

Rethinking Tourism Post-COVID: A Public Health Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolving relationship between tourism and public health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores how tourism contributed to the spread of the virus and the subsequent impact on public health systems. The pandemic has reshaped the tourism industry, emphasizing the need for public health measures to be integrated into tourism planning and recovery efforts. This study highlights the economic implications of COVID-19 on tourism, public health adaptations, and the future of sustainable and resilient tourism practices. By rethinking tourism from a public health perspective, the paper provides insights into creating a more resilient industry post-pandemic.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted the global tourism industry, an essential sector for many economies worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). As an early vector for viral transmission, tourism significantly contributed to the pandemic's spread (Gössling et al., 2020). In response, public health measures, including travel bans, lockdowns, and quarantine mandates, brought tourism to a near standstill. This paper argues that post-pandemic tourism must incorporate public health perspectives to bolster resilience against future health crises. By examining the interdependence between tourism, public health, and COVID-19, this study provides a pathway for creating a more sustainable and health-conscious tourism industry. The focus is on how public health strategies can shape tourism planning and management in a post-COVID-19 context (Sigala, 2020). The objectives of the study are: to examine the impact of tourism on the dissemination of COVID-19, emphasising the influence of travel and tourist behaviours on the worldwide propagation of the virus, to evaluate the public health interventions enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic and their effects on the tourism sector, especially in high-risk tourist locales, to recommend solutions for incorporating public health considerations into tourist planning and management in a post-pandemic environment, with the objective of enhancing resilience and sustainability within the industry and to assess sustainable tourism frameworks and public health readiness strategies that may alleviate the effects of forthcoming health emergencies on the tourist sector.

2. Methodology

This study relies exclusively on secondary data to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector and the integration of public health strategies in tourism management. A systematic review of existing literature was conducted to understand the role of tourism in the spread of COVID-19 and the subsequent public health responses. Scholarly articles from journals and additional sources included government publications and reports from international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC).

3. Review of Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped tourism, impacting mental health, decision-making, economic performance, and consumer satisfaction within the sector. Bajrami et al. (2023) explored how psychological capital and mental health affected young volunteer tourists' intentions to continue volunteering post-COVID. Their study found that while psychological capital strongly predicted negative feelings, mental health concerns also influenced volunteer intentions, moderated by organizational and social support structures. Similarly, Buckley and Westaway (2020) observed that women's outdoor tourism significantly contributed to mental health recovery, enhancing well-being through psychological rescue, community effects, and nature appreciation, underlining outdoor tourism's therapeutic role post-pandemic.

Moreover, Li and Wen (2024) focused on the wellness tourism decision-making mechanisms, identifying trust

and self-efficacy as critical factors influencing intentions to participate in forest-based wellness tourism. Their study showed that perceived threat from COVID-19 significantly dampened tourism interest, indicating the pandemic's sustained psychological impact on travel choices. Chen et al. (2024) adopted a macroeconomic perspective, finding that COVID-19 severely impacted Chinese tourism companies, with financial constraints exacerbating losses for smaller enterprises. These results underscore the necessity for robust financial strategies to mitigate pandemic-related disruptions. In Mauritius, Ramlall (2024) used a dynamic stochastic general equilibrium model to demonstrate that COVID-19 caused a downturn in the tourism sector, depressing exports and raising government debt. This highlights the need for policy diversification to protect economies reliant on tourism. Park et al. (2022) compared tourism responses to COVID-19 and past crises, identifying unique COVID-19-specific challenges, such as elevated risk perceptions and shifts in human resources management, emphasizing the need for crisis-tailored strategies in hospitality.

He et al. (2024) explored China's red tourism-aviation relationship, noting a pandemic-driven shift to domestic travel. Findings indicated a reciprocal influence between red tourism demand and airline capacity, suggesting potential recovery pathways for tourism within restricted travel contexts. Antwi et al. (2024) investigated the effect of COVID-19 misinformation on cross-border tourism, revealing that beliefs about the virus's origin could influence tourism biases, animosity, and destination image, reflecting how misinformation can reshape tourism dynamics. Lastly, Štumpf and Kubalová (2024) examined visitor satisfaction in nature-based tourism, observing that intangible factors, such as active sports options, became more prominent during COVID-19. Their findings suggest that Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) should adapt to shifting visitor expectations, prioritizing sustainable practices while accommodating increased demand for active experiences.

These studies collectively highlight the transformative effects of COVID-19 on tourism, suggesting that while mental health, financial resilience, and adaptive management are essential to recovery, evolving visitor preferences toward wellness and sustainable practices are reshaping the industry's future.

4. Tourism and the Spread of COVID-19

International travel, particularly air travel, accelerated the global spread of COVID-19, as airports, airplanes, and cruise ships posed high risks due to confined spaces and the constant movement of people across borders (Ioannides & Gimóthy, 2020).

- **Air Travel and Transmission:** The initial phase of COVID-19's global spread was closely linked to international travel, with airlines facilitating rapid transmission across continents. Insufficient distancing in airports and on flights contributed to these spaces becoming transmission hotspots (World Health Organization, 2020).
- **Tourist Destinations as Epicenters:** Popular tourist hubs, including Northern Italy and New York City, experienced significant early outbreaks. The influx of international visitors to these crowded destinations and the limited infrastructure for managing such rapid viral transmission underscored tourism's role in spreading COVID-19. Cruise ships, where social distancing was impractical, further highlighted tourism's critical role in accelerating the pandemic's reach (Gössling et al., 2020).

5. Public Health Response to the Tourism Industry

Governments worldwide responded with unprecedented public health measures that directly impacted tourism. Travel bans, social distancing requirements, and quarantine regulations were implemented to contain the virus, effectively halting tourism (Hall et al., 2021).

- **Travel Restrictions and Quarantines:** Most countries imposed stringent travel restrictions to contain the virus, including quarantine measures for travelers from high-risk areas, and, in some cases, outright bans on international tourism (Romagosa, 2020). While effective in controlling the virus, these restrictions led to a collapse in tourism demand, with significant economic implications.
- **Health Protocols and Tourism Businesses:** As the pandemic persisted, tourism businesses adapted by implementing health protocols such as mandatory mask-wearing, increased sanitation, and capacity limits. These measures, while essential for traveller confidence, also increased operational costs for the industry (Sigala, 2020).

6. Economic and Public Health Impacts of COVID-19 on Tourism

The economic repercussions of the pandemic have been severe for the tourism sector, with downstream effects on public health systems, especially in economies reliant on tourism revenue (Impact, 2021).

- **Economic Losses in Tourism:** According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the global tourism sector lost over \$4 trillion in 2020 alone. This loss was particularly devastating in countries like Thailand, Spain, and the Maldives, where tourism forms a significant portion of GDP, resulting in job losses and business closures (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2021).
- **Impact on Public Health Systems:** In many developing countries, tourism revenue supports healthcare infrastructure. The decline in tourism income further strained public health systems, which were already struggling to manage the pandemic, thus exacerbating healthcare challenges (Hockings et al., 2020).

7. Rethinking Tourism Post-COVID: Public Health Integration

The pandemic has necessitated a re-evaluation of tourism's resilience, with public health now a priority in future tourism planning.

- **Vaccination and Health Passports:** Vaccination campaigns have facilitated tourism recovery, with some countries introducing health passports to verify vaccination or testing status. Although these passports enable safer travel, they also raise ethical concerns regarding vaccine equity and privacy (Gössling et al., 2020).
- **Sustainable Tourism Models:** The pandemic underscored the importance of sustainable tourism practices that reduce environmental impact and prioritize public health. Strategies like reducing tourist overcrowding and implementing community-based tourism models align with sustainability and health safety goals (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020).
- **Health Preparedness in Tourism:** Integrating health preparedness into tourism planning, including protocols for future pandemics, is essential. Investment in health infrastructure in tourist destinations and health safety training for tourism stakeholders can strengthen the sector's resilience (Song & Sun, 2023).

8. Future Challenges and Opportunities

The post-pandemic recovery offers opportunities to rebuild tourism with a focus on sustainability and public health, though significant challenges remain.

- **Balancing Economic Recovery and Public Health:** As countries prioritize economic recovery, there is a risk that public health measures may be relaxed in favour of tourism growth. A balanced approach is essential to avoid future health crises (Sigala, 2020).
- **Equity in Health and Tourism:** Health passports and vaccination requirements pose issues of access, particularly for low-income countries with slower vaccination rollouts. Addressing these inequalities is essential for an inclusive recovery (Romagosa, 2020).
- **Resilience in Public Health Systems:** The pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in global health systems in managing tourism-related health emergencies. Strengthening public health infrastructure, especially in developing nations dependent on tourism, will be crucial to mitigate future crises (Gössling et al., 2020).

9. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the tourism industry, exposing its vulnerability to health crises. Future tourism planning must integrate public health measures to build resilience and ensure sustainability. Vaccination campaigns, health protocols, and sustainable tourism models are driving recovery, but challenges related to equity and health preparedness persist. By considering tourism through a public health perspective, stakeholders can build a more sustainable and resilient tourism landscape, better equipped for future global health threats.

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