

Challenges and Opportunities in Philippine Tourism amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This exploratory study aims to discuss the multifaceted challenges and opportunities of the Philippine tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges and opportunities are organized by following the elements of anti-pandemic strategies in the COVID-19 Management Framework. Some pressing challenges are the decline in tourism demand, layoff of workers, demand for online/digital transactions, avoidance of tourists to occupy hotel rooms used as quarantine facilities, and compliance of disaster management and control preparedness protocols. However, tourism industry can thrive through ample opportunities like exploring local tourism, training employees on digital services and on safety protocols, rebuilding company brand, improving business facilities, adapting to modern technology, and collaborating with consultants on disaster and risk management. These challenges and opportunities provide the bases for suggestions and recommendations to improve policies for future pandemic planning to cushion any potential impact on the tourism industry.

Keywords: tourism, tourism industry, challenges and opportunities, COVID-19, Philippines

1.0 Introduction

The tourism industry plays a significant role in the Philippine economy and in labor market. "In 2019, the contribution of Tourism Direct Gross Value Added (TDGVA) to the Philippine economy as measured by the Gross Domestic Product was estimated at 12.7%. The TDGVA amounted to PHP2.48 trillion [approximately US\$ 51.25 million] in 2019, was higher by 10.8% compared to PHP2.24 trillion [approximately US\$ 46.29 million] in 2018. Employment in tourism characteristic industries was estimated at 5.71 million in 2019, higher by

6.5% compared to 5.36 million in 2018. Share of employment in tourism industries to total employment in the country was recorded at 13.5" (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020a: para. 1-2, 7).

When 2019 was about to end, World Health Organization's (WHO) Country Office in the People's Republic of China picked up a media statement on December 31 about cases of 'viral pneumonia of unknown cause' in Wuhan. Nine days later, the WHO reported that a novel coronavirus caused such viral pneumonia. The first death caused by the

novel coronavirus was then reported on January 11, 2020 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic due to its spread and severity. Even with the massive rollout of COVID 19 vaccines in the Philippines, there have been more deaths reported daily relative to virus transmission. Community quarantines and accompanying restrictions are still being imposed, thereby affecting the tourism industry.

The enormity of the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted all industries including tourism which is one of the hardest-hit (Nicola et al., 2020) and greatly affected (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020; United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably brought organizational and operational disruptions in most, if not all industries, and consequently, in the global economy (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2020). The International Labour Organization estimated that the new coronavirus would pose a threat to 25 million workers. This new grim evaluation represents the complete or partial lockdown steps impacting nearly 2.7 billion jobs, four out of five employees in the world (United Nations News, 2020). In the Philippines, "the 'unemployment rate in July 2020 was estimated at 10.0%. It was higher than the unemployment rate of the same month a year ago, placed at 5.4%. Unemployed Filipinos who are 15 years old and over were estimated at 4.6 million in July 2020, higher by 2.1 million compared to the same period a year ago" (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2020b: para. 1).

The COVID-19 has become the epicenter of academic research and discussions the world over. Specifically, much attention has been drawn to the

impacts, effects, implications, and costs brought about by the current pandemic towards various industries, including tourism. Undeniably, this pandemic has altered the usual tourism-related activities and services such as travel booking, traveling, hotel accommodation, tours, dining, nightlife, and the like. Obviously, these alterations are due to national quarantine measures, non-essential business closures, travel restrictions, border closures, social distancing, and stay-at-home orders that aim to contain and to stop the widespread of pathogens that carry the highly contagious and deadly virus.

A range of scholars have studied the impacts (Alonso et al., 2020; Hao et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020; Uğur & Akbiyik, 2020), effects (Karabulut et al., 2020; Sharma & Nicolau, 2020), implications (Nicola et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020; Hu et al., 2020), and costs (Qiu et al., 2020) of the current pandemic to tourism and hospitality industry. However, the researcher sees the need to put greater attention the discussion about the COVID-19 pandemic on realistic opportunities in the tourism and hospitality industries that go beyond the already established conventions and assumptions in the Philippine context.

This study provides theoretical and practical insights on how the Philippine tourism industry can be more resilient in addressing organizational and operational disruptions. It also includes the challenges carried by health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and future phenomena that would adversely affect the said industry.

This study contributes to the increasing literature on the COVID-19 pandemic's challenges to Philippine tourism. Moreover, it provides practical insights for managers and policy-makers

in our tourism industry to respond effectively to crises and disasters, specifically those that result in a standstill of usual operations and massive layoffs of employees. Since this study is forward-looking, as highly suggested by Kock et al., (2020) that tourism-related research should not only confirm what is already known but rather investigate how tourism could fundamentally be different in a post-COVID-19 era. This paper will contribute to the policy discussions by offering extensive insights with the opportunities available for the tourism industry in the country to thrive.

Challenges and Opportunities in Philippine tourism amid the COVID-19 pandemic

The challenges encountered by and the opportunities available for the Philippine tourism industry in this time of pandemic are organized in Table 1 following the elements of anti-pandemic strategies in the COVID-19 Management Framework (Hao et al., 2020), namely: leadership and communication, human resource, service provision, corporate social responsibility, finance, and disaster management standard operating procedure.

Table 1. *Challenges and Opportunities in Philippine Tourism Based on the Elements of Anti-pandemic Strategies*

Elements of anti-pandemic strategies	Challenges in Philippine tourism	Opportunities in Philippine tourism
<i>Leadership and communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decline in tourism demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exploration of local tourism • collaboration with external systems, promoting agri-tourism and medical tourism
<i>Human resource</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • layoffs of workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • training employees on digital services and safety protocols
<i>Service provision</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of transparency on safety and travel insurance • rising demand for online/digital transactions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rebuilding company brand, improving business facilities, and adapting to modern technology
<i>CSR</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • possible avoidance of tourists to occupy hotel rooms used as quarantine facilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building up goodwill
<i>Finance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rising demand for insurance and refund options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • government subsidies to hotels that serve as quarantine facilities
<i>Disaster management standard operating procedure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high demand for disaster management and control preparedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • team-up with expert consultants on Disaster and Risk Management

Note: The elements of anti-pandemic strategies in the first column are based on the COVID-19 Management Framework introduced by Hao et al. (2020). The information contained in the second and third columns were the ones explored and elaborated by the researchers below.

2.0 Challenges in Philippine tourism

The decline in tourism demand

The Philippines has seen the growth of foreign and domestic travels from 2011 to 2015, with an increase in tourism internal expenditure amounting to PHP2.0 trillion in 2015 from 1.4 trillion in 2011 (Department of Tourism, n.d). With the increased income of tourism in the Philippines, it has been foreseen that the industry will continue to attract visitors and will be driven to develop in the next coming years. However, the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the tourism demand in the country.

The coronavirus pandemic has reshaped tourists' and residents' behaviors, which must be scrutinized (Zenker & Kock, 2020). This pandemic is expected to affect the tourists' psyche and considerably change tourism demand (Kock et al., 2020; Hao et al., 2020). According to previous studies, tourists prefer to restrict their journeys due to pressing health threats. In addition, the destination's carrying capacity is already being monitored, limiting the number of people who can visit a tourist destination simultaneously (Cruz, 2014). In 2019, the Philippines recorded 8.3 million tourist arrivals and PHP550.2 billion in international tourism receipts. However, recent projections show that tourist arrivals and international tourism receipts in 2020 would fall to 3.9 million and PHP279.5 billion, respectively (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020).

Conversely, the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the rising demand of the tourism industry in the Philippines. Both foreign and domestic visitors in the country are anxious to travel due to COVID-19. As a result, the demand for travel and leisure has continued to decrease over time. The government wanted to expand the

road network of the country to become a major travel destination. It would lead to the opening of tourism sites, increase of infrastructure investment, creation of employment opportunities, and expansion of small-scale enterprise. The plans are placed in a standstill. This COVID 19 pandemic will significantly affect the income of tourism shared to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Department of Tourism, n.d). It implies that the income foreseen by the Department of Tourism (DOT) for the coming years will also be decreasing. Therefore, revisiting the National Tourism Development Plan for 2016-2022 of the country is much likely needed.

PwC Philippines, together with the DOT, surveyed 247 decision-makers across different subsectors in May 2020. Forty-four percent of respondents (i.e., travel agencies, bookings, tours, and other service providers) come from the tourism services sector and 34 percent come from the accommodation sector. According to the survey, 97 percent say that COVID-19 can significantly affect their business operations and cause great concern (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020).

The Philippines received only 1,323,956 foreign visitors in the year 2020; this is 83.97% lower compared to the 8,260,913 arrivals in the year 2019 (Cordero, 2021). The same significant decrease was recorded at 83.12% based on total receipts generated from inbound tourism – from an estimated PHP482.16 billion in 2019 to PHP81.40 billion in 2020 (Cordero, 2021). Specifically, Baguio City, dubbed as the country's tourism capital, was not spared from the ill-effects of the pandemic towards tourism. In year 2020, the city experienced an unprecedented decline of tourist arrivals of around 82.5% compared to 2019; consequently, an estimated P7 billion was lost (Llanes, 2021).

Layoffs of workers

The pandemic mainly affects the tourism and hospitality industry, causing many workers to lose jobs (Nicola et al., 2020; Hao et al., 2020). The airline employees, in particular, are among those who are directly affected (Sobieralski, 2020). Due to pandemic, airlines has been forced to limit the capacity and has petitioned the authorities for emergency relief.

An estimated 5.7 million people are employed in the country's tourism sector. Around 4.8 million of this population turned out to be underemployed or unemployed because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bigtas, 2020). For instance, the 314 boat operators who worked in a world-renowned UNESCO heritage site, the Subterranean River National Park in Puerto Princesa, Palawan, used to earn PHP10,000 – 15,000 per month (USD200 – 300) (Fabro, 2020). With a maximum of 1,200 visitors daily, this site which earned PHP108 million (USD2.1 million) in entrance fees from its 331,356 visitors in 2019 (Fabro, 2020) was forced to stop its operation due to quarantine measures and travel restrictions. Furthermore, most, if not all, of the 30,000 workers in the world-famous PHP 58.18 billion industry Boracay Island were affected by the economic impact caused by the pandemic (Burgos, 2021). In addition, some 14,000 hotel workers in El Nido, Coron, and San Vicente, Palawan lost their jobs because of the pandemic (Garcia, 2020).

It was not a surprise anymore because only businesses with essential products and services were given a chance to continue their operations in the different places in the country during the quarantine periods. However, the restrictions and the risks associated with health and safety during this pandemic have resulted to lower demand in the tourism industry, resulting to a change in

staffing requirements (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020).

The Philippines' 2016-2022 National Tourism Development Plan requires tourism to create a globally competitive and environmentally sustainable and responsible social tourism industry. It encourages growth through job opportunities and equitable income distribution, creating a basis for a highly trusted society. The tourism industry must give relevance to the mandates in Section 13, Office of Industry Manpower Development, Chapter 2 of Tourism Act of 2009 (2009) or Republic Act 9593. Therefore, it should develop training modules and undertake workshops and continuing education programs for the workforce of the industry, in collaboration with relevant government agencies and tourism companies and organizations, to enhance their quality, competence, and excellence in tourism services.

However, the mandates are in contrast to the present situation of the tourism industry in the Philippines. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many tourism industry staff were laid off for no one would visit tourist destinations. As can be seen in Tourism Act of 2009 (2009) or R.A. 9593, the Department of Tourism should have prepared separate modules and preparation for workers who have been displaced. Thus, training and modules should also be made available to employees who have been displaced to upgrade the skills required for the tourism industry.

Lack of transparency on safety and travel insurance

One factor contributing to the downturn in tourism demand is a lack of openness and the insufficient facilities in low-income economies (Karabulut et al., 2020). Therefore, strict compliance

is required with hygiene and precautionary measures to safeguard the accommodation experience of the customers. It includes complete disinfection, control of food safety, distribution of masks, online medical consultation, health detection of consumers and employees, the shutdown of laundry rooms, gyms, and other public area facilities (Hao et al., 2020). These protective measures are significant in restoring customers' trust (Hao et al., 2020; Valle, 2020).

The tourism industry in the Philippines has been highlighted as one of the most powerful engines of long-term economic growth (Pilapil-Añasco & Lizada, 2014). The decline of tourism demand during the COVID-19 pandemic created a significant impact on the country's economic growth. The pandemic has resulted to travel restrictions across the board through border restrictions and tourism attractions closure. The Department of Tourism (DOT) has gradually implemented precautionary measures to ensure the safety and security of tourists visiting the Philippines.

The Philippines has taken steps to combat the COVID-19 pandemic by issuing Memorandum Circular No.2020-003 and addressing the country's implementation of community quarantine. The circular stipulates certain guidelines that highlight "safety-first policy" which aim to safeguard the well-being of tourists. It also highlights the policies of "No Mask, No Boarding, and Physical Distance". A thermal scanner, emergency care aid kits, sanitation kits that include alcohol with 70% solution or hand sanitizer are all requirements in all public utility vehicles (PUV's) and tourism business establishments (Philippine News Agency [PNA], 2020a).

Rising demand for online/digital transactions

The skills required now in the tourism industry involve adaptability and preparedness in digitalization. The rise in smartphone ownership and internet access by individuals manifests the rising demand of customers in the digital world (Ackehurst & Loveder, 2015; Deloitte Access Economics & Ministerial Industry Commission, 2014). In addition, the pandemic sees the need for smart services to boost both the industry's demand and supply. The digital network and innovative technology currently support contactless systems.

To retain competitiveness in the post-pandemic, many hotel brands are moving into digital transformation (Hao et al., 2020; China Hospitality Association, 2020). To deploy workers and arrange events, hotel owners developed an effective way to command and control infrastructure that integrates online office technologies, applications, and networks (Hao et al., 2020). Adopting this modern technology can help stabilize the quality of service, thus increasing customer loyalty and enhancing hotel performance (Hao et al., 2020).

The Department of Tourism in the Philippines is urging people to switch to electronic and contactless purchases. This is one of the "new normal" protocols that must be followed for business to continue in the face of the COVID-19. As a result, the use of modern technology that improves the safety protocols is practised. There is the application of the industry-driven best practices that provides clientele with optimum quality services to ensure customer satisfaction. Also, all DOT-accredited establishments are provided with a digital contact tracing SafePass seal, health declaration, capacity planning, and

incident management solution (Philippine News Agency [PNA], 2020b).

Along with the surge of COVID-19 cases in 2020, electronic payments have become increasingly popular, with cash transactions declining. This indicates that the use of digital means such as bank transfers and QR codes are dramatically increasing. This development reflects consumers' rising trust in digital techniques, which is projected to usher in a coin-free and cashless world (Lucas, 2021).

Possible avoidance of tourists to occupy hotel rooms used as quarantine facilities

The Philippine government has tapped the hotels' services in these times of pandemic to serve as additional quarantine stations. There are possible negative connotations of hotels that serve as isolation stations, health facilities extensions, and clinical team dormitories (Hao et al., 2020). Skeptical customers might avoid them in the post-pandemic on the issue of hygiene and sanitation.

Hotel management's decision to allow the facilities to be temporarily used as quarantine stations for returning OFWs exemplifies "corporate social responsibility." The Senate Bill 2747, also known as the Corporate Social Responsibility Act (2011), is a mandate of the Philippine government that every business in the country is responsible for balancing the 3P's: People, Planet, and Profit. It suggests that enterprises need to rely on income and to consider the impact of their actions on the environment (planet) and on the workers (people).

The hotel industry in the Philippines has been very committed in supporting the national efforts in prioritizing the public health and safety by converting hotel rooms into quarantine facilities to the medical front-liners, business process outsourcing employees, stranded local and

foreign travellers, retuning OFW's and Filipino and foreign nationals (Philippine News Agency [PNA], 2021). Through this, the hotels not only help the people but also earn revenues through payments provided by the government, private businesses and individuals staying in hotel isolation rooms. This action also mitigates the spread of COVID-19 and ensures safety of Filipinos.

Rising demand for insurance and refund options

Flight insurance covers passengers from the cancellation of the flight to flight delays and provides assistance on the loss of luggage and on medical emergencies. During pandemic, people are more particular about insurance and refund options. It was stressed that travellers are commenting on refunding some portion of the fees and modifying or cancelling travel plans (Uğur & Akbiyik, 2020).

The Inter-Agency Task Force for Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases of the Philippines has issued Resolution No. 52, which aims to strengthen adequate travel and health benefits to cover rebooking and hotel costs if stranded and hospitalization in case of illness in the amount determined by the Department of Tourism. As long as the COVID-19 threat is present, arguably, individuals will still be afraid to travel even if travel restrictions and border closures are lifted. Nevertheless, enhancing of travel and health insurance is a welcome development, particularly for those who need to travel for work.

The insurance business is facing a surge in reimbursement demands now (Levantesi & Piscopo, 2021). Insurance companies have had a lot of pressures from the public to include coverage for pandemics like the COVID-19. At the same time, it is an opportunity for the insurance business

because people are becoming more interested in purchasing insurance to cover losses from potential new pandemic waves. They are willing to pay significant insurance premiums to have resiliency with greater confidence. On the other hand, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) issued Memorandum Circular No. 20-30 on June 22, 2020, which outlined procedures for refunding events that were cancelled or scaled back due to the pandemic. To ensure compliance with the community quarantine's social distancing rules, business establishments would scale-down event to reduce the number of guests. This DTI circular covers partial (i.e., down payment, reservation) or full payments that may be eligible for a refund. The DTI Circular further states that if a written contract on force majeure exists, it will be acknowledged, and in the absence of one, the Civil Code will be used as a reference.

High demand for disaster management and control preparedness

During this pandemic, the tourism industry faces a challenge in recovering customers' trust regarding many health and safety concerns. In the first six months of 2020, international visitor arrivals dropped by 65%, with Asia and the Pacific suffering the most with a 72% drop (UNWTO, 2020 as cited in Kumar & Nafi, 2020). To execute the concept of mitigation in the face of calamity, various structural and non-structural initiatives became the top priority in community preparedness (Wahyuningtyas et al. 2020). Effective training, policy, and risk management are required to reduce the effects (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2020).

With the increasing threat to tourism businesses and destinations from natural disasters, only a few tourism businesses have been prepared

to cope with the consequences of such a threat. Therefore, disaster preparation that everyone expects is a crucial competency of tourism managers. Measurement of preparedness includes awareness of emergency planning, the existence of precursors and alert systems, and, ultimately, the creation of emergency management and tourism management training and simulations (Ritchie, 2008).

To promote safety and comfort, The Manila Hotel, for example, has enhanced its cleanliness routines and amenities following Department of Health requirements. Ventilation is becoming increasingly critical in limiting virus transmission as more information emerge regarding how the virus might be transmitted in air-conditioned indoor environments. In response to the pandemic, the Manila Hotel has added extra air filters and UV-C radiation to a fresh air ventilation duct. It has an air intake cover and duct fan to give fresh air into the common spaces. As part of a system-wide sanitation and cleaning drive, the management sanitizes rooms now considerably more thoroughly using EPA-listed disinfectants and UV lights to deep-clean rooms. It frequently cleans air con filters and systems and high-temperature linen washes. Their hotel staff has also received sufficient training in the new safety standards (The Manila Hotel, 2021).

Opportunities in Philippine tourism

Exploration of local tourism and collaboration with external systems

This pandemic is an eye-opener for government leaders and business managers to explore the local community's potentials in analysing the demand and supply of the tourism sector. During this pandemic, residents have manifested interests in the tourism destinations in their towns and in

other places. This necessitates Local Government Units to have a forecast on knowledge of tourist flow to plan out their budget focused in the local tourism development of tourism areas (Velos et al., 2020). Tourism areas are challenged to become adaptive to survive in this continually changing environment (Hartman, 2020).

Strategic planning and good governance are needed for adaptive tourism to assess new areas' ability to become viable tourism destinations as market demand changes (Hartman, 2016). It is an excellent time to collaborate with the government and non-government agencies, especially with the health systems. In the sense of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local government might be an avenue for establishing and promoting local tourist sites. Since many local tourists would like to visit, Local Government Units would create local attractions as trend project. In this case, the LGUs can generate income through the local tourists and can provide job opportunities for the residents near the tourist site. Through this project, the LGUs in the country will have the chance to develop tourism sites present in their place.

One example of a local attraction developed during this pandemic and made open to the public in April 2021 was the Santabucks Eco Adventure. This is located in a hinterland barangay in the Municipality of Sta. Catalina, Negros Oriental. Among other things, this site offers a downhill ride on a coconut palm frond (locally known as *palwa*), giant spider web bouncing net (tied in coconut palms), swing, lovers' lane, coffee shop, and lovers' elevators allowing someone a 360 degrees view of the surrounding mountains in the area. This is an ideal place to relax and to unwind since it has a wide space which allows visitors to observe social distancing and an open space that gives them an opportunity to breathe fresh air.

Collaboration with external systems, promoting agri-tourism and medical tourism

The world is now in a situation where only resilient and robust leadership can save society and the economy (Nicola et al., 2020). During this crisis, collaborative actions and social bricolage, requiring coordination among authorities and stakeholders, are necessary for the tourism industry (Zenker & Kock, 2020). Promoting agri-tourism and medical tourism are valuable programs that developing country such as the Philippines can prioritize to help rebuild the country's tourism industry (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2020).

The government is encouraging the involvement of the private sector and agri-tourism to grow rural areas and sustain rural life. Through the partnership with the private sector, it improves the capacity-building of local government units (LGUs) in the management of local tourism projects. It ensures reachable and low-cost destinations throughout the country, especially in areas that have proven a robust comparative advantage (Tourism Act of 2009, 2009). The World Bank reports that about two-fifths of the total land area of 300,000 square meters in the Philippines is devoted to agriculture, employing about one-fourth of the country's workforce. Republic Act No. 10816 recognizes the importance of agriculture in producing food and other agricultural products to maintain and improve human life and provide a significant portion of the population with a livelihood (Domingo, 2019).

The promotion of agri-tourism in the Philippines can help the people sustain their daily needs and have income through tourists visiting the place. In times of crisis like COVID-19, the most important thing is having food on their tables because they will be harvesting what they have planted. Therefore, they can still sustain their daily

needs even in the absence of tourists. Agri-tourism is the process that develops agricultural activities while a tourist is also free to interact. It includes diverse agricultural activities such as animal riding and the environment remains natural with fresh cuisine (Srivastava, 2016).

One of the many agri-tourism sites which develops in the country during the pandemic is the Artemio's Heritage Eco farm in Sibugay, Zamboanga. Being owned by a couple, this eco farm continues to make significant improvements. The eco farm doubly promotes farming and agri-tourism since it is growing papaya and vegetables. It also has piggery, poultry, and tilapia pond. When the COVID situation in the area permits, the couple is planning to open to the public its campsite and restaurant (Taculao, 2021).

On the other hand, the country could use this pandemic as an opportunity to improve its medical health sector. The Philippines is among the Asian countries involved in medical tourism with Thailand, Singapore, India, and Malaysia. Since new medical and health technologies have allowed patients greater leeway in sourcing care and are not restricted to their residential cities and towns, medical tourism is becoming a norm. In addition, as airfare has become more affordable and less expensive medical care of comparable quality has become available in middle-income countries, patients have become open to traveling for care with their families. Concerning the countries of origin of medical tourists and their leading competitors in Asia, the Philippines is very price-competitive (Picazo, 2013).

However, this clinical tourism program affects how the authorities handle the COVID-19 pandemic and the different Asian international locations. Early proof shows that international

locations, including Taiwan, Vietnam, and South Korea, which successfully flattened the curve and controlled to reduce the damage to their economies, are international leaders inside the combat in opposition to the COVID-19. There are early indicators in the Philippines that many hospitals are going through severe monetary stress, such that a number of them have already resorted to financial cuts, layoffs, and temporary suspension of certain services.

The Philippines is located in one of the most strategic spots in Southeast Asia. The country's tropical climate and the rich natural and human resources, with its beaches and very hospitable and compassionate medical staff, are other significant factors why the country made it to the list of medical tourist destinations compiled by the International Healthcare Research Center and Medical Tourism Association, peaking at number eight back in 2015 (Grajo et al., 2018). The challenge now is to get the government's full support for the needs of the country's health industry to maximize its potentials in the medical tourism program.

It is now high time for the Philippine government to work closely with the medical institutions and to invest effectively in health facilities identified by health experts. Looking at the best practices of the neighboring countries in dealing with the COVID-19, good public-private collaborations in the health sector are critical ingredients for their success. This is with emphasis on adopting knowledge dissemination and communication tracing technologies, with less emphasis on punitive lockout steps (Mendoza, 2020). The government must also set aside their political agenda to be more united in fighting this pandemic. As stressed in the recent debate in the United Nations, this pandemic requires collective

action to tackle shared threats and "vaccine multilateralism" to combat the coronavirus (UN, 2020).

The Provincial Tourism Unit of Negros Oriental has opened various tourist sites that the local community can visit. It is also one way of dealing with mental health challenges that occur during the quarantine period. In addition, the province is fully implementing the health and social distancing guidelines by ensuring strict adherence to the destination's carrying capacity, reducing the number of local visitors entering the area.

Training employees on digital services and safety protocols

To accept changes promoting multi-business and multi-channel channels, hotels, and leisure companies should begin engaging in workforce training for digital functions, support personnel development, and job versatility (Hao et al., 2020). The use of digital technologies will help the Philippines restart tourism activities and operations in the new normal. The tourism enterprise needs to implement digital transactions to ensure customer confidence towards their health, safety, and security as per the Department of Tourism (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

The Department of Tourism has enforced the country's tourism establishment to adopt health and safety protocols by contactless and cashless transactions (Asian Development Bank, 2020). With the use of digital services, the Philippines' tourism industry can bounce back to its operations. It just needs to ensure that both foreign and domestic visitors adhere to the government's health and safety protocols.

Experience and profound compliance that integrate improvements in workers' knowledge

and understanding inspire the implementation of safety criteria and protocols. In addition, deep alignment with safety behaviours that encourage further learning is not stagnant. It is but a constant activity, as workers further review their perceptions of danger and safety procedures. Via three management practices: security, advancement, and engagement, managers will show their sincere dedication to employee safety in the workplace (Hu et al., 2020), which subsequently benefits the customers and the entire company.

Rebuilding company brand, improving business facilities, and adapting to modern technology

The pandemic crisis allows businesses to revisit their business model and marketing concept. The tourism industry can update or upgrade its systems to create a brand that fits the digital civilization era. They should invest more in online and cashless transactions and in digital marketing within the tourism industry. They should consider the maximum benefits of the internet in sending products and messages to the market. Stories of customers posted online are very critical in branding the business. Experiences of satisfied customers shared online create a positive image of the company and establish trust and confidence, especially if the company passes international safety and quality accreditations. Also, sending clear messages on health and safety measures helps visitors feel safe at various attractions, restaurants, or tours. This can be a significant factor in tourists' decisions.

The infusion of modern technologies and applications in hospitality management and travel operations is no longer a choice these days. It is considered necessary to remain competitive. The Travel Pulse has shared how post-COVID-19

pandemic technologies would reshape the hotel industry. About every part of the hospitality experience can now be reached in the visitors' mobile devices, provided that hotels have embraced the right software. Scanning QR codes, contactless hotel check-in features, smartphone room keys, touchless transactions, in-app shopping, and scheduling appointments may now be used to replace physical restaurant menus and paper in-room compendiums (Baratti, 2020).

In terms of facilities, the tourism sector focuses on specific priority areas, including the spacious rooms' layout, the ventilation, cleaning and disinfection procedures, and complete emergency facilities (e.g., the first aid kit and emergency exits), safety and health measures, and green consumption and environmental protection measures (Hong et al., 2020). In addition to the basic specifications of global guidelines, the internet provides several possibilities for operating back-of-house operations and streamlining organizational complexities such as organizing housekeeping processes, assigning personnel roles, and verifying compliance with recently strengthened cleanliness standards (Baratti, 2020).

One of the most innovative companies in the Philippine Tourism industry is the Golden Prince Hotel and Suite in Cebu City. Golden Prince was able to take its business model to the next level during the pandemic. The company earned high praises, especially from the DTI, for being one of the first businesses in Region 7 to have prepared for the pandemic. The company has established some pre-COVID-19 best practices, including the company-wide awareness campaign with the Department of Health during the year's first quarter. It also distributed safety kits to its employees during the pre-quarantine send-off and awarded a grant

further to explore agripreneurship in their homes during the pandemic.

Moreover, the company provides a series of online talks and webinars to equip employees through knowledge support. It has online '*Kumustahan* sessions' with team members to check on their emotional and mental health. Other services include re-skilling training through mini-training, cross-training, and multitasking mindset. The management has prioritized employees' and customers' safety and introduced the tag line, "Your safety is Gold." The company also came up with more hashtags such as "Golden Prince cares! We heal as one!"

Golden Prince Cebu has also adopted advanced technology in observing safety and health protocols in its daily operations, such as using the significant investment in Automated Thermal Scanning technology and touch-free sanitizers and advocating on locally-developed contact tracing apps. The hotel has also made new room service positioning, introducing the 'Work-from-Hotel' concept and 'Self-Care Stay.' In addition, the company has observed enhanced housekeeping cleaning standards and an automated ordering system for food services using mobile apps to view menus and to take orders. It has also promoted cashless transactions with digital payment gateways like Gcash, Paymaya, Paypal, and more. Furthermore, for events and functions, the company has resorted to pocket events, virtual training activities, and more intimate gatherings with changes in their floor layouts to observe proper distancing among attendees and assisted buffet services with protective shields.

This pandemic pushes the industry to employ mobile and self-service technologies for more efficient and effective operations management.

There is also an emphasis on the importance of having strong ties with health insurance companies in the tourism industry and strengthening government commitment in the public-private partnership to facilitate more projects and programs in health and tourism.

Building up goodwill

The consistency in providing accommodation services even during the pandemic shows commitment to the hospitality industry. Hotels that are used as quarantine stations during this pandemic may have earned respect from the community. This is a win-win situation between the hotel and dormitory establishment since they can still gain income amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Proper implementation of safety and sanitation protocols must be observed throughout.

On the other hand, the government can save expenses since it will no longer build infrastructure for isolation purposes. Instead, it can use the saved amount to help Filipinos who are affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, the competence of companies to handle adequately their employees and customers in this crisis reinforces their brand and builds goodwill among their staff and customers.

Government subsidies to hotels that serve as quarantine facilities

The local government provides subsidies to hotels that serve as quarantine stations during the pandemic. With the increased number of infected cases that lead to the shortage of hospital beds, many hotels have been used as accommodation facilities for medical staff, construction workers, and patients (Hao et al., 2020). This action can be a win-win situation between the government and the industry.

In the Philippines, the *Bayanihan* Act of 2020 is granting powers to the President to reallocate US\$5.37 billion to fight against COVID-19. This includes the accommodation of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) flying back to the country amidst COVID-19. Through this, the accommodation sector can still gain income while the government will shoulder the expenses for the hotel rooms to be used for the 14 days quarantine of the OFWs.

In May 2020, Senator Juan Miguel Zubiri introduced to the Senate of the Philippines Senate Bill No. 1558, which is the planned Philippine Economic Stimulus Act (PESA) for the country's growth and development in the aftermath of COVID-19 and providing funds therefore. This Act calls the Department of Tourism to assist critically impacted businesses that are DOT-accredited tourism enterprises in any of the following programs: (1) interest-free loans or issuance of loan guarantees with terms of up to five (5) years for maintenance and operating expenses; (2) credit facilities for upgrading, rehabilitation, or modernization of current establishments or facilities to be compliant with new health and safety standards; (3) marketing and product development promotions and programs; (4) grants for education training, and advising of tourism stakeholders for new normal alternative livelihood programs; (5) utilization of information technology; and (6) other relevant programs, including infrastructure to mitigate the economic effects of COVID-19 on the tourism industry" (Philippine Economic Stimulus Act [PESA], 2020).

Republic Act No. 11494 provides funds to industries in the Philippines affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the tourism businesses which could avail of the loan assistance provided by the government, cash-for-work programs, and the unemployment and involuntary

assistance for the displaced workers or employees in the tourism sector. In the case of Negros Oriental, Philippines for instance, the Department of Tourism (DOT) has allocated PHP11.840 million as monetary assistance for a total of 2,368 workers from the tourism industry sector in the province (Partlow, 2021). Of the total allocation, PHP6.815 million has been disbursed, covering 1,363 beneficiaries from 254 establishments, records showed. The financial aid is funded by the DOT with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) facilitating the beneficiaries' applications under the Covid-19 Adjustment Measure Program II (CAMP II) for DOT-accredited establishments. Using other provisions of this Act to obtain grants, loans, or loan guarantees does not disqualify a tourism enterprise from receiving economic relief. The DOT will give preference to businesses that support the Balik Probinsiya, Bagong Pag-Asa Program and follow the DOH's requirements to ensure a sufficient and timely supply of health care services.

According to interim standards, only facilities with legitimate Department of Tourism accreditations were permitted to operate during the peak of the lockdown in the Philippines. These hotels are either employed as quarantine hotels or approved as places for staycations per interim regulations. As quarantine hotels, they house guests who may have been exposed to the virus or become isolation facilities for COVID-19 positive guests. Hence, the Department of Tourism with its tourism response and recovery plan (TRRP) brings together several government departments to help the tourism industry in the country devise new business strategies with health and safety measures in its entire service delivery (Aquino et al., 2021).

Team-up with expert consultants on Disaster and Risk Management

The first step is to formulate an effective and accountable team for disaster management and appoint a team leader (Faulkner, 2001 as cited in Hao et al., 2020). In the tourism context, risk management is the planning and implementation process for which it is directed towards managing contrary effects of crisis and disasters/calamities on tourism (Ural, 2016).

Collaborating with expert consultants on making Disaster and Risk Management Plan for the Tourism Industry in the Philippines will provide solutions to problems such as pandemic like COVID-19. It will minimize its effects on the industry and mitigate job opportunities for people employed in Tourism. Likewise, this should be included in the formulation of the National Tourism Development Plan and needs to be mandated in the Republic Act 9594 (Tourism Act of 2009).

This pandemic serves as a wake-up call for the government and industry to be more stringent in their disaster risk reduction and control systems deployment. The Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010 require that each level of government form a DRRM Council, which acts as the first responder to disasters and is at the forefront of DRRM in their geographical jurisdiction. According to a May 2020 report from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, numerous MDRRMCs have prepared Memorandums of Understanding for further isolation areas/quarantine facilities to various hotels in their respective regions (NDRRMC). Stranded tourists in different areas of the country, including Puerto Princesa, Palawan, and Boracay, have received prompt assistance from their local DRRMCs. Local governments and private

companies worked together on risk management and control measures (NDRRMC, 2020).

3.0 Implications

Theoretical implications

This paper provides additional support to the theory of complex adaptive systems (CAS). This pandemic has brought many challenges and inconveniences globally. However, it can also be perceived from a different perspective, focusing on opportunities. The idea of Adaptive tourism emphasizes the creativity and flexibility of the Tourism sector, which are essential to sustain its operations in a dynamic environment.

Managerial implications

The COVID-19 pandemic puts businesses to the test, where only resilient and robust leadership can endure the challenges and see opportunities. By being aware of the present challenges and opportunities in the Tourism industry during this pandemic, business leaders and managers can revisit their business model and develop innovative strategies to sustain their business operations and maintain social responsibilities.

Practical implications

This paper is forward-looking. By properly recognizing opportunities available for the Tourism industry, particularly in the Philippines, the government can consider making policies to strengthen local tourism and to help the locals survive challenging times. Moreover, ample and clear opportunities provide a bigger chance for improved productivity among firms and individuals.

Economic implications

This paper offers several factors affecting demand and supply in the Tourism sector which both the government and the industry should consider. Furthermore, it highlights proper government regulations and financial support in preserving the economic system.

4.0 Conclusion

The Tourism industry worldwide is vastly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the Philippine Tourism industry. Travel bans and other quarantine measures prevent tourists and residents, especially minors and senior citizens, from being exposed in public places, thus affecting demand. These changes are expected to have a long-term effect on customers' behavior involving their preferences and buying decisions (Hao et al., 2020; Kock et al., 2020). Businesses in the tourism industry, like in travel and leisure, face significant challenges in having strategies to continue their business with the strict implementation of social distancing policies and safety precautions set by WHO and the national and local government. With low demand and many restrictions affecting the operations of the Philippine Tourism Industry, only those who are resilient can survive with a strategic approach and innovative practices for the new normal. Proactive institutions use these challenging times as an opportunity for them to revisit their business model, renovate facilities, remove unnecessary costs, and organize upskilling programs for their key workers. This study highlights the significance of adaptive tourism and how it fits into the current state of the country. It mentions various aspects of the country's

policies and regulations that have an impact on local tourism enterprises. It also emphasizes the digitization of processes, the demand for travel insurance, and other services. Aside from theoretical and managerial implications, it involves economic repercussions such as the loss of income in the community for employees and workers in the tourism sector. This paper can be a valuable reference for future studies relative to the effects of COVID-19 on the Tourism industry. However, the researchers acknowledge that there is a vacuum in the scientific analysis as to the amount to which it will affect the overall industry, especially that the crisis is still ongoing. This paper has the following limitations. First, this paper only provides the big picture of the Philippine tourism sector's challenges and opportunities. It does not give an in-depth discussion of a specific area of the industry. Future studies should evaluate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This can be done by using case studies from the Tourism sector and by gathering scientific evidence on how particular businesses survive in these challenging times. It could be an excellent and timely basis to position institutions better and be more prepared for another future virus outbreak. Second, this paper is only focusing on the Philippine context, which limits its generalizability. Future studies may consider a comparative study of challenges and opportunities in the tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic between an Asian and a non-Asian country. Lastly, this paper is done within the pandemic period. It is noticeable that the government and other sectors are making new initiatives from time to time, which future studies should consider in their analysis until the post-pandemic stage.

Ethical approval

No ethical approval is required.

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Declaration of competing interest

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