

# Slow Tourism in the face of Covid-19 in Southern Africa

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**Abstract:** *Pandemics have always had varied effects on the tourism sector; and Covid-19 is no different; the fact that a lot of unprecedented happenings have taken place in the face of the recent Covid-19 crisis calls for a thorough analysis in order to understand what their impact is and how different the situation can be handled. The possibility of dealing with a seemingly obscured and misconstrued scenario in which the pandemic and its effects are less understood day-by-day is high. And this, if not addressed, prolongs their impact on the sector, yet some could be mitigated earlier. Slow tourism, for instance, has been one of the fastest growing niches in the tourism sector in southern Africa. With the advent of Covid-19, this market has not been spared too. This article, therefore, aims at analysing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism in general and slow-tourism in particular. Special attention is given to the aspect of social distance and how it is affecting this niche of tourism that is fairly new in the region and how these challenges can be over-turned to benefit this market. Mechanisms that should be employed by stakeholders in the industry to maintain the slow tourist loyalty even as the Pandemic continues are too pointed out.*

**Key Words:** *Slow Tourism, Covid-19, Social-Distance.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Slow tourism is described as a profoundly enriching experience that provides tourists with an authentic cultural involvement. It is referred to as slow tourism because it entails tourists staying for longer in a particular destination in order to delve into the history and culture of the community (Stainton, 2020). Like most players in the tourism industry, service providers in slow tourism model in Southern Africa are grappling with the impact Covid-19 has had on the industry. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), for instance, estimates that Covid-19 is to setback international tourist arrivals by 78% which translates to a loss of US\$ 1.2 trillion. Africa, according to UNWTO (2020), had received about 5% of the global tourist arrivals in 2018 which was equivalent to a growth of 5.6% in comparison to the Global average of 3.9%. Among the top African blocks was Southern Africa which received approximately 10.9 million arrivals (WEF 2019). The World Travel and Tourism Index in 2018 placed Southern Africa at the helm with a score of 4.01 (WEF 2018); this had positioned Southern Africa above its peers in attracting direct investment in its travel and tourism.

Despite of this seemingly brighter future for the industry in the region, the advent of Covid-19 reversed this seemingly positive trend. Goodwin (2020) observes that Covid-19 has had adverse effects on mobility. Governments have placed restrictions on border crossing; consequently, shutting down tourist destinations throughout the globe; “places which were suffering because of over visitation (Milano et al., 2019), are now eerily quiet (Nyabadza, 2020). In the attempt to slow down the spread of the Covid-19 virus, the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, recommended limiting close physical contact with people who are not members of one’s household both indoors and outdoors (CDC, 2020). Prior to covid-19, “social distance” was considered a derogatory term which had psychological implication on an individual or groups (Davidio et al., 2017). Social distance had been used to measure prejudice of one person or a group towards another person or group which resulted many times into conflicts (Reimer et al, 2016).

Social distancing imposed as part of Covid-19 Standard Operating Procedures, came with its fair share of pleasantries to slow tourists. Its limits to interpersonal interaction have psychological impacts on how people view and experience leisure and travel. “Social distancing can significantly impact how people experience and evaluate leisure and travel activities like hiking, outdoor activities and nature-based tourism or even personal services like spas, dining, and concierge services. Social distancing or physical distancing may influence tourists’ perceptions of health hazards, insecurity and unpleasant tourism experiences” (Sigala, 2020, P.34).

## 2. SLOW TOURISM IN THE ADVENT OF COVID-19:

Little has been researched yet in relation with slow tourism in times of Covid-19 and maintenance of loyalty among slow tourists; however, this is not the first time that tourism is facing challenges on almost a similar magnitude;

natural calamities, wars, terrorism and even disease outbreaks have previously rocked the tourist industry. Nevertheless, none amounts to the extent Covid-19 has done. The existing studies, therefore, need to be keenly related to the current dispensation in the slow tourism niche in the face of Covid-19 requirements.

Covid-19 has rattled the tourism industry in a way that no other calamity has done before (Sigala, 2020). Despite tourism being a very sensitive sector to both external and internal turbulence and gets easily upset (Reimer et al., 2016), it has, nevertheless, proven to be resilient to both man-made and natural calamities in the past (Reimer et al., 2016). The only difference is those past crises were not as global as the Covid-19 crisis (Sigala, 2020). Chebil, (2020) observes that for any destination to absorb the shock of disturbances and be able to bounce back to stability, service providers must be dynamic, innovative and pro-active. Tourism, therefore, being intrinsically sociological and a subject of social psychology and international politics, as part of Covid-19 SOPs, social distancing has, slowly but surely, become the norm in this sector. Yousaf et al. (2015) describes social distancing as, “gaps in the relationships between individuals, groups and communities and explains the intimacy, distance, association and separation between them.

Slow tourism is at crossroads especially with the social distance requirement. Tourists are very sensitive and get easily upset when situations deviate from the normal which makes the maintenance of royalty and trust challenging as is the case now with social distancing requirement (Sigala, 2020). During times of crisis, which Chebil (2020) defines as a low probability, high frequency event that develops rapidly and involves ambiguous situations with unknown cause and effects, tourists loyalty and trust are so dependent on how the economic environment, socio-political environment and their perception of security and safety (Yousaf et al., 2018). This, therefore, should inform any service provider intending to maintain loyalty of their customers during this social distance times to find creative ways of assuring the slow tourists of their health safety since “consumers will always chose low risk products” (Yousaf et al., 2018). Any can be a window of opportunity to transform tourism in general and slow tourism in particular through innovative products that will incorporate interactive technology that will ensure safety of the tourist, service providers and the host community and in the process win tourists’ confidence and trust (Sigala, 2020). Social distance can effectively be part of the slow tourism when technology is employed to alley tourists’ fear of physical interaction and proximity (Chebil, 2020). Tourist Loyalty can be maintained during these times of social distance by digitizing service, embracing online interactions and utilization of Virtual Connectivity instead of physical contacts (Chirisa 2020).

Slow tourism is goal driven (Sigala, 2020); it follows a goal-driven-behavioral process which determines the satisfaction of the slow tourist (Nyabadza, 2020). The slowness to a tourist is, therefore, subjective because it is determined by the attitude of the tourist (Yousaf et al., 2018). Furthermore, it is dependent on attitudinal loyalty as opposed to behavioral loyalty and it is based on underlying psychological processes (Yousaf et al., 2018). Most tourists who, for instance, embark on slow tourism are after self-actualization (Annayah et al., 2020). They seek self-enrichment and, immersing themselves deeply into a destination (Stainton, 2020). They savor the beauty of the environment and culture (Aquilera, 2020). These tourists, running away from the monotony of their daily routine and responsibilities, try to engage in the day-to-day activities of the host community (Gunlu, 2015). With a prolonged stay of a tourist in a particular destination (what is referred to as slow tourism), tourists’ prejudices are diminished, hence, increasing their satisfaction (Fullanger, 2012). In addition, the longer a tourist stays in a destination the more he understands the people and their culture resulting in the tourist future visits due to the connection to the culture and the people (Reimer, et al., 2016)

### **3. THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING:**

#### **3.1 On Slow Tourists**

Slow tourism in Southern Africa is modelled around cultural experience and nature (Nawaal, 2015). When the first case of corona was reported in Southern Africa, South Africa, it was an imported case from Italy in Europe (Nyabadza, et al., 2020). This was followed by more imported cases from Europe before the first case of community transmission was reported (Nyabadza et al., 2020). Then there were restrictions in movement and protocols were issued to ensure the Virus was under control (TBCSA, 2020). Among the measures was the requirement for each individual to exercise social distancing. This resulted in massive cancellations by tourists due to fear both of the reaction of the host communities (xenophobic attacks because the virus was perceived to come through visitors) and fear of their health safety (Aquilera, 2020).

This was worsened by reports from WHO that the virus could overwhelm Africa health systems (AP News, 2020). Such reports eroded tourists’ confidence in travelling in Africa and in particular Southern Africa since it was among the countries with high cases of Covid-19 reported in Africa (Euronews, (2020). The lack of confidence in the health facilities in Africa is one of the greatest challenge slow tourism service providers are faced with in order to maintain loyalty and trust of tourists. Research carried out in countries where demand is show that most tourist feel safe to travel to destinations they believe the Covid-19 cases are low, have the ability to test and have reliable health facilities (Gursoy, 2020). It is, therefore, of paramount importance that tourism stakeholders in Southern Africa come up with mechanisms to inspire confidence and attract slow tourists now that most potential tourists interviewed by various

researchers are more comfortable with slow Tourism as the restrictions ease. They are more inclined towards ecotourism in rural destinations (Gursoy, 2020).

### **3.2 On the Hosting Community**

Host communities of the slow tourists are at crossroads. On one hand, they are suffering the economic impact of the Covid-19 due to retrenchments and diminished trickle down revenue obtained through direct interactions with tourists staying among them and, on the other hand, they are fearful of coming in contact with tourist in fear of contracting Covid-19 from them (Nyabadza et al 2020). This is causing conflict with the community with some being pro-social distance while another set also referred to as “Covidiot” being against the measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 which is not unique to Southern Africa but is also being observed elsewhere in the world (Annayah et al., 2020). This conflict is, therefore, a threat to slow tourism as the government continues to ease restrictions and tourist begin to travel to destinations and it should as a matter of urgency be addressed by stakeholder through community sensitization campaigns to make the community more receptive to visitors while taking precautions to avoid infecting and being infected (Leighton, 2020). The host community is a key pillar in winning visitor’s loyalty at a time like this because they are the culture that slow tourists are yearning to have an authentic experience off (Stainton, 2020). Their safety is the safety of a slow tourist, and when they keep the social distance, tourists will feel safe and have increased confidence (Euronews, 2020).

### **3.3 On Slow Tourism Service Providers**

Service providers are decrying the loss of revenue, job cuts and risk of infection (Chirisa, 2020). Due to enforcement of Covid-19 protocols (TBCSA, 2020), social distance means lessened number of tourists served at any one time and that translates into loss of revenue and redundancy of employees, (UNCTAD 2020). The service providers are frontline worker and must be provided with sufficient personal protective equipment to keep them from contracting Covid-19 from the customers (TBCSA, 2020). This in itself can impress the tourists and inspire confidence about their own safety, therefore, winning their loyalty (Bhattacharya, 2020).

## **4. MECHANISMS TO REWIN SLOW TOURISTS’ LOYALTY AND TRUST:**

Covid-19 presents a real challenge to slow tourists’ service providers and as a response it demands change of tact in making slow tourists come back to southern Africa destinations. Research shows that 70 % of customers are likely to go back to a destination they are loyal to (Bhattacharya, 2020). This means that with a sustained campaign, slow tourists will return to Southern Africa. Although there is a perception that African healthcare systems are inadequate and ill prepared to handle this health crisis (AP NEWS 2020), slow tourists who stay longer in a destination will not be worried about visiting this destination (Gursoy 2020). Therefore, in order to maintain loyalty of slow tourist’s players in tourism in Southern Africa: governments, RETOSA and private firms have to come up with mechanisms some of which are discussed below:

### **4.1 Use of Online Platforms**

After the pandemic halted tourism in the Southern Africa, a successful resumption of the bookings that were cancelled can, to a large extent, be determined by maintaining loyalty through online engagement with the customers (Liljander et al., 2015). This should be done through sending emails and social networks just to check on the customer and update them on the new developments and on what is happening with regards to Covid-19 (Bhattacharya, 2020). Another online mechanism to use would be co-browsing (Bhattacharya, 2020), which can enable customers and service providers interact in real time (Schivinsiki, 2015). The use of chat bots in the service providers’ website dashboards with three options of; learning about the product, learning about the price and getting educational content (Bhattacharya, 2020), can help significantly in maintaining slow tourists loyalty to Southern Africa during this times of social distance.

### **4.2 Honesty in Marketing Products**

Maintaining loyalty during this time of social distance also requires rigorous online advertisement (Deloitte, 2020). It’s important to note that to capture the attention of the slow tourist, the destination and the products offered should be vividly described to leave a lasting impression on the mind of the customer; however, this information needs to be accurate. Advertising services that are not actually being offered or painting a picture in the mind of a tourist that is not commensurate with reality at the destination can have long lasting implication on loyalty (Lazarevic, 2012). In their study on repeat customers, Melnyk and Bijmolt (2015) found out that 51% of customers never purchase a product or a service again when they find that it is not what was advertised. The prices and costs have to be open with no hidden charges. This can be achieved by use of chat bots already discussed above. The stakeholders in tourism industry in Southern Africa have to pay attention to details when marketing so that the adverts are tailor made to address the current trends following the covid-19 health crisis ( the desire of tourists to participate in slow tourism) (Gursoy 2020). This can be achieved through personalization, creating user profiles on websites that track customers browsing history then sending the customers emails tailored to their preference which will lure the tourist to the website again and make them loyal to the brand (Lazarevic, 2012).

### 4.3 Being Innovative

This time of social distancing calls for innovation and novelty. Service providers could use, for example, augmented reality to work people through their products and provide easy to follow visual instruction (Desboilles 2020). This is the best time to develop and use promotional videos to continue capturing the attention of loyal customers and use virtual reality to continue offering services and by doing so continue maintaining loyalty (Bhattacharya, 2020). This, coupled with rewards to loyal tourist can really inject new life in this section of the industry. Surprise gifts or promised rewards can be sent to them when they book or claim them upon arrival (this is operationalization of principal of reciprocity) (Smith and Eliot, 2014).

### 4.4 Surveys and Feedback

This is the right time to conduct online follow ups of the loyal tourist by engaging them through online surveys and feedback (Chang, 2020). This will ensure that tourists remain loyal and create a sense of belonging to the brand and, despite the pandemic, choose the southern Africa destinations. This surveys and feedback programs will also be a practical way of measuring the loyalty of the slow tourism bend in southern Africa (Lazarevic, 2012).

## 5. CONCLUSION:

This article has discussed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism in general and slow tourism in particular. In this discussion, I have paid attention to the specific aspect of social distance and how it is affecting this niche of tourism that is fairly new to this region and how the challenges can be turned around to benefit this market niche in Southern Africa. I have also looked at the mechanisms that can be employed by stakeholders in the industry in the region to maintain the slow tourist loyalty in this region even as the Pandemic continues; these include changes that need to be implemented to ensure confidence and trust in the Southern Africa region. Lastly, there is a gap in studies that can inform the tourist manager and policy makers on how the host communities can be integrated in slow tourism in Southern Africa and Africa as a whole.

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