

## CHANGING THE FORM OF LEISURE TOURISM UNDER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF ONLINE EVENTS

MASAMITSU FUTAESAKU

Graduate School of Letters Course of Civilization Studies  
Tokai University  
4-1-1 Kitakaname, Hiratsuka, Kanagawa 259-1292, Japan  
2ckc0102@mail.u-tokai.ac.jp

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**ABSTRACT.** *The emergence of the novel coronavirus has changed in recreational activities. As a result, the introduction of network communication also influenced leisure tourism. This paper focuses on online events as one of the several features of leisure tourism. To guide its examination of leisure tourism, this study hypothesizes that online events will emerge as predominant means of leisure tourism following the COVID-19 period. Thus, online events have been discussed through three perspectives: structure of online events, considerable effect of online events on tourism destinations, and the possibility of online events. The structure of online events is comprised of the viewers, role of holding, broadcasting sites, event venues, and their interactions with one another. Furthermore, online events may have a considerable impact on tourism, with some people being concerned that the benefits of tourism will dwindle for tourist destinations. The possibility of online events presents two major benefits and two potential drawbacks.*

**Keywords:** Online tourism, Online events, Leisure tourism, COVID-19

**1. Introduction.** The emergence of the novel coronavirus in 2019 has culminated in its outbreak at a global level. The first confirmed case of the coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) in Japan was that of a passenger on the cruise ship Diamond Princess. This individual was diagnosed with COVID-19 on February 3, 2020; furthermore, the first death linked to COVID-19 was registered in the same month. COVID-19 has brought about tremendous lifestyle changes, together with changes in recreational activities. Following the Prime Minister's declaration of the pandemic as an "emergency situation", many commercial facilities, including sports centers, theatres, theme parks and even educational institutions such as universities, closed down. In addition, the government appealed to the citizens to stay home as far as possible to avoid the three Cs, namely, closed spaces, crowded places, and areas characterized by close contact between individuals. Remote work and telework were soon set up using Zoom and Teams, among other software solutions. Consequently, network systems emerged as essential communication tools. Furthermore, the introduction of network communication also influenced leisure tourism, which enabled many tourists to set out on world tours. Online tourism has grown rapidly owing to the inability to visit places in person.

Online tourism entails benefits for tourists as well as travel agencies due to its ability to prevent three Cs while ensuring that economic activity continue in this sector, generating steady cash flow. As a result, many tourists can enjoy tourism virtually without any health or other concerns. For instance, the Hawaii Tourist Bureau has initiated a project entitled Remote Hawaii traveling [1]. This program is a type of online tour comprising four classifications, which are as follows: i) Feel Hawai'i; ii) Discover Hawai'i; iii) Adventure

Hawai'i; and iv) Support Hawai'i. Tourists may watch each of these videos on YouTube [2] and virtually enjoy the experience visiting these Hawaiian destinations against the backdrop of the pandemic.

Online events are also organized in conjunction with online tours. Even in the case of the cancellation of in-person events, online events form a new holding style. In fact, several in-person events (e.g., concerts, sports, live shows, and seminars) have been converted to online events and broadcast on sites such as YouTube and SPWN [3].

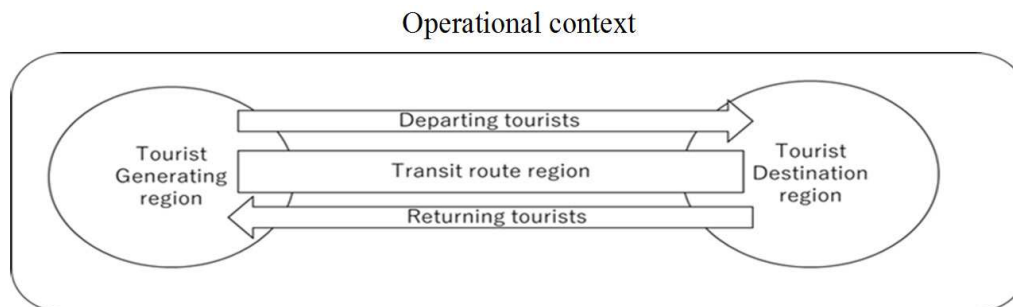
As mentioned earlier online tourism has become a prominent feature of several Internet sites. This trend demonstrates that the medium of leisure tourism shifting rapidly into new environments owing to the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift to online tourism must be recorded through research. The COVID-19 pandemic is a new phenomenon that began in 2019; thus, leisure research under pandemic conditions is still in its early stages. The present study has a social significance, in that it will serve as a reference for the post pandemic era on how the organizers of each event attempted and failed to organize online events in the rare situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the study's academic significance lies in the fact that by elucidating the current benefits and drawbacks of online events, which have also been used to prevent the spread of infection, we can discuss how to solve these issues in the future. Therefore, this study aims to identify the mechanisms for holding online events during the COVID-19 pandemic, their impact on existing leisure activities, and the benefits and drawbacks of holding such events.

Then, this paper focuses on online events as one of the several features of leisure tourism having emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2. Previous Studies.** The most characteristic feature of tourism is "transition". In general, tourism is accompanied by physical movement. The Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework of UN World Tourism Organization defines tourism as "the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited" [4].

The tourism system model created by Leiper (Figure 1) contains three interrelated components, which are as follows: i) the tourist generating region; ii) the tourist destination region; and iii) the transit routes linking both these regions [5]. Therefore, this model is centered on the movements of tourists.

Shirasaka et al. noted that tourism is a comprehensive term that not only refers to the movement of tourists from one place to another and the enjoyment resulting from the activity but also includes learning, medical treatment, and volunteering. Furthermore,



Operational context includes economic, socio-cultural,  
political, technological, legal and environment variables

FIGURE 1. The tourism system: A spatial construct [5]

they indicated that this definition should reflect a consideration of transit and the distance traversed by tourists [6].

The common element in all of these definitions is the idea of transit. Here, tourists are defined as individuals stepping out for a specific purpose from a generating region to a destination before returning to their places of residence. However, online tourism does not incorporate the idea of transition because tourists as “viewers” in this form of tourism use electronic devices such as personal computers and smart phones for travel purposes. In other words, the phenomenon of tourism occurs at a virtual level, and the viewers do not participate directly in the experience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals (including those hailing from countries other than Japan) have acquired the means to participate in online events. Furthermore, leisure tourism is rapidly transitioned into new forms with the emergence of virtual tourism. Quality-of-life concerns related to this trend can significantly affect leisure activities and even ordinary lives as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following question arises from this observation: “Will the increase in the number of online events affect in-person tourism? If so, what effects can be expected?” Here, we focus on animate and *tokusatsu* (special-effects) films taking place online in Japan.

**3. Objective, Subject, and Method of the Study.** This study aims at determining the reality and growth potential of online events featuring Japanese anime and tokusatsu, and how they may affect future tourism in Japan. To guide its examination of leisure tourism, this study hypothesizes that online events will emerge as the dominant mode of leisure tourism following the COVID-19 period.

To achieve this goal, the paper employs two research methods: a web survey and a field survey. From February 2020 to April 2021, 23 online event sites were accessed for the web survey (Table 1). At each site, the author documented the event content while actually participating in the event. For example, these events include live video viewing, avatar exhibitions, and product sales via purchasing pages. Furthermore, the contents of each event were listed, and the advantages and disadvantages of online events versus on-site events were summarized from the standpoint of “preventing the spread of COVID-19”. Subsequently, we researched the people who hosted each event and the methods by which it was communicated to the audience. This will help clarify each company’s role in online event production and how they are promoting the event for audience participation.

A supplementary method was used for the field survey. The author attended and meticulously documented the three on-site events listed in Table 2. These three events took place both virtually and in person. The author documented how the local event was

TABLE 1. The 23 investigated online events from February 21st, 2020 to April 27th, 2021

| Online event title (English)   | Date of the event    | URL   |
|--|----------------------|---|
| 1.TAMASHII Cyber Fos 2020  | Feb. 21st~23rd, 2020 | <a href="https://cyberfes.net/?_ga=2.195162789.823649615.1588218093-572888080.1479638539">https://cyberfes.net/?_ga=2.195162789.823649615.1588218093-572888080.1479638539</a>   |
| 2.TAMASHII Feature 2020  | Jul. 4th~31st, 2020  | <a href="https://tamashii.jp/features_2020/">https://tamashii.jp/features_2020/</a>   |
| 3.ULTRAMAN FESTIVAL ONLINE   | Aug. 1st~23rd, 2020  | <a href="https://www.ulfes.com/online/">https://www.ulfes.com/online/</a>   |
| 4.Kishityu Sentai Ryusoulger Final Live Tour 2020  | Aug. 15th, 2020      | <a href="https://l-tike.zaiko.io/e/ryusoulfinalstayhome">https://l-tike.zaiko.io/e/ryusoulfinalstayhome</a>   |
| 5.ULTRAMAN ZERO TALKISH  | Aug. 23rd, 2020      | <a href="https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/20082-talkish">https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/20082-talkish</a>   |
| 6.ULTRAMAN Z SPECIAL NIGHT ONLINE SYMPOSIUM  | Oct. 3rd, 2020       | <a href="https://youtu.be/SBhVA14J8qM">https://youtu.be/SBhVA14J8qM</a>   |
| 7.“Tokumei sentai Gohasters” talk show   | Nov. 1st, 2020       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RClwck3mvYH">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RClwck3mvYH</a>   |
| 8.Kazuyoshi Sakai Presents “Kiryūkyū sentai Gogofive VS Gingaman” Online talk show           | Nov. 3rd, 2020       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p1U0akhDHQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p1U0akhDHQ</a>   |
| 9.Mahou sentai Magiranger 15th Anniversary Online talk event                                 | Nov. 3rd, 2020       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keQYCeHdyg">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keQYCeHdyg</a>   |
| 10.GODZILLA FES ONLINE 2020  | Nov. 3rd, 2020       | <a href="https://stagecrowd.live/9781936660/">https://stagecrowd.live/9781936660/</a> , <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5XRZP9kwJ5g0rYqPpBaPrA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5XRZP9kwJ5g0rYqPpBaPrA</a>                   |
| 11.The walking of Super Sentai/TIFF master Class   | Nov. 4th, 2020       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF_xvThnO-Y">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF_xvThnO-Y</a>   |
| 12.TAMASHII NATION 2020  | Nov. 6th~8th, 2020   | <a href="https://tamashii.jp/special/tamashii_nation/">https://tamashii.jp/special/tamashii_nation/</a>   |
| 13.Kazuyoshi Sakai Presents “Hyakujū Sentai Gaoranger” feature                               | Nov. 8th, 2020       | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwSddVPTO9o">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwSddVPTO9o</a>   |
| 14.ULTRA 6 BROTHERS THE LIVE in Hakuhinkan theatre -The book of ULTRAMAN-                    | Nov. 23rd, 2020      | <a href="https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/201123-ultra6">https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/201123-ultra6</a>   |
| 15.“ULTRAMAN” The celebration of Latest Publication ULTRA TALK SHOW                          | Dec. 5th, 2020       | <a href="https://tcworld.jp/premium/stage">https://tcworld.jp/premium/stage</a>   |
| 16.“SSSS.DYNAZENON” Special Stage  | Dec. 6th, 2020       | <a href="https://tcworld.jp/premium/stage">https://tcworld.jp/premium/stage</a>   |
| 17.ULTRAMAN ZERO 10th ANNIVERSARY THE LIVE   | Dec. 27th, 2020      | <a href="https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/20122720-zeronight">https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/20122720-zeronight</a>   |
| 18.“Healingood♥Precure” limitation of Blu-ray vol.1 purchasers -Special talk event           | Feb. 5th~12th, 2021  | <a href="https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/21010416-ultra-expo2021-finale">https://ultraman.spwn.jp/events/21010416-ultra-expo2021-finale</a>   |
| 19.ULTRA 6 BROTHERS THE LIVE in Hakuhinkan theatre -The book of ZOFFY-                       | Feb. 14th, 2021      | <a href="https://econtent.jp/serial">https://econtent.jp/serial</a>   |
| 20.“Healingood♥Precure” Thanksgiving Online  | Feb. 21st~24th, 2021 | <a href="https://precure-kanshasai.com/">https://precure-kanshasai.com/</a>   |
| 21.The celebration of ULTRAMAN 55th anniversaryJ Part1 “Galaxy Market ONLINE”                | Mar. 20th, 2021      | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbB07Izat2k&amp;t=312s">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbB07Izat2k&amp;t=312s</a>   |
| 22.The celebration of ULTRAMAN 55th anniversaryJ Part2 IMAGINATION Special LIVE broadcasting | Mar. 20th, 2021      | <a href="https://m-78.jp/lp/2021/001/?utm_medium=link&amp;utm_source=web&amp;utm_campaign=station_post-5815_2021-03-17">https://m-78.jp/lp/2021/001/?utm_medium=link&amp;utm_source=web&amp;utm_campaign=station_post-5815_2021-03-17</a> |
| 23.Airean Magna’s room !?  | Apr. 27th, 2021      | <a href="https://m-78.jp/news/post-5853">https://m-78.jp/news/post-5853</a>   |

TABLE 2. The three on-site events held from November 21st, 2020 to May 4th, 2021

| Online event title (English)  | Date of the event | Each event's detail (URL)   |
|---|-------------------|---|
| 1.ULTRA 6 BROTHERS THE LIVE in Hakuininkan theatre -The book of ULTRAMAN- | Nov. 21st, 2020   | <a href="http://theater.hakuininkan.co.jp/pr-2020_11_21.html">http://theater.hakuininkan.co.jp/pr-2020_11_21.html</a> |
| 2.ULTRA HEROES EXPO GRAND FINALE  | Jan. 4th, 2021    | <a href="https://m-78.jp/news/post-5724">https://m-78.jp/news/post-5724</a>   |
| 3.ULTRA HEROES THE LIVE ULTRAMAN Z  | May 4th, 2021     | <a href="https://www.ultra-expo.com/live/">https://www.ultra-expo.com/live/</a>                                       |

managed, including the use of masks, disinfection, and other infection control measures, by actually going to the three event sites listed below.

4. **Discussion.** Online events have been discussed in this paper through three perspectives, namely, structure of online events, considerable effect of online events on tourism destinations, and the possibility of online events.

4.1. **Structure of online events.** As noted, online events are characterized as not comprising a setting. The main stage of each online event is situated on a website. Viewers access and enjoy the event on the screens of electronic devices such as computers, smartphones, and iPads. Thus, Leiper and some other researchers suggest that transit is ultimately inessential.

The analysis of the features of online events being held during the COVID-19 pandemic entails the consideration of four groups, namely, ① the viewers, ② the role of holding, ③ the broadcasting sites, and ④ The event venues and their interactions with one another (Figure 2). ① the viewers are tourists; instead of attending events physically, these viewers access the events on the sites that broadcast them. Moreover, the viewers prepare their electronic devices to participate in these events and access the broadcasts. The responsibility of organizing the event is shouldered by its author; subsequently, this “author” formulates the plan for and content of the event. In the absence of the pandemic, these events would be organized at commercial facilities such as amusement parks and theatres; however, these plans must be changed to suit the online context. In addition, information on the online event must be provided through the Internet or an SNS (Social Networking Service). Sometimes, ② the role of holding must formulate a double plan, one for the in-person event and the other for the online one. For instance, the event may be held at an actual location, and a video of the event may be supplied to ③ the broadcasting sites

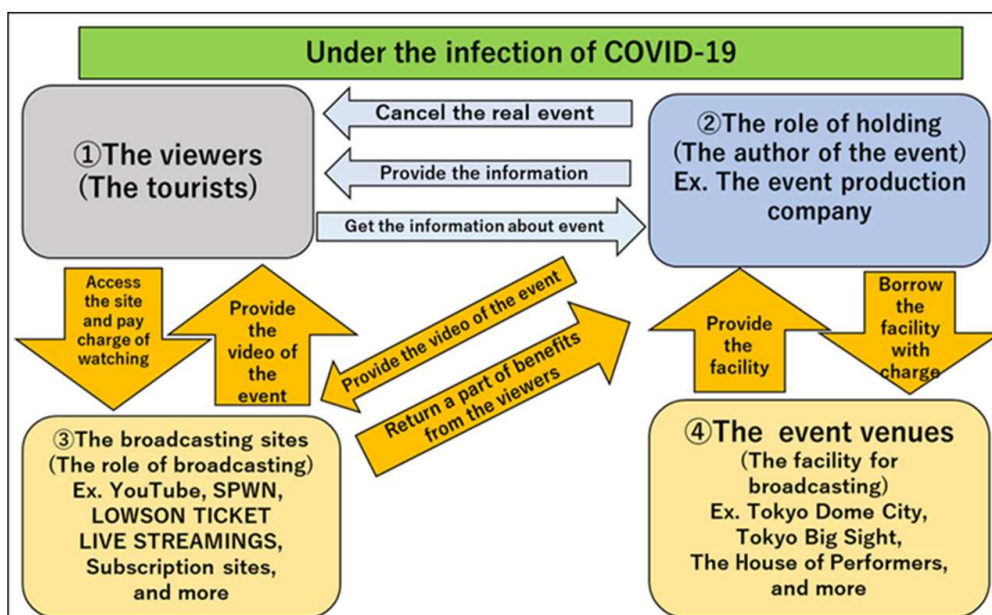


FIGURE 2. Structure of online events

for the purpose of relaying the event. The broadcaster then sends the live feed to several subscription sites, including YouTube and SPWN. Each of the sites receives the video of the event from the sending office and makes it available for tourists. Finally, ④ the event venues provide facilities including locations such as Tokyo Dome City, Tokyo Big Sight, and House of Performers for broadcasting purposes. The host of the event pays a certain amount to broadcast the event in such facilities.

When the field survey was conducted at three event sites (Table 2), the event venues were able to accommodate a large number of visitors while implementing the infection control measures. Moreover, the event production company held its own live show on the stage for the audience. Simultaneously, this performance was broadcasted through a specific distribution site, and viewers could watch it for a fee. The content of this performance was the same for both events, but the primary difference was the presence of staff. Visitors to the on-site event could either form a line and follow the staff's instructions to purchase tickets, or they could directly inspect the merchandise at the product sales area and interact with the staff before making their purchases. Thus, the presence of workplace to set up the venue is a significant difference. This is because, in the case of an online event, the viewer interacts autonomously with the website and does not require the presence of staff to assist them.

**4.2. Considerable effect of online events on tourism destinations.** Online events are not held at specific physical setting. This implies that the growth of online events can hamper the flow of income at tourist destinations.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism has been facing critical challenges. Each aspect of the tourism industry, including transportation, accommodation, and regional developments is impacted by the potent coronavirus. Presently, although the usual activities of the tourism industry have halted, online events are fast replacing the in-person ones. The most significant advantage of virtual events is their ability to conform to social distancing norms, i.e., the three Cs mentioned earlier. Individuals can enjoy attending such events on websites from the comfort of their homes. For this case, the conventional definitions of tourism that necessitate transit in the tourism process are redundant in this context.

Certain disadvantages of virtual tourism must also be recognized. If the popularity of online events continues after the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of tourists physically visiting the destination will decrease. Consequently, the benefits of tourism for the tourist destinations (i.e., cities, towns, villages, etc.) will diminish.

For instance, when tourists attend an event in a city, they may not only enjoy the event but also purchase special products as gifts, dine at regional restaurants, use public transport, etc. All of these activities are accompanied by money transfer (Figure 3).

As mentioned before, the virtual nature of online events limits cash flow. If online events become more common, less money will flow to the destination. Some fear that this situation may damage the future of tourism itself. Thus, even during the post-COVID-19 period, it would be crucial to consider the benefits of tourism for tourist destinations, including cities, towns, and villages.

**4.3. The possibility of online events.** Online events provide tourists an artificial experience of visiting a tourist destination. This paper suggests that online events have advantages as well as disadvantages.

This study describes two main advantages of online events. First, they are not limited by location and capacity. In addition, online events allow viewers to observe specific aspects of the performers on stage, including their faces, carefully from their screens. At in-person events, the distance between the stage and the viewers' seats is typically vast, preventing a clear view of the stage. In contrast, online viewers can enjoy an unobstructed view of the stage. This study raises two potential disadvantages. First, tourists may miss absorbing

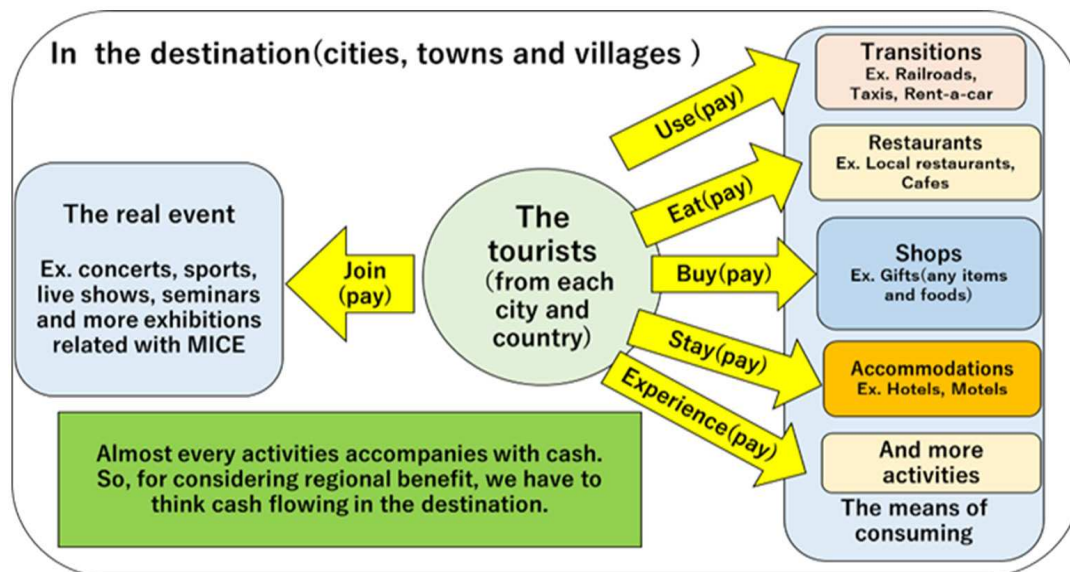


FIGURE 3. Structure of the destination

the physical atmosphere of in-person events. As online events are virtual and constitute participation via electronic devices, the conditions of the actual event are only simulated for viewers. Moreover, broadcasted images depend on the broadcasters' perspective, i.e., the image projected on the screen depends on the videographers' capture of the event. Thus, viewers cannot select a preferred angle for viewing the stage.

5. **Conclusion.** This paper describes the state of online events during the COVID-19 pandemic. While online events provide a temporary solution to tourists in the face of the pandemic, they may not always act as effective substitutes to in-person events. This phenomenon of online events is still in its development phase. Three aspects may be observed in this context today. First, many broadcasts of online events have taken place through subscription services. Second, these events then began to be broadcast on YouTube and SPWN. Third, many such events relate to individual countries such as the US. This paper investigates online anime and tokusatsu events held in Japan. This discussion may encourage further studies contributing to the establishment of a new form of tourism in the post pandemic world.

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