Has COVID-19 Incapacitated the Instagram Travel Influencers in India?: Ramifications & Coping Strategies

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Abstract

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global business landscape has experienced unparalleled disruptions, particularly impacting the tourism industry. This article delves into the repercussions of the pandemic on Indian Instagram travel influencers and its subsequent effects on the tourism sector. Grounded in a social survey encompassing 55 Indian Instagram travel influencers, this study sheds light on the challenges they confronted and the strategies they employed to navigate the crisis. The scholarly work by R. Edward Freeman (2009) and Peter Burns (2013) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the responses of Instagram influencers.

The study's findings reveal that a substantial majority of the respondents faced financial losses due to the pandemic. In response, these influencers diversified their approaches, engaging in responsible and local travel, adapting their content to enhance audience engagement, acquiring digital skills to prepare for the future, and hosting webinars, among other measures. In conclusion, this research presents innovative coping strategies, tailored not only to Indian Instagram travel influencers but also applicable to influencers worldwide who faced similar challenges.

Keywords: Tourism industry, Instagram travel influencers, Coping strategies, COVID-19

Introduction

Branded as the 'black swan' event (Renjen, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted substantial harm not only on the healthcare sector but also on the broader economy. Within the global economy, encompassing primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors, the pandemic's disruptive impact has been felt to varying degrees, each contingent on the market's demand and supply dynamics. Among these, the tourism industry, falling within the tertiary sector, stands out as one of the hardest hit due to the ongoing crisis.

Consequently, the turmoil in the tourism industry has cascaded to affect a multitude of stakeholders, with social media travel influencers prominently among those bearing the brunt. This research article aims to address two primary research questions: (i) What were the consequences of the pandemic on Indian Instagram travel influencers? and (ii) What strategies did Instagram travel influencers in India employ to navigate the global crisis?

The significance of this research is multifaceted. Despite the tourism industry being severely impacted by the pandemic, there exists a dearth of literature that specifically addresses the issues faced by its stakeholders, particularly influencers. In its light, this study serves as a platform to raise awareness among both the public and government about the numerous challenges faced by the Indian travel influencers

during the global crisis. The study also illuminates innovative strategies employed by travel influencers, offering valuable insights for other influencers and individuals considering a similar career path but who may be hesitant due to pandemic-related uncertainties in the future.

The article is divided into x sections. The first section illuminates the impact of the global crisis on the tourism industry, including the travel influencers. It walks the readers through Peter Burn's stakeholder map (2013) and the stakeholder theory by Freeman (2009). The second section explicates the methodology, including the construction of the social survey, followed by data collection and analysis procedures. In the third section, the ramifications of the pandemic on the travel influencers are discussed, followed by the distinct coping strategies used. The fourth section suggests a way forward, focusing on some innovative coping strategies as adapted from the existing literature, followed by the final section underscoring the directions for future research.

Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism industry

In the backdrop of COVID-19, which further divided the already polarised world and accentuated the various social inequalities, the work-from-home regime coupled with the social distancing norms, became the new normal. With over 59 million infected cases globally by the end of November 2020, of which nearly 9.1 million cases belong to the second-largest pool of coronavirus, India (*Worldometer*, 2020), the present impediment appeared to have an unknown expiry date. This was when the pandemic was at its peak, and numerous industries faced a setback, including the tourism industry.

The tourism industry which accounted for 10.3% of the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 6.6% GDP in South Asia in 2019 (*Economic Impact Reports*, 2020), was amongst the hardest-hit ones in 2020 (Nicola et al., 2020). The World Travel and Tourism Council extrapolated a loss of nearly 50 million jobs in the tourism industry, all attributed to COVID-19, with Asia being the largest sufferer (Faus, 2020). Also, the United Nations (UN) predicted a 60-80 % loss in international tourism due to the turmoil ("The Economic Times," 2020).

The blow faced by Indian tourism on account of COVID-19 cloud is in sync with the global trend, as is evident through the systemic risk survey, which mentioned it to be one of the five adversely hit sectors, with over 90% of the respondents estimating its stagnant recovery in the next six months (Reserve Bank of India, 2020). National tourism, which generated 8.1% of the total employment (Moolya Foundation, 2020) and contributed 9.2% of India's GDP in 2018, the third among the other 185 countries (*Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Tourism Industry*, 2020), was forecasted to incur a monetary loss of 75% in the Financial Year (FY) 2020-21 in their business (BW Online Bureau, 2020). These statistics throw light on the profound impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry.

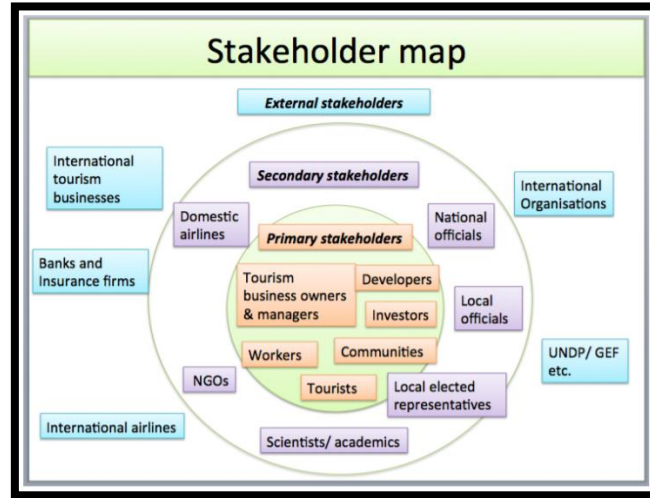***Travel Influencers: A stakeholder in the Tourism industry***

Figure 1: Peter Burn's stakeholder map

Note. From "Increasing climate change resilience of Maldives through adaptation in the tourism sector" by P.M. Burns, 2013, *University of Bedfordshire*, p.13. Copyright 2013 by the author. Reprinted without permission.

The deep wounds on India's tourism tend to perpetuate the pain to its stakeholders, who can easily be identified through Peter Burns's stakeholder map (Burns, 2013), as given in Figure 1.

From figure 1, we find that the travel influencers occupy a place of primary stakeholders in the tourism industry, both in the form of developers and tourism business owners and managers. Their experiences and reviews are believed to be trusted more by the people in comparison to other online reviews (Influencity, 2018).

Moreover, R. Edward Freeman through his 'stakeholder theory' has explained that the only way for a declining business to revive is by managers and entrepreneurs accepting and promoting the interconnections and interdependence between various stakeholders, instead of letting them thrive in an isolated ecosystem (Freeman, 2009). The study emphasises on the application of this theory in the tourism industry as well.

Who are travel influencers?

Influencers are themselves the consumers but with the fervent following, who hold the tendency to shape the opinion of their followers as they have greater expertise, knowledge, or experience about the product (Gretzel, 2018). We have observed a paradigm shift from traditional influencers being just celebrities (Glover, 2009) to the recent trend of influencers on social media. In today's era of the tech-savvy world, social media influencers have become an ingrained part of the social fabric of any society.

With the Finnish government calling social media influencers as 'critical actors' to help flatten the curve during the pandemic, alongside 'doctors, bus drivers, and grocery store workers', they play a pivotal role in providing digital information to its followers in real-time, before any other form of media, or where government communication is not accessible (Heikila, 2020). According to (Abidin et al., 2020), influencers perform a rainbow of activities like promotion of digital economy, dissemination of information, and maintaining public relations.

A subset of influencers is the travel influencers on social media whose niche lies in promoting the tourism industry through their content which may take the form of social media posts, blogs, or vlogs. These digital-first personalities (Hutchinson, 2019) are a major player in today's information ecosystem. They usually post their live travel stories and pictures on Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, etc. and are not hesitant to show their back-stage behaviour, a term coined by Erving Goffman (Cole, 2019), which in turn creates an imprint of legitimacy in their followers (MacCannell, 1973).

A study by Lalangan (2020) reveals that it is not just the influencers who shape the content, but, the content also, in turn, motivates travel influencers to earn a living through their hobby of travelling, in addition to having an impact on the audience. These 'social media celebrities' may further collaborate with a few brands or companies, and promote them in accordance to their experiences with it (Baruah, 2017). Their importance to tourism can be drawn from considering the example of Indonesian government allocating US$ 5.2 million to influencers to boost and safeguard tourism from the web of COVID-19 (Gorbiano, 2020).

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of the present study, Travel influencers and Coping strategies are defined as following.

1. *Travel influencers:* Here, travel influencers refers to those Indian influencers who promote travelling on Instagram through content creation in the form of posts, blogs, vlogs, or Youtube videos (shared through Instagram). It includes the scope of both who have taken this as a profession as well as as a hobby. Further, it covers tourism business managers and owners who promote their travel businesses through Instagram. Conclusively, it refers to all the respondents who had responded to the social survey.

2. *Coping strategies:* In the present study, coping strategies include all the behavioural and psychological efforts put by the travel influencers to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on them. It was measured through the self-developed google form.

Methodology

Social survey, a type of descriptive survey study was conducted to obtain data from the respondents. The theoretical framework finds its place through the works of Peter Burn and R. Edward Freeman. The population for the present study included all the Instagram travel influencers in India. The sample was selected by employing the two types of non-probability sampling techniques, i.e., snowball and purposive sampling. It included the 55 Instagram travel influencers in India who had responded to the google form on Instagram and email.

The google form sent to the respondents was in the form of a questionnaire, including a total of 14 items. It included both open and closed-ended questions. The responses to the open-ended questions were tabulated and organised in various categories using tally marks, which were further converted into frequencies and percentages. Similarly, the responses to closed-ended questions were also converted into percentages. Suitable diagrammatic and graphical representations were used to further analyse and draw conclusions from the information.

The review conducted was used to support the various claims. Further, I added all the 55 respondents to my Instagram account and followed their posts for more than three weeks to get a clear picture. Hence, a mixed-method research was employed, i.e., QUAL-quan (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

Research findings, analysis and interpretation
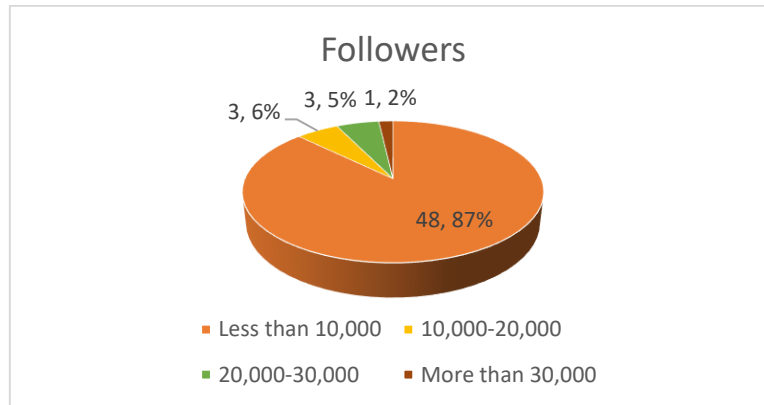
1. Participant demographics

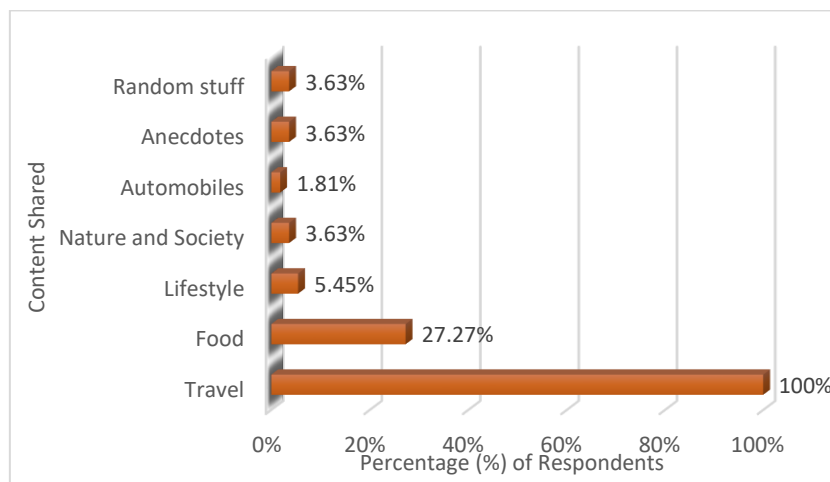*Figure 2: Respondents following on Instagram in %*

Figure 3: Type of content shared by the respondents

The 55 respondents were from different states of India and had a varied following, as shown in figure 2. Figure 2 reveals that nearly 87% of respondents in the present study had less than ten thousand followers. The profile of most of the respondents was public. While the majority of the respondents shared only travel content, a few respondents shared content other than their travel saga also, as shown in figure 3.

65.5% of respondents had their blogs/vlogs as well, though only 21.8% of respondents were making money through being an influencer. Here, it becomes important to mention a trend that was observed, wherein 91.67% of respondents who were earning through being an influencer had their blogs/vlogs. Further, only 10.9% of respondents had made this their profession, while the remaining 89.09% of respondents took it as a hobby. Interestingly, the study revealed that the number of followers did not have much effect on social media travel influencing to be taken as a profession, in contrast to the expected belief.

It was also observed through the posts of the selected travel influencers that while some respondents were amateur, others were professional. They were monetising not just through their blogs/vlogs/websites, but also through collaborations, promotion of brands and products, paid campaigns, freelancing assignments, giveaways, and travel businesses.

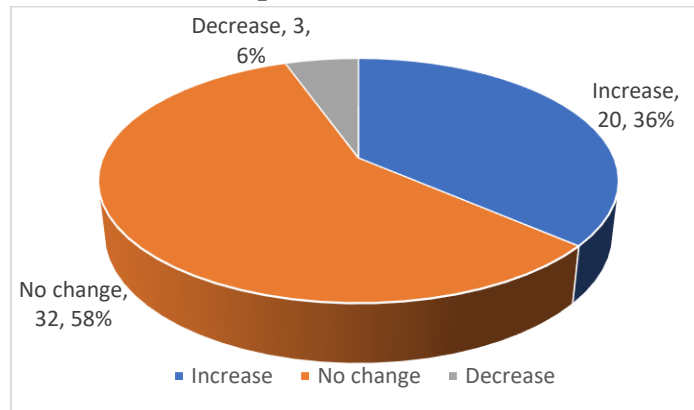## 2. Ramifications of COVID-19 on the respondents

Figure 4: Variation in the followers' frequency

69.09% of respondents incurred a financial loss due to the pandemic. As speculated, my intensive following of the respondents on Instagram confirmed that it was mainly due to the cancellation of their travel bookings and freelance assignments. Also, 66.67% of respondents from the ones who took it professionally were the ones to face the economic blow. The change in the followers' frequency during the pandemic is given in figure 4.

Surprisingly, nearly 36% of respondents witnessed an increase in their followers in contrast to 6% of the respondents who lost them, as seen in figure 4. It indicates that maximum respondents were able to find out ways to engage their audience.
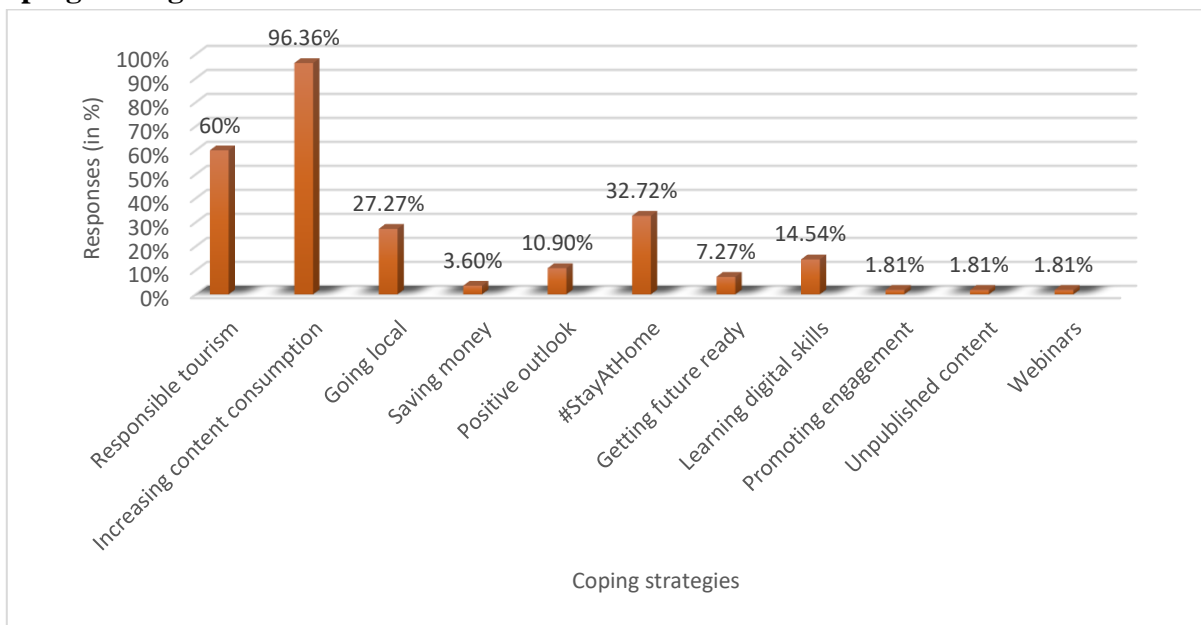
3. Coping strategies

Figure 5: Coping strategies used by the respondents

According to @travelburpwithsurya, one of the respondents, "Creating content has become very difficult in this pandemic, but somehow we are managing it." The various coping strategies used by the respondents to get through the pandemic are given in figure 5.

The coping strategies given in figure 5 are described as follows:

a. **Responsible tourism:** 60% of the respondents were still travelling despite the pandemic. Moreover, 83.33% of the respondents who had taken travel influencing as their profession were the ones to continue their travel. While @Mannu_Sambyal said that he was following all the Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's), @mussafir_hun_yaro and @visualsofmylife said that they were carrying the "safety gears" and "covid essentials" while travelling. It somehow helped in the adaptation of social distancing norms by their followers as well, thereby making it a new trend. Moreover, it was work from the home regime, which enabled a few of the respondents, like @visualsofmylife and @akhilesh1125, to travel more.

b. **Increasing content consumption:** The respondents were posting the content, as shown in figure 6, to keep the audience involved.
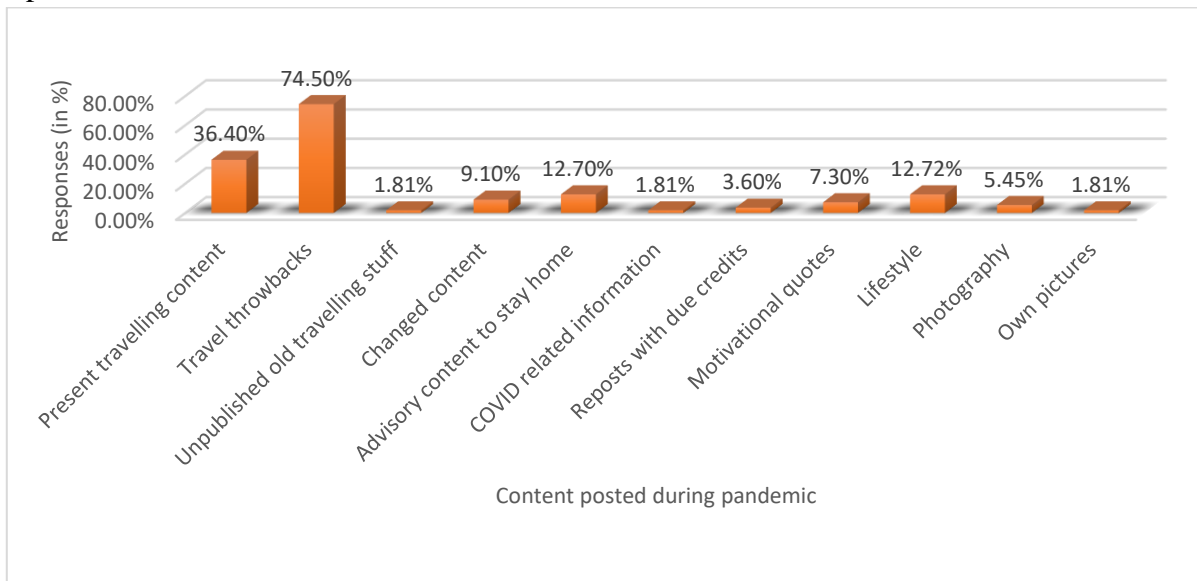

Figure 6: Content posted by respondents during the pandemic

Figure 6 shows that majority of the respondents were sharing travel throwbacks, while nearly 36% of the respondents did share their present travelling content as well. Nearly 9% of the respondents changed their content from travelling to something else, in order to stay buoyant. Further, 12.7% and 1.81% of the respondents were posting advisory content and covid related information, respectively. With over 12% of the respondents sharing content related to lifestyle, and a few others sharing diverse content, like motivational quotes, reposts, photography, own pictures, and old unpublished travel stuff, respondents were doing all they could to increase the content consumption among the followers. It becomes vital to mention that 3.6% of the respondents were not updating anything at all.

c. **Going local:** Nearly 27% of the respondents started bringing into limelight the local travelling places, with @dhritikapur rightly saying that it was "time to support local travel businesses." While @karavanlife started "exploring new places which are not crowded", @akhilesh1125 was "able to explore the overrated places during COVID-19 in a much better way."

d. **Saving money:** 3.6% of the respondents saw COVID-19 as an opportunity to save money for future travels. @dhritikapur said that she was coping through the pandemic by "booking in advance to capture good deals for future travel."

e. **Positive outlook:** Since every person has a unique defence mechanism, coping strategies, for some were to stay in the competition and balance out the monetary losses, but, for the others were to safeguard their mental health. 10.90% of the respondents looked at the pandemic optimistically and saw it as an opportunity to wind up their pending works. While @rajeshwar.s.jamwal saw this time

perfect for spending it with his family and pets, @gobanjare said that for him, COVID meant "taking time off." @the_iffy_explorer did her pending "room renovation" and @meghana_goes_places got herself indulged in "reading about travel followers, sustainable options, and why it is important to travel slow."

f. **#StayAtHome:** COVID-19 had drowned 32.72% of the respondents in the limbo of an apparent endless pause, all of whom reiterated and advised their followers to stay safe at their home. Hopelessness amidst the respondents was reflected with @indian__travellers saying that "nothing much" was left to do now for travel influencers. According to @traveldiaries_nabanitaroy, "travel will not be possible in the near future and will have to wait for a long time." So, like most of us, influencers like @breathe_dream_travel_repeat were also coping up by "building immunity, praying, and hoping."

g. **Getting future ready:** 7.27% of the respondents took out this time to get ready for the future. For this, a few respondents like @m_i_s_i_x, @my_wandering_list, and @bagsonwheels utilised this time to prepare the bucket list of the places they would like to go, post-COVID. Also, @davidangami said that his travel company was taking this time for "advertising places for people to come and visit once travel starts." In parallel to this, his company was also "setting and polishing the travel packages to be COVID SOP compliant."

h. **Learning digital skills:** For 14.54% of the respondents, coping up through the pandemic was facilitated by learning the essential digital skills. While @creating_destinations learnt the various editing skills to help them with their future content, @jammu360 emphasised on learning those digital skills which would help them "monetise their travelling career." Further, @hkmurali worked on refining and polishing both his profile and collaborations.

i. **Promoting engagement:** One of the respondents, @trek_a_break, had found a unique way of coping through the pandemic, by working on their social relations with their existing followers and thereby promoting engagement on their Instagram page.

j. **Unpublished content:** @travelure, one of the respondents, said that "I have a plethora of unpublished content. So, I can go on, with or without pandemic, and keep bringing out stories to my audience." This could be a great insight for somebody who loves travelling and has already travelled a lot, but is sceptical about turning into a travel influencer presently, given the COVID-19 situation.

k. **Webinars:** @india.trail, a travel company, had found an innovative way of managing stress during the pandemic, by "giving and attending webinars, and other social online meetups."

Way forward

In the post-COVID time, the travel industry needs a good kick-start. However, I argue that social media travel influencers can not save themselves or the tourism industry in isolation. The need of the hour is a nexus of the various stakeholders in tourism, given by Peter Burns, to work collaboratively and cooperatively. Trends such as increasing ICT readiness and destination brand management through a multi-stakeholder approach can go a long way in reviving tourism from the aftermath of the pandemic. Thus, it would have a high probability of reviving the almost collapsed travel industry, in congruence with the 'stakeholder theory' by R. Edward Freeman.

Building on the existing works, I suggest the following coping strategies for the travel influencers:

1. **Increasing awareness:** Taking examples from the Finnish (Heikila, 2020) and the UK's government (Pritchard, 2020), India can also mobilise various social media influencers to not only spread

awareness but keep a check on fake news. Travel influencers can help to a great extent in reiterating the social distancing norms and other safety protocols to be followed while travelling during the pandemic. In the long run, they can prove to be a vital agent to curb environmental pollution created by travellers. Thus, a collaboration with the government will help the influencers in coping up not just economically, but also by becoming mainstreamed in the tourism industry.

2. **Promoting local tourism:** Going a step ahead of travelling locally, and taking the idea from Mariellen Ward, influencers can consider launching a "digital marketing company" (Kaushik, 2020) or a start-up to promote local tourism professionally. It can pave a way to preserve the local culture and environment as well, along with increased tourism, and effective dissemination and knowledge about the local practices to the tourists.

3. **Government funding:** The Indonesian government has already set the benchmark by funding the travel influencers to boost its tourism (Gorbiano, 2020). I suggest a similar type of arrangement for Indian travel influencers as well.

4. **Virtual tourism:** The social media travel influencers may cope up through the cascading impact of the pandemic by being the digital vehicles to promote virtual tourism. A perfect example to explain this is the 'Experience Mecca' app created by a travel company, BSocial, which provides a virtual tour to all the Hajj pilgrimages (Cheng, 2017). Further, companies like 'andBeyond, Singita, and Lewa Wildlife' have found a temporary fix to rescue kneeling tourism by providing virtual safaris (*Virtual Safari Tours Pick up as Global Travel Hit by Restrictions*, 2020). It can provide a great insight to social media travel influencers to work on some innovative ways to thrive and flourish despite pandemic.

5. **Learning from others:** In conjunction with the 'stakeholder theory', it is suggested that even the travel influencers must learn from each other, and must-see this uncertain time as an opportunity to do so. As an example, @the_nomad_couple, one of the travel influencers, has been reading other travel blogs for "pleasure and inspiration" during the pandemic (David, 2020). To further reinforce the idea of collaboration between the various stakeholders, it is suggested to organise frequent webinars. It can not only offer a platform to discuss their common problems and ponder over its solutions, but also a commonplace to help mitigate their mental health problems.

6. **Weighing the pros and cons**: Finally, it is suggested that the travel influencers can utilise this time for spiritual growth and personal journey. Introspection and self-appraisal, along with "revaluating choices" (Joseph, 2020) of the brands they are associated with could be a good way to cope up presently, thereby making them future-ready. Further, they may work on building new business tie-ups and collaborations.

Suggestions for future research

The present study has some limitations that could pave the way for future research, written as follows. First, the scope of the present study is limited to travel influencers only. Further studies could be initiated covering influencers from other fields as well, along with the various stakeholders of the tourism industry. Second, only the travel influencers from Instagram were included in the present study. Further studies may cover travel influencers from other social networking sites, like Facebook, Twitter, etc. Third, the study can be improved by communicating directly with the respondents, through a blended interview, depending on feasibility. The present study is limited to collecting responses from travel influencers through a google form.

In addition to this, the some unexpected trends were noticed while analysing the data. These include: (i) the study did not observe any association between the number of followers and motivation in the travel influencers to take it as their profession, and (ii) despite the majority of respondents having taken travel influencing as their hobby, they did not opt it as their career. It calls for future research to unlock if any correlation exists between the number of followers and career choice for a travel influencer. Further, the factors that motivate a travel influencer to take it his profession, apart from just hobby, may also be looked into intensively.

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