

# The Research on the Digital Transition of the Tourism Media

-- Taking Lonely Planet as Example

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**Abstract.** Social media also experienced transitions from paper material to digital forms. In the previous years of the COVID outbreak, a particular part of social media---tourism, has been affected and is worth paying attention to. *Lonely Planet* (abbreviated as *LP*) is one of the most famous tourism media brands, previous researches have shown its development or transitions during the pandemic. Through using surveys, questionnaires and interviews, this research aims at investigating the strategy of *LP* for digital transition over the pandemic period, which could be applied for other media companies as an inspiration. The result from surveying *LP* in a chronicle order suggests negative impacts the COVID has on the business, while the transition of the company is spontaneous, also containing positive potentials for *LP* to get recovered or developed. Researchers receive 107 participants about their attitudes and understandings toward the transition of travel media and pandemic effects, and it shows the majority of audience focus on convenience of the journalist media, and most of them are optimistic about the digital transition of traditional media, agreeing with the statement that digital media would receive a wider audience, which indicates a benefit in digital transition. Two interviews are also carried out with loyal fans of *Lonely Planet*. The interviewees are used to reading printed material and are convinced that COVID affected traditional media use. However, they agree that digital platforms would not completely replace the traditional media in *Lonely Planet's* case, presenting a surprising point of view.

**Keywords:** Digital transition, Tourism, COVID-19, *Lonely Planet*.

## 1. Introduction

Social media is seen in progress overtime, that media has been changing from the papyrus letters in Roman times to the brochures in eighteen centuries. The ways people used to communicate with others still have a vital influence in these years. In the past few decades, newspapers, radio, and television became the dominant ones in social media. With the bombarded development of the internet nowadays, online platform gradually becomes a powerful tool for people to share information and ideas with others.

Because of the relative peace of the world and improvement of people's living standards, people pay more and more attention to the spiritual and cultural level of consumption, tourism is also gradually paid attention to [1]. Plus, with the advent of trains and planets, travel become a thing that is easy to get. Now, it seems like tourism has become part of most people's daily life. Tourism as an international industry and as the biggest provider of jobs on the planet boasts a greater array of heterogeneous stakeholders than many other industries [2]. Tourism as the third industry is very important for the development of a country, which means that the government will also support the development of tourism. Demand for effective travelling information increases as its complement travel increases. Therefore, the combination of social and tourism is related and important.

*Lonely Planet* is the largest private travel guide publisher in the world, which was founded by married couple Maureen and Tony Wheeler in 1973 after they finished a trip from London to Australia [3]. After they arrived in Australia, many backpackers asked for the trip experience of the Asia tour, then they decided to publish a travel guide book which was also the first journal of *Lonely Planet*. In

the beginning, the authors of *LP* were only the Wheelers. Since then, the reputation of *LP* has improved, and there were more and more people involved in the writing work of *LP*. Over the period, *LP* gradually becomes the most popular tourism media. "Travel is in our DNA." *LP* is known for its delicate travel plannings, exploration stories and motto of immersive experiences. Its publications are of immense scale, attracting many researchers to analyze. *LP* provides travelers with not only information of accommodations and local attractions, but also a humanitarian insight [4]. Later, under the Internet background, *LP* starts to establish its online business, as they spot the trends brought up by internet, just as Benxiang Zeng and Rolf Gerritsen argued: tourism gains influence because of the development of social media [5]. This transition promotes large flux into the platform, with 10 million average monthly views, 12 million social media followers and 450 thousand email subscribers, *LP* achieves greater number of publications throughout the year.

In December 2019, the outbreak of the COVID-19 seriously affected people's normal life. The global spread of SARS-CoV-2 and the thousands of deaths caused by coronavirus disease led the World Health Organization to declare a pandemic on 12 March 2020. To date, the world has paid a high toll in this pandemic in terms of human lives lost, economic repercussions and increased poverty. COVID-19 has a deep influence on many industries, especially tourism which is an industry that needs to go out [6]. During the COVID-19 period, the activities, in reality, were cancelled and people have to stay at home, the consequences are a higher unemployment rate and a lower living happiness index. This situation brings a strong effect on the tourism industry, that fewer travelers or none carry high demand to enjoy the tourism, that the producers may be failed to earn income from the consumer. As such, COVID-19 stimulate the digital transition of traditional media to help them survive in the period, and *LP* is one example of them. Applying more business online, *LP* experiences similar situation on tourism as a whole, but finally transits into internet-driven modes. The impact of COVID is self-evident, and researchers make an explanation by studying Sri Lanka, stating that Sri Lanka in which tourism contributes a big part to their economy by providing 12.5% of GDP, will be affected by the pandemic. The effect will be much longer than crises and restoration [7]. As a worldwide tourism publication, *LP* depends on its internet influence to hold still, using it to continue selling its printed magazines.

## 2. Literature Review

Traditional media is defined as any form of mass communication available before the advent of digital media, while digital media referred to any online platform including website, social media, and online streaming is nowadays many traditional media trying to reach for its potential benefits. And it is seen as a gradual tendency that many companies or governments use digital media as a means of strengthening their popularity, researches have shown the use of digital media would directly affect the organization of political action and public mobilization [8], that introducing digital media would somehow play a prominent role in the social activities under the contemporary period [8-9]. Other researchers focus on the function of the new media, suggesting media may provide additional explanation for economic development while McCombs discovered consumer spending on mass media would be relative to the Gross National Product [10-11]. These researches have shown that new media, particularly digital media, not only impact the political movement, but also play a role in the overall economic development. And because of the change in consumer demand, producers also have gains in surviving in the market through improving their brand images. This shows the digital transition for traditional media would make a positive difference economically.

Because of the variance in the way of digital transition, and different measures take different effects on the media branding, analysts start focusing on specific media such as *The People's Daily* in China. Discussing what is their strategy to take digital transition, how this benefits themselves, and the potential problems that existed through the process. *The People's Daily* has established new media account on TikTok, showing traditional media are challenged by the internet development, more and more audience attach the importance of electronic devices rather than reading printed ones [12]. And

this indicates how *The People's Daily* survived during the situation of pandemic period, which gives inspirations about how to analyze the digital transition of traditional media for the research on *Lonely Planet*, exploring the prominent role of digital media in traditional media industry on the complementary coping with the traditional media, rather than replacing it.

Articles focusing on digitalization of tourism medias are getting prevalence currently. Previous researches lay foundations on the analysis of media transition during pandemic. However, researches are lack of focusing on tourism media, indicating the uncertainty in the strategy of different traditional media to establish new media platform exists, so it is valuable to investigate *Lonely Planet*, the world-wide publication, contributing for other researchers to understand the process of digital transition of the *LP*.

### 3. Methodology

This paper adopts questionnaires and interviews and surveying information data from digital platforms of *Lonely Planet* including official account (*LP* magazines), official website and RED, a platform for information sharing before promoting those two methods. The questionnaire is established for receiving audiences' attitudes about the digital transition of the journalist brand, and the responses on the digital transition from those who know about *LP*. Snowball sampling is used to collect the data in a limited time frame. To better quantify the participants' attitudes, Likert-scale questions are applied to capture participants' ideas, as well as four-choice questions. As such, the conclusion would help the researchers to explore the strategy *LP* took to recover from the loss during the epidemic era, as well as make comparisons between traditional and digital media. In this process, convenience sampling and snowball sampling methods are used. These sampling methods used could help the researchers to collect their data within a limited time frame. By using convenience sampling, researchers give out questionnaires to the surrounding people who are available, and once they have finished, snowball sampling is used, participants are encouraged to share the online questionnaire link to their relatives or friends who have similar characteristics of reading journal magazines to expand our sample size. During the period, participants' basic information including their year of birth and their preference for digital media and traditional media was collected. The reason for determining the participants' year of birth is that this may help discover different preferences for media materials various age groups have: printed magazines or digital platforms, because people in different generations may experience different forms of media throughout the ages. In the sequel, they are asked for insights on the digital transition of media in the overall media industry such as how the technology improves the audience's way of receiving travelling information. Then the case of *LP* is applied. Researchers establish questions for the subscribers to gain their views on using *LP* and how they think of the digital transition of *LP*. Since this questionnaire tends to obtain views, it contains Likert-scale questions (4 of 15) and informed questions (about 11 of 15). The Likert-scale questions are commonly used to measure attitudes on a scale from 0 to 10, including the comparison between traditional and digital media, the willingness of using digital media during the pandemic period, and expectations about digital media. According to the scale, it is easier to conclude, and the data reveals how the samples think of digital transition in different degrees of opinion. And other multiple-choice questions help this study understand their ideas about the digital tourism platform.

Then the semi-structured interview is carried out after the questionnaire. According to the data collected by questionnaires, the target interviewees are the people who are big fans of *LP* or have used it many times. The establishment of this interview aims to learn about the advanced opinions and understanding of how people think about the digital transition of *LP* and know the stories behind the questionnaires. Therefore, these interviewees are chosen from the respondents of questionnaires through the final question to know whether they want to accept the interview. This is regarded as a semi-structured interview that gives predetermined questions and is conveyed in a predetermined order but may change according to the real-life settings. Since each respondent's responses varied, certain questions need to be modified to reflect the real circumstance better. And some of the

responses make a significant point that is worth exploring further. There are about 8 questions set in progressive depth. Since the questionnaires are published in the form of closed questionnaires, most of the interview questions are open-ended questions, and a few closed questions would be pursued to ensure the answers. Because of the restriction of area, this interview uses the form of the telephone interview, and the interviewer collects and integrates the data. The final analysis of this interview represents the personal view about the digital transition on *LP* and reflects the whole group.

#### 4. Results

*Lonely Planet*, instead of fully transiting into digital mode, still holds on to its paper publication. *LP* is famous for its well-edited magazine and publications since 1973. According to market statistics, *LP*'s publication scale has taken up 30% of market share, which is seen as a tycoon of tourism industry. Under this massive scale and mature management, it is a question if they are ready to transit. According to statistics on the *LP* website: 10 million average monthly page views, 12 million social media followers and 450 thousand email subscribers all represent *LP*'s online platform a highly-valued one and the digital approach is effective [13]. However, the bulk of *LP*'s service is still based on paper material. It can be concluded that tourism medias do not risk to transit into digital forms completely.

During the pandemic, changes on destination images, tourists, resident behaviors have emerged [14]. And in order to recover the loss, the tourism industry needs new forms of media. The immersive feeling when touring a destination online is being stressed since the chance of going to a place in real person is lost. Therefore, the pandemic pushes the tourism media to develop in a new way that requires a high standard for tourists online.

The investigation also notes one peculiar matter that *LP* is facing a crisis after COVID-19. The website's expiration date is September 8th, 2022, and it is reported that *LP* has been bought by Red Ventures in low prices. The signs indicate a probable downfall of *LP* in the future. The crisis may also reflect onto the mass media, bringing the tourism industry a loss which is hard to recover. However, no matter what peril the industry is facing, the trend of digital transition is not to be reversed.

The questionnaire has received 107 sample sizes in total, with no invalid data considering the time taken to finish the questionnaire and the responses done by the participants. 76 out of 107 were born in 2000s, 22 out of 107 were born in 1990s, 8 out of 107 were born in 1980s, and a sample was born in 1960s. The basic data from the participants reveal the Internet is becoming popular in people's daily lives. To be specific, 98.30% of the sample size (105 out of 107) make frequent use of digital media, suggesting an increasing tendency that digital media would be a major role in the media industry. As such, the background information indicates the media industry including the tourism area, has to get digitalized to survive in the market, which is seen as the major way for most media companies.

The advanced questions support the digital transition of tourism is beneficial for the company during the pandemic period. The data illustrate the digital media of tourism is more convenient compared with the traditional media from the audience perspective, which can be explained that participants on average 70.15% agree with the statement "Digital media is more functionalized", and they hold 84.85% agreement with the statement "Information can be grabbed in a short period". As such, more Internet users are willing to subscribe to the media that is more convenient and present similar characteristics. In addition, responses from the questionnaire reveal a decline in the expectation of using traditional media. The likelihood that the audience nowadays is willing and still keep reading printed tourism magazines is 41.87%, while in terms of the likelihood of continuing to read printed magazines in the future, the expectation dropped to 32.68%. This, in the sequel, points out the trend that consumers are getting relied on the Internet, which is a potential opportunity for companies to get recovered under the COVID-19 period, and survive in the competitive market. For the responses to *LP*, 79 of 107 have read *LP* before. The questionnaire shows online platforms established by the tourism media are in fact done well in attracting new audiences to get recovered.

Among the responses, 57.14% of the people who have known about *LP* through digital social media, including the Red and WeChat official accounts, and 58.33% of participants are more willing to read its digital information such as blogs and videos. And through digital platform of *LP*, the audience's expectation of travel to the places of interests introduced by *LP* is measured before and after the pandemic period. It shows that the mean rate of expectation is about 29.4% during the pandemic period, while a sharp increase to 89.7% if the audience, who read the *LP* through digital media, can travel after the pandemic. This infers the audience, who viewed the digital platform *LP*, got motivated to travel after the epidemic. In addition, 58.33% of samples could be seen as hardcore fans that keep supporting the development of *LP*, exploring the digital transition of *LP* would be beneficial for *LP*. Apart from the attitudes toward the statement collected from the samples, opening comments on the digital transitions also explores its benefits to the tourism media. The comment is "Digital form of tourism media is more accurate and convenient compared with the traditional media, when you watch the introduction clips, you can truly feel how wonderful the place of interest is."

As for the interview, two interviewees accepted this interview and both of them are in the same age group but they exposure to *LP* with different objectives and used it in different ways. The form of media they used to read is both printed magazines and they all know other forms of media of *LP* but the form they used frequently is printed one. One of them hasn't read the digital form before and the other one has read it because of the convenience and the language on the official website. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, it has been hard to buy magazines off the line, therefore, more people tend to read online. But these two interviewees tend to re-read the printed magazines after the pandemic. It shows that *LP* gets a great reputation in the area of printed magazines. However, one of them said that if she uses digital tourism media, she would like to choose the other platform like RED which is a social application like Instagram. This respondent reflects that *LP* doesn't get a successive digital transition or build a completely digital system that can attract the original audiences. Unlike the other media industries, tourism media is based on the development of travel. During the pandemic, tourism is one of the industries that be seriously affected, and as such, the heavy implication for tourism media followed up. One of the interviewees expresses that she uses *LP* as a travel tool, and because she doesn't have travel plans during the pandemic period. Therefore, she became less willing to read the tourism magazine in later lives.

From the audience's perspective, both of them believe that the digital transition of *LP* makes the reading more convenient that people can search for information at any place and at any time. They also reckon that the digital form can bring more traffic to *LP* because of the convenience and the cheaper price. Both of them think that the digital form will not totally replace the traditional magazine, since it is a very famous magazine on travel or the human geography field, it would not abandon the most traditional way. Also, there are still many loyal readers and even some people are big fans of the collection of *LP*. In-depth, it will instead have a renewed vitality due to the diversity of digital platforms to the printed magazines, according to one interviewee.

## 5. Discussion

Although the results are listed and analyzed as above, there are still some considerations and flaws to be solved based on the results. The study agrees that *Lonely Planet* is one of the few traditional media producers that still survive in the age of new media, which means it has a solid foundation in the traditional media. And with its digital transition, *LP* is beneficial for its success in receiving the number of subscribers during the epidemic period. However, through inquiries on the case itself, general media and tourism, this investigation reveals challenges that *LP* is facing over the period, what it can do to deal with the potentiality of down falling [15]. It also draws inspiration on past posts and discusses how *LP* can do to broaden its way of future development [16]. One aspect perceived is that despite *LP*'s well-preserved publication foundation, COVID-19 has influenced *LP* seriously. The publication of every tourism media is based on the travel industry; however, the tourism industry has been stagnant for years during the pandemic period. People have to rely much more on electronic

devices to receive information rather than the traditional forms such as magazines which struggled because of the lack of human resources during the period. *LP* provides platforms to stabilize the number of printed-magazine subscribers, which the followers can get accessed the digital form more conveniently. In addition, the subscribers would have the ability to share with others who are searching for traveling information, which to some extent broadens the group size of the audience. As such, *LP* may get recovered with a slight development during the COVID-19 situation according to the attitudes of the audience toward the digital transition of *LP*.

The pandemic factor is temporarily removed for better observation and the paper just digs into *LP*'s spontaneous development, according to interview feedback, the interviewees mostly use printed magazines of *LP* for the reason that they are more familiar with the traditional ones and the tactility of the real books is better than the electronic ones. Plus, one participant mentioned that if she wants to access information from online tourism media, she would prefer to use other digital media platforms. It means that there are many complementary goods to the digital version of *LP*, and people could have chosen many other digital forms of tourism media. These results show that *LP* has a better reputation in the traditional media before but the digital transition still has a long way to go. One limitation of the digital transition may be the neglect of the quality and variability of the context, that the information itself maybe not so attractive as what the audience prefers to read, seen as a presentation of allocative inefficiency. *LP* can seek a way to survive and thrive without relying solely on tourism itself. It can improve the quality of printed magazines and differentiate them from digital ones and other normal publishers. For instance, it can open up a new channel to focus on native culture sharing instead of mainly concentrating on travel information. Moreover, publishing highly-qualified photographs like National Geographic is another approach that *LP* can try. Both two interviewees reckon that the digital form of *Lonely Planet* will not totally replace the traditional form since there are still many loyal followers of printed *LP*. It means that *LP* doesn't need to abandon the traditional magazines. Nevertheless, it is necessary for *LP* to consider the sustainability of printed magazines and as mentioned before, *LP* can seek or add more new ways to make the magazines more attractive.

For maintaining its publication, *Lonely Planet*'s joining the trendy digital transition has advantages that have been discussed in earlier stages. There are also uncertainties about developments after the transition happened. Has the number of subscribers increased despite the initial number of printed-magazine subscribers? The concern is roused from the consumption pattern of the economy that might remain constant with the development of new media [17]. Specific evidence that comes from the questionnaire is that many people agreed the most that *LP*'s digital platform is more outstanding in convenience than the quality of the blogs. And it creates suspicion that *LP* may be recovered with a non-significant development during the epidemic period. In this situation, market surveys would be carried out to measure the demand of the consumers in terms of using tourism media, and then produce traveling information that satisfies the consumers' wants.

Looking at the relationship between *Lonely Planet* and the whole tourism industry, its reputation in the whole industry is inevitably in a high position, a position that can lead to mainstream. Every year, *LP* offers a list of the best 10 destinations. As a result, many travel bloggers would go to the places and help "rate" the destination for the mass. In this way, *LP* and the tourism industry seem to benefit each other. However, it is shown that *LP*'s popularity is declining, not only because of the pandemic, but also accounts for the mass's preferences and the rigor on editorial control. In order to lead mainstream, the *LP* editors prefer to publish those articles that create high potentialities to make a place go viral. What's more, tourists are more interested in set routes instead of spontaneous travel experiences [18]. This violates the initial aspiration of many authors of *LP*, and there are frustrations within the authors. The original number of the staff is not large, and the frustration brings operation risk for *LP* which can affect the persistency of the company. On the issue, the study suggests that *LP* can build up a community that stresses "exploration", which encourages travelers to create their personal travel routes. The community can include online tips, salons, chat rooms and so on. The travel experiences will become more diverse and the company will be more thrived if tourism and *LP* are more aware of independent traveling proposals.

## 6. Conclusion

The literature review identified that new media plays a vital role in economic development and social advancement. Nowadays, it is a fact that electronic devices are becoming more capable for people to get contacts, rather than using printed ones. This phenomenon gives massive pressure on traditional media. Most of the traditional media start to seek a new survival approach. *Lonely Planet* is a classical instance that is valuable to instigate its digital development. Additionally, COVID-19 is a crucial factor that accelerates the process of moving to digital. This paper provides a suitable combination of these three factors and examines the topic, the digital transition of *Lonely Planet* in the period of COVID-19. To sum up, it has been shown from this paper that *LP* has a strong basis which fortunately enables it to endure in the new media era. However, *LP* has experienced a significant influence from the rapid growth of the internet and the accompanying impact of the epidemic on the tourism media, making *LP*'s situation even more difficult. The researches above confirm that it is inevitable that new media will mostly replace traditional media and *LP* still falls short in this digital transition. It is necessary for *LP* to find some new ways to survive.

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