


## Article

# Coping with COVID-19: The Resilience and Transformation of Community-Based Tourism in Brunei Darussalam

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted the travel and tourism industry, economies, livelihoods, public services, and opportunities globally. This is also observed in the small country of Brunei. As one of the few countries that have successfully mitigated COVID-19 transmissions, Brunei is slowly rebuilding its tourism industry through its community-based tourism (CBT). Following Sharma et al.'s resilience-based framework for reviving the tourism industry post-COVID-19 established in 2021, this study incorporates responses from semi-structured interviews with 16 local CBT owners on the challenges, the management, and the CBT initiatives during the height of the pandemic until today. These initiatives include diversifying more tour packages and utilising local resources and products. Despite the lockdown imposed by the government, which suspended businesses and restricted all travelling, local CBT operations flourished, generated more income for the owners, and created job opportunities for the community. Such efforts have caused the public to appreciate local cultures, the environment, and ultimately increase CBT experiences in the country. While shedding light on Brunei's unique management of its tourism industry during the pandemic, this paper also demonstrates theoretical and conceptual contributions to the recent literature of resilient and transformational tourism and provide suggestions on how to manage CBT operations during these challenging times.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; pandemic; community-based tourism; resilience; transformation; hospitality; technology; local communities; Brunei; Southeast Asia



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## 1. Introduction

Since the first recorded case of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Hubei, China in December 2019, the pandemic has impacted many aspects of global livelihood and public health, with no reservation to the travel and tourism industry. Based on a report by United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) [1], the global inbound and outbound expenditure was forecasted to plummet by 60–80% due to travel restrictions imposed by many countries, including those of key players in global tourism and economies, and this has since affected other smaller countries that rely heavily on international tourism [2–4].

As the pandemic continues to change how global citizens view many aspects of lifestyle, resilience and the implementation of transformational efforts are necessary to secure sustainability and continuity of operations in many areas [2,3,5–8]. In July 2021, international communities are still struggling to cope with the ongoing effects of the pandemic with more than 191 million confirmed recorded cases globally. Much research has been done to assess the current situation to prepare future guidelines and action plans for global communities [2,4,9–13].

The effects of the global pandemic have also affected the tourism industry in the small Southeast Asian country of Brunei. Since the first reported case of COVID-19 in

the Sultanate on the 9th of March 2020, Brunei has promptly restricted inbound and outbound travellers to prevent continued transmission within the country [14] where the number of inbound travellers coming into Brunei had dropped by more than 70% in 2020 [15]. Today, as one of the few countries that have successfully mitigated COVID-19 transmissions [16–18], Brunei is slowly rebuilding its tourism industry through various national and community approaches, particularly through the growth of its community-based tourism (CBT) operations.

CBT is normally marked by certain criteria such as tourism involving community members and their participation, community control and empowerment, conservation, and its contribution to the well-being and the development of community [19]. Whilst CBT is ‘a much-contested area of practice and research that is marked by differences in opinion on definition, interests served and bases for assessment’ [20] (p. 178), in the current study, we refer CBT as a form of tourism runs by local community members that specifically focused on offering products and services in small-scale industry and hospitality. In comparison to general tourism that is normally managed by large-scale industry and companies, CBT is often operated by community members. Whilst the current study observed that there are more than 30 CBT establishments operating as homestays, lodges, and cultural centres across Brunei, this figure is not fixed due to the rapidly growing CBT operations from the outbound travel restrictions imposed in the country. It has become a necessity for countries to assess the effects of COVID-19 in various aspects of life for future references, including its bearing to the decline of travel and tourism industry in global contexts [11,13,21,22]. However, fewer studies have been undertaken in the context of Brunei, particularly involving the small-scale industry such as CBT operations that have contributed to the growth of the economy. This is amid international recognition of Brunei being ‘exemplary’ and ‘a success story’ in mitigating COVID-19 issues [16–18,23–25]. Thus, this paper attempts to highlight research importance and potential contributions to the contemporary literature of tourism and hospitality studies and COVID-19 in Brunei and internationally. This paper also acknowledges the scarcity of research on CBT in Brunei [26,27].

Using the case study approach involving a number of CBT owners in Brunei, this study investigates the impact of COVID-19 on CBT owners’ perceptions, experiences, and management during the pandemic. Surrounding these themes, and by utilizing Sharma et al.’s [7] resilience-based framework for reviving the tourism industry post-COVID-19, the aim of this study is to address three research questions: (1) what are the main challenges faced by CBT and how they are managed accordingly; (2) what are the contributing factors to making the tourism industry sustainable through CBT operations; (3) how can the tourism industry make use of this unprecedented crisis as an opportunity to ensure sustainability in tourism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Challenges, Resilience, and Transformation of Tourism Amid COVID-19

Since the COVID-19 outbreak towards the end of 2019, the disruption of global flows and mobility has triggered economic loss to the tourism industry [4,28,29], affected human freedom and travelling rights [21,30], while also challenging public services and hospitality [31–33], job precariousness [34–37], and emotional health and wellbeing [28,38,39]. The pandemic also impacted smaller establishments and businesses, including CBT operations [9,40–42].

COVID-19 has changed the way people think and evaluate tourism practices, as it brought about ‘a critical reconsideration of the global volume growth model for tourism, for interrelated reasons of risks incurred in global travel’ [31] (p. 13). For example, the pandemic has influenced consumer attitudes and behaviours forcing various stakeholders to reassess management strategies and adapt to the new environment. Luo and Lam [39] found the changes in psychological attitudes among Hong Kong travellers influencing their mobility intentions and destinations, while Im et al. [43] detected sudden changes

in South Korean consumer behaviours resulting in risk aversion such as social distancing during travelling. Meanwhile, Toubes et al. [44] found the changes in tourist behaviours and consumption in Spain that have forced the hospitality and tourism sector to adapt their promotional and marketing strategies to the 'new normal' standards, including incorporating online platforms and digitization to secure health and safety standards. Similar accounts have been reported in various case studies published globally, further changing the tourism paradigm on many levels [44–47].

The pandemic has also impacted job employment on a global scale. Chirumbolo et al.'s [34] analysis on 830 Italian workers showed that job insecurity and life precarity have had a detrimental impact of consumer behaviours, due to the decreasing level of economic opportunities and livelihood. Other studies also report on the loss of employment caused by ceased business operations, which further led to raising mental and health issues [33,37,42]. Moreover, Jiang and Wen [38] reported several intersections of raising health concerns and the hospitality industry not only among business practitioners but also consumers worldwide. The psychological effects of COVID-19 towards hospitality workers and businesses operators have raised concerns and have called for innovations in the tourism management and industry [28,32,33,48].

To date, continuous efforts have been undertaken to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic to prepare for a more adaptive and resilient industry while paving the way to transform in coping with the unprecedented global health crisis and potential post-COVID-19 tourism [7,32,38,49]. Recent literature on COVID-19 has called for the efforts to alleviate and avoid the negative impacts of the pandemic towards tourism and hospitality sectors [2,11,22,29,45,50,51], job precarity and related mental health and anxiety [33,34,38,47,52], and the small-scale industry [4,9,53–56], among others. Moreover, in these challenging times, the 'formulation of appropriate recovery and resilience strategies is still critical not only to the survival of the sector in tourism-intensive small states but also to maintain the vital socio-economic linkages the sector cultivates' [4] (p. 6).

As an attempt to prepare the tourism and hospitality industry post-COVID-19, scholars and relevant organisations have continued their approaches to understand the new environment to sustain the capacity of tourism in various levels. For example, Abbas et al. [2] and Persson-Fischer and Liu [29] found that the tourism hospitality sectors need to adhere to transformations, such as boosting the domestic market. These studies also report the feasibility of such a strategy by taking into account of cooperative resilience management and increasing social values among tourism key players throughout the pandemic. Meanwhile, Lew et al. [12] suggested that the resilience adaptive cycle in tourism can be reviewed in four phases: (1) (re)organization involving innovation and creativity, (2) growth of opportunities from Phase 1, (3) consolidation of fixed institutions and rules of Phase 2, and (4) collapse where the failure of Phase 3 to adapt to changes can be returned to Phase 1 or dissolution. In their analysis, Lew et al. [12] believe that Phase 1 is crucial in securing sustainable tourism.

In a comprehensive review of responses from tourism sectors globally, Cave and Dredge [51] also call upon innovations in the hospitality sector, including diversifying economic practices of enterprises, labours, and properties in order to raise regenerative tourism. Meanwhile, Kampel [4] outlines several potential strategic actions to be implemented by small countries mitigating the loss of economy and hospitality industries during the pandemic. The study suggests initiatives including diversifying tourism products and services while increasing collaborations between stakeholders. Reviewing salient features on the effects of the pandemic and the ongoing mitigation efforts undertaken by tourism stakeholders, Sharma et al. [7] produced a policy framework for market players and governments worldwide to cope with the challenges emerging in the global tourism industry.

As global tourism and hospitality industries are still facing challenges from the uncertainty of the pandemic, more literature on strategic management of resilience and transformation are needed to revive tourism industries in preparation for post-COVID-19 [6,11,21,56–62].

## 2.2. Community-Based Tourism Amid COVID-19

The consequences of the pandemic have also been perceived as an opportunity to re-evaluate tourism development strategies. It is forecasted that international tourism would be suspended by mid-2020 and cause major losses to tourism stakeholders, but domestic tourism and staycations will be expected to prevail [5]. Emerging studies reported that domestic tourism will thrive during the pandemic, and this is expected to remain prevalent even in post-COVID-19 era [4,11,29,63].

Recent literature on COVID-19 has suggested that promoting CBT is an alternative way to boost the capacity and contribution of local economy in respective countries [9,40,41]. While Nyakiba et al. [64] claim that the growing CBT industry can be seen all over the world, particularly in developing countries, current reports have now raised the definite value of CBT as an alternative tourism during and post-COVID-19, which includes promoting community-based products and services such as providing accommodation and utilising local resources [53,65,66]. Furthermore, domestic tourism through community approaches is reported to be significant in coping with the loss of mass tourism caused by COVID-19 [4,55,67]. There are also reports on the resilience of small-scale industries in coping well within the pandemic due to their high level of adaptability [8,68].

Nevertheless, growing literature on the impacts of COVID-19 towards CBT still show that CBT-based establishments are struggling with various issues. Stone et al. [41] found that the pandemic has increased the uncertainty in the future of Botswana nature-based tourism sector, impacting MSMEs severely, causing a loss of jobs to the locals, and affecting its resilience to bounce back to normal operations. As aforementioned, COVID-19 has offered opportunities to rethink its conservation practices in rural operations. However, the pandemic still causes concerns to the revival of the tourism sector in Namibia [40], even though CBT operations have been forced to refocus on boosting its domestic market and catering to the locals as mitigating efforts sustaining business amid the pandemic [49,67].

Continuous efforts have been made by various tourism stakeholders to ensure the resilience and sustainability of CBT operations. For example, Polukhina et al. [6] claim that a 'unified approach' from key players such as the government and local communities is crucial to ensure the sustainability of community-based and rural tourism in Russia. In their study, they also believe that proper crisis management 'will promote the development of domestic tourism and improve the quality of tourist services in rural destinations' [6] (p. 14). Similar responses were reported by Giampiccoli and Mtapuri [53] that raised the importance of promoting MSMEs in Hanoi.

Meanwhile, 24 establishments involved in CBT tourism in Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico have been forced to rethink their businesses and activities, including diversifying potential products and services, while focusing more on natural resources, as those CBT operations that offer 'pluriactivity schemes are the ones best adapting to the pandemic' [54] (p. 13). Similarly, Kristiana et al. [69] also highlight the importance of cooperation between tourism stakeholders in Indonesia to 'develop the resilience of the tourism industry players that generates community resilience and to revive tourism by implementing new normal adaptations' [69] (p. 220). However, the resilience strategy in reviving community-based biodiversity tourism is not only urged to utilise natural resources but also to reconsider the sustainability of the surrounding ecosystem and social structure amid the eagerness to rebuild the economy post-COVID-19 [61,70,71]. Following studies involving small-scale commercial industries including CBT, these reports have suggested that a number of opportunities can be made possible, while mitigating the negative impacts of the pandemic during these challenging times [13,31,65,72].

As a way of reviving tourism and community economy, tourism and hospitality operations have to shift their focus to boosting the domestic market, while adapting technological advancements as well as recalibrating the approach of diversifying local products, services and resources. As more scholarly works suggest the importance of small-scale industries and domestic tourism amid the pandemic, the majority of literature

on COVID-19 and tourism has also raised the importance of policymaking in efforts to secure sustainability even after the COVID-19 era.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Sharma et al. [7] developed the resilience-based framework for reviving the tourism industry post-COVID-19 (see Figure 1) based on a systematic review of 37 articles on the field of tourism, hospitality, and COVID-19 under the themes of ‘sustainable tourism, climate action, transformation to the new global economic order, and resilience’ [7] (p. 4). Whilst there is a growing number of works on tourism in post-pandemic era, this framework has since made ‘significant theoretical and practical contribution to the field by suggesting a coping-up mechanism, which revolves around resilience . . . from market players, governments, non-government agencies, and all other stakeholders’ [7] (p. 4). In their framework, Sharma et al. [7] identified four main factors involved in the process of resilience making that contribute to the transformation in tourism to secure sustainability during and after the COVID-19 era. These factors were identified based on salient features related to the significant strategic planning and tourism management towards the pandemic found across the selected literature.

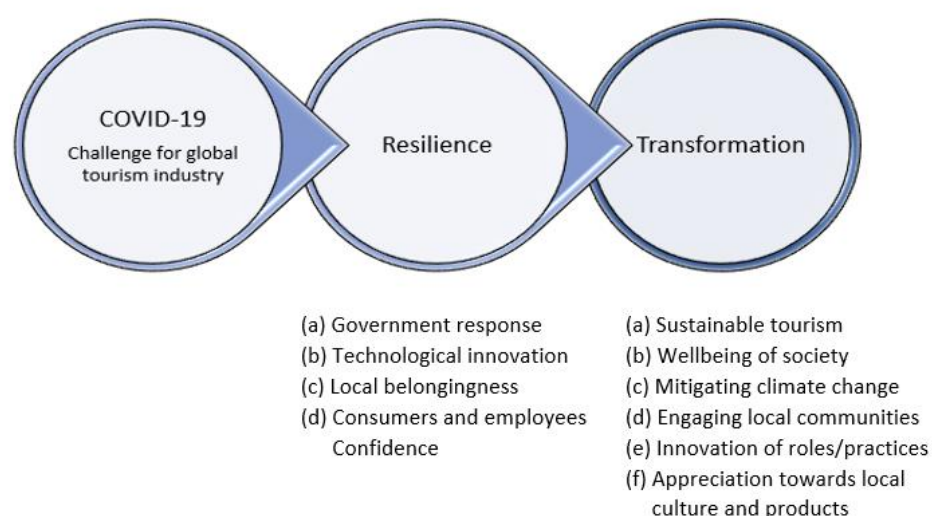


**Figure 1.** Resilience-based framework for reviving the tourism industry post-COVID-19 [7] (p. 8). source: Elsevier.

This study utilised Sharma et al.’s [7] framework to substantiate the understanding of the current CBT management during the pandemic by formulating research ideas, administering interview questions and guidance for discussion. Beside its current relevance and influence in contemporary studies on the effects of COVID-19 towards tourism and hospitality sectors globally, the flexible nature of the framework in evaluating the potential factors of resilience and transformation through multi-faceted levels and perspectives is deemed highly adaptive with the current explorative study’s research aims and questions.

Even though the framework has detailed four specific subdivisional factors in each of the two overarching themes of resilience and transformation, this study added two more transformational factors of (1) the innovation of roles and practices and (2) the appreciation towards local products and services. By taking account previous literature in tourism amid COVID-19 and our early observation on CBT industry in Brunei, we believe that these two added factors are expected to remain significant post-COVID-19. This newly adapted framework will be used in this current study to further discuss the situation in Brunei as a case study (see Figure 2).





**Figure 2.** Resilience and transformation-based framework during and after COVID-19 (adapted from Sharma et al. [7] edited by authors).

As Southeast Asian countries are underrepresented in the development of Sharma et al.'s [7] theoretical framework, we believe our newly adapted framework offers a more well-rounded perspective on strategic planning for resilience and transformation amid COVID-19 that can be utilised by other Southeast Asian contexts and beyond, particularly involving small-scale commercial establishments and domestic tourism. As there is a myriad of literature on COVID-19 and tourism, this study further takes this opportunity to incorporate the perspective from Brunei, whose tourism industry has prospered in recent years and how its new CBT operations are mushrooming during the pandemic.

Whilst Sharma et al. [7] reviewed responses of various stakeholders predominantly in mass tourism industry during COVID-19, this study expands its potential to focus on the community tourism by investigating CBT owners' perceptions and their management during the challenging times. CBT has been claimed to generate national economy vis-à-vis mass tourism industry in the global context [73,74], as it supports and empowers the community on many levels [19,75] including the context of Brunei [26,27]; thus, the framework is essential to understand the management of CBT operations during the height of the pandemic and today, and in its correlation to appropriating resilience and transformation for sustainable tourism and economy. Furthermore, there is 'a need for a "community-centered tourism framework" with responsible approaches to reset, redescribe, and refamiliarize the tourism industry in the interest of local communities' [7] (p. 7), which is the focus of the current study. In this case, the formation of a community-managed tourism framework is imperative to understanding the ongoing issues faced by local communities amid the pandemic. As CBT can strongly impact a country's economy even during the pandemic [4,55,66,73,74], this study attempts to raise theoretical and conceptual contributions to the recent literature of resilient and transformational tourism and further provide suggestions on how to manage CBT operations during these challenging times. This is expected to generate further discussion on the interests, the effects, and the contributions of CBT on a larger scale of mass tourism.

#### 4. Methods

This study is qualitative in nature. Using purposive sampling, 16 owners of CBT operations running the same line of work in Brunei were approached and interviewed (see Table 1 for respondents' background). A few CBT operations were approached through the list of CBT operators gathered from the official webpage of the Tourism Department, Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism in Brunei [76], while others were selected due to their success and active role in running CBT operations in Brunei. The interviews

were conducted in March and April 2021 at the respondents' CBT establishments when the country had implemented the de-escalation plan, and businesses operated normally.

**Table 1.** Respondents' demographic background and CBT line of work.

Respondent	Age	Gender	CBT Line of Work	District	Year Established
A	54	Female	Lodge	Brunei Muara	2015
B	52	Female	Homestay	Brunei Muara	2018
C	50	Male	Homestay	Brunei Muara	2009
D	36	Female	Travel service provider	Brunei Muara and Tutong	2018
E	46	Male	Lodge	Brunei Muara	2015
F	40	Female	Homestay	Brunei Muara	2012
G	52	Male	Homestay/cultural village	Brunei Muara	2015
H	26	Female	Cultural centre	Tutong	2012
I	64	Male	Homestay/cultural centre	Tutong	2017
J	40	Female	Homestay	Temburong	2011
K	67	Female	Guesthouse	Temburong	2006
L	59	Male	Guesthouse	Temburong	2014
M	69	Female	Guesthouse	Temburong	2001
N	25	Male	Lodge	Temburong	2020
O	56	Female	Homestay	Tutong	2010
P	76	Female	Homestay	Temburong	2007

This study utilised semi-structured interviews enquiring the CBT owners' knowledge on COVID-19 and its effects to tourism and hospitality industry in Brunei and internationally, their perceptions and experiences during the height of COVID-19 and today, and their personal and collective approaches (with the community) to mitigate the effects of the pandemic to their businesses (see Appendix A for the list of interview questions). In this study, a semi-structured interview was used to acquire more in-depth information in order to understand the current situation of small-scale tourism industry in Brunei from the perspective of the key player (CBT owners), while identifying the reasons behind the sudden upsurge in CBT operations during the pandemic. As this study is explorative amid scarcity of similar studies in Brunei, the combination of using a semi-structured interview involving purposive samples had provided opportunities to explore the relevant participants' thoughts, beliefs, and expectations, while delving further into their personal and professional perspectives in managing CBT operations during COVID-19, ultimately showcasing new findings.

Theoretically grounded by Sharma et al.'s [7] framework, content analysis was used to create relevant themes based on salient features and discussion surrounding the CBT owners' responses to being resilient and transformed to secure sustainability in operation amid COVID-19. Content analysis is used as it is a reliable yet flexible approach in determining relevant themes in contexts and times (which in this case is on CBT during and after COVID-19) that are replicable and can be reproduced in different contexts and settings by other researchers [77–79].

Brunei (see Figure 3 for map of Brunei Darussalam) was chosen as a case study due to its effective responses to COVID-19 and has since garnered international attention. As of mid-July 2021, the country had detected a total of 291 cases with only three deaths [80]. The last local case reported was on the 6th of May 2020, which marks more than 400 days without local transmissions. Whilst Brunei has been successful in flattening the curve and has been able to curb the spread of COVID-19 within the country [16,18,25] through prompt actions from the government and mutual adherence by the people, there are still concerns among the people on a possible emergence of a second wave of COVID-19 in the country [81]. As with other countries worldwide, Brunei's tourism has been severely affected by the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Brunei enjoyed an upsurge in incoming tourists, but this plunged by 81.3% year-on-year since the border closure in 2020 [82,83].



**Figure 3.** Map of Brunei Darussalam (source: authors' copyright).

The impact of COVID-19 on tourism in Brunei can be illustrated with some key government decisions imposed within a few days of the first detection of the virus in the country in March 2020: the pronouncement of a national lockdown on the 16th of March where all citizens and residents of Brunei were not permitted to leave the country without the state approval; all travellers arriving in Brunei starting on 20th March were required to undergo self-mandatory isolation for 14 days at the government-designated facility; the restriction of all foreign nationals through any points of entry (including transit purposes) since 23rd March. Aside from these responses, the Brunei Government has implemented other measures such as introducing the BruHealth application (a one-stop mobile application for any related COVID-19 updates in Brunei) and contact tracing for every confirmed case, while provisionally imposing incoming travel restriction from countries recording ongoing COVID-19 cases [84].

The major themes in this study are on the main challenges faced by these CBT owners and operations, their resistance and resilience facing the pandemic, and transformational efforts in securing sustainability of the small-scale tourism industry, community well-being, and their own economy. Ethical consent agreement between the researchers and the participants was made prior to the interviews. The participants also requested to remain anonymous in the writing of this report.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

### 5.1. Challenges Faced by CBT during COVID-19

Based on our findings, the suspension of business operations during the early months of the detection of COVID-19 cases in Brunei was a tremendous challenge for most of the CBT owners, leading to economic instability and financial loss, amid apprehension towards the pandemic. Moreover, the emergence of over-domestic tourism may also become problematic for Brunei's CBT despite its flourishing domestic tourism in the country.

All 16 CBT owners have reported their struggles during the abrupt restriction of movement—domestically and internationally—since March 2020. This partial lockdown was enforced in the country where businesses were allowed to operate unless there were directly involved with community infections [16]. Whilst there was no specific restriction imposed to businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector in the country, these CBT owners recalled the fear and apprehension from the customers and themselves in engaging



any social activities. Local businesses were disrupted, and the CBT owners had to cease operations for the following three to four months. The owners also claimed that the pandemic was the most unprecedented challenge that they had ever faced in years of operating their businesses, as it also affected the economy of most of these CBT operations.

We couldn't receive any customers for a while, especially in the very beginning [of the first COVID-19 case recorded]. It continued for months. We were afraid. Customers wanted to check in to our homestay, but we couldn't accept due to the risk [of transmission]. Once the virus transmission was contained, then we could slowly accept customers but in a small number. Yes, we couldn't accept a lot. At the end, we didn't make any profits. Yet again, we were apprehensive that the virus may spread again (Respondent K).

Yes, it has affected my business due to no incoming tourists [considering her homestay caters mostly for foreigners]. Foreigners can no longer come to Brunei, and Bruneians can't travel outside of country. If there were, now I only receive expatriates who are working in Brunei. They only stay for a day or two. I used to cater large numbers from abroad, corporate people, or even from foreign students from many international universities (Respondent M).

The fear of receiving customers and engaging in socialisation in the hospitality industry is expected during the height of the pandemic. For example, Jiang and Wen [38] found several intersections of raising health concerns and hospitality industry across the globe since the emergence of COVID-19. Luo and Lam [39] further found changes in psychological attitudes among Hong Kong travellers influencing their mobility intentions and destinations, while Im et al. [43] detected sudden changes in South Korean consumer behaviours resorting for risk aversion such as social distancing affecting tourism sector. Other studies reported on the psychological effects of COVID-19 towards hospitality workers and businesses owners that have caused innovations in tourism management and industry [28,32,33,48]. This is also observed in the responses from the CBT owners in the current study. In our study, the apprehension from both the owner and customer had caused cancellation and suspension of CBT operations causing great financial loss to the business owners.

COVID-19 further exacerbated financial difficulties faced by CBT owners whose businesses were self-funded and relied heavily on the tourism sector where most of these CBT businesses had only started operating since early 2000. Moreover, the pandemic was deemed 'the greatest challenge' to their businesses, as Brunei had never been largely affected by other major international outbreaks such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-Cov-1), Middle East respiratory syndrome-related coronavirus (MERS), EBOLA, or ZIKA disease.

For me it [COVID-19] was a great challenge, especially on my earnings. The economy, not just my homestay but also other travel agencies and commercial activities related to tourism. It was a difficult time. We just hope everything will be back to normal. Because of COVID-19, I no longer receive tourists from Malaysia, my greatest source of travellers. I haven't been able to receive anyone [considering his homestay only caters to foreign visitors] (Respondent C).

As the country managed to contain the number of local transmissions, the government slowly eased restrictions on movement. On the 27th of July 2020, the government allowed businesses to continue operations while abiding to health and safety precautions. Today, all businesses have operated at full capacity with less restrictions imposed on movement and social engagement. As part of the state intervention, the government through its Ministry of Health also introduced the BruHealth application (a self-contact tracing and an application to be scanned in any premises, which also updates on COVID-19 development and related policy measures, as it helps monitor health conditions of residents of Brunei) as part of the de-escalation plan, where the information on the use and its benefits are made available for the public [85]. This is also an effort to regain the trust and confidence of the

people (both consumers and service providers), which has been deemed significant in past literature on resilience and transformation amid COVID-19 [7]. Today, all CBT owners run operations normally with continued practice of health and safety measures including incorporating the BruHealth QR code and scanning at their premises, as also observed by the researchers.

As local businesses have operated at full capacity at a much more rapid rate than any other countries [24], a few CBT owners recalled another challenge in meeting the demands of consumers in the thriving industry of domestic tourism. In the interviews with our respondents, we found that the scenario of ‘over-domestic tourism’ is one of the challenges faced by CBT operations affecting other tourism stakeholders and environment. The CBT owners stated that the sudden upsurge in consumers has made their businesses ‘uncontrollable’, whereas some of them also feel that ‘the market was not managed properly’. For example, Respondent D who is managing a travel service provider company reported on the possibility of declining quality of local products and services in order to meet the demands of the local market. They also claimed more travel agencies are eager to overpromote domestic products that are albeit not ‘properly implemented’. A similar sentiment was raised by Respondent G, who collaborated with local tour agencies and recalled the constant disagreement and inconsistencies of tourism offerings between travel agencies and hospitality establishments. Whilst the sudden upsurge in local demands were expected to benefit local entrepreneurs, CBT owners described such situations as a loss of opportunity and finance. This is because they believe that the inconsistency of standardising the prices of tourism packages and scenarios of uncontrollable market and overgrazing natural resources will potentially cause more harm to their businesses and environment.

And then there was a new challenge—consistency. Suppliers—nobody wanted to say no. Too many bookings, too many people. Quality—consistency has become a problem. In December, people had gone a bit mad. Everybody is just looking for something to do. It’s not only locals who are looking for something to do, but also expatriates. They put massive pressure on the resources [referring to overgrazing of natural resources such as local produce of honey, etc.]. I won’t say greedy is the right word, but they were just overcommitted to themselves (Respondent D).

There is one complication when dealing with travel agencies. These travel agencies cater to the customers. They come up with their own packages with fixed rates and time. Then, they would come to us requesting for various products and activities with standardised rates. But for us, we have to engage the community and our people, and there shouldn’t be fixed rates on these. It always varies and depending on the activities that we offer. Then, who bears the losses? Us! We can see this in a lot of other villages (Respondent G).

The term ‘over-tourism’ may be a new concept in the growing literature of tourism during COVID-19. Instead, Koh [86] and Arora and Sharma [63] forecasted the pandemic as a way of lessening over-tourism in highly visited countries and tourist attractions. Meanwhile, studies including Gossling et al. [31] and Sharma et al. [7] also report that the pandemic has diverted ‘over-tourism’ to ‘non-tourism’. However, the CBT owners in the current study have insinuated the presence of over-tourism in Brunei since the announcement of the de-escalation plan for businesses, which has had an impact on society and the environment.

Over-tourism is usually defined as ‘an excessive growth of visitors leading to overcrowding in areas where residents suffer the consequences of temporary and seasonal tourism peaks, which have enforced permanent changes to their lifestyles, access to amenities and general well-being’ [87] (p. 254). The current study reports that the expansion of ‘over-domestic tourism’ does not only involve the overflowing receiving of domestic tourists, but also the overpromotion of products and services and the sudden mushrooming

of unmonitored and uncontrolled CBT operations to cater to the sudden upsurge in local demands during the pandemic. Therefore, in this study, we define over-domestic tourism as the sudden upsurge in local demands on tourism products and industry, which leads to an uncontrollable market while impacting the environment, due to the perpetuation of domestic tourism campaigns and COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Amidst scarcity of similar literature, Cahyadi and Newsome [70] have suggested that ‘over-tourism scenarios’ may have occurred in countries that have slowly revamped their tourism industry while focusing on domestic attractions. According to their studies, the over-tourism in Indonesian geoparks has since raised concerns on ecological damage and social impacts. Similarly, a few Bruneian CBT owners claimed that the ‘over-domestic tourism’ may have led to overgrazing of natural resources, decreasing of quality control, and overexposure to financial and opportunities loss to relevant stakeholders, thus prompting more research or intervention by responsible stakeholders.

As over-tourism scenarios usually call for new policy development [88], a few CBT owners in the current study also suggested for the adoption of sustainable policy for CBT operations in the country. They recalled that the pandemic has given the opportunity for ‘everybody [to] set up their own CBT, be creative, and many have done so’ (Respondent E). Domestic tourism is expected to continue, and we can predict that it may flourish in the post-COVID-19 era [4,11,29]. It is then vital to prepare measures to prevent prolonged over-domestic tourism in Brunei.

The occurrence of this situation coincides with the United Nations’ [89] call to form a new policy framework and constant monitoring on ‘the structure of tourism economies to improve competitiveness and building resilience’ [89] (p. 22) on the business and tourism industry affected by COVID-19. This is also to understand the full impact of the pandemic towards tourism, while ensuring support and development towards local infrastructures and facilitate micro, small, and medium enterprises in respective countries. In this case, the challenges faced by the CBT operations discussed in this study may pave a path to developing a policy framework on tourism management involving self-dependent business such as CBT operations or other small-scale commercial industry affected by the pandemic.

## 5.2. *The Resistance and Resilience of CBT Amid COVID-19*

Resilience in tourism involves managing crises using strategic approaches for ‘business stability and adaptability to all types of risks’ and being responsive towards new emergencies and environment through effective mitigations involving responsible stakeholders [7] (p. 4). Our study analysed the responsiveness and adaptability of CBT operations as they raised various opportunities in testing and promoting their products and expanded their market and network to secure business stability amid COVID-19. CBT operations implemented four main strategic actions: (1) quick recovery response and understanding new market; (2) diversifying products/services in domestic market; (3) government intervention supports confidence and accessibility; (4) incorporating technological advancement in operations.

The success of mitigating COVID-19 transmissions in Brunei is owed to the quick response of the government, and this includes mutual cooperation and agreement between the government and the people [16,18,25]. This is also reflected within the CBT operations. The resilience of this small-scale industry was due to the swift restart of their businesses as soon as the government lifted its restriction. This has been reported by all the CBT owners. Upon restarting, the CBT owners revived their business operations by understanding their ‘new situation’, while exploring and shifting to the potential local market and, in return, boosting domestic tourism. These CBT owners also reported recalibrating their tourism products to be suited to the interests of the local people and expatriates living in Brunei in times of the travel restriction. Meanwhile, others recalled reviving other aspects such as offering new tourism packages and prices to stay competitive and relevant during the challenging times.

Now we have two markets—before and after COVID-19 hit Brunei. Before COVID-19 happened, we received many backpackers from all over the world. After COVID-19, we focus on local market—the local people—who cannot travel outside of Brunei. Also, we focus on the expatriates who are working in Brunei. Now we have to diversify our services to both local and international market. After COVID-19 hit us, we had to think about how to attract back our customers. We had to understand local market and our competitors. I had to reconsider our services, prices, and promotions to be competitive and to stay relevant (Respondent B).

While I'm no longer opening my doors for homestay purposes, I'm offering flexible tourism packages according to my customers and travel agents. This includes providing flexible services such as incorporating traditional games, food, and related activities that adhere to customers' wants and their time . . . Since I try to attract local people after COVID-19 happen, I started offering specific and unique experiences around this area, for example paddy planting, because this area is popular for that particular activity. I'm not offering similar cultural activities as other businesses offer (Respondent C).

. . . when they started de-escalation, that's where the staycation packages came about. It's been very successful. I think that was something that we had never thought [about before COVID-19]. Why would any local Bruneian want to stay at our homestay? But we had locals staying here, we had expatriates staying in because they are doing our [diving/snorkelling] activity (Respondent F).

The resistance towards COVID-19 can also be observed in the decision made by some CBT owners to expand their businesses by utilising local products and resources and, in return, promoting locality and boosting domestic tourism. These efforts were reportedly unprecedented, but considering the need to diversify their products and services, some of these owners have taken charge in developing potential product/site to support their businesses as a way to keep resilient during the challenging times and further test and promote the potential of these products and services for international communities during the post-COVID-19 era. For example, one CBT owner has expanded their homestay programme by incorporating activities at one of the ASEAN heritage sites in Brunei, while others prepared new activities to meet the demands of domestic tourism. These initiatives have further realised the national mission in tourism in 'strengthening the attractiveness and diversity of tourism products and improving the quality of tourism services' in securing tourism sustainability in the country [90]. As part of the strategic approach in staying resilient in the market, these CBT owners—who predominantly operate in the hospitality sector—have also contributed to domestic tourism through 'staycation' amid COVID-19 [91].

There wasn't much happening from March until June, then the Government started to boost domestic tourism. We were part of it. Later, we didn't expect that our local people show lots of interest in our homestay, and it even has overwhelmed returns that we got from previous years. Many locals, because they couldn't go travelling. Furthermore, we had started launching our hill, located just behind our homestay. Now we incorporate activities that we do at the hill in our packages, such as hiking. So we have best of both world. The locals can go hiking at the hill, and then stop by here for coffee on the water [the homestay is located at Kampong Ayer/Water Village]. They can do camping overnight and many other interesting things (Respondent G).

. . . one of our products that we're going to be launching is with Tasek Merimbun [Lake Merimbun]. You could say it's part of the homestay. It's an additional service that we offer for the guests. I think we want to do definitely more when the borders open. We hope to have more tourists coming in and we can show and host them here and do more activities like in Tasek Merimbun, do more hikes and stuff like that (Respondent F).

I wouldn't say we were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 throughout. It opened more opportunities for us instead because people are forced to stay in Brunei and find new places to visit and new things to do. So it kind of gives us the opportunity to boost our name in local community and especially among the local Bruneians and expatriates. We received financial support for our jetty. It is funded by the Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism and it's going to start its construction soon. More ideas and planning have been put out for these surrounding areas (Respondent H).

In the international contexts, previous studies have suggested the significance of diversifying products and services and utilising the ecosystem and natural resources as a way of coping with losses from the pandemic and remain sustainable in post-COVID-19 tourism [4,53,54,66,68,69]. The CBT owners in the current study have proven to be such a success from their strategic action in diversifying niche products and services offered to the domestic market. This is amid a similar strategy that has also been used successful in sustaining the agritourism sector amid the pandemic in Brunei [92].

The expansion of CBT operations by incorporating more local products and resources have slowly contributed to the sense of local belonging among the people of Brunei. Haywood [11] and Persson-Fischer and Liu [29] claim that the pandemic will change the global pattern of travelling with domestic tourism is expected to dominate the industry. Meanwhile, Sharma et al. [7] (p. 5) believe the 'feeling of belongingness among locals will dictate terms for the revival of the tourism industry'. These expectations may apply to the current situation of domestic in tourism in Brunei. Some CBT owners have claimed that the pandemic has made Bruneians appreciate the local culture, while assisting the domestic tourism sector to realise and lift the national aspiration of '*Kenali Negara Kitani*' (to know our country) through its CBT. As part of the current resilient strategic actions with CBT, it may also secure the sustainability of domestic tourism in the country (see the next section for further discussion)

Five CBT owners (J, K, L, M, and N) who run establishments in the eastern most district of Temburong (see Figure 3 for the location of Temburong) claimed to have maintained and flourished their business stability in terms of domestic tourism and generating the economy. Known for its nature, forest reserves, and eco-tourism industry, Temburong district is separated from the rest of Brunei by Malaysia and Brunei Bay and is conveniently accessible from the mainland via the Temburong bridge (also known as Sultan Haji Omar Ali Saifuddien Bridge), which was officially opened on the 17 March 2020. These CBT owners acknowledged that the convenient accessibility of the bridge has become a contributing factor for more incoming locals and expatriates from mainland Brunei and securing the stability and sustainability of their operations.

[Our customers are] increasing. Yes, because normally people would go to Kota Kinabalu or Miri. As soon as the bridge was opened, we were surprised by the overwhelming incoming of people. We were hectic. We used to receive customers during school holidays only, but now we receive customers everyday. It used to seasonal. After COVID-19 hit us, and the bridge was opened, we receive people every week, until at times we are fully booked (Respondent J)!

For my own business, yes I earn more these days. There are more opportunities today. One, because our locals can't go travelling abroad. For those from the mainland, they can come to us in Temburong easily these days. Since COVID-19 has hit us for almost a year now, my business is flourishing. I used to accept customers for Corporate Days, but now I receive big families for their vacations and weekly trips. The COVID-19 didn't really affect my business so much to be honest (Respondent L).

I believe the newly opened bridge gives an opportunity for the people not just for the people in Bandar to go here but the people in Temburong to go there as well. So yes, basically I believe the bridge is definitely going to help them boost the



opportunity and the financial stability of every business here in Brunei especially with tourism. I believe it will also help us venturing in CBT (Respondent N).

The resilience of CBT operations in Temburong was further strengthened by the sudden initiative by the Brunei Government to promote domestic tourism in Temburong due to COVID-19 [83,93,94], including the decision to launch the opening of the bridge that was aimed to eliminate communication barriers between the mainland and Temburong during the needy time [95]. It has been a national aspiration to elevate Temburong as a new holiday destination bolstering local ecotourism for domestic and foreign travellers [96,97], and the pandemic has given the opportunity for the government and the community to realise it while benefitting CBT and local businesses in the district. This is further confirmed by the recent announcement of planning for various developments of infrastructure and establishment reported in the 17th National Legislative Council Meeting, focusing on the community engagement, specifically on the Mukim and Village Consultative Councils' One Village One Product (1K1P), which predominantly engages CBT operations in the country [98]. In this case, government intervention alongside the resilience of CBT operations contributed to the sustainability of CBT operations and may further secure the future of domestic tourism.

Hall et al. [21], Higgins-Desbiolles [99], and Sharma et al. [7] claim the significant role of government responses, intervention, and support such as government stimulus packages particularly for those businesses operating at lower capacity during the pandemic. In Brunei, the government also provided aid and support including a fees waiver for trade and payment and a 50% tax discount on corporate income tax for businesses in the tourism and hospitality industry, which came into effect on the 1 April 2020 until the 30 September 2020 [95]. The government through its Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE) also provided financial support of BND 250 million for all business sectors and individuals under the Economic Relief Package [100].

A few registered CBT establishments acknowledged the government support during the pandemic, but these local owners felt more could be channelled through formal institutional support, such as in their way of promoting and operating their businesses and accessibility to greater funding.

In relation to our upcoming report on CBT operations in Brunei [101] and insinuated in previous studies in tourism research in Brunei [102–104], we assume the lack of effective communication and coordination between the government representatives and tourism stakeholders may have contributed to the lack of understanding on tourism operations involving these CBT operations during the pandemic. For instance, this can be detected by the inconsistency of claims made by the CBT owners about receiving the relief package and being part of community discussion that may have helped to further support their business during COVID-19. Only four out of 16 CBT owners explicitly claimed to have direct support and engaged with responsible tourism stakeholders. This is perhaps due to the relief package announced available for small-scale businesses with no specific designation for tourism-based business owners. In this case, the government support is seen as indirect and 'invisible' by the CBT owners, insinuating that the communication issues between tourism stakeholders should be addressed in order to maximise the sustainability of tourism during the post-COVID-19 era in the country.

As the pandemic has boosted technological innovation in daily lives today, the global commercial and tourism industry has followed the same pursuit as a method of resistance to secure sustainability in their operations [7,10,13,105,106]. Today, technological advancement is 'the core of solutions for combating the COVID-19 and re-opening tourism and the economy [where] COVID-19 has further enhanced the role of technologies in the recovery and reimagination of tourism, while it reinforces existing paradigms in the e-tourism evolution' [13] (p. 314).

The same case was analysed involving two CBT operations owned by a much younger CBT owner (Respondent H) and a highly experienced lodge owner (Respondent A), where both view the pandemic as an opportunity to incorporate technology in their re-

spective businesses. Respondent H used a more structured virtual engagement for her cultural village while still adhering to the health and safety measures imposed by the MOH, and Respondent A used an online tourism convention as a way to promote local food, culture, and the surroundings of her cultural lodge. Even though Sharma et al. [7] found that most technological incorporation during COVID-19 have focused on the ‘massive aid from technology experts’ [7] (p. 5), these two operations showcased otherwise, as there were no formal institutional efforts but the owner and their surrounding community, presumably because CBT operations in Brunei are predominantly involved as a community-centred business [26,27].

The element of virtual performance was inspired due to the limitations of capacity allowed by the MOH. During that time, the maximum capacity allowed was 30% and we were only able to have less than 20 individuals at one place. This inspires us to innovate the concept to include the performance as part of the package. The package is named ‘[the name of the establishment]’s *Glam Gurindam Jiwa*. The concept offered an experience of indulging modernized traditional dishes while being entertained with a virtual performance by Kulimpapa [a local cultural band]. The virtual performance was included via a live video which was two ways interaction where the guests are able to communicate directly to request for songs for the band to play and viewed the surrounding (Respondent H).

... during COVID, I said let’s make Kueh Moor [a type of snacks], and I was on Zoom [participating an online international tourism convention]. *Hei, hello everyone, I’m making Kueh Moor here.* You get what I mean? The culture has changed because now we have Zoom. And we can talk about food culture and the promotion. You know where is my Zoom [backdrop]? Outside, so they can see Omar Ali Saifuddin Mosque. I want to show my country. I walk around and sit down there. So, this is where you see the outside of my lodge. You can show and talk about culture. When you walk, you can see houses [in Kampong Ayer], and you can see the different structure of the house, the windows, the wood, the architecture of the house is part of our culture (Respondent A).

As an effort to stay resilient in the industry during COVID-19, the use of technology has multiplied and is now deemed a necessity to the everchanging paradigm of sustainable travelling and tourism sector [7,10,13,107]. For example, Lau [108] found multiple technological innovations used by hotels in China implementing live promotion through active social media and interconnectivity engagement during the pandemic. Meanwhile, other studies also see the upsurge in technological advances in various forms of global tourism and hospitality industry, which are implemented to stay relevant and maintain sustainability in the hospitality sector [2,50,105].

The pandemic forced the tourism industry to adapt to the situation where technology has become a major force in creating flexibility [10,21,50]. Furthermore, as one of the ‘six transformative e-tourism research pillars’ for short and longer term in hospitality industry [10], both CBT owners in our study also believed that ‘experimentation’ with technology may assist in better CBT experiences, promotion, and further secure the sustainability of their businesses. This seems highly possible for Brunei as it has the highest consumption of internet connectivity and social media in Southeast Asia [109], where the majority of our CBT owners also claim that the ‘word-of-mouth’ promotional review through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube is an effective way to promote their CBT businesses to locals and tourists. Respondent A claims that the effort incorporating virtual technology can secure their existence today and in the post-COVID-19 era to international communities, while Respondent H also aspires to implement virtual tourism with more collaboration and better coordination.

... certain things that we gained from the virtual performance to name some are such as new collaborations with new individuals, financial benefits, new concept of package offered by [the name of the establishment] and innovating the concept

of tourism in Brunei. Yes. Yes, we would implement it again with better and improved settings considering how the responses were remarkable (Respondent H).

The pandemic is seen as an opportunity for small countries to reset their tourism activity and perspective by utilising local biodiversity and natural resources to secure sustainability and boost diversification and resilience in post-COVID-19 tourism [4,13,71]. In the current study, the pandemic has indeed given more opportunities for the CBT owners to re-evaluate potential alternative attractions for domestic tourism through alternative promotion of products by offering more local-oriented products/services.

To date, the sense of resilience in these CBT operations are owed to their adaptability in understanding the 'new' market and the unprecedented situation forced by COVID-19. It was also accomplished through self-observation and further promoting self-independence to their businesses. Sharma et al. [7] detailed the process of resilience in tourism predominantly relied on implementing strategic actions amid COVID-19 while adapting to the new environment. This study found that the resilient efforts of CBT operators in Brunei also engaged in incorporating creative initiatives to boost their tourism products and services to locals and Brunei residents during the pandemic, but they are also expected to be available for the international communities in the post-COVID-19 era when the borders open.

### 5.3. Transformation Sustaining CBT Amid COVID-19

Transformations in tourism usually refer to the efforts of restarting, recalibrating, and readapting to the latest standards and new environment in the ever-changing tourism industry [2,7,12]. COVID-19 impacted the tourism industry in various ways, and this has forced the hospitality sector to rethink and readapt in order to remain sustainable, which is expected to be prolonged even after the post-COVID-19 era when the revival of global tourism takes place. Sustainability in tourism is achieved from a continuous process involving changes in beliefs, skills, and public knowledge to gain positive results [60].

Sharma et al. [7] outline four major transformational factors in reviving tourism post-COVID-19: (a) sustainable tourism, (b) well-being of the society, (c) climate change, and (d) local communities as the centre of transformation. As the results from coping with the challenges and maintaining resiliency during the pandemic, our data show three major transformational factors, which are: (1) innovation of roles and practices, (2) appreciation towards local culture and products, and (3) creation of job opportunities. Whilst our findings showcase that Factor (3) has overlapping sentiments with Sharma et al.'s [7] factors (a), (b), and (d), as this factor focuses on sustaining tourism and creating a positive impact towards the community, we believe Factor (1) and (2) play a pivotal role in sustaining tourism in our study, and they should be added as additional mechanisms due to the less emphasis on them in Sharma et al.'s [7] framework.

In the current study, COVID-19 has been observed to change the beliefs and practices of some of these CBT operations. In order to stay resilient in the CBT market within domestic tourism, the owners have quickly adapted their roles and practices initiating creativities that are expected to sustain even in the post-COVID-19 era. Some establishments that run homestays are now functioning as service provider and mediator in collaboration with travel agencies, while others are intending to expand their operation to other ventures considering the flourishing of domestic tourism that will guarantee their business sustainability. For example, Respondent I who used to operate their CBT business for free has started making profits out of the business.

Now I provide a day-trip package. I haven't opened my door for homestay. So, [the name of the establishment] was used to be a homestay. After COVID-19, it's more like a cultural village. I provide and promote more cultural services. It depends on the requests of the domestic tourists. If they request paddy harvesting activities, then I'll focus on those activities (Respondent C).

Since now we're only offering a gallery, in the future we can add on more facilities such as homestay. Rather than just half a day or a day at [the name of the establishment], they get to experience of overnight stay here (Respondent H).

When COVID-19 struck, representatives from the MPRT came and asked how much I charge for entrance. I said it was free. They advised me to make profit out of my CBT operations. Used to be free, now I started charging my customers, like business activity, either for a visit or just to dine in. So COVID-19 does help our local businesses too (Respondent I).

It is also observed that the transformation of roles and practices does not only affect their own business operations, but also the community. Three out of 16 interviewed CBT owners ran their operations while also being engaged in charitable activities to empower the community. Whilst a few CBT owners stated that community intervention is needed to help locals in need during the pandemic, others have also started offering spaces for charity and become business service providers to the locals.

Our inspiration of continuing the business was due to my late father's last wish. So it's for his charity too. We don't think much about budget, as long as we can maintain the homestay, that's fine. Thus, we recently made a collaboration with the Charity Department at the Baitulmal [government sector]. We charge less for the people in need of place to stay, especially the elderly during these difficult times (Respondent J).

So, basically [the name of the establishment] is a family-run lodge. It's charity-based actually. We started off as a family foundation and our goal and vision is to help the needy families in Brunei. Our most recent charity program was I think it was last week. Around last week and we would handout basic necessities to around 100 needy families to prepare them for Ramadan . . . We would want them to understand that we are actually doing this to help the community, we're not all profit-based business (Respondent N).

My biggest attraction [at my homestay] now is the business space which is operating under my homestay. It used to be parking lots. The big space is for those [food vendors] who wish to run business but have trouble finding a place to do so, especially younger people who wish to kick start business. It will help them as much as it will help my business. More people will come and stay at my homestay, and it will help these aspiring small businesses too (Respondent J).

Growing literature has suggested that micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are prone to collapse during economic crises [110,111], which have negative implications to the quality of life [112,113], but constant innovation of roles and practices in entrepreneurial endeavours may be able to sustain MSMEs in dire situations [114,115]. Freeman [116] claims that effective implementation of creativity and innovation can contribute to positive outcomes in businesses, while Adam and Alarifi [9] found that the innovation of roles and practices and external support from the government is crucial to secure the sustainability of MSMEs during COVID-19. As claimed by our respondents, strategic innovation of roles and practices raised from their creativity has helped supported not only their own CBT operations but also the surrounding community, even though they only received minimal external support from the government and other agencies. Other studies have seen a change in mindful attitudes of cooperation in the tourism industry, taking into account of relevant hospitality stakeholders and the community in the diversification of their roles and practices in the industry [22,28,29,57]. Similar to these international case studies, these initiatives implemented by our respondents are expected to potentially promote their CBT operations, simultaneously fostering a greater relationship with the surrounding community and relevant stakeholders.

We assume the 'creative initiatives' implemented by CBT owners (which have been proven successful in sustaining their operations during the challenging times and today)

emerged due to less bureaucratic involvement from the government sector. Aside from receiving the relief fund package for MSMEs granted by the government during the height of the pandemic, the respondents recall managing their CBT operations independently. Most CBT owners acknowledged that their operations had yet to be officially registered with the local Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT), albeit some are operating under the Business License 16–17 and are supported by their respective district offices.

Although our previous study [26] has exhibited findings that unregistered CBT establishments in Brunei are subject to restrictions in terms of financial accessibility and market promotions—which have been reiterated by CBT owners in the current study—the situation seems to be beneficial for the sustainability of CBT operations during the pandemic. This is due to the power of ownership and quick decision making of the CBT owners. As CBT mainly engages with MSMEs, the CBT operations in this study have been able to innovate their practices conveniently and sustain in the crisis [9,116]. For example, Respondent N claims that ‘the reason why we could sustain in the business because it’s a family-run, just imagine it’s around four months after we launched. If you heard about the [another big and popular resort], they cease operation’ (Respondent N). This response is reiterated by other CBT owners.

A number of reports have supported that the success and sustainability of CBT are due to the community empowerment through independent control and decision making [20,74,117,118]. This has been proven in the case of CBT operations during the height of the pandemic in Brunei. The considerable amount of government interventions in CBT operations during the pandemic—that focused on alleviating charges and providing funding—have allowed these business owners to manoeuvre control, become creative, and make decisions benefitting their businesses. This can be observed by the inconsistency of actions/initiatives raised among these CBT owners, while making use of local products/resources in the process. Whilst it is crucial to standardise CBT operations to avoid negative impacts to the environment and the society [19,74,117], this does not mean that these CBT owners have implemented ‘random actions’, considering many have also claimed to have constantly consulted responsible stakeholders including their Head Villagers/Penghulus, respective *Majlis Perundingan Kampung* (Village Consultative Council is a local community association that manage the well-being and the development of a village, under supervision of the government), the Tourism Development Department and MPRT, while running operations based on community ethics and adherence to the local principal of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (Malay Islamic monarchy is the national philosophy that has become the national ethics to the people).

Furthermore, in our forthcoming study [101], we have found that CBT practices are not static and standardised but are still developing in Brunei. This is due to the constant ‘improvisation’ of business practices and ideas implemented by CBT owners and operators. In this study, we found that the situation is further reinforced by the need of being resilient and to transform in coping with COVID-19. Sustaining competitiveness is essential in any case to stay afloat in such a situation [119]. Nevertheless, we must also acknowledge the necessity of further examination on the ‘over-domestic tourism’ mentioned by the CBT owners.

Whilst Sharma et al.’s [7] framework does not explicitly discuss the bearing of empowering local resources and services in part of the transformational mechanisms of reviving post-COVID-19 tourism, we find that the resilience efforts of CBT owners diversifying their products/services utilising local resources (discussed in the previous section) have contributed to a greater appreciation to local culture, artefacts, and places among the locals, prompting a need for further discussion. This is amid the importance of boosting the cultural sector as part of the tourism industry, which was negatively impacted by the pandemic [120].

In the current study, the CBT owners acknowledge that COVID-19 has changed the local people’s belief and perceptions and has been focusing more on domestic tourism, while showing interest to local products and services. This also means that consumer



consumption and expenditure have been redirected to empowering local culture and services and in return boosting CBT opportunities. The CBT owners also recalled the situation as reviving the national motto of '*Kenali Negara Kita*' (knowing your own country) that has been imposed by domestic tourism in the country.

Benefit from COVID-19 is probably the rise in domestic tourism. Before COVID-19, most local people would go travelling abroad, especially to our neighbouring countries. But now, because of COVID-19, they are here visiting their own country—KNK—*Kenali Negara Kitani* (knowing your own country) (Respondent C).

International schools can't get any of international trips. So then, we've done activities with younger students at ISB [International School of Brunei]. We did a very successful trip with JIS [Jerudong International School] for two days. We did everything. Even for the 180 kids go all the way just to hold the metal and get the hammer right? [referring to sword-making course]. They tried Gasing [local traditional game]. They had Kelupis [local traditional food] challenge. They made their own Candas [traditional utensil]. They got to go on the nature trail (Respondent D).

Since COVID-19, our society has opened its eyes, their perceptions changed too. They prefer to visit interesting places in our country, including mine. I don't receive any foreign visits these days, but I have many local customers (Respondent I).

We've got a lot of different packages that we offer to the guests. So they can sort of get to know *Kenali Negara Kitani*—KNK. So, it's a much more holistic experience. Not just you staying in a homestay, we try to get them involved. We've got bicycles for them [customers] to Serasa Beach. They go to Jong Batu, and then we also offer like Kayaks for free . . . we wanted to make more of local culture like making *sambal* or Ketupat-making [local delicacy] or something. So that kind of community activity would probably promote the community-based tourism further (Respondent F).

Mulder [49], Hussain and Fuste-Forne [67], and Woyo [42] reported on the upsurge in interests towards domestic tourism amid COVID-19, whereas other studies including Abbas et al. [2] and Polukhina et al. [66] have showcased the gaining proclivity and demands towards local services and products. We believe that the transformational mechanism of greater appreciation towards local products and services and their impact on tourism in the new environment are crucial to be scrutinised as 'many intangible cultural practices have been disrupted, which not only has an impact on the culture life of communities but also has consequences for those working in performing arts and traditional crafts who operate largely in informal sector' [120], simultaneously exhibiting the bearing of this factor to a larger context that is post-COVID-19 tourism.

Whilst growing literature on recent tourism studies has suggested major concerns on the loss of jobs and increase in mental health issues in the hospitality industry due to the risk of closure of small-scale establishments [2,33,34], the current study has shown an unfamiliar narrative. The transformation in CBT amid COVID-19 has boosted the local economy, provided job opportunities for the locals while securing the well-being of the society [83,91].

Similar to other studies in the international contexts [34,36,37], employment precarity was also a main concern during the early detection of COVID-19 cases in Brunei [25,121]. The situation had exacerbated the already alarming rise in employment among locals in the country [122]. In the past, Yap and Kamaludin [123] and Teo [124] have reported on the attitudes and preferences of many local employers in hiring foreign workers for their reliability and commitment to work. However, COVID-19 has changed the job scene in Brunei. A recent report released by the Annual Census of Enterprises and the Brunei's Ministry of Finance and Economy showed that Bruneians have outnumbered foreign workers with 50.2% in the private sector, where there is also a sudden upsurge in MSMEs

by 97.3% [125]. In the international context, Mulder [49] found an increase in the MSMEs industry in domestic tourism, and this has prompted the significance of reviewing the aspects of job opportunities during COVID-19; moreover, domestic tourism is expected to flourish even after the pandemic phase is over [4,9,67].

Whilst further studies should be undertaken to find the correlation between the impact of COVID-19 to the current stimulating job environment involving the locals in Brunei, this study has exhibited that the sudden surge in local employments was due to the demands of local market and establishments. Our findings also show that the CBT owners have taken the opportunity of the 'national lockdown' as a way to divert their beliefs and attention to hiring more locals as part of their operations. Some CBT owners claimed to have hired locals to assist their operations, while others stated that it was to optimise economic opportunities between parties during the challenging times. These are achieved through collaboration between the CBT owners and the local community.

The boat operators are the most grateful [considering the CBT operations is located in the water village]. They can transport hundreds of customers in a day. They earn a lot. Also, the new food vendors around here. Our guides too. Ever since the opening of the new hill for hiking, we have hired about 10 guides among the locals living around here. They earn a lot as many people come by to do hiking there (Respondent G).

Job opportunities yes, because there are four permanent employees with two are actually local people from Temburong. The others are from Bandar. Yes, it would be best to offer job opportunities to the people in Temburong, because we want to help the community here in some ways (Respondent N).

It has slowly become the livelihood for the community now. We help single mothers who are not employed by promoting and selling their traditional crafts or food on their behalf. Also, for those who help in running activities. They can get commission from just assisting these CBT activities (Respondent C).

... we know the connections and the people, there's a lot of small entrepreneurs around here. They sell doughnuts, Nasi Katok [local delicacy] and stuff, and there's quite a few small restaurants as well. If there were guests coming in and they would want to eat, we would offer them to all these places, and we would give them all their numbers and locations (Respondent N).

Overall, COVID-19 has not only given the opportunities for the locals to re-evaluate confidence towards the ability of local people and community in commercial industry, but also elevate the sense of belongingness in the process. Through CBT operations, the owners have fully utilised the local communities as a conduit of transformation, secured sustainability in terms of hospitality industry and well-being of the society, and contributed to community empowerment. As an expansion to Sharma et al.'s [7] framework, which predominantly reviews the mitigating responses from more bureaucratic and structured stakeholders in mass tourism, the current study has provided theoretical and practical implications on the significance of evaluating a smaller-scale industry and the ever-changing community involvement that may have generated unique, impactful perspectives of the mass tourism industry. Although there are reports on job instability and loss, which have been the main concern in the global economy in various sectors [35,37], this current study has exhibited the potential of reviewing the creation of job opportunities in the small-scale industry as an effort to revise and prepare the tourism industry for a post-pandemic situation.

Based on the main strategies and major transformational mechanisms in preparing for sustainable tourism in the post-COVID-19 era, summarised in Table 2, the current investigation involving CBT operations showcased a more comprehensive understanding of hospitality management at the community level amid the pandemic. As Sharma et al.'s [7] framework calls upon the development of the 'community-centered tourism framework' (p. 7), this study, which engaged responses from CBT owners, has exhibited strategic

actions, management, and transformational results that are not emphasized in larger and more bureaucratic organisations. The flexibility and creativities that emerged from these community approaches—in an aspiration to stay resilient as they are also expected to transform their businesses and the industry as a whole—are beneficial to business owners and the surrounding community as they are contributing to the national economy during these challenging times.

**Table 2.** Summary of resilience and transformation of CBT in Brunei.

Resilience strategies	COVID-19 and CBT operations	(1) <b>Quick recovery response and understanding new market:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBTs resume operation as soon as the government eases movement restrictions;</li> <li>• CBTs understand ‘new market’ situation and revives businesses to domestic interests;</li> <li>• CBTs explore and shift to potential domestic tourism;</li> <li>• CBTs revise competitive financial charges of tourism products/services;</li> <li>• Small-scale industry of CBT (vis à vis bigger hospitality industry) assists the resilience of business practices.</li> </ul>
		(2) <b>Diversify products/services in domestic market:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBTs rebrand current tourism products/services for domestic tourists;</li> <li>• CBTs introduce new tourism packages for domestic tourists;</li> <li>• CBTs expand businesses by fully utilising local resources (e.g., launches new sites for recreational activities, promotes more local and niche cultural products/services, expands business offerings such as staycation).</li> </ul>
Transformation		(3) <b>Government intervention supports confidence and accessibility:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government provided aid including fees waiver for trade and payment and 50% tax discount on corporate income tax in tourism and hospitality industry during the height of pandemic;</li> <li>• The government provided financial support of BND250 million for all business sectors and individuals under the Economic Relief Package;</li> <li>• The launch of connecting bridge between mainland and enclave district increases accessibility for domestic movement;</li> <li>• The nation-wide promotion of domestic tourism boosts CBT businesses;</li> <li>• The announcement of development and planning of tourism infrastructures and establishments support CBT businesses.</li> </ul>
		(4) <b>Incorporate technological advancement in operations:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBTs bolster online promotions through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube;</li> <li>• CBTs engage online virtual performance to enhance experience amid restrictions of movement and capacity;</li> <li>• CBTs introduce their business through online tourism convention.</li> </ul>
		(1) <b>Innovation of roles and practices:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CBTs operate as a service provider and mediator in collaboration with local travel agencies (e.g., homestay establishment turns to becoming cultural service provider/mediator);</li> <li>• CBTs expand operation to other ventures (e.g., cultural village establishment turns to boosting traditional food-making and offering homestay)</li> <li>• Previously non-profit CBTs change practices for economic gain;</li> <li>• CBTs offer charitable activities such as accommodation and business space for community.</li> </ul>
		(2) <b>Appreciation towards local culture and products:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of local resources (products and services) increases the sense of belongingness for CBT owners and community;</li> <li>• The local people’s belief and perceptions and has changes and has been focusing more on domestic tourism;</li> <li>• The boosting of domestic tourism assists in realising the country’s aspiration in tourism of <i>Kenali Negara Kitani</i> (knowing your own country);</li> <li>• Tourism interests shift to local cultures and niche products and are expected to remain relevant post-COVID-19.</li> </ul>
		(3) <b>Creation of job opportunities:</b>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The increase in MSMEs and domestic tourism provides job creations for the locals;</li> <li>• The custom attitudes and preferences of local employers in employing foreign workers have transformed to hiring the locals;</li> <li>• Creation of jobs for the locals (through direct and indirect approaches) empowers the locals and surrounding communities.</li> </ul>

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendation

Using the case of CBT operations in Brunei, this study has detailed experiences of community-based commercial operations from the perspectives of the owners during the height of the pandemic and today, while in preparation for post-COVID-19.

Being in the small-scale industry, CBT operations in Brunei have been able to remain profitable due to their quick response in understanding new markets and diversifying local products and demands with considerable intervention by the local government. The resistance and resilience of these operations are also owed to their continued innovations in managing various roles and practices benefitting their businesses, which cannot be easily manoeuvred by larger scale or mass industry in the hospitality or tourism sectors. Their strategic management also empowers CBT operations as well as the local community and resources. Thus, this situation should be explored further by various stakeholders in tourism as well as researchers as a way forward for the tourism industry in Brunei and other Southeast Asian contexts and internationally. This is amid continuous claims that small-scale industry such as CBT can become an alternative tourism that positively impacts the national economy even during the pandemic [4,19,53,55,65–67,73–75].

From our findings, we added two major transformational factors: (1) innovation of roles and practices and (2) appreciation of local culture and products related to Sharma et al.'s [7] resilience-based framework for reviving the tourism industry post-COVID-19. We believe these factors are significant as they impacted the domestic tourism in our case study and, thus, should be explored further in other Southeast Asian and European contexts. This is expected to offer new perspectives in efforts for securing sustainable tourism in the global context.

Whilst there is limited resources on CBT operations during COVID-19, the current case study has offered new perspectives in reviewing community-based industry in a more holistic approach, including highlighting on the community-based management as well as the utilisation of local culture and resources that are expected to remain relevant in the post-COVID-19 era. Our report also discussed the issues of 'over-domestic tourism' and ineffective communication between relevant tourism stakeholders where we assume the latter must have also contributed to the fall of MSMEs in tourism industry in broader contexts. Thus, we recommend further research to find solutions on these aspects.

This study has also provided some evidence on the importance of roles, practices, and contribution of small-scaled CBT operations to domestic tourism during the height of the pandemic and its potential in securing the sustainability of mass tourism in post-COVID-19, and simultaneously contribute to the growing literature of COVID-19 and tourism.

We acknowledge some limitations in this study. For instance, the small number of participants selected through purposive sampling may not represent the whole CBT situation and management affected during the pandemic. Nevertheless, this study has raised the potential for further study by incorporating larger sampling of CBT owners where quantitative approaches may be applicable to show some trends on the ongoing issues faced by CBT operations. A larger sample would also allow a future study to review and evaluate the successful characteristics of CBT owners in managing CBT operations during these challenging times that can be a useful guidance for business owners.

Besides, as our explorative study has generated some unexpected issues such as charity that intertwined with the aspect of religion that may have contributed to the resilience of CBT operation through community empowerment in Brunei, this study can become guidance for future research in exploring similar issues while juxtaposing the discussion with other Southeast Asian or Western contexts. Further study also should include the possibility of incorporating responses from other CBT key players, such as the government and private companies, which might have played significant role in the success of CBT management amid the pandemic. These recommendations for future research are expected to generate a more comprehensive discussion about the resilience and transformation of CBT industry during the challenging times that are expected to further contribute to the growing literature on tourism amid COVID-19.

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## Appendix A

List of interview questions:

- (1) Are you aware of the impacts of COVID-19 in the global scale and to our tourism industry in Brunei?
- (2) As COVID-19 has impacted tourism flows worldwide, how does this situation affect your CBT operation?
- (3) Have you encountered any challenges in practising CBT during the height of COVID-19? If you do, could you describe some of these main challenges/barriers?
- (4) In what ways do you think that your business has overcome these challenges/barriers?
- (5) How do the Brunei government and the community assist in maintaining your business resilience during the pandemic?
- (6) Do you think the local cultures/services have been affected by COVID-19? Are these positive or negative impacts?
- (7) In your opinion, to what extent/in what way has your business contributed to the sustainable development of tourism during the pandemic and perhaps post-COVID-19?
- (8) How did your CBT operation stay resilient during the height of the pandemic and today?
- (9) Other than economic benefits, what and how does your CBT operation provide advantages or create opportunities for your business and community?
- (10) Additionally, due to the pandemic, what other opportunities can be accessed through CBT?
- (11) What were the new changes and developments in your CBT operations after COVID-19 struck? How did these changes help your business?
- (12) How do you think your CBT operation has transformed contributing to the sustainability of tourism in Brunei and perhaps beyond?

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