

EXPLORING MARKETING CONSIDERATIONS IN NEPALESE TOURISM DURING THE COVID-AFFECTED ERA

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ABSTRACT

A tourism sector is one of the major economic wheels of Nepal. Reviving the tourism sector after the outbreak of COVID-19 is a big challenge before Nepal. This study examines tourism marketing practices during COVID-affected era and analyses tourism operators' adaptation to COVID-19 cautions as prescribed by the WHO guidelines for tourism. Tourism operators of Nepal were surveyed on tourism marketing practices that they adopted during the COVID-19 era. At present most of the tourism businesses are targeting domestic tourists. The study also found that tourism operators emphasised on positioning Nepal as a naturally beautiful and adventurous country. Nepalese tourism businesses have taken the initiation to tackle the challenges during this COVID-affected era. Further studies could refine this study and analyse the effects of various measures taken by tourism business operators during the COVID-affected era

1. INTRODUCTION AND STUDY OBJECTIVES

COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis in human civilisation. The whole world got locked down for months, and restrictions of various kinds for more than a year are going on. Nepal, one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, was also hit hard, and Nepal was compelled to suspend the Nepal Tourism Year 2020 (NTB, 2021) due to the pandemic.

The tourism sector is one of the major economic wheels of Nepal. How to revive Nepalese economy after the outbreak of COVID-19 is a big challenge. Marketing is the means to create the customers' business (Drucker, 2006). How should the marketing activities be after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is of great interest. How tourism operators in Nepal started marketing after the COVID-19 outbreak. Has tourism marketing during the COVID-19 era followed the guidelines of the World Health Organisation (WHO) for preventing the spread of COVID-19 (World health organisation, 2020)? What changes have taken place in tourism marketing after COVID-19? There is the new normal (WHO, 2020). What is normal in marketing now must be understood. Marketing strategies like market segmentation, market targeting, product positioning, product designing, pricing, promotion, placement should be redefined now. Therefore, this study is important to assess the changes in tourism marketing activities

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and later to evaluate whether tourism marketing practices suit to tackle the COVID-19 threats.

This study discusses the marketing concepts on how it could adapt to the changing marketing environment (Kotler et al., 2014). It has specially used how people, processes and physical environment can be managed during pandemics (Lovelock et al., 2010; Zeithaml et al., 2011). Theories of service design and distribution of service could be still a more significant aspect in this situation. Scholars have not been able to clearly grasp the right tourism marketing theories to be applied in this unprecedented crisis in human civilisation. What changes have come in tourism marketing after COVID-19 is not clear? How are tourism operators marketing today? What differences have come in tourism marketing today compared to pre-COVID-19? Is marketing applying theories of business environment adaptation, SWOT analysis, business opportunity analysis to adopt the changing business environment? How has tourism marketing adopted the prevailing business environment? These are some of the important questions to be answered.

Nepal has not been able to make adequate efforts to market tourism relative to other similar tourist destinations (Pradhan, 2013; Sthapit, 2021). There is a lack of proper strategies for implementation of research-based marketing programmes (Sthapit, 2021; Thapa, 2010; Shrestha, 1998). It is necessary to identify effective marketing tools to realise the tourism potential of Nepal (Basnet, 2009). The main objective of this study is to examine the marketing considerations in tourism marketing during the COVID-affected era in Nepal for which tourism operators' adaptation to COVID-19 cautions as prescribed by the WHO guidelines for tourism has also been studied as its environmental background.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Tourism

Tourism is the second biggest foreign exchange earner for Nepal after remittance (Economic Survey Nepal, 2019; Turner, 2016; Basnet, 2009). Tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors who are making a visit to a main destination outside his/her usual environment for less than a year for any main purpose including holidays, leisure and recreation, business, health, education, or other purposes (UNWTO, 2017). Accommodation, attractions, access, amenities, and activities are considered as infrastructure of tourism (Cooper et al., 2008; Haneef, 2017; Pradhan, 2013).

According to Bhatt and Munjal (2013), tourism is an increasingly popular global activity. Besides being the world's largest export earner, its strong linkage with other sectors of the economy enhances its overall impact. UNWTO (2017) has recognised the potential of the tourism sector for the purpose of poverty alleviation, post-conflict stability, socioeconomic recovery, and multilateral integration and peace (Okello & Novelli, 2014; WTTC, 2019). Nepal is located between economic giants India and China that offer huge tourism potentials. Nepal is naturally, culturally, biologically diversified, and beautiful (NTB, 2021; Lonelyplanet, 2017; Shrestha, 1998; SKAL, 2019; Tripadvisor, 2019; Sthapit, 2020; UNSECO, 2020).

2.2 Marketing

Marketing is satisfying customers through creating the right product, right price, right promotion, right placement (Kotler et al., 2014). For service customers, additional three Ps are essential; that is, creating right people, right processes and right physical environment need to be adjusted (Lovelock et al., 2009; Raina & Rana, 2021; Zeithaml et al., 2013). Among the various factors influencing tourists to visit an overseas country is that of marketing activity by tourism operators and government tourist commissions in the destination country (Lewis & Jonsson, 2017). To target foreigners, NTB (2020) conducts tourism promotion campaigns every year and develops new tourism products. Tourism operators are using social media, endorsements, sales promotion schemes, online promotions, sales missions, and participation in tourism fairs (Liberato & Liberato, 2018; Ayeh & Lin, 2011; Yang, 2018; Yen & Teng, 2015, Kim et al., 2009; Neuvonen et al., 2010; Yu, 2007; Yuksel & Voola, 2010).

2.3 Pandemic and COVID-affected era

According to the World Health Organisation (2020), coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. The virus that causes COVID-19 is mainly transmitted through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. The whole world has suffered from lockdown for several months. Many countries have halted some or all international travels since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic but now have plans to reopen travel. There is a new normal, and marketing of tourism is changing. The COVID-19 disease was declared as a pandemic by WHO on 12 March 2020. COVID-19 significantly has impacted the global economic, political, and socio-cultural systems. Health communication strategies and measures (e.g., social distancing, travel and mobility bans, community lockdowns, stay-at-home campaigns, self- or mandatory-quarantine, curbs on crowding) have halted global travel, tourism, and leisure. Being a highly vulnerable industry to numerous environmental, political, socio-economic risks, tourism is used to and has become resilient in bouncing back (Novelli et al., 2018) from various crises and outbreaks (e.g., terrorism, earthquakes, Ebola, SARS virus and Zika).

However, the nature, the unprecedented circumstances and impacts of the COVID-19, demonstrate signs that this crisis is not only different, but it can have profound and long-term structural and transformational changes to tourism as socio-economic activity and industry. Indeed, the global and huge scale, the multidimensional and interconnected impacts challenging current values and systems and leading to a worldwide recession and depression are the most distinctive characteristics of this pandemic. Hence, Sthapit (2020 December) and Sthapit (2021 June) have described the current world scenario as pandenomics and submitted that collaboration and cooperation be promoted at global, regional, and local levels to manage the pandenomics by addressing the global recovery woes.

Tourists themselves have experienced the travel difficulties, or through their loved ones and/or through the shared experiences of others (e.g., user-generated-content) significant disruptions and health-risks in their travel and bookings plans. The tourists' experiences and/or exposure to others' experiences (that are also magnified through the emotional contagion and information diffusion of the social media) can have a significant impact on their travel attitudes, intentions and future behaviours. Psychiatric research investigating the impact of traumatic experiences on people's life, behaviours and experiences of places and services (Baxter & Diehl, 1998) can provide a useful theoretical lens for understanding the travel behaviour and attitudes of tourists

that have been exposed to their own or others' COVID-19 travel trauma. Tourism research has mainly focused on studying how tourists develop their perceived risk and the impacts of the latter on tourists' decision-making processes, future intentions, and segmentation profiles (Matiza, 2020). In addition, the new operating environment enforced by COVID-19 measures require firms to adopt new technologies and applications to ensure management of crowds and number of people gathered in public spaces (e.g., airports, shopping malls, museums, restaurants, hotels), human disinfectors and hand sanitiser equipment, applications identifying and managing people's health identity and profiles.

2.4 Environment and SWOT

Before making any decisions, planning, implementation environment should be analysed. Different marketing tool may be effective in different situations. Environment analysis is monitoring environment to determine SWOT (Gluck, 1980). The situation analyses consist of external environmental analysis and internal environmental analysis. Environment (external) analysis gives rise to opportunities and threats profile. Internal analysis gives rise to strength and weakness profile. SWOT analysis is realisation of company's strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats. SWOT analysis is a tool for auditing an organisation and its environment (Ramaswami & Namokumari, 2013). SWOT analysis help set the right marketing objectives, strategies and tactics (Cravan et al., 2009, Kotler et al., 2014).

III. RESEARCH METHODS

Based on the philosophy of post positivism, this study has adopted a quantitative, descriptive analysis. Primary data was collected from the survey of stakeholders of tourism. Tourism operators of Nepal were surveyed on tourism marketing practices after the outbreak of COVID-19 for which tourism operators working in various sectors of tourism were covered, because tourism business activities spread across star-hotels, non-star hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, transport companies, tourism-related activities /entertainment providers, trekking agencies, rafting agencies, safaris, airlines, etc. Total number of managers of all tourism businesses of Nepal was considered as the population of this study. It has considered the sample size of 500 respondents as sufficient to cover any study in general (Cochran, 2002). Of them, 400 questionnaires were returned fully filled by respondents. Multistage sampling was adopted to choose the target sample. Quota sampling method was applied to represent all tourism related sectors; then judgmental sampling was applied to choose information resourceful businesses and knowledgeable respondents. To measure the variables, a questionnaire was developed as instruments for collecting data. Questionnaire items were taken from Marketing Scales Handbook of Bruner (2009), studies of Shrestha (1998) on tourism marketing and of Basnet (2009) on tourism service marketing for its validity. Face validity of the questionnaire was achieved through consultation with experts and mentors of this study.

The NTB (Nepal Tourism Board) was approached for information on tourism business operators and their addresses and contact numbers. Selected sample tourism businesses were contacted through telephone and emails. Knowledgeable persons were identified through preliminary discussions with the receptionists and relationship managers of the companies. Phone number and email addresses of knowledgeable persons of the companies were collected. Questionnaires were dropped in their offices, then telephone calls were also made to brief about the study and questionnaire. Special appointments were requested with knowledgeable persons to brief

about the study. To gather sufficient responses tourism companies were visited and knowledgeable persons were also contacted in person to make them fill-up the questionnaires. Collected questionnaires were processed, put into tables, descriptive analysis was done, then a report was drafted.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

To achieve the research objectives, the collected data were analysed and the following findings were found.

4.1 Respondents Profile

The following discussions present the demographic characteristics of the respondents surveyed for this study.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Respondents by sectors	Percent
Entertainment	7.6
Handicraft/souvenir	3.8
Hotel (Lodging and fooding service)	15.4
Human resource development for tourism	15.3
Transportation	4.2
Restaurant (Fooding service)	3.8
Mountaineering	15.3
Travel Agency	26.9
Trekking	7.7
Total	100

Note. Author's survey, 2021

The tourism industry mainly comprises lodging-fooding, transportation, entertainment and such other sectors. Therefore, quota sampling is applied to accommodate the perspective of all sectors.

4.2 Government Attention

Promoting tourism destinations by a single business entity is not possible. Therefore, a body that coordinates all tourism businesses and addresses the various needs of tourists is essential for promoting tourism. Governments play an important role in coordinating tourism destinations (Basnyat, 2020). The government is the major player in promoting tourism destinations. So, respondents were asked about where the government's tourism-related activities should focus t. Table 2 shows 26.9 percent of the respondents think the government should give attention to the marketing of the tourism industry; hence tourism marketing has been identified by the respondents as the highest priority area.

Table 2 Areas requiring Government Attention

Respondents by sectors	Percent
Accommodation	11.5
Agency service (travel/trekking etc.)	19.2
Airlines	3.8
Environment	11.5
Immigration administration	7.7
Marketing	26.9
Sanitation	3.8
Transportation	15.4
Total	100

Note. Author's survey, 2021

4.3 Marketing considerations during the COVID-affected era

Table 3 presents the various considerations for tourism marketing in Nepal by analysing the current practices of tourism marketing practices.

Table 3: Marketing Consideration During COVID-affected Era

Variables	Percentage					
Base for segmentation	age	country	income	length	purpose of visit	
	7.7	23.1	11.5	7.7	50	
Target tourist	Internal	foreigner				
	39	61				
Target age	old	adult	young			
	5	80	15			
Target income	high	moderate	low			
	30	65	5			
Target purpose	Adventure	culture	business	pilgrimage	pleasure	
	54	9	7.7	7.7	22	
Positioning	Adventure	Cultural heritage	naturally beautiful	friendly people	peaceful	
	23	12	42	18	4	
Product development	prevailing product	modified product	new product			
	27	50	23			
Service quality	adaptive	clean	friendly	quick	safe	
	34	16	8	8	34	
Important cost	money	time	search	convenience	uncertainty	
	15	19	9	34	23	
During off season	discount	new market	non price incentives	business tour		
	46	12	8	34		
Appropriate media	travel journal	radio	word of mouth	social media	website/internet	television
	8	2	16	43	11	18
Promotional tool	advertising	personal selling	sales promotion	publicity	direct marketing	public relations
	15	7	7	61	5	5
Appropriate transport	Air	road	water	train	cable car	
	27	70			3	
Important human quality	hygiene	cooperative	knowledgeable	physical attraction	polite	
	12	19	23	38	3	
Improve processing	document	luggage	booking	visa		
	19	16	38	27		
Physical impression	landscape	interior	brochure	seating distance	uniform	equipment
	34	15	3	24	13	11
Re-visitors	< 20%	20 to 40%	40 to 60%	60 to 80%	>80%	
	8	12	35	40	5	

Note. Author's survey, 2021

The present study examined the marketing considerations that included such factors as preferred market segmentation base, target market, destination positioning; marketing programmes (7Ps) like tourism products, price, promotion, placement, people, process, physical environment. The study showed that country-wise segmentation of the market was more preferred. And about 40 percent of the respondents preferred targeting internal tourists during the COVID-affected era. Eighty percent of tourism operators targeted adults rather than young ones. Sixty-five percent liked the tourist group of moderate-income. Most of the tourism business operators (54 percent) preferred adventure loving tourists in Nepal.

The data results showed that most tourism operators prefer positioning Nepal as a naturally beautiful and adventurous country. Fifty percent of them think Nepalese tourism offerings must be modified. More than two thirds of the respondents (i.e., 68 percent) think tourism services must be adapted to changing environments and tourists should be assured of safety. Similarly, the study discovered that tourism operators gave more importance to non-monetary costs: the major non-monetary costs that tourists bear in purchasing tourism services are convenience cost, psychological cost, and search cost. More than half of the tourism businesspeople thought

that monetary and non-monetary incentives would drive tourists in off-season also. More than half of the tourism operators also considered internet-based social media and websites as a more effective media than other traditional media, to promote tourism in Nepal. More than 60 percent of the respondents believed publicity, endorsement, tourist testimonials (word-of-mouth) as more effective tourism promotional tools. And, 70 percent identified road transportation as the most appropriate to travel across Nepal.

The study also found that about 50 percent of tourism business operators have given importance to physical attractive people, cleanliness, and hygiene. Sixty-five percent of them believed that travel booking, visa processing must be more convenient than what we have now. About 40 percent have mentioned the importance of interior decoration and seating arrangements. Table 3 also showed that more than 40 percent tourists are repeat visitors in Nepal.

Discussion

Since the sum of the population of India and China being the world's one-third population, targeting these two countries could be more than enough for Nepalese tourism (UN, 2019). This present study finding also indicated it as an opportunity. It showed that about 40 percent of the tourism operators have been targeting internal tourists; because there is a danger for foreign tourists to visit abroad (Sthapit, 2021; WHO, 2020). Eighty percent of tourism operators have targeted adults rather than young or old tourists. It is because young folks could not afford travels and other tourism related activities, and old people could not move around to enjoy natural beauty and trekking and mountaineering in Nepal (Basnet, 2009; NTB, 2021, Shrestha, 1998). Majority of them would like to position Nepal as a naturally beautiful and adventurous country. Highest mountain range and famous wildlife reserves in Nepal make this possible (Basnet, 2009; Shrestha, 1998; NTB, 2021). Most of the tourism businesspeople (i.e., 68 percent) think that tourism services must be adapted to changing environments and tourists must be assured of safety amid the COVID-19 period. Physical distancing, mandatory mask provision, sanitisation, and health and hygiene protocols should be followed while travelling (Sthapit, 2021; WHO, 2020). Safety is more important than monetary cost (Lovelock, 2009; Zeithaml, 2011). This present study also showed the importance of uncertainty cost. More than half of the respondent tourism people believed that monetary and non-monetary incentives drive the tourist in off-season also. Hence, it is an important finding. Promotion schemes stimulate and dampen the service demand (Kotler et al., 2014). More than half of the respondent tourism people also considered internet-based social media and websites as more effective in promoting tourism. This is obvious as more than half the globe use Facebook (Liberato & Liberato, 2018). More than 60 percent regarded publicity, endorsement, tourist testimonials (word-of-mouth) as more effective tourism promotional tools; it is consistent with previous studies (Basnet, 2009; Shrestha, 1998; Yen & Teng, 2015). Sixty five percent thought that travel booking, visa processing must be made convenient, as red-tapism in bureaucracy is common in Nepal (Awale & Shrestha, 2022). Table 3 also showed that more than 40 percent of tourists do repeat the visit to Nepal; this finding has matched with previous findings of Shrestha (1998).

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Tourism industry of Nepal has realised the present and clear danger in tourism due to COVID-19 pandemic. This study indicated China and India as potential tourism markets for Nepal. At present, most of the tourism businesses are targeting internal tourists. As for tourists, adults rather than old and children are found to be suitable for Nepalese topography as far as the target tourists are concerned. Nepalese tourism business operators underline that Nepal should be positioned as a naturally beautiful and adventurous country. During the COVID-affected era tourists are giving ever more importance to non-monetary costs like psychological costs, assurances on health concern rather than the monetary costs. Nepalese tourism businesses have taken the initiation to tackle the challenges during this COVID-affected era. The WHO guidelines are being followed by Nepalese tourism business operators. Physical distancing, spacious interior layouts, masks, sanitisation, hygiene protocols are taken care of by tourism businesses. Nepalese tourism products like trekking, mountaineering, and wildlife exploring, are suitable for tourists during the COVID-affected era.

This study has tried to identify various implications in Nepalese tourism businesses and tourism research. Nepal should also target the neighbouring Chinese and Indian tourists. Nepal should position its natural core competency as natural beauty mountains and hills for adventure. Social media must be used massively to promote Nepalese tourism effectively and efficiently. Road transportation must be expanded and made convenient so that more exotic places of Nepal can be made accessible to tourists. To address the unprecedented pandemic COVID-19 problem, new safety measures must be brought into operation so that tourists can be assured of their safety. Further studies could refine this study and analyse the effects of various measures taken by tourism business operators during COVID-affected era with the help of more scientific research tools.

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