

We are open: understanding crisis management of restaurants as pandemic hits tourism

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Abstract

The global crisis derived from the rapid spread of the Covid-19 has led to the temporary closure of tourism services. As countries and regions come out of the lockdown, a new normal has automatically taken over. Among numerous business, restaurant services are the first to respond to this new normal way of living. As a consequence, this study reviews how restaurants are responding to the new context, where strict measures are required to grant social distance and a safe service provision. Based on published research and news media, this paper reveals how restaurants as a tourism system are resilient and adapting to the coronavirus. Results show the significance of technological, creative and do-it-yourself solutions. The study contributes to the further understanding of the coexistence of tourism and pandemics.

Keywords: Coronavirus; COVID-19; Crisis management; Gastronomy; Restaurant industry.

1. Introduction

Eateries and restaurants represent a specific tourism system which has been ‘closed’ for a limited period as a response to the spread of the Covid-19. The restaurant industry is a significant contributor to the global economy and is vulnerable towards natural hazards such as pandemics (Dube, Nhamo and Chikodzi, 2020). Recent research highlights that restaurants are one of the worst affected sectors as a result of social distancing measures implemented by governments all around the world (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). Nonetheless, it is argued that the restaurant industry is creative, innovative and resilient against any change (The Chef’s Garden, 2020), and it already started to implement strategies to recover consumption in eateries and restaurants while the virus is still active in many parts of the world (World Health Organization, 2020).

Drawing on published research and news media, this research discusses the innovation processes carried out by restaurants in response to Covid-19 and how they have adapted their service provision to the new context. The paper is structured in three sections. Part one describes the role of resilience in tourism as a strategy to face pandemics. A later section discusses the examples of initiatives implemented by the restaurants. Finally, the

conclusion and implications of the research are built in relation to a new normal for a restaurant industry where tourism and pandemic coexist.

2. Tourism and hospitality in resilient times

According to Ritchie (2016), crisis management in tourism “refers to any unplanned event or situation emerging from the internal or external environment of a tourism organisation, which can disrupt operations, threaten customers and employees physically and mentally, and endanger its financial status and future viability” (2016, p.200). The rapid development of a crisis results in challenges related to crisis management and recovery processes. The resilience of tourism stakeholders is critical. The adaptive nature of a business will ensure its capacity for resilience (Cheer and Lew, 2017). Lew et al. (2017) affirmed that, from a resilience perspective, change occurs at different spatial and temporal scales. They identified restaurants as a specific subsystem which influences a community tourism system. A tourism system requires a coordinated and planned management response, which primarily involves both the tourism sector and the community (Lew et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Lew differentiated examples of slow and fast drivers of undesirable change, where among the fast change driver variables are found “acute disease epidemics leading to: human illness and death; quarantine closures and travel restrictions” (2017). The current pandemic is an example of a fast change driver which urges tourism systems to be resilient. While the negative impacts of disasters on tourism vary from region to region, Lew (2017) reports that they are significant during a short term of up to three years.

Restaurants, as observed above, constitute a specific tourism system. In the Encyclopedia of Tourism, restaurants are defined as “commercial establishments designed to serve refreshments and meals, which are either prepared fresh or partially produced elsewhere and finished in on-site. [...] The importance of restaurants in tourism is linked to the fact that they complement other products and services as well as the global need that tourists wish to experience no matter where they go” (Sánchez-Cañizares, 2016, p.796). Its relevance in tourism is manifested as follows: “foods and drinks account for about 25–30 % of the daily expenditure of tourists. Dining and drinking is not simply a question of fulfilling a basic need but is another way to experience and learn about the identity and culture of a destination. Over the years, studies on culinary tourism have been increasing and have demonstrated that local cuisine is a source of leisure and entertainment that influences tourist memories and experiences” (*ibid*).

Food tourism includes a wide range of activities and experiences, such as visits to producers and shepherds, fairs and festivals, markets and groceries, or other food-based tourist activities (Hall and Sharples, 2003). These activities stimulate the discovery of a culture through food (Long, 1998). Focusing on food-based tourism practices, restaurants play a vital role in the creation of destination food experiences (Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2017) and the promotion of food as a tourism attraction factor (Du Rand and Heath, 2006).

The current health crisis derived from the spread of the Covid-19 has led to tourism closures and travel restrictions at both global and local levels (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). As a result of the relaxation of lockdown, the tourism industry has reopened up. One of the first progressive recoveries was noticed in the restaurant sector. Restaurants proactively started to modify their model to takeaway services (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020). Innovative solutions applied by restaurants need to offer new, unique and memorable experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). This exemplifies the resilient nature of the restaurant industry. The current paper contributes to understanding the crisis management of restaurants in order to demonstrate how gastronomy is coping with the pandemic to recover their central role in the tourist experience.

3. The resilience of restaurants towards tourism reborn

Restaurants as part of the tourism system of a destination are urged to provide safe and secure dining experiences which meet new legal and social rules derived from the Covid-19 pandemic. Plenty of initiatives started to showcase the adaptation of restaurants in order to recover the demand, departing from business owners who are responding proactively to the change and extended to customers who wish to share ‘experiences’ around a table again. Handley (2020) wonders “how we’ll start to go to restaurants again” and explains that during the second half of the year restaurant industry is going to face a ‘restricted recovery’ where creativity and safety will be crucial manifestations of the resilience processes. As a result of this research, three main trends were observed in the first stages of restaurant reopening: the implementation of robots; original ways to assure social distance; and do-it-yourself kits.

Restaurants closed very quickly when COVID-19 hit. In the United States, “after their in-house dining services become unavailable, many restaurants began to create, diversify or expand their carryout, curbside and/or delivery services, while others simply shut their doors to try to weather the storm” (The Chef’s Garden, 2020). Once governments start to relax the containment measures (which vary from region to region), people will not immediately return to restaurants and new dining experiences must be rapidly created. For example, QR codes are an easy and effective alternative to physical menus (Rodriguez, 2020). In this sense, “hotel restaurants are moving to paper and digital menus, the latter located on walls or via customer’s mobile phone, with a renewed reliance on single-use plastic and paper products. Bar stools are being removed to provide space between customers” (Buchanan, 2020). More complex issues also emerged, such as the individual ventilation system implemented by Alain Ducasse on its Allard restaurant (Caballero, 2020) which controls air travel speed. These systems are reinforced by separations in the centre of each table and transparent screens between tables.

3.1 Technology leads the recovery

New technologies and gastronomy are inseparable: “more and more restaurant projects are committed to surprising their customers with dishes created with 3D printers or directly changing the usual chefs or waiters for androids” (Ruiz de la Prada, 2020). While technological processes and robots have been progressively adopted by restaurants in recent years, the current pandemics has urged the industry to a faster implementation of robotics. However, many questions arose: “Beijing bars have begun home delivery of cocktails. And of course, there will continue to be many who simply prefer to have heavy groceries delivered directly to the front door. What bets on a fresh push for delivery drones and unmanned delivery robots?” (Dodwell, 2020).

In Singapore, for example, Sophie the robotic chef “can serve up a piping hot bowl of laksa in under a minute” (Agence France-Presse, 2019), which means around 80 bowls every hour. This type of service robots will be in charge of repetitive tasks and will let human chefs to be more oriented on customers’ needs and desires. Robots do not only take orders and serve food, but robots can also make a coffee or pour a beer (Berger, 2020). In a Dutch restaurant, located in Maastricht, three robots were hired:

“the humanoid robots have mechanical arms, torsos and LED-lit faces and take on some of the customer-facing tasks to reduce person-to-person contact. James greets customers at the door as maître d’. He then scans customers body temperatures. If they don't have a high fever, Jamie's face turns from blue to green (giving customers a literal green light to enter) and then he escorts them to their table. Amy serves drinks, which staff load on to her tray and direct her to customers by entering the table number into her system.

Aker comes along at the end to collect used dishes, cups and cutlery from the table. Human waiters take orders, serve food and disinfect tables” (Brady, 2020).

This example reveals how service robots are adopted by restaurants, with different roles that ease the provision of culinary experiences featured by a technological context.

3.2 Creative social distancing measures

Space divisions have emerged as the most common practices to implement social distancing in restaurants, which are used to reduce human-to-human contact to a minimum (Ankel, 2020). Berger (2020) highlights different ways restaurants are adapting to coexist with coronavirus. First of all, she underlines that “plastic or plexiglass partitions positioned to divide diners are popping up”. For example, a French restaurant has used plastic bubbles, called Plex’Eat, where customers can eat ‘inside’, causing discomfort while eating (Homs, 2020). Social distance is also granted with the construction of ‘chambres séparées’ or separated greenhouses (in the form of enclosed structures made of glass), which are adopted by restaurants around the world. In particular, these private greenhouses are installed to meet social distancing rules in the terrace of a restaurant in Amsterdam (Andrade, 2020). In this case, “the restaurant has already conducted a test run of serving its visitors four-course, plant-based meals in their little greenhouses. Mediamatic Eten aims to offer a new concept in safe hospitality. The glass chambers are recommended only for people who are already living together” (Smith, 2020).

In the United States, “a Maryland restaurant's new tables have huge inner tubes that make social distancing look fun” (Williams, 2020). They have implemented ‘bumper tables’ that contribute to keeping customers far from one another. “At Fish Tales Bar & Grill, the custom-built tables look like huge 45 vinyl records and are on wheels, so people can walk in the restaurant's parking lot and bar area and mingle, while enjoying a cocktail or some food” (*ibid*). The placement of mannequins or stuffed animals (for example, teddy bears) between customers is another strategy “to keep people seated far apart without the space looking eerily empty” (Berger, 2020), and to easily encourage social distancing. For example, Vilnius restaurants have dressed mannequins with local-based collections. “The country this week began lifting lockdown restrictions on bars and restaurants, allowing them to use some indoor seating. But some tables have to remain empty to keep people a certain distance apart and these are being used to promote local fashion designers” (Euronews, 2020). While complying with new rules, this solution provides an avenue to economic recovery not only to restaurant establishments but also to fashion entrepreneurs.

3.3 Do-it-yourself (DIY), at home

Takeaway kits became a very innovative platform to keep eateries working even during the most restrictive lockdown periods. This is exemplified by pizza kits which are promoted as follows: “our menu offers some of Passo’s most popular Pizzas, freshly prepared, portioned and delivered to your door ready to be assembled at home. You also have the option to Build Your Own (our bestseller). Pizza’s can be cooked in either a frying pan, oven or even better, a Pizza oven! Kits are available for 2 or 4 people. Buon appetito!” (Passo, 2020). This is similarly done by bakeries. The customer changes its role from ‘sit and eat’ at a restaurant to ‘assemble and bake’ at home, as it is offered in places such as Sugar Suckle, in Hoboken (New Jersey), whose online site offers baking, making and decorating kits (Sugar Suckle, 2020).

Another example is Crisp & Green's bulk to-go boxes, which is "a meal kit delivery and pick up service available at all seven of their Minnesota locations. It allows patrons to select 20 meals worth of a la carte ingredients, such as Crisp & Green's salad mixes, grains, cold and hot ingredients, beverages, snacks, whole fruits, prepared proteins, and dressings. Ingredients can be assembled at home, or refrigerated and enjoyed throughout the week" (Turow-Paul, 2020). This is easily applied to both fast food and slow food eateries, both to food trucks and Michelin-starred restaurants. For example, "Michelin-starred Kanoyama in New York City's East Village has set up a street-side table for meal sales. The revered establishment featuring the impeccable sushi skills of Chef Nobuyuki Shikanai is now selling their fresh fish in the form of bento boxes, chirashi bowls and sushi roll combo boxes" (*ibid*).

4. Conclusion and implications

This research contributes to an understanding of hospitality and leisure management in times of crisis. In particular, restaurants are examined from a descriptive study which provides texture to the timely conversation about the relationships between food, tourism, and pandemics. The world awaits, with a mixture of desire and fear, restaurants reopening. Visitors and tourist look forward to experiencing how new normal will influence the gastronomy journey. In Alaska, Fairbanks restaurants were among the first to reopen after the coronavirus lockdown. "Most of America now eats at the dining room table, or at the kitchen table, or on the couch, or in bed, or out on the front stoop. But in Alaska, at a place called the Roundup Steakhouse and Saloon, something remarkable happened in this age of infection. The place was open! People weren't sitting at home! Food could be ordered and served, and it wasn't in a takeout box! Fairbanks's restaurants were among the only ones in the country open to in-person indoor dining, a distinction that came as the first few states began to reopen amid the pandemic. It happened through an alignment of state and local relaxation of rules in Alaska last week, and a handful of restaurants including the Roundup that was ready to restart under strict limits about capacity and separation of customers" (Black and Johnson, 2020). This quote shows both the willingness and the challenges that the restaurant industry is facing.

Restaurant landscapes commonly include, according to The Chef's Garden (2020), take-out and delivery options, "grab and go" and delivered meal kits that diners cook at home. These examples are also observed in this research. However, further actions also include outdoor dining, online chef experiences and cooking lessons. It is clear that "people can expect to be seated next to mannequins, served by robots and have their contact details shared with authorities, according to restaurant experts" (Handley, 2020). Innovative examples are found all over the world, from simple lines, partitions, or chairs occupied by teddy bears, to individual greenhouses which also provide great opportunities to take pictures (Williams, 2020) and post them online (Rousseau, 2012). As Turow-Paul (2020) states, "some restaurants and bars are shifting their business models to match the current demand for shelter in place eating experiences". This paper demonstrates to what extent restaurants are resilient as part of a rapid response to an unexpected crisis and a fast change. Results show how table spacing contributes to maintaining social distancing, robots create unique and safe experiences, and food kits enhance home cooking. All of them will lead to the creation of upcoming tourism experiences that need to reduce human-to-human contact in food services.

This research has analysed how restaurants as an example of a tourism system in destinations are adapting to a new context where tourism and pandemics will coexist during an uncertain period of time. Theoretical insights of this research reveal the central role of technology in this recovery process, which is accentuated and accelerated in pandemic times. Further research must explore, from both offer and demand perspectives, the effectivity on the adoption of robotics by hospitality and tourism, and how robots, specifically, contribute to the building of

trust and safety in restaurant experiences (see, for example, Seyitoğlu and Ivanov, 2020). In terms of practical outputs, this paper informs restaurant stakeholders about the leading initiatives that demonstrate the capacity of resilience of the industry. In parallel to the technological solutions, creativity is regarded as a critical skill to face the challenges derived from the Covid-19. To be creative is to be resilient. Future research may add empirical approaches to this paper to continue the call for action towards the recovery of tourism relevance worldwide, and, as a consequence, the significance of restaurants in tourism.

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