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To cite this article: Sebastian Filep, Brian King & Bob McKercher (2024) Reflecting on tourism and COVID-19 research, *Tourism Recreation Research*, 49:2, 426-430, DOI: [10.1080/02508281.2021.2023839](https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.2023839)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.2023839>



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Published online: 19 Jan 2022.



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RESEARCH NOTE



Reflecting on tourism and COVID-19 research

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ABSTRACT

Reflection is a form of deep thinking that is evident in everyday lives – private and professional – and this article offers insights for key parties about reflecting on research outcomes to ensure enhanced tourism impacts post-pandemic. Using a hermeneutic perspective on reflection, the authors reflect on research outcomes since the pandemic began. Three types of reflection are deployed: anticipatory, active and recollective. While the ultimate effects of the pandemic remain uncertain, a scholarly rush to collect new data has been observed. Earlier research predictions seem unlikely to materialise. Taken collectively, the reflections suggest that researchers should slow down and allow for collection of more research data over extended time periods to generate stronger theoretical contributions. Scholars may apply anticipatory, active and recollective reflection to applicable research contexts. Documentation of the reflective process alerts practitioners to economic and social trends which may impact on global tourism post-pandemic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 September 2021
Accepted 19 December 2021

KEYWORDS

Tourism; COVID-19;
pandemic; reflection;
research knowledge

Introduction

It is timely to reflect on scholarly outputs about tourism and COVID-19. Reflection constitutes a form of 'intelligibility by which the world is made meaningful' (Mortari, 2015, p. 1). The present article is not a reflection on research methods, which has been extensively discussed amongst tourism scholars. Nor is it a reflection on researcher assumptions, norms and practices. Instead, the authors reflect on the outcomes of research about tourism and COVID-19, taking account of the production and impacts of new knowledge. The COVID-19 pandemic has evidently upended tourism globally (Brouder, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Lim, 2021) prompting a flourishing of academic research. However, there has been insufficient time for tourism scholars to reflect more deeply on tourism and COVID-19 knowledge. Reflection has the merit of forcing researchers to slow down and evaluate their work. Reflecting on knowledge produced can take various forms. Examples include Dewey's (1916) pragmatic perspective, Foucault's (1985), critical perspective and Moran's (2000) phenomenological perspective. The current authors have adopted Van Mannen's (1991) hermeneutic perspective to reflect on tourism and COVID-19 research.

Van Mannen's (1991) reflection perspective is well suited to examining both the nature and trajectory of COVID-19 and tourism research. Three types of reflection are proposed, namely: the anticipatory which makes sense of previous research about the future (in this case, conceptual papers on what will occur following the pandemic), the active (*in-situ* reflections while undertaking tourism and COVID-19 research) and the recollective (making sense of past research predictions about specific impacts of COVID-19). This staged approach to reflection has several merits. First, as will be demonstrated by the authors, it is improbable that some of the predictions which were published as the crisis was initially unfolding will materialise, thereby limiting their value for both practitioners and scholars. Second, publications predicated on particular post-pandemic tourism scenarios (Goretti et al., 2021) are premature, since the crisis is continuing (at the time of writing in late 2021), with fresh outbreaks of the virus and new mutations.

Generating reflections

Since there is a continuing flow of new data about the effects of the pandemic, there is no substantive multi-year history about this research topic. Consequently,

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the authors have eschewed the adoption of a systematic literature review (Davis et al., 2014) or a semi-systematic literature review (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017), in reflecting on the outcomes of research about tourism and COVID-19. Such approaches would be premature for such a novel and still emerging topic. Systematic reviews are normally based on analyses of empirical findings that fit pre-specified inclusion criteria over an extended period (up to several decades) and address narrowly defined research questions or hypotheses (Snyder, 2019).

The authors have purposely pursued an integrative literature review (Torraco, 2005) and have identified, appraised and synthesised journal articles on COVID-19 and tourism. In pursuing such an approach, the creation of new knowledge is based on an existing conceptual structure (Snyder, 2019). The authors draw on Torraco's work (2005) about integrative literature review processes through three key stages. The first involved identifying a conceptual structure to approach the topic of interest. This normally entails a guiding theory and in the current circumstances the authors adopt Van Mannen's (1991) chronological conceptualisation of reflection. The authors were mindful of this when proceeding to the next stage. During the second stage, keywords *COVID-19 and tourism* were entered into a Google Scholar search engine. This generated several thousand works which had been published on this topic since March 2020.

Following a refined Google Scholar search with phrases such as *research predictions and COVID-19 and tourism, reflections and COVID-19 and tourism*, the third stage (conducted in June 2021) involved interrogating (critically appraising and scrutinising) a small, randomly selected portion of the published works (30 journal articles). The journal items were chosen for their quality, clarity and relevance to the generation of reflections. This final stage involved discussions amongst the three authors resulting in approximately 95% agreement about which journal papers to select and review. Some limitations are acknowledged - the review was relatively informal and relied on the authors' familiarity with the topic and opinions. In the future, there will be potential for more extensive bibliometric analyses (Donthu et al., 2021; Paul et al., 2021) or meta-systematic reviews (Lim & Weissmann, 2021) to confirm or disconfirm the conclusions of this initial review.

The aggregate finding was that the reviewed articles may be classified into (predominately) conceptualisations about post-pandemic tourism (thereby allowing for anticipatory reflection); and empirical investigations with confirmed research outcomes (thereby allowing for recollective reflection). Although it was impractical

to categorise papers within the pool of examined work to fit active reflection, the approach has been documented here as a potential source of value for tourism scholars. The three types of reflection are presented in the following discussion. Reference is made to some of the reviewed journal papers which are illustrative of the value of each type of reflection.

Anticipatory reflection

Following Van Mannen's (1991) chronological conceptualisation, anticipatory reflection has a specific concern with reflections on papers about post-pandemic tourism. It has been suggested that COVID-19 is a major disruption that will ultimately transform and upend the tourism industry (Lew et al., 2020) with COVID-19 pandemic being a turning point for the sector (Stankov et al., 2020). Such articles mostly rely on scholarly opinions about tourism and COVID-19. Though optimistic and positive scenarios are tempting, previous crises suggest that the opposite may be more likely. Mckercher and Pine (2005) noted that dramatic explosions of sometimes frenzied tourism demand have followed periods of deep hardship during previous crises (manifestations of revenge tourism). They likened the reaction to a coiled spring which will rebound when suppressed a little. However, when suppressed a lot, the spring will rebound even more strongly.

A parallel revenge tourism outcome applied in the case of South Korea following the global financial crisis and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome outbreak, with outbound travel growing by over 31% and 20% in 2010 and 2016, respectively (UNWTO, 2021). Beyond revenge tourism in certain regions and neighbourhoods, the post-pandemic world may have the negative effect of accelerating inequalities with developed countries benefitting from advanced vaccination programmes. Lew et al. (2020) acknowledged the risks of prognosticating about the future when the progress of the pandemic remains uncertain. The new outbreaks and virus variants in different jurisdictions at the time of writing underline the challenge of predicting accurately. Conditions across different settings are clearly complex and unpredictable. The key message of the anticipatory reflection is therefore that when proposing post-pandemic visions, these should go beyond scholarly opinion and draw upon actual data such as future demand forecasts.

Active reflection

Active reflection is akin to Schön's (1983) reflection-in-action, reflecting on behaviours as they occur or reflecting on the impacts of research as soon as they unfold

(the current case). The following exemplifies the multiple effects of the crisis on psychological health and well-being. Most tourism-related research involves human contact, whether with tourists, tourism workers or host communities. Commenting on the urgency of scholars to capture the moment, Haux (2020) called for social scientists to ensure that investigators take full account of participant health and well-being. Research is emerging about how the lockdowns that were enforced in some jurisdictions to contain the virus through 2020 and 2021 have impacted on mental health (Brodeur et al., 2020). Brodeur et al. (2020) used Google Trends data for Europe and the United States to evaluate changes in search terms for topic related to well-being. An increase was evident in searches for boredom, loneliness, worry and sadness. The overall findings suggested that the pandemic has adversely affected mental health amongst various populations (Brodeur et al., 2020). Though no equivalent tourism data are available, active reflection urges us to avoid losing sight of the plight of tourism stakeholders, even if and when the seriousness of the pandemic abates. Sectoral job losses have been prevalent, particularly in the most vulnerable host communities with their highly dependent tourism workers.

Recollective reflection

Recollective reflection considers specific past predictions (Van Mannen, 1991), in this case about how COVID-19 impacts on the tourism sector. Unlike anticipatory reflection on conceptual papers about post-pandemic tourism, and active reflection that examines *in-situ* impacts of research, recollective reflection seeks to make sense of historical research data. We might for example reflect on past research predictions about air travel and COVID-19. Before the vaccine rollout, Gössling et al. (2020) predicted that COVID-19 would transform the airline sector thereby marking a distinction from prior crises. Drawing upon historically based research data that the approval of vaccines would experience lengthy delays, and with no vaccines then in sight, they anticipated dramatic impacts on global air travel. However, the global vaccine rollout in February 2021 prompted a predicted recovery of global air travel by late 2022 (Hemmerdinger, 2021). This was based on the volume and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines used in the West, the relative health of major world economies and high rates of personal savings (Hemmerdinger, 2021).

The aviation data emerging from China point to a rapid recovery within the world's most populous nation – domestic arrivals at Chinese airports had

reached 86% of 2019 levels by August 2020 (Taylor, 2020). By the end of 2021, it is anticipated that the Chinese will have made a total of 4.1 billion domestic tourist trips, an increase of 42 percent on 2020 (Xinhua, 2021). If such rapid recovery were replicated elsewhere, it is questionable whether the global tourism airline sector would be transformed. Incremental change is more likely in this scenario – for example, implementing additional hygiene measures for travel and tourism industry personnel.

Gössling et al. (2020) identified that the pandemic would likely prompt the retiring of fuel inefficient aircraft. However, the large-scale cancellation of new aircraft orders by financially crippled airlines may reduce the likelihood of this outcome (Josephs, 2021). One scenario is that older aircraft will be retained as a cash measure. In other words, economic factors may delay the factors driving enhanced sustainability. It is impossible to know what will happen to the aviation industry globally with any confidence at the time of writing. The advent of incremental or transformational change will have broader implications, such as the type of prevalent sectoral leadership post-pandemic. As the aviation example clearly demonstrates, the recollective reflection unveils a divergence between previous research predictions and current realities.

Conclusions

Though the value of reflection as a mental activity is evident in the current pandemic, the act of reflecting need not to be tied to the immediate circumstances of COVID-19. Beyond being an important generic mental activity in research practice (Mortari, 2015), reflection urges a re-examination of habits and assumptions, thereby benefitting private lives more broadly. Winston Churchill made his observation 'never let a good crisis go to waste' (Deery, 2020, p. 47), when engaged in the formation of the United Nations – a reminder of the learning opportunity that arises from crises. More contemporaneously, Stankov et al. (2020) suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic provides a potential opportunity for the tourism industry to embrace mindfulness (a mental activity of greater awareness and sensitivity to context). The reflections raised in the present paper arguably contribute towards the mindfulness agenda by recognising the role of reflecting deeply on the outcomes of previous research.

A number of limitations should be noted about reflections. As stated by Mortari: 'the mental life is so complex that, in order to gain complete awareness of it, it would be necessary for us to become spectators of its flowing from a place of observation outside ourselves' (2015,

p. 6). Second, it is noted that reflection is a post hoc mental exercise, including anticipatory reflection. Therefore, we cannot reflect on what tourism and COVID-19 research will be like in the future. Third, the authors have reflected on the work of others. More elaborate future reflections would entail looking back at our own research, perhaps through journaling and digital diary methods. Despite the previously noted limitations, the three reflective types imply the following. Researchers should avoid rushing to collect their data while the ongoing pandemic persists since the effects remain unknown at the time of writing. To complement current speculations about post-pandemic tourism, it may be timely to collect more data over lengthier periods, to extend theories and to exchange knowledge across various disciplines. Future researchers might await the collection of full year data to provide a holistic and more complete picture of year-on-year effects as in the case of Lim and To (2021).

The previous suggestions might ensure that COVID-19 tourism research is more durable. Finally, recognising that scholars have a moral responsibility to the tourism industry and to associated stakeholders, it would be extreme to urge a halt to scholarly investigations about tourism and COVID-19. However, evidence is widespread that attempts to capture this moment have been conducted in haste. Crises offer opportunities for reflection and not solely for the pursuit of volume and speed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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