RiAT
Revista Interamericana de Ambiente y Turismo
Interamerican Journal of Environment and Tourism
Print version ISSN - 0717 - 6651, Online version ISSN - 0718 - 235X
http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-235X20230002000100
http://riat.utalca.cl
www.fen.utalca.cl

Research paper

COVID-19's effect on Spanish retail travel agency management. The case of A Coruña

La COVID-19 y su efecto en la gestión de las agencias de viaje detallistas españolas. El caso de A Coruña.

Ángel Rodríguez Pallas[1], Ana Montoya Reyes[2*] and Carlota Lorenzo Pérez[3]

[1] PhD in Tourism, Faculty of Tourism, Universidade da Coruña, A Coruña, Spain. http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9380-7038
[2] PhD in English Historical Linguistics, Faculty of Tourism, Universidade da Coruña, A Coruña, Spain. http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7986-4116
[3] Degree in Tourism and Degree in Business Science, Faculty of Tourism and Faculty of Economics and Business, Universidade da Coruña, A Coruña, Spain. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9324-528X
[*] Corresponding author: ana.montoya@col.udc.es

Received: 2023-10-05 Accepted for publication: 2023-11-04 Published: 2023-12-31

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects and changes brought about by COVID-19 on retail travel agencies in A Coruña (Spain). The study aims to investigate the impact of past health crises and the actions taken by retail agencies in response. Additionally, the study aims to identify the opportunities and challenges faced by these agencies in the current context.
To achieve these objectives, a qualitative methodology was developed to collect and analyse primary data, which was supplemented by secondary sources. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant travel agency professionals.
The results of the study highlight the impact of COVID-19 on the retail travel industry in A Coruña. The study found that no other pandemic has required retail agencies to adapt their working style to the limitations and measures set by governments. Teleworking has become crucial to their ability to continue operating. The study also found that COVID-19 has introduced opportunities and challenges, including the use of personalized attention as a strategy to gain a competitive advantage and the provision of security assurance in an environment of uncertainty and risk.
In conclusion, this study provides insights into the impact of COVID-19 on the retail travel industry in A Coruña. The study highlights the need for retail agencies to adapt to changing circumstances and the opportunities and challenges that arise as a result. The findings of this study can be used to inform future research and policy decisions in the retail travel industry.

Keywords: *Retail travel agencies, tourism intermediaries, Covid-19, pandemic impacts.*

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es examinar los efectos y los cambios provocados por la COVID-19 en las agencias de viajes minoristas de A Coruña (España). El estudio pretende investigar el impacto de anteriores crisis sanitarias y las medidas adoptadas por las agencias minoristas en respuesta a las mismas. Además, el estudio pretende identificar las oportunidades y retos a los que se enfrentan estas agencias en el contexto actual.
Para alcanzar estos objetivos, se desarrolló una metodología cualitativa de recogida y análisis de datos primarios, que se complementó con fuentes secundarias. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas en profundidad con profesionales relevantes de las agencias de viajes.
Los resultados del estudio ponen de relieve el impacto de la COVID-19 en el sector minorista de los viajes en A Coruña. El estudio reveló que ninguna otra pandemia ha exigido que las agencias minoristas adapten su estilo de trabajo a las limitaciones y medidas establecidas por los gobiernos. El teletrabajo se ha convertido en un elemento crucial para que puedan seguir operando. El estudio también encontró que la COVID-19 ha introducido oportunidades y retos, incluyendo el uso de la atención personalizada como estrategia para obtener una ventaja competitiva y la provisión de garantías de seguridad en un entorno de incertidumbre y riesgo.
En conclusión, este estudio proporciona información sobre el impacto de COVID-19 en la industria minorista de viajes en A Coruña. El estudio pone de relieve la necesidad de que las agencias minoristas se adapten a las circunstancias cambiantes y las oportunidades y retos que surgen como consecuencia de ello. Las conclusiones de este estudio pueden servir de base para futuras investigaciones y decisiones políticas en el sector de los viajes minoristas.

Palabras clave: Agencias de viaje minorista, intermediarios turísticos, Covid-19, impactos de la pandemia

INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, epidemics, plagues, and pandemics have decimated civilisations and influenced the course of history. About twenty pandemics have been recorded since the beginning of time, which have endangered and hindered human life. They have affected and provoked changes in society, economy, beliefs, wars, and in the vision that we have of human beings, health, life, and the environment that surrounds us (Oldstone, 2020).

The rise of contagious diseases came to the fore when human beings began to organise themselves in society and to share a specific space in which to coexist. As a result of the growth of the world population and globalisation, the spread of diseases was favoured, becoming a threat to different areas of the planet; the first pandemics were documented at that time (Piret and Boivin, 2021).

Tourism functions as a gauge in national and international affairs, being also an indicator of good or bad times, depending on its stagnation or acceleration (Fernández, 2021). With this respect, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the global economy, particularly affecting the tourism sector (Vărzaru et al., 2021) and the classic problems related to concerns about tourist saturation have been displaced by those of restrictions on movement and the future of travel, two facts which profoundly influence the future of the world economy and societies (Kainthola et al., 2021).

As Pastor and Rivera (2022) point out, the COVID-19 pandemic in the retail agency sector has generated multiple problems, but also new challenges and opportunities especially if we consider the tourist's point of view and the changes that will have to be made by these intermediaries to reactivate tourism.

Given this situation, the primary goal of this study is to evaluate the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on the travel and tourism sector, with a focus on the impact and modifications made to the operations of retail and wholesale-retail businesses in the city of A Coruña, both online and on-site.

Secondary objectives are derived from the main objective and for each of them a series of related sub-objectives (So. I to So. V) were formulated, to subsequently contrast them. The first secondary objective consists of investigating the influence of other health alerts in the tourism sector and the actions carried out by retail agencies in the city of A Coruña. Two sub-objectives to respond to this objective were setted out:

- So. I: To find out whether the experience gained in previous pandemics has helped retail travel agencies to cope with the COVID-19 crisis.
- So. II: To find out whether retail agencies have survived the pandemic thanks to teleworking and the support they have received.

The third and final sub-objective aims to shed light on tourism and tourist trends in a post-COVID scenario. A final sub-objective was proposed to respond to this objective:
- So. III: Trying to predict whether after the COVID-19 pandemic, the market share of face-to-face agencies will increase, as the security and personalised service they offer will be valued.
- So. IV: Find out whether telework is a threat to traditional retail agencies.

The third and final sub-objective aims to shed light on tourism and tourist trends in a post-COVID scenario. We propose a final sub-objective to respond to this objective:
- So. V: To find out whether after the end of the pandemic there will be a change in the way face-to-face agencies work and in the characteristics of what they offer, due to new consumer preferences.

The type of methodology designed to respond to the proposed objectives after carrying out the literature review is qualitative, aimed at obtaining and analysing primary information, which could be complemented by secondary sources of information. Semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 relevant professionals from the travel agency sector in A Coruña. The findings achieved are subsequently highlighted based on the sub-objectives set out and arising from the previous analysis of the state of the question.

THEORETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Health crises and their academic economic and social impact.

Diseases have been an intrinsic part of human history since time immemorial (Piret, & Boivin, 2021). The health crisis generated by COVID-19 has placed global economic policy in a compromised position. Spanish GDP has suffered a severe contraction and faced the greatest global economic challenge since the Great Recession; governments and the European Central Bank have adopted emergency measures aimed at preserving the productive apparatus, maintaining employment in sustainable companies, helping groups in difficult situations and controlling the rebound effect. These measures, in the form of public guarantees and loans, will generate a consequent increase in the public deficit (Boscá et al., 2021).

Historical experience shows that there is no trade-off between the economic and health crisis because the impact on the economy cannot be reduced until the spread of the virus is reduced. Thus, It can be stated that COVID-19 has a serious impact on public health, causes changes in consumer preferences, changes in supply structures, deteriorates productivity, employment, generates uncertainty and in turn decreases confidence on the part of society (Brodeur et al., 2021).

The effect of COVID-19 on the tourism industry.

he impact caused by the COVID-19 health crisis has forced society to rethink certain aspects of the way of life on a political and economic level. It has also drawn a new global scenario for the tourism model and especially affecting mass tourism destinations, which already had pre-pandemic problems, and have needed to address structural changes in their management (Arold, 2021). In this sense, it must considered that the tourism sector is linked to a set of activities that make up its value chain, which need the influx of tourists and their contribution in terms of income for their survival (Bai and Ran, 2022).

The impact of the pandemic on tourism services exports has been drastic, detracting from GDP growth, situation which will take time to return to normal (Torres and Fernandez, 2020). Although the tourism sector was subjected to the cessation of its activity, the effects may not be exclusively negative. Adopting a positive perspective, this situation may have become an opportunity to change the tourism model towards a more sustainable one that promotes growth integrated with local communities, trying to solve negative externalities and in which collaboration between the agents in charge of management is a priority, to optimise its future efficiency (Arold, 2021).

During the COVID-19 crisis, passenger flows and tourism activity came to a standstill. This globalised sector depends on the protectionist political measures imposed by the sending and receiving destinations; moreover, the very movement of international tourists can alter the geopolitical, health and psychosocial situation of today's society (Iaquinto, 2020). In view of this and to encourage tourism, it is crucial to guarantee a certain level of security by adopting measures aimed at lasting in the long term and creating a new tourism model that does not compromise the viability and competitiveness of the sector. In the past, security was related to the occurrence of terrorist acts; nowadays, we must also focus on health security, also considering the quality and availability of health care at the destination (Arold, 2021).

Opportunities and challenges for retail agencies in the post-COVID-19 scenario

With the end of the pandemic and the restrictions in the travel sector, and until the disease has been eradicated, the decision to travel has been linked to existing security protocols and infection rates. For face-to-face agencies, this reality could be seen as an opportunity, considering the differential value of providing security in the personalised service offered to their clients (Toubes et al., 2021). An example of this has been the efficient way in which on-site agencies have acted in the face of the pandemic, compared to other actors in the value chain such as OTAs (Online Travel Agencies) that did not adequately manage the rescheduling, modification or reimbursement of trips contracted by their clients (Gandini, 2023). In the new international scenario that the pandemic brought, travel insurance with COVID-19 coverage was one of the most sought-after products; travel agencies could treat this as an opportunity, offering packages with well-designed and insured experiences (Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020). In this scenario, face-to-face agencies have seen their professional role strengthened as the customer has needed their advice more than ever, due to uncertainty and constant changes in restrictions (Toubes et al., 2021).

Towards a more sustainable tourism in tourism intermediation

It is necessary to resort to planned tourism, which considers environmental care, identity, culture, and local heritage. In terms of tourism promotion, after COVID-19 there will be two scenarios: intensive promotion without programming aimed at rapid economic recovery; or economic recovery based on more sustainable tourism, taking advantage of the opportunity to restructure and improve this activity (Arold, 2021); although the difficulties of marketing sustainable tourism modalities, compared to other mass tourism products, must be considered (Tudorache et al., 2017).

Package holidays, which usually do not meet minimum sustainability standards, are the most profitable product for 79% of Spanish agencies, which are involved in 38% of the trips made in Spain, representing some 36 million trips (UNAV, 2020). It is therefore essential that travel agencies adapt to established quality standards, contributing to the development of more sustainable tourism (Pastor and Rivera, 2022).

Despite the market share acquired by virtual agencies, the future of traditional agencies is guaranteed. The model, the number of points of sale or the way of relating to suppliers may vary; but if they offer a professional, personalised, empathetic, and trust-generating service, there will be a type of customer willing to pay for advice, peace of mind and help in discriminating between all the information offered by the Internet (Rodríguez-Pallas, 2018).

Teleworking in the COVID era

The spread of teleworking as a means of combating the possibility of contagion, outbreaks or lockdown has been one of the major changes in the workplace brought about by the pandemic. When teleworking is possible, productivity is often increased, workers' time management is optimised, absenteeism is reduced, accidents at work are reduced, costs are reduced, and workers' work and family life management is improved. Teleworking is not without disadvantages such as the deterioration of the bond between workers or difficulties in disconnecting from work.

For travel agencies, telework has been a challenge and, although it became a solution in times of pandemic, once the pandemic is over, travellers may prioritise online booking, avoiding crowds. Therefore, face-to-face agencies should not stop offering personalised attention remotely, considering it as an opportunity. There are customers who still prefer to receive personalised face-to-face attention, so it is necessary to manage appointments in advance, have secure spaces and contactless payment systems. Through good planning and resource management, agencies that manage to adapt will be able to continue to maintain this new way of working (Trasnforma Turismo, 2021).

The future of tourism after COVID-19

COVID-19 has marked a before and after in the tourism industry and has drawn a new scenario after the full reactivation of the activity. While it is impossible to specify all the consequences, one of them has been the change of direction or disappearance of certain businesses, due to the loss of human capital or because they have not been able to cope with the economic situation. In addition, some tourism businesses have not been able to find a place because of the products or services offered. Although most of the population is vaccinated, the risk of the appearance of mutations of the virus or the outbreak of a new pandemic is present; contingency plans and action protocols are still necessary. In this sense, the activities of the tourism sector are highly incompatible with the protocols for the reduction of contagion, monitoring, and isolation of the sick. The virus affects young people less seriously and their intention to travel has not decreased due to fear of contagion, as is the case with other groups (Arold, 2021).

Tourist motivations

According to Uysal et al. (2009) it is possible to differentiate between two types of motivations:

- Socio-psychological ones, related to push factors, which act as levers to start a trip and are not related to the destination, such as the need to escape from routine, to combat stress.

- Cultural factors, related to pull factors, which are related to the destination and justify the choice of destination, such as the climate or the security it offers.

In Spain, once the COVID-19 crisis is over, the push factors have not been altered because, despite the existence of health protection measures, the intention to escape from routine continue to exist. This means it is necessary to seek a combination of security, protection, and enjoyment. As for the pull factors, severe changes are expected due to the reduction of travel limitations and the primary need for security. Regarding the choice of destinations, preference will be given to those located in large spaces that allow interpersonal distance to be maintained. In addition, tourism companies will have to strive to be competitive in terms of price and marketing campaigns will have to focus on highlighting quality, safety, and the possibilities of enjoying tourism products (Arold, 2021).

A new paradigm for the tourism sector

Tourism, focused on attracting large crowds, is at the ideal moment to change the paradigm and growth model. It is a good moment to take advantage of the opportunity to promote responsible and respectful tourism activity that transmits to the visitor the need to choose quality services. Reactivating the tourism sector is crucial, but introducing reforms that help to improve its growth model; avoiding overcrowding, establishing security protocols and monitoring of tourist activity, promoting technological improvements, adapting the tourist offer to the new circumstances and offering tourist packages with travel insurance and refund guarantees (Arold, 2021).

The post-COVID tourist

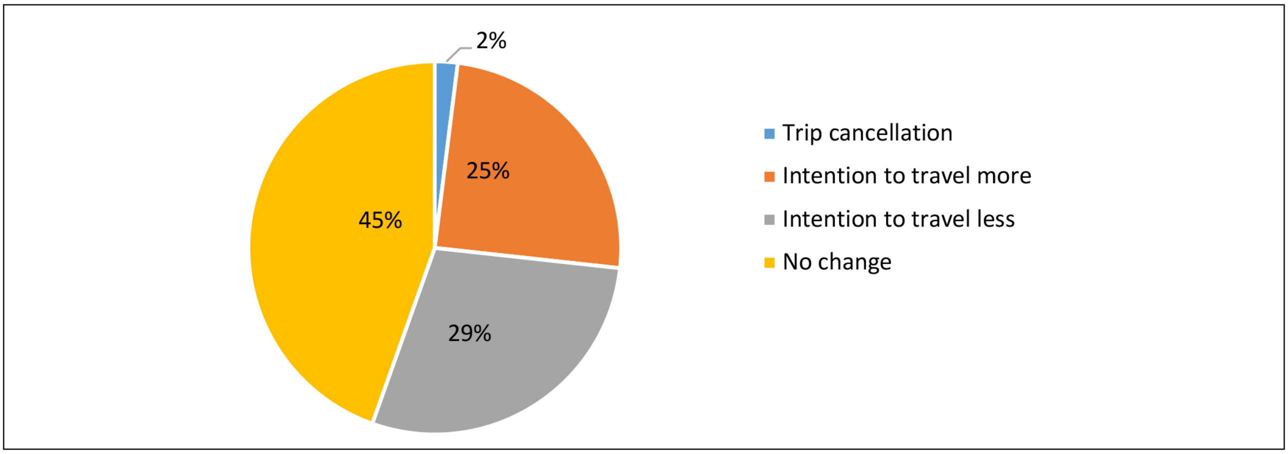
Among the changes that have been witnessed in the way tourists travel are the booking of smaller accommodation to avoid crowds, the search for à la carte restaurants and the preference for less crowded means of transport. Travel agencies need to improve their relationship with the client by offering a personalised service (Toubes et al, 2021) that allows them to solve unforeseen events, manage bookings, changes, cancellations, and refunds (Nair et al. 2022), as well as offering their clients insurance with adequate health coverage (Uğur and Akbıyık, 2020).

Through the Wyman survey (2020), which reveals data on consumer leisure travel intentions globally 2021-2022 after the end of COVID-19 restrictions. As shown in Figure 1, 45% of respondents consider they will not change their travel planning, 29% say they will travel less, 25% say they will travel more and 2% say they will cancel their trips. In relation to the reasons why consumers consider that they will travel less, fear of returning to the pandemic situation stands out, along with lower travel budgets and concerns about health protocols.

In terms of consumer leisure travel intentions at a global level 2021-2022 and considering aspects related to comfort, neutrality or discomfort when carrying out certain activites (Wyman, 2020); as shown in Figure 2 the high degree of discomfort expressed when travelling on a cruise ship stands out with 48%, followed by the tourist bus (45%) and public transport (44%); the best considered means of transport being air travel (50%) and long-distance trains.

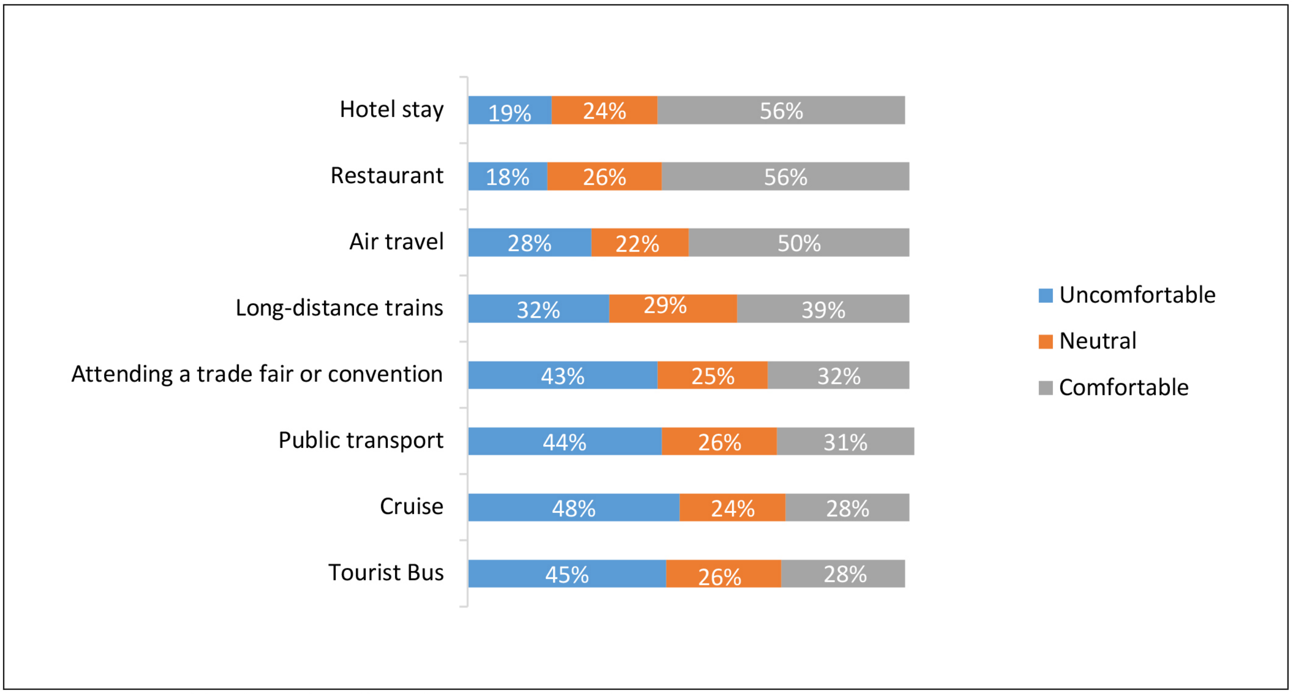
Changes in travel patterns and preferences are evident, making it necessary for tourism companies to adapt their Products and services to the new reality and preferences of consumers (Arold, 2021).

Figure 1. Leisure travel intentions in 2021-2022 after the end of restrictions



Source: Prepared by the authors (based on Wyman, 2020)

Figure 2. Intention to travel for leisure in 2021-2022 after restrictions have been lifted and considering the comfort-inconvenience of carrying out certain activities.



Source: Prepared by the authors (based on Wyman, 2020)

METHODOLOGY

With the aim to respond to the objectives and sub-objectives set out and given the particularities of the travel agency sector, a qualitative research design was used, as it allows the researcher to give meaning and significance to the experience of the other and, based on the interpretation of ideologies, customs, and values, to develop a discourse marked by subjectivity (Sierra, 2019). In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to understand the perspectives of the informants, through a conversation between equals with the researcher, about experiences or situations lived in relation to the object of study (Taylor et al., 2015).

For this purpose and considering that retail travel agencies in the city of A Coruña have a total of 81 points of sale in the locality (Turismo de Galicia, 2021), a sample of twelve interviewees was selected considering personal and strategic criteria, trying that they were individuals in possession of special knowledge, status or communicative skills and willingness to cooperate with the researcher (Izcara, 2014).

The aim is to address a specific problem with a limited sample of professionals and experts in the travel agency sector, making it appropriate to carry out semi-structured interviews with previously defined questions, although with a formulation and sequence subject to variation depending on every individual to better obtain data (Valles, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in person during June 2021, and information was collected on the knowledge, experiences, or perspectives of twelve informants representing the group of retail travel agencies in the city of A Coruña. Five of the interviewees are managers (I1, I2, I3, I4, I5) and the other seven are travel agents (I6, I7, I8, I9, I10, I11, I12).

As shown in Table 1, the study universe of the qualitative research carried out is categorised by: retail and wholesale-retail travel agencies, both online and traditional, operating in the city of A Coruña. The sampling unit is composed of both travel agents and branch managers who have been contacted directly and personally. The sampling procedure of this qualitative research is non-probabilistic, by convenience. Regarding the methodology selected for this research, as indicated above, semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen. The interviews were designed in a funnel sequence including seven open-ended questions, divided into four thematic blocks related to the objectives pursued in the investigation.

Following the structure suggested by Mayntz et al. (1993), seven questions were posed (Q.1 to Q.7) structured in four thematic blocks linked to the objectives of this research, with a funnel sequence; starting with general, open-ended questions, then moving on to more specific and closed questions, arriving at more precise aspects.

Table 1. Qualitative research

UNIVERSE OF STUDY	Categorised by retail and wholesale-retail travel agencies both online and traditional operating in A Coruña.
SAMPLE UNIT	Travel agents and branch managers.
COMPOSITION OF THE SAMPLE	Direct and personal contact.
SAMPLING PROCEDURE	Non-probabilistic convenience method.
METHODOLOGY	Semi-structured in-depth interviews in funnel sequence including seven open-ended questions, divided into four thematic blocks related to the research objectives.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 2. Characteristics of the interviewees

Interviewee	Company	Position	Agency
I1	B Travel	Director	Wholesale-retail
I2	Candal Tours	Director	Retail
I3	Viajes IAG7	Director	Wholesale-retail
I4	Beira Viajes	Director	Retail
I5	T4 Viajes	Director	Retail
I6	Miramar Cruceros	Agent	Online Retail
I7	Viajes Bivestour	Agent	Retail
I8	Viajes Halcón	Agent	Wholesale-retail
I9	Viajes Nautalia	Agent	Wholesale-retail
I10	El Corte Inglés Viajes	Agent	Wholesale-retail
I11	Viajes Ecuador	Agent	Wholesale-retail
I12	Viajes Carrefour	Agent	Wholesale-retail

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 2 shows a list the participants in this qualitative study (I1 to I12), the name of the company in which they work, the position they hold at the time of the interviews and the type of agency in which they work.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in four thematic blocks from which the most representative aspects were extracted to facilitate the understanding of the information presented. Due to the impossibility of perfectly understanding the experience of the interviewees as they have lived it, the perception presented here will be indirect, subjective, and partial (Sierra, 2019).

Health Crises and pandemics throughout history

All interviewees agree that the Covid-19 pandemic is not comparable to any previous pandemic, not even the closest and most relevant (Influenza A in 2009). As can be seen in her answer to question 1 in Table 3,interviewee I11 states that the influenza A crisis was the best in terms of sales volume.

COVID-19's effects on the travel and tourism sector

During the lockdown, all the respondents stated that they had managed refunds, changes and cancellations from home, teleworking. Respondent I1 stresses the precariousness of the situation as they were not prepared to telework. Respondents I12 and I6 point out that agencies focused on holiday travel had no turnover during this stage. On the other hand, interviewees I3, I4, I5, I10, I11, state that they continued to invoice thanks to corporate travel.

Interviewee I2 indicates that they continue to work by video call and by coming to the office by appointment, which they find very efficient. On the other hand, respondents I1 and I7 add that they still maintain the reduced hours and staff.

Below, in table 4, you can read the transcript of the answer that respondents I12 and I4 provided regarding question 2. All the interviewees affirmed that the subsidies do not arrive and that they are reduced. Interviewee I12, as can be seen in his answer to question 3 in Table 5, points out the poor distribution and states that he was obliged to pay his self-employed contribution during the pandemic, despite not having invoiced.

Respondents I2, I4 (answer to question 3 in Table 5) and I12 refer to ICO loans, which have helped to alleviate the situation during the pandemic.

Challenges and opportunities of the COVID-19 crisis on travel agency management

Regarding security guarantees, interviewee I4, as can be seen in his response to question 4 in Table 6, states that many insurers turned their backs on clients during the state of alarm and pandemic, taking refuge in their clauses, which did not cover these cases. This same idea is also defended by interviewee I12.

In addition to this, travel agents had to arrange refunds with airlines and tour operators, mostly in the form of vouchers, which led to numerous problems with customers who preferred to get their money back (I4, I5 and I12).

As a result of this situation, all the interviewees (I1-I12) agree on the benefits of incorporating COVID-19 coverage in travel insurance, covering cancellations due to positives or quarantine prior to the trip and covering the costs if this occurs at the destination; although, as interviewee I1 points out, this extension of coverage has implied an increase in premiums, making the overall price of the trip more expensive, as does the need for PCR tests to travel to certain destinations (I11).

Regarding teleworking, respondents have mixed opinions. As advantages, respondents I1, I4, I7 and I10 point out that the corporate segment could telework, as it is mainly managed via e-mail or telephone. However, in the holiday segment, according to respondents I1, I4, I5, I7, I8, I10 and I12, it is very important to be face-to-face with the customer, a distinguishing feature of the travel agencies they represent. Respondents I1, I3, I4, I5 and I7 added that after the pandemic situation with refunds and cancellations, customers will feel more secure and confident knowing that they can go to a physical office for any inconvenience.

In favour of teleworking, they highlight higher productivity (I2) and efficiency. There are no interruptions, no need to travel to the office and time is saved by not being in front of the public (I8).

Table 3. Question 1

Q.1. From your perspective as a professional in the tourism intermediation sector, and comparing previous pandemics, such as swine flu (2009) with the current COVID-19 pandemic, could you tell me about some similarities or differences in the management of the work and the tools used?	
I11	"Well, none like this one, because I remember 2008 for example, but it was an economic crisis, then the problem was that people didn't travel because they didn't have the cash. Now the problem is that people want to travel, but due to circumstances, such as having to pass health controls and that many people are still not vaccinated, it is not that they can't travel because they don't have money, but because of medical issues, and people are afraid, of course. On the other hand, I don't remember other health crises that affected us like this one. In fact, we didn't notice the swine flu at all. What's more, it was the year we sold the most. It had no influence at all. This one did because you were forced to comply with the restrictions, which meant we had to close the door and go home".

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 4. Question 2

	Q.2. How did lockdown and other restrictions affect the way you work?
Teleworking and no invoicing	"When we were closed, we focused on teleworking, especially for the departure of the people we had at the destination, because as it was from one day to the next we had to manage their return, as well as cancel or change the bookings we had pending. For us, working with holidaymakers and not having almost no company had a big influence, because people stopped travelling" (I12).
Teleworking and invoicing	"During the lockdown we teleworked, so the little that we were able to travel at that time, especially for the company, we managed it perfectly from home. I mean, we were able to work from home and without contact with the client, without any problem" (I4).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 5. Question 3

Q.3. If you have had the help of public guarantees and loans to avoid closure, do you consider them to have been sufficient or, on the contrary, too little?	
Poorly distributed	"It's not that there were not enough or not enough. The problem is that they are badly given, because for example we are still being forced to pay the self-employed and other tax-related fees, when the months we were forced to close we had zero turnover. And the ICO loans, for example, should have been given by the government without the mediation of the banks, because in the end they charge interest, even if it is small, but they are charging it and they shouldn't be charging it, because in the end it is aid. So, it's not that the amount of aid is low, but it is badly distributed" (I12)
ICO Loan	"It is true that the ICO funding helped many agencies to cope with the financial problems and the bookings that clients had made for trips that could not be made (...) It also depends a lot on the bookings that we found at the beginning of the pandemic" (I4).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Interviewee I2 adds that teleworking has allowed them to deal with new clients from all over Spain, not limited to A Coruña.

Respondents I4, I8 and I11 highlight the increase in working hours, the difficulty to disconnect and the disappearance of links with other workers.

The future of tourism. Tourism and tourists post-COVID

Regarding the future of tourism products offered by retail agencies, respondents I1, I2, I4, I6, I8 and I12 consider that they will maintain the same characteristics as before the pandemic; thanks to the vaccine and health protocols, travellers are less afraid and more willing to travel. Respondents I3, I7, I8 and I11 believe that mass tourism, group tourism and tours will be affected after the pandemic and will take time to recover.

Respondents I1, I5 and I8 state that the way some retail agencies work may change by adopting teleworking especially in corporate travel management. Respondent I5 points out that it will be necessary to adapt to changes and consumer preferences by improving the web or maintaining a good telephone and e-mail service. On this point opposing opinions were found; interviewee I2, after a favourable experience in teleworking, states that they will continue to serve customers via video-calls, combining it with face-to-face service; while agent I11, as can be seen in his answer to question 6 in Table 7, believes that teleworking has no place in retail agencies, as the customer will prioritise direct contact.

Respondent I10 believes that there will be more travel than before. Respondent I12 believes that retail agencies will gain market share as consumers feel more confident coming to the office.

Regarding the seventh question, in which the experts were asked whether they perceived any discomfort or new preferences on the part of consumers when carrying out certain activities. The interviewees mostly agree that customers seek to avoid crowds (I11), avoid cruises and crowded transport, prefer their own car rather than bus or plane (I1, I8, I10), try not to travel to cities and avoid visiting museums or enclosed spaces (I2, I12). As for corporate travel, respondent I3 states that it remains unchanged.

Below, in table 8, you can read the transcript of the answer that respondent I2 provided in relation to question 7.

Table 7. Question 6

Q.6. Do you think that this situation will affect the way the travel agency works or the characteristics of some of the products offered, such as package tours for senior travellers?	
I1	"I think that in terms of product offerings, it will remain the same. The way of working is likely to change, with regard to teleworking, because of what we were talking about before, as there will be companies that will continue to work from home, but as far as the characteristics of the products are concerned, I don't think they will change too much, as little by little customers are losing their fear of travelling and are less reluctant to travel, thanks to the vaccine".

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 8. Question 7

Q.7. Have you noticed any discomfort or new preferences on the part of consumers when carrying out certain activities?	
I2	"It is true that we have noticed that people are not yet encouraged to go on closed trips, i.e., to cities, museums, etc. This year most of the trips are outdoors, in nature and with open spaces. This year most of the trips are outdoors, in nature and with open spaces. As far as cities are concerned, no, not at the moment. We are not trying to sell them either, because things are not yet ready to rocket. Iceland, Tanzania, Costa Rica, Maldives, or Seychelles, are places that are selling quite well, and for the time being the rest will be sold little by little".

Source: Prepared by the authors.

CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the first secondary objective proposed, which consisted of investigating the antecedents of health alerts, their influence on the tourism sector and the actions carried out, in comparison with those of the COVID-19 pandemic and from the perspective of retail agencies in the city of A Coruña; a response to this objective was managed through the findings achieved with the sub-objectives set out (So. I and So. II).

With respect to Sub-Objective I, which asked whether previous pandemics helped retail agencies to cope with COVID-19, the interviewees agree that the magnitude and effects experienced by retail agencies are incomparable to previous health crises, when sales volume decreased without paralysing activity. The interviewees agree that the magnitude and effects experienced by retail agencies are incomparable to previous health crises, in which the volume of sales decreased without paralysing activity. Based on the responses collected for question Q.1, it can be concluded that the interviewees have had to face and adapt to a new and unfamiliar situation, for which no one was prepared.

In relation to Sub-Objective II, which sought to find out whether retail agencies have survived the pandemic thanks to teleworking and the support they have received, all respondents indicated that during the lockdown they managed refunds, cancellations, and changes for their clients by teleworking; some even sold corporate travel this way. All the interviewees indicated that during the lockdown they managed refunds, cancellations, and changes for their clients by teleworking; some even sold corporate travel in this way. Regarding the aid received, despite having contributed to alleviating the economic consequences of the pandemic, the interviewees agreed that it was scarce. Analysing the information obtained in response to questions Q.2 and Q.3, it can be concluded that teleworking has been crucial in solving the problems caused by the pandemic in the operation of retail agencies, while aid, although it helped to cope with the situation, was insufficient.
To answer the second sub-objective, which sought to

analyse the challenges and opportunities faced by travel agencies since the advent of COVID-19, two sub-objectives were proposed (So. III and So. IV). With regard to Sub-Objective III, which sought to predict whether after the COVID-19 pandemic, the market share of face-to-face agencies will increase, as the security and personalised service they offer will become more valued; interviewees emphasise the hard work involved in managing customers' refund requests to suppliers and claim that many consumers who booked travel online on their own are still trying to get their money back. To avoid this, insurers have added the Covid-19 clause, covering expenses incurred due to possible positives or the need for quarantine.

After analysing the answers to question Q.4, related to Sub-objective III, It can be affirmed that after the situation experienced, consumers will feel more secure knowing that in the event of unforeseen events, the face-to-face agency, experienced and equipped with the resources to manage inconveniences, will be able to defend their rights before airlines, tour operators and other providers.

In relation to Sub-Objective IV, which seeks to find out whether teleworking is a threat to traditional retail agencies, after analysing the answers to question P.5, the findings allow us to affirm that it could become a threat to traditional retail agencies oriented towards the sale of holiday trips where the face-to-face and personalised treatment in the office will prevail as differential aspects; although they could take advantage of it in the marketing of corporate trips where the treatment with the client is mainly by telephone or via e-mail.

The third and final secondary objective was to shed light on the future trend of post-COVID tourism and tourists. Sub-Objective V was proposed in order to respond to this objective, which seeks to find out whether, after the end of the pandemic, there will be a change in the way the agency works as well as in the products offered due to new consumer preferences. Analysing the answers obtained to questions Q.6 and Q.7, the interviewees agree that the tourism products offered will gradually return to normal; although they consider it necessary to adapt their way of working and the characteristics of their products to the new consumer preferences. It is foreseeable that destinations characterised by mass tourism will be affected, as consumers will opt for destinations of proximity, related to nature and the open air, avoiding crowds and crowded transport. Respondents say they are convinced that with a vaccinated population and a willingness to travel, tourism will make a strong comeback.

Retail agencies have faced the challenges and opportunities that have arisen in the wake of the pandemic. Teleworking is one of the major players, which has allowed them to stay in business. In the future, combining telework with face-to-face work could be a good option for traditional retail agencies, taking advantage of the benefits of each mode of working; but without losing the essence and distinctive characteristics of the services they offer. Traditional agencies can also emerge stronger from the pandemic if they take advantage of the competitive advantages of providing a personalised service to the consumer, together with the security guarantees they offer to face the uncertainty and fear of consumers, after the situation they have experienced. Likewise, this crisis can be used as an opportunity to question the different models of tourism, such as mass tourism, attempting to promote sustainability in tourism.

REFERENCES

Arold, P. (2021). Apuntes para la gestión del turismo en España tras la crisis sanitaria de la Covid-19. PASOS Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural, 19(1), 189–194. https://doi.org/10.25145/j.pasos.2021.19.012

Bai, H., & Ran, W. (2022). Analysis of the vulnerability and resilience of the tourism supply chain under the uncertain environment of COVID-19: case study based on Lijiang. Sustainability, 14(5), 2571. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14052571

Boscá, J. E., Doménech, R., Ferri, J., García, J. R., & Ulloa, C. (2021). The stabilizing effects of economic policies in Spain in times of COVID-19. Applied Economic Analysis, 29(85), 4-20. https://doi.org/10.1108/AEA-11-2020-0165

Brodeur, A., Gray, D., Islam, A., & Bhuiyan, S. (2021). A literature review of the economics of COVID-19. Journal of economic surveys, 35(4), 1007-1044. https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12423

Fernández, A.M. (2021). Turismo, negocio o desarrollo: el caso de Huasca, México. PASOS Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural, 16(1), 233-251 https://doi.org/10.25145/j.pasos.2018.16.015

Gandini, M. L. (2023). Experiencia poscompra de servicios turísticos internacionales durante la pandemia COVID-19 desde la mirada de los consumidores turísticos millennials [Doctoral dissertation]. Universidad Nacional de La Plata, Argentina. Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/3O5Ce3R

Iaquinto, B. L. (2020). Tourist as vector: Viral mobilities of COVID-19. Dialogues in Human Geography, 10(2), 174-177. https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820620934250

Izcara, S. P. (2014). Manual de investigación cualitativa. México: Editorial Fontamara. Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/45g9Piz

Kainthola, S., Tiwari, P., & Chowdhary, N. R. (2021). Overtourism to zero tourism: Changing tourists' perception of crowding post COVID-19. Journal of Spatial and Organizational Dynamics, 9(2), 115-137. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3Dpkhbh

Mayntz, R., Holm, K., & Hüber, P. (1976). Introduction to Empirical Sociology. Harmondsworth, Baltimore: Penguin Books.

Nair, B. B., Sinha, S., & Dileep, M. R. (2022). Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the travel intermediaries in India: mapping trends and strategies. International Journal of Tourism Policy, 12(4), 427-442. https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTP.2022.128137

Oldstone, M.B. (2020). Viruses, plagues, and history: past, present, and future. New York: Oxford University Press.

Pastor, R., & Rivera, J. (2022). El rol de la agencia de viajes ante la nueva situación post Covid-19: decálogo de propuestas para su recuperación. PASOS Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural, 20(1). https://doi.org/10.25145/j.pasos.2022.20.004

Piret, J., & Boivin, G. (2021). Pandemics throughout history. Frontiers in microbiology, 11, 631736. https://doi.org/10.3389/fmicb.2020.631736

Rodríguez-Pallas, A. (2018). Convivencia del negocio online y offline en las agencias de viajes españolas como consecuencia de los cambios introducidos por las TIC y los hábitos de compra del consumidor. Revista espacios, 39(39). Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/3q5fGrK

Sierra, F. (2019). La entrevista en profundidad. Función, sentido y técnica. In J.A. González & C. M. Krohling (Ed.), Arte y oficio de la investigación científica: cuestiones epistemológicas y metodológicas (pp. 301-379). Ecuador: Ediciones CIESPAL. Retrived from: https://bit.ly/3O7HJPg

Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M. (2015). Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.

Toubes, D. R., Araújo Vila, N., & Fraiz Brea, J. A. (2021). Changes in consumption patterns and tourist promotion after the COVID-19 pandemic. Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research, 16(5), 1332-1352. https://doi.org/10.3390/jtaer16050075

Transforma Turismo (2021). Herramientas para la sofisticación la operación de T.T.O.O. y Agencias de Viaje. Estudio sobre los nuevos perfiles de cliente. Chile: Corporación de Fomento de la Producción (Corfo). Retrieved form: https://bit.ly/44BVzAI

Tudorache, D. M., Simon, T., Frenț, C., & Musteață-Pavel, M. (2017). Difficulties and challenges in applying the european tourism indicators system (ETIS) for sustainable tourist destinations: the case of brașov county in the Romanian carpathians. Sustainability, 9(10), 1879. https://doi.org/10.3390/su9101879

Turismo de Galicia. (2021). Agencias de viajes en A Coruña. Retrieved form: https://bit.ly/3Oq7awZ

Uğur, N. G., & Akbıyık, A. (2020). Impacts of COVID-19 on global tourism industry: A cross-regional comparison. Tourism management perspectives, 36, 100744. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100744

UNAV (2020). Libro blanco de la sostenibilidad en las agencias de viajes. Retrieved form: https://bit.ly/3Kby35n

Uysal, M., Li, X., & Sirakaya-Turk, E. (2009). Push–pull dynamics in travel decisions. In H. Oh & A. Pizam (Ed.), Handbook of hospitality marketing management (pp. 412-439). Oxford: Butterworth-Heineann.

Valles, M. S. (2002). Entrevistas cualitativas. Madrid: CIS. Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/472Ukfu

Vărzaru, A. A., Bocean, C. G., & Cazacu, M. (2021). Rethinking tourism industry in pandemic COVID-19 period. Sustainability, 13(12), 6956. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126956

Wyman, O. (2020). COVID19 Global Traveler Sentiment Survey (Edition 2-Global Summary). Retrieved from: https://bit.ly/44D2v0f.