

MEDIA TOURISM AND COVID-19: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE SCOTTISH TOURISM INDUSTRY

STEPHANIE GARRISON,  CLAIRE WALLACE, AND XIAOQING CHEN

School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

The growth of Scotland’s creative industries within the last decade has resulted in a significant rise in media tourism, a subsector of cultural tourism that focuses on tourism inspired by media such as novels, films, and television series. In March 2020 when Scotland’s tourism and hospitality industry would typically be preparing to welcome visitors, the nation went into a national lockdown due to mounting concerns over the rapidly spreading coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). This “black swan event” brought Scotland’s tourism industry to a complete halt with government-mandated cessation of international travel, stay-at-home orders, and the closure of non-essential businesses going into effect. By drawing on qualitative interviews with Scotland-based tour operators and international travel bloggers, as well as examining the strategies of heritage and conservation charities and national tourism bodies this article explores how media tourism, as a main form of tourism in Scotland, was restructured during the pandemic. From these data, the authors consider three phases of the 2020 season beginning with an initial lockdown, which evolved into a stalled seasonal start and concluded with a truncated summer season. This article highlights the challenges presented to those in the industry and how these challenges were mitigated through the use of digital platforms from the creation of “virtual tours” and using social media for a “top of mind” marketing approach to the use of online booking platforms for track and trace and measuring visitor numbers. It then turns to explore the different strategies adopted to create a sustainable tourism model for reopening. In looking to the future of Scotland’s tourism industry, the article concludes with what the expectations are for the industry and recommendations for sustaining the industry in a postcoronavirus climate.

Key words: Coronavirus; Digital technologies; Media tourism; Popular culture

Introduction

Prior to the 2020 season, tourism in Scotland was on an upward trend with 2019 being the second most successful year for the industry in the

last decade in terms of the number of visitors. In March 2020 when the tourism and hospitality industry in Scotland would normally be preparing to welcome visitors ahead of the April to October tourism season, the country went into a full-scale

Address correspondence to Stephanie Garrison, School of Social Science, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK AB24 3UD.
E-mail: stephanie.garrison@abdn.ac.uk

national lockdown due to mounting concerns over the rapidly spreading coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2 or “COVID-19”). This “black swan event” brought Scotland’s tourism industry to a complete halt with government-mandated cessation of international travel, stay-at-home orders, and the closure of non-essential businesses going into effect.

While all aspects of the industry faced significant challenges, a unique challenge presented itself to those in the industry who relied on “media tourism” for business. Media tourism, as defined by Reijnders (2011), is “the act of visiting locations which are connected with popular media narratives” (p. 106). Scotland’s association to popular media narratives such as *Outlander*, *Braveheart*, *Game of Thrones*, *Outlaw King*, *James Bond*, and *Harry Potter* has spurred an international attraction to the country (Garrison, 2020; Garrison & Wallace, 2021). This popularity has not only been explored academically but has also been reflected in data collected by VisitScotland, the national tourism board for Scotland. VisitScotland found that 1 in 10 visitors were prompted to visit the country after watching a program about Scotland. Additionally, television, film, and novels featuring Scotland were also identified by visitors as one of the primary sources of inspiration for visiting Scotland (VisitScotland, 2022).

This rising form of tourism to Scotland is particularly popular with international travelers, especially North Americans. This is reflected in VisitScotland data, which indicates that the US is the largest international market to Scotland in terms of the number of visits with 18% of American visitors in 2016 partaking in TV/film-related activities (VisitScotland, 2022). This is significant as government lockdowns, and later international travel restrictions, prevented this market from visiting Scotland and engaging in media tourism during the 2020 season. Concern then arose surrounding the sustainability of media tourism, and the vitality of media tourism-oriented small and medium-sized businesses, such as tour operators specializing in media tours who rely on an international market for income. This concern also extended to bloggers and vloggers (v/bloggers) whose livelihoods are centered on producing travel content, some of which specifically caters to media tourism. Emerging from these concerns came questions of survivability: How was

media tourism, and the business brought with it, sustained during the precarious 2020 season when the industry was at a standstill? How was media tourism sustained when the industry was allowed to resume trade, yet remained severely handicapped by the level of local, national, and international travel restrictions? What impact do the events of the 2020 season have on the future of tourism?

In drawing on empirical data collected during the 2020 tourism season from independent tour operators, v/bloggers, as well as key actors in the Scottish tourism industry this article illustrates how digital technologies were used to steer through some of the greater uncertainties brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. We identify how digital technologies were utilized by industry actors in three different phases of the 2020 season, from digital technologies being used to “push” a message of public safety, to then fostering a creative “upcycle” of products, and, finally, to supporting a “hybrid” tourism season. The authors then reflect on what arises from these phases and what impact this can have on the future of both the industry and tourism research, in Scotland and abroad.

Literature Review

As the coronavirus pandemic was in the early stages of unfolding, most early pandemic era tourism research was speculative or conceptual due to the lack of information available (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Jarratt, 2021). However, enough time has now passed that we can begin to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the wider tourism economy and to understand what themes are emerging from discourse on COVID-19, digital technologies, and the future of tourism. From the literature, it is clear that digital technologies were at the nexus of the 2020 tourism season. This is indicated in several country-specific case studies that illustrate how digital technologies were an integral part of maintaining some semblance of tourism in a time when physical travel was prohibited (Briciu et al., 2021; Kononova et al., 2021; Sheresheva, 2020; Sorooshian, 2021). The major threads of discourse that have emerged in this period concern two themes: digital technologies as an assistive tool for physical travel, and digital technologies as a means of creating new forms of travel.

Scholars have begun to examine, in earnest, the wide-ranging integration of technologies within the tourism industry with previous scholarship exploring digital technologies regarding themes such as tourism marketing (Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2013), travel planning (Pencarelli, 2020; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010), tourists' experiences (Egger et al., 2020), enhancing attractions (He et al., 2018), and consumption (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019). The coronavirus pandemic has merely served to accelerate these debates and to widen the scope of research. In terms of examining the role of digital technologies as a tool, scholars such as El-Said and Aziz (2021) have noted that rather than using digital technologies to substitute in-person experiences, digital technologies are used to support experiential travel in the pandemic era. While assistive technology is not new, the literature is also examining the integration of digital technologies for relatively new purposes such as mobility tracking (otherwise known as "track and trace") and robotic applications that reduce person-to-person interactions (El-Said & Aziz, 2021; Zeng et al., 2020). As this article explores, the need to maintain physical distancing between visitors was one of the many factors that attractions had to contend with when the tourism season resumed.

The other theme to emerge with COVID-19 tourism research concerns the emergence of new forms of travel that do not require *physical* travel and instead are reliant on digital technologies to facilitate *virtual* travel. While augmented reality and virtual tours are well research concepts in tourism studies (Yung & Khoo-Lattimore, 2019) with precoronavirus literature focusing on questions of authenticity (Mura et al., 2017), movement (Tzanelli, 2020), and marketing (Neuhofer & Buhalis, 2013), newer research debates whether the ongoing coronavirus will be a catalyst for entirely new forms of virtual travel and what it might mean for the future of tourism (Akhtar et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2020; Jarratt, 2021; Lu et al., 2022).

Arising with the digital is what Jarratt (2021) termed "webcam-travel" in which the viewer uses a webcam (i.e., digital technologies) to view places and attractions around the world. Jarratt's assertion that visual consumption is at the root of tourist practices and that webcam travel can act as a facilitator to physical travel is echoed by several scholars

who view virtual tours as an assistive counterpart to in-person experiences (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2021; Kononova et al., 2021). In moving beyond the COVID-19 era of travel, scholarship on the future of tourism in a postpandemic era is divided. Some scholars point to a return to the industry's prepandemic state with an emphasis on physical travel (Sheresheva, 2020), while others suggest that virtual tourism will either begin to offer new experiences that cannot be replicated in physical travel, such as opportunities to view a museum object in fine detail through zooming in on a computer screen (Burke et al., 2020), or will replace mass tourism in postpandemic society (Akhtar et al., 2021). Gretzel et al. (2020) went so far as to argue that there is no future to tourism without information technologies. In examining greener travel, others also suggest that virtual tourism provides a pathway of promoting sustainable tourism through the reduction of carbon emission through limiting physical travel. Additionally, arguments are being made that virtual tourism is breaking down economic and physical barriers associated with physical travel as virtual travel options are more cost-effective and accessible to those with physical impairments (Burke et al., 2020; Cooper & Alderman, 2020; Lu et al., 2022).

While the coronavirus pandemic raises issues surrounding digital technologies, modes of travel, and the future of the tourism industry, we must ask how these issues are reflected in types of tourism, such as media tourism, where *experiencing a specific place* is the primary reason for travel. As mentioned previously, media tourism is a form of tourism that is largely reliant on physical travel to a location. The basis of which is centered on the visitor being able to access the places that are significant to a media text, such as a book series, film, or television series. These sites can include places such as film studios (Couldry, 2000), filming sets/sites (Goh, 2014), locations featured in books, films, or music (Beeton, 2016; Hovi, 2010), or popular culture icon's homes or resting places (King, 1993). While virtual pilgrimage is newly discussed (Tzanelli, 2020), several case studies highlight the importance of place and physical travel in engaging in media tourism (Couldry, 2007; Hovi, 2010; Reijnders, 2011; Williams, 2017).

Media tourism and physical travel have not only been approached from the perspective of

visitor experience, but scholars have also explored the overall impact that media tourism has on the location being visited (Garrison, 2020; Garrison & Wallace, 2021; Phillipov, 2017; Van Winkle & Thomlinson, 2021). As explored here, media tourism offers an opportunity to develop businesses off the back of a media text's popularity. This financial and employment growth is seen in Scotland with the "Outlander-effect," a socioeconomic phenomenon that was borne off the back of the popular book and high-end television series, *Outlander*, which is set and almost entirely produced in Scotland (Garrison, 2020). Scotland has a long history of media-inspired tourism from media such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (Beeton, 2016), *The Da Vinci Code* (Martin-Jones, 2014), and *Braveheart* (McArthur, 2003). From this rich association with media narratives, businesses have emerged that specialize in offering media-specific travel experiences. These range from independent tour guides offering overnight tours of Scotland to bloggers and vloggers creating media-specific content to attract potential visitors to their platforms. While it is well established that digital technologies are used as a tool to help facilitate business within the tourism industry, we must ask what happens to media tourism, and tourism more generally, when physical travel is jeopardized? Additionally, what happens to travel vloggers and bloggers when the content being generated is no longer relevant (Briciu et al., 2021)? The coronavirus pandemic tested the vitality of media tourism and further emphasized the role of digital technologies in making media tourism possible. It is these questions that the authors investigated, using media tourism and media tourism-related businesses and stakeholders in Scotland as a case study.

Methodology of Research

The data collected consists of qualitative interviews and primary source analysis. Qualitative interviews were conducted between January and March 2021 with six Scottish-based tour operators and seven international bloggers/vloggers. The professional tour guides were selected because they are the operators of small, independently run tour companies that provide media-based tours in Scotland. The bloggers and vloggers interviewed

were selected as they produced content relating to media tourism in Scotland within the last 5 years. Additionally, industry stakeholders were interviewed to gain a full understanding of how the coronavirus pandemic was impacting the industry at regional and national levels. These stakeholders were the film and creative industries manager for VisitScotland, as well as key individuals from Historic Environment Scotland (HES) and the National Trust for Scotland (NTS), two heritage and conservation charities responsible for the care and management of Scotland's built and natural heritage. HES and NTS both care for sites that are popular locations for media tourists. All interviews were semistructured and took place either on the web-based conference platforms Zoom and Microsoft Teams or via the cross-platform instant messaging and voice calling platform, WhatsApp. Each interview lasted between 30 min and 1 hr.

In addition to qualitative interviews with key members of the Scottish tourism sector, tour operators and bloggers/vloggers, we also drew on quantitative surveys conducted by VisitScotland as well as primary source analysis of government policies, open access newspapers, and social media content generated by industry stakeholders. We also relied on data collected by the authors in September 2020 through participant observation as they visited the Scotland-based attractions Doune Castle and Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott, in the capacity of visitors. This analysis was done in conjunction with the interviews allowing for a clear understanding of the 2020 Scottish tourism season to emerge.

Results

The data illustrates that digital technologies were a vital component to the viability of the 2020 season. Throughout the season in order to sustain a connection between those in the industry and those who were would-be visitors, the ways in which digital technologies were adapted were altered as the season progressed. The authors identify these shifts in three phases: a "Push" phase, an "Upcycle" phase, and a "Hybrid" phase. Within each of these phases tour operators, vloggers, and industry stakeholders relied on digital technologies to salvage the 2020 season and to keep media tourism viable.

The Push Phase

On March 23, 2020, the First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon gave an address that outlined restrictions placing Scotland into a national lockdown and marked the first phase of the unusual 2020 COVID-19 tourism season. Outwith restrictions specific to the Scottish tourism industry, this announcement brought with it a citizen-wide stay-at-home order, as well as the closure of schools, offices, non-essential shops, restaurants, and social venues. In terms of the Scottish tourism industry, this last week of March marked a period of uncertainty with cancellations of flights, hotel bookings, guided tours, and other industry reservations. This was reinforced in interviews with tour operators, such as Adam, a tour guide and business owner, who reflected that “[Lockdown] decimated about 85% of my income within about 10 days” and another guide, Euan, described his experience as “cataclysmic. It has been a 98% to 99% decline [in trade].” This loss of income and sense of uncertainty was echoed in research conducted by VisitScotland. According to their survey of industry businesses conducted March 20–30, 2020, 99% of 2,243 business respondents experienced either cancellations, a decline in bookings, or a reduction of visitors with the average length of survival of business anticipated to be 3 months without financial support (VisitScotland, 2021).

It is in this climate of uncertainty, with industry businesses hemorrhaging money and in need of ways to remain relevant to their markets, that the first phase of the season began. The authors identify this phase as a period of time marked by a “push” mentality. During this period marketing strategies shifted from enticing people to visit, to encouraging people to be responsible and postpone visits to Scotland. This was aptly exhibited in online social media content, which took reproductions of early tourism advertisements, such as postcards, posters, and magazine covers, and digitally added new text that “pushed” people away from visiting. These posters were inspired by a digital campaign first circulated in Wales, which discouraged visits to Welsh cities and rural areas. This was then adopted in Scotland in April 2020 by Martin Crewe, the Director of Barnardo’s Scotland charity.

Crewe shared his poster “Not the Best of Times” on Twitter with the hashtag #dontvisitscotlandchallenge. Others began to add their own works using the same hashtag, drawing the attention of social media users and newspaper outlets with messages of “dinnae bother” (don’t bother) and “Isle of Skye: It’s a lot wetter than you think—stay home.” This atmosphere of pushing tourism away was borne from a desire to keep residents healthy and to prevent the virus from spreading. Also occurring at this time was a different form of “pushing”—would-be visitors were pushing their booked tours into 2021 or 2022 in the hope that travel would be safe and unrestricted travel would resume. While safety was a priority, this “pushing” presented several challenges to those in the industry, namely: How can a business sustain itself when its primary market is unable to travel? How can traveler v/bloggers sustain a following and maintain an income when travel content is no longer relevant in the short term? This was the atmosphere in which the 2020 tourism season tipped into the second phase of the tourism season: upcycling.

The Upcycle Phase

The second phase of the 2020 tourism season was marked by what the authors identify as an “upcycle.” Where the “push” phase actively sought to discourage physical travel of any kind, the “upcycle” phase, which lasted from April to June 2020, featured a desire to keep the industry, and Scotland as a destination, fresh in potential visitors’ minds. During this time the tourism industry still faced debilitating restrictions as people were still expected to maintain social distancing of 2 m and the Scottish government-mandated 5-mile travel ban was still in effect. As a result, experiencing physical travel to tourism destinations in Scotland remained an impossibility for international markets. This proved to be a challenge for both tour operators and v/bloggers as their main traffic was predominantly overseas visitors. As Allan, a tour operator and business owner explained:

People were saying, “Oh, well move over to domestic” but that’s not my market. People . . . in Scotland—they don’t need me to drive them around. That’s one of the things, people coming

around here like, “oh, I don’t want to drive on your roads. Can you do it?”

The main concern became how to maintain an interest and a market in travel when physical travel, and delivering first-hand experiences, was impossible. It is during this time that industry stakeholders transformed their services and created new products online in order to maintain an audience base. This manifested differently for various stakeholders in the industry and involved relying on older digital material to present a new product offering. These new upcycled products included online live virtual tours, prerecorded video “tours,” and the creation of podcasts.

For v/bloggers this manifested in the form of upcycling older content from their original platforms (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, or websites). Upcycling, as identified here, took the form of stripping, reusing, and recycling older content and transforming (upcycling) this content in order to host it on different platforms. As Sara, an American vlogger, explained:

I’ve started to do TikTok because that’s a completely different set of folks. And it tends to be even younger [people]. Short little videos of places we’ve been are easy for me because I have the content already.

In doing so, this content appeared “fresh” and reached a new audience. Alongside repurposing content, digital storytelling also became a feature of the upcycle period. Kathleen, a written word blogger, is an example of this as she transformed her blog into a podcast. As she explains:

What I noticed was that practical content on my website isn’t any use to them right now, but what is useful to them is the inspirational content that I post on my social media, and that’s what a podcast came out of as well because that would be inspirational rather than practical. . . . The podcast is going to be a storytelling podcast and . . . every episode is going to be a 15 to 20 minutes story about a travel story. First-person narrative. Kind of like a “lean back and imagine you’re there with me” sort of direction and followed by a few practical tips to visit that location as well.

In taking the knowledge already present on her blog, Kathleen was able to use digital technologies to create an entirely new product.

Where v/bloggers relied on recycling digital content to maintain an audience base, tour operators used social media and digital conferencing platforms to reach across the physical divide of lockdowns to access international markets. This manifested in different forms of virtual tours, with the tours on offer varying from business to business. Where some tour guides offered prerecorded videos for purchase through their website, others offered donation-based live tours. As Craig explained:

Initially, we set up a computer and logged in to Zoom and paid for a subscription for it. I then went around the locations—I had a lot of photographs anyway from the filming—so the way Doune [Castle] was dressed . . . so I pretty much went A to Z on the locations I have. . . . So what I’ve been doing saying is “look—it’s a free tour and my maximum amount of people is one hundred” and the last times I’ve done it—I’ve had a few full houses and people can just leave a donation at the end of that if they liked it.

David, a tour guide and company owner, began a series of free-to-view videos on Facebook. This guide filmed these videos in his driveway, inside of his (now stationary) touring van. As he explained:

for the first two or three months, it was all based on books because you were not allowed out and you were not allowed to travel more than five miles. So, I would just get into my kilt, and I would go out to the front where my van is parked. I would get in the van and I would do anywhere between a three to seven minute piece. [I would] open up the glossy coffee table books on pre-marked pages and talk about the fact that you can, “walk down this street and this Red House here is a fantastic chocolate shop, and over here you can get a lovely Christmas gift for your family.” And this is what I would do when if I was on a tour. I would give them a history of the buildings and I would then carry it from next week.

It was also noted that these upcycled products were produced *because* of the pandemic, meaning that the tour operators and v/bloggers would not have created these new products had 2020 been a normal tourism season. This was done purely as an effort to keep viewership and an audience, and to keep Scotland and businesses relevant. The hope was that these efforts would encourage future

visits to Scotland and were not viewed as long-term paid-for services. In most cases, tour operators expressed discomfort with charging for tours. As David explained, “I just feel I don’t have the wherewithal to actually charge people money for something that’s not the real thing.” Craig echoed this sentiment, saying: “I have kind of a resistance to [virtual tours]. I don’t have a resistance to the concept. I have the resistance to charging for it.”

Where these content providers and tour operators were using digital technologies—from streaming platforms, social media platforms to other digital spaces—to create upcycled products, VisitScotland’s approach to maintaining relevance did not involve the creation of new products. On a national scale, VisitScotland developed a new marketing approach that adopted a “top of mind” approach, the backbone of which was a strategy called “Dream Now. Travel Later.” According to the Film and Creative Industries Manager for VisitScotland, this strategy was adopted across all of VisitScotland’s digital platforms and channels and involved reposting (upcycling) content from VisitScotland’s social media channels in order to keep Scotland in the minds of future visitors. This campaign was particularly present on Twitter and Instagram where content would be posted featuring a picturesque location in Scotland, immediately followed by a warning reading: “For now travel is not permitted to or from this area, but we will continue to share inspiration for future visits. Please follow all current government guidelines to protect yourself & others.” The design of this strategy served to create a digital campaign that would maintain interest in Scotland as a premiere tourism location, particularly for overseas visitors who were unable to visit during the lockdown. The idea was to tap into the sense of nostalgia and longing to travel (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2021), which permeated people’s mindset at the time and reminded them that Scotland was a destination worth visiting in the future and, at the same time, promoting adherence to national and local guidelines.

The Hybrid Phase

At the end of July 2020 government restrictions were lifted and the Scottish tourism industry resumed trade, yet the number of visitors was

low, and the visitor demographic shifted. Visitors were almost entirely domestic travelers as the international market remained challenging due to travel restrictions and isolation requirements. International travel, while legally permissible, was precarious as travelers to Scotland from abroad faced challenges with isolation requirements, the cost of out-of-pocket mandatory COVID-19 tests, and travel restrictions between council areas in Scotland. It should also be noted that at this time vaccine trials were under way; however, the first vaccines would not be authorized in Scotland until December 2020. In terms of the employment of digital technologies, there was a shift from “Dream Now. Travel Later” to when and how to travel, and how to do it safely. V/blogger content shifted away from being entirely virtual to providing information on responsible traveling. While none of the tour operators interviewed for this research partook in the 2020 season, newspaper outlets and industry organizations indicated that some tour operators resumed trade. According to VisitScotland’s (2021) survey, 19% of the 2,974 businesses surveyed did not reopen for this truncated season and 79% decided to reopen when conditions improved. Additionally, 5% of businesses surveyed indicated that their business permanently closed during this time (VisitScotland, 2021). According to the NTS, tour operators struggle to visit NTS properties and run tours, particularly large coach tours as social distancing and the number of people allowed in one space would not match the operational costs of running the tours. It is in this phase that the 2020 season entered the “hybrid” phase—a period lasting from July to September 2020. This final phase transitions away from a sole *reliance* on digital technologies to maintain business to a hybrid mix of physical travel with a reliance on digital technologies to *assist* social venues, tourist attractions, and to improve visitor experience.

In September 2020 the authors traveled to two locations featured in a wider research project, Doune Castle and Abbotsford, the home of Sir Walter Scott. Our experiences on this trip reinforced the prominence of digital technologies in making the 2020 season possible. This was most notable with the employment of quick response (QR) codes. These matrix barcodes were vital to the function of the industry during this hybrid phase. On a wider

scale, QR codes were used in the Scottish Government's "Track and Trace" policy, which required any persons visiting a venue, whether a restaurant, attraction, or social venue, to register their presence. This check-in scheme was designed to "trace" coronavirus cases and inform people if they came into contact with the virus during their visit.

Within attractions, QR codes also featured prominently as these codes were not only used for contact tracing but were also used for prebooking visits to sites and scanning menus or accessing information points. This was an effort to mitigate risk factors by reducing queuing, touchpoints, and excessive interaction with staff. In terms of tourist experience, both Doune Castle and Abbotsford also created audio tours that were accessed by scanning QR codes (Fig. 1).

While both attractions already had audio tours in place before the pandemic, the QR codes replaced physical handsets and largely replaced person-guided tours during the pandemic. The use of QR codes situates nicely within HES' (the caretakers of Doune Castle) "agile interpretation" approach to online media, which includes the integration of progressive web-based apps and online downloadable material onto smartphones, tablets, and computers.

In addition to the employment of QR codes and the reliance on smartphone technologies, most attractions required prebooking that could be done by registering online. An e-ticket would then be

generated, removing the need for paper copies for entry. In a similar fashion to the digital artwork prevalent in the "push" phase, several sites took to photoshopping masks onto figures associated with the attraction. For example, marketing for Abbotsford featured a digitally altered image of Sir Walter Scott with a facemask covering his face (Fig. 2). Such subtle reinforcement of safe practices was not unique to Abbotsford and could be seen across a variety of public spaces, such as visitor attractions, restaurants, and shops.

Discussion

While digital technologies were integral to supporting the Scottish tourism industry during the turbulent 2020 tourism season, it is important to reflect on what questions were raised from such events. Perhaps the most significant question to reflect on is what can be regarded as a crisis measure to overcome the coronavirus pandemic and what is a permanent fixture of future tourism? Some measures that were adopted during the 2020 season have roots in previously established measures to mitigate overtourism. This has already been witnessed in places such as Dubrovnik, where the number of visitors is capped in order to protect the city's infrastructure and ensure a decent quality of life for residents (Camatti et al., 2020; Gretzel et al., 2020). Such measures were similarly

QR Code Audio Tour: Author's own



QR Code Audio Guide: Author's own



Figure 1. QR codes at cultural sites. Author's own photos.



Figure 2. Walter Scott with superimposed face mask. Author’s own photo.

adopted across HES and NTS properties during the pandemic as a means to ensure visitor and staff safety. From interviewing the Admissions Manager of HES, it was made clear that while prebooking online was introduced during the pandemic, timed entry and prebooking provisions that maintain a set number of visitors per hour will become a permanent fixture across HES properties and is not just a crisis measure.

One of the larger questions emerging from the 2020 tourism season is whether or not the emphasis on virtual tourism is a permanent fixture of future tourism. Previous studies note how the internet can be used as a vehicle for physical travel (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2021; Jarratt, 2021; Urry, 2003) but will virtual travel supplant physical travel? At this stage it remains too early to predict the full trajectory of virtual tourism; however, an argument can be made that virtual, and digital technologies, remain an accessory to physical travel. While some scholars speculate that the virtual will supplant physical travel in the near future (Akhtar et al., 2021), virtual tours and other “upcycled” products (e.g., podcasts) were only used as a stopgap measure to keep audiences engaged and services relevant for a time when travel could resume. This is supported by opinions in the industry, with Heather, a travel blogger commenting:

I think many companies will likely abandon many of their virtual tours once the pandemic ends and

travel increases, as most are just a way for tour operators to generate income while waiting for travel to return.

This idea of virtual tourism as a stopgap measure was also supported by Kathleen, another travel blogger:

I do think that as soon as we open up again, as soon as people can travel again, the majority of people will want to travel who are not going to want to go on virtually because this is about getting those first-hand experiences. It’s experiential travel that people talk about as one of the big tourism or travel trends for the past couple of years, and even more so now, is transformative and experimental travel. And virtual tours are not going to do the same.

It is well documented that the desire for first-hand experiences is a theme that is prevalent in any form of popular culture-inspired tourism (Couldry, 2007; Gammon & Ramshaw, 2021; Hovi, 2010; Reijnders, 2011; Tzanelli, 2020; Williams, 2017). Critical to popular culture (media)-inspired tourism is the desire to be close to the object of affection and to experience places within the media text. This makes media tourism a place-driven mode of tourism. This need for physical travel was a theme that was prevalent when engaging with tour guides who operate media-specific tours, such as *Outlander* tours. As Allan recalled of touring with an *Outlander* fan:

I did have one lady from Canada that I picked up in the morning in Edinburgh and I had a whole day planned. She said, “I just want to go around these sites.” It was all Doune Castle, Blackness Castle, Lallybroch . . . she went outside, took a picture. I came out of the car, because I take my guests around the location, I don’t just drop them off [and say] “half an hour, on you go.” And she said, “where’re you going?” I said, “I’m going to take you around the castle” and she goes “I don’t care about the castle. I just want to get a picture here where they were filming.”

Graham, another guide, echoed this idea of the need for physical presence to experience a place:

we normally, most of my clients and myself, put the world to rights during these couple days. But sometimes it can be a genuinely, as I said,

reorientation process. People will come away feeling like their lives have been changed in some small way. And so that's the most important thing to me and I suppose that's what I'm always trying to do. . . . it's really about allowing people to experience things for themselves.

In continuing to emphasize the importance of physical travel, virtual tours were viewed as marketing tools by tour operators running these virtual tours to entice virtual tour participants to visit Scotland at a later date. This parallels research conducted by Lu et al. (2021) where virtual tourism was used in China as both a proxy to physical travel in order to contain travel during the pandemic and as a marketing tool for attractions. Jarratt (2021) also echoed this as he found that those who participated in webcam travel have a desire to see these places in person at a later date. While it is argued here that in relation to media tourism, the transition to virtual tours was a crisis measure and an accessory to physical travel, we must consider the possibility of virtual tourism becoming more mainstream with other types of tourism and what issues may arise from this mainstreaming (Akhtar et al., 2021; Burke et al., 2020; El-Said & Azizi, 2021; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; Jarratt, 2021). While accessibility (Burke et al., 2020) and lower cost (Gretzel et al., 2020) have been explored, we must consider the economics of virtual travel. This stems back to the concept of authenticity, a topic widely debated through tourism discourse: Does one charge for virtual tourism when it can be interpreted, as one of the tour operators described, “not the real thing”? It is only in the postcoronavirus era that we will be able to fully assess these issues.

In looking ahead to the 2021 tourism season it was made clear that 2021 would not be a postcoronavirus era and tour operators were less optimistic about reopening. As Craig explained:

I think realistically 2021 is going to be challenging still. We're still in the middle of the pandemic—whether people have to quarantine if they want to come or have a covid passport or have to be vaccinated—we still have a lot ahead of us. A lot of challenges ahead of us. So realistically it'll be towards the end of the year that international travel might open up again for us. But realistically hoping 2022 will be kind of back to normal in some way.

This sentiment was reinforced by other operators, all of which decided to postpone tour bookings to 2022. These decisions were made as the Scottish Parliament described the outlook for tourism as “extraordinarily uncertain” and noted that face-to-face interactions continued to be difficult (O'Connor, 2021). Due, in part, to the continued concerns surrounding physical interactions, Scottish Parliament has remarked that “digitalisation in tourism services is expected to continue to accelerate, including a higher use of automation, contact-less payments and services, virtual experiences, and real-time information provision” (O'Connor, 2021). At this stage, it is evident that, from industry stakeholders and government, digital technologies were the primary thrust behind why the tourism industry did not collapse during the 2020 season and continues to be a foundation for recovery in the postcoronavirus industry.

Conclusion

This article explored how digital technologies were used throughout the 2020 Scottish tourism season to argue that through an interlay of creative measures fostered by digital technologies, it was possible to salvage some of the season during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. In drawing on industry interviews, primary source analysis, and quantitative surveys conducted by VisitScotland the authors illustrated how digital technologies were harnessed in three forms: first as a deterrent of physical travel through “pushing” messages of keeping locals safe and pushing visits to the following year, second as a vehicle to “upcycle” knowledge and material in order to create new products to sustain potential visitors' interest, and third as assisting a “hybrid” tourism season, which was a critical asset to the resumption of in-person travel to Scotland. In looking to the future of the tourism industry, digital technologies will have a more integral part in the industry as venues, attractions, and travel rely more on automation and tracking technologies. The future of tourism in a postcoronavirus era will be one that also sees virtual tours and sustainable tourism as rising areas of focus.

ORCID

Stephanie Garrison:  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0647-515X>

References

- Akhtar, N., Khan, N., Mahroof Khan, M., Ashraf, S., Hashmi, M. S., Khan, M. M., & Hishan, S. (2021). Post-COVID-19 tourism: Will digital tourism replace mass tourism? *Sustainability*, *13*(10), 5352. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105352>
- Beeton, S. (2016). *Film-induced tourism* (2nd ed.). Channel View Publications.
- Briciu, V. A., Briciu, A., & Csiki, A. E. (2021). Comparative analysis of coronavirus influence on the content generated by Romanian travel blogs. In A. Kavoura, S. J. Havlovic, & N. Totskaya (Eds.), *Strategic innovative marketing and tourism in the COVID-19 era* (pp. 49–57). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66154-06>
- Burke, V., Jørgensen, D., & Jørgensen, F. A. (2020). Museums at home: Digital initiatives in response to COVID-19. *Norsk Museumstidsskrift*, *6*(02), 117–123. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2464-2525-2020-02-05>
- Camatti, N., Bertocchi, D., Carić, H., & van der Borg, J. (2020). A digital response system to mitigate overtourism. The case of Dubrovnik. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, *37*(8–9), 887–901. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10548408.2020.1828230>
- Cooper, J. A., & Alderman, D. H. (2020). Cancelling March Madness exposes opportunities for a more sustainable sports tourism economy. *Tourism Geographies*, *22*(3), 525–535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1759135>
- Couldry, N. (2000). *The place of media power: Pilgrims and witnesses of the media age*. Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2007). Pilgrimage in mediaspace: Continuities and transformations. *Etnofoor*, *XX*(1), 63–73.
- Egger, I., Lei, S. I., & Wassler, P. (2020). Digital free tourism—An exploratory study of tourist motivations. *Tourism Management*, *79*, 104098. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2020.104098>
- El-Said, O., & Aziz, H. (2021). Virtual tours a means to an end: An analysis of virtual tours' role in tourism recovery post COVID-19. *Journal of Travel Research*, *61*(3), 528–548. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047287521997567>
- Gammon, S., & Ramshaw, G. (2021). Distancing from the present: Nostalgia and leisure in lockdown. *Leisure Sciences*, *43*(1–2), 131–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2020.1773993>
- Garrison, S. (2020). Beyond fandom: Outlander Facebook fan groups and the guardianship of an imagined Scotland. *Journal of Fandom Studies*, *8*(1), 83–101. https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00011_1
- Garrison, S., & Wallace, C. (2021). Media tourism and its role in sustaining Scotland's tourism industry. *Sustainability*, *13*(11), 6305. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13116305>
- Goh, R. B. H. (2014). The Lord of the Rings and New Zealand: Fantasy pilgrimages, imaginative transnationalism and the semiotics of the (Ir)Real. *Social Semiotics*, *24*(3), 263–282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2013.866781>
- Gretzel, U., Fuchs, M., Baggio, R., Hoepken, W., Law, R., Neidhardt, J., Pesonen, J., Zanker, M., & Xiang, Z. (2020). e-Tourism beyond COVID-19: A call for transformative research. *Information Technology & Tourism*, *22*(2), 187–203. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00181-3>
- He, Z., Wu, L., & Li, X. (2018). When art meets tech: The role of augmented reality in enhancing museum experiences and purchase intentions. *Tourism Management*, *68*, 127–139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2018.03.003>
- Hovi, T. (2010). Dracula tourism as pilgrimage. *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, *22*, 211–227.
- Ioannides, D., & Gyimóthy, S. (2020). The COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for escaping the unsustainable global tourism path. *Tourism Geographies*, *22*(3), 624–632. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1763445>
- Jarratt, D. (2021). An exploration of webcam-travel: Connecting to place and nature through webcams during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *21*(2), 156–168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1467358420963370>
- King, C. (1993). His truth goes marching on: Elvis Presley and the pilgrimage to Graceland. In I. Reader & T. Walter (Eds.), *Pilgrimage in popular culture* (pp. 92–104). Macmillan.
- Kononova, O., Prokudin, D., & Ryabysko, J. (2021). The vision and the perspective of digital tourism. *CUER Workshop Proceedings*, *2784*, 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2109.09795>
- Lu, J., Xiao, X., Xu, Z., Wang, C., Zhang, M., & Zhou, Y. (2022). The potential of virtual tourism in the recovery of tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Issues in Tourism*, *25*(3), 441–457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1959526>
- Martin-Jones, D. (2014). Film tourism as heritage tourism: Scotland, diaspora and The Da Vinci Code (2006). *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *12*(2), 156–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2014.880301>
- McArthur, C. (2003). *Brigadoon, Braveheart, and the Scots: Distortions of Scotland in Hollywood cinema*. I.B. Tauris.
- Mura, P., Tavakoli, R., & Pahlevan Sharif, S. (2017). 'Authentic but not too much': Exploring perceptions of authenticity of virtual tourism. *Information Technology & Tourism*, *17*(2), 145–159. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-016-0059-y>
- Neuhof, B., & Buhalis, D. (2013). Experience, co-creation and technology: Issues, challenges and trends for technology enhanced tourism experiences. In S. McCabe (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of tourism marketing* (pp. 124–139). Routledge.
- O'Connor, A. (2021). *Scottish tourism and COVID-19*. Scottish Parliament. <https://sp-bpr-en-prod-cdnp.azureedge.net/published/2021/3/8/2700b49a-ae5d-4973-a149-88b7b5144d70/SB%2021-17.pdf>
- Pencarelli, T. (2020). The digital revolution in the travel and tourism industry. *Information Technology & Tourism*, *22*(3), 455–476. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-019-00160-3>
- Phillipov, M. (2017). Media tourism and rural romance: Constructing food television's 'Cult Geographies'. In M. Phillipov (Ed.), *Media and food industries* (pp. 107–131). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64101-0_5

- Reijnders, S. (2011). *Places of the imagination: Media, tourism, culture* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315600628>
- Sheresheva, M. Y. (2020). Coronavirus and tourism. *Population and Economics*, 4(2), 72–76. <https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.4.e53574>
- Sorooshian, S. (2021). Implementation of an Expanded Decision-Making Technique to Comment on Sweden Readiness for Digital Tourism. *Systems*, 9(3), 50. <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems9030050>
- Tzanelli, R. (2020). Virtual pilgrimage: An irrealist approach. *Tourism, Culture & Communication*, 20(4), 235–240. <https://doi.org/10.3727/109830420X15991011535517>
- Urry, J. (2003). Social networks, travel and talk. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 54(2), 155–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000080186>
- Van Winkle, C., & Thomlinson, E. (2021). Creative tourism opportunities through film and tourism industry collaboration. In K. Scherf (Ed.), *Creative tourism in smaller communities: Place, culture, and local representation* (pp. 229–254). University of Calgary.
- VisitScotland. (2021). *Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19)*. <https://www.visitscotland.org/research-insights/coronavirus-insights/industry-impact#final>
- VisitScotland. (2022). *Film, TV, and literature: Outlander effect & tourism*. <https://www.visitscotland.org/research-insights/about-our-visitors/interests-activities/film-tv>
- Williams, R. (2017). Fan pilgrimage & tourism. In S. Scott & M. A. Click (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media fandom* (pp. 98–106). Routledge.
- Xiang, Z., & Gretzel, U. (2010). Role of social media in online travel information search. *Tourism Management*, 31(2), 179–188. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2009.02.016>
- Yung, R., & Khoo-Lattimore, C. (2019). New realities: A systematic literature review on virtual reality and augmented reality in tourism research. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 22(17), 2056–2081. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2017.1417359>
- Zeng, Z., Chen, P.J., & Lew, A. A. (2020). From high-touch to high-tech: COVID-19 drives robotics adoption. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 724–734. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2020.1762118>