



SURVIVING A PANDEMIC CRISIS: STRATEGIES FOR TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Global disease outbreaks have become a major concern for sustainability of tourism and hospitality industry. Recently, many top performing tourism destinations were gripped by Covid-19 and Kenya was not spared either. There are no ways of keeping the world safe from pandemics and so the main point of concern ought to be means of surviving when, not if plague strikes. Therefore, this paper aims to offer answers to what can be done to mitigate devastating effects of pandemics in tourism and hospitality operations. The research systematically reviewed 40 articles which were selected using the PRISMA flowchart criteria. The review examined both reactive and proactive coping strategies that have been devised to help the industry bounce back after a pandemic crisis. Based on the analysis, promotion of domestic tourism, tax waivers, economic aids and demonstration of commitment to safeguard health were found to be the most common reactive strategies, while diversification of products, shift to other market niches and review of travel policies were found to be the most common proactive strategies. This study proposes the following as survival strategies for the industry; market and product diversification, a cohesive cross-border collaboration within the EAC, substantial automation of sectors, endorsement of certified safe destinations and a special fund for the industry. The study advances knowledge about pandemic crisis management by highlighting the most promising and plausible strategies to navigate the on-going pandemic crisis and those that are unforeseen. The study results have practical implications on what Kenyan tourism and hospitality stakeholders can do in readiness for pandemic predicaments.

Keywords: Covid-19, Reactive strategies, Proactive strategies, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of human civilization, pandemics have been a serious public health issue. A number of communicable pandemics have been witnessed throughout the world in the last 100 years. For example, the Spanish Flu in 1918, the Asian Flu 1956, the Pandemic Influenza in 1968, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002, Avian Flu in 2008, Swine Flu in 2009, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012 and the Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) in 2019 (Koca, 2020). Amongst these pandemics, Spanish Flu was the deadliest. Globally, Spanish Flu killed between 17 - 100 million people before the world was officially declared free of the pandemic (Spreeuwenberg et al., 2018). Besides being a key health concern, pandemics can also lead to disruption of social and economic activities especially those related to tourism and hospitality. In fact, Hung et al. (2018) claim that accommodation facilities are the primary transmission points of local epidemic outbreaks that rapidly turn into global pandemics. For that reason, in the event of a pandemic, movement of people from one place to another is restricted and the shock waves of a pandemic are first felt by tourism and hospitality enterprises. Although the impacts and incidences of earlier pandemics did not significantly affect the global tourism and hospitality operations, most recent pandemics reveal a different picture. Possibly this is because the interconnectedness of tourism and travel operations was still at its infancy when the earlier pandemics hit. According to Behsudi (2020), only about 25 million people could take trips abroad at the beginning of jet age in 1950. Following more transport advancement and connectivity that figure had risen to 1.5 billion in 2019. Tourism development is a double-edged

sword because it brings economic benefits but also it can cause a disease outbreak in a far flung region to rapidly spread across the world in a matter of days.

Tourism and hospitality industry is one of the key contributors to the local along with international economic development. For instance, statistics show that during the pre-Covid-19 periods, tourism accounted for 10% of the global GDP and employed over 320 million people worldwide (Behsudi, 2020). In Kenya, tourism generated 27% of foreign exchange, 11% of GDP and 12% of total wage employment (Ondicho, 2021). Above and beyond the direct economic benefits of tourism, sectors in the tourism supply chain like agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing and so on indirectly gained immensely. In the face of auspicious benefits, there are numerous risks to prosperity of the global tourism and hospitality industry including terrorism (Bowen et al., 2014; Samitas et al., 2018), climate change (Becken, 2005), natural disasters (Ghaderi & Henderson, 2013; Huan et al., 2004), political tensions, economic fluctuations (Redjeki et al., 2021) and pandemics among others. All these adversities present obstacles to travel which is requisite for tourism activities. In particular, fragility of tourism and hospitality operation has been notable in the recent incidences of pandemics. In 21st century, pandemics have wreaked havoc in tourism even though the number of total fatalities were small with the exception of Covid-19.

SARS emerged in 2003 causing 774 deaths worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). According to World Health Organization-WHO (2021a), SARS was the first of readily transmittable novel infections in the 21st century and cautioned it could easily spread through international travel. Unsurprisingly, the alert greatly affected tourism destinations as a result of cancellations of hotel and events bookings, decline of travel and interruption of capital investments among others (McKercher & Pine, 2006). The Avian Flu had a cumulative of 374 deaths (WHO, 2013). In 2009, Swine Flu related deaths during the first year of the virus spread was between 151,700 and 575,400 people worldwide (Dawood et al., 2012). The H1N1 virus was also responsible for the loss of approximately 1.6 million visitors in the UK during the second quarter of 2009 (Page et al., 2012). According to WHO (2018) MERS killed 803 people worldwide, since its emergence in Saudi Arabia in 2012. The outbreak had a dramatic effect on tourism, with South Korea having lost USD 3.1 billion in tourists' receipts between June and September 2015 (Choe et al., 2021).

Even though these outbreaks had adverse impacts on civilization, the most recent outbreak of Covid-19 is so far the deadliest in the world since the Spanish Flu in 1918. By August 2021, the global Covid-19 deaths were over 4.2 million and the pandemic is yet to be declared over (WHO, 2021b). Moreover, the fatalities would possibly increase because new variants of the virus are emerging (Do et al., 2021). The cruel progress of Covid-19 across the world has put mounting pressure on the economy. The pressure is very intense particularly for tourism and hospitality industry due to regulated movement and social interactions. Oxford Economics (2020) projected that the economic loss in hotels could outweigh that of 9/11 attack, 2008 depression and SARS crises combined. Besides that, the World Travel and Tourism Council-WTTC (2020) issued a caution that 50 million jobs in the global travel and tourism sector were at risk. Some instant reactive actions that were taken during these pandemics included indefinite suspension of both local and international travel, regulated events attendance, suspended restaurant and club operations and so on. Carrying out operations under such uncertainties blur prospects of the industry as they present a major hurdle on business activities that highly depend on mobility and convention of large number of people. Behsudi (2020) cautioned that countries which greatly hinged on tourism were likely to experience prolonged adverse effects of pandemics. From the report, the author further indicates that the real GDP among African countries that depend on tourism would plummet by 12%.

Previously in Kenya, tourism and hospitality industry had to contend more with political and economic instability. However, recent occurrences of global pandemics have given rise to a new threat that Kenya had been least prepared for. For instance, during the Avian Flu outbreak, Kenya was considered vulnerable because of its proximity to high-risk countries and its location along the migration path of about 170 species of Palearctic birds (Thurlow, 2010; Muiruri & Maundu, 2012). Heightened fear of infection drastically reduced the number of tourists, especially bird enthusiasts visiting Rift Valley lakes (Selva, 2006). To date, Covid-19 is the worst disease outbreak that Kenya has experienced in its brief history as an independent country. According to UNDP (2020), many coastal hotels closed down because of low occupancy rates. By July 2020, Ksh. 80 million of tourism receipts had been lost and projections indicate 750,000 jobs might be lost (Ondicho, 2021). Being cognizant of the industry's susceptible economic sustainability, there is need for practical strategies that could help the industry in becoming more resilient during and after the pandemic. Prospective rebound strategies should provide solutions to recoup from the upheavals of Covid-19 and similar future pandemics. Moreover, it is essential to combine efforts from various stakeholders to help the industry regain its lost glory. Presently, Kenya has little experience in handling global pandemics, hence the need to seek evidence-based pandemic coping mechanisms. The aim of this paper was to find out concrete strategies that would enable industry operators to cope with the present and possible future pandemic crises.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted a systematic review to gather all accessible empirical evidence that would provide possible solutions to afflictions caused by pandemics on tourism and hospitality industry in Kenya. The review specifically analyzed recovery strategies implemented by different stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry to keep the industry afloat. Resourceful articles were selected using criteria borrowed from the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram (see Figure 1). The reviewed publications were obtained from Emerald Insight, JSTOR and Google Scholar electronic databases as well as internet search engines for related grey literature. Using key search words 'pandemics' or 'Covid-19' and 'tourism/hospitality/hotel' and

‘coping/recovery strategies/mechanism’ or ‘reactive and proactive strategies’, the search yielded 191 articles. The first screening for duplication reduced the articles to 138. Further on, 3 articles not written in English were excluded. Titles and abstracts were examined for eligibility. Where the titles and abstracts were not conclusive, whole articles were examined. In the end, 40 articles were appraised for qualitative synthesis which provides evidence-based strategies for coping with pandemic crises.

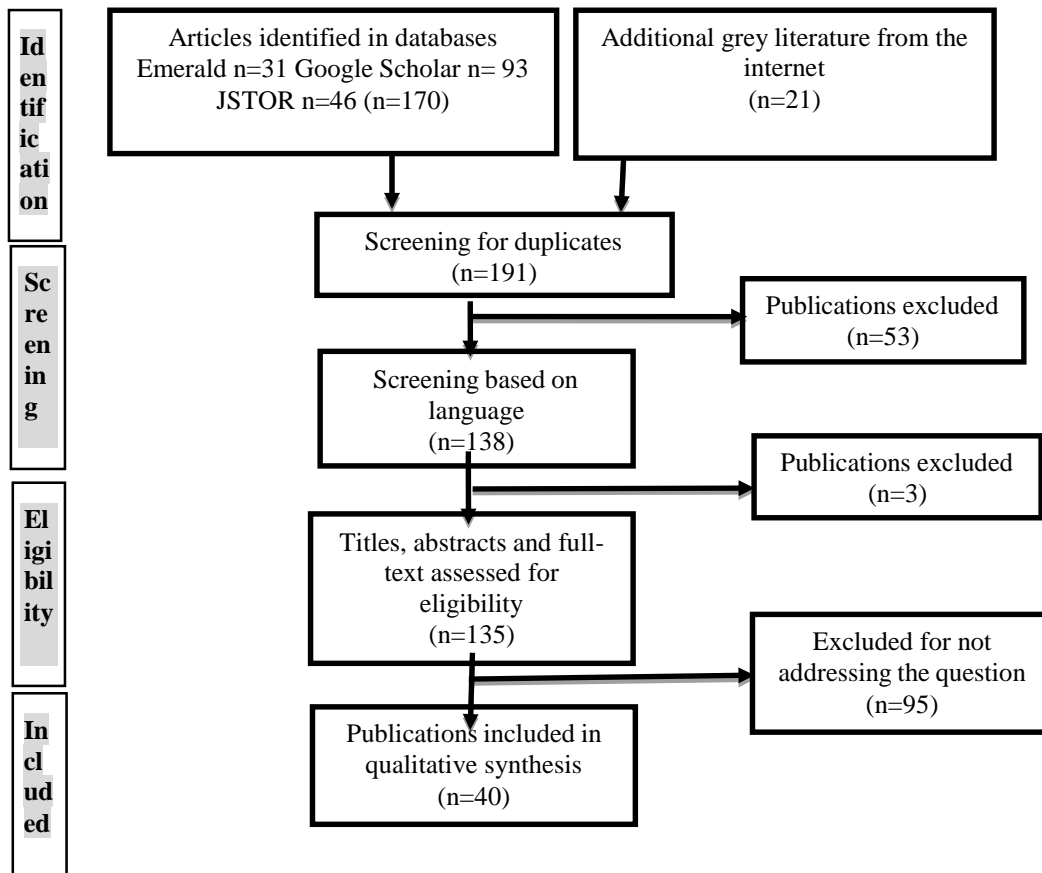


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the publications selection process

RESULTS

Reactive Strategies

Crisis occur without notice when they do, there are measures that are taken to deal with the immediate challenges that were unforeseen. During the previous and in the current pandemic, tourism and hospitality businesses resolved to different ways of keeping afloat. During the SARS outbreak, big companies in the Pacific Asia Region collaborated to organize a world-class event dubbed ‘Project Phoenix’ aimed at luring back tourists. At the same time, Singapore launched ‘Singapore Roars’ campaign to promote the country as a safe tourist destination. The campaigns saw Singapore’s tourist arrivals rise by 76% and a further 43% in the month that followed (Dalberg, 2020). The Prime Park Hotel in Bandung, Indonesia whose major customer base was from overseas markets changed its marketing strategy and focused on local market. The hotel also targeted specific groups such as retirees, students and families in its sales promotions. Additionally, hospitality facilities including the Prime Park Hotel lowered their room tariffs to fascinate more clients and withstand the crisis. The strategy proved to be effective as the number of customers increased (Redjeki et al., 2021). Arbulú et al. (2021) endorsed this approach asserting that domestic tourism could generate 33% of overnights stays that were attained before pandemic.

Governments at different levels also provide economic aids and other non-monetary incentives to rescue the industry. When SARS gripped Hong Kong in February 2002, the national government funded a tourism drive to stimulate tourism demand after SARS and it included free airline tickets and hotel and restaurant discounts for nine months. A package to restore the image of Hong Kong as a tourism destination was also available. As a result of the

drive, tourist arrivals increased by 70%, airline passenger traffic improved by 15% and more than 1,040 weekly flights resumed. During the same period, China set aside some funds to encourage senior citizens to travel thereby boosting domestic tourism whereas Germany extended massive credit facilities to tourism related businesses (Nhamo et al., 2020). Countries that highly depend on tourism sought refuge in domestic tourism. For instance, in order to encourage domestic tourism in Costa Rica, all national holidays were moved to Monday to create longer weekends. Elsewhere, a one-year work permit that allows visitors to live and work in Barbados was introduced (Babii & Nadeem, 2021). A study in seven countries, that is, Italy, Brazil, Japan, Australia, Israel, China and Austria revealed that the national governments adopted several recovery strategies that were recommended by UNWTO. Among the most popular tactics that were partially or fully adopted included; job retention, support for the self-employed, safeguarding the most vulnerable groups, backing the liquidity of companies, review of tariffs and enhancing travel simplification (Kreiner & Ram, 2020). These strategies push and reignite tourism within the countries' borders.

UNWTO (2021) also emphasized the need to promote tourism across borders. The UNWTO recommended tourism destinations to create 'travel bubbles' which would allow travel between particular destinations. Furthermore, the agency echoed the importance of cooperation and synchronization of international policies to drive more resilient and sustainable tourism. Other countries supported tourism and hospitality companies in adapting new business models by retraining staff. For example, Jamaica offered free online training certification classes to over 10,000 tourism workers to help improve their skills. Other approaches involve creating an atmosphere that would attract investment opportunities. Governments at different levels are expediting recovery by enticing investors in tourism with tax breaks, lenient land-use rules (Sharma et al., 2021; Brouder, 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020).

According to Elgin (2020), economic policies are commonly used by governments to pull through during global pandemics. Notably when Covid-19 struck, national governments around the world provided economic stimulus packages to enterprises. According to Dube et al. (2020) fiscal incentives increase liquidity which helps to resuscitate businesses that would have otherwise gone under during the pandemic. For example, Egypt slashed take-off and landing fees for new entrants, China refunded 70% of quality guarantee deposit paid by travel agencies when they started business while sinking tourism enterprises in Barbados were bailed out with \$15 million. Governments which announced tax cuts to resuscitate tourism and hospitality operations included, Jordan, France, Vietnam, Belgium, Jamaica, and Czech Republic (ILO, 2009; Nhamo et al., 2020). Hotel establishments in Sharjah in UAE were given a 5% municipal and tourism levy for 3 months (Vij et al., 2021). Ghana made a declaration to financially support hospitality businesses through tax exemptions and deferrals, special credits and loans (Dayour et al., 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). The Ghanaian government also offered economic stimulus such as tax waivers and utility bills rebates in order to sustain small tourism and hospitality enterprises (Dayour et al., 2020). Elsewhere, Thailand allocated \$700 million as an incentive for domestic tourism, while Vanuatu offered grants to small and medium-sized enterprises (Babii & Nadeem, 2021). Spain took financial initiatives such as specified monetary aid and tax exemptions to support its tourism and hospitality industry (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020). Some African governments have also stepped up to help the aviation sector. For example, Senegal had a tourism and air transport relief provision of \$128 million; landing and parking fees was waived in Seychelles; Cote d'Ivoire waived tourism tax for transit passengers and South Africa deferred payroll, income and carbon taxes for the airline industry (International Air Transport Association, 2020).

As pandemics continue to be become a health concern, there is possible longer term behavioral shifts in tourists' choice of travel mode and destination. Travel companies are aware of these concerns and have devised ways of addressing them. For instance, Cathay Pacific Airways placed a newspaper advert which promised to prioritize health of its passengers and crew. The airline passenger numbers showed some stability in weeks that followed (Pine & McKercher, 2004). Emirates redefined hygiene standards for passengers where complimentary hygiene kits are provided when checking in at the Dubai International Airport and on flights to Dubai (Emirates Media Centre, 2020a). Emirates also had plans to offer a free cover against Covid-19 related expenses, a maximum of EUR 150,000 and EUR 100 per day for 14 days for quarantine costs, if diagnosed during travel far from home ((Emirates Media Centre, 2020b). Pardo and Ladeiras (2020) noted tourists were likely to search for safest destination that there are not congested.

In response to the potential detrimental fears, the government of Emirates of Sharjah of UAE launched 'Sharjah Safe for Tourism' a WTTC stamp for institutions that followed the approved Covid-19 control guidelines (Vij et al., 2021). Spain openly communicated to domestic and foreign tourists about sanitary measures it undertook to show

commitment to safeguard their health (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020). Furthermore, Yu et al. (2020) claims that tourists' perception of tourism products will be influenced by effects of Covid-19. With respect to this claim, Assaf and Scuderi (2020) emphasize the need to lessen perceived risks by boosting travelers' confidence. This strategy has been used by five large Spanish hotel chains, who sought certification services related to health issues in order to contain spread of Covid-19 (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020). The initiative is similar to those implemented by hospitality facilities in Hong Kong, Singapore and Toronto during SARS pandemic in 2003 (Chien & Law, 2003; Tew et al., 2008). Apart from containment of the disease, Alonso-Almeida and Bremser (2013) alluded that the strategy helps to build confidence of guests in regard to safety in lodging facilities. McKercher (2020) emphasizes the need for strong coordination among all stakeholders in tourism network both private and public in order to have consistency and reduce perceived travel risk.

Proactive Strategies

Pandemics bring about short-term and long-term impacts that require tourism and hospitality industry to revise, innovate and transform their businesses. Ritchie (2004) emphasizes the significance of proactive strategies, citing increasing episodes of pandemics that make the risk apparent in lieu of uncertain. Following, several incidences of global pandemics crisis, industry players have put measures in place in anticipation of possible future crisis as health experts have cautioned. Some investors have opted to tailor their products to be more appealing to local markets which is readily available even when international demand declines. For instance, some operators in Ghana are broadening the spectrum of their products and also shifting their attention to market niches that were more resilient to the impact of the pandemic. Facilities that offered lodging services exclusively were expanding to include food and beverage facilities as well. Similarly, tour and travel operators are turning their attention to domestic tourism to hasten recovery and secure sustenance (Dayour et al., 2020). Subscription-based distribution system is another feasible business model that has been adopted. This is practical because of some essential business travel that need to be undertaken during a crisis, especially after its containment. InterContinental and Accor hotel companies launched monthly payment plans for guests to access their facilities for pleasure, short business trip or long-term stay wherever they are (Gilchrist, 2020). This plan creates some flow of revenues for hotel units that have chain affiliations. Other hotel operators resorted to providing both short-term hospitality services and long-term rental contracts to arrest the low occupancy issues (Wynn, 2020). Le and Phi (2021) also advises that hotels should move away from traditional business models and adopt mixed revenue models. For instance, Accor is modifying its guestrooms into private gyms and recording studios (Gilchrist, 2020). Hospitality and tourism operators have also been proactive in pooling resources to have a better cover during emergencies and crisis. Clemence (2020) noted that almost 1000 new hotels were still opening amidst the pandemic. Notably international hotel chains like Hilton and Marriott proceeded with the pre-covid-19 plans to launch new properties. This finding supports an earlier claim by Ritchie et al. (2020) that, big hotel chains can cope with a pandemic crisis better than small and medium ones. Crouch et al. (2020) claim that small and medium sized hotels are likely to sign up for mergers and acquisitions. This means that strategic alliances generate a new kind of capabilities which are mutually shared by all parties. In other words, individual hotels leverage group capabilities to sail through a crisis.

Another tactic that has been used to minimize the spread of pandemics is digitalization of services. This approach reduces physical contact which then breaks the chain of infection. A study by Jiang and Wen (2020) found that automated hotel services like contactless registration, digital menus, online service ordering, mobile concierge apps and smart room control are now widely used and accepted. Moreover, Fusté-Forné and Ivanov (2021) argue that many aspects of tourism and hospitality industry have to be reconsidered in since pandemics threaten its human to human contact nature. The authors further opine that despite the challenges in the service experience and sustainability of service providers, increasing safety for service providers and visitors is priority. A study in Portugal showed that 92% of hotel managers admitted that Covid-19 is a catalyst for hotel digitalization which is a new normal (Nuno & Paulo, 2021; Urban & Łukaszewicz, 2021). Pillai et al. (2021) also uphold the claims that augmenting people and technology would boost operational efficiency in terms of safety and hygiene in the wake of global pandemics.

Due to unforeseen travel restrictions, guests are likely to be worried about losing money due to postponed events and cancelled vacations. On the other hand, businesses have to endure an unplanned cash outflow due to refunds. In order to avoid such scenarios, the French government modified the terms and conditions for cancellation of travel bookings. The amendments approved all refunds to be substituted by a credit or voucher of same monetary value on a service later. As a result, travelers that make reservations with French operators are entitled to a refund if the voucher is not used after 18 months (OECD, 2020). Dickler (2020) noted that a number of airlines and hospitality

establishments have eased their refund policies. For example, Frontier Airlines which is an American low cost carrier now allows credit for future travel for up to one year, an extension from 90 days previously. Other airlines have followed suit. Such kind of proactive measures are instrumental in reducing the impacts of failed services. During Covid-19, refund issues were the most common complaints against airlines and travel agents (Baratti, 2020). As such, there is need for tourism and hospitality operators to provide some assurance to visitors at the reservation phase that they will be able to recover most of their money.

CONCLUSION

There are many strategies that have been applied to help tourism and hospitality industry spring back to its pre-pandemic peaks after disease outbreaks that the world has experienced hitherto. Multiple viewpoints have been brought forward in the recent research studies. Despite having varied tactics in different set-ups, the discussion shows that a lot can be when a pandemic crisis occurs. Travel related operations are extremely vulnerable to pandemics hence the need to have well thought reactive and proactive strategies. Although tourism and hospitality industry players in Kenyan have taken a number of similar impressive measures to cushion against immediate and short-term adversities of Covid-19, more needs to be done for recovery and rebound beyond 2021. As a matter of fact, many stakeholders have largely focused on reactive responses to pandemics rather than proactive responses. Due to the seemingly recurrent incidences of global disease outbreaks, it would be judicious to look beyond the ongoing crisis in contemplation of the emotional, economic and physical wellbeing of all the parties likely to be affected. Besides, end of the on-going Covid-19 crisis is still blurred despite mass vaccination which begs for long-term solutions. Going forward, it is essential for the industry to proactively address sustainability in the design of coping strategies. This study recommends several about-turns for the Kenyan tourism and hospitality industry. The current business model requires revision so that the industry is not highly dependent on overseas markets. This means that diversification of markets and products is essential for quick recovery and future sustenance.

A well-coordinated cross-border collaboration of the six East African Community members would give way to regional travel bubbles. Therefore, acceleration of approval and use of East African single tourist visa in all member states is desirable. Secondly, it is important to revamp the industry so that digital skills can steer transformation especially in marketing and in MICE sector. Automation would also promote hygiene which is greatly required to break the contagion chain of pandemics. The government can endorse certification of tourism and hospitality operators that have met strict pandemic containment measures to boost travelers' confidence and encourage return of international tourism. Strategic business alliances would increase resilience and spread risks associated with pandemics in different regions.

A long-term government economic intervention would sustain public welfare. The government can set aside a special fund for tourism investments to bail out instead of letting them go under for the greater good of its citizens who depend on such enterprises for livelihood. The government can also endorse revision of refund policies in order to protect the interest of travelers and stabilize cash outflows of travel operators during a crisis. Avenues for future research include studies on social and environmental aspects of sustainability amidst a pandemic crisis. Additionally, a longitudinal study to examine efficacy of the recommended strategies in reviving tourism and hospitality industry would be significant.

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