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**Virtual Travel Experience: COVID-19 crisis as a disruptive force
to the nature of travel in the tourism industry**

Submitted by

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A Master thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Tourism Development and Culture (TourDC)

Department of Service Management and Service Studies

Campus Helsingborg, Lund University

Master Thesis 2021

SMMM20/30 credits

August, 2021

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, my gratitude goes to God the Almighty who enabled me to undertake the Master's degree successfully. Besides, my special appreciation goes to all the parties involved in making the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master in Tourism Development and Culture (TourDC) possible. This scholarship opportunity that took place in Scotland (University of Glasgow), Malta (University of Malta) and Sweden (Lund University) had an undeniable impact in my life both professionally and personally.

I would also like to thank most sincerely my supervisor Professor Stefan Gössling from the Department of Service Management and Service Studies at Lund University for his invaluable contributions at various stages of writing this paper. Your positive criticisms gave me the drive to finish and produce quality work in time. Thank you for making me enjoy the whole writing process aside from learning a lot from it. Bravo! I also had the benefit of getting a second feedback from University of Glasgow that helped me to further improve on the quality of the thesis.

Thank you to my respondents for being responsive at a period filled with COVID-19 health related concerns, stress and uncertainty. Your cooperation meant a lot to me. Stay blessed.

I would like to thank my family and friends for their instrumental support during this whole process. Thank you Wilson (dad), Anne (mum), Irene (sister), Ian (brother), Imelda (sister), Aunty Caro, Aunty Julia, Sania, Melissa, Farida, Stacy and the rest for always exchanging kind words and being there for me. You are all treasured.

My final appreciation goes to all my TourDC classmates (2019-2021) more so, Abdul, Julie, Stephen, Eilis, Lika, Daisy and Alima. You have contributed greatly to my Erasmus Mundus experience. Thank you for such a culturally exhilarating experience. I wish you all the best in your future endeavours!

Abstract

The main aim of this study is to describe and explain virtual travel, as an example of disruptive innovation in the face of COVID-19 crisis, while focusing on how travel companies are now offering alternative travel products and its consumer value to the tourists. It thus attempts to further our understanding on how a crisis can be used as an opportunity to offer and experience alternate travel products, that is, virtual travel. This study takes an ethnographic approach focusing on digital observations and open-ended interviews, while drawing on Christensen's disruptive innovation theory and Holbrook's typology of consumer value. Results from this study confirm that virtual travel products are a type of disruptive innovation as it possesses attributes akin to a disruptive product. Moreover, the current COVID-19 health crisis has forced travel companies to offer a varied array of virtual travel experiences with some unique features and themes. This is as a result of the pandemic impact on the nature of travel such as travel restrictions and stay at home orders. Disruptive innovation has its own set of benefits, and instinctively virtual travel experiences exemplified its own distinct set of benefits. These benefits included convenience in terms of time value, ease of use, inclusivity, price and a pre-plan preparation tool. The other features that were appreciated consisted of virtual travel being used as a tool for living through others, its interesting and fun nature, its beauty and the ethics or principles associated with its consumption. These benefits and experience features encompassed the consumer value of efficiency, excellence, play, aesthetics and ethics.

Keywords: COVID-19; crisis; crisis management; disruptive innovation theory; disruptive product; consumer value; virtual travel experiences; qualitative; tourism industry.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The nature of the tourism industry is uncertain and very vulnerable to outside forces. In fact, numerous studies (e.g. Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Glaesser, 2006; OECD, 2020; Williams & Baláž, 2015; Pappas, 2021; Ghaderi, et al., 2014; Cro & Martins, 2017; Gössling, et al., 2021; Chang, et al., 2020; Hall & Williams, 2020) have expounded on the vulnerability of the tourism industry sector as it is easily exposed to and affected by a variety of crises of different nature and extent such as SARS, Earthquakes, Tsunami, Financial crisis, Ebola, 9/11 attacks, AH1N1 Influenza crisis, Zika virus and MERS.

The world is currently facing an unprecedented type of crisis, that is, the COVID-19 pandemic which is causing great fear among people and havoc in numerous sectors. This study will focus on the tourism industry. Indeed, the pandemic has brought about widespread negative impacts on all sectors of the economy but the global tourism sector is the one that became one of the hardest hit, and its outlook remains highly uncertain for destinations and travel organisations (Nhamo, et al., 2020; OECD, 2020; Pappas, 2021; Luo & Lam, 2020). International and domestic travel has been following an almost stable pattern, but since the pandemic crisis a colossal drop in travel is identified as can be seen below.

Figure 1: Domestic and international air passenger traffic fell to less than 2% of its February 2020 levels in April 2020

Air passenger traffic, non-seasonally adjusted, indexed to February 2020

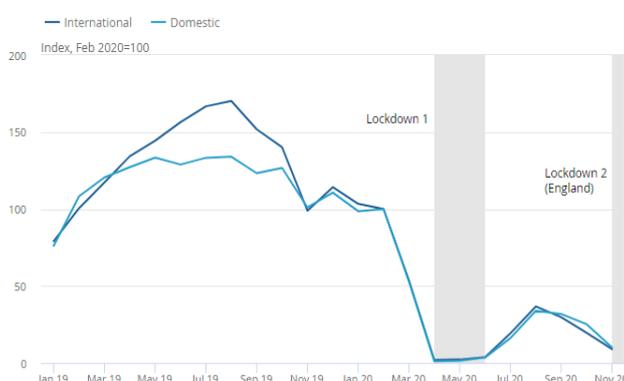


Figure 1: The Plunge in domestic and international air passenger traffic in England before and after COVID-19 crisis

Source: Online (Office for National Statistics, 2021)

1.2 COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis and Travel

The term *crisis* originates from the Greek word *Krisis*. It is a dangerous, undesired and extraordinary situation or occurrence that is unexpected and/or unplanned. It leads to a critical change in important variables that endanger or destroy either parts of or the entire system. A suitable example is how the COVID-19 crisis devastated the entire world system from travel, to education, to entertainment and to work. In the event of a crisis, immediate decisions and countermeasures are critical in order to influence further positive development and to limit the negative consequences as much as possible (Glaesser, 2006; Okumus, et al., 2005; Ghaderi, et al., 2014). On the other hand, a tourism crisis is a disaster or an event of sufficient magnitude that severely upsets the routine functioning of the tourism industry or totally disrupts the tourism industry (Ghaderi, et al., 2014; Cro & Martins, 2017). For the purpose of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic will be treated as a tourism crisis.

The first case of COVID-19 was brought into the world's attention on the 31st of December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei province of China. The World Health Organization (WHO) then declared it as a global pandemic on the 11th of March 2020 which sent huge shock waves across the global community. Some of its symptoms include fever, cough, dyspnea (shortness of breath), fatigue, diarrhea and lymphopenia (Nhamo, et al., 2020; Gössling, et al., 2021; Magano, et al., 2021). The severity of this virus is immense as can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2: The devastating scale of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis

Source: Online (World Health Organization, 2021)

Crisis Management are strategies, processes and measures which are planned and enforced in order to prevent and cope with a crisis (Glaesser, 2006). Okumus, et al. (2005) also described crisis management as a process of identifying and planning what and how to respond to a crisis. Various measures have been put in place globally to ensure that there is no further spread of the COVID-19 virus as it is quite evident how the global impact of the COVID-19

virus has had a disruptive impact on the whole planet in unprecedented ways (Fennell, 2020). The measures include unprecedented travel and entry restrictions such as travel bans from selective countries, arrival self-quarantine or self-isolation measures, and/or health certificate requirements, stay-at-home orders/messages, restrictions or cancellations on mass/public gatherings and social events such as festivals and the summer Olympics, closing international borders and airports, imposing norms for social distancing and sanitary measures, lockdown of countries or cities, closure of educational institutions (remote or online teaching) and non-essential businesses/services such as shops and restaurants, working from home, imposing curfews, suspending public transport and taxi operations to limit travel (Gössling, et al., 2021; Nhamo, et al., 2020; Washington Informer, 2021; OECD, 2020; Skare, et al., 2021; Pappas, 2021; Chang, et al., 2020; Barbieri, et al., 2020; Abdullah, et al., 2020).

All the above measures are placed in good faith but it is having a negative impact on travel. For example, travel restrictions or border closures have affected visitor flows. Its impact can be seen in the fall of international arrivals as demonstrated in Figure 1, which also illustrates a reduction of passengers in the aviation industry. This is affecting the airline companies as they have to match the current demand with supply. For instance, 65 international airlines have reduced their flights by 95% in Hong Kong (OECD, 2020; Pappas, 2021; Luo & Lam, 2020).

In truth, COVID-19 has forever changed the world in each and every aspect. Its impact is heavily experienced on international travel, tourism demand and in the hospitality industry (Chang, et al., 2020). Aside from air flights, other sectors facing devastating effects are cruises, the accommodation sector, restaurants, MICE and sporting events (Hall, et al., 2020; Gössling, et al., 2021). All these negative impacts caused by COVID-19 not only affects the tourism system but also the individuals view on travel. As a matter of fact, Magano, et al. (2021) identified that the anxiety and fear about COVID-19 has other implications for people's daily lives such as travelling (for work, leisure or holidays) and hospitality. The fear of infection and perceived risk significantly influences travel behaviours. During the pandemic, people perceive a higher risk for all types of trips and as a consequence avoid travelling to places where they perceive medium to high risks (Abdullah, et al., 2020). Evidently, people are afraid to travel because of their anxiety and fear related to COVID-19 infection. Therefore, this makes it possible for them to demand alternative products such as virtual travel experiences. The fact that there are external and internal factors making it

harder to travel or basically makes travel less enjoyable such as travel restrictions and COVID-19 related fear makes virtual travel experiences seem like a viable option.

In contrast, Luo & Lam (2020) emphasized that there is no direct relationship existing between the fear of COVID-19 and travel intention. Figure 2 demonstrates the high infection rate and severity of the virus which could serve as a possible reason as to one of the factors that makes people avoid travelling. Regardless of whether there is a relationship between the fear of COVID-19 infection and travel intention, the fact remains that travel is no longer the same since the pandemic. It is harder to travel to any destination of interest and enjoy your experience because of the numerous measures put in place to help curb the spread of the virus. Certainly, the tourism industry is now presented with a major and evolving challenge (Fennell, 2020).

Surely, crisis events bring about undesirable changes but it could be used as an opportunity. It is a turning point that can create an opportunity to change our way of thinking and to quickly adapt to the new reality (Ghaderi, et al., 2014; Pappas, 2021). In line with this, Hall (2010) illustrated that a crisis presents opportunities for the tourism industry. For instance, in the promotion of visitation to vanishing destinations. This could be easily achieved through virtual travel experiences. In fact, OECD (2020) concluded that digitalisation in tourism services is one of the potential long lasting tourism policy implications as a result of the pandemic.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused a ripple effect in the tourism industry. It has not only changed the nature of travel but also the type of travel products that are sold. Some travel companies have already started embracing the idea of digitizing their travel services by offering virtual travel experiences. Clearly, the pandemic is a disruptive force that has compelled travel companies to offer alternative products by thinking outside of the box, that is, using an innovative framework. Ghaderi, et al. (2014) pinpointed that the vulnerability of the tourism industry to any form of crisis endangers the survival of tourism businesses. This could be the reason why some travel companies have started adopting the innovation of virtual travel to try and stay afloat. Surely, crises are sudden challenges which test the ability of organisations in the tourism industry to cope (Anderson, 2006).

Today, there are vast opportunities to experience different styles or themes of virtual travel. This includes virtually driving in different cities around the world while listening to the local radio station of that country (Heroku app, 2020), virtual walking tours (Wind Walk Travel

Videos, n.d.), virtual museum tours (Ascherl, 2021), virtual tour of national parks (Koh, 2020), virtual tour of some of the world's most famous landmarks and World Heritage Sites (Wilson, 2020), virtual wine tours (Wine Shop Lanzarote, 2021) and virtual cultural experiences (Top Didj , n.d.).

1.3 Problematization

In the background literature review, I have touched on the phenomenon in focus, that is, the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and its impact. While all the literature offer detailed knowledge of the impact of crises, they fail to explore more insights in the tourism industry. In fact, Hall, et al. (2020) and Skare, et al. (2021) observed that there is a gap in empirical studies or limited literature on the interrelationships between the pandemic and tourism. For instance, the impact of pandemic outbreaks on the tourism industry. Likewise, Cohen & Neal (2010) also established that there is a lack of studies on the effect of the crisis on the tourism industry. Still, even though there are reviews that have been done on tourism crisis and disaster management, they still have limitations in terms of scope and depth. For instance, by only focusing on post-crisis or disaster recovery strategies for tourism destinations and not examining other management stages such as planning and preparedness (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). This thesis will be focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism industry.

One identifiable factor in studies about the impact of crisis events is the huge attention or focus on the economic side. Glaesser (2006) presented numerous crisis events and how they have led to economic consequences. Despite the fact that they mentioned the tourism industry, the focus was still on the economic losses that were experienced. In line with this, Hall (2010) conducted content analysis of a database on tourism and crisis and suggested that economic and financial crises always receive the most research attention. Moreover, crises with respect to international tourism are usually interrelated with other crisis events in economics, finance, politics and energy. This thesis will directly link the global pandemic crisis to the negative impact of the crisis event in travel which has experienced a great downturn.

Quite notably the discussion of innovation and tourism are not usually placed together. In fact, Hall & Williams (2020) argued that not much has been written on tourism innovation. In line with this, Hjalager (2010) conducted a review of literature on innovation in tourism and identified that innovation research in tourism is a young phenomenon, and that there is very

limited empirical knowledge about the effects of innovation action in tourism enterprises and destinations. The main focus of this thesis is disruptive innovation and quite noticeably Alsos, et al., (2014) and Hjalager (2014) pointed out that Clayton Christensen's research (the initiator of disruptive innovation theory) had its main focus on manufactured products, and its groundbreaking analysis only dealt with the disc driver industry. Hence, innovation in the tourism industry was never addressed, but instead a range of other services were mentioned. Through this study, I set out to understand the impact that COVID-19 has on the tourism industry by looking at how the nature of travel has been changed. This will be explored by looking at how travel companies are now forced to offer alternative travel products, that is, virtual travel experiences and its consumer value to the tourists. This will be addressed through the lens of disruptive innovation theory.

1.4 Aim and Research Questions

Against this background, I aim to demonstrate that crisis events can be used as an opportunity to quickly change our way of thinking and adapt to the new reality by illustrating and examining how virtual travel experiences are reshaping the nature of travel. I will focus on both the travel companies' perspective and the tourists' perspective. From the companies' perspective, I will explore how they have used an innovative framework to change and offer alternative travel products, in addition to, understanding what key aspects/features of virtual travel that they are keen on presenting to their customers. From the tourists' perspective, I will investigate the kind of experience they have with the virtual travel products and what they mostly admire or appreciate about it. On the whole, I aim to pick out the differences between virtual travel products and physical travel products. Moreover, a look at the benefits and opportunities for customers undergoing the virtual travel experience. Hence the research questions:

- How has COVID-19 forced travel companies to redefine their travel offers?
- What is the consumer value of virtual travel experiences to the tourists?

I will apply Clayton Christensen disruptive innovation theory to conceptualise how COVID-19 has acted as a disruptive force in travel by forcing travel companies to offer alternate travel products. Moreover, Holbrook's consumer value will be used to illustrate what the tourists appreciate in the new virtual travel experiences.

1.5 Academic and Societal Relevance

As previously observed, discussions on tourism and innovation do not normally go together. This study aims to aid in breaking down this limitation. The study looks at virtual travel experiences through the lens of disruptive innovation theory. This theory has hardly been linked or discussed with concepts in the tourism industry. Moreover, Fennell (2020) conducted a rough sketch on crises presenting challenges in the new age of disruption, and the need for radically different ways of providing services in the tourism industry. Personalised, interactive, real-time tours (PIRTs) were presented as an example of the proposed different model of service provision. The author recommended more intensive investigation of this proposed model both conceptually and methodologically. This study aims to entirely focus on PIRTs kind of virtual travel experiences.

In terms of societal relevance, this study is focusing on an aspect that has affected everyone globally. The issue of the COVID-19 crisis is seen to have caused major changes in all sectors in the economy, and the most visible is travel. Travel is an integral part of everyday life that is enjoyed by all. However, it is now being threatened by this devastating crisis. One of the aims of this study is to present the consumer value of virtual travel experiences so that others can find the usefulness of this type of experience at a time when they cannot travel comfortably to any destination of their choice.

1.6 The Structure of Thesis

The next chapter, which is my theoretical framework, will review relevant literature in connection to my research aim. Disruptive innovation theory and Holbrook's consumer value will be applied to the rest of the thesis. This will be followed by a methods chapter whereby I will present and justify my methodological considerations. In the fourth chapter, I will present my findings through an analysis. In the fifth chapter, I will discuss how my analysis has addressed my research questions and will conclude on how the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a disruptive force to the nature of travel in the tourism industry.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Chapter Overview

The COVID-19 crisis has caused tourism companies to consider a new business model which is built around modern technology, that is, virtual travel experiences. The way in which Airbnb has disrupted the traditional accommodation sector as described in Guttentag (2015) is equivalent to how the pandemic has disrupted physical travel through the integration of virtual travel experiences. This section will explore this situation by focusing on concepts such as disruptive innovation theory and its limitation, the double-edged nature of disruptive innovation, challenges faced by a disruptive product and lastly the consumer value of a disruptive product will be assessed coupled with a look at the difference between virtual travel and physical travel.

2.2 Disruptive Innovation Theory

Clayton Christensen developed and shared the theory of disruptive innovation in his book titled the Innovator's Dilemma in 1997. It generally pinpoints the failure of well managed companies when confronted with certain types of market and technological change. This failure occurs because the very management practices that have allowed them to become industry leaders also makes it extremely difficult for them to develop the disruptive technologies that ultimately steal away their markets. This is the gist of the book, that is, the dilemma.

This sound management practices are biased towards listening sagaciously to the customers, aggressively investing in new/sustaining technologies for better customer products, targeting larger markets rather than smaller ones and seeking higher margins. Christensen emphasises that these practices are only appropriate situationally, and carefully developed a set of rules from the research and analysis of innovative successes and failures in the disk drive, excavator, steel and auto industries. These rules are what Christensen termed as principles of disruptive technology, which indicates that good companies always fail when their managers either ignore or choose to fight these principles. They include companies dependent on customers and investors for resources, small markets do not solve the growth needs of large companies, markets that do not exist cannot be analyzed and technology supply may not equal market demand.

Christensen explains that disruptive technologies are distinctly different from sustaining technologies that are mostly focused on by the established companies. Disruptive technologies tend to completely change the value proposition in the market. They almost always offer lower performance in terms of the attributes that the mainstream customers care about when they first appear in the market. Still, disruptive technologies have other attributes such as being cheaper, smaller, simpler and more convenient to use that only a few customers value. Therefore, they instead open new markets. In the long run with experience and sufficient investment, the developers of disruptive technologies will always improve their product's performance and eventually take over the older markets (Christensen, 1997).

This has been considered as one of the most influential business ideas out there, as it is considered useful by businesses. It has also been widely used by numerous authors (e.g. Weeks, 2015; Logue, 2019; Denning, 2016; Chulu, 2015; Tabbah & Maritz, 2019; Si & Chen, 2020; Schmidt & Druehl, 2008; Vecchiato, 2017) in attempts to understand the theory of disruptive innovation through analysis and discussions. This theory has also been linked or applied to various phenomena or concepts. For instance, low-cost carrier models in the airline industry in Gemici & Alpkın (2015), water technology in O'Callaghan, et al. (2020), hospitality and tourism context with examples such as Airbnb, Uber, Eatwith and Vayable in Adeyinka-Ojo & Abdullah (2019), rural tourism in Hjalager (2014), Airbnb novel business model in Guttentag (2015), free guided/walking tours in Copenhagen organized by Sandeman New Europe in Meged & Zillinger (2018), South African mobile phone money transfer non-adoption mystery in Chulu (2015), the legal world including legal services, law school and legal education in Pistone & Horn (2016), the evolution of technology in the United States sound recorded music industry in Coccia (2020) and the disruptive innovation of Go-Jek's service provision in Suseno (2018). Surely, this is a theory that holds a firm basis in both the research and business world. Moreover, it is evident that this theory has an irrevocable link in the service field.

2.2.1 The limitation of Disruptive Innovation Theory

The previous section expounded on the fundamental concept of disruptive innovation theory as developed by Clayton Christensen. For sure, it is a theory that is famous and widely used by many but it still does have its limitations.

The term disruptive innovation is often misunderstood, and has been used loosely in different situations or contexts. This is because the term is not well defined or the boundaries are not

clearly outlined which has led to many using the term subjectively (Danneels, 2004; Tellis, 2006; Markides, 2006). This is a dangerous situation as most innovation will be incorrectly considered as disruptive innovation when it is not. The fact that the theory's core concepts have been widely misunderstood and its basic tenets frequently misapplied (Denning, 2016), has led to the application of so many irrelevant situations that makes it seem rather confusing than concise and accurate (Si & Chen, 2020).

Clearly, the over-using and misusing of the term disruptive innovation has reached a point where it has lost its meaning. There is a definite need to define disruptive innovation (O'Callaghan, et al., 2020). It is necessary to clearly classify both the basic concept of the theory and its real connotations so that people can correct previous misunderstanding, prevent the misusing, and identify the real implications of the concept of disruptive innovation. The goal of the stipulated definition is to ensure that the term is given a specific meaning for a specific argument/purpose in order to be used in the right context (Markides, 2006; Schmidt & Druehl, 2008; Si & Chen, 2020).

There are various authors that have tried to give their own definitions to the concept of disruptive innovation to reduce this limitation of misunderstanding. For instance, Schmidt & Druehl (2008), offered an alternate terminology and complementary framework for the easily misconstrued term. On a positive note, Clayton Christensen has also worked on developing and advancing the theory from time to time. For example, when the theory was developed, it was initially termed as disruptive technology but due to the arguments against the theory, Christensen (2006) decided to no longer label this phenomenon as that but instead as disruptive innovation. The term disruptive technologies evoked a technology problem when it is supposed to be a business model problem. He also wrote another book, that is, Christensen & Raynor (2003) to indicate the same replacement in order to broaden its applicability. This broader concept not only involves disruptions in technology but also other aspects such as products, services and business models (Schmidt & Druehl, 2008; Weeks, 2015; Si & Chen, 2020).

Despite the limitation, one cannot argue about the impact that this theory has had in management research and on business practice. This theory played a key role in reigniting debate within academia on the difficulties of incumbent firms to respond to discontinuous technological changes (Vecchiato, 2017). Si & Chen (2020) also mentioned that this theory has become one of the most important theories in the field of entrepreneurship and

innovation, as it has engendered a significant impact on entrepreneurship and innovation practices. This theory has predictive validity while providing important value in guiding innovation practices. Regardless of the considerable issues raised beforehand, the framework of disruptive innovation has proven to be a powerful lens for examining certain technological advances (Weeks, 2015; Si & Chen, 2020).

2.2.2 The Double-Edged Nature of Disruptive Innovation

The previous section has already highlighted the theory of disruptive innovation and its limitations. The central focus of this theory is disruptive innovation, which exhibits both positive and negative traits.

At the business level, companies that adopt disruptive innovation often use new technologies and/or business models while replacing archaic ways of doing business thus creating new demands, new competitors and new ways of doing business (Suseno, 2018). This has always been the positive side of disruptive innovation as it brings in a fresh perspective to how a business is operated or conducted while being considered new and attractive for customers. However, this has a downside. Guttentag (2015) observed this phenomenon through the use of Airbnb as an example of disruptive innovation. He stated how disruptive business models are always based on new technology that often outpaces their relevant legislation and consequently encounters issues associated with general legality. Airbnb is a good example of such a disruptive business model that is surrounded by legal issues in terms of illegal short term rentals and tax obligations. In line with this, Logue (2019) stated that the development of disruptive models has its challenges such as the issue of liability for guests and hosts in an Airbnb outlet coupled with breaches of government regulations, that is, the conditions on renters regarding subletting their apartments. Airbnb's growth since 2008 to the now established global accommodation provider via an online platform has prompted numerous legal battles notably in New York City. In addition, Berlin with local governments and regulators and also the hotel industry. For sure, the operations of companies such as Airbnb and Uber challenges the backbone of established welfare models such as national legislation and tax systems (Meged & Zillinger, 2018).

Disruptive innovation has a profound effect on other businesses. For instance, Tabbah & Maritz (2019) pointed out that while disruptive innovation brings desirable impacts to some firms, it could also have massive destructive effects on others. There is always a threat posed by a disruptive innovation which the incumbent firms often fail to recognize. It is critically

important for managers to be able to recognize a disruptive innovation when they see one as it entails outright destruction among other suppliers in the same market. For instance, it may lead to damage in stakeholder investment, possible displacement of human capital that is employed in these firms, damage on the company and its value and in the end closure of the competing enterprises (Schmidt & Druehl, 2008; Hjalager, 2014; Tabbah & Maritz, 2019). Undoubtedly, one cannot deny the powerful transformational impact that a disruptive innovation possesses on others.

At the workforce level, the influence of technological disruptions is indisputable as it has the ability to do away with certain jobs, reinvent others and also create new roles that require new skill and knowledge. In fact, one of the perils of disruptive innovation as evidenced in the tourism and hospitality industry is that it increases the rate of unemployment due to lack of required digital employability skills (Rebitzer, 2015; Sousa & Rocha, 2019). In some instances this could be true, however there are some cases that point to how disruptive innovation can be used in the best of interest for employment purposes. As a matter of fact, disruptive innovation can be used to increase job opportunities or better yet improve the working condition of the employees. In agreement with this, Ulen (2020) argued that disruptive technology does not always destroy jobs. The technological change might actually increase the number of jobs instead.

This thesis is focused on looking at virtual travel experiences as an example of disruptive innovation. There are numerous examples of virtual tours that are now being encouraged and offered by the local people or local guides in the destination or activity of interest (see ToursByLocals, 2021; Footprints of London, 2014; Urban Adventures, n.d.; withlocals live, 2021; The Tour Guy, 2020). Fennell (2020) remarked that as the popularity of virtual travel experiences that are personalised, interactive and real time improves, the potential to employ many more guides in the same location becomes a distinct possibility increasing the number of jobs and economic impact for local communities. For sure, disruptive innovation may displace some jobs or decrease the income earning potential of others. However, it has also created opportunities for the creation of different jobs and more disbursement of income to other individuals such as Uber drivers and Airbnb hosts for instance (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019).

At the customer level, the technological transformation in disruptive innovation is allowing customers to have new and different experiences. Tabbah & Maritz (2019) pointed out that

disruptive innovation creates a new dimension of value that was not available in the existing established product or business model. In line with this, Hjalager (2014) also stated that disruptive innovations constellate the customer value in entirely original ways, and this has led to customers' needs being suddenly fulfilled in new ways that were not previously thought of. For sure, disruptive innovation changes the performance metrics or consumer expectations in a market by providing radically new functionality, discontinuous technical standards, or new forms of ownership (Nagy, et al., 2016).

For sure, the influence of disruptive innovation in the market cannot be ignored. Lorde & Joseph (2019) explained that disruptive products transform the market to the point of upending dominant incumbent firms. This is because this type of innovation introduces different product features that were of no or little value before, and this leads to a change in the basis of competition (Gemici & Alpkan, 2015). Shang, et al. (2020) revealed the evolutionary process of opening up a new market and/or expanding the new market through the use of a disruptive green innovation example, that is, the use of an electric bicycle in China. In the end, disruptive innovation targets those without an option to be customers and these are the first consumers of disruptive products (Ulen, 2020). This cannot be further from the truth as the whole world is currently facing the pandemic crisis which has led to physical travel being restricted in numerous destinations. Therefore, people have no other choice but to travel the world virtually.

In essence, the double-edged nature of disruptive innovation can be clearly viewed from its impact on numerous actors namely businesses, the workforce and the customers as previously observed. Unquestionably, disruptive innovation usually adopts a completely different business model that must not only be sustainable from an economic perspective, but also be consistent with existing market realities, customer expectations, and competitive pressures (Si & Chen, 2020). The current market reality is that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has led to occurrences such as travel restrictions and COVID-19 related fear. Surely, the development of virtual travel experiences at this time is consistent with the market reality.

2.3 The consumer value of a disruptive product

Evidently, disruptive products possess its own set of attributes that exemplifies its own distinct set of benefits. These sets of benefits are what is considered as the consumer value of the disruptive product in this study. Fundamentally, the consumer value is an interactive, relativistic, preference experience, and it consists of eight values. These include efficiency, excellence, status, esteem, play, aesthetics, ethics and lastly spirituality as developed by Holbrook (1999). This study will be focused on identifying the distinct set of benefits of a disruptive product, that is, virtual travel experiences while analysing it using the typology of consumer value as shown below.

Table 1 A Typology of Consumer Value

		<i>Extrinsic</i>	<i>Intrinsic</i>
Self-oriented	Active	EFFICIENCY (O/L, Convenience)	PLAY (Fun)
	Reactive	EXCELLENCE (Quality)	AESTHETICS (Beauty)
Other-oriented	Active	STATUS (Success, Impression Management)	ETHICS (Virtue, Justice, Morality)
	Reactive	ESTEEM (Reputation, Materialism, Possessions)	SPIRITUALITY (Faith, Ecstasy, Sacredness, Magic)

Figure 3: The typology of consumer value

Source: Holbrook (1999)

Each value will be briefly discussed in order to get an overview of Holbrook’s typology of consumer value.

Efficiency

The value of efficiency is extrinsic, self-oriented and active. It is measured as a ratio of outputs to inputs with the common denominator being time. In general, convenience is the fundamental concept of efficiency, which is a relation of the output to the input. It is important to note that time is perceived in a situational manner as we all view time differently

(Holbrook, 1999). For instance, one enjoys the convenience of a car as it saves one the time they would have otherwise spent walking to their place of work.

Excellence

Excellence is extrinsic, reactive and self-oriented. This value consists of an appreciation of an object or a treasured experience for its capacity to accomplish some goal or to perform some kind of function. This strongly relates to the concept of satisfaction and quality. The reactive aspect of excellence is what sets it apart from the value of efficiency. One does not actively seek out an experience or test the object in question. Instead, one just reactively admires the quality and satisfaction potential of the experience or the object (Holbrook, 1999). For instance, one can build a house with ten bedrooms just to admire the architectural design but would not be able to sleep in all of those bedrooms.

Status

Status is extrinsic, active and other-oriented. The value of status is where a consumption behaviour is actively manipulated in order to communicate a certain message to others, with the aim to improve one's own success. As a result of this, Holbrook defines this value as political as it can be used as a tool or symbol to project a certain image and to have a certain effect on others (Holbrook, 1999). For instance, one can use a certain object or go through a certain experience in order to signal to others that one is knowledgeable about sustainability or sustainable practices.

Esteem

The value of esteem is extrinsic, reactive and other-oriented. This is closely interlinked to status, but its nature is more reactive. A consumption experience, lifestyle or objects of consumption are appreciated for their ability to represent a certain prestige, thus building one's public image or reputation among others (Holbrook, 1999). For example, one would always get the latest Apple iPhone device to keep up with the trends and to show one's own prestige or social position.

Play

The value of play is intrinsic, self-oriented and active. This value is actively sought and enjoyed for its own sake. It typically involves having fun, and is strongly situational as the same activity in different contexts can be either work or fun (Holbrook, 1999). For instance,

one can keep on playing with jigsaw puzzle pieces for hours on end just to enjoy the process of completing the puzzle pieces.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is intrinsic, reactive and self-oriented. A consumption experience or an object is valued or appreciated without regard to any further practical purpose that might serve as a means to any other end (Holbrook, 1999). A wood carved sculpture can be appreciated for its own sake, for example, its beauty. The entailed value is thus an aesthetic one. However, as soon as the same object is appreciated for its practical use, for instance, as a weapon when a thief breaks into the house, the value stops being aesthetic and becomes something else (e.g. convenience).

Ethics

The value of ethics is intrinsic, other-oriented and active. Ethics is about doing something for the sake of others. This value consists of three concepts, namely, the natural, the right and the good. The natural consists of a person's character, the right is prescribed by deontology that is determined by various principles that are embodied in numerous rules, laws and duties. The good is reflected by teleology that is concerned with the consequences/results of a certain behaviour or action. During consumption these three concepts can be combined subjectively and result in virtue, justice and morality (Holbrook, 1999). For example, a person's character can push one to engage in actions that enable them to follow the rules on the road such as stopping the car when the traffic light turns red.

Spirituality

Spirituality is intrinsic, reactive and other-oriented. This entails an acceptance, adoption, appreciation, admiration or adoration of an Other (a deity, some magical force or superior power of any kind). In this case, a consumption experience is appreciated for its own sake and it is an end in itself (Holbrook, 1999). For instance, one may choose to do yoga on numerous occasions to renew or develop their inner being or inner self.

Holbrook's framework is considered as one of the most effective tools in conducting an analysis on a consumption experience. However, it is important to note some important aspects. Firstly, the eight values that are described in Holbrook's framework often present 'fuzzy or blurred' distinctions as the differences among the values are sometimes not so clear.

There is still a 'grey area' in the dichotomy (Holbrook, 1999, p. 188). For instance, Wagner (1999) conducted a study on aesthetic value in fashion and concluded that it involves both the intrinsic and extrinsic value. Thus, aesthetic value in fashion is both self-oriented and other-oriented, and that it is both active and reactive. Secondly, Solomon (1999) and Smith (1999) pointed out that a product or an experience can impart different types of value as identified in the typology of consumer value. For instance, a paper clip can be considered both of efficient (holding papers together) and aesthetic value (its undulant shape) (Holbrook, 1999). Thirdly, Holbrook's framework is not exhaustive as there is the possibility of creating additional or alternative dimensions of value. For instance, Smith (1999) questioned the details within the framework and its theoretical basis. He raised the question on the possibility of adding other frameworks such as an affective dimension, an economic dimension, a tangible/intangible dimension or a physical/mental dimension.

2.3.1 Challenges faced by a disruptive product

As earlier stipulated, this thesis will focus on the tourism industry by exploring the virtual travel experiences as an example of a disruptive product. It is worth noting that the tourism and hospitality industry has had its fair share of disruptive products such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing in digital accommodations, Uber and Liftshare in digital transportation, Eatwith and Feastly in digital food sharing economy services and lastly Vayable and ToursByLocals in digital travel planning and activities. They not only present benefits to consumers but have also transformed the market they belong to. For instance, the rise of online travel agencies (OTAs) such as Expedia, Orbitz and Travelocity reduced the number of physical travel agents (Adeyinka-Ojo & Abdullah, 2019; Guttentag, 2015).

This influential and transformative quality that disruptive products possess does not guarantee it a smooth journey once in the market. In fact, the disruptive products tend to underperform with regards to the prevailing or dominant products' key performance attributes/dimension as they lack the traditionally favoured features (Reinhardt & Gurtner, 2018; Govindarajan & Kopalle, 2006; Guttentag, 2015). Disruptive innovation introduces a very different package of attributes from the one mainstream customers historically valued, and they often perform far worse along one or two dimensions that are particularly important to those customers (Bower & Christensen, 1995). For instance, low cost airlines such as Ryanair developed by offering cheaper fares in exchange for a lowered range of services. This includes no free food, no entertainment and minimal financial responsibility when it

comes to delays. These are services that have been appreciated by mainstream flight consumers (Lockett & Thompson, 2010). Additionally, Airbnb which is also attributed to the disruptive innovation concept appears to underperform in comparison to traditional hotel performance attributes such as service quality assurance, security, cleanliness and the check in and out process (Guttentag, 2015; Guttentag & Smith, 2017).

However, all is not lost. Yes, the new product is de-rated, that is, it underperforms with regards to the primary performance dimension that is most appreciated by mainstream customers of the old product. Nonetheless, the new product may perform better on an alternate dimension and thus open up a new market (Schmidt & Druehl, 2008; Lorde & Joseph, 2019; Gemici & Alpkan, 2015). They introduce performance attributes that marginal or new segments will value such as appearing cheap, convenient and simpler. Indeed, they do bring advantages to the market which might eventually be accepted, although often delayed (Christensen, 1997; Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Hjalager, 2014). It should be highly noted that disruptive innovation is a timely process through which the market outsiders target or serve a niche market segment in its early stages of the product's life cycle (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019; Vecchiato, 2017). In due course, the disruptive product improves and satisfies the demand of the mainstream market that was initially not interested (Roy, 2018).

The second challenge faced by a disruptive product is that it is not initially popular among the current market when introduced or launched. Gans (2016) highlighted that demand uncertainty is associated with disruptive innovation. This occurrence is the norm with the launch of any type of innovative product in the market whether it is disruptive or not. In the business world, there is no 100% assurance of what will happen once a company launches a new product. However, there is a clear pattern that is often associated with disruptive products when once presented that works to their disadvantage. This is that they typically present a different package of performance attributes, which from the outset are not valued by the existing customers (Bower & Christensen, 1995).

The third challenge faced by a disruptive product is related to the incumbents disregarding nature to it. One would assume that all the leading companies would immediately accept and adopt the disruptive product in their fields/domain but it is instead the opposite. In general, disruptive products appear financially unattractive for the established companies or the incumbents to pursue. This is relative to its profit model and the other investments that are competing for the organisation's resources. The potential revenue from the discernible

markets are small, and it is often difficult to project how big the markets for the disruptive product will be over the long term (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Christensen, 2006; Si & Chen, 2020). As earlier stated the disruptive product is not very popular among the established market when launched.

Most studies have indicated how the incumbents would not give priority to the disruptive innovation projects in practice, because these projects do not seem to be consistent with economic logic. Most of the incumbents have their existing business models as well as customers, in the case of possessing limited resources and alternative investment options, investing in disruptive innovations may not be their preferred scheme (Christensen, 2006; Tellis, 2006; Si & Chen, 2020; Bower & Christensen, 1995). This incident of established firms not necessarily taking the initiative to adopt disruptive products because they do not seem to conform to economic logic, forms a glaring contrast to the important role of disruptive innovation that is highlighted in the theory (Si & Chen, 2020). It is worth noting that disruptive innovation is rooted in economics, and that disruptive innovation was intrinsically a domain of economists who focused primarily on the analysis of economic growth and exploitation of wealth (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019). It is therefore ironic to see the established companies that have the financial means avoiding this type of innovation in the beginning. As previously shown the impact of disruptive innovation on the market is paramount as it involves products, services or approaches that transform existing markets or create new ones (Gemici & Alpkhan, 2015). Therefore, it is of best interest to pay attention to this kind of innovation once it enters the market.

From the company's perspective, these large incumbent players find it difficult to introduce a lower cost, lower functionality version of what they already provide to capture the lower end of the market which is often deemed to be less profitable, or not large enough to be significant. This situation is what is regarded as the conundrum as explained in the Innovator's Dilemma (O'Callaghan, et al., 2020). The large companies opt to overlook disruptive products until they become more attractive in terms of profit as it initially does not satisfy the demands of even the high end of the market (Logue, 2019). The disruptive product is seen to appeal to the lower end of the market or instead completely creates a new market. This low-end market is what is unappealing to the established firms which are content on focusing on their more profitable markets and therefore continue marginally improving their products through sustaining innovations (Lorde & Joseph, 2019; Guttentag, 2015). Even

though disruptive innovation theory suggests that a disruptive product should enjoy limited initial popularity, thus leading to it appearing as unappealing to the leading companies since its initial market is limited in size and profit margins. Nonetheless, the disruptive product improves with time and increasingly appeals to a greater number of customers and finally enters the mainstream market (Guttentag, 2015).

The challenges that face the disruptive product seems to come from all angles as seen above. For sure, it can be nerve-wrecking to launch or specialise with the disruptive product. However, this type of innovation always manages to overcome its setbacks and later on disrupt the whole market, thus becoming accepted by the mainstream customers or establishing its own niche or new market while also throwing out the incumbents that do not specialise in it. Evidently, there is always a future for a disruptive product despite the challenges faced by it. In fact, Guttentag (2015) outlined that Airbnb, an example of a disruptive product, has continually introduced improvements in areas where it underperforms, just as disruptive innovation predicts. Therefore, even though the product lacks in some qualities, there is always room for continuous improvement. Over time, the disruptive product improves on its quality or its primary dimension to the extent that it eventually appeals to the very mainstream customers that initially shunned it. This is done by providing solutions capable of handling more complex problems that are simpler, more affordable or more convenient than the dominant solutions that the incumbent providers offer (Schmidt & Druehl, 2008; Pistone & Horn, 2016).

The disruptive product in focus in this thesis is the virtual travel experiences, and of course as is the norm with a disruptive product it also has its challenges. In fact, Choi, et al., (2018) pointed out that a virtual travel experience reflects both positive and negative experiential attributes. For instance, the feeling of distraction/dizziness or disorientation as one of the reflected negative affection when exploring a virtual environment. Moreover, Fennell (2020) stated that one of the major challenges that impacts virtual travel would be that information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure is likely in place in most urban environments, however, there will be more significant challenges in wilderness settings that do not have the infrastructure to allow transmission. Furthermore, success of such a model would necessitate the need for more ICT expertise in remote areas or regions.

Another concern is that the virtual experience might have the effect of making its viewers or consumers crave the real thing even more. The viewers might get motivated to experience the

physical travel more and not really appreciate the virtual experience. However, this depends on how one looks at this kind of situation. From a marketing point of view, the virtual experiences could be used as a vehicle to generate more visitation for attractions and destinations in the future (Fennell, 2020). Despite all the challenges mentioned above about a disruptive product and the virtual travel experience, it is clear that the process by which products made with potentially disruptive technology are able to meet the needs of all mainstream customers, will definitely take place over a period of time. As earlier noted, disruption is a process and not an event, and one should expect this process of disruption to unfold over a period of time (Roy, 2018) once they decide to launch a disruptive product. And once the disruptive product improves, it will become more appealing to a larger volume of consumers (Lorde & Joseph, 2019).

2.3.2 The difference between Virtual Travel and Physical Travel

Travel around the world was always carried out physically until the COVID-19 pandemic crisis arose. This free nature of physical travel was halted because of numerous factors related to COVID-19 such as COVID-19 related fear of infection and global travel restrictions as previously mentioned in the introduction section. As a result, numerous travel companies have started offering a different form of travel, that is, virtual travel experiences. Studies that focus on disruptive innovation theory always compare the disruptive product to its mainstream product and established customer base. Therefore, this section looks at the differences between virtual travel and physical travel. This will aid in furthering the understanding of the consumer value of virtual travel by picking out its different features when compared to physical travel. In this study, physical travel is considered as the mainstream activity with an established market force while virtual travel is the new activity that is acting as a disruptive force as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

Wagler & Hanus (2018) mentioned that it is not clear on how a 360° virtual tour could match up against being physically present at the location, but still it has some notable qualities. On one hand, physical presence allows for the most realistic and detailed experience as users can experience the tour with all of their senses, and must pay close attention to the environment to navigate. Nonetheless, this physical presence may also create negative user experiences and additional distractions due to bad weather, loud cars, or even being jostled in a crowd. The fact that physical travel experience can be affected by numerous factors such as the weather conditions can affect travellers enjoyment of the experience. On the other hand,

immersive 360° videos' controlled environment can help minimize distractions or negative experiences, but it requires the user to balance being in two locations at once (i.e in the room with the headset and in the location of the virtual tour).

With physical travel, one enjoys the feeling and excitement of leaving their homes behind to see, feel and experience the chosen destination, but with virtual travel one can tour the destination at the comfort of their seat at home. This does not offer the feeling of being presently there at the destination, taking photos and being basically spontaneous. However, numerous authors have argued that it is possible to get the feeling of being there with technology. A higher level of modality such as 3D virtual reality produces a stronger immersive user experience or the heuristic of being there (Choi, et al., 2018). Moreover, Ahn, et al. (2014) argued that immersive virtual environments allow individuals or tourists to see, hear and feel digital stimuli as if they were in the attraction site themselves.

Virtual travel experiences open up the possibility of visiting protected or impossible to visit sites such as historical sites and outer space. Furthermore, it creates the opportunity to make locations more accessible for those with physical impairments by visiting virtually (Wagler & Hanus, 2018).

Virtual travel products also have a preservation and personalization value. For instance, Guttentag (2010) pointed out that virtual travel products are a useful preservation tool as it has the potential to create virtual experiences that tourists may accept as substitutes for real visitation to the threatened sites. Therefore, the threatened sites can benefit from less visitation. Likewise, Hall & Williams (2020) identified that augmented reality offers flexibility and the potential to individualise tourism experiences, as well as the excitement and dynamism that stems from interactive technologies. Below is a table that showcases a summary of the differences between virtual travel experiences and physical travel experiences.

Category/Dimension	Virtual Travel Experience	Physical Travel Experience
The location of the travel experience	The experience happens at the comfort of one's home.	One must physically go to the attraction site for the experience.
The state of the travel environment	The experience occurs in a controlled environment thus leading to minimal distractions and negative experiences.	The experience occurs in an uncontrolled environment full of distractions that can lead to negative experiences e.g. getting lost or having your items stolen while travelling. The issue of pickpocketing is quite common in popular attractions with huge crowds.
Type of travel experience	The travel experience is realistically induced.	The travel experience is the most realistic.
Utilisation of human senses	Tourists do not use all human senses in the experience. This is only applicable to looking at a site or attraction virtually, as you cannot touch or smell anything at the attraction site. The only sense that you are using is sight and hearing.	Tourists use all the five human senses in the experience.
Travel cost	Most virtual travel experiences are free.	Physical travel is met with a varied scale of costs and expenses from the point of departure to the arrival point.
Type and nature of accessibility	There is unlimited accessibility. For instance, locations/sites that are not easy to visit physically are now easily reached. It is also accessible to those with limited mobility.	There is limited accessibility. One can only travel on the route allowed for tourists or is affordable. Not all of the sites or tourist activities are conducive for those with limited mobility.

Table 1: Virtual Travel Experience versus Physical Travel Experience

Source: Author

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter illustrates how data for this research will be gathered and analysed while describing the rationale behind it. The chapter will also address the research questions, sampling technique, method of analysis, ethical considerations, thought process in the choice of literature and a reflection of the research quality and limitation of my methods.

3.2 Research Strategy

In order to understand and explain how COVID-19 has forced travel companies to redefine their travel offers and the consumer value of virtual travel experiences to the tourists, I departed from a belief that allows subject interactions. As a researcher, I needed to be comfortable with multiple meanings, findings and reports (Stake, 2010). Bryman (2012) pinpointed that acceptable knowledge is one that follows a strategy that respects the differences between individuals and the objects of the natural sciences. This is the reason why the research was approached from an interpretive epistemological stance, which stresses on the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of the world by its participants. I wanted to grasp the subjective meaning of the social action of engaging in virtual travel experiences from the participant's view. In essence, the analysis and interpretation of the consumer value of virtual travel is as a result of seeing from a particular perspective, that is, the participant's view through the lens of disruptive innovation theory and Holbrook's consumer value typology.

Drawing from these two concepts, I departed from a belief that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors through social interaction which is in a state of constant revisions. This is aligned with the constructivism ontological orientation that enabled me as a researcher to focus on socially constructed views while presenting a specific version of social reality that centers on how global physical travel has been negatively impacted by the onset of the pandemic (Bryman, 2012).

Studies on disruptive innovation (see Christensen & Bower, 1996; Guttentag & Smith, 2017; Chulu, 2015; Sousa & Rocha, 2019; Shang, et al., 2020; Reinhardt & Gurtner, 2018; Gemici & Alpan, 2015; Alsos, et al., 2014; Suseno, 2018; Si & Chen, 2020; Roy, 2018;

O’Callaghan, et al., 2020; Lorde & Joseph, 2019; Adeyinka-Ojo & Abdullah, 2019) have been conducted under different methods including qualitative, quantitative and mixed method in order to fully understand this phenomenon and its impact. The common factor among the mentioned studies is their use of secondary data in their quest for understanding disruptive innovation under different contexts. In reality, too many studies under disruptive innovation have been using secondary data in analysing their findings, and there is the constant need for more studies on disruptive innovation to be conducted empirically. Despite some of the studies including methods such as interviews and online surveys, they still combine their results with desk research or secondary data.

Numerous authors (such as Alsos, et al., 2014; Chulu, 2015; Suseno, 2018; Coccia, 2020; Adeyinka-Ojo & Abdullah, 2019) have called upon future studies on disruptive innovation to be conducted empirically in order to get the perception of the study objects, better explain the behaviour of disruptive technologies in different markets and to empirically focus on the stakeholders in the hospitality and tourism industry so as to address the challenges and opportunities in the digital age. Such kinds of studies have contributed greatly by giving empirical support for further studies. In fact, Tabbah & Maritz (2019) specifically focused on developing a conceptual framework while using secondary data so that it can be used as a hypothesis for future possible empirical research.

I adopted a qualitative approach in this thesis, specifically an ethnographic approach based on three motives. Firstly, in order to fill up the gap in the methodology used in studies about disruptive innovation. As seen above, numerous studies based on disruptive innovation and its associated contexts are frequently analysed with secondary data, and there is a call for more studies to pursue this phenomenon empirically. Therefore, an ethnographic research was chosen as the methodology for this thesis as it is a significant qualitative empirical approach. Moreover, Li, et al. (2018) conducted bibliographic coupling of the literature related to disruptive technology and disruptive innovation and found that the most favourite issues or method of analysis for this kind of literature is human/consumer behaviour, case studies and empirical analysis. This further pushed me into conducting the study empirically by focusing on the consumer relationship with virtual travel under the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Secondly, this study adopted the qualitative approach as it conforms to the objective of the research as it is able to capture the individual’s point of view. In consequence, it is much

easier to capture the subjects' perspectives as compared to doing the research quantitatively (Silverman, 2013). Moreover, qualitative research places high importance on the understanding of the social world through attitudes, perceptions and experiences of the individual. In-depth open-ended interviews, which is the principal means of data collection in this research, represents one of the best possible ways in which to access the experiences, thoughts and opinions of the subjects in focus (Sheard, 2011, cited in Silverman, 2013).

Finally, using a qualitative inductive approach was the most suitable in supporting my line of reasoning in exploring the phenomenon in focus through the lens of disruptive innovation theory. Induction allows for the linkage of both theory and research, although it contains a deductive element too. This deductive element is evident from the way the collected data was analysed through the lens of disruptive innovation theory. Theory has always had an important value to the social researcher as it provides the foundation and rationale for the research being conducted, in addition to, a framework within which social phenomena can be understood and the research findings be interpreted (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, the literature on disruptive innovation theory formed the background of the study/literature and provided the main impetus for the interpretation of the findings.

3.3 Sampling Technique

The logic behind the sampling used in this thesis is on reaching a deeper understanding of my research objects. Therefore, I used a purposive sampling technique to sample travel companies and participants in a strategic way, so that those who are sampled are relevant to the two research questions posed in this thesis (Bryman, 2012). The criteria for travel companies to be included as a unit of analysis was a presentation of virtual travel experiences packages/products.

Twelve travel companies were picked in this thesis to clearly demonstrate how they are changing their physical travel products to more of virtual travel products as a result of the disruptive force of COVID-19 crisis. A level of saturation was reached after identifying this common pattern among all these companies offering varied virtual travel experiences. Moreover, a new app (Drive & Listen) that was fully developed as a result of the pandemic was added to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on the supply of virtual travel experiences. Likewise, a start-up company (Dobiison) was lastly added to the list as it detected this new need for virtual travel products as a result of the pandemic. In total, fourteen companies have been analysed in this thesis as they fully answer the first research

goal in two different ways. Firstly, the first twelve companies prove to be travel companies that have been offering physical travel experiences for some time before the pandemic arose, but are now developing and marketing more virtual travel experiences to their former physical tourists as well as the new virtual customers. The new app called Drive & Listen and the new company Dobiison illustrates how disruptive the COVID-19 crisis has affected the tourism industry as new business/company models focusing on virtual travel experiences are introduced into the market.

The criteria for the respondents to be included as a unit of analysis in this study was based on three factors. Firstly, their exposure to or experience with virtual travel, as this is how the consumer value of virtual travel experiences could be identified. Secondly, the respondents were selected because of their past physical travel experiences. This is because disruptive products are normally compared to the traditional or established products/market. Therefore, the respondents could successfully give a detailed account of what they appreciate in virtual travel as they would often compare their virtual experience to that of physical travel. Thirdly, the respondents were picked because they represent the most suitable study objects for virtual based on their ages. Nielsen (2016) conducted an online study of more than 8,000 consumers and found that adult consumers between 18-54 years are not only virtual reality enthusiasts but also feel most knowledgeable about virtual reality as well as other popular tech trends. This type of respondents would be the best to approach since the COVID-19 crisis is an unprecedented event with new technology-related ramifications in the tourism industry.

A total of fifteen respondents were recruited for the interviews through network. I understand that a higher number of respondents could have potentially offered more depth to the analysis. Still, this is qualitative research and more emphasis was placed on the personal experiences with virtual travel from a tourists' point of view. Additionally, I realized that I had reached the point of saturation considering the nature and extent of my research. In fact, Guest, et al. (2006) identified that data saturation in most research projects normally occurs at 12 interviews as the maximum variation has already been achieved.

3.4 Collection of Empirical Material

Since I departed from an inductive line of reasoning, I initiated the idea of this thesis by a set of observations. I noticed that more virtual travel products were being offered by travel companies, and quite calculatedly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of this, I wanted to make sense of this new finding by conducting an online ethnographic study on virtual

travel experiences through digital observation followed by interviews. As a societal phenomenon, my aim was to explore this from two perspectives (the supply side of travel companies through digital observations and secondly from the demand side of the tourists through in-depth open-ended interviews) as seen below.

3.4.1 Digital Observations

Based on the first research question, I reasoned that it was essential to show the travel companies that are now offering virtual travel experiences as a result of the pandemic. Careful attention was made to pinpoint the tour packages/products of the travel companies before and during COVID-19. This observation process started from the onset of the research formulation and took place for two months. Ethnography, the chosen methodology, proved to be conducive for this process to take place effectively as it reveals fascinating and practically relevant things about organisational routines (Silverman, 2013). Therefore, it was possible to detect the response of organisations, that is, the travel companies to their current state of the environment through repetitive and recognizable patterns. Pryke, et al. (2003) pointed out that ethnography pays close attention to social practices, that is, what people do as opposed to social discourses, that is, what people say. In essence, the digital observations proved to showcase the actual social practice of virtual travel experiences as provided by the travel companies. They are directly observable as it is what the travel companies are doing and not something that is of lip service.

3.4.1.1 Digital Observation Analysis

Different travel companies, that is, multiple actors were identified and their virtual travel products analysed through a certain process as shown in the figure below.

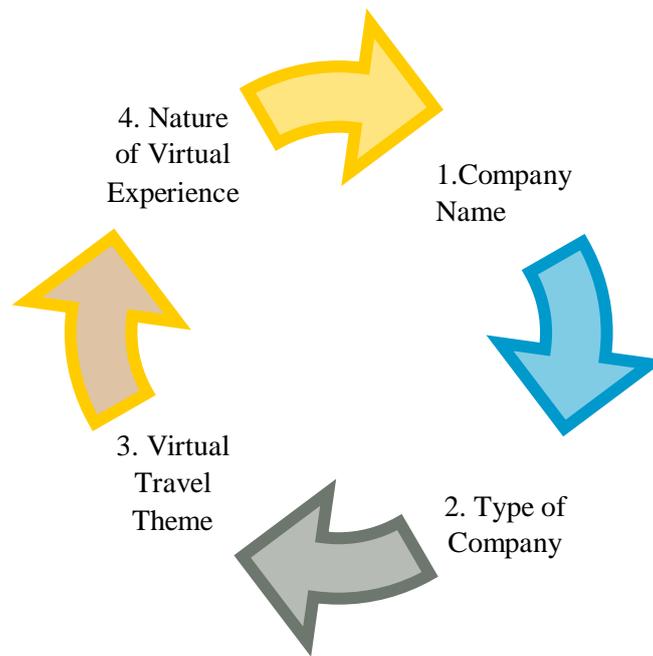


Figure 4: Digital Observation Analysis of Virtual Travel Products Supply

Source: Author

Firstly, the travel companies offering virtual travel experiences were identified from different online sources such as social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), company websites and media articles (e.g. Parkes, 2021) focused on virtual travel experiences. Secondly, the nature of the companies were assessed in order to identify which kind of business they were initially focused on before offering virtual travel products. This is a way to find out and show how COVID-19 crisis has forced them to shift or offer alternate travel products. Thirdly, the theme or the specialization of virtual travel experience was identified for each company through direct observation and attendance in some of the free virtual tours. The second and third process shows the before and after COVID-19 effect to the travel business operation of the travel companies. Lastly, the nature of the virtual experience was evaluated based on where the virtual tour is presented, the person presenting the virtual experience, the type of presentation and the cost implications. This was interesting for the analysis as it was fascinating to pick out the features that are in focus and presented by the travel companies. This was later linked with the opinions and experiences of the respondents from the interviews.

3.4.1.2 Ethical Considerations for Digital Observation

There was no specific ethical consideration that was taken into account in relation to the digital observations. The travel companies' websites and the different social media platforms that I did my observation on were all accessible to the general public. This is the reason why the ethics of privacy and anonymity was not taken into account.

3.4.2 In-depth Open-ended Interviews

Based on the second research question, I reasoned that using the interviews was the best method to get personal experiences with virtual travel. By using in-depth open-ended interviews as a method, I was able to get the real raw thoughts or views of the respondents on their virtual travel experiences. Although a more structured type of interview is suitable when the researcher is trying to standardize the results (Bryman, 2012). My aim was to reach a deeper understanding of an individual experience rather than just comparing and generalising results. Attention was not only paid to what was said but also on how it was said, that is, the emotions and feelings of the respondents when talking about both virtual travel and physical travel. The open-ended questions were based on a specific set of inquiries that attempted to find out what is the consumer value of virtual travel experiences.

3.4.2.1 Designing In-depth Open-ended Interviews

A short list of questions was prepared to conduct a pilot test interview with the first of my respondents, in order to increase the effectiveness of the interview guide. The pilot test allowed me to view how the answers were being responded to and if it truly answers the research aim. Later on, necessary adjustments were made to the questions (see interview guide in appendix 1) and my mode of asking questions.

My aim was to avoid leading the interviewees as well as allowing them to be free and open. The respondents were made to feel comfortable by being asked to share their personal travel experiences so that the interview seemed more of a pleasurable chat between friends. The goal of the interview was to hear what the respondents felt about virtual travel and where this experience stands when compared to their past physical travel experiences. Attention was paid to not only what was being said but also on how it was said. I made a point of deciphering how they were talking about both physical travel and virtual travel experiences

that they have been engaging in. Therefore, specific feelings and emotions were pinpointed in the interviews, and will be later linked to the consumer value of virtual travel.

3.4.2.2 Conducting In-depth Open-ended Interviews

All the interviews were carried out in English and in a virtual manner due to COVID-19. The majority of the interviews were conducted through a video call on Zoom, four of the respondents preferred to avoid disclosing their face and were therefore conducted on a voice call on the phone. The maximum and minimum duration of the interviews were 111 min and 36 minutes respectively (see table below). This variation occurred as a result of factors such as repetition of the experience account, unexpectedly getting straight to the point of what was required to be shared or having more of an engaging interview about the topic (Lartey, 2021).

Name	Interview Date	Duration	Age	Gender	Occupation	Country	Virtual Travel Experience of Respondent
Respondent no.1	13/04/21	111 mins.	66 years	Male	Retired	United Kingdom (UK) - Scotland	Destination travel videos on Facebook and YouTube.
Respondent no. 2	13/04/21	36 mins.	27 years	Female	Student	Georgia	Virtual tours on Facebook and travel documentaries on TV.
Respondent no. 3	14/04/21	43 mins.	25 years	Female	Student	South Korea	Travel vlogs on YouTube and virtual exhibitions and collections of museums and art galleries.
Respondent no. 4	14/04/21	37 mins.	21 years	Female	Student	United States (USA)	Extreme travel activities such as bungee jumping and tightrope walking on Facebook and Instagram. Food focused travel videos on BuzzFeed.
Respondent no. 5	16/04/21	43 mins.	32 years	Female	Student	Rwanda	Travel videos from different channels such as Expedia and Touropia on YouTube. Virtual tour of hotels and other attraction sites such as nature reserves and national parks in their websites.
Respondent no. 6	16/04/21	38 mins.	27 years	Male	Student	Ghana	Online city tour on withlocals.com

							Virtual driving experience across global cities in Drive & Listen app. City tours on YouTube.
Respondent no. 7	16/04/21	43 mins.	24 years	Female	Student	Ireland	Travel destination and lifestyle vlogs on YouTube.
Respondent no. 8	17/04/21	42 mins.	25 years	Female	Working	Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	Destination themed videos on YouTube. Virtual driving experience in Drive & Listen app.
Respondent no. 9	17/04/21	54 mins.	26 years	Female	Student	Indonesia	City virtual tours as accessed from links on WhatsApp travel groups. Destination themed videos on YouTube.
Respondent no. 10	19/04/21	42 mins.	23 years	Female	Student	Kenya	Travel vlogs on YouTube. Travel videos on Instagram.
Respondent no. 11	19/04/21	38 mins.	49 years	Female	Working	Kenya	Wildlife safari travel documentaries on TV and YouTube.
Respondent no. 12	20/04/21	46 mins.	54 years	Male	Working	Denmark	Travel documentaries on TV related to wildlife and local culture. Travel videos on YouTube.
Respondent no. 13	22/04/21	39 mins.	50 years	Female	Student	China	Virtual tour of museums from their respective websites and on different social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook.
Respondent no. 14	23/04/21	46 mins.	27 years	Male	Student	Yemen	Virtual tour of museums on their websites. Travel related videos aimed at activities, wildlife and attraction points on YouTube.
Respondent no. 15	23/04/21	41 mins.	26 years	Female	Working	Pakistan	Travel content related to food, culture and scenic spots on different social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram.

Table 2: Overview of the respondents

Source: Author

3.4.2.3 Transcription and Analysis of the results

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I decided to do the transcription myself as it allowed for a greater recall of the events that transpired during the interviews. This allowed for a more thorough and detailed examination of the findings, as it brought me closer to the data. The transcription process produced a document of roughly 150 pages thus leading to the need of a more structured analysis of the results. Key themes started to become identifiable during the transcription stage and in the latter interviews. Several categories were identified that were related to the second research question. This was built on codes that were identified in the transcripts. They provided a sound basis for a theoretical understanding of the data which was used to make a theoretical contribution to the literature relating to the research focus (Bryman, 2012). Throughout this process, I took into account the main concepts of consumer value while linking it to the basic tenets in disruptive innovation theory that centered on the benefits of a disruptive product. This directed me towards developing a line of reasoning to support the aim and the theory of my study.

Ultimately, the process proceeded through a thematic analysis after several examination processes. These themes were identified during the creation of nodes in the NVivo12 Plus software. While this method in research fails to be identified as an approach to analysis (Bryman, 2012), the structure and order in how themes were identified and discussed have been important. I managed to thematise my data by using scrutiny techniques such as repetitions, similarities and differences as recommended by Ryan & Bernard (2003). I have used the Framework approach as illustrated by Bryman (2012), to organise and synthesise data. As shown in Table 3, focus has been on identifying and managing themes and its subsequent subthemes in order to gain a better overview and flow in analysis.

Theme 1: Convenience

	Time Value	Ease of Use	Inclusiveness	Price	Pre-plan Assistance
Respondent no. 1					
Respondent no. 2					
Respondent no. 3					
Respondent no. 4					
Respondent no. 5					

Table 3: The Framework Approach to Thematic Analysis

Source: Author

3.4.2.4 Ethical considerations for Interviews

My study ensured the anonymity of the respondents. I obtained informed consent before any recording took place. All the respondents were given a description of the study and how I planned on using the data. I expressed gratitude before and after the interviews for their participation in order to make them feel valued and to also be more open and participate voluntarily (Bryman, 2012). All the interviews were conducted on Zoom in order to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection.

3.5 Thought Process in the Choice of Literature

The aim of this study resulted from an inspiration generated while attending a virtual session in Lund University and through personal travel experience. The problem in mind was in regards to the pandemic and how it influenced travel for everyone. This intellectual curiosity led to an interest in literature that led to a back and forth iterative of taking notes on this event, confirming whether it is a big phenomenon by identifying companies offering virtual travel experiences, refining the research question and seeing new ties to explore in the literature. With time key precedents were identified and appropriate citations were mapped out (Stake, 2010).

Since I departed from the epistemological orientation of interpretivism, the review of literature was based on enriching human discourse by generating understanding rather than by accumulating knowledge. The literature review was a means of gaining an initial impression of the topic area that I intended on understanding through research (Bryman, 2012). The pertinent literature that was reviewed in chapter 2 was retrieved from three main channels namely LUBsearch at Lund University, the online library at University of Glasgow and Google scholar. I had access to the first two channels because I am an Erasmus Mundus student. I then used phrases such as “disruptive innovation and disruptive technology”, “virtual travel”, “COVID-19 and pandemic”, “crisis and crisis management” in the search commands of the above channels.

After relevant literature was identified, the concept mapping began. This was made much easier and effective for retrieval purposes through the use of Zotero, a free reference management software. The literature was mapped mainly into two themes, that is, the crisis

framing and disruptive innovation framing. The crisis management literature review provided a sound basis of understanding the disruptive force of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the literature review of disruptive innovation theory served as a basis to understand the underlying factors facing the disruptive product, that is, the virtual travel experiences. In this process, it became evident that a disruptive product has both benefits and challenges. This thesis focused on addressing these benefits by analysing it using the consumer value typology found in Holbrook (1999).

3.6 Research Quality Consideration

In order to ensure credibility and quality in the thesis, I used the technique of triangulation as a means of increasing content validity, hence generating greater confidence in the findings (Deacon, et al., 1998; Bryman, 2012). In truth, using triangulation as a strategy helped to promote the qualitative research validity of the paper. Information and conclusion was cross-checked through the use of personal observation and interviews. This technique allowed me to draw coherence between the findings and conclusion as different angles of virtual travel experiences were explored from both observation and interviews, thus providing a variation of results (Johnson, 1997). For sure it did help me as a researcher to recognise that things need more explanation than what was once first thought of (Stake, 2010).

Piloting was also done to ensure that the research instrument as a whole functioned well. A short list of questions was prepared to conduct a pilot test interview with the first of my respondents, in order to increase the effectiveness of the interview guide by identifying problem areas. The pilot test allowed me to determine whether the questions were interpreted correctly and if it truly answers the research aim. Later on, necessary adjustments were made to the questions, its flow and my mode of asking questions (Bryman, 2012).

Since the phenomenon in focus in the thesis is global, I aimed to reach respondents from across the globe. Respondents from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ghana, Kenya and Rwanda represented the African continent. Respondents from Denmark, Ireland and Scotland represented Europe. Respondents from China, Indonesia, Pakistan and South Korea represented Asia. The respondent from Georgia represented the intersection of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. The North American continent was represented by the respondent from the United States, and the Middle East region was represented by the respondent from Yemen. I recruited all these respondents from a wide geographical network consisting of fourteen countries, in order to get insights of virtual travel experiences across consumers

from different backgrounds and cultures. Thus, ensuring that the results are not unique or biased to a specific group of people or culture.

3.7 Reflection on the Limitation of the Methodology Choices

Although an extensive explanation has been provided about my research approach and choice of methods, I do not deny that there is a potential limitation in the formulation and interpretation of my findings. First of all, I approached the study from an interpretive epistemological stance whose basis or subjective nature allows great room for bias in place of the researcher. This denotes that the primary data and findings generated in this thesis cannot be generalized as the data is heavily impacted by personal perspectives. My results may not be sufficient for the generalization of virtual tourists, but it can rather be appreciated for its delivery on a profound understanding and inductively supporting the use of disruptive innovation theory in the tourism context.

Finally, my purposive sampling technique resulted in a gender bias of only four male respondents compared to eleven female respondents. This is despite my attempt in recruiting respondents from a wide geographical context to avoid results being biased to a specific culture. Moreover, there was a slight inclination towards the student occupation among the respondents as a result of the researcher's available and suitable network. There were ten students, four working respondents and one retired respondent. It is difficult to pinpoint whether the gender bias or occupation bias directly affected the quality of the results as this study still reached the most appropriate virtual audiences/consumers, which is, adult consumers between the ages of 18-54 years. They are virtual reality enthusiasts as well as the most knowledgeable about virtual reality and other popular tech trends (Nielsen, 2016). All the respondents were purposively selected because of their past physical travel history and their experience with virtual travel which satisfactorily answered the second research question.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the analysis of my findings based on the reflections discussed in the methodology chapter. I draw on disruptive innovation theory as a lens, and discuss concepts such as Holbrook's consumer value and virtual travel to break down empirical material. The analysis of the travel companies was focused on the patterns of their virtual travel experience and its nature such as the cost implications, the theme or specialisation of the virtual tour, mode of presentation, where the presentation is taking place and who is presenting. The thematic analysis of the interviews presents five key emergent themes from the empirical material on the consumer value of virtual travel experiences. They include convenience, the aspect of living through others, interesting and fun nature, beauty and ethics. The theme of convenience was later on broken down into other various sub themes namely time value, ease of use, inclusivity, price and a pre-plan preparation tool.

4.2 Virtual Travel Products Supply

Virtual travel experiences have always been around even before the onset of the pandemic. However, since the pandemic started travel companies across the globe have been forced to create and market more virtual travel experiences as there are numerous physical travel restrictions. For instance, Footprints of London (2014) stated that since May 2020 it became apparently clear that they were not going to be able to return to the streets any time soon to conduct their usual guided walking tours, and therefore decided to take the plunge into virtual tours. Moreover, Romanian Thrills (2021) emphasized that the past year has not been the best in terms of travelling and that the pandemic is still affecting everyone, which is why they decided to step up their game and go virtual. These virtual travel products have become more varied with distinct specialisations as shown in the table below.

Company Name	Type of Company	Virtual Travel Experience Theme/Specialization	Nature of the Virtual Experience
1) Girl Travel Tours	Travel Tour Company has been offering three types of physical tours across the world, that is, girl tours, adult-only tours and family-friendly tours since 2015.	Virtual tour presentations with a focus on history started after COVID-19 restrictions.	Global destinations presented live by different tour directors on a Zoom webinar for free. One can access the recorded virtual tours on the company website and their Facebook page.
2)ToursByLocals	International Private Tour Provider offering private physical tours with local guides worldwide since 2008.	Live virtual guided tours of cities and attractions across the globe since the pandemic began.	Real-time or live streamed private virtual tours presented by local guides on a video conferencing software. These tours are subject to costs.
3) Intrepid Urban Adventures	Travel Company fixated on responsible physical travel by offering day tours in over 50 cities focused on food, history, street art, beer, wine and active adventure since 2009.	Diverse online experiences such as hands-on cooking classes and virtual city walks to help support its cohort of local guides during the pandemic.	At home online experiences presented by local expert guides in cities around the world on Zoom. This is subject to costs.
4) Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve	State department of environment in Florida that focuses on research, education, conservation and training. It's timeline dates back to prehistory with the Calusa Culture. It conducts guided nature tours of its ecosystem via boat and kayak tours.	Videos, tours, downloadable activities and quizzes concerning the natural environment, animals and waters of Southwest Florida e.g. the birding virtual lecture at the height of the pandemic.	Virtual lecture series on the biology and habitat of shorebirds and seabirds as presented by a biologist on Zoom. This lecture is subject to costs.
5) Film at Lincoln Center	Non-profit organization that celebrates American and international film through year round programming and discussions, festivals and publications. Founded in 1969.	Virtual Cinema	Documentaries, shorts and features are presented once one has created an account and has paid on the website. Only accessible to those living in the United States and its territories.
6) Romanian Thrills	Tour Guide Company focused on a boutique travel style for private and small groups visiting Romania from 2018.	Virtual tours based on Romania from October 2020.	Free virtual events are presented on Zoom by two tour guides, that is, the owners of the company. Recorded Live sessions are present on the website and on Facebook. Also has interactive virtual tours that are subject to cost.

7) Wine Shop Lanzarote	Wine selling company and a producer of homemade craft beer since 2017.	Diversified their range of service to virtual wine tours of Lanzarote's wine region and its wine products as a result of the pandemic.	Virtual wine tour and tasting event is presented through an online Zoom video call with one of the team from Wine Tours Lanzarote. This costs Euro 100. The company also has access to free, livestreamed Lanzarote craft beer and brewing sessions on Instagram.
8) Top Didj	Art Gallery in Australia founded in 2009.	Virtual cultural experience of the Aboriginal Culture from August 2020.	Presentation is provided by an Aboriginal through talks and activities such as playing a tune on the didgeridoo in Zoom. This live recorded session can be purchased from the online store in the company's homepage at AUD10.
9) Footprints of London	Tour Company that promotes the best walks in London and with the best standards in guiding since 2011.	Virtual guided walking tours in London since May 2020.	Virtual walking tour is presented by a tour guide on a video conferencing software at varied costs.
10) Withlocals	Tourism Company that links worldwide locals with travellers. Private local hosts are connected with travellers visiting the locals' city. Launched in 2013.	Private online experiences ranging from cooking classes, city discovery to yoga classes as a result of the pandemic.	Private virtual experience presented by a local on a video call at a cost. Also has an application for users to download and use for virtual experiences.
11) The Tour Guy	Tour Company offering unforgettable experiences to those visiting Italy through the use of tour guides that are passionate about history and storytelling.	Live Guided Virtual Tours of Global Tourist Attractions.	Virtual guided tour is presented by a guide on a webinar at a cost.
12) Viator	Trip advisor company that allows one to browse and book tours from top destinations across the globe. Founded in 1995.	Online experiences ranging from food and drink, culture, sightseeing, entertainment, nature and wildlife, classes and workshops. Aiming to support small businesses and helping travellers roam around the world from home.	Virtual tour is presented on Zoom by a guide at a cost.
13) Drive &	App developed and uploaded in the Heroku	Virtual driving	Allows one to take a virtual drive across different cities in

Listen	platform at the height of the pandemic.		the world while listening to the local radio station of each city for free.
14) Dobiison	Ghanian start-up company that offers 360° photography, 360° videography, interactive virtual tours and Google street view from 2020.	Interactive virtual tours and dynamic digital experiences across numerous industries e.g. travel and hospitality.	One can navigate through the interactive virtual tour of forts, castles, landmarks, arts, culture, hotels, nature and wildlife in Ghana. This free virtual tour consists of moving imagery or video with audio and maps.

Table 4: Overview of virtual travel products from travel companies

Source: Author

Table 4 offers a glimpse of virtual travel products that are been offered by numerous companies, and clearly there is a shift in terms of what the companies were doing before or known for and its present operations. The travel companies were previously offering physical tours but are now forced to present virtual tours as a result of the strict travel rules and restrictions caused by the pandemic. It is important to note that this shift to virtual travel in some companies is in line with the specialty of what was previously presented physically. This is evident from the virtual travel experience theme or specialization column. For instance, Romanian Thrills was previously designing unique package deals for tourists visiting Romania but because of the pandemic they have decided to offer virtual tours purely based on Romania. Footprints of London is another example that is still sticking to their domain. It was keen on physical walking tours in London and is now offering virtual guided walking tours still based in London.

On the other end of the scale, there are some companies that are becoming more daring by trying out new products or diversifying their virtual travel experiences as opposed to their previous physical tours. For example, the mission of The Tour Guy is to offer unforgettable experiences for travellers visiting Italy by sharing its local culture. However, as seen in the table above they are currently offering live guided virtual tours of not only Italy but also other global tourist attractions. At the end of the day, it is not yet clear which is the best option to take for the companies as this study was only focused on showing how COVID-19 has forced travel companies to redefine their travel offers. Clearly, the option of sticking to what one is good at or your niche is commendable and makes a business unique. However, there is the possibility of reaping more benefits by diversifying your products. It would be beneficial for

other studies to go further and conduct a case study on travel businesses to get insights on this phenomenon.

All the travel companies in Table 4 have exhibited commendable strategic marketing as a result of the pandemic. Wine Shop Lanzarote for instance, has always been fixed on selling wine and producing homemade craft beer. Presently, they are using the COVID-19 crisis to create an opportunity by conducting virtual wine tours of their wine region and its products. The different virtual travel experiences presented by the companies acts as an effective channel in not only maintaining the relationship with previous clients but also in reaching a wider channel. This wider channel of potential tourists could possibly use the travel companies' physical travel products in the event that the world opens up again. This is because they have had a taste of what the company is all about and have slowly become affiliated to it. Withlocals is a good example of using the online tools to expound more on their strategic selling points. This company was mostly linking the tourists with a local in the visited city who would guide them around and show the hidden gems. Their focus has always been on giving a personal account story. This makes the travel experience more personal and fulfilling. They are still using the storytelling technique of locals in their virtual travel products to continue to appeal to their customers' emotions as can be seen below.

The screenshot shows a travel experience listing on the Withlocals platform. At the top, there is a circular profile picture of the host, Sebastian, a man with a beard wearing a purple t-shirt. Below the photo, the title reads "History of Barcelona & Spanish music: Online experience with a local Musician" in bold black text, followed by "With Sebastian" in a pink cursive font. A short description says "Olé! Join a Spanish jam session with host Sebastian and learn all about the history of Barcelona and Spanish guitar music." Below this, there are icons for "LIVE" (from Barcelona), "1 hours", and "Private group up to 4 people". There are also icons for "music" and "English, Español". On the right side, there is a booking panel with the price "€38 par personne", a 5-star rating with "134 reviews", a "Select date" dropdown, a "Select time" dropdown, and a note "Times are indicated in your timezone (UTC+03:00)". Below that is a "4 Adultes" dropdown and a prominent pink "Book now" button. A small note at the bottom of the booking panel states "This experience is private, just you and your friends. You can invite your friends after you completed your booking." Below the booking panel, there is a section titled "What we are going to do" with three paragraphs of text describing the experience.

**History of Barcelona & Spanish music:
Online experience with a local Musician**
With Sebastian

Olé! Join a Spanish jam session with host Sebastian and learn all about the history of Barcelona and Spanish guitar music.

LIVE from Barcelona 1 hours Private group up to 4 people
music English, Español

What we are going to do

Activate your ears through this live music experience! Nothing brings the feeling of Spain to your home like the sound of Spanish guitar. Musician Sebastian will play Spanish guitar and tell you all about its fascinating history.

Get in touch with Sebastian and share your passion for music. Any preferences? Sebastian's got you covered and can personalize this experience 100% for you.

This experience is 100% online. While you are at home, your host will connect with you from their city via a link that will be provided to you. For this experience, your host will be hosting from their home using their camera. All you have to do is get your computer ready, have a proper internet connection, and enjoy your tour in a comfy setting.

Figure 5: Withlocals storytelling technique for virtual travel experience

Source: Online (Withlocals, 2020)

The tour above is being conducted by a local at the city of interest and has been made personal and private for the virtual tourist. One can also attend this tour with their friends or family. Identifiably, the local in question is keen on being flexible and catering to the individual or personal interest of the tourist. This virtual experience appears to be personal and engaging. Other travel companies that have adopted this kind of personal virtual experience at a fee includes ToursByLocals and Intrepid Urban Adventures. Some travel companies such as Girl Travel Tours adopted a different style for their virtual travel experiences as seen below.



Figure 6: Free virtual tour of the Capitals of Scandinavia by Girl Travel Tours

Source: Online (Girl Travel Tours, 2021)

This kind of virtual tour by Girl Travel Tours is public as one just needs to register in time and join the virtual trip experience using a unique link for free. Even if one is late they still have access to the past virtual tour recordings. This virtual experience is similar for all the attending virtual tourists and is displayed as a classroom slideshow presentation. Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research also assumes the same format as Girl Travel Tours but has limited slots available. On the other scale, Romanian Thrills embraces a mixed approach of a free slideshow presentation of their virtual events and a more engaging interactive recorded virtual tours that are subject to costs. One can watch the recorded interactive virtual tours privately as they have the freedom to choose which direction the tour will go.

All things considered, engagement is one critical factor that can aid in making the tour fun for the virtual tourists and encourage repeat visits. It is challenging to keep the interest level of the tourists at maximum level with an online platform. This is especially so as the virtual tours normally run from 1 hour to 4 hours. Thus, companies are keen on making it engaging for the virtual travellers to ensure maximum enjoyment and repeat viewers. For example, Withlocals, ToursByLocals and Intrepid Urban Adventures focus more on the individual experience and tailor their virtual tours according to the needs and expectations of the virtual traveller. Girl Travel Tours and Romanian Thrills try to make their free virtual events more personal by allowing a question and answer forum at the end of the presentation. The limited slot availability for the lecture series carried out by Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research is a strategic means of ensuring that the public lecture has few attending virtual tourists to allow everyone to speak or share their thoughts, opinions or questions.

Conversely, there are some virtual travel experiences that do not have any degree of flexibility between the virtual traveller and the provider such as Drive & Listen. The virtual traveller does not have much control of the experience. The user only has the freedom of choosing which city to tour but cannot pick the specific street they want to drive in. One has no idea about the destination of the journey and cannot control basic car functions such as turning left or right on command. Furthermore, not all cities in the world can be found in this app. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this is a newly developed app and further improvements can be made. It is taking the virtual travel experience to a whole new level as one can enjoy driving virtually in cities across the world for free. The street noise function aids in inducing the feeling of being there and one enjoys listening to the local radio station of each city. Besides, this app was uploaded at the height of the pandemic to satisfy in part the many frustrated travellers all over the world that are now confined to their homes because of the pandemic. It basically duplicates some of the same sensations one feels when travelling (Ontheroadtrends, 2021).



Figure 7: Virtual drive in Los Angeles (USA)

Source: Online (Drive & Listen app)

Evidently, virtual travel experiences are the new norm for most travel companies under the current pandemic crisis. This new norm has some consequences for the employees in the tourism industry in terms of their skill set. Adeyinka-Ojo & Abdullah (2019) highlighted that it is paramount for tourism businesses to train their employees so that they would have the soft skills, hard skills and digital literacy that is required for a growing disruptive digital technology innovation that has changed the existing business model in the tourism industry.

The pandemic has caused drastic changes for the travel businesses, and this has led to the need of travel guides or professionals who are adept at handling virtual tours. For instance, G-Guides has launched a digital course (which is certified by the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations) that is tackling the travel industry's final frontier, that is, virtual tours. Some of the courses include becoming a virtual experience creator and storytelling for virtual tours (Garry, 2020; G-Guides, 2021). Certainly, disruptive innovations have the potential to redefine or create new jobs that require upskill and new knowledge from the workforce such as tour guides in the tourism industry (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019).

4.3 The Demand of Virtual Travel Products

Virtual travel products are becoming the closest form of travel for most people as a result of the pandemic. As previously mentioned there are some key themes that became emergent during the coding process such as convenience, the aspect of living through others, it's interesting and fun nature, beauty and ethics.

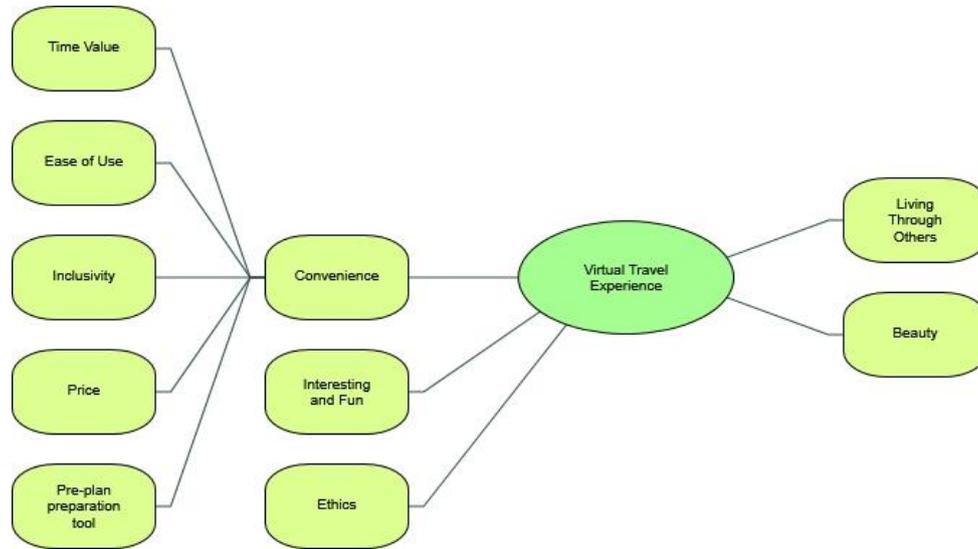


Figure 8: Themes and subthemes of the consumer value of virtual travel

Source: NVivo 12 Plus Software

4.3.1 The Convenience of Virtual Travel Experiences: The Value of Efficiency

Convenience, which is the essence of efficiency, was the main theme that stood out the most from the findings. The value of efficiency results from the active use of a product or consumption experience as a means to achieve some self-oriented purpose (Holbrook, 1999). There is always a purpose or goal when using any type of product or engaging in a certain type of experience. For sure there are numerous reasons that one would decide to engage in virtual travel experiences. It could be either to pass time or for work purposes. During the analysis, it became evident that time value, ease of use, inclusiveness, price and pre-plan assistance all made the virtual travel experience convenient according to the respondents. For sure, this convenience of virtual travel products is akin to the concept of disruptive innovation theory. Christensen (1997) explicitly stated that some of the attributes of disruptive technologies include being cheaper, smaller, simpler and more convenient. All these attributes can be related to what the respondents mentioned as their convenience in virtual travel as seen from the subthemes.

One can engage in virtual travel at any place that is suitable for them. All the respondents demonstrated their appreciation of this as they can enjoy travel experiences at the comfort of their home. They explicitly mentioned that they do not need to expend much effort or spend much time that would have otherwise been spent when travelling physically, hence the first subtheme of **time value**. This type of convenience influences the rate of enjoyment as the virtual tourist is able to use travelling and waiting time more efficiently (Reinhardt & Gurtner, 2018). One of the qualities of disruptive innovation is that it usually adds an additional performance dimension, which existing products do not possess (Si & Chen, 2020). For instance, the product's mobility (Christensen, 1997; Tellis, 2006). There is great flexibility in terms of where one can take part in virtual travel experiences, and even though time is considered subjective (Holbrook, 1999), it is clear that the respondents are spending less time and effort on virtual travel when compared to physical travel as can be seen below.

[So for you, you feel like virtual travel is more accessible?]

Ehm yeah, 100% like literally all you need is a touch of your finger as opposed to having to like, book ticket, get on a plane, try this. Yeah, literally Touch, touch a button and you're there [at your chosen destination].

(Respondent no. 7)

Another aspect is that unpredictability or the uncontrolled environmental factor in physical travel is enhancing this time value convenience of virtual travel experiences.

Virtual experience brings a variety within a very short time as compared to the physical [travel] although physical experience is more fulfilling. But the fact that you can spend a whole day before you see a lion yet, when it is brought virtually you can see several animals at a go. So you see it's a bit better when it is virtual.

(Respondent no. 11)

Undoubtedly, this time value concept is of huge significance to the respondents. Guttentag (2015) recognised that the benefits of a disruptive product ran along the lines of length of time, travel distance and accessibility. When linked with virtual travel experiences, it is clear to see these benefits in terms of the time value. One has easy access to virtual travel products coupled with no travel distance expended thus leading to less time and effort used.

The second sub-theme that came up in regards to convenience was **ease of use**. One of the distinct benefits of a disruptive product is evident from its attribute of being easy to use

(Danneels, 2004; Gemici & Alpkan, 2015; Schmidt & Druehl, 2008). In relation to this, Si & Chen (2020) pinpointed that a product's usability is one of the new additional performance dimensions of disruptive innovation. This feature leads to more enjoyment and satisfaction with the virtual travel experience. The devices that portray virtual travel are very easy to use because of its features and language availability.

[Have you ever had any problems or issues with handling these devices for your virtual travel?]

I mean, come on one click in YouTube, any animal you want and it's there.

(Respondent no. 14)

[You have never had any issues with understanding the tours or travel videos?]

Yeah, [...] Because I can access like both English and Korean. Right. In a Korean context. Usually they elaborate every information so yeah, I would say [it] is easy to understand.

(Respondent no. 3)

The third subtheme that was identifiable is the **inclusive nature** of virtual travel experiences. Fennell (2020) pointed out that persons with disabilities and the elderly people who are faced with accessibility constraints may see virtual travel as an attractive option. The inclusivity of virtual travel was pointed out by the respondents both from a second-hand experience and from a personal experience.

[Do you think that virtual travel products can be used as a tool for sustainability purposes?]

Sustainable tourism sometimes does not necessarily mean about environmental impact, but also inclusiveness. Right? [...] you know, there's a vulnerable side of the social fabric. Like [...] those kinds of people definitely needed this kind of technology, right? Because they cannot really physically move, you know, then in the cases that they really need this kind of technology to travel somewhere, like beyond the space and time.

(Respondent no. 3)

Oh I remember what [...] travel it can be. It can be daunting, especially if you've got a condition [...]. Hidden disability like me, I'm diabetic and my hearing [loss]. These are hidden disabilities that people don't see. [When travelling physically I was always worried about] Where do I go? There's so many people, where do I stand? What do I say, you know, that kind of thing? Again. Heathrow is good they have [...] something to put around your

neck [shows Sunflower Hidden Disability card] to actually tell the staff that you've got a disability.

(Respondent no. 1)

[Museum interactive virtual tours] They're 360 degrees, you can zoom in. And you can see details, especially for me, I am partially sighted. I'm a professional in tourism, but also I am partially sighted, it is very helpful in knowledge. And also as well as is a good complement for my eyesight, because I cannot see in that detail. And I cannot see that far.

(Respondent no. 13)

The fourth subtheme that brought to light the convenience of virtual travel experiences is the **price**. Disruptive products are generally cheaper (Christensen, 1997). In fact, words such as lower-priced or simpler are often associated with it (Schmidt & Druehl, 2008). Fennell (2020) also pointed out that one views virtual travel as a cheaper alternative to conventional travel. There is the convenience of excluding travel fees, hotel/accommodation fees and flight fees that are normally associated with physical travel. All the respondents showed their huge satisfaction with enjoying these travel videos for free or at a minimal cost.

[What do you think of these virtual travel products?]

So it's a good way to get educated about [a] certain place [...] and [to] get a lot of information for free or for a very cheap price.

(Respondent no. 2)

The aspect of price was an interesting take in the interviews. Only two respondents have once paid to engage in a virtual travel experience. The remaining thirteen strongly claimed that they have never paid any amount to engage with virtual travel products. During the digital observation, it was evident that numerous travel companies were offering virtual travel experiences at a price mostly for their private interactive tours. For instance, ToursByLocals can be seen below.

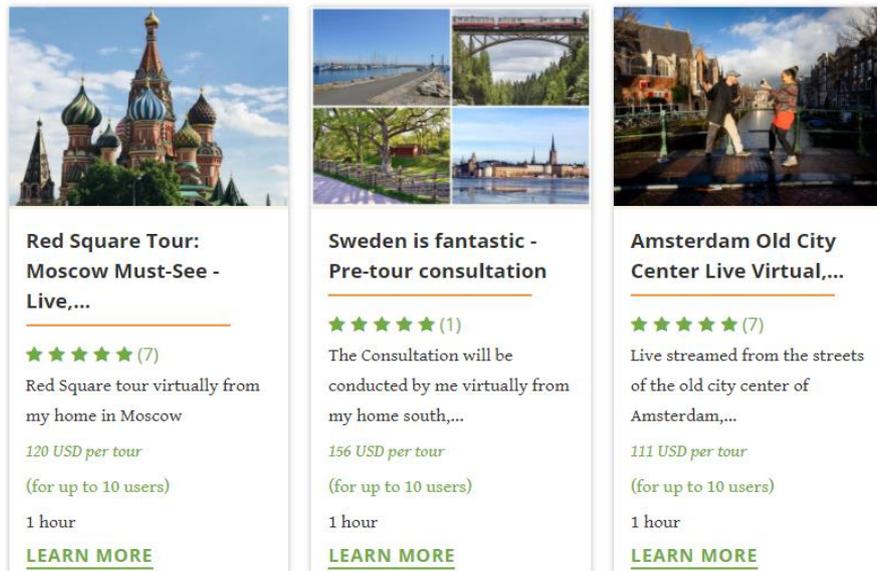


Figure 9: Examples of paid virtual tours by ToursByLocals

Source: ToursByLocals (2021)

Understandably, this is a means of ensuring that the travel company and their travel professionals such as tour guides still have some access to finance. The Tour Guy (2020) for instance, openly mentions in their webpage that all the proceeds from their virtual travel experiences, which are priced at €15 per tour, will go towards keeping their guides employed and to pay the wages for their dedicated staff while on lockdown. On the other scale, there are the free virtual products as previously observed in Table 4 that are offered by travel companies. Despite these tours being free, they still request for one to give tips to show appreciation for the guides that presented the tour. An example is Girl Travel Tours and Romanian Thrills as seen below in Figure 10.

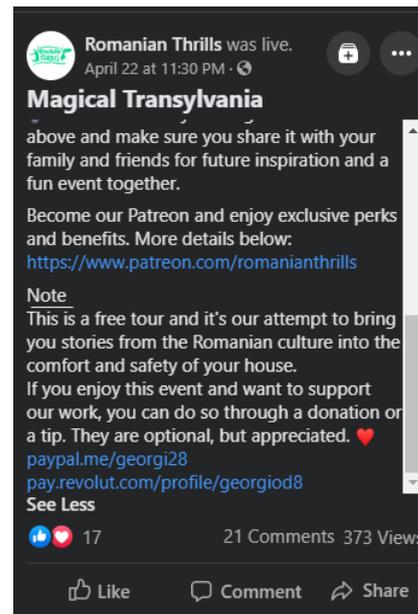


Figure 10: Facebook post from Girl Travel Tours and Romanian Thrills requesting for tips and donations for their free virtual tours

Source: The travel company’s Facebook page

There were mixed responses in terms of whether one would possibly part with some money in order to enjoy a virtual travel experience. Still, it is interesting to note that for those who do not mind paying a fee for virtual travel had some conditions. For instance, respondent number 2 mentioned that she would not mind paying as long as the travel company communicates that the income will be used for a good cause such as a donation. Respondent number 11 also said that she would pay if it helps in facilitating the virtual travel experience program. In essence, it all comes down to what one values the most as explained by respondent number 3 below:

[Let's say you see a virtual tour, but it has a charge. Will you ever pay to watch it?]

I think it [...] depends [...]. For example, I've seen there's gonna be [an] online virtual tour that they're working on in St. Petersburg. If they get to the palace, and that is the one of the most amazing collections that I [have] ever seen. You know, so if I have [a] chance, again, to see even virtually, I was thinking maybe I'm willing to pay for that, you know, but I think this [...] really depends on what you value about, you know, because I value watching really masterpiece, just kind of art paintings masterpiece to this, because I really believe it is worth paying.

(Respondent no. 3)

The last sub-theme in terms of the convenience of virtual travel products is its ability to **aid in the pre-planning process of physical travel**. Despite the current health situation globally and the subsequent travel restrictions, all the respondents are still thinking about using their virtual travel experiences for their next possible physical travel plans. Even before the onset of COVID-19 it became apparently clear that the respondents have still been having access to virtual travel products for pre-trip planning purposes as shown below.

So the virtual travel experiences can reduce the need [to travel], but they can also help you to plan better, where you want to go. Yes, that's an important aspect. In fact, for me, even when we are going for any business trip, I always, two or three days before travel, or one day before travel, I always go to the internet, I search for important information about that country, search for important touristic attractions in that country, search for information about the political situation in the country, the physical attractions in the country, and so on, and so on. So that is one way of preparing myself when I go there so that when I go there, once I arrive in the country, I'm able to have an intelligent conversation with the locals.

(Respondent no. 12)

The main reason why the respondents felt that the virtual travel experiences are a worthy tool for pre-trip planning purposes was because it acted as a reliable source of information. It has more access at the attraction site than a physical experience could have while providing very detailed descriptions. This quality is not only leading to better trip experiences but also has an impact on the personal attitude that one has towards physical travel. For instance, respondent number 10 clearly demonstrated how the virtual travel experiences have made her become more comfortable with travelling.

[In what sense do you mean when you said that you feel like you have more control now with physical travel after watching vlogs?]

In the sense that I'm going to [...] already know what to expect. So there won't be any fear or anxiety. Because already in the vlog, I've already been shown how things go and all that. So this reduces fear. [...] Mostly anxiety is fear of the unknown. And people who have already got an experience even from the moment they leave their house. You get to see how you yourself you navigate from your house, to the airports, the checkout point also entering the plane boarding out even the cab from the airport you get to see and now when you go there yourself you wouldn't panic as much because you know, when I reach here, I need to get this, this and that.

(Respondent no. 10)

Interestingly enough this convenience of virtual travel experiences as a source of information for pre-trip planning is embodying a double-edged nature that is common with disruptive products as seen below:

But sometimes I really believe since I gather up too many information before I go there [to the planned destination]. So I feel like I really already travelled there, you know, because I know every single things about the places you know, so sometimes there's no such things like serendipity like spontaneous tea, you know, because also, this is a huge part of the trouble. [...] sometimes I feel like, my travel is very standardized. Like become very uniform, because I don't want to make mistake. [...] I somehow follow the most common choices of other travellers. You know what I mean?

(Respondent no. 3)

Clearly too much planning can lead to the loss of excitement or a happy accident in the physical journey experience, and this can make the real travel experience dull. The obsession of planning every single detail from point A to B can deter one from making flexible choices during the physical travel experience. One is instead only focused on doing what they saw in the travel video that they are 100% certain they will enjoy.

4.3.2 Living vicariously through others with virtual travel products: The Value of Excellence

Some of the respondents opted to have an experience through the activities of others instead of engaging in such activities themselves. These activities mostly included some form of dangerous or thrilling aspect. This is a reactive appreciation that comes with engaging in virtual travel experiences, as one does not actively seek out the particular virtual experience. Instead, one just reactively admires the quality and satisfaction potential of the experience (Holbrook, 1999).

So I like [...] watching videos about like, just cool [stuff or activities]. Kind of like extreme travel things, you know, like things that maybe I wouldn't do. But like other people [would]. [...] I've seen several like, I think they're like bungee jumping or something like jumping off huge cliffs. And I'm just like [amazed], and I saw one the other day that was like, you know, like, tightrope walking kind of, but they were walking across this huge Canyon, and I was like, I don't think I would ever do that.

(Respondent no. 4)

There are numerous reasons that could make one opt to not engage in the virtual experience but instead admire it reactively. One could be fear or safety concerns as seen in respondent number 4 above. The other reason is the inability to meet the travel cost as can be seen below.

The videos are so beautiful and so wonderful. But at the same time, [...] they project to a normal consumer [places that] [...] looks a lot more expensive than what I would afford. So I just look at it and say, Wow, that place is so wonderful. The day I'll make more money, then I'll consider [going there], and then you move away from it [the travel video]. Those are the options that make me decide whether to add it [those places on travel videos] on my travel list, want to travel places, or just imagine and wonder with it and say Oh, this is such a beautiful place. But it's too bad I can't afford it.

(Respondent no. 5)

Clearly, virtual travel is enabling one to be able to live through others' travel experiences. It is important to note that the satisfaction and quality level or potential is the stepping stone for this occurrence. This is dependent on numerous factors such as the clarity of the videos and its ability of inducing the feeling of being there. This was a huge debate in the interviews as there were varied responses in terms of how the videos make one feel like they are also there in the destination or not. Some such as respondent number 7 and 11 felt that they were present in the experience.

So it's a YouTube blogger, YouTube personality who doesn't necessarily just do travel vlogs they do lifestyle blogs, because like they travel as part of their lifestyle, they go travel, they bring you along [...] with them.

(Respondent no. 7)

Like the wildebeest when they're crossing over to Tanzania [on a wildlife documentary]. You actually see it and you think you are right there because they are normally very clear. And even the commentators are normally very clear in giving the story. [...] That clarity is what makes it interesting because it's like you're just seeing the [...] animal right there in your face. In fact, it makes you just [...] get glued to the screen [...]. You move with the animals. As they move you also move with them.

(Respondent no. 11)

Some felt that they are not getting the feeling of truly being there such as respondent number 15 and 12.

Last time we were watching about Italy [cultural experience video], and [...] how the weather is there and how the houses condition looks like and they were very old and about all the things that [...] is happening in Italy [...]. So you can watch these things. But the [...] thing is the feel is not there. I don't feel it. That's [...] me. But it's different when you feel like personal experience and someone else's experience.

(Respondent no. 15)

These virtual travel experiences also have some weaknesses, because seeing an actual lion is different from seeing a lion on TV or a lion on a video. So I think in as much as virtual experiences are good, they're cheap and convenient, you still miss [...] the actual experience. And there are also cases where for example, the culture of the people is completely missed, because the culture of people is better [...] experienced physically when you are there and intermingling with the people rather than just seeing them on the screen.

(Respondent no. 12)

Irrespective of whether one feels like they are at the destination or not, it appears that there are some factors that play a role in this feeling. Some could be dependent on the personality of a person and others could be dependent on the type of video and its quality. In terms of the video characteristics, Choi, et al. (2018) reflected that a higher level of modality such as 3D virtual reality produces a stronger immersive user experience. It is an essential technology affordance that not only influences the quality of the virtual travel experience but also has the potential to induce the heuristic of being there and realism (Sundar, 2008). On the other hand, personalization is one of the factors that stands out in making customers adopt a disruptive product as there is enhanced customer experience and value to the customers (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019). Fennell (2020) added that when it comes to the demand for personalized, interactive and real-time tours, the most popular might be a personalised tour that an individual, family or a small group is attracted to, as this would allow for a more intimate experience with guides while providing freedom and flexibility in time and space, and where participants could ask questions and get answers, in real-time. All of these factors embody what a customer would deem as excellent in virtual tours.

4.3.3 Virtual Travel Experience as a Hobby: The Value of Play

Adeyinka-Ojo & Abdullah (2019) highlighted that disruptive innovations in the tourism and hospitality industry always promise to offer memorable experiences. The features of a disruptive product enhances the level of enjoyment or fun for the customer. For instance, the technology used in virtual travel experiences produces different heuristics such as novelty and coolness (Sundar, 2008), which have been regarded as an important motivational factor that fulfills pleasure in a travel experience (Choi, et al., 2018). During the analysis, it was evident that virtual travel experiences are being actively sought for and enjoyed for its own sake by the respondents during their leisure time (Holbrook, 1999).

The current state of the world has forced people to spend most of their time at home, and with this free time they are exploring the world through virtual travel. Different words and expressions such as *fun*, *interesting*, *funny*, *intriguing*, *relaxing*, *wonderful*, *calming* and *guilty pleasure* were used by the respondents to show their excitement with virtual travel. However, as noted before there is usually a double-edged nature that is evident with disruptive innovation. Engaging in virtual travel experiences can be considered an unhealthy hobby as one remains seated or in a motionless position for long periods of time. This became apparent as one of the challenges of virtual travel experiences in the interviews.

The major challenge with these virtual experiences is that you are basically sitting in a chair, there's no physical exercise. [...] you are spending all your time sitting and maybe eating and drinking. And so there is very little physical activity. So they can also be addictive, you can get addicted to them. And then you find yourself not devoting much time, to physical activity, and not even devoting much time [...] to your business of the day.

(Respondent no. 12)

It was clear that some respondents had already fallen prey to this behaviour of not being able to stop or regulating their virtual travel experience as can be seen below.

We took hours watching these things [travel videos], you just [...] can't stop it because you know, you're enjoying it.

(Respondent no. 14)

Probably the biggest problem with watching YouTube is that you kind of, you get sucked into this void, especially if it's on auto play, and you watch. Usually travel vlogs are very, very long, usually they can be about an hour each, and they're split up into different parts. So if

there's like four parts, that's like four hours of your day gone. Your day is, like, wasted. So that's probably one of the things that can be quite addictive, because there are millions upon millions, millions of different videos that you could watch.

(Respondent no. 7)

Virtual travel experiences can be considered addictive thus leading to some undesirable health effects as the amount of physical activity or exercise is cut down. Still, this is something that can be handled or controlled at a personal level by instilling self-discipline or moderating the time spent when engaging in virtual travel experiences.

As is the norm with disruptive innovation, there are some challenges that affect the virtual travel experience as a hobby. The most common or identifiable ones in the interviews centered on network unavailability, short attention span and low replay or returning desire as respectively seen below.

Where I live, sometimes we have power blackouts, the internet, sometimes goes on and off. So that might make me not watch maybe more videos, like let's say in a week as compared to when there's unlimited supply of electricity and internet.

(Respondent no. 10)

When I see it [travel videos], [...] I'll be interested in like, one or two minutes, then after that, I'm gone. Like my mind just wanders into the tasks that I have to do and those kind of things. [It's a challenge to] Like [...] immerse myself in the whole video because now you see I'm looking through a computer. So there you can see a pop, pop, pop of an email, a pop up of I don't know what. So it's like, if you're not really focused. Yeah, so that it's kind of distracting.

(Respondent no. 8)

It was [...] on Zoom. It was held by well, I know this person. So I will call it like a friend, like he's a tour guide. So he work[s] in a travel agency, and then he shows around [...] Paris. So it's just like he used Google Street View [...]. So we go to this place and [...] I mean, [...] it was fun. And the tour guide. He's, like, really talkative. But I mean, it's not something that I would go every week you know once or twice is alright.

(Respondent no. 9)

Clearly, not all places are conducive for virtual travel. Fennell (2020) stated that one of the major challenges that impacts virtual travel is the ICT infrastructure especially in wilderness settings or remote areas. Some of the respondents showed this frustration as they are

currently located in remote areas or where there is no reliable network. The issue of low replay or return desire shows that there should be more and constant supply of new and different virtual travel products for the users to consume. Despite all the above challenges, the majority of the respondents said that they would still use the virtual travel products even though physical travel is allowed. They claimed that it does have some usefulness in catering to their various needs. Disruptive products are known to possess its own set of distinct benefits that are not present in the traditional products in the market (Christensen, 1997).

4.3.4 The Beauty in Virtual Travel Products: The Value of Aesthetics

The reactive appreciation (Holbrook, 1999) of virtual travel products has been made possible because of the use of enchanting images, videos and attraction sites in the videos. All of these are seen to have an effect on the viewers as it also makes them appreciate the beauty that is outside either natural (wildlife) or man-made (museum and the arts). The quality of the videos is seen to have a huge influence on this reactive appreciation of the virtual travel products as seen below.

[The quality of my virtual travel experience] just depends on the video like in regards to the clarity of the photos because each YouTuber uses a different type of camera. [...] Mostly the YouTubers that have a lot of views have a lot of subscribers, [and] [...] they're very good at photography. Very artistic taking stuff.

(Respondent no. 7)

If this is not done, then it is easy to find the viewers not appreciating the beauty that is being presented in the video as can be seen below.

When it's low quality [the travel videos], it brings the feeling of boredom from the word go.

(Respondent no. 10)

When the quality of the aesthetics in the virtual travel products are well taken care of it seems to cause an effect on the audience. For instance, it induces the dream of going to the same place as seen below:

[These videos] give you a feeling of Wanderlust. And they make you feel like you should even go and enjoy the experience, the things that they have experienced.

(Respondent no. 10)

In most cases, these videos are designed to excite you. And they [...] project, the places [as] exciting, or beautiful or relaxing. So most of them have this feel of a dream place that you really desire to go. So in most cases, those videos are really enticing, and they kind of appeal for you to want to go and try them.

(Respondent no. 5)

This characteristic is of significant value as it can be used by travel companies to raise awareness or attract one to some destinations.

Yes, it is for a good way to promote a place and to motivate future tourists or potential tourists to go to that place. And I think the mission of this kind of virtual tours, and the purpose is, of course to promote and to attract the tourists. I think that's more commercial thing than cultural thing, maybe cultural as well to raise awareness about different nations and their cultures around the world.

(Respondent no. 2)

Moreover, it could also be used as a communication tool to promote the message of sustainability.

After coming here to Sweden, sustainability is spoken [...] about a lot. And I'm also doing a course on sustainability. So more and more, I'm understanding the importance of sustainability and how we really need to change our thoughts and attitudes towards the role we play towards sustainability. So I would think the more and more resources or tools or channels that we can get to push the sustainability agenda forward, then definitely so I think it's a good thing. If [...] tourism as a discipline, or [...] as an industry also took their platforms and their channels to sensitize consumers on sustainability.

(Respondent no. 5)

The beauty in virtual travel products are not only being purely enjoyed for its own sake but it can also create a desirable impact on others and the environment. Fennell (2020) argued that there is a market for virtual travel experiences as it provides some distinct benefits, which are of value to the sustainable tourist. Without a doubt, it is not uncommon to link disruptive innovation with sustainability. For instance, Shang, et al. (2020) combined disruptive innovation theory with green innovation and identified how disruptive innovation is suitable for green innovation in China, which exemplified an improvement of mainstream performance in multiple dimensions such as low price, easy operation, and most importantly environmental protection.

Virtual travel can be appealing to the sustainable tourist who is mindful of the impact they have on the environment when travelling. The simple act of opting to engage more in virtual travel as opposed to physical travel could possibly reduce instances of over-tourism and pollution to the environment. The virtual travel experience could also be used to market the lesser known or visited areas as it would be monotonous to watch the same tour of the world's top or most visited destinations. And in the possibility that physical travel is open again, the tourists may opt to visit these lesser known areas that they initially experienced virtually.

4.3.5 Principle exercised in Virtual Travel Experiences: The Value of Ethics

The current state of the world is going through a health crisis, which has ensued numerous travel restrictions. This has caused slogans to be promoted of staying at home and not engaging in physical travel. This has forced people to be creative with their free time, and this has resulted in some relying on virtual travel as can be seen below.

Now you cannot go [out] like before. So you have to do something and you have to watch things. And then you have to plan something, but you cannot do it because of the COVID. So yes, the frequency [of watching travel videos] has been increased than before.

(Respondent no. 15)

A good principle that all the respondents exhibited was that they are limiting their physical travel in order to not contribute to the further spread of COVID-19. The value of ethics involves doing something for the sake of others, and with a concern for how it will affect them. Another quality in ethics is the respect of rules and adherence to it (Holbrook, 1999). This was well demonstrated by the respondents as shown below:

But now, with COVID, we are no longer travelling to any of the countries because of the public health protocols which have been put in place by various governments and even the travel restrictions.

(Respondent no. 12)

Fennell (2020) pointed out that in the search for the moral good, consumers gain pleasure in purchasing products that are good for other people, or by not purchasing products at all in their search for the moral good. Evidently, engaging in virtual travel instead of physical travel at this time is an act that is good for other people as it limits the virus infection rates. The next chapter presents a discussion of the results and how they address my research question.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Chapter Overview

This final chapter brings everything together into a nutshell with a discussion on the major findings, a summary of the study and the type of conclusion to be drawn in regards to my research questions and aim. In addition, I highlighted the theoretical, practical and social implications and made suggestions for future research.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

The previous chapter presented the analysis of my empirical data. This next phase focuses on how this analysis addressed my research questions, and how the findings are advancing based on what we have already understood.

As previously stated in the introduction of this study, crisis events can be used as an opportunity to quickly change our way of thinking and adapt to the new reality. My broad aim was to understand and demonstrate this with an empirical explanation. In order to accomplish this aim, I sought for answers by linking innovation and tourism, which is surprisingly limited in previous studies. Thus, how has COVID-19 forced travel companies to redefine their travel offers and what is the consumer value of virtual travel experiences to the tourist formed my basis of investigation.

Addressing the first question, the analysed empirical material suggests that the pandemic has changed the normal business operations of travel companies from physical experiences to virtual experiences. This aligns with OECD's (2020) claim that digitalisation in tourism services is one of the potential long lasting tourism policy implications as a result of the pandemic. The constant development and marketing of virtual travel experiences as seen in Table 4 proves that Fennell's (2020) view on the need for different models of service provision such as personalised, interactive and real-time tours (PIRTs) to deal with the challenges presented by crises in this new age of disruption cannot be further from the truth. My analysis identified numerous companies that altered their usual service provisions in order to cater to this new reality. Moreover, an app was presented that was purely developed to also cater to this new reality. Surely, crises are sudden challenges which test the ability of organisations in the tourism industry to cope (Anderson, 2006). The best way for travel

companies to create an opportunity in this new market reality laden with pandemic related restrictions is through the use of disruptive innovation principles. It creates a new dimension of value that was not available in the existing established product or business model (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019). This study has proved through thematic analysis that virtual travel experiences have a list of values that are not available in physical travel such as inclusivity, travelling at the comfort of your own home, its usefulness as a pre-plan preparation tool and ethics in terms of following the stay at home order.

It was interesting to not only point out how disruptive COVID-19 is to the tourism industry, but to also illustrate how the virtual travel experiences offered by travel companies exhibit similar features to a disruptive innovation. Aside from its own distinct set of benefits, it was interesting to identify that virtual travel also possesses a double-edged nature which is common for disruptive innovation. Virtual travel is appreciated for its reliability on providing information but still too much information can take away the excitement of that certain place before going or even when there. Also, it is appreciated as a pastime activity but this can be an unhealthy habit as one needs to make sure that they regulate their screen time, and stay active.

One of the most fascinating factors identified in the study was that not all virtual travel experiences are free. One would automatically think that the thought of travelling the world at the comfort of your home would not cost a cent but the list of companies and their virtual travel products proved to illustrate that virtual travel can be just as costly as physical travel. Some tours would even run up to 300 USD per tour as can be seen in ToursByLocals. This is an initiative to ensure that the tour guides are still getting access to income in this uncertain market reality for physical travel. Indeed, pandemics can play a transformational role in societal and economic change (Hall, et al., 2020) as companies have to adopt a completely different business model that must be consistent with the existing market reality (Si & Chen, 2020).

I found that virtual travel is not only useful in the context of COVID-19 but also for some of the contemporary issues affecting the tourism industry globally such as sustainability and environmental protection. In fact, Shang, et al. (2020) identified that disruptive innovations follow a technical trajectory that not only leads to an improvement of mainstream performance but in also multiple dimensions such as environmental protection. The thematic analysis of the consumer value of virtual travel revealed that one of its features is that it has

an effect on others and is regarded as a reliable source of information. This influence can be positively used in championing the message of sustainability, for attracting tourists to a vanishing destination or for leading tourists away from a destination that is negatively affected by overtourism. For instance, virtual travel could be used as a medium for travel instead of going to the destination physically for sites that need less pressure to be put on it. For sure, disruptive innovation has the characteristic of substitutes with a powerful force in markets to generate technical, economic, industrial and social change (Coccia, 2020).

This study has demonstrated in detail the consumer value of virtual travel but evidently one critical thing was always found missing that greatly affected its value. The missing link identified with most respondents was the social context that is normally experienced with physical travel. There is still the need to meet locals in the visited destination and have random conversations with locals. Some of the listed companies are offering tours where one can watch with their friends and are having the tour presented by a local (see Table 4) but still this is not equivalent to physical travel. Furthermore, one cannot use all of their senses with virtual travel compared to physical travel. This therefore does not fully produce the real feeling of being there.

At the end of the day, one cannot deny the unique value of virtual travel despite some limitations. Wagler & Hanus (2018) were able to prove in their comparative study of virtual reality tourism and real-life experiences that it is possible for people to have fulfilling, engaging experiences from the comfort of their own home. This increased access to impossible places to visit or protected sites improves the users perceptions of the location and results in the tourists being more accepting of the virtual experience as a substitute to the real location (Wagler & Hanus, 2018; Guttentag, 2010). The virtual tourist can use this disruptive innovation to determine the place where they would like to tour the world (Reinhardt & Gurtner, 2018). Its popularity can be seen by the huge number of tourists showing a keen interest in the virtual tours as seen from the views and comments in Figure 10.

5.3 Summary of Study

This study departed with the aim of understanding how a crisis can be used as an opportunity in the tourism industry. This aim was postulated with two key questions while using a context that was principally missing in previous disruptive innovation literature. Despite attempts by other studies to understand this type of innovation through the use of hospitality and tourism examples, discussions connecting innovation with tourism and crisis with tourism are still

lacking. Moreover, there is a gap in studies that have used primary data in their quest to understand disruptive innovation.

This study addressed these three gaps by conducting an ethnographic study, whereby digital observation was made on fourteen travel companies offering virtual travel experiences. Likewise, a sample of fifteen adult consumers of virtual travel from fourteen countries were used as empirical material for thematic analysis through an in-depth open ended interview. Drawing on disruptive innovation theory and analysis of my empirical data, I was able to effectively produce, present and interpret the results in chapter 4. Based on these results there is an appropriate reason to bring into being two major conclusions about virtual travel and its consumer value.

5.4 Conclusion

First of all, it is viable to conclude that COVID-19 has had a drastic impact on the tourism industry. This crisis was trailed by numerous measures and procedures to help curb its spread that inadvertently made physical travel near impossible. This affected numerous actors in the tourism system, and quite distinctly travel companies decided to redefine their travel offers from physical travel to virtual travel. In essence, the pandemic has acted as a catalyst for virtual travel experiences as a result of its disruptive force.

Secondly, virtual travel experiences are evidently constellating the consumer value in entirely original ways that were not thought of in physical travel. This is the essence of disruptive innovation theory. In the event that the world opens up again and the travel restrictions cease, virtual travel still holds its own distinctive value. It has the potential of serving other numerous purposes such as a leisure activity or as a pre-plan preparation tool. Interestingly, virtual travel and physical travel are in a symbiotic relationship. One cannot do without the other or be completely replaced/erased. Aside from these conclusions, the next section expounds on what this study denotes for current disruptive innovation research, practice and society.

5.5 Theoretical, Practical and Social Implications of the Study

For the field of tourism, the results indicate that using disruptive innovation theory can be a creative technique for researchers, to understand opportunities for exploration in the tourism system as this sector has rarely been touched upon in previous studies. In fact, Christensen (1997) developed and analysed this theory with other industries such as the disk drive,

excavator, steel and auto industries. The main focus is always on manufactured products (Hjalager, 2014). This theory has hardly ever been placed in discussions within the tourism industry (Hall & Williams, 2020). Moreover, the initiator of the theory had also expressed the need for more studies on disruptive innovation in other industries (Christensen & Bower, 1996). Therefore, my results offered a different perspective in terms of the context and concepts used for analysis. This is a significant headway as this thesis contributes to existing knowledge about virtual travel experiences through an examination of a phenomenon that belongs to an area that has limited prior research published. It is especially critical to point out that not much research has been done on virtual travel experiences in relation to COVID-19 as it is a novel kind of virus. Furthermore, Christensen's disruptive innovation theory primarily indicated how disruptive innovations introduce a different value proposition to the ones offered by the incumbents but failed to include customers and what value propositions they are after (Tabbah & Maritz, 2019). This study has made a great leeway by thematically analysing the consumer value of virtual travel experiences that identified what value tourists admire or look out for with virtual travel.

In regards to the COVID-19 crisis, this study has made an important progress in leading the discussion between crisis and tourism. There is a gap in empirical studies or limited literature on the interrelationships between the pandemic and tourism. For instance, the impact of pandemic outbreaks on the tourism industry (Hall, et al., 2020; Skare, et al., 2021; Cohen & Neal, 2010). Despite some studies effort in closing this gap between tourism and crisis, economic and financial crises always end up receiving the most research attention (Hall, 2010). This thesis bridged this gap by considering the COVID-19 crisis as a tourism crisis in the introduction while exploring its impact on the tourism industry, specifically on travel.

Aside from the theoretical implications, it is not possible to produce knowledge without input from the real world. This thesis has opened a discussion on disruptive innovation with a practical current threat that is facing the whole world. Si & Chen (2020) pointed out that there is a gap between theory and practice when it comes to disruptive innovation. This is why they suggested that disruptive innovation should be embedded in new contexts as the world changes such as in the sharing economy with the example of the effects of disruptive innovation on Airbnb (see Guttentag, 2015; Guttentag & Smith, 2017; Lorde & Joseph, 2019). This paper has attempted to close this gap by practically applying disruptive innovation with the new context of virtual travel experiences while highlighting the fact that

the world of travel has finally changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism professionals can leverage the knowledge produced on the consumer value of virtual travel experiences to develop and market effective virtual travel products for virtual tourists.

For our society, this study provides a reflection on our human instinct to travel especially in these pandemic times. The results illuminate how virtual travel can be a reliable alternative to physical travel while still undergoing COVID-19 related travel restrictions. Policy makers and tourism stakeholders may use this study as an empirical reference to justify activities aimed at promoting vanishing destinations or for sustainability purposes of attractions.

5.6 Directions for Future Research

In light of the contributions made in this study, much is yet to be done to further the research area in this study. Below are some directions that were beyond the scope of this study but provides new avenues for future research.

There is a need for future studies to delve further into virtual travel experiences and its relation to the sustainability concept, while applying the theory of disruptive innovation. Shang, et al. (2020) pointed out in their case study on disruptive green innovation that there are very few studies that have combined disruptive innovation theory with green innovation. This study only proved that there is a form of interest in sustainability among the respondents and how virtual travel products could be used as a tool for combatting over-tourism.

Future studies can conduct a longitudinal study especially from the perspectives of tourism professionals in travel companies. This is especially so as this thesis did not get the outlook of the travel companies analysed in the study that responded to the disruptive nature of COVID-19. This was not an aim of the study as the concept that needed to be discussed was directly observable. Moreover, a longitudinal study could be useful in revealing how the phenomena and the issues have changed over time. This is useful as the current state of the world keeps on changing as seen with the increased number of vaccinated individuals, entrants of new COVID-19 variants, changing travel policies such as modifications in red, amber and green list rules. The socially constructed views in this study only focused on the first year of the pandemic. With time, it would be interesting to evaluate the relationship travel companies and tourists have with virtual travel. The perceptions and feelings towards the virus could easily change as fear that was once felt at the onset could easily turn to a state of being normalized.

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Appendix 1: Interview guide for In-depth open-ended interview

- Have you heard about virtual travel products (or experiences)?
- What are your thoughts on these?
- Where do you watch the travel videos? And why?
- Has the frequency of watching virtual tours or travel videos increased after COVID-19? Why?
- In the occasion that international travel has no restrictions, would you still engage in virtual travel experiences?

(Satisfaction, Quality of virtual experience, Personalised and intimate experience, Convenience, Simple (ease of use), Cheap (price), Accessibility, Fun (enjoyment), Heuristics of being there, Usefulness - sustainability)

- What do you miss the most about travelling physically?
- Have you ever had any negative experience or challenges while travelling physically?
- Do you think those challenges or negative experiences can be avoided by instead engaging in virtual travel experiences? Explain
- Have you experienced any problem or anything negative while engaging in virtual travel experiences?