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Impact Of COVID-19 On Subsistence Consumer-Merchants: A Study Of Tourism In The Himalayan Region

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global production and consumption patterns, affecting all anthropogenic activities. Findings from in-depth interviews with subsistence entrepreneurs in the Himalayan region highlight how the pandemic exacerbated the day-to-day challenges of the locals and the strategies they utilized to tackle uncertainties. Implications are derived for research and practice.

Key Words: Pandemic, tourism, subsistence consumer merchants (SCM), subsistence entrepreneurs

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Introduction

Subsistence marketplaces, overlapping descriptively with the ‘base-of-the-pyramid’ or ‘informal economies,’ account for 60% of the gross domestic product in developing countries (Venugopal et al., 2015). In these marketplaces, consumers often participate in dual roles; besides being consumers, they act as consumer entrepreneurs, described as subsistence consumer-merchants (SCMs) (Viswanathan, et al., 2010). Such SCMs run microenterprises that operate as final links in the supply chain (Viswanathan et al., 2010) overcoming significant adversities (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007; Upadhyaya, 2020). In this paper, we focus on tourism in subsistence marketplaces. This situation is particularly pertinent during the pandemic with travel restrictions, as numerous SCMs draw their livelihoods from tourism (Damayanti et al., 2017). Tourism plays a central role in providing livelihood opportunities for SCMs and improving the quality of life for people in subsistence marketplaces. (Mai et al., 2014).

The pandemic has heightened inequality between haves and have-nots (Oxfam India, 2021) amplifying the difficulties and uncertainties confronted by subsistence consumer merchants (SCMs) and causing them to move deeper into poverty. SCMs were among the highest at risk of getting an infection and losing their livelihood due to a lack of resources to defend themselves from the pandemic (CDC Covid-19 Response Team, 2020; Jiwani & Antiporta, 2020).

According to the International Labour Organization, in December 2020, more than 81 million people in Asia-Pacific markets lost jobs due to the pandemic. The Travel and Tourism sectors have been adversely impacted, with SCMs affected the most. Extant literature on SCMs (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007; Viswanathan et al., 2016; Viswanathan et al., 2020) highlights different strategies they use to navigate resource constraints. The pandemic exacerbated these constraints and created unique challenges for them, such as lack of employment opportunities, sudden loss of income source, lack of institutional support, and breakdown of social relationships due to health and economic uncertainties. Those engaged in the service sector had to endure significant economic losses (Ma et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2021). To enhance our current understanding of challenges faced by SCMs, this paper examines pandemic-related crises faced by SCMs in the travel and tourism industry. The following research question guides the paper: what strategies did SCMs adopt to navigate pandemic-related challenges in the service sector? In turn, our research provides a basis to derive implications for bottom-up policy-making to support SCMs in overcoming challenges.

The paper begins with a brief overview of relevant subsistence literature on SCMs, followed by the study context, method, and the findings from in-depth interviews with SCMs fully employed in the travel and tourism section in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, India. The findings are interpreted in light of the

literature in subsistence marketplaces and elsewhere. Based on these insights, implications are derived for research and practice.

Research Context

According to the Oxford dictionary, subsistence means “the state of having just enough money or food to stay alive.” Within the subsistence marketplaces stream, subsistence consumers and consumer-merchants are in the broad range of low income (Viswanathan & Rosa, 2007; Viswanathan et al., 2010), barely making ends meet and having limited resources to survive on a day-to-day basis. Though the pandemic accentuated vulnerabilities, subsistence entrepreneurs displayed resilience and innovative spirit in addressing the challenges that arose (Viswanathan et al., 2021; Upadhyaya, 2020).



Figure 1. Ladakh Marketplace during COVID-19 and pre-COVID

As the pandemic spread, subsistence communities had to manage meager incomes amongst curfews and lockdowns with the closing of workplaces, places of worship, and markets. The pandemic decreased consumption to mere essentials and risked livelihoods (Viswanathan et al., 2021a).

Specific to the aim of this paper is the domain of tourism that has facilitated economic development (Paul, 2012; Briedenhann, 2011). Particularly in the Himalayan region travel and tourism are two of the biggest sectors creating hundreds of millions of jobs and responsible for 10% of total employment in 2019 (WTTC, 2020). The socio-economic impact of the pandemic on tourism, especially on the livelihood of millions of people, has been immense. All value chain elements have been affected (UNWTO, 2021). The tourism industry has been vulnerable to pandemics, , seasonal influenza, epidemics, natural calamities, and ecological changes. (Ma et al., 2020; Abbas et al., 2021).

The research context is the tourism sector in the Himalayan region of Ladakh (Figures 1 and 2). Situated in the extreme north of India, Ladakh shares its borders with Pakistan and China. The region is famous among domestic and international tourists for many reasons, including its natural environment and unique lifestyle and culture. Ladakh is also known as ‘little Tibet’ as the region shares similar culture and religion with Tibet, and many foreign tourists visit this place to learn and explore Tibetan Buddhism. From a cultural perspective, Ladakh has many Buddhist monasteries that are a few decades old with distinctive customs and

traditions. SCMs include tour operators, guesthouses and hotel owners, taxi operators, farmers, and other small businesses.



Figure 2. Marketplaces in Ladakh in 2021: Mothers (Amalays) Selling Vegetables and Fruits

The tourism industry in Ladakh is the strength of its economy and has grown swiftly over the past two decades. On the one hand, the Ladakh region has benefited economically by promoting tourism. On the other, it is experiencing the negative impact of tourism on its fragile physical environment. The state already faces water scarcities, irregular temperatures, flash floods, solid waste administration challenges, and the impact of climate change (Chevuturi et al., 2018).

After the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, Ladakh witnessed few tourists even with government and private tour and travel companies using robust integrated marketing communication and other promotional methods to invite tourists. However, the second wave was more devastating for India. This wave overlapped with the prime tourist season in Ladakh, i.e., from April to June, affecting many subsistence communities involved in the value chain (Zargar, 2021).

Method

This research captures different perspectives of key SCMs through in-depth interviews with SCMs from the Leh district of Ladakh marketplaces. The goal is to explore how the interactions and exchanges between these market actors, primarily earning livelihood through tourism sectors, were impacted by the unprecedented shock from the pandemic and the nature of resilience shown by the local community during those tough times.

For exploratory purposes, we analyzed three YouTube videos of interviews of stakeholders associated with the tourism sector to understand the impact of the pandemic on the livelihood of subsistence communities (Table 2-4). By analyzing those videos, we aimed to understand the implications of the pandemic on the

livelihood of SCMs.¹ The word cloud in Figure 3 depicts words such as 'tourism,' 'Ladakh,' 'pandemic,' and 'lockdown,' which are most frequently used in YouTube videos. Other terms such as, 'short-season,' 'lockdown,' 'sole bread earner,' and 'travel agent,' reassert the problems many stakeholders face. Figure 3 shows the impact and challenges due to the pandemic. This challenge includes a lack of assistance from the government, overdependence on tourism, limited tourism season, fear and uncertainties for the future, and substantial economic losses.

¹ The authors used R software to analyze transcripts in Youtube videos. The findings are presented in Word Cloud since it is a novel visual depiction of text data to represent keyword metadata or visualize words from the text. A Word cloud is a visualization of a set of words, where the size and the placement of a word represent the commonly used phrases in detailed research (Heimerl et al., 2014).

survived during the pandemic. We also asked about the future impact of the pandemic on the tourism sector and their relationships with other stakeholders.

The research applies a grounded theory approach, which involves collecting primary data, open coding the transcripts to identify emergent themes, comparing thematic categories, and updating data interpretations to develop a nuanced understanding of the respondents' context (Kozinets et al., 2012). The study excluded a priori themes and manually analyzed interview data to identify themes and categories. These themes were further refined by re-analyzing the data and interpreting it in light of the literature. The findings from the data analysis are discussed in the next section of this paper.

Findings

The findings address the research question by highlighting challenges SCMs had to endure due to the pandemic-related sudden shifts in their income, employment, and daily routine, as well as resilient strategies adopted to navigate the challenges. We represent the findings thematically to illustrate the impact of the pandemic on SCMs and the tourism sector in Ladakh (Figure 4).

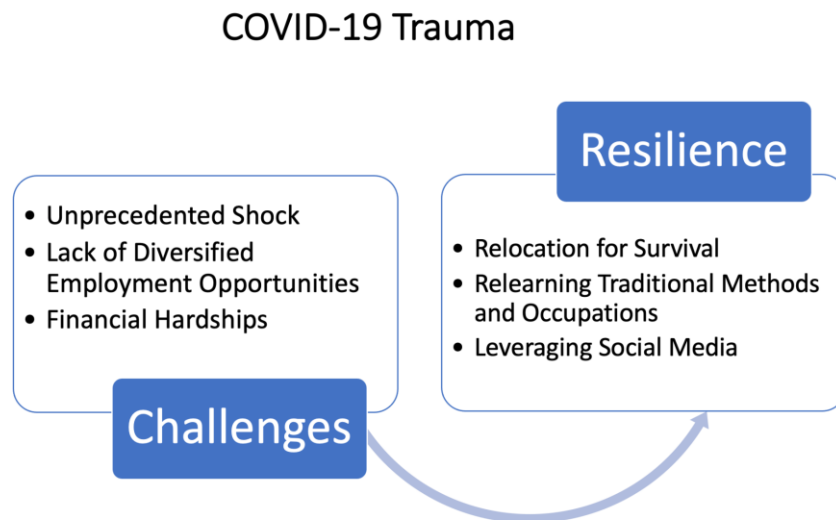


Figure 4: Impact of COVID-19 on SCMs

As informants grappled with public health directives and personal health measures, they had to sustain employment-related challenges that inevitably affected other aspects of their lives. Findings reveal that many informants experienced a significant decrease or complete loss of income during the pandemic, as they depended entirely on the tourism industry for livelihood. Apart from the economic losses, the lack of tourists in 2020 led businesses to suffer as they had to manage fixed costs in the form of interest on loans and rent on occupied properties.

Challenges

Unprecedented Shock

We discuss unprecedented shock concerning the multifold effects of unexpected and sudden changes caused by the pandemic (Figure 4). We also highlight the deep

uncertainty and despair experienced by the informants due to this sudden shift in their social and economic circumstances.

Subsistence communities have to conduct their businesses with constrained resources, which exacerbates their economic vulnerabilities with sudden shocks (Viswanathan, 2013). Individuals and families in these communities often rely on one source of income and resort to different social and economic strategies to ensure a sustained flow of resources. The circumstances triggered by the pandemic further exacerbated the challenges, making it extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to access resources needed to sustain their source of income (Viswanathan et al., 2021a).

In particular, the pandemic has had devastating effects on various services within the tourism sector that are already affected by various seasonal factors. SCMs in the tourism service sector are aware of seasonal fluctuations and adjust their strategies as this is the only source of income for many. In this research context, informants communicated the challenges associated with the short tourist season. Due to its remote location and heavy snowfall during winter, Ladakh remains cut off by road for almost five months. Adding to this, SCMs income had dwindled due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, resulting in even greater struggles for livelihood, especially during the cold winter season. When asked about the challenges, Thinlay, a 30-year-old tour operator who started his business

in 2017 after working as a tourist guide and helper since his college days, stated the following.

“The peak tourist season in Ladakh is from May to October with a very limited number of visitors in the months of September and October.”

Jigmet, a 20-year-old trekking guide, describing the challenges of the limited tourist season.

“The income is restricted to the tourist season of around 4 to 5 months and further even during the season only a limited number of tourists, especially the foreign tourists prefer to go for trekking.”

Subsistence marketplace communities operating in an already resource-constrained environment had to endure the sudden loss of income due to pandemic-related travel restrictions. Tsering, a 65-year-old farmer from Saspol village, Ladakh, shares how his family, who are dependent on the tourism sector, faced financial challenges.

“I own a garden of apricot and apple trees and during the tourist season there always used to be huge demand for both. I used to earn 2500 USD every year, but during pandemic surviving has been a big challenge for my entire family”

Due to daily uncertainties, individuals and communities in subsistence contexts are vulnerable to various shocks. 2020 and 2021 brought unique challenges

to the tourism industry. Phungtsong (Female, 38), a souvenir stall owner in Leh, reveals that managing a family with two small children and looking after her business has been a big challenge during the pandemic.

“I am a single mother of two children, I lost my husband five years back and since then, I have been raising both of them. One is ten-year-old and the other is five-year-old. My husband used to run this stall earlier but after his death I have to continue with his business as starting with anything new will be tough. For many people tourism is their only source of income and pandemic like this has put extreme pressure and challenges on us for our survival”

Apart from tourism and government jobs, there are no other alternative employment opportunities available in Ladakh. Similarly, Sonam, a 58-year-old farmer from Leh town, is the eldest in the family. Whereas his younger brother could complete his studies and get a government job providing a stable source of income, Sonam did not get the opportunity to complete his formal education. Therefore, he had to identify employment alternatives that could have been more stable. To overcome the complete loss of income due to the pandemic, Sonam learned farming, following in the footsteps of his father and forefathers.

“I grow and sell vegetables (cabbage, cauliflower, green peas, carrot, potatoes, beans, onions and some leafy vegetables) and supply milk to restaurants and hotels

in Leh market as there is huge demand from hotels. Before covid I used to earn around 2,500 USD every year. In 2020, I could hardly sell any vegetables as the restaurants were shut down due to pandemic and government's lockdown policies further declined the local demand"

Surviving during the pandemic was physically and mentally catastrophic for SCMs, as many lost their livelihoods. In contrast, many others faced challenges due to poor healthcare facilities, infrastructure, and transportation problems. Travelling to and from the workplace took a long time, and the cost of travel almost doubled due to the shortage of public transport.

Lack of Diversified Employment Opportunities

SCMs in remote locations with significant resource constraints have limited options (Figure 4). As the influx of tourists increased exponentially over the past two decades, many locals in Ladakh moved from traditional agriculture to the tourism industry. They work as tour operators, travel agents, hotel and guesthouse owners, trekking guides, helpers, taxi drivers, and small businesses targeting tourists. According to experts, around 70% of the population in Ladakh is directly or indirectly dependent on tourism for their livelihood. Whereas this sole dependence on tourism guaranteed stable income for many, pandemic-related unprecedented restrictions brought the entire economy to a standstill. Jigmet, a 21-year-old trekking guide, started as a helper for trekking groups with travel agencies when he

was in school. Soon after becoming familiar with trekking routes, he started working full-time as a guide and left his formal education because the income was robust, and working as a tour guide was something he enjoyed. However, the pandemic adversely impacted his primary source of income.

“My income is totally dependent on tourism. I used to earn 10 dollars per day on trekking trips which has now been reduced to zero. Covid has ruined the life of many people like us.”

Phungtsong, a 38-year-old lady who owns a souvenir stall in Leh market, relates the challenges she faced.

“Yes, my income is totally dependent on tourists and because of this we had a challenging and tough last year and it continues till today. I have to take care of my family who are totally dependent on me, especially after my husband's death.”

Tsering, a farmer speaks about his challenges.

“Two of my sons are also engaged in the tourism industry, one as a cab driver and another as a tourist guide. Most of the households in Ladakh are engaged in tourism and there are no other job alternatives. During covid there has been no income” (Tsering, 65-year-old farmer from Saspol village)

Financing Hardships

One of the biggest pandemic-related challenges SCMs faced was financing hardships (Figure 4), such as the repayment of loan installments. SCMs depend on credit from banks or local money lenders for even small capital expenditures. Nurboo, 32 years old, is the sole bread earner and takes care of his mother, wife, and two children by running a souvenir stall.

“In 2020 I had opened my stall for only two months, there was no demand due to lack of tourist footfall. We have survived 2020 on our savings but 2021 will be a difficult year if things will be the same as last year. We are hopeful things will change in 2021 and more tourists will visit Ladakh.”

As there was no income due to the closure of the tourism industry, many individuals failed to pay their installments that came due. Many had to use their life savings, and some borrowed money from friends and relatives to repay loans to eliminate the burden of credit and its increasing interest rate. Thinlay, a 30-year-old tour operator since 2017, has an excellent understanding of the local market. He had to reach out to his friends and family for financial support during the pandemic.

“I own 10 Bullet (brand) bikes which are available for rent for tourists. Before the pandemic every year there used to be huge demand for Bullet bikes from both domestic and foreign tourists. To purchase bikes, I have taken a loan from the bank.

During covid there was no income whereas I had to pay around 700 USD in installments which I paid by borrowing money from friends and relatives.”

Nurboo, a 32-year-old souvenir stall owner in Leh Market speaks about his hardships with loans.

“I sell handmade decorative scarves, a small statue of Buddha, Tibetan Buddhist flags for bikes and cars, some precious stones, artificial jewelry etc. To buy stock in bulk I took a loan from a local money lender, they charge little more than bank but no formalities are required, so it is easy cash. This year he had extended the due date for the payment but I still have to pay full interest on a later date.”

Further, SCMs did not receive formal institutional support for managing their business and related expenses. Consequently, many had to endure substantial economic losses with no safety net. In October 2020, the Ladakh government provided modest help and incentives to promote tourism by releasing subsidies. However, according to the general public of Ladakh the government acted late.²

²Recent initiatives provided by the Ladakh government to revive the tourism sector include opening the region in 2021 with proper rules and regulations by making negative RT-PCR reports mandatory for tourists. On arrival, travelers have to undergo a rapid compulsory antigen test. Similarly, publicity through integrated marketing communication and digital platforms was important to ensure the inflow of tourists. In April 2021, the Ladakh UT administration postponed the famous Sindhu Darshan Festival with the second covid wave. To fight the pandemic, in 2021, the Ladakh government started a free vaccination drive in four phases, starting with frontline workers, then those above 60 years old, followed by those above 45 years and above 18 years. As of 10 June 2021, 49.9% population of Ladakh was vaccinated, out of which 12.7% were fully vaccinated with two doses (Covid-19 India, 2021).

Tsering Yangzes, a 60-year-old vegetable seller from Leh, has been selling vegetables for over the past three decades. She dresses in traditional Ladakhi costumes and sells vegetables and fruits on the footpath of Leh market.

“We had huge financial crises as my husband and I became jobless during the pandemic. No one was there to heed to our problems. For those who came from outside as laborers they were provided with food and free rations by the government but we locals have not received any assistance and support.”

The pandemic worsened the resource constraints and economic challenges already experienced by the SCMs in the tourism sector. Most of them lost their daily source of income with limited ability to switch to new employment opportunities. Limited skills, lack of formal education, and geographic and infrastructural complexities exacerbated the SCM's pandemic-related challenges. Similarly, securing credit through formal and informal networks took time, leading to non-payment of loans and the inability to maintain current business operations. Consequently, SCMs had to downsize their current activities or look for other creative income opportunities. In the next section, we discuss how SCMs in the tourism sector navigated these challenges with limited resources.

Resilience

Despite the pandemic-related challenges, the SCMs worked with available resources and tried to find alternatives to navigate various stressors in their daily lives. They showed resilience (Figure 4) through relocation for survival, relearning traditional methods and occupations, and leveraging social media.

Relocation for survival

Many people moved from villages to Leh town in Ladakh for better jobs and livelihood but struggled to survive in Leh town during the pandemic. They moved back to the village for survival and engaged in farming activities. Stanzin, a 38-year-old taxi driver, shares a similar story. Stanzin is married and has a 12-year-old son. Before the pandemic, Stanzin planned to send his son out of town for better education, but the pandemic changed everything. Now his entire family has shifted back to the village.

“Few months after the lockdown, I shifted from Leh town to my village and started pursuing agriculture as getting a new job in the period of pandemic and lockdown was almost impossible. Like me many other people from my village who were engaged in tourism industry also came back to villages to do farming”

Relearning Traditional Methods and Occupations

It was a big challenge for small businesses to meet daily necessities like food, shelter, and clothing. Food was relatively readily available for farmers as they were

self-sufficient, but most local communities had moved from agriculture to tourism-based small businesses in preceding years. Farmers also used traditional methods of storing vegetables and fruits for winter by drying up the green leafy vegetables and fruits and storing them in underground bunkers. For farmers in Ladakh, the agricultural season is only between May and September, a relatively tight timeline. Due to extremely cold weather, nothing can be grown after September, but many farmers have constructed greenhouses to grow leafy vegetables in October-November and March-April. Tsering (Male, 65-year-old farmer) spent most of his life in the village growing fruits and frequently traveled to Leh town to sell them as there is massive demand by tourists, and his village is known for producing good quality apricots. His wife and elder sister depended on him, although his children are well-settled in Leh town. He tackled the problematic situation very skillfully and resourcefully.

“I used the traditional method of drying apricots and apples so that I could preserve them for a longer period of time. There is demand for dried apricots from local people in Leh town. The dried apricot and apple are further crushed into powder and sold in the market as apricot and apple powder.”

As SCMs migrated back to their villages, it became necessary to identify employment methods. Hence, most SCMs turned to agriculture to sustain their everyday lives, as daily cash flow was highly uncertain. Motup (Tour operator)

stated, *“Since there was lack of assistance from the government in the beginning as COVID struck, many SCM households shifted back to agricultural activities.”*

Tsering, a vegetable seller in Leh market, who has been farming for more than thirty years, mentions how experimenting with new vegetables traditionally not grown by farmers and learning newer drying techniques and preserving helped him survive during the pandemic.

“It was a difficult year for everyone including me, but since we grow our own vegetables and grains so in terms of food we didn’t have difficulties as compared to others. During the pandemic we learnt many new techniques such as usage of the greenhouse and black silver plastic agriculture mulch film to grow new vegetables and fruits. For winter vegetables were dried by using solar dryer”
(Tsering, Female, 60-year-old vegetable seller)

Leveraging Social Media

Due to travel restrictions and lockdowns, tourist numbers declined in Ladakh, and the pandemic impacted the entire value chain. In order to survive during those tough times, SCMs learned digital promotional methods to sell their handicrafts. They used social media platforms and blogs to communicate with travelers by uploading pictures and videos of famous locations in Ladakh.

“During the pandemic, business was totally shut down. With no to limited footfall of tourists we made business plans for the post covid tourism industry. To attract and promote our business, we used social media platforms like Whatsapp business, Instagram page and Facebook page. We constantly share videos, pictures and other information to promote and spread awareness about unique Ladakhi culture and beautiful landscape.” (Thinley Travel Agent)

Stanzin Nurboo (31, Male), a trained and certified mountain guide, described how the pandemic accentuated their problems. With very few tourists visiting, he used digital platforms, especially YouTube, to upload his pictures and videos to attract traffic.

“I work as a trekker and a mountain guide. I pursued multiple courses from Indian Mountaineering Institute (IMA) as there are huge opportunities for professional trekking guides in Ladakh. Some of the famous mountaineering expeditions are Skok Kangri, Lasermo, Kang Yatse etc. The Covid has put a stop on these activities. During the covid to spread awareness and promote mountaineering I started sharing content on different social media platforms.”

General Discussion

Theoretical And Practical Implications

This paper sheds light on the impact of the pandemic on SCMs engaged in the tourism sector. SCMs engaged in the tourism sector were badly affected due to the pandemic and leveraged scarce resources to survive in extraordinary circumstances. SCMs are already vulnerable and affected by various seasonal fluctuations and environmental stressors (Viswanathan et al., 2021a). Challenges revolving around unprecedented shock, lack of livelihood opportunities, and financing hardships were countered with resilience through relocation, relearning livelihood methods, and using social media. SCMs relied not only on resources from traditional social networks but also learned new skills to enhance their income pool. SCMs developed innovative strategies such as learning traditional methods of agriculture to meet their daily needs, tapping into their social networks to increase their access to capital, and leveraging technology to reach a larger audience.

Our findings highlight the need for both individual and system-level flexibility and adaptability in the face of unprecedented changes. Indeed, such changes are increasingly likely in the era of climate change and natural disasters. Changes can be fostered through better technology and alternative forms of income-generating opportunities. Marketplace literacy programs (Viswanathan et al., 2021) play an important role in providing context-relevant training to subsistence communities to open up their employment options. Marketplace literacy programs can also focus on technology training for SCMs in the tourism sector. Technological innovation can play an important role to enhance subsistence

marketplaces (Viswanathan & Sreekumar, 2019). Policymakers should similarly incorporate flexibility and develop bottom-up programs for extraordinary circumstances. Such policy should involve all stakeholders (tourists, travel agents, tour operators, residents, government, and others). Further, policies should be in place to safeguard and promote the responsible use of local resources, including all local stakeholders' participation.

The adverse conditions of subsistence marketplaces are magnified in extraordinary circumstances such as war, earthquakes, famine, and pandemics. Past research has examined marketplace exclusion for refugees, coping during demonetization, as well as in post-conflict settings (Viswanathan et al. (2021b, 2021c; Abdelnour and Branzei, 2010). This paper extends the literature on SCMs' experiences of collective shock and trauma associated with the once-in-several lifetimes pandemic, highlighting their use of technology and traditional methods to overcome occupation-related barriers in the tourism sector caused by the pandemic. Subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs are very resilient in the face of sudden changes (Viswanathan et al., 2021c). This paper shows that with manifold uncertainties, and no margin for error, subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs had to grasp a most complex invisible fast-changing phenomenon with much stigma attached. Moreover, the relational strength characterizing these settings was frayed due to social distancing. However, subsistence consumers and entrepreneurs

continued to be resilient by identifying alternatives to sustain their livelihoods (Viswanathan et al., 2021c),

This paper highlights the resilience of SCMs in the tourism sector in the face of unexpected challenges . Under extreme circumstances such as the pandemic, after the initial experience of shock and trauma, SCMs remain resilient as they draw upon local resources to cope and make sense of what is happening to them. According to Nath et al. (2022) SCMs in India and Bangladesh relied on emotion-focused coping strategies driven by religiosity and social support to manage different challenges posed by the pandemic. We find in our research that, despite resource constraints, SCMs working in the tourism sector utilized innovative strategies such as relearning traditional methods of agriculture to meet their daily needs. SCMs also tapped into their strong and weak social networks to increase their access to capital and leveraged technology to reach a larger audience.

Technological innovation has the potential to open up multiple economic opportunities for subsistence entrepreneurs that can help them build social capital and explore their occupational aspirations (Viswanathan and Sreekumar, 2019; Delacroix et al., 2019). This paper demonstrates how technology, in general, and social media in particular, can help SCMs innovatively address the communication and access-related challenges caused by extreme circumstances. SCMs in the tourism sector self-trained to enhance their technical skills, improved their social

capital and created virtual content for a larger audience to supplement their primary income. Social media played an instrumental role in the tourism sector during the pandemic because SCMs were willing to learning new technology skills for survival (Hall & Seyfi 2020; Stankov et al., 2020). The tourism sector in subsistence contexts also reflected a broader trend involving integrated technology to overcome occupational challenges and the lack of diversified opportunities caused by the pandemic. SCMs in the tourism sector learned digital promotional methods to sell their handicrafts. They used social media platforms and blogs to communicate with travelers by uploading pictures and videos of popular tourist locations.

Future research should investigate innovative methods SCMs utilize to overcome economic uncertainties. These methods may include traditional agricultural techniques, social exchanges, and unique product offerings that help address SCMs' overlapping uncertainties. Future research should also investigate how sustainable these traditional practices and product innovations are in the post-pandemic world. The limitations of this research also offer directions for future research. We performed the analysis in a specific setting, a popular tourist destination in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. Future research should examine other subsistence consumption and marketplace contexts to unpack the multidimensional impact of the pandemic at different levels - individual, community, and institutional. Similarly, future research should also examine the

impact of pandemic impact on supply chain components that connect SCMs to global market opportunities.

Future research should also investigate the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement in overcoming challenges posed by an uncertain situation. Open dialogue and collaboration between industry partners, local SCM representatives, policymakers, and consumers are needed to identify policy gaps and integrate policy-related implementational fluidities to support SCMs (Upadhyaya, 2020). In the tourism sector, these multi-stakeholder engagements are important in the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism sector. In conclusion, the challenges and resilience we present about SCMs have important implications for research and practice.

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Table 1: Respondents' Profile

| S.No | Informant | Age | Sex | Occupation | Income pre Covid (Per Annum) | Income during Covid (Per Annum) | Number of dependents |
|------|-----------|-----|--------|--------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Thinlay | 30 | Male | Tour Operator | 15000 USD | Nil | 0 |
| 2 | Stanzin | 38 | Male | Taxi Driver | 5000 USD | Nil | 2 |
| 3 | Jigmet | 21 | Male | Trekking Guide | 3000 USD | Nil | 0 |
| 4 | Sonam | 58 | Male | Farmer | 2500 USD | 500 USD | 2 |
| 5 | Tsering | 65 | Male | Farmer | 2500 USD | 200 USD | 3 |
| 6 | Dolma | 45 | Female | Vegetable seller | 800 USD | 200 USD | 3 |
| 7 | Tsering | 60 | Female | Vegetable seller | 600 USD | 100 USD | 2 |
| 8 | Nurboo | 32 | Male | Business (Souvenir shop) | 3000 USD | Nil | 4 |
| 9 | Phungtsog | 38 | Female | Business (Souvenir shop) | 2000 USD | Nil | 2 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|----------|----|--------|------------------------------------|-----------|----------|---|
| 10 | Angmo | 29 | Female | Volunteer at NGO | 1500 USD | 1000 USD | 0 |
| 11 | Yangjor | 28 | Male | Labour | 2000 USD | 300 USD | 3 |
| 12 | Stanba | 44 | Male | Labour | 2200 USD | 400 USD | 4 |
| 13 | Diskit | 37 | Female | Business (Grossary shop) | 4000 USD | 1800 USD | 3 |
| 14 | Rinchen | 45 | Female | Works at a Restaurant | 1000 USD | 300 USD | 2 |
| 15 | Sonam | 32 | Female | Café owner | 7000 USD | 2000 USD | 2 |
| 16 | Morup | 40 | Male | Government employee | 5500 USD | 5500 USD | 2 |
| 17 | Zangpo | 52 | Male | Teacher | 5000 USD | 5200 USD | 3 |
| 18 | Arif | 44 | Male | Business (Meat shop) | 4000 USD | 2000 USD | 3 |
| 19 | Hassan | 38 | Male | Business (Clothes & Footware shop) | 4200 USD | 2000 USD | 2 |
| 20 | Ali | 28 | Male | Taxi Driver | 5000 USD | 300 USD | 0 |
| 21 | Motup | 33 | Male | Tour operator | 5000 USD | Nil | 3 |
| 22 | Tamchos | 29 | Male | Business (Guest house) | 10000 USD | Nil | 1 |
| 23 | Wangchok | 34 | Male | Business (Guest house) | 9000 USD | Nil | 3 |
| 24 | Dorjee | 49 | Male | Business (Shop) | 5500 USD | 2000 USD | 4 |
| 25 | Laskit | 28 | Female | Business (Coaching centre) | 4000 USD | 800 USD | 2 |
| 26 | Chuskit | 44 | Female | Business (Homestay) | 4000 USD | Nil | 4 |
| 27 | Wangmo | 35 | Female | Business (Café) | 3500 USD | 1000 USD | 2 |
| 28 | Deldan | 55 | Male | Business (Photocopy shop) | 3000 USD | 500 USD | 4 |
| 29 | Wangail | 46 | Male | Farmer | 2500 USD | 500 USD | 3 |
| 30 | Tsomo | 23 | Female | Tourist guide | 2000 USD | Nil | 0 |
| 31 | Namgyal | 24 | Female | Business (Bike on rent) | 3000 USD | Nil | 0 |
| 32 | Stanzin | 28 | Male | Guide | 2300 USD | Nil | 0 |

Table 2: Exploratory Analysis - Youtube: The Tribune June 29, 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EkmsBvZRe14>

| Source | Respondent | Transcript | Issues | Broad issues |
|--------|------------|------------|--------|--------------|
|--------|------------|------------|--------|--------------|

| | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Youtube: The Tribune June 29, 2020</p> <p>Covid-19 impact: Tourism industry comes to a halt in Ladakh. Leh town witnesses deserted markets</p> | <p>Travel Agent</p> | <p>Tourism industry has gone for a toss in 2020 and we are not expecting that future will be that good. After nine months of offseason tourist season is only in summer which has been impacted due to pandemic. We were expecting some financial aid program from the PM GOI but nothing for tourism industry. We are really hurt as there is no incentives for us. The travel agents specially in the Ladakh are in a big mess now, economically.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Uncertainties ● Limited tourism season ● No support or package from states ● Big economic mess | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Seasonal Business ● Economic losses ● Lack of assistance |
| | <p>President All Ladakh Tour Operator Association</p> | <p>Ladakh is one of the favorite and exotic destination located in the Himalayas. Particularly in context of this pandemic, no doubt Ladakh tourism is hugely affected. 70% of the household's income are directly or indirectly depend on tourism. 60% of GDP contribution comes from tourism industry. So, no doubt that our business has hugely suffered due to this pandemic. In Ladakh as a stakeholder we have some 452 tour operators with their supply chains like hotels, guesthouses, homestays, camps. And in transport segments we have got airline and around 4000-5000 taxi. Many young people are employed as a cultural trekking guide during this short season. There are many porters and horsemen who also go on different treks during this short season. No doubt our livelihood has been suffered a lot. It's a matter of our survival and revival in the context of this pandemic</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tourism is hugely affected ● 70% of household dependent on Tourism ● 60% of GDP contribution from Tour ● 452 tour operator ● 4000-5000 taxis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Losses ● Overdependence on Tourism ● Unemployed |

Table 3 – Exploratory Analysis - The Quint June 18, 2020

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXPvMBigIwI>

| Source | Respondent | Transcript | Issues | Broad Issues |
|--------|------------|------------|--------|--------------|
|--------|------------|------------|--------|--------------|

| | | | | |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| <p>Youtube The Quint June 18 2020</p> | <p>Entrepreneur & Fashion Designer</p> | <p>Majority of people are dependent on tourism and due to the covid 19 pandemic obviously there is no travelling and Ladakh has been impacted the most. Ladakh is functional only for 6 months in a year because we have very harsh winters due to which businesses are shut down during the winter. But this year due to covid 19 pandemic and lockdown even in summer businesses are hit so it is like a whole year of lockdown for us. It's very unfortunate.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Majority Dependent on Tourism ● Impacted the most ● Limited tourism season | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Over Dependent on Tourism ● Economic Losses ● Seasonal Business |
| | <p>Executive Councillor</p> | <p>More than 50% of people of Ladakh especially from Leh district are totally dependent on tourism. Due to pandemic and lockdown the industry and business are badly affected.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 50% Dependent on Tourism ● Businesses are badly affected | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Over Dependent on Tourism ● Economic Losses |
| | <p>Genral secretary Ladakh taxi operator</p> | <p>Because of covid 19 we have incurred huge losses. Around 4000 taxis which are totally dependant on tourism are adversely affected. Due to this the taxi operators have lost approximately 3.2 – 3.3 million USD</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Incurred huge losses ● Dependent on Tourism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Losses ● Overdependent on Tourism |
| | <p>General Secretary, All Ladakh Tour Operators</p> | <p>We had good year of tourism in 2019 but in 2020 the tourism industry is at standstill. Since September 2019 when tourism season ended and from then it has been around nine months that people associated with tourism industry are without any work</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Industry is at standstill ● No work, No Job | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Losses ● Unemployed |
| | <p>Local</p> | <p>Travel agents are inviting both domestic and international tourists to Ladakh. They provide employment to taxi drivers, hotels helpers, and cooks. About 60% of GDP of Ladakh depends upon tourism. If tourism industry suffers then</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Taxi drivers, hotels, helpers, cooks are | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overdependent on Tourism |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| | | entire economy suffers and for many local people, it is an unbearable cost. Lots of unemployment. It is a disaster. | <p>dependent on Tourism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 60% of GDP depends upon tourism Unbearable cost Unemployment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic losses Unemployment |
| | Trekking Guide | I do not have a job now. So, it is exceedingly difficult for me and other people who are dependent on tourism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I don't have any job | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unemployed |
| | Locals | There are not many tourists, so restaurants are also closed. We want tourists to visit Ladakh to experience local cuisine. But due to covid 19 there are very limited number of visitors and it is difficult to sustain. This year we didn't know what to do. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Businesses closed Limited customer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic losses |
| | Locals | We as an association are trying to come together and fight against covid 19 pandemic and to come out successful. But it is a matter of survival, this year we don't see any hope of industry reviving. So, it's a big threat to the small players. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survival No hope Threat to small players | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear and Uncertainties |
| | President, All Ladakh Guest Houses and Hotel Association | We are approaching UT administration and LAHDC for some financial assistance. We don't know whether our appeal will be heard but we are still hopeful of getting some relief. The industry has incurred losses around 40- 60 million USD. We are all going through very tough situation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No response from state Losses around 40- 60 million USD Tough situation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of assistance Economic Losses Fear and Uncertainties |

Table 4: Exploratory Analysis - **Mojo Story** Tibetan Refugees in Ladakh and the COVID impact on their livelihood | Ground Report
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtVT95ype7E>

| Source | Respondent | Transcript | Issues | Broad Issues |
|--|---------------------|--|--|---|
| Youtube: Mojo Story Tibetan Refugees in Ladakh and the COVID impact on their livelihood Ground Report | Footwear Shop owner | <p>During the lockdown the shop was totally shut, there after it opened for two days in a week. The whole 2020 was like this. The increasing number of cases in some states of India is alarming and it seems 2021 will also be tough and challenging year for all of us. Running the business is difficult as we have to repay bank loan. Initially during lockdown the bank officials said no interest would be charged but once the lockdown was over, they have charged interest. I have 4-5 members in my family and I am the sole bread earner. We are surviving from our savings only. I have two children. Due to covid schools were also closed. The online classes for students in primary classes are difficult and not at all effective. Rather than attending classes online, children are busy playing games on smartphones.</p> <p>Before lockdown I used to earn 7-8 USD per day but during lockdown there was no income and nowadays, I earn around 3-4 USD per day. It will be tough if the lockdown is imposed again this year. We hope that tourists come to Ladakh in 2021, but if they don't, we still have to survive like this only.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Business closed ● Tough and challenging ● Difficult to repay bank loan. ● sole bread earner ● surviving from our savings only ● Income reduced to less than half. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Losses ● Fear and Uncertainties ● Lack of assistance |
| | Vegetable seller | <p>I am a vegetable seller. During covid 19 pandemic I totally stopped selling as I was afraid of covid 19 infection. We had financial problems during the pandemic as I and my husband got jobless.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Business closed ● Fear of Covid ● Unemployed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Losses |

| | | | | |
|--|-------------------|--|---|--|
| | | <p>There is no one to look after poor. Facilities like ration was provided to people who came from outside but no one came to help us. My husband is a carpenter but due to covid he also had to stop his work. Covid 19 mostly affected the poor. We need to take care of our children including their education etc. In this tough time of covid, it takes more than 3 days to sell even 20 KG of Radish. I earn around 6-7 USD per day.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● No help from state ● Affected the poor ● Income reduced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fear and Uncertainties ● Unemployed ● Lack of Assistance |
| | Small stall owner | <p>I have a small stall where I sell mala (beads). Business was shut due to lockdown. There was tension in family and some also got sick. We get ration so we are surviving on that. It is difficult to earn even 6-7 USD. Earlier I used to earn 12-25 USD per day. I am also the sole bread earner for the family. It is a difficult time but what can we do it has affected across the world.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Business shutdown ● Income reduced ● Sole bread earner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Economic Losses |



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