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## New priorities influencing the travel decision: Can VFR travel get a leading role after the pandemic?\*

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### Abstract

This study aims to reveal if individuals' preferences of tourism type change after COVID-19. Its other purposes are to understand how participants position visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel in their previous and current travel priorities and to determine the most significant effects of the pandemic on life, tourism motivation and expectations from travelling. In 2021, interviews were conducted with 18 Turkish travelers who traveled regularly before the pandemic. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants and a structured interview technique was utilized. Content analysis was used in the interpretation of the wide-ranging qualitative data to identify the most frequently recurring themes. Findings show that demand in VFR travel and health tourism increased after the pandemic, while options such as sea-sand-sun tourism, cultural tourism and business travel lost the interest. Results such as longing for relatives and friends, escape from unknown destinations, disturbances such as anxiety caused by psychological turmoil, the lack of trust in COVID-19 measures in businesses, statements that the duration will be kept short even if plans are made to participate in different tourism types other than VFR travel, the desire to be safe in terms of health, and to hold cash against the outbreak of a new crisis in the future came to the fore under three main categories: (1) emotional turmoil, (2) involvement in tourism, (3) the family and friend effect. Consequently, the current paper recommends that comprehensive research examining the relationship between reunion travel and VFR travel in the future. Additionally, new studies supported by the psychology discipline are needed to interpret the risk perception and emotional ups and downs occurred during COVID-19.

**Keywords:** Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel, COVID-19, travel decision, tourist behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

The effects of COVID-19 on tourism are devastating and its costs are too high to be calculated precisely. Although the industry has faced many crises from past to present, such as terrorist attacks, wars, political and economic instability (Issa & Altinay, 2006; Papatheodorou et al., 2010; Sönmez, 1998; Sönmez & Graefe, 1998), reflections of COVID-19 are considered as unprecedented (Kock et al., 2020). With the pandemic alert for Coronavirus, all countries in the world have become actors of a common struggle. First-stage measures such as closing the borders of countries to entry and exit, placing social distance and hygiene rules at the center of life, and imposing long-term curfews in order to reduce the rate of spread of the virus were supported by actions such as interrupting the activities of businesses where human density may be experienced, reducing their capacities and even closing them completely for a while. In this context, tourism scholars have started to investigate the effects of the pandemic on stakeholders, especially from the supply side. The themes of financial distress, resilience, firms' responses to the COVID-19 disaster, coping with concerns and panic are among the most frequently discussed topics (Alonso et al., 2020; Crespi-Cladera et al., 2021; González-Torres et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2021; Magno & Cassia, 2021; Qiu et al., 2021; Sobaih et al., 2021).

The observation of different variants of the virus, the uncertainty about when the effects of the virus will be relieved and when life can return to normal has also made it necessary to investigate the fate of tourism demand, which has come to a standstill. Although some researchers indicate that the demand for domestic tourism may increase due to restrictions on international travel (Joo et al., 2021; Wen et al., 2021), some others point out that COVID-19 lowers the motivation of tourists to travel and changes their priorities dramatically (Wen et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2021).

This study suggests that the COVID-19 disaster reveals the importance of visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel and that the VFR travel concept will become more visible at least in the short and medium term. It is predicted that people staying away from loved ones for a long time and not being able to establish physical contact with them will greatly increase the effort to satisfy this emotional need in future travels. Additionally, as many people lose their jobs or faced a decrease in their overall income during the pandemic, those with weakened purchasing power may prefer VFR travel, which can be considered as a lower cost holiday option. Within the scope of VFR travel, the idea of staying in a familiar place will be an attractive alternative for individuals who do not trust

tourism businesses in terms of hygiene measures and crowd. If demand continues to decline in other tourism branches, increased participation in VFR travel could help revitalize the industry (Hall et al., 2020).

In this context, this research is basically looking for answers to three questions:

(Q1) What were the preferred tourism types before the pandemic and have these changed after COVID-19?

(Q2) How do participants describe the place of VFR travel in previous and current travel priorities?

(Q3) What are the most prominent effects of the difficulties experienced during the pandemic on life, tourism motivation and expectations from a travel?

Since the issue that people may tend to the VFR travel with the desire to reunion with their loved ones has been largely ignored in previous studies examining the effects of the pandemic on tourist behavior, this study will expand the extent knowledge. Furthermore, within the scope of the research, determining the reactions towards other tourism types in addition to VFR travel deepens the paper's contribution to the literature.

## PANDEMIC AND VFR TRAVEL

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the perception of high risk to health has been one of the most important determinants of tourist behaviors (Bae & Chang, 2021; Godovykh et al., 2021; Matiza, 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020; Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021). As the perception of risk increases, people experience psychological problems such as anxiety. The attractiveness of sparsely populated and nature-based regions increase because travelers may prefer destinations that preserve both psychological and spatial distance (Li et al., 2020). In other words, risk perception is among the critical factors underlying the changes observed in tourists' behaviors, and the proximity to home and the presence of natural areas are expected to be more important in destination selection with the lapse of time (Donaire et al., 2021). Health and safety concerns may also shape the accommodation decision-making process during and after the pandemic (Pappas & Glyptou, 2021). Additionally, the most visible effects of COVID-19 are evaluated with the change in demand for different types of tourism. Accordingly, while the trend towards mass tourism decreases; the popularity of alternatives such as slow tourism, smart tourism, health and wellness tourism is expected to increase (Wen et al., 2020).

There are also some researchers, albeit limited, who predict that the pandemic will significantly increase the popularity of VFR travel. For instance, Dube-Xaba (2021) who discusses the tourism demand during the

pandemic from the perspective of African travelers in her research, emphasizes that more than half of the region's domestic tourists already constitute the VFR travel market, and VFR travel will continue being the most important resource that will help revive domestic tourism especially after COVID-19. Lin and Zhang (2021) provide information that travelers who want to be with their families in times of crisis or just after, can consider VFR travel the safest form of vacation. Poulaki and Nikas (2021) examining the behavioral trends experienced in the Greek market in the early stages of the pandemic also provide important empirical evidence about the course of the trend toward VFR travel. According to the results of the aforementioned research, the demand for VFR travel and the preference rate of relatives and friends' homes as accommodation places increased significantly during the pandemic. Finally, VFR travel is perceived as one of the modes of travel with the lowest risk to health (Ma et al., 2021), especially by youth studying abroad (Ma et al., 2020).

All those research outputs related to the subject in the literature have prepared an important basis for the arguments of the current paper. In the following sections, it is clearly presented how the trend towards both VFR travel & other types of tourism, and how motivational factors were shaped during the pandemic on the side of Turkish travelers.

## METHOD

Interviews were conducted with 18 Turkish travelers in 2021. Individuals who regularly joined in tourism activities during the last 5 years (2015-2019) before the pandemic were targeted. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants and a structured interview technique was utilized. More specifically, an attempt was made to reach people who were thought to have the most comprehensive information on the subject. This method is widely preferred in qualitative studies. In this sampling technique, the aim is to gain insight and deep understanding of the phenomena rather than generalization of findings. To gain this insight, cases with rich knowledge that can answer research questions or broaden the context with an in-depth perspective are chosen (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

Interviews were conducted by two ways: (1) by recording video in online live interviews, and (2) using an online interview form. Specifically, since 8 of the participants did not prefer the live interview with audio or video recording, data were gathered from these people through an online form.

Interview included three standardized questions (*demographics, travel frequency, preferred tourism types before and after the pandemic / research question 1&2*)

and an open-ended question on the general and specific effects of COVID-19 (*research question-3*). Interviews were lasted between 30-45 minutes. Apart from sharing the general lines of the research, the researcher took care not to interfere with the participants to get detailed feedback, especially in the open-ended question, and left them free during the interview in terms of the scope of the answers. Feedback compiled as study data were re-sent to the participants in the final stage for review and the validity and reliability of the study was thus tested.

Ethical approval for this study was received from the Social and Human Sciences Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Pamukkale University (*date of ethics committee decision: September-2021; decision number: 68282350/22021/G017*).

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Demographics of the participants is provided in Table 1. The travel frequency of the respondents before the COVID-19 pandemic and in the year of 2020 is also presented in the same table. Accordingly, participants are in the age range of 28 to 46, and the number of female respondents is 11. The majority of the participants ( $f = 13$ ) have a postgraduate degree. Within the scope of the research, a question about individual monthly income was also directed to the participants. As is evident, the lowest average income is 4500 Turkish Liras (TL), while the highest is 10000 TL. A vast majority of the participants ( $f = 12$ ) earns an income ranging from 7000 to 9000 TL per month. Taking into consideration that the annual household disposable personal income in Turkey is approximately 2400 TL (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2020), it can be indicated that the financial power of all the participants is above the country average. High level of income is one of the most prominent indicators of the purchasing power held by the individuals. This common characteristic shared by the respondents has also reflected on their travel frequency. So much so that 10 participants stated that they had an annual average of 5 to 20 travels (within and outside the country) in the last 5 years before the outbreak of the pandemic. The remaining 8 participants expressed that they used to travel 3 to 4 times a year.

Taking into account that travel trends and post-pandemic plans in the COVID-19 period (in 2020) may differ depending on the family structure of the individuals, the participants were also asked about their marital status and whether they have children. 11 of the participants are married and only 5 have children. In the light of the data, it is understood that the number of travels in 2020 reflects a dramatic fall compared to previous years, and it is an expected result. What is critical here is to find out which tourism types that

people maintaining their travel activities, albeit less than they did in previous years, have gravitated toward during the pandemic. The information collected in this context has been compiled and is presented in Table 2. On the other hand, except for P3 and P6, married respondents and those having children reside in the same city with their nuclear family members. However, none of the participants live in the same province with other family members such as mother, father, and siblings. The fact that all the participants and some of their immediate family members live in different cities has partially (in terms of measuring the intention to family visits) laid the foundation for analyzing the reactions towards VFR travel.

Table 2 presents information on the types of tourism that the respondents have attached priority before and throughout the course of the pandemic. Following the questions concerning demographic information, respondents were provided with a broad range of options involving types of tourism. Respondents were requested to rank the tourism types in the pool in accordance with the priority they have attached to those before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. In cases where the respondents indicated a different type of tourism that is not included in the pool, those responses were noted as well. The preferences referring to the post-pandemic period cover the travels planned during the pandemic and in case the pandemic is

over. At this juncture, the findings in the research will provide the opportunity to make projections regarding the direction toward which the tourism demand may develop in the coming years.

The top four types of tourism demanded the most, irrespective of the ranking, before the pandemic are VFR travel ( $f = 16$ ), sea-sand-sun tourism ( $f = 16$ ), cultural tourism ( $f = 14$ ) and business travel ( $f = 11$ ). By the year of 2020, the top four types of tourism preferred the most frequently have remained the same. Nevertheless, a decrease is observed in three of them except for the VFR travel. Specifically, VFR travel was repeated 17 times by the respondents, whereas sea-sand-sun tourism was included in the category of tourism type of priority by 12 participants, cultural tourism by 8 participants and business travel by 8 participants. The only tourism type that has grown in popularity in addition to VFR travel following the outbreak of the pandemic is health tourism. While the number of those who prefer health tourism is 2 in the previous years, it has reached to 7 by 2020. The number of those preferring religious tourism has remained the same ( $f = 2$ ). In brief, all types of tourism except VFR travel, health tourism and religious tourism have partially lost interest from participants. Considering the ranking, it is observed that VFR travel comes to the fore again. While VFR travel was ranked as 1st by 8 people in the category of tourism type of priority

**Table 1.** The profile of the interviewees and travel frequencies

| Code | Gender | Age | Education     | Monthly personal income | Marital status | Do you have children? | Proximity to family members | Travel frequency* | Travel frequency** |
|------|--------|-----|---------------|-------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| P1   | Female | 34  | Graduate      | 7300 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 7-8               | 4                  |
| P2   | Male   | 34  | Graduate      | 7500 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 10                | 5                  |
| P3   | Female | 32  | Graduate      | 7000 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 3                 | None               |
| P4   | Female | 33  | Undergraduate | 6000 TL                 | Single         | No                    | No                          | 5                 | 2                  |
| P5   | Female | 32  | Undergraduate | 4500 TL                 | Single         | No                    | No                          | 4                 | 2                  |
| P6   | Female | 33  | Graduate      | 7500 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 10-20             | 10                 |
| P7   | Male   | 34  | Graduate      | 10000 TL                | Married        | Yes                   | No                          | 4                 | 1                  |
| P8   | Male   | 31  | Graduate      | 7400 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 3                 | 1                  |
| P9   | Female | 46  | Undergraduate | 5000 TL                 | Single         | Yes                   | No                          | 12                | None               |
| P10  | Male   | 33  | Graduate      | 8000 TL                 | Single         | No                    | No                          | 5                 | 2                  |
| P11  | Female | 28  | Graduate      | 9000 TL                 | Single         | No                    | No                          | 5                 | 1                  |
| P12  | Male   | 34  | Undergraduate | 4700 TL                 | Single         | No                    | No                          | 4                 | 2                  |
| P13  | Male   | 32  | Graduate      | 9000 TL                 | Married        | Yes                   | No                          | 4                 | 3                  |
| P14  | Female | 32  | Undergraduate | 4500 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 5-6               | 3                  |
| P15  | Female | 31  | Graduate      | 7000 TL                 | Single         | No                    | No                          | 4                 | 2                  |
| P16  | Female | 39  | Graduate      | 9000 TL                 | Married        | Yes                   | No                          | 4                 | 4                  |
| P17  | Female | 33  | Graduate      | 7800 TL                 | Married        | No                    | No                          | 6-7               | 2                  |
| P18  | Male   | 37  | Graduate      | 8500 TL                 | Married        | Yes                   | No                          | 5-10              | 2                  |

*Proximity to family members= Do you live in the same city with your family members (such as parents, siblings)?*

*Travel frequency\*= Average number of travels per year between 2015-2019 (overnight)*

*Travel frequency\*\*= Number of travels in 2020 (overnight)*

**Table 2.** Preferred tourism types before and after the pandemic

|  | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 | P6 | P7 | P8 | P9 | P10 | P11 | P12 | P13 | P14 | P15 | P16 | P17 | P18 |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>Preferred tourism types before the pandemic</b> |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| A  | 1  | 2  | 3  | 2  | 3  | 5  | 1  | 1  | 2  |     |     | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 2   | 2   |
| B  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 1  |    | 2  | 2  | 2  |    | 4   | 3   | 4   | 3   | 2   | 2   | 4   | 3   | 1   |
| C  | 3  | 3  |    | 4  | 2  | 1  | 3  |    | 3  | 2   | 2   | 3   | 2   |     | 3   | 2   |     | 3   |
| D  | 4  | 5  | 1  |    |    | 4  |    | 4  | 1  | 3   |     |     |     | 4   | 4   | 3   | 1   |     |
| E  |    | 4  |    |    | 5  | 3  | 5  | 3  |    |     | 4   | 2   |     | 3   |     |     |     |     |
| F  |    | 6  |    | 3  | 1  | 6  |    |    |    | 1   | 1   |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| G  |    |    |    |    | 4  |    |    |    | 4  |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| H  |    |    |    |    | 6  |    | 4  |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| <b>Preferred tourism types after the pandemic</b>  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| A  | 1  | 2  | 2  | 1  | 4  | 1  | 1  | 1  | 1  | 1   |     | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   | 1   |
| B  | 2  | 1  | 1  |    |    | 3  | 3  | 2  |    |     | 2   |     | 2   | 2   | 2   |     | 2   | 3   |
| C  |    | 3  |    | 3  |    | 5  | 2  | 5  | 3  |     |     |     | 3   |     | 3   |     |     |     |
| D  |    |    | 3  |    | 6  | 4  | 4  | 4  |    | 2   |     |     |     |     | 4   | 2   |     |     |
| E  |    |    |    |    | 2  | 2  |    | 3  |    |     | 1   | 2   |     | 3   |     |     |     | 2   |
| F  |    |    |    | 2  | 5  |    |    |    | 2  |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| G  |    |    |    | 4  | 1  |    |    | 6  |    | 3   |     | 3   |     |     | 5   |     | 3   |     |
| H  |    |    |    |    | 3  |    | 5  |    |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |

A= VFR travel, B= Sea-sand-sun tourism, C= Cultural tourism, D= Business travel, E= Nature-based tourism, F= Gastronomy tourism, G= Health tourism, H= Religious tourism

before the pandemic, this number increased to 14 after the outbreak of the pandemic.

Following the questions introducing the participants and picturing their preferred types of travel, the respondents were requested to explain in detail which dimensions of their lives have transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, the researcher slightly directed the respondents toward sharing their views and intentions related to tourism activities. Nevertheless, the points raised by the respondents were not interrupted under any circumstances and particular attention was placed to receive comprehensive feedback as much as possible.

The broadness of qualitative data obtained through the research rendered necessary to identify the most significant and frequently reiterated themes. Since it allows compiling a wide range of texts under the category of limited content (Weber, 1990), content analysis was adopted for the interpretation of the data. So as to avoid the researcher bias in this process (Uşaklı et al., 2017), further support was sought from a tourism scholar specialized in qualitative research. The author of this paper and the volunteer rater independently examined and categorized the data. Since inconsistency was observed between the categories determined in the pre-evaluation stage, the process was reiterated until a consensus was reached (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Eventually, three main categories were identified through content analysis: (1) emotional turmoil, (2) involvement in tourism, (3) the family and friend effect.

**Emotional Turmoil**

One of the matters emphasized the most frequently by the participants during the interviews is psychological and emotional ups and downs that have been experienced since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Information pollution about the disease, abandoning the usual daily routines suddenly, curfews extended for a long time, staying away from family members, stress stemming from the fear of family members at a distant place getting sick and not being able to help them, the fear of getting infected with the virus and transmitting it to the others are some of the contents gathered under the theme of “emotional turmoil”. Respondents underlined that their concerns and anxiety reached an uncontrollable level when the spread rate of the virus increased, and they started to hear that even those in their close circle contracted the COVID-19.

Through the conversations during the interviews, it was determined that family members or close friends of 17 respondents recovered from the COVID-19 infection. 13 of them mentioned that their acquaintances had moderate or very severe infections.

On the other hand, 3 respondents themselves were infected with the virus. It is observed that unpleasant experiences experienced or witnessed during the pandemic have intensified individuals' health-based sensitivity.

*Just like everyone else, I intensely fought with the fear of contracting the disease and, more importantly, transmitting the virus to my beloved ones, especially to my partner. I was terrified by the possibility that my grandparents could not recover from the disease. The panic feeling I have had still comes and goes. [P1]*

*Not being able to visit my family was the most challenging part for me. Not being able to be with my loved ones when they get sick and not being able to share the sorrow when acquaintances of ours pass away is immensely devastating in psychological terms. I consider COVID-19 as a process that helped me realize my priorities in life. [P8]*

*I was constantly worried about my parents. The fact that they got infected with the virus and were going through a tough recovery period made me realize that they got old. I feel my heart rate accelerating every time the phone rings, worrying whether I would hear any bad news. [12]*

Not being able to be with relatives and close friends at the time of illness, funerals and weddings further intensified the feeling of longing for the loved ones and strengthened the emotional ties. The rush to save against the risk of possible economic depression in the future taking into account the uncertainty concerning when the pandemic would end and the significant reduction in luxury spending in order to provide financial aid to relatives and friends who lost their jobs are among the significant findings observed. Despite the fact that the respondents expressed that they are tired of the sedentary lifestyle imposed by the pandemic, they also mentioned that they may suffer from lack of motivation to socialize again when things get normal. Being alone for a long time or staying in contact with a limited number of people seems to have turned into a habit, which points out that the respondents may avoid engaging in mass activities in the future.

*I got alienated from people except those in my immediate circle. I've got used to loneliness and simplicity. Now, spending time at home feels much more enjoyable than going out. Everything can be handled online. [P11]*

*The constant changes in restrictions and restriction criteria have shifted my balance remarkably.*

*Putting the concerns for health on top of this, I have no motivation left to make plans for social life. [P14]*

*I miss the crowded social events I used to attend. On the other hand, I also feel that I lost my motivation for such things. It is a weird dilemma. [P16]*

Lastly, it is worthy to note that respondents frequently highlighted the term anxiety. Some of the respondents expressed that they had severe psychological disturbances in the pandemic period, and they act more vigilantly on any matter now. This finding could be an important indicator signaling that tourist behaviors in the upcoming period will develop along the axis of "selectivity and sensitivity".

*I already have anxiety as proved by a report. My complaints have become more evident in the pandemic. I believe what we have been through in the pandemic period has transformed our social structure, habits and expectations radically. [P3]*

*The frequency of my anxiety attacks increased after the outbreak of the pandemic. In 2020, I had 4 anxiety attacks, which used to happen once or twice a year in the previous years. Particularly the lack of hygiene and crowds have a negative impact on my psychological well-being. [P6]*

*In 2020, I showed severe symptoms of anxiety and started to take medication. My fibromyalgia, a psychological condition characterized by physical pain, recurred in the pandemic. I feel overwhelmed by the feelings of fatigue and exhaustion. These conditions will be a determining factor in all my plans for the future, including travels. [P17]*

### **Involvement in Tourism**

In the light of the information obtained from the participants, a number of important implications have been deduced concerning the present and future travel intentions and expectations. The common view points out that the number of travels has decreased dramatically, and this approach will remain in place for a long time for precautionary reasons. Using personal vehicles instead of transportation services for travel, preferring those with the safe tourism certificate while choosing the accommodation facility, gravitating toward businesses operating at half-capacity, checking the number of positive cases (Covid-19) in the region before deciding on the destination, and traveling individually or in small groups are the responses coming to the prominence more. It has been observed that the respondents avoid large-scale businesses while deciding on the accommodation facility and have

gravitated toward alternative options such as camping, staying at a boutique hotel, renting a boat, summer house or caravan. In addition, it grasps the attention that all-inclusive hotels are not even taken into account by the participants, as it is considered that those facilities would be flooded with people and therefore the hygiene rules would not be followed adequately.

*I cannot take the risk of traveling by public transportation as the virus goes through mutations constantly and vaccines do not provide 100% protection. Therefore, I prefer destinations that we can reach by our own vehicle. During this period, I have not traveled by plane, including domestic flights. We had planned a vacation in England with friends and we had bought the tickets much earlier. We canceled the tickets without hesitation, risking that our money would be wasted. To be honest, I do not intend to travel for a while unless I have to do so. [P1]*

*We had the summer holiday of 2020 with a small group of friends in 4 different ways; namely, by boat tour, by renting a private villa, in tents and in an apart hotel. Our focus while organizing all the vacations was to choose uncrowded places. Before we go to an accommodation facility, we ask whether it serves at full or half capacity. If it operates at half capacity, we make a reservation. [P2]*

It is observed that the mitigation measures and quarantine practices imposed in most countries have alienated the participants from international travel. Therefore, there is a tendency towards domestic tourism. It was also expressed that the days of vacation were reduced by almost half to reduce the risk, in addition to the reduced number of travels. Travel plans that used to be finalized at an early date before the pandemic take its final form at the last minute in our day and time. Mitigation measures updated in accordance with the total number of positive cases and curfews across the country have detracted the participants wishing not to suffer from last-minute changes from making long-term plans and driven them to act spontaneously.

### **The Family and Friend Effect**

Currently, travel plans that used to be made randomly and for recreational purposes in previous years seem to be replaced by mandatory activities or visits to relatives and close friends. Another remarkable matter causing respondents to feel uncomfortable about engaging in tourism activities is turbulent prices. The fact that a great number of businesses have gone bankrupt or suspended their operations in the pandemic period has also reflected on the price policies adopted by the operating businesses which are quite scarce in numbers. Particularly those operating at half

capacity might adopt unfair pricing strategies in order to bear their costs and make a profit. Furthermore, it is observed that the participants, suffering from dramatically decreased purchasing power due to the increases in fundamental consumption items such as food, textile, electronics, and gasoline driven by the overall economic depression, try to eliminate the accommodation costs by visiting the destinations where their relatives or friends live.

*Since March 2020, the prices of all products have almost doubled, which caused the fixed salaries to be crushed under additional charges. Hence, my travel plans faded away in parallel with my weakened financial power. In fact, I can frankly say that I currently have no travel plan except family visits. [P4]*

*My financial power decreased, which has impacted on my purchasing power. The number of travels and overnight stays I had earlier in one year has decreased dramatically. Until the pandemic ends, and I regain my previous financial power, I will give weight to visiting my relatives and friends residing in tourism areas and I will have my vacation as such. [P5]*

*I have financial concerns about my travel plans. The voice saying that I should save and not spend out my cash preoccupies my mind constantly. In the past, I used to try to finalize the things in my to-do and save money in order to make a travel plan. Now, I have started to think over whether I should save my money for more vital needs. I may satisfy the need for travel by visiting my family members reside abroad or in a distant city than where I live. I have the feeling that I would reach both moral and material satisfaction by doing so. [P9]*

Responses conveyed by the participants signal that interest in VFR travel will sustain. One of the most prominent reasons underlying this tendency is the desire to reunite with the loved ones in a familiar environment. Therefore, we can assert that travel intentions within and in the post-crisis period have developed on the axis of “reunion travel and the sense of being safe”.

*One of my priorities during vacation will be visiting my relatives in different cities. I wish to feel safe in terms of health and spend lots of time with my loved ones after a long time. So, I will be a reunion traveler. [P3]*

Lastly, it is important to address the travel intentions of the participants who have children. It is observed that individuals desiring to establish emotional bonds between their children and relatives have attached a

more profound meaning to VFR travel as a result of the distressing psychological turmoil driven by the pandemic.

*The pandemic has not changed our demand for cultural tourism or the sea-sand-sun tourism. Nevertheless, it has impacted on the number of days we spend on vacation. In the past, we used to visit our family members or friends several times a year so that they would not feel offended. Nowadays, we dream of reducing the number of days we spend on vacation and being able to visit our loved ones residing close to the destination we choose for vacation and enjoying leisure activities with them. It seems that our plans for other types of tourism will be jammed into the remaining time after relative and friend visits. [P7]*

*I have two little kids. The pandemic coincided with the initial phase of their cognitive development. Due to the virus, my wife and I have taken strict measures to protect our family. Our children did not have the opportunity to get to know almost no one other than our nuclear family. Since the beginning of 2020, we have better understood how important it is to be in contact especially with relatives. We wish our children to experience special moments with other family members to record in their memories and to recognize the importance of kinship at an early age. The elderly family members cannot travel easily due to physical constraints they have. Therefore, at least for the next couple of years, we plan to pay more frequent visits to the destinations they live in and engage in recreational activities that we can spend time together. [P18]*

## DISCUSSION

Research findings point out that the popularity of VFR travel has increased since last year and its location in the ranking of preferred tourism types has changed in the upward direction. One of the fundamental underlying reasons for the change concerned is the increased perception of health risk in the pandemic period. Particular studies in the body of literature also underline that travel is perceived as an important risk factor especially when it comes to health (Godovykh et al., 2021; Li et al., 2020; Matiza, 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020). In this respect, the findings revealed in the current study show parallelism with those concluded in previous research. From another perspective, Zenker et al. (2021) place emphasis on anxiety and assert that phobias such as nosophobia, demophobia/enochlophobia may drive significant psychological problems. It is argued by the researchers that long-lasting fears would trigger anxiety, which will impact on travel intentions and decisions. Individuals feel anxious about leaving safe environments. The fact

that the current study has revealed in the light of the feedback from the participants that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the arousal of anxiety and some other psychological disorders support the research arguments put forward by Zenker et al. (2021).

It is observed that the growing concerns about family members, friends, and health have undermined the motivation for leisure activities such as tourism, at least for a while. In Turkey, as in many other countries, the curfews imposed to keep the number of positive cases under control and the restriction of domestic travels even in non-curfew periods except for force majeure circumstances have reduced to a great extent the physical contact of the participants with relatives and friends living in different cities. Gatherings with family members and friends, which used to be considered quite usual, are now perceived as actions to be performed depending on certain criteria. It is understood from the feedback of the participants that the intention to gather with the loved ones has become a psychological need now. As emphasized by Cheung et al. (2021), such unsatisfied psychological needs have transformed into stronger desires that must be met promptly. Taking into consideration the escalation in the risk perception of tourists due to COVID-19, it is likely that the tourism industry will face bottlenecks in recovery in the short and medium term. At this juncture, it is self-evident that the desire to gather with the loved ones will increase the activity of VFR travel. The growth in the participation rate in VFR travel may facilitate the revival of the industry which suffers great losses in other lines (Hall et al., 2020). Motivating people that it is safe to participate in local events with relatives or friends and visit attractions in the region they are can be considered as “an early post-crisis recovery strategy for tourism destinations” (Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

Tourists' levels of risk perception toward travel and how this perception can be transformed in the positive direction can be discussed more deeply from crisis management and psychology perspectives in future studies. On the other hand, the finding concluded in the current study revealing that the desire for “reunion” prevails among the participants points out that studying the theme of VFR travel in company with reunion travel will yield more abundant content. In societies embracing diverse sociological structures or with the participants having different demographic characteristics than those in the current study, it is likely to hear different responses to the research questions in the current study. Furthermore, it should be remembered that the feedback received throughout the pandemic period may evolve toward another direction after the pandemic. Whether the increased



interest in VFR travel is a temporary outcome stemming from emotional reactions experienced throughout the course of the crisis, or it is such a development that would sustain also in the future should be examined in studies to be carried out at the early post-pandemic period. Lastly, considering that the pandemic has elevated the stress levels in general, it is recommended for destination managers to promote and offer the values embodied by the destination as an opportunity for mental restoration, in case they plan to create demand (Wen et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSIONS

The current study has investigated how COVID-19 has impacted on travel trends, expectations and priorities. It is considered that the research findings offer critical clues for the future to tourism researchers studying in the field of tourist behavior as well as the industry stakeholders. This paper embodies important implications in the particular context of understanding the concerns that urge individuals to abstain from engaging in tourism activities. It is evidently observed that the tendency toward VFR travel has increased along with the pandemic. The statements of the respondents during the interviews such as the longing for relatives and friends, the desire to feel safe in terms of health, escape from unfamiliar destinations and supply elements due to the unpredictability of the near future, perceiving great risk of entering crowded areas earlier than the spread rate of the virus winds down or the course of the pandemic improves, general financial fluctuations, additional charges on products and services, the urge to hold cash in case an economic crisis outbreaks in the upcoming period, disorders such as anxiety triggered by the psychological exhaustion, lack of confidence in businesses for complying with the COVID-19 mitigation measures, and the time for vacation being planned to be short in case of engaging in other types of tourism activities than VFR will help predicting the tourists' mental attitude and reactions in the post-pandemic period. Despite the research efforts in the recent period on the effects of COVID-19 on tourist behavior (e.g., Bae & Chang, 2021; Donaire et al., 2021; Pappas & Glyptou, 2021; Villacé-Molinero et al., 2021), the fact that the subject matter has been ignored from the perspective of VFR travel increases the added-value of the findings revealed in the current study.

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