

Virtual Tour: Tourism in the Time of Corona

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ABSTRACT

Since the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak hit Indonesia on early March 2020, many activities were delayed, flights canceled, and tourist attractions closed. Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) lasting for months prevented people from traveling. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were at least dozens of local tour platforms offering virtual tours via Zoom and Google Meet such as the Jakarta Good Guide and TelusuRI. In addition, museums and tourist destinations both national and international also provide similar services. Conducted with online interviews and observation, this paper explores the participants' experiences with the virtual tour. The result shows that the loss of actual travel sensation, no photo experience, and unstable internet connection were some weaknesses. Although virtual tour can never replace traditional travel, it still provides an interesting advantage. Through virtual tour, people are still able to enjoy a piece of relaxation during quarantine period. As an alternative tourism during COVID-19, virtual tour also helps those with physical limitation do traveling and reduce carbon footprint.

Keywords: virtual tour, covid-19, corona, tourism, Indonesia

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the first Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) case, so called Corona virus pandemic, was announced by the Indonesian government on March 2, 2020, many procedures have been carried out, ranging from Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) to "Adapting to New Habits" (AKB). Presidential Decree Number 11 Year 2020 on Stipulation of Public Health Emergencies [1] signed by President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo due to the massive spread of COVID-19. This required all local governments to coordinate with the central government in issuing policies.

To break the COVID-19 chain, the Indonesia government through Minister of Law and Human Rights issued temporary prohibitions of entry and/or transit (travel ban) into Indonesia for foreigners in the Regulation Number 11 Year 2020 concerning Temporary Prohibition of Entry to the Territory of the Republic of Indonesia for Foreigners [2]. The closure of tourist sites was also done as an attempt of preventing the COVID-19 transmission. In Jakarta alone, a number of tourist attractions have been closed e.g. National Monument, Jakarta Old Town, Ancol Dreamland, Ragunan zoo, and museums.

Meanwhile, other areas in Indonesia such as Aceh (e.g. Mount Leuser National Park), Medan (e.g. Maimun

Palace), Bandung (e.g. Dusun Bambu and Maribaya Natural Hot Spring Resort), Solo (e.g. Pura Mangkunegaran and museums), Makassar (e.g. Losari Beach and Fort Rotterdam), and Papua (e.g. Raja Ampat) were closed during COVID-19 outbreak. The closure of this tourism area certainly supports the effectiveness of social and physical distancing policies. Avoiding crowds will reduce the transmission of Corona virus that occurs in public spaces. Thus, people decided to work, study, and pray from home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has massive impact on tourism industry in Indonesia. The total loss of hotels and restaurants in Indonesia during period of January to April 2020, according to the Chairman of the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association (PHRI) Hariyadi Sukamdani, amounted to IDR 70 trillion due to over 2,000 hotels and 8,000 restaurants had to cease their operations [3]. One of the COVID-19 pandemic impacts is seen in Bali. Bali, Indonesia's most famous island and tourist destination, encounters the worst conditions along the history due to COVID-19 pandemic. The chairman of Badung Hotel and Restaurant Association, I Gusti Ngurah Rai Suryawijaya, stated that the impact of COVID-19 is more severe than that of Bali Bombing (2002 and 2005) and Gunung Agung Eruption because the hotel occupancy rate reached zero occupation [4]. The impact a COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia makes many hotel and

restaurants employees laid off or take unpaid leave. Tourists decided to stay at home, shop based on priorities, and consume entertainment virtually.

To respond to the collapse of tourism industry, dozens of local tour platforms offer virtual tours via Zoom and Google Meet such as the Jakarta Good Guide, TelusuRI, and Outing.id. Local museums and tourist destinations such as the Jakarta History Museum, MH Thamrin Museum, Virtual Tour De Cirebon, Virtual Tour de Lawang Sewu, and Virtual Tour Bali also offer similar service via official website. Meanwhile, international tourist destinations like the Studio Ghibli Museum in Japan and the Buckingham Palace in the United Kingdom also provide virtual tour.

Virtual tour can be an alternative tourism to people unable to do a vacation temporarily due to COVID-19. In addition, the concept of virtual tour also becomes a means of promoting tourist destinations expectedly able to boost tourist visits after COVID-19 pandemic. The research problem raised in this paper is how do tourists respond to virtual tourism offered by service providers? This study is intended to explore the participants' experiences with virtual tour.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last 40 years, the world has experienced a number of major epidemics and pandemics but none had implications to global economy as same as the COVID-19 pandemic had [5]. National and international travel restrictions happening in many countries affect over 90% of the world populations and smashes national economies including tourism industry [5]. This causes many events cancelled, from music concerts, film festivals, cosplay events, sports competitions, to conferences. As a result, flights do not operate, hotel and restaurant do not open, and tourist attractions are shut down.

Several studies have been conducted on the effect of COVID-19 on tourism in Indonesia. For instance, Hakim's study on COVID-19 spread in small islands which were visited by foreign tourists leads to potential contact between local dwellers and tourists [6]. The research showed that local dwellers in small islands are one of the groups most at risk of COVID-19 pandemic due to potential exposure and poor health facilities. A study has been done by Sugihamretha on the policy responses to tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic done by Europe, Southeast Asia, China and Australia that might be implemented in Indonesia [7]. Some recommendations are a) to give financial and fiscal supports to the tourism industry and tourism labour, b) to provide discounts for airlines especially airport parking fees and cargo rental, and c) to establish a disaster management agency for tourism at the central and regional levels.

Furthermore, according to the Institute for Economic and Social Research Faculty of Economics and Business University of Indonesia (LPEM FEB UI) [8], short-term policy recommendations can be given to the tourism

industry in response to COVID-19. The recommendations are: a) Indonesian tourism promotion with content showing improved health standards, cleanliness, and security, b) subsidies for transportation, accommodation, and recreation areas, c) technical guidance on health, hygiene and safety standards for accommodation and food and beverage sector, especially for SMEs.

Since a few years ago, academicians have tried to make new innovations in introducing tourist destinations through virtual tours. For example, an interactive application has been developed to display visual information from nature tourism in North Sulawesi [9] and research implementation of virtual tours as a regional information media in the city of Manado [10]. Yet, the implementation of virtual tours is limited due to technological constraints and internet network. Virtual tour also was not popular because tourist prefers to experience traveling sensation in tourist destinations.

However, due to COVID-19, virtual tours began to become one of solutions to the sluggish tourism industry in Indonesia, and the world. Virtual tour offers the ability of enjoying tourist attraction virtually from home or anywhere without the need to visit the place directly. Using technology, virtual tour places a user into an image and allows the user to increase situational awareness as well as improves the viewing, capture, and analysis of virtual data significantly [11]. Through virtual tour, tourists are able to taste the combination of picture, music, videos, map views, and narration in one integrated experience.

3. METHODS

This research was conducted using qualitative methodology. The main research methods were done with online interviews via voice/video call and participatory observation. In this paper, the author examined not only the experiences of people participating virtual tour during COVID-19 pandemic, but also those of tourism industry workers. As for secondary sources, this research also used literature review.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. General Description of Virtual Tour

World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) projected 50 million jobs in global travel and tourism sector at risk due to COVID-19 pandemic [12]. In detail, there would be 30 millions in Asia, seven millions in Europe, five millions in America and the rest in other countries. After COVID-19 can be overcome, it will take ten months for the tourism industry to return to normal. Since COVID-19 vaccine has

not been available yet until the middle of 2020, no one can estimate when exactly the tourism sector will recover. Mobility restrictions make people cross the borders difficultly for tourism purposes, education, medical, and personal needs. Fortunately, there is an alternative escapism through virtual tour helping people get entertainment to forget stressful and nauseating realities. People can enjoy the sensation of vacation without leaving their home.

Jakarta Good Guide (JGG) is one of the popular local tour platforms offering Jakarta walking tour. Basically, tourists will be accompanied by a guide to explore the interesting parts of Jakarta such as the Old Town, China Town, and Jakarta city centre by foot. However, since COVID-19 outbreak, JGG do virtual tours via Zoom only. Affiliated with Jogja Good Guide and Bandung Good Guide, these tour platforms use pay-as-you-wish method for tourists who take a virtual tour with them. JGG offers not only local attractions but also international virtual tours such as to Ho Chi Minh, Beijing, New York, Madrid, and Jerusalem. In addition, JGG has thematic virtual tour programs such as virtual tea and coffee brewing, Spice Girls' iconic visit, mosque visit, and urban legend.

Generally, tourists just need to fill in the registration form containing their name, email address, and program they want to join in the virtual tour program. Then, the tour platform will then send an email confirmation informing Zoom ID and password. On the day of tour, tourists can join the program in Zoom along with guide and other tourists. The guide not only shows photos of tourist sites but also invites the tourists "to take a walk" using Google Earth. The guide frequently presents YouTube videos, detailed images on Power Point or website accompanied with detail explanations. Tourists may conduct a two-way communication with guide like asking question and sharing opinion. Occasionally, the guide provides a quiz to live up the atmosphere so tourists would not feel bored.

4.2. Tourist Receptions on Virtual Tour

All informants interviewed had a similar impression when they first joined the virtual tour organized by the local tour platform. Some informants expect to take a virtual tour using 360-degree and virtual reality. Virtual tours with 360-degree are common among overseas tourist attractions such as museums, Kyoto Garden, Niagara Falls, and the Grand Canyon. Furthermore, other informants assumed that the virtual tour means the guide is

live on site and participants enjoy the virtual stroll via online. They did not expect that the virtual tour they join used Google Map and power point to display image. The quality of the photos displayed also needs to be considered, i.e. using large photo pixels so that the photos do not look blurred.

“At first I thought virtual tour is like going into a tourist spot such as a museum and seeing a collection. It’s like a virtual 360-degree tour, you know right? However, the virtual tour I participated in was not like that. We used Zoom and Google Map only, and then we were told what was on the left, on the right. So, you have to imagine yourself. I was a bit shocked at that time. It felt downgraded if compared to 360 degree or virtual reality. But, the virtual tour price was so cheap, so yeah... Just enjoy it.” (Informant D, female, 30s, interviewed August 5, 2020)

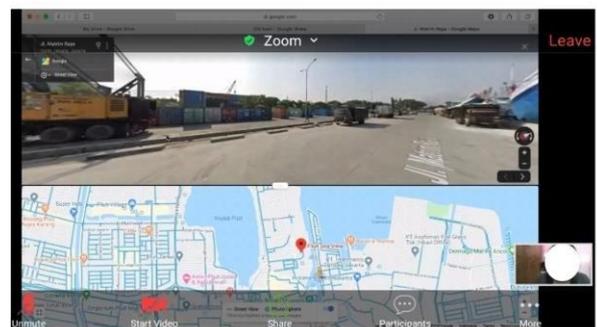


Figure 1 Screen capture of virtual tour joined by Informant D

4.2.1. Pleasure Experiences on Virtual Tour

Year 2020 is a tough year to the tourism industry. Even though the PSBB has been loosen and a number of tourist attractions have been operated with strict health protocol, but some people still consider not to take a vacation. Informant D admitted that she has not had any vacation plans because many things have to be done to prevent COVID-19, from wearing mask, washing hands regularly, to maintaining physical distancing.

“I still worry whether or not there will be a virus, it is safe, etc. I prefer staying at home since everything is available. I have internet access, YouTube,

Netflix. I can buy things via online. If I want a vacation, I can use virtual tours." (Informant D, female, 30s, interviewed on August 5, 2020)

Most informants have tried JGG services to take a virtual tour. Having 27,000 followers on Instagram (as of August, 8 2020), JGG is one of the popular tour platforms among young people. JGG guides are, according to informants, official guides from the tourism office and members of the guide associations. This professionalism made the delivery of virtual tour information fun, informative, and detail.

"It was really fun to join the virtual tour because the interaction was 2-way. We need to turned on the camera and we can interrupt if want to ask something, a lot of information that I did not know previously. If I go there myself, I don't think I will get this much knowledge. Maybe I just take photos, upload them on Instagram. That's it. This virtual tour at least broadens my insight. I really enjoyed it" (Informant C, female, 20s, interviewed on June 19, 2020)

Meanwhile, informant A had an impression that virtual tour he joined was very entertaining. Amid work-from-home routine and hectic online activities such as meetings and webinars via Zoom, the virtual tour becomes an oasis in the middle of a desert. As someone who lives alone and away from family, virtual tour gives me an opportunity of interacting with different and new people. For him, virtual tour is an activity enjoyable to join.

"This virtual tour gives me the highest scale of relaxation. It shows new places and photo of dishes. In the middle of Zoom-based activities, this Zoom is fun. Fun is the keyword. It was like an oasis in the middle of desert. I felt there was an interaction with other humans. The interaction was fluid and warm. The guide was warm, the group was small, the people were friendly, and we were at the same age. It felt like being taken into a real walk but through a platform." (Informant A, male, 20s, interviewed on June 20, 2020)

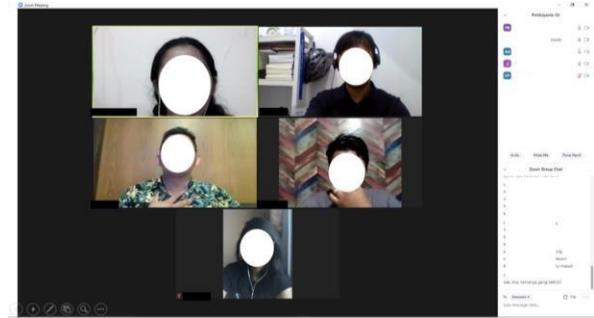


Figure 2 Screen capture of virtual tour joined by Informant A

Furthermore, one of the virtual tour advantages is that it does not take much money. Many tour platforms offer a pay-as-you-wish option so everyone can adjust with the budget. Moreover, tourists also do not have to spend money on transportation and accommodation expenses. Anyone can enjoy the beauty of attractions in other countries, despite no passport. Tourists just need to provide gadgets such as smartphones and laptops, as well as internet connections. People with limitations such as physical, time, and money will be able to enjoy traveling, even though it is virtually. Virtual tour is also believed to be environment-friendly as it reduces the carbon footprint resulting from vehicle emissions.

"In my opinion, virtual tours can be a solution to people who want to travel but are not able to do it for some reasons. There are people who could not afford traveling, e.g. people with no money and people who were physically handicapped. To others, virtual tour can be a fun activity during pandemic besides watching Netflix and YouTube. Sometimes you can make new friends." (Informant E, female, 30s, interviewed on July 7, 2020)

4.2.2. Unpleasant Experiences on Virtual Tour

The internet connection is the reason often stated by the informants regarding the unpleasant experience with taking the virtual tour. Some informants mentioned that error network happens mostly if the weather is bad like cloudy and rainy. One of the informants said he experienced a bad connection and was unable to continue the virtual tour. Virtual tour service providers also encountered the same problems. Informant C had several experiences when the host was accidentally logged out and the virtual tour stopped for a few minutes. Informant A also faced network problems when he only could hear the

guide's voice, but the video was freeze. This made him lose the flow of the virtual tour explanation.

"When I was on virtual tour, there was an internet problem. We (audiences) can hear guide's voice, but the video was freeze. Because of this, the route became unclear and there was a missing part. It made me not understand the route flow. That was happened around 10 minutes. So, we communicated through chat. Then, the guide decided to re-log in to fix the problem. Since I was the second person who joined Zoom, I became the co-host. Ha-ha. When the guide logged in, the host role was back to the guide again." (Informant A, male, 20s, interviewed on June 20, 2020)

Apart from internet connection problems, the length of the virtual tour, which was 2-3 hours, has received critics from several informants. Even though on a "vacation", the tourists have to sit down during the virtual tour. This made the body feel uncomfortable, achy, and tired. In addition, virtual tour also preferred to be in a casual way instead of serious and rigid style, because, it will reduce the joy of the virtual tour. As a result, the virtual tour will feel more like a webinar and online lecture.

"I took several virtual tours during pandemic. Once, I joined virtual tour that in collaboration with certain institution. There was a welcome remark from representatives and tour guide mostly used formal language. Too bad, we were not allowed to talk directly. We can only have asked questions via chat column. For me, it was more like webinar or online lecture. I think it will be more interesting if the virtual tour delivered in casual way. Since, it is a tour, it should be enjoyable" (Informant B, male, 30s, interviewed June 21, 2020)

To photo hunters, such as photographers and social media enthusiasts, virtual tours certainly cannot fulfill their needs for taking pictures at tourist sites. It cannot be denied as virtual tours could not provide the actual travel sensation when tourists can see, feel, hear, and smell the aroma of the place they visit. The same feeling is also felt by culinary lovers. Their main essence of traveling is to

try the local and specialties dishes. The opportunity of tasting and perpetuating the culinary dishes in a photo could not be done. The loss of actual sense of traveling makes virtual tour just as a reference of tourist attraction before actually visiting there.

"I'm a sensory person. If take the virtual tour, I don't know what the actual experience will be. I could not see, could not smell, could not touch, and could not feel the area. For example, if I go to the klenteng (Chinese temple) via virtual tour, I can't smell the fragrance of incense. That is the missing part of the virtual tour" (Informant A, male, 20s, interviewed on June 20, 2020)

5. CONCLUSION

Virtual tours can be a starting point as an alternative tourism during Corona time and even after the pandemic ends. Moreover, there are people who do not have the resources, economic capacity, spare time, and access. For example, people with disabilities and people who have limited mobility will be able to taste the sensation of recreation via virtual tour.

Apart from its affordability, virtual tours can be a medium of promoting the tourist attractions to central and local governments. Indeed, it requires technological improvements such as the use of 360-degree software, virtual reality (VR), and panoramic picture. This technology upgrade enables 3D visualization to make virtual tours closer to real and futuristic ones. Virtual tour can be an entrance and make people triggered to visit these tourist attractions directly.

COVID-19 pandemic reflects the tourism industry not to return to business-as-usual. Huge transformation needed to make this industry survive after the pandemic. Strict health protocols and improved safety standards are needed in order to make tourists feel safe during the tour.

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