

VIRTUAL TOUR PLATFORMS ACT AS A PAID PROMOTION TOOL TO TOURISM INDUSTRY DURING COVID 19 – AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Tourism industry plays a very vital role in economic system and becomes crucial since India has to grow rapidly. It was the largest service industry in India was worth \$234 billion in 2018. However, the outbreak of the Corona virus pandemic and subsequent lockdown restrictions under weighed the industry's output last year. This crucial situation reflect on the consumer behavior is happening now, which is being irrevocable. COVID 19 is such a pandemic situation arises where various measures taken to control. This resulted in economic instabilities of the country which hits the market potentialities. For every market, consumers have the supreme power and drivers and they enhance the growth, market competitiveness and economic integration. Economic instability is caused by behavioral transformation of the consumer, even though the demand of the product in the market is currently fluctuating. To understand this changing behavior, a detailed market studies are needed. Implementation of 3D technologies and virtual experience is new terminologies to the people. The latest technological development helps to enhance the buying behavior of the people. Some of the virtual tourism platforms in India have an great impact during pandemic crisis. The consumer can use paid or free software to access the virtual world. This paper studies about the impact of various virtual tour platforms and how it acts as a support system to promote tourism.

KEYWORDS : *VR Platforms, Consumer behaviour, COVID-19, Tourism.*

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INTRODUCTION

Government of India announced first Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on 27th January, 2020 at Kerala, India, among three Indian medical students who had returned from Wuhan (China), the epicenter of the pandemic and that witnessed lot of outbreaks in the country viz., entry restrictions and lock downs. This required the cabinet ministries and local government co-ordinate and issuing policies. The World Health Organization had recommended for the general public to reduce exposure and transmission of a range of illnesses and advised that measures to limit the risk of exportation or importation of the disease should be implemented, without unnecessary restrictions of international traffic. The Ministry of Tourism issued travel ban into India for the outsiders as well as insiders to break this chain of COVID 19 and to prevent transmission of Corona Virus and thus closed tourist sites like, Agra Taj Mahal, Holy City of Varanasi, Amritsar Golden Temple, Gateway of India, Goa Beach etc., To support physical and social distancing policies, closure of tourism is implemented and that affects International Tourist arrivals in India from 17.9 million to zero.

The tourism industry includes hospitality (e.g., accommodation, restaurants), transportation (e.g., airlines, car rental), travel facilitation and information (e.g., tour operators, travel agents, tourist information centers), and attractions and entertainment (e.g., heritage sites and theme, national, and wildlife parks), has affected by COVID-19 pandemic, due to its massive impact. Thus the scope of tourism supply is low-ranging and adversely influenced by market conditions that affect the environment in which tourism businesses operate. During COVID-19 Pandemic, there were a least number of digital softwares like JAATRA, 3D VISTA offering virtual tours , via Google meet, zoom platforms. Some tourist destinations such as Mysore Palace, Humpy Vittala Temple, and Madhurai Meenakshi Temple also offer similar services via official websites.

However physical tour, cannot be replaced by virtual tour, but it is a way of alternative tourism to the people who is not able to enjoy their leisure days under COVID-19 circumstances. Virtual tourism helps the people with an immersive experience of an activity, location, or destination through the use of technology. There are lots of different types of virtual tourism offerings. Usually a combination of virtual reality, still images, video, audio, narration, interactivity, and other multimedia formats to provide an experience of a destination that a user cannot get through images or websites alone.

Viewers can access virtual tourism content using a virtual reality headset for the most immersive experience. They can also usually view the content on a normal computer or even a mobile device.

The term virtual tour is interpreted in different manner. it can be described as "a simulation of an existing location that is composed of a sequence of video images" (Osman, Wahab, and Ismail 2009). The simulation is set up by a sequence of videos or pictures and is accompanied by text descriptions, audio guides, or sound effects. The simulated location, with all of its associated effects, is set up with the intention of authentically re-creating the real site experience (Aguilera, Alonso, and Gomez 2014; Spielmann and Mantonakis 2018). As can be inferred from the work of Koutsoudis, Arnaoutoglou, and Chamzas (2007), for the most part, VTs are experienced through the worldwide web using a computer, through which a visitor can see and interact with a simulated environment using a monitor and a mouse, respectively. Although, as Barbieri, Bruno, and Muzzupappa (2017) explain, VTs also may be experienced using other advanced technologies such as virtual reality. As discussed by Mah, O., Y. Yan, J. Tan, Y. Tan, G. Tay, D. Chiam, Y. Wang, K. Dean, and C. Feng. 2019, VTs are popular with attraction managers because they usually require relatively little financial investment, they offer visitors a number of tools that facilitate learning, and allow for an attraction's intangible, as well as tangible, qualities to be communicated.

Carvajal, Morita, and Bilmes (2020) state that as museums exist to communicate and provide mass access to information, VTs are one of the most potentially effective ways of achieving this purpose. Consequently, it is no surprise to find that a number of world class museums have adopted VTs to allow the public to experience their collections from anywhere in the world.

Technology became very vast and the implementation of 3D is new to consumers and they are beginning to spend more time on internet during lockdown days. Use of VR/AR tools like Google Cardboards, Amazon Sumerian, and Unity etc. helps the consumers to conquer the virtual worlds. The developers of VR/AR have planning to let their customers to use the product experience virtually.

Virtual tourism is so benefitted to customers during lockdown period as the viewer can get virtual experience in various tourist destinations at 360 degree locations. A lot of tourist places have taken this technological advantage. The immersive VR experiences also let users to interact with the environment and discovering more through their actions. This is often a ministered experience focusing on Hospitality, like the food court, music galleries, historical place visits, Virtual reality yoga classes, nature walks, stargazing and bird watching have also become popular.

The objective of this study is to know the impact on Virtual tourism platforms available to the consumers and how it effectively utilized as a promotion tool during pandemic covid outbreak.

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis is formulated H0: Attitude of the consumer towards Virtual tour positively impact the intention to choose it during pandemic crisis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research is purely explorative and secondary data is used for the study. As the first step of the secondary research, the study developed a research question; "What is the impact of COVID-19 outbreak on the tourism industry and how the virtual platform affect the consumers to make their virtual experience success". The researcher then detected, evaluated, and prepared a conclusion on the secondary data set. The study mainly used reviews, journal articles, and reports from various statistical survey and reports. Further, news articles and web pages were referred to collect the secondary sources of data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

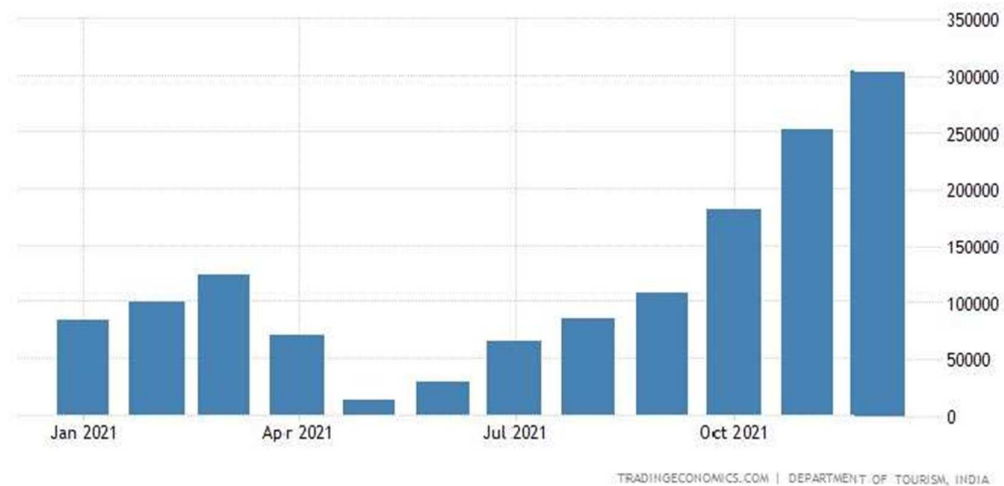
As the Covid pandemic situations become worst, the international arrival of tourists declined from 60% to 10% with a loss of US\$ 30 to 50 billion. The available data in UNWTO has pointed out a 22% decrease in international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020, with a 57% reduction of tourist arrivals in March. This represents a loss of 67 million international entries in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the same period last year. In the case of the regions, Asia and the Pacific region, the first region to suffer the impact of COVID -19, experienced a 35% decrease in tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020. With a 19% decline in tourist arrivals, Europe was the second-most affected region in the tourism industry.

The below table shows the International tourist Arrivals in India during Jan –June of 2019 and 2020. (in 000's)

Year	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June
2019	96.56	94.38	107.31	117.96	120.54	135.67
2020	98.45	83.41	48.31	36.53	28.37	Not available

Source : Indian Tourism Statistics 2021

Indian Tourist arrival during the year 2021 is shown below



In Jan 2021, the Indian Tourist arrival is 20% and it slowly increased in the month of March, but after the pandemic increased on April, lockdown continued. On July 2021 the situations became favourable and slightly increased the tourist arrival on December 2021 by 86%.

In this context, viewers can experience activities, locations, and destinations from the comfort of their own homes.. The most important benefits is that viewers can see and experience a destination without traveling to it, which means they aren't limited by available flights, travel logistics, safety concerns, and whether destinations are open. They don't even have to think about time zones or weather conditions.

The following are the twenty most popular virtual tour platforms available to the user that make them more get outlooked.

No.	Popular Virtual Platforms	Customers Review (Feedback)						
		User Friendly	Easy To Login	Page Attractiveness	Price Strategies	Easy to Track	layout and Design	Customisable
1	Jaatre	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
2	Panoee	√	√			√	√	
3	Kalpty	√	√	√		√	√	
4	RTV Real Tour Vision	√		√		√	√	
5	My360	√			√	√	√	
6	Kuula			√	√	√	√	√
7	Threshold 360	√	√	√	√		√	√
8	3D Vista		√	√	√	√		√
9	Tour Wizard	√	√	√	√	√		√
10	Seek Beak	√			√	√		√
11	Cupix	√		√	√	√		
12	Live Tour	√		√	√	√	√	
13	Envisioneer		√				√	
14	Virtual Tour Creator		√			√	√	
15	DiveIn Studio	√	√	√				
16	Panopedia	√	√	√		√		√
17	Virtuallyshow.com	√		√		√		√
18	Eyespy		√	√		√		√

(Source : Customer Review on various virtual tour platforms)

More than 50% of them are very user-friendly virtual tour platforms. It is very accessible to user and have mobile compatibility and Well Planned Information Architecture. More than 50% reviewed that virtual platform is very easy to login through web browsers like Chrome, Vista versions, Safari etc., Website aesthetics is very important for every virtual tour platforms and most of them are highly attractive and navigable to the reference sites. The price strategies of the

software are depends upon the quality and access they ensured to the customer. \$ 0-\$100 is the range they offered for accessing features of various platforms. Adaptable layout and design is required more in the platform offered so that it could be more attractive. The individual requirements and specification is highly favourable to the customers so that they can be customized in proper way.

CONCLUSION

The research discovered the prominence towards a virtual tour for getting virtual tour experience by user from his personal workspace. Since the virtual tours provide attractive panoramic view as compared to still images found in brochures and websites it is considered that virtual tour can be used as a tool to promote tourism.

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