COVID-19: a pandemic to tourism guest-host relationship in India

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Abstract

Purpose – The emerging situation of pandemic due to COVID-19 has not only influenced the daily life but also the society and travel activities around the world thereby depriving tourists (especially who are already on the move) of facilities and even making them to look for desperate alternatives. Such situation in fact may draw a long-term impact on guest-host relationship while residents’ behavior reflects hostility toward the tourists. Such kind of interactions contributes toward tourists’ perception and experience about the destination and its services thereby affecting their level of acceptance and tolerance for tour and travel activities (Armenski et al., 2011). Moreover, the guest-host relationship has mostly been studied with perspective of and focus on residents/host and not enough on tourists (Skipper, 2009; Vargas-Sánchez et al., 2014). Keeping this in view, this paper aims to analyze the impact of pandemic situation on guest-host relationship and its future impact on travel intentions among the tourists in India.

Design/methodology/approach – The study undertakes the help of in-depth interviews and extracting themes to understand the guest-host relationship and the perspective of tourists in challenging times like COVID-19 and its impact on the relationship. The secondary sources have been adopted to retrieve the data related to current status of travel industry in India. In-depth interviews were conducted online to gather data for the qualitative analysis regarding the research. Further, the data has been analyzed for retrieving a dimensional approach to subject area.

Findings – The data from participant observation showed that the hosts displayed panic, mistrust and irresponsible behavior toward the guests, and this clearly indicates that the pandemic situation has a highly negative impact on the image of the community and the destination. This ultimately affects the guest-hosts relationships in the long term. Most of the tourists showed that they were okay with following the rules and respect local culture but were expecting support from local community during distress. It was found that there were two female tourists who were asked to vacate the accommodation, which can be considered as an inappropriate and extreme behavior. Thus, COVID-19 is not only causing a threat to the tourism presently but will have a prolonged influence on guest-host relationship as negative interaction or experiences are supposed to be frequently radiated by the tourists (de Albuquerque and McElroy, 2001).

Originality/value – There is no dearth of studies focusing on travel behavior dimensions, whereas the linkage of residents’ behavior toward it still requires much consideration and analyzing simultaneously. The study looks into the area of guest-host relationship and tries to explore it from the perspective and significance of tourist (guest) rather than the much read and researched resident (host) perception at the center. The findings of the study could be helpful in drawing the strategic framework for the industry to handle and sustain the guest-host relation so as to safeguard the future of tourism and sustain potential travel market reiterating the significance of tourists/guests and their perspective about the hosts, in developing and growing the tourism of a destination.

Keywords Travel behavior, Intention to revisit, Guest-host relationship, Pandemic situations

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Tourism has been considered as a source for social interaction and cultural transformations and economic growth. Interaction between guest and host is inevitable during travel where tourists generally assume a positive interaction with the local community (Armenski et al., 2011) resulting in positive experience and vice versa that ultimately affects the destination.
This industry has been one of the oldest industries giving employment to millions all over the world bringing much required foreign exchange and growth to the nations with some nations building their whole strategy on tourism (D’Amore, 1988; Davis et al., 1988; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006; Leiper, 2008; Safavi and Bouzari, 2019). If a nation faces a conflict, political challenge, financial struggle or a pandemic, it surely affects its tourism industry (Pizam and Smith, 2000; De Sausmarez, 2013; Gössling et al., 2020; Nguyen and Coca-Stefaniak, 2020) and other nations might help it to be better or revive itself. But what happens when the whole world faces a pandemic and the world tourism industry is shaken throughout while air travel and even public transport is being shut and people are advised to be away from crowds and gatherings? What happens to the relationship of the residents and tourists? What about the future of tourism industry and how is the tourists’ perspective much more significant in these challenging times and if and how does it affect the future tourism prospects of a particular destination and future travel intentions?

Tourism sensitivity to risks and threats, diseases and epidemics has influenced such relations in one or other form thereby resulting in emergence of constraints for tourism development (Rosselló et al., 2017). In the mid of January 2020, United Nations World Tourism Organizations estimated about 3 to 4% of international tourist arrival across the globe in 2020. And the estimation cannot be denied as the industry has successfully reported its strong growth in 2019, where destinations achieved 1.5 billion worldwide and Asian continent added +5% (UNWTO, 2020a, 2020b).

In India, the concept of “Atithi Devo Bhava-Guest is God” has made its space where about 10.89 million foreign tourist arrivals were reported in 2019 (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2020) and depicted strong travel receipts amongst other nations in Asia (UNWTO, 2020a, 2020b). In contrast to this, the tourism in 2020 not only in India but also around the globe is facing a new challenge where outbreak of pandemic COVID-19 is leading out the way and turned up all the estimations to new outlook. UNWTO (2020a, 2020b) has estimated about US$300bn to US$450bn loss in international tourism receipts in 2020. According to World Travel and Tourism Council’s (WTTC, 2020) report, it may result, in about 38 million potential losses in hospitality and tourism jobs in India. To this, economic impact of such kind of pandemics with respect to tourism has largely been discussed by numerous authors like Burns (2008), Kuo et al. (2009), McAleer et al. (2010), Page et al. (2012), Baum and Hai (2020) and Jamal and Budke (2020), whereas another aspect is still at the negligible stage where the concept of social distancing is giving another dimension to the challenges being faced by the tourism. Large-scale restrictions and cancellations by foreign tourists have been estimated to create about INR15,000 crores of foreign exchange loss to Indian Tourism Industry (including hotels, aviation and related travel service providers) (IATO, 2020).

If the residents or host community represents supply side of the tourism industry (Smith, 1988; Ap, 1992; Bramwell, 1994; Milne and Ateljevic, 2001; Capone, 2006; Uysal et al., 2012; Witt, 2013; Walters and Duncan, 2017), tourists address demand side of the industry (Smith, 1988; Ap, 1992; Bramwell, 1994; Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001; Capone, 2006; Andersson, 2007; Khirfan, 2016) where hosts community influence tourists’ travel decisions (Mace, 2017; Thyne et al., 2006). Realizing their travel demands and prospects is essential to suppliers of tourism products and services which in fact has attracted significant attention by tourism researchers (Mathieson and Wall, 1982; Smith and Brent, 2001). In other words, both local residents and tourists are major stakeholders of tourism business, which means they both are influenced either positively or negatively by tourism (Aas et al., 2005; Sharpley, 2014). The concepts have been considered widely in terms of resident’s role and relationship in tourism thereby understanding their overall life quality (Timothy and Tosun, 2003; Scheyvens, 2003; Harrill, 2004; Skipper, 2009; Zhang et al., 2006; Vargas-Sánchez et al., 2014), whereas the other side (tourists’) of the interaction still needs to be
evaluated and discussed (Bochner, 1982; Guthrie and Anderson, 2007; Skipper, 2009; Su and Wall, 2010; Chang and Chiang, 2019). Moreover, in this pandemic situation, the tourists’ perspective becomes far more significant and critical.

Because of the pandemic situation and the crisis, the guest–host relationship was abruptly disrupted leading to future critical consequences in tourism leading to a drastic transformation in consumer trends and their behavior (Çakar, 2015). Such kind of hostile situation of antagonism among locals not only decreases the tourism (Cordero, 2008) but may raise the situation of diminished destination image (Zhang et al., 2018). In fact, a sustainable development cannot be said achievable in such areas where communities hold negative outlook and shows an unfriendly behavior toward tourists (Zhang et al., 2006). Covid-19 has not only been posing a threat to the tourism presently but will have a prolonged influence on guest-host relationship as negative interaction or experiences are supposed to be frequently conveyed by the tourists (de Albuquerque and McElroy, 2001). In lieu of this, the present research examines the existing literature associated with the understanding host–guest interaction in pandemic situations and its future impact on travel intentions among the tourists in India. Following this, qualitative methods like conducting interview from tourists and their experiences have been analyzed to reflect upon the status and research objectives.

2. Literature review

Tourism terminology is all about business, tourists and an environment surrounded by local people that provide space for operations (Williams and Lawson, 2001; Scheyvens, 2003) and involves practice of social interactions among people and stakeholders (Marsh and Henshall, 1987; Han et al., 2019) involving tourists and local community (Aas et al., 2005).

With respect to social interactions, tourism serves as a platform for travelers to experience varied cultures and rituals, thereby endorsing the concept of global community across the nations (Zapata et al., 2011; Tarlow, 2002) where the quality of community’s behavior and their tolerance with guests or tourists determines a long-term development of tourism sector (Zhang et al., 2006; Armenski et al., 2011; Bimonte and Punzo, 2011; Morrison, 2018). To this, tourism experience has been considered as an outcome of interactions occurred between the tourists and the hosts and the physical surroundings of the destination (White and White, 2008; Bimonte and Punzo, 2016). Such encounters or interactions that take place between the local community who acts as host and tourist (who are actual guests) are determined as guest–host relationship, interactions or encounters (Smith, 1977; Smith, 2012; Proyrungroj, 2017). To this, the guest–host relationships and interactions have been found to be varying in accordance with the situations, level, intensity, frequency and surroundings such as culture, characteristics and configuration of local community and tourists (Pearce, 1995; Pizam et al., 2000; Turner and Reisinger, 2003; Andereck et al., 2005; Smith, 2012; Sharpley, 2014; Kastenholz et al., 2013), which determines the image and future of the destination and its people (Pizam et al., 2000; Fan et al., 2019).

Tourists generally acknowledge and appreciate being in a hospitable atmosphere and enjoy the responsive and genuine treatment by local people who they interact on the streets rather than having intentional encounters for regular commercial exchanges (Cohen, 1979; Kastenholz et al., 2013; Sharpley, 2014). Pizam et al. (2000) suggested intense guest–host relationship as a critical component to explain the positive image of a destination and its community. However, the attitude of local community has found to be weakened especially in the time when issues arise with the community well-being (Bramwell, 2003; Nepal, 2008). Apparently, the concern for health and danger amidst corona alert has contributed to implementation of social distancing (Martin et al., 2007) which in terms of tourism has raised so many prejudiced concepts (Yilmaz and Tasci, 2015). Social distancing is actually the intimacy level disposed and maintained by groups or individuals toward others (Bankston, 2000). Whereas in tourism it has been elaborated generally as a socio-cultural phenomenon.
(Pi-Sunyer, 1989; Tasci, 2009; Yilmaz and Tasci, 2013; Yilmaz and Tasci, 2015) rather than a situational construct which is aimed to reduce physical interactions among people in a broader community so as to mitigate the spread of virus (Glass et al., 2006; Das et al., 2008; Baum et al., 2009; Wilder-Smith and Freedman, 2020) and hence needs to be understood and realized. This is becoming much prevalent in present situations thereby influencing the behavior of residents toward the tourists (Monterrubio, 2016; Joo et al., 2018).

The behavior of local people functions in both the ways that they either create a warm feeling or may generate a stereotyped analysis among tourists (Sedikides and Skowronski, 1991; Aronoff, Woike and Hyman, 1992). Change in direction of decisions generally depends upon the conditions or a situation surrounding the interactions where favorable one reduces prejudice, unfavorable conditions increases the intolerance and anxiety among people (Amir, 1976; Fisher and Byrne, 1975). In other words, the interaction between host and guest create actual destination experience, which ultimately affects tourists’ behavior, destination evaluation and their further decisions with the destination re-visitation and recommending it to others (Oppermann, 1999; Lawson and Thyne, 2001; Thyne et al., 2004; Lopes et al., 2019). Thus, negativity among host and their behavior or attitude not only causes conflicts and apathy in guest–host relationship but also long-term damage to destination image thereby affecting revisit intentions among tourists (Pizam et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2006; Fan et al., 2019).

2.1 Pandemic-driver to conflict and irritation in tourism experience

Knox (1982) in 1982 stated the residents as both enhancers and spoiler of tourists’ vacations and the side of which can be seen as another dimension of COVID-19. The result of such newly formed crises is even visible in so many regions where the tourists have started cancelling their bookings to even remote destinations like Ladakh (India) (Rashid, 2020). This pandemic has even taken up another level that tourists are even reporting of facing hostility where tourists have been told to evacuate the places and leaving India (Purohit and Mukherjee, 2020), while some situations are even worse with reports of foreign tourists even having to face starvation and moreover harassment and with some being beaten up in Goa during the COVID-19 lockdown in the country (Arnimesh, 2020) with another similar incident in Delhi, where a girl from Manipur was harassed by local people on the name of corona carrier (Sharma, 2020). The act of harassment indeed adds up to negative destination experience among tourists (Albuquerque and McElroy, 2001; Ajagunna, 2006; Kozak, 2007). Being harassed and facing negative reaction or behavior of residents or host community causes dissatisfaction and criticism amongst them (tourists) and their likeliness to return to the destination in future (Tasci and Kozak, 2006; Kozak, 2007).

Such kind of changes among tourists because of certain events is considered as hostile situations (Alvarez and Campo, 2014). Such hostile situations which tourists face during their visit generally makes them to avoid the services and products of such nations toward which they feel animosity (Anastasopoulos, 1992; Klein et al., 1998; Jung et al., 2002; Chan et al., 2010; Stepenchenkova et al., 2019). According to the study conducted by Smith et al. (2004), hostile people tend to endorse social conflict and put a question mark over others and in fact may influence the trust of consumers over service providers (Jiménez and Martín, 2010; Lee and Mazodier, 2015; Loureiro and Jesus, 2019). This has been observed to be much rampant in crisis (situational and economic), war and conflict destinations (Klein et al., 1998; Huang et al., 2010; Jiménez and San Martín, 2010; Nes et al., 2012; Stepenchenkova et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2020). This reflects tourists’ disposition to trust that emphasizes the core of humanity (Liang et al., 2018) thereby explaining insecurity and vulnerability of social interactions (Gefen, 2000; McKnight et al., 2002; Bicchieri et al., 2004; Lühiste, 2006), thus raising another alarm for the tourism industry in near future.
However, the impact of such interactions varies from hosts and guests (Kastenholz et al., 2013). Where a balanced relationship is the foundation to successful development of tourism (Sharpley, 2014), such kind of interactions contribute toward tourists’ perception and experience about the destination and its services thereby affecting their level of acceptance and tolerance for tour and travel activities to that particular destination (Armenski et al., 2011). However, it would be biasness to discuss the tourist experiences by merely considering the encounters/interactions they had without understanding the broader context or settings in which these interactions occur so as to manage and control the appearance of conflicts (Murphy et al., 2000; Postma and Schmuecker, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to recognize and address the sources through which host-guest interactions take place and how they influence tourists with respect to their on-site experiences, behaviors and evaluations, which are key factors for determining proper planning and management of a destination (Marsh and Henshall, 1987; Smith and Brent, 2001; Teye et al., 2002). The nations and destinations are required to assess the impacts of the COVID-19 not only at monetary and but also at non-monetary metrics and evolved against social back lash (Novelli et al., 2018; Gössling et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

The preliminary analysis examined the guest-host relationship through the viewpoint of tourists in the middle of the global pandemic known as COVID-19. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the tourists through online video sessions, the instrument being preferred as they (semi-structured interviews) have the strength to empower a researcher to collect “rich” data permitting a researcher to elucidate and inspect the topics being studied (Bebbie, 1990) while allowing the scope for more detailed explanation in case the responses are short or not precise (Carey, 2013). The data was collected from a sample of 26 respondents of which 17 were males and 9 females. All 26 respondents were interviewed individually. According to Hennink et al. (2017), evolving a “richly textured” consideration of a problem, it requires at least 24 interviews. This number was determined by the saturation point; which is a point at which no new information or theme is obtained from the data. The interviews were taken in English language with the tourists. All of the interviews were conducted in the months of February and March 2020. Before taking the interviews, all the ethical practices were considered. The in-depth interviews were conducted with the help of judgmental cum purposive sampling technique, and the respondents are various tourists located in different states of India.

Qualitative research was undertaken to analyze the contact situations between the host community and the visitor amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Its primary aim was to gain a rich, in-depth, holistic understanding of the interactions and relationship between the tourists and hosts in India during the emergence of COVID-19. The rationale for employing qualitative approach can be justified in terms of ontology, purpose of the study and methodology. In keeping with the interpretive paradigm, this study used a qualitative methodological approach, because the interactions and relationships between guest and hosts are complex and dynamic in nature, and thus cannot be conveyed and presented in a numerical or statistical form. The questionnaire focused on respondents’ opinions or perceptions derived from their travel experiences, including their willingness to travel in future, their opinions on impacts of COVID-19 on the interactions with the hosts; behaviors of hosts and other experiences of tourists while thematic analysis was used for better understanding while data analysis was done during and after the data collection. Even though, software for analyzing the qualitative data packages like Nvivo is accessible, the researchers selected to analyze the data manually as it allows in depth analysis and better insights.
4. Findings and discussion

The data analysis revealed that pandemic situation of COVID-19 deeply impacts the guest–host relationship, and it further influences the travel decision-making or travel intentions of the tourists. From the point of view of tourists, three major impacts of pandemic on guest–host relationships were identified, a sense of mistrust among the host community toward tourists; generation of negative emotions in the mind of visitors toward the destination and lack of willingness to interact with host community:

The situation got really tense. I always wanted to see that place, but things got difficult. I felt lucky to have basic necessities in the resort I was staying in. Our host usually made excuses for the other requirements we requested. Me and my friend were told to check out early, as the owner said that things will get hard in coming days. Somehow, managed to make travel arrangements. It was an unfortunate circumstance […] I was really expecting more help from the manager of the property and the other staff. (T1)

I am someone who always likes to be immersed into the culture of the community and interact with them. I was visiting New Delhi in the month of February. I wanted to learn and experience how people live in the sub-urban areas around the city for professional reasons. When the fear of corona started escalating slowly, people were anxious to interact with me. I think […] it was mostly because of my north-eastern looks. I believe that local people had this fear and bias, all because of this global pandemic. (T9)

I decided to go on a vacation in the month of January to a hill station in Himachal. I often go there to learn painting, as I am interested in art. As soon as lockdown started, I got helpless. I am still stuck in Himachal and family living in Delhi is worried about me. I had to change many accommodations due to unprofessional behavior of owners and some local people. It’s easy to judge that I am an outsider and that makes it difficult for me. I have been forced to take Covid-19 test in-spite of having no symptoms so far […] just because I am not local. (T12)

The above given statements make it very clear that pandemic situation creates mistrust in the minds of host community toward guests/visitors, as the guests/tourists mentioned that there was not enough support from the staff at hotels where they were staying, the host community looked at them with suspicion, and they felt helpless in such situations. This can also be due to the advice of the government to reduce physical interactions among people. The guests are dependent and reliable on the host community for almost everything during the visit and the pandemic situations clearly make things difficult for the guests. Many hosts also mentioned that they faced many difficulties because of lack of co-ordination and solidarity from the host community. This pandemic has even taken up another level that tourists have even reported of facing hostility where tourists have been told to evacuate the places and leaving the nation (Purohit and Mukherjee, 2020).

Furthermore, it was found that the volunteer tourists had some negative feelings, these were not just related to the hosts, but rather in more general sense that their overall trip and experience got ruined which was something they didn’t expect, as stated by responses marked T4, T13 and T21:

We didn’t get to see many places we were planning to visit. Plus, we were overcharged at many points for food, daily needs and even water bottles. We had no choice but to pay whatever money they asked for. I think I will not visit that place again […] We used to talk about this trip and it got ruined. I am glad I came back but personally I came back with many bad memories. Whenever I think about that trip I can’t think about any happy moments. (T4)

The pandemic situation made me realize that once things get bad, no one cares about the other person […] especially, when you are a tourist. It was the month of February and I was travelling through outskirts of Punjab. I am a solo traveler […] I noticed that suddenly the travel agent who was helping me with my trip stopped picking up my calls. I was told to get home by the police as soon as possible. The bus I was supposed to catch got cancelled due to unknown reasons. I somehow got the bus from my home state because I had no other option. (T13)
They [local people] started pressurizing me and my friend to leave the area. We had been staying in a home stay for more than two weeks. The owner was also being pressurized by the society to vacate the property and there were rumors going around that this pandemic situation was because of tourists like us. We were roaming here there to get shelter and many property owners either refused to let us stay or asked for excessive amount of money. It was bad experience overall and ruined the trip. My family somehow traveled from Chandigarh to us back home. I don’t think I will go back ever again. (T21)

The data also suggested that the tourists felt abandoned and mistreated in the wake of the pandemic and that they went through numerous problems because of the panic among the local community. This made them feel negative, about the destination or about the overall visit. This impacts the travel intentions of the tourists, meaning their willingness to travel to the destination again. This is due to the generation of negative emotions or feelings which is generated due to lack of support, misbehavior and alien like treatment by the host community. The interaction between host and guest create actual destination experience, which ultimately affects tourists’ behavior, destination evaluation and their further decisions with the destination re-visititation and recommending it to others (Oppermann, 1999; Lawson and Thyne, 2001; Thyne et al., 2004; Lopes et al., 2019).

Moreover, some tourists also exhibited the lack of willingness to interact with host community during the pandemic situation. This can be due to fear, stress, doubt or any other psychological reason which stopped them from interacting with the hosts. This has been expressed by T10 and T15:

> I just felt like I was not getting involved with the local community during that time. The news articles, television were advocating to maintain social distance [...]. Also at the same time I felt like the locals don’t really want us to be there [...] I think it’s natural to feel because corona was spreading like fire during that time [...] [...]. It felt like we are coming in, intruding a little bit on their lives. (T10)

> Seeing the lives of the local community in chaos made me realize that I can live simply and be so happy over the simple things I have back home [...] Also, many people were not following the norms of social distancing and cleanliness. This made me stay away from the interactions with people except the hotel manager and few staff [...]. I noticed that people were gathered in groups everywhere. They looked distressed and confused just like I was. That clearly wasn’t the right time to indulge in social interactions. (T15)

Apart from the major theme of negative connotations associated by the respondents about their travel experiences during this time, two respondents mentioned about the support and help they got from the local community and authorities during the crisis situations. These are mentioned in the following paragraphs:

> I got a lot of help from the local people during that time. The trip was going well and suddenly the lockdown was announced [...]. The hotel owner assured me that there will be no problem and moreover [...], helped me in making travel arrangements on time so that I could reach home before lockdown is imposed. I was escorted safely to the railway station. (T2)

> I didn’t face much problem during the panic situation created because of corona virus [...] all thanks to the local authorities who came to my rescue when I called on the local helpline numbers. Also [...], till the arrangement for my transfer to my hometown wasn’t made, authorities kept a check on my basic needs. I will be happy to visit the destination again. The prompt action and support from local authorities was a great relief for me. (T18)

During data analysis no report of violence or abuse between the tourists and the hosts were found. The data from participant observation showed that the hosts displayed panic, mistrust and irresponsible behavior toward the guests, and this clearly indicates that the pandemic situation has a highly negative impact on the image of the community and the destination. This ultimately affects the guest–hosts relationships in the long term. Most of
the tourists showed that they were okay with following the rules and respect local culture but were expecting support from local community during distress. It was found that there were two female tourists who were asked to vacate the accommodation, which can be considered as an inappropriate and extreme behavior. Thus, COVID-19 not only is causing a threat to the tourism presently but also will have a prolonged influence on guest-host relationship as negative interaction or experiences are supposed to be frequently radiated by the tourists (de Albuquerque and McElroy, 2001).

5. Conclusion and suggestions

The findings of this study contribute to the literature on guest-host relationship, especially in terms of the impact of pandemics on interactions and relationship of the guests and the hosts. The findings of this study agree with Çakar (2015), who point out that because of the pandemic situation and the crisis, the guest-host relationship abruptly disrupts leading to future critical consequences in tourism and a drastic transformation in consumer trends including their behavior. The study carves out of guest-host relationship being affected by different prevailing normal situations and critical/pandemic situations and also analyses the scenario from the perspective of the tourists and their perceptions regrind the hosts, the destination, guest-host interactions and their future travel intentions. In this study, three major impacts of pandemic on guest-host relationships were identified; a sense of mistrust amongst the host community toward tourists; generation of negative emotions in the mind of visitors toward the destination and lack of willingness to interact with host community. Moreover, there is reduced revisit intention among the tourists with their bad travel experiences owing to deteriorated host support or behavior. All of these impact the guest-host relationship and also might greatly affect their intentions to revisit the destination and could potentially be source of negative future referrals (verbal or online) about the destinations sharing their bad experiences related to respective destination(s).

The host perceptions and consequent behavior differs significantly during a critical/emergency situation or a pandemic situation and so called normal situation (Bramwell, 2003; van Zijll de Jong et al., 2011; Alvarez and Campo, 2014). The testing situations (critical/emergency/pandemic) evoke escalated emotions among people and urge a sense of survival where suddenly they shift in thinking of saving themselves first and a sense of mistrust begins to grow (Bramwell, 2003; Rofes, 2013; Ehrenfeld and Hoffman, 2013; Alvarez and Campo, 2014; Stepchenkova et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2020; Cheer, 2020). Moreover, in the current COVID-19 situation where the disease is highly communicable (Serra Valdés, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Díaz-Castrillón and Toro-Montoya, 2020; Pimentel et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020), the tourists in many areas are seen as “outsiders” and potential threats/carriers of the disease and hence a significant mistrust develops among the hosts toward the tourists that could be coupled with other underlying cultural/racial biases or prejudices (Hall et al., 2020) that further deteriorates the guest-host relationship similarly depicted from the excerpt mentioned above (T21) while it is happening in many countries against Chinese nationals or racially similar people where people perceive and link this spread being originated from China thereby influencing its tourism industry at large level (Phillips and Killingray, 2003; Novelli et al., 2018; Mao et al., 2020). In addition, the prevention measures against this pandemic (COVID-19) suggest social distancing among people that further deteriorates the interaction of guests-host thus widening the gap. When the tourists visiting a particular destination face this feeling of mistrust from the host side, they might develop dissatisfaction and discontentment regarding their travel experience and may consequently develop feeling of mistrust toward the hosts of the particular destination (Liang et al., 2018).

The pandemic situation and parallel changed perception/behavior of the hosts toward the guests, sowed negative emotions of the visitors toward the hosts. The weakened or deteriorated interaction of these two (guest-host), results in bad experiences or reduction of
happy experiences that the visitors might have had during their visit. This ultimately leads to their generation of negative emotions in the minds of the guests with dissatisfaction and disappointment and may possibly lead to bad word of mouth. With the various insights and findings from the respondents it was clear through this study that at this challenging time their hopes were with the locals rather than prioritizing other travel experiences or expectations and those who got mistreated have remembered that very vividly to the point they not only want to revisit the destination again but also would not recommend that destination to anyone else that puts the future travel/tourism of the particular destination at huge risk even after the mitigation of the pandemic as negative connotations have been added regarding the destination.

Apart from the negative experiences that the visitors have had during their visit while the COVID-19 pandemic is going on, there were few visitors that didn’t show that much disappointment. These tourists understood the situation and its criticality and were supported by the locals. Moreover, they were handled by the administration with efficiency and care and appreciated its (administration) role. This stresses how significant is the role and behavior of the hosts for shaping tourists’ perception and experiences especially at this challenging time. Moreover, it also gives insight as to how administration can add to the better management and improved experiences of the tourists and hence signifies how critical is host support including local administration for the tourist experience and their revisit intentions.

This study puts thrust on the critical role of various tourism organizations during this time. The national tourist organizations patronizing tourism all over the country and various other tourism promoting agencies including the stakeholders at the supply side of the tourism industry have to be vigilant more than ever in support and services of the tourists that have visited the country or are stuck due to the pandemic travel restrictions so that they feel safe and taken care of and hold positive travel revisit intentions after the pandemic and also spread positive word of mouth about the destination. Moreover, the role of private players in the industry goes far beyond as they have to showcase their care for the travelers who have booked/booking through their portals resulting in not only stronger associations with the travelers but also potential growth, loyalty and better customer profitability in the future not only in India but also for other nations.

References


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