

# Linking HR Responsiveness with Tourism Employee Experiences: A Qualitative Approach

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the urban tourism employees' experiences during the recent pandemic in India. It aims to investigate the initiatives by HR to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic and also explore the recent HR trends in the tourism industry of the new world order, which have a positive impact on the employee's experiences.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Multi-study approach was used where qualitative analysis using semi-structured interviews were conducted. Study 1 was done after the second wave of the recent pandemic while Study 2 was conducted after a gap of one year with the professionals working in the tourism industry. The transcripts were analysed using manual coding and NVivo software.

**Findings:** The findings revealed only negative sentiments harboured by tourism employees during the recent crisis but a bent towards positive was observed after the new initiatives taken by the HR. The thematic analysis for positive and negative experiences have been indicated by themes like abandoned, and empathetic approaches from co-workers, stress, job insecurity, burnout, fear of uncertainty, work-life conflict, reduced compensation, limited stress relief options, and emotional imbalance. The themes for recent trends that have a positively impact on the employees working in the tourism industry have been mentioned in the study.

**Originality/value:** This study attempts to bridge a prominent gap in the literature by providing a holistic understanding of all aspects of the pandemic and its impact on the employees working in the urban tourism industry and proposes strategic policy interventions required for developing a resilient tourism sector in the coming years.

**Keywords:** Recent HR trends, urban tourism employees, experiences, qualitative study, India

## 1. Introduction

The tourism industry is enduring a significant revolution driven by emerging Human Resource (HR) trends. These include technological advancements, employee well-being, agile workforce planning, diversity and inclusion, remote work and flexi-scheduling, data-driven decision-making, upskilling and training. Incorporating these trends is critical and essential to thrive in this competitive world. HR has played a crucial role in helping organizations navigate the pandemic and mitigate its adverse impacts. By adopting a culture of people first and valuing the overall wellbeing (mental, financial, and physical) of the employees, and building a resilient workforce, HR has been able to bring down the stress level of the employees and control burnout in them. The years 2020 and 2021 have been a catastrophic phase for human beings across the globe. It is being characterised as an unprecedented era that encompasses feelings of helplessness and loss of control for humanity. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, caused by Coronavirus, which later blew up like a wildfire in the rest of the world (Singhal, 2020). This pandemic spread rapidly across Asia and the Pacific region, before becoming a global threat. The worldwide impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector has been devastating (ILO, 2020a). The Asia-Pacific region started experiencing the impact on economies and



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labour markets early on, with the urban tourism bearing the maximum brunt. This sector started to experience a rapid decline in several countries, driven by a major decrease in tourism from China, which constitutes a major share of tourism revenues in many countries. The rapid spread of the virus resulted in the imposition of international travel restrictions, due to which international tourism essentially came to a halt. With the global spread of the virus, the governments-imposed lockdown measures in many countries as well as stay-at-home recommendations, consequentially domestic tourism also took a hit. This adverse impact on the tourism sector of the Asia Pacific region had far-reaching consequences in terms of GDP contributions given the high level of importance of tourism. Asia-Pacific region in 2018, recorded 348 million tourist arrivals worth US\$ 442 billion in tourism receipts with an export contribution of 5 percent (ILO, 2020 a, b).

Economic growth in Asia hit rock bottom in 2020, due to the pandemic. This qualifies for the worst growth performance in almost 60 years as per the IMF. The worst hit was Pacific Island countries like Fiji, Vanuatu, and Samoa, where revenues from the tourism sector constitute more than 50 percent of total exports. The business activity in the tourism sector has witnessed a negative impact on all jobs in the sector, with a large number of workers becoming redundant. Millions of workers are facing the risk of sliding into poverty (ILO, 2020b).

This pandemic has not only impacted individuals in particular but also the economic scenario in general by bringing an array of challenges and dilemmas for the organizations, more so in urban tourism (Dangi and Petrick, 2021). The pandemic apart from bringing about a plethora of changes in the lives of individuals has also made organizations revamp their operating styles (WHO, 2020). Organizations are forced to take a tough decisions in terms of retrenchments, salary cuts, and layoffs on one hand, while on the other, they were concerned about employees' health and safety leading to drastic changes in work settings and arrangements (Kumar et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020). The repercussions of this pandemic did have a long-lasting effect on employees' mental health as well (Roy et al., 2020; Staglin, 2020). Studies done by Wang et al. (2020) and Jeong et al. (2020) have urged future researchers to understand the facets that may help in catering to employees' psychological well-being during stressful situations.

The Indian tourism industry has started to show signs of recovery on account of domestic tourism since November 2020, after the decline of the first wave. The state governments and tourism boards were on the path of rebooting the industry after the second wave to reinstate travelers' confidence (Lamba and Mohan, 2021). The need for 'systematic longitudinal studies' to assess the impact of Indian government policies has been emphasized (Dash & Sharma, 2021). There have been numerous learnings from the pandemic. Digital transformation has received widespread adoption, and the world is witnessing a shift from efficient and effective hybrid work model to the metaverse and algorithmic HRM. The year 2022 did show some façade of normality along with challenges for HR and the employees. There has been a shift in priorities and the creation of new avenues of opportunities because of the combined impact of imminent recession, survival crisis due to higher cost of living, and enduring staffing crisis. The present study is an attempt to address this gap realised by scholars and policymakers and highlights how this pandemic has transformed policies and practices.

The present study intends to address four research gaps. Firstly, studies done in the past have discussed various aspects of job demands leading to negative outcomes including employee stress and burnout (Zhang et al., 2020; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2021, Kapoor et al., 2021) or positive outcomes including engagement, work efficiency, support, readiness to change, etc. while overlooking the linkage (Liu et al., 2021; Yacoub and El Hajjar, 2021; Roemer et al., 2021; Pathak and Joshi, 2021). The linkage requires investigation because employees in crises often experience stress and seek resources (individual and social) to reduce stress and enhance psychological well-being. Secondly, although numerous studies have been carried out to understand the human psyche perspectives, both from employees and employers' perspectives (Collings et al., 2021; Achenbach, 2020; Kluger, 2020; Semple and Cherrie, 2020; Trougakos et al., 2020), this study intends to shed light on tourism employees' perception concerning their experiences (both positive and negative). Also

specifically, employees with dependents have been considered for the study, so as to comprehend their plight during both waves of the pandemic. Thereafter the HR managers' (tourism sector) role has been investigated, in helping these employees to confront and combat the reality in an emotionally balanced way. Thirdly, previous studies have deliberated upon the quantitative aspect, there is however a paucity of qualitative understanding in the context of employee's (with dependents) perception concerning their experiences (in the tourism sector) during the pandemic. Fourth, and most important contribution of this research lies in highlighting the recent HR trends in the tourism industry, that have contributed towards positive employee experiences. Hence, in alignment with these research gaps, the present study attempts to deliberate on three important questions:

RQ1: What are the positive and negative experiences of working professionals with dependents in the urban tourism during both the waves of the recent pandemic?

RQ2: What are the initiatives taken by HR in the urban tourism during the pandemic?

RQ3: What are the recent HR trends in the tourism industry that have contributed towards positive employee experiences?

The paper is structured as follows. The introduction is followed by the literature review, then the research methodology, and the results and discussion. The study concludes with implications.

## 2. Literature review

### First and second waves of COVID-19 and tourism industry

Millions of the tourism industry's working professionals are struggling for their means of survival as this recent pandemic has driven this industry into an indeterminate state (Adams et al., 2021). As per the study of the National Council of Applied Economic Research, the Indian tourism industry suffered a humongous loss of around 14.5 million jobs during April-June 2020, the period immediately following the announcement of the first lockdown in March 2020 after the first wave had hit in (News18, 2021). A big chunk of the employees had informal jobs which render them more exposed to the negativity arising from COVID-19 (ILO, 2020a). Furthermore, after the first wave, many companies had switched to WFH policy for many of their employees which have restricted business travel; this has had a major impact on the recovery of the tourism industry (Kwok, 2020). The Indian tourism industry has started to show signs of recovery on account of domestic tourism in the months of November 2020, after the decline of the first wave. The state governments and tourism boards are on the path of rebooting the industry after the second wave to reinstate travelers' confidence (Lamba and Mohan, 2021). The need for 'systematic longitudinal studies' to assess the impact of Indian government policies has been emphasised (Dash and Sharma, 2021). The present study is an attempt to address this requirement felt by scholars and policymakers. Large-scale suffering by industry professionals worldwide has strengthened them and many of them have depicted a high level of resilience by diversifying into other industries for earning their livelihoods (Adams et al., 2021).

### Employees' experiences and COVID-19

Employee experience is defined as "the employee's holistic perception of the relationship with his/her employing organization derived from all the encounters at touchpoints along the employee's journey" (Plaskoff, 2017, p. 137). Even in a similar cultural setting, individuals may respond differently to a crisis situation. A study done in the Indian context revealed that employees may depict 'fight/yield/accept symptoms' during the crisis (Wang et al., 2016). Thus, emotional well-being influences employees' experiences.

Studies have demonstrated adverse impacts of the COVID-19 on employees' experiences (Collings et al., 2021). Recent studies on urban tourism employees inform the tremendous negative impact of job loss and rising health apprehensions on employee experiences (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Ozdemir, 2020; Peterson and DiPietro, 2021; Lim et al., 2023). Loneliness and ambiguity about health and job security, resulting from COVID-19, made employees feel anxious and mentally unstable (Rudolph et al., 2020; Kabra, 2022). The tourism sector depends highly on employee motivation to establish a long-term positive connection with the customers (Peterson and DiPietro, 2021). Motivation levels are influenced

by the sense of psychological well-being (Olivares et al., 2020). Lower well-being perceived by tourism employees has negative implications for employee engagement, thereby marring the customer experiences (Peterson and DiPietro, 2021). As the tourism sector is currently under acute distress, its employees need to be calm and optimistic, this would help them in controlling their negative emotions and contributing effectively to the process of recovery of their organization (Pathak and Joshi, 2021)

According to Self-determination Theory (SDT), employees' well-being is influenced by the fulfilment of their psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness with others (Deci and Ryan, 2014, Reis et al., 2000). A greater sense of competence in an employee shall motivate him/her to endeavour for the attainment of work goals (Gagné and Deci, 2005). During the pandemic, employees' pursuits for the attainment of goals became of paramount relevance due to prevailing ambiguity (Trougakos et al., 2020). Employees' need for autonomy is significantly associated with their health and well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Reis et al., 2000, Sheldon and Kasser, 1995). This association is of more prominence during pandemic times (Trougakos et al., 2020) owing to an enhanced level of health-related anxiety amongst employees. Prior studies have shown that poor work-life balance adversely impacts employees' well-being (Ilies et al., 2007; Rudolph et al., 2020; Gabriel et al., 2020; Palumbo, 2020). This may be attributed to the psychological need for relatedness amongst employees. Person-specific and context-specific factors might enhance or diminish autonomy, competence, and relatedness and thus affect well-being (Reis et al., 2000).

#### HRM Practices during pandemic

HR department needs to prepare employees for the unforeseen changes emanating from a crisis event. Its focus in such situations should be on retaining extraordinary employees who could contribute effectively towards organizational productivity (Naudé, 2012). The HR department plays a key role in crisis management by providing the necessary care and support systems for the employees' well-being (Dirani et al., 2020). During stressful times, the department must include employees in business continuity and crisis management plans (Dirani et al., 2020). The role of HR during the global financial crisis was critical in the recovery of many organizations; it played a strategic role in organizations' cost reduction and productivity enhancement via "downsizing, reductions in working time, lay-offs, concession bargaining, and related changes in reward systems and working conditions" (Gunnigle et al., 2013).

Adikaram et al. (2021) recommended soft HRM for managing employees during this crisis period using three key HRM bundles: health and safety, cost-saving, employee engagement, and motivation. Plaskoff (2017) advocated a changed method of HRM wherein, employee experience is at the core of people management in an organization. COVID-19 has impacted HR practices, policies, and interventions across various Indian industries (KPMG, 2020).

One of the worst-hit sectors, tourism, demands substantial attention of HR to help firms become resilient by managing their human capital appropriately during these tough times (Pathak and Joshi, 2021, Prayag et al., 2020). Organizational resilience is the function of individual employee resilience since an organization comprises a group of individuals. By instilling positivity and hopefulness in their employees, HR may be able to boost the resilience level of their employees (Tugade and Fredrickson, 2004). Studies reflect the scope for improvement of HR practices in the tourism sector to enhance the positivity amongst its employees; recovery of the sector from the current crisis requires effective employee engagement and employee resilience (Peterson and DiPietro, 2021).

HRM's role in the Indian hotel industry witnessed remarkable expansion, during the pandemic, from a restricted work-life view to a personal life view of employees, strongly supporting the notion of well-being-based HRM which is mutually beneficial for both parties (Agarwal, 2021). The author contended that HRM practices meet employees' intrinsic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The psychological well-being of employees can be enhanced, during this period, by establishing a culture of 'autonomy, trust, and empathy' during the pandemic (Lee, 2021). Aitken-Fox et al. (2020) revealed the relevance of trust in HRM during the COVID-19 crisis as the enhanced usage of employee surveillance softwares

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by some organizations depicts a lack of trust, which might harm employees' productivity. Lee et al. (2020) revealed the impact of 'effective leadership' and 'internal crisis communication' on organizational settings during COVID-19 was instrumental in satisfying the employees' fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

#### Recent HRM trends

This pandemic has resulted in numerous workplace transformations in the last three years. As things have returned to normal now, organizations are implementing a lot of strategies and policies to ensure that their employees experience a holistic and conducive work environment. HR is making all efforts to ensure the smooth and seamless functioning of the organizations, by strengthening the employee-employer relationship.

HR has now started to bring fresh and new perspectives. All efforts are made to enhance the experience of the employees working in the tourism industry, which includes providing them with flexibility at work, workplace safety, upskilling and reskilling, talent management, etc. HR is focusing on a seamless transition and a collaborative work environment where the voice of every employee is heard. A system of giving feedback, receiving rewards, and recognition further motivates the employees constructively. Another critical factor that HR is now concentrating on is the proper and repetitive communication of the mission and vision of the organization to the employees. This is done to motivate them, to create value, and encourage them to achieve the goals and objectives of the organization. The presence of learning opportunities is another trend that has been a great boon for the industry. Continuous upskilling and upgrading for employees at different levels is implemented in most organizations now. This helps in creating an immersive work culture.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **Data collection**

A multi-study and longitudinal qualitative approach was implemented for this research where data was collected from professionals working in the tourism sector in India at two different time periods (Study 1 and Study 2), in order to attain a holistic overview of our research questions. Our study is based on a grounded theory approach where purposive sampling was used to recognize the respondents having different professional and academic credentials (see Appendix 1). Participants were approached and informed about the process involved in this research and all the interested participants were requested to give their consent for participation in both the studies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by two of the researchers themselves in both English and Hindi language as some of the interviewees were more comfortable answering in Hindi. Both the studies were conducted sequentially where data for Study1 data was collected after the second wave (September 2021) of the recent pandemic and for Study2 data was collected after a gap of one year (September 2022). In Study 1, data was collected (RQ1 and RQ2) to explore the positive and negative employee experiences during the pandemic and what initiatives were taken by the HR to mitigate the impact of this crisis. Depending on the comfort level of the participant, interviews were conducted by telephone or face-to-face and this process was continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The respondents were approached again for the participation in Study 2 where the interviews were conducted to explore (RQ3) the recent HR trends in the tourism industry and their impact on the employees. Suitable date for interviews were taken from the interested respondents who participated in Study1. The interviews were conducted and finally, a total of 36 respondents were included in this research. All the interviews were recorded, and the transcripts were converted from the Hindi language to the English language (for all those respondents who have given the interview in Hindi) with the help of two language experts. Most of the interviews lasted for 45 to 60 minutes and all precautions and ethical standards were followed keeping in mind data biases of both internal and external validity.

#### **Data Analysis**

Initially, the recordings were coded into text which was further converted into a transcript by assembling all the responses into one single sheet for all the research questions for Study1

and Study2, Data cleaning was done for all response sheets to exclude all the special characters, spaces, and numeric values from the response sheets. Uniformity of cases was also ensured for the response sheet followed by defining the 'stop words'. Finally, these transcripts were imported into NVivo for data analysis. To map the responses with the themes budding from the interviews, a codebook was developed for which the intercoder reliability was established. Group consensus-based approach helped in developing the face validity. Word cloud was created, which helps in obtaining the main matter from the analysis followed by sentiment and thematic analysis using the feature of auto code (Malik et al., 2021). The same data files were also analysed manually, where the transcripts were read many times in order to get familiar with the content (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As suggested by Smith and Beretta (2021), various codes were assigned to the all the relevant data chunks (line by line) for every relevant response. The codes are termed as first-order descriptive concept. Similarities were brought down by creating mutually exclusive concepts. This was followed by generating second order concepts where themes were created with the help of respondent-centric terms, emerging codes and the literature available on the topic. In simple terms the first-order codes were aggregated into second-order codes or themes based on the identified links. Efforts are made to identify the links between the first-order codes, and this is further assisted by the theoretical explanation for the major factors identified. And finally, these second order codes were converted into themes. This method is consistent with the principle of contextualization which pays emphasis on understanding the importance of background (both social and historical) setting in qualitative research (Klein and Myers, 1999). The results obtained from Study1 and Study2 were used for Study3. All these steps were repeated for analysing the data collected for Study3.

#### 4. Results

##### Study1

The analysis of the transcripts indicated two major thematic categories, namely, positive and adverse experiences of employees working in urban tourism having dependents during the two waves of the recent pandemic.

Positive and negative experiences of employees with dependents working in urban tourism during the pandemic.

For the positive experiences, the word cloud in depicts that 'abandoned' is the most emphasized word by the respondents followed by emotional, mental, adverse, difficult, upskill, empathetic, employer, life, etc. These words facilitated developing the themes with the assistance of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of RQ 1 (Table 1) revealed that an empathetic approach from co-workers was the only prominent theme that emerged. Most of them mentioned that this pandemic has only negatively impacted the lives of employees working in the urban tourism. However, they mentioned that after wave II, there was a small relief as some of them received partial remuneration and some support from their organizations. The sample quotes of responses for RQ 1 are given in Table 2. The sentiment analysis of RQ1 revealed that most of the respondents had moderately negative and highly negative sentiments for this crisis during the pandemic. This analysis revealed that employees working in urban tourism were badly affected and as compared to other sectors as they had no positive sentiments.

**Table 1.**  
Themes identified for RQ1

S. No.	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
1.1	Empathetic approach	17	9%

Note: All the themes emerging were negative except the one mentioned

Responses for Wave I	Responses for Wave II	Linking HR Responsiveness with Tourism Employee Experiences: A Qualitative Approach <b>130</b>
Respondent 2: <i>"In my organization, all of us were asked to leave and no salary was given to us. The only change I could see was that my co-worker was compassionate towards me as he was also going through the same situation. In the time of crisis, when we had no one to earn for our family my co-worker was there to understand me and provided emotional support."</i> [1.1]	Respondent 2: <i>"I was contacted by my manager to join back again as the visitors have started arriving but I am still not sure that whether this job will remain with me or not. I am worried about the infection but much happy that I will be able to earn for my family."</i>	
Respondent 20: <i>"No positive experiences"</i>	Respondent 20: <i>"I am happy that I am supposed to join my work again. They have promised that I will get 60 % of my salary and as soon as things are on track we will get full salaries."</i>	<b>Table 2.</b> Sample quotes for RQ 1

While for negative experiences, the word cloud depicts that 'stress' is the word that is emphasized most by the respondents in the data collected, followed by falling, burnout, mental, work, life, lowered, mental, limited, emotional, physical, sick, insecurity, uncertainty, fear, imbalance, politics, etc. These words helped us in developing themes using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis for both the waves revealed eight defined themes namely stress (of falling sick) experienced by employees, job insecurity, burnout, fear of uncertainty, work-life conflict, reduced compensation, limited stress relief options, and emotional imbalance. Most of the respondents mentioned that they had no option of working from home like employees working in other sectors had. They were at very high risk since they were in direct contact with the customers and had to serve them in the best possible manner in order to sustain their jobs. Overall, they were not given any kind of medical insurance or assistance by their organization. Table 4 has some instances from the respondents. Sentiment analysis revealed that employees were harbouring very negative to moderately negative sentiments, related to their experiences during both the waves of this pandemic.

S. No.	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
2.1	Stress (of falling sick)	32	16%
2.2	Job insecurity	27	14%
2.3	Concern for dependents	25	13%
2.4	Mental stress and burnout	24	12%
2.5	Fear of uncertainty	20	10%
2.6	Work-life conflict	18	9%
2.7	Lowered compensation and incentives	17	9%
2.8	Limited options to relieve stress	12	6%

**Table 3.**  
Themes identified for RQ2

Note: Only themes having a frequency of more than ten were included

**Table 4.**  
Sample quotes for RQ 2

Responses for Wave I	Responses for Wave II
Respondent 11: <i>“I was worried about falling sick and there was a lot of stress because three of my peers were asked to leave their jobs. I was worried about my job too as the scenario is getting worst only. I am concerned about my family members, if I get infected by coming in contact with any infected customer, I will take this virus home and my family members will be at risk”</i> [2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.5]	Respondent 11: <i>“I am very much insecure about my job. No one is really worried after the lockdown had opened.... people have started coming out of their homes and everyone is planning to go on hill stations, and no one is worried that the virus will spread again. There is so much work here and the staff is just half. Workload has increased badly”</i> [2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.5]
Respondent 17: <i>“I felt a lot of work pressure, there was no end to work, and I could not spend much time with my family. We like other employees working in the different sectors had no option of working from home. We are in direct contact with our customers and serve them and if we get infected?? Who will earn for my family?? How will my family members survive???”</i> [2.3, 2.4]	Respondent 17: <i>“The condition is getting worse day by day. The number of customers is increasing and even after repeated reminders, they are not taking proper precautions.... Risk is increasing day by day and our organizations are not even providing any kind of medical insurance or assistance”</i> [2.3, 2.4]

Initiatives taken by the HR department to handle this crisis.

The word cloud depicts that 'safety' is the word emphasised most followed by protective, support, training, transparent, well-being, understanding, opportunity, increased, engagement, measures, health, leaders, use, practices, support, financial, technology, trust, etc. This facilitated theme development using thematic analysis. This analysis brought forth prominent themes like (Table 5) implementation of protective measures by employers, enhanced use of technology, safety measures, medical support, financial support, safe and inclusive environment, and consistent HR policies. Organizations needed to take cognizance of the perception, sentiments, and concerns of the employees. The morale was low, and employees were in need of encouragement and confidence. The loss of income, unemployment, and increasing COVID health concerns had severely affected the employees working in the tourism industry. They wanted to be nurtured and reassured by their organizations. Table 6 has some instances from the respondents. The sentiment analysis revealed that the respondents harbored moderately positive sentiments related to initiatives taken by the HR department during the crisis.

**Table 5.**  
Themes identified for RQ3

S. No.	Themes	Frequency	Percentage
3.1	Implementation of protective measures	28	14%
3.2	Enhanced use of technology	25	13%
3.3	Safety measures	22	11%
3.4	Medical support (vaccination drive)	21	11%
3.5	Financial support	20	10%
3.6	Creating a safe and inclusive environment	17	9%
3.7	Creating and communicating consistent HR policies	15	8%

Note: Only themes having a frequency of more than ten were included

#### Study 2

The word cloud depicts that 'well-being' is the word emphasised most followed by protective, safety, health, flexible, support, technology, training, transparent, well-being, understanding, opportunity, engagement, measures, knowledge, sharing, support, financial, trust, etc. This facilitated theme development using thematic analysis. This analysis brought forth prominent themes which highlighted the recent practices that organizations have implemented post-pandemic - (1) Emphasis on employee well-being: HR departments are now focusing more on the well-being of the employees by organizing well-being programs for their employees, taking different initiatives to provide mental health support, medical support, help them dealing with stress and workload, handling work-life conflict, implementing strategies to engage and recognize employees, etc. (2) Implementation of protective (safety and health)

measures: Strict safety and health measures are taken by the HR departments to protect their employees as well as their customers. Practices such as enhanced cleaning protocols, health screening, emergency response plans, regular distribution of PPE, etc. (3) Enhanced use of technology: The tourism industry has become more tech-savvy and is practicing digital recruitments and onboarding. Organizations are complementing the use of digital HR tools and platforms. There has been a very significant hike in the online booking by the customers. (4) Remote working facilities and flexible scheduling: Many tourism companies have started offering remote working facilities and flexible scheduling whenever and wherever possible in order to retain and attract talent. (5) Diversity and Inclusion: HR departments have started emphasizing more on creating an inclusive work environment for the employees by ensuring a diversified workforce in their organizations. (6) Data Analytics and HR metrics: there has been a rise in leveraging data to reach informed decisions about acquisition of talent, performance management, rewards and recognition, retention, etc. This is also assisting in selective hiring which aims at hiring the right candidate. (7) Upskilling and training: HR departments are emphasizing on presence of learning opportunities, they are now investing more in upskilling programs to support their employees by making them equipped with latest knowledge, techniques, and relevant skills. Training assists them in developing self-managed and effective teams. (8) Environmental sustainability: Many organizations have incorporated sustainable practices into HR policies to survive with the growing call for responsible tourism and eco-friendly travel options. Green HRM practices are given importance. (9) Emphasizing knowledge sharing behavior: Organizations have started focus on building a culture that emphasizes on knowledge sharing among the employees. (10) Promoting and developing positive leadership styles: A shift towards development of positive leadership styles such as authentic leadership, ethical leadership, etc. has been observed in the tourism industry, as these leaders provide motivation, encouragement, assistance to employees and act as role models for them. (11) Emphasizing collaboration: Every employee is treated equally irrespective of their role or designation. The concept of 'every voice in the organization is important' is in practice. (12) Value addition: HR are emphasizing more on making every add value to their work.

## 5. Discussion

The pandemic had a far-reaching impact on the socio-economic landscape of the world. The flow of international tourists suffered a severe setback, dropping from 76.3% to 30.8% in different parts of the world (Fotiadis, Polyzos and Huan, 2021). According to a KPMG report, the Indian urban tourism and hospitality sector was one of the worst affected. It witnessed the unemployment of 38 million people (The Hindu, 2020). The employee perceptions of the tourism industry and their sentiments were rather negative, vis a vis employee in other sectors (Peterson and DiPietro, 2021). In this sector, even the basic needs of safety, security, and stability were not addressed. Also, with the pandemic entering the next phase, the employee needs were evolving, and organizations needed a more sophisticated approach to address them. The first research question investigates the positive employee (of urban tourism) experiences during the pandemic. The sentiment analysis revealed only negative sentiments harbored by the employees followed by the thematic analysis, which brought forth themes like abandoned, insecure, and empathetic approach from co-workers as being most important for respondents. This indicated that the employees (with dependents) of this sector had no positive experiences as such, with a slight improvement in sentiments after the second wave of the pandemic. These findings are in sync with extant literature and extend the boundaries of knowledge as well. Revisiting SDT, the overall well-being of employees is a fallout of fulfilment of their psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness with others (Deci and Ryan, 2014, Reis et al., 2000), which is highlighted in the disparate responses received post-pandemic. This situation also resulted in employees' pursuits of their goal attainment gain paramount importance due to the prevailing ambiguity and an enhanced level of health-related anxiety (Trogakos et al., 2020). Prior research has indicated that organizational support to employees during health crisis impacts positive as well as negative emotions of employees (Lee, 2021), which affects their emotional well-being). Also, employee experiences impact their 'satisfaction, engagement, commitment, and

performance' (Plaskoff, 2017).

For negative employee experiences during the crisis. Themes like stress (of falling sick) experienced by employees, job insecurity, concern for dependents, burnout, fear of uncertainty, work-life conflict, reduced compensation, limited stress relief options, and emotional imbalance indicates the trauma experienced by the respondents; and sheds light on the fundamental truth about employee experience, a large percent of the respondents say the crisis has materially affected their daily work lives. Different people have widely varied experiences and perspectives. For instance, the analysis further revealed that women working during this pandemic were experiencing more negative sentiments in terms of stress, burnout, insecurity, and work-life conflict. This gender difference can be explained in terms of women trying very hard to balance work and personal life as compared to men. This enhanced effort is probably the reason for higher stress and burnout. The scientific viewpoint is that during uncertain times the natural human tendency is to flock towards individuals and situations that make them feel safe (Mawson, 2005). The ready availability and tailored support can enable organizations to build employee resilience as well as social capital and affiliation (Malik and Dhar, 2017; Malik, 2018). These findings are also in sync with SDT, which emphasizes the fulfilment of employees' psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness with other employees' for their overall well-being. We can also draw upon the need-based theories of motivation, and apply them to employee experience management, wherein organizations need to address critical and prominent needs of the employees, taking into account, the individual differences. The fulfilment of these needs will result in employee engagement, well-being, and work effectiveness.

The second research question seeks to develop an understanding of the organizational initiatives which were implemented in response to the pandemic. The thematic analysis revealed prominent themes like protective measures by employers, enhanced use of technology, safety measures, medical support, financial support, safe and inclusive environment, flexible work practices, and consistent HR policies. The findings indicate that tourism employees were harboring rather pessimistic sentiments, particularly with reference to the financial and economic condition as well as future income assurance. Also, the relatively younger and lower-paid female tourism employees are more vulnerable (Tripathi et al., 2023). Some of these negative sentiments were partially mitigated after the second wave of the pandemic as reflected in the word cloud as well as the sentiment analysis. This crisis has resulted in people experiencing unprecedented levels of disruption in their work and personal lives; thus, organizations adopted a holistic approach to manage the employee experience. A Mc Kinsey survey (2020) revealed that responsive organizations tend to have a tangible impact on employees. Satisfied respondents are four times more likely to be engaged and six times more likely to report a positive state of well-being. This is indicative of employee confidence and trust in their organizations' leaders.

The third research questions help in understanding the recent trends in the tourism industry in the transformed work environment which is far more competitive compared to the pre-pandemic times. Emphasis on employee well-being and workplace wellness is the main focus of most of the organizations. HR are able to build a healthy and positive environment in the workplace by helping the employees maintain a balance between personal and work front. The implementation of protective (safety and health) measures is another trend that observed in tourism sector. Security in terms of their job is another critical factor. Enhanced use of technology (for example, the adoption of benefit management, HR analytics and payroll processing using digital HR tools) in the tourism industry has eventually helped in streamlining the HR operations. Processes like online interviews, virtual orientation of the employees, and virtual assessment if needed have also been in practice. Many tourism companies have continued offering remote working facilities and flexible scheduling whenever and wherever possible in order to retain and attract talent. Diversity and inclusion are given great importance in the current scenario. Data Analytics and HR metrics have enabled leveraging data to reach informed decisions about acquisition of talent, performance management, rewards and recognition, retention, etc. Upskilling and training are another trend that has been seen in most organizations now where continuous training and

development of employees at different levels is practiced. This helps in creating an immersive work culture. Many organizations have incorporated sustainable practices into HR policies to survive with the growing call for responsible tourism and eco-friendly travel options. Basically, an inclination towards Green HRM practices is observed. The need of the hour is compassionate leadership and exhibiting deliberate calm and optimism. Organizations can improve the employee experience by shifting from a focus on meeting only health and safety needs to a more targeted and customized approach, recognizing differential needs and perspectives of different employees (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020; Aitken-Fox et al., 2020; Adikaram et al., 2021), in line with SDT. This will help organizations create meaningful impact now and well into the future.

### **Theoretical implications**

There is widespread recognition of the concept of volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments (Schoemaker et al., 2018; Van Tulder et al., 2019). However, this idea has been given further fillip due to the health and economic crises as a consequence of the pandemic. The recent crisis has revealed extraordinary vulnerabilities brought to the fore due to widespread global uncertainty in the tourism sector, with managers needing to manage complex global supply chains, unpredictable geopolitical relationships, and volatile financial markets. This uncertainty sets an important boundary condition in understanding the efficacy of existing theories like SDT (e.g., Brewster et al., 2016; Cooke, 2018; Cooke et al., 2020). Thus, future research can explore new avenues of managing global urban tourism-related uncertainty and contribute to answering macro questions like contextual leadership, collaboration under stressful conditions, and health and safety management.

The current pandemic has revealed new ways that organizational work can be accomplished, encouraging theorists to rethink how multinational enterprises can deploy global teams (Adamovic, 2018), using virtual collaboration and international assignments (Haslberger et al., 2013; Hippler et al., 2014). Finally, future researchers can explore the possibility of tourism enterprise resilience being the key performance indicator rather than just monetary performance. This resilience is the ability of an organization to respond to shock events (Branzei and Abdelnour, 2010; De Cieri and Dowling, 2012) and large-scale disasters like the global pandemic. This crisis stressed the importance of building this enterprise resilience and drives home the importance of developing organizations that actively contribute to environmental sustainability.

### **Practical implications**

HR has played a crucial role in helping organizations navigate the pandemic and mitigate its adverse impacts. By adopting a culture of people first and valuing the overall wellbeing (mental, financial, and physical) of the employees, and building a resilient workforce, HR has been able to bring down the stress level of the employees.

Having flat and egalitarian organizations:

Employee experiences can be addressed in a targeted and dynamic way using listening techniques, advanced analytics, behavioral science, and other technologies. Support response can be thus customized creating an overall feeling of well-being and cohesion.

The tourism industry, even in normal circumstances is associated with a wide range of risks (Chew and Jahari, 2014; Ross, 2005; Deery and Jago, 2009). Crises of any type evoke anxiety and fear, whereas tourism is associated with relaxation and enjoyment. Thus, the lessons learned, provide pertinent indicators for urban tourism and hospitality organizations along with governments to go in for some strategic planning for uncertain times so as to ensure the continuation of employability in this sector (Santana et al., 2003). This requires definitive proactive management measures for crises situations so as to mitigate negative impacts and provide an impetus for the future (UNWTO, 2020). Future policy interventions need to be in line with Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG, 2018), so as to strengthen the economic resilience of the sector. The tourism policy details need to strengthen the sector's linkages with other sectors, constituting its supply chain, so as to adopt an integrated approach for local sourcing of people and products.

The policy details also need to address income and social inequalities, safeguarding the well-being of urban employees, especially of the vulnerable groups and informal, unregistered workforce. This may also call for labor market regulatory enforcement and collaboration with the private sector. Another major recommendation is concerted policy action for investing in upskilling and reskilling of urban tourism employees. This will enhance their employability potential.

The HR function of tourism organizations needs to evolve and grow in several ways in terms of policy design and implementation. First, organizations can look at creating a central crisis command center, which can perform a critical role in overseeing any such future occurrences and have well-defined emergency response protocols. It can ensure coordinated response efforts to help organizations recover. Second, the HR function/ organizations need to design an analytics-based dashboard, to have a centralised repository of employees' health information, to be updated regularly.

Third, organizations are in the process of moving from responding to the crisis to thriving in the new normal. Hence there exists an opportunity to explore new work designs, organizational structures, and team collaboration models, i.e. developing an adaptable organization capable of harnessing an adequately networked structure of human resilience. Insights from organizational analytics can be leveraged to harness formal and informal networks, experiment with cross-functional teams to achieve greater collaboration and efficiency.

### **6. Conclusions**

The findings of the study clearly brought to light that HR practices in tourism and hospitality organizations have room for significant revision so as to improve the underlying sentiments of tourism employees.

HR has immense opportunities in the coming times but not without obstacles. For taking on these challenges, the HR needs to prioritize their own well-being first and become resilient and agile. They now need to work in collaboration with the other departments to embrace a holistic perspective. The needs of the employees need to assume priority along with their empowerment, so as to drive the strategic impact via people.

A pandemic like COVID-19 has had an enormous impact on urban tourism and hospitality organizations at the global level. Although there have been prior studies on various aspects of HRM related to crisis and recovery (Farndale, et al., 2019; Kim, 2020; Premeaux and Breaux, 2007; Varma, 2020; Wang, et al., 2009; Wooten and James, 2008). However, this literature is rather incomprehensive. This study attempts to bridge this gap in the literature by providing a holistic understanding of how this pandemic had an impact on urban tourism employees. It also explores the role of the HR function in crisis and recovery in a more focused manner.

The current crisis has laid the responsibility on the HR function for assessing and contributing to a multi-faceted response that embeds an organization's driving values, and societal impact with a clear focus on the well-being of employees, other stakeholders, and the community at large. Strategies that are deployed for business continuation also need to address the need for psychological resilience of employees. It also calls upon government policy interventions with sustainable tourism policies, so as to set the stage for developing resilient and self-sustaining tourism organizations (Alberini, 2021)

The organizations will also need to think strategically about the crisis implications followed by the process of recovery in the changing environment. HRM will be a critical element for organizational continuity and its recovery. Alterations in work design and practices may call upon HR for developing and implementing agile practices and strategies for this sector. These changes may include technology-based solutions, flexible work designs, new performance management approaches, and altering the overall employee experience.

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