

OVERTOURISM TO ZERO TOURISM: CHANGING TOURISTS' PERCEPTION OF CROWDING POST COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The World Health Organisation declared the novel coronavirus disease as a pandemic in March 2020. The outbreak of the novel coronavirus restricted global mobility as cities and countries started to impose complete lockdown to curtail the spread of the deadly virus. The restricted movement of people and transport worldwide resulted in a metamorphosis from overtourism to zero tourism within a short period. This study aims to analyse the effect of COVID-19 on the tourists' perceptions about crowding and how will this transition impact their decision while choosing a destination. In-depth interviews were conducted with tourists, and Nvivo12 plus was used to analyse the data. The study reveals that in the post-COVID-19 phase, tourists will be more sensitised towards crowding, and they would volunteer to avoid crowded places in the short run. Further, maintenance of social distancing norms and sanitised services at destinations will be a pre-requisite in selecting a destination. The study is a pioneer in analysing the changing tourist's behaviour concerning crowding, evolving perceptions of overtourism for the tourists which will aid the stakeholders at the destinations in developing strategies. Inadvertently, the tourists visibly reflected the need for sustainable tourism.

Keywords: Overtourism, Zero Tourism, Crowding, Post-COVID-19, Tourists' Behaviour.

JEL Classification: Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

The exuberant growth in tourism over the past decade attracted an increasing number of investors to the sector (World Tourism Organization, 2004). The year 2018 witnessed the arrival of approximately 1.4 billion international tourists in the world (UNWTO, 2018) and the target for the year 2020 was swiftly achieved in 2018 itself. This rapid unprecedented growth in tourism rendered not only economic benefits but also culminated in negative effects on the hosts (Murzyn-Kupisz & Holuj, 2020; Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019) environment (Benner, 2019; Weber et al., 2017), and on the destination itself (Benner, 2020; Weber et al., 2017). In 2019, overtourism was a hot topic amongst media and academicians. There were several special issues and debates over the ill-effects of tourism like tourismphobia and the anti-tourist movement (Jover & Díaz-Parra, 2020). Harold Goodwin in 2017 observed that the phenomenon will be a common sight in several destinations globally if tourism continues to grow unmanaged at this pace (Goodwin, 2017).

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An essential component to the concept of overtourism, the UNWTO defined carrying capacity as “the maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without destroying the physical, economic and socio-cultural environment, and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitor’s satisfaction”(Kennell, 2014; UNWTO, 2018). Overtourism became a usual sight in popular tourist destinations and therefore, the government’s imperative to figure out a resolution to the contention amidst all the stakeholders (Martins, 2018). Researches in heavy numbers commenced in the subject and different management strategies and coping mechanisms were being tested for efficient management. The world is so volatile that in 2020 the entire notion of overtourism has vanished temporarily from the face of the Earth (Niewiadomski, 2020). The outburst of COVID-19 allegedly in December, brought a shift from overtourism to zero tourism. The change in ideologies of both the tourists and the locals are the most obvious predictions by scholars. Based on the evidence of the past it is safe to say that the idea of sustainability will reside (Romagosa, 2020), and the key coalescences of overtourism like carrying capacity, perception of crowding, reactions of the host community and human understanding of various fundamentals will see a change in the post COVID-19 scenario.

Overtourism was not clearly defined and characterised by the scholars even before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Benner, 2020) and with its onset, it has become especially difficult to understand the fuzzy coalescence of overtourism (Koens, Postma, & Papp, 2018). Also, since time memorial, crowd density is considered a crucial factor in the transmission of diseases (Ebrahim, Ahmed, Gozzer, Schlagenhauf, & Memish, 2020) and mass gatherings work as a playground for the viruses (Elachola, Assiri, & Memish, 2014). It is worth noting that most of the studies on overtourism and crowding have rather focused on analysing the residents’ perception (Neuts & Vanneste, 2018; Kuščer & Mihalič, 2019) as locals directly face the brunt of tourism growth at a destination. However, the widely accepted definition of overtourism by UNWTO also stresses the deterioration of tourists’ quality of experience, there are fewer studies that have investigated the tourists’ perspective at a crowded place, especially in the post-COVID-19 phase. Thus, this study aims to add value to the existing literature on tourists’ crowding perception. Therefore, the current research possesses majorly two objectives. Firstly, the authors aim to understand the effect of Covid-19 on the tourists’ perceptions about crowding. Secondly, the research investigates the impact of the pandemic on the decision making of the tourists.

The authors interviewed 27 potential tourists aged between 16 to 75 years to understand the future choices of travellers whilst selecting a destination to travel post COVID-19 and their discernment about crowding and social distancing. The semi-structured interview is designed to understand whether the travellers will opt for the traditional crowded popular places or will they seek a place of peace and less population. The data are interpreted with the help of NVIVO Software 12 which is considered laborious (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014) yet effective way of examining data (Zamawe, 2015; Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016).

The study allows the readers to comprehend the evolving understanding of crowding amongst the tourists. Also, the study is a forerunner in analysing the changing tourist’s behaviour concerning crowding, the role of tourists in aiding to overtourism, and the role the tourists can play in developing a destination. The information is viable for the stakeholders at the destinations in developing strategies to market and manages the destination more efficiently. The current study aims to provide insights and recommendations to the stakeholders for increasing their efficacy in comprehending tourists’ behaviour, particularly, in India.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The conceptual framework of the study is developed through an in-depth review of literature that provides proof on the changing perception of consumers with a lifestyle change and the effect of the pandemic on the psyche of people.

2.1 COVID-19 and Tourism

The ripple effect of COVID-19 is noticeable on the global economy ever since it was first reported on December 31st 2019 by the Chinese government to the World Health Organization (WHO). The disease named novel coronavirus or COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic on March 11th (World Health Organisation, 2020) due to its rapid spread to different parts of the world. The national authorities resorted to measures to restrict the further spread of the disease through stratagems affecting the world in ways unthinkable before. The ease of travel was considered one of the significant ways facilitating the highly contagious virus through territories (Niewiadomski, 2020). Thus, to prevent COVID-19, the governments decided to close down borders, suspend international transportation, and employ measures for social distancing (Ebrahim et al., 2020). The immobility of people brought a sudden halt to tourism. Moreover, the prevalence of social distancing measures manifested a dilemma for the world seen in the desire to “go back to normal” while rejecting the probable “new normal” (Brouder et al., 2020). The fear created by the life-threatening COVID-19 along with hedonic and utilitarian motives (Addo et al., 2020), China, and across the world based on the theory of fear appeal. We gathered published statistics, suspected, confirmed, and fatality influenced both the demand and supply side simultaneously. Therefore, the change in the consumer behaviour of tourists is obvious.

International tourism witnessed a low of 22% in the first quarter, and it is expected to fall further by 60-80% over the year (UNWTO, 2020). The UNWTO report mentioned the decline in the arrival of 67 million international tourists up to March transpired into an overall loss of US\$80 billion. The repercussions are visible in the loss of several jobs worldwide with millions of livelihoods at risk. While several analysts believe in the black swan theory wherein a fixed unknown period the industry will get back to a situation similar to its earlier form (Romagosa, 2020). Several other authors believe that COVID-19 has provided a chance to reboot tourism in a more sustainable manner (Strielkowski, 2020). Although, it would be troublesome if the world goes back to its toxic attitudes considering the recurring warnings that tourism has received for its unsustainable growth. COVID-19 is supposed to challenge humanity to ponder on the unsustainability of pre-COVID travel and re-establish the tourism industry with a new model of sustainability.

The large number of restrictions imposed by the governments showcase their ability to regulate footfall according to an operational sustainability model with their will and political consensus. However, a sense of anxiety, bewilderment, and social unrest manifests a fear of tourists being carriers of the diseases, which in turn can pave the way for tourismphobia (Romagosa, 2020). The tourist movement was affected considering the health risk posed by Covid-19 even before a complete ban was imposed by the government. It could be ascertained that the future demand for tourism would witness a further change (Yang et al., 2020). Further, it is imperative to understand the coalescence of overtourism to deconstruct the changing tourists' crowding perceptions.

2.2 Overtourism and Perceived Crowding

The growth in tourists' number, which is believed to be an essential indicator of tourism growth, does not imply sustainable growth of the destination (Seraphin & Ivanov, 2020). A

critical barrier in the long-term sustainability is the short-term vision of making economic benefits. Thereby, the adversities of tourism are reflected in overtourism. It is an issue of contention when “too many tourists” converge at the same destinations during the same period (Kuščer & Mihalič, 2019; Perkumienė & Pranskūnienė, 2019). It is widely evident in popular destinations (Hughes, 2018; Bertocchi et al., 2020) and became a topical issue in the pre-COVID phase (Tiwari, Kainthola, & Chowdhary, 2020). The core issue lies with the unmanaged influx of tourists which on the one hand degrades the tourism experiences, while on the other hand, leaves a negative impact on the resident and host destinations (Oklevik et al., 2019).

A part of overtourism, crowding is a multi-variate concept that is primarily a construction of social, personal, and spatial attributes (Stokols, 1972; Ditton, Fedler, & Graefe, 1983). It is highly subjective due to the involvement of humans at different levels (Kalisch & Klaphake, 2007). Considered as a perceived generic term, crowding can be defined as a state where there are more people than perceived acceptable at a particular place (Santana-Jiménez & Hernández, 2011; Dichter & Gloria, 2017; Weber et al., 2017). Thus, earlier studies by Ditton et al. (1983), Popp (2012), and Sun and Budruk (2017) suggest that crowding can lead to both negative and positive experiences. Whereas overcrowding is a temporary state or a chronic situation that can arise in all spheres of institutions like hospitals, public transports, roads, monuments. In the tourism context, overcrowding denotes a fine line between popularity and crowding that starts impacting the tourist experience and the lives of the locals (Santana-Jiménez & Hernández, 2011). The perceived levels of overcrowding are influenced by several interlinked factors, and the major driving forces include perceived image of the destination, tolerance of an individual, and nature of tourism that the destination manifests (Padrón-Ávila & Hernández-Martín, 2019). For instance, a theme park is perceived as a place which observes a larger number of visitor and people will be more tolerant towards the crowd as opposed to a nature-based destination (Santana-Jiménez & Hernández, 2011; Eliasson & Velasco, 2018). Also, crowding is not a year-round state; instead, it is primarily based on the seasonality aspect of a destination, and therefore the reaction to crowding varies at different times (Bimonte & Faralla, 2016; Lu & Wei, 2019). Strikingly, the problems arising from both overcrowding and overtourism are similar which range from locals feeling alienated at their place, to the deteriorating experience of the tourists, and overburdening the infrastructure and natural resources (Johansson et al., 2012; Cheer et al., 2019; Namberger et al., 2019). Although commonly seen at mature destinations, overcrowding could also impact emerging destinations, cities, monuments, and even smaller events at tourist destinations (Mowen, Vogelsong, & Graefe, 2003; Das, 2014; Nazrin et al., 2019; Kainthola, Tiwari, & Chowdhary, 2021). While some destinations struggle to absorb crowds of domestic visitors, others face an influx of international visitors, and some places experience both (Lu & Wei, 2019). The popular belief is that the crowd is a regular feature in large cities but raises concern during crises leading to perpetual risks (Johansson et al., 2012). This risk is especially consolidated in the situation of a pandemic. Nevertheless, continuous efforts are made to formulate effective management plans to avoid disasters in mass gatherings and crowded places.

2.3 Carrying Capacity

Crowding and carrying capacity are two parallel concepts that are majorly related to the management of destination and tourism growth. Carrying capacity is broadly defined as the total number of tourists that a destination can support without facing the negative impacts of tourism (Simon, Narangajavana, & Margués, 2004). It is a multidimensional concept which deals with four significant thresholds, namely- environmental, economic, psychological, and perceptual (Trakolis, 2003; Zaidan & Kovacs, 2017). Different authors have defined

carrying capacity differently, and its practical definition has changed over time. O'Reilly (1986) criticised those definitions for not including the other aspects of sub-system namely economic, psychological, cultural, and social despite their relative importance (Simon et al., 2004). The author opined that there could not be a universal characterisation of carrying capacity since it differs from one situation to another and is diverse in terms of tourists' typology, speed of tourism development, characteristics of destination, etc. In the context of destination management, Sharma (2016) posits that carrying capacity cannot be applied directly as a management tool. Earlier, Mc Cool and Lime (2001) had criticised the concept as innate which is based on the scientific theory of finding the 'magic numbers', quite contrary to the decision-making or planning frameworks like Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) and Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP). The benefits of adopting LAC were reported by Simon, Narangajavana, and Margués (2004) stating that it can be easily converted from conceptual to operational terms as opposed to carrying capacity. In the early era of mass tourism, Canestrelli & Costa (1991) emphasised that the concept of carrying capacity be centred on the quality of tourists' experience, but if the tourism destination is a city, then considering the quality of life of residents is ideal. Nevertheless, the quality of tourists' experience is based on several idiosyncratic factors such as preference, tolerance, and expectation from a destination etc. which are necessary to be measured.

2.4 Expectancy Theory

The expectancy theory of motivation was developed by Vroom which analyses the reason behind an individual's behaviour. The theory is largely based on perceptions and asserts the connotations that individuals make towards the expected outcome (Vroom, 1964). This theory is utilised in analysing the tourists' perception of crowdedness at various destinations (Vaske, Donnelly, & Heberlein, 1980; Arnberger & Brandenburg, 2007). Lee & Graefe (2003) emphasised that tourists' expectations are generated based on their experience as well as from information attained before visiting a destination. After assessing the information and integrating it with different factors such as quality of service, convenience, price of the package, etc., the choice to visit a specific destination is made. Yeh, Wai Aliana, & Zhang (2012) mentioned that an individual's personality, socio-demographic, cultural traits, etc. affect the process of evaluating the information about a destination. Thus, every individual has different expectations from the same destination or the services offered at a destination. In the context of tourists' crowding perception, several researchers have analysed the effect of different factors such as gender, cultural norms, motivations, nationality, etc. in shaping their expectations of a destination (Jin & Ruban, 2011; Maruthaiah & Rashid, 2014; Sun & Budruk, 2017). Further, studies have analysed the crowding perception with the help of photographs by asking tourists about the difference between an expected crowd and actual crowd during their visit (Kalisch & Klaphake, 2007; Bell et al., 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the tourists' perception of crowding after the outbreak of COVID-19. As the research area is novel, adopting the qualitative method was considered suitable to provide in-depth knowledge and valuable insights on the subject (Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Parsons et al., 2019). Thereby, the study is exploratory in nature.

3.1 Data Collection

For this study, the respondents were selected based on their familiarity with the authors. The respondents were characterised as avid travellers who travel at least three to four times a year. Accordingly, a list of 73 people was organised, and personal e-mails and messages were sent asking for their participation in the study. Out of these, 27 people agreed to participate in the study hailing from different states of India. The small sample size is appropriate for the qualitative study and adequately answered the research problem (Byrne, 2001).

Purposive sampling was used for the interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to form a homogenous data set of respondents from both urban and rural areas comprising of different age groups and gender (Guest et al., 2006). This type of sampling is frequently used in qualitative studies (Etikan, 2016). After informing the objective of the study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via video and phone calls. Every interview lasted on average for 40 minutes and respondents were asked 14 questions. The questions were open-ended (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009) that were carried out in a form of discussion like naturalistic manner (Griffee, 2005; Chima, 2020) for allowing meaningful responses. The interviews which were primarily in English were recorded with due permission of the respondents and were translated into transcripts manually to avoid any error. The first section included five questions that aimed to know the general awareness of respondents regarding overcrowding, crowding, and overtourism. The second section was related to the crowding perceptiveness amongst respondents and included three open-ended questions aimed to understand if their perception of crowding changed after COVID-19 outbreak, will the crowd play any role in choosing a destination for travel, and how will they manage to travel in the post-COVID-19 phase? These questions were adapted from existing literature to suit the research objectives of this study (Manning & Valliere, 2001; Mowen et al., 2003; Popp, 2012). The last section is comprised of 6 questions primarily to find out the factors which will be considered while selecting a destination in the post-COVID-19 phase. These interviews were conducted for 20 days from 8th June to 28th June 2020.

Member checking was then completed with the participants reviewing and confirming the accuracy of the transcripts with additional comments wherever necessary (Birt et al., 2016). Table 1 shows the respondents' profiles in brief.

3.2 Data Analysis

After collection of the data, verbatim transcription, familiarisation with the data, and multiple reading, the text was then coded, their relationship evaluated, patterns and commonalities were studied and themes identified (Alhojailan, 2012; Walters, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017) on both semantic and latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The developed themes were then studied and evaluated concerning to the existing frameworks of overtourism and crowding before formalising any proposed constructs (Schutt & Chambliss, 2013). The authors adopted thematic analysis to analyse the data as it enabled the investigation of individual experiences in objective settings (Percy et al., 2015). Scholars like Holloway and Todres explicated that the 'thematising meanings' are amongst the few shared generic skills across qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003). It is considered the most efficient tool in the interpretation of written texts, especially interview transcripts (Hannam & Knox, 2005; Walters, 2016) by unravelling inherent cultural meanings (Walters, 2016). The data were analysed with the help of qualitative data analysis software, Nvivo 12 plus. Though the use of the application for analysis is labour intensive (Sotiriadou et al., 2014), it positively contributed to the efficiency of the analyses by adding rigour to the study (Alhojailan, 2012). The results from the thematic analysis regarding these concepts are discussed in the

next section along with the findings from the data are supported by direct quotes from the respondents to support the results.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

| Respondents' Profile | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| <i>Age of Respondents</i> | <i>No. of Respondents</i> | <i>%</i> |
| 16-24 | 6 | 22.2 |
| 25-40 | 14 | 51.9 |
| 41-60 | 5 | 18.5 |
| 61-75 | 2 | 7.4 |
| 75 and above | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Gender</i> | <i>No. of Respondents</i> | <i>%</i> |
| Female | 10 | 37.0 |
| Male | 17 | 63.0 |
| Other | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Marital Status</i> | <i>No. of Respondents</i> | <i>%</i> |
| Not married | 16 | 59.3 |
| Married | 11 | 40.7 |
| Prefer not to say | 0 | 0 |
| <i>Occupation</i> | <i>No. of respondents</i> | <i>%</i> |
| Student | 10 | 37.0 |
| Service class | 9 | 33.3 |
| Own Business | 6 | 22.2 |
| Retired | 2 | 7.4 |
| <i>Education</i> | <i>No. of respondents</i> | <i>%</i> |
| Matriculation | 2 | 7.4 |
| Under-graduate | 14 | 51.9 |
| Post-graduate | 10 | 37.0 |
| Above post-graduate | 1 | 3.7 |

Source: Own Elaboration

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Awareness about the Term Overtourism

A total of 18 respondents were aware of the term 'overtourism' and their understanding emphasised that 'too many tourists' are the major cause of this issue. Various studies have focused on analysing the residents' perception and concerns regarding overtourism (Marsiglio, 2016; Kuščer & Mihalič, 2019; Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2020; Bertocchi et al., 2020) showing how different the preferences of tourists towards crowding fail to demonstrate the tourists' understanding of the phenomenon. During the course of the interviews, the respondents used the terms 'overtourism' and 'crowding' synonymously. Thus, it is found that tourists don't differentiate between these two notions and even the current studies

4.3 Changing Tourists' Perception of Crowding Post-COVID-19

4.3.1 Pre and Post COVID-19 Perceptions

The notion of crowding before COVID-19 was such that it largely affects the famous tourist destinations (Dichter & Gloria, 2017; Namberger et al., 2019). About 17 respondents believed that famous places are likely to attract a crowd in general. This opinion is supported by Joppe (2019) who emphasised that destinations listed on Lonely planet or included in blogs titled 'must visit in your lifetime' plays a key role in attracting a crowd. The respondents further stated that earlier (i.e., before the pandemic), the number of people at a destination did not bother them significantly. This has two underlying assumptions, i.e., tolerance limit of tourists and their preference. Jin and Pearce (2011) reported that when acceptability levels lie between tolerance and preference, the tourists' perception of a crowd is lower. However, the tolerance limits might vary amongst tourists belonging to different parts of the world, and thus, making crowding perception a multidimensional socio-psychological construct (Kim, Lee, & Sirgy, 2016). For instance, one of the respondents said:

"Earlier crowded destination doesn't affect me as much as it affects me now. As an Indian, I had never thought that it would have been so crucial for us to maintain social distancing practice."

[Respondent 22]

Electronic and social media plays a vital role in creating a destination image and influencing people to visit a specific destination. Thus, a change in the tourists' perception of a destination in both pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 phase would have a significant impact on the demand and supply sides of the tourism system. The below mentioned response demonstrates both the acceptability of crowding while travelling (pre-COVID-19) and the role of media and destination authorities in creating awareness (post-COVID-19).

"Honestly speaking, before the spread of the coronavirus, I think I was not sensitive towards crowding affecting me directly. But now I am becoming more aware of its problems with the help of media and national authorities (sic.)."

[Respondent 20]

The respondents recurrently recalled their experiences of long queues, high prices of accommodation, unavailability of parking spots, traffic jams near famous hotspots, etc., especially during the peak season.

4.3.2 Factors to be Considered in Travelling Post-COVID-19

The majority of the responses showed that the outbreak of the pandemic would push people to think beyond their usual decision-making state while choosing a destination. For instance, Padrón-Ávila and Hernández-Martín (2019) analysed a total of 13 potential determinants that attract tourists to crowded places. These include theme parks, convenience to travel, weather, health tourism, environment, natural safety, etc. These could be considered as determinants of the pre-COVID-9 phase. However, the post-COVID-19 responses demonstrate the importance of health and safety from infection while preparing to travel. This correlates with the study conducted by Wen et al. (2020). A respondent replied:

"Surprisingly, now, I will rather look at the health and wellness status of a destination which I earlier did not consider. For instance, how clean, sanitised and hygienic services are being offered by the destination. If I am not satisfied with the online reviews, I am opting out of"

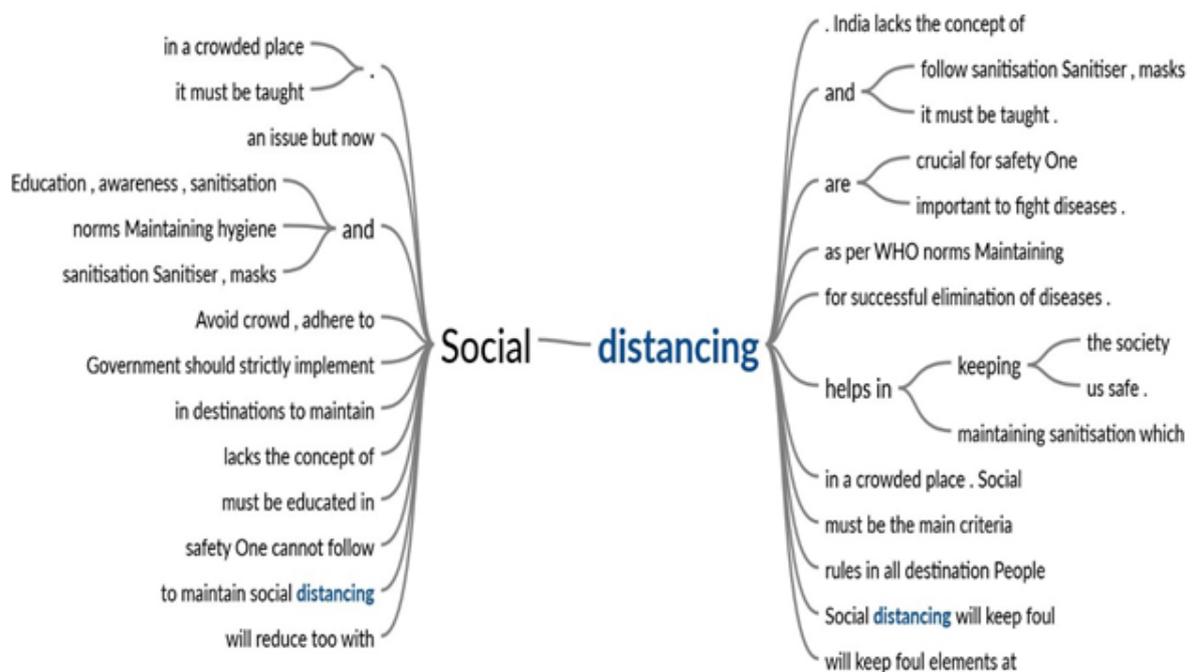
[Respondent 1]

Though all the respondents emphasised the need for safety and hygiene while travelling, the main factors that would be considered have not changed much such as the price of the package, accessibility to the place, and weather. However, an additional component was added, i.e., the place should be less crowded. For instance, when asked this question, a respondent replied:

“Distance, whether it is accessible through private transport, the area’s population and scenic beauty and it will be a freebie if the destination has some adventure fun activities, provided it is not open for very large general public”
[Respondent 2]

The text search query of the word distancing, as shown in Figure 2 reveals that distancing is naturally linked with social distancing, and it has become a corresponding necessity to survival.

Figure 2. Text Search Query of the Word ‘Distancing’



Source: Own Elaboration

4.3.3 Will the Crowd Discourage Travelling in the Post-COVID-19?

The respondents linked COVID-19 and crowding, where the risk of infection is high due to the poor standards of hygiene and absence of social distancing. The outbreak of global health issues has made people more attentive to hygiene which indicates that perception of safety and hygiene will be a significant factor in travel decisions (Nazneen et al., 2020; Ozili & Arun, 2020). On asking if the crowd would discourage them to visit a destination, 22 respondents agreed, whereas 5 of them said that it is too early to say anything. It is assumed that the pandemic is unprecedented and travelling to crowded places would be unsafe in the present scenario. In the same context, a female respondent replied:

“Firstly it’s always an uncomfortable situation where ever there is crowding, and secondly, in the present COVID-19 situation it is unsafe too. So for me, safety is going to be the priority.”

Within the context of Haiti, Seraphin (2018) emphasised the need to improve destination image in the recovery phase, especially after a destination is affected by any conflict or disaster. Thus, it is advisable for the destinations which had a larger number of coronavirus cases such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Tamil Nadu, etc. to re-work their destination image in the post-COVID-19 phase. The creation of a safe travelling environment, and incorporation of factors related to health, hygiene and wellness would be appreciated by potential travellers. A female respondent shared her perception of post-COVID-19 travel plans:

“Now I might not travel to the regular popular monuments or places and rather opt for something where there is a lesser crowd. Or probably a destination which has branded itself as covid-19 free and is strictly following precautionary measures”

[Respondent 3]

4.4 Suitable Measures Adopted to Avoid the Crowd

In the post-COVID-19 phase, the respondents candidly replied that they are following the governments’ regulations regarding travelling activities, and avoiding travel as far as possible. In this dynamic situation, about 6 respondents said that they would avoid traveling till the time vaccine is available or traveling becomes safe. About 17 of the total respondents said that they would avoid going out to crowded places in the first place, and if travel is mandatory, they would maintain social distancing norms, and follow the instructions laid by the authorities at a place. This practice falls under the typology of behavioural coping mechanism related to crowded places and is termed displacement (Manning & Valliere, 2001). As per Manning and Valliere (2001), displacement is involuntary and relatively caused by adverse stimuli. It is observed in our study that the decision to displace would rather be voluntary among potential tourists. When asked about suitable measures that would be taken in the post-COVID-19 phase, a male respondent answered:

“I may not prefer to travel until next year or until the vaccine is out. Even if I happen to travel for something important, I will ensure to minimise physical contact with people around me.”

[Respondent 17]

The displacement tactic is not only limited to the place visited but also with its core components. About 10 respondents emphasised that they would avoid eating out and would choose a take-away service if possible. Even if they are staying at hotels, they would rather skip buffet services for meals. A male respondent within the age bracket of 16 to 24 replied:

“To be precise, I will avoid having food at buffet services while my stay in a hotel for some time. I will try my best to maintain less personal contact with others by using less public transport, and would choose to have tech-based transactions while travelling.”

[Respondent 13]

It is worth noting that Nickerson (2016) presented four categories of commonly practiced coping behaviour amongst tourists. These are: a) changing the time of day or season in which to visit; b) changing their attitude/perception about crowding; c) going to less popular locations in the same area; and d) not visiting the area altogether. The author emphasised that the fourth coping behaviour mechanism is least adopted by visitors. However, the pandemic has brought the adoption of the fourth coping mechanism widely in the short run.

5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Perceived Crowding Factors and Expectancy Theory

The present study adds value to the existing paradigm of tourists' crowding perception and their expectations from a destination in the post-COVID-19 scenario. The study reports change in crowding perception in three aspects. Firstly, the pre-COVID-19 studies reported the impact of spatial crowding in impacting the tourists' perception of crowding such as traffic, lack of space to carry out activities, etc. (Kim et al., 2016; Sanz-Blas, Buzova, & Schlesinger, 2019). However, in the post COVID-19 phase, human crowding is likely to have an adverse impact on tourists' perception of crowding at a destination. The larger the number of humans, the more the level of perceived crowding. Secondly, the situational characteristics of a destination will play a major role over the personal and behaviour of others' characteristics in tourists' crowding perception. As mentioned by Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon (2004), three factors influence the crowding experience of individuals namely, personal characteristics, behaviour of others, and situational or environmental factors. The situational factors majorly include the number of tourists, ease of accessibility to the destination, seasonality, availability of services, design of space, and other physical characteristics of the destination visited (Neuts & Nijkamp, 2012; Yeh et al., 2012). In the post-COVID-19 phase, the respondents would acknowledge the situational factors in all the components of a destination. For instance, the increased role of safety, hygiene, accessibility, design of space, management of sites, traffic control, regulations for site management, etc. would be crucial factors in the travelling decision process. And lastly, a change in the behavioural coping mechanisms by tourists would be evident in the post-COVID-19 phase. Both inter-site (i.e. shifting within one recreational setting) and intra-site displacement (i.e. shifting from one period to another) would be common parlance but this would be a voluntary decision of tourists. Unlike emphasised in pre-COVID-19 studies that displacement is involuntary and is a result of adverse stimuli (Shelby et al., 1988; Moyle & Croy, 2007), the tourists in the post-COVID-19 phase would adopt displacement coping behaviour whenever they encounter a crowd. Likely, tourists might not prefer to visit a destination wherein the destination management authorities are incapable of ensuring social distancing norms and providing sanitised services. Therefore, the perceived definition of crowding is likely to change due to the change in the tourists' behaviour and their expectations of the services offered at a destination.

5.2 Tourists as Prosumers

The research acknowledges the role of tourist's decisions in negatively affecting the destination, aiding the constructs of overtourism, and sub-consciously contributing to crowding. The research considers tourists as inadvertent prosumers to crowding and overtourism, whereby the manifestation of activities is evident in the destination. The term 'prosumer', was first coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980, to recognise the already prevalent culture of individuals concurrently working as producers and consumers for products or services (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). Research on tourists as prosumers is its incipient stage where not much attention has been provided to the subject other than referring to the creative tourist in particular as a prosumer (Messineo, 2012; Ritzer et al., 2012). The process is mostly discussed based on conscious development of a product with due assistance from the consumers through co-creation (Campos et al., 2018) or 'prosumption' (Carvalho, Costa, & Ferreira, 2019) that transforms the consumers into producers of the final product or experiences they consume". As a deviation from Toffler's definition of "prosumer" which addressed them as attentive customers (Ritzer et al., 2012), this research propounds on the

accidental role of the tourists in contributing to overtourism in a destination. Prosumption is recognised to leave a direct influential relevance in the economy (Ritzer et al., 2012), however, since tourism is a people's industry (Goh & Lee, 2018), the implications are visible on the people and on the destination as a whole. Therefore, as a prosumer the tourists can constructively contribute towards sustainability (Guilarte & Quintáns, 2019) by ensuing responsible behaviour at destinations with due education and awareness (Chowdhary, Tiwari, & Kainthola, n.d.).

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

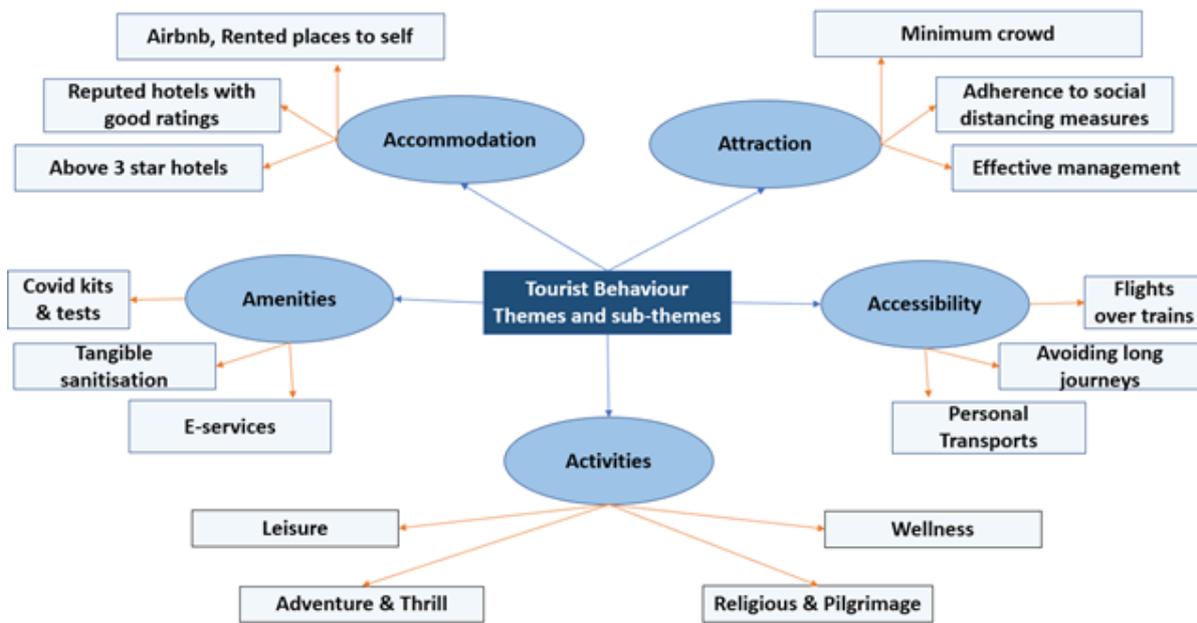
6.1 Managing Destinations in the Post-COVID-19 Phase

The change in perception of crowding after the COVID-19 outbreak would likely affect the management strategies of any destination. The respondents' frequent emphasis on the maintenance of social distancing highlights the significance of better management policies at tourist destinations in the post-COVID-19 phase. Visitor Management techniques are crucial for every destination for monitoring the tourists' flow and ensuring that locals and destinations are not affected (Scuttari, Isetti, & Habicher, 2019). It is likely that the concept of carrying capacity as the 'maximum limit that a destination can possess' would be an outdated mechanism to monitor the tourism system at a place (Sharma, 2016). Rather, adoption of other techniques such as limits of acceptable change (LAC), visitor impact measurement (VIM), visitor activity management process (VAMP), Visitor Environmental and Research Protection (VERP), etc. is suggested to be more effective. Managing the flow of tourists, traffic, easy movement of locals while ensuring that the ecological environment is least affected should be a pre-requisite in the post-pandemic phase. For instance, the idea of 6-feet tourism (Lapointe, 2020) or encircling on floors for ensuring that tourists follow social distancing at sites, pre-registration or electronic tickets/bar codes, etc. could be considered potential steps in the new normal scenario. Therefore, the implementation of these techniques would ensure re-establishment of the pillars of sustainable tourism growth at tourist destinations in the long-run.

6.2 Incorporating Hygiene in 5 A's of Tourism

The respondents in the study emphasised the need for hygienic and sanitised services during their visit and stay at any destination. This correlates with the study done by Naumov, Varadzhakova, and Naydenov (2020) who indicated that the sanitation and cleanliness at the accommodation establishments are the focus areas of the tourists' preferences. For instance, the American restaurant chain Ruby Tuesday said that it regained 30 per cent of its lost customers by adopting appropriate hygiene measures such as providing clean uniform to the restaurant's staff, sanitization, and routines of disinfecting etc. In the hospitality context, the Hilton hotels have also announced the 'Hilton CleanStay' program in April 2020. This program comprises features like a contactless digital room key, and Cleanstay Room Seal as an additional layer of safety assurance for its guests. This confirms that the guests' room is not accessed after been cleaned by the housekeeping department (Sanand, 2020). Likewise, the tourism department of the Meghalaya state located in India has released a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the entry of tourists at famous attractions. It would be implemented to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the state (Sentinel Assam, 2020). Even though various destination across the world is gearing up to offer an exquisite experience to potential tourists in the new normal scenario, the question of whether the cost of sanitised services falling on tourists needs to be inquired.

Figure 3. Identifying Themes and Sub-themes of Tourist Behaviour Post Covid-19



Source: Own Elaboration

6.3 Application of Demarketing to Manage Tourist Flow

Demarketing is the new marketing technique of the 21st century (Lawther, Hastings, & Lowry, 1997). The authors propose that the application of demarketing in the tourism system in the post-COVID-19 phase would be a useful step towards the development of quality tourism practices. For effective implementation of demarketing in the tourism system, Tiwari, Kainthola and Chowdhary (2020) suggested a marketing mix framework for demarketing the various components of a destination such as cutting down the promotion of highly populated sites, increasing the ticket prices, limit on the number of tourists, etc. A combination of these strategies could be adopted by monuments and cities to manage tourists' flow.

6.4 Utilising Technology for Sustainable Growth of Tourism

The reported issues of overcrowding and overtourism were largely related to the ill-management of tourism growth (UNWTO, 2018), the pandemic has offered an opportunity to redesign and rethink the destination management perspective. Recent studies have proposed it is the right time to centre tourism activities on providing benefits to the locals (Lapointe, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly highlighted the advancement in internet utility and e-activities in every economic sector (Chen & Li, 2020). The increased use of digital media platforms, artificial intelligence applications, and advanced communication and technology could be used for collaboration between government, tour operators, and local stakeholders at a large scale. The use of robots and robotic artificial intelligence is also considered an innovative step to manage tourism activities in the post-COVID-19 period (Zeng, Chen, & Lew, 2020). For instance, the Indian-based ZafiRobots has developed a robot that is deployed in some garment shops in the state of Tamil Nadu. The robot alerts if any visitor in the shop is not wearing a mask or not maintain social distancing, it dispenses sanitiser and performs a thermal screening function while anyone enters the shop. Moreover, it keeps track of the number of people entering the shop at a time (Ahuja, 2020).

The transition in tourists' behaviour requires an equal transition in the offering of services at destinations. Therefore, to pave the way towards smart tourism destinations (Tiwari, Kainthola, & Chowdhary, 2020), stakeholders' cooperation along with the incorporation of technology in the tourism production and consumption process would yield efficiency. Tourist education and effective marketing strategies also play an important role in improving the destination's image affected by disaster or a crisis (S raphin et al., 2019). The consistent advertisements and reminders by the government to maintain physical distance and cleanliness have developed enduring habits among people. The use of sanitiser, wearing masks, and maintaining distancing has become muscle memory for people. Therefore, this research aids the destination management organisations in understanding the expectations and perceptions of tourists related to crowding and frame strategies to ensure better visitor management at famous tourist sites.

7. CONCLUSION

The study analysed the change in tourists' perception of 'feeling crowded' in the post-COVID-19 phase. It was found that more than half of the respondents were aware of the overtourism issue and identified some destinations like Barcelona, Shimla with it. However, using the terms crowding and overtourism synonymously highlighted the complexities between both issues. Further, crowding is majorly perceived as a negative feeling for tourists as they denoted the term with congestion, claustrophobic, traffic jams, unhygienic and prone to disease, etc. and it might not likely alter in the post-COVID-19 scenario. The study also reported that women are more likely to perceive crowding as a negative emotion than men. A significant number of respondents reported that crowding or crowded places didn't affect them earlier but after the rise in the COVID-19 cases in the country, they are avoiding travel to crowded places to a large extent. There are certain factors which they would consider important while travelling shortly such as the preference for hygienic and sanitised services, and maintaining social distancing norms. The respondents mentioned that they would either choose staycations or postpone travelling till the time vaccine is discovered to combat the ill-effects of the virus.

The change in consumer behaviour due to the fear of COVID-19 would bring a shift in the tourism supply-side correspondingly. Tourism and hospitality experiences being mostly abstract, the service providers will have to put in more effort to demonstrate that they are conscious of hygiene, safety, social distancing, and other norms. Based on this, the accommodation sector might increasingly play on the idea of hygiene, the restaurants would strategize marketing to portray their setting as clean and safe, and the destination management would prioritize managing visitors by ensuring that social distancing measures are followed. Certainly, the stakeholders have got an unprecedented opportunity to reboot the tourism sector more sustainably and responsibly manner (Strielkowski, 2020). The research lays out the evolution in tourist consumption behaviour with the onset of the pandemic that has seemingly caused fear as well as awareness regarding the environment. Its high time that the 'old normal' needs be restructured with the changing circumstances (Nepal, 2020; Romagosa, 2020). However, if they are made aware of the consequences of their irresponsible conduct that could have adverse impacts on the destination and the hosts, the 'new normal' will be the 'right normal'.

Future studies can focus on analysing the safety perception of tourists in the post-COVID-19 phase, comparison between change in travelling behaviour among a different generation of travellers, the role of tour agencies in minimising the risk perception of tourists, utilisation of technology at famous places to monitor crowding, etc.

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