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Identifying and Prioritizing Ways to Improve Oman's Tourism Sector in the Corona Period

ABSTRACT

Objectives: To identify the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the country's tourism industry; to identify ways to enhance domestic tourism so as to increase income in the Oman's tourism industry which has since been declining; to identify specific travel destinations and associated recovery plans; and to suggest recommendations on the best approaches to improving the Oman tourism sector.

Methodology: The research involved collection of primary data using interviews where opinions and perceptions of Omani tourism industry experts were collected regarding economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the country's tourism industry; the rationale of lifting travel restrictions and the ways of increasing traveller confidence amidst the uncertainties and fears associated with Covid-19 in Oman; ways to enhance domestic tourism so as to increase income in the Oman's tourism industry which has since been declining; and recommendations on the best approaches to improving the Oman tourism sector.

Findings: The main impacts of coronavirus on Omani tourism industry include loss of revenue and reduction in hotel and occupancy rate. These effects resulted into massive job losses, unpaid leave and pay cuts amongst employees in the country's tourism industry. The measures to be taken to enhance recovery of the tourism industry were categorized into two: government measures and business measures.

Value added: With the multiple adverse effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the tourism sector, this study will help in establishing the potential measures of fostering the positive outcomes in the sector.

Recommendations: Setting aside COVID-19 recovery financial kitty; Increasing the frequency of marketing the country as the preferred and the best tourist destination in the world in both local and international media; Public-private partnerships; and encouraging domestic tourism by offering discounts and incentives for the locals enjoying the country's tourism facilities. Offering discounted rates and fees; adopting a flexible booking policy; cancelling or waiving all the fees and fines that were charged on customers who cancelled or amended their bookings as result of COVID-19 pandemic; offering attractive discounts to clients who want to re-book their previous cancelled bookings without conditions; and diversification of operations.

Key words: coronavirus pandemic, tourism sector, recovery phase, domestic tourism, international tourism, and tourism destinations

JEL codes: L83, Z30, Z32

Introduction

Research Problem

The tourism sector has registered multiple adverse effects due to the coronavirus pandemic. Particularly as noted by WHO, Domestic production and

commerce were hampered by the global epidemic and mitigation strategies implemented at the outbreak. Border closures and panic purchasing resulted in a brief increase in the prices of some foodstuffs in April 2020, which has since subsided after the reopening of borders in early June. Oman took such measures by suspending all tourist visas from March 15, 2020. As a result, Oman began to register a significant decrease in occupancy rates, with many hotels registering a significant reduction in prices. With the persistence of the pandemic for several months, the tourism industry has registered economic losses, although analysts are yet to provide specific data regarding the economic impact of the pandemic on the Oman tourism industry. Oman needs to develop strategies for dealing with the pandemic while saving the tourism sector (Al-Hasni, 2021). For this reason, the research problem involves the identification and prioritization of specific ways that can help Oman to achieve positive outcomes in improving the tourism sector during the uncertain period of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Main Research Question

What are the ways in which Oman can improve the tourism sector as the industry focuses on successful recovery after the pandemic?

Objectives

- 1) To identify the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the country's tourism industry.
- 2) To identify ways to enhance domestic tourism so as to increase income in the Oman's tourism industry which has since been declining.
- 3) To identify specific travel destinations and associated recovery plans.
- 4) Suggest recommendations on the best approaches to improving the Oman tourism sector.

Research Significance

With the multiple adverse effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the tourism sector, this study will help in establishing the potential measures of fostering the positive outcomes in the sector. The tourism industry has registered a 60–80% decline, and there is an evident need for potential recovery measures. Just like other countries, Oman has not had immediate measures to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic. The researcher will utilize a qualitative approach that will help in identifying the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the tourism industry. Specifically, the study will also explore the environmental effects of COVID-19 that have led to the observed decline.

Literature Review

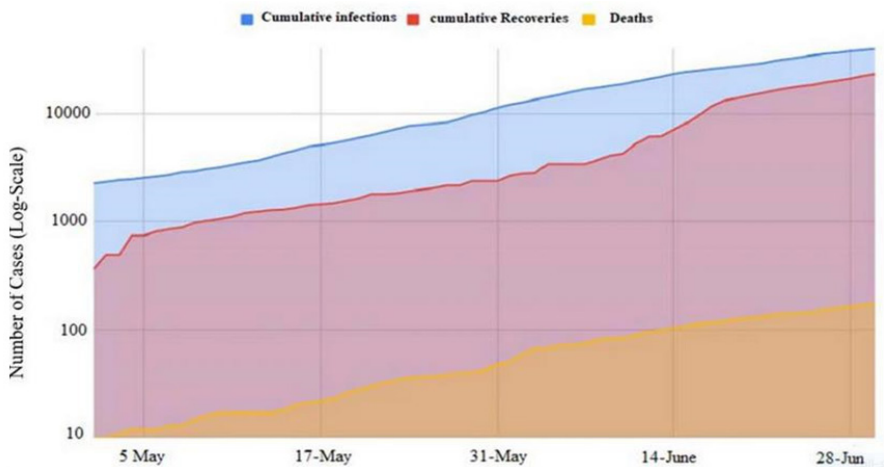
The Beginning of COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic was first reported on December 31st, 2019 at a food market in the Chinese city of Wuhan when about 27 people were diagnosed with the virus (Azzi et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Liu, Chen, Lin, & Han, 2020; Potus et al., 2020). These patients tended to exhibit symptoms that were similar to those exhibited by people suffering from common influenza such as dry cough, fever, and dyspnoea (Bhattacharya, 2020; Law, Leung, & Xu, 2020; Vella et al., 2020). What was common about these 27 cases was that they were traced to one of the Wuhan's wholesale seafood market (Barbuddhe et al., 2020; Bhattacharya, 2020; Lorusso et al., 2020; Saito et al., 2020; Sciacqua et al., 2020). The food market was popular in selling fish, poultry and exotic animals used as food in China such as snakes, bats, and dogs (Barbuddhe et al., 2020; Darvas, 2020; Lake, 2020; Mahdy, Waleed, & Ewaida, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2020).

Testing of samples obtained from these patients found that they were suffering from a severe form of Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2.

This was later named by World Health Organization (WHO) as Novel Corona Virus Disease (COVID)-2 (Barbuddhe et al., 2020; Darvas, 2020; Lake, 2020; Mahdy, Waleed, & Ewaida, 2020; Tiwari et al., 2020).

Figure 1. A log–log plot showing the growth in the accumulative, recovered, and deaths cases between 29th April and 30th June 2020 in Oman



Source: based on Al Kindi (2020).

In the initial stages that disease did not show any life-threatening symptoms and most cases associated with it were resolved spontaneously (Liu, Chen, Lin, & Han, 2020; Novick, Rizzolo, & Cervantes, 2020; Osama, Pankhania, & Majeed, 2020; Sciacqua et al., 2020). However, there was high mortality and complications in older members of society who caught the virus (Liu, Chen, Lin, & Han, 2020; Novick, Rizzolo, & Cervantes, 2020; Osama, Pankhania, & Majeed, 2020; Sciacqua et al., 2020). As of mid-January 2020, COVID-19 was reported in many other countries and as result, World Health Organization declared it an outbreak (Liu, Chen, Lin, & Han, 2020; Novick, Rizzolo, & Cervantes, 2020; Osama, Pankhania, & Majeed, 2020; Sciacqua et al., 2020). According to the WHO, the pandemic had the potential of spreading to nations around the world and nations with

weaker health systems were expected to be worst hit by the outbreak (Liu, Chen, Lin, & Han, 2020; Novick, Rizzolo, & Cervantes, 2020; Osama, Pankhania, & Majeed, 2020; Sciacqua et al., 2020). It is also stated that the spread of the disease could be minimized through instant treatment, early detection and isolation and tracking of the infected individuals and those they have come into contact with (Garcini, Domenech Rodriguez, Mercado, & Paris, 2020; Jagtap, More, & Jha 2019; Lorusso et al., 2020; Vella et al., 2020).

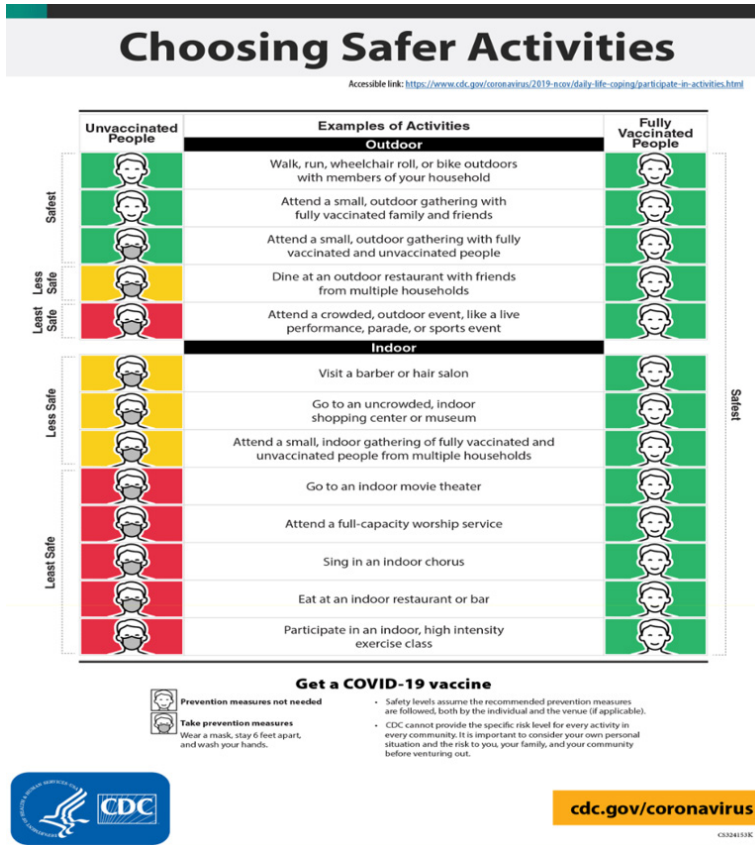
How the World Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The global outbreak of the virus prompted many countries around the world to respond in the ways they believed would prevent the diseases from either getting into the country or spreading further (Varga et al., 2021). For example, United States of America responded by stopping the movement of immigrants and non-immigrants as well as closing its borders to some of the countries. In Hong Kong, all transport services were suspended (included road, air, and sea). Only essential transport services were allowed in Hong Kong (Bhattacharya, 2020; Deharo & Madanamoothoo, 2020; Jacofsky, D., Jacofsky, E. M., & Jacofsky, M., 2020; Sohrabi et al., 2020). Countries such as India, France, Germany, and Italy also took various action such as implementing total lock down and closing of international borders as ways of preventing spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bhattacharya, 2020; Deharo & Madanamoothoo, 2020; Jacofsky, D., Jacofsky, E. M., & Jacofsky, M., 2020; Sohrabi et al., 2020). In Palestine, all forms of transport were suspended, international borders were all closed, and many cities and jurisdictions were locked down (Alser, AlWaheidi, Elessi, & Meghari, 2020; Bahkir & Grandee, 2020; Lee, Chiew, & Khong, 2020). Oman too responded by locking down its cities and closing international borders. Other nations such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain, India as well as others implemented the above actions as a way of preventing the disease from spreading (Bhattacharya, 2020).

Response Recommendation by the CDCs and WHO

The global outbreak of the novel COVID-19, which the World Health Organization has deemed a pandemic, affected the aspects of the human activities and thus countries had to act and respond to the pandemic. Following the World Health Organization's (WHO) global warning on the COVID-19, the majority of countries took urgent steps to curb the disease's dissemination. Numerous steps to halt the spread of COVID-19 have been considered in different sections of the world (Ho, Nguyen, Elias, & Le, 2021). Despite these efforts, as of 15 April 2020, more than 2 million cases were recorded globally, with 138,000 deaths registered. Worldwide, Governments announced COVID-19 response programs not only to control the spread of the virus but also to help citizens to service in the collapsing global economies. The CDC provided a chart upon which the countries can respond to covid-19 pandemic and reduce the spread.

Figure 2. Guidance from The Centers For Disease Control And Prevention (CDC)



Source: Important COVID-19 Updates (2021).

Notably, on 10 March 2020, His Majesty the Sultan of Oman issued an executive order establishing a supreme committee to enact the required steps at the appropriate scale to mitigate COVID-19 transmission and any expected public and socioeconomic consequences. The committee was led by the Minister of Interior Affairs and included representatives from a variety of government agencies, including the Ministry of Health (MoH) of Oman. The Ministry of Health's preparedness and response for COVID-19 is thus expanded, with the aim of improving health emergency response ser-

vices, increasing capacity to screen and treat COVID-19 patients, ensuring sufficient medical resources and staff, and developing life-saving medical procedures (Bandyopadhyay et. al., 2020).

Guided by The World Health Organization and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Oman pushed for quarantine system for the control of COVID-19 transmission. Potentially, the quarantine system could prevent disease spread that could arise before a person becomes aware they have the infection. The CDC concurs that a quarantine of fewer than 14 days strikes a compromise between reduced strain and a minor chance of virus spread.

Further, following the World Health Organization's (WHO) global warning on the COVID-19, Oman has put forward emphasis to fasten research, COVID-19 information and knowledge sharing and backing up all medical input towards the pan-demic (Bandyopadhyay et. al, 2020). World Health Organization's (WHO) through CDC has acknowledged that information sharing is key for travellers around the world. Oman being a tourist attraction site, with enough research and sharing her information on the trends and patterns of COVID-19 would be a great help to the global populations.

Further, following the World Health Organization (WHO) and the CDC on the COVID-19, Oman has made it possible through the tourism agencies to do staff in-person COVID-19 inspection; this is done adequately to protect all people from highly contagious employees and tourists accessing the buildings. In addition, the government has responded to the COVID-19 issue by ensuring and recommending all the citizens to maintain social isolation, in offices to have physical breaks / walls, and people to put on masks (Gasana & Shehab, 2020).

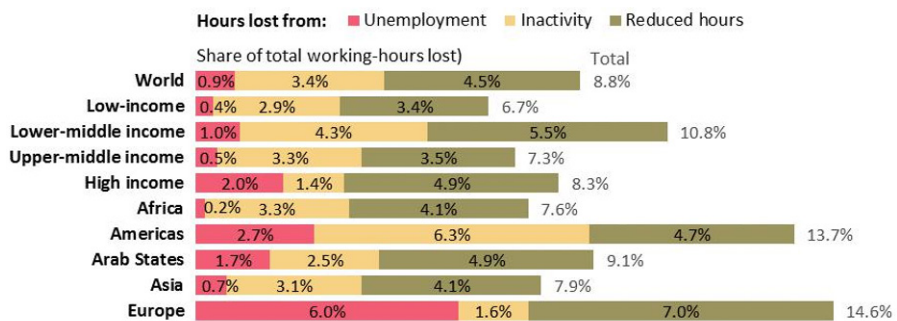
The government of Oman further through the guidance of World Health Organization (WHO) and the CDC, recommend that all people coming to their country have personal protective equipment (PPE) that can be used with the COVID-19 screener at the food outlets, restaurants, and all related avenues (Al-Hasni, 2021). However, the government of Oman through the Ministry of Health (MoH) of Oman warned that relying solely on personal

protective equipment (PPE) is a less efficient control method which could be more complex to enforce due to PPE shortages and preparation standards.

Impact of COVID-19 on Global Economy

Since COVID-19 pandemic was reported in China in December 2019, its effect has been felt everywhere around the world. This is due to the important role China (the epicenter of the COVID-19 virus and the epicenter of global manufacturing) in the global economy. According to World Economic Forum (2020), China contributes more than 60% of the global supply chain and demand; more than 60% of the goods manufactured in the entire world are manufactured in China. Additionally, of all the manufactured goods and services currently supplied to the international market, Chinese export contribute more than 40% (World Economic Forum, 2020). Therefore, anything that disrupts China's manufacturing and logistics industries is likely to affect the global economy. It is for this reason that the effects of COVID-19 pandemic quickly spread to other nations around.

Figure 3. Global Economic Effects of COVID-19



Source: Congressional Research Service (2021).

Before COVID-19 pandemic was reported, International Monetary Fund predicted that global economy would grow by approximately 3.4% in the

near term (Ozili & Arun, 2020). But as results of implementation of COVID-19 containment measures by various governments, the global economic growth rate was revised downwards. In fact, International Monetary Fund stated that the average global economic growth would be negative during and immediately after the pandemic (Ozili & Arun, 2020). World Global financial markets were amongst the worst hit by the pandemic. In fact, during this period global stock markets lost more than 6 trillion dollars, according to Ozili and Arun (2020). They further stated that in the S&P 500 firms (in the United States of America) lost more 5 trillion US dollars between 24 and 28 February 2020. As a result of this, 10 companies in the S&P 500 index lost more 1.4 trillion US dollars combined (Ozili & Arun, 2020).

Other than stock market, airline industry also suffered serious losses during the pandemic. As a result of border closures and suspension of travel, airline industry lost more than 113 billion US dollars during the pandemic (Ozili & Arun, 2020).

Other than airline industry and stock market, global chain supply has been severely affected by the pandemic. Since China is the world's biggest manufacturer, the world's biggest exporter and a significant global supply chain contributor (more than 65% of the global supply chain is controlled by China), the closure of factories and lockdowns in one the major Chinese industrial hubs (Wuhan) significantly reduced the global supply chain (Ozili & Arun, 2020).

Nationwide lockdowns implemented by nations such as Italy, France and Iran result into significant job losses, unpaid leave and job cuts resulting in economic recession in these countries (Ozili & Arun, 2020).

Effects of COVID-19 on Global Tourism Industry

Global tourism industry was never spared. and was significantly affected by COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, people's livelihoods, nations' economies, public service as well as opportunities in all nations

across the world were severely affected. In fact, COVID-19 pandemic brought lockdowns, prohibiting public gatherings and cancellation of international flights, cancellation of hotel bookings and other tourism related bookings (Ozili & Arun, 2020). By April 2020, cancellation of local events, flights as well as cancellation of international events resulted into more than 200 billion US dollars loss according to Ozili and Arun (2020). The tourism export revenues reduced by more than \$910 billion to a value which was less than 1.2 trillion in accordance with World Tourism Organization (2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic negative impact on the tourism industry, the world GDP decreased by approximately 1.5 to 2.8% (UNWTO, 2020).

Given the importance of tourism in the world economy, anything affecting it affects the livelihood of many people around the world (UNWTO, 2020). For in-stance, tourism is considered one of top 10 employers in the world and is a source of livelihood for millions of individuals in both developing and developed nations (UNWTO, 2020). In some nations, such as the Small Island Developing States, tourism industry contributes to approximately 80% or more of the total exports (UNWTO, 2020). This means that in these nations, tourism industry is a major source of employment (UNWTO, 2020). Therefore, any disruption to tourism such as this caused by COVID-19 pandemic, may severely affect these economies (UNWTO, 2020).

Effects of COVID-19 on Oman's Tourism Industry

Just like many tourism industries around the world, Omani tourism severely suffered due to the coronavirus pandemic. With the advent of the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19 and its effects on numerous sectors of the economy, whether affecting intra- or inter-country exchange, the economies of the majority of countries have sustained significant financial and economic harm. The pandemic has caused a crisis of Oman as a result of the termination and closure of investments in different in the tourism sector. It is impossible to predict with precision how soon the economies of different countries can rebound from the containment

of the epidemic or any subsequent wave. The tourism sector is one of the most severely impacted sectors by the pandemic; it is one of the most significant sectors for countries that depend on tourism as a main economic engine or strategic development sector. For instance, Omani hotels experienced 50.1% decline in hotel occupancy rates when compared to similar period in 2019. In 2019, hotels recorded an average occupancy rate of 52.3% but in 2020 (as of end of October), the hotels recorded an average occupancy rate of 26.21% representing a 50.1% decline in hotel occupancy rate (Prabhu, 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic also significantly reduced the number of guests visiting Omani hotels. In the first 10 months of 2020, a total of 646,841 guests visited hotels which is a 53.9% decline compared to the number of guests who visited the hotels during the same period in 2019 (Prabhu, 2021). During the same period in 2019, more than 1.4 million guests visited the hotels. It is important to note that of the 646,841 guests who visited, more than 50% (337687) were Omani nationals, 164,873 were from Europe and 47,643 guests were from Asia (Prabhu, 2021).

Other than loss of revenue and occupancy rates, the industry also suffered massive job losses. With decreased revenue and lower occupancy rates, service providers in the Oman's tourism industry were not able to sustain large number of staff. As result, most employees were forced to go on unpaid leave, accept pay cuts and some lost their jobs completely. Examples of these individuals are tour guides, drivers, hotel attendants etc. In 2014, this sector offered employment to approximately 37,000 people representing 3.3% of all jobs in the country (Prabhu, 2021). It was expected that by 2024 this number will rise to at least 60,000 people directly employed by the tourism industry (Prabhu, 2021). This dream is threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of job losses experienced by the industry in 2020 is likely to make it difficult for the country to achieve this dream. The dream was geared towards shifting the country's economy from relying on oil to relying on tourism and other service sectors. It is estimated that Omani oil wells may dry up in 20 years (Prabhu, 2021).

Research (Literature) Gap

From the above discussion it is quite obvious that just like in many countries, Oman's tourism industry has suffered and continues to suffer as a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic. The industry has registered a number of adverse coronavirus associated effects. By suspending tourist visas, closing of the international borders and lock downs, the tourism industry started to register significant decline in occupancy rates (as already discussed), revenue associated with tourism begun to decline and many jobs were on the line if not already lost. With the pandemic persisting for several months, reduction of revenue continued to such a level that the entire industry was experiencing serious economic losses. What makes matters worse is that just like many countries around the world, Oman had no immediate measures and strategies of dealing with the effects of such a pandemic. As such, the country needs strategies of bringing its ailing tourism industry back on track. This is where the research comes in. The research aims at identifying and prioritizing ways through which Oman can put its tourism industry back on track during and after the pandemic. With new strains being identified in many countries it is clear that the end of the pandemic is still uncertain and Oman's tourism industry cannot continue to suffer. As such, the study aims at answering the research question below.

What are the ways in which Oman can improve the tourism sector as the industry focuses on successful recovery after the pandemic?

By answering this research question and with the current effects of COVID-19 pandemic on Oman's tourism industry, the study intends to help the authorities in the tourism industry in establishing measures that can enhance the tourism industry's positive outcomes both during and after the pandemic. The identified measures may help the country deal with future pandemics especially on effects associated with tourism industry.

The tourism industry has registered a 60–80% decline, and there is an evident need for potential recovery measures. Just like other countries,

Oman has not had immediate measures to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Case Studies

Case Study: the Netherland's Case

Even though Oman tourism industry suffered as result of coronavirus pandemic, there are countries whose sectors (including tourism industry) were not affected as much. One such nation is the Netherlands. Most of the impacts of the coronavirus were as a result of implementation of COVID-19 pandemic control and prevention measures. While Oman cancelled tourist visas and closed its international airport, the Netherlands implemented what they called Intelligent Lockdown (de Haas, Faber, & Hamersma, 2020). Visiting the elderly and events comprising of over 100 people were also not allowed (Antonides & van Leeuwen, 2020). However, public transport, businesses and shops were allowed provided health protocols and social distancing was observed and face masks were obligatory at all times in public space. International borders were also never closed. Visitors were allowed provided they showed negative coronavirus test and were not exhibiting the symptoms associated with the disease. Only individuals who came from nations that the Netherlands considered red spots for the coronavirus were needed to self-quarantine for a period of 14 days (Antonides & van Leeuwen, 2020).

Netherlands Intervention Towards COVID-19 Pandemic

Right from the beginning the Netherlands government invested a lot into dealing with the pandemic. By the end of March 2020, the government implemented an initiative geared towards saving the country's jobs. This

included providing compensation of up to 90% of wages for companies that were worst hit by the virus (including organizations in the country's tourism sector). This initiative prevented huge job losses in the Netherlands which Omani's tourism industry is suffering from. Additionally, self-employed individuals were offered an allowance known as social benefit allowance for a period of three months. The Netherlands government also offered organizations that were worst hit by the pandemic a 4,000 euros subsid and start-ups were allowed to borrow up to maximum of 2 million euros to help them avert any coronavirus effects (Antonides & van Leeuwen, 2020). As result of these mitigation measures, the rate of unemployment and revenue in the Netherlands' tourism were minimal. For instance, 2020, the Netherlands's unemployment rate went up only by 1.7%.

Research Methodology and Data

This research chapter gives the methods and procedures that were followed while achieving the aims and objectives of the study. The chapter discusses the research method employed, research design adopted, research strategy, data collection and analysis.

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study is known as descriptive cross-sectional research design. According to National EMSC Data Analysis Resource Center (2019), a descriptive cross-sectional research involves studying effects a particular condition or disease (such as a pandemic) on certain aspects such as a nation's sectors (for instance construction sector, health sector, tourism sector, education sectors and others) over a period of time. In the current study, the condition being studied is the coronavirus pandemic which has affected many parts of the world and its effect on the Oman's tourism industry. This research design is generally effective and cost-effective in

understanding the characteristics of a pandemic with respect of how it affects industries (National EMSC Data Analysis Resource Center, 2019).

Research Method

Two types of research methods can be used to achieve objectives of a study: quantitative study and qualitative study. Quantitative research method mainly employed were the research data of numerical type. Generally, the research method involves developing research method hypotheses then validating or rejecting the hypotheses based on the results of the numeric data analysis. In qualitative research method, opinions, and perceptions of people about a research topic are collected and analysed. Such types of data are non-numeric and, in most cases, do not involve collection of numeric data. The research method aims at identifying a common theme from the varied opinions and perspectives of participants. The research method can be applied in situations where there is a small amount of data, i.e., opinions and perspectives collected from the participants and accurate conclusions made regarding the research topic. It is important to note that in quantitative studies data is mainly collected through questionnaires. In qualitative research, data is often collected via interviews. However, in certain cases questionnaires can be used to collect the qualitative data. Here, a questionnaire with questions (often open ended) that were asked during interviews are sent to the participant via post office, email address or via any method they are likely to be comfortable with.

Research Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach and utilized purposive sampling to identify experts in the tourism industry who have the potential to highlight measures that can help the Oman tourism industry to embark on a successful recovery. The researcher conducted interviews with the identified partici-

pants in order to seek their opinions and perspectives regarding the rationale of lifting travel restrictions and the ways of increasing traveller confidence amidst the uncertainties and fears associated with COVID-19 in Oman. During the interviews, the researcher also explored the perspectives and opinions of experts on how to enhance domestic tourism to increase income in the Oman's tourism industry, which has since been declining. The interviews also focused on highlighting experts' views on specific travel destinations and appropriate recovery plans. Qualitative approach was also employed to identify the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the country's tourism industry. Specifically, the study also examined the environmental effects of COVID-19 that have led to the observed decline.

By employing interpretivist framework, the researcher analysed the data collected from the interviews and identified the predominant themes on how Oman can enhance the recovery of its tourism industry. From these findings, the author will conclude how to improve the Oman tourism sector and restore functionality in the industry. The study will also provide recommendations on the best approaches to improving the Oman tourism sector.

In order to avoid risk of contracting and spreading the disease (COVID-19), interviews were conducted virtually. That is, they were conducted via online and digital platforms such as video calls and teleconferencing using platforms such as Zoom, Google meetings and Microsoft Team Views. Interviews were also conducted via telephone calls. Questionnaires were sent via emails, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook.

Research Strategy

Several types of research strategies can be employed to achieve the objectives a study. They are as follows: case study, survey, interviews, grounded research, action research and experimental research (Naim, 2018). Archival research strategy mainly involves collection and analysis of secondary data. Such data may be obtained from various databases, books, reports,

repositories, journals and from conference papers (Naim, 2018). Some of the online databases where archived data can be obtained include: World Bank, Compustat, OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) and Execucomp. According to Naim (2018), survey research mainly involves collection of quantitative primary data through questionnaires. Interviews mainly involve collection qualitative primary data through one-on-one encounter or via questionnaires. Such data involve collection of opinions and perception of the participants regarding a research topic (Naim, 2018). In experimental research the performance of two groups of experiment subjects is compared. One group is known as the experimental group, while the other is known as control group. The experimental group is subjected to experimental conditions, while control group is not subjected to conditions. The performance of the experiments on the groups is based on experimental factors and conditions they are subjected depending on the aims and objectives of the experimental study. Lastly, case study involves examining a problem in real life context. An example of such a study is this study, which examined COVID-19 pandemic in Oman with intention of identifying and prioritizing ways to improve Oman's tourism sector during Corona period.

Research Strategy

This study employed three research strategies, namely: interviews, case study and archival strategies. The research is a case study itself. It entails examining a problem affecting a society (tourism industry) and this problem is coronavirus pandemic. The real-life context where the problem is examined is Oman. The research also involves identifying and prioritizing ways to improve Oman's tourism sector during Corona period. The research also involves interviews. Interviews were conducted with the aim of identifying the common theme regarding the opinions and perceptions of specialists from Oman's tourism sector on the fiscal, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic

on the country's tourism industry; the rationale for lifting border controls and strategies for rising travellers trust in the face of COVID-19-related uncertainty and scares in Oman; and strategies for enhancing domestic tourism in order to increase revenue in the destination for tourism.

The research also involved archival research. It is, however, important to note that most research data were not collected from archived data sources. The archival research was rather employed in the literature review section where some impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Oman's tourism sector were identified. This information was obtained from the nation's leading newspapers and other online sources. Two techniques were used in retrieving the most relevant articles during the archival research strategy: snowball technique and keyword technique. In keyword method, several keywords were searched in search engines of the various databases. Some of the keywords employed were: impacts of coronavirus on Omani tourism industry; tourism industry recovery from COVID-19 pandemic; coronavirus in Oman. Snowball technique was mainly used to retrieve relevant articles from already downloaded articles. It involved obtaining the relevant articles from the bibliography and intext citations of the already downloaded articles.

Data Collection and Analysis

The research involved collection of primary data using interviews where opinions and perceptions of the Omani tourism industry specialists were consulted on the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the country's tourism industry; the rationale for lifting travel restrictions and strategies for increasing travellers trust in the face of COVID-19-related inconsistencies and concerns in Oman; and strategies for enhancing domestic tourism in order to boost revenue in the country's tour industry.

Results and Discussion

Impacts of Corona Pandemic on Oman's Tourism Industry

From interviews, it was found that the most of participants identified the following factors as the most significant impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on Omani tourism industry.

- 1) Reduction of hotel occupancy rate.
- 2) Reduction of hotel bookings.
- 3) Reduction of revenues.
- 4) Loss of employment.
- 5) Unpaid leave.
- 6) Pay cuts.

Reduction in Hotel Occupancy Rate and Bookings and Consequences

One of the major impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on Oman's tourism industry is reduction of hotel bookings (visitors) and occupancy rates. The statement of the one of participants has been given below:

"Our businesses suffered. We do not know how long it will take us to recover from the effects of this monster (coronavirus). Before the virus, we used to register 60 to 70% occupancy rates. Some hotels were full at certain times of the year. But in 2020 and when the virus hit Oman, what we saw was not good. Some of us did not register any booking at time when they should register 50 to 60% bookings. The best bookings were around 20 to 30%. We had to send some of our employees' home (terminate their contracts) and some special those offered essential services were forced to take pay cuts. We had no money to pay our employees."

The above statement paints a grim picture on the state of tourism industry during the pandemic. Hotel bookings declined and occupancy rates reduced. Consequently, jobs were lost, and employees were forced to take pay cuts. The loss of hotel occupancy rate in the Omani tourism industry has also been reported elsewhere and thus validating the results of this research. According to Prabhu, (2021) and as already been discussed, by end of October 2020, Omani hotels experienced 50.1% decline in hotel occupancy rates when compared to a similar period in 2019. In 2019, hotels recorded an average occupancy rate of 52.3% but in 2020, the hotels recorded an average occupancy rate of 26.21% representing a 50.1% decline in hotel occupancy rate.

Reduction in Revenue

Another major effect of coronavirus on Omani tourism industry is reduction of revenue. According to participants, all their organizations recorded huge financial losses as a result of COVID-19 pandemic translating to huge losses in the entire industry.

"The reducing in bookings and occupancy rates seriously affected our earnings and profitability. Most of the companies in the industry are noting losses. I think none is making profit currently or if they are, then they must be very few. Our company's earnings dropped by more than 60% by November 2020 and we continue to note losses. The situation is likely to continue as there are very few willing to travel despite opening of the borders. People still fear because the virus is still here with us. To save this industry urgent actions are needed to be taken by both the government and industry players."

Prabhu (2021) published similar results, thus authenticating the observations of this review. Prabhu (2021) had predicted that the sector would have lost more than 1.3 billion US dollars by September 2020 (0.5 Billion Omani Rials). As per Prabhu (2021), Omani hoteliers, especially those in the three to five-star range, saw a revenue decline of more than 60.2% in 2020 compared to 2019. For example, in October 2019, such hotels received a total of

177.72 million Omani Rials, but just 70.70 million Omani Rials in October 2020, a decrease of 60.2% in turnover (Prabhu, 2021). The hotel industry's revenue loss can be attributed to a decline in hotel occupancy as a consequence of booking cancellations and a shortage of new bookings.

Loss of Employment

One of the major effects of coronavirus pandemic on Oman's economy, according to the interviewees, is the loss of employment. All interviewees mentioned employment loss as one of the impacts of novel coronavirus on the country's tourism industry. One of the interviewees (who is a senior in the tourism industry) made the following statement regarding the loss of employment.

"During coronavirus most companies in this industry suffered. 90% of the companies could not sustain all their employees. In fact, for most organizations, only a small percentage of the employees were working. Everything went to a halt. We could not afford to pay our employees. Literally, there was no money. Some of us were forced lay off their staff either permanently or temporarily."

The above statement paints the picture of what things were like during the pandemic. Many jobs were lost since occupancy rates significantly dropped. This means companies in the tourism industry did not have enough money to sustain their employees and as a result terminated contracts of some while others were sent on an unpaid leave.

The loss of jobs was experienced not only in Oman. Many researchers reported job losses experienced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Newsome (2020) showed that more than 75 million people lost their job and sources of livelihoods in the tourism and hospitality industry as a result of coronavirus. The main reason for this is government interventions for protecting their nations against the spread of COVID-19. Such actions included cancellation of tourist visas as in the case of Oman, closing of international borders, and partial and complete lockdowns.

Recovery and Mitigation Measures

The interviewees identified a number of recovery and mitigation measures that can help the Omani tourism industry to be back on track regardless of ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. These are explained below.

Measures to Taken by the Omani Government

- 1) **Setting aside COVID-19 recovery kitty.** One of the recommendations by those interviewed is that government sets aside a recovery kitty. The intension of the recovery kitty is to help business which are worst affected by the pandemic and are operating in the tourism industry recover from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic within the shortest period possible. The kitty should also be used as stimulus package geared towards helping business that operate in the country's tourism industry take care of losses experienced or they currently experience as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. Loans with low interest and long repayment periods should also be covered in this package. Such money can help businesses recover from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. Stimulus package may also include offering tax vacations and reliefs especially during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2) **Increasing the frequency of marketing the country** as most the preferred and the best tourist destination in the world in both local and international media. The recovery kitty (discussed above), according to participants, can also be used in organizing campaigns and marketing in the country's mainstream media to encourage domestic tourism and world's mainstream media to restore the country's confidence and emphasizing the maintenance of the highest standards of hygiene to prevent the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3) **Public-private partnerships:** The recovery of the tourism industry can be accelerated by the partnerships between private and public or-

ganizations operating in the Oman's tourism industry. For example, hotel and accommodation organizations should collaborate with the Omani ministry of health and local government to set up COVID-19 testing and management facilities. Doing this not only protects the visitors from COVID-19 but also gives the would-be visitors a sense of security and confidence.

4) **Encouraging domestic tourism** by offering discounts and incentives for the locals to enjoy the country's tourism facilities. This will help companies keep operating even with the absence of the international tourists.

Measures by Tourism Industry Players

Table 1. Measures by tourism industry players taken by Oman to curb spread of Covid-19

	Measure taken
1	Offering discounted rates and fees: The organizations and businesses operating in the country's tourism industry should consider offering discounts during the pandemic. Such discounts may include booking rates, parking fees and others. Such discounts will not only encourage local tourists but also international tourists and thus help in bridging the current gap.
2	Additionally, businesses operating in the Oman's tourism industry should consider adopting a flexible booking policy. The policy should be such that customers are allowed to cancel or amend their bookings without additional charges nor conditions at any time. This ensures a booked space is kept and not lost. This can also serve as a marketing strategy as customers are likely to inform their friends of the offer.
3	The organizations should also consider cancelling or waiving all the fees and fines that were charged on customers who cancelled or amended their bookings as result of COVID-19 pandemic. Such customers should also be allowed to make a new booking with current rates without giving them conditions at any time provided it is within the laws and regulations of Oman.

4	<p>Businesses and organizations operating in the Omani tourism industry should also consider offering attractive discounts to clients who want to re-book their previously cancelled bookings without conditions. Such offers should also be extended to customers who wish to re-book after normalization of everything (after the coronavirus pandemic). Attractive re-booking offering will help organizations not lose their loyal customers and as a result, maintain their market or even expand it.</p>
5	<p>Organizations and businesses operating in the country's tourism sector should also consider diversifying their operations. For example, such organizations should consider offering facilities such as meeting and conference facilities among other services. With a wide range of services, they can always find a way to survive one of their products fails.</p>

Source: own elaboration.

Research Limitation

This is qualitative research where data used were collected using interviews which were carried out with carefully selected participants. But since the research used interviews to collect data, it involved mainly collection of the opinions and perceptions of the experts from Oman's tourism industry. As result, the accuracy of the results is based on the honesty and truthfulness of the participants. Another major limitation associated with the study is that interviews were never carried out using face to face contact and as result, impromptu interviews were not possible and only results from the those who agreed to participate were included in the study.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to achieve the following objectives: to identify the economic, social, and geopolitical impacts of the Corona pandemic on the country's tourism industry; to identify ways to enhance domestic tourism so as to increase the income in the Oman's tourism industry which has been declining; to identify specific travel destinations and associated recovery plans; to suggest recommendations on the best approaches to improving

Oman's tourism sector. The main impacts of coronavirus on Omani tourism industry include the loss of revenue and the reduction in hotel occupancy rate. These effects resulted in massive job losses, unpaid leave and pay cuts amongst employees in the country's tourism industry. The measures to be taken to enhance recovery of the tourism industry were categorized into two: government measures and business measures. The government measures include: setting aside COVID-19 recovery kitty; increasing the frequency of marketing the country as the preferred and the best tourist destination in the world in both local and international media; public-private partnerships; encouraging domestic tourism by offering discounts and incentives for the locals to enjoy the country's tourism facilities.

Private measures include: offering discounted rates and fees; adopting a flexible booking policy; cancelling or waiving all the fees and fines that were charged on customers who cancelled or amended their bookings as result of COVID-19 pandemic; offering attractive discounts to clients who want to re-book their previously cancelled bookings without conditions; diversification of operations.

One of the countries that successfully managed its coronavirus and, as a result, where the impact on tourism industry was minimal is Netherlands. The Omani authorities in the tourism sector should consider visiting Netherlands for benchmarking.

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