Abstract: Crises or disasters negatively impact different sectors, and the tourism industry is one of the sectors that get affected massively. The severity of damage caused to the industry is immeasurable, and the frequency of crises destroying the tourism industry's backbone is far more than other industries. Since emergencies or disasters negatively affect the destination's image, it eventually affects the tourist inflow with dampening travel intentions. When a crisis happens, a tourism destination primarily plunges into action to stimulate or induce tourism demand by adopting image recovery strategies to increase the influx of tourist arrivals. However, the recent Novel Corona Virus COVID-19 Pandemic has created a global catastrophic situation. The virus has not spared all countries regardless of their economic, technological, and scientific prowess. Importantly, all earlier calamities related to the virus were dominated by the monster Covid-19, thereby posing significant health risks on the one hand and socio-economic and political risks in another hand.

Eventually, as a key driver of the economy, the tourism sector has faced a major setback in revenue and job loss during the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, tourism destinations are grounded with the deserted look and have almost lost a positive vibe. Thus there is an emergent need for regaining glories and fame of tourism destinations, with the option of formulating and implementing image recovery strategies. With this background, the present study attempts to debate and discuss theoretical backgrounds and linkages of the components of image recovery strategies and their applicability to the current pandemic scenario. Based on the review of secondary data, three central components consist of message, source, and audience. The study has suggested a short and long-term integrated plan for image recovery strategies to revitalize the lost grandeur of destination image, severely blemished by the COVID-19.

Keywords: Image Recovery, Destination Image, Covid-19 Pandemic, Integrated Plan, Tourism Recovery

Introduction

Crisis and disasters are not new phenomena to the tourism industry, and tourism has become a direct victim and has demonstrated its resilience. In the past decades, the sector was exposed to many crises and disasters of different magnitudes and scales. Tourism proved to be resilient as well as buoyant during the past calamity. In a real sense, the damages caused to the destination image often outlive the crisis period. Hence, recovery and repair strategies for destination image and reputation have become an area of debate and discussions in the literature pertaining to Crisis and Disaster Management (CDM) in tourism (Gani & Singh, 2019).
Each destination has its own image, which is either an ‘organic image,’ i.e., an image formed on the basis of the destination’s natural attributes, or an ‘induced image’, i.e., carefully tailored to achieve a set of predetermined objectives (Khan, 2021). A destination image can be either positive or negative, and it is directly proportional to the travel decision-making (Najar & Saini, 2018). When the tourism activities of a particular destination or a country are affected, the established public and private agencies like Destination Management Organizations (DMO) go on adopting image repair strategies to boost the confidence of entrepreneurs or operators or vendors, or providers of tourism services at the tourism destinations through financial aids and logistics supports to restart and revitalize businesses. Nevertheless, image repair strategies are not a new concept.

As such the DMOs also heavily invest in promotional or makeover measures with the help of print and electronic media channels, including social media platforms, to offset adverse impacts of catastrophic situations like pandemics or fury of flood cyclones, rains, earthquakes, etc. Fundamentally, crises and disasters inevitably play a predominant role in tarnishing destination image, especially with media coverage directly impacting a destination image. The situation becomes awful and shoddier, particularly for developing countries, due to the deleterious role played by international media channels, which distorted and misled tourists to cancel or postpone travel or vacation plans (Avraham & Ketter, 2017). However, in the case of Novel Virus Global Pandemic COVID-19, both developed and developing countries are vulnerable to extensive negative media coverage, leading to a negative destination image. That has become disastrous during the prevailing pandemic situation.

Several factors influence tourism recovery strategies adopted by the countries following a crisis or disaster, and each country espouses a different strategy based on its availability or unavailability of resources. Similarly, the size of the tourism sector in a particular country directly influences the use of resources in multiple ways and timely policy actions on recovery strategies (Khalid et al., 2021). Likewise, the countries with advanced infrastructure can have faster means to plan and implement such strategies when compared to the countries lacking such infrastructure (Avraham & Ketter, 2013). Many countries which lack such infrastructure find it challenging to focus on tourism image recovery strategies as the fundamental of a tourism destination is infrastructure and superstructure. For example, the external propaganda efforts by the Chinese Government to repair the image of the country at a global level and boost tourism comprise a combination of image repair strategies, including denial, evasion of responsibility, and reduction of the offensiveness of events (Jacob, 2020).

Though there is an ample amount of literature dealing with tourism image recovery during a crisis or disastrous situation, there exists a research gap in terms of the availability of in-depth studies on certain key areas (Zenker & Kock, 2020). With this background, the present study is a sincere attempt on one such critical area on the tourism and pandemic literature dominated by the research paper on destination image recovery strategies. Based on the findings of previous studies and secondary data in the form of news articles, this study aims to analyze the effectiveness of image repair strategies for tourism recovery in times of pandemics. It extensively discusses image recovery and broadly highlights its relevance and areas of further scope with reference to the current pandemic situation.
Image Recovery and Pandemic

Unlike the crisis and disasters that affected the tourism sector in the past, the COVID-19 neither has a geographical boundary nor does it have a time frame. When an emergency or disaster is short-lived, people tend to forget about the crisis over time and resume travel with new vigour and interest (Farmaki, 2021). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 outbreak holds a longer time frame accompanied by a frequent surge in infections resulting in the rise of the COVID-19 hotspots all across the globe. Many countries have declared it an endemic and made all possible efforts to restructure policies and governance systems to adjust with the “New Normal”. Thus, it is essential to identify destination image recovery strategies following the ‘new normal’ guidelines to revive the tourism sector.

“As parts of the world begin cautiously opening up again, now is the time to be creative in showing why tourism matters – for individuals, for our communities and for our planet. UNWTO’s partnership with Instagram will show that safe, responsible travel is possible, and to illustrate how just one tourist can make a big difference.”

-Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary General-UNWTO

A crisis recovery concerning destination image of this magnitude precisely demand coordination from different organizations involved for two main reasons: i) the pandemic has had noticeably affected the political, economic, and social fabric of many infected regions in addition to intense disruptions in health care systems, and ii) the multi-disciplinary nature of tourism sectors with different stakeholders involved has become the most or worst victim of the Pandemic (Yeh, 2021).

When strategizing destination image recovery, the organizations involved can pay more attention to the type of destination image to be more appropriate and effective in identifying those tourists who are the potential to purchase the related tourism and travel products. For example, Abbaspour et al. (2021) proposed ‘Medical Tourism’ as an effective Post-Covid-19 recovery strategy for the nationals of Iran, keeping in mind the country’s health infrastructure and proximity to a destination of the source countries of medical tourists (Abbaspour et al., 2021).

Any image repair approaches adopted by a tourism destination considers the type of crisis or disaster and the depth of the damage it has caused to its image and reputation. Based on the previous studies on crisis management by destinations, a “multi-step model for altering place image” emerged as an effective model to combat the image damage on destinations following a crisis. The model encompasses three important aspects of crisis management: source, message, and audience (Avraham, 2021; Avraham & Ketter, 2017).

Media

The media is a vital component frequently mentioned in the tourism literature focusing on image recovery. Tourism sectors of a region or nation suffer the most when media coverage associates them with the crisis. A recent study conducted on the travel intentions of the US tourists to China disclosed that the respondents showed low travel intentions. Most of these respondents follow news outlets that negatively project the association between China and the Covid-19 outbreak (Lu & Atadil, 2021). Biased media coverage and the frequency of news screening of pandemic impacts have tarnished destination images of places like China. Especially in the beginning stages of the pandemic, most media outlets addressed the COVID-19 virus as a “Chinese Virus”, which
had and still have devastating effects on China’s image (Yang et al., 2021), thus restricting the travel intentions of potential tourists.

Apart from news outlets, social media plays a significant role in shaping a destination’s image, especially during post-crisis. Potential tourists find user-generated content on social media to be relatively reliable when making travel decisions (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2022). Even though destinations can’t have complete control over the user-generated content posted on social media platforms, they can regulate it to some extent.

**Message**

Unlike the earlier pandemics with a shorter life span, the COVID-19 has managed to linger around for longer. Meanwhile, the intensity of the outbreak, “waves”, is not uniformly addressed across nations. Therefore, the message that a destination decides to convey during its image recovery process is transmitted or communicated as per the severity of the outbreak at the given time and the absence or presence of travel restrictions (Ketter & Avraham, 2021). The “message” component of image repair strategies consists of two essential criteria to be fulfilled to meet its intended objectives. The first is the context of the message, and the second is the timely response. For example, the delay in the Chinese Government’s response to accept the outbreak of the COVID-19 in its earlier stage and the coverups that deflected from the reality proved to be catastrophic to China’s image (Jacob, 2020).

On the contrary, Dubai, one of the first countries to welcome tourists during the Post-COVID outbreak, had a set of effective marketing and promotional strategies to convey the country’s message of being a safe travel destination. The country has received around nine million visitors between October to December 2021 for its ‘Expo 2020’ (ET Bureau, 2022). Similarly, Maldives launched a campaign with the tagline “Isolation Never Looked Good” to promote a better image of a safer and sustainable destination (Li & Mercer-Blackman, 2022).

**Audience**

Perceivers of the image, in the context of this study, consumers or potential tourists are one of the determinants of the destination image. Their demographic characteristics and past travel behaviours influence the image formation process (Tasci & Gartner, 2007). Thus, it is vital to identify the target market and understand its characteristics. The health and other related safety risks associated with the pandemic have created striking dissimilarities in the travel intention of international and domestic tourists. Despite Europe and China being the traditional source markets for Maldives tourism, India and Russia became their top source markets during the post-pandemic Recovery (Dhoot, 2021). A study on the past travel experience and future travel behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the respondents who previously visited the destination showed more positive travel intentions on revisiting post-pandemic when compared to the respondents who never visited the destinations (Kumar & Mishra, 2019; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Considering this, image recovery strategies should have a clear idea about its market segment.

When a country opened its tourism sector to international tourists during Post-COVID-1999 surge, domestic tourists showed fewer travel intentions due to perceived health and safety risks (Volgger et al., 2021). However, studies have also shown a growth in the domestic tourism market of countries in the post-COVID-19 surge stage (Poulaki & Nikas, 2021). As a significant tourism industry stakeholder, residents played an essential role in bringing back the destination to
its ‘pre-pandemic’ normal or the “new normal” (Qiu et al., 2020). Hence, it is crucial for tourism organizations planning recovery strategies to include this stakeholder. Also, when there is a fear of higher health risks associated with travel during the pandemic, there are chances of hostility expressed by the residents/hosts against tourists, which can further damage the destination image (Tung et al., 2021). Therefore, the residents or hosts must consider when formulating image recovery strategies.

**Practical Implications & Future Prospects in Image Recovery Strategies**

A destination cannot revive or repair its image on its own most of the time. It requires a collective effort from various key players and stakeholders of the tourism sector to design and implement recovery strategies. Policies and schemes introduced by the Government are vital in this aspect. Through its schemes and procedures, the Government can decide the course of actions and pace at which a destination’s image can be altered, especially at a national level. The PRASHAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual, Heritage Augmentation Drive) Scheme launched by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India aims to boost India’s image as a spiritual and religious tourism destination (Ministry of Tourism, 2015). Amid a rising demand towards more sustainable and responsible forms of tourism, countries like Costa Rica are shaping their image as an ecotourism destination on its post-pandemic recovery (Marie & Swain, 2021; Babii & Nadeem, 2021).

Restrictions on international travel amid the COVID surge and safety and health risks have increased the demand for domestic tourism. Many countries are tapping this potential market on its post covid tourism recovery process. For example, the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India is vehemently promoting its domestic tourism initiative ‘DekhoApnaDesh’ on various platforms, intending to boost its domestic tourism further and spread awareness about its lesser-known destinations (Ministry of Tourism, 2021).

Recognitions and approvals from reputed national or international organizations significantly strengthen the image of a destination and its popularity. Receiving heritage tags from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has proved to be an image booster for the destinations resulting in increased tourist flow (Dhoot, 2021; Hassan & Rahman, 2015). One of the first destinations to increase inbound tourists is Dubai, and this country is also one of the first to receive the ‘Safe Travel Stamp’ issued by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (ET Bureau, 2022). Such recognitions have helped consumers identify destinations that are either safe or have the desired value, thereby influencing their travel decisions.

Apart from the strategies mentioned above, the usefulness of modern technologies like virtual tours is often overlooked in image recoveries. Virtual tours are practical ways to engage visitors’ interest in a destination when there is a travel restriction (El-Said & Aziz, 2022). However, virtual tours are not exploited to their total efficiency except for a few countries or destinations. Similarly, technology that enables contactless services can also project a destination or tourism services to be relatively safer.

**Discussions and Conclusion**

Image recovery strategies adopted by destinations during post or crisis have two critical agenda items. Any destination that goes through a crisis needs a strategy that would help revive its image in a relatively short period, its tourism sector. Then, strategies will repair and strengthen its appearance in the long run. The pandemic was more than a
health disaster in many countries affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. A pandemic of this magnitude has led to socio-economic and political crises in nations worldwide. Hence, the image recovery strategies should be inclusive of the complexities associated with the Pandemic (Zenker & Kock, 2020).

The unpredictability of its occurrence and its complexity generally delay the crisis management process in the tourism sector. In addition, tourism crisis management lacks conceptual and theoretical frameworks, with each crisis having its own set of complexity and uniqueness (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012). In contrast, countries with larger tourism sectors can have more resilience at tourism recovery owing to economic stimulus packages introduced by their governments. It is relatively tricky for nations with smaller tourism sectors to plan and implement recovery strategies as their tourism sector does not receive similar economic stimulus from their governments (Khalid et al., 2021). That narrows the recovery process of emerging tourism nations with relatively small tourism sectors as such countries are unlikely to receive a major economic stimulus to boost the tourism sector.

A destination image is formed by combining two components, its key attributes and a holistic impression (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003). Therefore, organizations that plan image recovery strategies should focus on these two components: the first component being specific to the destination and the second one being a collective or holistic attribute of the state, region, or country where the destination belongs. Moreover, each destination has its unique set of features contributing to the image formation process. Hence, destinations focusing on image recovery should design strategies keeping in mind the uniqueness of the destination attributes and the characteristics of the source market. With a pandemic like COVID-19 affecting almost all sectors of a country, it is inevitable and essential to plan image recovery strategies that are collaborative.

References


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