

Has the outbreak of tourism research involving COVID-19 been cured by 2022?

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Abstract

Expanding on the recommendation of Assaf et al. (2022), this research note provides insights and recommendations for the post-COVID-19 future of tourism research. We reviewed 56 recent papers related to COVID-19 published in the top three high quality tourism journals. Whilst there was a glut of relatively descriptive research on the pandemic, especially involving the economic impacts as a result of the virus, the results indicate that inadequate attention has been given to technology adoption and tourists' well-being. Recent discussions of post-COVID-19 tourism have emphasised crisis management, which remains an important direction for future research. We recommend tourism recovery and resilience as one of the major focuses for tourism research and for greater importance to be attached to crisis planning and preparation so that lessons can be learned from COVID-19. Rather than a single country, cross-sectional studies, the adoption of cross-cultural, cross-contextual, and longitudinal study approaches is also recommended.

Keywords: COVID-19; Tourism; Future; Post-COVID-19 tourism research

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Introduction

On January 9, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognised a mysterious Coronavirus-related pneumonia in Wuhan, China, and on March 11, 2020 declared COVID-19 a pandemic. With the subsequent closing of international borders, international travel came to an immediate halt. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented crisis in the tourism industry. As such, the academic community focusing on tourism immediately started researching the impacts of the pandemic on the industry. However, a lot of research at the start of the pandemic was either descriptive or speculative, with opinion pieces flooding publication outlets.

With many destinations having now relaxed their COVID-19-related travel restrictions and international tourism having gradually recovered, this research note examines the extent to which tourism scholars are still discussing and publishing COVID-19-centric research. This paper provides a brief review of the recent trends of tourism research related to COVID-19 and offers insights and recommendations for the post-COVID-19 future of tourism research. The findings can benefit tourism scholars, businesses, and policymakers in highlighting a research agenda and recommending gaps in knowledge concerning pandemics.

Method

The paper search was conducted in December 2022, and all the full papers published in English within 2022 (including those being accepted) were counted. The keywords 'COVID' / 'COVID-19' / 'pandemic' were used in the search (paper titles) in the top three tourism journals, including *Tourism Management (TM)*, *Journal of Travel Research (JTR)*, and *Annals of Tourism Research (ATR)*. This literature review was systematic (Shamseer et al., 2015) and focused on the top three journals. The TM (IF=12.879) and ATR (IF=12.853) were the top two tourism journals according to 2021 Impact Factors of Clarivate's Web of Science (note: the 2022 statistics were released in June 2023). JTR was not among the top three journals in this regard but different experts and scholars had recommended it more than the 3rd place journal *Tourism Geographies* (IF=11.355), due to its historical reputation in tourism research. Initially, ninety-three papers were found from the three targeted journals. After removing duplicate papers, a total of fifty-six recent COVID-19-focused tourism papers were collected from *TM*

($n = 23$), *JTR* ($n = 17$), and *ATR* ($n = 16$). They account for around 14% of the total published articles in these journals. Manual content analysis was conducted with a coding and categorisation process (Ren, 2014). Later, the content analysis was supported by the generation of a concept map (abstract) in Leximancer (100% visibility and 33% theme size), with general terms (e.g., ‘analysis,’ ‘data,’ ‘findings,’ ‘results,’ ‘research,’ ‘study,’ ‘pandemic,’ ‘COVID’) excluded.

Findings

Recent COVID-19 Research Themes

Table 1 summarises the major themes and sub-themes discussed in the collected papers in 2022 (including those published online). The two major themes (‘impact of COVID-19’ and ‘the post-COVID-19 future of tourism’) are divided into various sub-themes (e.g., ‘tourist behaviour,’ ‘financial management,’ ‘tourists’ well-being,’ ‘technology adoption,’ ‘tourism demand,’ ‘tourism forecasting,’ ‘destination marketing,’ ‘hospitality marketing,’ ‘crisis management,’ ‘sustainability,’ and ‘tourism recovery’). The themes identified from the concept map generated by Leximancer are shown in Figure 1 and share some similarities with those identified in the manual content analysis. These themes highlight areas with future research potential, but the important theme of ‘technology adoption’ is absent in the concept map and could benefit from more in-depth studies. We conducted a pathway analysis on the ‘future’ concept, indicating that the industry can benefit from learning from the pandemic crisis and upgrading its crisis management tactics accordingly.

Table 1. Recent COVID-19 topics in tourism research

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency
Impact of COVID-19 (Positive and Negative)	<i>Tourist behaviour</i>	16
	Risk perception	9
	Travel decision making	2
	Biosecurity	1
	Emotions	1
	Purchase intention	1
	Travel anxiety	1

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency
Impact of COVID-19 (Positive and Negative)	Vaccination intentions	1
	<i>Financial management</i>	5
	In general	1
	Firm value	1
	Government assistance	1
	Resilience	1
	Revenue	1
	<i>Tourists' well-being</i>	4
	Mental health	3
	Quality of life	1
	<i>Technology adoption</i>	4
	Virtual tourism	2
	Big data	1
	Service robots	1
	<i>Tourism demand</i>	3
	<i>Tourism forecasting</i>	3
	In general	2
	Tourism demand forecasting	1
	<i>Destination marketing</i>	2
	In general	1
	Destination image management	1
	<i>Hospitality marketing</i>	2
	In general	1
	Pricing	1
	<i>Others</i>	6
	Host-guest interaction	1
	News media	1
	Public policy	1
	Tourism performance	1
	Visual attention	1
Mobility	1	

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency
The post-COVID-19 future of tourism	<i>Crisis management</i>	8
	In general	5
	Crisis response	2
	Crisis communication	1
	<i>Sustainability</i>	1
	<i>Tourism recovery</i>	1
	<i>Agenda for future research</i>	1
Total		56

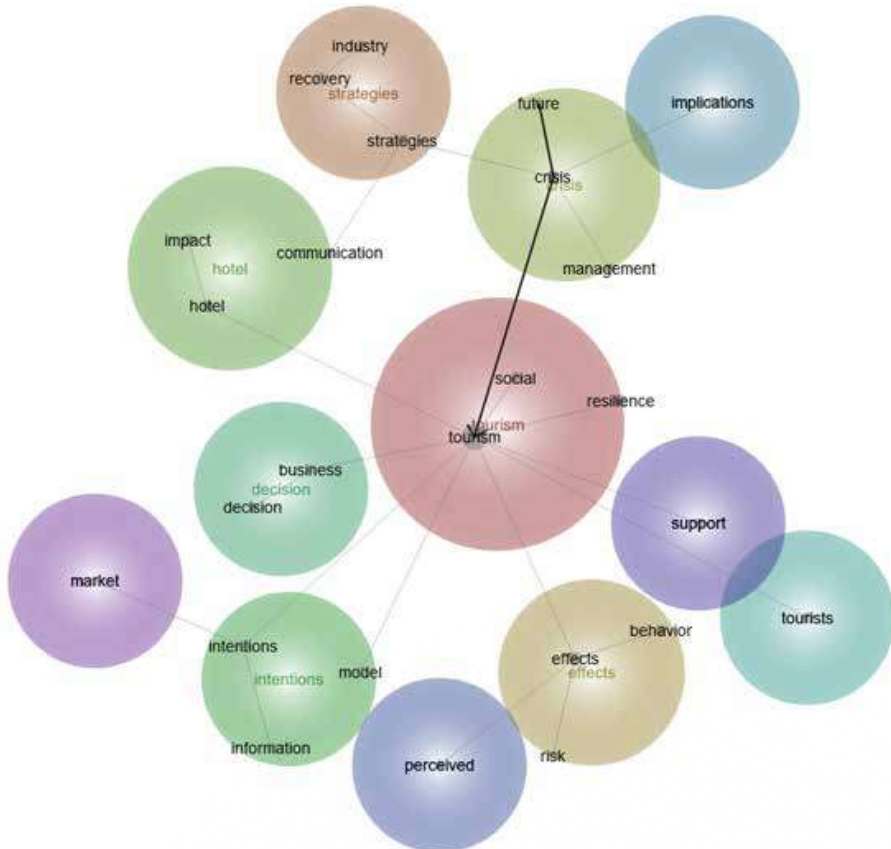


Figure 1. Concept map (Abstract) from Leximancer analysis



Findings of Impacts of COVID-19 on Tourism Research

Unsurprisingly, much published research in the area of tourism in recent years has focused on the negative impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism industry, particularly with respect to the decrease in tourism expenditures and business revenues. Many tourism businesses have struggled due to the lack of tourists resulting in declining sales during the pandemic (Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022). However, new technologies in the tourism sector had been used, which had proved the positive impacts of the pandemic. Another positive impact was the increase of public awareness for the importance of safety and sanitation as well as healthcare provision.

‘Tourist behaviour’ was the most commonly researched topic of the nine sub-themes of the impact of COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis impacted travel decision-making and tourist behaviours (Kim et al., 2022c). For example, Shin et al. (2022) pinpointed that social distancing constraints influenced tourists’ decisions of travel and travel frequency. Zheng et al. (2022) highlighted tourists’ risk perceptions in relation to tourist behaviours during the pandemic.

Surprisingly, the topics of ‘technology adoption’ and ‘tourists’ well-being’ received relatively less attention. Technology in tourism has been a popular research topic in recent years (Sigala, 2021), and the pandemic has raised the level of public interest in technology, especially the use of service robots and virtual reality (VR) technology. Several studies have highlighted the relationships between various technologies and tourists’ risk perceptions and travel decisions during the COVID-19 period. For example, virtual tourism provided a novel and safer form of travel whilst offsetting the limitations on physical travel during COVID-19 (Zhang et al., 2022), and the use of contactless service robots in the hospitality and tourism industry as a response to the highly infectious nature of the COVID-19 virus reduced tourists’ concerns about health risks (Liu et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also called attention to tourists’ well-being, particularly concerning mental health and quality of life. Given increased public concerns about tourists’ well-being and mental health, there has been surprisingly little recent research on this theme. The sudden intrusion of the COVID-19 virus into people’s lives had a large negative effect on mental health owing to the fear of illness and death, as well as

isolation and depression due to quarantining. However, with the relaxation of preventive measures and people's long-term adaptation to the 'new normal' of COVID-19, some recent studies have begun to focus on mental health recovery (Cheng & Liu, 2022; Luu, 2022).

The Post-COVID-19 Future of Tourism

Whilst reviewing the literature illustrating COVID-19's impacts, tourism scholars have also endeavoured to discuss the post-COVID-19 future of tourism. For example, the tourism industry has been urged to learn from the pandemic in order to manage future crises more effectively, thereby making crisis management a popular research topic. One such strategy is to clearly communicate preventive measures to customers and promote these measures via social media platforms (Kim et al., 2022b). Another strategy, recommended by Li et al. (2022), is to use stronger linguistic cues in crisis communications to manage consumers' emotions. Crisis management has been underestimated in the past decade, however, it is anticipated that it will receive more attention in future studies as tourism industry players need effective guidance to prepare for the next crisis (Wut et al., 2021).

Future of COVID-19-related Tourism Research

From interviews with 19 industry representatives and reputable tourism scholars, Assaf et al. (2022) proposed six focal areas that tourism researchers should emphasise in future COVID-19-related tourism research. In this section, we offer further insights and recommendations for future tourism trends from our review of the future research suggestions in the 56 papers identified above.

First, we recommend that scholars conduct more longitudinal research. Many recent studies have undertaken cross-sectional research, exploring one period of COVID-19, often a period before, during, or after the pandemic. However, it is recommended that future studies compare different time points (Guizzardi et al., 2022), including post-COVID-19, to examine the changes over time and therefore understand certain tourism phenomena more holistically (Cheng & Liu, 2022; Femenia-Serra et al., 2022). These changes should also be studied with an awareness of possible differences between different destinations and between tourists of different cultural and personal backgrounds. Some destinations may be more sensitive to certain diseases such as COVID-19, even when international travel has



resumed. In the meantime, some tourists may be continuously more adventuresome to visit those destinations with higher pandemic sensitivity.

Second, it was found that mental health and people's perception of quality of life did not receive adequate attention. It has been widely acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted local economies and brought about many social changes, and thus, mental health issues are becoming more prominent over the short term and long term. The importance of advanced technologies (e.g., big data, VR, artificial intelligence) in addressing tourists' emotional and social needs should be highlighted in order to achieve quality of life and ultimate happiness. These might be among the core topics of tourism research emerging from COVID-19.

Third, the recent body of research remains overwhelmingly focused on the immediate impacts of COVID-19 and lacks a more critical lens for considering tourism resilience. A systematic and deep reflection is lacking (Filep et al., 2022). Tourism recovery from COVID-19 will be an ongoing topic, but the resilience of tourism to future changes, adaptations, and 'radical' restructuring needs more research attention. First, many studies have explored the influences of the pandemic on tourists, but how these influences transform tourism in the future is unclear. Second, more studies are needed to identify the key drivers of tourism resilience (Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022). There might be many factors of uncertainties for the world and the tourism industry, thanks to our understanding of COVID-19 (Liu & Mair, 2023). However, there has been little recent research into how tourism resources could be systematically restructured for the preparation of the future. Furthermore, many moderating factors could also be tested for their effects on the main relationships among concepts, including tourists' predispositions (Kim et al., 2022a) and heterogeneous characteristics (Kim et al., 2022d) and the regulatory focus in tourism bodies (Liu et al., 2022).

Fourth, under the realm of crisis management, crisis planning and preparation (Chen et al., 2022) must be given more attention. COVID-19 is a warning to the tourism industry that crisis preparedness is vital for dealing with future possible crises (Kuscer et al., 2022). Future crises could take different forms, which involve natural disasters, social/political instabilities, and health risks (El-Said & Aziz, 2022). The effectiveness of relevant crisis management and preparation strategies should be tested and proved

respectively. The importance of crisis management has been usually forgotten or underestimated after a certain amount of time has elapsed since a crisis. It will be wise to devise, implement, and monitor a long-term crisis management strategy to sustain competitiveness in the future world.

Finally, it is recommended that researchers respect the views of various tourism stakeholders, such as entrepreneurs and destinations' residents. Most of the past studies merely discussed the views of tourists, tourism managers and employees. Tourism entrepreneurs would definitely look into the future development trends and important factors that could help them to obtain competitive edges in the future. Destinations' residents could provide in-time constructive feedback to tourism practitioners and governments for the sake of tourism sustainability. These stakeholders' viewpoints should be incorporated into post-COVID-19 industry restructuring.

Conclusion

This research note provides a brief review of the most recent studies on tourism and COVID-19 in the top three tourism journals to provide insights and recommendations for tourism research in the post-COVID-19 period. With the relaxation of travel restrictions and the resumption of international travel, tourism recovery and resilience should be studied in depth, attaching importance to such key factors as tourists' and residents' well-being, strategic crisis management, and the application and advancement of information technology. Furthermore, research findings should be underpinned with cross-cultural, cross-contextual, and longitudinal evidence.



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