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Article

Exploring post-COVID-19 travel intentions of foreign tourists in Nepal: An empirical study using structural equation modeling

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Abstract: Amidst the global challenges posed by the rapid transmission of a new coronavirus, the tourism sector has undergone an unprecedented downturn, similar to all economic sectors. In light of this, the present study aims to examine the travel intentions of foreign tourists in the post-COVID-19 era in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal using Social Cognitive Theory. Structural equation modeling was used for data analysis of 350 tourists. The study revealed that the travel intention after the COVID-19 outbreak was significantly influenced by severity perception and personal positive effects, both of which were shaped by environmental changes. Results indicate that a common challenge faced by tourists was the lack of quality hotels and homestays, and the suggested managerial solution was to increase the number and enhance the quality of available accommodations. Tourism in Nepal serves as an enduring source of national income, offering a significant competitive advantage, thus rendering sustainable tourism unavoidable.

Keywords: tourists' travel intention; post COVID-19; social cognitive theory; structural equation modeling; Kathmandu-Nepal

1. Introduction

Tourism brings multiple benefits to people despite being a risky business [1]. It brings benefits to environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects [2–5]. Sustainable tourism development helps to manage different aspects of the environment and conserve biodiversity [6,7]. It accelerates economic development and generates employment opportunities [8,9]. The economic benefits of tourism enhance society, eliminate poverty, and promote environmental conservation [10,11]. To increase benefits, tourism stakeholders protect culture, maintain peace, and collaborate among the communities [12]. However, the tourism sector has been affected by different risky events [13]. Disasters, diseases, security, climate change, and seasonality issues have affected tourism adversely in the past and could impact it in the future. In early 2020, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) started severely disturbing the travel and tourism sector [14]. At that time, tourism across the world was suffering a crisis bringing socioeconomic disturbances [15]. In developing countries, the impact on tourism has been even more severe due to periodic lockdowns [16]. The rapid spread of new variants of coronavirus has significantly decreased all types of economic activity worldwide, including tourism and businesses related to it [17]. Large-scale

travel restrictions and social-distancing policies limit the travel of people, which prevents the circulation of money [4]. These restrictions have adversely affected international travel and the domestic movement of people and might be further affected by future uncertainties [18]. Travel around the world was drastically disrupted by the COVID-19 epidemic, which at first resulted in widespread cancellations and limitations. Travel intentions were increased by vaccination campaigns, but vaccine use was impacted by persistent virus worries and shifts in consumer confidence. Tourism has changed due to shifting travel habits, safer destination selections, and regulatory developments [7,18]. Post-pandemic travel decisions were still influenced by psychological elements such as fear and trust in health measures, in addition to economic repercussions [19,20].

Increased anxiety and panic, interrupted travel, fewer social connections, limited finances, and emotional exhaustion are all associated with COVID-19 in travelers [21,22]. Due to constant adjustments to shifting criteria, the extended epidemic length has also resulted in emotional tiredness and decreased enthusiasm for travel [23]. On the other hand, travelers have had favorable personal impacts with COVID-19. Some have reassessed their objectives for travel, placing a stronger emphasis on eco-friendliness and ethical travel [14]. Health-related worries have made it more important to prioritize one's own wellbeing when traveling, encouraging healthier habits [24]. Furthermore, the pandemic has had a major impact on how seriously people take the situation, increasing people's awareness of the possible outcomes and encouraging preventive measures like wearing masks and practicing good hygiene [25].

Travel behavior of tourists was changed as a result of COVID-19 from both the demand and supply sides [26]. Considering the demand-side factors, restrictions on freedom of movement, border closures, and guests' concerns about infection played a significant role. On the supply side, the shutdown of lodging, dining establishments, and recreational facilities was notable [17]. Consequently, it significantly influenced travelers' experiences [27]. Travel readiness among visitors is significantly influenced by their concerns about safety [28]. Furthermore, different visitors have different perceptions of risk based on intricate psychological traits [29]. In an adventurous destination, like Nepal, travel behavior might be different, and there might be different perceptions of travel risk, which need to be explored further.

COVID-19 has adversely affected Nepal's economy, which has a high tourism potential [7,18]. The tourism industry has a significant impact on everything from the country's foreign currency reserves to job prospects [30]. Nonetheless, the pandemic's impact on this business has put a significant burden on the country's economic status [31]. The revival of the tourism industry and travel has emerged as an exceedingly challenging issue in the post-COVID-19 era, primarily due to the absence of a specific preparedness strategy for a catastrophe of this scale [12]. As per Sah et al. [32], the recovery of tourism might take longer than was observed following the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. It was observed that even after the lockdowns were lifted, the travel and tourism areas were still battling to recover, and the speed of recovery was uncertain [31,33]. This is a problem to be addressed in the case of a new COVID-19 variant and future tourism uncertainties.

Thus, it is essential to have a thorough grasp of post-crisis travel intentions to

help the tourism sector respond to crises in an efficient manner [34,35]. Seyfi et al. [36] examine the evolution of research on travel intentions before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying shifts in focus and emerging trends. The study highlights research gaps in understanding psychological factors, cultural variations, communication strategies, technology adoption, and the post-pandemic evolution of travel intentions. While previous studies have explored various aspects of travel behavior during crises, there remains a significant gap in understanding how specific factors like severity perception, personal impact, and environmental impact influence travel intentions in the post-COVID-19 era, particularly in developing countries like Nepal. The interplay between these factors and their combined effect on tourists' decision-making processes has not been fully examined, especially in the context of ongoing uncertainties. This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how severity perception and personal and environmental impacts shape travel intentions, providing new insights into the challenges and opportunities for tourism recovery in a post-pandemic world.

Hence, this study tries to identify the main factors affecting the travel intention of tourists in Nepal, using social cognitive theory, the challenges faced by them, and managerial solutions for reducing the challenges in the post-COVID-19 era, including the psychological and environmental factors. The outcome of this study will help to make policy decisions to entice travelers in the post-COVID-19 period and minimize the challenges faced by tourists in Nepal. For instance, the total number of tourists arriving in Nepal in 2019 was 1,197,191, which decreased to 230,085 in 2020 and further decreased to 150,962 in 2021. However, this number again bounced back to 614,896 in 2022, which was 307.3% higher compared to the previous year [37]. Previous studies have shown that a good enabling environment can flourish foreign tourists in Nepal [38]. So, this study would provide theoretical contributions by enhancing understanding of behavioral responses, psychological impacts, and risk perception shifts and offers practical insights for tourism stakeholders in policy development, market targeting, and crisis management in future uncertainties, similar to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Methods

2.1. Conceptual framework

The measurement of tourist intention is important as it helps in appropriate decision-making [39,40]. With this respect, the present study discusses Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) [41]. According to the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), social settings have a significant impact on learning and are not just the product of individual processes. It places emphasis on the dynamic interplay between social interactions and environment, which shapes people's behaviors and how those behaviors affect personal and environmental elements [42]. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is highly relevant for this study as it integrates both environmental and personal factors to explain tourist behavior. SCT's emphasis on the reciprocal interaction between individuals and their environments aligns well with our analysis of how COVID-19 influences travel intentions. It allows us to explore how changes in travel conditions and safety measures interact with personal perceptions and risk evaluations, offering

a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic factors affecting travel decisions. By focusing on cognitive processes and behavioral modeling, SCT provides a robust framework for analyzing the complex and evolving nature of travel behavior during and after the pandemic.

In this theory, behavior is influenced by an individual's cognition and environmental factors [43]. By integrating behavioral, psychological, and environmental factors [44], this theory examines the influence of COVID-19 on travel intentions viewed through the perspective of social cognition. Hence, this study adopts SCT as its theoretical foundation to better comprehend the effects of behavioral processes on travel intention in the post-COVID landscape. In an attempt to explain the behavior and travel intentions of tourists, a wide range of factors have been proposed (see **Figure 1**). Several past studies related to COVID-19, travel intentions [43], future travel intentions [45], and willingness to travel during COVID-19 [46] have adopted SCT. The environmental factor encompasses the impact of COVID-19 on the environment, while the personal factor includes both negative and positive effects on tourists. Notably, the environmental factor influences the personal factor, together with severity perception. Zhu and Deng [47] describe severity perception as the subjective evaluation that has a negative impact on tourism and results from objective asymmetries in the information connected to tourist safety and the subjective perception that travelers have. Severity perception further shapes the willingness to travel in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context [46].

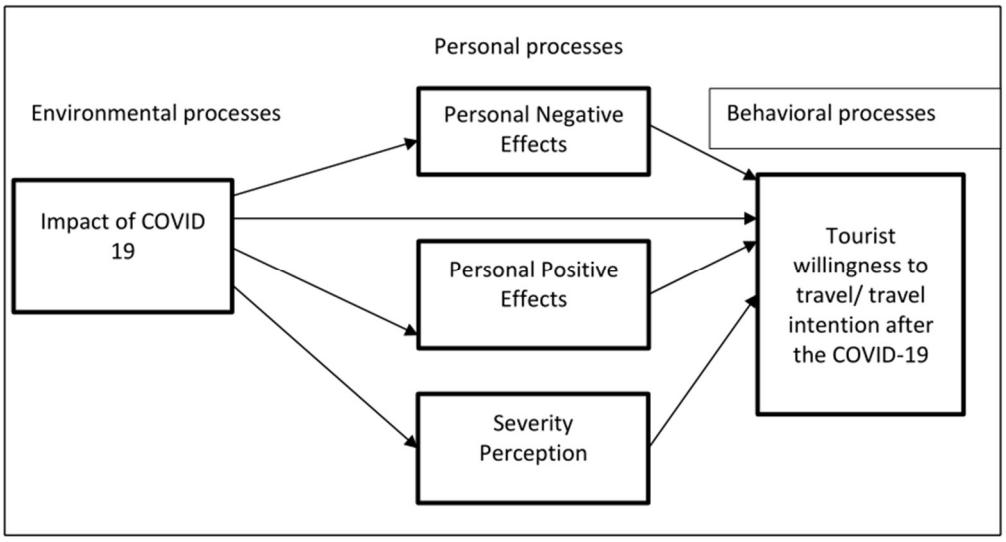

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Sources: Adopted from Hao et al. [46].

- COVID-19 and travel intention of tourists

The pandemic led to various factors that discouraged or altered travel behavior, impacting the way people perceive and approach tourism [48]. Tourism encompasses various factors such as transportation, distance to the destination, hospitality of local residents, living conditions at the destination, variety and quality of food, and environmental conditions. These factors collectively influence tourism decision-making and impact people's inclination to travel [49]. The pandemic resulted in widespread economic challenges, including job losses and financial insecurity for

many people [50]. As a result, individuals are less inclined to spend on leisure travel and prioritize other essential needs [51]. The travel industry suffered during the pandemic, leading to closures or reduced services in various tourist destinations [15]. This reduction in tourism infrastructure has discouraged potential travelers who seek a certain level of convenience and amenities [52].

Thus, it is anticipated that COVID-19 will significantly influence tourists' travel intentions, as indicated by prior findings and theoretical discussions.

H1: There is a direct impact of COVID-19 on the travel intention of tourists.

- COVID-19, personal negative effects, and travel intention of tourists

The personal negative effects of COVID-19 on tourists encompass heightened fear and anxiety, travel disruptions, limited interactions, financial constraints, and emotional fatigue [21,22]. The economic implications of the pandemic have also affected tourists personally. The financial strain caused by job losses or reduced income has rendered travel less feasible or entirely unaffordable for many individuals. This added financial burden has contributed to heightened stress and disappointment among those who had to cancel or delay their travel plans, significantly impacting their overall well-being. Moreover, the prolonged duration of the pandemic has taken an emotional toll on tourists, leading to feelings of fatigue and emotional exhaustion [53]. The continuous adaptation to ever-changing travel guidelines and restrictions can be mentally draining, affecting their enthusiasm and desire to explore new destinations [23]. This negative effect arising from the pandemic has had a substantial influence on the way people perceive and approach travel post-outbreak [54]. It has cast a long shadow on the travel intentions of potential tourists [55]. A multitude of factors, including health and safety concerns, financial insecurities, traumatic experiences, environmental awareness, and changing travel preferences, collectively influence individuals' willingness to engage in travel adventures [56]. Furthermore, people are less likely to spend money on non-essential expenses like a vacation as a result of job losses, salary reductions, and economic instability [57]. Many people resorted to home attractions and locations while limitations and concerns plagued foreign travel [15]. After the epidemic, this trend has persisted, resulting in a decrease in interest in group activities or overseas travel [58].

Thus, it is anticipated that personal negative effects will significantly moderate the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and tourists' travel intentions, as indicated by prior findings and theoretical discussions.

H2: Personal negative effects mediate the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and the travel intention of tourists.

- COVID-19, personal positive effects, and travel intention of tourists

The pandemic has offered a chance for self-reflection and reevaluation of travel priorities. Some tourists have reassessed their travel habits and consumption patterns, recognizing the importance of sustainability and responsible tourism [14]. As a result, there has been a growing trend of eco-conscious travelers seeking accommodations, tour operators, and experiences that align with their values of environmental preservation [6,59]. Furthermore, the pandemic allowed tourists to prioritize their health and well-being during travel. With sensitive health concerns, individuals became more cautious and proactive about safeguarding their health [24]. This newfound emphasis on personal well-being has led to healthier travel practices and a

greater awareness of the importance of maintaining physical and mental health during trips. This has led to several personal positive effects that can have a profound impact on tourists' travel intentions [60]. People have developed a renewed appreciation for the intrinsic value of travel and now prioritize experiences that promote well-being and meaningful connections. People are more likely to travel to meet up with family and friends and appreciate nature [61]. This shift in mindset has fueled a sense of enthusiasm, wanderlust, and a strong desire to create lasting memories through travel [62]. As the world gradually recovers from the pandemic, these positive influences drive a surge in travel demand, playing a vital role in rejuvenating the travel and tourism industry.

Thus, it is anticipated that personal positive effects will significantly mediate the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and tourists' travel intentions, as indicated by prior findings and theoretical discussions.

H3: Personal positive effects mediate the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and the travel intention of tourists.

- COVID-19, severity perception, and travel intention of tourists

COVID-19 has had a significant effect on the perception of severity [63]. Before the pandemic, people weren't aware of the severity of infectious diseases and their consequences. However, the advent of COVID-19 and its swift global spread have highlighted the reality of pandemics [64]. The fear and uncertainty generated by the pandemic have made individuals more conscious of their vulnerability and the need to take preventive measures seriously [25]. Practices like wearing masks, hand hygiene, and social distancing have become ingrained in daily life for many as a result of the perceived severity of the virus [65]. Moreover, the experiences of those who have personally suffered from COVID-19 or witnessed it have heightened their perception of the virus's severity. The devastating loss of lives and the long-term health complications reported by survivors have left a lasting impact on public consciousness, further reinforcing the perception of the virus as a severe and dangerous threat [66]. Tourists' decisions to travel and to select a particular location or item are influenced by their perceptions of risk, particularly during times of crisis [67]. In general, previous contemporary research has consistently demonstrated that perceived risk negatively impacts tourists' travel intentions [25,68].

Thus, it is anticipated that severity perception will significantly mediate the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and tourists' travel intentions, as indicated by prior findings and theoretical discussions.

H4: Severity perception mediates the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and travel intention of tourists.

To perform analysis, this study has undertaken several variables as shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Variable table.

Construct	Observed variables	Indicator	Explanation
Impact of COVID-19	Good service quality	IC_1*	Ensuring high-quality service in tourism can be challenging[1].
	Supporting facilities	IC_2	Difficulty in having complete supporting facilities for tourism[1].
	Transportation and travel	IC_3	Challenges in ensuring convenient transportation and travel conditions for tourism[1].
	Safety and hygiene	IC_4	Challenges in maintaining safe and hygienic conditions for tourism[1].
	Hospitality	IC_5	Local people are not hospitable to tourists due to COVID-19[2].
	Hotels	IC_6	Difficulty in booking hotels due to COVID-19[2].
	Destinations	IC_7	Restriction in exploring every destination after the pandemic[2].
Severity perception	Contagious	SP_1	COVID-19 is contagious[1].
	Harmful	SP_2	COVID-19 does harm to the human body[1].
	Impact on Society	SP_3	COVID-19 has an impact on society[1].
	Long lasting impact	SP_4	The enduring effects of COVID-19 on society will be long-lasting[1].
	Avoidance	SP_5	I prefer to avoid traveling to large cities[2].
	Shorten duration	SP_6	In light of COVID-19, I opt for shorter durations for my prospective trips[2].
Personal negative effects	Risk of contracting	PNE_1*	Post-pandemic travel may elevate my risk of contracting the virus[1].
	Condemned	PNE_2	Post-pandemic travel might subject me to criticism from others[1].
	Worry	PNE_3	Traveling after the pandemic will cause me to worry about others[1].
	Extra energy	PNE_4	Post-pandemic travel may require additional energy expenditure[1].
	Enjoyable	PNE_5	Post-pandemic travel might not offer the same level of enjoyment as it did before[2].
Personal positive effects	Relationship	PPE_1	Traveling after the pandemic can improve my relationships with relatives and friends[1].
	Fun	PPE_2	Traveling after the pandemic can add fun to my life[1].
	Enjoy natural resources and culture	PPE_3	Post-pandemic travel can provide me with the opportunity to appreciate both natural wonders and cultural offerings[1].
	Knowledge and horizons broaden	PPE_4*	Post-pandemic travel has the potential to expand my horizons and enhance my knowledge[1].
	Congestion	PPE_5	Traveling after the pandemic can help to travel without congestion, crowds and pollution[1].
Travel intention of tourists in post COVID-19 era	Travel	TI_1	Willingness to travel after the outbreak[1].
	Commitment	TI_2	Commitment to travel after the pandemic[2].
	Keenness	TI_3	Keenness for the vacation after the pandemic[2].
	Support the people	TI_4	Encourage and support others around me to travel after the epidemic[1].

Sources: 1 = Hao et al. [46] and 2 = Chansuk et al. [69].
Note: The items IC_1 from the Impact of COVID-19, PNE_1 from Personal Negative Effects, and PPE_4 from Personal Positive Effects were dropped after performing measurement modeling.

2.2. Study area, population, sampling and data

The study was conducted in Kathmandu Valley, which lies in Bagmati Province in central Nepal. Kathmandu Valley is the most populous and developed place in Nepal, which comprises three districts: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur. The valley is rich in cultural heritage, which is the main attraction of tourists [70]. Seven groups of monuments and buildings within the valley exemplify the region's renowned historic and artistic accomplishments [71]. The study targeted foreign tourists visiting

Kathmandu Valley as its population of interest. As the country has only one regular international airport in operation for foreign tourists to arrive in Nepal, Kathmandu is the aerial gateway and entry point to other touristic destinations of the country. Since the focus of the study is on tourists visiting Kathmandu Valley, the researchers have selected only those tourists who decided to explore the valley as their destination. Hence, the scope of this study is limited to capturing data only from tourists who specifically visit Kathmandu Valley using a purposive sampling technique. Also, the names, numbers, and specific details of the tourists were not accessible to the general population due to confidentiality requirements to undertake a random sampling technique.

In this study, we utilized a sample size of 350 respondents to evaluate 32 items through exploratory factor analysis. According to established guidelines, a minimum sample-to-item ratio of 5:1 is recommended, which would necessitate 160 respondents for our study [72–74]. In this study, the sample size significantly exceeds this minimum requirement, thereby enhancing the robustness of our findings.

A structured questionnaire was the main research instrument used in this study. The questionnaires were developed and refined based on a scientific approach, taking references from previous studies by Hao et al. [46] and Chansuk et al. [69], which included pretesting and testing. A pilot survey with 15 respondents was conducted to identify ambiguities in the survey questions and establish the ecological validity of the questionnaires. The structured questionnaires created for this purpose were stored in the Kobo toolbox for data collection. For the data collection, the researcher collected data by interviewing tourists who were visiting major tourist destinations in Kathmandu Valley, such as Durbar Square of Bhaktapur, Kathmandu and Lalitpur, Bouddhanath Stupa, and Swayambunath Temple. In the first part of the study, the researcher asked questions about how COVID-19 affected the environment, individuals, and travel intentions. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure responses. The second part of the study looked at the difficulties tourists encountered while traveling and explored potential solutions to these problems.

Once the target of 350 completely filled questionnaires was reached, errors in the responses were checked. Then, the information was entered into MS Excel for further analysis. Data analysis was carried out using MS Excel and SmartPLS 4.0, encompassing both descriptive and inferential analyses.

3. Result and analysis

3.1. Socio-demographic characteristics

Among the total 350 respondents surveyed, the majority of respondents were females, constituting 53.71% of the total sample (see **Table 2**). Additionally, a significant proportion of the respondents (74.86%) reported being married. The age range of the majority of respondents was 20–30 years (i.e., 49.43%), indicating youths were willing to travel. Again, looking at level of education, results exhibit that 58.57% were bachelor's degree holders. Occupationally, a significant proportion of the respondents, approximately 53.71%, were employed in the service sector. Furthermore, the primary purpose of travel for most respondents was relaxation, rest, and enjoyment. Results show that the majority of respondents expressed a positive

outlook toward traveling after the pandemic (99.15%). About the commitment to travel after the pandemic, around 94.86% of respondents expressed a positive commitment. Regarding the adoption of necessary traveling behavior, a significant majority (77.14%) of the respondents revealed a positive attitude toward adopting such behaviors, while 20.86% remained neutral, and a very small proportion (2%) disagreed with the idea.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics.

Title	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	162	46.29
	Female	188	53.71
Age	18–20	19	5.43
	21–30	138	49.43
	31–40	116	33.14
	41–50	72	10.57
	51 and above	5	1.43
Marital status	Married	262	74.86
	Unmarried	88	25.14
Education level	Illiterate	0	0
	Primary level	0	0
	Secondary level	11	3.14
	Intermediate	79	22.57
	Bachelors	205	58.57
	Masters and above	55	15.71
Occupation	Service sector	188	53.71
	Industrial sector	25	7.14
	Government sector	9	2.57
	Student	5	16.57
	Self-employed	63	18
	Unemployed	3	0.86
	Others	4	1.14
Purpose of visit	Relaxation, rest, and enjoyment	265	75.71
	Business purpose	31	8.86
	Visiting friends and relatives	42	12
	Educational purpose	20	5.71
	To experience new things	34	9.71
	Others	2	0.57

3.2. Post-COVID-19 travel challenges and solutions

A majority of respondents (67.43%) encountered travel challenges, while 32.57% did not. The study identified lack of quality hotels and homestays (35.17%) as the primary challenge to tourism, followed by lack of sanitation (25.85%). High traveling costs (17.8%) and lack of infrastructure and facility development (15.68%) were also significant issues. Improper tourism planning and implementation (8.29%), improper

management (5.51%), and maintaining social distance (5.51%) were additional challenges. The category "others" accounted for 1.27% of responses.

Out of the 350 respondents, the majority (235 participants) expressed that the challenges could certainly be managed. Answering the questions related to managerial solutions to the problems, 39.15% of respondents believed that increasing the number and quality of hotels could address the issues. Similarly, 26.38% of respondents said proper infrastructure and facility development was a must to overcome the problems. Likewise, in other questions related to solutions, 23.83% of respondents believed in proper maintenance of sanitation, 14.04% suggested reducing traveling costs, 9.79% highlighted proper management and role of government, 6.81% supported the idea of implementing tourism planning and implementation, and 4.68 respondents recommended better crowd management and destination planning. Lastly, 1.28% of respondents proposed alternative approaches, including enhancing security measures, introducing new policies, and increasing the import of foreign products to enhance overall travel management for foreign tourists.

3.3. Inferential statistics

Common Method Bias (CMB): A Full Collinearity Test using VIF was performed where all VIF values were found to be below 5 [75], suggesting no issue of CMB, thus ensuring its suitability for subsequent analysis.

Measurement Model: In the measurement model, we evaluated both validity and reliability (see **Table 3**). This study employed a reflective measurement model, which allowed us to assess Internal Consistent Reliability, Convergent Validity, and Discriminant Validity. Internal Consistent Reliability (using Cronbach's Alpha [CA] and Composite Reliability [CR]) was examined, and the results met the criteria for both CA (> 0.7) and CR (ranging from 0.60 to 0.90), indicating satisfactory internal consistency reliability [76,77].

Table 3. Measurement model.

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha (CA)	Composite Reliability	AVE	VIF
Impact of COVID-19	ic2	0.833	0.916	0.941	0.711	3.265
	ic3	0.890				
	ic4	0.904				
	ic5	0.578				
	ic6	0.916				
	ic7	0.888				
Personal negative effects	pne2	0.802	0.829	0.844	0.659	2.471
	pne3	0.862				
	pne4	0.822				
	pne5	0.759				
Personal positive effects	ppe1	0.816	0.700	0.733	0.520	1.134
	ppe2	0.709				
	ppe3	0.614				
	ppe5	0.732				

Table 3. (*Continued*).

Construct	Indicator	Loading	Cronbach's Alpha (CA)	Composite Reliability	AVE	VIF
Severity perception	sp1	0.900	0.925	0.934	0.732	2.409
	sp2	0.893				
	sp3	0.899				
	sp4	0.888				
	sp5	0.704				
	sp6	0.833				
Travel intention of tourists in post COVID-19 era	ti1	0.777	0.764	0.825	0.597	1.594
	ti2	0.846				
	ti3	0.890				
	ti4	0.525				

For convergent validity criteria, factor loading and AVE were tested, where factor loading and AVE values should ideally be 0.7 and 0.5 or higher, respectively, and items with loading values less than 0.4 were excluded [78].

In testing discriminant validity, cross-loading, the Fornell and Larker [79] criterion, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio were used. We found that the loadings on each item were greater than all of the cross-loadings, providing evidence that all latent constructs and relative items are distinctive, as mentioned by Ab Hamid et al. [80]. **Table 4** revealed the square root of AVEs greater than the square of inter-construct correlations fulfilling the Fornell and Larker [79] criterion for discriminant validity [81]. Also, we found the HTMT values less than 0.9 in our data set.

Table 4. Inter-construct correlations, the square root of AVE, and HTMT results.

	Fornell-Larcker criterion					HTMT results				
	ic	**pne**	**ppe**	**sp**	**ti**	**ic**	**pne**	**ppe**	**Sp**	**ti**
ic	0.843									
pne	0.748	0.812				0.850				
ppe	0.527	0.347	0.721			0.602	0.409			
sp	0.780	0.564	0.638	0.856		0.820	0.622	0.739		
ti	0.466	0.320	0.630	0.650	0.772	0.542	0.400	0.820	0.749	

Goodness of Fit: To ensure that the model aligns well with the data, we examined the SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual) and NFI (Normed Fit Index). The SRMR value should be less than 0.1, and the NFI value should fall within the range of 0 to 1 [82]. We found that all R^2 values exceeded 0.2. The SRMR value was 0.097, and the NFI value was 0.726, all of which met the prescribed threshold values, indicating a strong model fit. Additionally, to ensure a satisfactory model fit, Hair et al. [82] recommended R^2 values of at least 0.20 and VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) values below 5. In this study, all R^2 and VIF values met the recommended threshold scores, confirming satisfactory collinearity.

Structural Model: The hypotheses were assessed using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) implemented with SmartPLS 4.0. The

structural model provided insights into the direction, strength, and significance of the path coefficients. To determine both direct and mediating relationship path coefficients, bootstrapping was conducted using SmartPLS 4.0 in this study. **Figure 2** represents five latent constructs, each comprising several observed variables. Following the recommendations of Henseler et al. [81] and Hair et al. [82], R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 signify substantial, moderate, and weak predictive capacity, respectively. The R^2 values for personal negative effects, severity perception, personal positive effects, and travel intention of tourists in the post-COVID-19 era were 0.560, 0.608, 0.278, and 0.507, respectively, demonstrating the model's satisfactory predictive performance. **Figure 2** provides an overview of the findings from the structural path model.

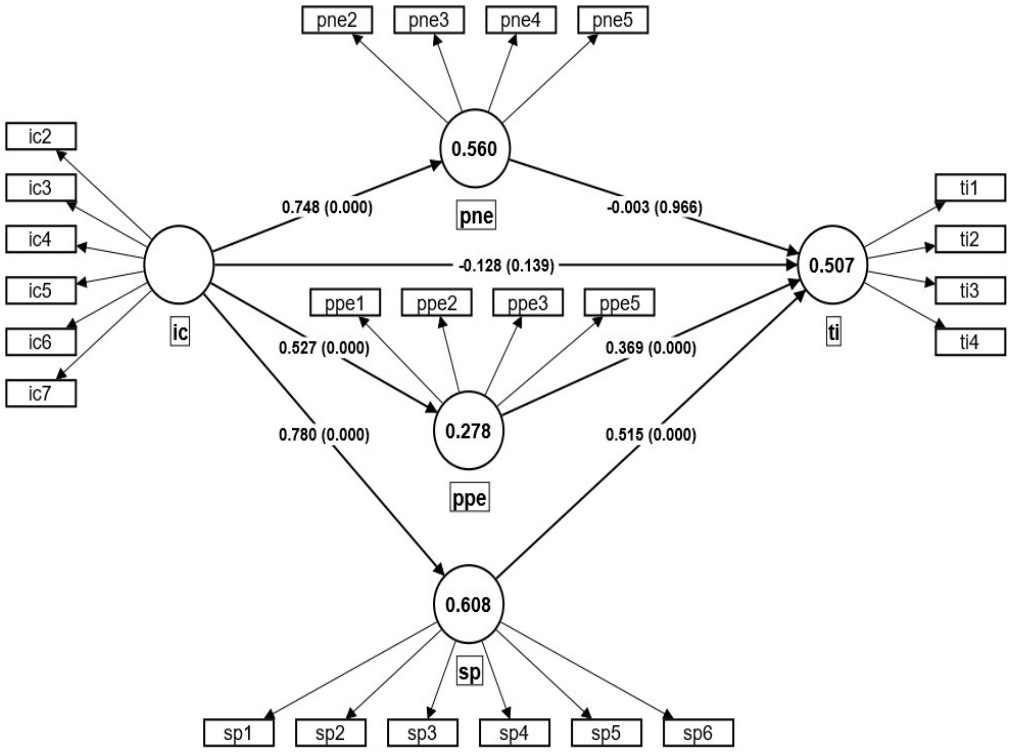

Figure 2. Path analysis.

Table 5. Hypothesis test.

Hypothesis		Beta	SD	*t*- values	*P* values	CI		Decision
						LL	UL	
H_{01}	ic → ti	−0.128	0.086	1.48	0.139	−0.296	0.042	Not Supported
H_{02}	ic → pne → ti	−0.002	0.046	0.042	0.966	−0.093	0.085	Not Supported
H_{03}	ic → ppe → ti	0.195	0.034	5.765	0.000	0.128	0.260	Supported
H_{04}	ic → sp → ti	0.401	0.063	6.341	0.000	0.274	0.521	Supported

To assess the significance of each path coefficient, a bootstrapping estimation with 10,000 samples was employed. As seen in **Table 5**, hypothesis 1; i.e., the impact of COVID-19 is not significantly associated with TI (β = −0.128, *t*-value = 1.48; p > 0.05). For hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, mediation analysis was examined through the bootstrapping method, which provided bias-corrected confidence estimates. The

indirect effect's 95% confidence interval was calculated based on 10,000 bootstrap resamples, following the approach outlined by [83] in 2008. **Table 5** also demonstrates that H_2 is rejected and the H_3 and H_4 are supported. The coefficient associated with the indirect influence of IC via PNE to TI wasn't supported ($\beta = 0.002$, t-value = 0.042; $P > 0.05$). Again, the result revealed that SP ($\beta = 0.401$, t-value = 6.341; $P < 0.01$) and PPE ($\beta = 0.195$, t-value = 5.765; $P < 0.01$) significantly mediated the effect of IC on TI. Therefore, it is found that SP and PPE have a mediation effect on the relationships between the impact of COVID-19 and the travel intention of tourists after COVID-19.

4. Discussion

This study explores various factors that influence tourist travel intentions, including the impact of COVID-19, personal negative and positive effects, as well as severity perception in the Nepali context following SCT. It reveals that eagerness to explore and experience, reconnect with loved ones, escape monotony, seek relaxation and stress relief, seize new opportunities, rediscover nature, support the tourism industry, etc. were some of the major reasons for travel intention after the pandemic, supporting the findings of Hao et al. [46]. Tourism is crucial for Nepal's economy, acting as a primary driver of growth and a significant livelihood source [2,84]. It generates foreign exchange revenue, creates jobs, and boosts various sectors like hospitality, transportation, and handicrafts [11,85,86]. By utilizing creative marketing, prioritizing safety and sustainability, offering personalized experiences, collaborating with stakeholders, embracing technology, and nurturing customer loyalty, the tourism industry can rejuvenate itself and attract more visitors to thrive once again and recover from future uncertainties [35,87].

The findings indicate that the direct impact of COVID-19 on the travel intention of tourists isn't statistically significant. This specifically means that factors such as high transportation costs, service quality, infrastructure, and health and safety facilities do not directly influence tourists' travel intentions in the post-pandemic period. This result is due to growing awareness of COVID-19 and its effects [88], which indicates that improvements in safety measures and changing perceptions have a less direct impact on travel behavior than initially expected. As awareness increases, the direct effects of the pandemic on travel intentions are better understood and less straightforward. This contrasts with Tien et al. [89], which found that during the pandemic, elements like the natural environment, infrastructure, and entertainment services did affect tourists' intentions to visit. Similarly, the study finds no mediating impact of negative personal effects on the relationship between the impact of COVID-19 and travel intentions. This is because, with increasing awareness of COVID-19, the personal negative effects have diminished, leading to a reduced influence on travel intentions.

On the other hand, the finding shows that personal positive effects and severity perception significantly mediate the relationship between the impact of COVID-19 and travel intention, aligning with a study by Hao et al. [46]. This means that the impact of COVID-19 highly induced personal positive effects on tourists, as many travelling conditions are slowly improving after the pandemic, showing a positive attitude of tourists towards travelling which further influences their intention to travel.

This result also aligns with the findings of Uddin et al. [90] and Khan et al. [10]. Uddin et al. [90] revealed that objective factors during the COVID-19 pandemic affected people's internal processes positively, and Lamichanne et al. [61] revealed that the positive change in tourist internal processes influences their willingness to travel. Similarly, the presence of a mediating role of severity perception indicates that COVID-19's impact significantly influences the perception of severity, and this severity perception, in turn, affects tourists' travel intentions. To attract more tourists, the travel risk of a destination should be minimized [91]. In this case, health, hygiene, and safety should be maintained despite fewer COVID-19 cases so that other infectious diseases, similar to this pandemic, could also be minimized in the future. Khan et al. [10] reveled that personal positive effects and the perception of severity influence tourists' travel intentions post-COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Neuburger et al. [92] illustrated a noteworthy increase in COVID-19 risk perception, travel risk perception, and travel behavior over a brief timeframe.

5. Implications of the study

5.1. Theoretical implications

By investigating how cognition, individual positive and negative impacts, and environmental factors interact to determine post-COVID-19 tourist behavior, this study draws attention to the significant influence that COVID-19 has had on travelers' decision-making, especially in light of their impressions of the pandemic's intensity and individual experiences. This contributes important new information to the theoretical discussion of how global crises affect people's decisions and behaviors. Additionally, the study emphasizes how psychological processes and environmental changes interact, supporting the idea that internal and external factors such as perceptions of safety and curiosity. Examples of external factors include infrastructure and sanitation. By combining environmental psychology with tourism studies, the theoretical framework is enhanced, and a thorough explanation of visitor behavior is provided. Moreover, this study advances the foundation of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) by expanding its application to the unique context of post-COVID-19 travel behavior. Specifically, while SCT traditionally emphasizes the interplay between social interactions, environmental factors, and individual cognition, this research extends the theory by introducing the concept of 'severity perception' as a critical mediating factor in the decision-making process of tourists. By integrating this new dimension, the study provides a more intricate understanding of how external threats like a global pandemic can alter the traditional SCT dynamics, offering novel insights into the evolving nature of travel intentions. Furthermore, this research contributes to SCT by empirically validating its applicability in a high-risk, post-pandemic environment, thereby broadening the scope of SCT beyond its conventional settings.

The preference of tourists keeps on changing with time and the travel risks [30]. This might be further influenced by the tourist's socio-economic status. It was observed that after the pandemic, married people, females, youth working in the service sectors, and individuals with higher education qualifications exhibit a great propensity to travel for purposes of relaxation, rest, and enjoyment. However, there are environmental changes after COVID-19 and alterations in individuals'

psychological processes in response to COVID-19 [46], both of which align with the concepts outlined in SCT. This paper contributes to SCT theory by bringing post-COVID-19 tourist behavior in terms of cognition and environmental factors. Also, this study highlights the context of one of the least developed countries in South Asia adversely affected by COVID-19 despite having high tourism potential. It further addresses the challenges faced by tourists in the post-COVID-19 era and the managerial solutions to those challenges.

5.2. Practical implications

The study's findings offer several key insights for the tourism industry. Embracing sustainable tourism practices is essential for environmental preservation and aligning with the growing demand for eco-friendly travel. Ensuring high standards of health, hygiene, and safety is crucial for reassuring tourists and mitigating travel risks, while also preparing for future health crises. Engaging local communities in tourism development and raising awareness about the benefits of tourism can create a supportive environment and improve tourist experiences. Offering personalized travel experiences tailored to diverse needs can enhance satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, robust crisis management planning is vital for ensuring a swift recovery from future pandemics or similar crises. Tourism marketers should emphasize unique experiences and safety measures, such as nature exploration and stress relief, to attract tourists. Tailoring marketing strategies to various socioeconomic groups can boost effectiveness. Enhancing infrastructure, including the quality of lodging, sanitation facilities, and transit options, is necessary to address visitor challenges and improve their overall experience. The study also highlights the importance of minimizing environmental impacts to positively influence travelers' perceptions and willingness to visit. In Kathmandu Valley, addressing issues like inadequate accommodations and high travel costs, along with implementing quality regulations, is crucial for improving tourist satisfaction and fostering a more resilient and thriving tourism sector [4,12,38].

6. Conclusion

The study provides valuable insights into the factors shaping travel intentions in the post-pandemic era, with a specific focus on foreign tourists in Nepal. The research demonstrates that personal positive effects and severity perception play a pivotal role in influencing travel decisions, highlighting the importance of psychological factors and environmental changes. Contrary to initial expectations, the direct impact of COVID-19 on travel intentions was not statistically significant, suggesting that as awareness of the virus increased, the influence of the pandemic on travel behavior became less direct. These findings have critical implications for the tourism sector in Nepal, emphasizing the need for a strategic approach that prioritizes safety, sustainability, and personalized experiences. The study underscores the importance of addressing infrastructure challenges, such as the availability and quality of accommodations, to enhance tourist satisfaction and competitiveness. Additionally, the research expands the application of Social Cognitive Theory by integrating the concept of severity perception, offering a more nuanced understanding of how global crises impact travel behavior. As Nepal continues to rebuild its tourism industry post-

COVID-19, the insights from this study can guide stakeholders in developing effective strategies to attract and retain tourists. By focusing on sustainable practices, improving infrastructure, and fostering a positive perception of safety, Nepal can strengthen its position as a premier travel destination, ensuring the resilience and growth of its tourism sector in the face of future uncertainties.

Limitations and Future Research Avenues:

One of the limitations of the study is its focus only on the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. By following the SCT approach applied in the study, it is necessary to conduct studies on other tourist destinations inside and outside of the country. Second, it targets heritage-loving tourists of the valley. However, nature-lover and adventure-lover tourists near protected areas and other destinations might have different perceptions after COVID-19. Third, this study tries to capture the travel intentions of international tourists after COVID-19 using SCT. Taking the perceptions of domestic tourists, tourism operators, and tourism policymakers might also be important to have a broader picture of travel-related behavioral intention in a post-COVID-19 era.

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