

The Influence of COVID-19 on Altered Paradigms of Global Tourism

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Working Paper for CAUTHE Conference February 2023.

Theme: Managing Risk and Crises and developing resilience in the new world order.

ABSTRACT

Many crisis events in recent years have disrupted global tourism flows, perceptions of specific destination regions, sectors of the tourism industry and individual tourism businesses. However, the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020-2022 was a transformative as opposed to a disruptive crisis event. The pandemic and associated restrictions had a global impact on every sector of the tourism industry. Many pre-pandemic paradigms which formed the basis of global tourism policy, planning and operation between 1970-2019 were challenged. These paradigms included assumptions that a growing portion of humanity enjoyed a “right to travel” and that this right was becoming increasingly democratic as the real cost of travel, year on year decreased. These were just two of many paradigms confounded by the COVID-19 crisis.

The imposition of government-imposed restrictions on tourism activity in most countries throughout the world between 2020-2022 in response to the pandemic, contradicted many of the paradigms which had substantiated the growth of tourism prior to 2020.

Many tourism scholars and tourism industry leaders are referring to the post-covid era as the “new normal”. This paper focuses on discussing three pre- pandemic paradigms and the emergence of the “new normal” responses to them and assesses perspectives of scholars and transnational tourism industry associations.

Keywords: COVID-19, Tourism Crises, Paradigm, Government restrictions, New Normal.

Introduction

Prior to the widespread global outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, global tourism was dominated by a number of key paradigms which dominated assumptions about the industry's overall direction. These paradigms were significantly challenged, and in some cases debunked by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated government restrictions on tourism. Consequently, many tourism scholars and tourism industry associations refer to the concept of a "new normal" as tourism recovers from the impact of COVID-19 from 2022 and beyond. The global extent of the COVID-19 crisis which almost brought global tourism to standstill for much of 2020 and 2021 has afforded an opportunity for both tourism scholars and tourism practitioners to re-think the research and practice of tourism (Kock, Zenker 2020). This working paper is part of a far broader study on the changing paradigms of post-covid tourism and aligns with research being undertaken by many tourism scholars and a review of tourism which is occurring across every sector of the tourism industry.

This brevity of a working paper restricts reference to just three of the many paradigms. The vast body of scholarly literature which has been generated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on all sectors of tourism hospitality and events has revealed multiple pre-COVID-19 paradigms which have been overturned by the pandemic and its impacts.

The three key pre-COVID paradigms discussed in this paper were challenged and largely debunked by the pandemic were:

1. **The right to travel internationally and domestically.** It was assumed prior to COVID-19 that most people enjoyed the right to travel within their own country and internationally. Border closures, lockdowns, quarantine restrictions, testing and vaccination requirements placed significant restrictions on the "right to travel" (Beirman 2022). Even though tourism had resumed to most destinations in the world by the second half of 2022 it is untenable to presume that tourism is an automatic right and governments at both national and regional level have the power to deny both outbound and inbound tourism should they perceive the need.
2. **The socio-economic democratisation of tourism.** Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, tourism experienced a trend, across all sectors, of a significant reduction in the real cost of travel and tourism. This trend made tourism affordable to a growing portion of the world's people resulting in significant growth in the number of people travelling internationally and domestically between 1980-2019. In turn this massive growth of tourism numbers generated a number of negative social and environmental impacts resulting from over-tourism and threats to the sustainability in a number of popular destinations (Brouder, Lapointe Mostafarezhad, Pung Salazar, Teo, 2020) The post COVID emphasis on the sustainability of tourism businesses and led to a re-evaluation on the nature of post-pandemic tourism and the pricing of tourism services. For tourism businesses, the future financial viability of tourism businesses will be largely dependent on a business model which emphasises yield for the business and a value proposition for consumers. In plain language, tourism costs are likely to increase and tourism is likely to become less democratic, more elitist and more sustainable. The nature of tourism product has been undergoing significant change with greater emphasis on health, individual space and a growth in nature-based tourism and sustainable tourism experiences. There is also a belief among some scholars that the "new normal" may lead to a reduction in over tourism in affected destinations (Koh, 2020).
3. **The number of tourists would continue (apart from some short-term disruptions and downturns) to grow indefinitely.** The COVID-19 Pandemic and its associated government imposed restrictions resulted in a significant downturn in tourism flows during between March 2020 and mid 2022. By late 2022, a number of countries continued to restrict tourism movements, most notably China which prior to COVID-19 was the world leading tourism

generating country. Although tourist numbers experienced a strong recovery during 2022 there are signs that the nature of tourism has undergone some significant changes since the pandemic with a far greater emphasis on tourism sustainability and significant re-imagining of tourism destinations. Global tourism associations, including the UN World Tourism Organisation and the World Travel and Tourism Council are advocating a more responsible approach to tourism and a heightened level of health orientated tourism than the pre-COVID years (Mc Guinness, Steffen, 2021; Sigala, 2020, Lapointe, Tremblay-Huet, 2021; World Travel and Tourism Council 2022; UN World Tourism Organisation 2022)

In their analysis of the altered paradigms there was widespread agreement among tourism scholars that COVID-19 was a transformational crisis for tourism and had widespread implications for a new research agenda for tourism. A key focus of the implications for post pandemic tourism was expected to be a heightened emphasis on a more sustainable form of tourism which would reduce the negative footprint of tourism and reduce the likelihood of over-tourism in a number of destinations.

Conclusions and Implications

Both tourism practitioners and tourism scholars employ the term “new normal” when discussing post pandemic tourism but there are significant differences in how that term is interpreted. For tourism professionals restoring the financial viability of tourism businesses is central to the new normal. In that context there is high degree of acceptance that the way business is to be conducted will vary considerably. If sustainability, a more individualised service model or small group tourism contributes to a sustainable yield for tourism enterprises then they will be embraced. As all sectors of the tourism industry have been exposed to a crisis, the new normal will include a heightened awareness of risk management and a commitment to operating safe and health conscious businesses. While many tourism professionals look forwards to tourist numbers returning to pre-pandemic levels many will accept small numbers of travellers paying premium prices for an enhanced standard of service.

The COVID-19 crisis has afforded tourism scholars with a rich vein of research opportunities which start with developing new paradigms of tourism and spread into analysing the state of post-pandemic tourism sector by sector and destination by destination. The new normal will include a significant focus on motivating and marketing to a consumer market which is keen to travel has had its confidence in tourism shaken by the pandemic.

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