

Tourism Mobility and the Challenges of Coronavirus Pandemic (Covid-19) in Nigeria

¹Adetola Omitola, ²Folake Sekinot Alo, ³Oluwadamilare Segun Olawole, ⁴Bolaji Omitola, ⁵Adebanji Adejuwon Ayobami Ayeni, ⁶Olawale Olufemi Akinrinde

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¹Department of Tourism Studies,
Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria, omitolaa@run.edu.ng

²Department of Behavioural Studies,
Redeemer's University, Ede, Nigeria alof@run.edu.ng

³Department of Political Science,
Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria
olawoleoluwadamilare4@gmail.com

⁴PhD, Department of Political Sciences, Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria
bolaji.omitola@uniosun.edu.ng

⁵PhD, Department of Business Administration, College of Business and Social Science,
Landmark University, Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria,
adebanjiayeni@hotmail.com Ayeni.adebanji@lmu.edu.ng

⁶PhD, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Johannesburg Business School,
University of Johannesburg, South Africa
oakinrinde@uj.ac.za

Abstract

People have always been on the move throughout human history for diverse reasons including economic, political, social, and religious. Tourism, which entails relocating from one location to another for pleasure, is another factor in human migration. Nigeria has adopted measures to lessen the effects of Covid-19 on aspects of tourism including air travel, hospitality, leisure, and entertainment. This study focuses on the Covid-19 outbreak in Nigeria, with reference to Osun state. The difficulties of mobility as they relate to tourism, as well as the survival challenges of its allied industries are also investigated. The study relied on primary data and a descriptive research design. In-depth interviews with important informants, primarily from the tourism business, were also conducted. This was augmented with secondary data, and the results were then thematically and content-analyzed. According to the study's results, the hospitality, transportation, and entertainment sectors saw low patronage and revenue losses. But when business owners' expenses and obligations grew, they were forced to take drastic actions, including downsizing and firm closure, among others. In conclusion, methods other than monetary and fiscal stimulus were advised for business owners in order to maintain employment in this crucial and labour-intensive area of the economy.

Key words: Tourism, Corona-virus diseases, Tourism Mobility Challenges, Small and Medium Businesses.

Introduction

Throughout history, human migration has been a common phenomenon, driven by various factors such as economic, political, social, and religious reasons. Additionally, leisure and tourism have played a significant role in people's movement from one place to another. However, the occurrence of infectious disease outbreaks, whether historical or recent, has often resulted in significant restrictions on people's mobility, leading to devastating human casualties.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, nations worldwide implemented measures to restrict movement, such as curfews, border closures, and total lockdowns. These actions, along with other preventive measures like physical distancing, hand-washing, isolation, and quarantines, had a profound impact on various businesses, including the

tourism industry. Unfortunately, tourism products, such as park visits, accommodation, and entertainment, were greatly affected as people could not travel to satisfy their tourism-related needs.

Tourism is a labor-intensive sector, employing approximately 300 million people globally. Despite its personalized nature, this industry relies on individuals serving both as suppliers and consumers. Moreover, the hospitality, entertainment, and recreation supply chain within the tourism sector mainly comprises small businesses, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. Notably, many eateries and entertainment centers in this sector are owned by women, and a significant proportion of its workforce comprises skilled and unskilled female workers.

To address the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism-related sectors of Nigeria's economy, the government released a 50-billion-naira payroll support aimed at aiding small and medium-sized businesses, where many informal businesses in the tourism sector operate. However, some eateries and entertainment sectors in Osun state could not access this support due to staff number requirements, and those who did expressed frustration over difficulties in obtaining the funds. Some perceived the allocation process as politicized, leading to uneven distribution.

Unlike some developed economies like the United Kingdom and the United States, the Nigerian government did not provide direct payment schemes for workers in the informal sector who were severely affected by the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and lacked income or social protection. This omission raised concerns about the welfare of vulnerable workers and tourists' mobility during the pandemic.

Literature Review

This section presents an overview of existing literature on pandemics and their impact on tourism, with a specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis management in the tourism industry.

According to Collins-Kreiner and Wall (2015), tourism can be defined as the temporary movement of people from their usual place of work and residence to other areas, where their needs and desires are fulfilled. Vijaya (2006) views tourism as a movement that occurs within a 24-hour period, encompassing visitor aspirations and experiences, local expectations and modifications, and the roles of various organizations and institutions that act as intermediaries in the process (Collins-Kreiner & Wall, 2015).

The concept of tourism is broad and encompasses travel and accommodation outside of one's usual abode. It significantly contributes to global exports of products and services and generates substantial economic benefits through the exchange of goods and services. Moreover, the tourism sector creates a considerable number of jobs, particularly within the service industry, which caters to the needs of tourists. This includes various service businesses such as transportation (airlines, cruise lines, taxicabs), hospitality (hotels, resorts, lodgings, dining establishments), and entertainment (theme parks, casinos, retail stores, music venues, theaters).

The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines a tourist as someone who travels and stays in a location for at least 24 hours in a foreign country for various purposes, including recreation, vacation, health, religious study, sports, business meetings, family visits, or missions.

The tourist sector comprises several elements, such as lodging and catering (hotels, resorts, vacation homes, guesthouses, restaurants), transportation options (trains, road, planes, boats, walking), various entertainment venues (social clubs, churches, mosques, casinos), travel agencies, tour operators, information services, government organizations responsible for tourist attractions (e.g., Yankari Games Reserve, Obudu Resorts, National Parks in Nigeria), artificial and natural attractions, universities and research organizations focused on tourism-related studies, and various stakeholders, including the local community, government, and shareholders.

Pandemic and Coronavirus

The term "Pandemic" originates from the Greek words "pan" meaning "all" and "demos" meaning "the people." It is commonly used to refer to a contagious epidemic that spreads across a specific country, settlement, or even multiple countries or continents simultaneously (Qiu, Rutherford, Mao & Chu, 2017; Honigsbaum, 2009).

Throughout history, various pandemics like the H1N1 influenza pandemic, H5N1 influenza virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and the recent coronavirus have demonstrated the world's vulnerability to health crises (Pike, Saylor, Fair, LeBreton, Tamoufe, Djoko, Rimoin, & Wolfe, 2010).

The appearance of Covid-19 led to a crisis in the tourism industry, with suspension of tourism activities and travel restrictions. While terrorism and conflicts have historically affected tourism growth, the study of crisis management in the industry is relatively recent (Tse, 2006). Rocca (2015) emphasizes the importance of "mobility" in tourism, defining it as a cultural, social, and economic phenomenon driven by the pursuit of unique experiences without financial incentives. However, the current economic crisis has impacted the mobility of the tourism industry (Ulak, 2020:6).

As the crises associated with Covid-19 continue to evolve, the tourism sector and related industries are adapting their crisis management approaches. Various organizations are implementing crisis management strategies, tailored to their missions and goals. Ulak (2020) suggests that each organization should have a contingency plan as part of the tourism crisis management process to prepare for potential risks before they escalate into crises. While crisis management is not uncommon in the tourism business, the Covid-19 pandemic represents a novel and unprecedented catastrophe. Many organizations, sectors, networks, and governments may face unforeseen crises for which they are unprepared. Consequently, plans are often created in response to specific events, and their implementation may vary in terms of time and effort expended.

The Covid-19 Pandemic's Impact on the Tourism Industry

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged in December 2019 and rapidly spread across the globe, leading the World Health Organization to declare it a pandemic in March 2020. Despite implementing emergency measures to contain the virus in January 2020, some infected individuals exhibited minimal or no symptoms, contributing to its widespread transmission. The ease of international travel facilitated the virus's spread, prompting some countries to close their borders and restrict travel even before the WHO declared the pandemic (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019).

To curb the virus, many countries enacted legislation mandating residents to stay at home, resulting in reduced economic activity, remote work arrangements, and panic-driven hoarding of goods, causing supply and distribution issues. These large-scale disruptions had a severe impact on various industries, particularly the tourism sector. Governments' border closures and restrictions on non-essential travel severely affected the viability of the tourism industry. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic is projected to potentially disrupt 50 million jobs worldwide in the travel and tourism industry, with Asia expected to bear the greatest impact.

Even after the pandemic subsides, the tourism sector may take up to 10 months to recover, according to the WEF. Considering that the travel sector contributes about 10% of global employment and 10.4% of global GDP, or 319 million jobs, this significant impact needs to be taken into account (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2019). Prior to the pandemic, efforts were made to develop the necessary support systems and infrastructure to attract more international tourists and make tourism a major source of foreign revenue. These efforts had been successful in creating more jobs in the sector. However, the Covid-19 outbreak has severely hampered the growth of the nation's tourism industry.

Methodology

In this study's descriptive research approach, key informants representing various tourist stakeholders from Osun state were selected through random sampling. The primary data collected from these informants was supplemented with secondary data. Thematic and content analysis methods were employed to analyze the data. A total of 9 stakeholders from the tourism-related sectors in Osun state participated in in-depth interviews. To ensure comprehensive representation, the interviews were distributed across the state's three senatorial zones, with 3 interviewees from each zone. This approach allowed for adequate representation of different aspects of tourism, including travel and logistics, hospitality, recreations, and event centers, within the selected sample. Additionally,

one of the criteria for choosing the interviewees was that they had either current or past employment in the tourism sector. This criterion helped ensure that the interviewees possessed relevant knowledge and experience, and it also influenced the number of interview questions asked in the respective regions.

Results and Discussion

The Covid-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences across various aspects of human life, including threats to human health, livelihoods, and the disruption of socio-cultural events. The delayed containment of the pandemic significantly impacted Nigeria's economy, leading to adverse effects on the standard of living for its citizens. Prior to the pandemic, Nigeria was already facing challenges in attracting tourists due to security issues, and the pandemic further exacerbated the decline in tourist inflow, resulting in a significant impact on the tourism sector.

The study revealed that Covid-19 severely affected traveling to and from Osun state, as various measures were put in place to curb its spread in Nigeria. These restrictions, even after being lifted, have led to reduced travel and limited use of recreational centers and relaxation venues. Many workers were laid off, and even after the lockdown, only a few were called back to work in the tourism sector.

One of the hardest-hit areas by the pandemic was the Nigerian Aviation Service, with a drastic reduction in international flights and the grounding of airlines. Many airlines faced financial difficulties and were unable to pay employee wages, resulting in layoffs and unpaid vacations. The National Association of Nigeria Travel Agencies, with around 2,000 registered agencies out of 6,000 in Nigeria, suffered severely during the pandemic, with a drop in ticket sales and overall revenue.

The hotel and hospitality sector in Osun state also experienced significant challenges, operating below capacity and attracting low patronage due to the continued observance of Covid protocols, reduced gatherings, and public fear of the virus spread, even with the availability of vaccines. Many businesses cut their workforce by 50% to manage financial losses, and the federal government's bailout funds mainly benefited larger airlines and hotels, leaving smaller businesses struggling.

While the government of Osun state provided some tax reliefs to businesses, the entertainment and recreation sectors, including eateries and events centers, which are mostly small and medium-sized enterprises owned by women, faced financial constraints. They claimed that they were excluded from some federal government financial interventions, which were perceived to be influenced by political patronage.

Employees in tourism-related businesses were not adequately supported by government policies during the pandemic, as many did not meet the criteria for general monetary transfers to households. Instead, their survival relied on the generosity of their employers and the community.

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an economic decline in Nigeria, and there is a growing call for a change in the political and economic structure to address the challenges posed by the aftermath of the pandemic.

Implications: Policy Options Towards a Positive Change in the Tourism Industry

The importance of the tourism sector in Nigeria's developing economy cannot be underestimated, especially concerning job opportunities and earnings. To ensure job retention and employment opportunities in this labor-intensive industry, Nigeria can learn from developed countries like the United Kingdom and the United States of America. For instance, adopting a furlough policy similar to that of the UK, which protects workers' employment during crises, could be beneficial for the tourism sector in Nigeria.

This study emphasizes the need for the government to implement such approaches to support tourist centers in the aftermath of the pandemic and to prepare for potential future challenges. Providing social support is essential to minimize the impact of Covid-19. The government must protect the large number of casual and self-employed workers in the tourism industry and consider salary subsidies to aid workers in transitioning to other sectors if some tourist outlets do not reopen after the pandemic.

Offering sufficient social support can mitigate the worst effects of shocks like the Covid-19 epidemic, especially for casual and self-employed workers prevalent in tourism-related businesses. The government should take responsibility to help these workers transition to other industries smoothly and quickly, thus addressing the unemployment issues that arose after the lockdown suspension.

Government support, in the form of financial assistance through grants and loans, is vital, especially for tourism-related enterprises such as hotels and event centers that were heavily impacted during the pandemic. Reducing or suspending levies, taxes, and social contributions can also stimulate tourism-related business growth, income, and job opportunities. Incentives and financial aid should be provided to support small businesses that struggled during and after the pandemic.

To further boost the economy and enhance the living standards of the people, the government should develop schemes to help those who lost their jobs during the pandemic. Providing unemployed labor with job opportunities or assisting them in setting up businesses will be beneficial for the country's economic growth and government revenue.

Instead of viewing growth as an impersonal ideal that only benefits a select few, Nigeria should link the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the global tourism industry. Embracing ongoing positive developments in the tourism sector could pave the way for more significant changes, enhancing the standard of living for the Nigerian population.

Conclusion

The tourism sector was severely affected during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the current state of tourist centers still reflects the aftermath of this crisis. It is crucial to develop the tourist industry in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) structure to prevent future outbreaks and disasters in this sector. Several issues arise from this situation, including the potential for the pandemic to foster nationalism and stricter border controls.

The role of domestic tourism in economic recovery and the shift towards more resilient locations is worth considering. Additionally, the pandemic has prompted short and long-term behavioral changes in travelers, such as increased use of videoconferencing and potential impacts on business travel. The financial stimulus measures taken during the pandemic raise questions about their effect on austerity measures and the global fight against climate change. Moreover, global public opinion on the SDGs is influenced by the pandemic's outcomes.

Vulnerability concerns have been raised, particularly due to the pandemic's disproportionate impact on low-paying jobs in the tourism sector. Early data indicates that the effects on tourism in lower-income countries will be significantly worse. The Covid-19 results have provided valuable insights into how global changes affect academia, government, and the tourism industry.

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