

Covid-19 Pandemic and Beachside Businesses: A Curse or a Blessing in Disguise?

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on businesses worldwide, with the tourism and hospitality sector being particularly affected. This study investigates how managers of beachside businesses in Cape Coast, Ghana, perceive the pandemic's impact on patronage and health and safety practices. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 managers, and thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. The findings reveal three primary themes: a significant decline in patronage due to restrictions and fear of infection, the adoption of enhanced health and safety practices to comply with mandates and reassure customers, and mixed perceptions of the pandemic as either a curse due to financial losses or a blessing in disguise due to opportunities for innovation and improvement. The study concludes that the pandemic has been both a curse and a blessing for these businesses, with recommendations for sustaining health and safety improvements, exploring digital innovations, and providing targeted policy support to foster recovery and resilience.

Keywords: Covid-19, Beachside businesses, Cape Coast, Ghana, Patronage, Health and safety practices

Introduction

Pandemics are contagious diseases that cause extraordinary level of ill-health and death across borders, as well as massive economic, social and political instability (Khamung & Hsu, 2021). History has indicated that, although pandemics have been occurring across the globe, the rate has risen as a result of frequent occurrence of animals carrying viral diseases (Zielinski & Botero, 2020). Jones et al. (2008) also indicated that industrialisation, tourism, migration and environmental degradation were the major factors responsible for the risen rate of occurrence of pandemics. The influenza of 1918 has been cited as the worst pandemic experienced in the world prior to 2019 (Liang, Liang & Rosen, 2021). Although not all countries were affected, about 100 million people across the globe lost their lives to the influenza pandemic (Duhoe & Toffa, 2020). In the 21st century, the novel Corona virus (Covid-19) outbreak appears to be the worst natural disaster the world has experienced, affecting both economic and social activities worldwide (Li, Ding, Zheng & Sui, 2021; WHO, 2020). Besides its devastating effect on public health, COVID-19 has threatened the survival of numerous businesses across the world, causing many of them to shutdown either perpetually or transitorily. The disease has changed the outlook and the manner in which businesses are being carried out in surviving firms (Bartik, 2020).

The devastating nature of the disease was due to the fact that the virus causing the disease spreads from one person to another through dribble from infected person's coughs, or sneezes (Khamung & Hsu, 2021). The virus, for this reason, was very communicable mostly in crowded areas. As part of measures to curb the pandemic, governments across the globe implemented a common comprehensive strategy in their respective jurisdictions. These measures included total or partial lockdowns of major cities, social distancing, hand washing, the compulsory wearing of face masks, restrictions on movement between towns and cities, and refraining from shaking hands and hugging one another. There were also isolations of affected individuals, travel bans and ban on public gatherings, and these halted the activities and operations

of beachside businesses – setups providing recreational and hospitality services at the beach (Aduhene & Osei-Assibey, 2021; Afriyie, Asare, Amponsah & Godman, 2020).

Particularly, in Ghana, aside these measures, at the height of the pandemic, the government banned all forms of public gatherings at places such as night clubs, hotels, drinking spots, beaches, and churches, among others. These measures, though, were intended to protect lives, had dire impact on the activities of leisure destinations. A report by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) on how Covid-19 pandemic affected businesses in Ghana showed that the measures intended to curtail the pandemic compelled numerous businesses to shutdown, while the customer base of the surviving ones reduced drastically (GSS, 2020). Available data showed that the tourism and hospitality sector was the most affected industry in the Covid-19 era, due to the fact that this industry relies greatly on human movements and gathering of people (Kang, Park, Lee & Lee, 2021). For instance, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation indicated that, between January and June 2020, tourism across the world fell by 440 million tourists (Putra, 2021).

Considering the immense contribution of beachside businesses towards economic growth of nations, many governments had to reopen beachside businesses after the number of active Covid-19 cases fell (Zielinski & Botero, 2020; Li, Zheng, & Sui 2021). Although beaches were opened for economic activities, it became essential that beachside businesses ensure the health and safety of their staff and clients. The health and safety measures upheld by these businesses came with two major impacts. On one hand, it appeared there was an improvement in health and safety practices of businesses operating along the beach. On the other hand, the cost of operating beachside businesses increased, due to the provision of health equipment and facilities. Despite all these, the available literature has not yet touched on how the beachside business managers perceive the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of whether it has contributed positively (blessing) or negatively (curse) to their business operations. Taking this into account, this study sought to investigate how managers of beachside businesses in Cape Coast, Ghana, perceive the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, in terms of patronage and health and safety practices.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section Two presents the theoretical background, while Section Three discusses the materials and methods employed. Section Four presents the results and discussion, followed by Section Five, which concludes the study and outlines its implications. Finally, Section Six highlights the study's limitations and provides suggestions for further research.

Theoretical Background

The Tourist/Destination Area Lifecycle (TALC) model by Butler (1980) provided the theoretical justification for the study. According to TALC, tourist sites or places of attraction go through six phases (Butler, 1980). The first stage, known as exploration, normally attracts few people due to inadequate facilities. This stage is followed by the involvement phase where the locals participate, through the provision of primary facilities, leading to increased tourist visits to the site. Development stage is the third phase of TALC, where involvement of the locals begins to shrink as natural and cultural resources are well developed. The development stage is followed by consolidation. This phase of the TALC sees the number of tourists visiting the site increase at a decreasing rate. The next stage is the stagnation phase where the number of tourists to the site reaches its peak and may even exceed the carrying capacity of the area. After the stagnation phase, the tourist site may experience rejuvenation or complete decline, which is the final stage of the TALC, due to a disaster. Piuchan, Chan and Kaale (2018) remarked that a tourist site might not traverse all the six stages of TALC, as unforeseen circumstances could happen anytime along the line. According to Al-Hasni (2021), these circumstances may include wars, catastrophic events, and diseases. This implies that the COVID-19 disease could be classified as one of these circumstances that might contribute to the rejuvenation or declining of TALC (Su, Yang & Swanson, 2021). This means that COVID-19 might either serve as a curse or blessing to the operations of beachside businesses in Cape Coast, as the disease may make the managers re-strategise and take actions that may generally benefit (blessing) the business, or cause the businesses to lose (curse) their investments.

A number of prior related studies employed this model to explain how natural disasters influence the operations of businesses (Fotiadis, Polyzos & Huan, 2020; Huang, Shao, Zeng, Liu & Li, 2021). The present study extends the model to the study of COVID-19 and its impact on beachside businesses, which has not yet been explored within the remits of the TALC model. Yeh (2021) used qualitative research method to study tourism recovery strategy against COVID-19 in Taiwan, and found that COVID-19 had caused a lot of losses to the tourist sector; thus, the need for government-sponsored interest free loans to help the tourism

sector and other businesses affected by COVID-19 to survive. Sun, Sie, Faturay, Auwalin and Wang (2021) also examined tourism employment vulnerability analysis for the COVID-19 management in Indonesia and ascertained that the employment vulnerability of women, youth and low-education workers were more than five times higher than the national average. They suggested targeted support packages for tourism recovery, such as sectoral-regional and worker specific relief policies in the short term.

Huang et al. (2021) examined the impact of COVID-19 on tourism preference of Chinese nationals. The results from the study indicated that COVID-19 considerably decreased the preference of Chinese nationals to travel to countries with high infection numbers, and geographically faraway, administratively and culturally distant outbound destination; and the preference of Chinese nationals in all forms of travel and majority of tourism forms declined. Zhang, Song, Wen and Liu (2021) examined the influence of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism income in Hong Kong, and the results proved that tourism loss was estimated to reach roughly US\$22,760 million in 2020 under the mild scenario. Fotiadis et al. (2020) used two distinctive methods – the Long Short Term Memory neural network and the Generalised Additive Model – and monthly data ranging from January 1998 to June 2020 to study the pros and cons of COVID-19 on worldwide tourism. The results from the analysis concluded that tourism dropped between 30.8% and 76.3% worldwide.

Bakar and Rosbi (2020) employed supply and demand curve to study the influence of COVID-19 to the tourism industry across the globe. The finding professed that the tourism sector was experiencing lower demand as a result of the lockdown and panic created by the pandemic. Taking these prior studies into consideration, it could be realised that there is dearth of studies on beachside businesses and how COVID-19 impact these businesses, despite the fact that they have also been affected just as other business setups (Zielinski & Botero, 2020; Li et al., 2021). Besides, the attention has mostly been on businesses outside the Sub-Saharan region (Asante & Mills, 2020; Nwagbara, Osual, Chireshe, Bolarinwa, Saeed, Khuzwayo & Hlongwana, 2021). This suggests a gap in the existing literature that needs to be filled, and the present study has been purposed to fill this gap.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of managers of beachside businesses in Cape Coast, Ghana, regarding the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants, targeting managers of businesses such as restaurants, bars, and recreational service providers located along the Cape Coast beachfront. This sampling method ensured that participants had direct experience with the phenomena under investigation – namely, changes in patronage and health and safety practices due to the pandemic.

A total of 12 managers participated in the study, representing a diverse range of beachside businesses varying in size and service offerings. This sample size was consistent with what was used in prior studies (Ahmadi et al., 2023; Ahmadi et al., 2024). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between August and December 2024. The interviews were held face-to-face at the participants' business premises, adhering to prevailing COVID-19 safety protocols (e.g., mask-wearing and social distancing). Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about patronage trends, health and safety adaptations, and overall perceptions of the pandemic's impact. Sample questions included: "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your customer numbers?" and "What changes have you made to your health and safety practices since the pandemic began?"

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content. Initial coding was conducted by assigning labels to segments of text that reflected key ideas (open coding). These codes were subsequently grouped into categories (axial coding) and refined into overarching themes (selective coding) that addressed the study's aim. To enhance analytical rigour, the process was systematic and iterative, with themes emerging directly from the data rather than preconceived notions. Reliability and validity were bolstered through member checking, where preliminary findings were shared with three participants to confirm accuracy, and peer debriefing with a colleague not involved in the study to review the coding process (Birt et al., 2016; Cho & Trent, 2006; Cypress, 2017). No qualitative analysis software was used; coding was performed manually to maintain close engagement with

the data. Reflexivity was practiced by acknowledging potential biases (e.g., assumptions about economic impacts) and focusing on participants' expressed experiences (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three primary themes: (1) a significant decline in patronage, (2) the adoption of enhanced health and safety practices, and (3) mixed perceptions of the pandemic as either a curse or a blessing in disguise. These findings directly address the study's aim by illuminating how managers perceive the pandemic's impact on their operations.

Theme 1: Significant decline in patronage

All managers reported a marked reduction in customer numbers during and following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This decline was attributed to government-imposed restrictions, such as travel bans and bans on public gatherings, as well as customers' fear of infection. One manager of a beachfront restaurant stated, "Our business relies heavily on tourists, and with the travel restrictions, our customer base vanished overnight." Another, who operates a bar, noted, "Even after reopening, people are still afraid to gather in large numbers, so our weekend events have seen much lower attendance." These accounts align with the Ghana Statistical Service (2020) report, which highlighted a drastic reduction in customer bases for surviving businesses during the pandemic, and with global trends documented by Fotiadis et al. (2020), who estimated a 30.8% to 76.3% drop in worldwide tourism.

Theme 2: Adoption of enhanced health and safety practices

In response to the pandemic, managers implemented various health and safety measures to comply with government mandates and reassure customers. Common practices included installing hand sanitising stations, enforcing mask-wearing, reducing seating capacity for social distancing, and increasing cleaning frequency. A recreational service provider explained, "We had to invest in new equipment like sanitisers and protective gear for staff, which was costly but necessary." Another manager of a small eatery added, "These measures have actually improved our service quality, and some customers have complimented us on our efforts." While these adaptations increased operational costs, they also enhanced the perceived safety of the businesses, suggesting a potential long-term benefit despite the immediate financial burden.

Theme 3: Mixed perceptions of the pandemic's impact

Managers' perceptions of the pandemic varied, reflecting both negative and positive interpretations. Some viewed it as a curse due to severe financial losses and operational challenges. A bar owner lamented, "The restrictions killed our business. Even now, with things opening up, people are hesitant to come back. I don't know if we'll ever recover." Conversely, others saw it as a blessing in disguise, citing opportunities for innovation and improvement. A restaurant manager remarked, "The pandemic forced us to innovate. We started offering online booking and contactless payment, which opened up new revenue streams and improved our efficiency." Another noted, "Customers feel safer now because of our health measures, and we've even attracted new clients who value safety."

Discussion

These findings resonate with the Tourist/Destination Area Lifecycle (TALC) model (Butler, 1980), which posits that destinations may face decline or rejuvenation following a disruptive event. The decline in patronage and pessimistic views align with the stagnation or decline phases, where external shocks like COVID-19 exceed a destination's carrying capacity. However, the adoption of health and safety practices and subsequent innovations suggest a potential for rejuvenation, as businesses adapt to new realities and enhance their appeal. This duality mirrors Piuchan, Chan and Kaale's (2018) assertion that unforeseen circumstances can alter a destination's trajectory unpredictably.

Comparatively, Yeh (2021) found significant losses in Taiwan's tourism sector, emphasising a negative impact akin to the curse perspective in this study. However, the positive adaptations in Cape Coast – such as digital innovations and improved safety protocols – suggest a context-specific resilience not as prominently featured in other studies like Sun et al. (2021), which focused on employment vulnerability in Indonesia. The increased operational costs echo findings by Zielinski and Botero (2020), but the potential

customer trust gained through safety measures offers a counterbalance not extensively explored in prior literature on Sub-Saharan beachside businesses.

Conclusions and Implications

This study reveals that managers of beachside businesses in Cape Coast perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as both a curse and a blessing in disguise. The curse manifests in significant declines in patronage and financial strain, while the blessing emerges from enhanced health and safety practices and operational innovations that may encourage long-term resilience. Within the TALC framework, the pandemic appears as a pivotal event that could lead to either decline or rejuvenation, depending on how businesses leverage these adaptations.

For beachside businesses, it is recommended to sustain health and safety improvements to build customer confidence and explore digital innovations (e.g., online bookings) to diversify revenue streams. Policymakers should consider targeted support, such as subsidies for safety equipment or training programmes, to alleviate financial pressures and promote recovery. These strategies could transform the pandemic's challenges into opportunities for sustainable growth.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Studies

This study's qualitative approach and small sample size (12 managers) limit the generalisability of the findings beyond Cape Coast's beachside businesses. Additionally, the data reflect perceptions at a specific post-pandemic moment (2024), which may evolve as recovery progresses. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to track changes in perceptions over time or expand to include other stakeholders (e.g., customers, employees) for a holistic view. Quantitative studies with larger samples could also test the prevalence of these themes across Ghana's coastal regions.

Declarations

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