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Developing Relational Constructs to Control Tourist Engagement in Low-Engaging Autochthonous Destinations in Post COVID-19 Environment

Arup Kumar Baksi*, Bivraj Bhusan Parida**

Abstract *The whiplash of COVID-19 has induced stagnancy across the global tourism industry. The post-pandemic resurrection of the sector is apprehended to be shaped by new industry and social norms governing stakeholders' attitudes and behaviours. The relational framework governing the service industry is likely to undergo dimensional shift as the choice of destinations will no longer be default and biased by popularity. The apprehensive tourist would explore destinations, which might offer transformative and immersive experience instead of conventional engagement. Autochthonous destinations, secluded from the vibrant ones, might hold the key to balance the urge of the traveler, the revival initiative of the industry and the new societal norms. This paper empirically explores the emerging relational constructs that might control tourist engagement in rural autochthonous destination with constrained scope of conventional engagement. The results identified a five-factor model (value co-creation scope, perceived health risk, destination authenticity, trust and continuance commitment) for the tourist relational-base and a three-factor model (host-bonding, transformational activity and absorption) for tourist engagement. The results revealed that value co-creation scope and destination authenticity are likely to build up trust resulting in continuance commitment, which subsequently had an impact on the engagement dimensions. It was also found that higher level of perceived health risk would compromise the overall relationship. While the results supported and reinforced the existing and emerging theories governing relationship marketing and its impact on tourist engagement, it also hinted towards the shifting cognition and behavioural intention in response to the pandemic scenario. The study could be extrapolated with new variables, namely tourist involvement, self-brand congruence etc. to have a deeper understanding on engagement.*

Keywords: *Relational Construct, Tourist Engagement, Control, Impact, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

An influenza like condition was detected in Wuhan, China and was first reported to the WHO Country Office in China on 31 December 2019. By the first week of January 2020, more than 40 patients with confirmed infections by a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) had been admitted to hospitals in China (Huang et al., 2020). The structural and genomic novelty of the virus escalated the spread and Wuhan was put into lockdown (a combination of regional and individual quarantine measures). However, the global air-transport ensured the penetration of the virus across the continents. As a response mechanism, the air-transport across the globe was grounded and by the end of March 2020, the nations entered into self-inflicted quarantine. Within the nations the scenario was no different as inter-state/ inter-province mobility (of human, goods and services) were disrupted, immediately affecting the tourism systems (Gössling et al., 2020). The virus affected the tourism value chain in major global destinations and induced a shift from overtourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Seraphin et al., 2018) to no-tourism, graphically illustrated by the travel blogs (Gössling et al., 2020; Cond_e

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Nast Traveller, 2020) India could not escape the eventuality as transnational ethno-cultural events, namely *Basantotsav (the festival of colours)* initiated by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore at Santiniketan, that lured millions of travelers across the world was cancelled within a day's notice. Major part of the Indian tourism industry, being unorganized, faced the immediate heat of unemployment, survival and uncertain recovery. It has been recognised that COVID-19 was no ordinary shock and did not have any analogue since the major expansion in global tourism during 1950s (Gössling et al., 2020). However, there is silver lining as evidence were gathered in support of an evolving and transformative tourism scaffold. These evolutionary changes were triggered ever since the new-generation pathogens were found to inflict heavy casualty, namely severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak (2003), the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) outbreak (2015) etc. The evolving uncertainty associated with the pandemic and policy responses had been exemplified in estimates of COVID-19 impacts on the tourism sector by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), which were significantly revised between early and late March, 2020. UNWTO (2020a) changed their projection from 1-3% (6th March, 2020) to 20-30% (26th March, 2020) in terms of declining tourist arrivals. These major modifications demonstrated the difficulty of projections at this time. Therefore, all estimates of eventual consequences for tourism, from the supply-side perspective, must be interpreted with extreme caution, and are at best indicative at present.

At the same time, a major behavioural change in the demand side is forecasted as the relationship marketing framework is likely to be reframed with new dimensions. The travel decisions and motives, with specific reference to choice of destinations, might undergo significant changes as the shape of the new normal, governed by social distancing and personal hygiene, would put the prospective travelers in a dilemma in choosing between high-engagement popular destinations with trends of overtourism that might compromise health and lesser known remote destinations with intellect-driven tourism orientation offering limited engagement scope (in traditional tourism sense), but assuring transformative experience and acceptable level of crowding. Autochthonous establishments, across the globe, provided the inquisitive and intellect-driven tourists with the opportunity to engage in transformative tourism through the process of acculturation. Tacana communities in Madidi National Park, Bolivia; Austronesian tribes in Taitung city in Taiwan; aboriginal communities in Broome, Western Australia; Maasai communities in Kenya and Tanzania and Five Nations in Vancouver, Canada are some of the autochthonous destinations that offered differentiated tourism products to the visitors. Autochthonous rural destinations having rich existence of indigenous culture, lesser penetrated and intervened rustic environment and opportunity to stay might be the right kind of getaways. The new relational base is likely to exercise control in engaging tourists with such kind of destinations for a meaningful and lasting interaction which may spin out value for both the subject and the object (Zhou et al, 2020). The new tourist engagement platform is likely to embed co-creation of value as the tourists are projected to enact role-reversal to maximize the immersive experience, and, at the same time would be transformative in nature, thereby capturing the peak, extraordinary and transcendent experiences (Kirillova et al., 2017b; Coghlan and Weiler, 2015; Jefferies and Lepp, 2012 and Saunders et al., 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Embededness of firms in complex ecosystem has induced fragmentation of academic research on relationship marketing in the areas of relationship communication (Balaji et al., 2016), relationship dynamics (Harmeling et al., 2015), negative notions in close relationships (Anderson and Jap, 2005) and relationship under disruption and recovery initiatives (Martin, 2016). This notion has been widely supported by the observations made van Tonder and Petzer (2018), Gummerus et al. (2017), and Sheth (2017). Loyalty & attachment (Coulter & Coulter, 2002), honesty, benevolence & competence (Moorman et al., 1992) and reliability & integrity (De Wulf, 2001) were some of the factors thrown into the equation to predict the orientation and dynamics of relationship. Further, in the context of service markets, 'perceived value' (Roig et al., 2006), 'perceived return-on-quality' (Rust et al., 2000) and 'service recovery' (Hess et al, 2003) were also found to shape relationship. Pandemic inflicted by COVID-19 has abruptly brought the vibrant global tourism industry to a virtual standstill (Gössling et al., 2020). With prevailing incapability to conceive re-building to pre-COVID levels of demand (Bariso, 2020) and an overall compulsion of all visitor-serving organisations to adapt new economic, social and behavioural norms, business models are bound to change (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Exacerbated and traumatized, the socially isolated instinctive travelers must be behaviourally evolving and contemplating on travel relationships based on sustainability issues (Raworth, 2020; Rifkin; 2019) and inculcation of anti-fragility (Haywood, 2020). Therefore, the modified relational framework might be grounded on co-creation opportunity, health related issues and authenticity of destination evoking a sense of trust and commitment to ensure tourist engagement through transformational activities, absorptive experience and in emotional solidarity with the host community.

Tourism-based co-creation, which refers to the synergistic creation of value by the tourists while interacting with the tourism products on offer, remains poorly understood (Chathoth et al., 2016), though, further insight into this

concept is expected to support better understanding about tourist interaction and engagement to facilitate effective infusion of designing elements to control tourism experience (Shaw et al., 2011). Co-creation can also be considered as a relational construct likely to impact tourist engagement as the concept has been widely studied in the context of customer engagement induced by relationship marketing (So et al., 2016; Vivek et al, 2012). Co-creation, as explained by service-dominant (S-D) logic, can create synergistic value through exchange mechanism between actors engaged in service transaction and is apprehended to contribute in tourist engagement with tourism products offered. This apprehension is supported by theoretical posits that considers service systems as value creation process involving actors in exchange mode (Blazquez-Resino et al., 2015; Edvardsson et al., 2011). However, studies involving co-creation as a relational construct in the context of tourism remains scant (Chathoth et al., 2016; Grissemann a& Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Co-creation and customer engagement were previously linked (Hollebeek et al., 2016; Groeger et al., 2016), though co-creation was never assessed as an antecedent to tourist engagement. In a study by Rather et al (2019) co-creation was dimensionalised (Ranjan & Read, 2016) into (a) *value-in-use and (b) co-production.* Relatively unexplored autochthonous destinations with inoculated indigenous tourism products could engage tourists in value co-creation in post pandemic phase. Opportunity to co-create value would also take into consideration the authenticity of the autochthonous destination for possible relational attachment.

Post COVID-19 travel motives and destination choice would be grounded on minimization of health risk as a result of which there could be a phenomenon to avoid popular destinations characterized by overtourism. As social distancing has been posited as the new normal, there could be a surge to explore new destinations embedded with autochthonous culture and heritage. However, destinations' authenticity would place a major role in the relational process. Perceived destination authenticity could be explored from literature, communications or lived experiences (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2018; Ram et al., 2016; Rickly-Boyd, 2012). The cognitive realignment of tourist in post COVID-19 phase would look for a justified and acceptable equilibrium between sacrificing visit to popular places with high engagement and leisure scope and travelling to places with rather intellect-driven tourism products and devoid of major natural assets. Therefore authenticity of the destination would play a critical role in the relationship. Extant literature revealed 'originality' (Ra & Hollebeek, 2019; Rickly-Boyd, 2012), 'symbolic authenticity' (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) and 'objective authenticity' (Bryce et al., 2015) as basic evaluative parameters to assess authenticity of destinations. Studies also suggested that perceived destination authenticity was likely to affect behavioural pattern (Ram et al., 2016) and induce travel motives (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2018). Destination authenticity was apprehended to affect the trust level.

However, COVID-19 pandemic had disturbed the trust orientation of the tourist due to low-level of perceived health-safety in travelling. The new normal would likely to embed 'perceived health risk' in the relational dynamics involving the tourists and their travel-related decisions. Studies were not carried out with 'perceived health risk' as a relational construct to assess tourist engagement. However, previous research works revealed that persistent health risk was influential in traveling decisions (Chien et al., 2017). Assorted risk perception in different contexts was established on empirical grounds about its antecedent effects on consumer loyalty (Scridon et al., 2019) which subsequently affected sustainable business models (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic & Zabkar, 2017). Studies hinted risk perception as surrogated relational variable whereby attempt were made to understand tourists' psyche in order to determine their general risk predisposition irrespective of types of risks perceived to develop effective communications related to travel health and safety (Hajibaba et al., 2015; Williams & Balaž, 2015). COVID-19 escalated 'sensation-seeking propensity' (Chien et al., 2017) which contributed to the spiraling perceived risk related to health and would require perceived control to mitigate with the same.

Scope to co-create value in low-engaging autochthonous destinations and perceived health risk (stimulating travel decisions) were apprehended to induce trust and commitment. Both trust and commitment were studied extensively as relational constructs. While trust related to the degree to which authentic travel experience could be provided (Kandampully et al., 2015; Bowden, 2009; Grabner-Kräuter & Faullant, 2008), commitment referred to attitudinal feelings, and, more importantly, participation in specific behaviour Fullerton (2014). Information-sharing behaviour was found to improve trust level (Chen et al., 2016) and would be critical in minimization of perceived health risk. In the context of this study continuance commitment, rather than affective and normative commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990), would be an appropriate relational construct to explore as it was studied to be conditioned by compromised choice and non-availability of alternatives as post COVID-19 phase would likely to limit travelling to relatively unknown destinations, namely, remote autochthonous places.

Studies have identified a number of antecedent constructs of customer engagement in tangible product industry, namely customer involvement (Dessart, 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Brodie et al., 2011), retail atmospherics (Choi & Kandampully, 2018), value congruence and self-brand image (Islam et al., 2018), interaction, attention, absorption & affection (van Tonder & Petzer, (2018) etc. While summarizing the findings of research on customer

engagement since 2005, Islam and Rahman (2016) concluded that engagement function could be factorized on interaction with focal object with varying intensity over time. Engagement for intangible and heterogeneous tourism industry is apprehended to be much more complex as psychosomatic interpretations of the tourism products and services will be based on individual cognition and socioemotional value perception. Tourist engagement, therefore, refers to emotional and behavioural investments of the tourists during their interactions with the focal tourism brands (Hollebeek et al., 2016). Research insights on tourist engagement had considered it as a complex psycho-behavioural attachment of the tourists with the tourism products (Dewnarain et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Taheri et al., 2014) and was observed to make positive contribution to augment brand experience, thereby, contributing in boosting firm's bottomline (Taheri et al., 2014). The existing research initiatives on assessing tourist engagement predominantly focused on the tenure of stay of the tourists in destinations and their repeat visit patterns (Falk & Storksdieck, 2005). On the other hand, destination-affinity (Loureiro & Sarmento, 2018; Ram et al., 2016) was also identified as antecedent constructs of tourist engagement. Loureiro and Sarmento (2018) also hinted that experiential traveling could shape engagement pattern. Studies also assessed tourist engagement in connection with online reviews using travel-blogs (Wei et al., 2013), social network interactions (Baumöl et al., 2016; Harrigan et al., 2017, 2018), heritage destinations (Bryce et al., 2015) and logistic brands (So et al., 2012). The empirical studies on tourist engagement were carried out, primarily, in prominent tourist destinations with high-engagement scope where tourist engagement was found to be driven by pull and push motives (Villamediana-Pedrosa et al., 2019) and reflected loyalty pattern. However, the high-engagement oriented destinations carry the risk of overtourism and would compromise with the norm of social distancing, the only known non-pharma intervention in COVID-19.

However, for destinations, which are relatively unexplored with low-engagement, scope may provide tourists with possible gateways to shake-off the claustrophobic feeling induced by pan-nation lockdown, in post COVID-19 scenario. The risk-aversive nature of travelers and the requirement to comply with a persistent social-distancing norm might inflict an avoidance attitude for those destinations offering high-engagement scope with their established and popular tourism products, and, thereby, amplifying the possibilities of a contagion situation based on tourist congestion. This scenario offers the tourists to explore low-engagement oriented destinations, which are conceptualised as places offering alternative tourism products, namely tranquil-stay, and secluded cultural immersion (offered by autochthonous destinations). The low-engagement destinations are relatively unexplored, devoid of exotic landscape and have little or no pilgrim significance, thereby, could evoke a sense of predisposition in the apprehensive mind of the tourists to execute a travel decision. Autochthonous destinations, namely tribal villages, aborigine spreads, rural cultural hubs etc. may offer the right kind of destination-mix in the post COVID-19 phase based on limited tourist intervention. Recent researches on traveling with limited intervention in lesser extravagant destinations (with low-engagement scope) focused on the scope of 'staycation'. Study conducted by James et al. (2016) revealed that culture and heritage (including performing arts), local cuisine and health consciousness enacted as factors driving the staycation travelers to destinations with limited scope for tourist engagement. Tourism experiences and attached memories were also analysed using interaction ritual (IR) theory (Collins, 2004) to develop a micro-sociological interpretation of these phenomena arising out of visiting relatively unknown destinations with low-engagement scope leading to the explanation of trans-dimensional nature of transformational cultural & heritage tourism (Sterchele, 2019). Transformative tourism was studied in the context of 'wellness' (Fu et al., 2015), life-altering experience (Jefferies & Lepp, 2012), value-driven sensitivity (Fu et al., 2015; Kirillova et al., 2017b) and co-creation (Kirillova et al., 2017). Transformational activity could well be the engaging element in low-engaging destinations. For example, role-reversal (Baksi, 2017; Baksi, 2016) was identified as a transformational co-creation based activity, hyper-experiential in nature, in rural autochthonous destinations. Immersed involvement with autochthonous destinations with intellectual tourism products to offer would lead to a kind of absorbed engagement (van Tonder & Petzer, 2018). Interaction with host-community was identified as an enriching trip-experience (Zahra & McGehee, 2013) which could intensify tourist engagement in lesser-known destinations. Bonding with hosts, however, was expected to be physically remote and based on emotional solidarity (Joo et al., 2018).

This study, therefore, had an objective to reinvestigate the relational constructs in the context of tourism and extrapolate the constructs with the tourist engagement dimensions. Further, the study objectified the prevailing COVID-19 scenario to decode the apprehended shift in the relational base and consequent changes in the tourist engagement platforms. The study embedded the notion of possible shift in the choice of destination in pandemic-inflicted restrictions and considered transformational tourism activities in autochthonous destinations.

Theoretical Model

Apropos review of literature the study hypothesized:

H1a: Scope of value co-creation (VCS) positively influence trust (TRS).

H1b: Perceived destination authenticity (DAU) positively influence trust (TRS).

H1c: Perceived health risk (PHR) positively influence trust (TRS).

H2: Trust (TRS) positively affects continuance commitment (COM).

H3a: Scope of value co-creation (VCS) positively influence continuance commitment (COM).

H3b: Perceived health risk (PHR) positively affects continuance commitment (COM).

H4a: Continuance commitment (COM) positively influence absorption (ABS).

H4b: Continuance commitment (COM) positively influence host bonding (HBN).

H4c: Continuance commitment (COM) positively influence transformational activity (TRN).

A theoretical model was developed (Fig.1) involving all the identified variables

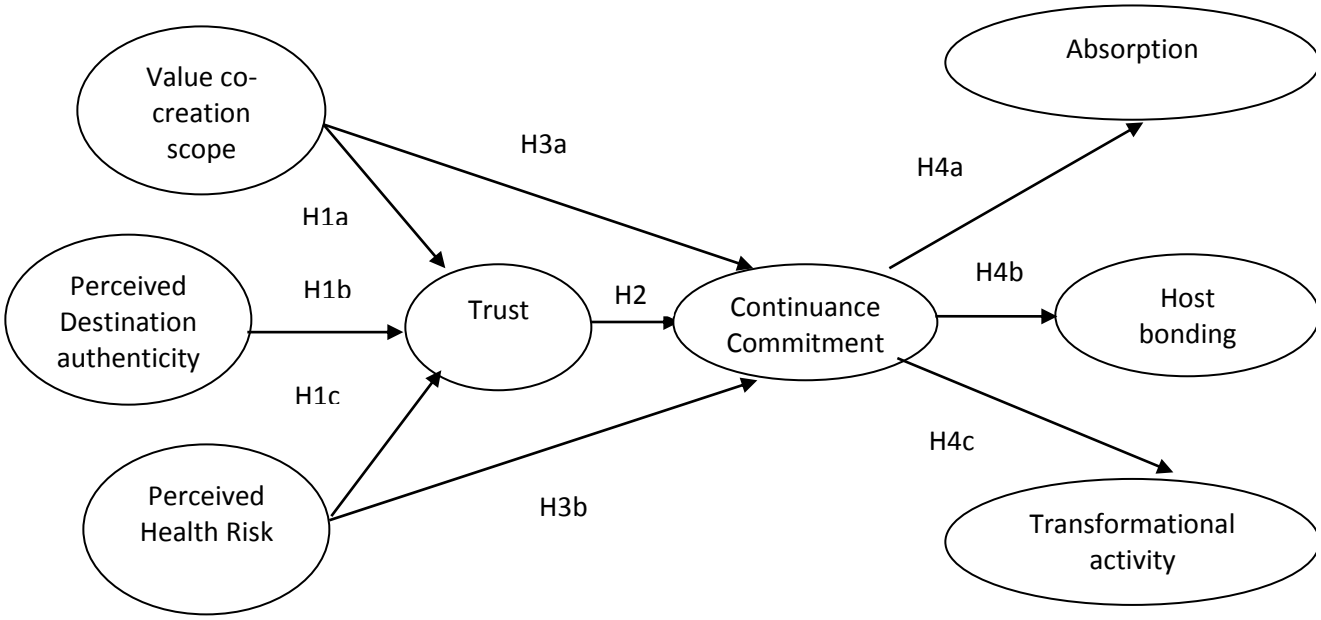

Fig. 1: Proposed Theoretical Model

METHODOLOGY

Following empirical procedures recommended in the context of tourism (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Kim et al., 2010) in developing and validating a multi-item instrument to capture relational constructs (RC) and tourist engagement (TE), this study conformed with the scale development methods recommended by Netemeyer et al. (2003). Initial pool of item was generated and assessed for the content validity. The entire study was segregated into two phases. Phase-I. aimed to refine the measurement scale and test the internal consistency of the scale. Phase-II of the study tested and validated the refined scale with confirmatory and validation samples (Kim et al., 2010). The confirmatory sample was used to examine the psychometric properties of the measurement model, whereas the validation sample was used to test the generalizability of the scale. To test the predictive validity of the scale, in Phase-II TE was measured as an outcome variable of RC. The selection of the construct was justified by the emerging scenario inflicted by COVID-19 that RC would potentially be a predictor of TC (van Tonder & Petzer, 2018; So et al., 2016; Islam & Rahman, 2016; Vivek et al., 2012). Considering the experiential nature of the study and affected by the lockdown scenario, the study focused on convenience sampling using virtual mode of connecting with the prospective respondents. Accordingly, the study used 'unrestricted self-selected survey' (Barratt et al., 2014; Poynter, 2010; Fricker, 2008; Berson et al., 2002) method whereby an online-survey instrument was developed and propagated through social-media and harvested e-mails (from known prospects) only. It was acknowledged that the convenience sampling method might affect the external validity of the results to such extent that it could be generalized on entire population (Ihantola and Kihn, 2011). However, the study followed the observations by Landers and Behrend (2015) and van Tonder and Petzer (2018) and

focused on internal validity instead of the external as the research question was grounded on probability of occurrence under uncertain conditions (eg. COVID-19 environment) rather than frequency of existing occurrence. Therefore, the aim of the study was to provide initial insight into the interrelationships between relationship marketing constructs and tourist engagement, which was expected to be impacted by COVID-19 environment.

The conceptual definitions, considered appropriate for the constructs, were identified from the review of literature. Value co-creation was measured with an initial pool of 12 items (Rather et al., 2019; Ranjan and Read, 2014; Hunt et al, 2012; Grissemann and Stokburger-Sauer, 2012; Chathoth et al. 2012; Parry et al. 2012; Arvidsson 2011; Ertimur and Venkatesh 2010). Our place authenticity scale 7 items modified from Rather et al. (2019), Loureiro and Sarmento, (2018); Ram et al., (2016); Rickly-Boyd (2012) and Kolar and Zabkar (2010). Scale items about perceived health risk were extracted from the works of Chien et al. (2017), Hasan et al. (2017), Cetinsoz and Ege (2013), Menon et al. (2008), Uriely and Belhassen (2006), Brewer et al.(2004) and Wilder-Smith et al. (2004). There were 7 items in the initial pool. Trust and continuance commitment was measured using an initial pool of 6 and 7 items respectively adopted from the studies of Rather et al (2019), van Toder and Petzer (2018) and Verhoef et al. (2002). The variables to measure tourist engagement were populated with scale items from various studies and were made contextual by incorporating some new items. Absorption was measured using 6 items adopted from So et al. (2012), Hollebeek (2009), Patterson et al. (2006), Bakker, and Salanova (2006) and Salanova et al. (2005). Transformational activity was measured using seven items collected from the studies of Kirillova et al (2017), Bottorff (2015), Reisinge (2013b) and Zahra and McIntosh (2007). Host bonding was measured with 5 items (Zahra & McGehee, 2013; Joo et al., 2018)

DATA ANALYSIS

Phase-I Study: Item Purification and Scale Reliability

Phase-I of the study was conducted to assess the internal reliability of the scale and to check the dimensionality. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used for the process. The survey instrument was structured and electronically administered. An invitational e-mail was sent to potential respondents encouraging participation in the survey stating its objectives and implications in COVID-19 scenario. The respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree/ disagree using a 7 point Likert scale with '1' indicating *strongly disagree* and '7' indicating *strongly agree*. 271 potential respondents were approached on the virtual platform with the survey instrument, which resulted in 139 complete and valid response (rate of response: 51.29%). Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure (KMO = .842) confirmed sampling adequacy (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001). Bartlett's test of sphericity confirmed that the data was amenable to EFA (chi-square = 6093.566, df = 138, sig. = .000). Relational construct RC) converged in a five factor model (total variance extracted: 74.57%): *value co-creation scope* (5 items), *perceived destination authenticity* (4 items), *perceived health risk* (3 items), *trust* (3 items) and *continuance commitment* (3 items). Tourist engagement was identified with three factors: *absorption* (6 items), *host bonding* (4 items) and *transformational activity* (3 items). Cronbach's alpha value (α = .909) confirmed internal consistency of the scale.

Table 1: Results of EFA

Scale items	Component							
	Value co-creation scope	Perceived destination authenticity	Perceived Health Risk	Trust	Continuance commitment	Absorption	Host bonding	Transformational activity
I intend to actively involved or participated in co-creation experience (VCCS1)	0.857							
I am interested in participating in co-creation activity (VCCS2)	0.853							
I have the intention to discuss this co-creation experience with the service provider (VCCS3)	0.834							
I intend to enact in role-reversal (VCCS4)	0.756							

Scale items	Component							
	Value co-creation scope	Perceived destination authenticity	Perceived Health Risk	Trust	Continuance commitment	Absorption	Host bonding	Transformational activity
I intend to add value to my trip experience through co-creation (VCCS5)	0.736							
During the visit I would like to feel related to the history of the autochthonous destination (DAUT1)		0.874						
I intend to enjoy the unique experience of visiting the autochthonous destination (DAUT2)		0.872						
The ethno-cultural legacy of the destination should evoke an urge to visit (DAUT3)		0.858						
I like the autochthonous destinations which are preserved (DAUT4)		0.856						
I expect service providers of the autochthonous destination made every effort to fulfill the promises made (TRST1)			0.857					
I expect service providers of the autochthonous destination have a high level of integrity (TRST2)			0.845					
I expect service providers of the autochthonous destination can be trusted at all times (TRST3)			0.808					
COVID-19 has compelled me to be extra cautious, health & hygienewise while travelling (PHLR1)				0.867				
COVID-19 has compelled me to assess health related information from the service providers before making a travel decision (PHLR2)				0.839				
Lesser known remote and autochthonous destinations worry me with their limited health infrastructure (PHLR3)				0.834				
I would travel to lesser known autochthonous destinations to avoid congestion (CCOM1)					0.827			
I would travel to lesser known autochthonous destinations to enjoy risk-free travel (CCOM2)					0.815			
I would travel to autochthonous destinations even if the scope of activity is limited (CCOM3)					0.796			
While interacting, the autochthonous destination should have a pleasant and overwhelming impact with all its existence which would make me oblivious of other things (ABSB1)						0.858		
While interacting, the autochthonous destination should not remind me about time (ABSB2)						0.838		
While interacting, the autochthonous destination should be an extended part of myself (ABSB3)						0.826		
While interacting, the autochthonous destination should stimulate me to forget everything around me (ABSB4)						0.822		
While interacting, the autochthonous destination should provide me with a feeling of immersive experience (ABSB5)						0.736		
While interacting, the autochthonous destination should evoke happiness in me (ABSB6)						0.702		
My interaction with the host community shall be driven by COVID-19 norms (HBND1)							0.823	

Scale items	Component							
	Value co-creation scope	Perceived destination authenticity	Perceived Health Risk	Trust	Continuance commitment	Absorption	Host bonding	Transformational activity
I expect sympathetic understanding from the host community about my intention to visit their place (HBND2)							0.803	
I expect friendly interaction with the host community (HBND3)							0.800	
I shall respect the sanctity of the autochthonous destination and its community (HBND4)							0.780	
I expect an novel inter-cultural travel experience in an autochthonous destination (TRAC1)								0.775
I expect autochthonous destination to generate a sense of selfhood and existential courage in me (TRAC2)								0.717
I expect autochthonous destination to mould me as a social agent who can trigger positivity (TRAC3)								0.708
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.								
a. Rotation converged in 9 iterations.								

Common Method Bias

As the study was rationally grounded on existing theories with contextual realism, EFA was also used to assess Common Method Bias (CMB) (Arya et al., 2019). Considering the fact that validity issues might yield potentially misleading conclusion (Campbell and Fiske, 1959), the assessment of variance attributable to the measurement method (Podsakoff et al., 2003) was applied. Testing the biasness was critical for the study as the data was obtained through remotely administered questionnaire (using online platform) and response to both the predictor and criterion variables were generated from the same respondent. The results revealed that the first factor explained total variance of 20.008% (< 50%), which confirmed absence of common method bias. is not a problem in this study. Further, it was established that the measures were free form common method variance ((< 50%) and hence concluded to be an insensitive test which did not support the fundamental assumption of Herman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Phase-II of the Study

Confirmatory factor analysis was carried out to assess the validity issues in the measurement model (Fig. 2). Adequate fit was achieved with the data as the CMIN/DF was found to be 2.255 (ref. value: < 3, Arya et al., 2019) (Table-3a). The values of Comparative fit index (CFI) (.937), goodness of fit index (GFI) (.942), Tucker-Lewis coefficient (TLI) (.928) and Normed fit index (NFI) (.918) were found to be greater than 0.9 and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value (0.056) was found significant (< 0.08) (Hair et al., 2010; Gefen & Straub, 2004).The goodness-of-fit indices for the conceptualized measurement model is established with the corresponding GFI, CFI, TLI, and NFI values, which are above the threshold value 0.9 and the RMSEA value was 0.048 (Hair et al., 2010; Gefen and Straub, 2004) (Table-3b). The reliability issue had been addressed adequately as the composite reliability (CR) was found to be >0.7 for all constructs. Convergent validity was established as the average variance extracted (AVE) was found to be greater than 0.5 for all constructs and CR > AVE. The maximum shared variance (MSV) and the average shared variance (ASV) were found consistently less than AVE, which established discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2010).

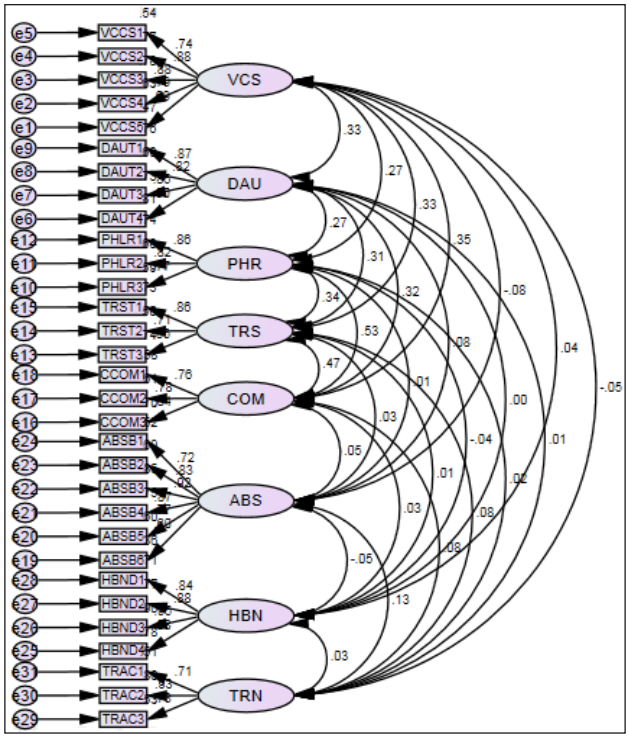

Fig. 2: CFA of Measurement Model

Table 3a: Model Fit Analysis (CMIN/DF)

Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF
Default model	121	988.248	406	.000	2.434

Note: NPAR- Number of distinct parameters, DF-Degrees of freedom, P-Significance value, CMIN/DF: minimum discrepancy divided by degree of freedom.

Table 3b: Model Fit Analysis (NFI, GFI, CFI, TLI, RMSEA)

NFI	GFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
0.918	0.942	0.928	0.937	0.056

Note: NFI-Normed fit index; GFI-Goodness-of-fit index; TLI-Tucker Lewis index; CFI-Comparative fit index; RMSEA- Root mean square error of approximation

Table 4: Construct Validity (CR/AVE/MSV/ASV)

	TRN	VCS	DAU	PHR	TRS	COM	ABS	HBN	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV
TRN	0.797								0.837	0.635	0.016	0.005
VCS	-0.051	**0.799**							0.897	0.638	0.120	0.060
DAU	0.006	0.326	**0.864**						0.922	0.746	0.106	0.054
PHR	0.021	0.271	0.267	**0.819**					0.859	0.671	0.276	0.077
TRS	0.080	0.334	0.309	0.341	**0.813**				0.853	0.661	0.225	0.079
COM	0.078	0.347	0.319	0.525	0.474	**0.793**			0.835	0.628	0.276	0.105
ABS	0.126	-0.079	0.080	0.008	0.035	0.055	**0.792**		0.909	0.628	0.016	0.005
HBN	0.032	0.037	0.004	-0.036	0.006	0.030	-0.051	**0.889**	0.938	0.790	0.003	0.001

Note: TRN-Transformational activity; VCS-Value co-creation scope; DAU-Destination authenticity; PHR-Perceived health risk; TRS-Trust; COM-Continuance commitment; ABS-Absorption; HBN-Host bonding. Diagonal elements show square roots of AVEs (average variance explained).

The proposed theoretical model was tested for validity. CFA was used to assess the hypothesized relationships. Bootsrapping was done to assess the level of significance between the hypothesized relationships. The study used bootstrap sample of 2000 and bias-corrected confidence interval level was fixed to 90%. The proposed model (Fig.3) holds good as the goodness-of-fit indices were found significant (Table-5) as per Hair et al., 2010.

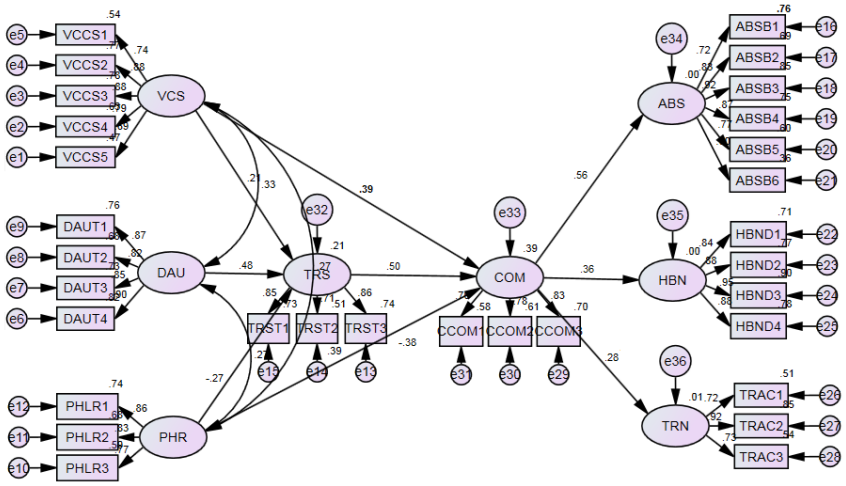

Fig. 3: CFA of Structural Model

Table 5: Goodness-of-Fit Indices for the Proposed Model and RMSEA Value

	CMIN					Baseline Comparisons				RMSEA
Model	NPAR	CMIN	DF	P	CMIN/DF	NFI	RFI	TLI	CFI	
Default model	103	1082.944	424	0.000	2.554	0.889	0.878	0.922	0.929	0.058

Note: Note: NPAR- Number of distinct parameters, DF-Degrees of freedom, P-Significance value, CMIN/DF: minimum discrepancy divided by degree of freedom, NFI-Normed fit index; GFI-Goodness-of-fit index; TLI-Tucker Lewis index; CFI-Comparative fit index; RMSEA- Root mean square error of approximation.

The bootstrap results confirmed significant relationship between all the hypothesized relationships with P value <.01 (Table 6). Scope of co-creating value (β = 0.332, p < .05) and authenticity of autochthonous destination (β = 0.488, p < .05) as relational constructs were found to build up trust which was found to have antecedent role in building continuance commitment (β = 0.505, p <.05). Perceived risk of health (β = -0.275, p < .05) was found to negatively influencing the trust component, i.e. higher the level of perceived risk, lower would be the degree of trust in the relationship. The scope of value co-creation (β = 0.93, p < .05) was also found critical in evoking continuance commitment. Perceived health risk (β = -0.386, p < .05) was found to evoke negative continuance commitment. Continuance commitment was found to influence the tourist engagement pattern. Absorption with the immersive experience (β = 0.563, p < .01) was significantly impacted by continuance commitment and the bonding with the host community as part of critical interaction was also found dependent on relational construct (β = 0.369, p < .05). Continuance commitment was also influential in stimulating engagement through transformational activities (β = 0.288, p < .05).

Table 6: Bootstrap Results

Hypothesis	Parameter			β Estimate	Lower	Upper	P	Hypothesis status
H1a	VCS	---->	TRS	0.332	0.158	0.386	0.001	Accepted
H1b	DAU	---->	TRS	0.488	0.379	0.593	0.001	Accepted
H1c	PHR	---->-	TRS	-0.275	-0.173	-0.389	0.001	Accepted
H2	TRS	---->	COM	0.505	0.412	0.609	0.001	Accepted
H3a	VCS	---->	COM	0.393	0.291	0.601	0.001	Accepted
H3b	PHR	---->	COM	-0.386	-0.281	-0.477	0.001	Accepted
H4a	COM	---->	ABS	0.563	0.398	0.721	0.000	Accepted
H4b	COM	---->	HBN	0.369	0.217	0.478	0.001	Accepted
H4c	COM	---->	TRN	0.288	0.184	0.395	0.001	Accepted

Note: TRN-Transformational activity; VCS-Value co-creation scope; DAU-Destination authenticity; PHR-Perceived health risk; TRS-Trust; COM-Continuance commitment; ABS-Absorption; HBN-Host bonding. The upper & lower bound of estimates do not contain zero.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study was conducted in an environment, which witnessed stagnancy; uncertainty and turbulence in the overall service industry, and, more so, in the travel, tourism and hospitality sector due to the pandemic impact of COVID-19. Therefore the grounded theories governing the relational dynamism and vis-à-vis engagement phenomenon were reinvestigated for explanatory relevance. The pandemic condition had inflicted a sense of hodophobia (irrational fear to travel) and xenophobia (dislike or reservations against people from other countries) as social distancing was setting in as the new normal. The structural model (Fig. 3) confirmed that tourist engagement is an extended part of the relationship marketing domain (So et al., 2016; Vivek et al., 2012).Value co-creation was identified as one of the relational constructs evoking trust and continuance commitment leading to engagement of tourists in lesser known rural destinations with limited scope of activities (eg. compromised on natural assets), but, with ethno-cultural legacy. The intellect driven scope of value co-creation was found to engage tourists with the realm tribal tourism in autochthonous places (eg., Santiniketan, Baratang Island, the Nilgiris,). The findings resonated with the observations made by Kastenholz and Lima (2014), Kastenholz et al., (2012) and Figueiredo, (2009), whereby low-engagement rural destinations, nomenclated as the '*rural idyll',* were found to establish relationship with the tourists on the ground of authenticity (Chambers, 2009) and opportunity to co-create value (Todt and Kastenholz, 2010). The concept of 'cultural brokerage' propagated by Cohen (1988) also hinted to place authenticity (Chambers, 2009), established in this study as a relational binder, and recognised as a social dimension of rural and indigenous tourism experience having favourable setting of co-creative design (Kastenholz et al., 2012). The opportunity to engage in a role-reversal process (Baksi, 2017, Baksi, 2016) in autochthonous destination, namely, Santiniketan, was found to be a unique platform to co-create value leading to predisposition in terms of transformative and absorptive experience. Authenticity of destination was found to contribute in the relational makeover between the tourists and the destination. This was concluded to be more valid with lesser-known destinations as tourists were apprehensive to visit destinations with proven credentials, but with trends of overtourism, thereby increasing the probability of health risk. The results of the study indicated support for the notion of 'symbolic authenticity' (Kolar & Zabkar, 2010) as the tourists' subjective value judgment accepted the autochthonous authenticity of the destination. The results also assured the 'objective authenticity' (Rather et al., 2019) of the destination on the ground of indigenous origin of the tribes and their ethno-cultural spread. The continuance commitment, as a significant relational construct, confirmed the associated constraints (eg. overtourism, social distancing etc.) and narrowed-down options in the choice of destinations. Perceived health risk was introduced as an imminent cognition associated with travel and postulated to be a component in designing the relational base for the tourists. Perceived health risk was found to have significant negative impact on the trust factor and continuance commitment. The study reassured the 'sensation-seeking propensity' (Chien et al., 2017) which contributed to the spiraling perceived risk related to travel-driven health issues and would require comprehensive communication from the service providers to mitigate with the same. The findings related to perceived health risk corroborated with previous research that implicated availability of travel medicine with travel patterns, destination choice and travel-vaccine uptake (Hamer & Connor, 2004; Wilder-Smith et al., 2004; Zwar & Streeton, 2007 etc.).

The relational constructs were empirically tested and found to impart control on the engagement perspective of the tourists with the autochthonous destination. The study identified absorption as one of the engagement dimensions, which was found to be influenced by continuance commitment. The conceptualization of 'absorption' on the basis of engrossment, a feeling extending beyond the notion of efficacy and hinted towards an optimal experience consolidated the theoretical posit of Csikszentmihalyi (1990), Salanova et al. (2005) and So et al. (2012). Absorption was also referred to as 'intrinsic enjoyment' (Scholer & Higgins, 2009) whereby tourists interact with destination and enjoys deep level of immersive experience. The study observed the 'perceived absorptive bliss' that autochthonous destinations might offer to the tourists in the midst of risk and uncertainty induced by the pandemic. The study postulated 'transformational activity' as one of the engagement constructs on the ground of claustrophobic feelings of prospective travelers and it was empirically validated, which, reinforced the theory of liminality laid down by Turner (1996). It further supported the views existential angst observed by Wang (1999) and substantiated as existential authenticity by Kirillova et al. (2017a). The transformational activities, referred to in the study, supported the theory of emotional valence (Kirillova et al., 2017) as it established a transformative change in the behavioural engagement of tourists. The transformational activities, triggered by risk and uncertainty (eg. COVID-19 pandemic), emerged as a new self-concept (Coghlan & Weiler, 2015) to engage tourists with relational stimulants, namely value-co-creation. Previous studies embarked on interaction of tourists with the stakeholders of the destination as an engagement-marker (Bijmolt et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2010). The current study specifically posited host-bonding as a critical engagement factor on 2 pertinent issues: (a) norm of social distancing in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic and (b) emotional solidarity. The

prevailing sense of xenophobia was also taken into account. However, relational dynamism was found to exercise a positive control on host-bonding on the ground of emotional solidarity (Joo et al., 2018).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The prevailing pandemic condition and the associated socio-economic constraints have been apprehended to be instrumental in changing the shape of the behavioural pattern of the tourists. The travel motives and the decisions governing the choice of destination, safety of health, degree of physical interaction and staying & dining are likely to be influenced by COVID-19. However, tourism is likely to spike, given the slightest chance to do so, and shall be boosted by the human instinct to defy social embargo infused with claustrophobic feeling. The study covertly focused on resurgence of tourism activities post lockdown and explored the possible attractions of autochthonous destinations for tourist engagement with relational constructs. Autochthonous destinations would possess their own legacy in terms of indigenous presence of aborigines and associated culture, festivals, food and social-nodes, all embedded in an intellect-driven ecosystem. Place authenticity was found to be one of the key inputs in building relationship between the destination and the tourists alongwith scope to co-create value and optimize the travel experience, which, in turn, was found to affect the trust and continuance commitment, thereby advancing literature-based insight. Based on the findings, the destination marketers are expected to design the tourism products for such low-engagement and culturally sensitive destination that, in turn, would stimulate firm performance (Hollebeek and Andreassen, 2018). The branding and positioning of an autochthonous destination could also be implicated from the study as transformative experience could be used as potent differentiator by the marketers with assured absorptive feelings. Bonding with host community would be critical for tourism in the aftermath of the pandemic as it was empirically established to be an engagement stimulant. The concerned industry must churn out plans and programmes take the local residents into confidence and remove sense of apathy, if any. Health issues would emerge as key determinant in shaping travel behaviour and are likely to be an integral part of tourism planning.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESULTS

Despite its contributions, this study had few limitations, which can be used as seed for further research. The study explored the possible relational re-orientation between tourists, service providers and the destination with an objective to assess its controlling impact on tourist engagement in secluded autochthonous destinations. While, place authenticity, value co-creation scope and perceived health risk were found to modulate the relational base (trust and continuance commitment), a number of analogous constructs, namely, tourist involvement, self-brand congruence etc. might be considered for their possible mediating or moderating impact on the fundamental relationships. Demographic impact was not explored in this study. For a comprehensive understanding of the tourism demand impact of categorical variables is necessary. The study was constrained with the sampling plan as it relied on convenience sampling using virtual channels. Longitudinal study would also be required to understand the path of evolution (Viswanathan et al., 2017) of relational constructs and their impact on tourist engagement in post COVID-19 environment.

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