

Exploring COVID-19 Adaptation Strategies in Nepalese Tourism Industry: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry is a major part of the global economy but is also affected by crises and disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges for tourism and hospitality business owners in maintaining sustainability while also keeping employees safe. Despite studies on how to manage uncertainty, there is a lack of concrete examples and research on actual practices used by businesses in this sector, particularly in Nepal. This research identifies and explores the adaptations made by hospitality business owners to maintain continuity and employee safety during this uncertain time. This research, using a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews in a conversational style with five tourism business owners in Pokhara, explores the adaptations made by these businesses to maintain continuity and employee safety during a crisis and pandemic. The paper analysed data collected from interviews through thematic analysis and used pseudonyms to protect participant anonymity. Four key adaptation strategies were identified: human resource management, reorganising operations, managing health aspects and implementing specific crisis management measures. The findings revealed that businesses were able to explore new opportunities, invest in technology, and improve efficiency. They also provided training and monitoring for sanitation and hygiene, and adapted to changes in guest and host behaviour. The paper highlights the efforts these business owners made to adapt and sustain their businesses during a difficult time.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching economic consequences, disrupting both the supply and demand for goods and services. Businesses of all sizes have been affected, with those in the small and medium-sized enterprise, aviation, tourism, and hospitality sectors particularly vulnerable to decrease in revenue, bankruptcies,

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and unemployment. This crisis has been described as a major occurrence of the 21st century (Zenker & Kock, 2020, Gossling et al., 2020), and its effects are widely felt in the economic, political, and social realms, impacting the travel industry as well. (Estrada et al., 2020; Folinas & Metaxas,2020; Sigala,2020).

The tourism industry is a major contributor to the global economy, but it is also prone to disasters and crises (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). Over the last decade, the industry has faced numerous challenges such as acts of terrorism, political turmoil, financial downturn, biological security risks, and natural calamities. According to Faulkner (2001), the number of crises and disasters affecting tourism-related industries is on the rise and can be caused by both natural and human factors. Cassedy (1992) notes that tourism businesses may have a harder time recovering from crises and disasters compared to other industries because a significant portion of a destination's appeal comes from its image that can be damaged during a disaster or crisis. Further, a lot of tourism companies are small businesses who may not have the means or abilities to recover quickly. Sthapit (2020) noted that pandemic has jeopardised the tourism industry, including accommodations and food services, employing 144 million globally and hurting small businesses which make up 80% of the industry. This suggests that crises and disasters pose major difficulties to the recovery and existence of the tourism sector.

Mair et al. (2014) argue that experts in the field of tourism have emphasised the importance of being proactive in crisis response and management planning, drawing on lessons learned from the SARS outbreak. Despite the calls for proactive crisis response, Jamal and Budke (2020) noticed a lack of such action in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. They suggest that coordinated crisis management and communication plans have often not been effectively carried out at the local or national level. In contrast, WHO (2020) asserts that the Chinese authorities have taken prompt and decisive action in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

According to Sadun et al. (2020), managers are working hard to adapt new practices in order to ensure changes in safety and managerial practices and maintain profitability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Ulak (2020) found that providing extensive training and orientation to employees in Nepal's hotel industry can help revive the industry. However, Ulak (2020) also notes that measures such as practising social distancing, avoiding contact, wearing masks and personal protective equipment, may decrease the appeal of hospitality. It can be inferred that simply adapting safety practices may not provide a long-term solution for the recovery of the industry, and many businesses in the hospitality sector may struggle to sustain their operations. The tourism industry in Nepal has faced crises of this magnitude before, such as the 2015 earthquake and trade interruptions at southern border, which resulted in a 33% decline in tourism (ADB, 2019; Ulak, 2020). The sector is currently being heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hospitality businesses and owners of tourism are facing the challenge of maintaining the sustainability of their operations while also ensuring the safety of their employees.

The tourism industry is a massive global business, accounting for a significant portion of the world's GDP and employment (Joppe, 2020; Menegaki, 2020). In Nepal, approximately 200,000 people are directly employed in various sub-sectors of the tourism industry, such as restaurants, airlines, mountaineering, hotels, and trekking. (ADB, 2019), all of whom have been impacted by the pandemic. The negative consequences of the pandemic have also led to a contraction of Nepal's economy by 2.12% in 2020 (Economic Survey, 2020). The number of tourist arrivals in Nepal had been increasing until mid-March of the fiscal year 2019/20, but the pandemic caused a decrease of more than 80.8% in 2020 (Economic Survey, 2020), and it is expected to continue to decline in the coming days.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the current situation, it is not yet clear what constitutes the best practices for owners of tourism businesses to adapt in order to maintain the sustainability of their business and ensure the safety of their employees. This lack of knowledge is especially pronounced in the context of Nepal. Therefore, this paper examines and explores the adaptation strategies that owners of tourism businesses in Nepal are adapting to ensure the continuity of their business and safety of their employees during COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this research will be a valuable resource for businesses of all sizes to identify their own response strategies and increase their resilience in an increasingly unpredictable world.

The paper commences with a literature review that summarises the key literature on past studies regarding impact of COVID-19 on tourism sector and adaptation measures adapted by key executives of tourism sector. The methodology section outlines the selection of the sample, and the design and conduct of semi-structured interviews with key executives/owners of tourism businesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused not only human losses but also significant damage to the global economy. Steps taken to prevent the spread of the disease have disrupted the production, supply, and consumption chain. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic is the most critical global economic turmoil in the last 40 years (Gosling et al., 2020). According to Ranasinghe et al. (2020) the impact of the virus is more severe than experts anticipated, and it is the most significant pandemic in recent history, affecting globally with over 1.9 million confirmed cases and 120,000 deaths by April 14, 2020. The tourism industry is particularly vulnerable to pandemics, as seen throughout history with past epidemics such as the Black Death, Spanish Flu, SARS, H1N1 Swine Flu, and Ebola (Mensah, 2020).

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the Tourism Sector

COVID-19 has had a major impact on the tourism industry, even in its early stages, with the effects being felt globally (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Many jobs in the industry, totalling around 75 million, are at risk of being lost and the industry is expected to suffer losses

(Mensah, 2020; Menegaki, 2020) of over 2.1 trillion US dollars (WTTC, 2020; in Zenker & Kock, 2020). Some stakeholders in the hospitality sector, as noted by Hung et al (2018), may have been better prepared for this type of crisis due to their previous experience with emergency planning and customer relations. However, the impact of the pandemic has still been significant and far-reaching.

In a study by Chang et al (2020), a 10-point charter was presented for establishing a sustainable tourism industry post-COVID-19. These points included implementing social distancing measures, particularly for adventure, farm, religious, and MICE tourism, implementing travel restrictions at both domestic and international destinations, making personal protective equipment compulsory for medical tourism, sea and air travel, monitoring and controlling medical and health situation at destinations to ensure safety, transforming future crises into opportunities for sustainability, updating rules and regulations for transport systems to ensure social distancing and safety measures, updating rules and regulations for major events tourism to ensure social distancing, comparing domestic and international travel demands, ensuring hotel accommodations follow social distancing measures, and using expertise of industry to control insurance premium increases and exclusions for pre-existing illnesses. These measures can help owners identify their response strategies and preparedness during times of uncertainty, as well as adapt practices that may be necessary in the event of future outbreaks.

A study conducted by Sadun et al (2020) surveyed 50 companies across various industries and countries to understand how business leaders were adapting to the COVID-19 threat. Through 56 interviews with businesses around the world, the study examined changes in safety and managerial practices during the COVID-19 era, covering four main areas: the impact of the emergency on business activities and staff, plans to resume operations, implementation of safety and managerial practices during the reopening phase, and key takeaways from the experience. The results of the study showed that managers are working hard to ensure safety and maintain profitability, using a great deal of energy and creativity.

In Nepal, the Nepal Preparedness and Response Plan (NPRP, 2020) has been developed to effectively respond to and manage pandemic crises. The NPRP aims to assist the government of Nepal respond to a potential COVID-19 pandemic and ensure equal access to assistance for all affected individuals, following humanitarian principles and practices. Likewise, the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB, 2020) has established guidelines for the tourism industry to adhere to when the national restrictions are lifted and operations restart. These guidelines aim to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by promoting physical distance between people. To promote social distancing, the NTB is encouraging the use of digital wallets for all transactions in the industry and has suggested conducting activities electronically to reduce the use of paper. The NTB has also developed hygiene protocols for restaurants, tour, trekking, hotels, vehicle operators, mountaineering, and rafting agencies.

Gautam & Kafle (2022) analysed the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the operations and profitability of star hotels in Nepal, using both qualitative and quantitative research methods and found pandemic greatly impacted hotels, causing decreased profits and increased costs and revealed hotels resorted to diversification and cost-focused differentiation. They also suggested that hotels should strive to measure and adopt top industry standards and create a solid emergency plan to tackle pandemics like COVID-19 in the "new normal".

Many businesses in the hospitality sector will struggle to sustain their operations during the COVID-19 crisis. A complete shutdown is not a viable option, leaving business owners with the challenge of keeping their employees safe while still trying to keep their businesses running. There is limited research on how organisations are managing the COVID-19 crisis, including practices related to sustainability. However, some research works have emphasised on the moral responsibility to proactively address the crisis and its connections to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) issues of companies (Bapuji.et.al, 2020; He & Harris, 2020; Talbot & Ordonez, 2020; Shan & Tang, 2020). Therefore, understanding the various ways in which organisations are dealing with the COVID-19 crisis can provide insight into best practices and strategies for managing similar crises in the future.

Despite the availability of research on how companies are coping with the COVID-19 crisis, it remains unclear as to what specific methods and actions are being implemented by owners of hospitality sectors. Much of the current discussion on this topic is based on general considerations or recommendations rather than empirical studies or concrete examples. This paper explores the adaptation strategies that owners in the hospitality sector have adopted to ensure the continuity of their businesses and the safety of their employees during this time of uncertainty.

STUDY METHODS

As the COVID-19 pandemic persists with an increase in new cases and new variants, researchers are conducting in-depth studies to understand the best practices that organisations are implementing to ensure business continuity and employee safety. Thus, there is a need to explore adaptation strategies that the tourism sector is adapting at this time of crisis in the context of Nepal. This research adapts a qualitative method, which enables the thorough examination of the opinions and perceptions of the participants, and the identification of recurring themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), using semi-structured interviews with key executives in the tourism sector to explore the adaptation practices being implemented in response to the pandemic. Therefore, this paper follows the semi-structured interview method and attempts to explore the adaptation strategies in response to COVID-19 pandemic for business continuity and employee safety by the key executives from tourism sectors.

This study used a semi-structured interview method with a conversational style and open-ended questions to gather data from five tourism business owners located in the Pokhara Valley. Since, Pokhara valley is major tourist destinations in Nepal, this paper delved into the adaptive strategies of key executives in the sector by conducting interviews each lasting approximately 45 minutes with five diverse business owners incorporating purposive sampling techniques to uncover unique insights on how they navigated the challenges and ensured business continuity and employee safety. Three of the interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform, while the other two were conducted in person. During the interviews, detailed notes were taken instead of recording. The collected data was analysed manually using thematic analysis to identify key themes emerging from the responses (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The notes were reviewed and used in transcribing the conversations verbatim. The transcripts were read, and key themes and categories were identified and coded (Elder & Miller, 1995) for further analysis.

All ethical considerations, including honesty, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the use of pseudonyms for the participants, were upheld during the study. In the findings, all identifying and demographic information of respondents were removed, except for information that is necessary for and supports the analysis.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, this paper presents findings based on themes emerged from data analysis which are presented as four major adaptation strategies, as listed out hereunder:

- Human Resource Management
- Reorganising Operations
- Managing health aspects
- Specific crisis management measures

Human Resource Management Practices

All the owners interviewed expressed concern about compensation, specifically maintaining salaries for temporarily laid-off employees or adjusting pay rates to cope with the difficult economic situation and minimise or prevent job losses. They also highlighted the importance of training and orientation for employees in the hotel industry to help revive the industry. The majority view was:

"In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we have had to make some difficult decisions regarding our employees' pay and their job continuity. We have had to adjust pay rates for some employees in order to maintain the financial stability of the hotel. We are also implementing compensation adjustments, such as reducing hours or suspending certain benefits. Additionally, we have established a reserve account to ensure financial stability of employees during these uncertain times. In order to further minimise financial impact, we also had to initiate a salary reduction for some staff. Despite these changes, we are

committed to providing training and orientation to our employees to ensure they have the skills and knowledge they need to safely perform their job and provide excellent service to our guests. We understand that these are challenging times, and we are doing our best to support our employees while also keeping the hotel operational."

Furthermore, the owners interviewed adopted salary reduction as a way to respond to the crisis instead of laying off employees and also introduced a reserve account to be used in the future as a measure of salary. This account would add a percentage of salary every month and would be available to use during future crises.

Reorganising Operations

In response to the crisis, some owners have undergone radical reorganisation of their business models in order to minimise costs and focus on their core business or adapt to new needs resulting from the pandemic. To limit the risk of contamination during the reopening phase, owners have implemented measures such as reducing the operating hours of resorts for local customers, dividing shifts, and alternating office work. One of the participants described thus:

"The pandemic has forced us to rethink our operations, but with a creative mindset, we've been able to minimise costs and focus on our core business. We've reduced hours for local customers, divided shifts and alternating office work. We've also revamped our business model to specialise in delivering customised meals through social media, while implementing contactless procedures and flexible cancellation policies. And for guests who need to quarantine, we have created special packages. These are trying times, but we're determined to come out stronger and are constantly evaluating to ensure safety and financial stability."

Furthermore, in order to maintain business after losing a significant customer base due to the crisis, some owners have reorganised their operations to specialise in delivering customised meals to individual customers through advertising on social media.

Managing health aspects

Owners noted that measures such as the use of protective masks, social distancing, and cleaning of work areas are basic guidelines and recommendations from public health organisations. However, they also expressed concerns that these safety measures may negatively impact the charm of hospitality. One of the respondents highlighted the difficulty of balancing the upkeep of their business along with addressing health needs. He explained:

"At our hotel, we take the health and safety of our guests and staff very seriously, especially amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. We are following all basic guidelines and recommendations from public health organisations and implementing necessary safety measures, such as increased cleaning and sanitation, social distancing in common

areas, mandatory face masks, and temperature checks upon arrival. We understand that some of these measures may negatively impact the charm of hospitality, but we believe that the safety of our guests and staff is of the utmost importance. We are continuously monitoring and developing our health and safety procedures to identify early indicators of potential resurgence, and we are ready to adapt as circumstances change. We are committed to providing a safe and comfortable experience for all of our guests while protecting their health and well-being."

To address these concerns, owners suggested implementing frequent monitoring and developing health and safety procedures to identify early indicators of potential resurgence. These findings align with the recommendations of Chang et al. (2020) who suggest that the tourism industry should update procedures related to social distancing and safety standards. This could involve implementing social distancing measures in hotel accommodation, such as at the lobby, during meal service, and during other social activities.

Specific crisis management measures

Owners emphasised the importance of crisis management in providing a more global perspective on the situation and legitimising the decisions made. However, some participants were uncertain about how to proceed in the face of sudden unpredictability, but they were able to take action by focusing on specific issues and developing a plan to address them. For example, one of the participants explained:

"As a hotel owner, we understand the importance of being prepared for any crisis, especially in the current COVID-19 pandemic. We have taken steps to create various scenarios, analyse risks, and plan for potential crises. We have also focused on specific issues such as training front-line staff, gathering information on investments, exploring new opportunities, communicating with stakeholders, and preparing for business resumption. We have also developed standard operating procedures for the safety of our guests and staff, and we are exploring the possibilities of becoming a destination for healing, natural, and wellness tourism during the recovery period. We are constantly looking for new ways to sustain the business in these uncertain times, and we are committed to being proactive and responsive in our crisis management efforts."

Further, tourism business owners noted that effective crisis management involves analysing the situation, creating a response plan suited to the crisis' severity, and restructuring activities to ensure business continuity. These measures involve creating various scenarios, analysing risks, and planning for potential crises. The owners also highlighted the need to focus on specific issues such as training front-line staff, gathering information on investments, exploring new opportunities, communicating with stakeholders, and preparing for business resumption. They emphasised the importance of developing standard operating procedures to ensure the sustainability of the business. Furthermore, to effectively respond to the crisis, the government should consider

promoting Nepal as a destination for healing, natural, and wellness tourism during the recovery period.

The pandemic has dealt a severe blow to Nepal's tourism industry, affecting both its social and economic systems. Businesses in the sector are facing a major challenge in adapting and sustaining their operations. To overcome the pandemic and regain the trust of travellers and hosts, it is crucial that tourism business owners strictly follow health and safety protocols. Wearing masks, maintaining social distancing, and adhering to hygiene norms will likely become the new normal in the post-pandemic world.

The findings from the interview session inferred that the tourism industry had a difficult time adjusting to the changes in safety measures and implementing new management practices. However, business owners are taking proactive steps to prioritise safety and profitability during this crisis, using their ingenuity and resourcefulness to overcome the challenges they face.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The main objective of this paper was to examine and explore what adaptation strategies owners from tourism sectors have adapted to thrive their business for sustainability along with keeping their employees safe especially in the context of Nepal. Owners revealed that adaptation strategies related to Human Resource Management, Reorganising Operations, Managing health aspects and Specific crisis management measures are crucial to thrive the business for sustainability. Nepalese tourism businesses are facing major challenges due to the ongoing pandemic, including losses in sales and cash flow, as well as the potential for layoffs. However, many businesses are still paying their workers and trying to adapt their operations in order to stay afloat. This resilience is evident in their efforts to maintain their relationships with clients and explore new opportunities, despite the difficulties they are facing. Overall, these businesses are showing optimism for the future and hope for better post-pandemic conditions.

Despite the ongoing challenges caused by the pandemic, tourism businesses in Nepal are trying to find ways to survive and even find new opportunities. This includes investing in technology and market development, as well as improving operational efficiency and building strong consumer bases. These strategies can help businesses strengthen their supply chain, reduce costs, and generate cash flow to get back on track.

Tourism businesses need to provide extensive training and orientation to their employees in order to maintain high standards of sanitation and hygiene, as well as implement strong monitoring systems to ensure that these standards are being followed. These measures will help restore travellers' confidence and encourage them to travel again. The pandemic will also cause changes in guest and host behaviour, which will become evident in the tourism industry in the coming days. By implementing these adaptation practices, tourism businesses can thrive and maintain profitability while keeping their employees safe. Moreover, effective adaptation strategies can help to mitigate the financial repercussions

on the tourism industry and secure the continuation of vital services, while preserving the warmth of hospitality. Conclusively, owners of tourism businesses are working hard to ensure safety and implement situation-specific managerial practices to sustain their businesses during the crisis.

The paper focuses solely on the perspectives of tourism business owners from Pokhara and therefore, may not accurately reflect generalisation to the entire hospitality industry due to limitations in the sample size and qualitative nature of the study as well as the possibility of response bias. Likewise, this paper only considers the viewpoints of owners of tourism businesses in Nepal and does not include the perspectives of other key industry organisations or the government's interventions. It could be interesting to further research the impact of such interventions on tourism businesses in the future.

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