

Flying in Travel Bubbles amidst the Covid Era: An Investigation on the Perceptions of Indian Tourists

Abstract

The world was struck by an unparalleled health, social, and economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the travel and tourism industry was among the severely affected industries. In a 'travel bubble', a set of countries agree to open their borders to each other while the borders to all other countries are closed. This allowed the people to move freely within the bubble and helped to restore the inbound cash flow streams associated with international tourism and travel. The current research is framed to understand Indian tourists' perception of travelling within available travel bubbles amidst the pandemic and to focus on the travel bubble concept from a post-COVID perspective.

Keywords: travel bubble, COVID-19, tourist perceptions, Indian tourist, tourism industry

1. Introduction

The global tourism industry economy has been severely affected by the unprecedented outbreak of COVID-19 (Beirman, 2021). Many countries closed their businesses and industries and took steps to ensure safety by shutting down their borders for international tourists (Luo & Lam, 2020). Due to the high risk of infection, countries suspended all kinds of travel (Ita, 2021; Maxouris, 2020). Travelers are terrified to leave their homes, so the tourism industry is shrinking (Salehniaa et al. 2020; Chinazzi et al., 2020). No sign of recovery was found in the tourism industry from January to April 2021 (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2021). Travel bubbles emerged as an exclusive partnership between two or more countries that had demonstrated considerable success in containing and combating the COVID-19 pandemic within their respective borders. The very first travel bubble destinations were taken by Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Luo & Lam, 2020). The Hong Kong tour operator also recommended this concept to the Hong Kong government to open the nation's boundary for nearby cities or countries like Thailand, Japan, etc. (Kanis, 2020; Cannix, 2021). This study has attempted to fill the research gap, focusing on the travel bubble concept to reflect a post-covid perspective.

2. Background

Past literature has studied the travel bubble in various contexts. Beirman (2021) argued about the multiple challenges associated with international travel bubbles during COVID-19 and the role of travel bubbles in resuming international travel. Yu et al. (2021) focused on whether citizens prefer to go to travel bubble destinations or not. Further, Luo and Lam (2020) examined the role of travel behavior (travel anxiety, travel risk and travel intentions) on travel bubble destinations amongst Hong Kong citizens.

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A travel bubble is an agreement between the states that permits international air travel between 2 (or more) countries based on a mutually agreed set of public health mitigation measures" (International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2020). Word travel bubbles or 'travel corridors' or 'air bridges' (Schiefelbusch et al., 2007; Locker, 2020) require faith from partner countries and their capability to deal with pandemics. A suitable time to form a bubble is when both countries don't have cases. Thus, low risk will be involved (Locker, 2020). When travelers became aware of the travel bubble concept, they started to travel to their neighboring countries (Jordan, 2020; Wego Travel, 2021). Countries consider that the travel bubble concept will give a ray of hope in business recovery and sustainability in the future (Fuste-Forne & Michael, 2023).

3. Research methodology

Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the respondents' feelings, which helps to obtain enlightening insights into the phenomenon under study (Berkwits & Inui, 1998; Tolkach et al., 2019; Kunjuraman, 2020; Yeh, 2020). The questionnaire was designed based on previous studies (Luo & Lam, 2020; Yu et al., 2021; Beirman, 2021). Thirty-five respondents were found appropriate for the study. For a rich understanding of a problem, 24 interviews are sufficient (Hennink & Kaiser, 2016). Finally, the data obtained through interviews was analyzed with the assistance of NVivo-12.

4. Analysis and interpretation

There were 20 male and 15 female respondents between the ages of 20 to 51 and above. The audio-recorded interviews were converted into transcripts and then loaded on NVivo-12, which assisted in finding meaningful codes/themes from the data, which led to the study's key findings. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gavin, 2008, Chapter 17; Brunt et al., 2017).

4.1. Inquisitiveness to travel

The data analysis revealed that the pandemic had deeply impacted people's travel plans, influencing their decision-making or intentions to travel. The respondents conveyed that they are keen to travel in future, but they seek the best and safest travel opportunities. Even though the pandemic is officially over, people tend to maintain a high level of personal hygiene more social distancing and are more likely to get vaccinated before travelling (Taylor, 2019, Chapter 3).

4.2. Curiosity towards travel bubbles

The data also indicated that the respondents felt curious about the travel bubble concept amidst the pandemic. From the respondents' point of view, they could not travel because of several restrictions and safety concerns. Still, there is a sense of hope for the future due to travel bubbles, which further leads to the willingness to travel again if any pandemic emerges.

4.3. Health and safety concerns

Furthermore, some respondents showcased their readiness to travel to the destinations that tourists were allowed to visit amidst the pandemic. But the health and safety concerns were inhibiting them from making travel decisions. This aligns with the supporting literature, which shows that while travelling, tourists are concerned about risk and security (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Luo & Lam, 2020; Morakabati et al., 2012; Reisinger, 2005; Sonmez, 1998).

5. Discussion

The recent pandemic has led to the demotivation of travel amongst people who were earlier used to travel frequently. On the contrary, some reports also show that people desire to travel twice what they did previously (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry [FICCI], 2020). In the future, tourists won't be willing to compromise on their travel plans if any similar situation arises. Travel bubbles can relieve tourists as they open doors to other countries. However, applying differentiated measures during travel will be complex and potentially disruptive. James Liang, co-founder, and chairman of Trip.com, mentioned that even the pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges to the global travel industry and new ways to revive the tourism industry in a few parts of the world (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2021).

6. Conclusion and research implications: Post Covid-19

COVID-19-like situations may affect tourism for the foreseeable future and may even affect people's ability to travel internationally. Many people are still suffering from travel anxiety (Pierce et al., 2020) and have health concerns (Tillu et al., 2020; Cullen et al., 2020). The future of travel, tourism and the hospitality industry will be completely different, with a new set of rules emphasizing social distancing, safety, health, and hygiene. Establishing a travel bubble can directly benefit the tourism industry of both countries which demonstrate a travel bubble.

There is a need for a formal definition of the travel bubble concept. This study contributes to familiarizing oneself with travel bubbles while creating a base for future research and decision-making. Travel bubbles have several management and research implications that encourage regional cooperation. Future studies need to explore strategies to revive tourism amid any future pandemic. With an increasing focus on sustainability, travel bubbles could be designed to promote more eco-friendly travel options, such as encouraging cleaner transportation and accommodations.

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