# COVID-19's Effects on Tourism

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Because of the COVID-19, health risks and perceptions may induce a more deconcentrated pattern of mass tourism, with more geographical dispersion to rural and natural areas. This represents the evolving deconcentration of tourism concentration facing the growing uncertainty in an inner-city due to health risks in a pandemic. Availability of diversified tourism resources may dampen the shock to a concentrated tourism destination when effectively linked to the decentralized but easily accessible tourism resources in dispersed rural and natural areas.

deconcentration tourism concentration Contextualization Conceptualization

## 1. Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a new view on the relationship between sustainable development and worldwide tourism. Over the past decades, this relationship was mainly investigated from the perspective of the unwanted effects of tourism—often in the form of mass tourism—on the environmental quality of regions or cities (see, e.g., [1][2]). Spatial density and geographical proximity were the characteristic features of mass tourism. However, recently, it has been observed a significant shift in the spatial behavior of visitors to regions and cities; the contagious effect of the coronavirus has caused a global awareness of the health risks of high human density in entertainment centers, theatres, museums, and other public events. Consequently, new sustainability motives in the tourism sector found their origin in environmental concerns and health concerns (in agreement with Goal Three of the SDGs). Density and proximity were increasingly seen as negative sustainability externalities, with the consequence that tourists and recreationers were re-discovering spacious and green areas ranging from urban parks to regional or national parks. Such green areas were not completely serving as substitutes for densely populated tourism centers, but to some extent, they acted as complimentary amenities mitigating COVID-19 infections. This has profoundly impacted the steady pattern of tourism trends over the past years.

The global rise in welfare, the ongoing rise in leisure time, and the improvement of geographical accessibility have, over the past decades, prompted an unprecedented increase in tourist movements, not only locally or regionally but also internationally [3][4]. Agglomerations with favorable connectivity have especially benefitted from this megatrend. This holds for tourist hubs such as Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, San Francisco, New York, Bangkok, or Tokyo favoring urban tourism and for Malaga, Nice, Antalya, Bali, Cape Town, or Miami favoring beach and nature tourism prominently. Clearly, this demarcation of tourism types is less sharp, and mixed cases are abundantly available. Even the traditional dichotomy between urban and rural tourism never led to entirely disjointed appearances of these two types of tourism, as both centripetal and centrifugal forces (for instance, urban tourists

who also make trips to rural areas or rural tourists who also make trips to cities) co-exist and interact. It is thus clear that both urban agglomerations and rural areas exert both repulsion and attraction forces on visitors.

From the perspective of sustainable tourism behavior, the trend towards less concentrated mass tourism patterns and more spatial dispersion is already present over a longer period. Consequently, environmental attractiveness factors and human health considerations come together in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems plausible that sustainability motives—interpreted in a broad sense—will exert a far-reaching impact on tourism behavior in the future.

Apart from wellness tourism [5][6][7], health considerations have only played a modest role in quantitative tourism studies in contrast to sustainability considerations in modern tourism research. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a different mindset in the motivation and decisions of tourists, in particular regarding modal choice, destination choice, and daily—often crowded—tourist amenities choice (e.g., shopping malls, museums, theatres). Currently, the pandemic is viewed as a risk of density for people and a health threat due to geographical proximity. Therefore, the question arises whether COVID-19 will act as a ‘game changer’ for contemporary (mass) tourism.

## 2. COVID-19 and Tourism: Contextualization

The COVID-19 pandemic has confronted people worldwide with the vulnerability of socio-economic and health systems. Policy intervention measures (e.g., lock-down measures, constraints on physical closeness, mobility restraints) left deep traces in the daily functioning of societies. In parallel, the increased awareness of COVID-19 risks for personal health led to a critical judgment of citizens regarding their daily environment. Especially high population density, close physical proximity, and physical interactions were often regarded as potential threats [8].

Interdependent urban challenges—including pandemics—call for response measures (short- and long-run) of greater strategic scope and effectiveness than just rethinking ‘intelligent lock-down’ solutions, sometimes articulated in policy-response plans. More than ever, cities today are, on the one hand, struggling for global sustainability, vitality, attractiveness, and quality of life to keep a heterogeneous landscape of stakeholders (with different needs and interests) satisfied and happy. However, they are on a complex battlefield, coping with the expansion of COVID-19 infections, vaccination programs and acceptance, effective coordination of extensive complementary policy implications, and a trustful response to protect people. Furthermore, they need to plan for a complete and rapid recovery with a more resilient response that offers cities and their stakeholders a clear competitive advantage of sustainability and attractiveness to keep delivering high-quality tourist goods and services and enhance (health) safety and vital city life.

One of the fields dramatically affected by COVID-19 is the hospitality sector [9]. The popularity of mass tourism to attractive places (cultural cities, popular beaches) showed a sharp decline, with some recovery in the second part of 2021. One of the striking phenomena was that people were seeking more individualized forms of tourism and recreation. According to some researchers[10], this will prompt a new trend towards rural tourism, or at least to extra-urban forms of tourism (inner- vs. outer-city destinations). Even though rural tourism is not an entirely new

trend [11][12], it is undeniable that low-density tourism—often outside of the main tourist attractions—has become fashionable during the pandemic.

An important question is whether new types of extra-urban tourism will be competitive with mass urban tourism in terms of economic efficiency, ecological sustainability, and social status. This question will be the subject of the study which will address whether the corona crisis is a game-changer for traditional mass tourism. Unfortunately, the empirical evidence—from different countries and cities all over the world—does not directly lead to unambiguous findings. In particular, since the intertemporal curves of COVID-19 variants reflect different cycles over the past months, the short-term relationship between tourism flows and pandemics is hard to trace against the time-varying background factors of government interventions and lock-down measures [13]. This phenomenon resembles the range of distinct economic dynamic cycles distinguished in growth theory, ranging from short-term business cycles via medium-term Juglar cycles to long-run Kondratiev cycles.

If the COVID-19 pandemic is substantially and structurally influencing tourism decisions, it may adopt different forms ranging from avoiding crowded urban agglomerations or mass tourism in crowded resorts to substituting shared accommodation facilities (e.g., hotels) for individualized accommodation types (e.g., individual apartments) or to more subtle forms of nature tourism. In addition, the frequency of making tourist trips might also be negatively affected. Additionally, intermediate (hybrid) tourist constellations might emerge, such as traveling to a popular tourist destination but instead of spending most of the time in crowded areas, choosing extra-urban tourist destinations that are less congested (e.g., natural parks, countryside recreation). There is some evidence that the latter new form of tourist behavior is gaining importance which leads to hypothesize that in the new ‘post-COVID reality’, mixed types of tourism may emerge in the form of a spatial spread of tourists around major accessible tourist destinations. Consequently, it is interesting to test the proposition that the dichotomy of urban-rural tourism may be mitigated by the new trend of ‘deconcentrated tourism concentration’.

The latter type of hybrid tourism is a merger of two different types of traditional tourism, viz. mass tourism in attractive locations (e.g., cultural tourism to Venice or Amsterdam or entertainment tourism to Las Vegas or Bangkok) and individualistic tourism to remote or rural areas (e.g., nature tourism). It means that tourists wish to enjoy both attractions by avoiding a permanent stay in high-density tourist accommodations while compensating this negative externality by visiting a more eco-based and healthy place in the surroundings.

## 3. COVID-19 and Tourism: Conceptualization

The force field of COVID-19 is complex, as the combination of epidemiological spread patterns among groups or regions, time-varying vaccination programs (with different vaccines and different degrees of protection for specific social-medical groups), and different governmental intervention measures (e.g., mobility restrictions, lock-down measures) lead to dynamic and complex patterns. All these forces impact tourist choices and behaviors, e.g., destination choices, local destination mobility, and local visits to tourist amenities. The integrated assessment of COVID-19 impacts on spatial tourism patterns will be oriented towards an analysis of the above proposition on ‘*deconcentrated concentration*’ of tourism patterns. This latter concept will be explained in more detail now.

Deconcentration is a term derived from industrial organization theory. It refers to a physical and managerial dispersion of functions and activities from a central corporate organization towards spatially and functionally separate divisions while maintaining a concentration of central competencies intact. This means that essentially a satellite network constellation is created, with a balance between spatial concentration ('hub') and functional deconcentration of activities. This regular business model is also replicated in the geography of spatial systems, where the concept of polycentricity has gained much popularity (see, e.g., [14][15]). A polycentric system is a geographical configuration with a combination of centralized and decentralized functions, where agglomeration forces and spatial network linkages provide a hierarchical structure with functional spatial specialization.

This polycentric conceptualization of spatial functions in terms of a major hub and complementary satellites will be used to describe the dispersion of tourism flows to Las Vegas during the COVID-19 pandemic. In period, the awareness grew that a high concentration of tourists in a given tourist destination accompanied with a high density and close proximity of people is a potential threat to human health. To mitigate health risks in congested tourist concentrations such as Las Vegas, many visitors to Las Vegas were tempted to combine a visit to mass entertainment places with a healthy environmental trip outside, in particular trips to the Natural Parks outside the Las Vegas metropolitan area, even up to a daily distance of 300–450 miles. They might also combine a visit to several medium-sized environmental amenities with a trip to a major Natural Park destination (in a way similar to the 'intervening opportunities' idea advocated by Stouffer [16]). This behavior in corona times was recently described as 'the path of least resistance' [17].

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