

Chapter 41

The Rise of Digitalization in the Tourism Industry During COVID–19: Cyber Space, Destinations, and Tourist Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, tourism is one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, it is one of the most important issues in tourism research. The strategies implemented in combating the pandemic caused a significant increase in the use of digital technologies in tourism. In this context, in this chapter, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism on digitalization are examined in the context of transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, and tourist experience. Research findings indicate that the traditional concept of space in tourism geography is in a transformation towards cyberspace. The pandemic has proven our need for digital strategies and planning tools in tourism. The future will be a time when smart and cyber tourism is increasingly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak is one of the most contagious in recent human history, with more than 155 million cases and 3.2 million deaths (WHO, 2021). Due to the high rate of transmission of the new type of coronavirus, governments around the world had no choice but to lockdown (Sharma et al., 2021). With the spread of the virus, measures such as curfew restrictions or complete closure created a critical risk for the livelihoods of the masses, causing various sectors to come to a standstill. The tourism sector, which can be characterized directly by the geographical mobility of people in the traditional sense, has been one of the most adversely affected industries in this process. According to the World Tourism

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Organization, tourist arrivals fell by 72% in the first ten months of 2020 (WTO, 2020). This news was announced by the World Tourism Organization with the title “The Number of Tourists Is At The Same Level With The 1990s”. The World Travel and Tourism Council’s (WTTC) research report shows that there are 75 million people whose jobs are at risk due to COVID-19 (WTTC, 2020). Research reveals a potential Travel Tourism GDP loss of up to \$ 2.1 trillion in 2020. WTTC (2020) also estimates a shocking closure of one million businesses in the tourism industry due to the widespread impact of the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, tourism is one of the most labor-intensive industries. This decline in the industry forces millions of people to struggle with unemployment or the lack of regular income.

The challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic are causing some structural changes in the tourism industry. The Kimono Tea Ceremony Maikoya and the Samurai & Ninja Museum, two major experience providers from Japan, recently examined in-depth the effects of the pandemic on travel behavior and reached the following conclusions: small towns will be visited more, fewer but longer trips, travelers will continue to visit museums, AirBnB and home rentals will not be the leading choice over hotels, sustainable businesses will be more supported, working from home will create more travel opportunities, women will pay more attention to safety due to the pandemic. Another result of the research is that virtual tours and online experiences will gradually increase (Kimono Tea Ceremony Kyoto Maikoya, 2020).

In 2020, the World Tourism Organization held its first online training committee. China Sports Tourism Fair was held online for the first time in 2020. Resources related to sports tourism and achievements in this industry were displayed in the form of “cloud screen”, “cloud visit” and “cloud forum”. The first online tourism survey was conducted in Fiji. The survey, supported by telephone operators and various electronic platforms, aims to determine the demands for domestic tourism after COVID 19. The “Virtual Tourism for Senior Citizens” project, developed in line with the efforts of branding and marketing in Malaysia, a leading tourism destination in the world, enabled Malaysia to receive the “Pacific Asia Travel Association Gold Award”. The project aims to make tourism more accessible for the elderly in and after the pandemic. Tourism databases have been developed to prevent the locals from being adversely affected due to the decrease in the number of international tourists in Australia. The events and developments listed point to a change in the tourism industry that has been discussed for many years but has become increasingly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic: tourism is becoming increasingly digital.

Experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have led to an increasing emphasis on the digitalization of tourism. Although this issue is controversial, it shows that the interest in “cyber tourism”, which is interpreted as a new type of tourism, will also increase. Prideaux and Singer (2005) define cyber tourism as an electronically simulated travel experience that will replace the physical tourism experience. It is assumed that this new type of tourism will allow participants to travel to places through new technologies without the usual constraints of time, distance, cost, and human vulnerability. Nowadays, especially the increase of concerns regarding environmental degradation causes cyber tourism to be considered in the context of sustainable tourism (Ross, 2005). Cyber tourism is considered an opportunity to improve the tourist experience of the elderly and disabled. Also, it is defined as an innovation that enables socio-economically disadvantaged groups to participate in tourism. During the pandemic period, virtual tours of many world-renowned museums were interpreted as one of the advantages offered by cyber tourism regarding the accessibility of tourism. For example, it was determined that 11 million people visited 32 museums and historic sites in Turkey (Anadolu Agency, 2020). Google Arts & Culture’s virtual tours repository lets you discover the riches of sites like the Museo Frida Kahlo in Mexico City, Mexico, or the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands with this service, it is possible to virtually visit more than 2000 museums and galleries. The state of being free and accessible to tourism, expressed in

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