



DOES UNCERTAINTY CHANGE TOURIST CHOICES? THE IMPACT OF FEAR ON GUEST DECISION-MAKING

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Abstract:

In a more complex tourism environment, uncertainty greatly affects tourists' decision-making, especially when choosing accommodations. This study examines how perceived risk and fear of the unknown impact guest behavior within the hotel sector. The research highlights the importance of affordability and convenience in uncertain situations by identifying pragmatic aspects like location and cost as the main considerations when choosing a hotel, based on data from a population that is primarily younger, female, and highly educated. Different tourists have different risk tolerances; some want innovation and adventure, while many favor familiarity and reliability. Booking urgency is driven by social factors, particularly FOMO, which emphasizes the efficacy of urgency-based marketing. This paper seeks to give hoteliers insights on adapting their offerings to meet evolving consumer expectations by examining the psychological and practical aspects of fear in decision-making. Emphasizing strategic methods such as open communication, adaptable booking policies, and trust-building efforts, is key to cultivating guest loyalty and ensuring strength in an unpredictable market. In the end, this study adds to the expanding understanding of consumer behavior in hospitality, with practical benefits for the industry's future.

Keywords:

tourist behavior, hotel guest, perceived risk, decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, changes in consumer behavior in the tourism sector have been notable, mainly due to increasing feelings of uncertainty and fear. Tourists are now considering uncertainties such as health risks, political instability, and environmental changes when choosing to travel. Uncertainty in tourism involves unforeseeable and unmanageable elements that may have adverse effects on a journey, leading to discomfort, financial setback, or potential harm (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Tourists' travel choices are heavily influenced by how they perceive risk, which is closely connected to the consequences of uncertainties.

Fear and perception of risk are closely related emotions that have a major impact on decision-making. Fear is related to decreased risky decision-making and increased risk estimation, with greater effects when risk tasks use tangible outcomes and clinically anxious participants (Wake *et al.*, 2020). For example, the fear of terrorism, natural

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disasters, or pandemics may prevent tourists from going to specific locations, even if the chances of facing these risks are low (Kassem & Ganepola, 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, tourists were heavily influenced by uncertain health and safety concerns, leading many to choose familiar, safer destinations (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

The influence of emotions on decision-making has been extensively recorded. As indicated by Ma *et al.* (2020), fear increases the perception of danger, resulting in more cautious decisions. Tourists who feel more scared or unsure may choose to visit places they see as safer, even if these places are not as exciting or new as riskier alternatives (Loewenstein *et al.*, 2001). This conduct is in accordance with the wider psychological framework that proposes people are driven to prevent loss or negative occurrences, especially in ambiguous circumstances (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992).

Additionally, studies show that fear and uncertainty not only affect the selection of a destination but also the nature of the travel experience. Travelers may prefer to visit places with more lenient cancellation policies or enhanced health measures in order to reduce their perceived risks (Quintal *et al.*, 2010). This change is particularly evident in the realm of eco-friendly or responsible tourism, as travelers take into account the environmental consequences and possible personal hazards in their destination choices (Fauzi *et al.*, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Risk perception is a fundamental concept in understanding how tourists assess potential threats during travel. Research suggests that tourists tend to evaluate risks not only based on factual information but also through emotional and subjective lenses (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). According to Roehl & Fesenmaier (1992), tourists' risk perceptions are often influenced by past experiences, media reports, and personal predispositions, which can lead to the avoidance of certain destinations perceived as unsafe, even if objective risk levels are low. This concept of risk as a subjective, emotional response is further explored by Loewenstein *et al.* (2001), who argue that feelings of fear and anxiety can distort risk assessments, leading to overly cautious decisions.

Studies on risk perception in tourism emphasize that tourists often differentiate between various types of risks, including physical, financial, social, and psychological risks (Quintal *et al.*, 2010; Najar & Rather, 2023). For example, physical risks, such as the threat of disease or natural disasters, may cause tourists to avoid specific regions, while social or psychological risks, such as the fear of encountering different cultures or unfamiliar environments, may affect destination choices (Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Najar & Rather, 2023). These insights have significant implications for tourism marketers and destination managers, who must address these perceptions in their strategies.

Emotions play a critical role in how individuals respond to uncertainty. According to the "Risk as Feelings" hypothesis proposed by Loewenstein *et al.* (2001), decisions under uncertainty are often driven by immediate emotional reactions rather than calculated, rational assessments. Fear is particularly relevant in this context, as it tends to amplify perceived risks and discourage risky behaviors, such as traveling to destinations with higher perceived dangers. Lerner & Keltner (2001) further elaborate on this by showing that fear leads individuals to overestimate risks, while other emotions, such as anger, might lead to risk underestimation.

In tourism, these emotional responses can be observed in travelers' reactions to health-related risks. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, tourists' fear of contracting the virus significantly altered travel patterns. Research by Zenker & Kock (2020) highlights how the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic led to a drastic decline in international tourism, as travelers preferred to stay within their home countries or opt for destinations perceived as safe.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a contemporary lens through which to examine the impact of uncertainty on tourist decision-making. The pandemic created unprecedented levels of uncertainty in the global travel industry, with tourists facing potential health risks, frequent changes in government regulations, and uncertain travel policies. Gössling *et al.* (2020) argue that the pandemic not only reshaped tourists' risk perceptions but also highlighted the importance of flexible travel arrangements, such as free cancellations and insurance options, as critical factors influencing travel decisions.



Tourists' responses to the pandemic demonstrate how fear and uncertainty can lead to the avoidance of international travel altogether, with many opting for local tourism or destinations with stringent safety protocols (Zenker & Kock, 2020). This behavior is consistent with the findings of Quintal *et al.* (2010), who suggest that tourists are more likely to avoid destinations where uncertainty regarding health, safety, or political stability is high. Additionally, tourism businesses need to manage uncertainty effectively by enhancing their communication strategies and providing clear, reliable information to reduce tourists' fear (Sigala, 2024).

The perception of risk and uncertainty in tourism also varies across different cultural contexts. For example, research has shown that tourists from individualistic cultures, such as those in Western countries, may exhibit different risk aversion behaviors compared to tourists from collectivist cultures, where social and community-oriented factors influence decision-making (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). These cultural differences suggest that tourism marketers need to tailor their risk communication and marketing strategies to address the specific concerns and preferences of different demographic groups. Kozak *et al.* (2007) conducted a comparative study on risk perception among tourists from different regions and found that cultural background significantly influences how risks are assessed and managed. For instance, Asian tourists were more likely to consider social and health risks when choosing a destination, while European tourists placed more emphasis on political risks and personal safety.

The theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 2020) has been widely applied to understand how uncertainty influences decision-making in tourism. This theory posits that behavioral intentions are shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, all of which are influenced by the level of uncertainty a tourist perceives. Quintal *et al.* (2010) used this framework to demonstrate how higher levels of perceived uncertainty reduce tourists' confidence in their ability to make safe travel decisions, ultimately leading to more conservative choices.

Moreover, adaptive decision-making theories suggest that when faced with high levels of uncertainty, tourists may adopt heuristic approaches or rely on trusted sources of information, such as reviews, recommendations, or travel advisors, to reduce perceived risks (Decrop, 2023). This highlights the importance of trust and transparency in tourism marketing, especially in times of crisis. Hotels and other tourism businesses should utilize social media word-of-mouth marketing and emotional connections to boost consumers' goodwill, trust, and purchasing intention (Bin, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the impact of uncertainty and fear on tourist decision-making. A mixed-methods approach allows for the triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings by integrating numerical data with more in-depth, interpretative insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study targets international tourists who travel at least once a year, specifically focusing on those who have experienced uncertainty or fear in relation to their travel choices. This will allow for an exploration of how different demographic factors may influence tourists' perceptions of risk and uncertainty (Bryman, 2016). A structured online survey will be used to collect quantitative data on tourists' experiences with uncertainty and fear when making travel decisions. The primary data was collected using a structured online questionnaire, distributed to potential respondents via social media platforms and email. The survey will be designed using established scales from previous research on risk perception and tourism behavior, ensuring that the questions are both reliable and valid. The research will be focused on perceived risk, fear and emotional response and travel decision making.



RESULTS

The study included 109 respondents from Serbia during September 2024. The research was conducted through a survey of tourists. Questionnaires were distributed via email and private communication channels. Table 1 provides a clear demographic profile of the respondents, revealing important insights into the composition of the sample and its potential implications for understanding tourist decision-making under uncertainty. The sample is mainly female (73.4%), indicating that the results might represent a viewpoint that leans towards women’s methods of decision-making. Given the potential differences in how fear and uncertainty influence behavior between genders, this imbalance should be acknowledged as a limitation when generalizing the results.

The age distribution is seriously biased toward younger age groups, as most respondents’ ages range from 18 to 35 years. More than half of respondents (51.4%) are between 18-25 years old, the second largest group being those between 26-35 years (45.9%), and only 2.8% of the sample are those aged 35 and above. This stress on younger age groups can be an indication of their higher demand for tourism or greater willingness to participate in questionnaires. While this fact contributes to the high participation rates among respondents, on the other hand, this means that the study mainly characterizes the attitudes and behavior of young travelers who may behave differently than elderly groups when responding to uncertainty, at least in terms of the level of risk tolerance and adaptability.

The sample has a high level of education, with 26.6% having a master’s degree and 45.9% having a bachelor’s degree. This suggests that the respondents are probably going to approach decision-making with a certain amount of analytical skill, which may affect how they respond to uncertainty and fear in a tourism environment. Because educated people are dominant, the results may indicate a more thoughtful or informed decision-making process rather than the impulsive or less thoughtful responses that could be typical of other groups.

Given that 19.3% of respondents make less than €500 per month and almost half (48.6%) make between €500 and €1000 per month, the income distribution further characterizes the sample as primarily low- to middle-income, particularly when compared to the average salary in the Republic of Serbia. This suggests that financial constraints might play a significant role in how the respondents perceive and respond to uncertainty. Lower-income travelers may be more risk-averse, carefully weighing the potential consequences of their decisions in fear-inducing situations, particularly when financial stakes are higher. This implies that respondents’ perceptions and reactions to uncertainty may be significantly influenced by their financial situation. Tourists with lower incomes might be more risk averse and carefully consider the possible outcomes of their choices in situations that make them anxious, especially when the stakes are higher financially.

Table 1. Sample description

Characteristic	Frequency	%
<i>Respondent's sex</i>		
Male	29	26.6
Female	80	73.4
<i>Age category</i>		
Age category: bellow 18	0	0
Age category: 18-25	56	51.4
Age category: 26-35	50	45.9
Age category: 35+	3	2.8
<i>Education</i>		24.0
High school	26	23.9
Bachelor's degree	50	45.9
Master's degree	29	26.6



Characteristic	Frequency	%
Education		24.0
PhD degree	1	0.9
Other	3	2.8
Monthly income (in €)		29.6
<500	21	19.3
500-1000	53	48.6
1001-1500	26	23.9
1501-2000	5	4.6
>2000	4	3.7
Total	100	100

Source: Author's research

Fig. 1 offers a useful overview of the main factors influencing tourists' choices of accommodation. Every aspect, shown as a percentage, shows how much importance travelers put on particular qualities, exposing not only their preferences but also the deeper challenges and priorities that influence their decisions. Participants were asked to select up to three most important factors when choosing hotel accommodation.

Accessibility is still crucial, as evidenced by the fact that location (95%) is the most important factor. Tourists frequently place great importance on being close to tourist destinations, transit hubs, or business areas, whether they are there for business or pleasure. This result corresponds with Valentin *et al.* (2019), who point out that a hotel's competitive edge is greatly increased by a prime location. Many visitors consider location as a key factor in determining accessibility and the general convenience of their trip, which aligns closely with more general travel objectives.

Closely following, price (92%) highlights the financial considerations that weigh heavily on decisions. Price comes in second (92%) and emphasizes how important money is when making decisions. Value-conscious tourists check prices across different booking sites to make sure their spending is in line with the benefits they believe they are receiving. Kamins *et al.* (2009) findings that price transparency and promotional offers frequently act as crucial motivators are confirmed by the focus on affordability. In a time when technology makes cost comparison easier, hotels that find a balance between competitive prices and high-quality offerings stand to earn loyalty.

The influence of recommendations from friends and family (48%) and guest reviews (52%), respectively, illustrates the social components of trust and reliability in decision-making. Reviews serve as a guide for navigating choices in a crowded market because they are frequently seen as objective representations of prior visitor experiences. According to Chen *et al.* (2022) individual recommendations can convey a level of reliability that internet reviews may not always guarantee. Both elements emphasize how group knowledge may reduce uncertainty and validate decisions.

Service quality (36%), website reliability (27%), and online hotel details (24%), although not as highly ranked, demonstrate the crucial role that digital engagement plays in influencing perceptions. Clear, precise, and aesthetically pleasing online content can close knowledge gaps and allay concerns about misrepresentation, according to Guzzo *et al.* (2022). Trustworthy booking platforms, in particular, serve as safeguards against fraud, fostering confidence among travelers wary of potential pitfalls.

The analysis of these findings reveals that hotel selection is a complex decision shaped by both pragmatic factors (such as location and cost) and psychological influences (including trust and social validation). The interaction of these components emphasizes the complex nature of travel planning, where logical assessment is frequently moderated by emotions. The chart also illustrates a wider trend in tourism: an increasing dependence on digital tools and platforms to reduce risks and uncertainties. In the end, this data provides a framework for hospitality providers seeking to attract and retain guests. By comprehending and addressing these priorities, hotels can develop customized strategies—spanning dynamic pricing models, better service services, and transparent digital communication—that align with tourists' transforming expectations.



Figure 1. Factors Influencing Hotel Choice

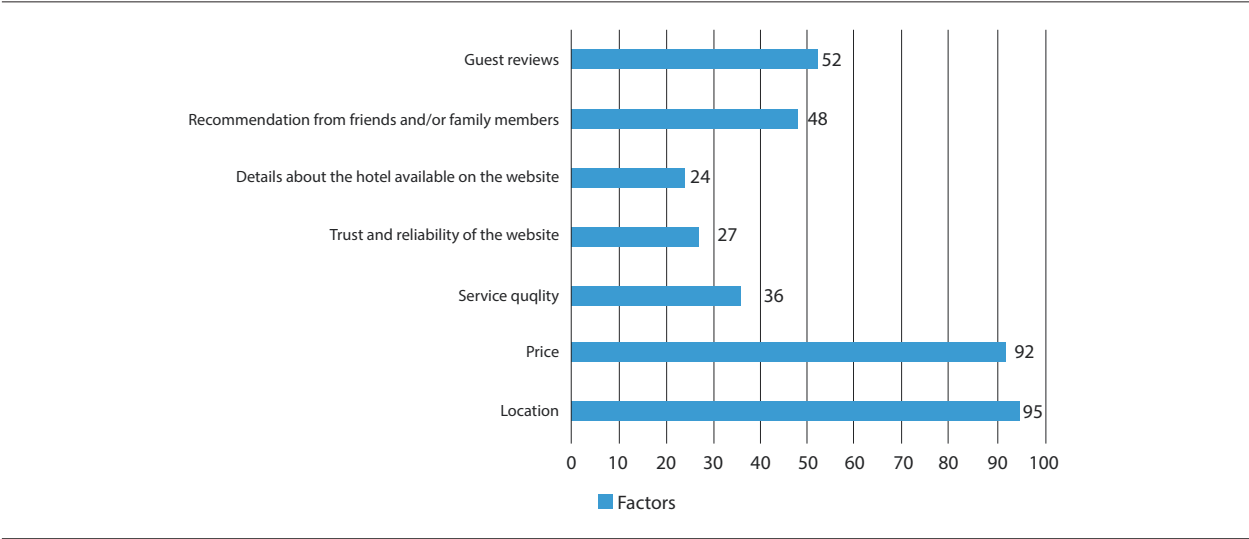


Fig. 2 provides an in-depth analysis of how tourists make decisions by highlighting the different risk preferences of tourists while choosing accommodation. Most of the respondents (52) said they prefer safe solutions that nevertheless allow some degree of originality. This decision implies a moderate level of risk tolerance, as tourists look for a balance between the thrill of adventure and the certainty of safety. This kind of behavior is related to psychological theories of risk management in leisure travel, where people balance the possible drawbacks of uncertainty against the perceived advantages of novelty. These results are consistent with research by Reisinger and Mavondo (2005), which highlights how travel decisions are frequently influenced by the interaction between safety and novelty.

Interestingly, 28 of respondents actively avoid clear of risk and uncertainty, highlighting a significant number of tourists who prefer tried-and-true and reliable options. Past bad experiences or elevated risk perceptions during periods characterized by global instability, including pandemics, natural disasters, or instability in politics, may have an impact on this behavior. Well-regarded and highly recommended hotels are probably quite appealing to this group.

On the other hand, a small minority (5) often accepts major risk-taking in their hotel choices, whereas 24 percent appreciate risks. This niche market may consist of thrill-seekers or seasoned travelers who perceive danger as a key part of their experience. Previous studies, such as those by Timothy *et al.* (2022), suggest that younger travelers and individuals with a higher tolerance for uncertainty often gravitate toward unique, unconventional accommodations that promise authentic experiences.

Figure 2. Risk-taking approaches in hotel selection

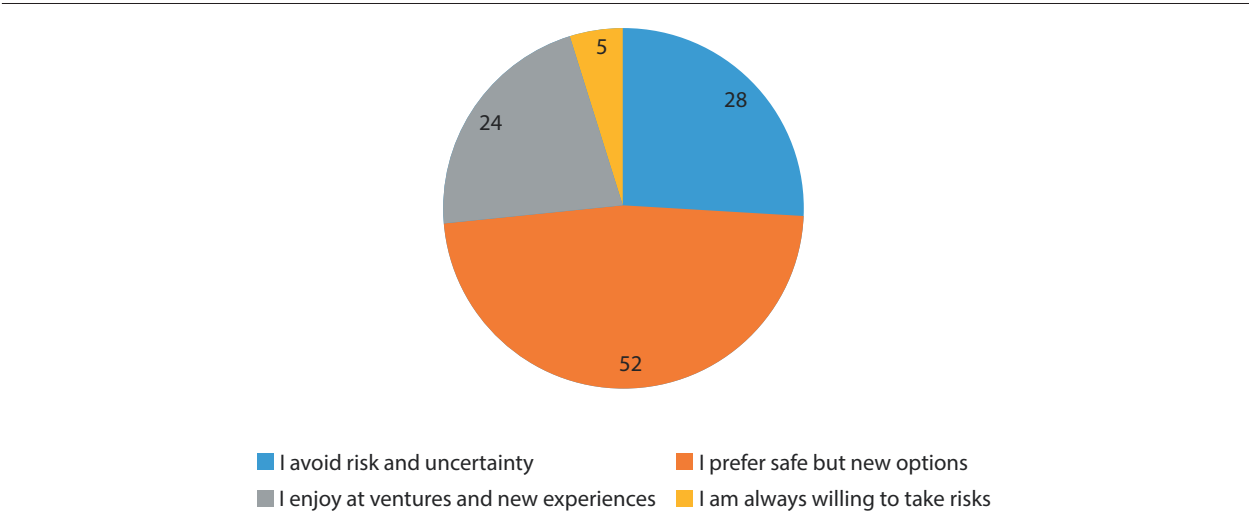


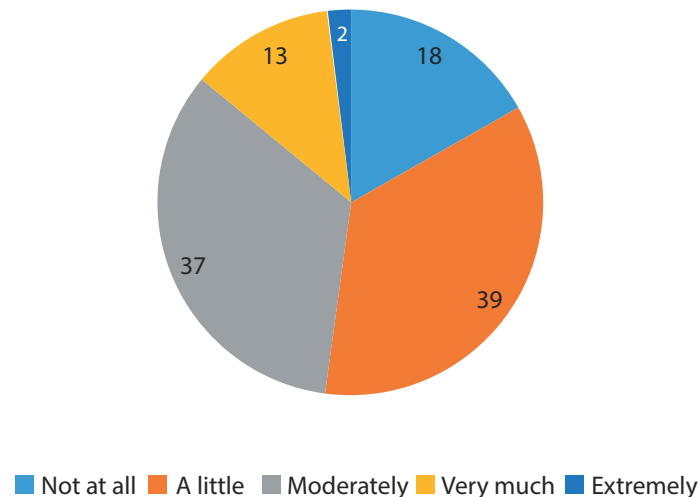


Fig. 3 illustrates the pervasive influence of the psychological phenomenon known as FOMO (Fear of missing out) in shaping hotel booking behaviors. To varying degrees, a significant percentage of respondents say they have experienced FOMO. Specifically, 39% feel it “a little,” 37% “moderately,” and 13% “very much.” This trend highlights the powerful role of scarcity-driven marketing tactics in influencing tourist behavior. Messaging such as “Only 2 rooms left!” or “Last chance to book at this rate” capitalizes on FOMO by creating a sense of urgency and exclusivity. Hayran *et al.* (2020) have documented how these strategies drive immediate decision-making by tapping into pearsons’ fears of losing access to desirable opportunities.

Interestingly, 18% of participants say they experience FOMO “extremely,” indicating a heightened sensitivity to social comparison and outside influences. Social media likely amplifies this effect, as aspirational travel content showcases exclusive destinations, compelling viewers to replicate similar experiences. Only 2% of respondents, on the other hand, say they have no FOMO at all. This category might be made up of people who make decisions very independently or who use social media less frequently, which is where FOMO-related triggers are frequently seen.

According to the research, FOMO is a powerful motivation when it comes to choosing a destination, especially when there is uncertainty. By using this knowledge, marketers and hoteliers can create ads that highlight exclusive deals or one-of-a-kind experiences, appealing to the psychological tendencies of tourists.

Figure 3. Fear of missing out while hotel booking



Detailed view of the factors that influence travelers when selecting hotels is available in the Fig. 4, revealing a complex interplay of informational, social, and economic considerations. The most influential factor is reliance on comments and reviews, with 70% of respondents citing this as a primary consideration. This is in accordance with plenty of research on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), which emphasizes how important user-generated information is for building trust and lowering perceived risks (Khwaja *et al.*, 2020). Travelers can use online reviews as a useful form of social proof to assess lodgings by reading about prior visitors’ experiences.

Furthermore, 63% of respondents highlight that extensive research is necessary before making a decision. This emphasizes how crucial detailed explanations and openness are to hotel marketing. Detailed photos, amenity lists, and clear cancellation policies are crucial in addressing travelers’ informational needs, particularly when they are unfamiliar with their destination.

Another significant factor is value for money, as 62% of respondents said cost-effectiveness was important. Strong price sensitivity is demonstrated by this research, indicating the significance of competitive pricing and perceived value in influencing customer loyalty and happiness (Lin *et al.*, 2022; Gonen *et al.*, 2024). Travelers on a limited budget tend to prefer hotels that find a balance between price and quality.

Social factors also come into play; according to 36% of respondents, friends and family have a big influence on their choices. This number shows that personal networks are still important, especially for tourists looking for suggestions or reassurance, even though it is lower than dependence on reviews. In contrast, promotional



campaigns have a minimal impact (9%), suggesting that traditional advertising methods may be less effective compared to peer-driven or review-based channels. Finally, only 7% of respondents claim to make decisions independently, highlighting the social and informational dependencies characteristic of modern travel planning.

Figure 4. Factors influencing hotel decision-making

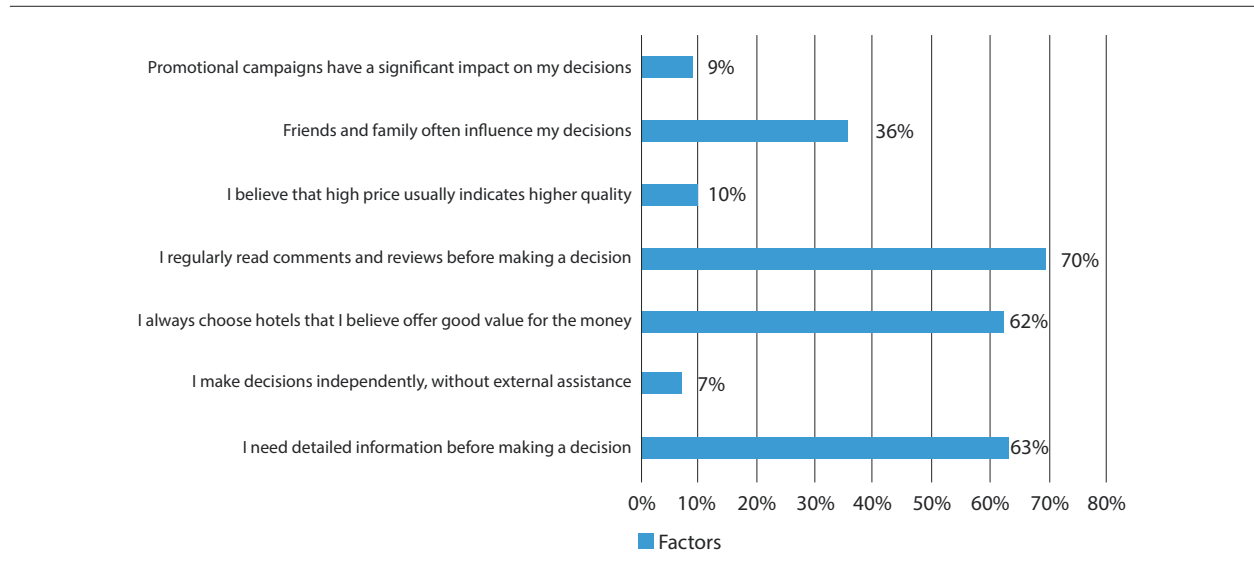


Fig. 5 illustrates the time individuals spend while researching accommodation options before deciding. Most of the respondents (41%) spend 1-2 hours on this activity, followed by 25% who invest 2-4 hours, 18% who spend more than 4 hours, and only 10% who spend less than 1 hour.

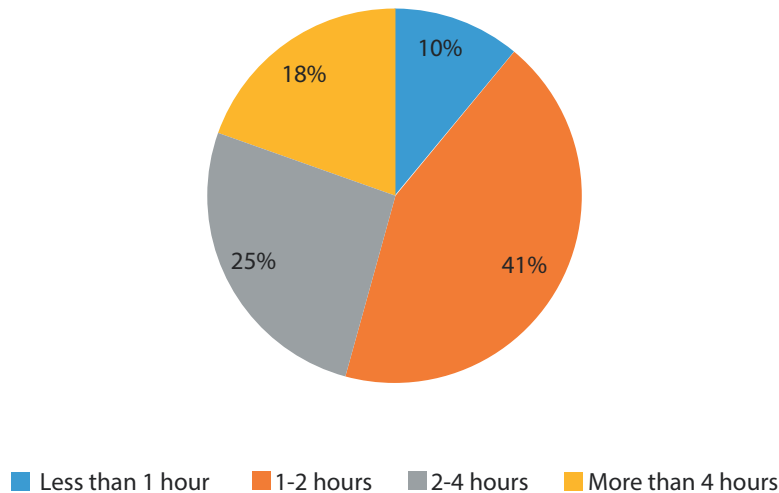
The distribution shows that most tourists take their time while researching accommodation, spending at least one to four hours making sure their selections are appropriate and of high quality. Given that tourists aim to reduce risks like poor quality service, unstated expenses, or undesirable locations, this trend implies that uncertainty plays a critical role in decision-making. According to research, visitors spend more time obtaining information because they are afraid of making incorrect choices. This tendency is further supported by research by Mihai *et al.* (2023), which highlights the function of information overload and its connection to anxiety related to decision-making.

People who spend more than four hours (18%) may be people who are making longer travel plans or who are very concerned about the quality of their accommodation. However, the 10% who spend less than an hour might include those who travel frequently or who rely on reliable websites or recommendations, which could decrease their perception that they need to do an extensive amount of research. Simplified booking systems or loyalty programs that ease decision-making and reduce related stress are frequently helpful to these people.

Furthermore, the majority of tourists fall into the 1-2 hour category, which indicates that they need to find a balance between time efficiency and the necessity for in-depth study. For faster decision-making, this group may rely on star ratings, internet reviews, or visual content like images and videos. These habits have been significantly influenced by the increasing dependence on digital platforms, which allow users to quickly select and compare options (Sharmin *et al.*, 2021). This research emphasizes how crucial it is for digital information to be clear and accessible in order to lower uncertainty and boost user confidence.



Figure 5. Time spent on accommodation research

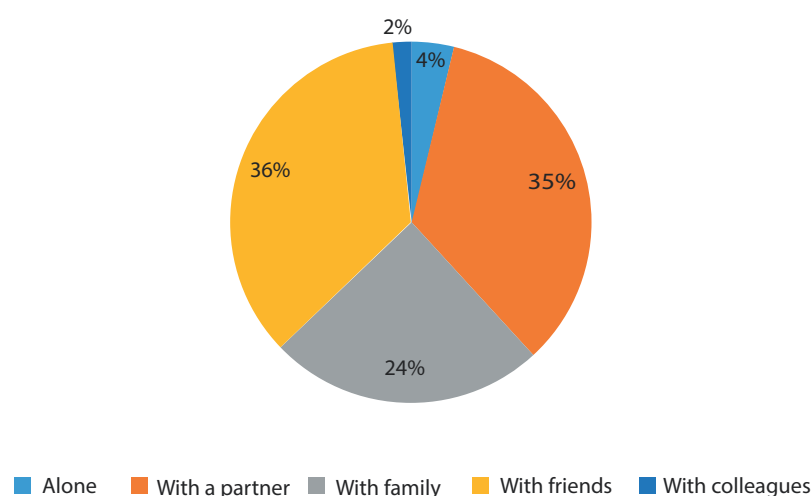


Traveling with friends or partners is preferred by 71% of respondents, highlighting the social component of travel and how shared experiences improve an entire trip (Fig. 6). This decision can also be related to lowering risk because going with trusted individuals can help to reduce the anxiety that comes with visiting new places. Group travel reduces individual stress associated with uncertainty by promoting a sense of security and collaborative decision-making (Lin *et al.*, 2022).

Despite being significant (24%), family travel may be driven by a variety of factors, including the desire to spend quality time together or to accommodate the preferences of the kids. But there are planning complications as well, which may put off some people. Schedule alignment, meeting a range of demands, and paying for larger groups are just a few of the challenges that families frequently encounter, which makes the process more complex.

At only 4 percent, solo travel shows its niche appeal, maybe because of the perceived risks or lack of shared responsibility. But some groups, including young adults looking for independence or self-discovery, are likewise becoming more and more interested in traveling alone. The low percentage might show that people prefer traveling with others rather than avoiding solo trips entirely. Likewise, the 2% who travel with colleagues are likely to reflect business trips, where the main purpose restricts options and flexibility.

Figure 6. Usual travel partners





CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study provides valuable insights into how fear and uncertainty influence tourist decision-making. The analysis of responses from a predominantly female, younger, and highly educated sample reveals several key factors shaping travel behavior. The most important factors influencing hotel selection are pragmatic factors like location and cost, which reflects passengers' preference for affordability and ease in ambiguous circumstances. Mechanisms to build trust, such as recommendations, guest reviews, and detailed internet information, emphasize the value of transparency and reliability in reducing decision-making anxiety.

The results show that different tourists have different risk preferences. A significant number of people are risk averse and value familiarity and dependability over innovation, even though the majority prefer a balance between the two. A smaller group, on the other hand, welcomes mystery in their decisions and looks for adventure. This variance highlights the complexity of tourist behavior, where decisions are influenced by a combination of psychological considerations, prior experiences, and financial limitations. Furthermore, the high level of FOMO (fear of missing out) highlights how social impacts and urgency-driven marketing can speed up booking decisions, especially for tourists who use technological devices.

Respondents spend a lot of time looking into accommodation alternatives on digital platforms, which is important to the decision-making process. The need for hotels to make improvements in their digital presence can be seen by the increasing dependence on online evaluations, images, and clear information. Ensuring accurate, visually appealing, and trustworthy content can significantly enhance confidence and attract hesitant travelers.

With the majority of respondents choosing to travel with friends or partners, the social component of travel also stands out as an important consideration. In order to decrease the uncertainty about new places, this choice shows a reliance on shared decision-making and support from one another. Due to heightened risk perceptions or a preference for group experiences, solo travel is still a niche choice.

Practically speaking, the hospitality sector will be significantly impacted by these findings. To serve a variety of traveler demographics, hotels should prioritize competitive pricing, clever location positioning, and individualized marketing. While risk-tolerant tourists could be attracted to unusual and risky offerings, risk-averse people place an importance on guarantees of safety, cleanliness, and dependability. As long as they remain transparent and credible, marketing methods that use FOMO-driven messaging can successfully draw in travelers who are anxious about travel decision-making.

Despite its contributions, the study acknowledges several limitations. The demographic makeup of the sample, which is primarily younger, female, and educated, might not accurately reflect the general tourist population. To capture differing behaviors and preferences across age groups, income levels, and cultural contexts, future research should involve a wider range of people.

In an increasingly uncertain world, the tourism and hospitality industries may better meet the demands of contemporary tourists by addressing these insights, which will increase overall guest pleasure, build trust, and reduce uncertainty.



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