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Post-pandemic echoes in the forms of spending and organizing leisure time by the Polish people

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Abstract

This article explores the extent to which various leisure activities adopted during the pandemic, due to the closure of service facilities and other restrictions, are still popular among individuals. It draws on both secondary research and primary data collected through a website survey technique among 1,100 adult Poles in November 2022. The findings indicate that Poles continue to enjoy streaming movies and music, and maintain social connections online even after the pandemic. Those who used physical activity tracking apps during the pandemic still rely on them. Due to travel restrictions and uncertainty of the pandemic period, respondents now plan and book trips within Poland on short notice.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes that consumers have had to adapt to when it comes to spending leisure time. Restrictions on leisure time services have forced people to find alternative ways to enjoy their free time. During lockdowns, cultural institutions like cinemas, theaters, and museums were closed, concerts and events were canceled, and fitness clubs and restaurants were shut down, limiting the opportunities for socializing outside of the phone or internet communication. Travel plans had to be made on short notice and were restricted to domestic destinations due to canceled flights and vaccination requirements

(Pawlas, 2021). As a result, people turned to virtual spaces and activities in their homes to satisfy their leisure needs. Virtual communication allowed for interaction with friends and family members regardless of location, while virtual libraries, museums, and streaming platforms provided access to books, art, music, and movies. Some of the changes described that were forced by the pandemic situation will probably be short-lived, while others will remain for a longer time (Reeves et al., 2020). In this context, the question is whether the leisure time habits developed during the pandemic are still used or have been abandoned. This article aims to answer this question by examining to what extent people continue to rely on the leisure activities and forms developed during the pandemic. It is assumed that the leisure lifestyle did not change during the pandemic, only the place where people spend them. Based on the increased use of the Internet for leisure activities during the pandemic, it is assumed that people are still utilizing virtual options for entertainment. The article draws on both secondary and primary research, including a survey of 1,100 adult Poles conducted in November 2022, to present theoretical aspects, research methodology, sample characteristics, results, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

2. Theoretical framework of the research

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the course of human life in Poland and around the world (Casselmann and Koeze, 2021). Consumers have been gripped by fear and concerns for their health and that of their relatives, as well as a general fear of contracting the virus. In response, various national solutions have been implemented to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2, including lockdowns, which involved restrictions on social contact, limitations on leaving home, and curfews or quarantine measures (Ludvigsen et al., 2023). The slogan “stay at home” became a widespread measure to limit social contact, impacting the daily lives of people worldwide in terms of maintaining social relationships, work, travel, and leisure activities. The early days of the pandemic saw widespread travel bans, school and university closures, and restrictions on entering public spaces like forests. Companies were forced to implement remote work and some even suspended their operations. While the closure of retail, service, and entertainment facilities was done with consumer safety in mind, it caused widespread dissatisfaction. The COVID-19 crisis led to unprecedented social unrest and significant changes in our lifestyle, work, and social interactions (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2022). The implementation of social distancing and the closure of meeting places such as parks, cafes, churches, and schools has also had an impact on consumers’ leisure activities.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on the leisure industry both in Poland and globally. One of the branches of the economy that suffered the negative consequences of the pandemic was tourism. Many researchers have analyzed the

effects of the pandemic in this sector, including Utkarsh and Sigala (2021), who reviewed 177 articles on the subject, such as the impact of COVID-19 on tourist decision-making and marketing efforts undertaken by travel service providers and travel destinations, as well as the future of tourism after COVID-19. Another related publication by Yang, Zhang and Rickly (2021) reviewed 249 articles on the pandemic and tourism. The pandemic also affected the scale of Poles' leisure travel. Taking into account holiday trips, after a decrease in 2020 (37%), almost half of the respondents declared a holiday trip (49%) in 2021, and 53% in 2022. Similarly, foreign trips suffering a decline in 2020–2021 (20% of declared trips each year), were on the rise in 2022 when 30% of the respondents took such a trip, as reported by Feliksiak (2023). Despite the pandemic's severe impact on the tourism sector, the situation is slowly improving, with the global number of arrivals from abroad almost doubling from 2021 to 2022, according to Statista (2023a; 2023b). Tourism research is now focused on rethinking, revitalizing, and resetting the industry to maintain sustainability during and after the pandemic (Bhatia, Roy and Kumar 2022; Homer and Kanagasapathy, 2023).

The pandemic has accelerated the digitization of people's lives. Difficult access to service facilities providing quality leisure time meant that during the pandemic, internet-based leisure activities substituted the traditional ones. Stationary leisure-time activities have been replaced with those available online. Virtual tourism has become more popular, providing a means for people to travel virtually and experience new places through technology, as noted by Lu et al. (2022). Virtual sightseeing can even influence consumers' destination choices in the future, as they may want to visit the place they saw virtually. The research conducted by Kolny (2021) showed that this form of spending leisure time during the pandemic was chosen by 28.7% of individuals who satisfied their need to travel in this way. Streaming platforms have also become a popular alternative to cinemas, as reported by Mroziński (2021). Fitness activities were also affected by the pandemic, with many people practicing sports at home or outdoors due to the unavailability of gyms, fitness clubs, or sports fields (Lesser, Nienhuis 2020; Hammami et al. 2022). Internet resources can be used to develop individualized plans for physical activity adapted to the person's overall health status, to record training details such as route, distance, time, and calories burned, and to connect with friends in real-time for mutual motivation, as reported by Zach and Lissitsa (2016) and Kolny (2021). According to Kolny's research (2021), 52.7% of consumers used such apps to monitor their physical activity during the pandemic. Finally, many people took up various sports and artistic challenges in their leisure time, becoming prosumers and creating networks of people who can move smoothly from being consumers to being co-creators or creators of various information (Bond, Widdop, Cockayne and Parnel, 2021).

Although digital technologies have helped to overcome some barriers in accessing market infrastructure and social connections, it is important to note that

the virtual world cannot entirely replace the need for face-to-face service outlets and interpersonal interactions. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, the internet successfully allowed people to stay connected while physically distant, and service providers to expand their reach to those who may have been digitally excluded (Local..., 2020). The impact of digital technology on people's lives was significant, with virtual interactions becoming more prevalent in both professional and personal spheres. However, the JOMO (joy of missing out) philosophy is gaining popularity, encouraging people to take conscious breaks from social media and focus on offline experiences (Aurel, Paramita, 2021). The pandemic has disrupted the work-life-balance, with remote work often blurring the boundaries between work and leisure time (Orzeł, 2021). Despite this, it is crucial to prioritize leisure time for activities that promote emotional well-being and social connections and stave off isolation and depression which was particularly important during the pandemic.

As a result of the pandemic, the ways of spending leisure time have changed. In particular, the pandemic affected relationships with friends and mental well-being. Research revealed that people value their leisure time more now than before the pandemic (Lazcano, Doistua and Madariaga 2022). The pandemic period made consumers long for a more active and interesting life, and they are eagerly looking for new forms of physical activity and entertainment (Buczyńska 2023). Active forms of spending leisure time dominate after the pandemic, and individuals feel encouraged to try very different forms of entertainment. Escape rooms are often visited. Extreme sports, e.g., off-road driving and flying light aircraft, are gaining in popularity (Dębska, 2022).

3. Research methodology

This article draws on both primary and secondary sources of information to examine leisure time, particularly during the pandemic, as well as the findings of CBOS and GUS research in this area. The primary information was gathered through a website survey technique, due to the ongoing pandemic at that time, and conducted among registered participants of the Ariadna National Research Panel between November 16, 2022 and November 23, 2022. It is worth noting that the panel is continuously recruiting participants whose socio-demographic profile matches that of Poles who use the internet (Ariadna..., 2023). The panel's research services are of high quality, as confirmed by an independent annual audit conducted by the Organization of Opinion and Market Research Firms. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards, taking into account the International ICC/ESOMAR Code (ESOMAR, 2016). The research also received a positive opinion from the Ethics Committee for Human Subjects Research at the University of Economics in Katowice (no. 001/11/2022). The research was anonymous.

A link with an invitation to participate in the research was sent to 8,046 adult panel members. 1,439 people responded to the invitation and 1,208 completed the survey. One of the criteria for classifying the completed questionnaires for further research was the amount of time the respondent devoted to completing the questionnaire. While testing the tool, it was found that it was not possible to read and reliably complete the entire questionnaire in less than 10 minutes. Therefore, all questionnaires that were completed in a shorter time were removed from the database. As a result of the research, 1,100 fully and correctly completed questionnaires were obtained and qualified for further analyses. The obtained data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics statistical package. The sample size was set in such a way that the maximum measurement error at a confidence level of 95% and a fraction size of 0.5 was no more than 3% (acceptable error in social research).

In the sample, females accounted for 51.7% and males for 48.3%. The respondents were selected to represent 4 equal intervals (generations) comprising 25% of people in each: 18–24 years of age (Generation Z), 25–39 years of age (Generation Y), 40–59 years of age (Generation X), and 60–80 years of age (Baby Boomer generation). The majority of respondents had secondary education (46%), while 39.4% had higher education, 10.5% had basic vocational education, and only 4.1% had primary education. In terms of place of residence, around 25% of respondents lived in cities, towns with up to 50,000 inhabitants, and towns with 51 to 200 thousand inhabitants. When it comes to household size, 33.4% of respondents lived in two-person households, 21.7% in three-person households, and 20.3% in four-person households. Only 2.4% of respondents reported not having enough financial means to meet their basic needs, while 57% described their financial situation as average and 26.3% as good enough to afford some luxury goods. 11% of respondents reported having a bad financial situation that only covered basic products, while 3.3% of those surveyed were able to afford everything they wanted.

4. Analysis of the research results

To present the range of post-pandemic forms of spending leisure time, the scale of behavior developed by consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic was used. It was a 13-item ordinal scale with no middle value. Respondents could choose from four answers: “I use them to the full extent”; “I use them to a limited extent”; “I used them during the pandemic, but I do not use them anymore”; “I never used them.” Before starting the analysis, the scale’s reliability was confirmed using Cronbach’s α coefficient. The obtained value of Cronbach’s α of 0.772 indicates that the scale used is characterized by a high level of reliability (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011).

Upon analyzing the responses, we found that 72.3% of respondents still prefer to spend their holidays in Poland, with 26.5% utilizing this form fully and 45.8%

occasionally, as presented in Table 1. Additionally, 68.2% of respondents still watch movies and series on streaming services, with 38.2% utilizing this form fully. Although it is now possible to freely meet with other people anywhere, people-to-people contacts are still maintained online, with over 60% of respondents still using this possibility, including 19.1% fully and 41.4% occasionally. These findings align with the research conducted by the Central Statistical Office, which shows that 66.1% of people made voice or video calls over the Internet in 2020–2021, and this number decreased only slightly to 63.0% in 2022 (GUS, 2022). It is worth noting that 20.9% of our respondents used this form of contact during the pandemic but no longer use it.

The pandemic made it difficult to plan tourist trips well in advance due to changing restrictions on vaccination requirements, SARS-CoV-2 testing, quarantine, and flight cancellations, as well as closures of hotels and cultural and gastronomic establishments. Consequently, many people chose to plan their trips “at the last minute.” According to the research, the majority of respondents (58.1%) still prefer planning their holidays not too far in advance, while 18.5% continue to plan extensively ahead. Meal delivery services also remain popular, with 51.8% of respondents availing of the option, including 11.5% who use it extensively and 40.3% who use it occasionally. Streaming music enjoyed wide popularity, with 23.8% of respondents listening to it extensively and 27% listening to it occasionally. However, only 10% of respondents preferred taking longer but less frequent trips during the pandemic, while 43.4% never did so. Listening to podcasts was less common. Nearly half of the respondents have never listened to them, with less than 15% of respondents still listening to them and every fourth respondent listening occasionally. Furthermore, over half of the respondents have never used apps to monitor physical activity. Therefore, it is unsurprising that only about 13% still use them regularly, and every fourth respondent declares using them occasionally. Similarly, over half of the respondents (51.7%) never used the opportunity for virtual travel, while 8.8% used it extensively which is confirmed by Lu et al. (2022). The research indicates that people still want to travel this way even after the pandemic. Online learning had mixed results, with just over 50% of respondents using it for leisure during the pandemic and 48.7% never using it. Currently, only 9.2% continue to learn online regularly, and 29% take advantage of it occasionally. Similar results were obtained in the GUS survey. Participation in an online course was declared by 8.4% in 2020, 13.5% in 2021, and 9.7% in 2022 (GUS, 2022). Our research also revealed that only 6.8% of respondents still take advantage of watching concerts, shows, and plays online to the full extent, and 27.0% use this form occasionally. Half of the respondents never used these possibilities. The services of travel agencies remain underutilized with 58.7% of respondents having never used them, while only 6.5% using them extensively and 27% using them occasionally as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondents’ engagement in specific leisure activities developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, categorized by gender (in %, *N* = 1,100)

Activity	I use it to the full extent			I use it to a limited extent			I used it during the pandemic, but I don’t use it anymore			I never used it		
	T	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M	T	F	M
Spending holidays/annual leave in Poland	26.5	25.8	27.3	45.8	47.6	43.9	10.5	9.8	11.3	17.1	16.7	17.5
Watching movies, series on streaming platforms, VOD	38.2	40.4	35.8	30.0	28.1	32.0	7.7	5.8	9.8	24.1	25.7	22.4
Maintaining interpersonal relationships online	19.1	21.1	16.9	41.4	40.6	42.2	20.9	20.9	20.9	18.6	17.4	20.0
Planning tourist trips on short notice	18.5	18.1	19.0	39.6	40.1	39.2	9.8	9.1	10.5	32.0	32.7	31.3
Ordering meals for home delivery	11.5	11.4	11.5	40.3	40.2	40.3	12.4	10.9	13.9	35.9	37.4	34.3
Listening to music via streaming services	23.8	25.3	22.2	27.0	23.2	31.1	7.5	6.7	8.5	41.6	44.8	38.2
Deciding on less frequent but longer tourist trips	10.5	10.0	10.9	36.0	35.3	36.7	10.2	8.6	11.9	43.4	46.0	40.5
Listening to podcasts	14.2	14.1	14.3	25.9	24.6	27.3	10.2	7.9	12.6	49.7	53.4	45.8
Using apps tracking physical activity	12.7	14.4	10.9	25.5	23.7	27.5	10.2	9.1	11.3	51.5	52.7	50.3
Sightseeing interesting destinations around the world online (virtual travel)	8.8	9.5	8.1	29.2	26.7	31.8	10.3	9.1	11.5	51.7	54.7	48.6
Leisure online learning (e.g., foreign language, cooking)	9.2	11.6	6.6	28.5	27.9	29.0	13.6	11.6	15.8	48.7	48.9	48.6
Watching concerts, shows, and plays online	6.8	7.4	6.2	27.0	24.1	30.1	16.2	16.5	15.8	50.0	52.0	47.8
Using travel agency offers and services	6.5	5.6	7.3	27.1	26.0	28.2	7.7	6.3	9.2	58.7	62.0	55.2

Key: T — total sample (*N* = 1,100); F — females (*N* = 569), M — males (*N* = 531).

Source: own study.

The data collected on the post-pandemic leisure activities were analyzed in light of the gender and generation of the respondents (Baby Boomers, X, Y, Z). The results showed that women tend to continue their pandemic leisure activities more consistently than men (Table 1). Women reported a preference for activities such as watching movies (40.4% of women’s responses compared to 35.8% of men’s),

maintaining online relationships (21.1% vs. 16.9%), streaming music (25.3% vs. 22.2%), using physical activity tracking apps (14.4% vs. 10.9%), and engaging in online learning for fun (11.0% vs. 6.6%). In contrast, men were more likely to enjoy holidays in Poland (27.3% of men's responses compared to 25.8% of women's), plan trips in advance (19.0% vs. 18.1%), and use travel agency services (7.3% vs. 5.6%), indicating a stronger inclination towards tourism-related leisure activities. Furthermore, men were more likely than women to deviate from their pandemic leisure habits across all activities analyzed (Table 2).

When studying consumer behavior across different age groups, it was observed that the youngest generation showed the highest degree of engagement in leisure activities during the pandemic and continues to do so. They particularly enjoy streaming movies and TV shows (52.4%), listening to music on streaming platforms (47.6%), maintaining social connections online (28.0%), listening to podcasts (23.3%), and engaging in online learning for fun (14.5%). Baby Boomers, on the other hand, tend to prefer domestic vacations and take less frequent but longer trips (12.7%), while also watching concerts online (8.7%). Meanwhile, Generation X still shows a keen interest in virtual travel (11.3%), and occasionally indulges in streaming movies and TV shows (36.0%), listening to music on streaming platforms (31.3%), and utilizing travel agency services (30.2%). Finally, respondents from Generation Y indicated a higher tendency to avoid less frequent but longer trips (46.2%), not plan their trips in advance (35.6%), and not maintain social connections online (22.2%) — as presented in Table 2.

5. Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for further research

Since the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of facilities offering leisure time services, increased the need to organize tourist trips well in advance and within one's own country, introduced restrictions on social contacts and the ban on leaving home, and pushed the transfer of many leisure activities to virtual space, people have begun to value their leisure time more highly and want to make the most of it. The conclusions drawn in this article provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on leisure habits and the subsequent integration of virtual activities into consumer behavior. The findings reflect a nuanced understanding of how the constraints of the pandemic have reshaped how people value and engage in leisure time. The pandemic period necessitated changes in how the leisure time is spent and organized. Leisure activities have moved to virtual spaces where people can watch movies, listen to music, play games, read newspapers and books, visit a museum, admire exciting places around the world, and make and maintain social contacts. The leisure lifestyle has not changed during the pandemic, only the place where people spend it. The research indicated that

Table 2. Respondents' engagement in specific leisure activities developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, categorized by generation (in %, $N = 1,100$)

Activity	I use it to the full extent			I use it to a limited extent			I used it during the pandemic, but I don't use it anymore			I never used it						
	Z	Y	X	Z	Y	X	Z	Y	X	Z	Y	X	BB			
	Spending holidays/annual leave in Poland	52.4	45.5	32.4	22.5	25.8	31.3	36.0	26.9	12.7	7.3	5.5	5.5	9.1	16.0	26.2
Watching movies, series on streaming platforms, VOD	22.9	25.5	28.4	29.5	49.5	44.7	42.5	46.5	14.2	10.2	10.5	7.3	13.5	19.6	18.5	16.7
Maintaining interpersonal relationships online	47.6	25.1	14.2	8.4	26.9	26.9	31.3	22.9	9.8	7.6	6.9	5.8	15.6	40.4	47.6	62.9
Planning tourist trips on short notice	28.0	19.3	14.2	14.9	37.1	39.6	41.5	47.3	19.6	18.9	24.4	20.7	15.3	22.2	20.0	17.1
Ordering meals for home delivery	23.3	17.5	9.5	6.5	29.5	26.2	24.4	23.6	11.3	13.1	10.5	5.8	36.0	43.3	55.6	64.0
Listening to music via streaming services	18.5	13.1	11.3	8.0	31.6	24.7	26.2	19.6	14.9	12.4	8.4	5.1	34.9	49.8	54.2	67.3
Deciding on less frequent but longer tourist trips	19.6	19.3	18.9	16.4	40.0	36.0	40.0	42.5	13.1	9.1	10.2	6.9	27.3	35.6	30.9	34.2
Listening to podcasts	19.3	15.6	6.9	4.0	46.2	46.9	42.5	25.5	12.4	13.1	13.8	10.2	22.2	24.4	36.7	60.4
Using apps tracking physical activity	9.5	10.5	9.1	12.7	36.4	32.0	37.5	38.2	15.3	11.3	8.7	5.5	38.9	46.2	44.7	43.6
Sightseeing interesting destinations around the world online (virtual travel)	14.5	7.6	8.0	6.5	35.3	34.9	25.1	18.5	21.1	14.2	12.0	7.3	29.1	43.3	54.9	67.6
Leisure online learning (e.g., foreign language, cooking)	6.5	7.6	11.3	9.8	23.3	26.2	29.5	37.8	17.5	9.1	7.6	6.9	52.7	57.1	51.6	45.5
Watching concerts, shows, and plays online	7.6	4.7	6.2	8.7	26.9	20.7	30.2	30.2	18.9	16.7	15.3	13.8	46.5	57.8	48.4	47.3
Using travel agency offers and services	6.2	7.6	5.8	6.2	19.6	28.7	30.2	29.8	10.9	6.2	7.6	6.2	63.3	57.5	56.4	57.8

Key: Z — Generation Z (18–24 years of age) ($N = 275$), Y — Generation Y (25–39 years of age) ($N = 275$), X — Generation X (40–59 years of age) ($N = 275$), and BB — Baby Boomer generation (60–80 years of age) ($N = 275$).

Source: own study.

online forms of spending leisure time have become ingrained in consumer behavior, which confirms the adopted research assumption. Watching movies on streaming services, which has become an alternative to going to the cinema, was still declared by 68.2% of respondents. Additionally, maintaining social connections online has become a common way of spending leisure time for many people, with 60.5% of the respondents stating that their relationships with family and friends have moved to a virtual level as a result of the pandemic. Despite the freedom to choose a destination and the possibility to plan a trip in advance, the respondents' declarations show that more than half of them still plan their holidays on short notice, and 72.3% still spend their holidays domestically, in Poland. More than half of the respondents also appreciated the convenience of home delivery. However, from the consumer's point of view, the same meal eaten in a restaurant satisfies other needs than just basic hunger. In conclusion, it should be noted that the findings presented by the author are limited, due to the fact that the survey covered only selected forms of spending leisure time when the state of epidemic threat had not yet been lifted. Moreover, the research was conducted through an online survey among Internet users, which could have influenced the high tendency of the respondents to spend their leisure time on the Internet. Therefore, it would be important to repeat the research in the future, using in particular in-depth research techniques and diagnosing whether the actual forms of spending and organizing free time described in this article have been rooted in consumer behavior after pandemic. It is important to note that the presented conclusions have been formulated solely based on descriptive statistics from the surveyed sample, therefore these findings cannot be generalized to the whole population.

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