Digitization in the tourism industry concerning covid19 pandemic scenario

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ABSTRACT:

COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. Due to the covid19 outbreak, the world is facing an unprecedented global emergency on the health, social and economic front. The movement of the people suddenly stopped, airlines were grounded, trains were halted, hotels closed, destinations were shut down, and only emergency limited movement on roads was allowed. With the imposition of the strict lockdown in various countries of the world, the hardest hit global economic activity was the travel and tourism industry, still, its future outlook remains highly uncertain. The fear in the minds of the people and its devastating impact on human life enforce most people to keep themselves restricted to the limited movements.

During the Covid19 pandemic; Digitization plays a central role in supporting people to handle their new normal activities in almost every aspect of human life viz e-shopping, digital banking payments, online studies, e-meetings, webinars, e-conferences, online workshops, work from home, OTT entertainment, online gaming and telemedicine facilities.

With the increase in the penetration of Internet and mobile subscribers even in the rural parts of India; the time has come to become smart enough to infuse technology innovations into every aspect of our life to handle any adverse effect from current and future pandemics. Digitization and information technology play a lucrative role in replenishing economic activities. Can digitization also play a crucial role in the tourism industry to revive?

This paper adopts a descriptive research methodology based on the secondary sources of information. This paper highlights the emergence and spread of covid19 zoonotic disease, the impact of covid19 pandemic on the tourism industry, assimilation of different digital innovations in the Tourism Industry and identifies the possible digital solution in crisis management during and post covid19 with special reference to the Tourism industry in India in 21st century.

Keywords: Digitization, Digital Solution, Digital initiative, Digital innovations, Tourism, Covid19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION:

COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. Due to the covid19 outbreak, the world is facing an unprecedented global emergency on the health, social and economic front. The movement of the people suddenly stopped, airlines were grounded, trains were halted, hotels closed, destinations were shut down, and only emergency limited movement on roads was allowed. With the imposition of the strict lockdown in various countries of the world, the hardest hit global economic activity was the travel and tourism industry, still, its future outlook remains highly uncertain.

Tourism was one of the flourishing sectors on the globe before the outbreak of the coronavirus. According to (WTTC, 2021), earlier to the pandemic the tourism was generating one out of every fourth of all new jobs, it was at the same time also contributing 10.4 % of global GDP in 2019 (https://wttc.org/Research/Economic-Impact). The total number of foreign tourists arrival in India in 2019 was 10.93 million that plunged to 2.74 million in 2020, accounting for a fall of 74.9 % after the global outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2020, 2021). It is now expected by the UNWTO and other industry experts that at least 3-4 years will be spent for the complete replenishment of the global tourism industry to its pre-pandemic level and is not expected before the year 2023 (OECD, 2020a).

The fear in the minds of the people, no medicines, no approved known treatments, no vaccinations at the initial stage of the outbreak, and its devastating impact on human life enforce most people to keep themselves locked inside the premises of their house. Travel was banned, the hospitality industry was vacant, and people lost their jobs. The enforcement of the social distancing, frequent sanitization of hands, and covering face with shield or mask during the pandemic, comes with an additional cost. Even then, the tourism sector is committed to putting people and their well-being first. The wave after wave of new variants of the corona virus stick fear in the minds of the people and this enforce most people to keep themselves restricted to the limited movements.

Digitization in such a scenario plays an important role in managing their day to day activities and at the same time, helps in boosting the economy to some extent by providing digital alternatives to other industries too. It also helps the tourism industry to bounce back and adopt the new normal drastically.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS/ INVESTIGATING QUESTIONS:

The main investigating questions of the research are as under -

- What is the Covid19 pandemic?
- What is the impact of the covid19 pandemic on the tourism industry?
- What are the different digitization initiatives in the tourism industry?
- What is the possible digital solution in managing travel and tourism activity in view of a pandemic like covid19?

OBJECTIVES:

The main objectives of the research include-

- To study the emergence and spread of Covid19.
- To study the impact of the covid19 pandemic on the tourism industry.
- To explore the assimilation of different digital innovations in the tourism Industry.
- To identify the possible digital solution in crisis management during and post covid19 with special reference to the travel and tourism industry in India in the 21st century.

RESEARCH GAP:

With the intense literature review of the articles, reports, and other published material related to covid19 and the tourism industry it was found that there has been a devastating impact of covid19 zoonotic disease on the tourism industry. Digitization and information technology play a lucrative role in replenishing other economic activities. Can digitization also play a crucial role in the tourism industry to revive?

METHODOLOGY:

Research methodology is the key parameter for any systematic research. The data gathered for this research is based on secondary sources. This study adopts a descriptive research method to achieve its objectives.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:**

COVID19: AT A GLANCE:

- Covid19 is an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. This new virus was unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China in December 2019.
- World Health Organization (WHO) was notified about a cluster of 27 pneumonia cases of unknown aetiology and zero deaths in the city of Wuhan, China on 31st Dec 2019.
- On Jan 07, 2020, the virus was reported by China to be a new type of coronavirus.
- China shares the genetic sequence of the virus on 11th Jan 2020.
- On the 30th of Jan, 2020, WHO declares a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC)
- On 11th March 2020, WHO declared Covid19 as a pandemic in view of its international spread and an alarming lack of action
- Globally as of 21st Dec 2021, there have been 27,46,28,461 confirmed cases of Covid19, including 53,58,978 deaths, a total of 8,38,76,58,165 vaccine doses have been administered and reported to WHO by respective national authorities (Source: https://covid19.who.int/ accessed on 21st Dec 2021)
- All the details related to the Covid19 situation is monitored digitally by WHO and has been publically displayed on their official website https://covid19.who.int/

Following are the Public Health and Social Measures (PHSM) steps taken by various countries, territories and areas that enforce rules or guidelines to limit the spread of COVID-19.

- Masks-Facial coverings and/or mask-wearing
- Gatherings-Limits and restrictions on public and private gatherings
- Domestic Movements-Restrictions on domestic movement, public transport and stay at home orders
- International Travel-International travel restrictions (entry restrictions, quarantining and testing)
- Schools and Businesses-Adaptation or closure of schools, educational institutions and businesses

KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF COVID19 IMPACT ON TOURISM:

- According to the (UNWTO, 2021) Barometer, in Jan-Sep 2021 period international tourist arrivals worldwide accounted were 20% lower than the time duration of the year 2020, but it is still 76% below the 2019 levels.
- In Asia and the Pacific international tourist arrival during (Jan-Sep 2021) are still 95% below the year 2019 levels due to many destinations remaining closed to non-essential travel in these areas.
- The strongest recovery in the international tourist arrivals was shown by the American market, with arrivals up by just 3% as compared to the previous year 2020 that is still 65% below the levels recorded in the year 2019.
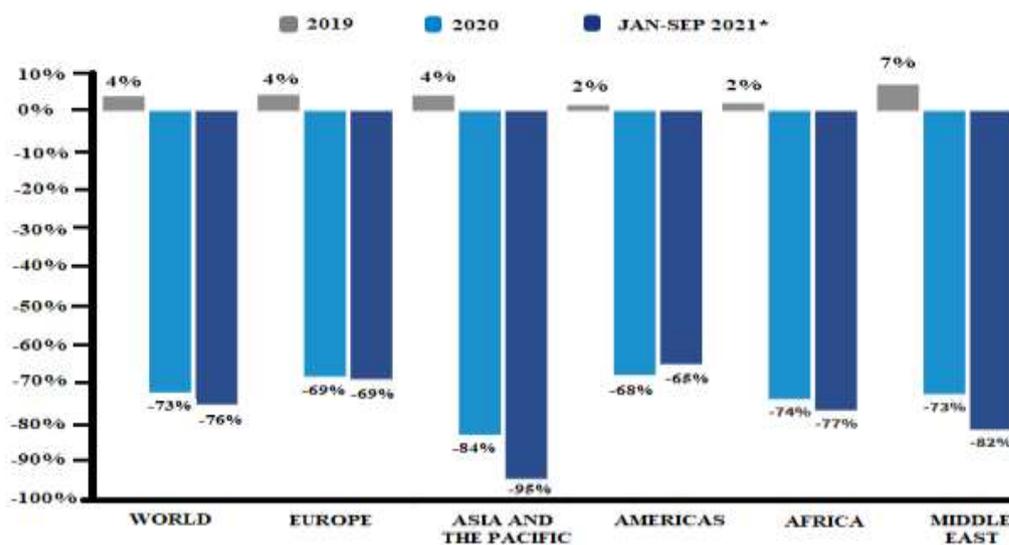
International Tourist Arrivals, World and Regions
International tourist arrivals (%change)

Source: World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) *Change over 2019 (provisional data)
Data as collected by UNWTO, November 2021. Published: 29/11/2021

Figure 1: Percentage change in International Tourist Arrivals, World and Regions; World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021) accessed on 25-12-2021

- It has been estimated by (UNWTO, 2021) that international tourist arrivals in the year 2021 would be expected to remain 70% to 75% lower than the levels of the year 2019.
- According to (UNWTO, 2021), due to Covid19, there has been a decrease in international tourist arrival by 1 billion tourists worldwide, accounting for an expected loss of US$ 1.3 trillion and a loss of 100 to 120 million direct jobs in the sector.

- According to (WTTC, 2021), the total GDP contribution by tourism globally was decreased to 5.5% in the year 2020, as compared to 10.4% GDP contribution in the year 2019. It has shown a fall of 4.9% contribution on tourism in total GDP of the country due to Covid19 effect.

- According to the report by (WTTC, 2021), Indian tourism has also shown a similar fall of its GDP contribution from 6.9% (2019) to 4.7 % (2020). It has shown a -36.3% change in travel and tourism GDP versus -7.1% real GDP change in India. There has been a loss of employment in the travel and tourism sector (-20.8%) (83,26,000 job loss) as compared to the previous year 2019. This shows a major fall in the GDP contribution as well as the loss of employment in the tourism industry due to the covid19 pandemic.
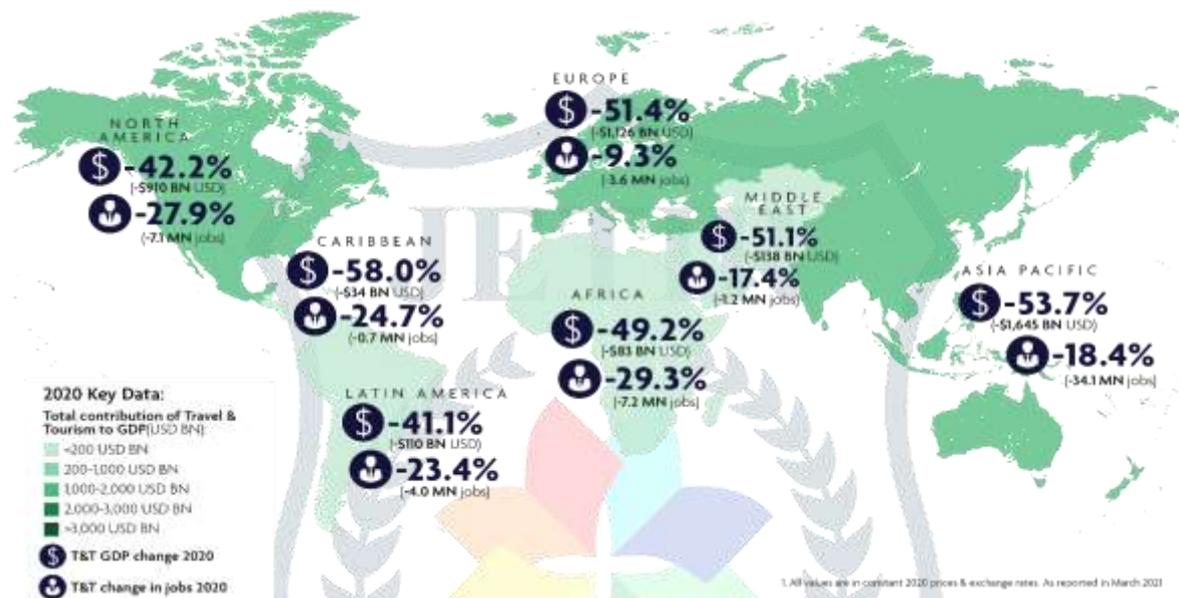

Figure 2: Total Contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP (USD BN) and Job Loss (in Million) in year 2020; (WTTC, 2021), https://wttc.org/Portals/0/Images/EIR2020-Infographic-Map-Regional.png?ver=2021-04-06-170812-653; Retrieved on 22-12-2021

Even after almost two years of the outbreak of the smart coronavirus (frequent mutation), people still are not willing to travel abroad due to panic situations, and the focus remains intact on domestic tourism only. According to (WTTC, 2021), generally, a major revenue source in the tourism sector is contributed by the domestic traveller (82% in 2019 increased to 89% in 2020). Still, there has been a major loss of revenue (both domestic and international) in the tourism sector due to which people lost their jobs. The safe reopening of tourism especially at the international level will continue to depend largely on the travel restrictions, a coordinated response among countries in terms of consistent health and hygiene practices and effective communication to help restore tourist confidence. By that time, tourism organizations and businesses need to focus more on domestic tourism for their survival. Digitization in such a scenario may help them to attract tourists to the destination.

UNWTO TOURISM DIGITAL INITIATIVE:

The UNWTO launched the World Tourism Barometer, a digital initiative that is monitored on a regular basis, the short term trends of the tourism industry. It helps the global tourism players and stakeholders to get up-to-date information and analysis on international tourism (UNWTO, 2021).

Tourism Data Dashboard is another digital tracker system by the UNWTO that provides statistics and insights on key indicators for both inbound and outbound tourism at all three levels viz. global, regional and national levels. The details of the tourism data and other information can be retrieved from its official website https://www.unwto.org/unwto-tourism-dashboard. It shows data on the current and potential impact of Covid19 on the tourism sector across the globe segregated by destination and by regions and is updated on monthly basis.

The tourism data dashboard includes data on:

- International tourist arrivals and receipts
- Vulnerability of destinations- Tourism as a share of GDP, total exports, and international tourism as a share of total tourism.
- Impact assessment of previous crisis and Covid19 crisis on tourism

The online tourism data dashboard also covers the tourist data on accommodation, seasonality, source market of tourist arrival and its contribution to the GDP of the country. With the help of this digital initiative by the UNWTO, one can track the demand and supply of the respective tourism essentials. The international tourist market that can be targeted for tourism can be accessed with the help of the digital initiative of the UNWTO. The expected or projected time for the recovery of the tourism in the particular destination can also be analyzed using this digital data dashboard service. It is the first global online dashboard for tourism insights.

UNWTO also have two different digital tracker systems. The first is the destination tracker system that highlights the information on Covid19 related travel regulations or restrictions by the destination country. It is a collaborative digital initiative by both UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) and IATA (International Air Transport Association).

The digital destination tracker system includes data on:

- Health Indicators – This health indicator provides the test positivity rate, people vaccinated for Covid19 and other 14-day notification rates.
- Current Air Travel Regulations – This indicator of the UNWTO provides data on the entry restrictions, quarantine time, covid19 test reports, and flight suspensions for the particular destination.
- Destination-specific Restrictions – Any restrictions for events, facilities, accommodation capacity, food and drinks, use of public transport and stay-at-home requirements about the attraction and destination can be tracked using this feature of the digital data tracker.
- Health Regulations – Travellers can check any health-related protocols and mask policies with the help of this digital tracker.

It aims to build confidence among travellers and businesses. It also supports trip planning, policy-making and provides a global overview of travel restrictions worldwide.
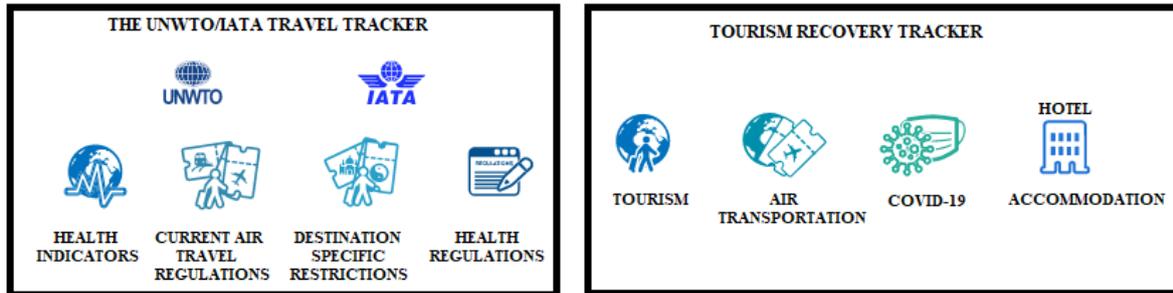

Figure 3: The UNWTO Travel Tracker and Tourism Recovery Tracker (UNWTO, 2021); https://www.unwto.org/unwto-tourism-dashboard; accessed on 25-12-2021

The UNWTO tracker for tourism recovery is another digital initiative. It has developed the first of ever kind comprehensive tourism recovery tracker worldwide.

The tourism recovery tracker includes data on:

- International tourist arrivals
- Seat capacity in international and domestic air routes,
- Air travel bookings,
- Hotel searches and bookings,
- Occupancy rates,
- Demand for short term rentals
- Travel sentiment (Net Sentiment Score)
- COVID-19 14-day notification rate per 100,000 population

It digitally monitors the tourism recovery indicators worldwide, giving governments and local business players the ability to digitally track the recovery of tourism. This helps them to take initiative for policy framing, strategy making, and business handling at both global and domestic levels. The UNWTO Tourism Recovery Tracker is freely available. It is a collaborative effort by UNWTO and a group of partners including the ICAO (International Civil Aviation Organisation), ForwardKeys, STR, Sojern, TCI Research and AirDNA.

UNWTO has launched an online interactive Covid19 dashboard on country measures to support travel and tourism policies based on information received from public sources, government officials and other international organizations. It covers 220 countries and territories with more than 30 international and regional institutions. It is one of the digital initiatives that monitors and provides up-to-date policy responses and measures adopted by different countries and international institutions to overcome the effect of the pandemic crisis in the tourism and travel sector. It also helps and supports businesses, jobs, and households. Its interactive online map allows searching the measure to restart tourism and accelerate its recovery.

DIGITIZATION IN TRAVEL AND TOURISM INDUSTRY IN INDIA - POST-COVID19:

- Digital Covid19 Vaccination Certificate – In view of the Covid19 and travel-related restrictions by various countries, the Government of India has also been issuing digitally signed, online verified, digitally stored covid19 vaccination certificates. This also helps the host country to digitally authenticate the originality of the vaccination certificate. Digital covid19 vaccination certificate has helped facilitate the free movement of tourists either domestic or international.

- e-Visa Approvals – Paperless and contactless approvals of the visa can be obtained with the ease of the tourist from their home. The government of India has taken initiative to provide e-visa facilities to 171 countries under 5 sub-categories as of December 2020. In continuation to e-visa facilities, the visa fee has also been reduced to encourage inbound tourism (Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, 2021)

- 24*7 tourist call centres – The government of India has established a multilingual toll-free tourist helpline (1-800-11-1363) that operates round the clock. It helps the tourist to get up-to-date information anytime regarding any tourist destination in India. In times of distress or Covid19 like lockdown situations, while travelling in India, concerned authorities are alerted. This provides a sense of safety, security and boosts confidence among travellers (Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India, 2020).

- The government of India also launched the Aarogya Setu App, one of its kind to digitally trace covid19 patients nearby. It is contact tracing, syndromic mapping and self-assessment covid19 digital service mobile app. CoWin is another digital support pillar for vaccination drives in India.

- Digital Fast-Tag enabled National highways to prompt travellers to move faster without any physical cash transactions on the toll, thus reducing the risk of any infectious disease.

- Sensor enabled sanitiser dispenser enables visitors to use it without touching hands.

- Sensor enabled doors and taps in the hotel, malls etc. provide easy movement without physical touching of handles, thus reducing the risk of any infectious disease.

- Digital thermal scanning gun for a temperature check is one of the essential thermal scanning tools to measure the body temperature of the visitors that helps the management to verify their eligibility to enter into a crowded place.

- Digital Bookings of hotels and destinations, Digital check-ins and check-outs, Digital menu cards in hotels and restaurants, AI-enabled Robotic delivery of food and other essentials in hotel rooms were additional sets of digital innovations in the travel and tourism industry to boost confidence in the visitor, related to their safety against zoonotic or other infectious diseases.

- Digital pooja darshan and prashad facility in temples and other religious places help the pilgrimage to feel their faith in God during the pandemic time, thus opening up a new form of online pilgrimage tourism in the country. Amarnath temple (J&K, India), Anandpur Sahib (Punjab, India), Mahaveer Temple (Delwara, Rajasthan, India), Vaishnodevi Temple (Katra, India), Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh, India), Rameshwaram (TamilNadu, India), Kedarnath (Uttarakhand, India), Akshardham (Delhi, India) are few of the examples where online Pooja, darshan, hawan, and prashad facilities were initiated during covid19 pandemic.

- Digital monitoring of the room occupancy and quarantine time helps the management to monitor any suspicious scenario for covid19 related movement of people.
- Virtual Tour to Museums, Historical Monument, Zoo, Wildlife Sanctuaries opens up a new world of tourism to travel-loving people.

DIGITAL SOLUTIONS TO REVIVE TOURISM:

According to (WTTC, 2021), in their report "Digital solutions for reviving international travel", published in Nov 2021, suggests four technical and four policy recommendations for reviving tourism from covid19 impact. They recommended the government to implement a practical, scalable, and achievable digital solution for Covid19 health checks for travellers. A machine-readable QR code certificate is advised to issue to all vaccinated travellers. It will reduce the complications of issuing different digital format certificates by different countries.

In their report, they encourage the implementation of a government-controlled digital travel portal, for online contact tracing, certificate verification and approvals for travel to the destination. This also informs the traveller, whom to contact in case of medical emergencies. An electronic record of the prospect traveller helps the destination government to take necessary steps to connect different stakeholders at the destination. The travel authorization certificate helps the traveller to digitally maintain their own record of their authority to travel. It can also be used by travel operators, trip planners, and destination organizations to verify the traveller's eligibility to travel (McDonald et al., 2021).

Figure 4: Technical Recommendations retrieved from "Digital solutions for reviving international travel" by (WTTC, 2021)

In view of the vaccinations, travellers need to keep two kinds of certificates during their travel. If they are travelling within the country, they just need to keep the covid19 vaccination certificate. If they are international tourists, they need to keep a travel authorization certificate issued by the respective government of the destination country. In this view, tourist venues such as hotels, restaurants, bars or tourist attractions only need to digitally verify certificates to ensure their eligibility to visit. By adopting these international recommendations, the government of the destination country may help in delivering a global inter-operable

digital solution for covid19 health checks for travellers. It is one of the effective digital means to deliver safe and efficient domestic and international travel that helps in the revival of the tourism sector.

Figure 5: Policy Recommendations retrieved from "Digital solutions for reviving international travel" by (WTTC, 2021)

According to the same report published by (WTTC, 2021), four policies has also been recommended to ensure the accessibility of digital system by travellers. It may build trust and confidence in the traveller about the digital solution, with lessons learned and opportunities captured to mitigate future health risks at the border.

TRENDING IN TRAVEL IN 2021 AND 2022:

According to a report "Trending in travel: Emerging consumer trends in Travel & Tourism in 2021 and beyond" by (WTTC, 2021), the top three favourite destinations for generation Z travellers are Theme parks, Zoos and Museums. Generation Z people also known as "zoomers" are more technology-friendly as compared to Millennials, Generation X, or the previous generation born people. They have been growing up with access to the internet and the availability of social media platforms.

These individuals consume digital information quickly, comfortably and predominantly book through smartphones and digital devices. They are likely to be the first movers to plan and book their trips as compared to the risk-sensitive older generation people. In view of the covid19 situation, virtual tourism to the museums, wildlife sanctuaries, historical sites, temples and natural places were on demand. These top travel trends of the year 2021 are expected to be continued in the year 2022.

Generation-Z Top Attractions 2021:
Ctrip's destination tags database shows the Post-90s and post-00s
favourite destinations in 2021 (January 1, 2021 - August 19, 2021)

Figure 6: Generation-Z top attractions 2021, retrieved from "Trending in travel: Emerging consumer trends in Travel & Tourism in 2021 and beyond", (WTTC, 2021)

A virtual tour initiative by Faroe Island (Denmark), SingapoRediscovers Vouchers (SRV), a scheme to boost domestic demand, "Monaco misses you" social media campaign by Monaco, keeps the destination on top of the mind of the traveller. According to (WTTC, 2021) "Destinations in action, digitally with the use of digital solutions continuing to accelerate in recent years and through the pandemic, destinations are increasingly diversifying their digital presence even offering remote travel opportunities and travel inspiration for when borders reopen". Once, the pandemic eased and travel restrictions vanished, the traveller would be most likely to travel to those destinations having some digital influence (created attention, interest and desire to visit) on the minds of travellers.

FINDINGS:

It has been found that COVID-19 has turned the world upside down. Due to the covid19 outbreak, the world is facing an unprecedented global emergency on the health, social and economic front. The travel and Tourism Industry is one of the hardest-hit sectors of the global economy, still, its future outlook remains highly uncertain. UNWTO, WTTC, WHO, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India and other organizations are working hand in hand to closely monitor the progress in tourism and covid19 impact. It has been observed that digital initiatives which were taken by any destination be helpful for learning and framing strategies to revive tourism by other destinations too. Effective implementations of technical and policy recommendations suggested by (WTTC, 2021) may help the tourism sector to reboot itself. Digitization and information technology play a lucrative role in replenishing economic activities, especially in the travel and tourism industry.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY:

As time passes, the situation and pandemic under control, vaccinations on the track, digital vaccination certificates in hand, countries start lifting border restrictions. With all safety measures and learning from other country's policies & measures to control the impact of covid19, the confidence would restore and the tourism

takes a step to reopen. Digital marketing and promotions also boost international and domestic demand. In the revival of tourism, a little but effective digital initiative and contribution by the UNWTO, WTTC, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India cannot be ignored.

In a view to recovering tourism from current or any future crisis, there has been a high need to develop a centralized destination management system (digital information portal about the destination by the country). It may also help the government and management stakeholders to attract tourists and monitor their movement. Data analysis of the tourist choices of the destination will help the host country and organization to manage them better. According to (Buhalis, 2003) digital investments in the tourism industry gradually become inelastic and it is almost difficult to escape its impact on strategic and operational management. Industry organization not only needs to improve their interactivity with tourist but also focus to readdress the digital needs of the smart tourist. Careful digitization management is crucial for the tourism organization to safeguard their interests, especially in crisis management time.

According to (WTTC, 2021) there is a pressing need to work together to restore livelihoods, recharge economies and reunite people around the world and digital solutions are a vital component that can help accelerate this recovery (McDonald et al., 2021).

Hence, Digitization in the tourism industry represents a new revolution that can help the sector to revive soon from the devastating impact of the covid19 pandemic, at the same time it creates digital organizational immunity to handle the adverse effect of any future pandemic.

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