

Family tourism: a New Zealand COVID-19 perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Because of COVID-19, tourist behaviour has changed with a range of trends becoming more prominent. This paper sets out to explain the dominance of family tourism in New Zealand's domestic markets and the trends associated with it.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based upon secondary data from academic literature, industry reports, news media and webinars associated with New Zealand during COVID-19, starting in March 2020.

Findings – The paper explains the rise of family tourism in New Zealand during COVID-19 based upon the consumer behaviour trends of: (1) Simplicity: In search of slow; (2) Mercurial consumption; (3) Localism; (4) Staycation; (5) Healthy habits; and (6) Is it safe to come out?

Originality/value – The usefulness of this paper is derived from explaining why the rise of family tourism occurred based upon the identified trends.

Keywords New Zealand, COVID-19, Consumer behaviour, Family tourism, Trends

Paper type Trends Paper

Introduction

In the companion paper, [Yeoman et al. \(2022\)](#), the authors tracked several consumer trends between May 2020 and 2021 that reshaped New Zealand tourism as international borders closed and the focus became domestic tourism within the country. The more important trends featured in the paper included:

Trend 1: simplicity: in search of slow

During economic downturns, tourists tend to travel less, stay near home, seek simplicity such as value-based holidays focussing on basic facilities, want to meet locals, have more free time and search for bargains ([Yeoman, 2016](#)). Here, tourism is about locations with attributes such as beaches or mountain views.

Trend 2: mercurial consumption

During economic downturns, impulse purchases dramatically decline. Tourists seek bargains. Accordingly, planned purchases come to the forefront. Those with responsibility for household budgets search more deeply for information; wanting to know about activities, experiences, reviews and prices ([Foresight Factory, 2018a](#)).

Trend 3: localism

Across the globe, the trend of localism has been advancing as tourists ([Towner and Lemarié, 2020](#)) and consumers are invited to show their support for all that is local by buying products locally,

Received 16 December 2021
Revised 4 February 2022
Accepted 5 April 2022

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choosing companies that engage actively with local communities or holidaying in one's own country.

Trend 4: staycation

Unsurprisingly, in an economic downturn, tourists focus on domestic rather than international holidays (Hall *et al.*, 2021). The term staycation is applied here for holidays within the country (Cvelbar and Ogorevc, 2020), although the term can also be used in regions; encouraging locals to explore their own backyard during their holidays.

Trend 5: healthy habits

The concept of health has developed from something associated with diet and physical exercise to a holistic entity (Quorin *et al.*, 2020), but health is also associated with mental well-being and mindfulness (Foresight Factory, 2018b, c).

Trend 6: Is it safe to come out?

Safety has become of paramount importance to tourists in COVID-19 scenarios (Singh, 2021) based upon an unprecedented level of public fear, which Zheng *et al.* (2021) call travel fear. Fear is a primitive emotional response to a threat, and COVID-19 is regarded as incalculable and unpredictable.

Combined, these six trends have had a significant impact on shaping one important segment which is *Family Tourism*. The purpose of this paper is to explain how these six trends dominated New Zealand tourism.

Visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel

The Domestic Growth Insight Tool (DGiT) [1] reveals that “family and friends” is the prominent market representing 20% of domestic tourism in New Zealand according to their segmentation model. The tool does not provide detail on how it defines or segments VFR travellers. However, it is assumed that this segmentation has been undertaken based on purpose of visit. It is well-acknowledged through the extant VFR literature (e.g. Backer, 2012) that VFR by purpose of visit will underestimate the size of VFR travel by around 20%.

Family tourism

The DGiT (2021) identifies that “family fun”, defined as family wanting to bond together through fun activities, represents 15% of domestic tourism. There are several reasons why family tourism is strong, and why it is expected to be a dominant trend in New Zealand.

First, families act as the “emotional glue of society” and are often who people contact when they need support (Trend 5). The special relationship grandchildren have with their grandparents is particularly important, filled with humour and less tension (Gram *et al.*, 2019) often providing much-needed stability in times of turmoil. Friends can also become *de facto* families – for immigrants who do not have their own families in New Zealand or singletons living in urban centres (Watters, 2003).

Family holidays are primarily about (re)connecting with loved ones, creating fun memories, photo opportunities and a family story/legacy (Schänzel and Yeoman, 2014) (Trend 1). This helps families to bond and communicate more, which is especially important in times of uncertainty (Trend 5). Theoretically, families could have a holiday at home (Trend 4), although less appealing post-COVID given families were in lockdowns. Time in lockdown at home in contested spaces led to tensions and stresses, especially for mothers (Prickett *et al.*, 2020). Travelling away from home allows families to leave some stress behind and focus on fun experiences, which is particularly important for disadvantaged, full-time working from home parents or single-parent families (Trend 5). Holidays are

often the only times for non-resident parents, usually fathers, to interact with their children, (re)build and maintain family relations and experience parenthood (Schänzel and Jenkins, 2017) (Trend 5).

Family tourism and domestic tourism

The primary form of tourism for families in New Zealand is domestic (Trend 4). There are many affordable places for families to go to and have a fun holiday, for example Department of Conservation (DoC) campgrounds and holiday parks (Trends 1, 2, 3 and 4). New Zealanders see the annual summer holiday by the beach or lake as a well-loved Kiwi icon and symbol of Kiwi identity (Schänzel, 2010). Additionally, pets are often an important part of families and need to be accommodated to travel.

There are changing family structures, with often smaller core families and people living longer leading to more grandparents enjoying multi-generation holidays and grandtravel (Gram *et al.*, 2019). The change in gender roles and parenting behaviour can influence family holidays, with, for example, fathers more involved with their children and mothers seeking relaxing “me time” (Schänzel and Yeoman, 2014) (Trend 1). However, many families have also been priced out of the opportunity to show their children more of the country. For example, many children in Auckland have not visited the South Island but have visited Australia, which may be perceived as better value (Trend 2). Families are often considered more price-sensitive and budget-minded. Although, some families who might normally go on overseas trips might, because of travel restrictions, consider a snow holiday, providing opportunities for domestic winter holidays (Trend 2).

What happened? Department of Conservation (DoC, 2021) had never observed such demand for New Zealanders to tramp a Great Walk as had been observed during the past two years; with families heading into the great outdoors, especially from city dwellers searching the nearby hinterland. Children below age 18 could stay for free in huts, which provided an incentive for families (Trend 2). This confirms the increased demand for families who are looking for outdoor or nature-friendly travel, with parents taking the opportunity to expose the next generation of New Zealanders to appreciate the country (Schänzel, 2010) (Trends 1 and 5). This is part of the “family fun” segment, seeking to create family memories that last a lifetime (DGIT, 2021) (Trends 1, 4 and 5). However, travelling was only an option for those families who could afford it with no vouchers issued by the government for domestic travel compared to other countries (Anthony, 2020; Cvelbar and Ogorevc, 2020) (Trends 1 and 2), with COVID-19 disproportionately affecting disadvantaged families. To partly address these inequalities, the government announced on 1 December 2021 that 100,000 vouchers would be made available over summer for Auckland families for a range of Auckland Council facilities (e.g. zoo and museums) as a reactivation package (Beehive, 2021) (Trends 1 and 2).

A change induced by the pandemic was that families started to pay more attention to cancellation policies, and to health and safety considerations when they selected accommodation, with a preference for self-contained accommodation, especially for extended family or family reunion travel (Zare and Dolnicar, 2021) (Trend 2). Family tourists tend to consider domestic self-drive tourism safer than international tourism with risk aversion particularly high for families providing opportunities for rental campervan companies (Trend 6). This is referred to as “home-is-safer-than-abroad bias” (Matiza, 2022) despite options of family travel to the Cook Islands and Australia available for part of 2021, and Cook Islands for fully vaccinated families from 14 January 2022. Looking towards the summer 2021/22 holiday period (current situation), there may be concern for travelling with younger children (below 12 years of age) as they have only become eligible to be vaccinated on 17 January 2022, as was observed in the US (Minnaert, 2021) (Trend 6). It can be expected that cleanliness, self-containment, self-drive and flexible cancellations continue to be critical for families (Trends 1, 2, 4 and 6).

Concluding thoughts

Family tourism has become the dominant sector in New Zealand’s domestic tourism market because of six trends. Although this paper is based upon New Zealand, the rise of family tourism

and trends identified are likely to be generalisable across many other countries considering the shared problem of COVID-19 and the similarities across advanced economies. Accordingly, this paper provides important value for scholars and industrialists, who can refer to these trends for future planning in post-crisis periods.

Note

1. The DGIT (<https://www.dgit.nz/>) was set up by New Zealand Tourism, the destination marketing organisation for the country to support Regional Tourism Organisation understand the domestic tourism market by social, economic and behavioural characteristics by regions of New Zealand for markets, products and experiences.

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