FROM STATUS TO STIGMA

THE DISCURSIVE JOURNEY
OF LEISURE TRAVEL
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Preface

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore and illustrate how the societal view of leisure travel is discursively portrayed during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have taken on a different approach compared to a majority of prior tourism research as we have shifted our focus from major actors within the industry to the contemporary consumer. Thus, our contribution to tourism-related research is that we shed new light on the role of discourses in the travel landscape during times of crisis. Our research demonstrates that there is a divide in public opinion that is mediated through three prominent discourses: the *shaming discourse,* the *justification discourse* and the *homo economicus discourse*. These discourses influence and affect the societal view of leisure travel during the prevailing pandemic, as they, combined, produce a form of stigma around leisure travel. This in turn renders an ethical and moral debate where the appropriateness of leisure travel is questioned and challenged, consequently resulting in an increased polarization and a divide in public opinion. Our findings indicate that the message mediated by the *shaming discourse* has been manifested as part of the new norm, and that the politically correct view of leisure travel is, during the current conditions, more of a skeptical nature.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Leisure Travel, COVID-19 Pandemic, Stigma, Polarization

Introduction

It has been said that "*every disaster movie starts with a scientist being ignored*". In *The Day After Tomorrow,* the US government downplays the scientist's concerns regarding climate change, resulting in a new ice age. In *28 Days Later*, a group of environmental activists release a group of chimpanzees from a laboratory, despite scientists warning that these chimpanzees are infected with a dangerous and contagious virus. In *Contagion*, a novel flu-like virus spreads for a significant time period until it is taken seriously and scientists are consulted by the US government, after which the world enters a race to develop a new vaccine.

Despite being warned by pop culture and Hollywood dramatisations several times before, the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic took many of the world leaders by surprise. Although the current pandemic shares some resemblance with what we have previously seen on the big screen, there is a significant difference – the COVID-19 pandemic is reality, not fiction. What started when a number of Chinese scientists in Wuhan were silenced (Xiong & Gan, 2020: Hegarty, 2020: Woodward, 2020: Buckley, 2020) has since developed into a humanitarian, economic and social disaster for a significant proportion of the world's population (World Health Organization, 2020; Chriscaden, 2020; De, Pandey, & Pal, 2020; Mazur, Dang & Vega, 2020), rendering the greatest global challenge the world has faced since the Second World War (UNDP, n.d).

As of the time of writing, *John Hopkins University of Medicine* (2021) reports that nearly 163 million people worldwide have been infected with COVID-19, of which over three million of these individuals have deceased. Despite rigorous measures; such as limited mobility in the form of local and national lockdowns, quarantine requirements for travellers, restrictions on the number of people allowed to participate in public events, face covering requirements, and requirements of social distancing in daily life, the spread of infection is still global (John Hopkins University of Medicine, 2021).

In retrospect, 2020 has undeniably been the year of COVID-19, and the catch-phrase "*stay home, stay safe*" has spread like wildfire, turning into somewhat of a global mantra (Flaherty & Nasir, 2020). Albeit governments, politicians and scientists have urged their fellow citizens to stay at home to the fullest extent possible, as well as to reduce the number of physical interactions to a bare

minimum (Akpan, 2020: BBC News, 2020: Department of Health and Social Care, 2021), it has, in a regulated form, been both perfectly legal and possible to travel, both internationally and regionally, during large parts of this pandemic (European Union, n.d).

The ability to continue to travel has transformed the consumption of travel into a moral grey zone, rendering an ethical dilemma (Takenaga & Wolfe, 2020) not entirely different from the stigmatization we today experience in the consumption of tobacco, gambling, trophy hunting etc. In a sense, to travel during the pandemic has become a loaded subject, and there is a divide in public opinion as to whether travelling is a suitable leisure activity during the prevailing circumstances. It is this polarizing discussion that underlies the research area of this thesis. To gain a deeper understanding of how travel has gone from being a form of status symbol (Clark, 2014; Fitzsimmons, 2019; Kickham, 2018; Zahler, 2017) to becoming somewhat taboo, we need to get an insight into how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced not only the tourism industry, but also society at large

Problem discussion

It is presently challenging to predict the wider long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the multitude of restrictions that have been imposed since the first virus broke out. A report from the *World Health Organization* states that the current pandemic has seen a significant impact on virtually all of society's organs (Chriscaden, 2020). Thus, the cumulative effects of the pandemic are far-reaching. The burden on health care has shown a significant increase, teaching/education and work are increasingly conducted remotely and digitally, and the limited mobility in combination with strict restrictions pertaining to social life has resulted in severe financial pressure on many businesses and individuals (World Health Organization, 2020; Chriscaden, 2020; De, Pandey, & Pal, 2020).

To illustrate the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on the global economy and business; in March 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, we suffered one of the most dramatic stock market crashes in history (Mazur, Dang & Vega, 2020). In an effort to curb the economic impact, governments around the world have chosen to stimulate the local and global economy with unprecedented financial support packages (Cetin, 2020; International Monetary Fund, 2020; European Commission, 2020). The short-term effect of financial stimulus packages has helped to stabilize the market as a whole, and has been directly decisive for the survival of many companies (ECB, 2021). However, it is important to note that the impact such stimulus packages have had varies greatly between different industries. For example, for businesses in a traditional office setting that does not rely on serving customers face-to-face, government-backed paid furloughs and similar job retention schemes have helped thwart loss of revenue.

However, for the tourism, hospitality, aviation and recreation industry, these types of measures are falling short due to the inherent nature of these industries, as they are all dependent on physical contact and free mobility (Mijinke, 2021). For these industries, stimulus packages have not had the same positive effects, simply because the industry is suffering from a greatly reduced market (Davahli, Karowski, Sonmez & Apostolopoulos, 2020; Cetin, 2020; OECD, 2020). Arguably, these industries are suffering harder than perhaps any other industry. Due to current travel restrictions, public health advice, restriction of free movement, border closures, a decrease of available means of transport, social distancing measures, and the like, there is a significant decrease of tourist arrivals - thus a decrease in demand (Davahli et al., 2020; Cetin, 2020; Marques Santos, Madrid González, Haegeman, & Rainoldi, 2020). For example, many businesses within the hospitality industry were indirectly forced to unwillingly halt further operations, due to legislation constraints (The Institute for Government, 2021). In cases like these, financial stimulus packages do not help the business retain revenue, since there is little to no revenue being made in the first place.

The direct effect the COVID-19 pandemic has had, and still has, on the tourism industry can be exemplified by the drastic change in the demand for air travel. A sharp reduction in demand for air travel can, at least initially, be explained by the introduction of government regulations and restrictions in many countries (IATA, 2020; Davahli et al., 2020). This can be illustrated by the early imposition of geographical restrictions between different countries, and during the period January - March 2020, almost 200,000 passenger flights had been canceled (IATA, 2020). For example, the US Government banned European passenger flights, and imposed an entry ban on Chinese travelers (The White House, 2020; CDC, 2020). Within the European Union, restrictions have been imposed towards non-essential travel, i.e. travel that is related to leisure, from outside the region, and within the EU area, travel restrictions have varied, and continuously changed as the pandemic has continued (Council Recommendation EU, 2020). Noteworthy in this context is that the spread of COVID-19 has not been constant, but rather fluctuated over time. This is reflected in travel-related regulations and restrictions, which have not only varied between countries, but also during the different phases of this pandemic.

Furthermore, the OECD (2020) notes in a publication that international tourism can expect a reduced demand corresponding to 60-80% compared to previous years. It is important to highlight that, although tourism has declined sharply, it has not been non-existent (Davahli et al., 2020; Cetin, 2020). Leisure travel, in this paper referred to as the activity of travelling from one destination to another in order to evoke emotions of pleasure, happiness, interest or joy (Purrington & Hickerson, 2013), has periodically been entirely possible during the pandemic, albeit in a more limited fashion than usual. With this in mind, it is not only government decisions and travel restrictions that are the basis for the decline in tourism, but also people's subjective thoughts, opinions and ideas about travel during the pandemic.

As for prior research, there is a solid research base that thoroughly investigates the tourism industry in an attempt to explain what factors that motivate and influence people to travel (Crompton, 1979: Tae-Hee & Crompton, 1992: Arnould & Price, 1993: Fluker, & Turner, 2000: Pearce, & Lee, 2005: Naidoo, Ramesook-Mumhurrun, Seebaluck & Janvier, 2015). What is interesting in this context is that a significant proportion of the research that has been conducted in the past investigates tourism that takes place during normal travel conditions, and not tourism that takes place during times of crisis, similar to the situation we now experience in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, as prior research to a large extent investigates the tourism industry from an actor perspective (Qian et al. 2017), we argue that there is a research gap to explore contemporary consumers' opinion on leisure travel during the ongoing pandemic, and how they choose to communicate regarding this subject.

Thus, the aim of this thesis is to explore and illustrate how international leisure tourism is discursively portrayed by consumers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to fulfill the purpose of this thesis, we have chosen to formulate the following research questions:
- Which are the most prominent consumer-driven tourism discourses in light of the pandemic?
- How do these contribute to shape the societal view of leisure tourism during the pandemic?

Literature Review

In this section of our thesis, we will present research and literature related to our area of research. The literature review intends to add to our theoretical framework, by providing an understanding on how discourse analysis previously has been used in tourism research, supported with the knowledge of how travel has been researched in relation to prior epidemiological outbreaks. A comprehensive theoretical background will be vital for a broader understanding of the subject at hand, as it later will be used as a magnifying glass in which we approach an analysis of our research problem.

Discourse Analysis

In order to understand how leisure travel is discursively portrayed during the prevailing pandemic, we need to clarify what the term *discourse* entails. When opinions are expressed in a homogeneous manner by a significant number of individuals, a pattern of communication arises, which in semantics usually is referred to as a *discourse* (Fairclough, 2013; Jörgensen & Phillips 2002). Qian, Wei and Law (2017) state that language is not *"a neutral medium used to reflect various superficial facts"* (p. 526), but rather a medium that *"intensely shapes how a person views the world and reality"* (p. 526).

Simplified, it can be said that the term discourse describes how humans communicate about various topics. As such, discourses come to influence what humans believe, feel and think. Thus, by ascribing and attributing value to what is being said or written, we are actively reforming, producing, reshaping and shaping our view of reality (Qian et al, 2017; Wodak & Meyer, 2015; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001; Opera, 2019; Fairclough, 2013; Jörgensen & Phillips 2002).

Furthermore, discourses are formed and established through *material facts*, i.e. happenings, events, incidents etc, which occur regardless of people's subjective values, beliefs and opinions (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002). Related to this thesis, a concrete example of a *material fact* is the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, whose occurrence is independent regardless of how people choose to express themselves regarding the subject.

What's more, the meanings that are created as a result of discourses can eventually become accepted truths (if supported by the mainstream), and become dominant discourses. Dominant discourses that are considered truthful can in turn, make people behave accordingly (IICSA, n.d). Furthermore, certain influential actors such as the media, celebrities and the government have the power to strengthen discourses. Another key thing to consider is that coexistence of contradictory discourses can occur, where competing discourses are co-existing during the same time span (IICSA, n.d). To illustrate; the dominant discourse on vaccines, which is primarily pro-vaccine, co-exists with another, opposing discourse, which is anti-vaccine in nature.

Additionally, there are several different techniques of discourse analysis that can be used depending on the area of research, and/or the desired research angle (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002). Within tourism research, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has become the prominent choice due to its ability to provide in-depth insight into a *"specific social context"* (Qian et al. 2017, p. 526). Thus, critical discourse analysis could be used to gain an understanding of how discourses influence society at large, as CDA enables for the interpretation of underlying and complex social structures (Qian et al. 2017: Fairclough, 2013: Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Although there is a solid research base that aims to account for the impact of tourism-related discourses, it is important to emphasize that a large extent of this research solely aims to analyze discourses mediated from major actors, such as media, travel magazines, DMO's etc (Qian et al. 2017). Qian et al. (2017) state in their research that this is largely due to the dominant and powerful position of these actors, and the plethora of communication they convey in order to stay relevant in a highly competitive marketplace. This is illustrated by McWha, Laing and Best's (2016) research as they use CDA to investigate how articles in travel magazines affect and influence the readers of the magazine.

Meanwhile the extent of research conducted in order to examine travel-related discourses mediated from the contemporary consumer's perspective is limited. This is confirmed by Small and Harris (2014) who states that there is a *"knowledge gap"* in tourism literature due to the limited inclusion of peer-to-peer communication (Small & Harris, 2014 p.27). In their research, Small and Harris (2014) used critical discourse analysis in order to investigate the impact of online discourse regarding crying babies on airplanes, concluding that two prominent discourses co-exists; *less tolerant* and *more tolerant*. They explored this knowledge gap by examining discourses from other

actors than the major ones mentioned by Qian et al. (2017), exempting from the norm of being one-dimensional, ultimately adding valuable information. This illustrates the importance of being nuanced, and not being limited to established research praxis.

Discourse Analysis in Relation to Epidemiological Outbreaks

Warren et al., (2010) analysed UK media discourses during the H1N1 pandemic. The authors focused on how the media portrayed biosecurity at airports and the effect of the discourse, pressuring them into complying with better security measures (Warren et al. 2010). Warren et al., (2010 p.734) research concludes that these discourses put pressure on airports to act in certain ways, and for travellers to act 'ethically' and to be 'responsible'.

Nerlich and Koteyko (2011) used discourse analysis to explore and illustrate how information, opinions and thoughts regarding the *swine flu* were communicated during the H1N1 pandemic. Their research primarily revolves around how traditional news articles in the UK, and how digital media in the form of blogs communicates on the subject, and the discursive impact this communication had on society as a whole.

Similar to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic, the H1N1 pandemic generated a high degree of uncertainty regarding rate of transmission, mortality rate, treatments etc. This resulted in something that can almost be compared with an abundance of information where both traditional publishers and non-traditional online media covered both every known aspect of the pandemic, as well as the prevailing theories at the time (Nerlich & Koteyko, 2011). The extensive flow of information in combination with a decentralization of information gave rise to both speculations and conspiracy theories.

Nerlich and Koteyko (2011) conclude their research by describing that there were two overarching discourses, where one revolved around spreading blame towards experts and officials, while the other emphasized that bloggers and journalists were the cause of a media outcry. Combined, these discourses created what Nerlich and Koteyko (2011) describe as an *"atmosphere of blame and counter-blame with regard to who scared whom, who created panic or not /../"* (p. 716).

Travel Research Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the time of writing, the tourism and travel industry has gained an increased interest amongst researchers due to the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic. Neuburger and Ebber (2020) strives to account for how people's travel behaviors and preferences might change as a result of the pandemic, and Matiza (2020) as well as Miao et al (2021), investigates whether these changes will have an impact on post pandemic travel behaviour. Škare, Soriana, and Porada-Rochoń (2021) discuss how the pandemic is influencing travel and tourism from an industry point of view, and the long-lasting industry effects of the pandemic. Thus, there seems to be a consensus amongst researchers regarding the negative impact COVID-19 entails on travel behaviour, and on the tourism industry as a whole. However, the authors mention that their area of research (travel in relation to COVID-19) is an ongoing phenomenon, and that their conclusions might lack longevity as conditions most likely will change in the future.

Moreover, Zenker and Kock (2020) argue that: although the COVID-19 pandemic to some extent can be compared to a natural disaster, or a socio-political/human crisis, the scope of the prevailing pandemic, and its implications does have an impact on all parts of the world - making it a rather unique and incomparable crisis in modern society. Thus, researchers who conduct research, or are planning to conduct research within this area, should take certain factors into account. For example, researchers should not only focus on the *"obvious and simply descriptive"* (Zenker & Kock, 2020 p.3), but also include a degree of complexity. This will, according to Zenker and Kock (2020), make for more nuanced research regarding this pandemic and its impact.

Evidently, it is not a unique area of research to examine how pandemics, outbreaks and epidemics influence the travel industry and people's propensity to travel. However, the research that has been conducted regarding COVID-19 has primarily emphasized the pandemic's impact on travel behavior or the economic aspects from an industry perspective. Although prior research has been conducted to explain how pandemics are portrayed discursively, these researchers have chosen to emphasize the balance of power between traditional and non-traditional media. With this in mind, there is a research gap to fill regarding how leisure travel during a prevailing pandemic is discursively portrayed, and the societal impact these discourses entails.

Stigmatized Consumption

Since the appropriateness of traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic is a well-debated topic, it can be of relevance to account for how stigmatized consumption manifests itself in prior research.

Gössling et al (2020) research examines whether flight-shaming results in a change in social norms and travel behavior. Their research concludes that environmental movements, and the emerging flight shaming debate have succeeded in shaping the societal view of travel, however, it had little to no impact on how frequently people consume air transportation (Gössling et al, 2020). Benoit et al. (2020) research investigates the stigma that surrounds prostitution, and how sex workers respond to and process this stigma. Benoit et al. (2020) found four types of reactions to the occupational stigma; *internalisation* (accepting stigma), *information control* (hiding their occupation), *rejection* (critizing the stigma) and *reframing* (highlighting the positive aspects of being a sex worker). Their study provides insight into how sex workers cope when afflicted by stigma, and how people process personal stigmatization (Benoit et al. 2020).

Similar to the research presented by Gössling et al (2020), and Benoit et al. (2020), Stuber et al's (2009) findings regarding stigma related to smoking suggests that stigmatization is counter-productive in the sense that it, to a large extent, does not reduce harmful consumption. Just as Benoit et al. (2020) describe how *information control* results in sex worker's hiding their occupation, simlar inclinations are seen in Stuber et al. (2009) research where smokers have a tendency to hide their habit towards their non-smoking peers. The hiding behaviour stigma entails is also prevalent in Hing, Holdsworth, Tiyce and Breen (2013) research regarding gambling addiction, where Hing et al. (2013) describe how stigmatization of gambling results in people not disclosing their habit.

Thus, we can conclude that prior research indicates that increased stigma entails negative consequences, and that shaming of a stigmatized behavior or consumption can lead, as inclined in Gössling et al's (2020) research, to an increased awareness, it is not certain that shaming will result in a change in behavior.

Theoretical Framework

In this thesis, we have chosen to base our theoretical framework around Fairclough's (2013) three dimensional framework for *critical discourse analysis* (CDA). As the purpose of this thesis is to explore and illustrate how leisure travel is discursively portrayed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we find CDA to be a suitable framework as it intends to account for the relation between discourses and societal change (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013), just like the change the travel industry is currently facing.

Within CDA, discourses are considered to be a form of "*social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices*" (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002 p 63). This alludes that discourses are in a "*dialectical relationship with other social dimensions*", meaning that discourses does not only have an influence on shaping social structures, but a discourse is also seen as a reflection of already existing structures (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002 p. 65). In other words, it is

possible to resemble a discourse with a mirror that reflects, reproduces and constitutes the reality of the contemplator.

Moreover, one of the advantages with CDA as a theoretical framework is that it allows us to identify and further explain the inherent meaning behind people's subjective expressions (Fairclough, 2013). Within CDA, the aim is to identify communication patterns from a holistic perspective. Thus, the emphasis is to analyze one or multiple discourses within their social context, and not to solely focus on one isolated entity of communication (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013).

Fairclough's (2013) framework follows the five common features shared with other approaches of CDA. **Firstly**, CDA is applicable on both the written and spoken language, as well as visual images, and it contributes to the constitution of the social world. **Secondly**, not only does discourse influence the social world but it is also influenced *by* it, meaning that discourses are a reflection of social structures. **Thirdly**, CDA analyzes language used in social interactions from a concrete, linguistic perspective. The **fourth** common feature is that discursive practices contribute to unequal power structures, and CDA aims to reveal the discourses that contribute to these structures, and the **fifth** and final feature is that CDA isn't politically neutral, but rather strives for social change (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013).

Fairclough's three dimensions of CDA are *text, discursive practice, and social practice.* These dimensions are visually presented in the following model:
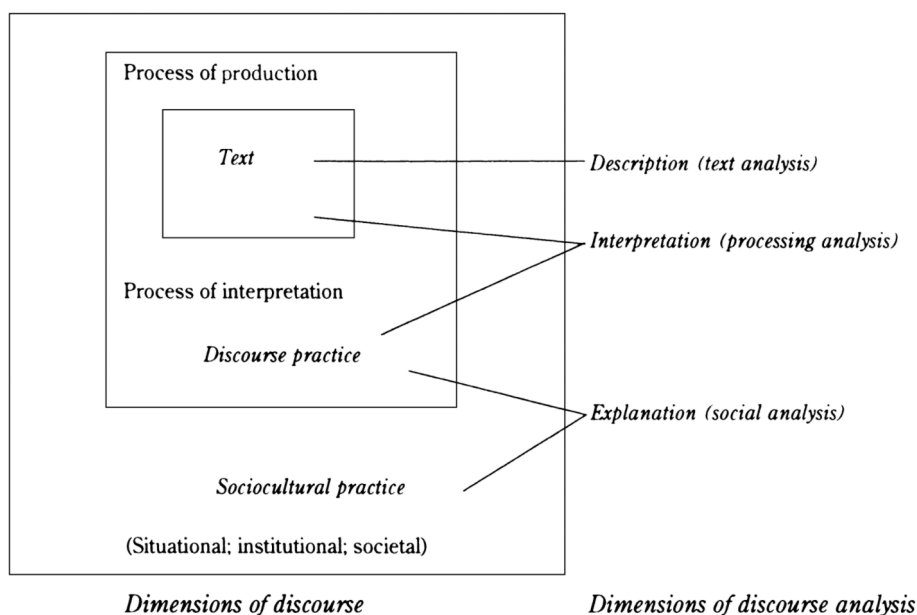

Figure 1. Dimensions of discourse analysis (*Fairclough, 2013 p. 133*)

First Dimension: Text

Text is the first dimension of the framework and refers to the linguistic analysis of communication, which can be in the spoken, written or visual form. Following, depending on the choice of words, which metaphors are used and how it is structured, an image is drawn of a certain scenario (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). Two important elements are mentioned when it comes to analyzing texts, transitivity and modality. Transitivity focuses on the ideological effects in a text, and is established through how the text is connected or disconnected from subjects and objects (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). This is done by judging if a statement is

made in a passive or active form, i.e. which words are used in a statement and where the emphasis lies.

The second element, modality, focuses on the level of commitment and certainty from the speaker/writer behind the statement. There are different types of modality, such as *truth, permission and hedges* (Fairclough, 1992 see Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002). *Truth* is when a person completely commits himself/herself to the statement made, for example "smoking will lead to cancer", a statement that is made without hesitation and/or uncertainty. *Permission* is when a person through their statement permits the receiver to do certain things, for example "it is okay to smoke after having a lung transplant". When speaking or writing with *hedges,* the person behind the statement is trying to moderate their view/views, often by using words to give a bit of uncertainty to their statement, such as "smoking **might** lead to cancer" or "you got it **a bit** wrong" (Fairclough, 1992 see Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Second Dimension: Discursive Practice

The second dimension of CDA is the *discursive practice* which aims to describe how *text* is produced and interpreted. The discursive practices that are produced and interpreted, are a part of- or rather a type of social practice, and this act (discursive practice) ultimately contributes to the social order (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997 see Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, when it comes to the dimension of *discursive practice*, researchers should look for interdiscursivity and intertextual chains (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013).

By looking at interdiscursivity, it gives insight into how different discourses and genres are articulated together in a communicative event. For example, a high level of interdiscursivity where *discourse types* are combined in new and creative ways, is often associated with social-change (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). However, discourses can also indicate that social-change is stagnant, which happens when discourses are mixed in a more conventional manner. Looking at the conventional mixing, a conclusion can be drawn that these discourses are produced in a more stable and dominant social hierarchy (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002).

The other part in the dimension important to look at is Intertextuality. Intertextuality explains how much the statement is based on earlier research or texts while intertextual chains are a series of discourses where each discourse is assimilating elements from previous texts (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). Useful when looking for patterns that take place due to production and interpretation of discourses (Fairclough, 1995 see Jörgensen & Phillips).

Third Dimension: Social Practice

The third and final dimension of CDA is *social practice.* In this dimension, the social context of the discourse is analyzed, and by doing so, one can determine which "network of discourses" a certain discursive practice belongs to. When this dimension of CDA has been analyzed, conclusions about the larger societal effects of certain discourses can be drawn (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013).

According to Fairclough (2013) there are different levels of social organisation; the context of the situation, the institutional context and the context of culture. Further, researchers should look for power relations and ideology within these levels as they are influential to the discourse. As mentioned in the *discursive practice* dimension, interdiscursivity enables endless variations in discourse and *"limitless"* creativity (Fairclough, 2013 p.95). However, creativity in discourse might be limited due to power imbalances in society, where others determine the norm in discourse (Fairclough, 2013). Therefore, researchers should take into consideration if the discursive practice strengthens or weakens the power relations of the social hierarchy or if it challenges these power structures and tries to promote social change (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Conclusively, social practice dimensions are changed through discursive practice, likewise the social dimensions contribute to forming the discursive dimension. These dimensions collectively make up the larger context which in turns create the reality we live in (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Methodology and Data Collection

The aim of our research is to acquire a deeper knowledge and understanding of a relatively complex phenomenon; namely how people choose to communicate regarding travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how this communication influences the societal view of travel during a pandemic. In this thesis, we have conducted a qualitative study. The reasons for why we have chosen to adopt a qualitative method of study are manifold; in the below sections, we will present our rationale for the chosen methodology, as well as its limitations. Continuing, we will also describe how we collected and analyzed the data, and the tools and materials used in this process. The chapter then continues with a section regarding the relevant limitations of the chosen method, and is concluded with a section on credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Justification For The Qualitative Method And Its Limitations

Bryman and Bell (2011) discovered that qualitative methods are best suited when the researcher is looking to describe, contextualise, interpret, and acquire in-depth understanding into particular phenomena or concepts. Flick (2014) shares this standpoint, and argues that a qualitative methodological approach is an effective method in cases where researchers want to investigate a phenomenon that exists in social contexts. The author argues that what makes a methodological approach suitable for studies in phenomena in social contexts is the fact that social interactions often take place in an uncontrolled environment, where people's subjective opinions, thoughts and ideas result in a comprehensive overall deduction. Flick (2014) continues to highlight an advantage with the qualitative approach, namely that the subjects are observed in their natural context, representing not only their interpretation as being affected by a cause in its specificity, but instead general assumptions observed in the subjects everyday life (Flick, 2014). Bryman and Bell (2011) share Flick's (2014) view, and resonate that a qualitative method has the advantage that, as opposed to quantitative studies where subjects are studied in a contrived context, the qualitative researchers study their subjects in a natural environment, giving more authenticity to the results.

However, by adopting a qualitative research methodology, it is we, the authors of this thesis, who are the main instrument for collecting and analyzing the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Accordingly, there is a risk that our personal preferences, values and opinions reflect on what data we consider relevant to use as a basis for our analysis, which in turn might result in subjectively influenced research results. Thus, as a result of the nature of the qualitative research methodology, it can sometimes be complicated for a third party to gain insight into how a researcher came to his or her conclusions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To counteract this, we have strived to maintain a high degree of transparency, both in terms of what data we have collected and how we have proceeded to analyze it. To further avoid bias, we tried to predict in which cases bias might appear in our study, and subsequently, being cognizant of the pitfalls of bias, we have tried to avert it to every extent possible. The series of steps we have taken to avoid bias will be developed further in detail in the section *Data Collection & Analysis*.

A well-known and accepted limitation of the qualitative method is that it often relies on a small sample size, and so the results extracted from such a small sample size *might not* be generalizable nor representative of a larger population (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Flick, 2014). On the other hand, since we have adopted a discourse theoretical perspective, this means that we, to a certain extent, can draw more general conclusions since communication in the field of discourse theory is considered to represent a societal opinion (Fairclough, 2013).

Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2011) states that the qualitative method places focus on words as opposed to quantification, which is in line with our aim of this study. Similarly, Flick (2014) asserts that a qualitative method is advantageous when trying to gain an understanding of social relations. Bryman and Bell (2011) continue to suggest that a qualitative approach is suitable for when researchers aim to comprehend small-scale and faceted conditions of social reality, e.g. interaction. The authors continue to argue that the qualitative method is particularly suitable for when researchers need rich detailed data that require careful attention, such as people's behaviour, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and values. Bryman and Bell (2011) continue by hypothesizing that a qualitative approach is well suited for language-based collection of qualitative data, including, but not limited to, discourse and conversation analysis.

To summarize, given our aim of study, and the above reasoning by Flick (2014) as well as Bryman and Bell (2011), we found the qualitative approach to be cogent for our area of study.

Data Collection & Analysis

Our data collection consists of primary data in the form of netnography as well as semi-structured interviews. The reason for choosing to combine these two data collection methods is that we sought to gain a broader understanding of how leisure tourism is discursively portrayed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our netnographic research aimed to gain a profound understanding of how online-based conversations drive, shape and produce the prevailing discourses that take place, and how these influence the societal perception of this phenomenon. Through the interviews, our hope is to obtain a more in-depth, rich understanding of people's reasoning, and how they express themselves regarding travel during a pandemic.

Netnography

We initiated our data collection with a netnographic survey so as to get an overarching picture of how people communicate in regards to leisure travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kozinets (2012) describes netnography as "*a specialized form of ethnographic research that has been adapted to the unique contingencies of various types of computer-mediated social interaction*" (p. 39), and given the prominent role of technology in communication contexts (Kozinets, 2012b; Alhadlaq, 2016), we argue that online-based conversations have a significant role in how contemporary travel-related discourses are shaped, reformed, and reproduced.

One of the key advantages with this data collection method is that it is not dependent on time, space and place (Bryman & Buchanan, 2018). As such, we were able to obtain data from all types of geographical regions, without the limits of geographical proximity. This was an important aspect for us, as we strove to analyze communications from various countries, and not limit ourselves to one country only. Continuing, an additional benefit stemming from netnography and communication among online communities is the ability to uncover data that might not be found in face-to-face context (Kozinets, 2012b). It is undoubtedly true that many users on digital forums operate under pseudonyms, meaning they can communicate anonymously, which in turn promotes free speech and uncensored viewpoints. Since people seldom have to take accountability for what they say online, it is hardly surprising that one unearths opinions and viewpoints online that would not have been unearthed during a one-on-one interview, particularly if the opinions and viewpoints could be considered to be unconventional or socially unacceptable. This is also a point that Kozinets (2012b) makes, as he argues how netnography is well suited for politically sensitive topics or stigmatic phenomena. Since we deem travelling during the Covid-19 pandemic to be a topic of sensitive nature, we found it particularly useful to employ netnographic research.

Continuing, Kozinets (2012b), as well as other experts, such as Pollok et al. (2014), similarly perceived a benefit of netnography, namely its unobtrusive and non-influencing nature. During our netnographic research, we undertook the roles of *complete observers*, covertly monitoring the communication of online groups in a non-fabricated context, allowing us to elicit data that is

naturalistic, where informants are expressing themselves freely without the hindrance of outside intrusion.

During the process of determination of what forums, platforms, and social media websites to analyze, we took into account Kozinets' (2012b) recommendations on processing data from sources that meet the following requirements; (1) sources with high activity, (2) sources whose nich aligns with our purpose, (3) relevant to our research purpose, (4) data-rich, (5), heterogeneous with a wide array of different participants, and (6) have a high number of active users.

The above parameters lead us to choose to focus on the online forums Reddit and TripAdvisor, as well as the social media platforms Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. Furthermore, all of these forums and social networks have a search function, which made it easier for us to find relevant discussions and user comments. To find pertinent material, we used covid and travel related search terms such as "*covid + travel*", "*coronavirus + travel*", "*travelling during covid*", "*traveling during corona*" and similar. We also followed discussions in popular subforums on Reddit such as *r/travel* (5.7m members), *r/solotravel* (1.5m members), *r/backpacking* (2.3m members), active Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, for instance *National Geographic Travel* on Facebook (5.9m followers), and *TravelLeisure* (4.1m followers) and *TravelMagazine* (2.7m followers) on Twitter.

One challenge with netnographic research is that the communication that appears in an Internet setting is primarily textual, an analysis of body language and tone of voice is not possible. Also, due to the Internet's amenability to anonymous communication, we were unable to obtain information on the demographics of the informants, such as age, nationality, age, or gender. However, social media platforms and forums such as Reddit, Twitter and Tripadvisor are mainly dominated by Western users (Statista, 2021a; Statista, 2021b; Statista 2021c), which could give some indication of the user demographics.

The data was collected during a 4-month period, between December 2020 – March 2021. During this period, we routinely visited the above communities in an effort to follow the development of discussions pertaining to our topic of investigation. Data was extracted from the above communities using the search function and using the aforementioned search terms.

The data extracted was primarily textual communication, with a degree of multimedia communication such as photos. Data was extracted from tweets, user posts, and comments to user posts, and were posted between January 2020 – Mars 2021. Throughout our netnographic study, we systematically collected, categorized the data in Microsoft Excel.

Kozinets (2010) reports that there are three types of data that can be collected in netnographic studies. Firstly, the *archival data* is described as data that is copied directly from pre-existing communications (forum posts, tweets, Facebook updates etc.) on online communities, and that the researchers have no participation or involvement in neither prompting nor creating (Kozinets, 2010). Secondly, Kozinets explains that *elicited data* is data that the researchers co-create with the community members. Lastly, Kozinets (2010) describes *field note data* as notes that the researchers themselves make pertaining to their observations of the communication online.

The data we have analyzed is primarily of the type *archival data.* Essentially, we identified user posts of interests, and took a screenshot of it, after which we saved it. We did not handle any *elicited data,* in other words, we have not participated in any forum discussions, we have not made any posts ourselves to prompt a discussion, and we have not posted any polls or surveys in these online forums.

Interviews

Interviews intended for qualitative data collection occur in a number of different embodiments, and are one of the most commonly employed data collection methods for researchers who intend to gain in-depth knowledge of a phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011: Patel & Davidsson, 2017). However, as Whyte (1953) points out; it is not possible to draw any conclusions based solely on one isolated interview, as interviews in research contexts only gain meaning when they are put in relation to other interviews and/or observations. With Whyte's (1953) recommendations in mind, we chose to conduct 10 semi-structured interviews as a complement to our netnographic data collection in order to increase the breadth and depth of our collected data and elicit further information. The reason behind the choice of semi-structured interviews is that we wanted to give space to the responses of the informants to affect how and which questions we asked next (Bryman & Bell, 2011: Patel & Davidsson, 2017).

The interview stage can be divided into two phases. The first phase includes pilot interviews where the purpose was to evaluate the appropriateness of the instrument, and ensure that our interview template produced sufficiently detailed and developing answers. In total, we conducted four pilot interviews and revised our questions in accordance with the responses. The pilot interviews gave us the opportunity to exclude questions that did not generate any, for this study, interesting answers, as well as areas of questioning that did not produce relevant data.

Continuing, in an effort to avoid *selection bias*, we carefully considered our recruitment strategy. In a way to actively try to avoid sampling bias and selection bias, and in contrast strive for a variation in sampling, we envisioned reaching a wide range of interviewees and sought representativeness of all aspects. This entailed actively avoiding most types of convenience sampling, such as snowballing, as we did not want to run the risk of selecting interviewees that may share too many similar characteristics. We reasoned that a chain referral sampling method, i.e. snowballing, would entail having participants recruiting primarily family members, friends, friends of friends, acquaintances, or people from the same circles, ultimately leaving us with a sample size that largely share similar characteristics and traits.

Instead, the sampling strategy utilized in this thesis have been of a purposive nature. The justification for this sampling strategy is that we sought to get maximum variation in our sample size, and so deemed the purposive method to be appropriate. As such, we determined a preselected criteria relevant to our research question. Which subsequently meant that we identified and selected participants who are fluent in Swedish with previous travel experience, and an expressed interest in travel for leisure purposes. This was done in order to ensure in-depth and relevant discussions that are not limited due to being restricted by language. Ultimately, we deemed people with these characteristics to be knowledgeable informants that would potentially be able to provide us with in-depth insight into the phenomenon we choose to research.

As to how our process of identifying and selecting respondents, the respondents interviewed during the first phase were found through an outreach on our social media. For the second phase, i.e. the final interviews, our sample size was made up of 10 individuals, also sourced from our social media. The reason we used social media to find relevant respondents is due to the fact that we, in total, have over 200.000 followers. Meaning that social media were a useful tool to reach a significant amount of potential respondents, while it enabled us to fulfill our sampling strategy.

After the screening and subsequent recruitment of potential participants, the conduction of interviews began. The interviews were held via our computers or smartphones by using video call applications such as Zoom, Skype and Google Meets. The reason for virtual interviews in place of in-person interviews was the social distancing recommendations pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. We wanted to ensure that the respondents felt that the interview took place in a safe environment.

A downside to virtual interviews, including video interviews, is that the interview situation can be experienced as strained due to potential technical hassle, limited bandwidth, lagging sound, etc. This is a pitfall we were well aware of, as a previous study conducted by Krouwel, Jolly & Greenfield (2019) found that in-person interviews resulted in respondents that were more actively engaged, and so in-person interviews were thought to be marginally better than interviews conducted virtually. These findings do have some validity, since McCoyd and Kerson (2006) argued that in-person interviews are commonly believed to be the "golden standard". Another downside of the video interviews is that a lot of the body language and cues are not as easy to observe as they would have been in a face-to-face, in-person interview.

Furthermore, we took Bechhofer, Elliott, and McCrone's (1984) recommendation into account and ensured that at least two of the researchers were present during each interview session, where one focused on interviewing, while the other took notes and, if needed, chimed in with relevant follow-up questions.

Procedural bias was actively avoided by providing interviewees with an optimum interview setting, allowing plenty of time for reflection and answers. The interviews took place in a quiet and peaceful setting, which gave us a chance to minimize any error in communication that potentially could occur as a result of external interference (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Continuing, the audio of all interviews were recorded, after which they were transcribed to a te, including continuers such uh huh; mm hm; yeah that at a first glance might not have seemed of importance.

Other types of biases, including *interviewer* and *response* biases, were much harder to eliminate, and we are aware of its inherent existence in our qualitative method of research. Questions were asked open-endedly, neutrally, and in a non suggestive manner, so as to not imply to the interviewee that there might be 'one correct answer' and reduce potential social desirability bias (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

An additional step we took in an effort to reduce response bias was being mindful about our selection sample, that we touched upon earlier in this section. Since respondents did not have a personal connection to us, and were previously unknown to us, our hopes were that they would not be too opinionated about us and as such, not be overly concerned about how their response would influence our opinion of them. This, we hoped, would reduce potential and acquiescence bias (Johnson et al. 2005).

To avoid *confirmation bias*, the collected data was analyzed individually and independently by the authors of this thesis, after which we met together and analyzed the material together, comparing our notes so to identify key similarities and differences, and to ensure we had interpreted interviewee's responses similarly, rather than interpreting in a way that supported each and every one of our individual hypothesis.

Moreover, data review, data analysis, and interviews were conducted concurrently. This due to the fact that we had no predetermined sample size, rather, we were looking to stop the conduction of the interview once saturation had been reached.

Data Analysis

Since we, in this thesis, have assumed a discourse theoretical perspective, we have used a linguistic approach to analyze our collected data. The data from the interviews and the data from the netnography were analyzed in a similar manner. In both cases, we used a text-based critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to gain a broader understanding of the prominent leisure tourism discourses, and their societal implications.

We used Excel to sort and categorize our data. The choice of software was due to the fact that Excel is the industry standard for data processing, and includes a number of functions for filtering, color coding and structuring data. This in turn facilitated our work of finding and identifying communication patterns. The data categorization occurred simultaneously with the data collection in order to ensure that we could reach a stage of saturation.

When we started categorizing our data, we began by creating two very simplistic themes: *pro-travel* and *con-travel*. This was done in order to get an overall view of how people choose to communicate on the subject. As the quantity of material collected increased, we identified several nuances in the communication, and expanded our themes in accordance to the image of leisure travel these discourses portrayed. Ultimately, the naming of our identified discourses were created in order to represent the characteristics of the communicative pattern they comprise. Thus, our final themes were constructed to represent how these discourses reform, produce, reshape and shape the reality of leisure travel amongst consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, & Confirmability

It is worth to mention that Kitto, Chester and Grbich (2008) argue that the three criteria that typically play a crucial role in quantitative research; *validity*, *reliability* and *empirical generalisability*, do not play an as crucial role in qualitative research. This, Kitto et al. (2008) argues, is due to the fact that qualitative research is based on contrasting frameworks, approaches to sampling, sampling size, and aim of study, and as such, the concepts of validity, reliability and empirical generalisability are not as relevant in a qualitative study. Kitto et al. (2008) move focus from the terms validity, reliability, and instead emphasise the importance of concepts such as rigour, credibility, and relevance, which they deem to be more relevant to qualitative studies. Rigour pertains to the scrupulousness and suitability of the methodological strategies chosen by the researchers. Credibility pertains to how meaningful and well-presented the research findings are. Lastly, relevance pertains to the trustworthiness of the research study.

The above has been discussed by a great number of experts, and a number of them, including Guba and Lincoln (1994) as well as Sukumar and Metoyer (2019) have reached a consensus of the lesser importance of validity and reliability in quantitative research. Continuing Bryman and Bell (2011) lends credence to this, and in a similar manner content that that, for qualitative studies, the criteria of validity, reliability and generalisability should be foregone in favour for the criteria credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, which are comparable to reliability and validity.

For this reason, we too, have chosen to focus on the following set criteria that is advocated by several scholars for assessing the quality of studies of a qualitative nature; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Bryman and Bell (2011) noted that credibility parallels internal validity. In other words, how trustworthy, believable, and credible are the findings of the research? In an endeavour to maintain credibility, we have purposefully chosen included direct quotations from the interviews to support our interpretations of them. Bryman and Bell (2011) endorse this, as they make note that verbatim quotations contributes to an enhancement of the perceived trustworthiness of the study, and that it carries the advantage of "giving a voice" to the interviewees rather than merely writing about the researchers own interpretations of the interviewee's quote.

Similarly, we have striven to provide explicit and detailed information on our research purpose, data collection, and procedural decisions, with the intent to maintain trustworthiness. The goal of the meticulousness and transparency is to give potential reviewers the ability to follow our sequence of events down to a tee, and to be able to replicate the study if they so wish.

As for literature sources, we tried to corroborate data and material whenever possible. Sources of literature were scrutinized and we used only subjective and validated sources.

Transferability

Bryman and Bell (2011) assert that transferability corresponds to external validity, and pertains to the generalization of the findings, i.e. how the findings of the research are applicable to other contexts. According to Trochim (2006), an important aspect to be mindful of in an effort to enhance the transferability of a research study, is to provide accurate, thorough, comprehensive and exhaustive descriptions of the study and its research context. Since a discourse is an interpretive standpoint that operates via discursive structures, it is not unlikely that similar communicative patterns that we have identified are reflected in other research contexts. What this means is that, although the qualitative research methodology is in general complicated to replicate, there is, as a result of the fact that we have adopted a discourse theoretical perspective, a possibility to apply our results, and our conclusions to other areas of research as well.

Dependability

The term dependability is analogous to reliability and pertains to whether the findings of the study are applicable to other times (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bitsch (2005) shares this notion, and describes dependability as *"the stability of findings over time"* (p. 86). Measures we took to enhance dependability were stepwise replication, use of purposive sampling, and providing thick descriptive data and detailed information on our research methodology and context (Li, 2004).

Confirmability

Bryman and Bell (2011) note that confirmability parallels objectivity, and Guba (1981) describes confirmability as the degree to which the findings of the research study are an accurate representation of the data, untouched and uncoloured from the researcher's own motivation, biases, and viewpoints. To establish confirmability, we have strived to maintain a high degree of transparency regarding the steps we have taken in our data collection, how we have interpreted our data, and how we have arrived at our findings and conclusions (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The idea behind this is to give a clear insight into how we have conducted our research, and to give readers of this thesis an opportunity to assess for themselves whether our conclusions derive from our collected data or not (Shenton, 2004).

Research Ethics

When conducting qualitative research, it is important to take the ethical aspects of the research into account (Flick, 2014). In order to maintain adequate research ethics, we have taken into account the potential impact our thesis might have on the external parties (e.g. interviewees, users of internet forums, etc) that have been involved in our research. With this in mind, we have chosen to anonymize all participants in our study so as to minimize any potential harm this thesis might evoke (Flick, 2014).

We have been transparent with the purpose of the research towards the interviewees, and we have explained how and where the material from the interviews would be used. This was done to ensure that all interview participants were comfortable with the fact that their answers from the interviews could be used as a basis in our research (Flick, 2014). Also, the purpose of our paper was shared prior to engaging in any formal interview.

Continuing, before conducting the interviews, all the participants were to sign a consent form in which they agreed that the interviews would be digitally recorded, and that the recordings from these interviews will be stored for a period of three months after the submission of this thesis. Another step in respecting the participants' privacy was to only record the audio of the interviews

which were held via video call applications (Flick, 2014). Thus, we did not document, record or save any video from the interviews.

Results and analysis

In this section, we will present the findings from our interviews and our netnographic research that are relevant and related to the aim of our thesis; namely how leisure travel is discursively portrayed in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we have adopted a discourse theoretical perspective in order to identify the most prominent tourism discourses, and strive to illustrate how these contribute to shape the societal view of leisure travel during the prevailing pandemic, it is important to narrate the discursive playground and take the current *material facts* into consideration (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairlcough, 2013). In other words; to gain an insight into the conditions under which these discourses prevail, we need to account for the objective facts, i.e. events and happenings that occur regardless of how people choose to express their subjective values, beliefs and opinions on this subject (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairlcough, 2013). Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic is global, widespread, and most importantly; it is not a hoax (UNDP, n.d; Pettersson, Manley, & Hernandez, 2021; Grennan, 2019). Secondly, it has been both legal and viable to travel during the pandemic, although in a more restricted and regulated fashion (Davahli et al., 2020; Cetin, 2020; IATA, 2020, Marques Santos, Madrid González, Haegeman, & Rainoldi, 2020).

Moving on, the result from our research demonstrates that there is a divide in public opinion that is mediated through three prominent discourses, which all revolves around uncertainty. Although the various discourses we have identified co-exist, they are, at least to some extent, of contradicting nature. Separately, and on a isolated level, these discourses produce and convey their own image of leisure travel during this pandemic, which is illustrated in the table below:

Discourse	Description
Shaming Discourse	Portrays leisure travel as an activity that entails severe health risks for the public. Produces stigma of leisure travel.
Justification Discourse	Portrays leisure travel as an activity, possible to practice safely, if the risks associated with travel are considered. A counter-reaction to the stigma caused by the *shaming discourse*.
Homo Economicus Discourse	Argues for the economical viability of leisure travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, in order to get a comprehensive understanding of how leisure travel is discursively portrayed, it is important to take the dynamics between these discourses into consideration, and analyse the societal consequences these have as a united unit, as well as the impact these discourses have on a isolated and individual level (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013).

In a sense, one could argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has rewritten the rules of the travel landscape where the appropriateness of travel as a leisure activity is being questioned and challenged. What once was considered a status symbol (Clark, 2014; Fitzsimmons, 2019; Kickham, 2018; Zahler, 2017) has now transformed into a polarizing discussion, rendering an ethical dilemma.

Shaming Discourse

The shaming discourse is characterized by the fact that the communication that takes place within this discourse is of a more aggressive and reprehensible tone in comparison to the other discourses we have identified. It emerged from our research that there is a tendency within the shaming discourse to use non-rational and emotionally loaded arguments. This in turn conveys the potential consequences that might arise as a result of leisure travel during these prevailing circumstances as a

matter that should be taken very seriously. This can be illustrated by the following answers to the question "*why do you think people travel during the pandemic?*"

"Because they're retarded. It's as simple as that." - John

When analyzing *transitivity*, i.e the ideological effects (Fairclough, 1992 see Jörgensen and Phillips, 2002) in the *text* above, it is striking that the quote is of rather aggressive and blaming nature. This statement also includes a distinct *responsible agent, "they"*, meaning there is no doubt who is to blame for the enduring pandemic and its consequences. By shifting the blame towards an external party, evidently *John*, through the choice of his words, contributes to produce an "us versus them" mentality. *We* who are responsible, and *they* who are irresponsible. This is not completely different from the results in Nerlich and Koteyko's (2011) article where they analysed two coexisting discourses during the H1N1 pandemic, and concluded that these contradicting forces created an atmosphere where a blaming culture was both prevalent and commonplace. In the same way that Nerlich and Koteyko (2011) concluded that information spread by dissenting parties resulted in uncertainty, rendering a panic-like situation, the *shaming discourse* we have identified operates in a similar manner. The key difference lies in who is considered to be responsible for the ongoing pandemic, and therefore, who should bear the blame. In Nerlich and Koteyko's (2011) research, it became rather evident that the media and politicians were considered to bear the heaviest burden, whilst the *shaming discourse*, in large, puts the blame on the individual traveler. This is illustrated by the following comment on a YouTube video concerning a woman travelling in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *"Lady it's not about yourself and the quick wipe on your tablet, you're obviously healthy so you can very well be an asymptomatic carrier. It's about you and people like you spreading this virus everywhere onto weaker people, like elderly or fragile people. Be responsible and just stay home for a while instead of bragging about your luck!" - perceneij*

In this comment, the woman in the video is criticized for pursuing leisure travel activities, and is personally being blamed as the main culprit behind the spread of COVID-19. As also seen in the quote from *John*, this YouTube comment also includes an explicit responsible agent (Fairclough, 1992 see Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002). Hence, finding a scapegoat and blaming him or her personally for the epidemiological outbreak is a recurring theme, and a significant trait of the shaming discourse. As it has been both perfectly legal and possible to travel during the pandemic, albeit in a more regulated and restricted fashion (Kantis, Kiernan, & Socrates Bardi, 2021), statements like these contribute to shaping a form of stigma of leisure travel. Much in the same way that environmental movements have been flight shaming air travellers for years (Gössling et al., 2020), and air travel as such has increasingly become stigmatized as it is continuously described as one of the greatest driving forces behind climate change (Gössling et al., 2020), a similar sentiment has been extended to leisure travellers who pursue travelling despite the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic endures and poses burdensome challenges, we believe this sentiment will continue to grow and polarize society even further.

Undoubtedly, there are potential risks for disease transmission pertaining to travel-related activities. However, the *shaming discourse* portrays these risks not as a *potential* outcome, but rather, as a *definite* outcome. In other words, our observation would seem to suggest the fundamental purpose of the *shaming discourse* appears to be to intimidate people who engage in leisure travel, and as such, one could argue that there is a lack of nuance in the communication that occurs within this discourse. The intimidating nature of the *shaming discourse*, and the lack of nuance can be illustrated by the following comment from Reddit user *Oftenwrongs* in the Coronavirus Megathread (Mar 2021):*"No one should have the right to spread a deadly disease so that they could travel for fun"*. By taking the first dimension of Fairclough's (2013) framework, *text*, into consideration, and by analysing the *modality* in this comment, it becomes rather evident that the potential correlation

between leisure travel and COVID-19 related deaths are presented as an undeniable truth, meaning that travel for leisure purposes is discursively portrayed as an unethical and dangerous activity that will have devastating consequences for societies.

In addition to the above, statements like the one from *Oftenwrongs* illustrate how the *shaming discourse* presents the ongoing pandemic as a serious and important matter. By drawing a direct parallel between leisure travel and the spread of a fatal virus, *Oftenwrongs* depicts COVID-19 as a phenomenon of greater importance than individual interest, which may be one of the reasons for the aggressive nature of the *shaming discourse*. A similar sentiment emerged during the interview with *John* when we discussed other people's propensity and willingness to travel during the pandemic. He said on several occasions that it is "*stupid*" and "*idiotic*" to travel during the prevailing circumstances, and that people who travel are "*ignorant*" and should take "*responsiblity*" by "*thinking about the bigger picture*". Through the use of emotionally loaded words when describing people who travel, and by emphasizing that these people should take responsibility **by** not engaging in these types of activities, and see things from a holistic perspective, *John*, and the *shaming discourse*, ultimately contributes to portray leisure travel as a selfish and non-solitary activity. This is further illustrated in the comment below from *WalkingEars*, who shared his/hers thoughts on traveling during the pandemic in the Reddit thread "*To people that are traveling during this time, are you enjoying it?*"

> "Some solo travelers sadly just don't care that much about other people. I've seen people in some of these threads actively argue that the lives of covid victims aren't worth saving if it means sacrificing the "well-being" (meaning leisure activities) of the young :/ Toxic individualism at its grossest. Maybe for some people traveling alone for too long makes them disappear up their own butts a little bit and forget that most humans love others, including others who may be vulnerable to covid. For many of us, protecting those loved ones matters a lot more to our "well being" than going on an "adventure" during a pandemic" - WalkingEars

Furthermore, during the interview with *John*, it became apparent that his negative view of non-essential travel is based on his beliefs that travel results in unnecessary risks as people who travel expose themselves to more social interaction than just the bare minimum. Thus, our research indicates that reducing the number of physical interactions is an important element within the *shaming discourse*, and the key approach of doing so seems to be to urge people to stay home to every extent possible. In other words, the *shaming discourse* highlights a rather simplistic solution to a complex issue. With this in mind, it is not entirely incomprehensible that the phrase *stay home, stay safe* has spread like wildfire and become somewhat of a global mantra. The comment below is a rather accurate illustration of this:

> "Good Lord, I have friends who are asking if they should travel too right now, and I've told them the same thing: Traveling is super irresponsible right now. I get it, we're all stir crazy and this sucks, but the US is worse off than it was at the start of the pandemic right now. Stay home." - elocin90

As it has been confirmed that COVID-19 spreads through interhuman transmission (Lovelace, 2020: WHO, n.d; Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d; Sauer, 2021), and travel restrictions were amongst the first measures to be imposed by governments (Pham & Ziady, 2020; Kantis, Kiernan, & Socrates Bardi, 2021; The White House, 2020; CDC, 2020), it's not surprising that the *shaming discourse* portrays travel as the driving force behind the spread of infection. Thus, one could argue that there is a distinct *intertextual chain* where information from media and scientists are intertwined with government actions, and together, this has, according to our findings, turned out to be the foundation for the *shaming discourse*. The quote below, which is extracted from a Reddit thread where the ethical aspects of traveling during the pandemic are discussed, is a good example of this.

"Yes, it is irresponsible. Scientists have found that the current second wave going around Europe is a strain that originated in Spain and was spread around by tourists that went there in the summer. Travel is one of the single biggest factors for transmission, as it's what brings the disease from one area to another." - Train-ingDay

As Fairclough (2013) stated; no text is isolated, and all communication, to a various extent, derives from existing communication. In this case, the essence of what is being communicated; namely that travelling during these conditions is unethical as it increases the spread of COVID-19, is, according to this user, based on scientific studies. Thus, this Reddit user draws upon *intertextuality* to legitimize and substantiate his position that pursuing travel for leisure purposes during the prevailing conditions is irresponsible, and should therefore be avoided. Consequently, using carefully selected pieces of scientific research as ammunition to strengthen an argument is a common *discursive practice* within the *shaming discourse*.

It is important to emphasize that the communication that takes place within the *shaming discourse* is not exclusively based on information from media, research statements and government measures. Our research suggests that it is common for users to spin on each other's comments, statements and assertions, thus creating a user generated intertextual chain. This is particularly noticeable on internet-based forums and on social media platforms, where people from all over the world can interact with each other seamlessly. With this in mind, we argue that the *shaming discourse* fertilizes itself to a fairly large extent, and it is not unreasonable to assume that this discourse will become even more prominent and powerful as the pandemic endures. To illustrate, the following conversation in the Reddit thread "*To people that are traveling during this time, are you enjoying it*?" acts as an excellent example of how text within the shaming discourse is shaped and reproduced based on prior existing user generated text:

> *"Don't travel. Covid is worse than ever. I know a guy that went on a trip last week and exposed his whole family, and his dad caught it. If you're not going to listen to this advice, at least don't expose other people as a consequence of your actions"* - *Whitehousevirus* [Reply to OP]

> *"People in this thread are making my blood pressure spike. I don't understand and yes I know several healthy young people who took all precautions and still got covid during trips that involved flying"* - Deleted user [Reply to *Whitehousevirus*]

> *"Yeah, by traveling now you are putting yourself and potentially thousands of other people at risk. What if you end up being the person to bring in covid to a place which has until now been able to keep the virus away?"* - *PacSan300* [Reply to Deleted user]

In this conversation, it is evident how the intertextual chain is constructed, how it develops, and how it becomes increasingly more shameful and agressive for each additional comment that is made. The user *Whitehousevirus* begins by describing his view of travel in a characteristic manner for this discourse, namely that travel should be avoided as it acts as a catalyst for the spread of infection. *Whitehousevirus* strengthened his claim with a personal anecdote that he personally knows someone who was traveling recently, and that this person, as a result of travelling, exposed his family to the virus, which ultimately resulted in this individual's father falling ill with COVID-19. This comment from *Whitehousevirus* is then answered by another user who builds on the conversation by explaining that safe travel is non-existent, and that precautions are not a guarantee to avoid becoming infected. This statement from the *Deleted user* is then substantiated, just as the first comment, with a personal experience that aligns and confirms with the message conveyed. Finally, a third user enters the conversation, and strengthens the *shaming discourse* by conveying an even more alarmist message. In the comment from *PacSan300*, the potential consequences of traveling escalate significantly. From the fact that only people in the traveler's vicinity could be infected and endangered, it appears from *PacSan300's* comment that traveling

during the pandemic puts thousands of people's lives at risk, and that travelers are the main reason behind the spread of infection. With this in mind, we argue that there is an escalation ladder within the *shaming discourse* where people trigger and frighten each other by confirming and further developing each other's claims, and this often with the help of a personal anecdote that is impossible for an external party to verify or confirm.

Continuing, when analysing the societal impact a discourse might have, it is important to take into consideration what Fairclough (2013) describes as *social practice*, i.e the social context in which the discourse exists. Our research suggests that the *shaming discourse* manifests slightly differently depending on whether the communication occurs in an online-setting, or in a more traditional offline setting. The online strain of the *shaming discourse* is of a more aggressive and reprehensible nature compared to the offline dito. This aligns with Kozinet's (2012b) theories which demonstrates that people are more comfortable with expressing their unfiltered opinions when they have the opportunity to do so anonymously. As online-based conversations tend to promote an uncensored point of view, it is not surprising why the *shaming discourse* is of an even more extreme nature online. While *John* during the interview expressed that people who engaged in travel-related activities during the pandemic were both "*idiots*" and *"retarded"*, his online peers takes it one step further by adopting an harsher jargon. This becomes rather evident when analysing the following conversation in a Reddit thread regarding air travel during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *"My grandma passed away earlier this month and I had to fly home. I had some coworkers get snarky when they found out I was out of town until I told them my grandma had died...."* - *SecretGeek97* [Reply to OP]

> *"You might kill more grandmas by spreading covid."* - *tamsinsea* [Reply to *SecretGeek97*]

The above is an illustration of how the *shaming discourse* manifests itself depending on where the communication takes place, and as Fairclough (2013) points out; culture, social structures and norms does have an influence on how discourses are interpreted, formed and reproduced. Since all of the people we interviewed live in Sweden, it is not unreasonable to assume that the Swedish culture, and the Swedish government's attitude towards COVID-19 related travel restrictions have had, at least to some extent, an influence on these peoples reasoning regarding leisure travel during the pandemic. On the contrary, it is extremely difficult for us to determine the origin behind pseudonymes used in an online setting. Hence, the comments we have identified on internet forums, and on social media might be influenced by a different culture, other social norms, and by stricter infection control measures, which in turn may affect how these users' choose to express their opinion.

To conclude, our research indicates that there is a prominent pattern of communication that forms a strong resilience towards pursuing leisure travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *shaming discourse* has a strong presence both online and offline, although, our research suggests that the *shaming discourse* adapts to the different settings, and their underlying characteristics by altering its appearance. By harshly blaming those who pursue travel for leisure purposes, *the shaming discourse* contributes to creating an *us versus them* mentality, evidently rendering travel as a polarizing activity. As travel has, to a large extent, been both perfectly legal and fully possible, this pattern of communication contributes to depict travel as an morally doubtful, and unethical leisure activity, resulting in a societal stigma surrounding travel.

Justification Discourse

As Isaac Newton once famously stated: "*for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction*". Although the laws of physics might not be applicable in our research, Newton has a point in that every action creates a counter-reaction, and certain parallels can be drawn to our study. As the

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shaming discourse is actively challenging the appropriateness of travel as a leisure activity, the contradiction force is of a justifying nature, hence, the *justification discourse* revolves around the recurring theme to legitimize and defend the suitability of travel as a proper leisure activity. Our research suggests that the *justification discourse* acts as a counter-reaction towards the blaming culture, and the stigmatisation of travel that has arisen as a result of the *shaming discourse*. Thus, we argue that the *justification discourse* and the *shaming discourse*, albeit being very different, co-exist in synergy with each other, and as such, they both play a vital role in how leisure travel is discursively portrayed.

The fact that there is a need to explain and defend an activity that was previously considered to be a status symbol (Clark, 2014; Fitzsimmons, 2019; Kickham, 2018; Zahler, 2017) strongly indicates that this is no longer the case, and that the stigma of travel has had an impact on a societal level. In other words, travel has transformed into something that many people no longer want to be associated with or seen engaging in, at least not openly, and the *justification discourse* mediates a defense for those who travel during the pandemic as it conveys an image of travel as an activity which can be carried out in a safe manner.

Interesting in this context is that prior research indicates that an increased stigma does not necessarily lead to reduced consumption, or a change in behaviour (Benoit et al, 2020; Gössling et al, 2020; Hing et al. 2013; Stuber et al, 2009). Benoit et al's (2020) research regarding canadian sex workers implies that stigmatization could lead to a hiding behavior, which, in our case, means that people will probably not stop pursuing travel for leisure purposes, but rather hide the fact that they are traveling. Stuber et al. (2009) arrive at a similar conclusion in their research on stigma related to smoking. Their research concludes that smokers, as a result of being marginalized, have a propensity to conceal their habits from their non-smoking peers. In our research, we have identified similar tendencies to a hiding behavior concerning traveling during the pandemic. During one of the interviews, we discussed how other people's opinions may influence travel-related decisions, and asked the respondent to express how he reasoned, to which he said the following:

> *"Maybe, ehm, you would be more secretive with it [to travel] [...] Maybe not show it [that you travel] to the whole world on Instagram."- Isac*

This answer shows a clear sign of wanting to avoid confrontation, which is a recurring element within the *justification discourse*. Other features like expressing hesitation in beliefs and backpedaling are common as well. These characteristics were seen in both interview answers and online comments. Amongst others, the following statement was made, showing the *justification discourse* in practice:

> *"We were very careful [...] It was another type of trip, you stayed away from people, we were outside [...] I was persuaded, I didn't want to go in the beginning". - Jane.*

Analyzing this quote from the element of *modality*, we can see a clear use of *hedges,* which is moderating the views presented in the discourse in order to downplay a statement, hence avoiding criticism (Fairclough 2013). The discourse tones down the trip itself by instead focusing on the safety measures that were taken to prevent the spread of the virus as well as a motivation for making the trip. When looking at *transitivity,* the *justification discourse* usually includes a responsible agent for the spread of the virus, but unlike the *shaming discourse* the responsible agent is seldom the individual traveller, but rather people who in everyday life don't follow common sense recommendations. In the Reddit thread *"COVID-19 Flight Shaming"* this topic is discussed and one user commented the following:

> *"[...] Yes I am travelling abroad and quote frequently but I don't let my guard down there either. Now, all those fuckwits back home who are flooding the pubs in groups of*

20 every night of the week. Who the hell are they to try and covid shame me for feeding my family?" - Kebabking93 [Reply to OP]

Although rarely this aggressive, the shift of the *responsible agent* from the traveller to everyday people is typical for the *justification discourse*. In this specific case the *responsible agent* becomes the people who do not keep distance and crowd public spaces, and as a consequence facilitate the spread of the virus. However, the *justification discourse* does not create the same "*us vs them*" dimension, since the responsible agent is people in general who are breaking rules, instead of focusing on a specific group of people (e.g. *shaming discourse* with people who travel).

Just as in the *shaming discourse* the *justification discourse* is based on previous text, i.e. there is a strong *intertextuality* (Fairclough, 2013). This is best exemplified by the following quote:

> "I'm probably going to get downvoted but here are my two cents: I do think there is irresponsible and responsible travel. I think clubbing, eating in restaurants, communal living spaces, doing anything excessively indoors is irresponsible while traveling. Or not while traveling tbh. I think renting a cabin, spending time on the beach, staying masked, doing outdoor/winter sports is not irresponsible. At least, not excessively so. You know what activities will and won't unnecessarily expose yourself and others whether you are traveling or not. I would say car travel > plane if possible, but if you are on a plane use a mask and a face shield. Get tested, stay away from people, wash your hands. I think we think of travel as ""bigger"" or more exposure than just daily living and I don't necessarily agree with that. There are people who will stay in their own hometown and go to weddings/bars/dancing and have really lax masking hygiene. Then there are people who will travel conscientiously and not pose a significant risk to themselves or others. So I think your approach will determine the responsibility more than anything. [...]" - Katelyn89*

This text is from the Reddit thread "*Do you think it is unethical/irresponsible to travel in the covid era?*" and comes after several comments stating that it is "*immoral*" and "*irresponsible*" to travel and urging people to "*stay home*", in essence the *shaming discourse*. As a result, *Katelyn89* starts off by writing that his/her statement will get downvoted, in this way acknowledging that the *shaming discourse* has successfully shaped the view of reality (Qian et al. 2017; Wodak & Meyer, 2015; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001; Opera, 2019; Fairclough, 2013; Jörgensen & Phillips 2002) in this particular setting. After that there is quite a large section of the text where travel is justified in different ways. Interestingly this part also seems to be based on previous text, research and/or science. The text states that responsible travel is possible and proposes a number of measures to take, such as "*wash your hands*", "*staying masked*" and "*stay away from people*", things that have been said by both governments and virologists (WHO, n.d., Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d.). In this sense the text is not isolated but rather linked to a high level of intertextuality. This specific comment also makes the claim that it is not necessarily travel that creates the problem, but rather ignoring the proposed measures to decrease the spread. From this viewpoint, going to a wedding in your hometown is more irresponsible than going on a skiing trip where you keep your distance from other people. As discussed earlier, the responsible agent is shifted from the individual traveller to people in general who do not follow recommendations to slow the spread of the virus. It is also a way in which the *justification discourse* is attempting to reshape the view of reality (Qian et al. 2017; Wodak & Meyer, 2015; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001; Opera, 2019; Fairclough, 2013; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002), currently dominated by the *shaming discourse*.

Interestingly, when analyzing the *modality* in these two Reddit quotes, it is evident that they both use *hedges* less compared to the quote from the interview (Fairclough, 2013). This is something that you will generally find within this discourse, some comments are more committed to the arguments made than others. In one sense, these two sides of the *justification discourse* can be compared to the study by Benoit et al. (2020) regarding prostitution, and the counter-reaction of sex workers to the

occupational stigma. Apart from hiding their occupation from others, the study showed that common responses were *internalization* - the acceptance of stigma and expressing feelings of shame because of their occupation - and *rejection* - rejecting the stigma and arguing against it (Benoit et al. 2020). Although the shared denominator in this discourse category is justifying travel during the pandemic, in what manner it is justified can differ. Some comments have been very argumentative and more in line with the *rejection* response, while others have been conflict avoiding and in that way more like the *internalisation* response

Our research suggests that the facts used in the *justification discourse*, is actually based on the same science as the facts used in the *shaming discourse,* so from that perspective they are in agreement. The big difference is how the text is produced, i.e the *discursive practice* (Fairclough, 2013). While the *shaming discourse* often draws the conclusion that since the virus spreads through interhuman transmission (Lovelace, 2020: WHO, n.d; Folkhälsomyndigheten, n.d; Sauer, 2021), interhuman contact should be avoided at all cost, the *"stay home, stay safe"*-mantra, the *justification discourse* presents a different perspective. This discourse instead presents a number of arguments for why personal travel or travel in general can be safe, including arguments like *"staying masked"* and *"you still keep a distance from other people",* resulting in an alternative to the "stay home, stay safe"-mantra.

When looking at the social context i.e. the *social practice,* the *justification discourse* is also influenced by the setting in which it takes place (Fairclough, 2013). For example, the online comment by *Katelyn89* has to be put in a perspective since it takes place on Reddit in a thread called *"Do you think it is unethical/irresponsible to travel in the covid era?"* and the majority of answers agree with the question. As a consequence there is an even greater need to justify travel, seeing how the opposition to it is so big to begin with. This might be one reason why the comment is so long, it needs to answer a number of accusations. Even though it is only a thread on Reddit, it can be seen as a symbol of society at large. Not all parts of society are as anti-travel as this specific thread but because of the prevailing circumstances, large parts of society are to one extent or another against travel. This lays the ground, the social context, for the *justification discourse.*

It could be argued that the *justification discourse* challenges power structures and promotes social change (Fairclough, 2013) in the sense that it defies the *shaming discourse* and presents an alternate narrative. The other side of the argument would be that the *justification discourse* rather strengthens the power structure of the social hierarchy on the basis that it more often than not fails to sufficiently challenge extreme claims made by the *shaming discourse,* and instead backpedals when confronted. There is a valid argument to be made for each claim and we have seen examples of both sides being true.

To conclude, our research suggests that the *justification discourse* exists as an contradicting force to the *shaming discourse,* arguing for a more balanced, multifaceted debate regarding travel and ways in which we can prevent the spread of the virus. Just like the *shaming discourse* the *justification discourse* is prevalent both online and offline, although presented slightly different. Online it tends to be a bit longer and can, in some rare situations, even be aggressive. The *justification discourse* found in the interviews were more toned down but could also be less committed to the arguments it was trying to make, using more *hedges.* While the *shaming discourse* created a polarizing view of travel, rendering it as an irresponsible activity, and simultaneously blaming individual travellers for causing spreads, the *justification discourse* argues against this, and shifts the focus towards following guidelines in general, whether travelling or not.

Homo Economicus Discourse

The third and final discourse we have identified is neither of an accusatory nature, nor of a justifying nature. This discourse, which we have chosen to name *homo economicus*, takes on an

economical approach, and rather aims to disarm and neutralize the other discourses by mediating a purely economical perspective on leisure travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interesting in this context is that the *homo economicus discourse* is multifaceted in the respect that it offers an argument for both those who choose to travel during the pandemic, as well as to the people who choose to refrain from traveling during the prevailing conditions. Thus, the *homo economicus discourse* is divided into two contradicting angles, both are based on the same economical principle, namely if it's financially defensible to travel for the time being. Accordingly, the *homo economicus discourse* can be likened to a double-edged sword where one side argues that economic uncertainties this pandemic embraces is not worth the financial risk, whilst the other side only considers the possibilities to get a travel experience for a fraction of the usual going rate. Consequently, this results in an interesting conflict within the discourse, where a similar economical mindset is mediated and used in both sides of the arguments.

To illustrate, *Marcus* states during his interview that he personally has no qualms about people traveling during the pandemic, provided they abide by the laws and regulations that are applicable at the destination they decide to visit. He further explains that he does not see any major risks in traveling, and that if he personally had decided to travel somewhere, he would only have followed the *"minimum requirements"* required by law. He develops his reasoning by explaining that he did not go abroad in 2020, despite the fact that he typically travels at least two times a year, since he, due to the pandemic, does not experience that he would get the same *"value for money"* as he normally would. He clarifies by explaining that when he travels, he wants to visit restaurants, socialize with locals, visit museums, and carry out other travel-related activities that have been tightly regulated as a result of governmental efforts to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Hence, since these travel-related activities only can be carried out in a restricted fashion, or to a limited extent, *Marcus* and this side of the *homo economicus discourse*, reason as follows:

> *"Then I will visit a country, go to a place, a tourist place that will be completely empty. Maybe even closed. Somehow it happens to me that when I go [abroad], I want to see things, I go to a place and there are no people there so I get no feeling. [...]. Okay why no people here, it's closed, the museum is closed we say. Okay, then I went here, paid the same money as I could have done two years ago, but then I had a very cool experience. Now I meet a door that says closed due to pandemic"* - Marcus

By analyzing the *modality* in the quote above, it is evident that the statement is made with a high degree of certainty (Fairlcough, 2013), suggesting there is no doubt that travel for leisure purposes during the prevailing conditions is portrayed as an activity that is not worth the money invested. Furthermore, in terms of *transitivity*, there is a distinct subject and object in this statement (Fairclough, 2013), indicating that traveling is an active act, and that it is those who choose to travel, despite the pandemic, who will have a limited experience due to COVID-19 related regulations. A similar sentiment could be found in the interview with *Steve*, who, just as *Marcus*, finds that the current situation renders travel to be an activity difficult to condone due to economical reasons.

> *"Travel really means that you want to visit markets, you want to visit shopping malls, you want to visit cultural sights. If it is limited, then the very purpose of traveling is limited. So, I would like to say that if there are such restrictions as there have been then with restaurants, with bars, with markets and everything else, then perhaps the very purpose of travel fails [...]"* - Steve

Furthermore, *Steve* touched upon the economic uncertainties around travel that prevail during the pandemic, on several occasions, and expressed his concern for additional costs that might arise as a result of the current precarious societal situation. Although *Steve* does not express any major concern about being infected with COVID-19, as he, according to his own statement, does not belong to any of the "*risk groups*", he emphasizes that "*it may be difficult to travel [for the time*

being] and many things can happen". He points out that the complexity of traveling during the prevailing conditions is based on financial uncertainty, and illustrates this by saying that it is uncertain whether his insurance will "*cover the costs*" of a potential hospitalization, if needed. Thus, it is not the risk of being infected with COVID-19 per se that prevents *Steve* from traveling, but rather the financial consequences that might arise as a result of a severe course of illness.

When further exploring the *homo economicus discourse* it becomes evident that there is a contradictory way of viewing travel for leisure, also having its base in the economical approach. Instead of emphasizing the financial uncertainty of travel, this side of the *homo economicus discourse* portrays an economical opportunity, which more often than not does not consider any potential economical risks. The contradicting viewpoint within the *homo economics discourse*, i.e the opportunistic side, is clearly showcased in these comments made in a Reddit thread regarding leisure travel:

> *"A lot of people typically would never in their entire life be able to go to Hawaii due to costs, which changed now [...]"*- nomii [Reply to OP]

The Reddit user *bankerman*, just as *nomii*, support our theory that the other side of this discourse uses economic opportunism by stating that *"Flights and hotels super cheap"* and that also, in case of a quarantine, it must not be an experience resulting in less value for money *"Oh no, you mean I can't leave this beautiful resort for 14 days? Heaven forbid!"*. This illustrates the opportunistic side of the *homo economicus discourse*, where the COVID-19 pandemic is not seen as a hindrance to have a good travel-related experience, but rather a phenomenon that reduces the costs.

The *homo economicus discourse* is also based on a strong *intertextuality* (Fairclough, 2013)*,* however unlike the previous two discourses, while it recognizes the science about the virus, it generally chooses not to put much focus on it. Instead the *homo economicus discourse* incorporates facts about government restrictions and rules which might affect the value, both financially and experientially for travellers. We can also see through our research, clear user generated *intertextual chains* on internet forums and on social media, where each comment assimilates elements from previous texts (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). This can be seen through the example below:

> *"I would not go this summer. Lockdowns will almost certainly be active until at least late spring, and some form of restrictions will probably be in place until Autumn time when the majority of populations will be vaccinated. It's also fairly likely that you will need to prove vaccination before being allowed into the EU, so restrictions aside, whether you're even allowed to fly there will depend on how quickly you'll get access to covid vaccines I wouldn't even consider international travel until at least October/November, and even then I'd only book something if it was fully cancellable and refundable"* - MuTron1 [Reply to OP]

> *"As hard as it is to hear, I was basically told the same thing and had to redo all my plans. Now hoping to travel January 2022 but not making any plans. Good luck OP hopefully soon we can all travel with some normalcy again"* - ireallydontcare13 [Reply to MuTron1]

> *"Yep. Even if it is just about possible to to get there and not be quarantined at each border crossing, it will still be a terrible time to travel through Europe. Everything but supermarkets and pharmacies are closed, and some countries are fining people if they stray too far from home without good reason. As a tourist, you'd just see the inside of a hotel Restrictions will likely be lighter in summertime, but things will still be uncharacteristically quiet and subdued."* - MuTron1 [Reply to ireallydontcare13]

In the conversation, the *intertextual chain* is constructed through the comments assimilating information from each other (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). We see how information is shared that determines if there is any value in travelling during the prevailing circumstances. *MuTron1* starts off by sharing some thoughts on travel restrictions and lockdown rules that affect travel negatively. He ends the comment by saying that he would not travel until October/November and even then he wouldn't do it unless there is a guarantee that the booking is cancellable and refundable, really emphasizing the financial uncertainty that plays a role in his decision making. *Ireallydontcare13* agrees with the reasoning in the first comment and even goes further by stating that he is not going to travel until January 2022. *MuTron1* then further elaborates that even if it would be possible to travel to Europe, it would still be a less valuable experience (lower value for money), another important aspect of the *homo economicus discourse.* This conversation shows a strong validation of each other's views, leading to the conclusion that travel, at this moment, is not worth it, both from a financial and experiential point of view. The *homo economicus discourse* is two-sided, with one side seeing the financial disadvantages with travel, while the other side is more opportunistic, arguing that there are more financial benefits, e.g cheaper flight tickets. This intertextual chain could have gone in a different direction if the other side of the *homo economicus discourse,* the more opportunistic side, were present.

When analyzing the *interdiscursivity* of discourse, one should examine whether the discourse types are combined in new and creative ways which are often associated with social-change (Jörgensen & Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 2013). Our research suggests that the *homo economicus discourse* is not associated with a high level of social change, mainly because it does not engage in the debate regarding the appropriateness of leisure travel during the pandemic purely from a health perspective. Rather value for money is communicated, and the monetary impact of possible health and regulatory related leisure travel implications. Therefore, it is safe to say that the *discourse* neither strengthens, nor does it weaken, the dominance of the *shaming discourse.*

As with previous discourse categories, the *homo economicus discourse* is influenced by norms, culture and social structures (Fairclough, 2013). It is rarely produced in a setting where the "*shaming-justification*" debate takes place, and therefore is not affected by the culture and norms within that specific social context. The *homo economicus discourse* rather exists in its own bubble, where pros and cons of leisure travel during the pandemic, from a monetary perspective, is discussed. Jörgensen and Phillips (2002) explain that discourses are formed and established through real events or fact, i.e *material facts,* which occur regardless of people's subjective values, beliefs and opinions. However, as a result of its social context, the material facts remain the principal focus for the *homo economicus discourse*, which creates a debate climate where relevant information is traded between different parties, and where the individual can draw their own conclusions if travel is worth the financial investment.

Ultimately, the economical mindset is present in both of these contradictory sides of the *homo economicus discourse*. Both sides, although one being *pro travel* whilst the other is *con travel*, clearly convey value for money as a core principle, and use personal finance and the inherent value of money to ascribe and attribute value to what is being communicated. Thus, this discourse, reforms, produces and shapes the reality of those with an already established economical principality in regards to leisure travel during the prevailing circumstances. In essence, this confirms what Qian et al. (2017), Wodak & Meyer (2015), Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates (2001), Opera, (2019), Fairclough, (2013) and Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) describe as discourses influencing beliefs, and the way we communicate regarding a certain subject, in this case: travel for leisure purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The *homo economicus discourse* ultimately finds its disposition validated through economical thinking. Interestingly, there is a nuance within this discourse that has unquestionably arosen as a result of the communication around leisure travel and the pandemic, and as such, although sharing a common ground, they find themselves on two sides of the double-edged sword.

Discussion & Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to explore and illustrate how international leisure tourism is discursively portrayed by consumers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to fulfill this purpose, we formulated the following two research questions: (1) *Which are the most prominent consumer-driven tourism discourses in light of the pandemic?*, and (2) *How do these contribute to shape the societal view of leisure tourism during the pandemic?*. To answer our first research question; we conclude that international leisure tourism is discursively portrayed through the following three prominent consumer-driven tourism discourses; the *shaming discourse*, the *justification discourse* and the *homo economicus discourse*. To answer our second research question; these discourses influence and affect the societal view of leisure travel during the prevailing pandemic, as they, combined, produce a form of stigma around leisure travel. This in turn results in an ethical and moral debate where the appropriateness of leisure travel is questioned and challenged, consequently resulting in an increased polarization and a divide in public opinion. However, it is important to emphasize that travel for leisure purposes has not always been an activity associated with stigma, and that the stigma we experience around leisure travel today will probably not be of a chronic nature, provided that the complications we experience with COVID-19 are alleviated.

Our findings indicate that the message mediated by the *shaming discourse* has been manifested as part of the new norm, and that the politically correct view of leisure travel is, during the current conditions, of more a skeptical nature. This can be illustrated by the tremendous media coverage, and the public outcry, that occurred when the former Swedish general director of MSB, Dan Eliasson, decided to travel abroad, despite the Swedish government advising against all non-essential travel. Although Dan Eliasson acted in accordance with Swedish laws and regulations, his international travels evidently resulted in him having to resign from his job for the Swedish government (Silverberg & Skagerström Lindau, 2021). It is noteworthy in this context that Dan Eliasson is not the only government official who has resigned as a result of his travels during the pandemic. In Canada, eight politicians resigned as a result of their travels abroad (Williams, 2021), in the UK , an advisor to the Prime Minister resigned after it emerged that he had travel from London to Durham during lock-down (Walker, Sabbagh & Syal, 2020), and in Wales, a politician resigned after he was found to be pursuing domestic travel (Clements, 2021). Overall, this demonstrates the magnitude of the *shaming discourse*, while highlighting that there still is a demand for travel, which is also consistent with the results of our research.

Thus, we argue that this new discursive landscape surrounding leisure travel leads to a change in consumer preferences, where consumers who wish to travel need to legitimize their actions by having a valid excuse, or a reason, for doing so. This in turn leads to a more responsible type of consumer who highly values the possibility of being able to travel 'safely', as this is, according to the *justification discourse*, one of the more prominent arguments used in order to validate traveling during the pandemic. As the consumption of tourism related activities and experiences has decreased significantly since the advent of the pandemic (Davahli et al., 2020; Cetin, 2020; Marques Santos, Madrid González, Haegeman, & Rainoldi, 2020), and given that we have identified a shift in consumer preferences where 'safe' aspects of traveling are highly valued, evidentially this means that actors within the tourism industry would benefit if they adapt their marketing strategies towards the new market landscape. Consumers who decide to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic run the risk of being attacked by the *shaming discourse*, which, as illustrated above, can lead to serious consequences. Therefore it is important that actors in the tourism industry are pronounced in their communication regarding what COVID-19 related measures they are taking, so as to provide consumers with the arguments needed to demonstrate that they are responsible in their travels.

Consequently, in order for businesses to stay operational, local COVID-19 related laws and regulations must be followed. However, if tourism actors solely oblige to minimum requirements

and regulations, these businesses might leap the risk of losing out on revenue, as a consequence of failing to attract the responsible consumer. For example, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts implemented a contactless engagement solution for all their hotels in an attempt to reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 (Four Seasons, n.d). This illustrates how a business can provide COVID-19 measures that extend beyond the bare minimum, in order to provide a safe travel experience that resonates with the responsible consumer.

As previously mentioned, and as prior research indicates, increased stigma does not necessarily lead to a change in how frequently consumers perform a stigmatized practice, but it rather results in an increased awareness, which in turn could lead to a change in consumer preferences (Gössling et al, 2020). Thus, it can be beneficial for actors in the tourism industry to monitor prominent discourses so they can optimize their marketing efforts in accordance with the prevailing market climate. An increased understanding of the discursive landscape regarding leisure travel gives them an opportunity to tailor their offered services and adapt to changes in both the industry and customer behaviour.

Accordingly, it is worth emphasizing the importance of not disregarding the discursive landscape when deciding which measures are needed to meet a new type of demand, as well as how these measures could impact a business from a negative perspective. The repercussions of negligence, and not being aware of norms and stigmatized practices can indeed have a negative impact on brand image. To exemplify, *Singapore Airlines* tried to adapt their services to the new, COVID-19 regulated market by introducing "flights to nowhere", a program that aimed to offer flights with departure and arrival at the same airport, so as to induce a travel-related feeling (Hosie, 2020). Although, at first glance this may seem like a creative way to offer a substitute for traditional travel, however, *Singapore Airlines* failed to recognize the discursive landscape regarding air-travel from an environmental perspective. Evidently, "flights to nowhere" was met by outrage from environmentalists, and *Singapore Airline* had to cease all such operations, and followed with a public apology for their actions (Hosie, 2020). Related to our research, and the current discursive landscape of leisure travel, it is important to take into account the implications of the *shaming discourse*, and how controversial business decisions could potentially harm brand image and cause negative exposure by attracting the *shaming discourse* and its peers.

It is noteworthy that the responsible consumers that have arised as a result of the discursive battle between the *shaming discourse* and the *justification discourse* is not the only type of consumer that this new travel-related discursive landscape generates. Whereas the responsible consumer can be seen as a product of the stigma that currently prevails around leisure travel, there is another type of consumer who uses economical arguments to legitimize and validate travel-related decisions. Our research indicates that these economically motivated consumers are less inclined to pursue leisure travel during the pandemic if their travel is associated with economical risks. These consumers base their decisions almost exclusively on whether they get value for their money. Thus, from a marketing perspective, actors within the tourism industry could, for example, consider implementing financial security measures such as comprehensive refund-, cancellation- and rebooking policies. This, in order to reduce some of the economical risks currently associated with leisure travel. To illustrate, the Swedish travel agency Ving, uses such marketing strategies in order to resonate with, and attract the economical consumer (Ving, n.d). Their marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic emphasizes policies which include guaranteed refunds if flights are cancelled due to newly imposed restrictions, as well as an extensive, and complimentary, cancellation and rebooking insurance (Ving, n.d.).

Continuing, we found in our analysis of the *homo economicus discourse*, that 'value for money' and what it entails extend beyond avoiding economical risks and unforeseen costs. The economical consumer, when seeking 'value for money', does not want to be limited in the possibility of an all encompassing leisure travel experience. Consequently, the extent to which a tourism actor can provide a certain service is determined, and dependent upon the local laws and regulations. Thus,

the activities and experiences offered during the pandemic may be limited as a result of a need to follow these rules of conduct. In order to attract the economically minded consumer, actors within the tourism industry need to ensure that their offers generate a value for money that corresponds to the value for money these consumers would have gotten pre-covid. In essence, going rates for limited experiences would not resonate with this type of consumer.

We argue that leisure travel has, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, become an increasingly elastic commodity, and that the cost aspect of travel has become even more important during these uncertain times. As such, our reasoning to market a leisure tourism service would be to promote affordable alternatives, and to emphasize experiences that are not limited due to COVID-19 laws and regulations. In other words, to highlight services that provide a satisfactory 'value for money'. For example, multiple airlines have offered flights at discounted rates (Whitley, 2021), and several hotels have discounted their services so as to attract and retain customers during the prevailing conditions (Koday, 2021). As costs are reduced, this could attract the economical minded consumer, although with an impending risk of a decrease in the travel experience. Ultimately, actors need to balance value for money in terms of experience and the economical costs of leisure travel.

However, this approach must be carried out with great caution, as it otherwise could be recognized as an act of irresponsibility due to the new discursive landscape where leisure travel, by many, is considered to be taboo. If tourism actors, in their marketing campaigns, put too much emphasis on competitive prices, and promote destinations with few restrictions, the likelihood of these actors being scrutinized by the *shaming discourse* increases significantly. This might result in negative exposure and criticism, not only for single actors, but for all actors operating in the region. To illustrate, during spring break 2021, the US media reported on an "invasion" of tourists in South Florida (Siemaszko, 2021). Competitive and aggressive offers from hotels and airlines, in combination with relatively relaxed COVID-19 restrictions attracted a significant amount of tourists, however, these actors, and the region of South Florida, got severely criticized by media and government officials, resulting in a public outcry (Siemaszko, 2021). This example showcases the negative aspects of competing on price without being aware, or taking the current societal view of leisure travel into consideration. Also, this exemplifies the prominence of the *shaming discourse*, and how it currently dictates and influences all parts of the travel industry.

On a final note, it is important to emphasize that it is difficult for us to determine the actual size of the discourses we have identified. The conclusion we have drawn is that the *shaming discourse* is the loudest and most prominent of these discourses. However, whether this is a result of the aggressive nature of the *shaming discourse*, or whether the *shaming discourse* relates to the largest proportion of people's views is difficult to predict. When analyzing discourses, it is important to keep in mind that the communication that takes place within the discourse is an interpretive standpoint for consumers. What this means is that an individual can reason with more than just one discourse, and that it is not uncommon for the same individual to communicate in accordance with several different discourses. This emerged during our interviews where a number of respondents bounced between the different discourse categories depending on which aspect of leisure tourism that was discussed. Furthermore, the discourses we have analyzed are, in large, based on material gathered from forums dominated by users from the Western world (Statista, 2021a; Statista, 2021b; Statista 2021c), and from interview respondents based in Sweden. What this means is that our results may be skewed insofar as they might not capture the entire discursive spectrum. This as people from other cultures and countries, with varied infection-rate, different laws and regulations may reason according to their specific situation. Which in turn, from a discourse theoretical perspective, could influence the discourses and the message conveyed.

Contribution

As previously mentioned, there is a solid research base that thoroughly investigates the tourism industry in an attempt to explain what factors that motivate and influence people to travel. Extensive research has also been conducted in order to explain how the travel industry has changed due the advent of COVID-19. Furthermore, we are not alone in adopting a discourse theoretical perspective in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of a travel-related phenomenon. However, prior research almost exclusively investigates the tourism industry during normal conditions, and not during times of crisis, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. The research that aims to examine the tourism industry during more extraordinary conditions, such as during an epidemic, natural disaster or similar, more often than not, emphasizes how various business and government actors should act in such a scenario.

Our intention has been to explore and illustrate how leisure travel is discursively portrayed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how consumer-driven discourses contribute to shape the societal view of leisure travel. As such, we have taken on a different approach compared to a majority of prior research as we have shifted our focus from major actors within the tourism industry to the contemporary consumer. Thus, our contribution to tourism-related research is that we shed new light on the role of discourses in the travel landscape during times of crisis. The results of our research are valuable in that they provide an indication of how influential public discourses can be, and how contemporary consumers, through their choice of words, can contribute to reforming the norms of society.

Although our research revolves around how consumers communicate about leisure tourism, it is important to emphasize that the discourses we have identified are not exclusive to this area of research. A discourse is an interpretive standpoint that operates via discursive structures, which means that it is not unlikely that similar communication patterns exist around other aspects of society as well. With this in mind, we suggest that our discourse categories can be useful when analyzing other polarizing fields, such as politics, the environmental movement or the automobile industry, to mention a few.

Furthermore, the results from our thesis contribute to prior research concerning stigmatized consumption, in the sense that we have chosen to investigate a phenomenon that is under a temporary stigma. Prior research regarding stigmatized consumption does, to a large extend, focus on areas that have long been associated with stigma, such as smoking, prostitution, gambling, etc. Leisure travel, on the other hand, is currently in a transformation phase where travel for leisure purposes has, in a short period of time, and due to the prevailing pandemic, gone from being a status symbol to being an polarized activity associated with stigma. Thus, our research suggests that there is some form of relationship between societal development, discourses and stigmatization, and that widespread stigma can arise relatively quickly, if the conditions allow.

Further Research

Although it has been possible to travel for leisure purposes during large parts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the barriers to be able to travel, both monetary and legal, as well as moral and ethical, have gradually increased as the spread of infection has become increasingly extensive. The Western passport, which could previously be likened to a master key in the global world, has now lost some of its momentum. Countries and regions that previously have advocated for free movement have today, to an increasing extent, shielded themselves from the outside world by introducing entry and exit restrictions. To illustrate, for the first time since World War II, there is border surveillance between Norway and Sweden (Ekström, 2021; Gagliano, 2021; Skogelin, 2021), non-essential travel between Europe and the United States has been banned, and within the European Union, where one of the basic principles is free movement of people and capital between the member states, several of the member countries have implemented their own entry and exit travel conditions.

In a sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the world from being a global playground for Western tourists to instead becoming a limited and confined space.

The solution to the travel-related problem that has arisen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the key to reaching a stage of normality, is, according to several researchers, governments and politicians; vaccines, vaccination and vaccination passports. Obviously, vaccines are an excellent invention that has saved people from all around the world from being infected with severe diseases in the past, reducing health risks for a large proportion of the world population. Although several actors have developed, according to research, effective COVID-19 vaccines in record time, there is an elephant in the room that needs to be addressed; namely the unequal roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccines. Forecasts indicate that countries with good economic conditions will be vaccinated first, thus (EIU, 2021), the order of the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out will not be determined by need, but rather by financial means.

Given that travel, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, could be seen as an activity reserved for the privileged world, and given that local vaccination passports already is a reality in countries such as Israel and Denmark (Pfeffer, 2021; Murray, 2021), it is still not certain how a potential global vaccination passport would influence the societal view of leisure travel. Our assumption is that an introduction of vaccination passports could further increase the polarization regarding leisure travel. This since an unequal rollout of vaccines, where some countries in the developing world are predicted to fully vaccinate as late as 2024. Meaning that, if these COVID-19 related measures are introduced, there is a risk that only vaccinated consumers will be given the opportunity to travel freely and unrestricted, consequently increasing the gaps between developed countries and developing countries even further.

As research indicates that COVID-19 is a disease that will continue to exist for an extensive period of time, our suggestion for future research is to investigate how the unequal distribution of vaccines will influence and affect the societal view of leisure travel in the future. Will leisure travel become less stigmatized in the future when more people are vaccinated, or will leisure travel become *the* symbol of the privileged world? Questions like these are well suited to be investigated from a discourse theoretical perspective, as patterns in communication can give an indication of how the societal view of a phenomenon is perceived and experienced.

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Appendix - Interview Template

1. Kan du berätta lite om dig själv, vad du gör, och vad du har för relation till resor?

2. Är resa ett nöje för dig?
   - Vad är det du gillar med att resa?
   - Hur länge har du haft detta intresse?
   - Hur uppstod detta intresse?

3. Kan du berätta om din senaste reseupplevelse?

4. Hur ser ditt resmönster vanligtvis ut (tex frekvens, typ av resa etc)?

5. Hur brukar du planera inför dina resor?

6. Vad är det för typ av resor du brukar genomföra?

7. Har du rest något under pandemin?
   - Vart reste du?
   - Varför reste du?
   - Hur upplevde du denna resan?
   - Vad anser dina bekanta om att du reste under pandemin?
   - Påverkade dessa människors åsikter dina beslut, och i så fall hur?

8. Hur resonerar du kring att resa för nöjes skull under pandemin?
   - Hur kommer det sig att du resonerar på detta sätt?
   - Hur har COVID-19 pandemin influerat ditt resande?
   - Upplever du att det finns några risker med att resa under pandemin?
     - Vilka moment upplever du som riskfyllda, och varför?
     - Om du reser under dessa förhållanden, vilka åtgärder hade du vidtagit för att minimera dessa risker?

9. Hur resonerar du kring att besöka länder/regioner där det finns restriktioner, t ex krav på negativt covid test, begränsningar i sociala sammanhang, munskydd, utegångsförbud mellan vissa tider?
   - Vad anser du om andra länders rekommendationer, begränsningar och regulationer som gällande vid covid och resande?
   - Har dessa restriktioner haft någon inverkan på dina resebeslut?

10. Vad anser du om att andra människor reser under pandemin?
    - Är det någon skillnad på var man reser? (Ex inhemskt/utlands/länder med stor smittspridning osv).
    - Varför tror du människor reser under pandemin?

11. Vad är dina tankar gällande den debatt som råder gällande nöjesresor?

12. Har denna debatt influerat dina resebeslut, och i så fall hur?

13. Hur går dina tankar gällande så kallat säkert resande?

14. Om vi summerar det vi har pratat om idag, tror du att andra människor resonerar på samma sätt som du?