Toward an agency and reactance theory of crowding: Insights from COVID-19 and the tourism industry

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Abstract
In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, this article endeavors to offer expeditious insights into the impact of the global humanitarian crisis on the tourism industry from a consumer behavior perspective. To do so, this article employs the theory of crowding as an overarching theoretical lens, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) as a context to represent a global humanitarian crisis, and the rapid review approach as a method to source maiden evidence. In doing so, this article sheds light on instances of undercrowding (undertourism) and overcrowding (overtourism) in tourism as a result of COVID-19, with interpretations enriched by agency theory and reactance theory—thereby resulting in the emergence of a new theory called the agency and reactance theory of crowding. The article concludes with pragmatic implications in light of the global humanitarian crisis.

KEYWORDS
agency, behavior, consumer, coronavirus, COVID-19, crowding, humanitarian crisis, overcrowding, overtourism, pandemic, reactance, tourism, tourist, undercrowding, undertourism

1 INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian crises are common, but global humanitarian crises in living memory have been rare. The recent outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has led to an unprecedented lockdown, with more than 3.9 billion people—or half of the world’s population—being subjected to quarantine measures and travel restrictions by their governments in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Sandford, 2020). This indicates that there are more people in “lockdown” today than there were people in the world (2.3 billion) who witnessed World War II (Jankowicz, 2020).

Few sectors have fallen as far and as fast as tourism, due to the sector’s reliance on travel (international and domestic) to generate economic activity with social impact. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (2020) estimates that international tourist arrivals could decline by 20%–30%, translating into an estimated loss in international tourist receipts of US$300 to US$450 billion (or approximately one third of the US$1.5 trillion generated globally). Moreover, the World Travel and Tourism Council (2020) suggests that up to 50 million out of the 320 million jobs in the global travel and tourism sector are at risk: 30 million in Asia, 7 million in Europe, 5 million in the Americas, and the rest in other continents (Faus, 2020).

In order to chart and contribute to a better understanding of the impact of the global humanitarian crisis (specifically COVID-19) on tourism, this article employs the theory of crowding as an overarching theoretical lens and the rapid review approach as a method to develop that understanding. In particular, this article contends that a rapid review of crowd density in tourism destinations can offer timely, pragmatic insights on the impact of the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis on tourism. This contention is predicated on three main rationales. First, crowd density is a reflection of tourist visits to tourism destinations, and thus, any observed changes in crowd density can speak to the impact of externalities on tourist visits to tourism destinations (e.g., externalities such as COVID-19 causing tourism impacts such as overtourism, where a tourism destination have too many tourists, or undertourism, where a tourism destination does not have enough tourists; Beabout, 2019; Lee & Graefe, 2003). Second, rapid review is an established form of secondary research that enables the timely discovery of relevant insights with respect to new developments (Tricco et al., 2017), especially when these insights are needed in times of humanitarian crises and not years later. Third, maiden evidence about crowd density that can be drawn from rapid review is an incremental but necessary step forward in answering the call by the United Nations...
World Tourism Organization (2020) to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis on tourism, wherein instances of overtourism and undertourism, if any, can be ascertained, theorized, and used to guide public policy and future research. Therefore, the findings herein should be useful to a broad range of tourism stakeholders who are interested in understanding the impact of the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis on crowd density in tourism destinations.

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The theory of crowding is a profound theoretical lens for understanding tourist density in tourism destinations. In essence, crowding is an assessment of density in a given area (Shelby & Heberlein, 1986). This assessment, which constitutes an objective measure of the number of people and a subjective measure of psychological distress in a given space, is a standard by which society declares crowding beyond a particular density and psychological tolerance to be unacceptable (Gray, 2001). Overcrowding is increasingly ascribed to tourism as a result of congestion from an excess of tourists—that is, too many tourists in a tourism destination at a particular point in time (Lee & Graefe, 2003). This situation is known as “overtourism,” which can be unpleasant because it creates negative experiences for tourists and diminishes the quality of life of local communities (Capocchi et al., 2019). The opposite is known as “undertourism,” where destinations with tourism potential are not getting enough tourists (Beabout, 2019). Unlike overtourism, which has garnered much academic attention over the years, undertourism remains underexplored in tourism studies.

3 METHODS

Rapid review is used in this article to source maiden evidence to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis on tourism from the perspective of crowd density in tourism destinations. The World Health Organization recommends the use of rapid reviews because they are a timely and affordable approach that can provide actionable and relevant evidence to guide emergent decisions in times of humanitarian crises (Tricco et al., 2017).

Following similar search methods in past rapid reviews (Brooks et al., 2020), including endeavors to source for maiden evidence to support theory development (Lim, 2021a), this article begins by conducting a search for articles on “COVID-19,” “crowd,” and “tourism” on Google due to its accessibility (i.e., free to use by anyone, anywhere, anytime) and sophistication (i.e., the world’s largest search engine; Gusenbauer, 2019). The outcomes of the search, which produced more than 100 articles in 2020, can be naturally segmented using content analysis into two main themes underpinned by the theory of crowding: undercrowding (undertourism) and overcrowding (overtourism) in tourism. Data saturation, which is a situation where no additional data (e.g., manifestations of crowding) can be found (Saunders et al., 2018), was achieved with 22 articles (see Appendix).

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Undertourism during the global humanitarian crisis

Undertourism is a legitimate but under-researched phenomenon in tourism. In the case of the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis, undertourism transpired in the form of a tourism paralysis that was triggered by lockdown orders enforced by governments worldwide. For example, Bali tourism experienced plummeting levels of travelers from China and Europe because Indonesia imposed travel restrictions and airlines around the world canceled flights, thereby impacting more than 70% of the Balinese whose lives directly and indirectly depend on tourism (Mulyanto, 2020). Similar instances of undertourism were observed in numerous tourist attractions around the world, as evidenced by satellite images of the deserted Duomo di Milano in Italy, Tiananmen Square in China, Tokyo Disneyland in Japan, and the Great Mosque of Mecca in Saudi Arabia (Stieg, 2020).

This observed phenomenon of undertourism can be explained by agency theory. In essence, agency theory is a theory of obedience. The theory posits that people (e.g., tourists) will obey an authority (e.g., government) when they recognize the authority as morally right and/or legally based (Milgram, 1974). In this regard, undercrowding at tourism destinations exemplifies the presence of an agentic state where high levels of obedience are observed in travel behavior during a global humanitarian crisis. Nonetheless, it is important to address the negative economic consequences of undertourism such as those mentioned herein, which may be mitigated when tourism operators and tourists pursue virtual tours in order to adapt to a time when social (physical) distancing is the new normal.

4.2 Overtourism post the global humanitarian crisis

Although the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis remains far from over at the time of writing, the findings from the rapid review indicate the potential occurrence of overcrowding in tourism destinations once lockdown measures are lifted. This has been most prominent in China as huge crowds returned to popular tourist attractions after the Chinese government ended its lockdown of the Hubei province. For instance, the Huangshan mountain park authorities had to take the unusual step of issuing a notice as early as 7:48 a.m. to declare that the park had reached its daily capacity of 20,000 people, many of whom were wearing face masks and rushed to get into the Anhui provincial park (Lee, 2020). Similarly, the famous Bund waterfront in Shanghai’s city center was once again packed with shoppers and tourists after weeks of being deserted (Westcott & Culver, 2020). The problem of overcrowding was also witnessed in the United States—for example, crowds flooded the beaches and parks in Florida, ignoring social (physical) distancing warnings, when they were reopened by the governor (Relman, 2020).
The phenomenon of overtourism attested to herein can be explained by reactance theory. In essence, reactance theory postulates that people (e.g., tourists) need to freely choose behavior (i.e., the need for self-determination), and that people will react to recover this freedom when it is compromised, limited, or threatened, such as by lockdowns or movement control orders (Brooks et al., 2020). In this regard, the overcrowding at tourism destinations indicates the presence of freedom restoration, whereby travel and tourism appears to be a powerful healing force in remedying the psychological anguish felt by people during the lockdown in times of a global humanitarian crisis. More importantly, the extraordinary rush witnessed indicates the need for sensible regulation in order to prevent the overharvesting of tourism (see tourism management options in Wall, 2020).

5 | CONCLUSION

From the tourism paralysis observed during lockdown to the extraordinary tourist rush witnessed once movement control orders were lifted, albeit temporarily at this juncture, the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis has proven thus far to be a crisis that has affected tourism like no other.

Through this article, the theory of crowding was established to be a profound consumer behavior theory that can be used to guide contentions with respect to crowd density in tourism destinations, whereas the rapid review enabled the author to source maiden evidence to support the contentions of crowding in light of the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis. In addition, the contrasting instances of crowd density that manifest across tourism destinations based on the severity of crisis experienced have enabled the author to explain when (i.e., with and without lockdown measures) and why (i.e., agency and reactance) undertourism and overtourism happen. In that sense, the maiden insights herein can represent an exemplar of using context (e.g., the COVID-19 global humanitarian crisis) and a review approach (e.g., rapid review) to develop new theory, and in this case, the agency and reactance theory of crowding, which explains crowd behavior from the perspectives of agency and reactance.

Further research on the impact of global humanitarian crises, such as COVID-19, on tourism is highly encouraged, because the findings herein may be limited to the time in which this article was written (Lim & To, 2021). For example, few countries have eased lockdown measures drastically at the time of writing and thus future research can consider empirical reexaminations of psychological reactance in travel behavior across the world in order to add greater support to, or counterargue, the contentions herein.

Other potentially fruitful areas that can be explored include alternatives to in-person tourism. Indeed, some scholars have begun to theorize extended reality (Kwok & Koh, 2020) and webcam travel (Jarratt, 2021) as potential alternatives to in-person tourism, but the conditions required for these alternatives to establish themselves effectively remain relatively underexplored (e.g., types of consumer—e.g., business vs. leisure travelers, digital natives vs. digital immigrants, young vs. older adults; types of consumer behavior—e.g., escapism, nostalgia, utilitarian, hedonic; types of tourism—e.g., adventure, beach, culture, education, hobby, nature). Thus, future research in this area is encouraged.

Future research can also focus on tourism strategies to recover post-crisis in order to support the recovery of the tourism industry. Given the potential occurrence of overcrowding in tourism destinations post the global humanitarian crisis, as seen in the maiden evidence herein, future research is encouraged to shed light, with empirical evidence, on crowd management strategies, which may include mechanisms to determine appropriate levels of crowd density and the ways in which crowding should be managed over time across different types of tourism and tourism destinations. Indeed, there are calls for tourism after the global humanitarian crisis to be slow and steady rather than rapid and risky, which can also help to avoid the negative externalities of the sector prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ioannides & Gyimothy, 2020; Prideaux et al., 2020). That is, tourism post-crisis should be curated as an enriching, sustainable immersion that does not overwhelm tourism destinations so as to avoid destroying the very things that draw our interest to those destinations in the first place. This is also in line with calls for additional research on sustainable (or alternative, soft) tourism that is compatible with environmental and social values (Carvalho et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021). Other endeavors that contribute to this cause, such as behavioral control studies using Lim and Weissmann’s (2021) theory of behavioral control or Lim’s (2021b) conditional recipes for predicting impacts and prescribing solutions for externalities, are also encouraged.

Ultimately, the recovery of the tourism sector is a collective effort that requires strong, coordinated action with sound judgment from each of the quadruple helix partners of tourism—academics, communities, service operators, and policy makers—alike.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be made available upon request.

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the dialectic antidotes to critics of the technology acceptance model, and the integrated information systems-consumer behavior (IS-CB) model for e-shopping. He has also presented his work and led high-level policy discussions at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the World Economic Forum.

APPENDIX: SAMPLE ARTICLES ON “COVID-19,” “CROWD,” AND “TOURISM”

| No. | Article                                                                 | Undercrowding/Undertourism | Overcrowding/Overtourism |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1   | Eighteen photos of eerily empty tourist attractions amid the global coronavirus outbreak | ✓                          |                          |
| 2   | “Before and after” satellite images show places like Tokyo Disneyland and Mecca deserted thanks to coronavirus | ✓                          |                          |
| 3   | Before-and-after photos show how fear of the coronavirus has emptied out Europe’s biggest tourist attractions | ✓                          |                          |
| 4   | Beijing Diary: The Great Wall of coronavirus data                       |                            | ✓                        |
| 5   | China ends Wuhan lockdown, but normal life is a distant dream           |                            | ✓                        |
| 6   | China’s Huangshan mountains swamped with visitors as country tries to ease coronavirus lockdown |                            | ✓                        |
| 7   | China limits admission as outdoor tourist sites reopen                  |                            | ✓                        |
| 8   | Chinese tourist sites packed as country comes out of lockdown, but experts say risk still high |                            | ✓                        |
| 9   | Coronavirus: Bali tourism “almost paralysed” as flow of Chinese tourists to Indonesia dries up | ✓                          |                          |
| 10  | Coronavirus: Before, after images show impact of COVID-19 on the world’s top tourist spots | ✓                          |                          |
| 11  | Coronavirus impact on major Australian centers leaves Byron Bay and Cairns most vulnerable | ✓                          |                          |
| 12  | Coronavirus: No tourists? Travel agencies take the chance to regroup    | ✓                          |                          |
| 13  | COVID-19: Live updates as more Chinese tourist sites resume operations  | ✓                          |                          |
| 14  | COVID-19: Otters play in 5G tourist spots as people steer clear of public places | ✓                          |                          |
| 15  | COVID-19: People in China rush to tourist attractions as virus infections subside | ✓                          |                          |
| 16  | Drastic drop in cross-border visitors due to COVID-19                   | ✓                          |                          |
| 17  | Hundreds crowd newly reopened Florida beaches even as the state sees a spike in coronavirus infections | ✓                          |                          |
| 18  | Kelly McParland: COVID-19 has shut down tourism. Is that such a bad thing? | ✓                          |                          |
| 19  | No crowds at the Mona Lisa: Coronavirus fears hammer European tourism  | ✓                          |                          |
| 20  | Starving monkey “gangs” battle in Thailand as coronavirus keeps tourists away | ✓                          |                          |
| 21  | The Coronavirus has emptied tourist sites and the images are haunting   | ✓                          |                          |
| 22  | Thousands descending on reopened Florida beaches prompts #FloridaMorons trend on Twitter as coronavirus cases continue to rise in the state | ✓                          |                          |

Note: Data saturation was achieved with 22 articles.