

Evolution of Tourist Behavior: Pre-Pandemic, Amidst COVID-19, and Post-Pandemic Trends

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Abstract:

The Corona Virus pandemic has rocked the tourism industry as countries sealed their borders and billions of people sheltered at home. But, as summer draws closer, areas that many areas reliant on tourism will miss out on their biggest season, countries and businesses are beginning to take cautious steps to reinstate travel services. To begin with behavioural pattern of tourists will undergo a massive change. Their preferred destination, cultures, adapting new habitat, mannerism will certainly not be as before. People have now become fully aware about the spread and outcome of this virus. Nevertheless, it has engulfed almost the whole globe. In this paper, analysis has been done to know the trends in tourism regarding perception, attitude, learning and motivating factors in the present context. Social distancing is the new terminology entering every phase of a tourist from choice of destination, planning, traveling, lodging, and dining. First-hand information will be sought from respondents belonging to different sector, different age groups, regular tourists, students, senior officials, businessmen. A questionnaire comprising of questions from different parameters will be asked. Online responses will be collected and analysed. Personal hygiene, cleanliness of food, dining area, lodging premises along with extensive use of sanitizer is the new beginning. Intimacy with friends, relatives and others are showing a downward trend. Western culture and its mannerism have started to take back seat in almost all kinds of professional meetings.

Key Words: Social Distancing, Sanitisation, Perception

Introduction

Tourism is an integral part of any nation. Not only does it provide relief and peace from work monotony to people but also acts as a rich source of revenue for many countries. Those regions which have limited opportunities for occupations get the benefit from it. It has been regarded as an industry which engages rich sources of manpower. It is a replica of our rich tradition, culture, religion, belief, and values. Man has always been curious to move to explore new places. This was one of the major reasons for the emergence of tourism.

The COVID 19 lockdown seems to have hit man and God alike. With doors of major shrines across the country shut for over 45 days now, daily collection of most of them has hit rock bottom, so much so that some managements are struggling to meet even their regular expenditures. Others are meeting the shortfall by dipping into their reserves. Due to lockdown these shrine managements are managing their expenses by "surplus funds". Tirupati Balaji temple in Andhra Pradesh has a cash reserve of Rs. 14000 crores. Religious destinations during peak season used to see maximum inflow of tourists. Certain religious tours such as "Haj" among Muslims, "Kumbh Mela" for Hindus, "Shobha Yatra" for Sikhs will now be secondary options for most of the tourists. Tourist's behaviour might undergo changes regarding the choice of destination. Religious destinations during peak season used to see maximum inflow of tourists. But times may change post COVID where fewer people going to such places even in lean season.

Literature Review:

After the outbreak of COVID-19, tourists' travel itinerary have changed tremendously everywhere in the world. People are highly concerned about the risk of infecting while travelling. Staying and moving around in a tourist

place govern their decision-making for a tourism trip. The importance of investigating the perceptions of travel risks has been recognized in literature ([Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021](#)).

Several studies have explored the consequences of COVID-19 on tourists' perceived risk and its impact on their future travel behaviour. The risk perception and its impact on tourism trips by Chinese travellers have been investigated by [Xie et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Jin et al. \(2021\)](#).

Investigations by various researchers have identified a number of factors that affect the tourists' perception in post-COVID era, like peoples' intra-pandemic risk perceptions ([Li et al., 2020](#); [Neuburger and Egger, 2021](#); [Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2021](#)), destination health-risk images ([Bhati et al., 2021](#); [Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021](#); [S. Yang et al., 2021](#)), travel fears and anxiety ([Zenker and Kock, 2020](#); [Zheng et al., 2021](#)), perceived knowledge ([Han et al., 2020](#)) and so on.

Several studies have been carried out to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on leisure, recreation and tourism sectors ([Gössling et al., 2020](#); [Y. Yang et al., 2020](#)) and also on their recovery ([Fotiadis et al., 2021](#); [Zhang et al., 2021](#); [Sigala, 2020](#)). The mechanism of recovery of tourism industry is different for different countries but for most of the countries, it starts with domestic tourism ([Gössling et al., 2020](#)). Systematic measures are necessary to resume the tourism trips in order to boost the industry and also the revenue generation. Tourists are now more concern about the hygienic measures that need to be considered by the service providers and also by the local government at the destination and in public transport.

Objectives:

- To have an insight about the tourist behavioural pattern.
- To know the prospects of tourism in India and abroad.
- To know the attitudinal change with respect to preferences of tour destinations.
- To know about the impact of social distancing and sanitization among the tourists.
- To know about the frequency of travelling among the tourists.

1. Risk Perception & Travel Intentions Post-COVID

- **Perceived health risks strongly discourage travel attitudes and reduce future travel intentions**, particularly in the post-pandemic context. This has been consistently demonstrated in surveys across diverse populations (e.g. Malaysian travellers).
- Travelers became significantly more sensitive to health-related risks after the pandemic, which in turn exerted a stronger negative impact on both destination image and likelihood to visit.

2. Insight: Chinese Travelers' Risk Behavior

- A study of Chinese leisure travellers found that **self-protection concerns (efficacy beliefs) mattered more than anxiety or perceived severity** in shaping behavior. Travellers viewed hygiene and contactless experiences as especially reassuring.
- Recommendations include stressing cleanliness protocols, reducing crowding, contact-free services, and using virtual or live-stream experiences to maintain engagement during restrictions.

3. Broader Population & Segment Effects

- Among Chinese students in San Francisco, levels of perceived risk influenced how travellers translate destination image into travel intentions: lower-risk students relied more on the affective (emotional) perception of their destination.
- Gender and age also played moderating roles: women were more risk-resilient, older travellers showed greater concern at high-risk levels, and less-educated groups were less responsive to risk information.

4. Impact on Destination Satisfaction & Imagery

- Perceived risk negatively affects satisfaction by damaging destination image and spurring protective behaviors. While self-protection behavior increased in response to perceived risk, it had no direct effect on satisfaction.
- In particular, pandemic management failures and ambiguity surrounding early COVID uncertainty further reduced post-pandemic intentions via elevated perceived risk and diminished perceived tourism value.

5. Implications for Tourism Stakeholders

- **Health and safety messaging matters:** Highlight contactless technology, hygiene, limited capacity, and virtual engagement channels to rebuild trust.
- **Tailor communications by traveler segment:** Younger vs older, male vs female, education level—all influence how risk information is perceived and processed.
- **Restoring destination image is key:** Mitigate risk perceptions to improve satisfaction and eventual travel behavior—even protective behaviors alone don't guarantee satisfaction if the destination image remains tarnished.

Emergence and Impact of Tourism Amidst COVID 19

Topography of one region is different from another. One tends to live in one region but aspires to explore adverse regions. For example, people residing in hills want to feel the warmth of sea beaches. People took tourism as a tool to break work monotony, to overcome work stress. Also, tourism provided jobs to almost 60 million people directly and about 100 million were indirectly associated. It comprised of unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled. But in the post COVID scenario, perceptions and planning will change. People would like to know more about the place, its COVID history, recovery status, health measures taken, the sanitation measures put in place, popularity of the place, etc. They may not prefer famous destination which were severely affected. Also considering the social distancing phenomenon, preference will be for remote regions or less known places and the *road less travelled*. Choice of destination will also be affected differently by different income groups. For high income groups social distancing and sanitisation will allow them to use private vehicle and luxurious travel options. However, middle income groups will wait for the outcomes of tourists before deciding. People will judge destination by online rating. It is expected that online bookings and in turn the agency that seamlessly provides the same will see a growth.

Places of historical importance are mostly preferred by tourists with young families. These are the images of our glorious past which we often like to visit with next generation. In post COVID situations those places where we can maintain social distancing will be preferred in comparison to where we are unable to. They might like to explore lesser known places.

Interaction amongst tourist might also see a change. Wearing of mask will prevent socialising among tourists. Fear of contracting such diseases might limit interaction amongst people. Talking to strangers to reduce work monotony will be a thing of past. Facial expressions play an important role in analysing a person, reading his intentions or motives. Mask will prevent them from doing so.

Most of the regular tourists belong to the category of super spenders. They are quite watchful for newer destinations. They hunt for new offers in travel, hospitality, and others. Post lockdown they seem to have frozen for at least six months in their homes only. They got their bookings cancelled. The asymptomatic behaviour of the Corona Virus has curtailed the movement of almost all national and international tourists.

Inputs from Primary Research

I conducted an online survey to collect first-hand information regarding tourist behaviour pattern. Total number of respondents were 104. Respondents were from various age groups, occupations and countries. They were frequent travellers.

Basic details of the respondents are as follows:

- Around 60% of the respondents were in the age groups of 20-26 years. 21% belonged to 35- 50 years. Rest were above 50 years.
- 36% respondents were comfortable to explore different tour destinations twice a year before lockdown.
- Respondents were mostly from India. Others were from Kuwait, Australia, Nigeria, and Norway.
- 62% tourists preferred to travel with family whereas 20% loved to travel solo. 19% were comfortable with their friend's group.
- Post lockdown 57% respondents would like to go for only national tourists' spots. 31% preference was mainly for national tourism whereas only 5% preferred international destinations.
- 98% of the respondents abided by the government norms of lockdown. Fearing the COVID-19 outbreak the cancelled their reservations and bookings for their tour programmes and stayed at home. Some of them postponed it too. 2% travelled during lockdown due to their personal reasons.
- 75% of the respondents had to cancel their tour due to lockdown.
- Post lockdown tourists were ready to adjust their travel plan. 45% respondents were ready to adjust while 37% would like to act according to circumstances.
- After the lockdown is removed 40% respondents were not sure whether they can plan to travel in the near future. 32% were ready to go after six months whereas 27 % preferred to go after one year.
- Preferred locations post lockdown will change for many tourists. 31% preferred mountainside. 28 % preferred beaches. 11 % wanted to visit historical spots. Pilgrim sites preference was for 9% respondents. Only 8% opted for tropical island resorts. Theme parks attracted only 3% of the respondents.
- Resorts plays an active part in Tourism as they provide the perfect ambience for pleasure and relaxation. They provide lots of facilities and attraction apart from only dining and lodging. Tourists take time from their busy schedule to visit these resorts to relax and spend time with families and friends. 21% respondents preferred swimming pool facilities. 19% of the respondents found the common dining and bar more entertaining. 18% preferred fun zones/ play areas. 15% respondents will try to avoid resorts post lockdown.
- Tourism used to swell during peak season. Be it festivals, scenic beauty, vacations, New Year or any other. But this year due to the outbreak of COVID-19 this behavioural pattern has undergone a drastic change. 55% respondents were not ready to take risk with their lives. They were not ready to go in peak season. 38% were indecisive when it came to this. They would be guided by the situation to make the decision.
- Preferred mode of transport might vary for tourists. 48% wished to travel only by Airways. 24% preferred railways. 18% preferred private transport whereas only 9% were comfortable with road transport.
- Before booking a destination there will be certain consideration for tourists in general. 64% respondents will review sanitation practices through trusted sites. 24% respondents will consider their friend and family's recommendation. Only 6% will rely on the word of travel agent.
- There might be certain new norms, new practices at different sites. More sanitization, cleanliness, packaged food items, thermal screening, etc. For this certain premium might be charged by the hospitality sector. 35% of the respondents were willing to pay for these premiums. 45% respondents were not sure about it. 20% respondents were not willing to pay any premium.
- On an average, respondents agreed to pay a premium of Rs. 5000 per person if the hotel provided the required sanitation. Willingness to pay ranged from Rs. 100 to Rs. 50000. The respondents who were willing to pay a premium were somewhat uniformly distributed across the income groups with 27.54%

having an annual income of less than Rs. 600000. 41 % lying between the group Rs. 600000 and Rs. 1000000 and 31.37% had annual income more than Rs. 1000000. It was seen that those who lied in the lower income bracket had lower willingness to pay but it was still significant as those whose income was less than Rs. 600000 agreed to pay Rs. 3500 per person.

Analysis and Findings

Having a holistic view of the responses gives a deeper understanding of the context.

Tourist in the age group of 35-50 have established families and are not ready to risk their family's lives. They are the ones who are ready to pay certain premium for extra facilities regarding sanitization, cleanliness, and others.

Another major change is being seen in the choice of destination. Tourists post lockdown have shown more interest in choosing mountainside and beaches more in comparison to others. Pilgrim Sites were the least preferred where there are negligible chances of social distancing. Sanitization will be yet another issue for them. Also, tourists are not ready to go for international spots where the COVID-19 outbreak was maximum, especially the European countries. Tourists have started giving more importance to domestic spots as compared to international ones.

We also came to know that tourism behaviour pattern is also affected by the income status of the tourists. Those with high income are ready to pay premium for better services, more conscious about social distancing and sanitization. Those with lower income prefer to stay back.

Tourists preferred to be with their families compared to friends as they were more aware about the medical history of their dear ones.

Restrictions were to be followed against overcrowding and polluting the places.

Telephonic interview had been taken to get the viewpoint of different persons engaged in the hospitality sector. Experts in hospitality sector said lockdown has left disastrous effects on the tourism sector worldwide, rendering millions of people jobless. According to a relationship manager of Club Mahindra Resorts, post lockdown thermal screening will be must for all entrants in the resorts. Dining Area and Fun Zone area will have proper social distancing. Newer resorts will be built in larger areas. Overall expenditure will be high, but they will not charge extra premium from their members. Another opinion was given by a small hotel owner at Gangtok, Mirik and Darjeeling, where he mentioned that dining area will be closed completely for guests. As it is rather difficult to expand area in hills. Packaged food will be served to the guests who will be residing there. Thermal screening and sanitization will be regular feature followed throughout the year. Also, they will add these features in their online reviews to make the customers aware. Another general manager of a resort in Rajgir was apprehensive of the situation post COVID-19 considering the Buddhist sites at Rajgir was visited by pilgrims of 16-17 countries usually and this crisis seems to be never ending.

The European commission on 13th May 2020 announced recommendation for travel across European union saying countries with similar level of Corona Virus outbreaks should ease restrictions. Some European countries have already begun experimenting with "travel bubbles", allowing movement within a group of specific nations. Austria said its border with Germany would reopen fully on June 15 and that border checks would be reduced starting May 15. Austria is announcing similar agreements with Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and its eastern neighbours. Latvia and Lithuania will allow travel among the three nations from 15th May. New Zealand, which reported zero new cases of the Corona Virus on May 13 and Australia have also agreed to allow travel between their two countries and have expressed interest in opening to other nations where transmission remain low.

Travel buffs are a breed apart. "More than the travel, it's the planning that gives me the kicks", says a CXO, For every holiday- at least once a quarter- she would meticulously research destinations, hotels, restaurants, walks and museums and compare them on an Excel sheet. Thanks to the lockdown her Goa holiday got cancelled. The summer break in Europe has been mixed. "There's nothing that I can plan for the future- for a very long time," she says.

She echoes what many globe trotters are feeling these days. Their favourite destinations are empty and pristine. The tariffs in luxury hotels have crashed to the carpet. But they cannot move out of their homes, forget flying out of their cities. All they can do is wistfully check the web, get some transient pleasure scanning through the offers, and then watch the clock ticking, second by second, season by season.

Meanwhile, the CXO has learnt to find pleasure in sending the WhatsApp forwards of the 80% deals that hotels are offering. “I am a deal hunter. That still gives me pleasure”, she says.

Conclusion

To sum up we can say that Tourism behaviour pattern has changed. Perceptual changes can be seen from mixing with people to staying away from people. Tourism used to invoke respect for other culture, develop new relationships, etc. But now attitude of tourists changed. Nobody wants to interact with a stranger. They are unable read their facial expression as it is hidden under the mask. Their intentions cannot be interpreted. According to the recent data at present the tourism industry has lost 38 million employees from 55 million in the past. Another 8- 10 million are likely to lose their jobs. The future looks grim. But we as tourists and citizens need to find better ways to revive this industry.

Suggested Measures

“Prevention is better than Cure “. We have often heard this proverb. This has now found its place in the present circumstances. We have not been able to find the cure for Corona Virus till now. Even as certain relaxations have been given to several sectors, the tourism and hospitality sector is still under strict restrictions. But, by following certain preventive measures we will surely be able to check its spread and revive this industry. Social distancing and sanitization, wearing masks by personnel, thermal screening are the new norms. All the tourist spots must follow these norms in future. Some older destinations which have lost its valour need to be revived. Lesser known places need to be tapped and developed for future. Certain States whose revenue have been greatly reduced due to pandemic need to take concrete decisions. They might try to convert this problem into an opportunity. For example, in Bihar there is negligible inflow of tourists to see Monolithic Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali, Tomb of Sher Shah Suri at Sasaram, Court Room of Ashoka: The Great, Migratory birds from Siberia at Begusarai. There is a chance that such lesser known places might gain prominence.

Pilgrim sites require more attention in terms of development. Cleanliness and social distancing should be given the utmost priority.

In response to social distancing recommendations, many aspects of life shifted from physical to online environments. Adapting to this change, most US adults (i.e, 90%) indicated that digital media was either essential or important for them throughout the pandemic. Digital media encapsulates social media as the platforms that enable human connection in the online environment, with varying degrees of privacy. On social media, individuals encounter and consume information, government announcements, and reactions from other users as they work, learn, connect, and are entertained online. In future, tourism may undergo certain changes like virtual tours offered by many tourism spots. Some of the world heritage offering virtual tours are:

1. The Louvre
2. Van Gogh Museum
3. The Vatican Museum
4. Metropolitan Museum of Art at New York
5. Rijks Museum at Amsterdam
6. Musee’ d’Orsay at Paris

We can also convert our rich cultural heritage depicted by historical spots, museums, art gallery, places of worship into virtual tours for business purposes. It will also prove to enhance our fallen economy.

According to Principal Secretary of tourism department of Bihar, Mr. Sanjay Kumar, post lockdown attracting people from within the state to visit different tourist sites in Bihar would be given priority. The focus will gradually shift to foreign and domestic tourists.

Time has opened new avenues for inviting perspective entrepreneurs in this sector. Measures should be engaged to employ local talent to avoid migration of workers.

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