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Article in *Tourism Planning and Development* · November 2022

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Resilience Strategies of Tour Operators During the Uncertainty of COVID-19: Evidence from Bangladesh

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, tour operators have been going through uncertain times as they depend directly on supply-side (e.g. airlines, hotels) and demand-side (e.g. tourists) of tourism as well as on destination management organizations. This study explores resilience strategies made by tour operators in Bangladesh that ultimately helped them survive through the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 25 tour operators, findings of the study show that resilience-building depends not only on strategies of tour operators but also on supports from external agencies. The study further shows that a multi-dimensional understanding of resilience strategies is essential in tourism research and proposes that the resilience-building of tour operators can be conceptualized as a three-dimensional mechanism including innate resilience, internally-induced resilience, and externally-induced resilience. The study would facilitate improved resilience strategy and informed policymaking to better address uncertainties during and after a major crisis for tour operators.

Keywords: Tourism, tour operators, COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty, resilience strategy, Bangladesh

Note: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Tourism Planning & Development* on 16 Nov 2022, available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21568316.2022.2144429>

To cite: Islam, M. S., Kabir, M. M., & Hassan, K. (2023). Resilience Strategies of Tour Operators During the Uncertainty of COVID-19: Evidence from Bangladesh. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 20(2), 281–300. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2022.2144429>

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 has disrupted every economic function all over the world; however, tourism is one of the hardest-hit sectors of the pandemic (Abbas et al., 2021; Mensah & Boakye, 2021). Developing countries that are more dependent on tourism have faced severe negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic compared to developed countries (ILO, 2021; Milesi-Ferretti, 2021). Supply-side stakeholders of tourism in developing countries are in distress due to the COVID-19, particularly tour operators who conduct business in both domestic and international markets (Do et al., 2022). Since the business of tour operators are closely associated with the core tourism services such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, tour guiding, and recreation, they are completely jeopardized due to the lockdown and other uncertainty of COVID-19 (Traskevich & Fontanari, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Prolonged shutdown of business due to lockdown imposed by governments has led to unprecedented uncertainty putting tour operators in complete pandemonium (Islam et al., 2020).

Tour operators play a key role in promoting destinations as well as the tourism industry to the international market. In most cases, these are small businesses operating in both domestic and international markets (Hasan et al., 2021). Having counterparts in different countries, tour operators ensure a complete outbound and inbound tourism experience to their clients (Ahmmed, 2013; Rahman, 2019). However, small tourism enterprises, particularly tour operators, in developing countries like Bangladesh constantly face uncertainties mainly from natural calamities and political instabilities (Buultjens et al., 2016; Kebede, 2018). Though tour operators often manage to survive and operate business throughout these natural and man-made harsh conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic caught them by surprise. This has resulted in loss of revenue as well as skilled workforce from the industry (World Travel and Tourism Council-WTTC, 2021). The unimaginable crisis due to COVID-19 demanded for a unique set of resilience-building strategies for tour operators (King et al., 2021). In Bangladesh, many tour operators have developed a certain level of tolerance and resilience to the looming threat of COVID-19 and are still continuing their businesses (Hasan et al., 2021).

There have been a number of studies focusing mainly on impact of COVID-19 on different economic sectors including tourism (Abbas et al., 2021; Hasan et al., 2021; Mulder, 2020; Pappas, 2021). Also, resilience of tourism industry has been explored in several studies (Boto-García & Mayor, 2022; Sharma et al., 2021; Traskevich & Fontanari, 2021). However,

there have been very few studies on resilience-building approaches of tour operators regarding COVID-19 pandemic (Hasan et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2021). Being closely associated with other tourism supply-side stakeholders, tour operators are a prominent contributor to the overall tourism value chain (Do et al., 2022). Their resilience-building strategies to combat the uncertainty of COVID-19 can influence other stakeholders involved within the tourism industry (González-Torres et al., 2021; Hasan et al., 2021; Jang & Kim, 2022). Therefore, knowing these strategies and adaptive management approaches could provide valuable insight on the resilience of tour operators towards the uncertainty of COVID-19 pandemic.

The overarching aim of the study is to explore different resilience-building strategies made by tour operators to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic situation in Bangladesh. More specifically, based on empirical findings, the study explores and compiles tour operators' resilience-building strategies during the uncertain and challenging time of COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 25 semi-structured qualitative interviews with tour operators operating in Bangladesh were conducted to achieve the aim of the study. The study contributes to the literature on tourism resilience and strategies developed by tour operators during the uncertainty of COVID-19 pandemic situation. The study will also help tour operators and government authorities to gain an insight from the empirical findings in formulating effective policies to combat the COVID-19 related uncertainty. Also, evidences of the effectiveness of resilience strategies taken by this special stakeholder group, tour operators, could be utilized as a useful reference in dealing with similar shocks in the future.

2. Theoretical context

2.1 Consequences of uncertainty in tourism

Uncertainty and disruption are nothing new to the travel and tourism industry. The global recession of 2008 caused a downturn in travelling as more and more people had focused on saving their money instead of spending on luxurious trips (Kwon et al., 2020; Papatheodorou et al., 2010). Epidemics such as SARS and MERS also brought in severe negative impact on travelling (Abbas et al., 2021). Events of terrorism also reason for an overall decline in hotel occupancy and passengers opting to travel by air as fear ensued (Ahlfeldt et al., 2015; Buultjens et al., 2016; Veréb et al., 2020). Natural calamities like the Tsunami also caused a tremendous loss in visitor economy (Barbhuiya & Chatterjee, 2020; Rosselló et al., 2020). These natural and manmade catastrophes often push tourism to turmoil and uncertainty.

However, in each case mentioned above, travel and tourism industry managed to bounce back. With positive branding and effective security measures, countries affected by natural calamities and terrorist attacks can see an upward recovery trend in tourism upon the initial decline (Do et al., 2022; King et al., 2021). In many cases when natural calamities caused a downfall in tourism activities, integrated coastal policies, earthquake resistant infrastructure, reconstruction and renovation of infrastructure and tourism superstructure and inclusion of local community in rebranding have contributed to resilience building to combat with the above mentioned uncertainties (Barbhuiya & Chatterjee, 2020; Bowen & Sotomayor, 2021; Buultjens et al., 2016). These incidents serve as an example that though tourism is one of the most vulnerable sectors in any calamity and uncertainty, the industry has a great capacity to bounce back mainly through building resilience during the challenging times (Sharma et al., 2021).

Similarly, in cases of tour operators in relation to any uncertainty, whenever tour operators face any severe crisis (manmade or natural) their demand might drop down to zero. Since tourism services are discretionary in nature, people do not like to take the risk of travelling when there is a crisis (Pappas & Glyptou, 2021; Veréb et al., 2020). However, as soon as the crisis is over and the situation becomes normal, tourists start travelling again. For this reason, the demand for tour operators might excel at optimum level as soon as people perceive no risk is associated with traveling (Veréb & Azevedo, 2021). Therefore, in many cases, the survival of a tourism operator mostly depends on how it can survive till the uncertainty is over, that is when there will be demand from the tourist.

2.2 In-built capacity to resist shocks

When the duration of a shock and its impact is unknown, the intensity of uncertainty increases. Particularly for tour operators, the duration of uncertainty is one of the prime determinants of the degree of resilience to a particular shock like the COVID-19 pandemic (Melián-Alzola et al., 2020; Szczygielski et al., 2021). Prolonged exposure to COVID-19 and the resulting uncertainty put the resilience of tour operators to test. In such case, the survival of a tour operator under any type of uncertainty developed by unpredicted shock depends on the innate quality of the business (Kutzner, 2019). The innate quality originates from the nature of the tourism industry, experience and extent of capacity of operating tourism business, reputation of business and loyal customers, and entrepreneur's personal traits (Hasan et al., 2014; Portuguez & Gómez Zermeño, 2020).

At times of unprecedented events resulting in uncertainty, experience and capacity of the tourism business comes to play (Williams et al., 2021). The degree of flexibility and the amount of investment of a company may help it to move forward during the challenging time (Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). Tour operators having employees with considerable skills and business acumen are less susceptible to the loss incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic than the ones with unskilled employees (Do et al., 2022). Furthermore, operations having more disposable assets are prone to survive by either selling or leasing them to other counterparts and generating marginal income during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hasan et al., 2021). Higher resource utilization leads to higher functionality; and during unpredicted shock, tourism businesses operating for a longer duration tend to adapt relatively easily than the businesses starting out their operations shortly prior to the crisis.

Entrepreneurs' passion for business also leads to precision and the existence of a winning mentality helps in resilience building during dire times (Maritz et al., 2020). Tour operators passionate about the industry tend to look for adaptive management approaches which helps them deal with the unpredicted shocks in the long run (Portuguez & Gómez Zermeño, 2020). Also, emotional attachment towards the business helps gain a sense of ownership resulting in higher motivation to serve customers (Kallmuenzer et al., 2019). Additionally, motivated employees and owners provide greater service and create loyal customers resulting in an overall positive contribution to the service value chain. At times of uncertainty, a strong customer base can help tourism business operators to stick to the industry and achieve a sense of confidence as there is an assurance of future business opportunities (Nilashi et al., 2021). Expertise in catering to a specific customer base also helps reducing risk and increases the chances of formulating resilience-building strategies during uncertainties.

In this study, the intrinsic capacities that contribute to resilience of tour operators during a particular shock (and shock-driven uncertainty) are termed as innate resilience. These built-in capacities developed from operating business over time help a tour operator to survive and grow during new normal situation at a considerable extent. These innate capacities are considered crucial for resilience and long-term sustainability of a tourism venture (Bown et al., 2013; Plummer & Armitage, 2007). Developing these innate resilience mainly depends on the capacity of individuals or organizations to learn (Islam et al., 2018).

2.3 Reactive strategies to COVID-19

When tour operators face a shock, they take on a few strategies to improvise, adapt and overcome the effect of the shock (Do et al., 2022). A few of the adaptation strategies are taken by the tour operators themselves and a few supports come from external sources such as government and peer groups (Foo et al., 2021; Huynh et al., 2021). These adaptation strategies are reactive response that enhances resilience of tour operators.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, customer needs have changed and so have the delivery mode of services (Osti & Nava, 2020). As tourism business operators adapt to change, they undertook various strategies to deal with the unpredicted shock (Williams et al., 2021). In order to reduce the spread of the Corona virus, businesses opted for “Work from Home” (WFH) policies which resulted in reduced cost and increased productivity (Do et al., 2022; Ratten, 2020). Small firms which are reliant on the Internet capitalized the most from this kind of change. Businesses invested more on ensuring their online presence as lockdowns ensued and people spent more time on social media sites. E-commerce boomed and so did virtual tours (Chirisa et al., 2020; Nayyar et al., 2018). People opted to taste the technological advancement in tourism and able tour operators obliged. A shift towards target customers was also noticeable as businesses explored new target customer segments and destinations which had lower COVID-19 restrictions and open borders (Hasan et al., 2021). Tourism businesses predominantly operating in international markets shifted their focus on the domestic side in order to expand their business and also to ensure a steady revenue stream during the uncertainty.

At the same time, cost-cutting strategies to survive during the pandemic have been commonly utilized (Foo et al., 2021). These are usually in the form of shutting down offices, reducing employee salaries and even mass lay-off of non-essential staff (Do et al., 2022; Hasan et al., 2021; Huynh et al., 2021; ILO, 2021). These measures are a stop-gap solution to the existing crisis and are not sustainable in the long run. The advent of sharing economy also played a pivotal role in adaptive management, as more and more tourism business operators paired up to share their resources, including workspace, to reduce overall office expenses (Bernardi, 2018; Godelnik, 2017). Changing employment type from permanent to freelancing also opened up new cost saving approach which saw an overall rise to productivity and optimum resource utilization under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ratten, 2020).

External support plays a pivotal role in the recovery process of unpredicted shock. This has proven to be essential in time and time again as tourism businesses underwent natural and manmade crises (Barbhuiya & Chatterjee, 2020; Buultjens et al., 2016; King et al., 2021). The government of a country is a major stakeholder in providing external supports. Formulating effective monetary and non-monetary policies reduce the impact of the shock leading to uncertainty. Effective lockdown policies and mass vaccination programs saw a slightly rejuvenated state of tourism during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hasan et al., 2021). Furthermore, workshops and training programs also equipped the tourism business operators with adequate knowledge on dealing with the crisis and gave them an optimistic outlook about the industry (Do et al., 2022). Sharing up to date information among peers also ensures on the buildup of a healthy business community which is effective in dealing with uncertainty (Ratten, 2020). Government intervention is crucial in the survival of any industry, especially when it comes to tourism industry as it suffered the most during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this study, the strategies taken by individual tour operators in response to shock (i.e. COVID-19) are termed as internally-induced resilience. Those reactive strategies are helpful to survive and carry out tour operators' business during uncertainty and new normal period. Besides, the assistance given by external agencies (e.g. government, peer groups, financial institutes) to tour operators for sustaining business from the impacts of COVID-19 is termed as externally-induced resilience in this study.

3. Methods

The study seeks to facilitate a critical understanding of the complex phenomenon regarding how tour operators develop resilience through strategy formulation during an uncertain period, more specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. A qualitative methodology was used to explore the study's aims by seeking the experiences and perceptions of tour operators regarding their resilience-building strategies during the pandemic. The qualitative approach has allowed the researchers to explore and gain an understanding of a particular situation or events as qualitative research takes place in a usual setting where the actual events occur (Creswell et al., 2007). Qualitative semi-structured interviewing technique (Bryman, 2012) seems more appropriate due to its strength in uncovering the participants' opinions and feelings in more detail. While, semi-structured interviews encourage the interviewees to speak in their own words (Packer, 2011), they also

allow the researchers to accommodate the emerging themes from that conversation and become more visible as a knowledge-producing participant (Brinkmann, 2014).

In total, 25 semi-structured qualitative interviews with tour operators were conducted (see Table 1). Data saturation occurred after conducting around 20 interviews, though, a total of 25 interviews were conducted for ensuring precision of the data (Saunders et al., 2018). Keeping the scope of the research and the replication of data (the commonness in key characteristics) in mind, when it was felt that the gathered data would be able to produce enough evidence to understand and critically explain the matters, data collection was stopped. Also, based on a preliminary understanding of each interview, after around 20 interviews similar types of responses were being raised by the participants with relatively no new information (Morse, 2015).

Table 1. Details of the tour operators participated in the study.

Respondent Identification	Role of the Respondent	Name of the organizations	Major tourism business	Interview duration (Minutes)
TO ₁	Managing Director	Tours and Trips Bangladesh	Inbound	51:28
TO ₂	Owner	Icon Tours	Inbound	50:00
TO ₃	Owner	Blue Sky Holidays	Inbound	39:24
TO ₄	CEO	New discovery tours and logistics	Outbound	36:15
TO ₅	Owner	Captain Holidays Ltd	Outbound	52:23
TO ₆	Owner	Travel Homes	Inbound	45:00
TO ₇	CEO	Calendar Tours and travels	Outbound	26:05
TO ₈	Managing Director	Sunshine Travel Air International	Outbound	22:00
TO ₉	Owner	Fast tours and travels	Inbound	25:02
TO ₁₀	Director	Regency travels	Outbound	32:05
TO ₁₁	Manager, Sales	Jaba tours	Inbound	38:08
TO ₁₂	Owner	Sky Holidays	Outbound	42:12
TO ₁₃	CEO	Delta Outdoors	Outbound	58:13
TO ₁₄	Owner	Holiday travels and tours	Outbound	45:00
TO ₁₅	Tour guide	Memory Makers	Domestic	29:00
TO ₁₆	Owner	Riverain Tours	Inbound	54:00
TO ₁₇	Owner	Rainy Deer Tours and Travels	Domestic	24:00
TO ₁₈	Manager, Sales	Fine World Travels and Tours Ltd.	Domestic	38:00
TO ₁₉	Director	Discovery Tours and Logistics	Outbound	22:00
TO ₂₀	Sales Executive	Simply Fly	Outbound	22:00
TO ₂₁	CEO	S-Tourism	Outbound	33:24
TO ₂₂	Owner	Vision Holidays	Outbound	29:00
TO ₂₃	Sales Executive	Silicon Trade Wind Tours and Travels	Domestic	25:04
TO ₂₄	Tour guide	Bengal Holidays	Domestic	28:00
TO ₂₅	Owner	Travel Architect	Outbound	35:00

Participants were selected purposively (Patton, 2002) to identify tour operators who had knowledge and lived experiences of surviving during the uncertain period of COVID-19 in

Bangladesh. Purposive sampling is useful for understanding the needs, interests, and incentives of a small number of carefully selected people (Patton, 1990). Another criterion for participant selection was the participant’s length of involvement with tour operation business in terms of years in successful operation (e.g. for 5 to 30 years), as participants who are involved for a long period of time are more likely to be information-rich (Islam et al., 2021). This is a deliberate effort of the researchers to access the knowledge and lived experiences of the information-rich research participants in order to develop an in-depth understanding on the phenomena under study (Faisal et al., 2020). The average length of the interview was 36 minutes. The participants (Tour Operators) are coded as TO in the empirical findings section alongside excerpts of the interviews (e.g. TO₁).

The data collection was done in July and August of 2021 and only tour operators who managed to survive since the pandemic had started were interviewed. Tour operators who left their tourism business were excluded from the study as they were no longer tour operators. The interviews were based around questions related to uncertainty and resilience strategies to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The interview session was divided into three parts: the first part of interview was about the impact of COVID-19 on tour operator; the second part involves questions around response strategies made by tour operators; and the third part of the interview was about support from government, banks, tour operators’ association and NGOs that help tour operators to build resilience (see Table 2).

Table 2. The line of questioning in the semi-structured interviews.

Part 1	Impact of COVID-19 on tour operators
	a) Average revenue before COVID-19
	b) Average annual revenue during COVID-19
	c) Employee turnover
	d) Approximate financial loss
	e) Non-financial losses
Part 2	Response strategies for COVID-19 by tour operators
	a) Initial actions in response to COVID-19
	b) Industry reactions during COVID-19 period
	c) Rejuvenation plan of individual tourism business
Part 3	Initiatives from other stakeholders to build resilience
	a) Extent of government assistance
	b) Actions by industry counterparts
	c) Role of financial institutions
	d) Support from non-governmental organizations

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the local language (Bangla), mostly in Dhaka. Due to the pandemic situation, some interviews were conducted through Zoom meeting. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and then translated into English for analysis. For data analysis, a manual thematic analysis was applied where transcribed interviews were manually coded and thematically analyzed using content analysis and thematic coding technique (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The coding process was both theory- and data-driven (Islam et al., 2018). Broad codes were developed through both the interview data and the literature review. The coding process with initial codes, sub-themes and themes has been summarized in Table 3. The results and discussions are presented under three broad themes: innate resilience; internally-induced resilience; and externally-induced resilience.

Table 3. Coding process of transcribed interview data.

Initial coding	Sub-themes	Themes
a) Capability to cope with instability	Reviving quality	Innate resilience
b) Ability to come back after downfall		
c) Creating or focusing on new market segment		
a) Involvement and experience	Industry experience and business capacity	
b) Level of capital investment		
c) Switching cost		
a) Loyal customer	Strong customer base and goodwill	
b) Commitment and goodwill of business		
a) Tendency to switch business	Entrepreneurs' confidence and passion	
b) Confidence		
c) Responsibility toward customers		
d) Entrepreneurs' emotion		
a) Online presence and involvement		Internally-induced resilience
b) Lay off		
c) Resource sharing		
d) Ancillary services		
e) Demands shifting		
a) Government policy intervention		Externally-induced resilience
b) Financial assistance		
c) Education and training		
d) Aid and support		

4. Empirical findings

4.1 Innate resilience

Despite COVID-19 being a new form of shock to the tourism sector, the tour operators have a certain degree of intrinsic capacity to deal with the pandemic. A few characteristics presented in this section as sub-themes such as reviving quality, industry experience and business capacity, strong customer base, and entrepreneurs' confidence and passion are reasons for having innate resilience.

4.1.1 Reviving quality

The study has found that the tour operation business exhibits a certain level of resilience to uncertainty due to the inherent reviving quality. It was found in the study that tour operators inherit the capability of surviving: as soon as demand for tourism grows, after temporary closure due to crises and uncertainties, tour operators would start their business once again. The reviving quality of tour operators refers to the capability to survive during challenging times and then to rebound when the situation becomes normal. Participants of the study identify that in a developing country like Bangladesh, where natural disasters are a common feature along with subsequent political instability, tourism still thrives even after facing a number of challenges and uncertainty.

Tourism in Bangladesh has suffered time and time again. For example, the political instability back in 2014 or 2015 and even in 2016 when the Holy Artisan attack took place, tourist inflow suffered a loss. But we turned it around and business was booming in 2019! (TO₁).

Participants of the study have identified that the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a rapid decline in tourism activities during the initial stage of the pandemic. However, participants also identify that there are a few incidents that indicate tour operators would eventually recover and be revived as the situation becomes normal again.

During the first three months [January, February and March, 2020] we received some business, but afterwards we just lost everything. But from time to time, we got some domestic tourists, mainly corporate clients (TO₄).

Even in April [2020], the COVID cases rise and tourism falls again, but fortunately, once airports were reopened in the middle of the year, people who bought tickets earlier could fly abroad and we earned some money (TO₁₀).

Participants confirm that their businesses, mainly package tours, rebounded immediately soon after the lockdown was withdrawn by the government for two weeks in December, 2020. All tour packages designed for Cox's Bazar, a prominent sea beach destination in the southeastern part of Bangladesh, were sold out, as TO₆ describes: *"When the country-wide lockdown was withdrawn in December [2020], we offered tour packages for Cox's Bazar. All packages were sold and many of our customers could not get any package from us as all were sold out in advance"*. Also, when international travels were under strict lockdown, simply focusing on domestic tourism helped many tour operators to survive. *"This pandemic has seen the rise of domestic tourism again, especially at the end of 2020, we did pretty good business"* (TO₅).

4.1.2 Industry experience and business capacity

Experience and capacity of business play a crucial role in steering an organization in the right direction during dire times. Particularly in tour operation, the size of the organization along with its business capacity can become the deciding factor for its survival. Small companies with very limited resources and companies who only started their operations prior to the pandemic are in a less favorable condition than the companies with long term experience in the field.

Our business operates solely on domestic tourism and as a small company we are constantly fighting for business with the big tour operators. But in this pandemic, it has been really tough for us to compete with them (TO₁₇).

Even though small firms are suffering, they show promise. As TO₁₄ states: *"...even if we lack the proper manpower to operate now, we can stop and do something else for the time being. Once, the lockdown lifts, we will get back to tour operation"*.

Large organizations may enjoy certain advantages from having more resources such as higher capital investment and more skilled personnel. However, they face an inadvertent resilience due to switching costs being high in the tourism industry.

I have more than thirty years of experience in this industry. All my clients, my goodwill, everything will go to waste if I leave tourism. So, I cannot leave this industry just because I want to... (TO₆).

Regardless of the business capacity and experience, tourism businesses are holding out based on their condition and flexibility.

4.1.3 Strong customer base and goodwill

The reputation of tour operators draws in larger customer base which results in increased revenue generation. Among the participants, TO₃, TO₅, TO₆ and TO₉ agree that having a strong customer base has helped them survive during the pandemic.

Having a set of fixed clients really helped us out during the pandemic. I didn't have to spend much on promotion, rather they inquired us about future events and services, specially ticketing (TO₅).

Providing exemplary services creates loyal customers who in turn aid in the survival of the business of tour operators. Few participants agree on continuing their operations solely because they do not want to let their clients down by shutting down their business, which has contributed to their goodwill and reputation among customers for *never give up* attitude.

I had targeted to stay in the business till June [2021] but now I have planned to extend it till December since we are getting calls from our clients. So, I'm hopeful we'll be able to manage till then (TO₈).

4.1.4 Entrepreneurs' confidence and passion

A strong client base and goodwill are not enough if the entrepreneur lacks the passion and confidence in his or her business. Utmost dedication and strong emotional attachment towards the business are prerequisites for its survival during uncertainties. Tour operators with strong passion for the industry tend to be less inclined in switching business.

I have been involved in this industry for a long time, even before I had completed my graduation. For the last 21 years all I have done is tour operation, so I don't intend on moving out of it, I just can't (TO₅).

Almost all of the participants agreed that they are in this business for the thrill and passion, not just for the sake of business. While TO₁, TO₉, TO₁₂, TO₁₈ and TO₂₂ admitted that even though the pandemic has threatened their business to a great extent, they are hanging in there just through sheer willpower and optimism. Their confidence in their abilities and also in the nature of the industry has led them to believe that things will be better eventually.

Those of us who are bona fide tour operators, we haven't switched our businesses. We are waiting for a better tomorrow, some may consider us to be lazy, but I see it as an expression of true passion, since we truly care about the industry. We may take some time to recover, but we certainly will recover, that's how tourism is (TO₉).

Having genuine passion for the industry along with a strong sense of responsibility towards the customer play a key role in making the entrepreneur more stress resistant.

A lot of people have switched from this industry. In the near future, we'll be suffering from lack of tour guides. Thus, I have been trying to address this issue and managed to gather around 20 people whom I provide tour guide training online. I'm doing it without charging them anything but my ultimate goal is to ensure we have skilled human resource available once the pandemic is over (TO₁).

4.2 Internally-induced resilience

Tour operation has gone through some unique and innovative approaches in order to adapt to the existing threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. “Improvise, adapt, and overcome” has been a key motto for the tour operators who have successfully stayed in the market. The businesses resorted to various approaches in order to ensure their survival. Some of it involved reducing costs whereas others saw a shift in determining target segment. Most of the participants complied with the lockdown policies and switched to a “Work from Home” (WFH) model.

From March 2020 to May 2021, our office was completely shut down. We worked from home but from June first, we started our office and even shifted our office location. We had our employees on roaster basis (TO₁₀).

The online presence provided the tour operators with new opportunities for business. As TO₁₂ explained:

I specialize in exhibition tours for business tourists, and during the pandemic I have switched online. It's not necessarily solely focused on tourism but connecting the foreign business personnel have helped me get tour bookings once the pandemic situation improves.

As businesses saw new opportunities, they also saw a rather harsh approach of reducing expenses. Employee lay off, cutting off salary, refraining from paying bonuses and other benefits were practiced by most of the participants. Some of them, however, were reluctant to deny the rights of their employees.

We haven't fired any of our employees. Maybe some months we are paying them 60% or even 30% less but we are still keeping the payroll running and our staff are still motivated to continue (TO₉).

The nature of tourism business also helped in adapting to the situation as many participants, especially TO₄, TO₇, TO₁₃, TO₂₁ and TO₂₅ insisted on this particular point from their experience.

In tourism, each activity supports the other. Sometimes the ticketing is low and group tours are major revenue generators whereas during the pandemic tours are low and ticketing is helping us out (TO₄).

We generated a lot from corporate clients and visa agencies. We are certified VISA agents of Singapore and in January we still managed to send some medical visas (TO₁₀).

While some of the tour operators opted for shared resources (workspace, employees) in order to reduce cost, others maintained constant communication with their counterparts in order to secure future business.

In order to reduce costs, we have planned on sharing our resources. Sharing office space will help run similar business and having one or two employees working as ticketing agents or in similar roles can support multiple organizations at a time (TO₂).

4.3 Externally-induced resilience

It was found in this study that tour operators may have some innate resilience, however, sometimes it is not enough to ensure a smooth transition toward the new normal situation, especially in the case of COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, some form of externally-induced approach is required along with the innate and internally-induced ones. Appropriate policy making is the core of this approach. TO₁₀ and TO₁₇ points out how withdrawal of lockdown and international travel ban had significantly helped their business to rebound.

It was very helpful for me to get the temporary withdrawal of lockdown by the government as I was able to do some domestic business which gave me enough earnings to survive for the next 2 months (TO₁₇).

Participants have reported that financial aids in form of loans and grants from the government, banks, NGOs, friends and relatives helped them to survive. Many participants have stated that they were able to pay office rents and salary of staffs from these financial assistances.

After like six months [during pandemic in 2020], I was almost bankrupt with no income for months. I could not have paid salary of my staffs... it was loans from my relatives that made it possible for me to continue my business in those days (TO₃).

Mass vaccination program also helped in gaining businesses as more and more people opted to travel. Even the employees working in the tourism industry were considered as front liners and were prioritized for vaccination.

Vaccination has been a glimmer of hope for us since people will start moving, especially in Canada and parts of Europe. If there is movement then we might get to a position to survive within one year. But reaching the profit margin might take a lot longer (TO₁₁).

Apart from that, national tourism organizations arranged various training programs and workshops which kept the tour operators motivated and updated about current and future practices. These workshops also provided knowledge about technological advancements.

I attended various workshops aimed at equipping tour operators with enhanced business knowledge. There were sessions on digital marketing, consumer behavior during Covid-19 and even presentations about post-COVID strategies to sustain our business. I think that really helped my firm (TO₇).

Since we had less business and more free time, I participated in a workshop about the implementation of IT on tourism and tour operation. This knowledge helped me to ensure effective online presence of my business (TO₂).

Exempting membership renewal fees during the pandemic by various tourism associations have also helped reduced the financial burden. Additionally, allowances and grants sanctioned by various government associations also helped the tour operators stay in business. Moreover, the conversations and exchange of dialogues among various peer-groups in the industry helped the tour operators to keep a positive state of mind.

During the pandemic, we hardly had any cash to pay our employees with or pay the rent. Membership renewal fees seemed like an extra burden but fortunately, most of the associations realized the impact and withheld the renewal fee for the time being (TO₁₀).

...we were in a slump. Mentally, physically, we just lost all hope for the industry. Yet, there were those who never felt despair and kept us motivated to stay in the business. They shared their thoughts and strategies on various forums and workshops arranged by tourism associations, which at least gave me a morale boost (TO₂₄).

Workshops and seminars not only helped to give mental support but also provided an avenue to allocate monetary support. Tour operators were given participation allowances as an incentive to participate and gain knowledge about developing post-pandemic strategies as well as have some form of cash to sustain basic operations.

We attended a workshop just before Eid and they provided us with some money as a participation bonus. I think that is a very nice gesture, no matter how little the amount (TO₁₇).

5. Discussion

This study provides empirical evidence to examine resilience strategies developed by tour operators during the uncertainty of COVID-19 pandemic and proposes that the resilience-building strategies of tour operators can be conceptualized as a three-dimensional mechanism (Figure 1). Therefore, the study facilitates a systematic understanding of resilience-building mechanism of tour operators to survive during an uncertain period of time. More broadly, conceptualizing resilience-building strategies as a three-dimensional mechanism, where strategies are analytically grouped into three different categories (i.e. innate, internally-induced, and externally-induced) based on distinct characteristics, would assist in understanding the concept of resilience-building strategies in a more systematic manner.

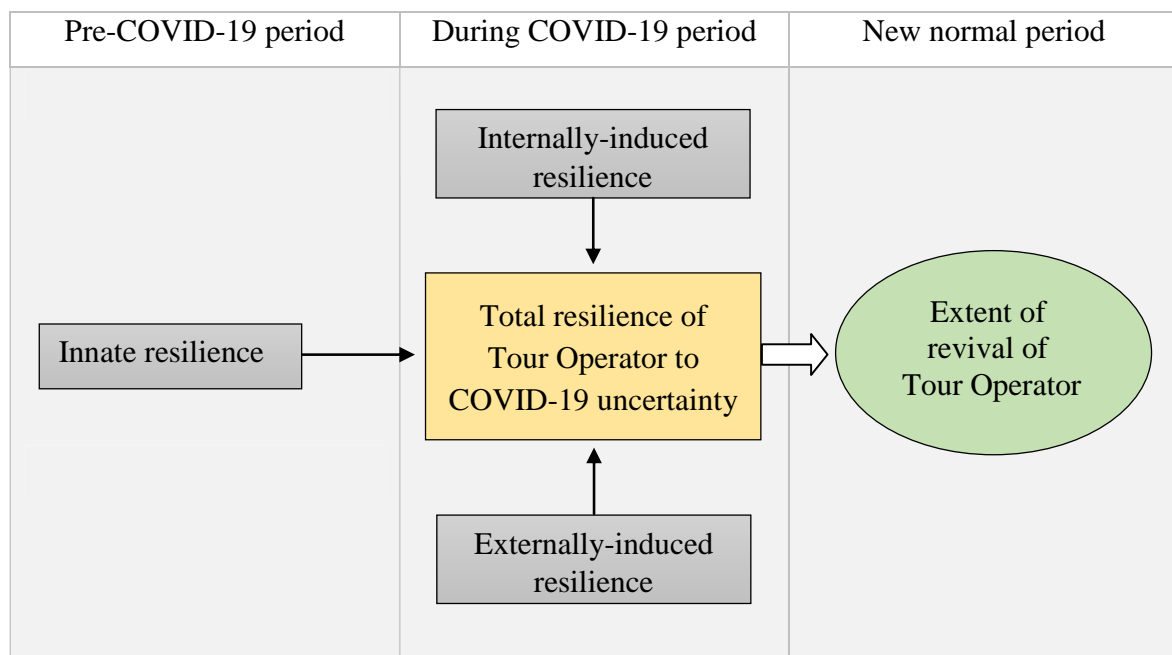


Figure 1. Resilience-building mechanism of tour operators during COVID-19 pandemic.

As shown in Figure 1, three dimensions are actually three broader categories of resilience-building approaches (innate resilience, internally-induced resilience, and externally-induced resilience) that collectively create a total resilience-building mechanism for tour operators to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the empirical findings of the study, an effective combination of these three types of resilience-building strategies can help tour operators to survive during the prolonged turmoil situation caused by COVID-19 pandemic and revive in the new normal situation during or post-COVID-19 period.

Over a given period of normal time, when there is no natural or human-induced calamity or turbulence, tour operators still develop some level of resilience to particular type of shock (Kutzner, 2019). In other words, innate resilience can also be termed as inherent resilience that tour operators gain mainly from their day-to-day operation (Kolb, 1984). For instance, experience of day-to-day problem-handling arising from financial crisis, cancellation of tour package bookings, resignation of employees from job etc. may help tour operators develop some strength that can ultimately help them to be resilient to a future catastrophic situation like COVID-19 pandemic situation (Hasan et al., 2021). This resilience is not developed in reaction to a catastrophic situation, but rather it is developed over time from day-to-day operation (Butler, 2017). For tour operators, this resilience existed before COVID-19 pandemic when the business operation was at a normal pace with no major interruption like lockdown.

However, during COVID-19 situation tour operators started facing turbulence and uncertainty which led them to a great extent of vulnerability and many tour operators had to permanently shut down their business. Those who survived developed some resilience, or in other words, those who were successful in developing effective resilience-building strategies, survived (Mandal & Saravanan, 2019). This internally-induced resilience came from all reactive strategies to cope up with or fight against the COVID-19 turmoil situation. Internally-induced resilience depends mainly on the capacity of the particular tour operator. Resilience-building strategies and actions taken by tour operators mainly reflect the financial capacity, business operational knowledge and experience of a particular tour operator (Rahman et al., 2021). The more the capacity to adopt with or fight against the changed situation, the more the chance to survive during the uncertain pandemic period and to revive in the post-pandemic new normal situation (Traskevich & Fontanari, 2021). It goes with the Darwinian evolutionary theory: the survival of the fittest.

While tour operators develop their own resilience strategies in reaction to the pandemic situation, external parties including governments, donors, and business associations may also effectively assist tour operators to be resilient to a crisis like COVID-19 pandemic (Clark et al., 2022). For tour operators, externally-induced resilience may include, but not limited to, financial supports (e.g. grants and loans), training on online business operation, assistance in marketing and promotion of tourist destinations and tour operators by the government (Hasan et al., 2021). One of the key external supports by the Government of Bangladesh was the temporal withdrawal of lockdown and reopening of tourist destinations so that tour operators can get some breathing space and earn some money to survive in between series of lockdowns (Rahman et al., 2021). Supportive and business-friendly policies of the government can also be a key to resilience in COVID-19 turmoil situation (Yeh, 2021). On the contrary, inappropriate government policies may lead tourism businesses to even more vulnerability during the era of COVID-19 (Clark et al., 2022).

Internally-induced resilience and externally-induced resilience strategies, both developed in reaction to COVID-19 uncertainty, together with innate or built-in resilience form the total resilience-building mechanism for a tour operator. An effective resilience-building mechanism depends not only on the inner capacity of an organization operator and support from the external agencies but also on the magnitude of uncertainty and the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic situation (Melián-Alzola et al., 2020; Szczygielski et al., 2021). And, for tour operators, an effective resilience-building mechanism can lead to survival during the crisis and revival in the new normal situation.

Resilience in hospitality and tourism studies is a contested boundary object with different understandings according to conceptual and disciplinary position (Hall et al., 2022). The proposed three-dimensional model (Figure 1) takes a focused but integrated approach to bring three broader categories of resilience-building approaches and stakeholders into a collaborative platform. The key contribution of the study is its effort in categorizing resilience-building strategies into three broader categories to develop a three-dimensional model that deal with different perspectives, uncertainties and complexities. Also, in the study, resilience in the context of COVID-19 related uncertainty was explored through the lens of tour operators. There are very few studies that seek to explore tour operators' resilience-building approaches to combat COVID-19. The study has also reinforced that, under the right circumstances and a proper combination of these three different broader types of strategies, tour operators may develop a certain level of resilience to uncertainty (Bown et al., 2013).

The study not only proposes the three-dimensional model to understand different categories of resilience, but also provides evidences of actual strategies made by tour operators and other external stakeholders under each category. These actual strategies reported can effectively facilitate knowledge sharing, particularly among tour operators, leading to experimentation with different strategies, continuous learning and adaptation, and modification of actions (Islam et al., 2018). Even if tour operators continue their operations without the pandemic challenges, the three-dimensional resilience-building model may assist tour operators in understanding and preparing in advance for similar types of challenges. For example, to deal with future potential crises tour operators may consider developing innate resilience in advance. Also, they may start developing and maintaining liaison with government agencies and other stakeholders for gaining support in the future if they encounter similar challenges of uncertainty of a crisis as the pandemic.

6. Conclusion and implications

The study has provided essential insights into how tour operators in a developing country like Bangladesh have survived through nation-wide lockdown and world-wide border closures resulting from COVID-19. Appropriate resilience-building strategies made by tour operators together with supports from the government and other key stakeholders have been found to be useful for tour operators to survive in challenging times and revive once the uncertainties and crises are over. These findings are important, as they establish that resilience-building depends not only on the responses or strategies of a particular individual or organization, for example tour operators in this study, but also on the supports from external agencies. This paper has further shown that a multi-dimensional understanding of resilience-building strategies (Figure 1), particularly made by tour operators, is essential in tourism research.

Also, the study explores a number of resilience-building strategies that tour operators may consider applying in similar uncertain situation other than COVID-19. On a more practical level, the study can facilitate tour operators in sharing their experiences that may lead to changes in their beliefs, ideas, and perceptions as they apply the knowledge n effective resilience building during challenging times (Kolb, 1984). Moreover, findings of the study can facilitate key stakeholders with evidence-based information in reviving the tourism sector in the changed reality after the pandemic.

However, as a qualitative study, the findings should not be assumed to represent the situation in all given cases, either in Bangladesh or in the context of other developing countries. Also,

the study focuses only on tour operators' resilience, and does not include any other component of tourism including hotel, restaurant, and transportation. While focusing on only one particular component, tour operator, gives an opportunity to develop in-depth understanding about the resilience strategies of the particular component, it is a limitation also as these resilience strategies cannot be generalized as appropriate for all components of tourism sector. Also, the study involved only tour operators who survived during the COVID-19 pandemic situation, that is, resilience strategies taken by only those who managed to survive were discussed in the study. Those who had left the business were not selected (or not available) as they do not identify themselves as tour operators any longer. In the future, studies can be undertaken on tour operators who failed to survive.

In spite of these limitations, the proposed three-dimensional model and empirical findings of the study provide the platform for further studies that can explore resilience strategies of other stakeholders and components of tourism. Also, the proposed resilience-building mechanism can be applied as a framework for similar research in other developing countries like Bangladesh. Though the study has been undertaken in the context of COVID-19 pandemic situation, the three-dimensional resilience-building model demonstrated in this study can potentially be utilized for systematically explaining resilience-building strategies and efforts made by tour operators under similar type of uncertain situation caused by a major catastrophic event like earthquake, flood and political unrest. Also, the same study can be conducted on other stakeholders including hotels, restaurants, and transportation sectors.

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Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions, which helped to improve the merit of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This research was supported by funds from the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Note: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Tourism Planning & Development* on 16 Nov 2022, available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21568316.2022.2144429>

To cite: Islam, M. S., Kabir, M. M., & Hassan, K. (2023). Resilience Strategies of Tour Operators During the Uncertainty of COVID-19: Evidence from Bangladesh. *Tourism Planning & Development*, 20(2), 281–300.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2022.2144429>

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Note: This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Tourism Planning & Development* on 16 Nov 2022, available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21568316.2022.2144429>

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2022.2144429>