to pre-crisis levels around one to two years earlier than outbound travel. Multiple factors drive this: fewer restrictions to travel within own country, more substitution options for non-air-based travel (such as cars and trains), anxiety and a larger share of business travel. In addition, domestic travel is expected to recover faster than hotels as we see a substitution towards vacation rentals and friends and family in certain markets. They propose five key drivers of tourist behaviour influencing the recovery trajectory in tourism: the attractiveness of domestic destinations, the materiality of air transport, health and hygiene factors, the importance of business travel and sustainability. According to UNWTO (2022), the latest panel of experts, organised in January 2022, estimates a return of international arrivals to 2019 levels only in 2024 or later. Experts from the last panel expect a later recovery compared to the conclusions of previous panels held from October 2020 onwards. Experts recognise domestic tourism, travel close to home, open-air activities, nature-based products and rural tourism as major travel trends in 2022. The changes in consumer trends are also related to sustainability, authenticity and creating positive impacts on local communities. In a recent study (Assaf et al., 2022), the group of researchers articulated new topics and trends that will shape future tourism research and practice, including consumer behaviour, demand and performance modelling, forecasting, destination and facility management, information technology, quality of life and sustainability, by developing an agenda for post-COVID-19 tourism research. They surveyed several industry and academic experts seeking their opinion on important questions and potential future topics needed to address the impact of COVID-19, existing research areas becoming more relevant, and changes recommended for data collection.

The pandemic changed travel behaviour, reorienting the majority of business travellers to videoconferencing and many tourists towards domestic holidays. Adinolfi et al. (2020) and Jacobsen et al. (2021) consider that in the post-pandemic period, there could be different opportunities for slightly more stays and short-distance travel which could open new opportunities for tourism valorisation of local natural and cultural resources and further development of domestic tourism.

The pandemic has also changed the criteria for selecting tourism destinations, placing health issues among the most important. Zheng et al. (2021) conducted a study with 1,208 respondents across mainland China in 2020, aimed at exploring what triggers a public “travel fear” pandemic and how people impose travel-related self-protection, coping and resilience. The results found that the severity and sensitivity of the threat could cause “travel fear”, leading to protective motivation and protective behaviour on trips after a pandemic outbreak. They also found that “travel fear” can trigger different coping strategies, which increases people’s psychological resilience and the adoption of cautious travel behaviours.

There is much evidence that COVID-19 will be different and transformative for the tourism sector. It should lead to a critical re-examination of the global tourism growth model and an opportunity to reorient it towards the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) (Gössling et al., 2021). This was confirmed also by Čorak et al. (2020), after a detailed literature review of published opinion papers by international scholars, who call upon “the transformation, regeneration and re-boot of tourism and its economic, environmental and social characteristics”. Sharma et al. (2021) analysed the most recent studies (35 papers elaborating on the tourism industry in the wake of the pandemic) and proposed a resilience-based framework for reviving the global tourism industry post-COVID-19. According to them, by using an inclusive resilience framework, based on adequate government response, technology innovation, local belongingness and consumer and employee confidence, the tourism industry may transform into a new global economic order characterised by sustainable tourism, society’s well-being, climate action and the involvement of local communities. The OECD report *Rebuilding Tourism for the Future* (2020) also discusses COVID-19 policy responses and recovery, indicating the crisis as an opportunity to rethink tourism for the future, by capitalising on digitalisation, supporting low carbon transition and promoting the structural transformation needed to build a stronger, more sustainable and resilient tourism economy.

In the first larger study reflecting on the implications of the pandemic on the global way of life and travel, Lew et al. (2020) offered visions of how the pandemic events are contributing to a possibly substantial, meaningful and positive transformation of the planet in general, and tourism specifically. According to authors, a return to a 'normal' that existed before is not possible – but instead, they focus on a vision of how the world is changing, evolving, and transforming into something different from what it was before the global pandemic experience. Čorak and Gjurašić (2021) indicated the most important current trends, challenges and opportunities related to (post)crisis destination management, with special emphasis on sustainable special interest tourism. According to researchers from the Croatian Institute for Tourism, the global pandemic experience will have a lasting impact on values and change aspects of our lives and, specifically, in tourism, it can result in a shift towards more spatially, environmentally and socially responsible behaviour (Telišman-Košuta in Čorak & Gjurašić, 2021), encouraging authenticity and creativity as well as special interest tourism which disperses the demand in time and space, such as cultural and creative tourism (Vodanović Lukić & Lukić in Čorak & Gjurašić, 2021), outdoor, wellness and ecotourism. In that way, destinations can use their comparative advantages by building the image of a 'healthy, green and interesting' destination, in which sports and recreation, relying on health-oriented physical exercise, will provide guests with an experience that will make them want to come again (Čorak, in Čorak & Gjurašić, 2021). To elaborate on sustainable recovery paths for the industry and the real impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on consumer perceptions and purchasing behaviour, the group of authors (Orindaru et al., 2021) analysed the influence of COVID-19 on travel patterns. The main results indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced travel patterns and habits regarding psychological and economic factors. The fear of contamination impacted travellers' willingness to travel and the conditions and preferences for vacation destinations, so tourists avoid travelling in large groups and being in crowded places. Hygiene and health conditions in the host destination represent essential factors in travel decisions, so tourism businesses should further enhance their hygiene conditions to restore confidence. In the context of the back-to-nature movement, tourists will prefer environment-friendly types of tourism, characterised by high flexibility in the planning and implementation, as well as the low environmental impact, possibility of isolation, such as ecotourism, sport and wellness, rural tourism as well as nautical tourism (Lapko et al., 2021).

Gössling and Schweiggart (2022) observe that the COVID crisis should be a turning point; an opportunity to rethink the future development of the tourism sector. It needs a systematic change, not a partial improvement of existing development models. Critical reflections on the contemporary evolution of tourism development towards unsustainable mass tourism practices which resulted in over-tourism and tourism phobia and the implication of such processes on people, place and space across the European region are the focus of the analysis offered by Milano et al. (2019), aimed at developing more nuanced insights into current tourism dynamics and to ultimately foster participatory and collaborative responses in the search for more sustainable future alternatives.

The multiple crises not only transformed the existing mobility models and changed the preferences of international tourists towards more sustainable special interest tourism, but also emphasised the importance of stakeholders' participation and cooperation in sustainable tourism development. The current pandemic could be seen also as an opportunity for all key stakeholders to reflect on the sustainability of the existing tourism practices and develop products which will be more nature-friendly and respond to the new needs and expectations of changing tourist demand. The new, more sustainable, post-pandemic model of participatory governance in cultural and tourism development should involve all interested stakeholders, by developing a distinctive offer for special interest tourist segments which could disperse demand in time and space and prolong the tourism season. The stakeholder theory, pioneered by Freeman (1984), continued to evolve in the business world as one of the fundamental principles of corporate social responsibility (Kordej De Villa et al., 2009). It was also discussed by numerous authors, among them Sautter and Leisen (1999), as a normative tourism planning model. Byrd (2006) applied stakeholder theory to sustainable tourism development,

analysing stakeholders' roles in policy development as well as types of stakeholder participation. According to Mihalic (2016), informed stakeholders' participation and collaboration are among the most important requirements for the implementation of sustainable tourism development. Recent research evaluated stakeholders' roles in governing sustainable tourism destinations, emphasising the importance of strengthened partnerships and collaboration among stakeholders in the framework of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and addressing concerns on sustainability, environmental conservation and local community involvement (Rocax et al., 2020). Giampiccoli et al. (2020) recently investigated the intersection between sustainability and community-based tourism (2020).

Different dimensions of stakeholders' collaboration and engagement with the public are elaborated in monographs dealing with the partnership between tourism and heritage management (McKercher & du Cross, 2002), as well as heritage and archaeology (Carman, 2002; McManamon et al., 2008). Collaboration among stakeholders could form mutually beneficial alliances that are both economically profitable and socially acceptable; successful cooperation and coordination between heritage and tourism management through stakeholder involvement could minimise conflicts between conservation and profit, establish channels of communication, involve local stakeholders in decision-making and generate income for heritage conservation (Aas et al., 2005). The 'principle of participation', reinforced by the 1998 *Aarhus Convention* and echoed in the right to heritage under the *Faro Convention*, stressed that diverse stakeholders should be integral to landscape and heritage management.

3. Vrsar - A typical Mediterranean mass tourism destination

Tourism is one of the most important economic sectors in Croatia, realising almost 20% of its GDP. Travel restrictions, border closures, quarantine regulations and the adoption of epidemiological measures in Croatia and around the world, to prevent the spread of the infection, had a direct impact on tourism figures. The decrease in commercial accommodation was 64.2% in tourist arrivals and 55.3% in tourist overnights in 2020 compared to 2019. After reaching a maximum of 91 million tourist overnights in commercial accommodation in Croatia in 2019, the number of tourist overnights in 2020 returned to the level of 20 years ago. Domestic tourists realised 1.5 million arrivals and 5.4 million overnights, which was a decrease in tourist arrivals of 34.2% and tourist overnights of 23.7% as compared to 2019. Foreign tourists realised 5.5 million arrivals and 35.4 million overnights, which was 68% fewer tourist arrivals and 58% fewer tourist overnights than in 2019. According to the eVisitor system, in 2021 there were 13.8 million tourist arrivals and 84.1 million overnights, or 67% of arrivals and 77% of overnights compared to the pre-pandemic 2019 (Croatian National Tourist Board [CNTB], 2022).

The County of Istria, the most developed county in Croatia, recorded the highest number of tourist arrivals and nights in 2020, with as many as 1.7 million arrivals and 11.5 million overnights, which accounted for 24.8% of the total realised arrivals and 28.1% of the total realised tourist overnights. Compared to 2019, there were 61.3% fewer tourist arrivals and 56.6% fewer tourist overnights in the County of Istria (Croatian Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2021). In 2021 there were realised 3.47 million arrivals and 23.5 million overnights, i.e., 76% arrivals and 89% overnights compared to the pre-pandemic 2019 (CNTB, 2022).

The research focused on the municipality of Vrsar, a typical Mediterranean tourist destination, characterised by mass tourism and high seasonality, as a case study. The destination Vrsar, which corresponds to the municipality of the same name, consists of nine settlements in which the majority of the population and the largest number of central functions are located in the village of Vrsar. The municipality had 1,944 inhabitants according to the Census of the population in 2021. Most residents (80%) live in Vrsar (CBS, 2022). The development of tourism in Vrsar is concentrated in the coastal area of Vrsar, mainly during the summer tourist season. As indicated in Table 1, the pandemic had a direct impact on the decrease in tourist arrivals

(-61%) and tourist overnights (-57%) in commercial accommodation in 2020 compared to 2019. In 2021, there were less than 76% arrivals and 87% overnights compared to pre-corona 2019 (Istria County Tourist Board [ICTB], 2022).

Table 1
Number of tourist beds, arrivals, overnights and the average stay in Vrsar 2015-2021

Year	Tourist arrivals	Tourist overnights	Average stay
2015	195,189	1,418,294	7.2
2016	203,712	1,492,275	7.3
2017	216,159	1,630,377	7.5
2018	225,735	1,646,465	7.3
2019	225,735	1,634,30	7.3
2020	87,087	712,854	8.2
2021	171,546	1,426,570	8.3

Source: Calculated by the authors according to data from the ICTB (2022).

In nearby Rovinj, although it was the city with the highest number of tourist overnights, there was a decrease in tourist arrivals (-59.5%) and in tourist nights (-54.9%) in commercial accommodation in 2020. In the following year, there were 549,304 arrivals and 3.5 million overnights, i.e., 76% arrivals and 51% overnights compared to 2019 (ICTB, 2022). Rovinj is considered in the paper since Vrsar and Rovinj are neighbouring destinations, located along the west coast of Istria, strategically linked through the co-creation of destination products, events and experiences by the same tourism company.

The unsustainability of the existing model of mass tourism indicates the need to reconsider the actual tourist offer. The pressures on key resources could be reduced by developing year-round tourism of special interest and by creating specific products such as thematic routes that allow the dispersion of tourism demand in time and space by creating innovative interpretation programmes.

4. Research methodology

The empirical research aimed to analyse the attitudes of key stakeholders towards the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was conducted in the final year of the scientific research project Archaeological Landscape in the Sustainable Development of Cultural Tourism of the Municipality of Vrsar - ArchaeoCulTour.

The research assumptions were as follows:

- The key prerequisites for choosing a destination during the pandemic and post-pandemic conditions are safety and proximity to the destination.
- In post-pandemic conditions, tourism development should be based on specific, sustainable forms of tourism that could disperse the tourist demand and prolong the tourism season.

The research was based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including a literature review, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders' representatives and a tourists' attitudes survey.

The analysis of the experts' (key stakeholders' representatives) attitudes was based on the semi-structured interview consisting of seven open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted in several phases of the three-year project research, in the framework of organised workshops and focus groups with experts and key stakeholders' representatives. Depending on the situation (and bearing in mind the recent COVID-19 pandemic context), interviews were conducted in person, by phone/virtual call and/or by email. This part of the research involved ten relevant stakeholders' representatives: the head of the regional tourism department, the head of the local

tourism board, an expert for EU projects from the local tourism board, two destination project managers of the major local tourism company, two local government representatives, a heritage interpretation expert and two scientists (archaeologists). The methodology and interview structure were based partially on the methodology proposed by Richards and Munster (2010) and the authors' previous research experience, as well as the previous phases of the research, and the content of the questions was related to the current pandemic context.

The analysis of the tourists' attitudes was based on a structured questionnaire printed in four languages (Croatian, German, English and Italian). Due to specific corona measures, the research was conducted by associates from the tourism company Maistra Ltd. which is a partner of the ArcheoCulTour science project. The survey was conducted in September 2020. Twelve interviewers participated. Before the start of data collection, all interviewers received detailed oral instructions from the authors of the paper. The research population consisted of tourists who stayed in the areas of Vrsar and Rovinj in the period under review. A random sampling method was used. The research instrument for the analysis of tourists' attitudes was a survey questionnaire consisting of 39 questions. The questionnaire was created by using a relevant methodology (Tomljenović & Marušić, 2009; Marušić et al., 2020) and the authors' previous research experience. The data was collected through direct contact with tourists staying in different types of accommodation. The paper provides a comparison with the data from the first phase of the research collected in May 2018 (Afrić Rakitovac et al., 2019) and a comparison with the results of an empirical study conducted for the city of Rovinj. The paper presents selected questions and answers. For evaluation of the significance of attractions, the 5-point Likert scale was used, coded as 1 - Very insignificant, 2 - Insignificant, 3 - Neither significant nor insignificant, 4 - Significant and 5 - Very significant. For analysis of where most tourists spent time during their stay a 5-point Likert scale for the offered answers was used coded as 1 - I strongly disagree, 2 - I disagree, 3 - I neither agree nor disagree, 4 - I agree and 5 - I strongly agree. In this way, a higher mean of the Likert scale means a more positive attitude about offered statements. The statistical significance of the differences between the two Likert scale means was analysed by One-Way ANOVA (F-test) using SPSS 24.0 software package.

5. Data analysis and interpretation

5.1. Analysis of the experts' (key stakeholders' representatives) attitudes

The interview with experts consisted of seven questions. It aimed to analyse the experts' attitudes regarding the effects of the current pandemic on tourist activities and their opinions about the possibility of using the current crisis as an opportunity to develop a more sustainable tourism model that will optimally valorise local heritage resources and reduce seasonality and pressure on key local attractions.

The first question related to the impact of the current pandemic on tourism trends in a global context. The respondents pointed out that tourism was probably the sector most affected by the pandemic crisis, whose form has changed drastically. The effects of the pandemic are likely to be felt for several more years and the big question is whether global tourism trends will ever return to their previous form and scope. It influenced safety concerns, but also significantly increased the desire to travel due to imposed restrictions: "The pandemic has reduced the number of arrivals and overnight stays by about 50% compared to 2019. The traffic in the hotel industry, i.e., in hotels, dropped significantly, while camps and holiday homes where guests could isolate themselves from others had a smaller decline, and there was a greater demand for them. The priority of tourists during a pandemic is safety. Accurate and timely information, responsible behaviour and care for the guest were important to them, and Istria proved to be very responsible and serious. Tourists avoided crowds and mass gatherings, spent more time in nature, cycled and walked" (head of the regional tourism department).

The second question was related to the impact of the current pandemic on tourism activities in the municipality of Vrsar. According to our respondents, in the history of tourism in the region of Istria and the Vrsar

municipality, last year (2020), along with the war years, was the most difficult. The pandemic has had a strong impact on all tourist activities: “Tourist traffic was drastically reduced (56% less overnight stays), and thus also revenues from sojourn tax and membership fees” (head of the local tourism board). Because of this, but also because of the observance of epidemiological measures, the Tourism Board gave up on organising events, and the promotion was carried out on a reduced scale, mainly related to pandemic-related news.

In the third question, the respondents were asked how the current pandemic affected the motives, needs and priorities of tourists who chose the municipality of Vrsar as a holiday destination. According to the experts, “the pandemic has affected their main tourist markets (Italy, Austria, Slovenia) by choosing a smaller and safer destination that allows social distancing. In 2020, the most sought after were campsites, especially mobile homes (most common accommodation facilities in the municipality of Vrsar), and family accommodation (private houses and apartments), as well as holiday homes in the surrounding villages” (head of the local tourism board). Key stakeholders agree that this is a comparative advantage of Vrsar, which will contribute to good results in 2021 as well.

In the fourth question, the experts were asked about the ways the Municipality of Vrsar could best adapt to the new situation and trends in the tourism market. All respondents stressed the importance of respecting all recommended anti-pandemic measures and transmitting information about it via social networks, following the recommended procedures in all accommodation facilities, thus providing guests with a sense of security. Furthermore, they suggested organising outdoor activities and experiences that ensure social distancing, by creating cultural itineraries and promoting the local unique natural and cultural heritage: “The richness of natural and cultural resources could be activated by creating innovative products for special interests and outdoor itineraries. In the long term, sustainable tourism development should be planned strategically” (EU projects expert in the local tourism board).

In the fifth question experts were asked if the current pandemic has changed their perception and opinion about the sustainable model of tourism development in general and in the municipality of Vrsar. “The pandemic only confirmed the need to strengthen and further develop the participatory model of sustainable tourism and heritage management in Vrsar” (head of the local tourism board). The experts emphasised the need to further valorise natural and cultural resources more sustainably, by developing tourism products of special interest (especially cultural, educational and ecotourism, as well as the sports and recreation segment) as an alternative to the current model of mass tourism and to innovate their tourism presentation by creating thematic products, cultural routes and interpretation centres. “A personal approach to the individual is essential, depending on his specific interests, which today's technology can enable. It is important to communicate and educate tourists about the destination's unique identity, which shapes the "spirit of the place". In this way, the tourist is enriched with knowledge and experiences, he is given a range of options from which he chooses some according to his interests, and the destination promotes and strengthens its identity. The key in this process is mutual trust, the truthfulness of the information and mutual respect which contributes to the partnership of the domicile population and tourists, nature conservation, respect for cultural heritage and cultural diversity” (local government representative).

In the sixth question, the experts were asked how the current ArchaeoCulTour project can help to find a solution for a more sustainable tourism development model that will optimally valorise key heritage values, reduce seasonality and reduce pressure on key local attractions. “The project can significantly improve the valorisation of cultural and natural heritage, by pointing out the unique archaeological attractions in the area and attract certain tourist niches of specific interests and greater purchasing power that will visit the destination outside the main tourist season” (expert in archaeology). It will diversify demand in space and reduce seasonality, by developing cultural itineraries that will allow visits to archaeological sites/parks with high-quality interpretation models and mobile applications): “Creating a new (additional) motive for coming to the destination

with an emphasis on culture and nature, and all "packaged" in the promotion of sustainable development of the destination" (destination project manager). The project will also bring the local population closer to the archaeological attractions and raise awareness about their importance, as well as their understanding of the unique cultural history of the municipality.

The last question was related to the results particularly expected in the current or (post)pandemic situation from the ArchaeoCulTour project. The experts and representatives of key stakeholders expect that the scientifically elaborated materials about the archaeological heritage of the Municipality of Vrsar will also be the base for tourism information and promotion of the destination as well as the creation of a tourist archaeological route and/or archaeological park and well-interpreted sites. They mentioned they plan to use the obtained research results for the preparation of new project applications: "The results of the research of key stakeholders' attitudes and preferences will be used as elements for the planning of future cultural and tourism development as well as education and informing of the local community and tourists about the rich heritage of this area. The results of the project will be presented to interested tourist niches and tour operators who recognise the value of this specific offer and who could organise the arrival of tourist groups respecting all epidemiological measures" (local government representative).

5.2. Analysis of tourists' attitudes

As indicated in Table 2, the structure of the sample according to gender is mostly balanced.

Table 2
Sample structure by gender

Gender	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Male	152	50.3	22	43.1	61	48.0	59	49.2
Female	150	49.7	29	56.9	66	52.0	61	50.8
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

Regarding the age structure, the largest group were those in the age group from 30 to 39, followed by those from 40-49, with an exception in the Vrsar Municipality having the largest group of tourists in May from the age group of 40-49, followed by those between 50-59 (Table 3).

Table 3
Sample structure by age

Age	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
18-29	31	10.3	10	19.6	12	9.4	28	23.3
30-39	48	15.9	7	13.7	38	29.9	31	25.8
40-49	71	23.5	4	7.8	27	21.3	27	22.5
50-59	66	21.9	10	19.6	19	15.0	15	12.5
60 and over	86	28.5	20	39.2	31	24.4	19	15.8
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

The structure of the sample regarding the level of education indicated the largest group of examinees with a university degree, followed by those with a secondary school degree. It is interesting to note that more than 60% of the tourists from the sample have at least a university degree (Table 4).

Table 4
Sample structure by the level of education

Level of education	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Elementary school	20	6.6	1	2.0	8	6.3	-	-
Secondary school	108	35.8	22	43.1	36	28.3	36	30.0
University	131	43.4	25	49.0	60	47.2	67	55.8
Master's degree	43	14.2	3	5.9	23	18.1	17	14.2
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

Regarding the actual position in the labour market, the majority of examinees are employed, followed by those who are entrepreneurs, retirees and students (Table 5).

Table 5
Sample structure by the actual position in the labour market

The actual position in the labour market	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Employed	160	53.0	22	43.1	66	52.0	67	55.8
Entrepreneur	38	12.6	6	11.8	21	16.5	31	25.8
Student	14	4.6	2	3.9	6	4.7	4	3.3
Retiree	85	28.1	20	39.2	28	22.0	15	12.5
Unemployed	5	1.7	1	2.0	6	4.7	3	2.5
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

Regarding the sample structure by type of accommodation, in May 2018, most respondents in Vrsar were accommodated in campsites (more than 60%), followed by those who chose hotels and tourist resorts. In the September 2020 sample, all respondents were accommodated in campsites (Table 6).

Table 6
Sample structure by type of accommodation

Options	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Hotel	75	24.8			65	51.2	58	48.3
Campsite	200	66.2	51	100.0	45	35.4	62	51.7
Tourist resort	23	7.6	-	-	11	8.7	-	-
Private accommodation	3	1.0	-	-	3	2.4	-	-
At friend's	1	.3			3	2.4		
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

As shown in Table 7, the most significant attractions for tourists who stayed in Vrsar in May 2018 and September 2020 were the characteristics of the sea, weather and climate, as well as the coast and islands. They are followed by natural attractions (natural and cultivated vegetation, parks, the Lim Bay), the old town and cultural attractions (Dušan Džamonja Sculpture Park, churches, mosaics, archaeological site of Monte Ricco). Tourists staying in Vrsar in September 2020 assessed the safety in the conditions of the pandemic as extremely significant (4.33) and the proximity of the destination (4.16). The performed statistical analysis did not show statistically significant differences in the observed samples.

Table 7
Importance of proposed attractions for tourists coming to Vrsar in May 2018 and September 2020

Attractions	Arithmetic mean		F (p)
	May 2018	September 2020	
Characteristics of the sea around Vrsar	4.59	4.49	0.743 (0.352)
Weather and climate	4.51	4.53	0.184 (0.907)
Coast and islands	4.37	4.33	0.144 (0.933)
Natural and cultivated vegetation	4.22	4.04	0.389 (0.680)
The Lim Bay	3.94	4.14	0.752 (0.527)
Parks landscaped public green areas	4.03	3.82	2.735 (0.054)
The Kontija Forest	3.66	3.43	1.307 (0.821)
St. Michael's Monastery and Church in Kloštar	3.43	3.39	1.771 (0.151)
Archaeological site Monte Ricco	3.28	3.14	0.633 (0.641)
Vrsar's mosaics (the old Neon)	3.36	3.27	0.121 (0.974)
Church of St. Mary of the Sea and the ruins of the monastery	3.42	3.53	2.204 (0.083)
Vrsar's old city centre	4.04	4.29	0.301 (0.876)
Dušan Džamonja's Park of Sculptures	3.38	3.47	0.925 (0.458)
Culinary tradition	3.87	4.14	2.705 (0.056)
Cultural, sports and entertainment events	3.49	3.69	1.013 (0.411)
Safety in a pandemic	-	4.33	-
Proximity to the destination	-	4.16	-

Source: Authors' research.

As shown in Table 8, the most significant attractions for tourists who stayed in Rovinj in May 2018 and September 2020 were the characteristics of the sea, weather and climate, as well as the coast and islands. Tourists who stayed in Rovinj in September 2020 rated as significant safety in the conditions of the pandemic (4.02) and the proximity of the destination (3.87). The performed statistical analysis did not show statistically significant differences in the observed samples.

Table 8
Importance of proposed attractions for tourists coming to Rovinj in May 2018 and September 2020

Attractions	Arithmetic mean		F (p)
	May 2018	September 2020	
Characteristics of the sea around Rovinj	4.57	4.41	1.350 (0.262)
Weather and climate	4.54	4.43	0.894 (0.412)
Coast	4.51	4.25	0.288 (0.834)
Rovinj's old city centre	4.28	4.20	0.399 (0.899)
Natural and cultivated vegetation	4.13	3.78	1.135 (0.344)
Protected nature: Zlatni rt, Palud, the islands	4.02	3.84	0.141 (0.967)
Parks landscaped public green areas	4.00	3.83	0.990 (0.416)
Culinary tradition	3.95	3.78	0.981 (0.421)
Cultural, sports and entertainment events	3.74	3.58	0.565 (0.588)
The Lim Bay	3.69	3.54	1.653 (0.166)
Church monuments	3.69	3.43	0.388 (0.317)
Archaeological sites (Monkodonja)	3.51	3.30	0.281 (0.290)
Safety in the pandemic	-	4.02	-
Proximity to the destination	-	3.87	-

Source: Authors' research.

As shown in Table 9, the most common activities of tourists who visited Vrsar were swimming and other recreational activities in the sea and by the sea, visiting restaurants and walking along landscaped promenades. The performed statistical analysis did not show significant differences in the observed samples.

Table 9
Tourists' activities in Vrsar in May 2018 and September 2020

Activity	Arithmetic mean		F (p)
	May 2018	September 2020	
Swimming and other recreational activities in the sea and by the sea	4.33	4.67	1.789 (0.162)
Visiting and staying in protected natural areas (the Lim Bay, Kontija)	3.76	3.98	0.589 (0.625)
Cycling	3.65	3.80	0.586 (0.674)
Visiting restaurants	4.12	4.18	1.076 (0.349)
Sightseeing	3.37	3.41	1.229 (0.312)
Visiting archaeological sites	3.36	3.20	0.649 (0.631)
Attending cultural events	3.37	3.08	1.825 (0.140)
Attending entertainment and sports events	3.42	3.29	0.545 (0.704)
Participating in the local community's activities	3.33	3.10	1.026 (0.404)
Walking the landscaped walkways	4.02	4.02	0.078 (0.972)
New experiences and adventures	3.94	3.75	2.305 (0.111)

Source: Authors' research.

As shown in Table 10, the most common activities of tourists visiting Rovinj were swimming and other recreational activities by the sea walk and new experiences. The performed statistical analysis did not show significant differences in the observed samples.

Table 10
Tourists' activities in Rovinj in May 2018 and September 2020

Activity	Arithmetic mean		F (p)
	May 2018	September 2020	
Swimming and other recreational activities in the sea and by the sea	4.42	4.57	0.361 (0.781)
Visiting and staying in protected natural areas (the Lim Bay, Kontija)	4.10	4.06	1.212 (0.310)
Cycling	3.97	3.72	1.255 (0.292)
Visiting restaurants	4.15	4.02	1.730 (0.148)
Sightseeing	3.89	3.75	0.327 (0.859)
Attending cultural events	3.65	3.57	0.218 (0.928)
Attending entertainment and sports events	3.71	3.59	0.547 (0.702)
Participating in the local community's activities	3.65	3.25	1.766 (0.141)
Walking the landscaped walkways	4.19	4.20	0.281 (0.890)
New experiences and adventures	4.03	4.22	0.476 (0.699)

Source: Authors' research.

The next question referred to the interest of tourists in getting to know the local archaeological heritage. As shown in the following table, most of the respondents expressed interest in researching the local archaeological heritage (Table 11).

Table 11
Tourist's interest in exploring the local archaeological heritage

Answers	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Yes	169	56.0	29	56.9	72	56.7	74	62.7
No	133	44.0	22	43.1	55	43.3	46	37.3
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

In the following questions, tourists who expressed an interest in exploring the local archaeological heritage were asked about a potential activity that would interest them and whether they were willing to pay for it. As stated in Table 12, for tourists visiting Vrsar, the best way to do this is through cultural routes or archaeological parks, followed by events - living history programmes, interpretation centres and museums and through interactive workshops. Approximately three-quarters of tourists were willing to pay for such a creative, innovative experience in the May 2018 sample, while just over half of the September 2020 sample were willing to pay.

Table 12
Preferred ways of exploring archaeological heritage for tourists visiting Vrsar

Activity	May 2018				September 2020			
			Willingness to pay				Willingness to pay	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Through interactive workshops	56	33.1	45	80.3	13	44.9	5	38.5
Archaeological parks	86	50.9	66	76.7	24	82.8	17	70.9
Cultural routes	97	57.3	59	60.8	23	79.3	11	47.8
Interpretational centres/museums	70	41.4	54	77.1	20	69.0	15	75.0
Events – living history programmes	76	45.0	47	61.8	18	62.1	10	55.6

Source: Authors' research.

As stated in Table 13, for tourists visiting Rovinj in May 2018, the best way to explore the archaeological heritage was through archaeological parks and cultural routes, followed by living history programmes and interactive workshops. Willingness to pay was expressed, on average, by two-thirds of respondents. Tourists who visited Rovinj during the pandemic (September 2020) were significantly less interested in the same types and sequences of activities. More than 80% of tourists, on average, were willing to pay for such services.

Table 13
Preferred ways of exploring archaeological heritage for tourists visiting Rovinj

Activity	May 2018				September 2020			
			Willingness to pay				Willingness to pay	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Through interactive workshops	35	48.6	17	48.6	26	35.1	20	77.0
Archaeological parks	46	63.9	32	69.5	35	47.3	30	85.7
Cultural routes	46	63.9	39	84.7	35	47.3	26	75.3
Interpretational centres/museums	42	58.3	29	69.0	29	39.1	28	96.6
Events – living history programmes	41	56.9	21	51.2	31	41.9	30	97.0

Source: Authors' research.

Tourists were asked about their intention to visit a cultural attraction or event during their stay in Istria (Table 14). Approximately one-third of them intended to visit a cultural attraction or event. Most often it was about nearby towns or micro-locations (Pula, Poreč, Rovinj, the Lim Bay, Monkodonja, NP Brijuni, Motovun, etc.).

Table 14
Tourists' interest in visiting a cultural attraction or event

Answers	Vrsar				Rovinj			
	May 2018		September 2020		May 2018		September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %	N	In %
Yes	135	44.7	19	37.3	49	38.6	45	37.5
No	187	55.3	32	62.7	78	61.4	75	62.5
Total	302	100.0	51	100.0	127	100.0	120	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

Given the pandemic conditions, respondents were asked to assess the health risk of staying in the considered destinations. The level of risk was considered relatively low (arithmetic mean 1.92 for Rovinj, slightly higher for Vrsar 2.11).

Table 15
Risk assessment during the stay at the destination

Answer	Vrsar September 2020		Rovinj September 2020	
	N	In %	N	In %
No risk	41	34.2	11	21.6
Low risk	53	44.2	29	56.9
I cannot judge	20	16.7	7	13.7
High risk	6	5.0	2	3.9
Very high risk	-	-	2	3.9
In total	120	100.0	51	100.0

Source: Authors' research.

The next question concerned the advantages and disadvantages of staying in the selected destinations during the pandemic. The most frequently mentioned advantages were: the safety of the destination, proximity to the destination, a small number of tourists, the possibility of staying outdoors, and responsible behaviour of employees in tourism. The most frequently mentioned shortcomings were related to the lack of cultural and sports events, too modest non-board content and protective measures (wearing a mask), which partly diminished the tourist experience.

The last question concerned changes in habits during a break in the pandemic. The habits of tourists in the observed destination changed mostly regarding pandemic obligations (wearing masks, hand disinfection, safety distancing, increased caution in dealing with queues of people and avoiding crowds choosing a new destination for safety and proximity).

6. Discussion

The conducted research confirmed the authors' assumptions and the willingness of the local stakeholders to use the current pandemic as an opportunity for transformation of the current unsustainable mass tourism model and base the local tourism development on specific, sustainable and responsible forms of tourism, which could disperse the tourist demand and prolong the tourism season. Interviews with experts and representatives of key stakeholders showed their attitudes and expectations regarding the changing travel trends and tourism demand preferences as well as the willingness to use the crisis as an opportunity to find a more sustainable development model. The interviewed experts agreed that the pandemic only confirmed the need to strengthen and further develop the participatory model of sustainable tourism and heritage management, which should be planned strategically. They indicated the need for collaboration, better coordination and communication between all key stakeholders to improve the current tourism offer and quality of life of local communities through awareness-raising campaigns which will inform both locals and visitors about the richness of the local natural, cultural and archaeological heritage.

The research confirmed the prevalence of the classical Mediterranean mass tourism model and indicated some important trends and paradigm shifts, also elaborated in mentioned recent studies (Čorak & Gjurašić, 2021; EC, 2021), such as appreciation of sustainable options and authentic experiences, increased proximity tourism, recreational and wellness tourism and active holidays, new expectations on public health and hygiene, etc. The research results are comparable with the TOMAS survey of the Institute for Tourism (Marušić et al., 2020), in which "rest and recreation" (55%), that is, enjoying the "sea" (82%) and "nature" (56%) was the dominant motivation for travelling to Croatia before the pandemic as it will also be after the pandemic.

The research confirmed our respondents' preferences to enjoy the preserved nature, regardless of the season; although the authors assumed that the tourists who visit Vrsar/Rovinj in the off-season could be considered cultural tourists, their motivation and preferences were very similar to the tourists arriving in the high season and 'normal' tourism years (before the pandemic). Although visitors were mostly interested in rest, recreation and enjoyment in nature (which could be connected to ecotourism), both before and during the pandemic, when asked if they were interested in exploring the local cultural and archaeological heritage, more than half of them answered positively. For the majority of respondents, the best way of exploring archaeological sites is through cultural routes or archaeological parks, connected with local natural attractions and creative special interest tourism experiences, followed by events – living history programmes, the network of interpretation centres and museums and interactive workshops. Most of the visitors are ready to pay for such innovative co-creating experiences. The survey on tourists' attitudes regarding the changing context of tourist activities confirmed that the key prerequisites for choosing a destination during a pandemic and post-pandemic conditions are safety and proximity to the destination, as indicated by the previously mentioned research (Čorak et al., 2020, Orindaru et al., 2021). When asked about health risks in the destination, the respondents (tourists) considered it relatively low, recognising the safety of the destination, high health standards in the accommodation facilities and various offered outdoor activities as the most important advantages of the chosen destinations. The proximity and central position of the selected destination to the main European markets were also important. The obtained results indicated the visitors' preferences towards nature-based, recreational eco-tourism in preserved nature, with an emphasis on camping and high-quality accommodation which could offer social distancing and safety and have a unique transformative effect both for visitors and the local tourism industry, in that way confirming the mentioned recent research (Lew et al. 2020; Čorak & Gjurašić, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021).

The conducted research had some limitations; it could not involve all relevant stakeholders and the sample of tourists in the last phase of the research (September 2020) was not representative due to the current circumstances (pandemic). On the other hand, it provided the authors and policymakers with some important insights relevant to understanding the change of preferences of tourists and trends in the global tourism market.

5. Concluding remarks

The travel and tourism industry is among the most affected by the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. Many destinations, previously challenged by over-tourism, were suddenly faced with non-tourism. The current crisis, which occurred at a time when the dominant, unsustainable, global economic system was running against its boundaries, could be seen as an opportunity to redefine and transform tourism towards a more sustainable model.

The conducted research indicated some important issues related to the importance of considering the new, more sustainable, post-pandemic model of participatory governance in cultural and tourism development, by developing a distinctive offer for special interest tourist segments which could disperse demand in time and space and prolong the tourism season (such as cultural, recreational and eco-tourism). The current pandemic could be seen also as an opportunity for all key stakeholders to reflect on the sustainability of the existing tourism practices and develop products which will be more nature-friendly and respond to new needs and expectations of changing tourist demand. Besides safety and high health standards as prerequisites when planning a vacation, opportunities for recreation and wellness activities in preserved nature are still a predominant motive for travel. Cultural and archaeological heritage could be valuable additional motives for visits, included creatively in existing packages, such as outdoor and bike trails, connected with creative and special interest experiences in the form of archaeological routes.

The conducted research confirmed both assumptions, indicating that the key prerequisites for choosing a destination in pandemic and post-pandemic conditions will be the safety and proximity to the destination.

Bearing in mind the mentioned challenges of the pre-pandemic unsustainable mass tourism model, in post-pandemic conditions, tourism development should be based on specific, sustainable forms of tourism, which could disperse the tourist demand and prolong the tourism season. The elaborated case study offered valuable data for policymakers in the process of developing new products based on the sustainable use of unique local resources and changing visitors' preferences. At the same time, the implemented participatory approach could be used as a sustainable development model for similar Euro-Mediterranean destinations.

To overcome the mentioned limitations, related to the pandemic context, the authors plan to continue research which will involve all key stakeholders (as was done in the previous phases of the research) and be based on a larger sample. To allow comparability, the use of sustainability indicators is suggested in further research. The next stage of the research should also show how local natural, cultural and archaeological heritage, included in educational programmes and tourism offer in a proper way, in the framework of participatory culture and tourism sustainable development models, could contribute to the quality of life and the pleasure of visitors to the Municipality of Vrsar. At the same time, the local case study and the conducted research, combined with the sustainability indicators analysis, could be used and applied as a model for other Mediterranean destinations characterised by unique cultural and natural heritage, but also the prevailing mass tourism model and sustainability issues.

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