



An Investigation on the Crisis Management Practices of Boutique Hotels and Villas in Sri Lanka: Lessons from the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract.

This study investigates the key crisis experiences and coping management strategies adopted by boutique hotels and villas in Sri Lanka with specific reference to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn era in Sri Lanka. A qualitative research method was adopted in conducting the study. Data was gathered using eight semi-structured interviews targeting general managers of registered boutique hotels and villas in Sri Lanka, selected through the snowball sampling technique. The thematic analysis was conducted to extract the main ideas from the transcripts. The study's results revealed infrastructural discrepancies, strategy risk, and distorted supply chains as three key crisis experiences encountered by boutique hoteliers in Sri Lanka during the period under study. Three key coping strategies were discovered as those predominantly used by boutique hoteliers during the crises, stressing the importance of product diversification, marketing efforts, and revamping supply chains. This study urges hoteliers to enhance crisis resilience through strategic adjustments, including restructuring supply chains via local partnerships for authenticity and cost benefits. It also raises caution to governments, emphasizes proactive planning for national resilience, especially in infrastructure, and advocates for active government involvement/participation in the tourism sector.

Kata Kunci:

Pengalaman Krisis,
Strategi Manajemen
Krisis, Butik Hotel
dan Vila, Industri
Parwisata, Covid-
19.

Abstrak.

Penelitian ini menyelidiki pengalaman krisis utama dan strategi manajemen penanggulangan yang diadopsi oleh hotel butik dan vila di Sri Lanka dengan referensi khusus pada pandemi virus corona (COVID-19) dan era kemerosotan ekonomi di Sri Lanka. Metode penelitian kualitatif digunakan dalam melakukan penelitian ini. Data dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan wawancara semi-terstruktur yang menargetkan manajer umum hotel dan vila butik yang terdaftar di Sri Lanka, yang dipilih melalui teknik pengambilan sampel bola salju. Analisis tematik dilakukan untuk mengekstrak ide-ide utama dari transkrip. Hasil penelitian ini mengungkapkan ketidaksesuaian infrastruktur, risiko strategi, dan rantai pasokan yang terdistorsi sebagai tiga pengalaman krisis utama yang dihadapi oleh pelaku bisnis perhotelan butik di Sri Lanka selama periode penelitian. Tiga strategi penanggulangan utama ditemukan sebagai strategi yang paling banyak digunakan oleh pelaku bisnis perhotelan butik selama krisis, yang menekankan pentingnya diversifikasi produk, upaya pemasaran, dan pembenahan rantai pasokan. Studi ini mendorong para pelaku bisnis perhotelan untuk meningkatkan ketahanan terhadap krisis melalui penyesuaian strategis, termasuk merestrukturisasi rantai pasokan melalui kemitraan lokal demi keaslian dan manfaat biaya. Studi ini juga meningkatkan kewaspadaan pemerintah, menekankan perencanaan proaktif untuk ketahanan nasional, terutama dalam hal infrastruktur, dan mengadvokasi keterlibatan/partisipasi aktif pemerintah dalam sektor pariwisata.

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1. Introduction

Crisis events have always posed significant challenges to the global tourism and hospitality industry, disrupting operations, destabilizing economies, and altering consumer behaviors. Over the past few decades, the industry has faced an array of crises, from natural disasters and political conflicts to economic recessions and health emergencies (Ritchie, 2004; Faulkner, 2001). These disruptions emphasize the critical importance of effective crisis management strategies to ensure resilience and sustainability in the tourism sector. Among these crises, the COVID-19 pandemic stands out as one of the most profound and far-reaching disruptions, severely affecting economies and businesses worldwide (Plzakova and Smeral, 2022).

Sri Lanka's tourism industry—a vital contributor to the nation's economy—has faced significant challenges due to multiple crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and an economic downturn. The tourism sector contributed approximately 12% to the country's GDP before these crises, underscoring its importance as a key driver of economic growth and employment (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2023). The pandemic caused an abrupt halt in international travel, leading to a drastic decline in tourist arrivals and revenue. Coupled with the economic downturn, these events amplified the vulnerabilities of the industry, particularly for boutique hotels and villas that cater to niche markets (Plzakova and Smeral, 2022).

Boutique hotels and villas, known for their personalized services and unique offerings, were uniquely impacted by these dual crises. Their reliance on both foreign and domestic travelers, coupled with limited access to financial and operational resources, highlighted the need for robust and adaptable crisis management strategies. Effective crisis management in the hospitality industry involves planning, preparedness, and agile responses to minimize operational disruptions and sustain business continuity (Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of localized solutions, supply chain resilience, and diversification in navigating crises (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008; Lu et al., 2023).

This study adopts a broad lens to investigate crisis management practices within the boutique hospitality sector, with insights drawn from the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the challenges and strategies employed during this unprecedented period, the study contributes to the broader discourse on crisis management in tourism. It explores critical areas such as supply chain adjustments, product diversification, and targeted marketing efforts, offering a comprehensive understanding of how boutique hotels navigated disruptions while maintaining operational viability.

The objectives of this research are twofold: first, to explore the key crisis experiences of boutique hoteliers, and second, to examine the strategies they employed to navigate operational disruptions. While the COVID-19 pandemic provides a significant context for analysis, the study situates its findings within the broader framework of crisis management, emphasizing lessons learned and their applicability to other potential disruptions in the future. Through this approach, the study highlights the resilience and adaptability required to sustain boutique hospitality operations during turbulent times (Fernando et al., 2016; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Bonadio et al., 2022).

The subsequent sections of this paper are organized as follows. A thorough literature review is presented in the section, followed by an explanation of the methodology employed in this study. The section thereafter will unveil and discuss the study's findings, followed by a brief discussion of the study's limitations and potential future directions.

2. Literature Review

This research involved a literature review on broader crisis management practices with specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic recession to set the theoretical foundation and underlying concepts regarding the research topic under study.

2.1. *Boutique Hotels and Villas*

A boutique hotel or a villa is an exclusive property that caters to affluent clientele offering an exceptional service level at premium prices (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, 2023). Boutique category hotels and villas are therefore best described as compact, attractive lodgings that provide top-notch services by Jones et al., (2013). Compared to the so-called "branded" hotels, boutique hotels are perceived as being creative and offering a more individualized experience. These hotels and villas provide tailored accommodations at a higher level that reflect their uniqueness and flair (Kurgun et al., 2011). As such, travelers who look forward to a difference/uniqueness in their board and lodging experience paying a premium are considered the target market for these boutique hotels and villas, which in turn thrive by fulfilling such desires of customers (Loureiro et al., 2019).

2.2. *Role of Boutique Hotels in Tourism Development*

Boutique hotels play a pivotal role in enhancing tourism development by combining cultural authenticity with modern amenities. These establishments often showcase local craftsmanship, cuisine, and architectural elements, offering guests immersive experiences that reflect the destination's unique identity (Loureiro et al., 2019). For instance, boutique hotels in Sri Lanka integrate traditional design features and locally inspired hospitality to highlight the country's rich heritage.

Economically, boutique hotels support local communities by sourcing materials and labor locally, thereby fostering community development and promoting sustainability (Kurgun et al., 2011; Weidenfeld, 2018). Their focus on eco-friendly practices and exclusivity aligns with global trends in responsible tourism, making them vital contributors to post-crisis recovery in the tourism sector. These features make boutique hotels a key asset in creating distinctive and meaningful travel experiences that attract niche markets and enhance a destination's appeal.

2.3. *Strategies Adopted by Hotels Across Countries at Times of Crises*

The tourism industry tops the list of industries that received the greatest blow from various crises in the past decades. Countries worldwide have experienced economic recessions, a direct threat to the flourishing of the tourism industry. This includes serious implications for different types of hotel establishments (Kapiki, 2011). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the global tourism industry, with hotels and other types of tourist lodging service providers globally experiencing unprecedented challenges (Agustina and Yosintha, 2021). Amidst these heap of challenges, mobility controls imposed to curb the pandemic, including lockdowns and closure of borders and airports heavily affected this sector. The nature of the tourism industry where extensive travel is required was directly victimized due to the pandemic. Moreover, tourism experiences that are greatly influenced by social interactions and travel faced a direct hit. Research conducted to understand the severity of these crisis' impact on the tourism industry, has highlighted the diverse strategies mainly adopted by hoteliers to face the crisis conditions.

Brand Management

Branding management is a popular strategy hoteliers adopt as a strategic response at times of crisis. Pongsakornrungrasit et al., (2021) revealed that brand management has elevated Thailand's tourism industry to rebound from the COVID-19 impact. It emphasized the importance of hoteliers working on building trust via strong connections and open communication during and post crises. The study further underscored building and maintaining a strong brand can assist hotels in surviving and engaging employees during recovery upon facing crises. Another study on the Spanish hospitality industry's response to the 2008 financial crisis, highlighted the importance of product quality and brand image as suitable key strategies in mitigating the crisis effects (Anton and Del Mar, 2020). Though branding has been studied by several scholars worldwide as a specific strategy adopted by hoteliers to combat crises, it is indeed worth exploring the applicability of marketing in a broader sense, as a crisis-coping strategy.

Product Enhancement

Another effective coping strategy hoteliers adopt is focusing on product enhancement during crises. During the 2008 worldwide recession, international tourism demand dwindled, but certain destinations like Las Vegas were exceptional and experienced steady or increased demand/uplift in demand. Lim & Won (2020) asserted that Las Vegas' international tourism demand grew due to several factors amongst which product diversification, high adaptive capacity, and uniqueness of product offered were key elements. Boukas, (2012) and Farmaki (2011) identified the crisis effects on Cyprus tourism as a lack of competitiveness, lower visitation/revenues, inferior quality, and increased pricing. The study underscored urgent response measures, foreign investment, product diversification, and quality enhancement as policy actions, calling for a comprehensive tourism planning framework. Although scholars worldwide have widely discussed product enhancement as a crisis-coping strategy by various hotel categories, its applicability in the Sri Lankan context specific to the boutique hotel category depicts a lacuna, that invites further scholarly exploration.

Financial Methods and Controls

Adopting finance-related controls and methods has been another strategy used by hoteliers to face crisis periods. De Sausmarez, (2004) evaluated Malaysia's response to the Asian Financial Crisis, specifically in the tourism sector, and explored the potential of sector-level crisis management. Financial interval forecasts and financial predictions were popular strategies adopted to gauge the crisis' impact on inbound and outbound tourism in Asia. Adding to another dimension, a study related to the Spanish hospitality industry proved cost-cutting and cost restructuring as crucial strategies to be adopted by organizations facing economic and financial crises (Anton and Del Mar, 2020).

Institutional Involvement

Furthermore, a Turkey-based study examined the impact of the 2001 economic crisis on Turkey's tourism industry, highlighting the pivotal role of national culture and government expertise in setting crisis management strategies. The study further suggested the need for strong regional alliances and national tourism plans, business support programs in place etc., related to financial resources, and establishing a national tourism crisis fund to assist in future crises. (Okumus and Karamustafa 2005). Another study related to the Baltic Republic's strategic responses to restore its tourism industries during and after pandemics revealed how critical the involvement of government and other regulatory bodies are in efforts related to opening borders, working together with other nations, and fostering collective understanding among tourism service providers within and between countries. It further

emphasized the extent non-governmental organizations are crucial in influencing political choices in times of crisis (Livina et al., 2021).

Though past literature brings to light dissimilar strategies adopted by hoteliers in general, its focus towards varied hotel categories, such as star hotels and resorts (Alzoubi and Jaaffar, 2020; Pavlatos et al., 2020) globally, is limited. The existing literature denotes that crisis practices adopted by boutique category hotels and villas have been an understudied research sphere; thus, there is space to be further explored. Moreover, our literature search specifically stressed that a limited number of empirical studies to date concerning the said sector leave a lacuna in the literature that is worthy of being addressed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Sample and Procedures

The present study focuses on the crisis management practices of boutique hotels and boutique villas in Sri Lanka. Aligning with Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority's (SLTDA) definition (SLTDA, 2023), our study interprets boutique hotels and villas as small but exclusive properties that offer exclusive amenities and individualized services to guests in an upscale, private, and cosy setting. As such, we considered 10 boutique hotels and 11 boutique villas registered with the SLTDA, as the sample population specific to this study (SLTDA, 2023). To select the research sample from the above population, we relied on snowball sampling, which enabled us to have eight respondents in total, among three boutique villas and five boutique hotels. The unit of analysis considered in this study was boutique hoteliers, particularly the general managers of boutique hotels and villas. Accordingly, our first respondent was a general manager from a boutique hotel. Through his colleagues across other boutique hotels and villas, the number of respondents was expanded up to eight, representing the applicability of the snowball sampling technique (Mousa et al., 2023) in this study.

These eight respondents faced semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 25-45 minutes. Ethical considerations in data collection were adhered to. All respondents were given a written assurance that the inputs (their responses) would be solely used for academic purposes and coded anonymously to ensure the respondent's identity and confidentiality. Moreover, the authors prudently ensured the respondents' informed consent and voluntary participation throughout the interviewing process, by allowing them to skip, prevent answering/respond to questions or withdraw from the interview at their sole discretion. The interviews were conducted by two of the authors in Sinhala language, which is the native language of all respondents as well as the authors. The respondents' statements obtained were subsequently transcribed verbatim and translated to English by each author individually. Authors later cross-verified this to confirm the accuracy of translation and interpretation.

3.2 Data Analysis

The authors used thematic analysis to assess the qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis is an effective method for detecting, evaluating, and interpreting patterns of meaning, known as "themes," in qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis in this study required dealing with a set of text-based data, especially interview transcripts. The researchers began the analytical procedure by becoming acquainted with the data they obtained. Each author/researcher worked individually on parallel coding, creating initial codes to identify and comprehend significant themes in the transcribed material. They then compared and reviewed the preliminary codes. Through this iterative procedure, the researchers obtained duplicate codes and aggregated these into a group of overlapping codes. The latter obtained by consensus among the

researchers, served as the foundation for subsequent investigations. The researchers intended to improve the quality and reliability of the qualitative analysis by utilizing the same coding system. Finally, the researchers divided the codes into 6 unique themes. Based on these topics, the practicality of solutions and coping strategies adopted by boutique hotel and villa owners to manage and survive Sri Lanka's string of crises that weaken sector performance were investigated.

4. Results and Discussion

This paper focused on crisis management within a niche in the tourism and hospitality sector, specifically examining the crisis experiences faced and crisis management strategies adopted by boutique hotels and boutique villas in Sri Lanka. Two-fold research questions guided the study. In this vein, we identified several key themes and codes through thematic analysis, which aligned with these two key research questions, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Themes and Codes related to the key research questions

Themes	Codes
RQ 01: What are the key crisis experiences encountered by hoteliers managing boutique hotels and villas with reference to the COVID-19 and the subsequent economic crisis in Sri Lanka?	
Basic Infrastructure Issues	Hindered public transportation.
	Disrupted accessibility
	Fuel crisis
Strategic Risk	Foreign client orientation
	Lack of local client orientation
	Zero income
Distorted supply chains	Discontinuity of imported supplies
	Import restrictions.
	Supply continuity issues
RQ 02: What are the key strategies adopted by boutique hoteliers to survive in the chain of crisis encountered by Sri Lanka?	
Product diversification	Uniqueness
	Experience
	Privacy
Marketing efforts	Marketing and promotional tactics
	Brand
Revamping supply chains	Move to local suppliers.
	Cost effective alternatives.
	Moving to homemade

Source: Authors (2023)

The first question our study intended to answer was, “What are the key crisis experiences encountered by hoteliers managing boutique hotels and villas with reference to the COVID-19 and the subsequent economic crisis in Sri Lanka?” In the current study, the period considered in our study covers three predominant crisis experiences encountered by boutique hoteliers managing boutique hotels and villas, which are discussed below.

4.1 Infrastructure Discrepancies

Infrastructure encompasses the essential facilities and systems that support the operations of a country, city, or region, crucial for the functioning of its economy. Tourism relies on a well-developed infrastructure within the economic framework to operate effectively (James and Essien, 2019). As

such, roads, water, electricity, safety services, health services, communication, and public transportation become fundamental infrastructure requirements for hoteliers (Gearing, 1974).

The present study revealed infrastructure discrepancies during the crisis period as a key challenge boutique hotels and villas experienced. The crisis in Sri Lanka, led by intertwined issues like constrained transport, disrupted energy supply, and communication difficulties, caused a recession in the tourism sector and pushed hoteliers to face the worst-case scenario. They faced significant challenges related to mobility and accessibility during the crisis. Limited public transportation and roadblocks disrupted both guest access and employee commutes, severely impacting daily operations. As explained by Respondent 03, a general manager with 10 years of experience managing a boutique hotel:

“The lack of ability to locomote freely was a key challenge we faced in managing our services. The travel limitations were a headache we always had because they disrupted accessibility to our clients as well as staff members. Although clients wanted to visit our villas to relax a bit amidst the chaos, the transportation hindrances in terms of blocked roadways, limited public transportation such as bus transportation and railway transportation and fuel supply shortages made us, hoteliers, miserable” (Respondent 03).

Similarly, Respondent 07, an operations manager with 12 years of experience at a boutique villa, highlighted the difficulties of ensuring staff availability:

“Even getting our employees to report to our premises to upkeep and run our business at least with minimal resources, was so difficult due to the lack of public transport facilities and roadway travel blockage during the crisis” (Respondent 07).

These findings align with Tang and Rochananond’s (1990) assertion that infrastructure inefficiencies directly hinder tourism operations. Additionally, they confirm Carvalhaes et al. (2020) and Lu et al. (2023), who emphasized the importance of infrastructure resilience during crises, particularly regarding mobility and energy supply. This study contributes unique insights by highlighting how boutique hotels, due to their limited operational scale, face disproportionate challenges in ensuring continuity compared to larger hotel chains.

“Due to the economic recession, the countrywide fuel shortages further pressured us because it was a threat to our hotel’s operational continuity. We were always worried about when we would run out of fuel stocks which were essential for functioning the generator (for electricity supply during power cuts) as well as locomotion requirements to ensure operational continuity of our hotel” (Respondent 05).

While past literature has broadly addressed the significance of infrastructure (Wani, 2023; Tang and Rochananond, 1990), this study adds specific evidence from boutique hotels, emphasizing their heightened vulnerability. These findings align with previous studies on tourism, which identified infrastructural discrepancies as a critical strain on smooth operations (Wani, 2022). Scholars such as Lu et al. (2023), Mishchenko et al., (2021) and Carvalhaes et al. (2020) have further highlighted the importance of infrastructure resilience for sustaining economic entities during crises, particularly pandemics. This study reinforces these conclusions by confirming that infrastructural discrepancies, including mobility challenges caused by distorted roadway access and utility hindrances, significantly impact boutique hotels. These issues emphasize an urgent need for targeted interventions to enhance infrastructure resilience, particularly for small-scale enterprises, to ensure their continued operations during crises.

4.2 Strategy Risk

The ambiguities and undiscovered potential inherent in the strategies adopted by businesses are often identified as strategy risk or strategic risk (PWC, 2016). The present study's insights indicate that boutique hoteliers in Sri Lanka experienced severe risks, which can be attributed to the strategies they adopted. Specifically, their over-reliance on foreign clientele left them vulnerable during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which halted international travel and severely affected revenue streams.

One operations manager of a boutique villa, Respondent 08, with 10 years of experience, reflected on the consequences of this over-reliance and the lack of foresight in their strategic planning:

"We strongly felt that there was a lack of attention on our part. We owe to what we suffered due to the risks and losses of the current strategy, as we have probably overly focused on our clients. When everything (concerning the business) was going fine, we did not feel that we had missed seeing something. Our main focus was attracting foreigners as guests/customers, and we never thought a pandemic of this magnitude would hit us so hard. We actually paid little attention to locals. This was a loophole in our strategy, which finally hit us really hard" (Respondent 04).

Similarly, an operations manager, Respondent 06, with 8 years of experience at a boutique hotel, shared the financial toll caused by their strategic choices. This respondent detailed how their lack of diversification led to a complete halt in business operations during the crisis:

"With the pandemic, our hotel had zero clients, which means our occupancy rate was completely nil and sadly our revenues too. This was the time even we as a boutique villa realized, there was something wrong with the strategy we were adopting for all these years. Simply, we have not seen the downside/ risk of the strategy we were holding high, until we underwent this adversity. When things were going smoothly and foreigners were freely visiting our villa, we did not realize the gravity of losses disasters and crises can bring. So we had little focus on targeting locals. I sincerely feel that was a grave mistake we made in terms of our strategy. But the pandemic taught us a lesson there" (Respondent 06).

These findings align with Kinyua and Kangai (2024) and Kahveci (2022), who identified a similar over-dependence on foreign markets as a key risk for small and medium-sized tourism enterprises. While the study confirmed that reliance on international clientele may sustain operations in stable periods, the lack of diversification—such as targeting local clientele—can exacerbate risks during crises.

Our findings also extend the literature by highlighting how boutique hotels, specifically, may face greater strategic risks than larger, branded hotels. Unlike large hotel chains, which often have a diversified client base and contingency strategies, boutique hotels are more likely to focus on niche markets, increasing their vulnerability during economic downturns or global disruptions.

The study emphasizes the importance of re-evaluating strategic orientations to include local clientele as a critical component of business models. This would enable boutique hotels to mitigate risks and maintain resilience in the face of crises. Past research (Rahmawati et al., 2023; Tsai, 2021) also supports this recommendation, noting the benefits of adopting adaptive strategies that cater to both international and domestic markets (Jeuring, 2016).

4.3 Distorted Supply Chains

Supply chains are essential for the continuity of any business. However, the pandemic situation faced by countries worldwide has distorted business supply chains (Bonadio et al., 2022). The present study

results are also congruent with previous research. The boutique hoteliers (respondents) concerned in our study made strong comments on supply chain distortions they underwent during the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the economic downturn in Sri Lanka. They opined that the supply chain distortion experienced as a strong hindrance to the operational smoothness of the boutique hotels and villas.

A general manager, Respondent 02, with 15 years of experience in managing a boutique hotel, described the impact of import restrictions and logistical challenges on their operations:

“During this crisis, most of our supply chains were interrupted. The import restrictions as well as travel bans hindered the continuity of imported supplies reaching our hotel premises” (Respondent 02).

An operations manager, Respondent 04, with 10 years of experience in a boutique villa, elaborated on the additional challenges of securing local supplies. Despite attempts to rely on local sourcing, transportation constraints compounded the issue, creating significant operational bottlenecks:

“If we had kept the foreign supplies aside, even local sourcing would have been very challenging for us due to the constrained transportation. It was a major challenge/difficulty/strain because hindered supplies meant operational disruptions in the villa” (Respondent 04).

These findings are consistent with prior research, such as Yousaf et al., (2022), Tellioglu (2021) and Karl et al. (2018), which emphasized how global crises disrupt supply chain continuity, impacting procurement and delivery. Boutique hotels in our study faced compounded challenges due to their reliance on smaller and often less diversified supply networks, highlighting their unique vulnerability.

Additionally, the study contributes to existing literature by underscoring how supply chain distortions were not limited to imported goods but also affected local sourcing, especially in regions with constrained transportation infrastructure. This complements findings by Bhai and Ran (2022) and Bonadio et al. (2022), who emphasized the critical need for supply chain resilience during crises.

These disruptions were not only logistical but also financial, as businesses faced increased costs due to limited availability of supplies. Boutique hoteliers in Sri Lanka, with their smaller-scale operations, were particularly affected, underscoring the need for improved planning and contingency measures to navigate future crises effectively.

The second question that our study intended to answer was “What are the strategies and tactics adopted by boutique hoteliers to survive in the chain of crisis encountered by Sri Lanka?” Accordingly, our study outcomes revealed three coping strategies predominantly used by boutique hoteliers to survive amidst the crises encountered, which are discussed below.

4.4 Product Diversification

The results of the study revealed product diversification as a strategy relied upon by boutique hotels and villas to survive amidst the series of crises faced by Sri Lanka. In raw terms, diversification involves broadening the reach of a product or industry into a new market instead of focusing solely on a single product (Weidenfeld, 2018). Diversification regarding tourism relates to providing diverse and customized experiences, flexibility in planning destination experiences, and enhancing competitiveness by creating more synergies and economies of scope (Benur and Bramwell, 2015). Product diversification can assist considerably to diversify risk, enhance business potential and adaptability to cope in volatile situations, especially in turmoils.

A general manager, Respondent 02, with 15 years of experience managing a boutique hotel, shared how their property offered unique accommodations to stand out in a competitive market. This respondent emphasized the importance of privacy and aesthetic appeal in creating memorable guest experiences:

“In our hotel, we ensure exceptional privacy and a unique experience for our guests. We do this by providing our guests with beautifully crafted unique chalets to lodge, as opposed to room-based traditional villas which are common everywhere. Now we have 36 such chalets featuring different scenic views. Apart from that, to customize the customer experience, we have a system to assign a butler and waiter dedicated to the respective customers throughout their stay at our premises. In doing so, our customers can feel the warmth of our customized and unique service, here at our hotel premises. I would say this is one keyway how we differentiate our service offered, from other boutique luxury hotels, which helped us survive/ keep going through the tough times” (Respondent 02).

An operations manager, Respondent 04, with 10 years of experience managing a boutique villa, highlighted how features like private pools added value to their offerings and aligned with guests' expectations for exclusivity and hygiene:

“We always offer full privacy to our guests because we feel that is a highly demanded aspect by our clients. The private plunge pools we offer in association with the villas, seem to be a key reason why guests keep coming to us amidst the pandemic. They don't find such privacy and uniqueness in every place. In a way, it adds to the hygiene assurance as well, because guests know that the pool will only be theirs. I think that is one reason they don't mind spending a little more in a situation. This is even more valid in a setting where they need relaxation amidst the stress of the pandemic as well as the economic turmoil they experience in routine life. We managed to keep the demand at a good level all because of the unique combination of services we offer here at our villa, according to my experience” (Respondent 04).

These findings align with Vumbunu et al., (2022), Boukas (2012) and Farmaki (2011), who emphasized the importance of diversification in helping tourism businesses adapt to external shocks. Boutique hotels in this study extended this perspective by leveraging unique accommodation options and enhanced privacy features, which became increasingly important during the pandemic.

This study adds to the literature by demonstrating how diversification can help boutique hotels retain and attract customers by catering to niche demands. For instance, exclusive offerings such as private pools and personalized services not only helped sustain operations but also positioned these establishments as safe and desirable choices for travelers during the crises.

4.5 Marketing Efforts

Our study further revealed “marketing efforts” to be a coping strategy that boutique hotels and villas use to sustain business during crises. Marketing collectively refers to the actions and procedures involved in generating, conveying, providing, and trading products or services that hold value for customers (American Marketing Association, 2023). The general tendency of any business entity is to contract costs, in crisis times as a coping strategy, which holds for marketing costs as well (Picard, 2001). However, cutting down expenditure for marketing in crisis situations may further deepen its negative consequences (Smeral, 2009). Enhancing marketing efforts during crisis periods to gain market share has favored businesses compared to those businesses that denied focus on marketing efforts (Haluk Koksall and Ozgul, 2007). This finding was also congruent with our study discoveries.

A general manager, Respondent 03, with 10 years of experience managing a boutique hotel, explained how their team adapted marketing strategies to cater to the shift toward digital platforms. This

respondent highlighted the significance of staying connected with potential customers during uncertain times:

“We have taken extra care to do more promotions during these tough times. If we don’t do that, failing will be unavoidable. As marketing tactics, we initiated personalized email campaigns, as well as attractive website and social media marketing campaigns because people have gotten closer to digital connecting platforms during these times. We also maintain a rapport with travel agents to popularize our villas through them” (Respondent 03).

An operations manager, Respondent 06, with 12 years of experience, emphasized the role of branding in ensuring business survival during the crisis. This respondent discussed how they leveraged their established brand name to secure customer trust and loyalty:

“Our brand is another key factor we rely on to sustain the crisis. We feel that the brand name we have established in the boutique hotel market is a key saviour at tough times like this. Therefore, we thought of turning this threat into opportunity and working on enhancing our brand identity, so that it will help us secure customers for our business irrespective of market unpredictability” (Respondent 06).

These findings align with prior studies, such as Pongsakornrunsilp et al. (2021), which highlighted the importance of robust marketing practices in aiding the recovery of Thailand’s tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Haluk Koksall and Ozgul (2007) emphasized that businesses that continue marketing efforts during downturns tend to outperform those that do not. In fact, recent studies by Taecharungroj, and Pattaratanakun (2023) and Milton and Knutson (2023), further complements the present study’s emphasis of marketing efforts as a strategy for aiding the tourism industry’s recovery during the pandemic era.

This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how boutique hotels utilized digital platforms such as email campaigns and social media to adapt to the changing preferences of crisis-era travelers. By maintaining a visible and appealing presence online, these establishments ensured customer engagement and retention despite market uncertainties.

4.6 Revamping Supply Chains

Our study confirms that boutique hotels and villas showed a tendency to revamp their supply chains whilst having a greater native focus, as a key strategy to withstand amidst the crises faced. A supply chain is a linked sequence of activities that involves the planning, coordination, and control of materials, components and finished products as these moves from suppliers to customers (Stevens, 1989). In the case of our study, it encompasses materials and supplies that flow from all forms of suppliers to the respective hotels and villas. In the present study, the respondents depicted a trend of altering the sourcing and procurement procedures to promote a greater focus on local suppliers and producers and minimize reliance on imports as much as possible. This strategy was mainly adapted to lower expenditure during crises while boosting the regional economy and supporting small-scale farmers and enterprises within the crisis situations to create win-win situations for the stakeholders. The initiative has enabled these boutique hotels and villas to provide their visitors with a more authentic experience.

A general manager, Respondent 01, with 15 years of experience, described how they reassessed their supplier network to optimize costs and ensure availability. This respondent highlighted the financial and operational benefits of transitioning to local suppliers:

“We have almost looked at/ reviewed the profiles of all our suppliers during this tough period. What we wanted was to identify where we can save in terms of our supply chains. Then we understood that sourcing of all-time supplies ranging from food items to beverages to hygiene products can be changed/ altered in our favor, as we are in a business/ sector where cleanliness is critical. For example, dairy products, such as cheese, butter, fresh milk, ice cream, and yoghurt, to name a few, then fruits, beverages, liquor, air fresheners, hygiene products, and many more could be sourced locally rather than going for imported products” (Respondent 01).

Our study even testified that these boutique hotels and villas have shifted to relying on home-grown, regional food to provide a distinctive experience that is both affordable and sustainable during crisis. This strategy has not only helped these establishments to have better control over cost and supply but also to create a positive impact in customers' minds about their unique culinary customs.

An operations manager, Respondent 05, with 10 years of experience at a boutique villa, elaborated on their innovative approach to in-house production, which reduced dependency on external suppliers and ensured continuity:

“This villa’s property spreads across 25 acres of land and the recent crisis gave us a point to think. Indeed, the crisis was an eye opener. We started growing our vegetables, greens, and fruits. We even started an in-house project to produce bee honey. Simply we do everything possible to be done in-house to facilitate our supplies” (Respondent 05).

These findings align with Bonadio et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of supply chain agility in responding to global disruptions. The shift to local sourcing and in-house production reduced dependency on imported goods, mitigating risks associated with transportation constraints and import restrictions.

Additionally, this study contributes novel insights by highlighting how boutique hotels integrated localized and self-reliant practices into their supply chain strategy. This approach not only enhanced operational resilience but also provided guests with an authentic and sustainable experience, aligning with the broader goals of sustainable tourism (Bhai and Ran, 2022; Tellioglu, 2021; Karl et al., 2018).

A general manager, Respondent 02, with 10 years of experience managing a boutique hotel, reflected on how small adaptations in their operations contributed to their ability to sustain during the crisis. This respondent emphasized the significance of producing homemade pasta as a creative solution to supply chain disruptions, which not only ensured continuity but also enhanced customer satisfaction:

“We started making homemade pasta. That had a lot of good customer compliments. If you look at it, there is a difference between when you use commercially prepared pasta served to a guest and when you have homemade pasta. The taste has a unique vibe, and we feel good in our pockets as well. Since pasta is an all-time demanded food item by the guests, we were very confident in the supply continuity as well. We actually felt these were trivial things that eventually supported us alot, to sustain the crisis” (Respondent 02).

By revamping their supply chains to prioritize local partnerships and in-house production, boutique hotels not only minimized operational disruptions but also enhanced their offerings (Abou Kamar et al., 2023). This strategic pivot underscores the importance of adaptive supply chain practices in navigating crises effectively (Tajeddini, et al., 2024).

4.7 Implications

The findings of the present study present important implications for boutique hotels and villas, regulatory authorities related to the tourism industry as well as the government. By revealing key crisis

experiences as well as key recovery strategies adopted by boutique hotels and villas in Sri Lanka, our study sheds light on the importance of being crisis-ready by boutique hotels (business entities) as well as the governing bodies of countries. In doing so, it can help minimize the ill effects/ negative impacts of such crises to hotels and villas as well as a country as a whole.

Since it has been evident that the majority of boutique hotels and villas heavily rely on a foreign cliental-focused strategy in operating their businesses, the study stresses the risk embedded in overreliance on a strategy during economic crises or pandemics like COVID-19. This steers hoteliers to rethink and reform their strategic orientation/strategic renewal in such a way that would make them capable of operating with minimalized adversities including business/market losses in prolonged periods of low yield amidst crises. Furthermore, this study unveils the possible synergies hoteliers could gain by revamping their supply chains. In this vein, our study clearly shows that having local-partnered supply chains (in majority or in full) not only enables hotels to be more resilient in crises but also provides them with native/authenticity-based-differentiation advantages as well as cost advantages in general. Furthermore, the cruciality of adopting continuous and creative marketing strategies by hoteliers to navigate amidst economic adversities and pandemic situations has been stressed.

Moreover, the study findings set an amber light for the government and regulatory authorities of countries to rethink /restrategize ahead and formulate backup strategies for business continuity to face crises. This kind of approach ensures a better level of resilience in a given sector as well as an economy. In this vein, our study further affirms the importance of governments and regulatory authorities of countries being envisioned and taking proactive steps and measures to ensure infrastructural continuity, if they foresee the grave importance of an economy or a country to navigate rough waters amidst a crisis condition without falling into further economic catastrophes. Furthermore, our study suggests that the governments, as well as regulatory bodies in the tourism industry need to play a stronger advisory and facilitating role in guiding and supporting hoteliers, thus enabling them to be geared to survive during crises. This is feasible by collaborating with the regulatory authorities of counterpart countries on a longer-term agenda and creating platforms to share learned lessons, new knowledge, and best practices.

4.8 *Limitations and Future Research*

Despite the valuable contributions set forth by the present study, a few limitations could be traced which can be addressed in future research. The study has been conducted based on the opinions expressed only by the “general manager” level employees of the boutique hotels and villas, which is considered the first limitation inherent to this study. Restricting the sample to “registered boutique hotels and villas” (disregarding the unregistered boutique hotels and villas) can be traced as the second limitation of this study, as it hindered capturing a complete picture of the concern under study. Future researchers could focus on analyzing the strategies suggested by the present study separately, on a deeper level to better understand their relevance and applicability for boutique hotels and villas as well as other hotel categories. As such, they could dig deeper into vital aspects such as supply chain revamping, infrastructural discrepancies and enhance the quality as well as improve the generalizability of findings for practical applications in similar scenarios. Future researchers could moreover look at considering higher sample sizes and altering the mix of respondents to gain a more holistic picture of this issue under concern.

5. **Conclusion**

Our study investigated the key crisis experiences and coping management strategies adopted by boutique hotels and villas, with specific reference to the pandemic era and the subsequent economic

downturn in Sri Lanka. In doing so, it fills a void in the literature and discloses unique insights relevant to the above-explained niche in Sri Lanka's tourism operators. Amidst many challenges faced by hoteliers during crises, the severely felt challenges tend to show a lack of smooth access to suppliers and supply chain constraints regarding daily needed supplies, infrastructural discrepancies including hindrances to utility and transportation modes, and risk related to a lack of long term planning priorities of hoteliers. Additionally, the study showed that boutique hoteliers relied on diversification of their service offerings, enhancing of marketing efforts and supply chain revamping as the key coping strategies they adopted amidst the crises. We believe that these discoveries pinpoint critical implications not only for boutique hoteliers but also for other hotel categories, given the practicality and the relevance of these findings project in general. If the hoteliers could see the rationale of shifting their focus towards localizing and reorganizing supply chains, it would not only assist hoteliers to strategically cope in crises times but also serve as a mechanism to enforce authenticity in their overall service provision offering a high level of customer experience. This will subsequently benefit not only the hoteliers but also the country as a whole in economic terms. Moreover, if the government's facilitation and other regulatory authorities' support during crisis could sharpen the focus, coupled with a sense of organizational readiness on ensuring the continuity of infrastructural provisions, it would help withstand the shock of crises with minimal friction for not only boutique hotels but all forms of hotels in general. As such, we believe that our study encourages diverse stakeholders of the hotel sector to rethink/reconsider strategies and meticulously to boost the resilience of the said sector players. By doing so, the entities in the hotel/hospitality sector are likely to minimize vulnerabilities in similar disasters (such as the fear related to uncertainties of being victims of future crises) and handle such situations with much preparedness in time to come.

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