

## CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND INNOVATIONS IN TOURISM IN THE NEW NORMAL: EVIDENCE FROM RURAL TOURISM SITES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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### Abstract

*This study explores how rural tourism sites in Southern Leyte, adapted their tourism packages during and after the pandemic, focusing resilience and sustainability. A multi-case study methodology was used in this paper with 10 informants whom were owners/managers of the hotel or beach resorts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews using Seidman's phenomenological interview paradigm. The results revealed the following: (a) the tourism sector faces challenges and opportunities spanning diversifying revenue streams, business operation, enhancing guest experience, building resilience, and marketing and promotion; (b) key adjustments in tourism packages under the new normal include marketing and promotion strategy, focus on safety and hygiene, adapting activities services, enhancing guest experience, price and policies considerations; (c) the valuable lessons gleaned from successful tourism packages implemented beyond the province's borders includes marketing strategies, financial sustainability, customer focus, and adaptability and innovation. The study contributes to understanding sustainable tourism strategies, offering insights into how the industry can remain resilient amid disruptions.*

**Key words:** multi-case study; tourism; pandemic; business operation; reinvention

### INTRODUCTION

Tourism makes a significant contribution to a country's economy and is widely regarded as a primary industry worldwide. The tourism industry in a developing country such as the Philippines is exploited and developed primarily for its economic benefits, with the long-term goal of creating a sustainable tourism industry [7]. The tourism sector's interdependence with other industries resulted in more beneficial to the whole economy. In other words, tourism triggers other services to prosper as it draws more foreign and domestic tourists paying for the goods and services within the circular economy. Furthermore, because of the country's low agricultural outputs, farm tourism can be a farm diversification strategy to supplement income in rural communities [52].

In 2019, the travel & tourism sector contributed 10.4% to global GDP; a share which decreased to 5.5% in 2020 due to ongoing restrictions to mobility. In 2020, 62

million jobs were lost, representing a drop of 18.5%, leaving just 272 million employed across the sector globally, compared to 334 million in 2019 [51]. Yet, the pandemic also catalyzes change, pushing stakeholders to innovate and adapt to survive. While the global tourism industry has since rebounded, the lessons learned during the pandemic highlight the importance of resilience and adaptability. In terms of tourism potential, the province of Southern Leyte has a great to exhibit, sell, grow, and improve. There are world-class dive sites, caves, extreme adventure sites, waterfalls, crater lake trekking, fish feeding, scuba diving and whale shark interaction, island escapades and beach fun. Tourism attractions could be discovered in almost every municipality.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on the Philippines' tourism industry, as it has on the tourism industries of other countries. The suspension of travel also resulted in the closure of businesses to prevent the virus from spreading further. Other

participants, such as the travel industry, shopping malls, restaurants, and other establishments, were also impacted. The pandemic affects many industries and occupations beyond the tourism sector [42]. As a result, the government's support for tourism is strongly recommended, as the tourism industry's recovery can have positive spillover effects on other sectors and the entire spectrum of occupations in the labor market.

Recognizing the adaptability of travel packages is crucial for facing upcoming difficulties, not just during moments of crisis such as the pandemic. Common risks such as natural disasters, economic downturns, and political instability are abundant within the sector. Examining how tourism businesses adapted during the pandemic can offer important insights into effective resilience tactics for future crises. For example, rural tourism destinations in Southern Leyte, Philippines, faced significant disruption, but their ability to pivot services, innovate marketing, and maintain operations under strict health protocols illustrated their resilience. These adaptations are essential for understanding how the sector can prepare for unforeseen disruptions.

The Philippines' tourism arm, the Department of Tourism, launches various programs to help tourism recovery. Some businesses are starting to open and offer services following COVID-19 regulations. Protocols such as headcounts per group, sanitizers in entrances, and curfew hours are implemented. However, the movement of people is not just factored by restrictions, but also by the willingness of people to travel. The COVID-19 pandemic has instilled fear in everyone that both private and public sectors have instituted countermeasures, both-related and health- and safety-related, to combat the spread of the contagious virus [43]. People are also scared to travel in fear of the consequence they might have to pay for health and budget-related expenses.

To encourage customers, players of the tourism sector started to offer different packages. An example is offering complimentary rescheduling of flights by the aviation industry and the inclusion of RT-PCR tests by the hospitality industry. Southern Leyte is an

emerging tourist destination in the Visayas. Its tourism is significantly affected, just like other tourist destinations. In this context, this study is to investigate how the tourism industry in the province of Southern Leyte re-invent their tourism packages in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study investigates how rural tourism sites in Southern Leyte adapted their packages during and after the pandemic. The focus is identifying strategies promoting business resilience, sustainability, and enhanced customer experiences. It aims to contribute to the literature on tourism resilience by offering insights that extend beyond COVID-19, emphasizing the adaptability of tourism enterprises to maintain relevance in an ever-changing global environment. Additionally, the research provides practical implications for stakeholders in developing crisis management plans that include flexible, innovative approaches. Furthermore, the specific objectives of this study are:

- (i) Determine the challenges and opportunities faced by the tourism sector in the province;
- (ii) Investigate the adjustments and reinventions made in their tourism packages to attract tourists under the new normal; and
- (iii) Reflect from the lessons learned of successful tourism packages offered in the province in redesigning the existing tourism packages.

This study aims to illustrate how tourism enterprises can leverage lessons from the pandemic to prepare for future disruptions, ensuring sustainability and growth in the long term. The findings can help local governments and tourism operators design policies and strategies that enhance the sector's resilience, benefiting local communities and economies.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study relies on Wohlwill's (1974) adaptation theory, which states that people's reactions to their environments are dependent on their adaptation level [50]. Everyone adapts to a certain stimulus or set of environmental circumstances. In this research, the COVID-19 phenomenon serves as the stimulus affecting the tourism environment as reflected in Figure 1. While tourism activities have not yet resumed, the tourism industry's adaptability to

changes and the pandemic must be commended [29]. Crises are regular occurrence in the tourism sector [13, 20]. Many destinations are affected by natural and human-made crises and, over the years, have developed tactics and strategies of resilience and mitigation [46]. The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted different sectors of tourism [20, 21], ultimately causing the industry to shut down for months.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework, showing how Adaptation Theory, Resilience Theory, and Crisis Management interact to shape the study's focus on tourism adaptability and reinvention.

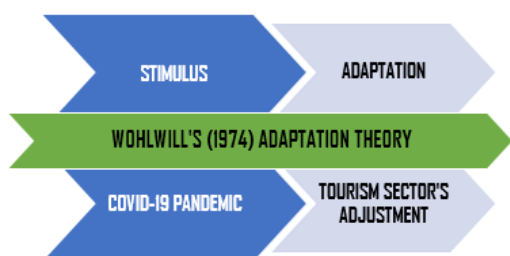


Fig 1. The theoretical and conceptual framework  
Source: Authors' elaboration.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected tourism in such ways that regional revenue was involved and the income of the people, especially those who work closely with tourists, such as local guides [16]. The demand for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) has also decreased, especially those related to food and souvenir sectors. To battle concerns, the people are trying to rise from the economic downturn by trying various new business alternatives, including utilizing social media to sell MSMEs products and services. Moreover, [33] claim that consumer behavior has been permanently altered by the pandemic, with an increasing demand for secure, eco-friendly, and custom-made travel adventures. This change has resulted in the rise of “micro-tourism,” where tourists choose smaller, quieter locations that provide distinctive, genuine experiences. These trends indicate a shift from mass tourism, underscoring the importance for local tourism businesses to adjust by providing specialized services that meet these changing preferences.

The theory of adaptation highlights the importance of being flexible and innovative when facing environmental pressures. Tourism businesses that can quickly adapt their services, operational methods, and marketing plans are more prepared to handle disruptions caused by health crises, natural disasters, or economic downturns. This research investigates how rural tourism businesses in Southern Leyte modified their offerings and services amid the pandemic, uncovering tactics that supported resilience and future viability. The knowledge acquired from this flexible behavior can be used in broader conversations about tourism resilience, highlighting the importance of incorporating flexibility into the sector's fundamental operations. To complement Adaptation Theory, this study also integrates concepts from Resilience Theory and Crisis Management. Resilience Theory in tourism explores how destinations and businesses can “bounce back” after disruptions. It highlights the capacity to not only survive crises but to emerge stronger by learning from challenges and implementing new strategies [46]. Resilience requires the development of robust frameworks that allow quick adaptation, such as diversifying revenue streams, embracing digital marketing, and enhancing safety protocols. This study identifies these resilience strategies as they were applied during the pandemic and assesses how they can serve as models for future disruptions.

Through various efforts have been made since June 2020 to reopen the industry, most sectors continue to struggle, and the tourism became as one of the hardest-hit industries [13]. Hence, the need to analyze and suggest programs that will help local tourism be back at its foot, especially now that travel borders are starting to open, is greatly significant.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research design

The researchers used a qualitative research design to learn how the tourism industry reinvents its tourism packages during the COVID-19 pandemic. It used a multi-case study methodology [54] because it will use a

set of case studies from rural tourism sites. A case study is a detailed examination of a specific case [31]. It investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and, in its context, allowing researchers to deal with complex social situations [12]. Using multiple cases also improves the external validity or generalizability of research findings [37].

A tourist site is a place of attraction that tourists visit for its inherent or demonstrated natural or cultural worth, historical significance, natural or architectural beauty, leisure, and entertainment. Beach sites, natural regions, towns and cities, and cultural and heritage places are all examples of tourism destinations.

We only have beach places and natural places in Southern Leyte.

### Research setting

The study focuses on tourism sites (Table 1) located throughout a rural province's municipalities.

This province is one of the Eastern Visayas' emerging tourist destinations. This study will use the registered beach places and natural places that cater to both domestic and international tourists. Meanwhile, the researchers contacted the provincial trade and industry office to seek assistance in determining potential contacts for each tourism site and verify the presented basic information.

Table 1. Case study tourism sites basic information

| Case Study Tourism Sites | Types of Tourism | Location                                | Status    |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------|
| Case 1                   | Beach            | Magallanes, Limasawa, Southern Leyte    | Operating |
| Case 2                   | Natural          | Asuncion, Maasin City, Southern Leyte   | Operating |
| Case 3                   | Beach            | Lugsongan, Limasawa, Southern Leyte     | Operating |
| Case 4                   | Beach            | Triana, Limasawa, Southern Leyte        | Operating |
| Case 5                   | Beach            | Buscayan, Macrohon, Southern Leyte      | Operating |
| Case 6                   | Beach            | San Agustin, Limasawa, Southern Leyte   | Operating |
| Case 7                   | Hotel            | Villa Jacinta, Macrohon, Southern Leyte | Operating |
| Case 8                   | Beach            | Villa Jacinta, Macrohon, Southern Leyte | Operating |
| Case 9                   | Beach            | Poblacion, Hinunangan, Southern Leyte   | Operating |
| Case 10                  | Beach            | Buscayan, Macrohon, Southern Leyte      | Operating |

Source: Authors' preparation.

### Sampling procedure

The researchers used purposive sampling to better match the sample to the research goals and objectives, thereby improving the quality of the data and outcomes [6]. It entails identifying and selecting exceptionally knowledgeable or experienced individuals about the phenomenon under consideration [10, 11]. The sample was selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that participants

had direct experience managing tourism businesses during the pandemic. While the sample size may seem small, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, and the chosen method allowed for comprehensive, in-depth interviews that yielded rich, detailed insights.

### Sample

This study includes 10 informants presently living within the province. It must meet the

following criteria: (a) informants were the owner/manager of the registered hotel or resort for at least 1 year before the pandemic, (b) informants actively involved in the operations of their hotels or resorts, and (c) informants are willing to take part in the study. Although the sample size of 10 informants provided in-depth insights, it limits the findings' generalizability. The experiences and strategies identified in this study may only represent some rural tourism enterprises in other regions or larger-scale tourism operations.

#### **Data collection method**

The researchers primarily collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews using Seidman's (1998) three-part phenomenological interview paradigm [47]. The first phase allows people to relive and describe their first encounter with the COVID-19 phenomenon. The interviews allowed informants to reflect on their experiences before, during, and after the pandemic. Questions were designed to explore the changes to their tourism packages, marketing strategies, operational adjustments, and lessons learned. This method enabled the researchers to gather detailed, qualitative data that reflected the informants' challenges and innovative solutions. The second phase focuses on the particulars of the informants' most recent encounters with the phenomenon. The third stage entails pondering the meaning informants attribute to the experience. It focuses on informants' intellectual and emotional connections in their jobs and personal lives. All three phases were combined into a single interview. Meanwhile, the researcher employed validation of the interview guide at three levels: internal testing, expert evaluation, and field testing.

#### **Data analysis framework**

This study employs [53] five-phase data analysis framework. The first phase involves compiling the data in some order. The second phase breaks down the collected data into smaller fragments or pieces and assigns new labels or codes. Codes are reassembled and arrayed using tables, graphics, and lists in the third phase. The fourth stage is interpreting, which involves developing a new narrative supported by tables or illustrations. The final step is to wrap things up. Data were

systematically organized and coded to identify recurring themes and then analyzed to draw connections between the adaptive strategies employed by different tourism enterprises. The themes were further examined to determine how they align with the adaptation, resilience, and crisis management theoretical frameworks.

#### **Ethical considerations**

The study employed Creswell's (2018) ethical framework to ensure that researchers adhere to appropriate ethical norms throughout their research activities [11]. Before conducting the research, the researchers will obtain permission from the university, tourism site owners, and participants. Second, the researchers will make their goal clear from the start and ensure that people sign the consent form voluntarily. The researchers will inform participants about how the data will be used while protecting their privacy and identity. The researchers will ensure that all sources cited in the paper are appropriately attributed. Finally, the researchers gave credit for all sources used in the study provided copies of the report to participants.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The pandemic in 2020 has affected many lives, not only households and communities but also the tourism industry. The results of the in-depth interviews revealed several key themes that illustrate how rural tourism businesses in Southern Leyte adapted their strategies during the pandemic. Qualitative interviews were conducted with owners of resorts to assess impacts on tourism from COVID-19 for this study. The themes outlined here all relate to broader strategies about adapting beyond the pandemic environment and therefore ensuring long-term resilience and sustainability. The results revealed the following important highlights:

#### **Challenges and adaptation strategies faced by the tourism sector in the province**

##### *Theme 1: Diversifying revenue streams*

Many tourism businesses experienced severe loss in revenue because of restricted travels and low inflow of tourists. Most businesses resorted to diversified sources of revenues as a way of checking the loss and keeping them

operational. For instance, many resorts ventured into new service packages; these included day-use packages with provisions such as tent hiring and kayak services to target the local market that had short-distance traveling. These new offerings provided additional income streams and catered to the needs of local guests looking for short, nearby getaways. Income generation during the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted tourism within a province, affecting various aspects of society; it is essential to consider factors like advanced payment methods, managing cash flow, developing fresh packages, and exploring other revenue streams. By incorporating advanced payment methods (e-payment), tourism resorts can guarantee upfront revenue, reducing the impact of cancellations and no-shows [1]. This is evident in the participant's statement: *"The introduction of local-friendly packages, such as affordable tent rentals and day-use amenities, helped to keep the business afloat."*-P8

The implication of the result is that these businesses-maintained cash flow in the restrictive periods by creatively diversifying their offerings and leveraging on resources. An advance payment can be encouraged if the incentive, such as discounting or flexible cancellation policies are provided, given that the policy of refund and safety measures to be adopted is communicated clearly. Most people consider discounts and flexible cancellation policies as incentives that can influence consumer behavior. Similarly, risk-seeking consumers would want free cancellation policies in online hotel booking, especially when there is an automatic rebooking service in place [34]. While cancellation windows are getting tighter, penalties do not necessarily rise, indicating a rather subtle approach to encouraging bookings [45].

The financial health of hotels and resorts is indeed crucial for survival; in the survival of any tourism business, controlling finances is very crucial. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world's tourism industry significantly and caused financial challenges due to lockdowns, travel restrictions, and a decrease in consumer

willingness to travel [25]. During the research, two beneficiaries revealed that they cannot rely solely on their own income to sustain their hotel. Hotel owner must search for alternative sources of income or financial management strategies to pay bills. Indeed, in the creation of new packages and experiences is very important for the satisfaction of customers and profitability in the tourism industry. The challenges that recognize more than the traditional sightseeing tours, which focus on meaningful and transformative experiences to improve customer engagement and increase revenue [41]. However, it is important to note that even though new experiences are important, they need to be inclusive and accessible to all customer segments. This involves understanding the expectations and experiences of access tourists to enhance the accessibility and inclusiveness that can lead to destination competitiveness and financial gains in tourism [9]. This means there is a search for novel and meaningful experiences by tourists [41]. There is also the need for inclusivity for all tourists, who may have access requirements [9]. As such, the players in the tourism industry should focus on diversifying their offers to meet the changing demands of travellers while ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness to maximize market reach and profitability.

#### *Theme 2: Streamlining business operation*

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected economies all over the world [8]. Regarding business operations, one thing that is evident so far is that the pandemic has significantly reduced business operations all over the world. The pandemic underscored the need for businesses to streamline operations to reduce costs and increase efficiency. Normal business operations are the need of the organizations to meet the daily tasks [3]. Sometimes, in certain circumstances such as the present coronavirus pandemic scenario, organizations cannot run business operations smoothly [23] as the health and safety of organization employees do and should come first [38]. There are a few significant categories that come out when one assesses the challenges and opportunities in the tourism industry in the province. These include managing closures from lockdowns, handling

bill payments, covering operational expenses, addressing damaged facilities, managing limited employee availability, offering restricted services, maintaining jobs, and managing water shortages. The vulnerability of small businesses to closures during the pandemic, with a disproportionate compared to larger businesses, leads to a concentration of market share among the latter [15]. Results reflect that the disturbance in the normal business operations eventually makes the organizations end up losing or fail [5]. Lockdowns because of COVID-19 outbreaks have shut many tourism firms temporarily leading to a great financial loss and a strain in running the companies. The inability to pay salaries and meet the financial obligation will affect meeting rent, utilities, and paying back loans.

Tourism companies would have to negotiate terms for receiving their money from the owners of the properties, banks, and suppliers or obtain loans and find new income-generating streams such as selling goods or gift certificates to raise additional revenue. Maintaining the correct working capital and proper financial management techniques will ensure that small businesses stay financially secure and profitable at such a trying time [14]. Meanwhile, two of the participants continued working through the lockdown to ensure they could pay the bills. Despite the pandemic, they continued operating to ensure they could pay their workers. However, the impact of the lockdowns has been significant, causing a noticeable decline in business operations. COVID-19 is causing severe damage to economies and societies; it has affected the business operations and lowered business activities significantly [48]. Staff shortages arising from illness, travel restrictions, or unwillingness to go back to work can hinder business operations and service quality.

As a result of COVID-19, governments have placed restrictions on people and vehicles movement and suspended business activities [36]. To manage the limited availability of employees, tourism businesses can engage their staff in cross-training across multiple roles, offer flexible work arrangements or incentives to attract and retain talent. It could

even be a change in the services offered or operating hours. It is not a weakness; it is rather a secret for making them stand out, since it is all about personal engagement with guests. Personal interactions can do much even with limited circumstances.

### *Theme 3: Enhancing Guest experience*

As travellers' safety and cleanliness concerns grew, improving the guest experience became a top priority. Businesses implemented strict hygiene measures, including contactless check-ins, frequent facility sanitation, and hygiene kits. These actions comforted visitors and established confidence, resulting in increased contentment and return trips. Furthermore, firms were concerned with making it a personal and safe space. They highlighted unique experiences for small, intimate groups.

The studies collectively indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has led the hospitality industry to adopt guest safety, personalization, and affordability while continuing to highlight beautiful surroundings and service costs. This is interesting to note as even though the focus is on research in luxury hotels, for example, there have been findings from certain studies such as [17], who discovered that customer satisfaction due to convenience and reduced perceived risk increases because of digital technology use in services like mobile applications, contactless check-in, and virtual reality. These innovations are now integral to modern tourism marketing. They would likely determine the future of the industry, and [27] examined the survival strategies of home-based accommodations and small-scale tourism enterprises. The smaller businesses have embraced "intact hospitality" to avoid direct contact with guests who are looking for secluded areas. On the other hand, safety and well-being of guests should be at the forefront, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and its global health concerns. The thematic analysis by [19] shows that personalization and hygiene have become more important in the guest experience. Self-service technologies are used to enhance customer satisfaction and reduce perceived risk. Opportunities can be found by focusing on cleanliness and hygiene standards, clearly communicating safety

measures, and using technology like contactless check-in and digital payments to minimize contact and build guest trust. The result implies that challenges could include implementing and ensuring compliance with health and safety procedures, managing guest expectations, and adjusting operations to meet evolving regulations. This is evident in the participant's statement: *"We also had protocols, such as handwashing stations and tarpaulins, with information posted. We strictly followed the protocols, but there were always limitations."*-P8

This is also apparent because of the economic burden on the industry as indicated by the devastating impacts and bankruptcy risks for hotels [49]. Affordability can open up tourism to more visitors by addressing this factor. Challenges include cost cutting without losing quality and remaining competitive. There are opportunities in diversified income streams and tiered pricing for different budgets.

In this theme, the guest experience during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of change in the hospitality industry regarding safety, personalization, and affordability. Adaptation reduces direct interaction to a minimum and increases appeal in the eyes of those guests who demand privacy and silence. Moreover, maintaining the most severe health protocols while balancing the changes with operations will help cater to guest expectations as well as support compliance with regulations. Still, it presents opportunities to enhance hygiene levels, embrace technology with contactless services, and introduce price flexibility. The statements of the participants reflect the sense of security and comfort these efforts were able to provide at such times, thereby giving an edge to the resilience of the industry while trying unexampled times and providing quality for a guest experience.

#### **Adjustments and reinventions made in their tourism packages to attract tourist under the new normal**

Tourism businesses in our province have adjusted and innovated their approaches to attract visitors amidst the new normal. Nevertheless, businesses demonstrated resilience and creativity in response to these obstacles by adapting their marketing tactics to

attract customers in the changing landscape. They revamped marketing strategies, adapted service activities, and enhanced overall guest experiences to align with the "new normal."

#### *Theme 1: Safety and hygiene measures*

The COVID-19 pandemic totally changed the tourism industry. Businesses across the globe rushed to adopt their services as safety and hygiene became the top priority. Each business started enforcing strict measures about safety. Some of these changes included temperature screenings, face masks on everyone, social distancing policies, and sanitation stations. Temperature checks, mask mandates, social distancing, and sanitation stations were some of the adaptations that were implemented. Although the measures started as a pandemic response, they have now taken on a life of their own. They are now the new normal ways of ensuring sustainable and safe tourism that will be ongoing. The paper discusses changes in business offerings in tourism to meet safety and hygiene guidelines. Current studies indicate that tourist destinations are imposing stringent health protocols, such as strict hygiene practices, adherence to safety regulations, provision of hygiene facilities, and crowd control measures to avoid overcrowding [54]. Additionally, there is a focus on the distribution of preventive tools and educating tourists and service providers on health protocols in a bid to ensure that all parties involved are guaranteed a safe environment [28]. The results imply strict protocols that entail temperature checks, QR codes to trace contacts, and even more recently, vaccine cards. Besides adhering to government requirements, it puts the minds of the visitors at ease about maintaining cleanliness and safety standards within those establishments.

#### *Theme 4: Adaptive marketing and promotion strategies*

The continuous inflow of new tourists is playing a crucial role in the prospering tourism industry in our region, offering crucial support to native businesses and preserving the vibrancy of our neighborhoods. However, it is necessary to accept the fact that attracting new visitors is a tough task. Businesses are now starting to rely more on digital marketing strategies, especially social media campaigns,

to target potential customers and boost local tourism. Some businesses observed that “digital marketing became a lifeline,” keeping them on people's minds and active participation in their audience. Verbal communication is significant in these terms of addressing the concerns. The result suggests that word-of-mouth is an effective marketing tool. Travelers can become directly interested in our province through personal recommendations. Even just the name of a resort ignites curiosity and recognition, often leading to prospective guests knowing who owns the resort. The integration of online advertisement strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic has been the key factor for hotels and resorts looking to maintain or boost their occupancy rates. These movements and physical commerce restrictions resulted in higher reliance on digital platforms for marketing purposes [2]. During the conduct of the research one of the beneficiaries disclosed that using digital marketing is essential for accessing opportunities, allowing them to connect with travelers as they plan their future vacations.

On the other hand, two beneficiaries admitted that they made a mistake by not utilizing digital marketing because they were unsure how to effectively promote their resort. This is evident in the interview results: *“That is where we made a mistake; we did not prioritize marketing since the beginning, and we do not know how to start in promoting our resort. That is why we were slow in utilizing social media.”-P1*

The outcome indicates that the proprietor of the hotel should use channels such as Facebook and Instagram and their ability to effectively showcase beauty of the province and attraction is something to be very admired. For resorts fully to exploit digital marketing opportunity, it should consider developing appropriate coordinated strategies in line with unique offerings and target demographics while as well ensuring its staff is correctly trained on digital marketing practices by [40]. They can also find creative ways to stretch their marketing budget and reach your target

audience, from targeted social media ads to strategic partnerships with travel bloggers.

#### *Theme 3: Adapting activities services*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry made radical adjustments and reinventions in the new normal to attract tourists. It included bettering the service activities to fulfil the shifting needs and demands of the traveller. New travel trends such as staycations, wellness and spa tourism, and eco-tourism, have emerged to cater to tourists' preferences for nature-preserved regions and their needs for private space, social distancing, and cleanliness [39]. It is found that improvement in pull factors such as service quality and travel activities increase domestic tourism [32]. The pandemic has caused many changes in consumer behavior that are here to stay. A recent study by [39] noted that there is an emergent interest in wellness tourism, nature-based holidays, and ecotourism accommodations. People's awareness of their health and safety and the environment made them choose destinations with respect to clean, safe, and sustainable tourism-related practices. This opportunity further allows countryside tourism destinations to attract visitors by showcasing their environment, absence of large crowds, and sustainability.

One participant introduced the provision of food services. Others were not provided for, without prior arrangements. Another participant adopted social distancing policies between cottages to ensure their guests' safety. Other interviewees mentioned taking efforts towards offering water-activity such as kayaking to entice visitors to enjoy better while visiting and staying; they indeed appear proactive by diversifying their services. While, other participant underlined obvious communication to limit the amount of visitors that would bring in congestion.

The results show these initiatives are proactive measures to support the needs of travellers such that there is a delicate balance between safety, pleasure, and accessibility. From these strategies and changes among local tourism businesses, it clearly shows how they have been keen on adjusting to the new reality to attract visitors.

#### *Theme 4: Enhancing guest experience*

One of the adjustments and reinventions in tourism packages have been directed toward improving the experience of the guest to attract more tourists. The new experience in tourism reveals that immersion, escapism, and fun are factors that positively influence satisfaction and loyalty [24], whereas service quality does not directly influence customer loyalty; however, it does impact customer satisfaction, which is an essential component of the guest experience [18]. These have also been areas of concentration for these organizations, from producing serene ambiance. The replies from the respondents demonstrate diverse approaches which have been undertaken to create experiences for visitors and accommodate changing expectations of visitors. A respondent commented that the guests especially enjoy the resort during sunset hours, attributing this to natural beauty, which has become an attraction feature. To further enhance guest experiences, acoustic nights have been promoted, and promotional offers, such as 50% discounts on room rates have been successful in attracting many guests. The flexibility to set up tent has also been a more popular option for guests. These new and updated tourism packages would bring into tourism businesses what they need during this new normal. The business firms showed how well they adjusted with natural attraction offerings, kept prices in the affordable range, added new amenities, and organized new events to please their customers. This makes the businesses not only new customers but also ensures return visitors have an experience which they will remember and look forward to in the future.

#### *Theme 5: Flexible booking policies*

Under the new normal, tourism businesses have changed their packages to suit the change in travel preferences and safety. Knowing the uncertainty of the travellers, businesses introduced flexible booking and cancellation policies. The policies made the customers feel secure in making plans without fear of losing money if things changed. The flexibility helped build customer trust and encouraged more bookings, setting a precedent for future crises where consumer confidence may be affected. The concept of price transparency and

perceived value now comes into play when attracting post-pandemic tourists and stresses sustainable business practices; [30] additionally state that consumers have been compelled by the pandemic to pursue flexibility in their travel planning. Moreover, this new definition of authenticity in the tourism marketing indicates a transformation in the packaging and pricing of experiences in accordance with evolving consumer perceptions [12]. Multi-dimensional risk perceptions need to be overcome in the formulation of the tourism packages that reduce anxieties and increase visitor confidence [35]. These trends indicate the dynamism in tourism strategies as they respond to the contemporary challenges and opportunities facing the tourism industry. One of the participants showed how one processes the step-by-step procedures from securing a permit down to operating through the local regulation of the Tourism Office in implementing new normal. Here, one could already observe this as to how one of the respondents said his words of statement: *“That is how our procedure is. Once confirmed, I will be asking for a permit through the Tourism Office because they have an approval which gives us permission to operate.”*-P5 These views indicate the operating challenges faced by tourism enterprises, especially taking proactive measures that allow them to maintain their business operations while continuing to develop the guests' experience within an evolving context.

#### **Lessons learned of successful tourism packages offered in the province in redesigning the existing tourism packages**

It has shown that long-term strategies for continuing rural tourism during future disruptions would be provided by the improved opportunities. With functional flexibility at the forefront, the main strategic requirement is streamlined operation and responsiveness to emerging demand trends. Third, an investment in online engagement, such as through digital marketing, social media, and online booking sites, would help reach wider populations. Strict adherence to hygiene and safety measures forms a core part of the daily routine that maintains customer confidence for

standards of safety. Such findings go to indicate that adaptability and innovation are very essential towards survival in tourism during any pandemic and even when concerns about the future are relevant. By taking these steps, rural tourism enterprises shall strengthen their foundation, ready themselves in case of emergencies, and ensure a long-term sustainability.

Considering the insights brought about by effective tourism packages, a diversified strategy is required for renovating current tourism alternatives. Understanding tourist behavior, crisis management, and the industry trends, especially with the COVID-19 outbreak, are crucial aspects that cannot be overemphasized [4]. Current studies state that resilience in the tourism industry is necessary to better cope with future crises. For example, [4] examines the way destinations that have learned to adapt to the changes could recover faster than those who still depend on the old models. The findings indicated that diversified revenue streams, flexible operational models, and robust digital marketing strategies put businesses in a competitive advantage in terms of recovery. This indicates the need for adaptation and innovation, especially for smaller businesses, which might require more resources compared to large chains.

Additionally, the importance of knowledge management systems needs to be acknowledged as well [26]. In fact, such systems can be adapted in the tourism sector as capturing and sharing best practices for different regions improves the design and management of packages for tourism. Finally, translating the practical experiences of the campaigns from well abandonment campaigns [55], might mean gathering tourist feedback and operational insights. The former would be crucial to refining and improving tourism packages as it could better meet traveller needs and expectations.

One critical element highlighted is that of marketing strategies. Online marketing has been emphasized on to reconnect with customers and maintain the visibility. Similarly, another interviewee commented that doing online marketing would benefit the business a lot. This is particularly evident from

the statement presented by the interviewee: *"...and engaging in online marketing can really benefit your business very much."*-P1 Financial sustainability became of top importance. During such conditions of economy, variation in sources of revenue helps a business thrive. That is how this strategy goes hand in hand with survival under uncertain circumstances. Indeed, as one participant attested: *"In this current situation, we should not rely on our usual means of earning money; we should look for other ways to earn."*-P3

A good customer focus is a must for success. Respondents have emphasized the willingness to implement practices that are guest-centric and safe. This finding suggests that the customer care focus does not only ensure great experiences for guests but also creates positive word-of-mouth and repeat visits. It is essential to be able to adapt and innovate in the face of unexpected problems. One participant was noted to be proactive in new normal practices. The other participant emphasized preparedness for unexpected events. Additional, one participant further remarked that there should be an open communication with the government regarding safety measures. The findings about the successful tourism packages in this province indicate that it needs innovative marketing strategies, financial feasibility, customer focus, and adaptability. If they are to redesign their packages in a successful manner within tourism businesses, they should welcome online marketing, diversify sources of income, take care of the guest, and have preparedness for unprecedented events. We should also consider the motivational factors for tourists, including their need for relaxation and the possibility of increasing their knowledge of tourism, which are very important when redesigning tourism packages [44]. Innovation is also very important in enabling sustainable tourism. Innovative practices can be incorporated into the redesign of tourism packages to ensure that they meet the needs of the tourists while still conserving the resources of the destination [22]. These proactive and innovative approaches ensure that businesses stay competitive and provide memorable experiences for their guests in the new normal.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how tourism businesses in the rural area of Southern Leyte modified their businesses and services during and after the emergence of COVID-19. While the spotlight continues to be on battling the pandemic, findings present more holistic approaches toward creating resilient and sustainable tourism. Businesses taking adaptive actions such as diversifying revenue streams, streamlining business operation, enhancing guest experience, building resilience, and marketing and promotion show the importance of being prepared for external disruptions whether these come from health crises, natural disasters, or economic changes. This study demonstrates changes in the tourism sector in response to the pandemic. These include the strategic shift in marketing and promotional strategies, safety and hygiene, activity choices to change according to the changing preferences of consumers, better guest experiences, and shifting packages according to the shift in travel trends while maintaining the aspect of safety. These fluid techniques demonstrate the resilience of the industry to bounce back with new ideas when challenged.

Lastly, the research learns valuable lessons from successful tourism packages implemented in destinations in the Philippines. It points out the importance of effective marketing plans, financial feasibility, customer-oriented strategies, flexibility, and creativity. These tutorials provide guidelines and guidance for tourism businesses to improve their strategies and products and position themselves for continuous growth and success in the dynamic tourism industry.

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