



COVID-19 and the Future of Tourism: Back to Normal or Reformation?

M.R. Dileep*, Bipithalal Balakrishnan Nair**

Abstract *The COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous pressure on the tourism and hospitality industries. In the post-COVID-19 era, destinations ought to attain the right balance between public security and economic recovery. Many destinations are trying to achieve this equilibrium by limiting international tourism and, instead, by targeting domestic tourists. Given that the future of tourism relies on the survival of the safest and smartest destinations, it is essential to work together on the recent advances in the sector. To this end, this research examines the current trends and practise by applying an explorative qualitative study design incorporated with data triangulation. The study findings point out two prevailing schools of thought, viz. the new normal and back to normal. The technological innovations support the 'new normal' waves, call for sustainability, rebuild current tourism to create a more sustainable form, and regenerate domestic and special interest tourism such as solo tourism. At the same time, the 'back to normal' philosophies are fuelled by the past global crises and the exceptional bouncy characteristics of the tourism sector to recover. However, both of these viewpoints are further direct towards the growing body of uncertainties, which can be unique to the COVID-19 pandemic, where predictions were found to be off beam.*

Keywords: *Post-COVID-19, Expert Opinions, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Regenerative Tourism*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the entire world of shared challenges in many ways. How the global community responds and recovers from this crisis has insights into how countries can effectively manage their vulnerabilities and possibilities. Glossing et al. (2020) describe many reasons for this unprecedented crisis, such as the mass and scope of the pandemic, continuing uncertainties, and lack of medical treatments; and characterize of the n-Cov are some of them. Unprecedented travel bans and stay-at-home orders are causing the world's most enormous disruption ever before. International travel bans affect over 90 % of the world's population and have broad limits on public meetings and civic movement. Early evidence on air transport, cruise ships, and accommodation facilities was devastating, especially in tourism-dependent economies. The tourism and hospitality industries are at a standstill at many destinations, and few of the places are trying to reform or transform to the 'New Normal' with innovative concepts and practices to provide safe tourism.

A crisis is a situation that can lead to such dramatic changes in the affected areas. When a crisis strikes, it generally comes in a series of urgent, unexpected, and unpleasant occurrences, leaving less time to organise or prepare appropriate responses (Nathan, 2000). Tourism is highly susceptible to crises of varied sorts (Nair & Dileep, 2020; Ritchie et al., 2017; Faulkner, 2001; Beeton, 2002). COVID-19 pandemic had hastily brought in an unprecedented situation when almost all human activities outside homes were halted, at least temporarily. COVID-19 effects infringed the rights of tourists in their movement due to policy decisions, and the ongoing crisis provides an opportunity to redress the neglect in considering the human rights aspects in the parlance of tourism (Baum & Hai, 2020). The pandemic induced lockdown caused continued physical, material and mental health challenges, which altogether led to widespread dissatisfaction among the ordinary people and created a bag of severe emotional consequences among people which include a combination of great anxiety, bewilderment, and explosive emotions, as well as trust and anticipation (Samuel et al., 2020). The epidemic has a substantial impact on

* Associate Professor and Vice-Principal, Travel and Tourism Management, Pazhassiraja College (Calicut University), Wayanad, Kerala. Email: dileepmadhav@gmail.com

** Assistant Professor, Woosong University, South Korea. Email. bipi.nair@wsu.ac.kr (Corresponding Author)

worldwide society, and this impact will continue in the long run (Chang et al., 2020; Lappan et al., 2020). Though the COVID-19 pandemic is around, the world is gearing up to manage the new normal. Societies throughout the globe are debating how to reconcile the need to minimise COVID-19 dangers with other social, economic, and health goals (Lappan et al., 2020). Moreover, they also opine that due to the current pandemic, people are reimagining the mutual interaction ways, and some of the deep-rooted practices are being changed to reach the ‘New Normal’.

The existing condition of affairs after a significant shift has occurred. What transforms the expected, usual, and customary situation after an occurrence? Rather than bemoaning what might have been, the new regular forces individuals to adapt to their current circumstances. Moreover, these New Normal parameters will create future dimensions of tourism. Changes are visible in the elements of the industrial tourism system. Gossling et al. (2020) also argue that, due to the severe consequences of the pandemic, there is a need to reconsider the growth projections of the tourism sector, and some likelihoods are emerging, like changing fleet of airlines by discarding inefficient aircraft; increase in virtual meetings which can lead to less fly by business travellers; and changes in recreational mobility patterns, at least temporarily. Though many are dissatisfied due to the corona-induced restrictions, still a significant sentiment to remain safe and opt for following all the corona spread prevention protocols.

People are now being adapted to merging situations. Qiu et al. (2020), based on an empirical research on the social costs of tourism during the current pandemic, opined that the inhabitants are willing to bear the brunt of the crisis to contribute to risk reduction and crisis response. A variety of variables contribute to travellers’ aversion to travel, and media-related issues can influence travel inclination; as Zheng et al. (2020) pointed out, overblown and inaccurate media attention has a detrimental impact on travellers. Along with rebuilding efforts, the tourist industry is prepared for the change in various ways. The current crisis is unprecedented, and it has to be transformative for the tourism sector (Grossling et al., 2020). Prideaux et al. (2020) argue that global tourism is at a crucial juncture, facing transformation, in the wake of the current crisis, and so that lessons learned from the pandemic crisis can prepare the tourism sector for the economic transformation needed to face the challenges of climate change. Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) opines that this crisis poses the potentials of transforming the tourism industry, and it offers a golden opportunity to rethink and reset the sector in leading it in a better pathway for the future, particularly by adopting a ‘community-centred tourism framework’ which can cause more ‘socialised’ tourism through benefiting the public well. Brouder (2020) argues that the transformation of tourism

is more realistic in the longer term, and it can be realised when necessary institutional innovation has occurred on demand and the supply side of tourism that can promote the emergence of new paths.

COVID-19 pandemic leads to various innovative practices and techniques in the tourism system. Likewise, many studies are published every day. However, all these processes are again leading to two main arguments. As per McKercher (2020), there are two schools of philosophy. One is that it will profoundly alter how we travel (the New Normal), while another is that tourism is so embedded in our culture that it will return and resume its pre-crisis levels once the crisis passes. Both of these arguments are relevant in this situation. This study further examines experts’ thoughts, industry, and the general population following these points. This preliminary analysis helps to understand the current trends and practices, which shape the future of tourism.

METHODOLOGY

This explorative study follows the tenets of doctrines of the interpretive paradigm, as suggested by Lincoln & Guba (2005). Data and method triangulation have been applied to inspect the COVID-19 and the future of tourism in more than one specific way. “Information coming from different angles can be used to corroborate, elaborate or illuminate” the insights derived (Decrop, 1999, p. 158).

Collection of Data

Expert opinion - The free webinars conducted in the context of COVID-19 and tourism were the source of the expert’s opinion (coded as EO with the number). These are applied as unstructured focus group to gather information-rich content regarding pandemics (Disimulacio, 2020). Initially, nine webinars were screened, and in which regional-specific ones were not taken for the study. Finally, four webinars discussing were selected purposively considering the richness of information (Oliver, 2006).

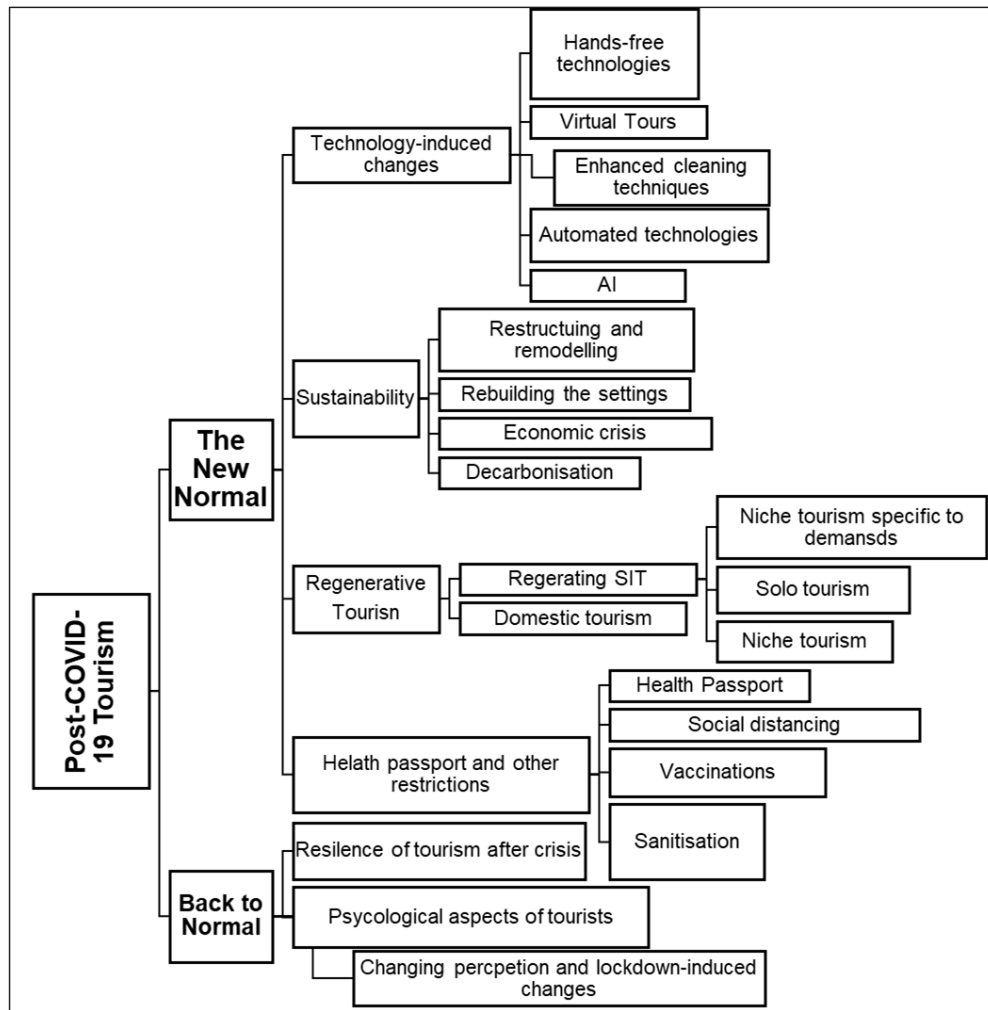
Media – Both online and printed newspapers (Coded as NP with a number) were analysed using keywords, such as the New Normal, COVID-19, Reformation of tourism, and so on.

Reflective thematic analysis was selected to analyse the data. Braun and Clarke (2019) well-defined thematic analysis as a technique for recognising, analysing, and reporting data patterns (themes). It organises and explains the data collection in (rich) detail. Firstly, the free codes (descriptive codes) were identified by the researchers independently to enhance reliability and validity. Secondly, the free codes were classified into themes using the interpretive coding technique.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The pandemic is changing the world in many ways as these recent changes have also bounced people’s business, tourism and hospitality sector. As a preliminary study, this research

note identified four prevailing themes (the ‘new normal’ trend, back to normal thoughts, sustainability issues, and regenerative regional tourism).



Source: Authors

Fig. 1: Thematic Diagram

The ‘New Normal’ Trends

- Technology and AI

In the tourism and hospitality sector, post-COVID-19 strategies are of varied kinds. As per Expert 1 (EO-1), post-COVID strategies will affect the aspects of the hospitality sector, such as *investment preferences, digital and intelligent transformation, and market upheaval* are some of the issues that need to be addressed. Using cutting-edge technology, social distancing is now achievable in the hotel business. According to Shin and Kang (2020), the hotel industry

relies on smartphone check-in systems, self-service consoles, and robot housekeeping systems to reduce direct worker engagement with visitors. Advanced cleaning technologies for enhanced disinfection (e.g., electrostatic sprayers, ultraviolet-light technology, etc.) is also being used (Garcia, 2020). AI technologies are widely used for check-in and customer identification mainly. Some locations, such as Columbia, have implemented bio-safety accreditation, which declares the breadth of hotel safety precautions in avoiding the spread of coronavirus (Moss, 2020). Hotels, such as Hilton, are going to attempt to be using electromagnetic spray bottles with hospital-grade cleaning agents,

frequent cleaning of 'high-touch substrate surface, complement paper amenities with digital amenities, phone contact for all communication systems, placing room seal to indicate the freshness of the room, and so on. (Garcia, 2020). Corona induced psychological aspects and the need to overcome it became a base for suggesting an innovative wellness tourism product, "healing tourism", involves psychological intervention and counselling methods in order to offer psychological aid to tourists, as an opportunity to achieve mental solace by engaging tourism (Ma et al., 2020). 'Staycation' (spending more time in resorts than on sightseeing), 'niche tourism,' solo travel trips (using private cars), wellness tours, and digital travel are some of the current rising trends in tourism (Yuswohady, 2020).

- Issues of Sustainability

The coronavirus outbreak is an opportunity to restore the tourism sector much more sustainably. Cultivating eco-tourism projects will ensure that the sector recovers and nature goes hand in glove. The term decarbonisation (NP-15) has been appeared in many contexts as the prime mover to ensure sustainable development. As per the opinion of one politician:

This time around, we must seize the opportunity to make the global recovery plan sustainable for our climate and our environment; to motivate and improve the poor, disadvantaged, and oppressed in our societies; and to promote democratic and open governance (EO – 5).

However, the concerns about sustainability are hindered when it comes to economic degrowth due to the present halt in the tourism industry.

I think COVID-19 has crowded out the acute crisis and lost us a valuable year or two to hammer the sustainability arguments louder and more straightforward. Bank balances are low, and refilling the coffers anyway I fear they will prevail (EO-12).

- Regenerative Tourism

COVID-19 pandemic induces many forbidden zones of tourism to regenerate or revitalise. Sudden travel restrictions and closing borders rebuild the importance of domestic tourism worldwide. Staycation and micro-holidays are more common and identified as the upcoming popular forms of tourism (EO-3). Similarly, rural-slow tourism, virtual tourism, and solo tourism are the identified trends (NP -42). In which virtual tourism, opined to be the trendsetter,

One positive result of the crisis is that it has accelerated a digital transition, which has made museum expertise and collections available to everyone from the comfort of home (NP-14)

However, experts identified that virtual tours are the early-stage interest for the people, which suddenly drops demands (EO-3). The main reason is:

The on-site experience, the experience with a native community, a global city, and a foreign past that can never be turned into a computer interface. That fabulous days and tourism is going to come back soon (NP-13).

- Health Passports and Regulation

The inevitable health-related cautions shape future travel, for instance, health passport, quarantine, social distancing, and PPEs. COVID-19 free certificates are mandatory for making international or interprovincial travel in many regions. As per NP-12, "Health passport is a presentable confirmation of immunity of COVID-19", and NP-11 mentioned it as a "the fulcrum of new normality." Social distancing and hand sanitisation have also become a big concern for developing touch-free technologies and physical reconstruction in the travel/hospitality and hospitality sector. Instead, these regulations are considered as an extra burden with the hard economic downturn and loss of business.

Back to Normal

On the other hand, the contradictory school of thought strongly chains the 'back to familiar' thoughts by considering the previous crisis. As per EO-1, crisis and pandemics are not new to the business, and after the invention of vaccination or successful preventive measurements, people suddenly started a travel and predicted the forthcoming year as a successful one for tourism. Many destinations like Costa Rica has already unfastened their door for tourism. As per EO-4,

The notion of opening up to tourists has gained momentum, and several countries are taking meaningful steps.

There are some serious concerns about the demand side were noticed that the psychology of tourists would play a pivotal role. Recent reports show the behaviour changes that could reshape the back to everyday thoughts since 70% of future travellers expressed their concerns to travel abroad due to the fear of death or infection (EO-10).

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 pandemic challenges the world and has been affected by all sectors of human life. The tourism and hospitality industries are one of the most affected ones fuelled by the travel bans, health regulations and second/third waves of the pandemic. The impact was severe for those countries, which heavily depend on tourism. The revolving uncertainties, lack of proper immunisation/medical treatments, growing debates about the mutagenic

properties of the n-COV virus, and the global spreading make the COVID-19 crisis unique from past situations. This preliminary study is a part of a larger platform to envisage the future of tourism and hospitality innovative practices post-COVID-19. The immediate findings identified two prevailing thoughts in the tourism and hospitality sector about the future of tourism.

On the one hand, there is strong advocacy for reforming pre-COVID-19 tourism to formulate more sustainable, technological-oriented, regenerative tourism. However, the growing economic downturn affects the fundings for these constructive changes regarding practicality limitations. Perhaps, the economic crisis creates a more unsustainable cutdown of the present scenarios. On the other hand, a prevailing wave of 'back to normal' thoughts exists by stating the 'bouncing nature of tourism', proven by the past week. Were those thoughts supported by the optimistic views of vaccine/immunisation formation and essential characteristics of tourists' eagerness to travel?

This study also identified technological advancements in this sector, especially artificial intelligence, and hands-free innovations. However, as a people's business, it could be argued that technology can replace actual human interference and interactions. Similarly, growing call for sustainability to reshape or restructure current tourism considering the over-tourism, carbon footprints, social contributions of tourism. However, this also could be questionable as this context of degrowth and close-down or lay off time for tourism-related jobs. To this end, this study also underlines the growing uncertainties around the COVID-19 pandemic as the most challenging aspects, which stress out future tourism.

This study is in infancy and therefore suggests future researches to identify the impact of technology on the future of the tourism sector in the post-COVID-19 era. Also, it highlights the need for demand-side analysis since tourists' psychological aspects will be the fundamental dimensions that shape tourism tomorrow. Moreover, the current study has many limitations. First, this study relies on the secondary source of data. Second, considering the vast scope of this crisis, only a particular context could be covered.

REFERENCES

- Baum, T., & Hai, N. (2020). Hospitality, tourism, human rights and the impact of COVID-19. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 32(7), 2397-2407.
- Beeton, S. (2002). The cost of complacency: Horseback tourism and crisis management revisited. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 5(5), 467-470.
- Brouder, P. (2020). Reset redux: possible evolutionary pathways towards the transformation of tourism in a COVID-19 world. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 484-490.
- Chang, C., McAleer, M., & Ramos, V. (2020). A charter for sustainable tourism after COVID-19. *Sustainability*, 12(9), 3671.
- Decrop, A. (1999). Triangulation in qualitative tourism research. *Tourism Management*, 20(1), 157-161.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Disimulacion, M. A. T. (2020). MICE tourism during COVID-19 and future directions for the new normal. *Asia Pacific International Events Management Journal*, 2(1), 11-17.
- Faulkner, B. (2001). Towards a framework for tourism disaster management. *Tourism Management*, 22(2), 135-147.
- Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. (2020). Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), 1-20.
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2020). Socialising tourism for social and ecological justice after COVID-19. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 610-623.
- Lappan, S., Malaivijitnond, S., Radhakrishna, S., Riley, E., & Ruppert, N., (2020). The human-primate interface in the New Normal: Challenges and opportunities for primatologists in the COVID-19 era and beyond. *American Journal of Primatology*, 82(8).
- Nair, B. B., & Dileep, M. R. (2020). A Study on the Role of Tourism in Destination's Disaster and Resilience Management. *Journal of environmental management and tourism*, 11(6)
- Oliver, P., & Jupp, V. (2006). *Purposive sampling*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Prideaux, B., Thompson, M., & Pabel, A. (2020). Lessons from COVID-19 can prepare global tourism for the economic transformation needed to combat climate change. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 667-678.
- Ritchie, B., Mair, J., & Walters, G. (2014). *Tourism Crises and Disasters*. The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Tourism, 611-622.
- Samuel, J., Rahman, M., Ali, G., Samuel, Y., & Pelaez, A. (2020). Feeling like it is time to reopen now? COVID-19 new normal scenarios based on reopening sentiment analytics. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi:10.20944/preprints202005.0318.v1