

AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF CHANGING CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR AND EXPECTATIONS IN THE TOURISM INDUSTRY - THE POST COVID SCENARIO

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Abstract

This paper presents the outcome of research conducted to evaluate the Post COVID-19 behavioural changes exhibited by customers towards tourism and travel, as well as focus on the deployment of enhanced hygiene and safety standards to ensure travelers' well-being and confidence. The study provides a better understanding of the impact of shifting travel patterns on people's physical well-being and risk perception. A descriptive research design was adopted for the study. The data was collected using Google Forms from 494 participants. Statistical tests namely independent t-tests, chi-square tests, and ANOVA were used to analyze the data. The study examined how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted a change in behavior among customers and it delved into customers' risk perceptions during travel, expectations for increased safety standards, and the resilience strategies required for the tourism and leisure industries to adapt and overcome challenges posed by the pandemic. The awareness of how these changes affect the mentality of travelers, stands important for devising new approaches to deal with the challenges.

Index Terms: Post COVID 19, Tourism industry, Travel risk, Customer behavior, Hospitality, Customer Expectations, and Pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism and Travel had fuelled world growth prior to the incidence of COVID-19. The pandemic had harmed tourism-dependent economies very adversely. Health and safety were recognized as a top priority for global tourism due to its long-lasting impact on public health. Many worldwide institutions, governments, and cultures were affected by tourism. COVID-19 has expanded globally and in the early 2020s global pandemic disrupted society and the economy. COVID-19 containment measures have reduced global travel and economic activity mainly due to the nature of this industry where business, relies heavily on customer contact. To ensure the resilience of the Tourism Industry from the pandemic struck scenario, the public should feel confident to travel in groups again.

This industry values variety and experience. The "experience economy" boosts leisure vacations. Well-planned, fun events can boost a country's tourism and economy, however, the pandemic has added many newer requirements in addition to already existing needs. Thus, several nations are preparing their tourism sectors for Post COVID-19 revival by rethinking

tourism, digital transformation, and creating a sustainable ecosystem to enhance sustainability of the tourism Industry. Risk and mitigation measures affect tourists' travel choices. The tourism industry is further plagued by other potential consequences like organizational issues, psychological risks, financial risks, and social risks. A detailed review of literature pertaining to post-COVID scenarios can provide a comprehensive awareness of the scenario persisting in the tourism industry today.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Review Stage

Though the crisis in the travel industry due to the pandemic is not new, the COVID-19 outbreak has created a lasting impact on the lives of the common man. A robust recovery and resilience strategy has to be put in place to address the damaging impact of COVID-19 and to ensure the sustainability of the industry. The strategies implemented in the past may not fully address the issues of the present scenario. A severe dip was observed in the volume of travel taken up by tourists and their travel spending. An overall change can be observed in the manner in which the health and resource standards were redesigned by the service providers, to lure the confidence of the tourist in terms of health and financial expenditure, to abide by the government norms, and to create a win-win situation for tourists and business [Assaf, A., & Scuderi, R. (2020).

Post-COVID domestic travels outweighed international trips, however with the gradual relaxation of visa norms international travel has also picked up. Media has reported a change in the pattern of travel during the Post COVID period, with greater preferences for Staycations. The new workplace models like WFH and hybrid working have enabled tourists to take up work cations which are a great relief for the survival of the tourism industry. The psychological distress caused during the COVID-19 outbreak would have bought high post-traumatic stress symptoms among the population and it was found that the stress experienced by the quarantined population was four times more than the non-quarantined population (Brooks, S., Smith, L., & Webster, R. (2020).

With more than 44,000,000 reported confirmed cases in India, post-traumatic stress symptoms would have been spread among a large share of the population which can have an impact on the Tourism industry. Tourists feared traveling to locations vulnerable to pandemic attacks in terms of health and safety due to the poor infrastructural arrangements in those countries (Wen, J., Kozak, M., Yang, S., & Liu, F. (2020). The study done among Indonesian tourists found that 78 % of travellers have chosen to avoid travel to pandemic-spread locations (Iin Rachmawati, I. R. (2020). Another serious concern faced by travel service providers is to understand the post-COVID changes in travel behavior across various generations. (Javadinasr, M., Maggasy, T., Mohammadi, M., Mohammadain, K., Rahimi, E., Salon, D., & Derrible, S. (2022) reviews also pointed to the fact that in the event of a decline being witnessed in travel patterns of population, the business and pricing strategy post-pandemic has to be reviewed in the context of new scenario to ensure a quick revival. The post-pandemic behavior of prospective tourists holds the key to resilience. Sharma, G. D., Thomas, A., & Paul, J. (2021)

outlined a framework proposing four-factor leading to resilience in the tourism industry, the framework has pointed to the need for employee confidence and customer confidence for the resilience of the tourism industry.

Post-pandemic tourism service providers have gradually introduced technological innovation into their business in a phased manner to bring down human interference, hence building customer confidence can help in the revival of the industry. Mehroliya, S., Alagarsamy, S., & Solaikutty, V. M. (2021) highlighted self-protective behavior and perceived threat as important constructs of changes in customer behavior in the food delivery services industry. These constructs also have a severe bearing on customer behavior patterns in the tourism industry. The perceived threat can negatively influence travel decisions, while self-protective behavior can be observed as a resilience effort on the part of the customers while planning travel.

3. METHODS

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research approach to describe the Post COVID perceptions and changing expectations of customers towards tourism and leisure sectors and the long-term recovery prospects. A descriptive research design was used for the study as it facilitates noting down the observations and explaining the behavior of a topic under study without influencing it in any way. A descriptive research design is a valid method for researching specific subjects and is effective to perform qualitative studies.

3.2 Population

Primary data for the study was collected from 494 participants using Google Forms constructed exclusively for the study. The primary data was collected on factors pertaining to the customer perceptions of the internal measures being adopted by the tourism providers, Risk perception, customers' confidence to take up more travel, confidence in the vaccination done, and desire to pay for increased safety and hygiene standards. The questions were in multiple-choice format from which the respondents could choose the best options that suited their perception.

Initially, the survey was emailed to an existing list of contacts with a request that they fill out the survey and then forward it on to additional potential participants, later the survey was also shared via social networking sites, with a request of forwarding the survey to acquaintances. This eventually resulted in obtaining the required number of responses. Hence Snowball sampling or chain-referral sampling was adopted for the study.

3.3 Tools used for Analysis

Data Preparation was performed on the data collected using Google forms; it is the process of collecting, cleaning, and consolidating data into one file or data table, primarily for analysis. After the data cleaning process, the data was analyzed with SPSS software using statistical tools like Frequency analysis, Independent sample t-test, ANOVA, and Chi-square test.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Preference for Leisure Trips

Travel trends have been gradually changing during the Post COVID period. Preferences have shifted to more domestic travel as restrictions that follow international travel were found to be more cumbersome during the initial days of the post COVID period. At the micro level a better understanding of the demography of customers can help in devising new strategies for sustainable growth of the tourism industry.

The need for understanding customers' travel behavior and the importance of predicting customers' travel behavior for better transport planning was stressed by Kusumaningrum, D. A., & Wachyuni, S. S., (2020). The study stressed on the role of socio-demographic variables on travel motivation. Barbour, N., Menon, N., & Mannering, F., (2021), reported based on a study conducted among US population that nearly one-half of the respondents preferred WHF formats during and post-pandemic period and found that the choice was greatly influenced by the demographic variables like age, educational qualification, income, etc., The same scenario existed in the tourism industry.

Kara, N. S., & Mkwizu, K. H. (2020) conducted a study among tourists in Tanzania which revealed that travel motivations are influenced by demographic variables like age, marital status, etc., In the present study of the responses obtained from 494 participants, it was found that preferences for leisure trip were highly associated with Age, Gender, Occupation, Income, Marital Status, and Vaccination Status.

The statistical significance was high on these demographical factors. Nearly 75 % of the respondents who have made more than 5 leisure trips belonged to the age group (20-29) years. 85% of the most travelled respondents were fully vaccinated with 2 doses of vaccination shots. 79% of Unmarried respondents had a history of travelling more than their married counterparts. Male respondents scored higher than female respondents in having undertaken a greater number of leisure trips.

Table 1: Leisure Trip Preferences

	Pearson Chi-square Value	Significance
Age	48.049	(.000) Yes
Gender	21.110	(.001) Yes
Occupation	22.834	(.011) Yes
Monthly Income	36.587	(.061) No
Vaccination Status	19.858	(.031) Yes
Marital Status	22.972	(.000) Yes

This indicated that the majority of respondents from the younger age group had taken up more than 5 leisure trips, the reviews indicated that this age group preferred WFH formats, and the increased travel may be due to the prevalence of WHF arrangements. The data showed that 85

% of fully vaccinated respondents took up more travels during the post-COVID behavior, this may be due to decreased perceived threat of contracting a viral infection. Unmarried respondents too have a lessened perceived threat, while married respondents would have taken up lesser travel due to self-protective behavior. A similar case of self-protective behavior was seen among respondents with gender- Female.

4.2 Confidence on Vaccination Shots

Paul, E., Steptoe, A., & Fancourt, D. (2021) and Ekinici, Y., Gursoy, D., Can, A. S., & Williams, N. L. (2022) pointed out that there existed negative perceptions towards vaccination due to the mistrust or fear of unknown, perceived negative side effects of vaccination, feeling of predatory intentions of vaccine manufacturers assumed from the reports from media, and an expectation of herd immunity being a better alternative than vaccination.

Ekinici, Y., Gursoy, D., Can, A. S., & Williams, N. L. (2022) also found in their research that travel desire has triggered the emotional confidence of positive health behavior which motivated individuals to volunteer for Vaccination shots. Classification and analysis of data in the present study have confirmed that Confidence in Vaccination shots enabled respondents to undertake travel confidently; it was proved statistically that there was a significant association of perceived confidence in vaccination shots with Age, Gender, Occupation, and Income of respondents.

Table 2: Confidence on Vaccination Shots

	Pearson Chi-square Value	Significance
Age	48.049	(.000) Yes
Gender	21.110	(.001) Yes
Occupation	22.834	(.011) Yes
Monthly Income	36.587	(.061) No
Vaccination Status	19.858	(.031) Yes
Marital Status	22.972	(.000) Yes

The highest distribution of participants having confidence in vaccination were members in the Age group 20-29 years (61.9%), Gender Male (52.3%), Respondents from the employed Category (53.1 %), and members from the high-income group. Hence this cluster of respondents was found to have higher confidence in the Vaccination shots, which can trigger their choices for travel.

4.3 Reason for Travel

Wang, J., & Xia, L. (2021) pointed out that the longing for psychological well-being hampered due to the COVID-19 scenario has stimulated travel intentions in public during the post COVID period. This has been further found to have been influenced by integrated marketing communications by travel service providers. Further studies also indicated that travel intentions are also influenced by personality and demographic factors to which the public is exposed.

Pawar, D. S., Yadav, A. K., Choudhary, P., & Velaga, N. R. (2021) based on a study performed in India pointed to the influence of perceived safety and Income on choice of Leisure trips. Work-based trips dominated travel preferences when compared to leisure trips and income-based demographic variables were found to influence leisure trips.

Table 3: Reason for Travel

			Reasons for travel		Total	
			Leisure/ Vacation	Work		
Age in completed years	20 - 29	% within Age	56.5%	43.5%	100.0%	
		% within Reasons for travel	81.2%	56.2%	68.0%	
	30 – 39	% within Age	28.2%	71.8%	100.0%	
		% within Reasons for travel	8.5%	19.6%	14.4%	
	40 – 49	% within Age	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%	
		% within Reasons for travel	3.4%	4.6%	4.0%	
	50 – 59	% within Age	25.0%	75.0%	100.0%	
		% within Reasons for travel	4.7%	12.7%	8.9%	
	Above 60	% within Age	21.7%	78.3%	100.0%	
		% within Reasons for travel	2.1%	6.9%	4.7%	
	Marital Status	Unmarried	% within Marital Status	55.2%	44.8%	100.0%
			% within Reasons for travel	79.9%	58.5%	68.6%
Married		% within Marital Status	30.3%	69.7%	100.0%	
		% within Reasons for travel	20.1%	41.5%	31.4%	
Overall			47.4%	52.6%	100%	

From the responses collected for the present study, it was found that Age and Marital Status had a significant association with the reason for travel. The majority of the travel undertaken by the respondents was for work-related reasons as contemplated in the review of literature presented; however, there are also a reasonably good number of respondents who chose travel as a part of their Leisure/Vacation. Greater choice of travel as a reason for vacation was found to be more among the age group (20 – 29) Years, respondents with Marital status as Unmarried.

While respondents in the age group between 30 to above 60 years category as well as marital status married, opted for the choice of travel as a reason for Work. The review has pointed to the role of income in influencing leisure travel decisions. This study has further added to it by presenting the influence of Age and marital status on leisure and work-related travel decisions. A close observation of the data distribution indicates the influence of perceived safety on leisure travel decisions.

4.4 Agreeableness to Make Additional Investment for Safety

The role and influence of media and more specifically social media is found to be more efficient during any pandemic. It serves as the main source of information dissemination. During the COVID-19 as well as during the post-COVID scenario, media has played a dual role of being a friend and a foe (Venegas-Vera, A. V., Colbert, G. B., & Lerma, E. V., 2020). Transmission of information regarding the pandemic was disseminated within an infinitesimal time period causing a worldwide info emic (Abbas, J., Wang, D., Su, Z., & Ziapour, A., 2021). Though the worldwide info emic had created anxiety and panic, during the pandemic and post-Covid period it had also paved way for enhancing capabilities and building self-resilience among the public.

This had led to tourists adopting Self-protective behavior against the pandemic, readiness to spend more on travel and stay for ensuring health and safety. Travel behavior and expectations of specific hotel attributes have changed post-pandemic; the expectations were also found to vary with demographic variables. Travellers were very cautious about cleanliness and sanitation during travel and stay (Spoerr, D., & Pitsoulis, A., 2022). Research has also pointed out the financial prudence of travellers post-pandemic in terms of price to performance ratio.

Table 4: Preferences for Additional Investment on Safety

			N	Mean	t Value and Significance
Self-protective behaviour	Gender	Male	280	2.35	-1.711 (Not Significant)
		Female	214	2.50	
Spend a premium price for additional safety precautions during travel		Male	280	3.29	.303 (Not Significant)
		Female	214	3.26	
Spend a premium price for additional safety precautions during stay		Male	280	3.16	- 1692 (Not Significant)
		Female	214	3.31	
Self-protective behaviour	Marital Status	Unmarried	339	2.44	.883 (Not Significant)
		Married	155	2.36	
Spend a premium price for additional safety precautions during travel		Unmarried	339	3.37	2.473 (Significant)
		Married	155	3.06	
Spend a premium price for additional safety precautions during stay		Unmarried	339	3.16	-2.025 (Significant)
		Married	155	3.36	

The present study indicated the existence of significant differences among respondents based on marital status in their willingness to spend more to ensure safe travel and stay, while gender-wise significant differences were not noted. Respondents who were not married exhibited utmost care and were willing to spend more for ensuring safety from infections during Travel, while married respondents gave more focus to spending more on their stay for ensuring safety from infections.

Though self-protective behavior did not reveal statistically significant differences among respondents based on gender or marital status, the mean value was found to be high among

respondents belonging to gender male and among unmarried respondents. Recording the behavior and perceptions across the cross-section of respondents can help the service providers to redesign their capabilities and pricing strategy as a part of building resilience.

4.5 Confidence on Vaccination and fear of contracting virus

Research conducted among adults in the UK showed decreased trust in COVID Vaccination among respondents with less education, low income, and belonging to minority groups. Respondents who were ignorant of the fatal impact of COVID and who were against the implementation of COVID protocols put forth by the Government too were against vaccination [Paul, E., Steptoe, A., & Fancourt, D. (2021)].

Moreover, in spite of several efforts put forth by the government in terms of restrictions and multi-level screening for COVID the volume of travelers contracting the virus and its spread could not be contained due to various reasons (Hendrickson & Rilett, 2020). Moreover, individuals who were vaccinated were also infected with COVID, though the cases were not fatal as in the previous cases. This had led to decreased confidence and an opinion among tourists that travel can contract COVID virus.

Table 5: Confidence on Vaccination during Travel

	Vaccination Status	N	Mean	F Value and Significance
Opinion that Travel can contract COVID Virus	Not Vaccinated	15	2.40	.165 (Not Significant)
	1st dose	31	2.55	
	2nd dose	448	2.60	

In the present study the responses pertaining to fear of contracting virus during travel was analysed using ANOVA to check if the vaccination status has a bearing on the fear of respondents during their travel.

However as indicated in Table 5, no statistically significant differences in mean value of the opinion provided by the respondents were noted. However, it was noted that majority of the respondents were fully vaccinated during the period of study. Those who were not vaccinated did not fear contacting virus and that would have been the reason for not being vaccinated even with a single dose of vaccination.

4.6 Choice of Travel- Perceived threat

Choice of travel as a part of leisure or for work, the mode of transportation adopted by the public during and post-COVID was highly dependent on the perceived threat as well as based on Government regulations. Private transportation was found to be a costlier option as a result of the precautionary guidelines put forth by the government to curtail the spread of the deadly virus.

A study conducted in Italy pointed to the changing choice of travellers in medium-sized cities to opt for private vehicles as against the bus available as a source of public transportation [Scorrano & Danielis, (2021)], [Javadinasr, M., Maggasy, T., Mohammadi, M., Mohammadain, K., Rahimi, E., Salon, D., & Derrible, S. (2022)] stressed on the need for travel service

providers to know the changing behavior patterns of the public in their choice of modes of transportation and the frequency and purpose of travel to take up informed decisions in the post COVID scenario. The study pointed out that the environmental awareness among respondents, WFH arrangements, changing lifestyle preferences and habits have a bearing on the choices made by the respondents.

Table 6: Choice of Travel

Reasons for travel		Do you choose to travel		Total	
		No Travel	Travel		
Leisure/ Vacation	Count	134	100	234	Pearson Chi-Square Value : 23.756
	% within Reasons for travel	57.3%	42.7%	100.0%	
	% within Do you choose to travel.	59.3%	37.3%	47.4%	
Work	Count	92	168	260	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided): .000
	% within Reasons for travel	35.4%	64.6%	100.0%	
	% within Do you choose to travel	40.7%	62.7%	52.6%	
Total		45.7%	54.3%	100.0%	

From the 234 responses obtained from those who adopted travel mainly for leisure 57.3 % chose to not travel, this may be due to perceived threat. However, 42.7 % have opted to take up travel for leisure, which indicates a positive note that the resistance among respondents to take up vacation trips is undergoing a transformation with lessening the fear of COVID-19.

Only 40.7 % of respondents from among 260 respondents who adopted travel as a part of their work arrangements showed their resistance to take-up work-related travel while 62.7% indicated their openness to take up work-related travel, this can be due to companies adopting WFO as well as Hybrid work arrangement.

5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

COVID -19 pandemic had forced all sectors of the economy to undergo a large-scale disruption and this has forced organizations to revisit their existing resources and plans. New policies and strategies were to be designed based on the new normal persisting in the environment.

An organization on the path of resilience has to embrace the need for innovating in all its subsystems, namely the critical resources, people, processes, infrastructure, and technology. A research based study would pinpoint the areas of change required in the organization.

This study has pointed to the fact that most of the travel was undertaken for work and business-related activities rather than for leisure. With most companies moving forward with WFO and Hybrid work arrangements, the travel undertaken for Work-based activities is growing further more than Leisure based trips.

As the government has relaxed all restrictions post-COVID in the travel and hospitality sector, the volume of travel has increased drastically. However, it is essential to check the changing

pattern of travel at the micro level. The study pointed out that Leisure trips were more adopted by respondents from the younger age groups, Unmarried, belonging to the gender Male, and from the high-income category.

The perceived threat of falling sick due to travel was found to be less among the category of respondents who chose to adopt travel for leisure, but they were also found to spend more on ensuring safety during travel. The younger age group was also found to be open to self-protective behavior, during post Covid period, which had been a reason for reduced leisure trips when compared to work-based trips. Work-based travel was found to be more prominent among the higher age group, and those who were married.

They preferred to spend more to ensure a safe stay when compared to travel. More leisure trips were likely to be preferred by those who felt a decrease in psychological well-being. Hence while redesigning and planning critical resources, travel service providers can focus on creating an environment that would boost leisure trips.

The price-to-performance ratio has to ensure, to attract more price-sensitive tourists, and a well-designed advertisement that can ensure fulfillment of psychological well-being can further complement the success of the strategy. Innovative packages for higher age groups, with competitive pricing for family-based trips, can enhance more tourists who take up work-based trips to convert them to leisure trips.

Staycations and work cations can be positioned based on the socio-demographic nature of the customers. Processes and tasks can be redesigned to ensure minimum human interface by adopting more technological advancement in the tourism sector. Continuous quality checks to ensure health and security for the wellbeing of customers are an additional assurance for tourists who are restrained from travel as a result of perceived threats. An overall change in employee outlook and enhanced confidence in the industry can ensure the revival of the tourism industry.

6. LIMITATIONS AND THE FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is subject to a few limitations as the study has not adopted a Pan India approach. During the pandemic period and post pandemic, public heavily relied on media for information, therefore though the study was limited to few cities, the results may be representative of the entire country's perception due to the exposure to media during and after the prevalence of the pandemic was indistinguishable all over the country.

However, future study has to establish the homogeneity of information and perception among tourists at the national level. Since the study adopted chain-referral sampling, a stratified approach to understanding the opinion and perception based on socio-demographic groups which are vital for the study could not be adopted in this study, this provides scope for future studies to focus on the changing customer behavior and expectations of tourists in each cluster of the socio-demographic group.

7. CONCLUSION

Although COVID – 19 has created havoc in all industries worldwide, it has paved the way for a new normal. Every industry has been gradually transforming itself from a period of unfreezing as a result of COVID-19 to a stage of changing during the early days of Post COVID and is now in the stage of refreezing (Lewin, K. (1951), (Nyamunda, J. (2022)), hence this is an opportunity to set new strategies for sustainable growth and transformation of the tourism industry by revisiting the financial and non-financial resource based on the socio-demographic segment catered by the individual travel and tourism service provider.

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