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Bending and Bouncing Back. Traits of resilience in hospitality firms

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hospitality industry. The study adopts the concept of organizational resilience to investigate how hotel managers in Rimini, a renowned Italian coastal tourism destination, managed their businesses and labor force after the pandemic outbreak. The analysis is based on a survey of 143 hotel managers conducted on the eve of summer 2020, and examines the changes in services provided, management practices, and labor force employed compared to the previous year. The paper contributes to the debate on organizational resilience and the factors shaping firms' reactions to the pandemic.

Keywords: organizational resilience, local impact, hospitality industry

JEL: Q54, R11, Z31

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, at the beginning of 2020, and the measures governments imposed to contain the spreading of the disease have had a detrimental impact on gross domestic product (GDP) and caused the loss of millions of jobs. Among all sectors of economic activity, the tourism industry has been one the most severely affected. In 2019, the travel and tourism industry contributed 10.4% of the global economy's GDP. In 2020, the industry's global GDP contribution dropped to 5.5%, highlighting the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Employment dynamics portray a similar dismal picture. Employment in the tourism sector declined by 18.5%, with micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, which constitute 80% of industry businesses, bearing the brunt (WTTC, 2021).

In Italy, the COVID-19 pandemic produced a detrimental effect on the tourism industry which lasted throughout the 2020. According to a survey carried out by the National Statistical Office in November 2020 (ISTAT, 2020), more than 6,400 firms in the hotel and restaurant industry (i.e., 3.9% of the total) were closed and did not plan to restart their business.

Companies operating in the hospitality and restaurant industry adopted various strategies to manage their labor force, resulting in reduced employment. Some firms reduced the number of worked hours (with 40.65% of firms doing so from June to November). Furlough schemes supported by public funding were also utilized, with 50.75% of companies benefiting from such schemes. Still, other businesses adopted strategies that may have enduring effects on the size and composition of the workforce. Some firms chose not to renew temporary contracts (20.64%) whereas a small fraction of firms (3.03%) fired employees enrolled with a permanent contract.

The aim of this paper is to examine the strategies and actions employed by hotel managers, both at the individual and collective levels, when faced with challenges of sudden, unpredictable, and hazardous shocks. The study draws upon the concept of organizational resilience to analyze the capacity of hotels to absorb and recover from such shocks.

On the one side, we explore the factors which might have prompted hotel managers to open their business in the first aftermath of the pandemic outbreak, in a condition of enduring emergency. This phenomenon relates to the first dimension of organizational resilience outlined in our literature review, that is, the organization's capacity of absorbing, bending, and adjusting to these shocks. On the other side, we investigate how hotel owners who operated regularly during the summer 2020 managed their labor force, the services offered, and the changes introduced in their business. This second phenomenon connects with a second dimension of organizational resilience, that is, the organization's capacity of bouncing back and returning to its pre-shock state after the crisis has passed. In addressing these issues, we contribute to the empirical stream of research that investigates the factors which shaped firms' reactions to the outbreak of the pandemic (Filimonau et al., 2020; Heredia-Colaço and Rodrigues, 2021; Ozdemir et al., 2021; Stergiou and Farmaki, 2021).

The context of the empirical investigation is Rimini, a renowned Italian tourism destination on the Adriatic coast, primarily attracting mass tourist segments. Rimini is a medium-sized city of 150,000 inhabitants and one of the most prominent coastal tourism destinations in Europe. The choice of this context is driven by the observation that a great deal of heterogeneity exists between tourism destinations within the same country and even within the same region.

This study is based on a questionnaire administered to hotel managers during the period of May-July 2020. The questionnaire aimed at identifying the differences between the summer season 2019 and the summer season 2020 in terms of services provided, management practices, and workers employed. We focus on the summer season because the Government's containment measures resulted in the near-complete shutdown of all tourism-related activities and businesses between March and May 2020. Once the containment measures were relaxed in May 2020, more flexible regulations were enacted, and firms could restart their operations. The final sample comprises 143 hotels which are prominently family-owned (72%), operate in the summer season (79%), and are small-medium businesses (45%).

The results of our investigation bear meaningful implications at the hotel as well as at the destination level. The analysis reveals that 10 percent of hotels did not reopen in the summer 2020: this value is consistent with official statistics concerning the entire population of hotels in Rimini. Factors that mostly affected the decision of hotel managers not to resume operations were the uncertainty about demand and future receipts, the risk of registering positive cases among employees or customers, and the difficulty of implementing the health protocols imposed at the regional level.

The 2020 season saw a significant decline in the labor force among sampled hotels. The sharpest declines involved hotels belonging to the following categories: small (-39.5%), seasonal (-33.6%), rated 1-2 stars (-33.5%), and owner-managed (-33.2%). Furthermore, the receptive capacity in terms of number of rooms has been reduced, especially among medium-large hotels. Similarly, hotels decreased their dining capacity, in terms of number of seats. Finally, we find that more than one quarter of hotels have downsized their food services and modified the treatments offered, while one out of five units has introduced new services.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the background literature we rely upon to analyze the behavior of hotel managers in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Section 3 describes the context of analysis, the survey conducted to collect the data, and the characteristics of sampled firms. Section 4 presents the main findings. In section 5, we outline the major implications of our analysis and offer the concluding remarks.

2. Background literature

Empirically oriented studies published in the last two years provide insights on several factors which shaped firms' reactions to the outbreak of the pandemic. Ozdemir et al. (2021) find that the performance gap (e.g., occupancy rate, RevPar, etc.) reported by hotels in the United States in the period March 1, 2020 and May 31, 2020 as compared with the same months of the previous year varies according to the structural characteristics of the business. In particular, the largest (negative) impact of COVID-19 occurred in the upper upscale and luxury hotel segments, while the downturn was relatively milder among properties operating in the economy segment. Moreover, independent hotels were least affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than franchised businesses and chain-managed hotels. Heredia-Colaço and Rodrigues (2021) investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in a cross-section of hotels around the globe which were surveyed four times from the last week of April 2020 until the third week of June 2020. Although the survey waves cover different samples of hotels, thus preventing the tracing of any specific business throughout the four phases, they offer interesting insights about the early reactions of operators in the lodging industry. A large share of respondents to the first wave, 85.4%, identified the complete shutdown of operations as the major impact of COVID-19, while 64.5% expected to reopen with the arrival of the summer season. By mid-June, when the fourth wave of the survey was conducted, still a large chunk of respondents, 68.2%, identified the interruption of business as the main consequence of the pandemic outbreak. Moreover, by the end of June, only half of the surveyed hotels had already reopened, while one quarter planned to reopen in July.

Alongside the shutdown of operations, some studies outline criticalities in the management of the workforce in the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak. Stergiou and Farmaki (2021) exploit focus groups to study front-line hotel employees' ability and willingness to work, during the first two weeks of March 2020. The authors find that most participants thought that they were willing to work through the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, they mourned the lack of training about the proper use of equipment and other precautions and lamented the absence of planning about their duties were the crisis to intensify, thus emphasizing the impression that their employer did not care about their needs. The importance of taking proactive stances with respect to the workforce is confirmed by Filimonau et al. (2020) who find that those hotels which adopted practices of corporate social responsibility related to employees displayed a higher degree of organizational resilience. In turn, organizational resilience positively affected the perception of job security (i.e., maintaining the job, receiving the salary on a regular base, working an adequate number of hours) experienced by senior hotel managers.

The aforementioned empirical research adopts analyses and interpretations that evoke (explicitly or implicitly) the theoretical framework of organizational resilience. The focus on organizational resilience should not come as a surprise, as this concept has become increasingly relevant in the last decade, even within the field of tourism studies. This concept adoption is also consistent with the interpretive needs and challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, as it constitutes an external, unpredictable, and hazardous shock.

In the tourism management field, the concept of organizational resilience has been repeatedly utilized to provide an interpretive framework for empirical findings across various levels of analysis: micro, referring to tourism businesses (e.g., Dahles, Susilowati, 2015; Orchiston et al., 2016; Melián-Alzola et al., 2020); meso, referring to tourist destinations (e.g., Cochrane, 2010; Butler, 2017); and macro, referring to tourism and economic systems (e.g., Becken, 2013; Lew, 2014; Ntounis et al., 2021; Van Oort, Thissen, 2021).

However, the focus on organizational resilience does not imply the coherence of theoretical constructs, resulting empirical evidence, or emerging implications. Despite its growing popularity in scientific, economic, and political debates, organizational resilience is defined in many different ways and investigated using non-homogeneous methods and tools. The conceptual disorder that afflicts the concept of resilience has already been investigated by a vast body of literature, including literature reviews and systematic analyses (e.g., Bhamra et al., 2011; Boin and van Eeten, 2013; Barasa et al., 2018; Ruiz-Martin et al., 2018).

For the purposes of this contribution, it is not necessary to delve further into this conceptual disorder, which we assume is a given. Instead, it is necessary to identify a conception of organizational resilience that is methodologically sound and can be adopted to evaluate the resilience of hotels facing the crisis caused by COVID-19.

Therefore, we propose a discussion aimed at evaluating the methodological quality of the concept of organizational resilience, analyzing its definitions, and subsequently referring to the classic evaluation criteria of concepts proposed by Hempel (1952; 1965; 1966): extension, clarity, and systematic import. *Extension* refers to the breadth and scope of the concept and its coherence and consistency across different domains. *Clarity* refers to the concept's potential capacity to be operationalized, allowing the definition of objective indicators. Finally, *systematic import* refers to the extent to which a new concept contributes to or builds upon existing theories and models systematically and coherently. It assesses whether the new concept is logically integrated with existing knowledge and whether it helps to explain and predict phenomena in a more comprehensive and meaningful way.

A good concept should have a precise definition and a good extension, clarity, and systematic import, making it a valuable tool for understanding and explaining a wide range of phenomena in a logical and coherent way (Maggi, 2019).

With its widespread diffusion, the concept of resilience is declined in different ways, which accommodate/enable many domain-specific stipulations of the concept. This heterogeneity can also be explained by its propagation path through different disciplinary fields.

Resilience has traditionally been adopted to describe a material's physical property to return to its original shape after being deformed. Then, it propagated to the field of psychology to describe the ability of a person, or a group of people, to overcome stressful or traumatic events without developing lasting psychological or emotional problems.

Subsequently, the concept of resilience was adopted in the field of ecology to describe the ability of an ecosystem to resist and recover from perturbative events, as stipulated by the often-cited work of Holling (1973: 17): "resilience determines the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist".

The concept of resilience was imported into management and organization studies quite late, in the Eighties-Nineties, mostly in the field of risk management and disaster management and recovery. Related definitions usually focus on preparedness and vulnerability reduction: “resilience is the capacity to cope with unanticipated dangers after they have become manifest, learning to bounce back” (Wildavsky, 1991: 85).

It was only in the aftermath of September 11 that it was widely adopted by the organization and management literature (e.g., Gittell et al., 2006). In this period, due to the strategic relevance of risk management and the huge investments that public and private administrations devoted to safety, resilience became a critical reference concept. It was also widely used in the popular framework of HROs (high-reliability organizations), as defined by Weick and Sutcliffe (2001: 14): “Resilient organizations keep errors small and improvise workarounds that keep the system functioning”.

Soon, the mainstream (functionalist) theory re-elaborated and endogenized the concept of organizational resilience (e.g., Hamel and Välikangas, 2003; Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2013): “Continued success no longer hinges on momentum. Rather, it rides on resilience – on the ability to dynamically reinvent business models and strategies as circumstances change. Strategic resilience is not about responding to a onetime crisis or rebounding from a setback. It’s about continually anticipating and adjusting to deep, secular trends that can permanently impair the earning power of a core business. It’s about having the capacity to change even before the case for change becomes obvious” (Hamel and Välikangas, 2003: 53). In the 2010s, organizational resilience has imposed itself as a new fuzzword in the managerial jargon, with a proliferation of definitions: “hotel resilience measures the degree to which the hotel is in continuous equilibrium in a changing context” (Melián-Alzola et al., 2020), “resilience, at the organizational level, is the measurable combination of characteristics, abilities, capacities or capabilities that allows an organization to withstand known and unknown disturbances and still survive” (Ruiz-Martin et al., 2018: 21).

This summary of the definitions of resilience, obviously not exhaustive, highlights the lack of convergence about the concept's meaning and purpose. Instead, four different conceptions of organizational resilience can be isolated:

- Potential ability to cope with uncertainty, i.e., the organization's capacity to survive by adapting to exogenous shocks;

- Ability to withstand external shocks;

- Ability of an organization to absorb external shocks while maintaining functionality and to return to its pre-shock state.

Hence, while the extension of the concept of resilience is impressive (this concept applies to numerous classes of situations, domains, and disciplines), its clarity is limited since the semantic disorder generates many different strategies and techniques to operationalize it. The empirical dimensions and indicators used to measure organizational resilience are heterogeneous and inconsistent.

To evaluate the systematic import of the concept of organizational resilience, we will focus on its relevance and coherence in the theoretical framework of management and organization.

First, we focus on the conception of resilience as the organizational capability to anticipate and adapt to external shocks, ensuring survival through a process of adaptation towards a new and better state of equilibrium. The idea of adapting to external contingencies in order to maintain a dynamic balance with the reference environment (and, therefore, the survival of the organization) is indeed at the heart of mainstream (functionalist) theory (Parsons, 1956). Since the 1960s, contingency theory (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) has focused on the need for adaptation and flexibility. Thus, the idea that an organization exposed to a change (more or less significant) in the environmental state reconfigures and changes to adapt and survive is not new. Nor is the discussion in terms of resilience more profound or dense in theoretical or applied implications. In fact, the adoption of this concept of organizational resilience merely reinvents the wheel, re-proposing, with different terminology, discussions and interpretations that have been consolidated for over half a century. This causes redundancy and theoretical confusion without adding new elements.

Regarding the conception of resilience as the capability of an organization to withstand external shocks while maintaining the existing structure, the usefulness of resorting to the concept of resilience appears questionable. This concept overlaps with that of resistance (or low vulnerability) without adding anything further.

From this analysis, we identify the only one conception of organizational resilience able to import a valuable theoretical contribution without overlaps and redundancy with pre-existing concepts investigated by organizational and managerial literature: *Organizational resilience refers to an organization's capacity to withstand and effectively manage external shocks by (a) absorbing, bending, and adjusting to these shocks while preserving its core functions and services within its operating environment, and (b) promptly bouncing back and returning to its pre-shock state after the crisis has passed.*

Therefore, we will base our empirical investigation on this definition to assess the resilience of hotels to the shock created by the COVID-19 pandemic. As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially affected the hospitality sector. The outbreak and lockdowns resulted in the closure of almost all hotels and, once containment measures were softened, hotel managers had to cope with critical decision-making challenges concerning the reopening of facilities, the provision of services, and the organization of operational activities.

Building upon this definition of organizational resilience, we gain greater insight into the complexities of the post-lockdown tourism framework; hence, we analyze hotel managers' decisions and behaviors to assess hotels' resilience at an individual and aggregate level. We will consider the containment and lockdown measures as an external shock that necessitates hotels' adaptation (*bending*) and analyze the reopening phase as part of the recovery process (*bouncing back*). It is important to note, for interpretive purposes, that the analysis was conducted in the summer of 2020, during a time when the external shock was still in progress and the hotel sector was exposed to competing forces that both required adaptation (e.g., containment measures, operational protocols and guidelines) and encouraged a return to normality (e.g., optimistic outlooks regarding the conclusion of the pandemic's peak phase).

3. Data and methodology

3.1 Context

This study aims to analyze the reaction, adaptation, and recovery capability of hotel structures to the shock caused by the pandemic. Rimini is a renowned Italian tourism destination on the Adriatic coast, primarily attracting mass tourist segments. It is a medium-sized city of 150,000 inhabitants and boasts a higher per capita income than the average in Italy. Rimini is one of the most prominent coastal tourism destinations in Europe. It experienced a period of rapid growth in domestic and international tourist arrivals between 1945 and 1967. However, since 1968, an increasing competition among coastal destinations led to a gradual decline in foreign tourists, while maintaining almost invariant the number of overnight stays. Despite this, Rimini underwent two revitalization phases: in the 1978-1988 decade, Rimini invested in entertainment activities, turning it into a hub for leisure and entertainment with amusement arcades, discos, and theme parks. During the 1990-2001 decade, Rimini diversified its tourism offerings by investing in the meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) industry in an effort to attract new tourism segments throughout the year. However, mass seaside tourism remains its primary source of overnight stays and arrivals, and competition among coastal destinations is becoming increasingly fierce as tourists' preferences change. The destination is currently in a mature phase of development and new strategies are needed to attract new market segments while retaining existing visitors and preserving the environment, local community, and traditional culture. Along with its province, which is primarily a 40-kilometer stretch of coast (including the municipalities of Bellaria, Riccione, Misano, and Cattolica), the area hosted nearly 16 million overnight stays in 2019, with 8 millions of those concentrated in the main city of Rimini (according to data from ISTAT and the Emilia Romagna Region, 2020).

In 2019, the accommodation sector in Rimini comprised 1098 businesses, that is, 32.5% of all businesses within the tourism destination Romagna (the tourism cluster where Rimini is located). Among them, 988 are hotels and the remaining 110 are hotel-tourism residencies. Most of the hotels located in Rimini (61.4%) belong to the 3-star category and account for almost two-thirds (66.9%) of the total number of beds available.

Since the beginning of March 2020, as the virus spread in the country, the Italian Government imposed a severe lockdown with generalized restrictions to internal mobility (not to mention international mobility, which was almost halted), leading to a surge in cancellation requests by both foreign and domestic tourists. As a matter of fact, the Government's containment measures resulted in the near-complete shutdown of all tourism-related activities and businesses.

The containment measures were relaxed in May 2020, and more flexible regulations were issued by the beginning of June.

In this context, it is worth noting that, during the month of May 2020, the Italian regions implemented specific protocols (based on the Government's blueprints and directives) to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in hotel facilities. These guidelines were aimed at protecting the health of workers and guests, as well as that of the general society.

These protocols regulated the hotel's architectural and operational dimensions of hotels. For instance, the front-desk services had to comply with rules to preserve social distancing, ensuring the use of face masks and (when necessary) protective gloves. To minimize crowding, guidelines recommended providing guests with online check-ins for guests and automated registration systems. Cleanliness and hygiene-related measures were also imposed, requiring staff to avoid contact with guests' belongings, frequently sanitize workstations and hygienize room keys.

In the dining room, tables had to be spaced at least one meter apart to maintain social distancing, and service should be provided by staff equipped with appropriate protective equipment. Buffet service hat to be generally avoided, and they were only allowed if crowding could be prevented. If the hotel had a swimming pool, the access had to be limited, and frequent water exchange and disinfection had to be carried out to prevent exposure to the virus. Housekeeping service was also exposed to strict regulation.

On the eve of the summer season, hotel owners and managers were required to decide whether to reopen or not their facilities and, in case of reopening, how to arrange their services to face the challenges of a situation that was still far from ordinary.

The new regulation and the virus-containment guidelines represented a sort of reference point, but their implementation would have imposed new investments, staff training, and the redefinition of internal operational procedures.

As for the outlook on tourist demand, uncertainty was overwhelming. On the one side, no foreign tourists were expected; on the other side, the increase in domestic tourist flows (which was expected but was hardly foreseeable in detail) promised to temper the decrease in international flows. In addition, the psychological impact of COVID-19 on tourists' behavior could not be disregarded, as the fear of contagion could significantly impact Italian tourists' travel plans, especially in the short term. The success of the recovery largely depended on the hospitality system's capability to generate trust and security while adapting its services to the new situation.

3.2 Survey

This study is based on a questionnaire administered to hotel managers in the city of Rimini. The survey was designed to be conducted in the immediate aftermath of the reopening of hotels, following a prolonged period of lockdowns and significant mobility restrictions. During this period, there was a high degree of uncertainty regarding tourism demand and the willingness of individuals to travel and have a vacation. Additionally, there was fear among hotel managers related to the difficulty of managing cases of positive COVID-19 among staff and customers and properly adhering to the regional guidelines and implementing health protocols. The questionnaire was implemented and tested in collaboration with the local branch of the Italian hotel-manager association (Federalberghi Rimini[1]), and required a series of focus groups with six hotel managers. These focus groups allowed for the inclusion of questions related to important issues and for the rephrasing of other questions in a clearer manner. The questionnaire, structured in this way, aimed to identify the differences between the summer season 2019 and the summer season 2020 in terms of services provided, management practices, and workers employed.

The questionnaire is composed of five sections. The first section collects information on the hotel, including its name and its characteristics (e.g., annual or seasonal opening), as well as the management's attributes, such as the manager's years of experience and whether the hotel is rented or owned by hotel managers. It also gathers information on the decision to reopen or not during the summer season 2020, at the onset of the easing of pandemic-related restrictive measures. The second section focuses on the decisions made by managers who chose to reopen their businesses during the 2020 season. It includes information on the months the hotel was open in previous years and during the summer 2020, as well as the services offered before and during the pandemic, such as the number of rentable rooms, restaurant capacity (in terms of seats), and employees hired. It also examines if

[1] Federalberghi is the leading entrepreneurial organization in the Italian tourism and hospitality sector. Its organization branches out through regional and sub-regional associations with headquarters in major tourist destinations, including Rimini (Federalberghi Rimini). Federalberghi represents the interests and concerns of hoteliers towards institutions and political, economic, and union organizations.

new or innovative services were offered during the 2020 season. The third section gathers information from both hotel managers who chose to reopen and those who decided not to, on the reasons behind their decisions. This includes factors such as uncertainty of demand and receipts, the influence of other hoteliers on managers' decisions, the risk of a new epidemiological wave, safety protocol applicability, and the destination's tourist-pulling capability. The fourth section deals with the perception of clarity and applicability of guidelines imposed by the Region to prevent contagion and the ability to manage potential positive cases among guests and staff. The final section includes open-ended questions inquiring about any omitted aspects or associated issues related to the objective of the questionnaire.

3.3 Data

The survey was administered to the managers of hotels located in Rimini during the period of May-July 2020. The questionnaire was sent to the entire population of 988 hotels in the city, encompassing those that operate throughout the year (27%) and those open only during the summer months. The majority of hotels fall under the category of medium-quality establishments, with 61% of them being 3-star hotels. On the other hand, 31% are categorized as 1 or 2-star hotels, and a small fraction, about 8%, belong to the high-end 4 or 5-star hotels (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2021). The invitation to participate in the survey was made through both Federalberghi Rimini's channel and the institutional email of the research group. A couple of reminders to participate in the survey were sent to the aforementioned hotel managers who did not previously complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire required an average of 10 minutes to complete.

In total, this study surveyed a total of 177 hotels, of which 34 were excluded from the sample due to inconsistencies in responses or lack of necessary data. Hence, the final sample comprises 143 questionnaires as described in Table 1. 79% of respondents (138 hotels) have a seasonal opening, highlighting the highly seasonal nature of Rimini as a seaside resort. 72% of respondents are the owners of the hotel they manage, reflecting the prevalent family-run management system characterizing the destination. Additionally, the majority of hotels in the sample are small-medium size hotels (45%), whereas only 27% belong to the category of medium-large hotels (with more than 50 rooms) and 28% are classified as small hotels (with 25 or less than 25 rooms). A large share of hotels in the sample are rated as 3-star (61%), while 11% are 4-star hotels, and the remaining 28% are 1 or 2-star hotels[2].

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

		Sample composition (%)	Open in 2020 (%)	Closed in 2020 (%)
nr. hotels	143 hotels		90.2	9.8
Hotel ownership	owned by manager	72	90.3	9.7
	rented by manager	28	90	10
Opening type	Annual	21	100	0
	Season	79	87.6	12.4
Size	small	28.2	87.5	12.5
	small-medium	45.1	90.6	9.4
	large-medium	26.7	92.1	7.9
Star category	1-2 star	27.7	84.3	15.4
	3 stars	61	90.7	9.3
	4 stars	11.3	100	0

* An inferential statistic t-test is used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two groups, whereas ANOVA test is used when groups are more than two. Sign. codes: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

4. Main findings

As highlighted in Table 1, there is no statistically significant difference in the rate of reopening between hotels managed by owners or renters. All hotels with annual operations decided to reopen in 2020, whereas a majority (87.6%) of seasonal hotels chose to reopen as the season progressed. The

[2] The destination has only two 5-star hotels, however, they did not participate in the survey.

pandemic disproportionately impacted smaller hotels, with only 88% opting to reopen, as opposed to large hotels, where 92% reopened. This result mirrors the trend observed in Italy, where the crisis dealt a severe blow to small-sized businesses, as outlined in Section 1. Furthermore, hotels of lower categories experienced more difficulty in reopening, with 84% of 1-2 star hotels, 91% of 3-star hotels, and all 4-star hotels resuming operations in 2020. t-test or ANOVA test results (t-test is used in the case of comparisons between two subsamples, whereas ANOVA test is used when the group means to compare are more than two) confirm that all the mentioned percentages statistically differ across subsamples.

In the survey, hoteliers were asked to evaluate a series of factors that potentially could have influenced their decision to open the hotel for the 2020 season or remain closed. Among the factors examined, they were asked to evaluate the influence of the following factors: the uncertainty about bookings and expected revenues, the behavior of other hoteliers, the risks associated with any positive case among customers or staff, the safety protocols to be applied, the spaces required for social distancing in common areas, the possibility of losing regular customers, a sense of responsibility towards employees, the risk of a new epidemic wave, and the attraction strength of tourists to the city of Rimini. Although the focus groups helped identify the main motivations that seem to have driven hoteliers' decision, we are aware that these motivations investigated in the questionnaire are not exhaustive and it is not possible to quantify the weight (priority) attributed by each hotel manager to each factor. In particular, it is not possible to identify the specific factor(s) that led to their final decision. However, what emerges when examining Table 2 is that most of the factors strongly pushed not to open. In particular, uncertainty about demand and future receipts, the risk of registering positive cases among employees or customers, the difficulty of implementing the health protocols imposed at the regional level, social distancing, and responsibility towards employees pushed not to reopen the hotel in 2020, although with limited differences between the hotels that opened or remained closed in 2020. The influence of competitors or other hotel managers had no substantial influence on the opening choice, while the risk of losing loyal and acquired guests pushed both sub-samples to reopen.

Table 2. Factors affecting the decision to open/not open in summer 2020

	Hotels closed in 2020			Hotels open in 2020		
	Encourage to close	No impact	Encourage to open	Encourage to close	No impact	Encourage to open
Uncertainty about demand and future receipts	100%	0%	0%	88%	5%	7%
Other hotel managers' influence	14%	64%	21%	27%	52%	21%
Risk of positive cases among guests	86%	14%	0%	88%	11%	2%
Risk of positive cases among staff	93%	7%	0%	86%	12%	2%
Implementation of health protocols	57%	36%	7%	61%	31%	8%
Social distancing	57%	36%	7%	43%	47%	9%
Risk of losing acquired guests	14%	43%	43%	23%	23%	53%
Responsibility towards employees	57%	21%	21%	28%	21%	51%
Risk of a new epidemic wave	71%	29%	0%	74%	24%	2%
Attraction strength of the destination	50%	43%	7%	15%	33%	53%

Two aspects had a discordant impact on the two sub-samples: the responsibility towards employees in the case of those hotels which remained closed pushed to close, while it drove to open in the case of hotel managers who opened. Furthermore, the attraction strength of the destination also had a discordant impact. In the case of hotels that remained closed, it pushed not to open, while it motivated reopening for those who opened. This result is focal when evaluating the policy to be implemented at destination level since it mirrors a blurred image of the destination in the eyes of hotel managers.

In the rest of this Section, we aim to investigate the management decisions undertaken by resilient structures that remained open during the challenging 2020 season.

We start by examining the degree to which the opening period of hotel facilities was shortened (measured in months). It is worth noting that this reduction in operating time may have resulted in difficulties in recruiting seasonal staff, as workers were unable to fulfill the minimum duration of work (13 weeks) required to qualify for unemployment benefits during the winter months. Furthermore, the contraction of the working period may have significantly impacted the workers' well-being.

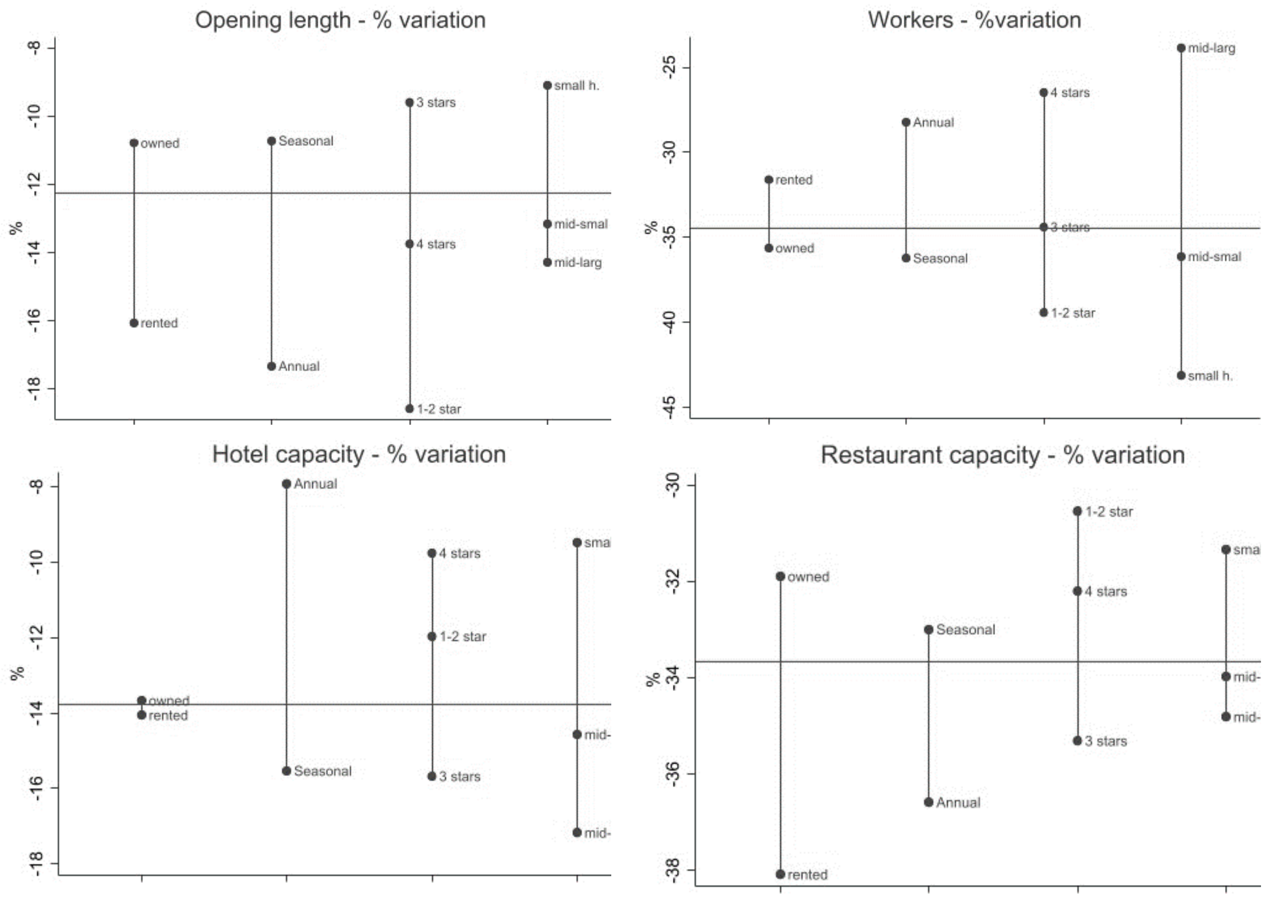
An analysis of the data reveals marked differences in the months of operation between the years 2019 and 2020, all of which are statistically significant. A comparison of the duration of the summer season, considering only the June-October period, illustrates a decrease of 17% on average between the two years, as outlined in Table 3 and Figure 1. Rental facilities experienced a greater reduction in operational months, with a decrease of 18.7%, in contrast to a decrease of 15.8% for owned facilities and annual hotels. Additionally, small hotels, which typically have shorter seasons, recorded a more moderate contraction in operational months at -11.6%, as opposed to medium-sized and large facilities, which experienced a contraction of -20.4% and -15.8%, respectively. A further examination of the data suggests that the lower the hotel category in terms of stars, the more pronounced the contraction of the opening period: hotels with 1-2 stars recorded a decrease of -19.3% in duration, compared to -16.7% for 3-star hotels and -13.8% for 4-star hotels.

Table 3. Opening length and workforce in summer 2019 and summer 2020

		Opening length (months)				Workers (nr.)			
		2019	2020	Difference	Δ%	2019	2020	Difference*	Δ%
nr. hotels (143)	2020 opening	4.29	3.57	-0.71***	-16.6%	9.37	6.45	-2.92***	-31.2%
hotel ownership	owned by manager	4.28	3.60	-0.68***	-15.8%	8.80	5.88	-2.92***	-33.2%
	rented by manager	4.31	3.50	-0.81***	-18.7%	10.81	7.89	-2.92***	-27.0%
Opening type	Annual	5.00	4.13	-0.87***	-17.3%	9.45	7.28	-2.17***	-23.0%
	Season	4.07	3.40	-0.67***	-16.4%	9.35	6.20	-3.14***	-33.6%
Star category	1-2 star	4.24	3.42	-0.82***	-19.3%	5.15	3.42	-1.73***	-33.5%
	3 stars	4.14	3.45	-0.69***	-16.7%	9.90	6.73	-3.17***	-32.0%
	4 stars	5.00	4.31	-0.69**	-13.8%	17.13	12.47	-4.67***	-27.2%
Size	small	4.17	3.69	-0.49***	-11.6%	4.34	2.63	-1.71***	-39.5%
	small-medium	4.31	3.43	-0.88***	-20.4%	8.95	5.79	-3.16***	-35.3%
	large-medium	4.34	3.66	-0.69***	-15.8%	15.50	11.65	-3.85***	-24.9%

* An inferential statistic t-test is used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two groups (means in 2019 and in 2020 for the variable analyzed). Sign. codes: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Figure 1. Percentage variation in the main indicators



The second aspect analyzed in this Section is the variation in terms of personnel and, implicitly, its impact on the well-being of residents, commuters, and out-of-town workers. The 2020 season saw a significant decline in personnel in the hotel sector in Rimini, which was estimated to be -31.2% (Table 3 and Figure 1). This decline was more severe for owner-managed hotels (-33.2%) compared to rental properties (-27%). On the other hand, annual hotels (-23%) registered a lower contraction of personnel compared to seasonal hotels (-33.6%), having a core of permanent employees and only a share of seasonal workers, who were more vulnerable to changes in demand or supply. Smaller hotels (-39.5%, reducing from an average of 4.3 employees in 2019 to 2.6 employees in 2020) and lower-category hotels (-33.5%, reducing from an average of 5.2 employees in 2019 to 3.4 in 2020) showed lower resilience in terms of personnel. As the size and hotel category increase, the hotel structures appear to be more resilient, with a smaller decline in terms of personnel. Medium-sized hotels recorded a decline of -35.3%, reducing from an average of 9 employees in 2019 to 6 employees in

2020, while large hotels recorded a decline of -24.9%, employing approximately 12 employees in 2020, which was 4 units less than in 2019. According to the focus groups, this aspect can be explained by a significant increase in the workload of the hotel managers, particularly if they are the owners, which is more likely for smaller hotels as the duties of the staff are less defined and more diversified. This explanation partially applies also to star categories where 3-star hotels lost about 3 employees (-32%), reducing from 10 employees in 2019 to 7 employees in 2020, while 4-star hotels, with well-defined and less delegable duties and services, diminished their personnel by 27%, reducing from 17 employees in 2019 to 12 employees in 2020.

While 4 and 5-star hotels have exhibited lower personnel losses on a relative basis (displaying a higher degree of resilience) and resulting in a lessened decline in worker well-being, it is worth noting that they represent only 11% of the city's hospitality establishments. Consequently, in absolute terms, at the destination level, the impact that 4 and 5-star hotels have on worker well-being – due to the decrease in employment – may be modest compared to the profound effect exerted by the much more numerous lower category hotels.

Table 4. Hotel and restaurant capacity in summer 2019 and summer 2020

		Hotel capacity (room nr.)					Restaurant capacity (seat nr.)				
		2019	2020	Difference		Δ%	2019	2020	Difference		Δ%
nr. hotels (143)	2020 opening	39.40	33.79	-5.61	***	-14.2%	89.43	59.09	-30.34	***	-33.9%
hotel ownership	owned by manager	37.46	32.09	-5.37	***	-14.3%	86.01	58.44	-27.58	***	-32.1%
	rented by manager	44.31	38.08	-6.22	***	-14.0%	98.03	60.74	-37.29	***	-38.0%
Opening type	Annual	42.24	39.41	-2.83	**	-6.7%	90.50	59.95	-30.55	***	-33.8%
	Season	38.56	32.12	-6.44	***	-16.7%	89.19	58.90	-30.29	***	-34.0%
Star category	1-2 star	25.61	22.42	-3.18	***	-12.4%	56.90	40.70	-16.20	***	-28.5%
	3 stars	43.16	36.14	-7.01	***	-16.3%	98.85	64.10	-34.75	***	-35.2%
	4 stars	54.33	49.80	-4.53	*	-8.3%	118.17	77.08	-41.08	***	-34.8%
Size	small	20.94	18.77	-2.17	***	-10.4%	47.55	33.45	-14.10	***	-29.7%
	small-medium	36.98	31.84	-5.14	***	-13.9%	83.02	54.14	-28.88	***	-34.8%
	large-medium	63.41	53.29	-10.12	***	-16.0%	140.60	92.13	-48.47	***	-34.5%

* An inferential statistic t-test is used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two groups. Sign. codes: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Among organizational strategies, we also analyse the decisions made in terms of changes in the receptive capacity. In fact, the decision to reduce the size of the staff may have led some structures to reduce the receptive capacity, or, in other terms, the number of bookable rooms. Similarly, the limited availability of common areas to comply with social distancing imposed by health regulations may have also imposed the need to reduce the receptive capacity of hotels. In this sense, we asked the respondents to specify the number of rooms available for booking in 2019 and 2020 (see Table 4). On average, the receptive capacity in terms of number of rooms has been reduced by 14.2% (Figure 1). The limited size of common areas may explain the large decrease in the receptive capacity of medium-large hotels, which dropped from an average of 63 rooms to 53 rooms (-16%), compared to a 13.9% reduction in small-medium structures and -10.4% in small hotels. There is no significant difference in the receptive capacity between owned or rented hotels. However, seasonal hotels decreased their receptive capacity by 16.7%, compared to annual hotels, which fell by 6.7%. Similarly, 4-star hotels (many of which are open all year) reduced their receptive capacity by 8.3%, which was less compared to 3-star hotels (-16.3%) and 1-2-star hotels (-12.4%).

Finally, due to stringent social distancing regulations in common areas, particularly in dining areas where a 1-meter distance had to be maintained between individuals belonging to different households, some hoteliers faced a challenge in reconciling the size of the dining room and its reduced capacity. To address this issue, various solutions were implemented: some hoteliers opted for a rotation of the dining room, allowing guests to dine at different times; others expanded the dining room, using other common areas (e.g., outdoor garden, veranda, etc.); others served meals at affiliated restaurants or delivered meals to the beach or room; others reduced the number of seats (in some cases, even down to zero) or changed the type of treatments offered.

On average, hotels decreased their dining capacity by 33.9% (in terms of number of seats), falling from 89 seats in 2019 to 59 seats in 2020 (Table 4 and Figure 1). While no substantial difference in the change of dining capacity appears between year-round and seasonal hotels, rental hotels showed a greater reduction in dining capacity (-38%) compared to owned hotels (-32%) but starting from a higher dining capacity (98 seats in 2019 compared to 86 in owned hotels). Hotels with more than 25 rooms (small-medium and medium-large hotels) experienced the most significant decline in dining capacity, losing approximately 35% of it, while small hotels lost 30%. Similarly, 3-4 star hotels, often larger in size, lost an average of 35% of their dining capacity compared to 1-2 star hotels, often smaller, that lost 30%.

In addition to the more marked changes in hotel offerings, some hotels have reorganized their operations by modifying the type of services and treatments offered. In some cases, new types of services have been introduced, sometimes as replacements for suspended service types. Table 5 displays the changes in the type of services provided.

Table 5. Treatments offered in 2019 and 2020

	2019	2020	Δ%	
Room only	58%	71%	12.4%	***
B&B	97%	95%	-1.6%	*
Bed and Breakfast	81%	70%	-10.6%	***
Full board	79%	65%	-14.0%	***
Swimming pool	23%	21%	-1.6%	*
Entertainment	32%	5%	-26.4%	***

* An inferential statistic t-test is used to determine if there is a significant difference between the means of two groups (means in 2019 and in 2020 for the variable analyzed). Sign. codes: * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

To reduce the high cost of catering and personnel during uncertain times, 26.4% of hotels have downsized their food services and modified the treatments offered. While the share of hotels offering only accommodation has increased, the share of hotels offering bed and breakfast is negligible and significant only at 10%. There is a noticeable decline in hotels offering half-board (-10.6%) or full-board (-14%). The implementation of health protocols to prevent gatherings has had a significant impact on limiting entertainment services, which have decreased by 26.4%. The pool usage has remained relatively unchanged. However, 21.9% of hotels have introduced new or substitute services, which include meals served in non-traditional spaces (pool, beach, room, garden, etc.) to deal with the problem of social distancing in limited dining areas; the use of outsourced catering to cope with the closure of the internal kitchen; the disinfection of rooms and common areas with sprayers, ozonators, and specific products; and the provision of self-cleaning kits to customers.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper presents the results of an explanatory analysis that deals with the first reactions of hotel managers to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing upon a conceptualization of organizational resilience which accounts for an organization's capacity of bending and bouncing back against the exogenous shock, we analyze whether and how hotels located in Rimini re-started their activity during the summer 2020. We exploit an original dataset originating from a survey which comprises 143 hotels.

Our investigation suggests that three main factors underpinned the first dimension of resilience (i.e., bending) of Rimini hotels in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic: i) the responsibility towards employees; *ii)* the risk of losing acquired guests; *iii)* the attractiveness of the destination. While the first two traits pertain to the individual organizations, the third one establishes a relevant connection with the tourism destination. The simultaneous presence of these three factors unveils the existence of interdependence between the ability of hotels to withstand and bounce back from a shock and the tourism destination they insist on. On the one side, the actions individual hotels undertake to retain their major stakeholders, that is, employees and customers, strengthen the network of formal and informal relationships which shaped the development of the focal destination. On the other side, the perception of the tourism destination's resilience influences the actions of hotel managers. This relationship is not limited to the phenomena shown by the empirical evidence from the survey but is a broader process of mutual influence (Bernini et al., 2021; Giannopoulos et al., 2021; Pham et al., 2022). Recognizing this mutual effect provides destination managers with an important policy and intervention tool. In particular, it supports the idea that a destination's ability to impose and communicate an image of resilience internally (and not just to external markets and potential customers) can reinforce the resilience of local businesses, triggering a virtuous cycle.

However, more nuanced interactions exist between the two levels of analysis and they should be opportunely considered. For example, whereas individual hotels may display a certain degree of resilience, the process of bouncing back resulting from their collective actions can bring the system as a whole toward a (very) different equilibrium point. An external shock may force specific segments of the hospitality industry out of the market (e.g., small family-run hotels) while others may recover. In such a scenario, there would be high resilience in the hospitality industry (since most segments of the hotel industry are able to withstand and bounce back), but the composition of the destination's hotel industry would be different from the initial one.

Whereas we cannot ascertain the existence and magnitude of such complex relationships, various findings presented in the previous section indicate that we cannot rule out their unfolding. First, the segment comprising small hotels experienced a sharp reduction in the average number of employees (from 4.34 to 2.63) and the number of seats at their restaurants (from 56.9 to 40.7) between 2019 and 2020. Second, hotels rated 1 and 2 stars incurred a major drop in the average number of employees (from 5.15 to 3.42) and their restaurant capacity (from 47.55 to 33.45), in the same period. Third, the share of hotels offering a full board treatment declined from 79% in 2019 to 65% the year later. Finally, the proportion of hotels organizing entertainment events declined from 32% to 5% in the same period. The joint occurrence of these contractions might have endangered not only the ability of budget hotels to carry out effectively day-by-day operations, but also their attractiveness towards the final customers. Moreover, these hotels might not easily recover the lost ground due to an economic context characterized by a tight labor market and ramping inflation.

Overall, the potentially asynchronous dynamics shaping the behavior of individual hotels and the structure of the whole destination provide further possibilities for direction and intervention by destination managers. In times of crisis, destination managers can deliberately support and subsidize specific hotel segments, thereby facilitating their bounce back while limiting that of others. In this way, destination managers can influence the innovation of tourist businesses towards new, promising horizons and expose less competitive hotels to natural selection.

It is noteworthy that our analysis is based on data collected towards the end of the lockdown period, when hotel managers were considering strategies to respond to the pandemic crisis, adapt to the situation, and prepare for the recovering process. Conducting a follow-up survey in the present day would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the hospitality sector's ability to "bounce back" to pre-crisis levels and the duration it takes to do so. This updated survey would offer insights into the sector's heterogeneity, dynamics, and composition, years after the relaxation of virus containment measures began. However, such an analysis would present relevant challenges, as it would be difficult to disentangle the impact of structural changes and post-pandemic recovery issues from that of new exogenous shocks, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and the increased cost of living. These shocks have had a clear and negative impact on tourism safety and mobility, making it challenging to isolate their effects from the broader context of the pandemic and its aftermath.

Our analysis suffers from several limitations which recommend caution in generalizing the implications outlined above. The sample size is small, thus preventing us from applying statistical tools such as multivariate regression models. Besides, by working with cross sectional data we cannot make inference about the causal relationship between the factors under scrutiny. Nevertheless, we think that the survey administered to collect the data can be used to replicate the analysis in other contexts and time periods thus offering promising opportunities to address those shortcomings in future research.

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