Tourists' Preferences for Locations and Hotel Accommodations After Covid-19: Insights from India

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Abstract

Among the major crises caused by the novel Covid-19, the hospitality industry was one of the most severely affected. The absence of tourism due to the lockdown and the post-Covid crisis seriously impacted the industry.

In this context, this study analyzes the changes in tourists' attitudes and preferences due to their perceived stress towards their hotel accommodation and location preferences in the post-Covid-19 lockdown in India. An online survey was conducted among 450 respondents to evaluate the change in tourists' perception in terms of their gender, income, and marital status.

The statistical analysis revealed that during the covid crisis, natural surroundings and pleasant weather conditions were the most important factors in determining hotel rooms and location preferences. This continues to influence in the choice of hotels afterwards too.

Keywords: Architecture, Tourism, Social Sustainability, Hotel Design.

1. Introduction

Tourist activities are frequently associated with countering stress, as tourism indirectly improves one's sense of well-being and overall quality of life (Genç, 2012). Travelers often seek out tourist destinations known to be relaxing and stress-free as a way to reduce the anxiety levels (Dann, 2012; Zhang & Xu, 2019). This study explores how tourists' stress levels during the post-covid phase influenced their preferences for hotel rooms and locations.

The novel Covid-19 caused a major crisis in the hospitality industry during the lockdown and the post-Covid phase, resulting in stagnation and travel restrictions (Qiu et al.,

2020; Fotiadis et al. 2021). In fact, tourism had been globally impacted due to various events even before the Covid-19 pandemic (McKercher & Chon, 2004; Pechlaner & Frehse, 2010). However, the early 2020 pandemic crisis of the Coronavirus created physical as well as mental health challenges (Greenberg et al., 2020; Gruber et al., 2021; Kar et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). As a result, the future trends in all the sectors, including tourism, have been radically altered. As unprecedented changes were witnessed in the tourism sector (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020; McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Ranasinghe et al., 2020), the crisis also opened up opportunities to study tourists' behavior, technological innovations, government policies, and academic research (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Seyitoğlu & Ivanov, 2021). One of the positive aspects of Covid-19 concerning the tourism industry has been a better quality of environmental preference (Kurniati et al. 2023).

Several scholars have studied the relationship between tourism and Covid-19 (Brouder, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), and have developed theoretical models (Rutynskyi & Kushniruk, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Yang et al., 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). In a study of tourists' attitudes in the post-Covid phase, Li et al. (2020) has argued that tourists preferred local destinations and short trips to nature-based settings and airy destinations due to the increased risk of infection in international travel. In a survey of 637 respondents in the Czech, Dušek & Sagapova (2021) has identified wellness as the top priority while choosing accommodation during the summer of 2020. Wang et al. (2021) have concluded that after the Covid outbreak, tourists prefer to pay a higher price for cleaner rooms and a more comfortable environment. Nazneen et al.(2020) have highlighted tourists' emphasis on hygiene and safety in accommodation facilities. Kaushal & Srivastava (2021) have recognized hygiene and sanitation as prime factors in tourists' preferences for accommodation. Small accommodation units were also preferred for social distancing and a lower perceived risk of infection (Li et al., 2020). However, Yanti et al. (2023) suggest use of virtual reality technologies for tourism during the pandemic.

Though various studies have identified factors contributing to satisfaction or preferences (Darini & Khozaei 2016, Khozaei et al. 2016), further research is needed on hotel preferences in the post-COVID-19 times. The study therefore aims to investigate the change in tourists' preferences due to perceived stress towards their hotel accommodation and location, during the post-Covid-19 phase. The research questions explored are whether tourist preferences significantly changed due to the pandemic crisis, and whether participants' gender, income, or marital status influenced their hotel room and location preferences. Its objectives are as follows:

1. To analyze the change in tourists' attitudes and perceptions towards their hotel accommodation and location preferences due to their perceived stress in the post-Covid-19 lockdown..
2. To analyze the influence of tourists' gender, income, or marital status on their preferences.

2. Literature Review

The review was conducted to identify the factors that influence tourists' preferences for their hotel accommodation and location. Studies on traveler's attitudes suggest that the type of traveler and circumstances also influence tourist preferences (Bigné et al., 2008; Žabkar et al., 2010; Aruan and Felicia, 2019). Different types of travelers have varying expectations of hotel features (Liu et al., 2015; Li et al., 2020). In this context, L. Wang et al. (2020) identified five types of travelers and their preferences for accommodation viz. business travelers, couples, families, friends, and solo travelers He concluded that the criteria for selecting an accommodation by families and friends were similar.

According to Heung (2000), tourists choose their destination and accommodation based on their personal experiences or services offered. Previous studies also highlight various factors influencing accommodation preferences, which include cleanliness, safety, staff attitudes, services, physical attractiveness, price, and value for money (Chu & Choi, 2000;

Raymond & Chu, 2000; Lockyer, 2005; Sohrabi *et al.*, 2012). Few studies also point toward tourists' preferences for a better built environment, such as the quality of the accommodation (Chen & Yang, 2010), room facilities (Sohrabi *et al.*, 2012), and the role of quietness in the surrounding environment (Edgard & Iraci, 2011; Albaladejo & Diaz-Delfa, 2021). Preferences also vary with age, gender, and other demographic factors. For female travelers, security and safety are the top priority (Fawzy, 2010), while the younger generation prefers accommodations equipped with Wi-Fi and the latest technologies (Kelley, 2012).

Hotel location is another significant factor that affects travel decisions (Lockyer, 2005; Lee & Jang, 2011; Yang et al. 2018), and one of the most essential factors influencing hotel choices of business travelers (Chou et al. 2008) and leisure travelers (Chu & Choi, 2000). While according to Adam & Amuquandoh (2013), the physical and sociocultural characteristics of the neighborhood also determine the hotel location preference, Mccleary et al. (1993) emphasize the geographic and traffic conditions of hotel locations on travelers' choice. However, studies also show that due to Covid-19 implications, tourists' attitudes and preferences have been drastically altered (Aruan & Felicia, 2019; Kock et al., 2020).

The review suggests that though there are studies on tourists' preferences, a thorough investigation based on their demographics such as age, gender, career, income level, and marital status has not been conducted. There are also not many studies on tourists' levels of stress, which was a key factor in deciding tourists' preferences during the post-covid phase. The study therefore additionally investigates how factors such as gender, income levels, marital status, and perceived stress influence tourists' hotel accommodation and location preferences.

3. Methodology

The study examines how tourists' hotel room and location preferences during and after the Covid-19 pandemic are influenced by their perceived stress levels. The sequence of lockdowns that India experienced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the distinctive character of India's lockdowns, which profoundly impacted various aspects of daily life, made it an appropriate setting for investigating the relationship between travelers' selections of hotel locations and accommodations and their levels of perceived stress during and post-pandemic. The study was conducted in October 2021 post-covid, amid partial lockdowns and widespread fear of infection in public places, following the second wave of Covid.

A random sampling approach was utilized to select participants at the undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD levels from the student population of Jamia Millia Islamia, a prominent public university in New Delhi, India. An online questionnaire was administered to understand their preferences and experiences amid perceived stress. The survey instrument was disseminated online through social networking websites and applications, which ensured accessibility despite safety, and active engagement among respondents.

To examine participants' hotel room preferences, a series of highly detailed 3D visualizations featuring five distinct hotel room scenarios were created, ranging from Room 1, which offered picturesque vistas of serene natural surroundings, to Room 5, which portrayed vibrant scenes from an urban context. Leveraging the capabilities of 3D Max software, these immersive images were meticulously designed, ensuring a lifelike and engaging representation of each hotel room. Participants were then prompted to articulate their preferences regarding these intricately designed hotel room options, utilizing a five-point Likert scale.
Furthermore, the research also investigated the preferences of tourists regarding the locations of their accommodations. The analysis considered seven distinct criteria, including affordability of the neighborhood and surroundings, appealing natural and urban environments, proximity to shopping centers, cultural and historical sites, pleasant weather, as well as easy access to central and vibrant areas.

We used a set of seven items from the DASS (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) instrument, which was specifically created to measure participants' perceptions of stress (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), to conduct a thorough assessment of perceived stress levels.

4. Results and Analysis

Out of 450 questionnaires distributed online, 426 responses were received, of which six were returned blank, and 420 were usable, with a fairly high response rate of 98%. Data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics 23.0 (Table 1). There was a preponderance of female participants (61.9 %) over males (38.1%). In terms of income, 52.4% of the respondents were in the 1 to 3 million range, and 22.6% were in the 4 to 6 million range. While 67.9 % of respondents were single, 32.1% were married, and no respondents were divorced/ separated.

Table 1. The demographic background of respondents

Source: Authors

Variable	Categories	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	260	61.9
	Female	160	38.1
Income	1 to 3 million	220	52.4
	4 to 6 million	95	22.6
	7 to 9 million	25	6.0
	Above 10 million	30	7.1
Marital status	Single	285	67.9
	Married	135	32.1
	Divorced/ Separated	0	-

The data was analyzed for tourist's preferences towards their hotel room and location, and their perceived stress during the covid phase.

4.1 Hotel Room Preferences

In the analysis of people's preferences for their hotel rooms, Room 1 hathe ving most natural surroundings (M= 4.06, SD=0.97) was most preferred. In a test of reliability for items for hotel room preferences, a strong Cronbach's Alpha of .801 was reported (Taber, 2018). No significant correlations were found between people's room preferences and their perceived stress.

4.1.1 Room preferences and gender

Both males (M= 4.09, SD=0.92) and females (M= 4.04, SD=1.01) preferred Room 1 (Table 2). The Independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference $(0.132 < p < 0.629)$ among hotel room preferences.

Table 2. Independent Samples Test for hotel room preferences based on gender

Source: Authors

	Female (n=260)		Male (n=160)		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Room 1	4.04	1.01	4.09	0.92	-0.55	0.58
Room 2	3.63	0.96	3.70	0.87	-0.7	0.484
Room 3	3.06	1.28	3.22	1.03	-1.33	0.184
Room 4	2.75	1.35	2.94	1.17	-1.51	0.132
Room 5	2.49	1.50	2.56	1.44	-0.48	0.629

4.1.2 Room preferences based on income

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of people's income groups on their room preferences (Table 3). People across all income groups significantly preferred Room 1$[F (3, 361) = 5.891, p<0.01]$, while other moderate preferences were for Room 2 $[F (3, 346) = 11.98, p<0.01]$, and Room 3 $[F (3, 346) = 6.8, p<0.01]$, all having natural surroundings.

Table 3. Independent Samples Test for hotel room preferences based on income
Source: Authors

	Income groups				F	p
	1 to 3 million	4 to 6 million	7 to 9 million	Above 10 million		
Room 1	4.1	4.3	4	3.5	5.89	0.001
Room 2	3.8	3.9	3.2	3	11.98	0
Room 3	3.3	3.1	3.2	2.3	6.8	0
Room 4	3	2.9	2.8	2.3	2.32	0.075
Room 5	2.6	2.7	2.4	2	1.72	0.163

4.1.3 Room preferences and marital status

Both single (M= 4.30, SD=0.87) and married respondents (M= 3.56, SD=1.00) preferred Room 1, though singles were more enthusiastic about their hotel room preferences and reported higher means (Table 4). The Independent samples t-test showed a significant preference for Room 1, t(419)= 7.46, p < 0.01, and Room 5, t(419)= 2.86, p< 0.005 among single respondents, indicating their contrasting preferences for natural as well as urban settings.

Table 4. Independent Samples Test for hotel room preferences based on marital status
Source: Authors

	Single (n=285)		Married (n=135)		t	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Room 1	4.30	0.87	3.56	1.00	7.46	0
Room 2	3.70	0.98	3.58	0.80	1.31	0.19
Room 3	3.16	1.28	3.04	0.94	1.06	0.291
Room 4	2.86	1.41	2.74	0.90	0.99	0.321
Room 5	2.65	1.58	2.24	1.18	2.86	0.005

4.2 Hotel Location Preferences

In the analysis of hotel location preferences, "pleasant weather" (M=4.60, SD=0.74), and "beautiful natural surroundings" (M=4.57, SD=0.68) were most preferred, indicating people's willingness for natural settings. In a test of reliability for items on hotel's location preferences, Cronbach's Alpha was reported as .524 with moderate, but acceptable reliability (Hinton et al., 2014). No significant correlations were observed between hotel location preferences and perceived stress among people.

4.2.1 Location preferences and gender

Females (M= 3.90, SD=1.17) significantly preferred hotel rooms with 'beautiful urban surrounding' t(419)= 3.18, p=0.002, compared to males (M= 3.56, SD=1.00) (Table 5). Females also preferred (M= 4.10, SD=0.95) a hotel room 'close to shopping hub' t(419)= 8.85, p<0.01, against males (M= 3.06, SD=1.28).

Table 5. Independent Samples Test for hotel location preferences based on gender
Source: Authors

	Female (n=260)		Male (n=160)		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Affordable neighborhood and surrounding	3.46	1.10	3.50	0.90	-0.39	0.698
Beautiful natural surrounding	4.54	0.72	4.63	0.60	-1.33	0.186
beautiful urban surrounding	3.90	1.17	3.56	1.00	3.18	0.002
close to shopping hubs	4.10	0.95	3.06	1.28	8.85	0
close to cultural and historical areas	3.77	1.25	4.03	0.89	-2.51	0.013
pleasant weather	4.56	0.72	4.66	0.78	-1.32	0.187
close to the city center and vibrating areas	3.52	1.27	3.66	1.32	-1.06	0.289

4.2.2 Location preferences based on income

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of income groups of people on their location preferences (Table 6). People across all income groups preferred 'beautiful natural surroundings' [F (3, 366) = 1.244, p<0.294], and 'pleasant weather' [F (3, 366) = 10.257, p<0.01], while the other moderate preference was being 'close to cultural and historical areas' [F (3, 366) = 2.062, p<0.105].

Table 6. Independent Samples Test for hotel location preferences based on income
Source: Authors

	Income groups				F	p
	1 to 3 million	4 to 6 million	7 to 9 million	Above 10 million		
Affordable neighborhood and surrounding	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.5	0.479	0.70
Beautiful natural surrounding	4.6	4.6	4.8	4.5	1.244	0.30
beautiful urban surrounding	3.9	3.7	3.6	3.3	3.204	0.02
close to shopping hubs	3.8	3.7	3.0	2.7	11.152	0
close to cultural and historical areas	4.0	3.8	3.4	4.0	2.062	0.11
pleasant weather	4.5	4.7	4.0	5.0	10.257	0
close to the city center and vibrating areas	3.5	3.8	3.4	4.3	5.129	0.002

4.2.3 Location preferences and marital status

Both single and married people preferred 'beautiful natural surroundings' t(419)= 1.78, p=0.076, and 'pleasant weather' t(419)= 0.05, p=0.96. While single respondents also preferred 'beautiful urban surrounding' t(419)= 5.77, p< 0.01 (Table 7).

Table 7. Independent Samples Test for hotel location preferences based on marital status
Source: Authors

	Single (n=285)		Married (n=135)		t	Sig (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Affordable neighborhood and surrounding	3.46	1.01	3.52	1.07	-0.58	0.563
Beautiful natural surrounding	4.61	0.64	4.48	0.74	1.78	0.076
beautiful urban surrounding	3.98	1.05	3.33	1.13	5.77	0
close to shopping hubs	3.74	1.15	3.63	1.29	0.86	0.391
close to cultural and historical areas	3.81	1.21	4.00	0.95	-1.78	0.076
pleasant weather	4.60	0.79	4.59	0.63	0.05	0.96
close to the city center and vibrating areas	3.65	1.28	3.41	1.29	1.80	0.072

4.3 Perceived stress

Female respondents were significantly more stressed as compared to male respondents, in 5 out of 7 given statements (Table 9).

Table 8. Independent Samples Test for perceived stress based on gender
Source: Authors

	Female (n=260)		Male (n=160)		t	p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
I felt I was close to panic	1.04	0.95	0.74	0.80	3.25	0.001
I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything	1.04	0.95	0.74	0.80	3.25	0.001
I felt I wasn´t worth much as a person	0.64	0.88	0.48	0.80	1.79	0.075
I felt that I was rather touchy	1.60	1.04	1.26	0.92	3.45	0.001
I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion	1.29	1.06	1.26	0.72	0.35	0.729
I felt scared without any good reason	1.08	1.04	0.77	0.83	3.26	0.001
I felt that life was meaningless	1.12	1.11	0.68	0.97	4.09	0

4.3.1 Perceives stress and gender

Female respondents were significantly more stressed as compared to male respondents, in 5 out of 7 given statements (Table 9).

Table 9. Independent Samples Test for perceived stress based on gender
Source: Authors

	Female (n=260)		Male (n=160)		t	p
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I felt I was close to panic	1.04	0.95	0.74	0.80	3.25	0.001
I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything	1.04	0.95	0.74	0.80	3.25	0.001
I felt I wasn´t worth much as a person	0.64	0.88	0.48	0.80	1.79	0.075
I felt that I was rather touchy	1.60	1.04	1.26	0.92	3.45	0.001
I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion	1.29	1.06	1.26	0.72	0.35	0.729
I felt scared without any good reason	1.08	1.04	0.77	0.83	3.26	0.001
I felt that life was meaningless	1.12	1.11	0.68	0.97	4.09	0

4.3.2 Perceives stress based on people's income

In terms of their incomes, though people differed widely in their perception, most agreed with the statement 'I felt I wasn´t worth much as a person' [$F_{(3, 361)} = 1.579$, p=0.194].

4.3.3 Perceives stress and marital status

In terms of their marital status, while singles significantly felt 'touchy', t(419)= .97, p=0.03, the married ones significantly felt 'scared without any good reason' t(419)= -3.52, p=0.001.

5. Conclusion

The study analyzed the change in tourists' preferences towards their hotel rooms and locations during the post covid phase, which was the first objective of the study. Room 1, with the most natural setting, was most preferred, which is consistent with the findings of Li et al. (2020). No significant correlations existed between people's hotel room preferences and their perceived stress.

In the analysis of the second objective, i.e. the influence of tourists' gender, income, marital status, and perceived stress on their preferences, both males and females, across all income groups, and marital status, preferred Room 1. However, single respondents showed an equal preference for Room 5 with an urban setting. People across all income groups and marital statuses indicated their preference for natural surroundings and pleasant weather conditions, although people's location preferences did not correlate with their perceived stress. Females and singles preferred beautiful urban surroundings, though females additionally preferred locations close to shopping hubs. Most people felt touchy, while females felt more stressed. Strong correlations among stress-related factors indicated multiple signs of stress among the respondents. Irrespective of their income, people didn't feel their worth. While singles felt touchy, the married ones felt scared without any good reason.

The findings reveal that during covid crisis, natural surroundings and pleasant weather conditions were the most important factors in determining hotel room and location preferences among people. This may be attributed to the fact that, even when people were going for a trip, they chose isolated locations close to nature and away from people to avoid infection. This change of attitudes continues to play a role in the situation afterwards too.

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