

# Why does resilience matter? Global implications for the tourism industry in the context of COVID-19

Tourism  
industry

431

Alex Altshuler

*Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, School of Social Work,  
University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel, and*

Joshua Schmidt

*Department of Geography, Faculty of Social Sciences,  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the concept of resilience both through conceptual lenses and an applied relevance and importance to the tourism and hospitality industry in the context of identifying the most effective approaches to cope with the worldwide epidemic of COVID-19.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This conceptual paper is based on a comprehensive literature review and strategic interdisciplinary analysis as a basis for comprehensive policy recommendations.

**Findings** – This paper suggests five clusters of globally applicable measures and approaches aimed to enhance the resilience of the tourism and hospitality industry in the face of COVID-19 and more broadly in the face of other regional and global large-scale disasters: fostering adaptive and creative leadership; humility and cautious navigating through a deep uncertainty; flexibility in building on the unknown; enhancing social capital; and developing mutual respect and positive interconnectivity among the various stakeholders.

**Originality/value** – Through policy-driven applied conceptual analysis, this paper provides the various audiences in the travel and hospitality sector across the globe with an original, flexible and strategic approach to effectively respond to the multiple cascading effects of COVID-19.

**Keywords** Resilience, Conceptual analysis, Policy recommendations, COVID-19, Tourism and hospitality industry, Transformation and uncertainty, Transformation, Uncertainty

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

## Resilience: what, why and how?

The assumption of human activity to minimizing the potential damage of emergencies is fundamental for disaster research and practical emergency management work (Beck, 1992). This principle is relevant for disasters of all types, and it highlights the need for developing concepts that may reflect the level of the adaptive capacity of any entity such as a firm, a community or a region to be prepared and to cope with large-scale emergencies (Altshuler, 2010). The concept of “resilience” or “resiliency” (from Latin *resilire* – to bounce – evolved over time to refer to recovering from adversity [Alexander, 2013]) has become increasingly common in professional, scientific and public discourse across the globe, especially in the context of preparedness and coping with crises and disasters. It may potentially offer a truly interdisciplinary theory in disaster research (Kendra, Clay and Gill, 2018). Resilience has hundreds of definitions that emphasize different aspects of the concept and which originate



from various scientific fields of study (Chandler, 2014). For instance, most of the social sciences apply this concept including in sociology, social work, psychology, geography, public policy, anthropology, urban development, emergency management and political science (Ungar, 2008). Resilience also serves as an explanatory framework for systems functioning under stress (Kendra *et al.*, 2018). However, and despite the continuous effort invested in defining the various aspects of resilience, there is no comprehensive “roadmap” that makes clear the differences between the diverse perspectives on resilience that can be used to navigate the multidisciplinary, dynamic and sometimes chaotic landscape of the multifarious notions of the term resilience. Thus, we are quite far from a consensus in the professional and scientific community regarding the core meaning of the term “social resilience” in the context of disasters and crises (Kahan, 2015). The lack of clear roadmap is problematic not solely theoretically but also practically as policymakers and practitioners tend to view resilience as an aspirational state to which they might target specific applied capacity-building initiatives (Kendra *et al.*, 2018).

When there is a claim that a particular community (or industry, organization and country) is characterized by high levels of resilience and another claims that it has low levels, it may well be that both claims are right, as each of them is approaching, defining and measuring the concept of “resilience” in a different way, and therefore, each of them is arriving at a different conclusion. The flourishing and growing field of resilience research clearly suffers from conceptual ambiguities and contradictions of scale (Kendra *et al.*, 2018). The possibility of arriving at a single definition of the concept of resilience that will be agreed upon by most of the scientific and professional community does not currently appear to be realistic.

Nevertheless, in any discussion, the author should present the specific definition that he is using when discussing the issue of resilience and in this way establish clarity for the readers with regard to his exact intention when making some claim or other on this issue. Furthermore, it is important to analyze the mutual relations between the various definitions of the concept of “resilience” to achieve a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the issue.

The potentially detrimental and devastating implications of disasters on the hospitality and travel industry have long been acknowledged and analyzed (Mair, Ritchie and Walters, 2016). Previous research shows that policymakers play an important role in pursuing the goal of building disaster resilience in the tourism industry, and effective ongoing collaboration among the stakeholders is crucial for sustaining and enhancing resilience (Filimonau and De Coteau, 2020). Literature also clearly depicts that the level of resilience of the tourism sector as a whole depends on the level of resilience of all its subsystems (Hall *et al.*, 2018). This interconnectivity and interdependence further calls for adopting the strategic approach toward continuous resilience enhancement. The term resilience is well-known in the tourism industry, but research shows that practitioners use its various definitions and accordingly stress its diverse potential characteristics (Filimonau and De Coteau, 2020). Because of the practical and theoretical importance of resilience for effective functioning of the various stakeholders in the tourism industry in the context of potential disasters and crises, it seems very important to present the “analytical portrait” of resilience and the main dilemmas or ambiguities its usage raises to allow careful navigation through its complexities.

Conceptually and practically speaking, beyond the issue of specific definition of resilience, it should be remembered that it is a characteristic of an individual, an organization or a society that is always context and time dependent and therefore to avoid overgeneralizations. Therefore, it is possible that a particular organization or a group will

---

deal successfully with one type of emergency but will have difficulty coping with another. Moreover, that same organization may be able to successfully contend with a particular crisis at one point in time but will have trouble dealing with the same crisis at a different point in time. The subject is a complex and dynamic one, and therefore, there is a need for caution and precision in drawing conclusions about the state of resilience.

One of the quite widespread definitions of resilience was made by Resilience Alliance, an international multidisciplinary research organization:

Resilience is the capacity of a system to absorb or withstand perturbations and other stressors such that the system remains within the same regime, essentially maintaining its structure and functions.

A rather similar definition – though more comprehensive – is provided by the US National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, and it again includes the component of absorbing a disruption and of recovery from it. However, it also adds the components of preparedness, planning and relates to potential events in the future ([National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, 2012](#)).

There is a certain degree of similarity between the definition of the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine and the broad definition provided by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. Following is the latter's definition:

The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management.

According to the above definition, resistance is part of a system's resilience. There is also a contrasting approach in which resistance and resilience are seen as opposite and contradictory paradigms. Thus, resistance is aimed to prevent or reduce risk, whereas resilience comes into play in the recovery from a disaster that is sometimes unpreventable or else, the investment of resources needed to prevent it is unattainable ([Elran, 2017](#)).

The recovery component is fundamental in defining resilience ([Kendra \*et al.\*, 2018](#)). The basic assumption underlying these definitions is that a severe disruption will always lead to a certain reduction in the functioning of the affected system. If there is no real reduction in functioning, then neither is there any real damage, and in such a case, one cannot refer to the situation as an emergency or a disaster for a given organization, industry or community. This definition implies that if the reduction in functioning is prolonged and recovery is slow (or does not occur at all), then the system has relatively low resilience. In contrast, if the decrease in functioning is relatively controlled with the system/organization "deciding" where to withdraw and where to stand firm, and so bounces back quickly, then it is viewed as having relatively high resilience. If the system not only recovers quickly from a reduction in functioning but also manages to enhance its level of operations relative to what prevailed prior to the disaster (referred to as "bouncing forward"), then it is defined as having a prominently high level of resilience ([Rockström \*et al.\*, 2009](#)).

Bouncing forward is definitely the most desirable scenario, in spite of the many challenges in confronting and overcoming the crises. In the next section, we will try to examine several generic and global directions aimed to increase the resilience of tourism and hospitality industry in the context of COVID-19.

### **Proposed measures to develop resilience components for the tourism industry in the face of the ongoing challenges of COVID-19: selected insights**

As of December 2020, the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic that started in December 2019 is still here. It has affected the whole world and has disproportionately impacted the tourism sector. The crisis is different from any disaster that the humanity recently experienced in its global spread and scope and in its unprecedented level of uncertainty. Beyond its immediate health, economic and social consequences, it may have also significant long-term effects on human life. Such a tremendous challenge calls for fresh thinking as to how to enhance the resilience capacities and capabilities of the tourism and hospitality industry. Below are several intermediate insights and ideas that may potentially enhance resilience in these sectors:

- Fostering adaptive and creative leadership – Effective leadership is closely related to resilience and effective coping (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2007). What is true for “routine emergencies” is much more needed and at the same time much more challenging for “novel crises” (Leonard and Howitt, 2009) where lacking is the benefit of prior experience, previously tested (for the same disaster) protocols (Altshuler, 2016). In these situations, the adaptive and creative leadership on all the levels – from small teams to big tourism companies and the industry as a whole – is truly crucial.
- Humility and cautious navigating through a deep uncertainty – We still do not know a great deal about COVID-19 and its impacts. This state of affairs calls for recognition that there are still no “golden standards,” clearly “right” or “wrong” measures, but rather everything is to the best of our current (inherently limited) level of our knowledge and analysis. Recognizing that we do not know enough about the virus and how to best respond is a painful but essential and realistic reckoning necessary for this situation.
- Flexibility in building on the unknown – In spite of the deep uncertainty, we have to make decisions and take actions to the best of our current knowledge. Indeed, professionals and managers in the tourism industry have to “hold the stick at both ends” – understanding the limitations of every step taken and at the same time trying to craft the best possible present and future outcomes per the limited context (Altshuler, 2016). There are no set and predefined doctrines for this situation, and this is why it is absolutely crucial to adopt via trial and error, a gradual and flexible approach.
- Enhancing social capital – There are numerous evidences regarding the strong connection between social capital and resilience (Aldrich, 2012). The mosaic of relations between individuals and the degree of mutuality and trust in their relations are generally referred to as “social capital” (Putnam, 2015). A high level of social capital enables organizations and communities under pressure or experiencing a major unexpected turn of events to respond more effectively and to mobilize collectively to moderate the negative consequences. Organizations and networks that have built up strong relationships before a crisis and/or strengthen them during the crisis may have higher chances to obtain assistance, information and scarce resources during or following a disaster. Such mutual assistance is a kind of informal, self-constructed insurance that is created not by paying premiums but rather by investing time and effort in creating and harnessing relationships ahead of a given disaster or emergency. The stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry should consider prioritizing the enhancement of their social capital through cultivating multiple interconnected networks that will make each

---

separate entity as well as the entire tourism industry ecosystem more resilient both in the in short-term and long-term perspective.

- Developing mutual respect and positive interconnectivity – Usually during times of disaster – and especially in the midst of such a large-scale major crisis as COVID-19 has turned out to be – various intergroup tensions may substantially increase because of an abundance of high levels of stress and distress. Precisely in those super challenging times, the tourism industry can creatively lead and highlight the enlightening values of inclusion and mutual respect. As tourism and hospitality is not about harsh decisive debates but rather about harmony and leisure, the industry may foster creative and flexible “islands” of harmony and quietude per the particular dynamic circumstances of the virus in a given area that contrast the harsh COVID-19 inundated outside reality. The tourism industry is indeed well-positioned in terms of public perception so as to also positively serve the greater needs of society as a whole.

### Conclusion

This paper introduced the concept of resilience, its roots, context-dependent meanings and potential implications for the tourism and hospitality industry. In addition, the potential to apply certain measures aimed to further develop resilience in the tourism industry was presented and thoroughly discussed. Those five recommended strategic and comprehensive measures and approaches are carefully crafted and targeted – individually and especially as a whole – to serve as significant game changers for the tourism and hospitality industry in the face of COVID-19 and more broadly in the face of other regional and global large-scale disasters. The above set of recommendations includes:

- fostering adaptive and creative leadership;
- humility and cautious navigating through a deep uncertainty;
- flexibility in building on the unknown;
- enhancing social capital; and
- developing mutual respect and positive interconnectivity among the various stakeholders.

Humanity currently experiences through COVID-19 an ongoing multifaceted challenge that actually tests almost every system both human and market driven, with a disproportionate degree of pressure place on the hospitality, tourism and travel industries. Hopefully, this huge challenge can serve as a window for improving resilience in both the short and long term by adapting certain essential measures for the benefit of the tourism sector. The challenges as presented in the previous section are at once both of global concern while having a direct impact on localized coping principles and strategies. However, many of the potential solutions are mostly – and almost inherently – found locally, as local circumstances play a critical role in any effective implementation of generic, globally applicable above ideas, as the poet Shaul Tchernichovsky wrote “Man is nothing but the reflection of his homeland’s landscape.” Resilience, an already shifting term of critical importance and potential for the tourism and hospitality industry, has been proven by COVID-19 to be very context and place dependent.

## References

- Aldrich, D.P. (2012), *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Alexander, D.E. (2013), "Resilience and disaster risk reduction: an etymological journey", *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences*, Vol. 13 No. 11, pp. 2707-2716.
- Altshuler, A. (2010), "Emergency preparedness of local authorities: General model and the Israeli case", *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, Vol. 25 No. S1, pp. 39-40.
- Altshuler, A. (2016), *Israel's Emergency Management Challenges. Strategic Survey for Israel 2015-2016*, INSS Publications, Tel-Aviv, pp. 147-154.
- Beck, U. (1992), *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity*, in Ritter, M.A. (Ed.), Sage, London.
- Chandler, D. (2014), "Beyond neoliberalism: resilience, the new art of governing complexity", *Resilience*, Vol. 2 No. 1, pp. 47-63.
- Elran, M. (2017), "Societal resilience: from theory to policy and practice", in Linkov, I. and Palma-Oliveira, J.M. (Eds), *Resilience and Risk*, NATO Science for Peace and Security Series.
- Filimonau, V. and De Coteau, D. (2020), "Tourism resilience in the context of integrated destination and disaster management", *International Journal of Tourism Research*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 202-222.
- Hall, C.M., Prayag, G. and Amore, A. (2018), *Tourism and Resilience: Individual, Organisational and Destination Perspectives*, Channel View Publications, Bristol.
- Kahan, J.H. (2015), "Resilience redux: Buzzword or basis for homeland security", *Homeland Security Affairs*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 1-19.
- Kendra, J.M., Clay, L.A. and Gill, K.B. (2018), "Resilience and disasters", in Rodríguez H., Donner, W. and Trainor, J. (Eds), *Handbook of Disaster Research. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*, Springer, Cham, pp. 87-107.
- Leonard, H.B. and Howitt, A.M. (2009), "Acting in time against disasters: a comprehensive risk management framework", In Kunreuther, H. and Useem, M. (Eds), *Learning from Catastrophes: Strategies for Reaction and Response*, Wharton School Publishing, Upper Saddle River, pp. 18-41.
- Mair, J., Ritchie, B.W. and Walters, G. (2016), "Towards a research agenda for post-disaster and post-crisis recovery strategies for tourist destinations: a narrative review", *Current Issues in Tourism*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 1-26.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (2012), *Disaster Resilience: A National Imperative*, The National Academies Press, Washington, DC.
- Putnam, R.D. (2015), *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, Simon and Schuster Press.
- Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K., et al. (2009), "A safe operating space for humanity", *Nature*, Vol. 461 No. 7263, pp. 472-475.
- Rodriguez, H., Quarantelli, E.L. and Dynes, R.R. (Eds), (2007), *Handbook of Disaster Research*, Springer, New York, NY.
- Ungar, M. (2008), "Resilience across cultures", *British Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 218-235.

## Corresponding author

Alex Altshuler can be contacted at: [alex.altshuler@gmail.com](mailto:alex.altshuler@gmail.com)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)