www.etimm.ase.ro

Consumer Behavior in the Cruise Industry: A Qualitative Perspective on First-Time and Repeat Cruisers in the Romanian Market

Ruxanda SÎRBU
The Bucharest University of Economic Studies
sirburuxanda25@stud.ase.ro

Article history
Received 30 April 2025 | Accepted 19 December 2025 | Published online 15 January 2026.

Abstract
This paper explores consumer behavior in the cruise industry, focusing on the behavioral differences between first-time and repeat passengers in the Romanian market - an emerging market rarely addressed in existing international literature. Cruising is a complex leisure product that integrates accommodation, transportation, dining, entertainment, and destination experiences into a single bundled offering. Such complexity leads to longer decision journeys and a strong reliance on travel advisors, particularly among first-time cruisers. In Romania, cruises compete directly with well-established land-based substitutes such as all-inclusive vacations. However, industry evidence confirms that cruises continue to generate some of the highest levels of satisfaction and loyalty in the leisure sector. The research applied a qualitative design, analyzing 47 narrative responses to a semi-structured questionnaire (24 first-time, 23 repeat cruisers) and complementary influencer content through thematic content analysis. As an exploratory qualitative study, it examines whether globally established patterns of cruise consumer behavior also apply to Romania's emerging market, seeking depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization. Findings reveal distinct behavioral patterns: first-time cruisers prioritize price, safety, and informational clarity, whereas repeat passengers emphasize brand loyalty, service quality, and itinerary depth. Both groups view travel advisors as key mediators of trust and experience personalization. Post-cruise advocacy and emotional attachment further transform initial skepticism into long-term loyalty, illustrating the consumer lifecycle specific to cruise tourism. The study contributes theoretically by extending segmentation insights to an underexplored Eastern European market and practically by guiding travel advisors and cruise operators toward differentiated onboarding and retention strategies. While limited by its qualitative scope, the research provides grounded insights and outlines directions for future quantitative and cross-cultural validation.

Keywords: Cruise marketing, consumer behavior, first-time vs. repeat cruisers, segmentation.

JEL classification: M31, L83, Z32, D91.

Introduction

The cruise industry has evolved significantly over the past decade, including a full recovery from the global Covid-19 pandemic. CLIA (2024; 2025) reports that passenger volumes in 2023-2024 have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, marking a renewed phase of consumer confidence and operational expansion. Once seen as a niche product for older travelers (Wondirad, Wu, Teshome, and Lee, 2023; Thornhill, 2025), cruising now appeals to a broader demographic, including Millennials and Generation Z (CLIA, 2025), who find cruise vacations increasingly attractive, particularly due to the personalized, tech-enabled and experience-rich nature of cruise offerings. The average age of cruise passengers has dropped to 46 years globally, with more than a third now under 40. Internal market insights from cruise operators in Central and Eastern Europe suggest that, in specific years and markets such as Romania, the average age of cruise passengers for some cruise brands may have reached as low as 41, indicating a notable demographic shift toward younger consumers.

In emerging markets such as Romania (Anton, 2019), these global trends intersect with particular national consumption patterns. Romanian travellers exhibit a strong last-minute booking behavior (Vola, 2024; Bursa, 2023) and a persistent preference for all-inclusive vacation packages (Hendrick, 2024), making the cruise product an attractive alternative that combines similar convenience with higher perceived value. Within Porter's (1979) competitive framework, cruises can thus be viewed as strategic substitutes for land-based vacations in the broader leisure market. Industry reports consistently show that cruises outperform traditional all-inclusive vacations in customer satisfaction and loyalty, owing to their comprehensive service offer and experiential diversity. Their perceived value, simplicity once experimented, as well as inclusivity of services, explain their growing appeal to Romanian travelers.

Romania has recorded one of the highest growth rates in passenger numbers across Eastern Europe, while regional data indicate increasing consumer awareness, online search interest, and the rise of specialized cruise agencies that have performed remarkably well. These new entrants illustrate a strengthening competitive environment and an institutional shift toward cruise specialization among major tour operators. CLIA's *State of the Cruise Industry Report* (2025) further confirms that cruises have registered the fastest growth among leisure travel products, with over half of travel advisors reporting a surge in demand. Together, these developments confirm Romania's status as an emerging and dynamic cruise market within Central and Eastern Europe.

However, despite this growth, the Romanian cruise segment remains largely under-researched. Most existing studies on cruise consumer behavior have been developed in mature markets, where travel culture, income structures and distribution channels differ substantially. Therefore, little is known about how far these global behavioral patterns apply to younger markets characterized by last-minute decisions, lower familiarity with cruising and varying degrees of reliance on travel advisors.

Addressing this gap, the present study builds on international literature in cruise marketing and consumer behavior to explore whether the segmentation patterns identified globally - particularly between first-time and repeat passengers - are also observable in Romania. By adopting an exploratory qualitative design, the research tests the contextual relevance of existing models while providing grounded insights into how emerging-market consumers perceive, evaluate and repurchase cruise experiences.

1. Literature review

1.1. Cruise booking journey and decision complexity

Cruising is widely regarded as a complex tourism product that includes transportation, accommodation, dining, entertainment, and destination exploration. As such, the decision-making and booking process is considerably more complex than in other leisure segments. Based on models proposed by Zhang (2020) and Reichheld, McGlone Russell and Teegarden (2018), the cruise customer journey can be structured into six key phases: inspiration, research, booking, preparation, onboard experience, and post-cruise engagement. Each of these stages involves distinct touchpoints, decisions, and emotional thresholds, especially for first-time cruisers, who often perceive the process as overwhelming due to the diversity of itineraries, ship configurations and additional services.

Cruise purchase decisions are influenced by multiple factors, including perceived value for money, brand reputation, loyalty programs and the recommendations of travel advisors or peers. Industry outlook reports emphasize the dual importance of professional and interpersonal influence - travel agents for guidance and reassurance, and friends and family for credibility and trust - highlighting the social dimension of the cruise decision-making process.

In emerging markets such as Romania, where cruising remains relatively new, this decision complexity is likely amplified by lower consumer familiarity and limited prior experience with cruise products.

1.2. Role of travel advisors in cruise decision-making

Cruises are predominantly booked through travel advisors, recent industry data and studies reporting that around 73% of passengers rely on agents for information, reassurance, and decision-making support. This percentage rises to nearly 80% in the luxury segment, where the product is even more nuanced and personalized consultation becomes decisive. Such reliance reflects both the complexity of the cruise product and the emotional commitment consumers make when purchasing these experiences. Personalized consultation plays a vital role in matching customers with the right itinerary, ship, and cabin type, given the variety of brands, ship sizes, and onboard offerings.

In the Romanian market, where the cruise industry is still consolidating, internal market insights suggest that travel advisors maintain a key role in assisting first-time cruisers throughout an unfamiliar and information-intensive decision process.

1.3. Generational differences and emerging consumer profiles

Deloitte (2020) and CLIA (2023; 2024) both note a generational shift in cruise perception: Generation Y and Z travelers increasingly view cruising as a customizable and tech-enabled experience. These segments respond positively to personalization, brand transparency, and digital engagement, traits that must be addressed through targeted segmentation and CRM strategies.

Similar generational dynamics appear to be emerging in Romania, where internal market observations and digital analytics indicate that younger travelers, often first-time cruisers, discover cruise experiences primarily through online channels and influencer content rather than traditional travel advertising.

1.4. Behavioral segmentation: first-time vs. repeat cruisers

Cruise consumer behavior is influenced by a complex interplay of psychological, social, and situational factors. Among leisure products, cruises consistently generate some of the highest levels of customer satisfaction and repeat customers, often surpassing all-inclusive land vacations (CLIA, 2019; Huseyin, Mehmet and Hasan, 2020; Deloitte, 2020; CLIA, 2025). The multidimensional nature of the cruise experience, combining accommodation, transportation, entertainment, and superior service, enhances perceived value and contributes to high Net Promoter Scores and long-term loyalty.

Segmentation is therefore a critical tool for understanding cruise consumers, allowing providers to tailor marketing strategies and product design to specific subgroups, thus improving cost-effectiveness and customer satisfaction. In the cruise context, the distinction between first-time and repeat passengers has been extensively documented (Sun, Kwortnik and Gauri, 2018; Han, 2017; Petrick, 2004; Georgsdottir and Oskarsson, 2017). Thus, first-time cruisers are typically more price-sensitive, prefer shorter itineraries and standard cabins, and rely heavily on promotional communication. In contrast, repeat cruisers demonstrate stronger brand loyalty, greater willingness to pay for upgrades and a preference for longer voyages. Han (2017) found that repeaters show higher affective satisfaction, perceived value, and behavioral loyalty than first-time travelers, while Petrick (2004) identified service quality as the best predictor of repurchase for first-timers and perceived value for repeaters.

Recent industry reports indicate that up to 31% of all cruise passengers in the past two years were first-timers, up from 24% in 2019 - a clear sign of growing interest from new segments. This evolution underscores the need for differentiated onboarding strategies, simplified communication and reassurance to convert new customers into loyal repeaters.

In emerging markets such as Romania, where the cruise sector is still expanding and the customer base remains relatively new, a large share of passengers are first-time cruisers. These segmentation insights help explain consumer decision patterns and can inform future communication approaches aimed at building trust and encouraging repeat travel. Nevertheless, internal market analyses indicate that awareness of this distinction among Romanian travel agencies is still limited. In practice, marketing communication tends to address both first-time and repeat cruisers in similar ways, without targeted differentiation, as most agencies primarily translate or adapt promotional materials provided by global cruise companies rather than developing locally tailored strategies.

2. Research objectives and methodology

2.1. Research Objectives

The primary aim of this exploratory qualitative study is to investigate the behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruise passengers in the Romanian market - an emerging leisure segment characterized by late booking habits and strong all-inclusive preferences. Building on prior work (e.g., Sun, Kwortnik and Gauri, 2018) and recent industry reports, the study seeks to contextualize these differences within a developing Eastern European market, contributing both to theoretical understanding and to practical applications in travel marketing.

Specifically, this study aims to:

- Identify the key motivations and decision-making factors distinguishing first-time from repeat cruise travelers in the Romanian market, including trust, safety, value-for-money and itinerary design.
- Examine how prior cruise experience influences booking behavior, channel preference (e.g., reliance on travel agents versus online self-service) and willingness to upgrade or plan in advance.
- Explore differences in consumer expectations and post-trip engagement, focusing on satisfaction, loyalty and advocacy behavior.
- Triangulate academic insights with market trends, particularly the growing share of new-to-cruise passengers and the influence of travel agents and word-of-mouth in shaping purchase decisions.

2.2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design to investigate behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruise passengers within the Romanian market. Given the exploratory nature of the research and the objective of capturing authentic consumer perspectives, an open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire was developed using the Tally.so platform. The instrument was designed to replicate the flow of a qualitative interview and contained 23 questions, organized into three thematic blocks:

(1) General travel profile - demographic information and preferred vacation types;

(2) Cruise experience - motivations, decision-making, booking behavior, satisfaction, and post-cruise perceptions;

(3) Comparative and reflective dimensions - attitudes toward all-inclusive holidays, emotional highlights, spending and loyalty intentions.

Midway through the questionnaire, respondents were asked "*How many cruises have you taken so far?*" to divide the sample into first-time cruisers (one cruise) and repeat cruisers (two or more cruises). This split ensured a clear analytical distinction between initiation and repetition behaviors within the same instrument.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling among Romanian travelers who had previously taken at least one cruise. To ensure authenticity and data validity, the survey was disseminated through several cruise-specialized travel agents and recognized cruise community representatives with verified travel experience, which shared it directly with their clients and peers. This recruitment channel significantly enhanced the credibility of the data, as respondents were verified cruise travelers with real booking experience. A total of 47 valid responses were obtained: 24 from first-time cruisers and 23 from repeat cruisers. The questionnaire required approximately 10 minutes to complete and remained active for 2 weeks in May 2025.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality. No personally identifiable data were collected, in full compliance with ethical standards for qualitative research.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic content analysis. Responses were manually coded in multiple iterative rounds and grouped into higher-order themes such as motivations, decision-making factors, booking behavior, perceived value, satisfaction, and post-cruise advocacy. Repeated readings and internal cross-validation were used to ensure coding consistency and analytical rigor.

In parallel, secondary qualitative material was examined through a directed content analysis of three publicly available blog articles authored by Romanian lifestyle journalist Diana Cosmin (FineSociety.ro, 2018-2022). While the author has published several texts on cruise travel, three were purposively selected for their explicit focus on the cruise experience and their chronological relevance to the study. The researchers maintained long-term familiarity with the author's published work, following her media narratives from her initial, invitation-based debut cruise coverage to her later personal travel accounts. This longitudinal familiarity provided contextual understanding of the authors' perspective and ensured accurate thematic interpretation of her evolving attitudes toward cruise travel.

The selected texts were chosen for their explicit focus on cruise experiences, illustrating the author's transformation from a first-time passenger to a repeat cruiser. Each article was coded using the same thematic framework applied to participant responses - motivations, perceived barriers, emotional reactions, perceived value, and advocacy behaviors. This procedure enabled cross-validation between primary (survey) and secondary (media) data, highlighting convergent patterns and subtle variations in tone, expectations and experiential framing.

While the influencer's perspective cannot be generalized, her public narratives served as cultural anchors, illustrating how cruise travel is represented and normalized within Romanian lifestyle media. This triangulation strengthened contextual interpretation and contributed to a more layered understanding of passenger perceptions.

Although the sample size (n = 47) may appear modest, it is consistent with qualitative saturation theory (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Fusch and Ness, 2015), according to which data collection becomes redundant once additional responses no longer produce new insights. In this study, thematic convergence was observed after approximately thirty responses, confirming the adequacy and analytical depth of the dataset.

The selection of Tally.so as the data-collection platform was deliberate: its interactive and mobile-friendly design increased respondent engagement and reduced response fatigue. Compared with more traditional tools such as Google Forms, which are often less adaptive on mobile devices, the chosen platform provides a smoother user experience. This aspect significantly reduce early abandonment rates and enhance completion accuracy, maximizing response validity. This proved essential, as most participants accessed the form via mobile devices. Moreover, the platform's adaptive design minimized incomplete responses or fraudulent behavior - a known issue in online data collection (Revilla and Ochoa, 2017). Considering the general tendency of respondents to avoid lengthy or impersonal questionnaires

(Fricker, 2017; Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014), this format ensured concise, authentic and context-rich narrative data.

While the qualitative nature of this study limits statistical generalization, its design provides rich, grounded insights into consumer motivations, perceptions, and loyalty mechanisms within an emerging European cruise market. Future research may expand on these findings through mixed-method or cross-country comparative approaches.

3. Results and discussion

Building on the qualitative dataset, the analysis draws on 47 valid responses from Romanian cruise passengers: 24 first-time cruisers and 23 repeat cruisers (defined as having completed two or more cruises). Most respondents had taken their most recent cruise within the past two to three years, ensuring that the insights reflect current consumer attitudes and post-pandemic travel behavior. Participants ranged in age from early 30s to mid-70s and were primarily urban, with extensive international travel experience. Besides cruises, their preferred holiday types included all-inclusive resorts, city breaks and organized tours.

3.1. Sample profile.

The respondent pool (n = 47) was demographically diverse, ranging in age from 34 to 75 years (average ≈ 44), with most participants residing in major urban centers such as Bucharest, Iași, Cluj. The majority were active travelers with prior international experience, predominantly favoring structured vacation formats such as all-inclusive packages, city breaks, and road trips. Most cruises had taken place between 2022 and 2025, reflecting post-pandemic travel recovery. European itineraries dominated, while a few participants reported Caribbean routes. Over 80 % of respondents booked through travel agencies, confirming the central role of intermediaries in the Romanian cruise market.

Table 1. Profile of respondents participating in the qualitative study

Characteristic	Observation (n = 47)
Age range	34 – 75 years (avg. ≈ 44)
Residence	Mainly urban (Bucharest, Cluj, Chișinău, Alba Iulia, Cugir)
Preferred vacation types	All-inclusive, city breaks, road trips, organized tours
Last cruise taken	2022 - 2025 (few "earlier")
Main destinations	Europe > 90 %, Caribbean < 10 %
Booking channel	Travel agencies ≈ 80 %, direct/company < 20 %

Source: Authors' analysis, 2025

Although not statistically representative, the purposive sampling offers meaningful insight into behavioral patterns among emerging-market cruise consumers. Given the exploratory nature of the study, results are discussed thematically, highlighting key contrasts and commonalities between first-time and repeat cruisers. Each theme reflects one of the main motivational or behavioral dimensions identified through inductive coding:

(1) motivations and decision-making factors,

(2) information sources and booking behavior,

(3) perceptions of cruise value and comparisons with alternative vacation types, and

(4) post-experience advocacy and social influence.

Where relevant, the analysis is further triangulated with secondary qualitative data derived from Romanian lifestyle journalist Diana Cosmin's public blog narratives. This comparison helps validate the thematic interpretation and situates individual responses within the broader cultural discourse surrounding cruise travel in Romania.

Table 2. Comparative summary of key behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruisers

Dimension	First-time cruisers (new-to-cruise)	Repeat cruisers
Motivations	Curiosity; perceived similarity to all-inclusive resorts; value-for-money; safety reassurance.	Desire to upgrade and optimize previous experiences; interest in longer itineraries and premium services.
Information sources	Heavy reliance on travel agents and advice from friends/family with cruise experience.	Mix of travel agents and self-directed online research; prior knowledge reduces perceived complexity.
Booking behavior	Tend to book late and delegate logistics to agents; rely on personal reassurance.	Plan earlier; compare brands & itinerary; seek loyalty benefits and cabin upgrades.
Perception of value	Initially skeptical; surprised by service quality and overall satisfaction.	Focus on comfort, convenience, and value optimization rather than price sensitivity.
Alternative comparison	Often compare cruising to land-based all-inclusive resorts.	View cruising as the preferred and superior vacation format.
Post-experience attitudes	Express enthusiasm and recommend cruising to peers; act as “new advocates”.	Strong brand attachment; repeat booking intent; serve as credible promoters.

Source: Authors’ analysis, 2025

3.2. Motivations and Decision-Making Factors

As summarized in Table 2, motivations differed considerably between first-time and repeat cruisers. First-time respondents were primarily drawn by the idea of a vacation format similar to all-inclusive resorts, yet offering the added appeal of multiple destinations within a single journey. Many described a mix of curiosity and initial hesitation, particularly concerning safety or unfamiliar logistics - concerns that were largely dispelled by the actual experience. This pattern echoes Cosmin’s debut narrative (2018), where early skepticism gave way to enthusiasm once on board.

In contrast, repeat cruisers in this study emphasized more pragmatic factors: itinerary length, quality of service, ship features and size as well as the existence of premium services and features. Their decisions tend to be shaped by their previous cruise experience and a desire to optimize future cruises, resonating with the evolution described in Cosmin’s later writings (2019; 2022) and reflected in CLIA’s (2025) findings that returning passengers increasingly opt for longer itineraries, book earlier, and prioritize enhanced experiences over price.

Despite these differences, both groups placed strong importance on the cruise itinerary as a central factor in their decision-making process - confirming that route design remains an important criterion in cruise selection, regardless of experience level. Moreover, CLIA (2025) confirms that destination variety and perceived value-for-money are the leading motivators among cruise passengers, alongside the reassurance provided by travel advisors and peer recommendations.

These findings support the necessity of differentiated marketing strategies. For first-time cruisers, communication should focus on building trust and reducing perceived complexity, emphasizing safety, ease of access, and the all-inclusive nature of cruise experiences. Parallels with traditional resort vacations can help close familiarity gaps. For repeat cruisers, by contrast, efforts should concentrate on brand loyalty and product knowledge, highlighting exclusive benefits such as upgrades, ship-specific amenities, loyalty rewards, as well as early booking advantages and distinctive itineraries.

As over 30% of passengers in 2024 were first-time cruisers, tailoring acquisition strategies to address their specific motivations presents a valuable growth opportunity, especially in emerging markets like Romania. Overall, first-time cruisers can be described as experience-seekers driven by curiosity and reassurance needs, whereas repeat cruisers are value optimizers guided by familiarity, brand trust, and experiential depth. This distinction reinforces both the theoretical segmentation logic and the practical need for adaptive communication in cruise marketing.

3.3. Information Sources and Booking Behavior

As illustrated in Table 2, both first-time and repeat cruisers relied heavily on intermediaries and social influence when planning their trips, yet the depth and form of this reliance varied substantially. Across the board, respondents relied primarily on travel agents for cruise-related information and booking support. Among first-time cruisers, agent guidance was often complemented by input from friends or family with previous cruise experience - confirming CLIA's (2025) findings that 79 % of passengers value travel advisors and 87 % are influenced by personal recommendations.

Social media rarely initiated the purchase journey, but it did inspire several novices and became highly relevant after the trip, when most respondents reported posting photos, answering queries, and encouraging others to cruise - behavior mirrored in Cosmin's trajectory from newcomer to informal advisor through social engagement.

Booking behavior followed a parallel pattern: first-time passengers typically booked later and invested full trust in agents or travel planners to manage logistics. Repeat cruisers, by contrast, demonstrated a more strategic approach, researching early-booking deals, comparing brands, itineraries and prices, and selecting cabin upgrades based on prior knowledge and expectations of value for money (distinct from price sensitivity). Industry data reconfirm this shift, noting a trend toward longer itineraries and earlier planning among experienced passengers.

From a marketing perspective, the findings confirm the critical role of travel advisors. While digital channels serve as useful entry points for inspiration and awareness, conversion relies heavily on human interaction and consultative sales. According to informal validation interviews with several Romanian cruise-specialized travel agents, their digital investments are not aimed at automating the booking process, but at attracting potential customers - especially first-time cruisers - into high-touch, personalized consultations.

While online promotion plays a vital role in raising awareness and generating leads, cruise bookings remain largely dependent on expert human guidance. This is particularly true in emerging markets like Romania, where cruises are still perceived as complex travel products requiring reassurance and tailored advice. Post-cruise, however, the digital dynamic shifts: many guests become vocal ambassadors within their peer networks, answering questions and sharing impressions.

In summary, first-time cruisers rely on mediated trust and interpersonal reassurance, building confidence through travel advisors and peer experience, whereas repeat cruisers rely on self-knowledge and proactive research, supported by loyalty programs and accumulated familiarity with cruise brands. For marketers, this confirms the dual importance of human mediation and digital storytelling - where consultative selling remains essential for conversion, and post-cruise peer engagement fuels organic advocacy.

3.4. Perceptions of Cruise Value and Alternative Options

As also shown in Table 2, perceptions of value and satisfaction evolved differently between first-time and repeat cruisers. Initial expectations, especially among first-time cruisers, were often shaped by stereotypes associating cruises with high costs and an older clientele. As reflected in Cosmin's (2018) early writings, these assumptions contributed to a perception of cruising as a luxury, niche product. However, post-cruise evaluations shifted dramatically: respondents consistently praised the organization, service quality, and overall experience, with many describing the journey as "worth every euro".

First-time cruisers frequently used emotionally charged language such as "captivating" or "magical", whereas repeat cruisers adopted a more rational vocabulary, focusing on "completeness", comfort, and value optimization. A key point of comparison for both groups was the all-inclusive land resort. Yet, many concluded that cruises provided broader experiential variety, higher service standards, and a better overall satisfaction.

This is strongly supported by CLIA's 2025 *State of the Cruise Industry Report*, which notes that cruise satisfaction scores now surpass those of both all-inclusive packages (3.7) and resort holidays (3.4), with ocean cruises reaching up to 4.2 of 5 points.

Marketing strategies should therefore actively address outdated assumptions, particularly those linking cruises exclusively to older demographics or luxury pricing. While industry reports show that the luxury cruise segment has tripled in the past decade, the broader market has evolved to offer a wide range of accessible and diverse experiences.

In this respect, first-time cruisers tend to interpret value emotionally - through novelty, surprise, and enjoyment - whereas repeat cruisers interpret it functionally, through service consistency, familiarity, and optimization of comfort and cost.

These findings have direct implications for communication: in emerging markets like Romania, positioning cruises as both emotionally rewarding and practically convenient can bridge perception gaps and attract first-time travelers without alienating loyal passengers.

3.5. Post-experience advocacy and social influence

As reflected in Table 2, both first-time and repeat cruisers demonstrated a pronounced tendency to talk about their cruise experiences with others. One of the most striking and recurrent themes emerging from both groups is their strong inclination to share impressions, spontaneously in conversation or in response to questions, during or after returning from their trip. Over 90% of respondents stated that they had spoken about their cruise to peers, confirming that social interaction and storytelling are integral parts of the post-travel phase.

Social media played a secondary role during the decision phase, but became much more relevant post-cruise, serving as a space for sharing, validation, and indirect promotion. This dynamic illustrates the rise of "natural influencers" whose credibility stems not from follower counts but from authentic experience. This finding mirrors the trajectory described in Cosmin's public narrative, as she evolved from skeptical first-timer to vocal advocate through blogs and social media. It also aligns with the latest industry data, which confirms that friends and family are the top influence in cruise decision-making and that Net Promoter Scores are significantly increasing, indicating deeper trust and satisfaction.

While trust in advertising is declining globally, peer-to-peer advocacy is increasingly valued and becomes a strategic asset. Cruise brands and cruise-specialized travel agents should treat post-experience enthusiasm as a key stage in the consumer lifecycle that fuels organic growth.

In this context, first-time cruisers tend to act as spontaneous storytellers who normalize cruising for new audiences, while repeat cruisers evolve into deliberate brand advocates who reinforce trust and continuity within their networks. These dual dynamic underscores the growing importance of authentic, experience-based communication as both a behavioral outcome and a marketing mechanism in the Romanian cruise market.

Summary of key insights

Overall, the findings confirm that while global behavioral patterns identified in previous literature largely apply to the Romanian context, their manifestation is shaped by specific market characteristics such as lower familiarity with cruising, high reliance on travel advisors and the influence of peer narratives. The analysis reveals distinct motivational and behavioral contrasts between first-time and repeat passengers: newcomers approach cruising with curiosity, caution, and emotional intensity, whereas repeat travelers demonstrate confidence, brand commitment, and a focus on optimizing value. Despite these differences, both groups share an appreciation for itinerary design, service quality and social validation, highlighting the experiential and relational nature of cruise travel.

These results illustrate how trust, familiarity and post-cruise advocacy form an interconnected behavioral cycle that defines cruise consumption in emerging markets. The insights derived from this qualitative analysis contribute to a better theoretical understanding of consumer segmentation in cruise marketing and offer practical implications for designing differentiated acquisition and retention strategies in contexts where cruising is still a developing travel product.

Conclusions

This study explored the behavioral distinctions between first-time and repeat cruise passengers in the Romanian market, providing an exploratory qualitative perspective that contextualizes global theories of cruise consumer behavior within an emerging European setting. In line with existing literature and industry outlooks, the findings confirm that the cruise experience generates exceptional satisfaction, with both rational and emotional value exceeding expectations - particularly among first-time passengers. While initial perceptions are often shaped by stereotypes related to luxury, age, or safety, the actual experience consistently overturns these assumptions, reinforcing the transformative and emotional nature of cruise travel.

In Romania, a market still dominated by all-inclusive land vacations, cruising is increasingly perceived as a superior alternative that offers diversity, structure and excellent service. While consumers are familiar with self-service tools for simpler travel products such as flights or hotel bookings, the complexity and higher value of cruises make human guidance more desirable, especially for first-timers. This reinforces the importance of high-touch, personalized marketing, as customers investing in premium experiences expect expert reassurance, reliable service and tailored support throughout the decision journey.

From a business and marketing perspective, the study confirms that cruising represents a high-loyalty, high-lifetime-value niche. CLIA (2025) reports that over 82% of surveyed passengers intend to cruise again, making the sector one of the most retention-oriented segments in the travel industry. Moreover, post-cruise advocacy acts as a powerful acquisition channel: satisfied guests often become informal brand ambassadors, influencing peers and family. This dual dynamic: strong repeat behavior and active word-of-mouth, justifies higher customer acquisition costs, given the long-term return on investment and potential for organic growth.

Effective marketing strategies should therefore be segment-specific: reassurance, onboarding support and simplification for first-time cruisers; recognition, personalization, and loyalty reinforcement for experienced travelers. Advocacy can be amplified through referral programs, user-generated content and community-based storytelling. In this context, cruise tourism is not merely a niche but a scalable and resilient growth opportunity, particularly in emerging markets where strategic segmentation and experience design can determine long-term adoption.

Although the qualitative design and modest sample size limit generalizability, the study offers grounded insights into an under-researched market and provides a foundation for future mixed-method and cross-country studies on cruise consumer behavior in Central and Eastern Europe. Future research should continue to explore the Romanian cruise market through larger-scale collaborations with specialized travel agencies, aiming to map both consumer motivations and structural barriers. Additional studies could also focus on the perceptions of individuals who have never cruised, including those who currently choose land-based substitutes such as all-inclusive resorts, in order to identify the psychological and informational barriers that prevent trial and adoption. Together, these directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how cruise consumption develops in emerging economies and how marketing communication can facilitate market growth.

Acknowledgments

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the cruise passengers who generously shared their time, experiences and reflections for this research. We also extend special thanks to the Romanian cruise-specialized travel agents who supported the dissemination of the questionnaire and provided valuable insights into the dynamics of the Romanian cruise market.

References

Anton, E. 2019. *Cruise industry in Romania - An emerging market* [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337814018_Cruise_industry_in_Romania_-_An_emerging_market (Accessed: 10 April 2025).

Bursa. 2023. *Animawings Study: Where and how Romanians prefer to travel in 2023* [online] https://www.bursa.ro/studiu-animawings-unde-si-cum-prefera-romanii-sa-calatoreasca-in-2023-25920051 (Accessed: 10 June 2025)

CLIA. 2019. *2019 Europe Market Report* [online] https://europe.cruising.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CLIA-Europe-Full-Report-2019.pdf (Accessed: 25 May 2025).

CLIA. 2024. *State of the Cruise Industry Outlook 2024.* [online] https://cruising.org/-/media/clia-media/research/2024/2024-state-of-the-cruise-industry-report_updated-043024.ashx (Accessed: 25 May 2025).

CLIA. 2025. *State of the Cruise Industry Outlook 2025.* [online] https://cruising.org/sites/default/files/2025-State-of-the-Cruise-Industry-Report-2025.pdf (Accessed: 15 June 2025).

Cosmin, D., 2018. *Symphony of the Seas. Cum a fost "live" lansarea celui mai mare vas de croaziera din lume* [online] https://finesociety.ro/symphony-of-the-seas-cum-a-fost-lansarea-milenista-a-celui-mai-mare-vas-de-croaziera-din-lume (Accessed: 15 May 2025).

Cosmin, D.. 2019. *De ce voi merge in cel putin o croaziera pe an, pentru tot restul vietii mele* [online] https://finesociety.ro/de-ce-voi-merge-in-cel-putin-o-croaziera-pe-an-pentru-tot-restul-vietii-mele (Accessed: 15 May 2025).

Cosmin, D.. 2022. *De ce iubesc croazierele si ce aduce ca sustenabilitate si spectacol cel mai nou vas din lume, Wonder of the Seas* [online] https://finesociety.ro/de-ce-iubesc-croazierele-si-ce-aduce-ca-sustenabilitate-si-spectacol-cel-mai-mare-vas-din-lume-wonder-of-the-seas (Accessed: 15 May 2025).

Deloitte Digital. 2020. *Cruisers Gonna Cruise* [online] https://www.deloittedigital.com/content/dam/deloittedigital/us/documents/offerings/offering20200730-hx-cruisers.pdf (Accessed: 30 April 2025)

Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., Christian, L. M. 2014. *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*. Wiley.

Fricker, R. D. 2017. *Sampling Methods for Web and E-mail Surveys*. In The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods (2nd ed.). [online] https://study.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/Fricker.pdf (Accessed: 20 October 2025)

Fusch, P. I., Ness, L. R., 2015. *Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research.* The Qualitative Report, 20(9), 1408–1416. [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282955844_Are_We_There_Yet_Data_Saturation_in_Qualitative_Research (Accessed: 10 October 2025)

Georgsdottir, I., Oskarsson, G. 2017. *Segmentation and targeting in the cruise industry: an insight from practitioners serving passengers at the point of destination*, The Business and

Management Review, Volume 8 Number 4. [online] https://cberuk.com/cdn/conference_proceedings/conference_17325.pdf (Accessed: 10 June 2025)

Guest, G., Bunce, A., Johnson, L. 2006. *How Many Interviews Are Enough? Field Methods*, 18(1), [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249629660_How_Many_Interviews_Are_Enough (Accessed: 10 October 2025)

Han, H., Chua, B., Sanghyeop. L. 2017. *Consequences of cruise line involvement: a comparison of first-time and repeat passengers.* International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management. [online] https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/ijchm-09-2015-0452 (Accessed: 10 June 2025)

Hendrick, A. 2024. *Expensive vacations and new destinations. Romanians don't look at money when it comes to ultra all inclusive*, [online] https://evz.ro/vacante-scumpe-si-destinati-noi-romanii-nu-se-uita-la-bani-cand-vine-vorba-de-ultra-all-inclusive.html (Accessed: 10 June 2025)

Huseyin, A., Mehmet, B. S., Hasan, K. 2020. *Cruise Travelers' Service Perceptions: A Critical Content Analysis* [online] https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/17/6702/pdf (Accessed: 30 April 2025)

Petrick, J.F. 2004. *First timers' and repeaters' perceived value*, Journal of Travel Research, 43(1), pp. 29–38, [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249701252_First_Timers%27_and_Repeaters%27_Perceived_Value (Accessed: 12 May 2025)

Porter, M.E. 1979. '*How competitive forces shape strategy*', Harvard Business Review, March–April.

Reichheld, A., McGlone Russell, D., Teegarden, L. 2018. *The next generation of cruise passengers has embarked. Personalized cruises sail away with profits* [online] https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/assets-zone3/us/en/docs/industries/consumer/2024/us-cruise-industry-analysis-passenger-experience.pdf (Accessed: 10 May 2025)

Revilla, M., & Ochoa, C. 2017. *Ideal and Maximum Length for a Web Survey Questionnaire*. International Journal of Market Research, 59(5), [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384454278_Ideal_and_Maximum_Length_for_a_Web_Survey (Accessed: 10 October 2025)

Sun, X., Kwortnik, R.J. and Gauri, D.K. 2018. '*Exploring behavioural differences between new and repeat cruisers to a cruise brand*', International Journal of Hospitality Management, 71, pp. 132–140. [online] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324140745_Exploring_behavioral_differences_between_new_and_repeat_cruisers_to_a_cruise_brand (Accessed: 15 May 2025)

Thornhill, T. 2025. *Travel experts reveal the truth about nine cruise ship myths, from claustrophobia to norovirus outbreaks*, [online] https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/cruise-ship-myths-vacation-norovirus-b2774044.html (Accessed: 25 June 2025)

Zhang, E. 2020. *OTA customer journey mapping: what has changed with COVID-19?* [online] https://www.travelport.com/insights/ota-customer-journey-mapping-otas-sample-leisure-travelers trip (Accessed: 8 June 2025)

Vola.ro. 2024. *Summer Trends: How Romanians traveled in the summer of 2024* [online] https://blog.vola.ro/summer-trends-2024 (Accessed: 12 May 2025)

Wondirad, A., Wu, K., Teshome, E., & Lee, T. J. 2023. '*What drives the consumption of cruise ship tourism? Analyzing factors that motivate visitors to participate in cruise ship holidays through a content analysis of selected journal publications'*, Cogent Social Sciences, 9(2) [online] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/23311886. 2023.2282411 (Accessed: 7 June 2025).