

A NEW NORMAL IN TOURISM INDUSTRY USING SOCIALLY DISTANT

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Abstract

Before COVID-19, exploring a crowded city would have been exciting and invigorating. Wandering through bustling markets, enjoying dinner at a bistro brimming with locals and visiting tourist hotspots were often the hallmarks of a fulfilling holiday. Social distancing, i.e., reducing interactions between individuals in order to slow down the spread of the virus, has become the new norm. In this viewpoint I will discuss the potential implications of social distancing on daily travel patterns. Avoiding social contact might completely change the number and types of out-of-home activities people perform, and how people reach these activities. It can be expected that the demand for travel will reduce and that people will travel less by public transport. Social distancing might negatively affect subjective well-being and health status, as it might result in social isolation and limited physical activity. While promoting safe health practices is, of course, going to be beneficial for the health of the travellers, it is also for the good of the community. Subsequently, these practices will allow tourism to start operating again safely and sustainably, producing economic benefits for those involved as well. To ensure future preparedness and alignment across the sector, governments should strengthen their engagement with the private sector, sharing key learning's from this crisis, jointly defining and implementing measures for future crisis mitigation and implementing a modus operandi on how to better collaborate on issues relating to resilience.

1. Introduction

Travelling in a group can be an appealing way for people to meet others, enjoy a unique experience or simply to save money on travel. However, in 2021 this option is likely going to become increasingly unattainable. Travelling with strangers widens everyone's 'bubble' and also increases the reliance on others to practise safe behaviours.

Tour operators and travel agents who specialise in creating group tours may want to start thinking about how to pivot their business to operate safely and successfully in this new world. One option could be to pivot completely from group travel to 100% FIT travel. Another may involve continuing to offer group travel but only to those groups who already know and trust each other and regularly interact. The COVID-19 (also known as coronavirus) outbreak started in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and rapidly spread in many countries all over the world (e.g., Jiang et al., 2020; Lipistch et al., 2020). In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak as a pandemic, with countries such as China, Italy, Spain and the US being hit hardest. At present (April 14th, 2020), more than 1,750,000 people have been infected and more than 110,000 have died from the virus (www.who.int). Numerous countries have taken unprecedented measures to prevent social contact and to slow down the spread of the virus, such as closing schools, shops, restaurants and bars, prohibiting public events and stimulating or imposing working from home. Social distancing measures have important effects on activity participation. A lot of people are temporarily unemployed or work from home, and most out-of-home (leisure) activities are cancelled. As a result, travel demand decreases and many countries have already witnessed spectacular drops in car traffic (strongly decreasing congestion and air pollution), and in public transport ridership (often resulting in less frequent services) (e.g., Carrington, 2020; Goldbaum, 2020; Plumer and Popovich, 2020). Of course, this is only a temporal situation and we can expect that out-of home activity participation and travel demand will rise again when the measures are lifted. However, we do not know how long these measures will last and whether or not subsequent waves can be expected. Furthermore, people might still fear social contact when social distancing rules are no longer in force, affecting activity participation and travel. In this viewpoint I offer some hypotheses on the potential effects of social

distancing on travel behavior. This viewpoint is organized as follows. In Section 2, I will describe the potential effects of social distancing on travel behavior, while in Section 3 the potential implications for health and well-being are described. Section 4 provides conclusions and policy recommendations. Although the COVID-19 outbreak has major implications on international travel, this viewpoint focuses on daily travel patterns.

2. Market Popularity may change

In the future, we may see destination popularity being dictated by how well that country or region has controlled the coronavirus. The precautions that are in place, and how the initial outbreak was handled, will reassure travellers that they will be safe while in a particular country or location. This may also, unfortunately, result in hot-spots that were popular prior to the pandemic, disappear due to the crisis and lack of tourism. As a travel designer it will be important to ensure you have a number of locations tucked up your sleeve that you can offer your clients if and when clusters break out elsewhere.



Not only will popular destinations change, but this mentality is also likely to impact how people travel to and within a destination. The choice of the airline may no longer be solely price driven, rather decisions will be influenced by hygiene standards; e.g. if masks are compulsory or not, seat occupation spacing etc. Within the country, travellers may be more interested in opting for private transport or upgrading to a business class train carriage so that they can stay safe and avoid crowds. Take time to keep up to speed with your transportation suppliers and their changing regulations as there will undoubtedly be related questions from your future customers that you will need to answer with confidence.

3. Effects of changed travel behavior on health and well-being

Since people often plan and perform out-of-home activities in order to maintain or enhance well-being, reduced activity participation as a result of social distancing can negatively affect subjective well-being (De Vos et al., 2013; Ettema et al., 2010). Out-of-home activities might no longer take place or – in case of reduced public transport services – might become inaccessible for those without a car. This isolation results in lower levels of social interaction and self-development, and higher levels of stress, boredom and depression (Brooks et al., 2020). Since people no longer have a lot of destinations to travel to, social distancing might also result in more “undirected travel”, i.e., trips without a destination. People might walk, jog, cycle, or joyride as a recreational activity, and thereby enjoy the sensation of speed, the exposure to the environment and scenic beauty (Mokhtarian and Salomon, 2001). As a result, recreational travel can play an important role in maintaining a certain level of subjective well-being. Since studies have indicated that active travel results in the experience of positive emotions (e.g., De Vos et al., 2016; Singleton, 2019), especially walking and cycling should be stimulated. Social distancing measures have clear direct positive effects on health, as they are implemented to avoid people getting infected by the COVID19 virus.

However, since people often derive physical activity from participation in certain out-of-home activities (e.g., fitness, sports, work), social distancing might result in a significant drop in physical activity (Panik et al., 2019). Since adults are recommended to engage in at least 150 min of moderate physical activity per week in order to prevent weight gain (WHO, 2010), it is important to remain physically active by frequently walking and cycling, recreationally or utilitarian.



Otherwise, it is likely that the total amount of physical activity will drop for most people, possibly resulting in increased levels of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (Lee et al., 2010). On the positive side, a reduced demand for (motorized) transport – as long it is not compensated too much by a higher share of car use – will most likely result in fewer car accidents (and related injuries and fatalities), and safer walking and cycling conditions (Pucher and Dijkstra, 2003). Several cities already reported significant reductions in traffic accidents (although the share of speeding cars is often reported to increase) (e.g., Sahagun and Writer, 2020). Furthermore, less traffic might lower air pollution, resulting in reduced chances of respiratory diseases, asthma, lung damage and high blood pressure (WHO, 2016), and possibly slowing down global warming.

4. A NEW BEGINNING

a) Co-Create with the Private Sector

It is important to ensure that policies implemented are long-termist and not driven by a party or the term of a government. Indeed, given that abrupt policy changes can be detrimental to planned business; regular touch points should be scheduled between policymakers and the business community to ensure that the impact on the sector is taken into account, whilst enabling the private sector to take mitigating actions for business continuity.

b) Promote Tourism, Starting with Domestic & Regional

Domestic tourism will be the first segment to recover, followed by short haul regional, then medium haul between regions and, finally, international travel. To capitalise on the initial recovery, governments, tourism boards and tourism organisations should direct their early marketing and promotional efforts to incentivise domestic and regional travel and inspire residents to explore nearby destinations and attractions.



c) Incentivise

Travel to activate demand, governments should offer early consumer incentives for travel spending, starting with domestic travellers and expanding regionally and internationally as quickly as possible and appropriate. These measures can be used alongside direct marketing to incentivise travel in the short term, particularly while travellers may still be wary of travelling. Consumer stimuli could include specialized insurance, subsidized holidays off from work, guarantees for medical care while travelling, as well direct cash or voucher subsidies for holidays.

d) Facilitate Short-Term Workforce Mobility

With over 121 million jobs being impacted according to WTTC, amounting to nearly a third of all Travel & Tourism jobs on the planet; governments have an important role to play in facilitating the short-term reallocation of staff, both within the sector and beyond, to mitigate the impact of furloughs and lay-offs. Initiatives such as official up skilling programmes to move out-of work staff into positions for which there is heightened demand, have been implemented by multiple countries.

e) Strengthen Worker Support Schemes

Employing over 10% of the global workforce, Travel & Tourism is a sector with people at its core. While businesses are doing their utmost to take care of their own, the mounting cost pressures faced by so many companies can make payroll an impossible feat, resulting in increased incidence of furloughs and lay-offs. Governments can play a pivotal role in the provision of payroll protections and wage subsidies, as well as general consumer stimulus cheques and tax payment deferrals.

5. Conclusion

It can be expected that – in times of social distancing – people will travel less, will try to avoid public transport and might travel more actively (recreationally or in case of short distances) or by car. The reduced demand for travel – as a result of decreased out-of-home participation – might, however, result in more social isolation, negatively affecting subjective wellbeing. It's clear that travel and tourism need to be sustainable; for the planet, the community, and the industry in general. Taking the principles of sustainable tourism into consideration, socially distant travel is even more important. While promoting safe health practices is, of course, going to be beneficial for the health of the travellers, it is also for the good of the community. Subsequently, these practices will allow tourism to start operating again safely and sustainably, producing economic benefits for those involved as well.

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