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Article

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Amfiteatru Economic

Provided in Cooperation with:

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Suggested Citation: Tuclea, Claudia-Elena; Vranceanu, Diana-Maria; Tigu, Gabriela; Diaconescu, Mirela; Curteanu, Oana-Diana (2024) : The influence of mass media on tourist behavior of people living in a country bordering war, Amfiteatru Economic, ISSN 2247-9104, The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Vol. 26, Iss. Special Issue No. 18, pp. 1193-1207, <https://doi.org/10.24818/EA/2024/S18/1193>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/318607>

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THE INFLUENCE OF MASS MEDIA ON TOURIST BEHAVIOR OF PEOPLE LIVING IN A COUNTRY BORDERING WAR

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Please cite this article as:

Țuclea, C.E., Vrânceanu, D.M., Țigu, G., Diaconescu, M and Curteanu, O.D, 2024. The Influence Of Mass Media On Tourist Behavior Of People Living In A Country Bordering War. *Amfiteatru Economic*, 26(Special Issue No. 18), pp. 1193-1207.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24818/EA/2024/S18/1193>

Article History

Received: 13 August 2024
Revised: 18 September 2024
Accepted: 12 October 2024

Abstract

The article examines the impact of war and war news in the mass media on the behaviour of tourists, based on a survey conducted in mid-2022 among a sample of 1036 respondents, citizens of a country close to the conflict in Ukraine. The tourism sector has suffered numerous crises triggered by various events that are essentially incompatible with the development of travel. War is a factor with a particular impact, but the academic literature regarding the impact on tourist behaviour during a conflict is insufficient. The study aims to investigate the mechanisms by which proximity of war influences tourists' decisions of tourists in Romania, one of the neighbouring countries of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, in terms of travel intention and destination choice. The results show that people do not give up tourism, but they are influenced by the news about the war in the media, and the possible panic caused by the news about the war influences their choice of destinations. Thus, an intuitive behaviour to avoid areas that are considered at risk due to the war is shown, but a panic control ability is also developed, which influences tourist behaviour both directly and as a mediator between the panic triggered by the mass media and the tourist behaviour to avoid conflict areas.

Keywords: mass media, tourist behaviour, war, panic

JEL Classification: Z30, L82

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Introduction

The tourism sector has gone through - and continues to go through - many crises that originated in other sectors: terrorist attacks, epidemics, pandemics, natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, fires, etc.) and even wars. Each of these situations has had a temporary or long-term impact on travel in general and on travel for tourism purposes in particular (Butnaru et al., 2018), which illustrates the vulnerability of the tourism industry to crises (Dogru-Dastan and Tütüncü, 2024). Experience shows that the negative effects of a war on the tourism industry are estimated to be felt over a period of at least three years (Kozłowski, 2023).

After each crisis situation, numerous analyses have measured the impact in terms of a decrease in the number of tourists and, consequently, in revenues from tourism activities. These analyses generally took place after the crises had ended.

Regarding the impact of war on tourism, the literature is sparser and generally examines the evolution of the number of tourists after the end of the conflict, either from the perspective of the resumption of tourist activities or precisely with the aim of visiting a battlefield for historical interest or to recall the memory of the heroes (Young, 2021). Some areas refer to past wars to reconstruct an image of a historical place (Sewell, 2024). But aspects of tourism in wartime have been too little studied, and even less so tourism in the vicinity of war (Tkalec and Žilić, 2021).

Statistics on the impact of war in Ukraine on tourism indicators have been developed by specialised organisations (e.g., IMF, 2022; UNWTO, 2022; The Warsaw Institute Review, 2022) and are continuously updated, but there are few studies on the impact that the proximity of war has on the behaviour of tourists in countries bordering the conflict. In 2020, Osiichuka and Shepotylo recommended increasing research on the impact of armed conflict on civilians outside of war zones. This study seeks to fill this gap and proposes the following research questions: What are the possible mechanisms by which the proximity of war affects the behaviour of tourists inhabiting a country adjacent to war? How does the news about the war in the media influence the behaviour of these tourists?

With these questions in mind, this study examines the tourist behaviour of inhabitants of a country on the brink of war in relation to the extent to which they control their panic caused by the war and the news related to the war of the mass media. As far as the authors are aware, this is the first paper to examine the reactions of tourists from countries bordering the war in Ukraine. The results obtained once again question people's need for tourism, even in a situation where travelling means taking more risks than would be normal for a "pleasure" activity (Tuclea, 2020).

Consequently, the paper continues with a literature review of tourist behaviour during a military crisis and the development of hypotheses. This is followed by a section on the methodology used for data collection and analysis and a description of the results we obtained. Finally, a section with a general discussion and conclusions follows.

1. Literature review and hypothesis development

As far as the authors are aware, there are few studies in the literature on the impact of an ongoing war on tourism in a country close to the conflict. Previous research has looked at

the impact of terrorism on the tourism industry, including the impact of mass media amplification of acts of terrorism on travel (Korajlić and Kešetović, 2011). The way in which a terrorist attack is portrayed in the media shapes potential tourists' perception of certain destinations, countries, and entire regions, with the media thus exerting a strong influence on tourists' perception of risk. Risk is understood as the probability of the occurrence of negative consequences of an undesirable event that lead to changes in consumer behaviour (Li et al., 2020). Furthermore, risk creates a need for safety (engel et al., 2022), which thus becoming an important component of the intentions to visit a destination (Beirman, 2003; Dogru-Dastan and Tütüncü, 2024). Furthermore, following the recent health crisis that humanity experienced in 2020, media-induced risk perception has been investigated in terms of individual fears and adoption of preventive behaviours (Mesch and Liu, 2023; Pennington-Gray and Lee, 2024), as well as the role of social media in assessing the health safety of a destination, with tourists avoiding areas considered unsafe from a health perspective (Țuclea et al., 2020). In the same context, the tendency of tourists to travel to areas closer to home (staycation) has been observed, a form of tourism considered suitable in times of crisis (Dărăbanț and Diaconescu, 2020). In the same line, war is a factor with a negative impact on tourism, as well as terrorism or pandemics (Liu et al., 2024). The mass media play a crucial role in stimulating or reducing public panic (Yu et al., 2017), with negative news leading to a decrease in people's positive emotions and resilience and positive news leading to a decrease in negative emotions and an increase in resilience (Giri and Maurya, 2021). If the mass media amplify the impact of these factors on tourism by changing the tourists' perception of the affected destinations, then we can formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. There is a direct positive relationship between media-induced panic and tourist avoidance behaviour in conflict areas.

The mass media have the power to amplify and quickly disseminate information about events that can cause panic among the population (Sun et al., 2024). Thus, constant exposure to negative and alarming news can increase individuals' anxiety and stress levels (Mızrak, 2024) and ultimately lead to panic symptoms (Alasousi et al., 2023). However, people develop overt and subtle emotion regulation behaviours (including those related to panic), such as re-evaluating the situation, shifting attention to other situations, avoidance, or escape (Cisler et al., 2010). The ability to control the panic response is important to prevent it from becoming overwhelming and negatively impacting the individual's well-being (Meine et al., 2021). Therefore, exposure to panic information in the mass media can lead individuals to develop greater resilience and coping skills for panic states and learn to manage crisis situations more effectively (Howell et al., 2023). Therefore, it is possible that individuals exposed to high levels of media-induced panic simultaneously develop self-control and stress coping skills, reinforcing the positive relationship between the two variables (Cerino et al., 2022). Based on this evidence, we can formulate the following hypothesis:

H2. There is a direct positive relationship between media-induced panic and the ability to control panic.

Previous studies have shown that tourists travelling to areas marked by conflict are often even attracted by the novelty of the situation (Bayramov, 2022). One such example is the border regions, which are often associated with geopolitical disputes. Many tourists are attracted to visit a politically disputed area. Many borders are integral to geopolitical

tensions and conflicts, and the nature of tourist attractions links them to dark tourism, war and battlefield tourism, tourism in dangerous areas, or political tourism (Gelbman, 2022; Dresler, 2024). Tourists attracted to conflict areas seem to have in common that they do not feel panic. Alvarez et al. (2020) show that they are consequently less concerned about risks and therefore have a higher intention to visit destinations with internal conflicts. Higher levels of perceived behavioural control increase the intention to visit high-conflict destinations (Bayramov, 2022), and the lower the level of anxiety, the greater the interest in travel (Mauliza et al., 2022). Based on these results, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3. There is an inverse relationship between the ability to control the state of panic and the in tourist avoidance behaviour of conflict areas.

Based on hypotheses H1-H3, we want to test whether the development of panic control mechanisms acts as a mediator between media-induced panic and tourist avoidance behaviour of war-affected areas. Thus, if mass media-induced panic leads to an intensification of tourist avoidance behaviour in conflict areas, but also determines the development of panic control mechanisms and the ability to control panic has an inverse influence on avoidance behaviour (in the sense of an increasing desire to visit conflict areas), then we formulate the following mediation hypothesis:

H4. The ability to control the state of panic mediates the relationship between media-induced panic and tourist avoidance behaviour in conflict zones.

The conceptual model can be organised as shown in Figure 1.

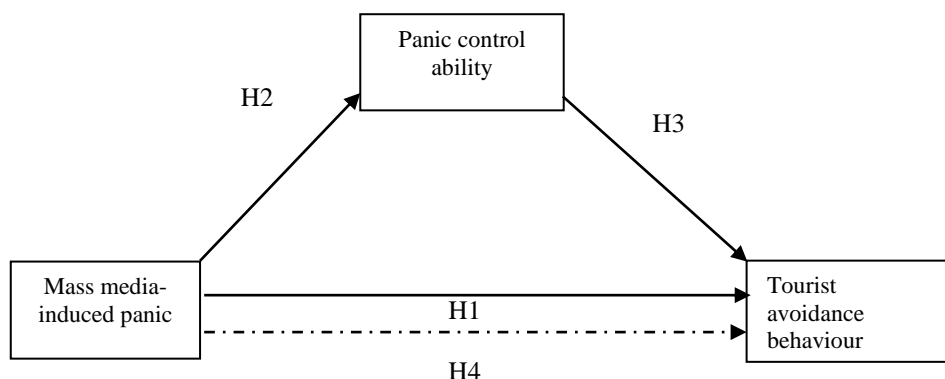


Figure no. 1. The conceptual model

Caption: Solid line - direct effect; dotted line - mediating effect

2. Research methodology

An online survey was conducted in Romania to collect data on the influence of war news in the mass media on the tourist behaviour of the inhabitants of a country close to war. The selection of respondents from this country is relevant for the identification of some models of tourist behaviour of people living near the conflict areas at the time of the outbreak of war. Data were collected in the months of May to June 2022, three to four months after the

outbreak of the conflict, from people over the age of 18. Such an approach to the study period is similar to that of Tomej et al. (2023), who examined the resilience of tourism businesses in the first three months after the start of the military conflict from the perspective of organisations from Ukraine operating in this industry.

To test the conceptual model, several latent variables were defined, considering the literature: mass media-induced panic, the ability to control panic, and tourist behaviour to avoid conflict areas. A latent variable is constructed when the phenomenon under investigation is complex, abstract, and unobservable (Hair et al., 2017). To measure the items that define these latent variables, a Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agreeing. All latent variables were operationalised as reflective constructs and developed with reference to various studies. Thus, the variable 'mass media-induced panic' was defined based on certain studies (Li et al., 2021; Naeem, 2021; Coleman et al., 2022), using items such as: "Mass media promotes a behaviour based on panic", "Mass media promotes a state of anxiety related to the lack of products or services in the market as a result of war". The variable 'ability to control panic' was formed based on certain research (Li et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2022) by the items: "I can control the state of panic that may arise due to the war", "I have total control over my behaviour even under the influence of war-related panic". The variable 'tourist behaviour to avoid conflict areas' was based on items such as: "I have given up visiting areas in conflict countries" and "I have turned to tourist destinations that are as far away from the war zone as possible", building on studies such as those by Tkalec and Žilić (2021) and Upadhayaya et al. (2011).

The sample consists of 1036 respondents, 53.3% women and 46.7% men, 14.1% born in 1965 or before, 33.6% between 1966-1979, 31.7% between 1980-1995, and 20.7% after 1995. The respondents were selected using the snowball method. This is a nonprobability sampling method that allows the original participants to recommend other people who have the desired characteristics of the target population to participate in the research (Nunan et al., 2020).

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with Smart-PLS 4.0 (Ringle et al., 2022) was applied to test the conceptual model. This technique is used to assess the cause-effect relationship between the latent variables and is a combination of multiple regression and factor analysis (Hair et al., 2017). The choice of this method for testing the conceptual model is justified by the fact that it aims to maximise the explained variance of the dependent latent constructs (Hair et al., 2011) and thus has an important explanatory and predictive value at the level of the phenomena under investigation. A structural equation model consists of two components: the measurement model, which assesses the relationships between each latent construct and its associated indicators, and the structural model, which assesses the relationships between the latent constructs (Hair et al., 2011). For models with five or fewer constructs, some of which are defined by fewer than three indicators, Nunan et al. (2020) recommend a sample of at least 300 subjects. In the case of the present study, the sample size is well above the recommended value.

To assess the suitability of measurement, the reliability and validity of the constructs must be demonstrated. For the constructs to be reliable, Cronbach's alpha, the composite reliability (ρ_c), and the reliability coefficient (ρ_a) should be higher than the value 0.7 (Hair et al., 2021). Table 1 shows that this criterion is met for all latent variables.

Table no. 1. Construct reliability and validity

Latent variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability coefficient (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Mass media-induced panic	0.827	0.827	0.920	0.852
Panic control ability	0.776	0.795	0.898	0.816
Tourist avoidance behaviour	0.741	0.747	0.885	0.794

Convergent validity is demonstrated by assessing the extracted average variance (AVE), which must exceed the threshold value of 0.5 (Nunan et al., 2020). Thus, the construct explains at least 50% of the variance of the indicators that define it (Hair et al., 2014). As shown in Table 1, this condition is met. Another measure of convergent validity is the outer loadings, which should be statistically significant and exceed the value of 0.5, ideally greater than 0.7 (Nunan et al., 2020). In the present study, all outer loadings are greater than 0.7, so this condition of convergent validity is met.

Each latent variable must differ from the other latent variables to prove the discriminant validity of the construct (Malhotra et al., 2017). One measure of this is the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell-Larcker, 1981), in which the square root of the average variance extracted for each latent variable is greater than all correlations between it and the other latent variables (Table 2).

Table no. 2. Fornell-Larcker criterion

Latent variable	Mass media-induced panic	Panic control ability	Tourism avoidance behaviour
Mass media-induced panic	0.923		
Panic control ability	0.323	0.903	
Tourist avoidance behaviour	0.146	0.111	0.891

Another measure of discriminant validity is the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) matrix. The results in Table 3 show that all values are below the threshold value of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2017), demonstrating that discriminant validity is achieved.

Table no. 3. The heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) matrix

	Mass media induced panic	Panic control ability	Tourism avoidance behaviour
Mass media induced panic			
Panic control ability	0.400		
Tourist avoidance behaviour	0.186	0.144	

The model is not affected by collinearity issues, as all values of the variance inflation factor (VIF) are below the cut-off point of 5 (Hair et al., 2017).

3. Research findings and discussion

To test the research hypotheses, the relationships between the latent variables were assessed. The strength of the relationships is estimated by the path coefficients, and their statistical significance was determined by performing a bootstrapping procedure. The results of the hypotheses tested are shown in Table 4.

Table no. 4. Tested hypotheses

Relationship	Path coefficient (β)	t test	P value	Result
H1: Mass media-induced panic -> Tourist avoidance behaviour	0.124	3.658	0.000	Supported
H2: Mass media-induced panic -> Panic control ability	0.323	10.339	0.000	Supported
H3: Panic control ability -> Tourist avoidance behaviour	0.071	2.006	0.045	Not supported

Based on these findings, the resulting model is shown in Figure 2.

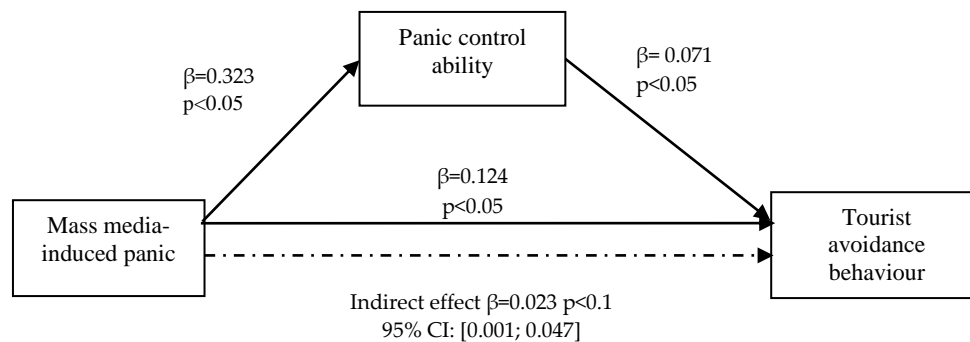


Figure no. 2. The resulting model

Caption: Black line – accepted hypothesis; red line – hypothesis not accepted; CI confidence interval

Regarding the relationship between mass media-induced panic and tourist avoidance behaviour, this relationship is statistically significant ($\beta=0.124$, $p<0.01$). The panic triggered by the media has a positive influence on the behaviour of avoidance of tourists, which means that hypothesis H1 is accepted. The more intense the panic induced by the mass media, the more people avoid visiting the neighbouring conflict areas for tourism purposes.

The panic caused by the mass media influences the ability to control war-related panic. The more intense the panic induced by the mass media, the greater the ability to deal with this challenge, as people are better prepared to control the panic. The strength of this relationship is rather moderate ($\beta=0.323$, $p<0.01$), so hypothesis H2 is accepted.

The ability to control panic caused by military conflict has no inverse effect ($\beta=0.071$, $p<0.05$) on tourist avoidance behaviour, but a direct one, of low strength. Therefore, even if people are better prepared to control war-related panic, they tend to avoid conflict areas for tourism purposes and travel far from these areas. Consequently, Hypothesis H3 is not supported.

Mediation analysis

To test the mediation role of the variable 'panic control ability' between the variables 'mass media-induced panic' and 'tourist avoidance behaviour', direct and indirect effects were determined by a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure on 5000 subsamples, whereby this

resampling approach leads to more precise confidence limits (MacKinnon et al., 2004). (Table 5).

Table no. 5. Mediation analysis

Path	Direct effect	Indirect effect	95% confidence interval for indirect effect		Result
			Lower	Upper	
H4: Mass media-induced panic -> Panic control ability -> Tourist avoidance behaviour	0.124***	0.023*	0.001	0.047	Supported

Note: * $p < 0.1$; *** $p < 0.01$

The ability to control panic acts as a mediator between mass media-induced panic and tourist avoidance behaviour, considering that the direct effect is significant ($\beta=0.124$, $p<0.01$) and the indirect effect is marginally significant ($\beta=0.047$, $p=0.054$). Since the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect does not include the value 0, this effect is considered significant (Zhao et al., 2010), and there is a partial mediation (Nitzl et al., 2016). Therefore, the ability to control war-related panic reduces the impact of negative media news on the tourist avoidance behaviour.

The results show that the panic caused by news about the war in the mass media impacts the tourism behaviour of citizens, who avoid areas close to the conflict and choose destinations that are further away and, therefore, considered safer. As in the case of the health crisis, tourists seek safety (Carballo et al., 2022), while the media tend to emphasise risks and uncertainties during a crisis, creating a state of fear and panic (Kilgo et al., 2019). The media can create panic through war news, which usually has negative connotations. Tan and Cheng (2024) show that more than 50% of main stream media articles linking tourism to the Russia-Ukraine war contained a negative emotional frame. The tendency to avoid destinations in war zones due to exposure to panic-inducing news is also consistent with Scharbert et al. (2024), who found that after the start of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, citizens of 17 European countries outside the conflict area experienced a decrease in well-being as information about the war was more salient in social media.

However, a positive aspect is that as the panic created by the mass media intensifies, people develop strategies and mechanisms to control the state of panic (Meine et al., 2021). We had expected that due to the increased ability to control panic, tourists would reduce their intention to choose destinations further away from the conflict zone (Mauliza et al., 2022), but the results showed the opposite. This result seems to be consistent with the findings of Dogru-Dastan and Tütüncü (2024), who showed that tourists consider a destination safe again if terrorist attacks are not repeated at short intervals and if sufficient time passes without other events. As war is an ongoing process, tourists feel the need to travel to areas further away from the site of armed conflict.

Consequently, hypothesis H3 was rejected, suggesting that although people develop the ability to control panic, this does not cause them to avoid areas considered risky due to war. On the contrary, tourists continue to avoid these areas even when they control their media-induced panic. This fact could indicate that this panic control works more psychologically, as people strive for a state of well-being, but this fact does not lead them to make decisions that they consider risky. Developing panic control mechanisms allows people to adhere to

their vacation plans, leading them to look for safer destinations rather than abandoning their trip altogether. Given numerous studies demonstrating the attraction of conflict areas for a number of tourists (Bayramov, 2022), we can hypothesise that war, especially a war perceived as escalating, is treated differently by tourists than other types of conflict (political instability, armed insurgencies, coups, or territorial disputes). This difference in perception of war could explain why the ability to control panic does not create a desire to visit areas characterised by the risk of an existing war.

Testing the mediation hypothesis revealed partial mediation, i.e., the ability to control panic only partially influences the effect of media-generated panic on avoidance behaviour in the war zone. This fact is consistent with the finding that the relationship between panic control and avoidance behaviour is a direct relationship. Thus, the ability to control panic can, to some extent, mitigate the effect of media-induced panic on tourist behaviour, but does not remove the intention to avoid destinations that tourists perceive as riskier.

Conclusions, implications and limitations

An important conclusion of this study is the fact that even in difficult situations, people are not willing to give up their vacations, but that their behaviour changes and they adapt to the new conditions. For example, the need for security is becoming increasingly important. While tourists needed guarantees for their health during the sanitary crisis, during the military crisis they are looking for guarantees of safety, which they offer primarily to themselves by choosing destinations that are considered safe. This finding seems at odds with studies of "dark tourism" (understood as travel to places characterised by disaster, suffering, atrocity, and even death), which are motivated either by the attraction of such harsh aspects of life or by a desire to understand historical events (Dresler, 2024). In other words, the present research suggests that during a dangerous historical event, people are not willing to take risks to understand history, but want to travel safely.

This change in behaviour is due to the war news in the media, which creates a sense of panic about the consequences of war, which may lead to a deterioration of destination image (Upadhayaya et al., 2011). This fact can be considered in the messages that players in the tourism industry can pass on to the target audience both via the established media (television, radio, etc.) and via social networks. Up-to-date and transparent travel information and open communication with tourists about the political and security situation at the destination are very useful. Information about the safety measures taken to protect tourists, such as the presence of security forces, safe or dangerous areas at the destination, and safety protocols that tourists should follow, can also help increase the sense of security. The dissemination of up-to-date and complete information about the measures taken to protect people at a destination and the ability to return home quickly in the event of an emergency could therefore increase tourists' confidence in certain destinations, making them more attractive. All of these aspects could become an important source of competitive advantage in the existing context (Qureshi and Dada, 2019).

The information provided by the various players in the tourism industry could also consider people's natural inclination to develop strategies to control panic by providing them with insights that change their understanding of the situation. Although the ability to control panic does not encourage tourists to choose destinations that present uncertainties in terms of safety, this fact could be of practical importance if we consider the (partial) mediating

role that panic control plays between the effects of media-induced panic and tourists' behaviour to avoid conflict areas. The implication of this approach would not be to encourage tourists to choose destinations with a higher degree of risk, but to help them assess the relationship between the attractiveness and the potential risk of a destination as objectively as possible. Furthermore, this relationship could be used by destination management organisations to promote domestic destinations (Diaconescu and Chiopu, 2023), which would be in line with the tendency toward staycation observed in crises (Muritala et al., 2022).

To summarise, the present research provides some new ideas that are relevant to the operations of tourism businesses. It is easy to imagine that panic related to the presence of war can lead to a change in tourists' decisions; however, it is worth noting that even in this difficult context from a military point of view, people are not willing to give up their vacation. Second, the ability to control panic does not reduce the caution with which tourists choose destinations, as highlighted in previous studies, but seems to increase it. This fact is interesting in that tourists who overcome their panic are likely to take a vacation from which they are likely to have more achievable expectations. The mere fact that they can enjoy their vacation while there is war in the neighbouring areas may lead tourists to be more grateful and satisfied with the services they receive, either by changing their perceptions of these services (Sarkar et al., 2021) or by adjusting their initial expectations (Wong and Dioko, 2023). However, panic control plays a mediator role between the panic generated by the media and the behaviour of tourists to avoid the areas they consider risky, which can be an effective way to create a correct image of potential destinations in the perception of tourists.

Apart from these contributions to the literature on tourist behaviour in wartime, the study also has some limitations. First, the fact that the data were collected four months after the start of the conflict may still reflect uncertain perceptions and behaviours. Therefore, a similar study could be conducted now, two more years after the start of the war, to see if the trends persist, strengthen, or weaken.

Second, the research concerns only tourists from a single country in the vicinity of the conflict. It would also be of interest to analyse the behaviour of tourists from other countries near the war. Studies could also be conducted on tourists living in countries further away from the conflict area to assess the intensity of emotions felt due to war news and their impact on tourists' behaviour.

Third, only variables related to mass media and news-induced panic and people's ability to develop panic control strategies were examined. Thus, the number of latent variables is somewhat reduced, which could diminish the explanatory potential of the model for the behaviour of tourists. In addition, a comparative analysis of media types - traditional media and social media - could be conducted to see if there are different reactions to these media. Further research could include other variables that could influence tourists' behaviour and their decisions when choosing vacation destinations.

Despite all these limitations, we consider this model important, especially since the overwhelming majority of people are exposed to information disseminated in the media (Sârbu et al., 2018), and too few remain indifferent to it. Furthermore, studying the factors that influence travel intention during a crisis is crucial, as these factors determine the recovery path of the industry (Castaldo et al., 2024), and in order to formulate an effective

strategy for the tourism and hospitality sector, understanding people's psychology and behaviour in (re)adjusting to normal life becomes a very important research topic (Shareef et al., 2024). Based on the directions proposed by Dolnicar and McCabe (2022), it is important to investigate the attitudes of tourists and authorities in the areas adjacent to the conflict toward solidarity tourism. This could reveal the willingness of stakeholders to support tourism in these areas through initiatives such as creating solidarity tourism packages, offering incentives to tourists (e.g., solidarity vouchers), or building partnerships with tourism organisations and international providers (such as Airbnb).

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