

Light at the end of a very dark tunnel: An examination of the survival and recovery strategies of Iranian tourist accommodation businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic enters year three, with no end in sight. Among hoteliers, small family run businesses have been among the hardest hit. We interview owners of small Iranian Eco-tourism lodges (Ecolodges). Using MAXQDA 2020 software, thematic analysis revealed 10 main themes, condensed into five discussion topics. Stakeholder theory shapes our discussion of findings, revealing roles of internal and external stakeholders. Findings also include the reactive and innovative strategies ecolodges use to stay open and generate cash flow, the importance of stakeholder communications and accessing up-to-date government rules, the value of constant learning, and H.R. practices that assure stakeholders' well-being.

Keywords

Iran, tourism, ecolodges, hospitality, covid-19

Introduction

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic projections for tourism were already bleak, with researchers around the world soon providing evidence of how hard the sector was being impacted. No country was immune to these tourism effects, as reports from the USA (Spenceley et al., 2021), China (Knight et al., 2020; Qiu et al., 2020), India (Jaipuria et al., 2020; Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021), Indonesia (Riadil, 2020), and many other nations revealed the devastating effect on tourism. Globally, vast job and economic losses were anticipated (Zenker and Kock, 2020) and, following more than two pandemic years, “the (global) decline in travel, hospitality and tourism” felt 2 years ago (Kreiner and Ram’s, 2020) continues being a global phenomenon. Collectively, tourism losses are having compounding effects due to impacts on “vulnerable categories (women, young people, and unskilled employees) who are an important part of the workforce, the large share of SMEs, (and) the importance of work for local communities and its multiplying effects” (Bulin and Tenie, 2020: 45).

Iran was named the world’s second fastest growing tourist destination in 2018, with 49.9% growth in arrivals per year (UNWTO, 2020). The 2025 Tourism Vision Plan projects that “the country aims to increase the number of tourist arrivals from 4.8 million in 2014 to 20 million in 2025” (Tehran Times, 2020). Throughout Iran’s 31 provinces there are innumerable historical and natural sites welcoming to domestic and international eco-minded tourists, with ecolodges a rapidly growing hospitality sector in rural areas (Khalili et al., 2020). Ecolodges are typically small and family run, with owners in regular communication with guests, and with services distinct from other lodging options (Cai et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2013).

Ecolodges, “an increasingly popular choice for ecologically minded travelers and those who are seeking

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a genuine cultural experience” (1STQUEST), have been viewed as the “economic dynamo in rural areas (and the) reason for reverse migration from cities to villages” (Financial Tribune, 2020). However, ecolodges suddenly faced bleak prospects when, in March 2020, COVID-19 brought an abrupt halt to most of the sector. In the ensuing months, COVID-19 led to over 2000 Iranian Ecolodges closing their doors, leaving 22,000 workers redundant (Financial Tribune, 2020). Our research focuses on the crisis management activities of Iranian ecolodges during COVID-19.

COVID-19 thrust all hoteliers into crisis management and there is a rapidly growing body of research examining how hoteliers are engaging, along with advisories on sustaining business through crises. Even before the present crisis, hospitality crisis research was extensive. Leta and Chan (2021) assess 88 research articles on the subject (date range: 1997–2019). Using a classic pre-crisis, mid-crisis management, and post-crisis recovery stages approach, the authors discuss how crisis research concerns itself with service providers and stakeholders, with the range of stakeholders affecting hoteliers “include(ing) but ... not limited to customers, employees, suppliers, creditors, shareholders, government, and communities” (p. 4). They recognize that the relationships service providers have with stakeholders affects how well providers handle crises. While prior hospitality crisis research informs how stakeholders may act during crises, COVID-19’s “devastating effects on operations, employees, and customers are unrivaled compared to previous crises (making it) critical to generate new knowledge” for transforming hospitality operations (Gursoy and Chi, 2020: 529).

Wut et al.’s (2021) tourism sector crisis management review paper includes the nascent research addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of their unresolved COVID-19 questions drew our interest. The first relates to the need to understand impacts of the crisis and strategic responses that are helping hoteliers through the crisis. The second concerns the need to understand how COVID-19 is affecting employee well-being and the actions hoteliers are taking in this regard. Adapted from Wut et al., we thus frame our enquiry as: (1) understanding COVID-19 crisis’ difficulties for (ecolodges) and strategies by (ecolodges) for surviving the crisis; (2) understanding ecolodge human resource practices for strengthening the business while assuring the well-being of personnel through the crisis.

We explore the first question using a stakeholders view of the firm. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) recognizes that “firms perform better by recognizing internal and external stakeholders...(that) some stakeholders are more salient than others” and that

firms must “identify how to serve these stakeholders well” as a path to improved performance (Murphy and Wilson, 2021: 4). Barakat and Wada (2021: 183) affirm the utility of stakeholder theory in hospitality, including how it “leads to reflections on the interests and influences of those involved in the value creation process” and through its focus on relationships. Any strategies or programs undertaken by ecolodges involve and affect stakeholders.

The second question is important for investigation because ecolodge success depends on employees. In this service intensive sector, employees work hand-in-hand with customers. COVID-19 has provoked hospitality to make dramatic service delivery changes; long-held service protocols have been torn from hospitality playbooks, with employees needing to quickly adapt in this high stress environment. Employment fragility, changes to job duties during COVID-19, and safety concerns, among other issues, make the well-being of employees a deep concern. In the context of ecolodges, these concerns may be heightened as few financial reserves may make layoffs likely and as limited training capacity may make transitioning employee skills and behaviors problematic.

Although Iranian ecolodges find themselves in desperate times, those still open have been seeking ways to survive. The novelty of the crisis, the distinct character of ecolodges within hospitality, and the scarcity of research in family run hospitality during the crisis, made it important for us to choose this sector for study. Beyond Iran, there is the simultaneous sense that ecotourism, a rapidly growing sector globally prior to COVID-19, has enormous pent-up demand. Being able to inform ecolodges on strategies being undertaken to survive through the crisis will make them more prepared for business success when eco-tourism again flourishes. This makes our research relevant for ecolodges around the world. Beyond ecolodges, any small family run hotelier may be advantaged by the insights.

The literature review opens with a discussion of crisis management and how stakeholders are fundamental to any crisis management discourse. The review includes studies of the impact of COVID-19 and ways that the hospitality sector has responded. Then, using a grounded theory approach, we explain our use of semi-structured interviews with business owners of Iranian Eco-tourism accommodation businesses. In addition to interviews, we examined documentation on Iranian ecolodges through the crisis to gain a better understanding of the conditions facing these businesses. As evidenced by letting what we understand from theory guide our data collection and interpretations, we concur with Thornberg (2012) that using grounded theory as a pure inductive approach is an impossible

position; by being informed, adjustments can be made to analysis based on the extent that it results in greater understanding.

Grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) was appropriate because the context (COVID-19, eco-tourism businesses, Iran) is unique, demanding understanding to induce theory. We use thematic analysis to identify themes and we scan the thematic content to understand how ecolodges learn from and communicate with their internal and external stakeholders. Our analysis also reveals the innovations/adaptations to business activities (HR, Marketing, Operations, Finance) undertaken by ecolodges through the crisis. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for Iranian ecolodges and, more broadly, tourism accommodation businesses.

Literature review

Crisis management and stakeholders

Three-phase crisis management models refer to pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis periods, and, when applied to hospitality (Leta and Chan, 2021), models inform improvements in crisis management strategies. Canhoto and Wei's (2021) case study of a UK boutique hotel's actions during the pandemic also uses a three-stage process, with adaptation more likely when there is; (1) *recognition* of the scale and severity of a crisis, (2) *rationalizing* as a process of identifying alternatives for dealing with the crisis and determining best options, and (3) *refashioning* the business to gain optimal outcomes. The authors go to great length discussing the importance of stakeholder relationships and collaborative stakeholder engagement, as well as innovation and adaptability to stave off the impact of the crisis. Alpaslan et al. (2009: 44), leveraging the crisis management insights of Pearson and Clair (1998), assert that the "success of crisis preparation or response efforts depends on at least two factors: the nature of an organization's established relationship with its stakeholders, and the accuracy of an organization's understanding of how its stakeholders might behave in the context of crises". Ultimately, firms prepared for crises, with the ability to sense and scan to gain crisis forewarning, and with good stakeholder relationships, are more likely to succeed through crises.

It is hard to imagine any stakeholder group not being affected by, or not having a role in dealing with, crises affecting a firm (Zech, 2015). When hoteliers are confronted by crises, stakeholder groups vary in their saliency as well as having varying levels of power. Wang and Ritchie (2010: 309) report that hotelier stakeholders range from "clients, shareholders, government

bodies and even pressure groups (and that each) could express their opinions on crisis planning" and that receptivity by owners/managers to these voices affects hotel crisis planning. Collectively, hotelier stakeholder groups include internal stakeholders (the organization and its personnel) and numerous external stakeholders (customers, suppliers, communities, financial institutions, media, etc.). We next discuss three of these stakeholders, *customers*, *personnel*, and *government*.

Customers as stakeholders. Customers are the ultimate stakeholder. Hoteliers need to meet or exceed customer service expectations to satisfy customers and engender loyalty (Rather and Sharma, 2017; Sharma and Srivastava, 2018). COVID-19 has provoked new service provision customer expectations; hospitality businesses have been racing to provide both proactive and reactive innovations to accommodate the situation. Hoteliers' responsiveness to newly identified customer needs and expectations was identified by Le and Phi's (2021) analysis of hotel news feeds indicating numerous proactive business innovations, along with reactive service change innovations, including new health and safety measures, were being implemented.

Alonso et al. (2020) report that early in the COVID-19 crisis many small hospitality businesses were already making operational adaptations, seeking alternative ways to gain revenue, and looking ahead to what their operations should look like in a post-COVID world. There have been COVID-19 provoked changes in person-to-person contact as well as enabling greater reliance on self-service (Hemmington and Neill, 2021). Meanwhile, "small incremental changes that can be implemented quickly" have been the most common during COVID-19 (Breier et al., 2021).

Health and safety, risk perceptions, and assurance of quality are on customers' minds (Pappas and Glyptou, 2021). When health and safety measures, as well as hygiene management practices are in place, there is a cascading effect on hotel image and customer behaviors during the crisis, with ensuing effects on repurchase intentions and word of mouth (Yu et al., 2021). European B&B's optimism toward recovering from the pandemic is associated with numerous reactive and proactive innovations, including having special cleaning programs, redesigning sales and marketing strategies, designing offers and incentives for local markets, and upscaling workforces (Herédia-Colaço and Rodrigues, 2021).

Beyond being reactively responding to urgently required crisis provoked expectations, proactively looking ahead to changes in customer priorities may offer opportunities for hoteliers. Zenker and Kock (2020: 3) suggest that tourist accommodation providers should

consider the possibility that “customers might see the pandemic...as a reason to behave more sustainably. With the movement toward sustainability growing exponentially, savvy tourist accommodation businesses may be using this time of crisis to explore and implement eco-friendly innovations. Prior to the pandemic, Iranian ecolodges had already been attracting travelers from Europe and elsewhere to experience and learn about nature (Chogan, 2021). These motivations surely persist, with additional concerns for the environment becoming more important. In many countries, B&B hotels have been early adopters of “green”, with guests appreciating this differentiating factor. Moise et al. (2020) find that green practices affect “perceived value, satisfaction, intention to revisit and word of mouth”. Cai et al. (2021) report that Chinese B&B’s may look forward to attracting more tourists by using this time to innovate through upgrading their green strategies. They further report that environmental value should be promoted, calling it “the highest priority (for) elicit(ing) tourist loyalty following COVID-19”.

Iranian ecolodges need to be alert to customer needs and expectations, as well as government mandates for service provision, taking both reactive and proactive approaches to innovating and adapting. Anticipating customer needs and expectations requires closeness to customers, made possible through ongoing information scanning and by asking customers using informal or formal market research. When customers value a business, they are more likely to support the business through crises. Breier et al. (2021) discuss the vital role of *stammgasts* to hospitality firms during COVID-19. *Stammgasts*, defined as loyal customers who are “connected on an emotional and personal level to the owner and the staff,” are thought to be helpful by offering ideas, assistances, and even serving as ambassadors through the crisis.

Personnel as stakeholders. Hospitality research often discusses HR practices including recruitment, training, mentoring, etc., often with the presumption that there is an HR function overseeing activities. But, small, family run ecolodges rely on very different human resources strategies. In fact, microfirms such as these may not need formality in HR practices, since internal stakeholders (owners, managers, personnel) are in closer relations, enabling “owners to control the personnel and...get them to respond quickly for the corrective actions” (Çetinel et al., 2008: 59). Additionally, microfirms are unlikely to have formal training, relying instead on the ease of observation accompanied by immediate ability to take corrective action with personnel (see also Kotey and Sheridan, 2004). Similarities are present with Iranian ecolodges, where the only

hierarchy is between owners/managers and personnel provides for close oversight and immediate corrective action capabilities by owners/managers.

It may not be sufficient for hospitality microfirms to simply rely on oversight in lieu of training in extreme crises such as COVID-19. Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) report that pandemic-caused challenges in India’s hospitality sector require “multiskilling and professional development of employees (with employees needing to have an) increased sense of hygiene, sanitation and related SOPs”. Smaller operations depend heavily on their personnel and, if personnel are to be capable of being creative and able to adapt service to meet changing customer requirements, there must be a leader-inspired innovative culture, sufficient education of personnel to enable learning, sufficient training, and empowered personnel (Martínez-Roman et al., 2015).

Iranian crisis management researchers have addressed the importance of training internal stakeholders, thereby assuring their competency in dealing with crises (Amani et al., 2018; Hosseinighousheh et al., 2020). These authors emphasize the need for leaders to impart an organization-wide culture of safety that helps everyone confront a crisis and intervene successfully. They also call for leadership skills for managing crises include *organization, communications, decision-making, recognition of crisis factors, and planning*. As pivotal stakeholders, there is the common expectation that employees should be prioritized during crises; Gheibi et al. (2020, p.286) tell Iranian business leaders that to gain both sacrifice and the huge efforts needed through crises, personnel must be motivated to the cause.

There is also concern for employee well-being. Bajrami et al.’s (2021) Serbian study consider the effects of the crisis on worker attitudes and turnover intentions. As they report, millions of jobs have been lost, liquidity became problematic, and job insecurity followed for those still employed. The consequences of job insecurity include a loss of motivation and, often, turnover intentions. However, as Bajrami et al. (2021) further note, people are aware that they have few options. The authors suggest that motivation and commitment can be enhanced if businesses are able to create “more challenging tasks, respecting the effort invested in doing the job and giving support to the employee.” They further recommend that employers make the workplace a safe place to talk about their physical and mental health concerns, maintain up-to-date communication, and assure employees that steps are being taken to keep them safe. It seems that if Iranian tourist accommodation businesses engage in these behaviors, they are more likely to have employees motivated and loyal to the business.

One of the COVID-19 induced challenges potentially facing Iranian ecolodges is how to assure that personnel capably handle customer concerns; expectations toward assurances of safety may lead to customers being quite demanding. Koc's (2013) Turkish service recovery study found that in high power distance countries there is a "tendency to use more mitigated and indirect expressions" (p. 3692) when personnel talk with supervisors about service problems being expressed by customers. In turn, this may make it more difficult to clearly identify and solve problems. Given that Iran is a high power distance country, owners may need to talk with personnel about the need to feel comfortable being more direct, so that customer concerns are shared with proprietors immediately and forthrightly.

Government as stakeholders. Crisis management papers acknowledge the major role played by government at national and local levels (Yeh, 2021), providing expert-informed guidance, mandates when appropriate, financial assistances, and other support. Government alert/warning levels directly impact economic activity, while wage subsidies and government business loans are widely appreciated, as are governmental initiatives toward promoting nation-brands (Hemmington and Neill, 2021). In terms of support, governments have been encouraged to provide greater supports to smaller hoteliers, since smaller ventures are otherwise crisis disadvantaged compared to larger businesses (Le and Phi, 2021). In large part, this is because survival concerns vary by business size; small businesses often must survive by self-funding while big businesses generally have better access to funding sources (Hemmington and Neill, 2021).

Trust in government plays a vital role in overcoming COVID-19. Gozgor's (2022) 178 nation study of the determinants of trust in government during COVID-19 concludes with the assertion that "governments should provide consistent, credible, and transparent communication about the COVID-19 developments... mov(ing) their communication channels to different news platforms to enhance the public interest and to gain the trust of educated people." Goldfinch et al. (2021: 10) provide additional nuance to trust, suggesting that "trust/confidence in government is ... an antecedent of success of policy and adoption of policy instruments". They further find that trust, accompanied by confidence in public health officials, makes people more likely to follow recommendations. In turn, this should be associated with improved crisis handling and more positive feelings about bringing the crisis under control.

Gaining trust through the pandemic requires different government approaches depending on national

conditions. Groeniger et al. (2021) find that strict lockdown measures increased trust in Holland while Schmelz's (2021) German study finds that if trust in government was low at the start of the pandemic then mandatory policies may compromise willingness to comply. Concerns about low trust in the Iranian health system led Vardanjani et al. (2020: 2) to call for "dynamic public epidemic communication with appropriate strategies to communicate with higher social classes". Additionally, the authors recommend designing and implementing "a rigorous, transparent and honest strategy for communicating with the public about the COVID-19 epidemic, in addition to careful planning based on scientific evidence". They conclude with advocacy for rebuilding societal trust in Iran's healthcare system, starts with active lobbying by the Iran's Ministry of Health.

Suggested by Vardanjani et al. (2020) and others (Knight et al., 2020), an important facilitator in the ability of government to gain trust is communications. Tohidi (2011) asserts that in today's electronic world, government should use "appropriate technology...in improving communications with citizens". Salari and Devin (2012) speak of efforts being made by the Iranian government to improve e-government, with an aim toward having government agencies collaborate to facilitate "providing timely information and delivery of government services". Given the importance of government in overcoming the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector, communication should be two-way; tourism businesses are advantaged by having "open communication to build rapport and a good working relationship" (Yeh, 2021: 192).

Through crises, governments have been encouraged to provide greater supports to smaller hoteliers, since smaller ventures are otherwise crisis disadvantaged compared to larger businesses (Le and Phi, 2021). However, this has not occurred in Iran. As the crisis shook Iranian accommodation businesses, Iranian ecolodges found themselves needing to rely on self-funding, as financial supports by government, including special interest rates, would not be available to ecolodges, going instead to hotels with insurance coverage (Xinhua, 2020).

In summary, research suggests that hoteliers are advantaged by viewing crisis management through phases (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis). Firms are also advantaged when recognizing that stakeholders are pivotal to dealing with COVID-19, with some stakeholder groups salient and some more/less powerful in their ability to help the firm through the crisis. While we have discussed customers, personnel, and government, numerous additional stakeholders have a stake in seeing



Figure 1. Map of Iran and province locations of ec lodges participating in study. **Source:** Google maps.

hoteliers successfully deal with COVID-19's deleterious effects. Next, we discuss our method and findings.

Method and findings

Using grounded theory for this research called for selecting cases, collecting data, coding, and analyzing, while interpreting the findings to assure internal validity as well as "establishing the domain to which the study's findings can (to) some extent be generalized" (Mehmetoglu and Altinay, 2006; p.29). Iranian ec lodges were chosen because these small, family run accommodations are a rapidly growing yet understudied accommodation sector. Additionally, as with other small hoteliers around the world, COVID-19 has put ec lodges in a particularly tenuous situation. Their fight for survival despite severe resource constraints requires tenacity and resilience that is important to explore.

Participants

Owners/managers of Iranian ec lodges were selected for interviews. Ec lodges were contacted in several cities so that more comprehensive data could be collected (location triangulation) and to increase validity. Also, the snowball method was used to identify additional prospects for interviews (Ghaljaie et al., 2017);

owners/managers of 10 ec lodges participated. Due to the scattering of Ec lodge locations across the country, travel difficulties in visiting sites, and the new wave of COVID-19 during the time of interviewing (May 2021), interviews were completed by telephone. After giving detailed explanations regarding the purpose of the study, including providing assurances that participants would remain anonymous when publishing the results, interviewees agreed to participate. A semi-structured query guide was followed, assuring that each interview included similar topical questions while allowing deeper learning through follow-up questions.

Of the 10 interviewees, four are men and six are women. Furthermore, seven are between 28 to 36 years old, with two between 37 and 49 and one between 50 and 65 years old. Six of the 10 have earned a Bachelor's Degree, with one having earned a higher degree, one with a diploma, and two with an associate degree. One ec lodge is in Mazandaran province, one in Zanzan province, three in Fars province, one in North Khorasan province, two in South Khorasan province, and two in Khorasan Razavi province (Figure 1).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis, which extracts and identifies the main themes/statements included in interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006), serves as our key data analysis

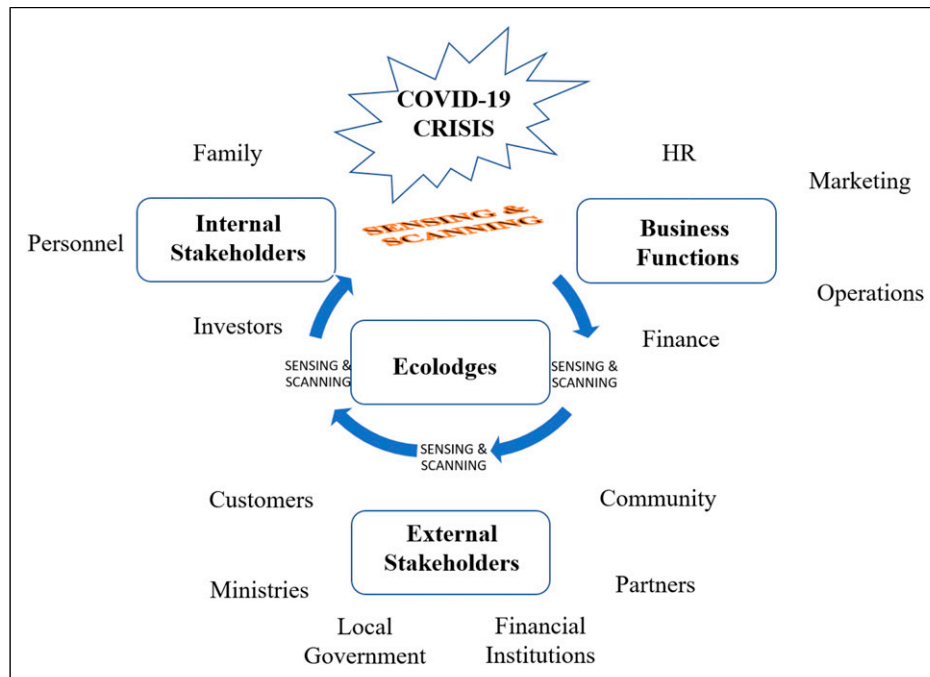


Figure 2. Ecolodges: Stakeholders and business functions affected by COVID-19.

procedure. We followed the six stages recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006): reviewing the data for more familiarity; initial coding of the data; identifying themes; reviewing the themes; naming the themes and defining them; and reporting the findings. The data were coded and analyzed using MAXQDA 2020 software, providing codes for themes, as well as subclasses of themes. A total of 333 codes were extracted from the analysis of participants' remarks, resulting in 10 main themes and a further 22 subthemes. The large number of codes and extracted themes revealed two common difficulties when using grounded theory, complexity and ambiguity, that hinder interpretation (Mehmetoglu and Altinay, 2006). To assist interpretation, we focused on the 10 main themes, seeking commonalities between them. This step led to reducing the themes from 10 to five. Three themes, representing 76 codes, we term **sensing and scanning activities** (identifying problems, 40; monitoring, six; observations of situation, 30). Three more, representing 49 codes, are **identifying needs and motivations to enact change** (needs assessment, 11; financial stability concerns, 13; motivations, 25). Of the remaining four themes, one is **communications with stakeholders** (45 codes), two, representing 157 codes, are **business functions and adaptations/innovations** (protection actions, 23; business actions, 134), and the final is **futureing** (16). Our final analytic step was to review the 333 codes to identify stakeholder groups. Collectively,

the analysis shows that ecolodges have ongoing scanning and sensing activities, numerous external and several internal stakeholders, and many business functions that have been affected during the pandemic (Figure 2).

Next, we discuss the findings, focusing on the roles and activities of stakeholder groups within each of the five themes.

Sensing and scanning activities

Crisis management models advise that institutions will be more prepared for crises by having sensing and scanning mechanisms giving them early warning of impending crises. These models further propose that there should be crisis teams skilled in scenario analysis and capable of making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Small hospitality providers such as ecolodges have neither the personnel nor resources to institutionalize crisis management, leaving sensing and scanning as informal activities. At the same time, owners were alert to COVID-19 updates and government policies affecting their businesses. One owner said that although ministries provided some early assistances, turmoil in the government during this period was felt to hinder help from coming, to the point that he felt there had been an "abandonment of the ecotourism sector". The difficulties already wrought over the past 18 months were showing their strain, with one owner

expressing dread when saying, "Ecotourism is on the verge of extinction". Sensing and scanning activities involve extensive communications with stakeholders, as identified in the next theme.

Communications with stakeholders

This theme, with 45 codes, revealed that numerous stakeholders were in communications with the ecolodges. Whereas every theme had various internal and external stakeholder groups mentioned, the codes here were dominated by communications with government ministries and with banks. While owners talked about appreciating information from these salient and powerful stakeholders, they also said that they wished that information would flow more regularly; one mentioned that there could be two-to-three-month intervals between receiving communications while others spoke of the need for more timely information, especially faster notification of new rules during COVID-19 peaks. Another said that government responsiveness to special requests often took so long that there were resultant difficulties. This owner gave the example of requesting authorization for a party on a specific evening that was left in limbo to the last moment, as "*permission (did not come until) the evening.*" Fortunately, the owner said that "*the people who wanted to have (the) party had already finished the arrangements*" while hoping for the approval.

Communications with banks occurred through loan processing and banks providing updates about changes to financial rules. The owners said that the central bank writes instructions for provincial banks and, in turn, the provincial banks inform local bank branches who then inform ecolodge owners. In addition to the codes for communications with banks, other financial issues were coded in the *business functions, finance*, theme, where specific financial actions taken by ministries and banks are discussed.

Communications by government stakeholders included many participants (governor, minister, deputy minister, deputy directors of ecotourism). Many communications tended to be one-way, with ministries or other officials providing updates online or by writing letters to the provinces (governorates), who, in turn, inform the tourism authorities about instructions for how hoteliers such as ecolodges must conduct business. For instance, an owner said, "*Circular will be sent electronically to (the city branch) of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, (who then) informs us*". There is also SMS (Short Messaging Services) from health centers providing updates. Several owners also talked about relying on ministry websites for updates, with the Ministry of Cultural

Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts a particularly important information source. While most communication with ministries was one-way, several codes revealed that owners have personal interaction with at least some ministry and local government officials. In this manner social networks, including face-to-face visits by officials, are facilitating information exchange during COVID-19. Finally, one owner reported using multiple tools for staying on top of government information; "*Communication with the government was through the site and WhatsApp groups and Telegram groups*".

An additional stakeholder heavily relied upon for communication is the Association of Ecotourism Managers. The owners appreciate that the association has a listening ear. However, some frustration was apparent, as exemplified by, "*the director of the country's ecolodge group is very listening and persistent, but no single voice may be heard.*"

Identifying needs and motivations to enact change

Owners talked about how COVID-19 has changed customer priorities and that they are talking with customers to find the best ways to provide quality services. Ecolodge owners also said they use customer feedback notebooks that are frequently reviewed, helping them identify service changes that might be needed. The goals were to assure pleasant experiences that meet ecotourism expectations while simultaneously providing the services and environment that gives confidence that the health and wellbeing of guests is assured. Owners talked about how customers expect government safety protocols to be followed. Owners felt it was important that protocols are carefully followed in their premises and that guests must have confidence in their actions. Also, owners said that changes to some services were expected, such as using outdoor spaces for dining rather than enclosed rooms. Owners have adjusted operations as result.

Regarding the motives for making changes, most of the extracted codes were related to the importance owners have for maintaining the health of local people (community), personnel, and their customers. Other motivations include finding ways to keep the ecolodges operating in difficult conditions and maintaining guests' trust. Owners also discussed how their alertness to changing conditions and orders from official sources (Ministries in particular) compelled changes. One owner also mentioned that his wife has higher education; she continuously studies the situation and then guides decisions being made at the ecolodge. Still another said that he was propelled to make changes in

operations due to the recent loss of *“the mother of the family who was also responsible for cooking traditional food.”* Finally, owners were motivated on a personal level to enact change, whether to “protect the reputation of our center”, or to assure security for their families.

Business functions and adaptations/innovations

Ecolodge owners wear many hats, at times making marketing decisions, while at other times managing finances, reviewing operations, or conducting human resources activities. There were 155 codes associated with business functions and adaptations/innovations. Across these codes, many reactive and proactive strategies have been undertaken, with each helping ecolodges survive and while involving various stakeholder groups. These are discussed across each affected business function.

Marketing. Through the pandemic, owners have been making decisions about when and how to engage in marketing activities with their valued external stakeholders, customers. Some ecolodges reported that they have chosen to continue their advertising activities, seeking to attract customers to visit their ecolodge. Some ecolodge owners said they have become friends with guests over time, saying they have been calling these guests and inviting them to come for another stay. One said that this year they wanted guests staying at their lodge during New Years Celebrations to feel particularly special; *“we gave all the guests beautiful pots”*.

Owners also talked about involving external stakeholders as partners for growing the business. For instance, an owner talked about community bus drivers being offered a promotion where if they bring customers, *“we give them a percentage. Or, one night we host their family for dinner”*. Still another spoke of *“invite(ing) vloggers to stay (while asking them to) post a story”*.

An internal stakeholder group, investors, have taken on active marketing roles, such as talking to travel agencies and tour guides; in one instance, an owner said that the investors were offering agencies and guides to come for a free stay at the lodge so they would better understand the quality and character of the lodge. Other codes included sending promotional text messages on special holidays or occasions. There were also mentions of word-of-mouth marketing. Other codes indicated specific tools used for promotional activities; Instagram was mentioned as a tool being used that was well-received by customers, although one owner said there had been instances where some people expressed their incredulity as to why people are being invited to

travel during this dangerous time. Whereas most interviewees were promoting their business in one way or another, not all ecolodges feel that this is an appropriate time to be drumming up business; one interviewee said that he has not considered any advertisements during COVID-19 even though he was keeping his ecolodge open. In his opinion, any actions taken that might attract customers to travel could cause a risk of infecting people with COVID-19. So, if customers ask to stay, they are welcomed, but he will not be doing any active marketing during the pandemic. Still another said he saw no point in promoting his business, mentioning there were checkpoints on roadways where fines were being imposed; *“Even if we advertise, people will not be able to come because of the fines of 500 to one million while passing the roads.”* Finally, the risk of COVID-19 being introduced into the community was ever-present, with an owner commenting that pursuing business could harm his relationship with the community; *“Even the village may have a bad view of you in that they blame you and (then you would be) in danger”*.

Finance. Owners acknowledged that even in ordinary times their businesses generated low to medium incomes. With the crisis, every ecolodge said that they are barely scraping by, with a typical comment; *“We were reducing profits and spending out of our pocket”*. Additionally, even with staff cutbacks, cash flow problems were making it hard to compensate workers; one said that he has been able to keep his full time employees but has made redundant his parttime personnel for this reason. There was also discussion of the inability to make loan repayments and how this was troubling the owners. Despite this strain, owners talked about finding ways to put money into workers hands. For instance, special payouts were made, such as an Eid bonus or to provide an assistance to workers in need. Meanwhile, owners talked about how they were adjusting operations, along with marketing activities (noted already) to reduce costs or to bring in alternative revenue streams.

Ecolodges gained a level of financial protection for their businesses through public sector support. As owners discussed, the actions of powerful external stakeholders, aka, government ministries, led to giving special permissions to open business on holidays, low-interest loans, the introduction of extended deadlines for loan repayments, and temporarily halting utility bills (water, electricity, and gas). To help them earn revenue, the government gave permission to be open for Newruz 1400 (Persian new year). The assistances were perceived as being far from ideal. One owner said that the process for gaining a loan *“was very long and we preferred not to take action”*. Another was prevented from gaining a loan because their city bank was restricting

loans only to nearby businesses and their rural locale (two km away) made it so “*we cannot take loan*”. These instances revealed that at least some ecolodges have been unable to take advantage of approved financial mechanisms for business survival. Another owner expressed concern that some banks continued routine processes, even ignoring ministry lending rules, as if they had no concern about the financial challenges being faced by eco-tourism lodges; “*Although the Central Bank and Cultural Heritage ordered the cancellation (of loan payment installments), the bank branches did not implement this order and fined (us for) the delay (of our payments)*”.

There was also financial support by internal stakeholders, including relatives (spouses were mentioned the most), and a specific customer segment, local clients. These stakeholder groups were helping cash flow by buying food and handicrafts from the ecolodges. Further helping finances, some owners reported that they had increased borrowing, while others had dipped into their savings. The commitment by owners to save their businesses was apparent, with one saying he “*sold my father’s property*” and another saying, “*we sold our house and spent (the money) on the ecolodge*”.

In efforts to improve finances, owners also talked about pursuing alternative revenue sources, including converting some of the land-space at their ecolodges into gardens for organic vegetables, with the intent of selling through local and online outlets. One owner said that organizations including Alibaba and Iran Hotel had been guaranteeing quarterly produce purchases from ecolodges, giving confidence that the conversion to gardening would be financially rewarding. Out of necessity, some launched into tailoring and selling handicrafts. These operations innovations (see operations section) were helping them survive the large financial difficulties they were encountering.

Operations. Operations has been greatly affected throughout the pandemic, with lodges being given capacity limitations, protocols for safety/health, and advisories from government, special customer requests, and the need to assure safety for personnel. This has led to numerous adaptations/innovations, some being reactive and others being proactive. Reactive adaptations include posting protocols, training personnel to follow guidelines such as providing disinfection devices to guests, and for following protocols for packing food safely during COVID-19. Other changes included removal of breakfast buffets, providing food services in outdoor settings, and even acquiring “*disposable fabrics for bedding*” from suppliers to help guests feel safe. At the same time, there have been proactive operations actions, including one owner saying that with overnight

lodging nearly gone, selling foodstuffs has become one of his few sources for income. This owner spoke well of local community members supporting his business, saying that they “*still buy to support us, even though our food is more expensive.*”

A proactive innovational operation change discussed by an owner has been his effort to engage his personnel in better waste segregation for recycling. Here, workers have been instructed on protocols for separating waste and incentives have been added to encourage worker involvement; workers can bring materials to recycling centers and keep the payments for themselves. This has the dual purpose of pursuing eco-friendly ways of doing business while also showing support for workers. Other proactive innovations have been converting land-space into gardens for organic vegetables to be sold to organizations and introducing cash businesses such as tailoring and selling handicrafts.

In addition to government COVID-19 safety protocols, Ministries and local governments dictate capacity decisions and whether special events can be held. Several owners talked about their frustrations, with one saying that local government has a “*lack of transparency and formality to information*”. Another expressed frustration that at times they were given booking permits only to find that COVID-19 road traffic orders prevented anyone from using the roads leading to their ecolodges. Collectively, there was a sense that operations difficulties were often due to government failing to communicate effectively, as well as a sense that officials may be unaware of their need for greater information currency and accuracy.

Human resource management. Owners have taken steps to protect personnel, to keep as many employees as possible on payroll, to train new protocols and reinforce with steady oversight, to provide compensation, and to be supportive. Each of the owners closely monitor staff for symptoms and, if so, “*they must give a test and we suggest them a break (from work)*”. In instances when staff have needed safe places to stay, some owners have provided free accommodation. Additionally, owners showed their awareness and concern for workers by straining their personal finances to support personnel or through innovative income supplements such as the waste management eco-project noted earlier. One owner showed his awareness of the importance of making payroll, saying; “*Delays in salaries have not happened and even assistance has been provided. Therefore, there was a happy mood and behavior in the staff, which was also transmitted to the guests*”.

Finally, ecolodge owners often noted their efforts to give personnel a friendly and supportive atmosphere, treating workers like family through the pandemic.

Some owners talked about how they simply could not afford to keep personnel, making them redundant. These owners went on to say that they had family members take over tasks so that the business could stay running.

New training has been needed to assure that personnel follow COVID-19 protocols. Some ecolodges have been able to have local health supervisors conduct this training. The ecolodges have posted mandatory COVID-19 safety protocols, with staff expected to behave accordingly.

Futuring

Mentioned earlier, at the time of the interviews (May 2021), some owners were already feeling despair, resigned to feeling that the government would not be rescuing their businesses and that the pandemic would continue straining them into the foreseeable future. When looking ahead, one seemed nearly ready to give up, saying, *"We are confused whether it is possible to continue like this or look for another job"*. Another was giving thought to converting the accommodation center into a craft store or producing masks. Meanwhile, hope was a common theme, with owners saying such things as: *"We have hopes"*; *"I have hope, because I have to manage my life myself"*; and *"We hope, because people need to travel specially after this pandemic."* Still another expressed hope, albeit in an almost fatalistic way, saying *"We are doomed to hope"*.

Discussion

In mid-2020, Tehran Times (2020) reported that "some experts expect Iran to achieve a tourism boom after coronavirus (is) contained, believing its impact would be temporary and short-lived for a country that ranked the third fastest-growing tourism destination in 2019." Sadly, as wave after wave of infections sweeps across Iran, the goal line for putting the destructive path of COVID-19 to an end has been moved, now into 2022. At this time (January 2022), after several months of accessing Chinese and Astrazeneca vaccines, 70% of the population has received at least one vaccine dose while officially reported deaths have climbed past 120,000 (Our World in Data, Jan 2022). An expensive black market for western vaccines has emerged, the rial may be near collapsing, and, as U.S. sanctions continue to strangle funds, there is growing anger in Iran, along with an increasing resignation that wave after wave may be unavoidable (Gambrell, 2021). The desperate need that tourism, ecolodges and all small hoteliers have for "identifying solutions and survival mechanisms" (Bulin and Tenie, 2020) is as real today as it was at the start of

the pandemic. Our work addresses this desperate need, while also answering important crisis management research questions directed at small hoteliers such as ecolodges. Although the context was Iran, small proprietors in hospitality anywhere in the world, particularly family run businesses such as ecolodges, likely have similar challenges to remaining viable post-pandemic. Any of these will find utility in the recommendations that follow.

The ecolodge owners lacked any pre-crisis planning; being family run businesses, limited resources, along with not knowing the value of such preparations, could be expected. Continuing the three-phase crisis management path, all ecolodges were in mid-crisis, striving to manage the situation. As suggested by Gursoy and Chi (2020), COVID-19 has been devastating to "operations, employees, and customers", making new knowledge vital for how to sustain business through the crisis. Our exploration was thus guided by the need for COVID-19 crisis management hospitality research, especially for small hoteliers. Realizing the importance of stakeholders to surviving crises (Leta and Chan, 2021), we considered the wide range of stakeholders affecting ecolodges. As we sought answers to two of Wut et al.'s (2021) unresolved COVID-19 provoked questions: (1) understanding COVID-19 crisis' difficulties for (ecolodges) and strategies by (ecolodges) for surviving the crisis; (2) understanding ecolodge human resource practices for strengthening the business while assuring the well-being of personnel through the crisis.

Following Baraket and Wada (2021), the interviews provided a sense of the relationships ecolodges have with various stakeholders, along with a sense of the salience and power of stakeholder groups affecting their businesses. Stakeholders affected interpretations of the crisis, the reactive strategies undertaken, and the innovations being introduced. Awareness of the roles and responsibilities of stakeholder groups affects how ecolodges communicate with each. For instance, ecolodge owners had a clear sense of their connectedness and value to the local community. One owner expressed this well, saying that *"the ecotourism unit considers itself the ambassador of the village"*. Collectively, communicating with stakeholders through crises is of high importance. Owners need to be cognizant of the wide range of internal and external stakeholders that the business depends on, making certain that communications coming from salient stakeholders are being received. Owners must also inform stakeholders of actions being taken while giving stakeholders the opportunity be involved in helping their businesses through the crisis. Here, this included such actions as asking officials to train personnel in health protocols or involving investors in marketing activities. Additionally, being transparent

with investors and personnel throughout the crisis keeps everyone aligned with why changes are being made and what owners are doing to sustain the business.

Ecotourism lodges must keep informed of the changing crisis through their sensing and scanning activities, including staying atop of changing government policies. As we saw, this should not be a passive endeavor, as there may be lags in information flows from top officials to local administrators, leaving ecolodges compromised for failing to be abreast of new mandates. Businesses are ultimately accountable for following protocols, compelling owners to actively acquire information. Our findings suggest that ecolodge owners might want to use a family member as the active eyes and ears of policy changes across relevant government and industry sources. This would help take the burden off of owners, simultaneously allowing owners to dedicate greater energy directly to operations. Additionally, with ecolodges under tremendous financial strain, it becomes apparent that having good relationships with another key stakeholder group, local banks, is vital. We found that there can be gaps between ministerial edicts for easing financial pressures and actions being taken by local financial institutions. This shows the importance of nurturing healthy personal relationships with local bank managers in ordinary times, improving the likelihood of favorable treatment during crises. With the crisis entering the third year, the innovative approaches being taken by eco-tourism owners to maintain cash flow can only go a small way toward keeping the businesses afloat. Government policies, enacted through local banks, will continue being a sustaining mechanism. Also, ecotourism trade groups must continue making the needs of ecotourism businesses heard at the national level.

During crises, ecolodges must stay close to customers. This requires that ecolodges engage in listening to customer needs and concerns while providing safety assurances through communications and visible safety practices. Like most hospitality businesses, ecolodges build their businesses through successful services encounters. Even though the pandemic has accelerated the use of low touch technologies in many hotelier settings (Hao and Chon, 2021), this is not the case for ecolodges, where performance depends on personal interactions with customers, resulting in lasting memories for customers and with ecolodge owners hearing such things as, *"I have foreign customers who tell me that I am a star"*. Being close to customers while simultaneously staying on top of government mandates, enables ecolodges to make faster, better decisions, ranging from reactive changes aligned with safety protocol mandates to proactive innovations that offer

better value. As we saw, despite – perhaps even because of – the crisis, some ecolodges have developed innovations aligned with ecotourism's conservation promises. Of course, successful adaptation is only possible by having healthy, motivated personnel.

This brings us to the second question we pursued, personnel. Personnel mean everything to the success of service intensive businesses like ecolodges. At a time when the personal safety of personnel was paramount, owners showed that the well-being of employees was an ongoing concern. Owners showed personnel that they were doing everything possible to care for them, from following health and wellness protocols, to maintaining payroll and providing special accommodations when possible.

As we saw, these are desperate times, with owners barely staying afloat, often drawing on saving or selling family homes, to fund their businesses. Simultaneously, all service protocols were disrupted, with personnel needing to learn new protocols while still meeting or exceeding customer expectations. This also meant that every time owners made operational changes, they needed motivated personnel to enact the changes, thereby continuing to have the business reflect the high caliber value delivery expected of ecolodges. All told, this requires owners to be committed to personnel. It also requires a cognizance that personnel, especially in high power distance cultures, may be reticent about directly telling owners about customer complaints (Koc, 2013). Personnel should be strongly encouraged to be honest with owners about needs for service delivery improvements so that prompt attention can be put to assuring quality service.

As these ecolodges demonstrate, human resources practices showing care and concern for personnel, training and coaching to assure quality service, transparency with personnel about why actions are being taken, and searching for ways to keep incomes flowing to personnel, will be valued. As ecolodges are often in remote areas, actions taken with personnel will resonate throughout the community. By showing genuine care to personnel, the community increases its commitment to the business, as indicated here by community members making purchases from ecolodges despite having to pay higher prices to do so. More broadly, small family businesses likely fare better through the pandemic when there is a genuine interest in both personnel and the welfare of everyone in the community. This can be a tricky situation when wanting to market a business during the pandemic; as an owner implied, there is the possibility of being blamed for outbreaks. This means there is a fine line during the crisis between sustaining the business and being perceived as endangering the community.

Prior to the pandemic, ecotourism in Iran was a rapidly growing sector for both domestic and international travelers. Given that the sector has been stalled for over 2 years, there will be pent up ecotourism demand once the pandemic ends. Ecolodges have needed to be resilient through this time. Resiliency has been evident as ecolodge owners maintain hopefulness while often digging deep into family funds to keep doors open and personnel on payroll. Owners have created new service protocols to meet COVID-19 health and safety mandates, while reducing or zeroing out capacity when required. They have also made numerous innovations in product and services offerings in hopes of improving cash flow, and much more. We also saw ecolodges looking ahead to a post-pandemic future, as when owners talked of launching green initiatives such as recycling. Ecolodge owners know that increasing numbers of tourists actively seek green destinations while villagers, often skeptical about tourism degrading their environment (Dadvar-Khani, 2012), surely appreciate seeing ecolodges being committed to green. Another plus of having a commitment to green initiatives is the differentiation value it affords. This aligns with Mahmoudi's (2020) commentary that accommodation providers can increase price when they have "attributes that contribute to the differentiation of their offers." We encourage these innovation efforts while realizing the tremendous stress Iranian ecolodges are under. In Iran, as many as 2000 ecolodges have succumbed to the crisis, shuttering doors and leaving more than 20,000 people unemployed (Xinhua, 2020). It is difficult to say how many more ecolodges will close before the pandemic ends and the thought of innovating may be more than owners can manage at this time. But, innovation brings hope for a better future and even small innovative steps, such as the improved recycling actions noted earlier, can create a sense of control over one's destiny that can be lost in an unrelenting pandemic.

As with any research, there are limitations to our findings. First, we used grounded theory and, therefore, our observations of interview data led to our conclusions and recommendations. More research needs to affirm the generalizability of our findings. Whereas we used our theoretical understandings of crisis management and stakeholder theory to guide our thought processes and data interpretations (c.f., Thornberg, 2012), future researchers may want to use our insights to adapt extant hospitality crisis management models and then engage in informed discovery to refine models. This is akin to Shim et al.'s (2021: 62) advocacy for mixed methods grounded theory, whereby general theories that result "can be contextualized to local complexities". Our identification of stakeholder groups, business functions affected, and reactive and innovative strategies will help

in this task. A complementary approach would be to review existing instruments for evaluating good practices in small hotelier' crisis management (c.f., McMullan and Baum, 2011), adapting them to be inclusive of the themes identified here and the stakeholder groups involved with Iranian ecolodges.

Second, we studied Iranian ecolodges. While we expect that ecolodges, as well as other small family-run hoteliers around the world, have many similarities in their pandemic responses, context matters. For instance, additional cultural contexts should be studied because culture affects how hotel managers choose business strategies (Ayoun and Moreo, 2008) and how personnel and hotel managers relate (Koc, 2013), among other things. A good starting point would be to contrast small hotelier' pandemic response H.R. practices in low power distance, low collectivism countries with those of Iran's high power distance, high collectivism culture. Also, we do not know the extent that a crisis – even one the scale of COVID-19 – might be approached differently in nations enduring never-ending barrages of national crises. Iranian ecolodge owners and stakeholder groups may be conditioned – or resigned to – viewing the pandemic through a different crisis mindset than nations having fewer crisis experiences. Finally, we used stakeholder theory to guide our interpretation of the data, constraining our interpretations. It may be fruitful to use an alternative lens, such as dynamic capabilities (Teece et al., 1997), for understanding hotelier strategies through crisis, as evidenced by recent papers (Clampit et al., 2021; Marco-Lajara, et al., 2021). Beyond this, we see opportunity for researchers to incorporate both stakeholder theory and dynamic capabilities, assuring that all stakeholders are being addressed while hoteliers engage in sensing, seizing, and transforming activities in managing crises.

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