



IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON INDIAN TOURISM INDUSTRY ROLE OF DIGITAL IN RECLAIMING THE LOST CHARM

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses on the impact of COVID-19 on tourism industry with special reference to Indian tourism and how digital communication can play an important role to help the revival of tourism. Study is from secondary literature through various sources on the devastation of tourism and to derive role of digital communication in retrieving its lost glamour. Impact of COVID-19 on the global economy is gargantuan. One of the most effected sectors is tourism and its allied sectors travel and hospitality. As tourism is one of the emerging industries and significant contributor to world economy, there is every need for a quick comeback to its stature on dilution of the pandemic. In the process of recapture its charm, the communication especially digital plays a pivotal role in instilling confidence in the tourist for a safe and secured tourism activity.

Keywords – Travel, Tourism, Digital communication, COVID-19, Pandemic, Safe Tourism

Background

The present lifestyle of people with frenzied work schedules certainly demands break from regular routines. Because of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, all generations irrespective of age & gender are mostly confined to homes. After spending more than an year at home, people are excited to move out for relaxing and refreshing. Travelling with friends and family to destination of their choice, no doubt will give new energies.

Because of the COVID-19, tourism is one of the badly impacted industries among many others. On dilution of the pandemic COVID-19, Tourism industry must focus on spring back to its grandeur. In these critical times, to attract the consumer and to instil confidence, communication from tourism destination management companies and government tourism departments play a very significant role.

In the present scenario with the advent of technologically advanced gadgets on hand, all generations Gen X, Y & Z are digital savvy spending reasonable times on digital space. Digital will be the most effective and focussed platform to catch hold of enthusiastic travellers along with other modes of promotion.

Objective

Objective of this article is to study the tourism trends pre COVID-19 and impact of COVID-19 on tourism globally and Indian in specific and suggest the role of digital marketing in the process of reclaiming its lost charm.

Introduction

Tourism Industry – Global Trends

Tourism is one of the dynamic and fast-growing industries globally and its' contribution is manifold. Over the last two decades Tourism's role as a service industry is immense in contributing to the global economy, socio economic development, employment creation and so many other benefits.

Increased travel enthusiasm of people across the globe has helped Tourism to emerge as a major industry with an uninterrupted growth year on year from last two decades. As per the research data available, growth in International tourist arrivals shows an increase of 138% globally from the year 1995 to 2016. While 524.01 million tourist arrivals were recorded during 1995, it went to 1.24 billion during the year 2016.¹

Various factors contribute to increase in tourism – frantic work schedules; high disposable incomes; increased purchasing power of middle class, evolving contemporary life styles; emerging tourism destinations with better connectivity, highly equipped technologies overcoming communication barriers are some of the key influencers in making travel plans often when compared to previous times. Apart from leisure and entertainment as driving force, the travel for corporate activities, health and wellness, weddings, adventure and other travel motivations is also on the surge contributing to tourism figures.

Amplified tourist arrivals for any country eventually results in ample benefits – foreign exchange earnings, revenue generation, employment opportunities, socio cultural bonding between the countries, etc. Augmented tourism inflows have contributed significantly to the global GDP, and Tourism has evolved as one of the key contributors to global economy.

As per WTTC (World Tourism & Travel Council), in the year 2019 Tourism has contributed US\$ 8.9 trillion to the world's GDP which is 10.3% of global GDP. Also 1 in every 10 jobs around the world are from Tourism sector, generating 330 million jobs.² Tourism industry has established its contribution in terms of foreign exchange, revenues and employment generation when compared to manufacturing industries, the primary contributors to global economy.

Indian Scenario

Travelling in the path of global tourism trends, Indian tourism is also on the rapid growth phase, evolving into one of the conspicuous tourism destinations globally. India with myriad attractions known for its rich cultural, historical and spiritual treasure inviting the travel enthusiasts of this category from all over the world. India is the country with geographical diversity and assorted portfolio of niche tourism products spread across the country.

Apart from leisure and entertainment, India is also in the forefront attracting tourists for various other segments – MICE, Weddings, Health & Wellness, Eco, Adventure, Sports, Film tourism, etc with world class venues, facilities and services.

As per India Tourism Statistics by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India during 2018 increased to 10.56 million as compared to 10.04 million in 2017. The growth rate in FTAs during 2018 over 2017 was 5.2%. Indian tourism is driven by domestic tourism, number of domestic tourist visits in India during 2018 was 1854 million as compared to 1657 million in 2017, with a growth rate of 11.9 %. Tourism continues to play an important role as a foreign exchange earner for the country. In 2018, foreign exchange earnings (FEE) from tourism were US\$ 28.59 billion as compared to US\$ 27.31 billion in 2017, registering a growth of 4.7%.³

As per India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), by 2029, India's tourism sector is expected to reach Rs. 35 trillion (US\$ 488 billion), accounting for 9.2% of the total economy. International tourist arrivals to the country is expected to reach 30.5 million by 2028.⁴

Impact of COVID 19 on Tourism industry

The first human case of COVID-19 was spotted in Wuhan, Hubei province of China in December 2019. The World Health Organization declared health emergency in January 2020 and pronounced it as a pandemic in March 2020. The outbreak of the pandemic has caused high concern for global health. Several countries imposed lockdown in the initial times because of the outburst of this pandemic and as a result the world has come to a standstill.

The COVID 19 pandemic has completely disturbed the socio economic conditions never like before and one of the adversely effected sectors is tourism industry. Tourism across the world has gone to toss with international borders closed, no travel and hotels locked during the lockdowns imposed by all most all countries. Post lockdown the travel and hotels are opened to very minimum extent with lot of

restrictions. Tourism is the kind of activity with maximum human interaction starting from travel to accommodation to experiencing the product. As one of the key factors as per WHO guidelines, to be away from COVID-19 is social distancing apart from other precautions. Tourism is one of the most suffered and suffering industries wherein mostly mass gatherings and high human interaction is involved.

As per UNWTO, there is 98% fall in internal tourist numbers in May 2020 compared to May 2019. Also, the tourism barometer shows a decrease of 56% year on year drop in tourist arrivals between January and May of 2019 vs 2020 which resulted in fall of 300 million tourists and loss of US \$ 320 billion tourism receipts globally. ⁵

All the figures cited in 1 to 4 references, shows and establishes tourism as potential employment generator besides being a foreign exchange earner and revenue generator to any country. While the closure / slowdown of tourism has direct bearing on the tourism sector, lot of other sectors which goes hand in hand with Tourism such as travel, hospitality and other big and small vendors which flourished because of tourism also facing a hard hit. The pandemic left the tourism industry in an enervated situation, with economic and employment succumbs.

COVID-19 impact on Indian Tourism

Certainly, the crisis created by COVID-19 pandemic to Indian tourism industry is colossal. As tourism industry has been one of the largest contributors to India's economy and employment generation, the quick revival of the Indian tourism post pandemic is indispensable. While keeping the safety & security of a tourist in mind, Government has bigger challenges to concentrate on the businesses and jobs lost in this sector because of the current pandemic.

As the pandemic is gradually coming under control globally, also in Indian context with massive vaccination drives, Tourism and Hospitality sectors opened the doors for their guests and finding their ways to bounce back.

Also, here it is appropriate to mention, confining to home for longer times has undoubtedly increased some kind of unrest in the people especially in youth. People, specifically the travel enthusiasts are eagerly waiting for travel plans.

Keeping in view of the dilution of COVID-19 cases and to serve the travel enthusiasts the **safe and healthy tourism**, role of communication in other words promotion of tourism products and services by government and private stakeholders is need of the hour.

Role of Digital Communication to restart the tourism

Communication is the key in any business whether it is through – conventional or digital. Unless the message is conveyed to the end user about a product there is no action. Communication in other words promotions play an important role in influencing the consumer behavior to buy a product.

India is the second largest country in internet usage with high social and mobile audience. It is easy to catch the target audience on the digital for a product like tourism which is experiential. The core of Indian traveller segment is digital savvy and are highly dependent on digital for their tourism plans -- starting from selection of the tourism place to booking of travel and accommodation requirements and to study on the experience of the product through reviews on various digital platforms. The reviews by an already visited person will have a great impact on consumer buying.

No doubt the pandemic COVID-19 has created havoc and still element of doubt prevails in the tourist mind for taking up any tourism activity.

At this point in time, the role of **Communication** is crucial in instilling the confidence for a safe, secured and healthy tourism activity. Unless the Government, State tourism departments, destination management companies, travel agents, tour operators and other allied entrepreneurs aggressively communicate to the end-user in a very clear tone about the precautions being taken for a safe and healthy tourism, it takes a long time for the revival of tourism. Every destination has to strictly follow the COVID-19 protocols to gain the confidence of the tourist.

This millennium, Google, an online search engine has become the answer for almost any query. People dependency on google for any information is humongous. Social platforms such as Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and others are youth hangouts. To mention here - not only youth, the yester generation also find hanging on social platforms spending good times.

Digital platforms provide an opportunity to reach the enthusiastic travellers and convey the message of importance of tourism in stressful lives.

Literature Review

Abbas, J., Mubeen, R., Iorember, P., Raza, S. and Mamirkulova, G., (2021)⁶ in their research article *“Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on tourism: transformational potential and implications for a sustainable recovery of the travel and leisure industry”* published in the journal *“Current Research in Behavioral Sciences”* narrated their study on the Covid 19 Pandemic reflections on social, psychological, socio-economic and cultural influences on various tourism stakeholders and the adverse effects they suffer for a long time. From the study and analysis their recommendation to 1) stakeholders is to reposition the tourism industry and change tourism products; 2) government to develop significant initiative with specific proposals to improve tourism.

Yadav, S.K.S., Qureshi, Mohd. Mohsin (2020)⁷, in their research article *“Impacts of Covid-19 on Indian Travel & Tourism Industry”*, published in International Journal of Trade and Commerce-IIARTC, spoke about the significance of tourism in India and the rich potential the country has with diverse tourism destinations. Discussed at length about the adverse impact of Covid 19 on tourism sector and huge damage occurred to tourism and allied sectors in terms of employment and financial losses. Author is hopeful for tourism industry to regain its glory with the dilution of the pandemic and very much needed support from the Government in framing industry friendly policies.

Dilip Modi, Founder of Travel Union (2021)⁸, in his article *“How India’s travel and tourism industry can retaliate the impact of COVID-19”* published in BW Hotelier penned down his views on how the travel & tourism industry is retaliating against the Covid impact. One of the reports by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTCC), COVID-19 refers to the loss tourism industry incurred is almost USD 22 billion and a loss of almost 50 million jobs worldwide. Author is positive for the travel to see an uptrend as country is getting a hold over the virus. Also the author feels people stuck at home for long time results in ‘revenge travelling’.

Divya Vasant Jagdale¹, Dr Heena Ganatra (2021)⁹ in their article *“Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on Tourism Industry of India”* in Munich Personal RePEc Archive, made a study on the importance of tourism sector in Indian economy and examine the impact of Covid 19. Through their study, they concluded saying the loss caused by the pandemic is huge to Indian tourism sector and various safety measures are being taken by hotel, airlines and other tourism sectors and State and Central governments are working towards providing safe travel and tourism to consumers.

Conclusion

Hope....the rested wheels and propellers start spinning fast with the improved situation of the pandemic to get Tourism industry on the track; Indian Hospitality and Entertainment sectors get ready to serve the ardent tourist the safe and healthy tourism abiding all the COVID-19 protocols; Government tourism departments and private stake holders help the tourism to reclaim its' lost charm with full funnel marketing approach with a deep focus on digital platforms where the maximum target audience hang on.

In the present scenario the marketing approach is to be different as the industry has to **recapture** its target audience. Here, the three elements of full funnel marketing – awareness, consideration and conversion can be applied in a strategic way to accomplish the desired result.

Awareness - Create awareness about the safety and security tourism destinations provide with a focussed communication in compliance with COVID-19 protocols which is the driving factor in the current disturbed times. Engaging the audience through digital activities such as pre-roll videos, social media engagements, content marketing will spread a word among the travel community.

Consideration – By instilling the confidence through awareness campaigns on safe, secure and healthy tourism, tourism destinations' next focus to get the target audience into their consideration sets for travel plans. Social advertising, email marketing and google paid promotions, online displays will help the brands in achieving second step of funnel marketing.

Conversion – finally by employing the reinforcing tactics like retargeting with digital paid promotions such as pay per click, pay per impression and pay per conversion models for conversions.

In light of the bettered situation across, let's hope the tourism is just a step away to contribute to the mankind in multi fold, regaining the lost businesses and jobs and its charm in total. At this juncture, reaching out to consumers with well-thought-out digital marketing strategies is much required for Tourism Destinations to achieve their goals and extending the safe tourism to tourism fraternity.

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