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Crisis Adaptation in a Thai Community-Based Tourism Setting during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Phenomenological Approach

Raksmei Sann ^{1,*} , Pei-Chun Lai ² and Chi-Ting Chen ^{3,*}

¹ Department of Tourism Innovation Management, Faculty of Business Administration and Accountancy, Khon Kaen 40000, Thailand

² Department of Hotel and Restaurant Management, National Pingtung University of Science and Technology, Pingtung 912, Taiwan

³ Department of Hospitality Management, School of Tourism, Ming Chuan University, Taoyuan City 333, Taiwan

* Correspondence: sann@kku.ac.th (R.S.); ctchen@mail.mcu.edu.tw (C.-T.C.)

Abstract: Introduction: COVID-19 has severely impacted industries and individual lives globally. Due to travel restrictions and social distancing to reduce the spread of the disease, it has seriously affected the travel and tourism industry in Thailand, especially its community-based tourism. The impact of travel bans has magnified employment and income loss to most local families and their communities, negatively impacting the development of local tourism economies. Purpose: The main objective of this study is to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on community-based tourism as well as its adaptation solutions using a case study from a specific region in Thailand. Design/methodology/approach: Using a phenomenological approach, a series of qualitative face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 42 stakeholders involved in community-based tourism. Findings: The study results indicate that job relocation, temporary business closures, reducing fixed costs, and increasing different sale channels represent the most critical factors impacting CBT operational activities directly affected by the COVID-19 crisis and requiring immediate action. Other supplementary actions involve government financial support, business compensation, early vaccination, reduction of agricultural debt, and increasing agricultural product value. Social implications: These study findings offer direction for Thai governmental policy makers and CBT leaders for the establishment of actionable practices designed to respond rapidly and appropriately to local communities and entrepreneurs during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Originality: The originality of this research was obtained from local stakeholders' insights on the impacts of COVID-19 upon community-based tourism in the northeast region of Thailand, where tourism represents significant economic value in terms of salaries, wages, and employment generation.

Keywords: community-based tourism (CBT); COVID-19 pandemic; adaptation; tourism industry; phenomenological approach



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1. Introduction

Historically, the tourism industry in Thailand has played a vital role in contributing to economic growth. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), approximately 3 trillion baht per year is generated through tourism-related spending [1]. Tourism income is often considered as a revenue and foreign exchange-generating force for both host countries and the tourists' home countries [2]. Among them, community-based tourism (CBT) is one of the most popular sectors that attract both local and non-local tourists. Community-based tourism provides job opportunities for residents as the providers of products and various services that support the traveling public. Community-based tourism employment constitutes primary or secondary sources of revenue for rural households.

It also offers educational opportunities and helps to promote environment conservation and sustainability through income-generating activities. The key to the successful implementation of CBT is to strengthen local participation and cooperation in the promotion of well-being, economy, society, and the culture of people in the community [3–6].

According to Rocharungsat [7], the main purpose of CBT is to develop programs that upgrade the social and cultural benefits of the local community through tourist exchanges, providing opportunities for the local people to engage in tourism within their own villages [8,9]. While tourists search for activities in the locality, CBT allows the tourists to experience and learn about community culture and traditional lifestyles through community-based resources [6,10]. Community-based tourism has allowed for a growing number of public–private partnerships among the community shareholders by emphasizing responsible tourism, increasing interconnectedness through social media and other information sources, and improvements in access, transportation, and infrastructure [6,11,12]. Although the advancement of CBT in Thailand has assisted numerous villages in creating unique brands, the pandemic attributed to COVID-19 has disrupted this process. Sharma, et al. [13] documented that the tourism industry is particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, Burhan, et al. [14] warned that the pandemic has specifically impacted the CBT sector, which is now in a crisis due to the lack of preparation, an insufficient cash flow, and the inability to mobilize resources.

Due to the COVID-19 situation, the associated revenue of CBT has dropped dramatically, leading to a negative impact on villagers' income. As well, the lack of tourists has resulted in lost revenue sources used to protect the local wildlife. Consequently, local communities that rely upon CBT have now lost the primary income source used to sustain them [15]. This exemplifies how the pandemic has created severe roadblocks for CBT and the industry overall. Because travel decisions are influenced by perceptions of destination safety and security issues, how CBT effectively copes with these challenges related to pandemics represents an important opportunity that could impact future sustainable development in rural communities.

Thailand's marketing brand, "Land of Smiles," focuses upon the country's rich culture, heritage, traditions, and sustainable natural environment. A variety of CBT activities such as homestays with hill tribes, participating in crop harvests, supporting endangered wildlife, and eco-tourism in general attracts millions of domestic and international travelers to Thailand each year. The importance of CBT in Thailand is well recognized, and for the purposes of this study, the northeastern region of the country serves as a representative example. However, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in lockdowns and travel restrictions by national and local governments. Little or no attention has been given to the development of a crisis management plan for local communities to respond to the economic challenges caused by these governmental mandates. Thus, rebuilding CBT in the post-pandemic era remains as an important issue for discussion. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to investigate the impacts of COVID-19 upon local rural-based communities in northeast Thailand and offer solutions for protecting and rebuilding CBT in this country's region. Using stakeholder insights, the opportunities and threats of crisis management are identified and discussed. This study's findings provide suggestions, guidance, and actionable results to stakeholders invested in Thailand's CBT industry. Sustainability through community involvement resulting in pandemic recovery strategies are presented.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Study Context: Baan Maung Nong Khai, Northeast of Thailand

Baan Maung is one of the communities under the CBT program in Thailand, located in the Sangkhom District, Nong Khai Province, northeast region of Thailand (see Figure 1). It represents an area of 72 squares kilometers in the Nong Khai Province. The total population represents approximately 3277 residents including 1644 males and 1633 females, reflecting a total of 994 households. Adjacent to the Mekong River, 90% of the region's economy is generated through the production and sales of agricultural products such as rice, rubber,

bananas, maize, and cassava. Government employees (3%), distributors (sellers) of local products (4%), and fishermen (3%) reflect the remaining workforce [16]. The provincial administrative authority has strategically developed and promoted CBT to successfully create job opportunities and enhance the living standards of the area's local population. In the recent years, the Ban Maung community has become one of the most popular CBT destinations in Thailand [16]. Importantly, the local government continuously encourages residents to promote CBT to improve the region's social conditions while preserving its natural resources. The province provides many activities related to natural and cultural resources for tourism enhancement. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Baan Maung community regularly exported their products to other provinces. However, the COVID-19 outbreak severely disrupted the exportation of agricultural products, causing a crisis within the agricultural industry. Local tourism has also been negatively impacted by COVID-19. All tourist attractions in Ban Maung, such as the Sea of Fog in Huai Isan, were prohibited to visitors due to the mandated travel restrictions. Prior to COVID-19, villagers provided sightseeing transportation services for tourists coming to visit these natural attractions, allowing them to generate income through visitor spending. The COVID-19 restrictions directly diminished tourism activity, which negatively affected the villagers' household incomes and the overall economic vitality of the community. Thus, the case of Baan Maung Nong Khai is deemed representatively suitable for this study addressing CBT and crisis management.

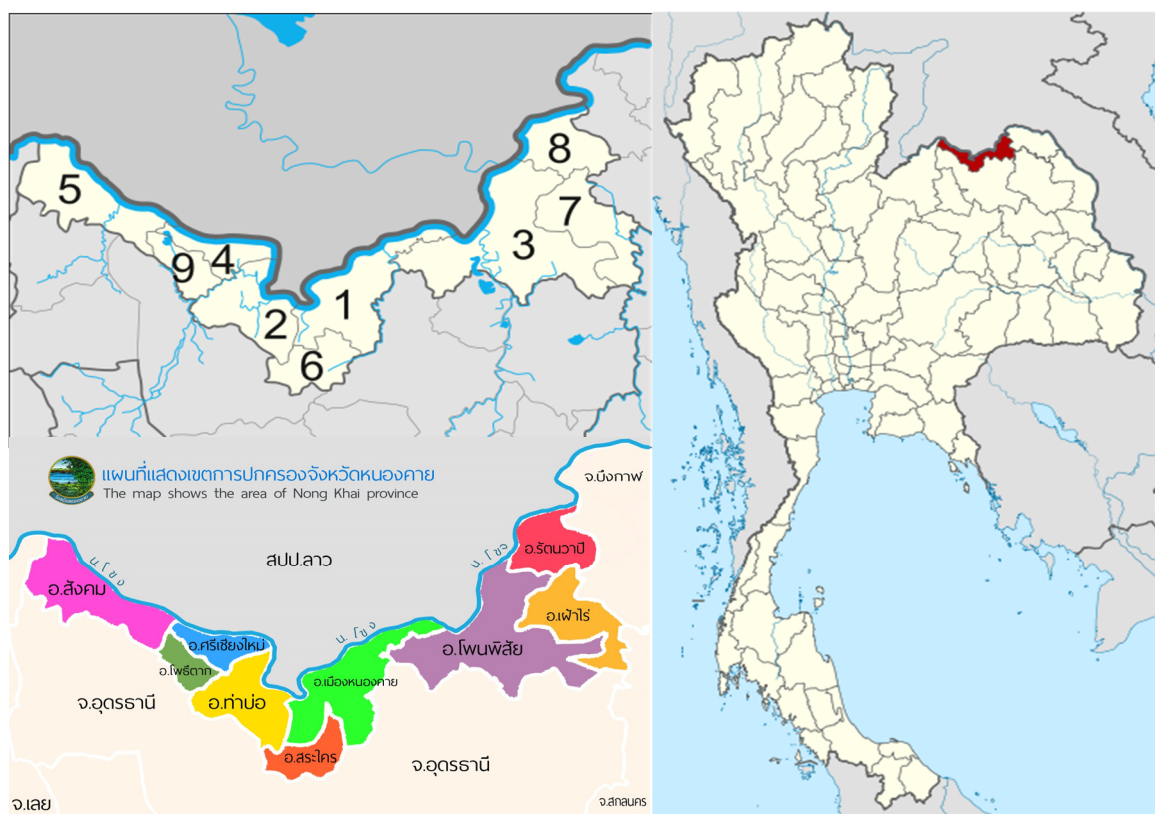


Figure 1. Number 5 is Baan Maung Nong Khai, Sangkhom District, Norng Kai Province, northeast of Thailand. (Source: Photos adopted with modification from: (1) Norng Khai province https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nong_Khai_province, accessed 18 December 2022; (2) The area of Norng Kai province <https://sites.google.com/site/nongkhaiprovince/kar-pkhrxng-swn-phumiphakh>, accessed on 18 December 2022; (3) Basic information of Norng Kai province <https://www.asean-tech.ac.th>, accessed on 18 December 2022). **Note:** (1) Mueang Nong Khai; (2) Tha Bo; (3) Phon Phisai; (4) Si Chiang Mai; (5) Sangkhom; (6) Sakhray; (7) Fao Rai; (8) Rattanawapi; (9) Pho Tak.

2.2. The Importance of CBT on Baan Maung Nong Khai

Ban Maung Nong Khai is well known for its natural beauty and the way of life that villagers live in a simple and tradition way. There are many tourist attractions such as the Skywalk viewing point (Figure 2) and the Huai Ison Sea of Fog (Figure 3). Compared with other destinations in this area, Ban Maung Nong Khai is characterized more by its CBT attractions. Community-based tourism offers greater job opportunities for the local people to generate income through the provision of services to travelers, such as local transportation services, local handmade products, food services, souvenirs, etc. Community-based tourism creates sources of income for the villages and locals. The benefits of CBT remain within the local economy and even those who are not directly engaged in the tourism operations still gain benefits from the development of the CBT community. Residents in the community may produce the local foods or handicrafts they sell to tourists, thereby benefiting members of the community directly or indirectly due to the presence of the tourism industry [6,17–19]. The perspectives of Hiwasaki [20] and Lo and Janta [6] indicate four major objectives of CBT: (1) Conservation of resources: sustaining the environment; (2) Social and economic development: delivering a new approach to local economic development, whereby the financial results benefit the residents participating in the tourism activities; (3) Empowerment and ownership: allowing the residents to participate in appropriate tourism planning and management; and (4) Quality of visitor experience: ensuring that tourists partake in authentic and meaningful experiences through social and environmental responsibility.

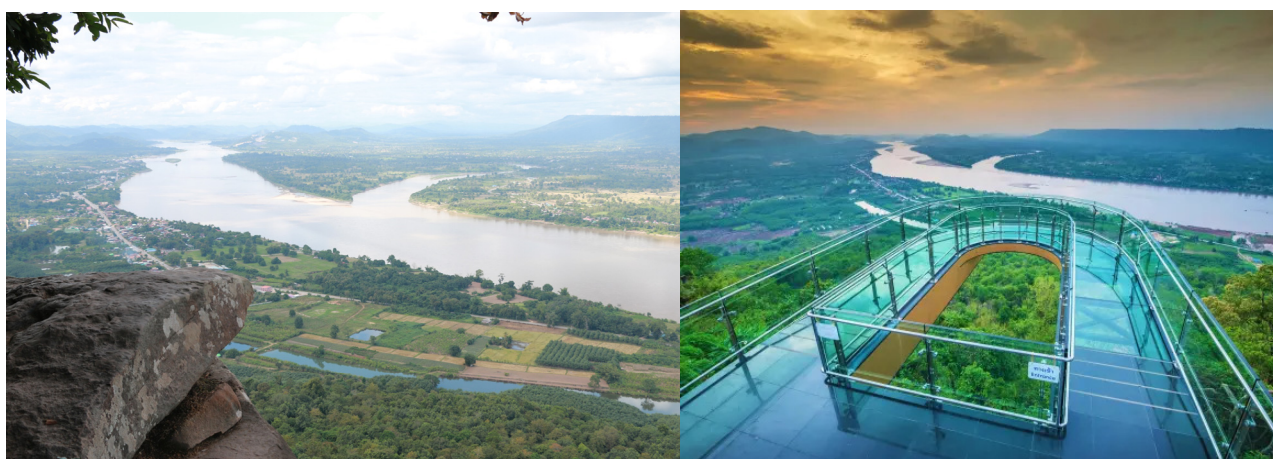


Figure 2. Wat Pha Tak Suea View Point and Skywalk, Pha Tang Sub-District, Sangkhom District, Nong Khai Province, Thailand. (Source: Photos adopted with modification from <https://thailandtourismdirectory.go.th/en/attraction/1200>, accessed 18 December 2022).

2.3. Adaptations of Local Community and Business during COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 caused a global tourism crisis. Governments worldwide imposed lockdowns, which affected millions of people engaged in the tourism industry with many losing jobs and businesses [13]. A case study from Tanjung in Indonesia depicted how tourism workers who lost their income were pushed to switch jobs to other sectors and seek other alternative occupations to survive during this most difficult situation. This exemplifies individual resilience during COVID-19. Hadi [21] define resilience as a crisis management strategy for business stability and adaptability during natural disasters and emergencies. It is linked to the organization's ability to adapt to the environment and new circumstances to alleviate the effects of the incident. Resilience strategies require coordination, various crisis management techniques, good relationships (among all stakeholders), a comprehensive network, and recognition of risks and opportunities. In the case of Tanjung Puting tourism, stakeholders were encouraged to be creative, innovative, and adjust to maintain their resilience until the tourism industry recovered [22]. In their study,

three adaptation strategies during the pandemic were emphasized: physical, economy, and society. First, a tourist destination needs to create an adaptation strategy for its physical area. Local communities should take action to protect the environment from illegal industries. In addition, the local community, tourism activities, and tourism practitioners can take mitigation action to reduce long-term risk to people and property from hazards and their impacts. Community-based tourism supports the sustainable environment, such as protecting the sea from illegal fishing and clearing forests for agricultural purposes. Second, the adaptation strategy of the local communities regarding the economic sector encourages communities to adapt to the previous livelihoods such as selling coffee and sage, fish, yellow rice, and wild boar to the traditional markets and online businesses. Finally, from the social sector during a pandemic, there are no community-based tourism activities. Therefore, in response, the local community adapted by planting through hydroponic methods, built homestays, coordinated with local government, searched new trekking at Kampung Dokay and Sosi, and re-explored fishing opportunities.

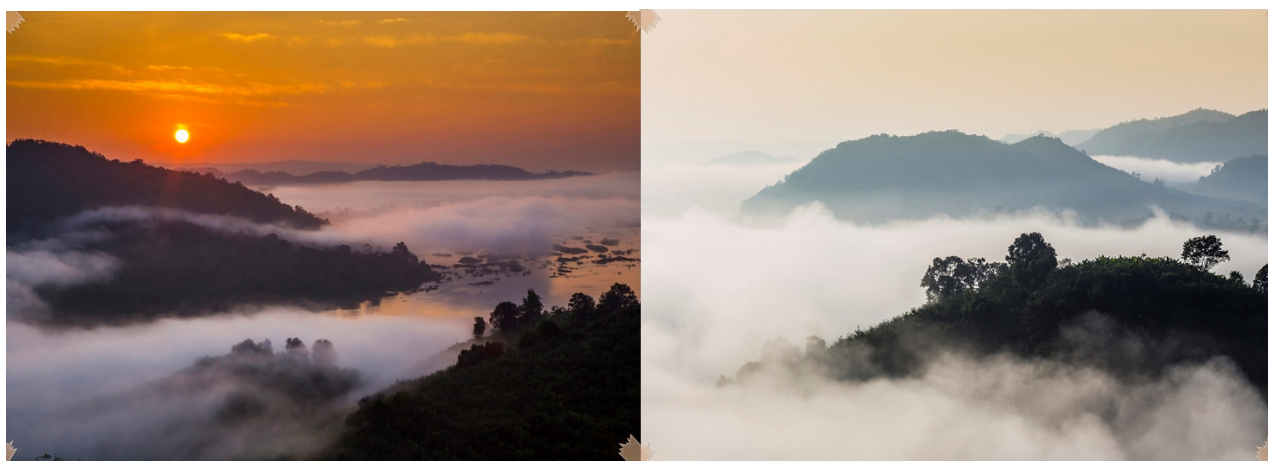


Figure 3. Huai Ison Sea of Fog or Phu Huay Ison Sea of Mist, Sangkhom District, Nong Khai Province, Thailand. (Source: Photos adopted with modification from <https://www.themaceohotel.com/en/album/5494/phu-huay-ison-sea-of-mist#on4>, accessed 18 December 2022).

Some studies focus on strategies and solutions in adaptation with Small- to Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) [23]. A case study of the Wildcraft Brewery in England, a micro-brewery enterprise, also serves as an example of resilience during COVID-19. Before the COVID-19 outbreaks, Wildcraft mainly sold products to pubs and restaurants. Wildcraft's beers, produced from locally foraged fruits and herbs, were popular in the community. During COVID-19, the pubs and restaurants lost their business. Customers did not visit Wildcraft as before. Therefore, the Wildcraft Brewery changed its customer targeting overnight by switching from pubs and restaurants to home delivery. Wildcraft also overcame the problem of limited indoor space by taking operations outside. They set up a drive-in shop and a pop-up pub in their car park [23]. The discussions show that government support, cooperative relationships with stakeholders, self-determination of entrepreneurs, and formal planning are the most crucial factors that shape the immediate adjustments of operational activities in the challenges of COVID-19. In addition, other resilient practices such as hygiene concerns, increased promotion through social media, innovative marketing practices (e.g., revised offerings), operational cost-cutting, and employee training to comply with the changing standard operating procedures from the government and industry may be applied in various cases.

Hall, et al. [24] emphasized technology as a major force in creating flexibility in the tourism industry. Technology can handle pandemic-specific problems such as screening travelers, discovering COVID-19 cases and tracking contacts, and ensuring online education for students. The "Internet of Things" (IoT) is an advanced technology that can link all smart

objects together within a network with no human interactions. The IoT revolution reshapes modern healthcare systems, incorporating technological, economic, and social prospects. Researchers urge the public to put trust in technology and their willingness to change their attitudes toward technology for bringing in changes in e-tourism by proactively using IT resources [25].

While facing the similar challenges caused by COVID-19, how did the local Thai community-based tourism adaptation react in this crisis? This sets a profound example for an in-depth study of the potential approach to the success of community tourism in Baan Maung Nong Khai. The living example of the Baan Maung Nong Khai can be applied as a prototype model to share the insights and experiences with other CBT communities.

2.4. Fear of Traveling and Stay Home Impacts on Domestic Tourism

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry represented a significant source of economic growth for many countries, including Thailand's GDP [26]. Globally, domestic tourism has been proven to be a key economic driver, accounting for 73% of total travel and tourism spending in 2017 [27]. The COVID-19 crisis may cause long-term socio-economic affects upon destination activities and industries, as potential visitors may avoid traveling to destinations perceived to be unsafe [26,28]. To minimize the stress of travel, some recommendations included plans for post-travel lock-down measures to enhance health protection in order to generate trust among tourists. As an example, because new virus variants caused a surge of outbreaks, most Bangkok residents opted to remain in their homes during the 2021 New Year's Eve holiday events. A study specific to this situation documented that over 54.8% of those Bangkok residents surveyed had no plans to travel to other provinces during the New Year holidays, while 40.7% cancelled or postponed their travel plans [29]. Concerns about being infected through contact with others resulted in social distancing, isolation, and quarantine, further exacerbating the social and economic fallout, and creating psychological and emotional issues regarding sadness, worry, fear, anger, annoyance, frustration, guilt, helplessness, loneliness, and nervousness. These features were common among those mental health problems many people have experienced during and after the crisis [30–33].

The pandemic has resulted in fewer tourists, which affected small business owners such as those involved with providing accommodations and food/beverage services [34]. Consequently, CBT communities have been forced to seek alternative sources of income rather than relying solely on tourist spending. Kim, et al. [35] indicate that the recovery of the tourism industry is greatly affected by how tourists modify their biosecurity behaviors to meet governmental and destination requirement. Their study reveals that a total of 63.7% respondents would wear masks rather than cancel a trip but would cancel a trip if they had to enter quarantine (62.9%). These findings imply that mandatory quarantine policies may hinder the willingness of US international travelers to visit foreign nations. During the pandemic and post-COVID-19, domestic tourism may be the key to promote local travelling. "Tourism bubbles," or local links built during the disaster, will act as a flexible plan. Future travel will depend on combined self-care [21].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Considering the scope of the research problem during the COVID-19 pandemic, the purpose of this study was to reveal the adaptation experiences of tourism stakeholders. It was suggested that qualitative research would benefit from undertaking research to gain a flourishing understanding of the tourism industry [36,37]. Thus, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to collect in-depth data. The primary study data was solicited from all participants through interviews designed to gain insight on their perceptions of what they considered to represent as core problems [14,38]. Thus, the respondent's multi-dimensional experiences were explored for the following topics, which included pandemic crisis impacts, the adapted actions taken, and recommendations for future local businesses.

3.2. Sample

A total of 994 households represented the study's overall sample, of which 90% represent farmers. By applying the convenience sampling technique to the local community, a total of 42 interviewees were selected and agreed to participate in the research [full dataset can be accessed at: doi: 10.17632/vvt585gp9n.1 (accessed on 2 November 2022) or in the supplementary]. Those respondents represented by thirty-two local community residents, six local government officers, and four local entrepreneurs. All participants were engaged in community-based tourism in Baan Maung Nong Kai, northeast Thailand. Because travel restrictions were enforced throughout the region, it was assumed that all participants were affected by their individual crisis-related experiences.

3.3. Data Collection

Primary research data was collected through semi-structured interviews with stakeholders located in the Ban Maung Nong Khai community, northeast of Thailand. According to Post, et al. [39], stakeholders represent a person, group, or organization that has interest or concern in an organization. These include creditors, directors, employees, government, owners, suppliers, unions, and the local community from which the business draws its resources. Using this definition, this study selected stakeholders representing local community residents, local government officials, and local entrepreneurs.

Interviewees were asked to identify the impacts of COVID-19 on CBT as well as those adaptation solutions developed by local community, government, and entrepreneurial sectors, which could potentially impact the sustainable operation of Thailand's community-based tourism sector. Two main questions were asked to stakeholders: 1. How did the COVID-19 pandemic affect community-based tourism in Ban Maung Nong Khai, Thailand? 2. How did the stakeholders adapt in response to this severe situation attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic? Stakeholders were then asked to make some recommendations on how such problems could be solved.

Each interview lasted about 35–45 min. Data were recorded and later transcribed. As the communication took place in Thailand and in the Thai language, the transcripts were later translated into English. When following a qualitative approach, it is not uncommon for interviewees with differing interests to present information from different angles [38]. Prior to the formal interviews, a pre-test was conducted by interviewing nine volunteers including agricultural professors, company marketers, local residents, academic scholars, and seniors. Based upon this pre-test, a total of four questions were developed for the main study. All interview questions were semi-structured to ensure consistency across the individual interviews, and appeared as follows: 1. Could you share with us your current occupation? 2. Could you tell us how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your life? 3. What have you done (local resident/entrepreneur/government officer) to adjust to the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic? 4. Do you have any suggestions on how problems caused by the pandemic could be solved?

3.4. Data Analysis

A qualitative phenomenological approach was applied since this method is considered appropriate for understanding the actual experiences of a particular phenomenon [14,40]. After all interviews were completed, the qualitative data were collected and analyzed to develop themes based upon using content analysis procedures. The study then used independent raters to establish context for interplaying and identifying themes and concepts.

The qualitative results were subjective due to the nature of the phenomenal research paradigm. By coding, categorizing, and theming the qualitative data, the raw data were then converted into manageable information. Inter-rater reliability refers to the degree of consistency in research findings and whether similar category labels and interpretation can be made by different observers and/or by the same observer on different occasions [41–44]. For this research, the interview contents were discussed with CBT expert scholars who helped shed further light on the key points of the most relevant and essential information

for each sector of respondents. This process also enhances both the reliability and validity of the study.

4. Empirical Findings and Discussion

4.1. Personal and Corporate Profile of the Informants

Over 60% of all interviewees were reported to be between the ages of 36 and 59 years old, followed by those groups indicating they were between 26 and 35 years of age (16.67%), over 60 years old (14.29%), and 18–25 years of age (7.14%). The results implied that the majority of interviewees were in their prime career period. The respondents indicated that they were female (69.05%) more than male (30.95%). This suggested that females may be more involved in CBT services than were males within the Ban Maung Nong Khai region of Thailand.

Interviewees were categorized into three groups: (1) Local community residents, (2) local government, and (3) local entrepreneurs. Local community residents included street sellers (e.g., selling street food, souvenirs, or clothes), store vendors (e.g., sellers who work for micro- or small business), working employees (e.g., gardener, waiter), farmers, and teachers. In Thailand, local community residents are likely to operate their own street shops for selling street food, local products, or souvenirs to tourists. The sample reflects that most of the local residents interviewed for this study were engaged in street vending activities as their primary occupation that generated their main source of income. The group of local government officers represented law enforcement, public health officers, and National Park officers. The entrepreneurs comprised a tour operator, car rental service provider, coffee shop owner, and restaurant owner (see Table 1).

4.2. Main Findings

In this study, the informants' ages ranged from 22 to 75 years old. Most of the informants were self-employed, and few were government workers/officers and SME entrepreneurs. They all contributed to the community-based tourism sector as being part of the community in Ban Maung Nong Khai, Thailand. Due to the tremendous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the informants expressed suffering from the crisis and adapting strategies to the situation in our research findings. After analyzing all interview contents, three themes were identified: 1. Impacts of how the crisis affected their lives; 2. Adaptation actions taken by the local business; 3. Suggestions for future local businesses. These three themes comprehensively captured the insights of the local stakeholders, government, and entrepreneurs. Thematic analysis techniques were applied to support respondent details as follows.

4.2.1. The Impacts of COVID-19

All forty-two stakeholders stated that their difficulties were attributed primarily to impositions caused by the domestic and international travel restrictions. The enforced lockdown measures throughout the country prevented local businesses from operating unless they were directly involved with government events pertaining to the community. These CBT stakeholders expressed their concerns about the prohibition of engagement involving any social activities among themselves and potential consumers. As a result, the stakeholders claimed that the pandemic and subsequent restrictions involving visitors and travel resulted in their personal financial loss and income shortage. The following statements below support this evidence:

※ "Tourism destinations are all closed so I can't sell (goods) in high season, no travelling, no transportation, and no income . . . that seriously affects my living." (LP 02)

※ "Before the COVID-19, I have a lot of customers, but when the COVID-19 happens, I hardly sell out any products. Travelling is difficult, which is very inconvenient for me to go back and pick-up goods in the city for running business. I have to be more careful than before." (LP 24)

Table 1. Summary of Informants Profiles.

No	ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	Group
1	LP01	F	33	Seller	1
2	LP02	F	34	Seller	1
3	LP03	M	29	Teacher	1
4	LP04	F	73	Farmer	1
5	LP05	F	43	Seller	1
6	LP06	M	48	Hotel Clerk	1
7	LP07	F	56	Farmer	1
8	LP08	F	56	Farmer	1
9	LP09	F	47	Lottery Vendor	1
10	LP10	M	53	Farmer	1
11	LP11	F	56	Store Vendor	1
12	LP12	F	34	School Bus Driver	1
13	LP13	F	59	Seller	1
14	LP14	F	45	Seller	1
15	LP15	F	22	Waiter	1
16	LP16	F	65	Seller	1
17	LP17	F	62	Store Vendor	1
18	LP18	F	62	Store Vendor	1
19	LP19	F	47	Seller	1
20	LP20	F	43	Store Vendor	1
21	LP21	F	56	Seller	1
22	LP22	F	39	Store Vendor	1
23	LP23	F	41	Seller	1
24	LP24	M	47	Store vendor	1
25	LP25	F	32	Employee	1
26	LP26	F	60	Store vendor	1
27	LP27	M	40	Employee	1
28	LP28	F	39	Waiter	1
29	LP29	F	49	Employee	1
30	LP30	F	47	Store Vendor	1
31	LP31	M	64	Gardener	1
32	LP32	F	65	Gardener	1
33	LG01	M	25	Police Officer	2
34	LG02	F	41	Government Officer	2
35	LG03	M	36	Government Officer	2
36	LG04	F	33	National Park Officer	2
37	LG05	M	56	Health Care Officer	2
38	LG06	M	59	Health Care Officer	2
39	EN01	M	41	Local Transportation Owner	3
40	EN02	F	48	Restaurant Owner	3
41	EN03	M	25	Coffee Shop Owner	3
42	EN04	M	26	Restaurant Owner	3

Note: LP: Local Community People, LG: Local Government, EN: Entrepreneur.

COVID-19 further imposed financial difficulties faced by the CBT entrepreneurs whose businesses were self-funded and relied heavily on the domestic tourism sector. Moreover, the crisis was considered as ‘the greatest challenge’ to their community businesses, as Thailand had never been threatened by other major international outbreaks such as SARS or diseases like Ebola. Major local entrepreneurs were panicked by the uncertainty of the lockdown periods. In addition, the local government banned some commercial or public activities such as dinning at restaurants, and hanging out at pubs, bars, etc. These imposed regulations directly contributed to lost revenue, leading to business closures. This was supported by several entrepreneurs who stated:

※ “Villagers who drive e-tak cars have to go back to farming during the COVID-19 because nearly 90% of the villagers are farmers. However, during the COVID-19,

the agricultural product price has dropped considerably; thus, we have no income.” (EN 01)

※ “... the worst impact is that the number of tourists dramatically decreased. Prior to the travel restrictions, crowds of people regularly came to visit our coffee shops and enjoyed photo taking activities nearby our shops around the Mekong River.” (EN 03)

COVID-19 also disrupted the freedom of leisure travel expectedly (i.e., travel restrictions), which led to staycations, or taking holidays at home. Some stakeholders (e.g., local government officer) reported that the travel bans imposed by the local authorities severely impacted their lifestyle and career, and also their psychological well-being. Additionally, they had to frequently complete numerous documents, and then send those to government administrators, requesting permission to travel. This added paperwork caused more stress for everybody. Even worse, this process took weeks or sometimes months, which negatively affected mental health. Several interviewees commented on this:

※ “Travelling for my duties is very difficult ... leaving your district requires obtaining permission from the province governors.” (LG 01)

※ “Difficult to travel to other areas ... and the job duties increased a lot ... Although travel expenses increased, my salary remained the same.” (LG 02)

4.2.2. Adaptation Actions Taken

The responses of adaptation actions taken from CBT stakeholders during the COVID-19 crisis emerged in the aftermath of the government’s mandatory lockdowns. The multifaceted adaptation actions taken reflected: job relocation, temporary business closures, reducing fixed costs, and the effects upon various sales channels (e.g., online delivery) (see Figure 4). This can be illustrated in the comments from the interviewees as follows.

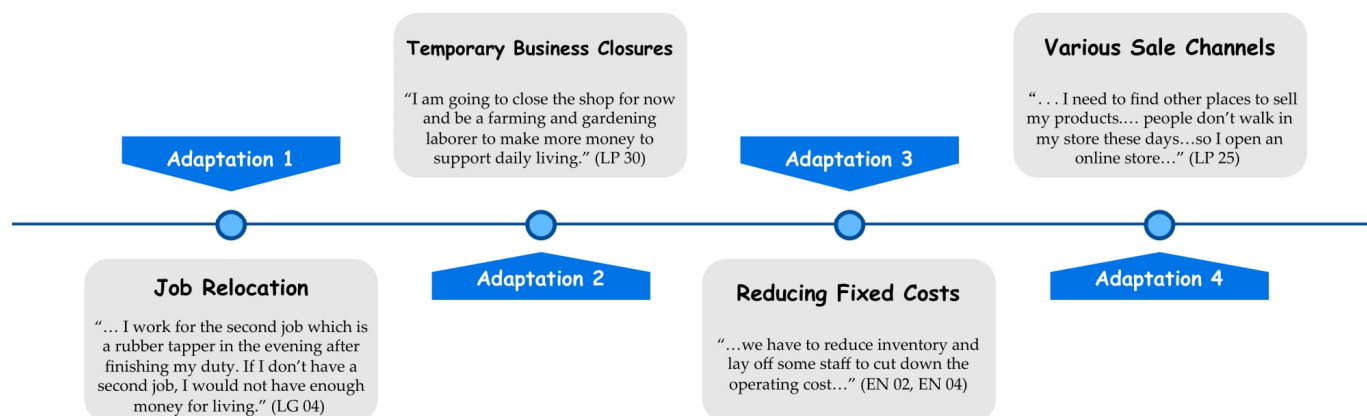


Figure 4. Adaptation actions taken by community stakeholders.

※ “Prior to COVID-19, I was a full-time worker. But, since the COVID-19 outbreaks, my employer hires me only 2 days a week. So, I start to open my online shop to earn extra income.” (LP 15)

※ “... I work for the second job which is a rubber tapper in the evening after finishing my duty. If I don't have a second job, I would not have enough money for living.” (LG 04)

※ “... I take a second job ... ” (LG 03, LP 18, LG 06)

※ “I reduce daily expense as much as I can to save money ... buy only necessities...” (LG 29)

※ “... we have to reduce inventory and lay off some staff to cut down the operating cost ... ” (EN 02, EN 04)

※ “... we have to change price to the target customers and offer delivery service ... ” (EN 03)

※ “I am going to close the shop for now and be a farming and gardening laborer to make more money to support daily living.” (LP 30)

※ “During the COVID-19 pandemic, I am not permitted to travel to the waterfall and sell goods to tourists, so I make brooms and grass flowers for extra income.” (LP 16)

※ “... Find forest products to sell or raw materials that can be stored for a long time ... in case if I can't sell it in a short time, I don't waste it.” (LP 02)

※ “... I need to find other places to sell my products. ... people don't walk in my store these days ... so I open an online store ... ” (LP 25)

4.2.3. Implications of Future Recommendations

Nearly half of the interviewees provided suggestions to solve these current challenging issues. They formed a coalition to strongly request that the government provide monetary subsidies to compensate for the loss of their income during the pandemic. Other propositions included the availability of early vaccination, business compensation, the reduction of agricultural debt, and the increase of agricultural product value. The respondents' suggestions for the future recommended discussions at local, regional, and national government levels. At the local level, since most of the residents are engaged in farming and agriculture, optimizing the existing resources around the village by enhancing the value of the agricultural products and packaging resources into tourists' attractions are high priorities. At the regional level, the stability of commodity prices, accessibility of school education, and effective marketing for domestic travel destinations are helpful for the survival of CBT villages during the pandemic. At the national level, due to financial difficulty and threat of the COVID-19 virus, monetary subsidies, effective early vaccination, compensations for the unemployment, and financial aid are recommended to lessen the burden for CBT residents (see Figure 5).

In reference to these suggestions, representative responses of expressed opinions are as follows:

※ “I need government monetary subsidies to help me pay rent...” (LP 01)

※ “I need government monetary subsidies to reduce the loan interests.” (LP24, EN02, EN04)

※ “I need government monetary subsidies to reduce agricultural debts.” (LP08)

※ “Government should offer monetary subsidies, and reduce the tuition fees for students since during these time students do not go to school.” (LP 12)

※ “... if we have effective vaccinated, we can shorten the quarantine and go back to normal life earlier.” (LP03, LG 06)

※ “... I need government monetary subsidies and effective vaccination ... ” (LP 05, LP 11)

※ “Government should increase the price and value of agricultural products ... and offer effectively vaccines.” (EN 01)

※ “... during the COVID-19, the productivity and price of agricultural products have dropped considerably, we have to make new products and increase the value ... ” (EN 03; LP 10)

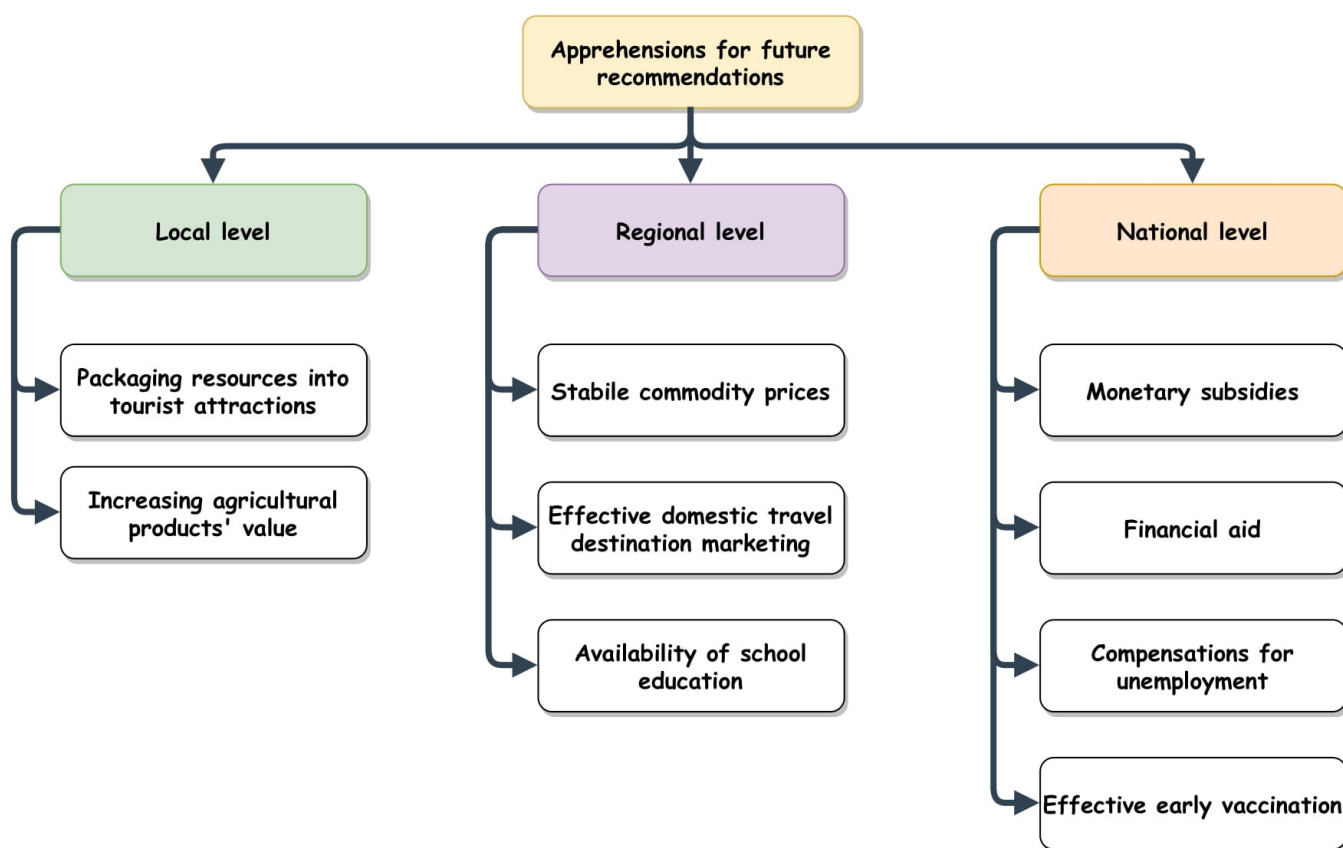


Figure 5. Implications for future recommendations.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Community-based tourism in Thailand has experienced the COVID-19 crisis in ways that explicate the outlook of local business settings and social cultural factors in general. The retrospect from the interviewees were illustrated in terms of the impacts of the crisis, the adaptation actions taken, and the future recommendation for managing local operations and business activities. As a result of using the phenomenological technique, the implications of this study are presented in a framework to explain the relationships between the underlying constructs [14]. Figure 6 demonstrates the key constructs on cause, effect, reaction, and prevention-resilient practices in the study case.

The decision to study the impact of COVID-19 on CBT in the northeast region of Thailand was to firstly widen our knowledge relevant to local community adaptation, in particular on the local tourism-dependent community. The understanding of people's adaptation is very important in our lives and offers the motivations to other communities to know more about the villagers' perceptions and characteristics. These study results document that tourism is a part of the action that improves the lives of local residents. A viable tourism industry highlights those special environmental, historical, and cultural components that make local communities very unique. At the same time, tourism spending infuses dollars into the community, which are used in part to improve the quality of life for the local residents while providing financial support through tourism spending to protect the community's sustainable attractiveness regarding its environmental, cultural, and historical treasures. The case study of a CBT community located in the Ban Maung Nong Khai rural region, depicts an area where 90% of the major community activities are related to farming. Thus, income is received for the provision of necessary agricultural products offered to the traveling public. Additionally, selling goods representing local commodities at daily food stands, along with hand-made crafts, and various types of souvenirs, contribute to tourism revenue through their direct spending. Other systems

designed to support the traveling public include transportation services, food and beverage services, sightseeing guides, and lodging. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most community residents held one primary job. However, the disappearance of tourists due to the COVID travel restrictions dramatically affected the primary income sources of the residents. The dramatic evaporation of the main source of income threatened the well-being of this community. To survive through the COVID-19 crisis, the CBT community sought changes. In the response to the ongoing crisis, the local stakeholders adopted strategies that incorporated their occupations with the local environment. Agricultural products underwent dramatic price reductions, but they were at least able to be sold to sources outside of their communities so that minimal levels of revenue were able to sustain their lives.

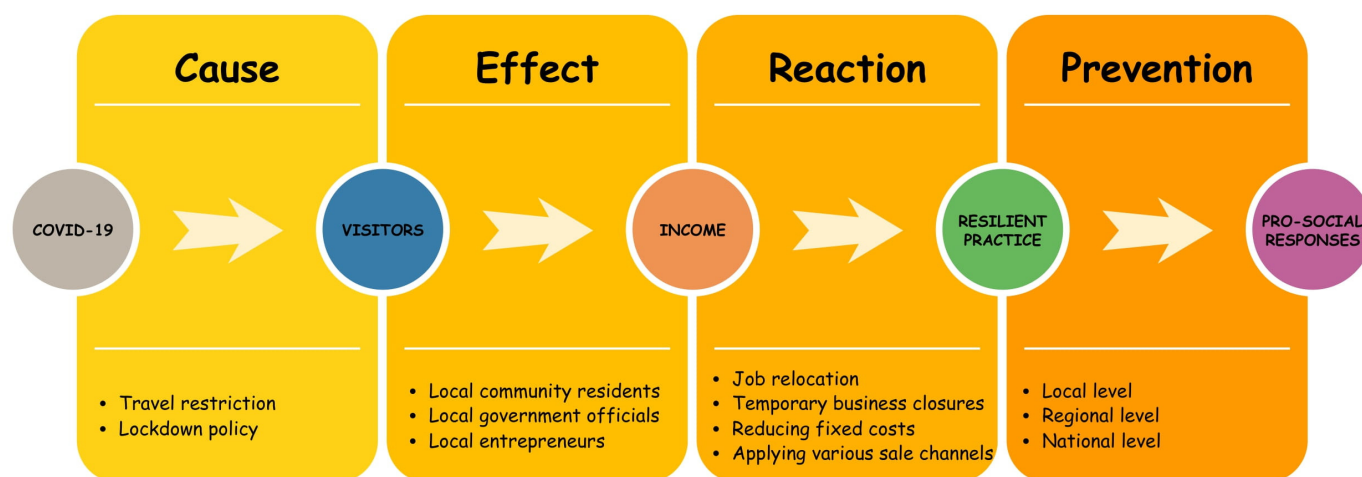


Figure 6. Key constructs on cause, effect, reaction, and prevention-resilient practices.

Local authority support through monetary subsidies has been highlighted as an influential factor that provides rapid response to local stakeholders affected by the dramatic reduction in income sources. However, subsidies in the form of 300 baht per day (about USD 8, exchange rate 22 December 2022), are not enough to sustain a person's cost of living in their community, forcing people to use their savings or borrow funds. This finding is in line with Burhan, Salam, Abou Hamdan and Tariq [14], that calls for the role of governments to support local community businesses during times of crisis. Government support allows local economies to develop practical methods that extend the supply chain to reach unique market segments such as providing upgraded agricultural products to upscale restaurants and lodging properties, whose brands depend upon quality goods and services. Also, government subsidies allow certain local community businesses and cooperatives to explore different business models including offline to online marketplace sales. Likewise, with government support, local community vocational education programs and institutions of learning can play an important role in terms of encouraging, motivating, and training local residents to learn new skills to improve their lives. Similar suggestions were also mentioned in the Indonesian research study conducted by Hadi [21]. According to Hall, Scott and Gossling [24], Sann and Lai [45] and Sann, et al. [46], technology is a major force in creating flexibility in the tourism industry. The "Internet of Things" (IoT) is an advanced technology to create smart networks without human interactions. To solve the obstacles caused by travel bans during the pandemic, technological enhancements can be applied to rebuild a community into a "SMART VILLAGE" using e-tourism. In the long term, village residents will benefit from the conveniences and efficiency of technology in promoting CTB and offset or minimize disturbances caused by travel distance.

Practically, the results of this study offer several implications in the CTB operations. For example, government input in terms of relaxation on domestic travelling without quarantine is much needed. Moreover, considering the limited financial assistance to local

business, a financial support package as well as the insufficient tax relief from the Thai government may play a key role in the survival of local small businesses since it composites the majority of the local business in the rural areas. In addition, stakeholders in the CTB sector and other related sectors should strive for increasing the mutual cooperation and communication with their third-party partners (most importantly, online travel agency and airline industry). This has emerged as an essential element for ensuring the continuity of the community business. Fostering a cooperative and empathetic culture can not only enhance the relationships with the third-party partners, but also the stakeholders of the community can share in the common good to work as a unit in times of a prolonged crisis.

In summary, COVID-19 negatively impacted global economic, political, and socio-cultural systems. Health communication strategies and measures (e.g., social distancing, travel and mobility bans, community lockdowns, stay at home campaigns, self- or mandatory-quarantine, limits on group gatherings) have damaged the global travel, tourism, and leisure industries [47]. The outbreak of this epidemic is complex and poses a huge challenge for the local people [13,48–50]. Although the threats and damages caused by COVID-19 may not yet be totally understood at this time, the case of Ban Maung Nong Khai encourages all of the stakeholders in CBT to cope with changes and seek potential opportunities. The old sayings, “Save dry hay for the raining day” and “don’t put all eggs in one basket”, serve as reminders to all stakeholders to always be prepared in advance for unforeseen crises and look upon challenges as opportunities for opening other business opportunities.

All studies have limitations and this one is no different. First, the interview process involving local interviewers and interviewees was challenging. Both groups were afraid of contracting COVID-19. This situation required unanticipated time extensions to recruit and train more volunteers to assist with data collection. As well, more residents were needed to for sampling due to their reluctance to spend time with strangers who could potentially and unknowingly spread the virus to private homes. Therefore, future research might consider online interviews using social media formats rather than site interviews during a pandemic. Even mail-out surveys could serve as an efficient method for collecting data since individuals are basically confined to their home residences and have the time to devote to completing the survey.

Supplementary Materials: More supporting information can be requested at: sann@kku.ac.th. The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su15010340/s1>.

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