

Organizational Resilience and Recovery of Tour Operators: Towards a Challenge-Metamorphosis Model

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Abstract

This study proposes the Challenge Metamorphosis Model (CMM) to understand the resilience and recovery of tour operators following the COVID-19 pandemic. CMM builds on challenges, crisis management, and resilience strategies to understand how businesses evolve or undergo a metamorphosis following disruptive external events. Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were carried out among Indian tour operators to understand the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, their responses, and views on recovery and resilience. Data were analysed using thematic analysis followed by network analysis that applies Spradley's semantic relationships to explore the latent relationships among three key concepts: challenges, recovery strategies, and resilience. Results revealed that tour operators employed a multiplicity of interrelated crisis and recovery strategies to deal with COVID-19 challenges, prompting a business metamorphosis in some cases. The findings have theoretical implications for crisis management and managerial strategies through the proposed CMM to strengthen the response and resilience of tour operators.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Resilience, Recovery, Challenge Metamorphosis, Business Transformation, COVID-19, Pandemic

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Tour operation was the third largest sector in the tourism industry globally after accommodation and aviation prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It accounted for one-tenth of the global travel revenue (Borko, 2018). Tour operators experienced an unprecedented drop in business during COVID-19 that contrasts with the exponential growth the sector was facing before the pandemic (Pompurova et al., 2022). As one of the most fragmented sectors and with over 70% small-scale businesses in most regions, the tour operation sector faced near-mortal challenges from the pandemic, making recovery and revival even more daunting (Pompurova et al., 2022; Patel, 2024). Given that the majority of tour operators are small scale, they confer both economic and socio-cultural benefits for the tourism sector in India. From an economic perspective, they organize and manage travel experiences for both domestic and international tourists while also maintaining employment of family members. From this perspective, these small businesses support local economies and livelihoods. Tour operators also have a critical role in enhancing socio-cultural benefits of tourism. By curating experiences, they promote cultural heritage and preserve traditions. They can encourage local communities to continue traditional crafts, arts and customs by providing a market for these practices. They can also develop packages that take tourists to less-exposed rural or remote areas, helping to spread economic benefits of tourism. As such, their capacity to survive and recover from adversity can contribute to regional tourism development.

Similar to other tourism sectors, the revival of the tour operation sector depends not only on its adaptive and absorptive capacities which can be viewed as its resilience but also the evolving travel behaviour (Morais-Storz et al., 2018; Ntounis et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2018; Prayag, 2023) and the recovery strategies that are deployed by businesses (Colmekcioglu et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2023; Ntounis et al., 2022). Resilience and crisis management strategies deployed by tourism businesses during the pandemic offer insights into their ability to understand a rapidly changing external environment as well as their capacity to develop resilience through managing their crisis planning and adaptive capacities (Colmekcioglu et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2023; Prayag et al., 2023). Organizational resilience is about the ability to cope with unknown circumstances (Linnenluecke, 2017; Hall et al., 2018; Orchiston et al.,

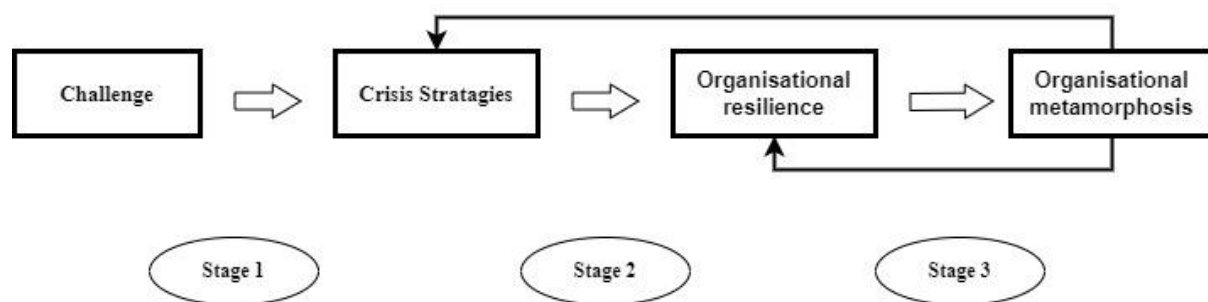
2016) and exploit existing and new knowledge gained from both internal and external sources to bounce back or forward from adversity (Coles et al., 2021; Prayag et al., 2023).

The increasing popularity of organizational resilience in tourism studies attests to its importance as a crisis management and business recovery strategy (Hall et al., 2023; Prayag, 2018). Several models of organizational resilience have been applied in tourism studies, including ICOR (ICOR, 2016) and Herringbone model (Tanner et al., 2022). These models are either conceptual (e.g., ICOR) or focus on large/small organizations. Yet, they do not explicitly account for the challenges emerging from the disruptive event itself that prompt organizations to leverage resilience in response and recovery strategies. As noted in recent studies (Hall et al., 2023; Raetz et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2023), the type of disruptive event itself and the challenges for organizations should be disentangled from the crisis management and resilience strategies they deploy. In this way, a better understanding of how disasters and pandemics can lead to different resource utilization for response and recovery strategies can emerge in the tourism literature (Jang et al., 2022; Jiang et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2023). Given the paucity of studies that propose resilience models derived from empirical evidence (see Hall et al., 2025), we examine the interplay of three factors (business challenges, crisis and resilience strategies) in explaining the metamorphosis that tour operation businesses have undergone following the COVID-19 pandemic. We adopt Morais-Storz et al. (2018) propositions on organizational metamorphosis driven by resilience to understand the circumstances, including the challenges that drive transformation in tour operation businesses. Thus, the main research question we ask is: ***what challenges and crisis/resilience strategies drive metamorphosis in tour operation businesses during COVID-19?***

Our potential contributions to tourism studies are three-fold. While the literature has examined crisis strategies and resilience-building approaches adopted by tourism and hospitality businesses (Espiner, et. al., 2017; Do et. al., 2023; Hall et al., 2023; Prayag et al., 2023), these studies do not necessarily examine business transformation resulting from the deployment of resilience strategies. Our first potential contribution is, therefore, the identification of drivers of transformation that emanate from crisis/resilience strategies deployed by tour operating businesses during COVID-19. Existing tourism studies on organizational resilience (Biggs et al., 2012; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Prayag et al., 2023;

Tanner et al., 2022; Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022) do not propose new models derived from empirical evidence for strategic management of resilience. However, Hall et al. (2025) propose a resilience framework applicable to destinations following disasters that can be used to understand the resilience implications for tourism businesses. Our second potential contribution lies in applying the simple process model (Figure 1) of CMM to understand and develop the resilience and recovery capacities of tour operator businesses. The process model can be used to understand how the challenges emanating from COVID-19 drove crisis strategies deployed and the organizational resilience strategies underpinning them. In turn, the latter can contribute to organizational metamorphosis, which then creates a feedback loop for the further development of crisis and resilience strategies by the organization over time. Third, we provide a methodological contribution by applying Spradley's (2016) semantic network analysis to verify and confirm themes extracted from traditional thematic analysis. Semantic network analysis allows us to explore the latent relationships among three key concepts: challenges, recovery strategies, and resilience.

Figure 1 – The Process of the Challenge-Metamorphosis Model



Next, we outline the theoretical background informing Figure 1, followed by the methods and findings. We conclude with the theoretical and managerial implications of CMM and the limitations of the study. These limitations provide areas for further research.

Theoretical background

The Challenge Metamorphosis Model (CMM)

A crisis is “a situation requiring radical management action in response to events beyond the internal control of the organisation, necessitating urgent adaptation of marketing and operational practices to restore the confidence of employees, associated enterprises and consumers in the viability of the destination” (Beirman, 2021:4). Crises are often unexpected and can cause adverse effects such as reputational damage or marketability impact on stakeholders (Bundy et. al., 2017). Santana (2004) argues that crises are processes that evolve according to their own logic. The origin and scale of a crisis depend on factors that are specific to its nature and that of the tourist destination or business activity (Biggs et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2018). Crises can also create opportunities for economic and organisational transformation through the process of creative destruction and innovation. Leveraging such opportunities through transformative innovation leads to new business paradigms and revolutionary changes (Sigala, 2020). Yet, the expected transformation of the tourism industry resulting from COVID-19 has not necessarily materialised (Price et al., 2022) but there are instances of tourism businesses undergoing fundamental changes following crises and disasters (Coles et al., 2021; Ntounis et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2023). Due to the unpredictability of crises and disasters, tourism businesses find it challenging to deal with them (Hall et al., 2023; Pforr & Hosie, 2008) and there are no universal strategies that can be effective at the individual business level.

CMM has its theoretical grounding in the organizational resilience literature (Morais-Storz et al., 2018), where a number of strategic levers have to be activated for building resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017). These levers can include employees through HRM practices (Linnenluecke, 2017), relationships (internal and external) (Coles et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Prayag et al., 2023), financial resources (Wieczorek-Kosmala, 2022) and other knowledge-based resources (Jiang et al., 2022). Accordingly, organisational resilience can be achieved if organisations leverage internal and external resources to develop the ability to predict, adapt and overcome the likely consequences of crises and disasters (Lee et al., 2013; Orchiston et al., 2016; Prayag et al., 2023). Organizations can then achieve renewal or survival (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007), which is grounded in the notion

of bouncing back to a pre-disaster mode of operation. Yet, more recently, the notion of bouncing forward (Hall et al., 2018) seems to be more pertinent than survival and renewal. Organizations can do better than their pre-crisis level (Hall et al., 2018; Prayag et al., 2023) by undergoing a fundamental metamorphosis. This metamorphosis distinguishes strategic resilience from organizational resilience (Morais-Storz et al., 2018).

Metamorphoses are transformations that mark stages of organisational history in response to environmental jolts or strategic interventions (Starbuck, 1967; Meyer et al., 1990). It is the capacity of an organisation to adapt, change, and innovate proactively leading to organisational resilience through transformation and reinvention (Do et. al., 2023). In a dynamic competitive environment, organisational metamorphosis or as often called organizational transformation is a constant for organisational sustenance and the key to achieving resilience (Hall et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2013). Despite COVID-19 triggering a paradigmatic shift in some tourism organisations resulting from the pandemic-induced environmental jolts and strategic responses, organizational metamorphosis is less well understood. As such, we propose the CMM to illustrate how organisational metamorphosis can happen in response to crisis-induced challenges. A ground-level analysis of how tour operators dealt with the pandemic is helpful for a better understanding of crisis management approaches adopted in response to the pandemic and the strategic levers that were activated by these organizations to become resilient.

Organizational Change as a Driver of Resilience

Resilience is one of the key attributes that can help an organization to survive and sustain itself when faced with challenges (Cheer & Lew, 2017; Espiner et. al., 2017; Hall et al., 2023). It provides the flexibility and diversity necessary for innovation and further development (Orchiston et al., 2016). Attributes of a resilient tourism enterprise would include the ability to survive, adapt and innovate (Biggs et al., 2012; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Hall et al., 2023; Lew, 2014; Orchiston et al., 2016; Prayag et al., 2023). Several studies suggest that resilience capacity depends on the ability to be in a constant state of preparedness to cope with adversity, often called planned resilience (Lee et al., 2013; Orchiston et al., 2016; Prayag et al., 2023). When adversity strikes, then adaptive capacity allows the organization to survive, bounce back or forward, often referred to as adaptive resilience (Chowdhury et al., 2019; Hall et al., 2018; Ntounis et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2020;

Tanner et al., 2022). Yet, planned resilience does not always boost adaptive capacity (Prayag et al., 2023) but both planned and adaptive resilience require organizational change (Lee et al., 2013). More recently, Raetze et al. (2022) suggest that research should focus on developmental resilience, which examines the positive long-term development of organizations despite the presence of chronic risk factors.

Several studies have also adopted the dynamic capability view of firms to understand organizational recovery following adversity (Jiang et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2023) as internal and external knowledge-based resources become critical for recovery. Few studies, however, examine the outcome of resilience from organizations utilizing dynamic capabilities (Ozanne et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2023). Even fewer studies disentangle the impacts of the disaster or pandemic from resilience outcomes (Prayag et al., 2023). Yet, the emerging consensus is that organizational change or transformation can happen in either a planned or a haphazard way (Prayag et al., 2023). Certainly, innovations that exploit existing competencies and capabilities can be considered as part of a revival and resilience strategy (Schmitt et al., 2018) but can also engender a more fundamental strategic change within the organization (Lee et al., 2013).

This is where organizational metamorphosis becomes salient, when the change is planned and driven by resilience capabilities (Morais-Storz et al., 2018). When a strategic approach to proactive innovation is utilized to sustain a continued state of resilience, strategic resilience is emergent (Morais-Storz et al., 2018). Strategic resilience, therefore, requires the integration of strategy and entrepreneurial innovation. As crises often lead to opportunities for systemic change, innovation and resilience development can be important outcomes (Langan-Riekhof et al., 2017). Leveraging the disruption caused by crises requires a proactive approach underlined by innovation and collaboration to find alternative sources of revenue and synergies, and develop new products (Wenzel et al., 2020). These often underpin the development of resilience capabilities following crises and disasters (Biggs et al., 2012; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Ntounis et al., 2022; Ozanne et al., 2022; Prayag et al., 2023). Crises often necessitate innovative measures not only for survival but also for sustenance (Biggs et al., 2012; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Schmitt et al., 2018). The medium and long-term strategies focusing on new product development, exploring alternative channels of distribution, and tapping unexplored markets, require innovative approaches

(Prayag et al., 2023). Organizational innovation and collaborations thus strengthen the revival strategies of the organizations in the long run (Wenzel et al., 2020). Having outlined the importance of resilience to organizational metamorphosis as illustrated in Figure 1, we now shift our focus to the challenges, outlined in the literature, emerging from COVID-19 and crisis management strategies deployed by tourism firms.

Crisis Management and Marketing Strategies of Tour Operators during COVID-19

Tour operators are especially vulnerable during crises and disasters as they are often the mediators of tourism demand and supply. Pandemic-induced fall in discretionary income, uncertainty-induced delay in purchase decisions, and the subsequent unwillingness to pay and travel have had a major impact on tour operators (Baker et al., 2020). Globally, tour operation business was seriously affected by the nearly total lockdown in both major markets and destinations, as restrictions were imposed in response to the pandemic, with disastrous implications for business survival (Toubes et al., 2021). The damage caused by the pandemic in terms of business loss and disruption was unprecedented across the tour operation sector, irrespective of their size or scale.

In response, one particular set of strategies that were activated were those related to marketing as they allowed tour operators to respond to both demand and supply side changes (Niewiadomski, 2020). In particular, many tour-operating businesses were forced to alter their marketing practices to survive (Toubes et al., 2021). Innovative marketing practices such as product redesign involving creative product mixes that are sensitive to health concerns and consumer spending capacity became common during the pandemic. Tourism businesses adopted measures such as tourist vouchers to promote local customer consumption, digital marketing, and crowd marketing campaigns in their efforts to survive during the pandemic (Vargas, 2020; Rutynskyi & Kushniruk, 2020). Digital platforms such as websites, social media, blogs, mobile apps and other information communication technologies were widely used to communicate and to make marketing decisions informed by a better understanding of customers' concerns and feelings of uncertainties (Jiang & Wen, 2020).

Research design

Study Context

India experienced a major fall in tourist arrivals during the pandemic, decreasing from 10.56 million international tourists in 2019 to 2.74 million in 2020 and 1.52 million in 2021 (Ministry of Tourism, 2024a). Domestic tourism decreased from 2321.98 million in 2019 to 610.22 million in 2020 and 677.63 million in 2021 (Ministry of Tourism, 2024a). The post-pandemic recovery saw an increase in international arrivals to 8.59 million in 2022 and domestic tourists to 1731 million in 2022 (Ministry of Tourism, 2024b). There are over 1842 tour operators in India in the formal sector that are members of the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO, 2024) of which nearly 74 per cent had to close down during the pandemic (Sharma, 2021). The rest were on the verge of closure but tried to keep their business running by repurposing their employees through training to take up other responsibilities (Skift, 2020). The Indian tour operators faced bankruptcy, unemployment and business closure (Skift 2020), especially in the small and medium segments. These challenges provide the context for understanding the strategies they deployed for sustenance and survival and the extent to which organisational metamorphosis was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the formal sector as experiences and responses vary between the informal and formal organisations (Biggs, et. al., 2012; Biggs, et. al. 2015).

Method

The study employed qualitative research methods to answer the research question, guided by the need to understand the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of tour operators during COVID-19. An interview schedule was designed to collect the primary data based on prior literature. The interview questions covered the following themes: changes brought about by the pandemic. (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Hemmington & Neal, 2022); impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on tour operators (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Hemmington & Neal, 2022); challenges faced in business operations. (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021; Hemmington & Neal, 2022); measures adopted to deal with the challenges and for business recovery (Kaczmarek, et. al. 2021; Hall, et al., 2021); and lessons learned from the crisis (Kaczmarek, et. al. 2021; Hall, et al., 2021). A pilot study with five tour operators was carried out to ensure that respondents understood the questions and were capable of eliciting the information required but also as a means to finalise the interview

schedule (Clark et al., 2021). After correcting the wording and modifying some questions, the final interview schedule was prepared.

The study employed a purposive sampling method to collect data. The initial sampling frame included a representative list of 60 tour operators in the formal sector from four regions of India, selected randomly by the authors from the IATO member directory, representing the formal sector and of a multi-scale nature (Hall and Koupaei, 2024; Hall, et. al. 2022). Tour operators were chosen for the study as they represent one of the most important components of the tourism industry that brings together all other tourism services as part of tourism packages, and any changes in the tourism industry can immediately be felt by them. They are different from other tourism businesses as they serve as the primary designer of the tour package, combining products and services of other tourism businesses. Tour operators are thus the gatekeepers of the tourism industry, and any impact related to the tourism sector can most appropriately be evaluated through the tour operator. In this role, the tour operator facilitates value creation by establishing and maintaining a network of forward and backward linkages within the tourism industry. The list included owners or top executives of tour operating companies with more than 10 years of experience. They were invited by telephone to participate in the research and 42 agreed to participate in the interviews. Telephonic interviews were conducted from March to June 2022. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. Telephonic interviews are considered to provide an equal amount of data richness as in-person interviews, could offer flexibility, and anonymity and reduce distractions thereby improving the quality of responses (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). Interviews were recorded with the prior consent of respondents, which and transcribed after translating into English. Data saturation was achieved after 25 interviews. Applying the principles of theoretical sampling, the number of samples used in the present study was deemed to be sufficient to elicit data to draw reliable conclusions (Clark, et al., 2021; Wiedemann, 1955).

Table 1. Respondents' profile

Demographics		No. of participants
Gender	Female	21
	Male	4
Age	19-25 years	1
	26-35 years	14
	36-50 years	10
Educational level	Post graduate and above	18
	Graduate	7
Job title	Director cum Manager	9
	Manager	16
Experience in the sector	1-5 years	4
	6-10 years	12
	11-15 years	9

Data Analysis

The present study used inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). TCA has been found as a useful method for data analysis in qualitative research as it helps identify the underlying patterns and themes that are embedded in the data (Clarke et al., 2015). Themes capture the meanings in the data, which enable the researcher to relate them to the research objectives (Miles, et. al., 2019). The data analysis process adopted procedures recommended by Friese (2019) using Atlas Ti (v.21). In the first stage, all interview transcripts were examined to identify similarities and differences. In the second stage, 117 first-level codes were categorized under 17 pertinent sub-themes. Among these, one sub-theme (communicating package details) reported similarity in patterns with broader coverage, which was included in the neighbouring themes (challenges and marketing strategies). After careful examination of the subthemes and the quotations embedded in the codes, three dominant themes (challenges, marketing strategy, and resilience-building) were identified by the authors to address the main research question of the present study. This was followed by Spradley's (1979 and 2016) semantic network analysis where a keyword extraction model was employed to draw meaningful conclusions from the lesser-known concepts and unstructured data. This semantic analysis allowed us to draw conclusions about the meaningful relationship between variables by reflecting on the semantics of the constructs that emerged from the findings (Garrido, 2017).

The assessment of reliability and validity for the study was conducted based on Trochim's criteria, focusing on dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The reliability is established through meticulous documentation and consistent procedures throughout the research process. Detailed records of interview protocols, data collection methods, and analytical decisions ensure transparency and reproducibility. The uniform coding applied by all researchers and the achievement of data saturation after 25 interviews further support the stability and reliability of the findings. The standardized approach in data collection and analysis contributes to the dependability of the constructs, ensuring that the results are consistent and replicable. The validity of the study is reinforced by several key practices. The interviews, lasting between 30 to 45 minutes each, provided in-depth insights into tour operators' experiences, enhancing the credibility of the findings. Triangulation with secondary data sources, such as newspapers and industry reports, supported the authenticity of the results. Member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with participants, ensured that their perspectives were accurately represented. Additionally, the detailed contextual descriptions and the reflexive approach to addressing researcher biases contribute to the confirmability and transferability of the constructs, demonstrating that the findings are robust and applicable to similar contexts.

Findings

Responses to Challenges, Business Strategies, and Organizational Resilience

(i) Challenges

The study identified a number of themes under the construct of 'challenges' and these have been grouped under the following categories: first, the overall economic impact on tour operating businesses; second, the impact on tourism service providers, who were directly impacted due to the health risks caused by COVID-19, and; third, the impact on employees who lost their jobs or compelled to work on a lower wage.

(a) Impact of COVID-19 on tour operators

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a huge financial crisis to tour operators who fully depended on inbound tourists. Loss of jobs was reported in every sector of the economy, but the tourism industry faced the worst crisis. A decrease in discretionary income due to unemployment

caused by shutting down the economy impacted the tourism industry badly. The following statements indicate the severity of the financial crisis.

“ the source of income for all tourism players has vanished. for the first time in history, the pandemic caused the travel business in the entire world to plead with governments for financial support...” (R4)....”.

(b) Changes in travel behaviour

Responses revealed that travel behaviour underwent changes after the outbreak of the pandemic. Earlier people preferred to travel in groups for their holidays, but after the restrictions were relaxed, people preferred family tours. As can be seen below many people preferred places near their homes or to short-haul destinations and less crowded places.

“... Customers mostly asked for budget travel, family trip, and with small group size...” (R14).

Safe and less crowded destinations and self-driving tours were major very popular among customers. A shift in the mindset of customers with a preference for more expensive and safe holidays was reflected in the demand for boutique hotels and short-stay rentals in less crowded places during different phases of lockdown was articulated by the participants.

“...weekend destinations reachable by car such as beaches and natural attractions, that had accommodation with excellent health and safety measures were in demand....price was not an issue for this segment” (R8).

(c) New consumer culture

Changes in consumer culture and consumption practices had been another significant challenge faced by tour operators. COVID-19 forced tourism businesses to be more customer-centric. It also led to disruptions in the distribution channel, but still, there were efforts to strengthen the relationship with vendors in the market. The findings suggest adaptation to the new business environment with a focus on measures to ensure transparency in communication and building business confidence. The following response state the challenges faced by tour operators during the crisis.

“... these days we have to do direct marketing, and convincing the client about the safety of places was a major challenge. When we do business with the agent, it was easier.. we have to provide a lot of information about the destinations and the safety measures.. we had to learn a new way of communicating with customers” (R17).

(d) Trust

Tour operators in India had to face several difficulties to sustain their business after COVID-19 cases were reported. The range and intensity of these problems were identical for most of the tourism businesses. The crisis had shaken the life of people who were completely dependent on the tourism business. One of the biggest challenges for tour operators was to alleviate the anxiety of customers and instil travel confidence. Although lockdown was relaxed at different phases, customers were quite uncertain about the destinations as can be seen in the following responses.

“First of all, they were hesitant to travel, convincing them to travel itself was a challenge...” (R27).

(ii) Marketing strategies

Marketing could play a very important role in addressing the disruptions caused by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Rebranding, changing distribution channels, product and process modification, customer communication, and moving to digital are some of the commonly seen crisis marketing practices. Five sub-themes emerged from the analysis.

(a) Customer Communication

Most of the respondents experienced major challenges in communicating package details to clients. During the pandemic, tour operators made the best use of social media to reach out to customers and inform them about the offers available. Tour operating companies focussed more on strengthening their relationship with customers. This process enabled them to develop a positive attitude and interest among the existing customers by providing accurate information on destinations.

“Telephonic conversations were always made like earlier, customers always preferred to talk with the staff and understand better...” (R2).

COVID-19 protocols, travel restrictions, and quarantine rules were frequently updated by the state government and local authorities. Trade associations such as the Indian Association of Tour Operators (IATO), and the Travel Agents Association of India (TAAI) communicated the same to their members. Customer assurance and compliance with

frequently changing COVID-19 protocols and communicating them to clients were one of the most important activities of the sales team. The process involved three stages; communicating protocols before the holiday, ensuring the protocols are followed during the holiday and facilitating the safe return of customers upon completing the holiday. Respondents also emphasized that many of them used their local contacts to understand the situation at the destinations and prevailing protocols and restrictions.

“Checked about the safety measures regularly at each destination, and also verified the government guidelines in this regard to inform customers and update our arrangements” (R20).

(b) Alternative marketing strategies

The study found that COVID-19 forced tour operators to adopt new marketing strategies in response to the changing business environment. To survive in the business, several companies used information technology to stay connected with the market. Digital marketing was found to be one of the inexpensive methods which could reach out to the customer base and the market. The new marketing strategies focussed on offering new products, providing detailed information during the interaction with guests, service assurance, and the use of the appropriate digital media. The following excerpts highlight the market positioning of tour operators.

“The Five R approach to help the industry are Reassess, Reassure, Raise, Remove and Revive” (R9).

(c) Risk perception management strategies

The results showed that communicating the actual situations on the ground by various means is one of the main strategies of the tour operators to inform and prepare the customers for potential issues. Constant interaction with stakeholders in the supply chain along with effective communication on the latest protocols with clients helped tour operators prepare themselves and their customers for any potential eventualities.

Our suppliers and sub-agents were proactive in updating us about the situation in destinations and helped us immensely in keeping track of the situation (R26)

(iii) Resilience-building strategies

Resilience strategies enable an organization to overcome a crisis. It involves several steps that could reduce the impact of the crisis and lead to business recovery. The analysis identified eight subthemes that demonstrated the recovery measures followed by the tour operators.

(a) *Customer motivation*

Customer loyalty is one of the crucial factors for the success of any business. Tour operators maintained regular communication with their customers by sending them updates on the pandemic and health protocols. Images and videos of destinations were widely used to inspire confidence in the customers and maintain their interest in them. Testimonials and authentic experiences of guests were also used to stimulate interest. Other triggering points were the health benefits of travelling to natural sites and the contribution of new experiences for rejuvenation.

“We shared a lot of information on health and wellness holidays with our customers. These included the comments left by those who took the plunge early to go on hour holidays. This seemed to have encouraged many to consider such holidays as a way to cope with their panic and stress.” (R9).

(b) *Travel confidence building*

According to the respondents, confidence-building measures played a very important part in keeping the business going. Tour operators communicate all possible information about the site, the level of infection rates in the destination, protocols along with recommendations for holidays to develop confidence. Many tour operators ensured that the staff of vendors and other service providers were vaccinated in order to convince the client about safety. As one of the respondents stated:

“A clear message of staff being fully vaccinated was communicated by hotels, travel agents and visitor places... Vaccination certificates became promotional material” (R2).

(c) Staff Efficiency

The findings revealed that tourism organizations understood the significant role of employees and took necessary measures to improve their motivation and confidence. There was no disagreement on the fact that the pandemic adversely affected the human resource in tourism organizations. Most firms were forced to trim the organisation structure and wherever employees were retained their pay was reduced. In such a situation, maintaining employee morale and motivation was a major challenge. The following responses articulate measures taken to boost employee morale.

“We had continuous training programmes from industry organizations such as FICCI, and various NGOs, which helped with our HR initiatives aimed at boosting employee morale and motivation...” (R10).

(d) Handling service failures

Service failure can result in losing customers, loss of reputation, and affect customer satisfaction. The Covid safety protocols created more instances of service failure due to the restrictions imposed on holiday mobility. Organizations were aware of the impacts of service failure and were taking measures to minimize them. A number of measures were taken by the respondents to address service failure such as employee training, complementary offers such as free meals and sightseeing tours, discounts for future bookings and so on. Many felt that these measures helped retain customer loyalty and establish long-term relationships.

“We tried understanding the root cause of the problem and tried to satisfy the clients by giving offers, and incentives such as complimentary dinners, extra sightseeing, and discounts. Most of our customers seemed to appreciate that we were working under difficult circumstances over which we had little control.” (R10).

(e) Innovation

Tour operators adopted many innovative strategies such as crisis marketing through influencers, bloggers, and vloggers along with the introduction of new niche attractions, rejuvenation packages and wellness holidays. Strengthening vendor relations and online presence was perhaps the most common innovation that evolved during the pandemic.

Many respondents thought that after the outbreak of the pandemic, the online presence of the companies has increased.

“Almost all tour businesses initiated the virtual model as a means for business operations. It made it easier to contact and communicate with our customers, and make transactions. Penetration of mobile and internet technologies was very useful during the pandemic” (R12).

(f) *Regulatory adherence*

Responses indicated that tour operators were consistent in their following of the COVID-19 regulatory guidelines issued by the government during the different phases of restrictions and containment. Many tour operators stated that protecting the health of their clients was a higher priority than business interests. This has been helpful in developing an in-house capability to respond to a fast-evolving system of government regulations to combat COVID-19. All regulatory guidelines were communicated to clients before the trip started and they strictly adhered to the government advisories.

“We passed on all government guidelines on protocols and restrictions in destinations and attractions to our customers on a regular basis before the trips. Our clients were happy with the amount of information they received. However, a few of our clients cancelled their booking when they received information on restrictions.” (R1).

The findings allude to inherent relationships among three concepts; challenges, business strategies, and resilience development. These relationships were analysed and grouped using semantic relationship analysis (Spradley, 2016). Seven of the nine semantic typologies of Spradley (2016) were deemed appropriate and used to understand the relationship between challenges and responses in the present study (Figure 2). A detailed analysis of these relationships was carried out to develop a model of crisis management and challenge metamorphosis that emerged from the findings. A detailed analysis of the semantic relationship (Spradley, 1979, 2016) is presented in Appendix -1.

Figure 2: Semantic Relationships

Semantic Relationship	Explanation		Challenges	Strategies	CHALLENGE METAMORPHOSIS
	Strict Inclusion ¹	Challenges contain potential coping strategies and resilience-building measures.			
	Rationale ²	Coping strategies resulted in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19-induced challenges.			
	Function ³	Strategies to combat challenges are used for resilience building.			
	Means-end ⁴	Crisis strategies are instrumental in achieving challenge metamorphosis.			
	Sequence ⁵	Crisis management strategies are a step towards challenge metamorphosis.			
	Attribution ⁶	Crisis management and resilience building are key attributes of challenge metamorphosis.			
	Cause and Effect ⁷	Challenge metamorphosis is a result of crisis management and resilience building, caused by the pandemic.			

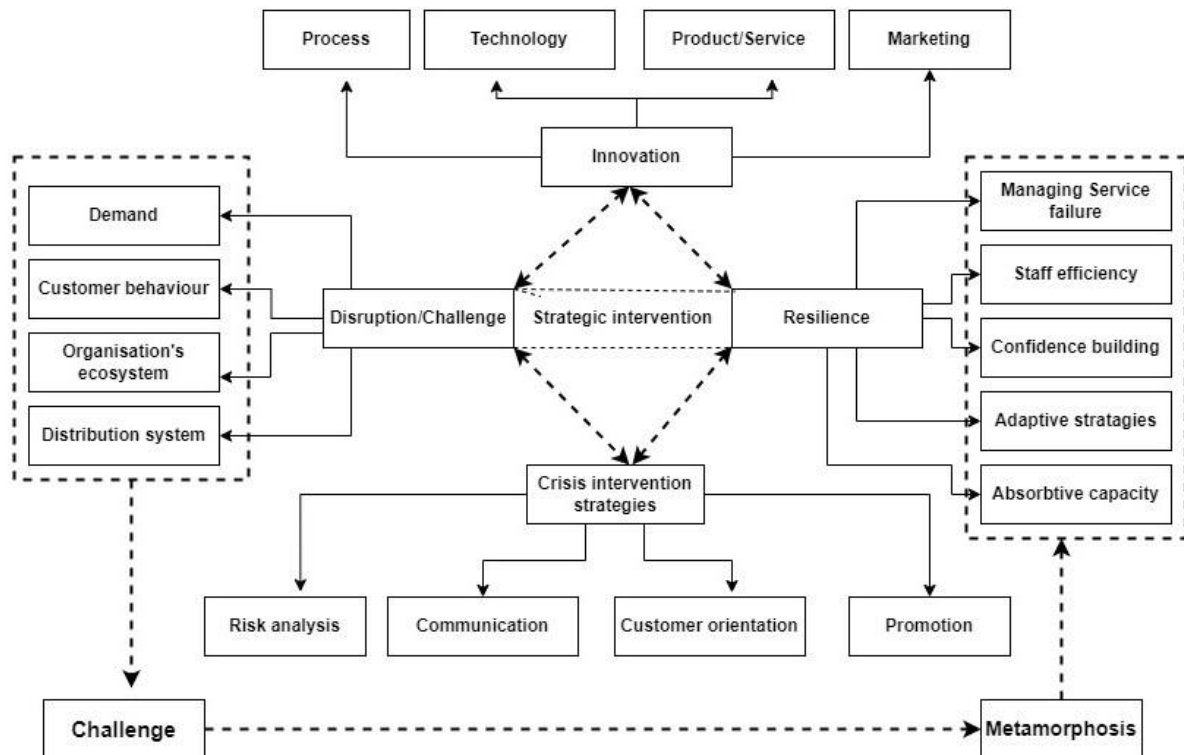
Relationship form

¹: X is a kind of Y, ²: X is the reason for Y, ³: X is used for Y, ⁴: X is a way to do Y, ⁵: X is a step in Y, ⁶: X is an attribute of Y, ⁷: X is a result of Y

Discussion and Implications

This study attempted to develop an understanding of the crisis/resilience strategies that can drive metamorphosis in tour operation businesses during COVID-19 in India. Such a ground-level analysis is useful to understand crisis management and business recovery in a contextually relevant manner and develop a theoretically valid model that can be used for managing crises in future. Applying the CMM model, we identify from the challenges businesses faced during COVID-19, the types of strategies deployed to build organizational resilience and how some of these strategies can drive organizational metamorphosis. The model-based approach that we adopted not only offers easily adaptable solutions to the challenges posed by crises but theoretically complements existing organizational resilience models (Lee et al., 2013; ICOR, 2016; Tanner et al., 2022). Thus, based on the findings and the theoretical discussion of crisis management, resilience and organisational metamorphosis, Figure 1 can be expanded to reveal the interrelationships between challenges posed by the disruption, strategic intervention and organizational resilience as proposed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The Challenge Metamorphosis Model – The expanded Model



Theoretically, this model identifies COVID-19 challenges for tour operators, which included disruptions caused to demand, customer behaviour, organization's eco-system and distribution system as suggested in other tourism sectors (Prayag et al., 2023; Price et al., 2022; Toubes et al., 2021). Strategic interventions made by the businesses included innovations related to process, technology, product and service, and marketing. These are factors that mitigate the disruptions/challenges but also be resilience enhancing as shown in Figure 3. Previous studies (Biggs et al., 2012; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Jiang et al., 2022; Orchiston & Prayag, 2016) particularly note that innovation capacity is critical for resilience building. Likewise, crisis intervention strategies (Figure 3) such as transparent communication, customer-oriented business practices and crisis-focused promotion must be deployed to reassure customers. Customization is also necessary based on a detailed risk analysis to adapt to the evolving customer needs. These factors are critical to adaption post-crisis based on previous studies (Sigala, 2020) and allow businesses to use crisis intervention strategies to mitigate challenges and improve resilience. Innovation and crisis

intervention strategies are two important processes in the CMM that leads to organizational resilience. Typically, resilience is demonstrated through developing absorptive capacity, adaptive strategies, staff efficiency and the ability to manage service failure and build confidence (see Figure 3). Absorptive capacity and adaptive strategies are core resilience facets (Hall et al., 2023; Prayag, 2018; Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007) while staff efficiency reflects their ability to respond to work challenges, which remains a critical indicator of organizational resilience (Lee et al., 2013; Orchiston & Prayag, 2016). As Sharma et al. (2021) observe, crisis intervention strategies and innovation are essential to developing resilience. Enhancing internal locus control is essential to build consumer confidence and effective communication reduces the trust deficit. The consequent metamorphosis helped these tour operating organisations to become crisis-ready with capabilities to survive, stabilise, and succeed in overcoming the challenges posed by crises, instead of succumbing to the crisis. Thus, key facets of bounce-back and bounce-forward (Hall et al., 2018; Prayag, 2018) are evident in these organizations, highlighting their resilient nature. Figure 3 also shows the link (through the arrows) between the type of challenges emanating from the pandemic and the processes that lead to metamorphosis (i.e. outcomes).

From a theoretical perspective, the simple process model depicted in Figure 1 can be empirically verified and extended to show how processes of business transformation are underpinned by strategic interventions in areas of innovation and resilience. This is a similar process to what happens at destination level, where transformation is underpinned by resilience capacity, governance structures that facilitate actor interactions and collaboration, as well as policy choices (Hall et al., 2025). These can influence how and when tourism businesses can initiate and sustain strategic interventions. As such, an important contribution of this study is to clarify the types of challenges encountered by tour operators in India and how innovation and crisis intervention strategies interplay in shaping resilience outcomes. However, it must be acknowledged that the governance structure in the industry or lack thereof, can shape these strategies. While prior studies allude to these factors (Biggs et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2022; Prayag, 2023), they have not been examined from the process perspective depicted in Figure 1. By providing an extended version of this process, Figure 3 also clearly articulates the key factors that affect the recovery and

rebuilding of the tour-operating sector post-crisis. This is important given the economic and socio-cultural importance of such small businesses in sustaining livelihood and promoting regional economic development by curating experiences and developing tourist packages to remote and rural areas. Small business resilience can support local communities in deriving economic and social-cultural benefits from tourism as alluded in previous studies (Biggs et al., 2012; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Orchiston et al., 2016). Thus, the model despite being drawn from a small sample, identifies how business transformation is possible after a disruptive event through the leveraging of innovation, digitisation, and collaboration that is relevant to recovery of other tourism and hospitality businesses in India and elsewhere. These factors have consistently emerged as being critical to small businesses in other countries in their recovery process following adversity (Biggs et al., 2012; Orchiston et al., 2016). In this way, we complement the tourism resilience literature by identifying drivers, processes and outcomes that underpin business change in the context of COVID-19. The model is also presented as a pathway for businesses in general to consider factors that could act as a catalyst for transformation but not all of them must transform to survive. The model builds on the prevailing problem-solving approaches while highlighting contextual opportunities for business transformation through the challenge-metamorphosis lens. Yet, as Hall et al. (2025) suggest, not all crisis and trigger events lead to transformation of destinations and tourism businesses. It is equally important to acknowledge that some businesses will go back to business as usual and utilize maintenance strategies, characterised by limited learning and interactions with other players in the industry. As Hall et al. (2025) observe, maintenance strategies can also be resilience enhancing.

The study also has managerial implications. Based on the periodic analysis of the crucial challenges, strategies, and resilience measures adopted by tour operating businesses, it becomes clear that addressing crises is possible without compromising the core business of tour operators. Table 2 provides a set of practices that can be applied in the short, medium and long term for tour operators to manage challenges and build resilience. Challenges caused by the pandemic are construed as of short and medium nature. As the changes caused by the pandemic may or may not lead to a radical change, it might call for incremental measures for recovery. Thus, the strategy could be short/medium/long term to

combat the challenges effectively. Resilience building through strategies adopted to cope with challenges must be oriented towards making transformational changes. Organizational resilience building thus is approached from a long-term perspective.

Table 2: Nature of challenges, strategies, and resilience with corresponding dimensions

Challenges (Short-term/medium-term)	Business Strategies (Short term/medium/long-term)	Organizational Resilience (Long term)
Preference changes for destination travel and accommodation units could be a medium-term challenge.	Strategies like customer communication, and reduction of risk perception could be adopted as short-term/medium-term strategies	Confidence building and customer motivation could help in building long-term resilience to address the challenges.
New consumer culture as a result of adaptation to changes calls for a customer-centric approach as the medium-term challenge	Product innovation, customization, and collaboration among stakeholders.	Innovation through direct marketing strategies exploring new attractions, long-lasting vendor relationships and enhanced staff efficiency through training will help to combat the challenges of the new consumer culture.
Impact on business, job loss, and other changes caused by the pandemic	Following protocols, insurance, sharing testimonials, revising existing marketing plans	Innovation, reduction of service failure, and customer motivation through service assurance.

Challenges irrespective of their impact need to be tackled with strategies that are appropriate to the level of their impact. However, it may not be possible to manage pandemic-induced challenges because they are new and sometimes unprecedented in their gravity. This warrants a comprehensive approach to minimise the impact of the challenges posed. Such strategies could lead to long-term positive changes and resilience building. Resisting challenges may not be pragmatic but adapting to the situations and creating innovations that could be sources of competitive advantage would appear more beneficial in such situations. We describe it as ‘challenge-metamorphosis’. Bound by constraints imposed by crises, such a metamorphosis represents an opportunity for rejuvenation and innovation. For example, in the wake of a pandemic, challenges such as ensuring trust (Sharma et al., 2021). The emergence of new consumer culture (Chen et al., 2021) can be addressed through innovative customer communication to develop and enhance customer confidence and resilience for tourism businesses (González et al., 2021).

Improvements in scale and scope with complete transformational changes are possible, provided stakeholder collaboration and innovation are leveraged as supporting or enabling mechanisms. Such metamorphosis is capable of cultivating and leveraging competencies as well as establishing well-developed capabilities, resulting in quick recovery and contributing effectively towards resilience building. Operating models with self-equipped internal resources and the possibility of strong interactions paving the way for the new journey of metamorphosis could be evolved. Contextualizing the CMM based on its antecedents and outcomes in diverse environments can add new dimensions of relevance and meaning to the initial challenges which had induced the metamorphosis chain.

Accordingly, the study proposes the CMM convert a crisis into an opportunity for resilience-building and business transformation while addressing the challenges faced during the pandemic by tour operators (UN, 2020). The model helps to streamline the priorities while identifying the challenges and designing relevant strategies that could lead to transformative outcomes and resilience. In practice, the proposed strategies to tackle the challenges imposed by the pandemic should have a resilience-building orientation rather than an ad hoc tactical approach to address the issues arising from the crisis. Thereby, an ecosystem can be created to build resilience as a default mechanism while combating challenges through innovation. Business models in tourism often ignore the potential for challenges to be opportunities for metamorphosis. Such an approach tends to undermine the role of resilience building and innovation for business transformation in times of crises and business volatility.

Conclusion, Limitations and Areas for Further Research

Tourism was one of the most severely affected sectors during the pandemic and tourism businesses faced several disruptions as outlined earlier. However, the crisis also saw a wide range of innovation practices that can potentially accelerate a process of transformation in the tourism industry. Indian tour operators experienced massive disruption resulting from business closure and changes in consumer culture and behaviour. Developing resilience became a necessity for businesses and tour operators which adopted a range of responses that ranged from marketing strategies, human resource practices, and technological

innovations in its pursuit. The disruption caused by the pandemic, however, represented an opportunity for tour operators to become more resilient and undergo transformation to become innovative, proactive, nimble and more responsive. The consequent changes in business practices could be described as an example of challenge-metamorphosis. Yet, some businesses return to business as usual without undergoing fundamental transformations. This does not imply that they are less resilient but rather they are focusing on bounce back as opposed to bounce forward strategies. Also, metamorphosis is very much dependent on the type of crisis event and its duration, the industry and social context, and structure of actors in the sector (Hall et al., 2025). Thus, metamorphosis is only one of the strategic options available to tourism businesses and not all businesses need to fundamentally change to survive disruptive events.

The CMM model initially presented (Figure 1) and the expanded model (Figure 3) represent a useful contribution to the crisis management literature and have practical implications for organisations on how to respond to crises in a way that could lead to resilience-building metamorphosis. This study also opens areas for further research to test CMM in numerous other contexts such as crisis and disaster management, strategic management, organisational behaviour, agile management, and organisational resilience in various sectors. This study focused on Indian tour operators and could be replicated in other sectors of tourism such as hotels, travel agencies, visitor attractions, restaurants and tourist destinations. The study reinforces the importance of strategic interventions and innovation for businesses to overcome challenges posed by crises and to metamorphose into resilient systems. One of the identified limitations of the model is the prioritization of the challenges, strategies, and resilience measures. Most immediate challenges with wider implications have been considered as the core of the model development but there are potentially other issues that impacted the sector. Also, the qualitative methodology only provides a baseline for the proposed model, which needs to be verified quantitatively to ascertain the professed relationships.

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Appendix 1: Semantic Relationships

Types of the semantic relationship	Number of relationships identified	Relationships identified
Strict inclusion	07	1. Challenges represent problems in sales, changes in interstate rules and protocols, and administrative difficulties in ensuring the safety of people. 2. Changes in the choice of destination, travel, vacation, group members and place of stay are construed as challenges. 3. The impact created by a pandemic concerning business activity, job losses, and other negative impacts has been considered a challenge. 4. The new consumer culture posed by the pandemic leading to the adoption of customer-centric approaches, compulsory adaptation to COVID-induced changes, and increasing requirements for transparency and clear communication with an Intensive focus on confidence-building had been presented as a challenge. 5. Problems of building and sustaining trust and relationships are construed as challenges. 6. Alternative measures including digital marketing product innovation, and new promotion campaigns construed as 'strategies' to combat COVID-induced challenges. Customer communication through social media, email, and telephone calls for relationship building is construed as a strategy. Risk perception is identified as an effective strategy for combating challenges. Adherence to the government protocols to ensure safety at the destinations is interpreted as a strategy. 7. Confidence-building by providing updates to regular clients, communication about safety, and precautionary measures interpreted as resilience-building measures. Customer motivation through persuasion, rejuvenation, and service assurance helps in building resilience. Rectification of service failure with maximum effort to avoid service failure is construed as a resilience-building measure.
Rational	02	1. The new consumer culture induced by the pandemic has called for adaptation to the new normal. Preference changes in the choice of duration of the vacation and the new consumer culture have manifested as a challenge. Preference changes are the reason for the new consumer culture being construed as a challenge. 2. To combat the challenges of new consumer culture, alternative strategies such as digital marketing are construed as strategies.

Function	11	1. Vendor relations construed as a resilience-building strategy is used for facilitating adherence to protocol. Following protocol through coordination with various stakeholders is an innovative step for building vendor relationships, leading to resilience. 2. Adherence to the protocol is based on updated information from local government authorities. The update of state government or other local authorities concerning safety protocol is used for building resilience through the coordinated or integrated effort by the stakeholders. 3. Strategies to combat challenges are used for resilience-building 4. Customer-centric approach mandated by the new consumer culture is used for creating trust among customers as this helps in keeping constant touch with customers. 5. Customer-centric approach forming a part of a new consumer culture is used for building trust and confidence among customers 6. Clear communication as a part of new consumer culture is used for building trust as it helps in the clarification of doubts and provides reassurance. 7. The provision of appropriate details as a part of trust creation is used for minimizing risk perception arising due to the non-availability of updated information 8. The long-lasting relationship helps in building trust and is used for enhanced customer communication and transparency, strengthening an existing relationship. 9. To minimize risk, updated information is to be provided to the tourist, and the provision of such information is used for customer motivation which contributes towards building resilience. 10. Social media has been used effectively for customer communication during the pandemic. Such unconventional promotional strategies have allowed analysis of customer buying behaviour, such mode of promotions, construed as innovation, is used for resilience building. 11. Information on Protocol minimizes risk perception. Such protocol from authorized sources acting as a precautionary measure is used for confidence building.
Means end	05	1. Strategies developed during the pandemic have helped to combat COVID-induced challenges as strategies are a way to address specific challenges caused by the pandemic. 2. Due to the challenge of a drop in sales, there was a need to work towards confidence-building despite travel restrictions. Problems of decrease in visitation are pursued as a way to emphasise the creation of confidence which could contribute towards resilience building. 3. Protocol sharing reduces the risk perception by addressing the problem of safety concerns. Protocol sharing with stakeholders of tourism including tourists is the way to resolve safety challenges. 4. Innovative efforts through coordination strategies with stakeholders are a way to reduce risk perception as it ensures sharing protocol about pandemics amongst them. 5. Building confidence measures by sharing videos and photos of safer accommodations/facilities is a way to motivate customers

Sequence	04	1. Confidence-building as a resilience measure is a step towards motivating customers; confidence-building and customer motivation can contribute towards resilience building to effectively combat challenges. 2. Efforts and resources to restore confidence call for a customer-centric approach. The requirement of building confidence is a step triggered by the new customer-centric consumer culture. 3. The Challenge of trust-building through constant touch is construed as a challenge. Constant touch with customers is considered during the pandemic as a step toward a long-lasting relationship. 4. Addressing service failure should be handled without probing customers or causing loss to them. Such kind of service failure handling, as a resilience measure is a step towards building a relationship through transparency and effective customer communication.
Attribution	02	1. The challenge of trust creation can be addressed through the strategy of effective customer communication as trust is a characteristic of a relationship. 2. The Challenge of building trust during the pandemic can be addressed by establishing long-term relationships; through the avoidance of service failure. Trust is construed as a characteristic of a long-term relationship.
Cause and effect	03	1. Preference changes in terms of destination choices; travel choices and other services are a challenge in the wake of the pandemic. Concerning the change in preference for various services enhancing the staff, efficiency could be a solution. The challenge caused by preference change leads to the creation of staff inefficiency, as they may not be trained adequately to face the challenge. 2. Lack of staff efficiency could be a cause for service failure. Building staff efficiency reduces service failure, leading to resilience building. 3. Deliberation on the attribute of products or destinations, potential negative results, and necessity values are found essential through customer briefing on destination details. Confidence building through the provision of details to customers is the result of customer motivation.
Spatial inclusion	02	1. Following protocols is part of building trust. The strategy of following protocol could be an effective method of combating the challenge of issues relating to trust. 2. Effective customer communication is a part of building trust among tourists. Customer communication through social media etc during the pandemic as a strategy is an effective method of combating challenges caused by lack of trust.