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TOURISM: REFLECTIONS REVOLVING AROUND COVID-19

TURISMO DE PANDEMIA: REFLEXIONES EN TORNO AL COVID19- PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: The present notes of research bring some critical reflections on the effects of COVID19 in the tourism industry. Although much has been written on tourism and COVID19 worldwide, less is known on how visitors –probably defying the health authorities regulations– travel to infected destinations to understand better the pandemic. We have coined the term pandemic tourism to denote the rise of a new tourist niche interested to travel to Wuhan, China and other destinations with high viral circulation. We have identified three clear cut clusters among pandemic tourists: those who are concerned to be infected but opt to start travel, those who are deniers of the COVID but they are worried about being fired once returned to the home, and those who are nostalgic expatriates. The obtained outcomes should not be extrapolated to other universes. **Keywords:** Risk, COVID19, Tourism Pandemic, Fear, Nostalgic Expatriates.

RESUMEN: La presente nota de investigación discute críticamente los efectos del COVID19 en la industria turística. Si bien mucho se ha publicado sobre el tema, no menos cierto es que poco se sabe sobre lo que hemos denominado turismo de pandemia, que se cristaliza por el interés de los turistas en viajar a lugares prohibido por las autoridades sanitarias. La nota muestra tres grandes grupos de viajeros, aquellos que temen por su seguridad pero aun así viajan, aquellos que niegan la pandemia y por último los que sienten una nostalgia manifiesta porque deben regresar a su país, Argentina luego de muchos años en el extranjero. **Palabras Claves:** Riesgo, COVID19, Turismo de Pandemia, Miedo, Nostalgia.

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INTRODUCTION

The term pandemic is often associated with the presence of infectious disease, most probably because of a virus outbreak, which cannot be contained and rapidly expands to infect people in multiple continents and countries. Needless to say that this applies very well for the virus outbreak and spreading of COVID-19, which today affects not only the tourism industry but also the global commerce as never before. The tourism fields, the specialized literature –discussing the effects of covid19- may be very well divided into two clear-cut poles: those studies focusing on the opportunity of COVID19 to generate more sustainable destinations or an eco-friendly industry (Gosling, Scott & Hall, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) and those works oriented to discuss the methodological implications of applied research to study tourism in a world without tourists (Zheng, Goh & Wen 2020; Wen et al, 2020). What is more important, this global emergency evinces the urgency to adopt new strategies and methods leading the current epistemology towards a more hybridized form, or so to speak to a multidisciplinary perspective (Gretzel et. al 2020). Quite aside from this hot debate, the present opinion-piece goes on to a new innovative direction. On 20 March of 2020 Argentinean President Alberto Fernandez ordered the lockdown closing not only borders, public transport and commercial activity but airspace. In consequence, thousands of Argentinean were stranded in the world, pressing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct a program of repatriation at a higher cost absorbed by the government. To some extent, these measures oriented to protect the public health were similar in the entire world less -for this case- that thousands of tourists turned a deaf ear to presidential decree flying abroad in the lapse of time between the ends of March to May of 2020.

METHODOLOGY

In this short note of research, we employ the neologism *pandemic tourism* to denote the decision or curiosity to travel to destinations seriously affected by COVID-19 and other pandemics. *Pandemics tourism* should be understood as a new trend of tourists who travel to zones affected by pandemics or highly-infected by virus(es) to get an outstanding experience. Although the results of this research should not be extrapolated to other scenarios, no less true is that they apply for other study cases associated with SARS, H1N1 or Ebola. Methodologically speaking, we have selected 35 participants (from 25 to 55 years old) divided among 15 males and 20 females. The participants were organized in two samples: a) those who have been stranded abroad by tourism or for working purposes (i.e. pilots, cruise workers, postgraduate students and businessmen, only to name a few) and b) those who voluntarily overlooked the risks of COVID19 and started a journey abroad ignoring the presidential decree. Both were named as cluster A and cluster B. Because of confidentiality issues, real names of interviewed people have been changed.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Because of the lockdown still remains, personal meetings –or face-to-face interviews- are not allowed in Argentina. Hence, the used method was snowball while the interviews were conducted through Zoom and Skype.

As the previous backdrop, both samples keep commonalities and serious differences. The first common-thread point in both samples is “the fear of being infected by COVID-19 abroad”. This suggests the impossibility to receive the correct medical support and follow-up, in a foreign country. Claudio (male, 27 years old) is flight attendant and says *“I have a great experience in traveling and particularly I am not afraid to be sick out of Argentina, but in this case, I was terrified to think in the odds of being infected by COVID19. If you ask me, hospitals and health system in the UK suddenly collapsed and the information was poor, we know nothing when and under what conditions we would return to home”*. A similar testimony can be found in Maria (female 39 years old) who works as a historian and was surprised while attending to a Conference in Spain: *“I was surely terrified when Covid19 spread; we had neither information to the details of flight to Buenos Aires nor any idea if the government will open the airspace to allow our repatriation. What is worse, all this resembles a horror history and apocalyptic genre where the bottom-days are around the corner”*. In sharp contrast to panic sentiment, those who have flown after the lockdown showed a manifest indifference to “Coronavirous decease” which was accompanied by a political hostility against President Fernandez. Carlos (male, 37 years old), who works as an agricultural engineer, travelled to Paris accompanied of his sons: *“I have no fear, this is an invention of China and the media to paralyze the industry in the West, this is like little flu which is being magnified by journalism. I do not share the decision of President Fernandez to close the airspaces, I have rights, and have the right to move as I want, from here to there, he is a dictator and this virus allowed him to impose a regime in my country. I made the decision to travel anyway and I am proud of that, this is an act of resistance!*

The second element, which distinguishes the two samples, is the worries for losing the job or the company to fall in bankruptcy. Interviewed participants in cluster A showed a much deeper concern of being laid off once returned to the home. This sentiment is particularly observed in tourism or hospitality workers. As Joaquin eloquently remarks: *“unemployment is one of my greatest fears, I am a tour-operator in Buenos Aires, and COVID-19 evinces the end of tourism. The lockdown not only limits public circulation but also mobilities and tourism. The system should face a serious crisis, probably like we have in 2001 in Argentina. Thousands and Thousands of Argentineans will impoverish because of COVID19. The government should assist rapidly to the industry and implement efficient policies of recovery.. the enemy is not the virus but poverty.*

Rather, in cluster B, the worries stem from the possibilities to weaken the democratic institutions taken advantage of the fear, the crisis generates. Fabiana (female, 27 years old) utters: *“I am afraid of the Argentine government, not the virus. The fear, this government is manipulating, facilitates things to undermine the check and balance forces that makes democracy strong, Fernandez wants to impose fear and the lockdown because his policies not to be widely rejected. Like in the case of terrorism, where the “terrorist” are demonized to impose economic policies that in other circumstance will be rejected, now Fernandez is adopting the lockdown to impoverish the private sector and*



in this way, introducing Chavism expropriating private fortunes, and properties (like in Venezuela now in Argentina).

Both testimonies agree poverty caused by the economic crisis is an important factor of COVID19, but they differ in their reactions. Fabiana seems to adopt a partisan (if not ideological) position blaming President Alberto Fernandez by the crisis, while Joaquin signals to the risks of collapse in the tourism industry as well as service sectors. For both something is in danger. Joaquin alludes to the economic factor while Fabiana by the democratic institutions.

The third factor of analysis appears to be linked to the needs to feel special experiences. Like in post-disaster or dark tourism, there is a segment of thrill-seekers who move to zones of disaster, war or conflict only to feel outstanding experiences. Almost 10 participants of cluster A replied that they were suddenly trapped after March and never would fly abroad after the lockdown while 12 in Cluster B were enthused to travel to understand what was happening in the world. This is the case of Juan (male, 45 years old), a sociologist, who acknowledged that: *“COVID-19 offers an apocalyptic scenario where things will not be normal any longer, this is an outstanding time, I loved to live. I am not frightening to travel abroad, I needed to be closer to this dark experience I needed to feel the adrenaline to be in destinations highly infected by COVID19. My first destination was China, preferably Wuhan but it was impossible, so I bought a ticket towards New York. I am not an unconscious guy.. this historical event should be lived with great intensity!*

Instead, Adriana (postgraduate student) offered a different viewpoint: *“these are sad days, I was studying anthropology in Australia when this happens. I thought I would never come back to my country, to be with my parents and sisters. This event will change me forever I will not see the travels and tourism, in the same way, I loved to travel and study worldwide, understanding other cultures and nations, be in contact with different people. Now, I have suffering insomnia, and some irrational phobias to take a bus or a train. I stay at home now, and probably will be a long time without planning holidays.*

Another interesting sub-cluster, which we have not typified in this note of research is reserved for the expatriates -which mean professionals -who even if working abroad- opted the decision to come back to Argentina. This is the case of Emanuel who is the hotel’s concierge in Portugal. He gives a romantic answer when this interviewer asked for what he felt once expatriated.

“Difficult to say I am sad, the feelings in my side are mixed ... I decided to study tourism in Europe and this goal was successfully achieved, but COVID19 allowed me to come back to my home. Believe me, though you work hard, you will be never a European guy. An expatriate feels a half side is emptied, you are happy by your achievements but here is not your home, they do not speak your tongue, they do not think like you, after all, you will be always a stranger. I note my compatriots are very tough when they return to Argentina. They come back temporarily by holidays or to visit friends and take a lodge at a hotel or rent a car. They scornfully treat badly to the staff, often comparing the service in a third world country with first world ones. To your question, I must confess, now I reckon they are hostile to them because they hate they will never be native of the society they admire, their half remains emptied. I am complete and it is a merit of COVID19”.

After further review, this note of research explored the emotions and expectances of expatriate tourists who remained abroad for days or weeks just after the lockdown affected thousands of Argentinean tourists. The information permits to draw an exploratory model centered on three different characters (so to speak or forms of adaptation to a risky situation) which are below detailed.



CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, and in an exploratory dimension, the gathered preliminary results evince promising hypothesis which may be very well continued in a future approach. However, these outcomes cannot be extrapolated to other universes and situations. The obtained outcome permits to draw three different grids or psychological characters, which are based on the factors that coadjuvate to make the decision to travel in a pandemic context:

- a) Stranded tourists: this segment represents all tourists who were involuntarily trapped by the global lockdown administered by nation-state because of COVID19. These tourists develop a “precautionary character”.
- b) Pandemic seekers-deniers: this segment is mainly drawn by those tourists who motivated to defy the government or to be closer the infected epicenter, make the decision to travel abroad in spite of the imposed travel-bans. These tourists develop a “defying character”.
- c) Nostalgic expatriates: the segment is formed by expatriates who works abroad but are emotionally or economically forced to return home. These tourists emotionally instill a “relational character”.

Last but not least, the present research ignites a new discussion –that starts a novel methodological insight- in the fields of post COVID-19 contexts. The specialized literature was historically characterized by the interplay of tourists vs. locals, but little attention was paid to expatriate or stranded travelers, given the gap this investigation intends to be an initial contribution.

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