

# COVID-19 and Virtual Tourism: A Model to Hoist the Tourism Market in Future

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**ABSTRACT** - Coronavirus a major breakdown in the history of tourism which had shaken the service sector to a great extent. This pandemic had created a fear in the consumer minds, and they feel hesitate to travel. In fact, few clients had already designed their wish list of many destinations where they want to travel, but current pestilence halted their dreams. The dangerous outcomes are visible in hotels, economy, transport, trade, and tourism sectors. Moreover, technological advancements always aided sectors to announce innovative products through its usage. In recent years, the technology of virtual reality (VR) has taken the command to support numerous sectors. On the other hand, by using VR tourism players could promote any hotel, airline, event, exhibition, trade show, fairs, festivals, or other religious procession. The tourism officials and professionals has been introducing new tactic of virtual tourism which provides the traveller with 360-degree tour of a particular destination. The amalgamation of virtual reality and tourism could help the industry to revive its position. This paper attempts to put light on the harsh impacts of COVID-19 at global market and focuses on an emerging trend of virtual tourism. Besides it, this study will clearly demonstrate the importance and challenges related to virtual tours.

**Keywords:** *Benefits, Challenges, Coronavirus Pandemic, UNESCO, Virtual Reality, Virtual Tours*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of virtual reality had become quite popular in recent years. The ride of roller coaster, aircraft journey or the journey through exotic hilly region all this could be experienced in the form of simulations. According to UNWTO, tourist arrivals down 87% in January 2021 as compared to January 2020. Additionally, because no show of tourists resulted in huge losses and to deal with such situation it is important to apply innovative strategy. As per the survey conducted in Australia it is concluded that 20 percent of consumers had utilized the VR technology in the selection of a destination while 25 percent planned to use this technology in the future.

This technique of virtual tourism could be applied by tourism professionals with the assistance of VR creator. Both parties should have proper knowledge and details regarding what they are interested to offer. For instance, if any of the travel agents want to offer a virtual tour of Rio Carnival of Brazil then they could provide it by implementing VR technology. In this the viewers could get every minute detail of this event with sound and music. In this way, tourist could get an experience of this festival while residing at their own home destinations. In 21<sup>st</sup> century tourism and hotel sector could survive with the implementation of VR. Significantly, the virtual tourism can bring life to a destination.

## OBJECTIVES

- The main goal is to highlight the impacts of coronavirus on global tourism and hospitality market.
- Additionally, this research emphasis on how this crisis of COVID-19 had forced the industry to promote Virtual Tourism.
- This paper also exhibits the importance of Virtual Tourism and Challenges exists in its execution.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word virtual is used to refer something which could be regarded as true (Collins). On the other hand, Oxford dictionary described the word reality something as which can be experienced and could have similarities to one's imagination. Virtual reality (VR) refers to a computer-generated simulation which is used for interaction with 3D environment. The concept of augmented reality is dissimilar from virtual reality as the former enhance the real-world environment (Mitchell, C. 2020). Moreover, Virtual reality creates an artificial world that can seem real with the usage of technology. It adopts technology, real world, effects, and interaction. Virtual tours can be described as "a simulation of an existing location that is composed of a sequence of video images" (Osman, Wahab, and Ismail 2009, p, 173). The trend of Virtual tourism allows the consumers to see world's popular destinations despite COVID-19 restrictions

(UNESCO, 2020). There are four main elements of virtual reality like targeted behaviour, organism, Artificial sensory simulation, and awareness (Steven M. LaValle, 2019). A simulation is the creation of real-world activities in a restricted environment (David Wood, 2021). This creative world of simulations needs one well-designed model for its usage.

### III. METHODOLOGY

During this disaster of coronavirus, the tourism players has been concentrating on the trend of virtual tourism which is ready to take off and will assist consumers to visit incredible places of the world.

Garcia, C. [4] elaborated this idea of virtual tourism as a marketing tool in which companies can utilise new technologies and creative stuff to attract consumers. Further, they can discover the valuable information and 360-degree virtual tours of specific destinations. The new virtual events will support the patrons to make reservation or booking.

Osman El-Said, Heba Aziz [10] highlighted that in the period of COVID-19 it is appropriate to travel virtually rather than physically. The VT's are considered to be secure as per the severe effects of this infectious disease. Moreover, the virtual tours could motivate people to visit the sites physically as it could not replace the actual experience.

Rogers, S. [12] enlightened that virtual platform offers the incentive of try before buy and assist the tourism industry to promote its components. The method of virtual reality stimulates customers to experience these areas virtually.

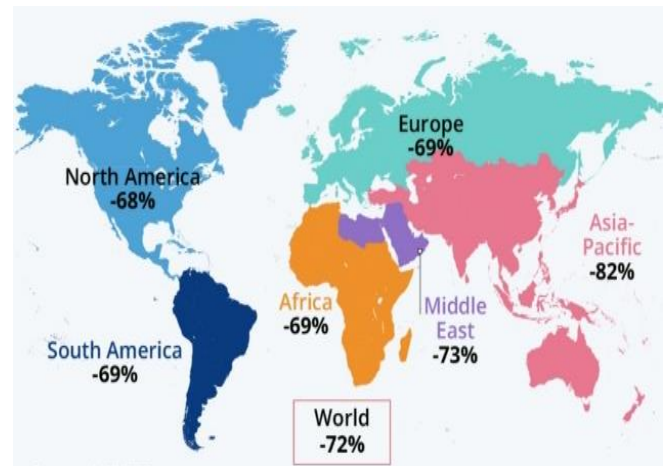
UNESCO [13] offers unique and incredible virtual tours to several destinations of the world. This renowned tourism organisation has been serving to preserve heritage and attract travellers to travel in post-pandemic era.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Pandemic forced tourism to endorse “unique element”

The thought of VR was started with VR photography where one can check number of still pictures. Later, with technological advancements sound and effects were also applied. Presently, one can see the three-dimensional views of any region and travellers can feel like they are at destination. Today, VR could be used to represent the real world. By this technology one can experience the virtual tour of Eiffel tower while residing in Australian continent. The key difference between virtual reality and augmented reality is that VR takes one to the real-world experience and AR deals with only creating digital effects to one's own space. The main equipment which is required to get an experience in VR is the headgear. Additionally, in today's world every individual has been using this technology for

different purposes like for education, interior designing, architectural work and so on.



**Figure 1. Change in International Tourists arrivals from January to October 2020 vs. 2019**

Source: UNWTO

In the figure1 it has been represented that pandemic of coronavirus had affected tourism and hospitality industry and forced the consumers to stop traveling. As per the reports of UNWTO, the international tourism back to levels of 30 years ago with a loss of 72 percent of international tourist arrivals in the year of 2020 over 2019. Out of which, the Asia-Pacific region had experienced a loss of 82 percent international tourist arrivals which is highest as compare to other areas of the world. This drastic change resulted in shutting down many businesses and services. The total loss of international tourism receipts was around US\$ 1.3 trillion which includes the chief share of tourist market (UNWTO, 2020). Now, the major question is how to recuperate this business? As per the tourism professionals the only strategy which could help in the current wave of coronavirus is virtual tourism. Virtual tourism is a kind of tourism in which citizens of all over the world could get an overview of diverse destinations. Ultimately, this will create a desire in their minds to travel to these places. After the end of coronavirus pandemic tourists will demand to reach the destinations those will sponsor something new and unique (Garcia, C. ,2017). As per plog's classification of tourists these types of consumers are known to be allocentric in nature. Moreover, to meet this demand the regions of the world are promoting unique attractions to explore. The tourist could be amazed by watching some exotic destinations only using a headset. As a result, this will really help tourism sector to revive the position in the coming years. All groups of society could use this technology to gain unique and extraordinary feel. Tourism professionals need to integrate VR as their marketing tool through which they can make profits in post pandemic world. Moreover, to deal with crushing impacts of pandemic the VR, AR and MR technologies can offer substitutes for travel the world (World Economic Forum, 2021). This kind of technology will be a game changer policy in this industry. Furthermore,

this technology could be proved as an incredible strategy to recover global tourism and hospitality business.

**Table: I Type of Virtual tours of Tourism and its allied sectors**

SECTOR	VIRTUAL TOUR
Tourism	Destination, attractions, events, handicrafts
Hotel	Lobby area, reception, rooms, restaurant, room service
Aviation Industry	In flight operations, bookings, safety measures
Cab/ Taxi service	Types of cars, facilities, transit points

**Source: Author**

In the table I, it has been specified that tourism and hospitality business could present the virtual tours of any destination, reception area, room facility in hotel, in-flight operations or cab service. For instance: Air Canada could give an overview of in-flight safety measures to its consumers in the form of virtual tours.

**2. Significance of virtual tourism**

The word virtual refers to what you can see through eyes and tour means to undertake any journey. This concept facilitates the people to experience the services by interacting with technology. The process of virtual tourism seeks the attention of consumers and leave them with a memorable experience. Moreover, the Virtual tours could be executed on four strong pillars those are destination or activity, technology, interaction and psychological presence. In past times, VR was introduced in video games and simulation while today it could be used in much expanded version. There are countless benefits of VR in tourism industry like:

- Tourist could get an experience of any destination by staying at home place. So, tourism professionals will sell experiences through virtual tours.
- Furthermore, it could assist the industry to utilize this technology as a marketing tool.
- In the marketing mix elements, the fifth ‘P’ which is known as physical evidence was added to provide some sort of proof in the form of booklets or brochures. Additionally, virtual tours will offer the tourist with evidence of a destination by conducting tours on virtual reality platform. Alternatively, this innovative solution could provide leverage to tourist to test the services before buying it.
- It will facilitate the tourism attractions to be maintained for future visits. The tactic of virtual tourism will preserve the charm of all tourist places.

- In country like India which has several tourist places those are unexplored, so this scheme delivers an opportunity to showcase these attractions to tourist market of different regions.
- The virtual tours deliver the facility to travel to those places which requires special permit or closed for tourist movement.

**3. Challenges to push virtual tourism**

Some major issues pertaining in the execution of Virtual tourism are as follows:

- Lack of funds: The government in developing nations always neglect the investment in an innovative solution. However, the public players of these nations don’t pay attention towards the execution of innovative strategies in service sectors. There are numerous future trends those are becoming popular like use of AR (Augmented Reality), VR (Virtual Reality), AI (Artificial Intelligence), Robotics, Recognition technology. In addition to it, Virtual tours are the best solution as per the current pandemic period. After one year of struggle with COVID-19 the majority of tourism professionals have introduced this trend. Unfortunately, the lack of capital investment and support from government hinder the way to growth and development of tourism and its allied sectors.
- Additional Efforts to Guide Virtual Creators: The virtual creators are the professionals who create an actual content of services. It requires more time to convey all the details to these creators. However, it increases the complexity in providing these virtual tours. On the other hand, most of the time you cannot get the desired outcomes (Bear, C., 2018).
- Helps or hinder in decision-making process: The only motive of applying VR and AR is to attract tourist traffic in post pandemic period. Once the tourist got to know about the attractions, hotels, transportation, and other service it’s not necessary that it will create a long-lasting impact on their minds. The experience of users could be faded away as the time passes. Additionally, virtual tour is just an approach but doesn’t give any surety to the industry professionals that it could help in earning revenues.
- Conflict between body and mind: Doubtlessly, the virtual tours can provide the consumers what they imagine, but it could also result in the conflict. While experiencing VT’s our mind concentrate on what we see, and our body gives us an opposite signal. Furthermore, it creates the negative impacts on customer’s mind and body, and result in other health issues.
- Lack of Real-Time Environment: However, the virtual tours could create an impression on

consumer’s mind but eventually the experience one can get in real time atmosphere is totally different. Moreover, the virtual tours could not offer the same as per the imagination of industry players.

**4. Role of UNESCO to promote Virtual Tours**

The COVID-19 had compelled the travel industry to stop all domestic and international tours, but it couldn’t stop people to use the facility of virtual tours. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) which was established on 16 November 1945 is concentrating to aid tourism sector via this innovative stratagem of virtual tourism. It had initiated the design of exploring world from home with UNESCO. This nodal agency under the campaign of Share Our Heritage is promoting access to numerous world heritage properties.

**Table: II Tours offered by UNESCO on Virtual platform**

DESTINATION	VIRTUAL TOURS
Spain	Mudejar Architecture of Aragon, Risco Caído and the Sacred Mountains of Gran Canaria Cultural Landscape, Roman Walls of Lugo
Brazil	Pampulha Modern Ensemble, Historic Centre of the Town of Goiás
United Republic of Tanzania	Kilimanjaro National Park, Ngorongoro Conservation Area
Germany	Messel Pit Fossil Site
Jamaica	Blue and John Crow Mountains
France	Le Canal du Midi
Sweden	Grimeton Radio Station
Republic of Korea	Jeju Volcanic Island and Lava Tubes

Source: Author and UNESCO

In the table II few places are mentioned from the official list declared by UNESCO. The main motive is to advertise some mysterious and fabulous areas on virtual platform. In addition to it, UNESCO in collaboration with Google Arts & Culture provides the tours of mesmerizing destinations from all over the world. This list of virtual tours will include more exotic destinations in future to elevate tourism industry and to contribute to achieving the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) till 2030 (UNESCO, 2020). Additionally, the Google arts and culture platform runs the tour package of spellbinding Taj Mahal of India. This initiative will add more value to heritage properties of the world.

**V. CONCLUSION**

As revealed by this investigation, the SARS-CoV- 2 virus had pressed the freeze button in all business operations. Currently, the tourism and hospitality forums are constantly working to endorse exclusive ideas. One of such measure is

the outstanding concept of virtual tourism. Nowadays, every corporate has been executing the trend of virtual reality as a promotional tool. Eventually, the hazardous Covid-19 influenced the global tourism sector to adopt this measure more passionately. Moreover, this concept will definitely aid the unabridged tourism business to a certain extent. The Virtual tour is an alternative for those who would like to experience stunning journey while staying at home. Moreover, in this study few challenges have been mentioned associated to the virtual tourism. It is recommended that government should find different tactics to overcome these limitations. Consequently, the officials should approach and encourage tourism players to contribute in this struggle. Furthermore, each agent is recalling about the losses those had incurred due to this infectious disease, but for rescue they must shift their mind towards the virtual platform. This technology-based tourism awakens the tourists and support them in their decision-making process. Additionally, it will boost the confidence and hope in virtual travellers that they will see these exotic places in post coronavirus epoch. The virtual tours could increase yields and developments in the tourism business. Evidently, it could be proved as a major turning point in post coronavirus times. Lastly, with the usage of virtual tours there are high chances that global tourism business could restore its position.

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#### ABOUT AUTHOR

Presently, I am working as an Assistant professor in the Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar (Punjab). I completed my Masters of Tourism Management (MTM) from BBK DAV COLLEGE FOR WOMEN, AMRITSAR in the year 2017, and qualified UGC NET for lectureship. Moreover, I attained first position in my post-graduation in Guru Nanak Dev University, and was awarded with a gold medal and honoured with number of awards during my studies. My specialization is in tourism so, I am keen to research in this field to gain more experience and opportunities. In this research project my major goal was to investigate and study various aspects correlated to current pandemic and role of virtual tourism during and after COVID-19. Moreover, I am analysing more challenging topics for my future projects so that I can make further contributions in the tourism and hospitality research area.

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