



# **TOURIST EXPERIENCE IN THE POST-COVID ERA: NEW PERSPECTIVES**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to explore new approaches to redesign the tourist experience (TX) throughout the recovery from the ongoing crisis brought by the pandemic Coronavirus.

This article adopts a multiple-case study research design in the context of tourism small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It develops a cohesive, conceptual framework identifying the key dimensions to redesign the TX in time of crisis recovery, supporting excellence in tourism SMEs' service management: (1) prioritize tourists' health and wellness; (2) make empathy an action; (3) build on long-term tourist commitment. This research represents a powerful benchmark for managers and practitioners to understand practical and efficient attitudes to be implemented during the crisis recovery. It suggests how to reimagine their entire business through the lens of TX, thus, dealing with the shifts in customers' needs, comfort levels, and expectations. Recommendations to further enrich this topic are then presented.

## **Keywords**

Crisis management; recovery; COVID-19; tourism SMEs; tourist experience; multiple-case study

## **1. Introduction**

Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has been wreaking deep chaos on the global economy (Pan et al., 2021), with unique, significant implications, particularly in the tourism industry (Gössling et al., 2021; Nicola et al., 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). Tourism organizations were immediately affected by the travel restrictions imposed by governments at the international, regional, and local levels to prevent the virus' spread (Baum & Hai, 2020; Gössling et al., 2021; Hall et al., 2020). They were forced to redesign different aspects of the tourist experience (TX) and cope with the disruptive effects brought by the pandemic more effectively (Hussain et al., 2020; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Knutson et al., 2007; Sigala, 2020).

Scholars underscore that the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic could “create deep marks in tourist's thinking and feeling, and change how tourists travel” (Zenker & Kock, 2020: 2), as tourists feel uncertain, fearful, and more concerned about protecting their health (Chan et al., 2021). For these reasons, tourist organizations have reshaped their service management processes to ensure, both during and after the pandemic, an outstanding TX that addresses the new customer expectations, e.g., the hotel undertakes preventive actions and controls such as the monitoring of guests' number or the checking of body temperature (Chan et al., 2021). In this conception, improving the TX through prompt reactions to new customers' needs, preferences, and requirements (Chan et al., 2021) takes a pivotal role in delivering excellent service experiences.

Despite the relevance of TX, there are still few theoretical and empirical insights as concerns tourism firms' service management throughout fluidly changing environments triggered by crises. If, on the one hand, there is an extensive body of knowledge on TX across the literature (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim et al., 2010; Oh et al., 2007), on the other hand, research on how tourist organizations improve the TX in times of crisis (Chan et al., 2021), boosting excellence in tourism service management (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), is required.

To fill this gap, this paper aims to investigate successful attitudes to redefining the TX throughout the recovery from the ongoing pandemic crisis. In doing so, we answer the following research question: “How are organizations redefining tourist experience during the pandemic crisis' recovery?” To unfold this study, we performed an exploratory multiple-case study in the context of Italian tourist organizations (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994).

This work extends prior literature on TX and crisis management by investigating the main dimensions that characterize the TX in the post-COVID-19 setting (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Yeh, 2020) systematically organized in a framework. Finally, the study proposes three propositions that synthesize the findings, providing a foundation for further theoretical and empirical research on the subject. From a managerial perspective, this work may support managers and practitioners in implementing an actionable, holistic approach in redefining the TX in the aftermath of critical business downturns.

## **2. Theoretical background**

TX represents a critical issue alongside the tourism field since the 1960s when hospitality and tourism researchers began to conceptualize the TX issue (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Mannell & Iso-Ahola, 1987; Uriely, 2005; Wang, 1999). TX is defined as a search for

authenticity and original cultures, symbols, or lifestyles during a journey (MacCannell, 1973). Over time, scholars have been trying to deepen and extend TX concepts (Otto & Ritchie, 1996; Ritchie & Hudson, 2009), looking back to the customer experience pioneers (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), who based their analysis on four experience dimensions distinguished by the extent and kind of consumer participation in business offerings (i.e., education, entertainment, escapism, and esthetics). Accordingly, hospitality and tourism management researchers recognized the massive role of TX, providing up-to-date conceptual alignments and realistic measuring frameworks on the topic (Kim et al., 2010; Oh et al., 2007). For instance, individuals acquire diverse attitudes depending on their own travel experiences, such as hedonism, positive emotions, involvement, recognition, and refreshment (Gentile et al., 2007; Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim et al., 2010; Ladhari et al., 2008; Otto & Ritchie, 1996).

In the tourism sector, consumers' perceptions of their experience are shaped by various joint relationships (get-togethers, social gatherings), multiple services, and a chain of events rather than by a single product or service (Mendes et al., 2010). In the tourism and hospitality industry, coordinating relationships between the company and its customers is pretty challenging to deal with: "the tourist product" is undeniably complex (Smith, 1998) due to the many actors involved in TX processes (Uriely, 2005). Customers judge the travel experience as a whole (Mendes et al., 2010), undoubtedly consuming a holistic tourism experience that spans the entire customer journey (Schmitt, 1999; Weiermair, 2000). As a result, a holistic TX considers and speedily addresses all customer's issues, pain points, emotions, and mental processes during the consumer journey. Identifying and investing in meaningful opportunities to strengthen consumers' relationships, proactively inspiring stronger loyalty, and improved trust (Alonso-Almeida & Bremser, 2013; Diebner et al., 2020; Oliver, 2010) is a crucial aspect of developing a successful, holistic TX practice. In the online context, making TX the company culture's foundation also leads to better word-of-mouth (WOM), positive reviews, and references (Oliver, 2010; Trusov et al., 2009).

To create enhanced holistic TXs strategies (Baum, 2006), organizations dedicate themselves to a positive company-wide, customer-centric mindset, spotting opportunities to make things better for customers. Notably, organizations put themselves in their consumers' shoes to provide the customer an added value to the standard purchase (Gentile et al., 2007; Helkkula et al., 2012). For example, they differentiate and enrich the tourist service offer, counteracting the tourism sector's hyper-competition (Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Morrish & Jones, 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 1998) through flexibility and agility (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020).

Another aspect argued by scholars to achieve a holistic TX is the necessity to broaden the TX spectrum and consider consumers as rational decision-makers and "emotion seekers" (Gursoy et al., 2006; Holbrook, 2006; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Considering visitors' psychological needs and perceptions (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Wen et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020) helps tourism providers to choose appropriate business methods to meet consumer preferences sustaining seamless TXs, and generate over time outstanding value (Palmer, 2010). Furthermore, the emotional stimuli consumers look for (Berry et al., 2002; Hang, 2020; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991), that is, customers' subjective personal reactions and feelings by consuming services (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), when met, reverberate themselves in satisfaction and loyalty (Della Corte et al., 2015; Gibson, 2005b; Hirschman, 1970; Wicks & Roethlein, 2009) driving outstanding results in service management (Oliver, 2010). Supporting a consistent, holistic TX tactic, a company makes itself available to consumers at all times, maximizing effective communication. Excellent communication may elicit, in fact, intense emotions in the audience (Gretzel et al., 2020; Mao, 2020). Allowing tourists to be kept informed, making sure the customer service team understands how their efforts are tied directly to the TX mission (Mao, 2020) contributes to strengthening emotional attachments and trust (Sigala, 2020). Tourist companies need to craft their interaction such that visitors feel heard and

confident that any of their issues will be fixed (Lee, 2020; Pappas, 2021; Widmar et al., 2017). Any safety measures taken by tourism enterprises have to be communicated to travelers also employing online platforms, including websites, or during the booking process (Chan et al., 2021), constantly striving to advocate and provide the best possible TX.

Despite the vast body of knowledge concerning TX (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim et al., 2010), the existing literature does not adequately discuss TX during “economic turmoil” times. Mainly during post-crisis response processes (Smith, 1990), customer expectations significantly evolve (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020; Lau, 2020; Mao, 2020). Visitors require truly, unique TXs. Hence, the entire hospitality and tourism industry needs to provide consistent service commitment to guests (Ritchie, 2004; Shin & Kang, 2020). Briefly, it has been growing the need to establish a thoughtful viewpoint on recovery TX dimensions to guide tourist organizations to the other side of their current trouble (Chan et al., 2021), therefore boosting excellence in tourism service management (Otto & Ritchie, 1996), taking the TX to a new holistic level through strategy and discipline. These premises stimulate the intention to identify the dimensions that, collectively and in an integrative manner, define the TX during the post-COVID-19 world and deepen the vast impacts that these features could generate on tourists.

### **3. Methodology**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, we performed a theory-building process based on an in-depth exploratory multiple-case study (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). This method is suitable for exploratory inquiries and facilitates cross-case comparison to generalize emergent findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

#### *3.1. Sample and data collection*

For this study, we adopted a theoretical sampling approach and sought cases that are likely to extend theory on the topic investigated (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We focused on the tourism sector since it represents one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (World Tourism Organization, 2020), constituting valuable research setting to study this topic. Case studies were selected from the Italian context, where the tourism sector plays a significant role in the economy (OECD, 2020).

To enhance theory building and improve the generalizability of the findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003), we included organizations operating differently in the tourism sector (e.g., hotel accommodation and other activity sectors).

Due to social distancing imposed by the pandemic, the data was gathered via an online questionnaire (Shafi et al., 2020). The questionnaire included 14 questions to understand the pandemic’s impact on tourist business activities and the initiatives implemented and/or planned to provide proper responses to the ongoing crisis. Examples of questions included the following: “What have been the main changes in the relationship with tourists in this pandemic period? How have their needs and expectations changed? How are you trying to meet these needs, and what services are you implementing? (motivate with examples)”; “Tell me about the initiatives you consider useful to promote and support better and faster recovery; what do you feel you can recommend to other companies in the sector?”

To aid case selection and reach theoretical saturation, we combined purposive and snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961; Patton, 2002). Participation in the survey was voluntary, and we assured the anonymity of participants (Shafi et al., 2020).

A total of 63 interviews were collected between September and October 2020, six months after the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, a time close to the occurrence of the event itself (e.g., Runyan, 2006), involving primarily CEOs and managers.

Looking at the gathered data, all the tourism SMEs enquired were located in Italy, and about half from Lombardy, Sardinia, Latium, and Piedmont. A vast majority had fewer than 50 employees, while in terms of annual sales, 2019 turnover was over 2.000.000€. Then, just over half of the small tourism businesses were hotel accommodation facilities. Our data reveals that more than half of customers during the COVID-19 emergency came from Italy (not including the Region where the enterprise is located), whereas in 2019, the most significant percentage was of international clients followed immediately after by Italian customers (not including the Region where the enterprise is located). Finally, almost all the tourism companies examined (60 out of 63) had a downward trend in their activity during the Covid-19 emergency in relation to the 2019 turnover. Thus, the outbreak of COVID-19 may have affected a significant number of SMEs in the tourism industry.

The sample details are summarized in Appendix A.

### 3.2. Data analysis and rigor

This study performed both within- and between-case analyses (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) through the “Gioia Methodology” (Gioia et al., 2013).

Firstly, we analyzed the interview data and identified open codes based on the research topic and survey data, “categorizing, and labeling direct statements” (Patvardhan et al., 2015: 411) to identify first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013) (e.g., create a protected environment that reduces the threat of contagion). Based on common/less common themes associated and organized, a standard iterative method was used for each subject (Hycner, 1985), providing a basis for theory building (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Secondly, we examined similarities and differences between first-order concepts, “synthesizing and clustering first-order codes into higher-order themes” (Patvardhan et al., 2015: 411), searching for data relationships (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Thus, second-order themes (Gioia et al., 2013) - *prioritize tourists’ health and wellness, make empathy an action, build on long-term tourist commitment* - allowed for in-depth distinctions within and across cases (King, 2004). Notably, we looked for theoretical categories or concepts emerging during the entire data coding process (Gibbs, 2007) through Nvivo11 software.

The core aggregate theme in our research is what we labeled as *the road to recovery*. Aggregate themes - themes that recur regularly - are fundamental to the phenomenon (Gioia et al., 2013).

Data extracts are presented in the upcoming sections to explore themes using the respondents’ words (Flowers et al., 2003). Hence, “power quotes” are shown in the body of the paper, and some “proof quotes” are presented in Figure 1 (Pratt, 2009).

**Figure 1. Data analysis process (code examples)**

<b>Aggregate Dimension: Road to Recovery</b>		
Second-order themes	First-order concepts	Representative quotations
Prioritize tourists' health and wellness	Create a protected environment that reduces the threat of contagion	"Implementation of anti-COVID protocols, we maintain a calm atmosphere without giving pressure to the guest, high standards of cleanliness and more attention to the guest". (BL5) "Customers are very sensitive to hygiene in this period; we have instituted specific protocols to ensure the health of guests and collaborators. Ex. Our buffet has become served and prevents the manipulation of food by non-professionals and is protected by the glass; Our staff sanitizes all the beach and pool stations after each use ...". (BL13)
	Digitalize traditional operations	"We used room service by adopting an app to order what you want directly from the room [...]". (BL22) "Only an app that allows you to download all the information (excursion menu times, etc.) in order to eliminate paper and therefore contact". (BL61) "Automated check-in to avoid more contacts". (BL19) "remote check-in with the help of WhatsApp web". (BL58)
Make empathy an action	Provide customers constant assistance	"[...] a lot of distrust, a request for more attentive service". (BL45) "More attention to personal needs required". (BL57) "Greater professionalism, attention, and customer care in a peculiar and personalized way". (BL42) "Modulate a more flexible accommodation proposal, oriented to the new needs of customer [...]". (BL30)
	Virtual customer-centric communication	"We have implemented our site with an interactive page where we publish all the updates regarding price lists, menus, communications, and anything else that is necessary for better communication with guests that previously took place with paper material". (BL36) "We are continuing to promote holidays and trips around Italy but now the season is over. We use social media and newsletters as always". (BL16)
Build on long-term tourist commitment	Be flexible and adaptable in pivoting positive and inspiring business models	"Focus on domestic tourism. Promote events, develop real calendars with cultural initiatives, fairs, always in compliance with the anti-covid rules, and advertising on the beauty of our cities and our food". (BL9) "Keep costs low, [...] reinvent yourself if necessary by adopting initiatives that can increase revenues". (BL27) "We always need to improve the services offered, respecting the new rules, always trying to satisfy the customers". (BL39) "Continuing to invest in staff training and in new technologies to be able to guarantee maximum safety for our collaborators and guests, I am sure that in the future, this will be a cornerstone of customer needs". (BL13)
	Seek partners and collaborating within and across networks	"Hold on and team up". (BL61) "[...] mainly reactivate sales through travel agencies in Italy". (BL55) "[...] partnering with sectors that attract high spending customers (i.e., art galleries) [...]". (BL40)

Source: our elaboration

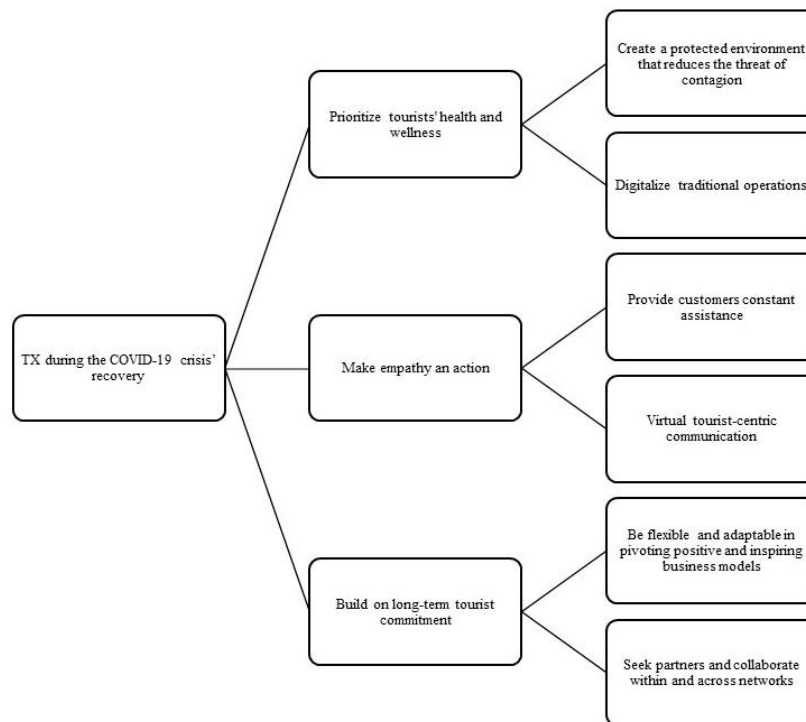
## 4. Findings

In this research, to provide a clear picture of how tourism SMEs refine the TX during the current COVID-19 crisis' recovery, we organized their road to recovery into three dimensions that allowed us synthesizing TX competencies and skills: "prioritize tourists' health and wellness", "make empathy an action", and "build on long-term tourist commitment".

Prioritize tourists' health and wellness, investigates the distancing, cleanliness, and safety concepts, exploring digital solutions to comply with the COVID-19 World Health Organization and the Italian government ministerial requirements upon customers and staff. Make empathy an action is when tourism SMEs establish an emotional attachment and a constant connection towards consumers to reassure them. Finally, build on long-term tourist commitment focuses on how tourism SMEs implement long-term business model upgrades to respond to the post-pandemic consumers' expectations more compellingly, implying seeking cross-functional collaboration through partners.

Figure 2 provides a visual summary of tourism SMEs' dimensions holistically improving the TX during the COVID-19 crisis' recovery phase.

**Figure 2. The TX framework in the COVID-19 crisis' recovery**



Source: our elaboration

#### 4.1. Prioritize tourists' health and wellness

Our data revealed that in Italy, as in the rest of European countries, the reopening of tourist firms took place on the sole condition of fulfilling a series of requirements to guarantee travelers and staff's maximum safety levels.

The limited number of travelers allowed to stay in the analyzed tourism facilities was naturally health conscious. Precisely, they wanted to feel the evidence of ramped-up COVID-19 protocols to create a "sterile" and free environment that lowered their risk of being infected.

According to the business leaders of our sample, tourists' expectations and priorities were heightened around appropriate on-property sanitation efforts and personal space, balanced with a frictionless, worry-free TX without excessive limitations that could upset their overnight stays and services. Then, tourism SMEs were responsible for reimagining operating and delivering the TX regarding the post-COVID era, as the following quote exemplifies: *"Guests want to feel safe staying in our facilities and to respond to this need we have implemented an internal security protocol which, while providing rigorous compliance with the new regulations, does not provide for substantial limitations to the experience of stay"*. (BL54)

Striving for, undertaking, and closely monitoring the government regulations and best practices' execution to demonstrate the prevention of Coronavirus infection outbreaks and alleviate tourists' health-related worries was vital. Thus, ensuring social distancing, cleanliness, and safety inside tourism SMEs (e.g., employing temperature measurement systems, floor signs on the distancing, intensifying daily basis sanitizing procedures through cutting-edge certified technological machinery in high touch areas and rooms, mandatory face coverings, removal of shared amenities like buffets) became imperative features: *"Contact with customers no longer exists. We have panels in every information point, bar, and reception. Or thermo-scanners measure the fever at the entrance of the hotel, the spa, and the thermal pools. Unfortunately, we have to take all precautions to keep distances, but so customers feel safer [...]"*. (BL23)

Undergoing regular cycles of COVID-19 tests and undertaking specific training to personnel

on the COVID-19 procedures (e.g., using PPE and new procedures in compliance with the sector's global and regional safety protocols) - making confident they understood the hygiene protocols' prominence, the latest guidance, and the steps and routines to adhere them successfully - was a crucial aspect tourism SMEs seemed especially concerned about for visitors and guests' safety, as the following quotes exemplify: *"In the organization of work, new procedures have been implemented in compliance with the sector's regional safety protocol. The company has provided PPE, training and all that is required"*. (BL54); *"[...] We have a self-control system on the health of the staff - sample tests, daily fever measurement. One person at a time entering the changing rooms"*. (BL33)

Furthermore, small tourism business leaders had to optimize the workflow inside the organizations. If, on the one hand, many tourism firms found themselves temporarily understaffed, on the other hand, the employees staying had to work extra or stagger their shifts to guarantee that consumers felt safe and comfortable, limiting inconveniences and rapidly resolving potential issues: *"The housekeeping staff has implemented completely new procedures, delaying their arrival at work to allow the machines to sanitize the room before any intervention by the staff [...]"*. (BL33)

Notably, the tourism companies that were able to carry out their activities in the recovery phase of the current Coronavirus pandemic were those able to adapt to the anti-Covid-19 regulations in force quickly. Even with social distancing and mask-wearing, travelers also proved their interest to benefit from the hotel amenities' comforts that make a stay unique (e.g., using the swimming pool, visiting the spa, sitting at the hotel bar), but also wanted to access them safely. Tourism SMEs that managed to open their doors once again had to deal with strict capacity limitations and access regulations, meaning undertaken proactive action plans to review public spaces' layout and capacity. Assessing which areas of the tourism SMEs' properties needed improvement, preserving the remarkable atmosphere, was significant in adopting the COVID-19 precautions. Tourism SMEs with wide spaces in our sample - hotel accommodation facilities, spa, resorts - or open-air facilities - campings - compared to extra-hotel accommodation facilities could easily comply with the World Health Organization and the Italian government ministerial rules upon customers and staff. This advantage allowed them to reorganize themselves easily and set in motion their services' supply chains: *"We had to rearrange everything in such a way that customers could feel safe. Our company has mostly elderly customers so we had to make sure that everyone could move safely. Thank goodness the hotel and the spa are characterized by large spaces, and we were able to organize the routes to take"*. (BL23)

Extra-hotel accommodation facilities are not generally able to guarantee appropriate social distancing. They are characterized, in fact, by small common areas where social distancing measures could not be respected and had no choice but to step up.

Tourism SMEs could not afford to wait for out-of-the-box thinking to cater to guests' needs. Keeping on learning methods of working and recognizing the opportunities that are better suited to the changed environment took a key role. The above all else, health, hygiene, and safety tourists' priorities and consistent service expectations required small business leaders to redesign client relationships continuously.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated customer demand for technologies to comply with all the measures provided by the security protocols. Tourism firms that were not sensing a trend yet redesigned the tourist relationship, accelerating and leveraging new, creative, digital technologies to adapt to consumers' new desires and expectations, delight and charm them. Many tourism SMEs took advantage of mobile self-service technology to ease and speed up processes and turned online the traditional procedures in person before the health emergency. Thus, they put guests' and associates' safety first, leaving non-essential human interactions and reducing touchpoints for the foreseeable future: *"We have reduced waiting times by creating a*



*multifunctional APP to be able to check-in, consult the menus, order room service, and book treatments at the spa directly from your tablet.*” (BL27)

To comply with safety and social distancing requirements, firms introduced fully next-gen contactless or touchless end-to-end services to manage and simplify guest arrival, stay, and departure. However, if, on the one hand, some SMEs already had high digital standards, on the other hand, several investigated companies decided to surrender to any technological option, confident that nothing would allow them to overcome the pitfalls of the crisis (Appendix B). Shifting interactions to digital channels did not wholly replace the human relationship but amplified it. Tourism SMEs’ personnel had more time to focus on consumers, providing secure, convenient, and quick ways to respond and accommodate their needs. The accommodation facilities guests could complete their check-in and check-out processes, booking for spa sessions, or place orders at the restaurant while they were out, encouraged to downloading specific, sophisticated apps from their devices - mobile, tablet, laptop. Self-exploring contributed to saving time, avoiding guests to touch items someone else just used (e.g., restaurant menus and other collaterals), bypassing unnecessary direct, physical interactions with the staff, overcrowding, and gatherings.

#### *4.2. Make empathy an action*

Tourism SMEs adjusted to the unfolding COVID-19 crisis, proactively building deep and authentic, practical engagement actions with customers based on trust and loyalty.

Inquired business leaders said guests were uncertain about booking and planning in advance due to border closures and travel restrictions that kept unpredictably varying. Offering a more flexible accommodation proposal for last-minute modifications played a critical role in preserving and exceeding guest satisfaction and loyalty during the turbulent time, sustaining competition throughout the reopening process. Hence, the introduction of flexible reservation policies (e.g., leniency in cancellation policies and refunds, the possibility of rescheduling the vacation without costs, free insurance) was widespread across our sample of data: “[...] *Commercially it is necessary to activate a sale without cancellation penalties, avoid the prepaid, possibility of changing dates without costs [...]*”. (BL55)

To gauge the guests’ sentiments, tourism SMEs had to step forward, thinking from consumers’ mindsets to understand what services could be provided to them, reducing the service delivery gap. Small business leaders actively provided customers constant assistance to support them, listening and responding to their requests. This proactive behavior implied paying attention to details and delivering personalized services, sustaining excellent and targeted solutions to address customers’ needs promptly: “[...] *personalized services and attention to special requests that are sometimes new to our work experience*”. (BL30)

Notably, customers wanted to feel looked after by businesses. Business leaders respondents emphasized the employment of 24/7 virtual customer support to enable consumers to text anytime, boosting customer engagement: “*We have tried to satisfy all the needs of our customers, providing a mobile number to ask for information or any other need at any time*”. (BL1)

The tourism SMEs’ outstanding involvement was also shown by caring for customers humanly. The psychological effects of the new scenarios of a global event like the COVID-19 pandemic, the experienced social isolation during the lockdowns, and the contradictory, confusing news (travel and mobility bans, self or mandatory quarantine) triggered a great sense of concern in them: “[...] *much distrust, a request for more attentive service*”. (BL45); “*Much more demanding and nervous ... need reassurance*”. (BL44)

Travelers were eager to escape from the chaos, looking for soul and body restoration to forget the current time’s hardship. One significant concern emerging from the surveyed tourist SMEs was creating a human, emphatic connectedness with consumers - authentically and

individually reassuring them, providing warmth, friendliness, and high-level services – making them feel relaxed and safe again. Tourist SMEs and customers experienced an extraordinary empathy for one another in ways they had not seen before because they went through the same challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, patience, compassion, and positivity are critical to eliminating uncertainty in unfamiliar situations: *“The relationship in our case has not changed ..... it has just been much more difficult. Their needs have not changed, and only a few (a minority, I would say) were aware of the objective difficulties. Difficulties were given by using the “masks”, by the distance, the disinfestation of the rooms, the lack of buffets or the need to offer served buffets, the distances in each service, from the beach to the restaurant. The tools ? : Common sense, patience, and availability ... a great and very patient availability”*. (BL6)

A great TX in times of uncertainty requires timely information, rapid feedback, and high-quality services. To succeed in this, tourism SMEs had to be as transparent as possible, removing consumers’ moments of doubts, fears, and frustrations. Notably, the unknown is making customers experiencing high levels of social anxiety. In uncertain times, communicating consistent, appropriate, transparent, and empathetic messages is essential for positive TX (e.g., travelers are looking for cancellation policies to ensure they can not make the trip they can quickly get out of it). As tourism SMEs adapted their offerings based on COVID-19 regulations, consumers had to be regularly informed before and during their stay. The letter needed to be confident that all the new measures tourism SMEs had in place would have allowed them to enjoy their coveted break. Tourists were cautious of traveling and sought information and reassurance about what to expect upon arrival (e.g., service restrictions and protocols). The surveyed tourism SMEs’ funds were budgeted to targeted virtual customer-centric communication strategies (e.g., social media, website) where the new safety - “virus-free” - messaging was disseminated to reaching out to tourism SMEs’ audience. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, outlining prominent and helpful guidelines through quick, targeted communication was necessary to update past and future consumers on how the business was performing, making them feel connected and engaged. The online presence helped manage consumer behavior; it instilled confidence in the consumers and showed them that tourism SMEs cared for their well-being and safety: *“We need clarity and be reassured, a communication that is precise on the rules and at the same time reassures tourists about what they will find or will have to face in the event of sudden closures”*. (BL19)

#### 4.3. Build on long-term tourist commitment

Another aspect that emerged from our analysis is how the tourist destination’s promotion is about to become different, making it necessary to reevaluate tourist destinations through ad-hoc, tailored tourist offerings in the post-COVID-19 world.

The questionnaire respondents repeatedly stressed the need to be flexible and adaptable in pivoting positive and inspiring business models - responding to the pandemic challenges seizing opportunities, and developing long-term strategies. As a structure’s necessity and value-added, implementing safety concepts is strictly connected with a quality enhancement: *“Invest in restructuring, tailor-made communication through digital and consider the space to be dedicated to guests not only as a contingent need but as a real plus of the host structure”*. (BL40); *“Where feasible and there was the possibility, I would invest resources and energy to strongly improve the offer in terms of quality of the structures and services, also reducing, if necessary, the number of beds, in favor of safer and more concrete services, living up to the expectations that the situation will generate”*. (BL6)

Thus, customer preferences, behaviors, and feedbacks shape tourist organizations’ new practices. Going forward right now, prioritizing innovations and improvements to apply in the TX on behalf of what tourists are going through today (e.g., pain points, struggles) helps create

new ways to serve and reach them. Accordingly, conveniences in COVID-19 (e.g., health and security standards, cancellation policies, cleanliness) that people appreciated and value will not go away, and tourism SMEs will have to continue doing so. Moreover, business accomplishments will be possible through culture and the relationship with the community. Even when the pandemic will be over and the restrictions dissipated, guests will still be making sure health services are reliable to ensure their safety. Promoting the destination – for example, the attractions and food - and providing a better TX through attentive and nuanced services is more likely to maximize tourist SMEs’ operational efficiency and better the TX. Experimenting (e.g., encouraging events, cultural initiatives, fairs) will help contribute to a positive guest experience, win customers’ loyalty, and maximize revenues. In this direction, focusing on environmentally friendly and socially responsible business practices is seen by one respondent as a silver lining to succeed and reach a new equilibrium when the global crisis subsides: *“To aim for eco-sustainability and greater attention to the comfort and healthiness of the structure”*. (BL20)

Moreover, business accomplishments will be possible through culture and the relationship with the community. Notably, seeking partners and collaborating within and across networks to create unique consumer value - strengthening or building a functional relationship (e.g., with local companies, art galleries, travel agencies) is considered an inner strength to provide SMEs insights regarding the pandemic and TX. Drawing upon leadership teams ensures a sense of community where everyone can benefit from the new knowledge, mobilizing the extra energy the tourism firms need to navigate critical occurrences through practical resources: *“We are all in this together. Create networks to help us at the regional level. I believe that a fundamental tool is the ability to adapt to change as well as good technological equipment essential to make the customer feel at ease”*. (BL12); *“I speak mainly for the city and the Region where I work, where there is no real confrontation between hoteliers and tour operators. We need more union and sharing of ideas”*. (BL28)

Hence, combining tools and expertise with an effective business network can become a winning pathway to broaden and shape new, richer tourism SMEs’ offerings, deliver value, and upsell the TX.

## 5. Discussion

Despite the vast body of knowledge concerning TX (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Kim et al., 2010), the existing literature does not adequately discuss TX during dire circumstances that can unexpectedly arise in the tourism business landscape (Chan et al., 2020). Little knowledge has proposed an overall perspective illustrating the main dimensions which may properly characterize the TX during distress. Therefore, literature on TX highlights the necessity to build up an overall perspective deepening the dimensions that, collectively and in an integrative manner, define the TX in times of crisis (Chan et al., 2021), boosting excellence in tourism service management (Otto & Ritchie, 1996).

This study investigates the main dimensions characterizing TX redefinition in the COVID-19 crisis’ recovery (Sigala, 2020; Yeh, 2020), contributing to extend current research in meaningful ways. Firstly, this research’s findings advance actual knowledge on powerful behaviors and tactics to redesign TX in crisis time. Secondly, we contribute to extending prior literature by developing a three-dimension, cohesive conceptual framework on holistic TX dimensions during distress, differentiated across prioritize tourists’ health and wellness, make empathy an action, and build on long-term tourist commitment.

In this section, we elaborate on the contributions of this study by developing three propositions that emerged from our analysis as the starting point for further research.

**Prioritize tourists' health and wellness.** Prior studies on TX have shown how customers evaluate the whole travel experience (Mendes et al., 2010), implying that customers are certainly enjoying a holistic tourism experience that covers the entire customer journey (Schmitt, 1999; Weiermair, 2000). Identifying and engaging in concrete opportunities to reinforce consumers' relationships, proactively inspiring greater loyalty, and strengthened trust (Alonso-Almeida & Bremser, 2013; Diebner et al., 2020; Oliver, 2010) is a crucial aspect of developing a successful TX practice). This study contributes to extend the existing literature by showing that to improve TX in the recovery phase of unexpected events, it is essential prioritizing customers' health and wellness through the use of innovative digital technologies. In our analysis, for example, the tourism SMEs were dedicated to managing customer expectations on ad hoc COVID-19 protocol fulfillment proactively (e.g., cleanliness, safety, engaged and trained employees as well as optimized workflow), emphasizing innovation investments to make interactions easier (e.g., online check-in and check-out, guest apps) so that tourists can be confident in the steps the firm is taking to meet their higher safety-related demands during travel. Therefore, empirical evidence from this study reveals that, in the COVID-19 crisis' recovery, firms *prioritize tourists' health and wellness* to improve the TX. Accordingly, we advance this proposition:

*Proposition 1 (P1): TX experience in the COVID-19 crisis' recovery is grounded in prioritizing tourists' health and wellness.*

**Make empathy an action.** According to the literature, excellent communication can evoke intense emotions in the audience (Gretzel et al., 2020; Mao, 2020). Allowing travelers to be kept updated and ensuring the customer service staff knows how their activities are closely linked to the TX mission (Mao, 2020) helps companies in crafting their interaction such that guests feel understood and reassured that any problems they have will be resolved (Lee, 2020; Pappas, 2021; Widmar et al., 2017). The empirical evidence presented in this study extends this argument showing that the TX could be improved in times of crisis by establishing real moments of humanity to reassure tourists on COVID-19-associated matters immediately. Tourism SMEs map organization's touchpoints and genuinely commit to tourists; they actively understand visitors' emotions - what they feel and what they experience - conveying confidence, trust, and cross-functional support to provide guidelines for feeling vulnerable. Therefore, this study reveals that *make empathy an action* in the COVID-19 crisis' recovery is crucial to improving the TX. Hence, we state that:

*Proposition 2 (P2): TX experience in the COVID-19 crisis' recovery is grounded in making empathy an action.*

**Build on long-term tourist commitment.** Earlier studies on TX claim that to build improved comprehensive TXs strategies (Baum, 2006), organizations commit to a proactive company-wide, customer-centric mentality, spotting ways to improve things for consumers. Hence, they identify with their consumers to provide them an added value to the standard purchase (Gentile et al., 2007; Helkkula et al., 2012); for example, they differentiate and enrich the tourist service offer - revealing the importance of tourism firms' willingness and propensity to experiment up-to-date business models - counteracting the tourism sector's hyper-competition (Gilmore & Pine, 2002; Morrish & Jones, 2020; Pine & Gilmore, 1998) through flexibility and agility (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020). By extending previous studies, we advance that even after unexpected events, it is necessary for firms to continue to look for gaps and pain points in the customer journey. Our findings show that tourism SMEs understand the end-to-

end TX during the COVID-19 crisis recovery. They become “TX innovators”, building journey maps to reinforce and elevate the TX bravely, always focused on the best customer outcomes. For instance, they reevaluate the tourist destinations’ promotion through ad-hoc, tailored tourist offerings in the post-COVID-19 world to tackle the coming tourist destination’s promotion change after they learned from the COVID-19 circumstances. Therefore, empirical evidence from this study reveals that firms *build on long-term tourist commitment* in the COVID-19 crisis’ recovery to improving the TX. Accordingly, we propose that:

*Proposition 3 (P3): TX experience in the COVID-19 crisis’ recovery is grounded in building on long-term tourist commitment.*

## **6. Managerial implications**

The present study provides significant managerial insights into TX dimensions to improve the TX during crises. This is a salient issue because of the current challenging times we face due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This work increases SMEs managers’ and practitioners’ awareness of efficient behaviors to rethink the TX in fast-changing business scenarios and emerge when crises strike.

Thanks to the proposed framework and findings, this study may provide remarkable and valuable insights for managers and practitioners to foster resilience in competitive and turbulent marketplaces, thus, understanding what tactics could be more suitable according to the recovery phase of the crisis (Smith, 1990). Our findings highlight how an empathic and proactive mindset is the turning point to succeed in the turbulent post-pandemic era. The winning companies will no longer be those who limit themselves to listening to consumers but those who will be able to go further by establishing a relationship of trust linked to the sharing of emotions. It will thus be through an “approach to empathy” that managers will be able to advance optimal long-term strategies.

## **7. Limitations and future research**

Despite the crucial insights of this work, further studies are needed to deepen and extend research on SMEs’ strategies to reframe TX in the post-COVID-19 world.

By extending the knowledge in this nascent line of inquiry, future studies could deepen and extend research on TX to other types of tourism affected by the pandemic, for example, the vital business niche of MICE (Meetings, incentives, conferencing, exhibitions) tourism.

Furthermore, this study examined the Italian context. Future works could compare our results with other research settings.

Moreover, it would be interesting to test and validate the proposed framework.

Finally, to have a more in-depth awareness of efficient recovery strategies to support TX, future studies could develop and implement a post-COVID-19 service blueprint for excellent TX in times of trouble. For instance, given the importance of blueprinting to plan the customer journey, the staff procedures, and events, future research avenues could provide a more detailed perspective of the inner path leading to change in business in the recovery phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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