

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF TOURISM INDUSTRY IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A STUDY OF SELECTED TOURIST ENTERPRISES IN KERALA

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Abstract

Struggling to come out of the shackles created by the apparent down in business owing to the decline in booking and travel trips, tourism enterprises have been forced to implement newer survival strategies to exist in the field. This paper sheds some light on the novel and innovative survival strategies adopted by selected tourism operators and hotels in certain selected tourist spots in Kerala. The study considers four types of survival strategies for analysis viz. Retrenchment, Persevering, Innovation and Exit. The study has found that the type of strategies adopted by the enterprises varies in accordance with their nature of business. Most of the enterprises preferred to adopt a persevering survival strategy that is they tended to continue their operations without applying any significant decline in their scale of operation. The study has found significant associations between the number of years spent in the field of operation and the type of strategies adopted for survival. It has been found that younger enterprises tended to adopt an 'exit' survival strategy while experienced and older enterprises stood for persevering strategy.

Key Words: *Survival Strategies, Retrenchment, Persevering, Innovation, Exit*

JEL Classification: Z30

I. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been one of the hard-hit sectors of the Covid-19 pandemic (Acquaah, Namatovu, & Kiggundu, 2021). The nature of the Virus and the unprecedented precautionary measures adopted by the Government across nations has virtually made the tourism sector inoperative and unremunerated. Struggling to come out of the shackles created by the apparent down in business owing to the decline in booking and travel trips, tourism enterprises have been forced to implement newer survival strategies to attract tourists. Although these measures appear to have been of sporadic attempts taken at the minute scale by certain enterprises especially of the small scale and medium-sized, as a survival strategy to nullify the adverse economic consequences of a pandemic it needs to be reckoned with. Taking the same to the larger platform with scientific-technical and marketing assistance may give a big scope of relief for the tourism industry as a whole. Nevertheless, it is feared that, unlike other sectors, the revival of the Travel and Tourism (T & T) sector is likely to take more time as people may postpone their most dispensable requirements in view of the safety measures that have still been on in the light of the possibility of the emergence of new variants of virus (Orîndaru, Popescu, Alexoaei, Căescu, Florescu, & Orzan, 2021). The decline in business travels and leisure travels has hit the tourism and travel industry to a greater extent. In this background, this paper sheds some light on the novel and innovative survival strategies adopted by selected

tourism operators and hotels in certain selected tourist spots in Kerala.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the present study is to understand how the enterprises engaged in various tourist operations attempted to adopt different survival strategies to withstand the negative consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

III. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Survival strategies are not a new one. Industrial enterprises in one form or other have embraced survival techniques to tide over the adverse economic backlash of several horrible financial turbulent times. For instance, when the financial meltdown shook the entire emerging and advanced industrialized economies in 2008, many firms including those pertaining to tourism activities adopted survival tactics, and many fared better to douse the flames of economic crisis. However, such strategies assumed a varied form, quite different from what has been followed during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, much innovation could hardly be claimed in the case of such strategies. Usual marketing techniques like offering high discounts and making joint products with other leading sectors were in fact put into the effort in those days, albeit it's discouraging impact on the arrival and booking of the clients. Almost distinct from this, Covid-19 has created unique circumstances where people find themselves ravaged, and unable to

provide for their basic economic necessities like food and shelter.

Crisis in the tourism sector is attributed to both supply-side and demand-side bottlenecks. Supply-side constraints usually come in twin forms. Firstly, constraints that emerge from the inability of the service providers to sufficiently cater to the varying requirements of the tourists (internal issues), and secondly, those that come up owing to the lack of social overhead capital (SOC) like all-weather roads, rail-road-air-water connectivity (integrated infrastructure), public transport, comfort stations, power, internet access and the like, and other specific infrastructure which are necessary for the successful operation of the tourism industry (these could best be labeled as external factors that create supply-side issues). These issues are partly systemic and partly firm or activity-specific but can be progressively tackled to the satisfaction of the tourists. Unlike supply borne issues, by and large, demand-side issues often lie outside the functional domain of the tourism entrepreneurs. However, to a greater extent, the specific demand for tourists' products for a particular entity can be determined by the distinguishing features of the products being offered for sale to the tourists through varied channels of marketing. It boils down to the fact that by devising and executing modern sophisticated marketing strategies, the tourism firms can easily influence the demand pattern of their products, and can attract tourists to their destinations even amidst all overarching negative factors that may deter tourists from availing such services. For instance, in Kerala, the hotels business running restaurants as well has innovated the 'car dining' method at the peak level of the spread of the Covid-19 Virus, when the government prohibited taking food inside the hotels. Car dining enabled travellers to take food without alighting from their vehicles. This attracted a huge number of travellers even in the midst of the peak in the Covid-19 crisis and proved effective in protecting the people from viruses without affecting the revenue source of the service providers. Another factor that works on the demand side is the decline in general economic activities leading to income shortfalls and employment loss, which may deter people from travelling and visiting tourists' destinations. For this, overall macroeconomic improvement is called for, and the tourism sector alone has little to do in this respect.

It is true that this is not the first time that the tourism sector across the globe has been battling with untoward times. In past as well, the tourism sector was badly hit by economic and health hazardous. For instance, foot and mouth disease, Avian flu and Swan flue afflicted the tourism sector enormously although the scale of the damage may not be comparable with the one being

caused by the spread of Covid-19. Terrorism and climate-induced disasters have had a dampening effect on the tourism sector. In response to this crisis, the tourism sector received external stimuli to get out of the crisis in a short and medium time. But, what distinguishes the present crisis are its widening ramifications on almost all spheres of the economic process, and hence, the remedy and response not only should depend on the external stimuli either directly from the government or from any other sectorial upswings having linkage effect with the tourism sector. What the current conundrum warrants are the internal stimuli and responses from the tourism sector itself to withstand the impending threats that the Covid-19 has created. The return of the tourism sector to the pre-Covid status apparently relies on this resilient of the tourism sector.

The nature of crisis be it as it may, the crisis should be dealt with accurate and reliable responses from the side of those who are afflicted by it. A crisis is something that is an unexpected uncertainty that interferes with the normal outcome leading to harmful effects (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). Putting in other words, Crisis is characterized by 'unpredictability, uncertainty, and inability to regulate the functioning of a system' (Beirman & Walbeek, 2011). Many studies focus on the recovery side of the crisis in the tourism sector, describing how to get out of the crisis. It is evident that for recovery to happen the recovery plan should encompass a marketing plan and management plan. In the immediate short and medial plan, however, crisis management is supposed to cover four things: Retrenchment, Persevering, Innovation and Exit (Wenzel, Stanske, & Lieberman, 2020). Moving on to the first one, retrenchment, a process where the firms narrow down its scope of business by way of reducing its assets and product lines, appears to be a short term strategy, which, if adopted, in the long run, will boomerang to the future prospects of the firm itself. Nevertheless, it is a strategy a firm can quickly rely upon to face a crisis that needs to be immediately tackled. The second one, persevering, is somewhat opposite to the retrenchment in the sense that the firms swim through the troubled waters by way of continuing with what they have been normally doing. In other words, in persevering, firms maintain the *status quo*. In many cases, persevering has been found to be far effective than any other strategic measures including retrenchment (Chakrabarti, 2015). Persevering can be proved to be effective especially in the long run provided firms access and receive enough assistance from external sources. It goes on saying every crisis is an opportunity to embark on a new thing to prosper further in future. The crux of this saying lies in the scope of innovation that firms rely on in times of crisis to wash

out the immediate and long term effects of such crises on the future prospects of the firm. Finally, exit, the discontinuation of the business activities of a firm, in the present context of this study, when firms discontinue their tourism operations and travel assistance, is the last resort when all arms in the armory get exhausted for a firm in its war against the untoward circumstances. Nevertheless, exit cannot be the end of the story. Some firms adopt exit as a business strategy to get them relieved for a while and before they embark on a new venture (Carnahan, 2017). In the tourism sector, some firms exist from their operation from one segment only to come back to another segment of the tourism sector itself with much rejuvenation. It may also happen that firms in the tourism sector may exit from a geographical location to relocate them to another new location which shall offer them lucrative business opportunities. It simply boils down to the fact that although exit is seemed to be somewhat apprehensive in the eyes of the competitors, it may not be the end of the business concern, and therefore, exit has to be considered as a coping up strategy in times of crisis like Covid-19.

In short, the tourism crisis needs special attention thanks to the specific characteristics of such crisis and the vulnerability and resilience associated with the crisis. Depending upon the core causes of the crisis, tourism crisis may be of five types: environmental tourism crises where climate and environmental reasons may create and exacerbate such crisis; socio-political crisis where social and political turmoil leads to a crisis in the tourism sector; health-related crisis where the disease causes a problem for the tourism industry; technology-related tourism crisis where the technological failure like the failure in internet facilities may create a crisis; and finally economic induced tourism crisis where financial and economic slowdown may generate waves of crisis in the tourism sector (Koehl, 2011).

IV. A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

At the outset, it may be appropriate to note that there has been no dearth of studies related to Covid-19 and its consequences on varied sectors and segments of the population. Nevertheless, rarely studies have focused solely on the impact of the tourism sector in terms of decline in tourists' activities, the decline in man-days lost, and revenue shortfalls. It is obvious that when bad times knock on the door, everyone tends to tighten the belt which is, through the lens of economics, does not appear to be a wise response to the crisis as tightening itself will worsen the cycle and frequency of the crisis rather than dousing the flames of it. These stringent austerity measures have been resorted to by many

tourists' entrepreneurs to tide over the crisis that Covid-19 unleashed.

A study on the survival of the tourism industry in India analyzed the challenges and opportunities of the tourism sector in the Covid times (Sandhya, 2021). This study based its findings on the available literally evidence on the issue concluded that many firms adopted cost-cutting measures to resolve impending financial crisis that loomed over their heads thanks to the Covid-19 social distancing and lockdown measured resorted to by the governments.

Kaushal & Srivastava (2020) found that the firms in the hospitality sector and tourism adopted multi-tasking by employees as an important way to cut down the manpower cost in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the exercise of qualitative research using mainly the content analysis of the responses provided by the samples drawn on judgmental sampling method, the study concluded that media roles, sanitation and hygiene were relevant in tackling the challenges posed by the severity of the crisis.

Orîndaru, Popescu, Alexoaei, Căescu, Florescu, & Orzan (2021) in their study on the sustainable strategies for the tourism industry in the post-Covid times obviously pointed out that the prospects of tourism in the post-Covid scenario would rely on the hygiene and health conditions in the host destinations of the tourism industry. Since people would not venture into accessing tourism products in bulk, the crisis is unlikely to be over in the immediate future. The study calls for enhancing communication with clients over fears and concerns with regard to the safety and hygiene conditions in tourist destinations. The study highlighted the significance of ameliorating the fears of travellers as the most important strategy to get out of the impending financial crisis that the tourism industry has been confronting.

Tsionas (2020) in a study analysed the feasibility of the strategy of a 'gradual adjustment' of the tourism sector to the pre-covid normally and attempted to examine how quickly such adjustment would help the sector to recover its losses incurred during the hectic days of Covid-19 crisis. Two models of reopening were considered in the study: reopening with non-negative profits and reopening with Pre-Covid profit status. Unsurprisingly, the study found that the former would be feasible while the latter would require reopening with at least 33 per cent capacity utilization. In the context of 'gradual reopening' which has been recommended by many governments, the second strategy would turn out to be unfeasible to some extent.

Jones & Comfort (2020) in their paper attempted to throw light on the 'dramatic effects the crisis has had on the sustainability and hospitality of the tourism industry and found that the crisis had offered a vision for a more sustainable future for the tourism sector. The paper argued that the onset of Covid-19 and the economic repercussions that it has had on the tourism sector in fact gives a rare opportunity to understand the relationship between sustainability and the hospitality industry.

Singh, Jamal, & Ahmad (2021) in their study on the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism activities in the Kashmir Vally of India drew attention to the fact that the lockdown and other restrictive measures put in practice by the government to fight the spread of the virus has had a negative impact on the life and livelihood of the lower level stakeholders of the tourism industry in the Kashmir Valley. Drawing on documentary research with semi-structured interviews, the study found that people engaged in the tourism sector had to go in search of other jobs in times of the Covid-19 crisis period without adopting any alternative strategy to revive their tourism activities. This often happens mainly because the tourism sector is highly dependent on many other external variables and externalities.

Bichler, Petry, & Peters (2021) endeavored to locate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of the sense making perspective and analyzed how the employees reacted to the crisis management steps initiated by the operators of tourism activities to mitigate the negative effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the tourism business. They evaluated how tourism organizers kept the balance between maintaining business and preparing for uncertain circumstances. Zooming in on the ad-hoc management practices adopted by the mid-level tourism operators, the study attempted to look into the gamut of crisis management from the point of view of employees engaged in tourism activities. The study emphasized the importance of paradox recognition by the employees and other stakeholders as a 'critical sense making outcome' for tackling the issues of the Covid-19 pandemic and its adverse consequences on the tourism sector.

Pramond, Kristiana, & Brian (2021) in their work on the tourism sector on the Indonesian economy described the changes in the tourism industry of Indonesia in times of the Covid-19 crisis and argued that most of the Indonesian tourism operators which the study surveyed had opted for shifting their area of operation to withstand the crisis created and exacerbated by the outbreak of the pandemic. Stakeholders in tourism including employees and operators switched their fields in response to the crisis without waiting much to devise an alternative strategy within the tourism industry itself.

Binh, Ninh, Clare, Huu, & Nguyen (2021) conducted an extensive study on the impact of the Covid-19 crisis and the strategies to cope with the crisis in the case of tourism firms in Vietnam. The results of the study demonstrated that the key influences of the Covid-19 pandemic included dwindling revenue for the firms engaged in the sector, enhanced operating costs eating into the precious and hard earnings in times of the crisis, and employee redundancy, furthering fuelling the variable costs of the firms. The study showed that most of the firms in the tourism sector had been opting for short and medium-term strategies to mitigate the crisis rather than adopting any long terms creative strategies like the adoption of any innovative strategies. The short and medium-term strategies included mainly retrenchment, apparently to meet the problem of employee redundancy, persevering and exiting from the business at least for a short while.

Blake, Sinclair, & Sugiyarto (2003) in their study on the impact of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) on the UK economy analyzed how the downward trend in tourism owing to this particular disease affected the GDP of the UK economy. The study showed that the disease had a negative impact on the tourism sector of the UK and consequently the UK GDP growth had registered a steep downward trend. The study called for devising strategies to connect the development in the tourism sector with agriculture so that the backwash effect of the tourism sector on the economy of the UK could be arrested efficiently.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study collected information on surviving strategies from 100 tourism enterprises located in Ernakulum and Alappuzha. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect information. Closed-ended questions were administered using the interview schedule. The sample was collected on the basis of a multi-stage stratified sampling process giving considerable importance to two places viz. Ernakulum and Alappuzha. Most of the Hotels were from the Ernakulum district while resorts and boat service enterprises came from both districts. The data were analyzed using appropriate statistical software. Cross tabulation and Chi-square tests were used to find out certain relevant associations among key variables under the study.

VI. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Of the total enterprises that came under the study, the majority of the enterprises were from the Travel and Tourism (T&T) field while 25 per cent were resorts. Many small scale T&T operators have been active in

both the Ernakulum and Alappuzha districts (Table No.1).

Table 1 Nature of Tourism Enterprise

Nature of Tourism Enterprise	Percent
Resorts	25
Hotel	17
Boat Service	18
Travel and Tourism Operation	40
Total	100

Source: Survey Data, 2021

An important variable that helps in the present analysis is the years that each enterprise has spent in the field of the respective business. Of the three categories that the study has made viz. less than five years, between ten to more than five years and more than five years, it has been found that 42 per cent of the enterprises that have

completed more than ten years belonged to the T&T sector while near about 34 per cent of resorts have also completed more than ten years of operation in the tourism sector. There is a significant difference between the nature of the tourism enterprises and the years of completed business (Table No.2)

Table 2 Nature of Enterprise: Completed Years wise Distribution

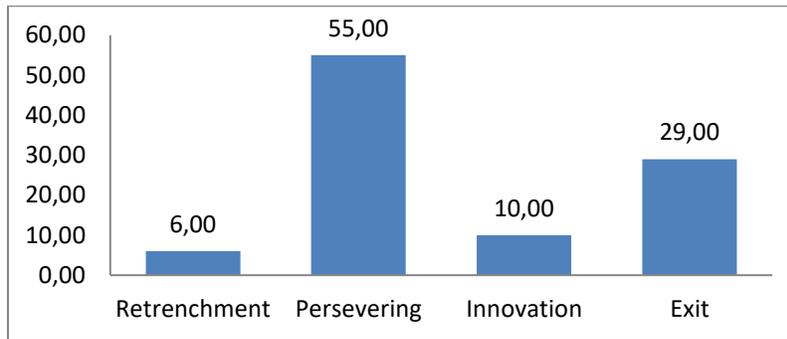
Nature of Enterprise	Years in Business		
	Less than Five Years	Ten to More than Five Years	More than 10 Years
Resorts	26.67	7.69	34.09
Hotel	6.67	46.15	6.82
Boat Service	23.33	15.38	15.91
Travel and Tourism	43.33	30.77	42.18
	100.00	100.00	100.00
Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	23.598a	6	0.001
Likelihood Ratio	21.807	6	0.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	0.25	1	0.617

Source: Survey Data, 2021

Moving on to the analysis of the different strategies that the enterprises have used to mitigate the severity of the crisis in the Covid-19 times, the study first sought to understand the kind of strategy which these enterprises preferred to use. Of the four strategies, it has been revealed that 55 per cent of the enterprises preferred to employ the strategy of Persevering which is nothing a

desire on the part of them to continue with the same scale of business that they had been doing (Figure No.1). This is of course a good sign that majority of them preferred to continue with their scale of business without resorting to any steps that would spawn untoward consequences.

Figure 1 Which Strategy did the enterprise prefer to use?



Source: Survey Data, 2021

It is quite evident that 90 per cent of the Travel and Tourism (T&T) enterprises preferred to use Innovation as the strategy to tackle the crisis brought about the

Covid-19 while 41 per cent of the enterprises dealing with the boat service preferred to close down their activity (Table No.3)

Table No 3 the Preferred Strategy: Nature of Enterprise Wise

Nature of Enterprise	Which Strategy would you prefer?			
	Retrenchment	Persevering	Innovation	Exit
Resorts	32.33	23.64		34.48
Hotel	16.67	22.64		10.34
Boat Service	34.33	6.45	10.00	41.38
Travel and Tourism	16.67	47.27	90.00	13.79

The preferred strategy to tackle the crisis differs from the exact strategy that the tourism enterprises actually adopted given varied circumstances and the pressures exerted both external and internally on the entrepreneurs. Further, it may be worth noting how the adopted strategy varies in accordance with the number of completed years in the field of the tourism business. It could be observed that in the present study among those with less than five years in the field of business, 68.42 per cent adopted the strategy of ‘exit’ from the field owing to the crisis created by the Covid-19 whereas among those firms with more than ten years of

completed experience in the field, 70 per cent strove hard to exist in the field by adopting innovation strategy and 52.63 per cent opted for persevering (Table No.4). This means that relatively old firms have had a tendency not to opt for an ‘exit’ strategy even amidst crisis while ‘young’ firms tended more to adopt the ‘exit’ strategy. Since the P-value in the Chi-square analysis happens to be 0.00, it could be concluded that there is a significant difference between the strategy adopted by the tourism enterprises and the years spent in the field of tourism business.

Table 4 Adopted Strategies and the Age of the Tourism Enterprises

Years spent in Business	Which Strategy did you adopt?			
	Retrenchment	Persevering	Innovation	Exit
Less than Five Years	35.71	15.79	30.00	68.42
Ten to More than Five Years	57.14	31.58		
More than 10 Years	7.14	52.63	70.00	31.58

P value is .00

Four types of retrenchment strategies have been followed by the surveyed enterprises in the present study. They are costs cutting measures, running down assets, reduction in the number of employees on the payroll and narrowing the scope of marketing the products. It is interesting to note that Resorts chose to cut the costs of operation in different ways while Travel

and Tourism enterprises made the drastic decline in the number of workers and 83 per cent of market narrowing strategy has also been adopted by the T&T enterprises (Table No.5). Further, the study has found a significant association between the nature of tourism enterprises and the different types of retrenchment strategies adopted by the enterprises.

Table 5 Retrenchment Strategies and the Nature of Tourism Enterprises

Nature of Enterprise	Which type of Retrenchment did you use the most?				Total
	Cutting Costs	Running down Assets	Reduction in Employees	Market Narrowing	
Resorts	71.43	16.00	10.42	16.67	25.00
Hotel	10.52	20.00	20.83		17.00
Boat Service	8.52	32.00	16.67		18.00
Travel and Tourism	9.52	32.00	52.08	83.33	40.00

P value is significant at five percent.

The study has considered three types of Persevering strategies viz. maintaining human resources, continuing the same scale of business as before the pandemic, and being ready to reap the benefits after the pandemic. It is

revealed from the analysis that most of the T&T enterprises that are nearly 47 per cent chose to keep everything intact with the intention of reaping the benefits after the pandemic (Table No.6).

Table 6 Type of Persevering and the Nature of Enterprises

Nature of Enterprise	Type of Persevering You Chose to Implement		
	Maintaining Human Resources	Continuing the Same Business Offers	To be ready to reap benefits after the Pandemic
Resorts	25.00	28.79	16.67
Hotel		18.18	16.67
Boat Service	50.00	15.15	20.00
Travel and Tourism	25.00	37.88	46.67

Regarding the type of innovation adopted by the tourism enterprises, it has been found that enterprises in the T&T field chose to come out with new products or diversified products and those engaged in offering boat service went in for finding out a new source of revenue generation (Figure No.2). moving on to the type of exit method used by the tourism enterprises in the study area,

it could be observed that 66 per cent of enterprises in the T&T sector adopted employee redundancy whereas 37 per cent of those enterprises engaged in hotel business chose the strategy of releasing committed resources to be used in other seemingly profitable areas (Figure No.3).

Figure 2 Type of Innovation adopted by the Enterprises

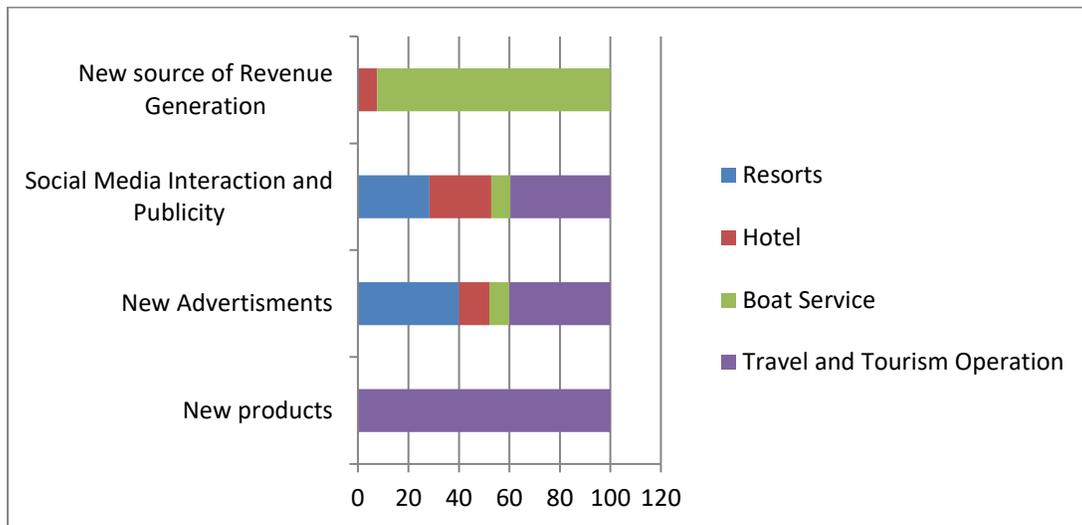
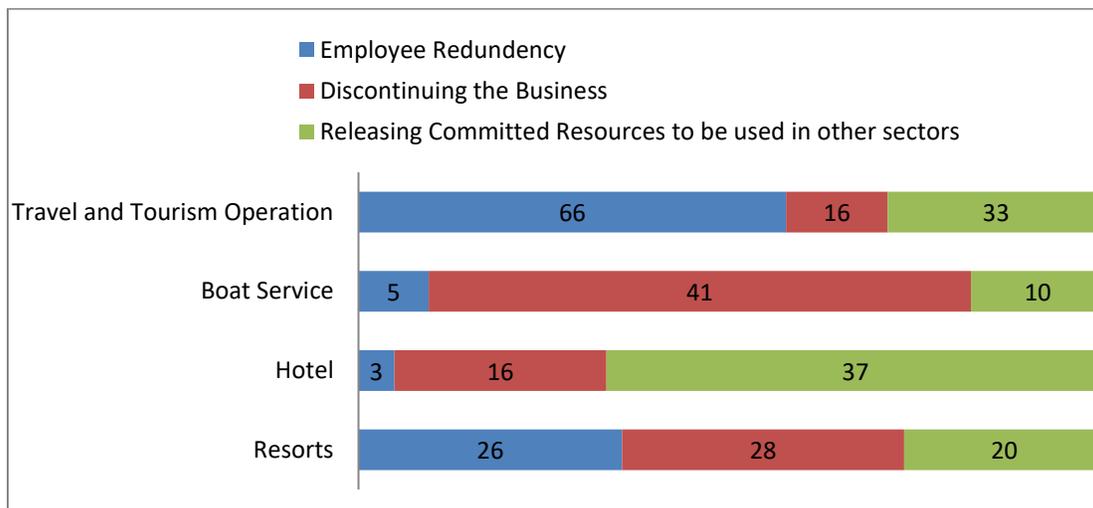


Figure 3 Type of Exit Method Adopted by the Tourism Enterprises



VII. CONCLUSION

Thus it is evident that enterprises engaged in the tourism sector have used different survival strategies to cope up with the crisis created by the Covid-19

pandemic. The type of strategies adopted by the enterprises varies in accordance with their nature of business. The present study shows that most of the

enterprises preferred to adopt a persevering survival strategy that is they tended to continue their operations without applying any significant decline in their scale of operation. The study has found significant associations between the number of years spent in the field operation

and the type of strategies adopted for their survival. It has been found that younger enterprises tended to adopt an 'exit' survival strategy while experienced and older enterprises stood for persevering strategy.

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