

Revisiting Hotel Brands in West Bengal: An Assessment for Confidence Building of Leisure Tourists amidst
COVID 19 Pandemic

Turkish Online Journal of Qualitative Inquiry (TOJQI)
Volume 12, Issue 6, July , 7480- 7491

Research Article

**Revisiting Hotel Brands in West Bengal: An Assessment for Confidence Building of
Leisure Tourists amidst COVID 19 Pandemic**

Dr. Debasish Batabyal

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Travel and Tourism, Amity University, Kolkata, India

debasishbatabyal@gmail.com

Mr. Pratim Chatterjee

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Hospitality, Amity University, Kolkata, India

chatterjeepratim29@gmail.com

Ms. Namrata Chakraborty

Assistant Professor, Guru Nanak Institute of Technology, Kolkata, India

namratachakraborty1988@gmail.com

Dr. Shatrajit Goswami

Associate Professor, SRM University, Gangtak, India

goswami.shatrajit@gmail.com

Ms. Vandita Hajra

Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Travel and Tourism, Amity University, Kolkata, India

vandita.hajra@gmail.com

Abstract:

Hospitality Industry in India is considered as Sunrise Industry as it has registered a huge potential for future growth. The tourism and hospitality sector is having a steady growth and accounts for 7.5 percent of the country's GDP. According to India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF), 4.2 crore jobs were created in tourism and hospitality sector as of 2019 which was 8.1 percent of the total employment of the country. Though the hospitality sector has the potential to be the major reason behind the growth of the economy, yet the COVID-19 pandemic has wrecked this as never before. Now it is critical whether the hospitality industry in the study area will move ahead or drop down by losing the market share. In this unparallel and unforeseen situation of low occupancies and higher fixed costs, correct and cost effective brand strategies are not only essentials but imperative as well. This article is an attempt to

build confidence of popular hotel brands in selected cities and hill stations of tourism importance in West Bengal. An opinion survey is conducted for identifying areas and issues of confidence building for selected hotels with wide ranging facilities and services. An effort is also put forward to move towards quality of life (QOL) in hotel branding. Principal component analysis, structural equation modeling (SEM) and ideographic ranking methods are used as quantitative tools for measuring data.

Key Words: Confidence Building, Ideographic Ranking, Quality of Life, Principal Component Analysis (PCA), COVID 19.

Introduction:

As per World Health Organization (WHO), COVID 19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered Corona Virus. It is one of the most dangerous highly infected disease the world has ever seen. As maintaining social distance is advised to avoid this disease so hospitality industry is badly affected and will continue to be so as it is a part of service industry. In this pandemic situation which may continue for an indefinite period Hotel Industry need to implement many measures to survive and grow. We need to have a clear strategy. It is not just to, I would say, mitigate. If you look at the curve of the cases, we need to break that curve. Not only to bend the curve. We need to suppress and then we need to mobilize what I believe is required, which is a double digit percentage of the economy at national level and of the global economy in order to address the socio-economic consequences of this disease (Guterres; 2020).

A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, design or combination of all these elements that an organization uses to convey the identity of its product or services to customers and differentiate them from the others. They are a combination of the company's marketing, promotional, distribution and service efforts with a suitable differentiation from the competitors. Hospitality Industry being a part of service industry need to brand in a proper way to gain competitive advantage. An established brand usually help gaining confidence of customers and other stakeholders. Creating and maintaining brand in service is a complicated phenomenon and needs experts' attention. This COVID 19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges in retaining and promoting brands. Priority issues are different now as never before. The entire hospitality is in a dilemma as to whether to wait till ultimate discovery of vaccine and medicine, or to invest for developing COVID 19 infrastructure and safety measures for survival. While incurring losses or somehow maintaining break-even level, the provision for new investment would not be a wise decision. Again, the severity and intensity of COVID 19 pandemic have been changing and so the directives at national and international level. Many properties are hankering after new and innovative pathways of survival to revival strategies as never before. Entrepreneurs and professionals are of different opinion with regard to the strategy formulation for the hospitality industry around the world and this study area is not exception to that. While a group of experts believe that leading hotel brands are able to regain confidence of customers quickly, others think that only justified safe-overnight accommodation providers with new innovative practices will be the next generation hospitality brands after the outbreak. Another group of supplementary and/or alternative accommodation providers are thinking of competitive advantages with regard to location, price, and more customized delivery.

Amidst this situation, the confidence of a brand is based on activity or reactivity of a brand, level of trustworthiness and professionalism, consistency in messaging, associated emotional and cultural values, delivered brand promise, simple and informative, at par with the mission statement, ability to recognize other needs associated with the main products, quality, reliability, price, delivery, support, features, and commitment for investing adequately in organizational capabilities critical to delivering against our brand's long term promise. Broadly, these are categorized into two issues contributing to the confidence building of hotel brands in the state of west Bengal. From an extensive review of literature and interview with hotel professionals confidence building issues are found. These are inherited factors and created factors respectively. Inherited factors are those factors which are already present in an organization and can be readily branded. These are (i) location of the hotel in the heart of the city or with high accessibility or in a beautiful place, (ii) quality, category, location and facilities of room, (iii) quality of the food

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items, (iv) architectural design of the guest area and other areas, (v) courteous guest contact employees, (vi) service mindedness beyond timing, (vii) database of retained guests, (viii) property management systems and related technological support system, (ix) and availability of such infrastructure or superstructure that are event specific in nature. On the other hand, created factors are situational factors e.g. moments of truth during actual delivery, new social responsibilities, safety and security for guests, customized service offering with individual attention etc.

Immediately after the COVID 19 crisis, quality of a hotel brand is how quality of life (QOL) is assured, safe tourism is practiced. The well-being of the society is not only indicated by the income level of the individual but also by the non-economic factors like health, education level, and now safety measures adopted in this new normal condition of COVID 19 outbreak. The human wellbeing does not depend on the possession of the resources but how scientifically in use (Verkerk et.al. 2001).

West Bengal is the only Indian state connected with the Himalaya and the Bay of Bengal. With almost 9.5 crore population, the total land area is little less than United Kingdom. Almost all the classified and maximum number of unclassified hotels, lodges and alternative accommodation units are located in our study area. Kolkata, Darjeeling, Digha and Shantiniketan are premier tourist destinations in the state. Table 1 is showing the classified and government owned accommodation units below.

Table1: Classified Hotels/Tourist Lodge/Youth Hostel in West Bengal

SI No	Hotels/Tourist Lodge/Youth Hostel	Number	Source
1	West Bengal Forest Development Corporation (Tourist Lodge)	8	West Bengal Forest Development Corporation Ltd
2	West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation Ltd (Tourist Lodge)	29	West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation Ltd
3	Youth Hostel (Dept of Youth Services and Sports)	27	Dept of Youth Services and Sports
4	Total star category hotel in West Bengal (One Star - Five Star Deluxe)	37	Ministry of Tourism,Government of India
5	Total Five Star Deluxe hotel in West Bengal	5	Ministry of Tourism,Government of India
6	Total Five Star hotel in West Bengal	8	Ministry of Tourism,Government of India
7	Total Four Star hotel in West Bengal	10	Ministry of Tourism,Government of India
8	Total Three Star hotel in West Bengal	13	Ministry of Tourism,Government of India

9	Total Two Star hotel in West Bengal	1	Ministry of Tourism, Government of India
10	Total One Star hotel in West Bengal	NIL	Ministry of Tourism, Government of India

N.B.: Retrieved from respective websites, 2020

Non star hotels (44.3%) were the major place of stay for the domestic overnight visitors, followed by star hotels (25.9%). On the other hand, star hotels (69.2%) were the major place of stay for the Foreign Overnight Visitors (Tourism survey, Govt. of W.B.; 2015). Majority of the domestic and foreign visitors visited West Bengal in the previous years for their holidays, leisure & recreation, followed by pilgrimage and religious activity for domestic visitors and foreign same day visitors. As the state has been experiencing a huge global socio-economic and behavioral change, this study attempts to analyze and interpret these conditions for diminishing guest confidence building amidst COVID 19 pandemic for seeking useful inputs required to support this hospitality industry for future tourism promotion and development in this state.

Review of Literature:

Chen H., Huang X. & Li Z. (2020) point out the role of hotels in boosting tourist confidence to reduce their psychological pressure and to give them a homely feeling and will promote the revitalization of post COVID-19 accommodation market. Hao, F., Xiao, Q. & Chon, K. (2020) explore how the medical emergency and economic influence of the pandemic significantly redirect the supply demand balance of the hotel industry, and suggest to reorient the present business model to explore their competitiveness. Another closely noticeable trend to check service failure and to be more competitive in the market, Petzer, D. J. & Steyn F. J. (2006). suggest several customer retention activities. Again, Baghmalek, J.R., Haghghi, M., & Mira, S. A (2019) suggest through a guest loyalty model for capturing new trend of assessing customers experience after COVID 19 crisis. Blengini I. & Yoonjongheo, C. (2020) state that the pricing decision of hotel always plays a crucial role in the determination of hotel revenue and in process of profit maximization while Hussain et.al. (2020) outline how existing brand equity is significantly associated with the future market performance of a hotel with their wide ranging facilities and services. Batinic, I. (2015) proposes internet marketing through the property website, via e-mail and through social networks. Ivanov S., Webster C., Stoilova E. & Slobodskoy D. (2020), emphasize on automation technologies, specifically chat-box, self check-in service kiosks, service robots etc. create a full proof technological shield between a tourism/hospitality company and its guests/ tourists, between employees and customers and between the customers themselves for contact and uninterrupted liaison. Kumar A. (2020) proposes that hospitality & tourism industry use the social media properly because importance of social media is well understood in the long run. Zhan Z., Chen Po Ju & Lew Alan. A (2020) advice that robots in tourism and hospitality can increase the efficiency of work, the quality of service, image and expectations. This is further strengthened after COVID 19 outbreak. A group of experts emphasized on modus operandi. Lanz H. L., Ferrari M & Mody M (2020), discuss about a modus operandi on how all hospitality industry proponents have to maintain confidence among each other in this challenging times. She further advises on the way of imparting information and communication, modification of sales and marketing strategy and initiative for the period of crisis to welcome the customers again as before. In line with the same, Jain S. (2020) proposes that the marketing strategy of hotel properties should change during this outbreak from providing ultra luxury to ultra hygiene accommodation with a genuine focus on a bacteria and virus free ambiance, décor and overall infrastructure. Lin Naiqing & Robert R Kevin (2020), on the other hand, states that upgrading food safety intentions and practices will reduce health care costs, and strengthen food safety culture and overall public health during and after virus outbreak.

In another research study, Thams, A., Zech, M., Rempel, D., & Koi, A. (2020) point out the importance of temporary tax waive off and reduction, particularly transaction based taxes for hotels and airlines which in recent years have

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been materialized to a certain extent. Based on the review of literature above, five macro domain areas are found out, with each area having observed variables. Again, addressing safe human life and its improved quality management is expected to contribute to confidence building. Relevant socio-economic, cultural issues addressed through this important domain will certainly help producing quality inputs for building confidence of all stakeholders in improving belief and confidence. World Health Organization (31st March,2020) in their interim guidance on 'operational consideration for COVID-19 management in the accommodation sector' proposes that lodging of the guest and any services where guest interaction happens requires special attention and advises to form a crisis management team from all relevant departments.

Qiu T., Richard, R., Park J., Li SN & Song H. (2020) suggest that instead of focusing narrowly and directly on reinstating tourism, strategies should be formulated with a holistic and innovative spectrum to satisfy the need of the people of safety and desire for travel while Zhang Y. & Ma Feei Z. (2020) states that positive impact of mental health helps the people to cope up with other negative impacts on mental health in this unprecedented situation.

While Sirgy Joseph.M (2019) states the incorporation and utilization of quality of life/well being concepts in the field of hospitality by reviewing seven major theories of quality of life, Uysal M., Sirgy J., Woo E. & Kim H. (2016) deal with the tourism experiences and activities that have a wide ranging impact on both tourist's overall life, satisfaction and well being of residents. In another research study, Bohdanowicz P. & Zientara P. (2009) point out much earlier that several chain of properties tried to improve the quality of life in local community and other important stakeholders as a mean of corporate social responsibility. This is a noticeable trend amidst COVID 19 pandemic in the study area through hospital-hospitality relationship. Peteras M., Kallmuenzer A. & Buhalis D. (2018) enhance the same concept to hospitality entrepreneurs and explore the factors influencing hospitality entrepreneur's quality of life and how these relate to the growth of business.

Objectives and Hypothesis : Present article is an effort to contribute to the existing brands through hygiene and safety measures for COVID 19 outbreak. Following the opinions of health experts it is assumed that the adverse impact of COVID 19 crisis will continue for some coming years. The dire need for hygiene and safety measures will remain unchanged even though the vaccine and medicines will be available soon, recovery rates of patients suffering from COVID 19 continues to increase in India. Therefore, the objective of the study is

- ✦ To find out the relationship between educational level of guests and preference for medical facilities and safety measures among leisure tourists amidst this pandemic.
- ✦ To measure the components and their weights respectively which are responsible for confidence building of guests through brands with respect to a five dimension model based on review of literature amidst COVID 19 pandemic effects.

Based on the objectives above following are the hypotheses given here under

H01: Economic factors are more important while choosing a brand for overnight accommodation and non economic factors such as special relationship with the properties, housekeeping and medical preferences in hotels are not important irrespective of educational level of guests.

H02: Infrastructural dimension is no longer important as the COVID 19 pandemic has been predominating the confidence building in hotels' branding.

Methodology: A total of three hundred forty questionnaires are found to be of use. The stratified random sampling is used for data collections in Darjeeling, Digha Shantiniketan and Kolkata. The study is confined to tourists' or guests' perception and opinion only, neither incorporating internal stakeholders nor other external interest groups of hotels. Bartlett's Sphericity and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) tests are conducted and confirm the inter correlation among the variables, degree of common variance and sampling adequacy (annexure 2) . Cronbach's alpha values for the five dimension model are given below showing scale reliability of the collected data.

Table 2: Scale Reliability for Five Dimension Model of Confidence Building through Hotel Branding

SI No	Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
1	Non-compliance dimension	0.6793
2	Infrastructure dimension	0.8958
3	Restaurant Bar safety dimension	0.6657
4	Media dimension	0.1161
5	COVID dimension	0.7941

Source: Primary data collection, 2020, Statistical package used is Stata

Mean, Standard deviation, coefficient of variation principal component analysis are used as statistical techniques in the study. Data are tabulated and analyzed mainly in excel and stata. Scale techniques comprising of five point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree and Strongly Disagree and Semantic scale (extremely important – absolutely unimportant) will be used to elicit opinion of the respondents.

The outcomes of principal component analysis (PCA) are usually discussed in terms of scores of factor and loadings i.e. the weight by which each standardized original variable should be multiplied to get the factor score. If these scores are standardized to the square of standard deviation, loadings must incorporate the data variance in them. If component scores are not standardized then loadings must have to be unit-scaled or normalized and these weights are called eigenvectors. PCA is the simplest form of the true eigenvector-based multivariate analysis. Often, its operation is revealing the internal structure of the data in such a way that it best explains the variance in the data set. If a multivariate dataset is visualized as a set of coordinates in a high-dimensional data space (1 axis per variable), PCA can supplement the user with a lower-dimensional picture, a projection of this object when considered from its most informative viewpoint.

PCA also upgrades the data to a new coordinate system in such a way that the greatest variance by some scalar projection of the data comes to lie on the first coordinate. This is called the first principal component and it goes on in this way from first to second and so on.

Consider this $n \times p$ data matrix, \mathbf{x} , with column-wise zero empirical mean (the sample mean of each column has been shifted to 0), where each of the n rows represents a different repetition of the experiment, and each of the p columns gives a particular kind of feature.

Here, the change or transformation is defined by a set of size l of p -dimensional vectors of weights or coefficients $w_{(k)} = (w_1, \dots, w_k)_k$ that map each row vector $X_{(i)}$ of X to a new vector of principal component scores $t_{(i)} = (t_1, \dots, t_l)_{(i)}$ given by

$t_{k(i)} = X_{(i)} \cdot W_{(k)}$ for $i = 1, \dots, n$ $k = 1, \dots, l$ in such a way that the individual variables t_1, \dots, t_l of t considered over the data set successively inherit the maximum possible variance from X with each coefficient vector W constrained to be a unit vector. A standard result for a positive semi-definite matrix such as $\mathbf{X}^T \mathbf{X}$ is that the quotient's maximum possible value is the biggest eigen value in the matrix, which occurs when w is the corresponding eigenvector. With $w_{(1)}$ found, the first principal component of a data vector $\mathbf{x}_{(i)}$ can then be given as a

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score $t_{1(i)} = \mathbf{x}_{(i)} \cdot \mathbf{w}_{(1)}$ in the transformed co-ordinates, or as the corresponding vector in the original variables, $\{\mathbf{x}_{(i)} \cdot \mathbf{w}_{(1)}\} \mathbf{w}_{(1)}$.

Another statistical tool used in the study is coefficient of variation to measure growth of tourist arrivals. Individual states and UTs are ranked thereby to measure correlation. This correlation between ranks of domestic and international tourists ultimately directs future relation between domestic and international tourism in any region or country. Ordinary linear correlation refers to straight-line relationships between two variables and ranges between perfect negative relationship and perfect positive relationship, with 0 indicating non-linear relationship.

The coefficient of variation is a reliable measure of dispersion in probability and is being used here a another statistical tool. Here, it is expressed as a percentage, and is defined as the ratio of the standard deviation (σ to the mean (μ or $|\mu|$)).

Another, statistical technique used in the study is structural equation modeling that incorporate several traditional multivariate statistical procedures like factor analysis, canonical correlation regression analysis, discriminant analysis etc. The visual form of this model is path diagram and represents in a set of matrix equations. Thus, researchers have to screen the matrix representation from the path diagram, and provide the software with a series of matrices for the different sets of parameters, such as factor loadings and regression coefficients.

Data Analysis & Discussion:

Based on empirical analysis for measuring the performance through coefficient of variation (from 2010-11 to 2017-18) it is found that the rank of domestic tourists arrivals is 21st whereas the rank of foreign tourists arrival is 5th in West Bengal. These ranks are nothing but the influx in tourist arrival from Bangladesh, mostly for medical tourism, MICE tourism etc. Moreover, the study clearly exhibits and promotes destination specific brand building also varying from one state to another. Again, more number of tourist arrivals is a conventional approach in brand building. The activities of tourists, duration of stay, per capita expenditure of tourist per day, nationality to be targeted, etc. should also be taken into consideration. Based on the review of tourism literature, confidence building through branding is essentially in line with the ongoing sustainable life style and quality development principals. Accommodating more number of guests in a large property, allowing more number of tourists in a destination or availing of congested public transportation enhance risks and community infection, threatening mass destruction of lives and loss of human capitals as a whole. Therefore, the quality of life ultimately enhances health safety in continuation with sustainable life. Table 2 deals with the classification of tourists on the basis of consumption of rooms nights over the last year.

Table 3: Idiographic Ranking of guests on the basis of average duration of stay for leisure tourists in West Bengal

Indicators	AVG consumption < 2.98 room nights		AVG consumption > 2.98 room nights		Total
	Absolute	Percentage	Absolute	Percentage	
Occupation	71	52.99%	63	47.01%	134
Income	71	55.47%	57	44.53%	128
Health security	59	53.64%	51	46.36%	110
Travel reimbursement	24	38.10%	39	61.90%	63

Educational level	18	54.55%	15	45.45%	33
Special relationship with hotel	7	29.17%	17	70.83%	24
Living environment	10	50.00%	10	50.00%	20
Medical preferences	4	28.57%	10	71.43%	14
Familiarity of staff	3	33.33%	6	66.67%	9
Housekeeping	3	60.00%	2	40.00%	5

Source: Field Survey 2020

The mean room night from the surveyed responses is 2.98 for this study of 180 leisure tourists after classifying into two categories viz. leisure tourists with an average consumption for more than 2.98 room nights (90 guests) and that of less than 2.98 room nights (90 guests). Surprisingly the difference between the two groups of guests are not that much prominent in case of their occupation, income, health security etc. It can also be argued that the educational level does not play a significant role in the factors like employment, income and health security of guests. But in case of travel reimbursement the guests with high educational background are aware of the economic conditions and almost 62% of the guests who prioritize the travel reimbursement belong to educated class. On the other hand, the non economic factors like special relationship with hotels, housekeeping and medical preferences are highly preferred by the highly educated guests in hotels.

A five dimension model, incorporating all the components, based on literature review and contemporary situation, is prepared for in-depth study. These components are grouped into five broad areas from noncompliance, infrastructure, restaurant and bar safety, media to COVID 19 dimensions. Infrastructure dimension is found to be the most important with ambience and décor after pandemic (2.050) and outside safety measures(1.997) respectively. Ambience and décor are largely responsible for mood or setting of a place making guests feel safe, comfortable and happy.

Table 4: Five Dimensions of Building Confidence through Branding

Dimensions	Issues	Eigen Values	Weight age	Rank
Infrastructure dimension	Outward Safety Measures of property after COVID 19 pandemic	5.46795	1.997	1
	Ambience & Décor after COVID 19 pandemic	1.18049	2.050	
	Room Size	.77729		
	Room Décor	.581358		
	Gym Facility	.502304		
	Lobby Décor	.385195		
	Spa Facility	.337835		
	Swimming Pool	.317574		
	Conference Hall	.245114		
	Parking Space	.204887		
Media dimension	best Promotion strategy during pandemic situation	1,17516		5
	Positive word of mouth publicity towards the Hotel (1 being	1,01794		

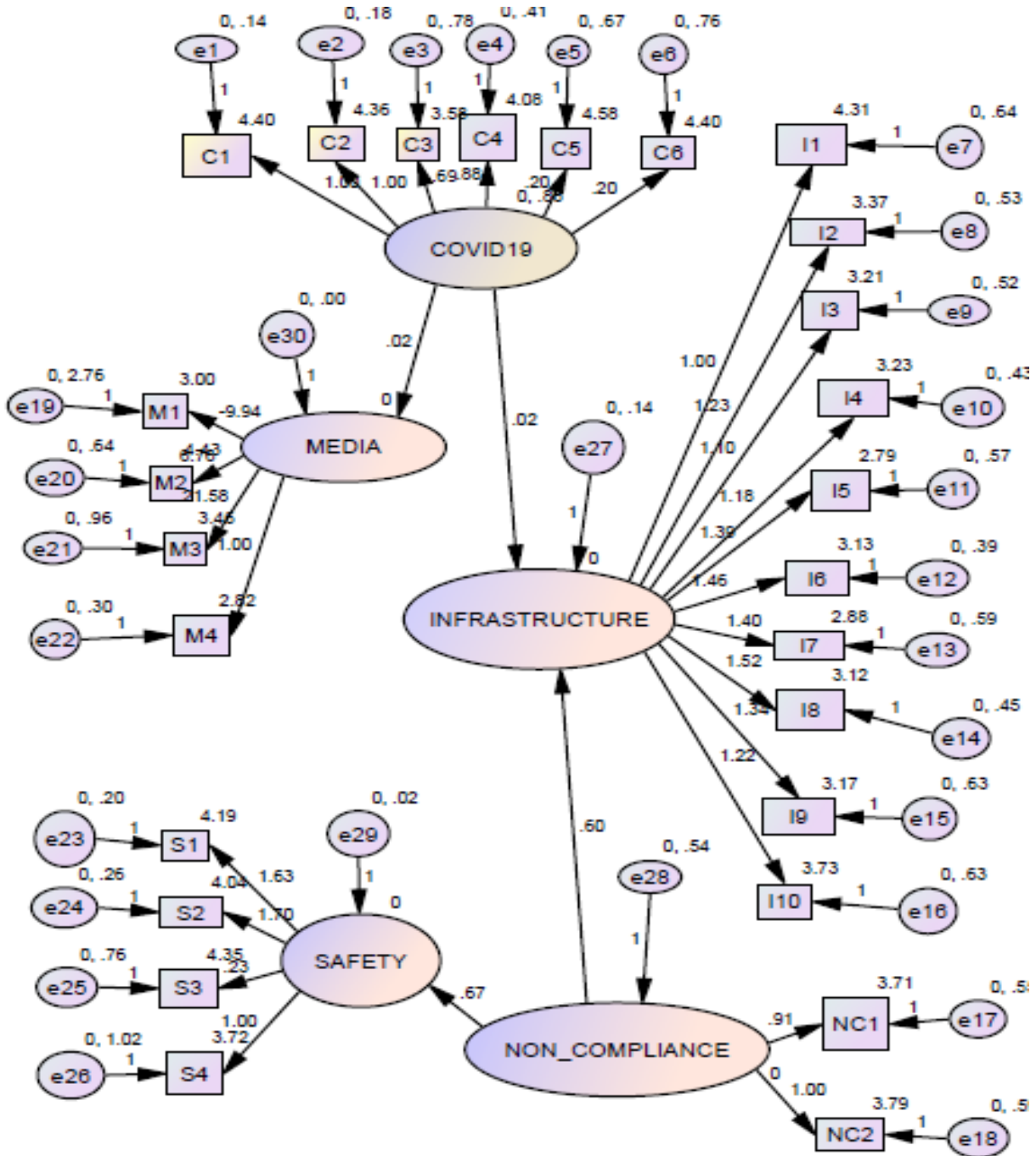
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	highly disagreed to 5 being strongly agreed) *			
	Brand Value	.952731		
	Choice of a type of advertising media	.85416		
Restaurant & Bar Safety dimension	Food Quality	2.09965	1.507	4
	Service Culture	.976752		
	Home Delivery market in both corporate and household sector (1 being highly disagreed to 5 being strongly agreed)	.480054		
	No Buffet Only A La Carte	.221771		
COVID 19 dimension	Proper sanitization of guest room and public areas	3.09	1.753	2
	Sanitization of guest luggage	1.33626	1.722	
	Fixation of Voice Recognition System in the guest room	.613911		
	Infra red technology to be used while check in	.510584		
	safety measure to be taken to ensure maximum occupancy *	.297288		
	touch less guest experience is essential to gain the confidence back of the guest(1 being highly disagreed to 5 being strongly agreed) *	.15196		
Non-compliance dimension	Location	1.51514	1.413	3
	Price Factor	.484861		

Source: Primary data collection, 2020, Statistical package used is Stat

The second most important is COVID 19 dimension in which we find proper sanitization of guest room and public areas (1.753) and sanitization of guest luggage (1.722) respectively. These are directly associated with immediately after involvement of guests. Non-compliance dimension is found to be the next most important in which location predominates with its weight of 1.413. Restaurant and bar safety dimension has a weight of 1.507 and the eigen value for the quality of food is 2.09965. The same model has been conceptualized in another way through structural equation modelling (based on covariance).

Figure 1: Five Dimension Model of SEM (Structural Equation Modelling) for Confidence Building



Among all measured variables infrastructure is found the most important macro domain for confidence building, followed by COVID 19 dimension and non-compliance dimension respectively. Media dimension is found the weakest part of this model in the study.

Conclusion: Therefore, the outcome of the study contradicts a generalized approach in strategy formulation for confidence building through branding. Hotels are suggested to look back the destinations or location where they are offering from and the guest segments they targeted before COVID 19 pandemic. The majority of tourists prioritizing the travel reimbursement belong to educated class and this segment prefers special relationship with hotels, housekeeping and medical preferences during and after this new normal situation. Building confidence through

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branding should be based on property's infrastructure. In other words, properties in the study area are expected to build confidence with the measures for infrastructure e.g. space, décor, ambiance, etc. The assertion of investing more and emphasizing on measures for COVID 19 is found the second important dimension of confidence building. Again, this COVID 19 dimension is found more important than the conventionally recognized non-compliance components of location and price. The restaurant and bar safety dimension is the forth important area with the quality of food still showing its importance.

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Annxure1:

Correlation between Ranks based on Coefficient of Variations of Domestic and International Tourist Arrivals

	<i>Domestic tourism</i>	<i>International tourism</i>
Domestic tourism	1	
International tourism	0.494678	1

Annxure 2:

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.930	
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3541.082
	Df	105
	Sig.	.000

Source: Primary data collection, 2020, Statistical package: SPSS 20.