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Coping flexibility and psychological resilience: small tourism entrepreneurs' coping strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

While the current literature has acknowledged the pivotal role of coping in safeguarding psychological resilience, the underlying mechanism remains unclear. This study investigates how small tourism entrepreneurs cope with stress and maintain psychological resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing upon interviews with 18 small tourism entrepreneurs in New Zealand, this paper finds that coping flexibility plays a key role in maintaining psychological resilience. Specifically, the broad repertoire of coping strategies, strategy-situation fit, and variability in coping strategies all constitute coping flexibility. Also, personal resourcefulness and social resourcefulness are two key conditions for coping flexibility to emerge. A conceptual framework is proposed to advance the understanding of how coping can contribute to psychological resilience through coping flexibility and resourcefulness. It has significant implications for small businesses in terms of managing a long-lasting crisis and designing effective interventions.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurs' well-being and business success are interrelated, and effective coping is key to forging this positive relationship (Colombo et al., 2016). In a turbulent environment such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and international conflicts, keeping the business afloat is no doubt demanding but important for both entrepreneurs and society (Spillan & Hough, 2003). Despite the literature pointing out the need to explore how tourism business responds to and survive crises and disasters (e.g. Power et al., 2020), little is known about how small tourism entrepreneurs cope with crises and maintain resilience. The Covid-19 pandemic struck the tourism industry severely. In response, tourism entrepreneurs' coping strategies have become particularly important for the industry's recovery and growth (Sharma et al., 2021). Scholars have called for the exploration of entrepreneurial strategies for global crisis recovery (Moyle et al., 2020).

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Existing studies on small tourism fail to recognise tourism entrepreneurs' coping strategies that are critical for maintaining positive outcomes in the pandemic environment (e.g. Coles et al., 2021; Prayag, 2018).

Although research on resilience has been conducted extensively, the priority has focused on the organisational level construct of resilience, rather than on psychological resilience at the individual level, particularly amongst entrepreneurs (Hillmann & Guenther, 2021; Santoro et al., 2021). While organisational resilience pertains to an organisation's capacity to sustain positive adaptation during adversity (Sonenshein & Nault, 2024), psychological resilience focuses on individuals' ability to achieve positive adjustment for personal well-being and functioning (Kennett et al., 2021). As entrepreneurs are key organisational decision-makers, their psychological resilience is crucial for organisational resilience. One significant omission in the current literature is how individual entrepreneurs' adoption of coping strategies influences their psychological resilience. While existing coping literature predominately focuses on coping strategies, more recent research suggests the importance of coping flexibility (Chen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, since coping flexibility is an emerging, multifaceted concept (Cheng et al., 2021; Kato, 2020), there is a lack of understanding of the underlying mechanism that supports psychological resilience.

Building on the existing knowledge of coping and psychological resilience, this study aims to explore two research questions: (1) How did small tourism entrepreneurs achieve psychological resilience by coping flexibly? (2) Under what conditions did tourism entrepreneurs cope flexibly? This research employs a qualitative method to answer these questions against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic in New Zealand. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by integrating the knowledge of coping flexibility and psychological resilience and providing new pathways to explaining the underlying mechanism of keeping individual well-being during crises. This is of significance from both theoretical and practical standpoints.

Literature review

Small tourism entrepreneurs during crises

The tourism industry is facing sustained crises caused by natural disasters, international conflicts or global pandemics. In response, the growth in the investigation of tourism in crisis has been considerable in the last two decades. Crises pose great challenges to the industry and businesses (Aliperti et al., 2019). As Dahles and Susilowati (2015) proposed, 'when crisis strikes, the volatility of tourism is strongly felt, in particular among the small-scale business owners and self-employed people who carve out a living in the hospitality sector' (p. 35). There are currently countless studies on the management of crises, tourism organisations' response to crises, and post-crisis recovery (e.g. Ritchie & Jiang, 2021). However, investigations of small tourism businesses in the global crisis context have been relatively neglected in the existing literature. It is well-established that small businesses constitute a substantial part of the industry (Dayour et al., 2020).

Small business entrepreneurs experience significant stress due to challenges posed by the high uncertainty caused by crises. Studies demonstrate that stressors are linked with

negative emotions, mental well-being and underperformance (Stephan, 2018). An important source of stress is that small business entrepreneurs need to be directly responsible for sustaining their businesses (Filimonau et al., 2022).

Psychological resilience

Given the fact that entrepreneurs face many uncertainties and financial pressure, psychological resilience is critical for maintaining their personal well-being and the success of business adventures (Luthe & Wyss, 2014). The entrepreneurial literature has predominantly focused on organisational-level resilience (e.g. Jiang et al., 2021; Sonenshein & Nault, 2024) despite the importance of individual resilience in safeguarding both personal well-being and organisational sustainability. Until very recently, however, few studies have explored the psychological resilience of entrepreneurs. There is a lack of consistency in defining psychological resilience since this construct has been conceptualised as a personality trait, a process of positive adaptation, or an outcome of coping and adaptation (Ahmed et al., 2022; Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). To better understand psychological resilience amongst entrepreneurs, the first step should be anchoring the concept to a definitional boundary whereby theoretical discussions can become consistent and meaningful.

This paper conceptualises psychological resilience as an outcome of positive adaptation. This is because research has shown that people can learn to become more resilient (Franken et al., 2020), which rebuts the trait perspective that resilience is a stable personal disposition (Liu et al., 2014). In a similar vein, conceptualising psychological resilience as a process of positive adaptation overlaps coping to some extent compounding the relationship between coping and resilience (Frydenberg, 2018). Some scholars claim that psychological resilience is an outcome of effectively coping with a wide range of adversity such as disasters, trauma, and stress. For example, Luthar et al. (2015) define resilience as a positive state of remaining healthy and effective to cope despite facing threats and adversities. Likewise, Leipold and Greve (2009) suggest that resilience is an outcome of successful coping which enables an individual a quick recovery or even growth from experiencing adverse conditions. This study defines psychological resilience as ‘recovering and regaining optimal levels of function after facing adversity’ (Kennett et al., 2021, p. 2461).

Resilience theory posits that resilience arises from the interaction between risk factors and promotive factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Promotive factors include assets and resources. Assets refer to personal resources that aid in coping with adversity, such as self-efficacy, competency, and coping skills. In contrast, resources are protective factors like family, social networks, and institutional support. A central tenet of resilience theory is that resilience is malleable, not a fixed personal trait. Thus, it highlights both the influence of the environment on individuals and the role of personal agency in overcoming difficulties and maintaining well-being (Zimmerman, 2013). Recently, scholars have focused on personal and social resourcefulness, which refers to an individual’s ability to identify and mobilise resources effectively in both personal and social domains. This perspective highlights the critical role of personal motivation and the capacity to utilise promotive factors in fostering resilience (Zauszniewski et al., 2016). In essence, promotive factors or resources alone may not yield positive outcomes; rather, it is the active engagement with those resources that makes a difference.

Resilience scholars argue that promotive factors can counteract or moderate the adverse effects of risk (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman, 2013). However, there is still ambiguity in the literature regarding how assets and resources operate to achieve the positive outcomes associated with psychological resilience. Empirical research indicates that resilience-promotive factors, such as social support, goal efficacy, and planning, are positively associated with various coping strategies (Van der Hallen et al., 2020). Interestingly, although the link between promotive factors and coping strategies is well-established, coping strategies do not always predict positive outcomes, such as resilience (Bakker & De Vries, 2021). Therefore, we propose that a different mechanism, beyond coping strategies themselves, channels the positive effect of promotive factors on psychological resilience.

Coping flexibility and psychological resilience

Coping refers to cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage external or/and internal demands that exceed the individual's resources to maintain his or her well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping is widely studied within the contexts of stress, trauma, illness, or other adverse conditions. Coping and psychological resilience are two related but different concepts: psychological resilience is always associated with positive outcomes while coping can lead to negative or positive outcomes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). Another difference between the two concepts is related to the time dimension. While coping revolves around short-term goals of removing the stressor or mitigating negative emotions, psychological resilience entails the ability to sustain stable equilibrium over the long term (Ahmed et al., 2022; Leipold & Greve, 2009).

While coping is considered an integral process of maintaining psychological resilience (Booth & Neill, 2017; Fisher et al., 2019), there are inconsistent results of coping. Engel et al. (2021) proposed that meditation as an emotion-focused coping strategy could foster entrepreneurs' resilience through self-compassion. Additionally, Corner et al. (2017) identified that entrepreneurs used emotion-focused coping strategies to lessen emotional distress immediately after venture failures and employed problem-focused coping strategies to reduce disruption in functioning and even enhance functioning at a later stage. Nonetheless, as previously explained, coping does not always produce desirable outcomes. For instance, the use of maladaptive coping strategies such as using alcohol and drugs is associated with increased psychological strain (Cox et al., 2015). Problem-focused coping strategies may look effective ostensibly but in fact, some research shows that problem-focused coping is less effective than emotion-focused coping when the situation is perceived as too arduous or uncontrollable (Yoo & Ahn, 2020). Thus, coping may not always contribute to psychological resilience.

Psychological resilience can only be achieved when effective coping happens. Instead of comparing the effectiveness of different coping strategies, scholars have become aware that coping flexibility is key to effective coping. Researchers have employed different approaches to investigate coping flexibility: the broad repertoire approach is concerned with the number of available coping strategies, while the variability approach attests that flexibility mainly lies in changing a coping strategy for different stressors or different stages of a situation (Freire et al., 2018). The third approach, strategy-situation fit, is similar to the variability approach but it emphasises the compatibility of a coping strategy

and the situation (Watanabe et al., 2002). Cheng et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analytical review of studies using these different approaches and found that the strategy-situation fit approach has a larger effect size than all other approaches.

The underlying mechanism of coping flexibility leading to psychological resilience remains largely unknown. Lam and McBride-Chang (2007) discovered that young adults who coped flexibly were less likely to suffer from depression amid life event stress. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2021) found that coping flexibility can result in a reduction in Covid-19 related anxiety and depression. Their study suggests a positive link between coping flexibility and psychological resilience, but both studies used a quantitative approach to examine one type of coping flexibility. While their studies offered valuable insights, we are still unclear about the dynamics of different forms of coping flexibility in fostering psychological resilience.

Additionally, the conditions that support and sustain coping flexibility were not fully explored. Since coping flexibility appears to be an important mechanism for achieving psychological resilience, it is necessary to explore the antecedents of coping flexibility to obtain a holistic understanding of how psychological resilience emerges. Resilience theory suggests that promotive factors can enhance psychological resilience (Zimmerman, 2013), whereas it remains unclear as to what promotive factors are crucial for facilitating coping flexibility. Amongst the scarcity of this line of enquiry, Cheng et al.'s (2012) study noted that coping flexibility could be developed through intervention and training. However, in the occupational context of entrepreneurship, business owners often bear their problems alone, lacking the job resources that traditional employment can provide. To address the research gaps discussed above, this study aims to unpack how small business entrepreneurs achieve their psychological resilience by examining their coping flexibility and its antecedents.

Research methodology

Study context

This research was conducted in New Zealand, which presents a unique and compelling context for investigating the above research questions. The tourism industry is particularly crucial to the country's economy. Tourism was the country's largest export industry, making a significant positive impact on the country, contributing 11.4% to the total exports of goods and services, and directly supporting 8.4% of employment of the New Zealand workforce (Tourism New Zealand, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic has devastated the industry due to the halt of international tourism and restrictions on domestic movement. The impact of Covid on the tourism sector in New Zealand has been severe – international visitor arrivals decreased 98.6% and the number of people directly employed in tourism decreased by a third (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2023).

New Zealand is a small country by population, with 97% of all firms being small and micro businesses (those with fewer than 20 employees) (Ministry of Business, Innovation, & Employment, 2020). The tourism sector is predominantly composed of small and micro businesses, making it an ideal setting to explore the resilience and adaptability of small businesses in a crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic has produced significant impacts

on tourism businesses due to strict border closures and comprehensive lockdown measures. To support the recovery from the impact of the pandemic, the New Zealand government implemented a \$400 million tourism recovery package including Strategic Tourism Assets Protection Programme (STAPP), Tourism Transitions Programme, and Small Business Digital Boost. These offer a rich context for understanding how policy interventions intersect with entrepreneurial coping strategies.

Research design

This research aims to develop an in-depth and systematic understanding of how small tourism entrepreneurs cope with global crises using the Covid-19 pandemic as a context, and how they develop psychological resilience amid the crisis. This entails an interpretive qualitative research paradigm, assuming a relativistic ontology, a subjectivist epistemology, and a naturalistic method for an in-depth understanding of the issues being studied (Sławecki, 2018).

Primary data sources were in-depth qualitative interviews with 18 entrepreneurs of small tourism businesses (with fewer than 20 employees) in the second half year of 2020 in New Zealand. Purposive and convenience sampling methods were used to recruit participants, which can ensure finding interviewees that are 'information-rich cases' despite the limitations such as the potential biases in participant selection and the generalisation of findings (Etikan et al., 2016). Several factors were considered in the sampling process. Instead of following the numerical guideline, the current study focused on achieving data saturation by considering the quality of data that participants can provide (Ong et al., 2022). As Fusch and Ness (2015) proposed, data saturation is not only about the number but primarily about the depth of the data. In practice, this research followed thematic saturation criteria. Data collection stopped when discovering no more information related to the research questions appeared from interviews. Two of the researchers are experienced with qualitative methods and agreement was reached to best decide data saturation was achieved. The interviewees were selected because of their depth of experience and representativeness in the tourism sector in New Zealand since their businesses cover a wide range of tourism services, from accommodation, food and beverage sectors to tourism guides. In terms of the demographic profile of the interviewees, the specific businesses they worked in included hospitality, accommodation, event and marketing, transportation, and tourism; twelve interviewees were male and eight are female. [Table 1](#) provides more information about the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were adopted, which allowed the investigator to have a structure facilitating the conversation, but also enabled the interviewees to share their stories and opinions related to the topics (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Due to the constructive and explorative nature of this research, open-ended questions (e.g. How do you deal with the stress and challenges caused by the Covid and its impact on your well-being? What type of strategies do you usually use? Are there any stories that you would like to share about you and your business during the crisis?) were proposed to encourage 'unanticipated statements and stories to emerge' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26). The length of interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted online through different online communication tools (i.e. Zoom and Teams) due to the lockdown requirements and safety considerations, which had also been widely used by

Table 1. Demographic information of interviewees.

	Gender	Role	Industry	Business information	Business location
#1	F	Owner	Hospitality	Restaurant, family business for 13 years, 5 employees	Wellington
#2	M	Owner	Event & marketing	Event organiser & marketing, online business without office	Auckland
#3	F	Owner	Accommodation	Motel, Family business for 2 years, 5 room attendees and 2 casual cleaners	Napier
#4	F	Owner	Hospitality	Restaurant, 8 years, 1 full time 2 part time employees	Auckland
#5	M	Owner	Hospitality	Café, less than 1 year, 16 employees	Auckland
#6	M	Owner	Hospitality	Restaurant with many different stores, family business, 3 years, 5 part-time employees	Auckland
#7	M	Owner	Tourism & transportation	Self-employed with PhD in tourism, 6–7 years, 1 full time and 3 part-time employees	Hamilton
#8	M	Manager	Tourism	Travel agent with Master in tourism, 2 years	Auckland
#9	M	Owner	Tourism	Travel agent, Self-employed with a Master in marketing, 3 years	Auckland
#10	F	Owner	Tourism	Travel agent, 17 years, 4 full time 3 part time employees	Auckland
#11	F	Co-owner	Tourism	Travel agent, over 20 years, 3 full time 1 part time employees	Wellington
#12	M	Owner	Accommodation	Motel, owner plus another full-time job, a few months, 4 part time employees	Wellington
#13	M	Owner	Hospitality	Takeaway restaurant, family business, 7 years, no employee	Auckland
#14	M	Owner	Hospitality	Ice cream shop, family business, 17 years, no employee	Auckland
#15	F	Co-owner	Tourism	Travel agent, 7+ years, 6 employees	Wellington
#16	M	Owner	Tourism	Tour design & guide, 6+ years, 4 full time employees	Dunedin
#17	M	Director	Tourism	Family business for over 16 years, 9 employees	Nelson
#18	M	Owner	Hospitality	Takeaway restaurant, family business for 8 years	Auckland

other researchers (Adom et al., 2020). To enhance the engagement of interviewees and build connection in the online environment, the investigator took several strategies (e.g. using video calls and active listening) to encourage interviewees to be open to sharing their stories. Most of the interviews were conducted in English with a few in Mandarin – the native language of the investigator and some interviewees. The researchers acknowledged their potential positionality and maintained reflexive awareness through the research process. One of the researchers had worked widely with the tourism industry as a researcher and policy maker in New Zealand, and thus had a good understanding of the industry, which was helpful in interpreting the participants' experience. At the same time, she recognised the potential for insider bias and used different strategies to mitigate preconceived perspectives, including reflexive journaling. The interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the participants. The interview data were transcribed verbatim after the interview. To ensure the richness of data, the interviews conducted in Mandarin were not translated into English until the writing stage where the useful quotes were translated. The translation was approached with methodological rigour to mitigate potential semantic and contextual challenges. To preserve the nuanced meanings and linguistic subtleties, the translation process involved a double-translation approach, where interviews were independently translated by two bilingual researchers fluent both in Mandarin and English.

Moving to the data analysis, the investigators first read the interview transcript to get familiar with the data. After that, a line-by-line coding process was conducted with the facilitation of NVivo. Given our focus on the mechanisms for achieving psychological resilience, we paid particular attention to descriptions of behaviours that supported the interviewees in recovering from stress and re-engaging with their businesses. Table 2 illustrates the coding process: concrete surface texts that were open-coded and then placed into categories that conveyed structural meaning. This process allowed for the inductive analysis of the established theoretical constructs while also allowing themes to emerge from the data (Qi et al., 2021). Investigator triangulation method was used to ensure analysis reliability. The researchers are experts in coping areas with strong knowledge of qualitative methods. Two researchers discussed the emerged codes and categories, and reviewed the analysis process with the goal of refining the identified themes and minimising the influence of personal bias to ensure the credibility and dependability of findings. The data analysis results are presented thematically in the next section.

Findings

This study aims to explore how small tourism entrepreneurs achieved psychological resilience by coping flexibly and under what conditions they cope flexibly. Data analysis reveals that psychological resilience is driven by three forms of coping flexibility, including the broad repertoire of coping strategies, strategy-situation fit, and variability in coping strategies. Also, coping flexibility is underpinned by personal and social resourcefulness during the Covid-19 crisis. The findings are organised in a conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 and the following sections will discuss the key elements of the framework.

Coping flexibility

As informed by data analysis, the broad repertoire of coping strategies, strategy-situation fit, and variability in coping strategies together constitute coping flexibility. Regarding the broad repertoire of coping strategies, all the participated interviewees disclosed that they used more than one coping strategy to manage their stress, although these strategies usually clustered into either problem-focused or emotion-focused types. While

Table 2. Example of the coding process.

Text	Codes	Categories
<i>It is a global emergent event, not something that we can control or change as an individual, so we have to adjust our own attitude ...</i>	Acceptance	Emotion-focused coping
<i>Using this quiet time, I am updating the system [of my business] to make sure it is faster and easier to use when the peak time comes ... Also planning to do a few trainings include the DOC, marine life and Māori culture training.</i>	Use different coping strategies	Coping flexibility
<i>Need to learn to reorient things that don't work for me ... This is also my passion and just need to prepare for the recovery of the sector ...</i>	Prepare for the future; take care of family and personal well-being	Psychological resilience
<i>I feel good because I have more time to accompany my kid ... Personally, doing more exercise and outdoor activities let me stay sharp.</i>		

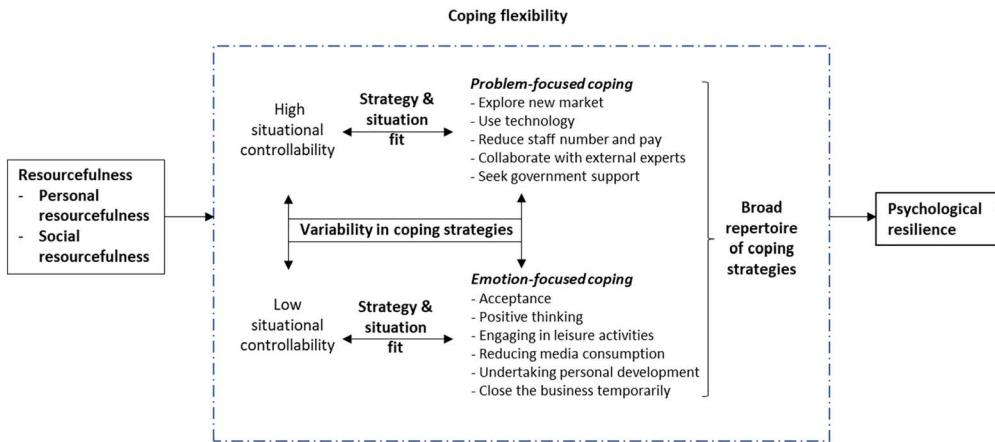


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of coping and psychological resilience.

problem-focused coping strategies aimed to remove or reduce the stressors, emotion-focused coping strategies focused on easing negative emotions emanating from the stressors. When the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was perceived by interviewees as high in controllability, they tended to employ problem-focused coping strategies. On the contrary, when the situation was considered beyond the control of the individual, they were inclined to employ more emotion-focused coping strategies. This compatibility between the focus of coping and the situation means strategy-situation fit. Regarding the variability in coping strategies, all the interviewees proposed to adjust their coping strategies according to the change of the pandemic to cope with their stress more effectively.

Using diverse coping strategies under controllable situations

About one-third of the interviewees perceived that the crisis is 'short-term' (e.g. interviewee #6) and the impacts are 'manageable' (e.g. interviewee #11). They tended to see the crisis as short-term and remain positive about the future. They considered the downturn of the tourism industry as an opportunity for them to reform or rejuvenate their businesses. For example, interviewee#10 focused on developing his digital skills, including developing his website by installing online credit card payment, and learning Adobe and Photoshops to prepare for future marketing needs.

To keep their business afloat during a hard time of Covid-19, the interviewees employed a range of problem-focused coping strategies. A prominent strategy was exploring new markets to maintain business continuity. Many of the interviewed tourism entrepreneurs developed new products or reoriented to new markets to maintain business continuity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Seven out of eight participants in the travelling and guiding sector shared that they shifted their focus from international tourists to the domestic market by developing domestic bicycle and kayak trips. For example, a travel agency owner (interviewee #17) in Nelson shared his experience:

The majority of my clients are from Europe and US; they cannot come [during the lockdown] ... I do some small group bicycle trips with local people ... I transfer people and bicycles from the airport ... At least these [businesses] can support us for the basic life.

Another problem-focused coping strategy was using technology to maintain business continuity. To deal with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, using technology has been a common strategy among business entrepreneurs and many of them believed technology would become more and more important in the future. Most of the interviewed restaurant owners shifted to online ordering and delivery platforms to maximise their business during lockdowns (e.g. interviewee #1). Five mentioned their coping strategies for doing digital marketing on social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) with the goal of maintaining visibility and connecting with clients.

Reducing staff and pay has been a common problem-focused coping strategy, particularly for those interviewees who were from the travel agency and event sectors. For example, interviewee #15, who reduced all staff except for the four co-founders, came back to work voluntarily together with the co-founders:

[We] lost 90% of our income since Mar; initially thought it will be a 2020 thing but it will last for a while; do some small things, but we'll essentially go back volunteer. Hopefully, 2022 will get back things.

Furthermore, some interviewees chose to collaborate with external experts in combining the use of other problem-focused coping strategies. For example, interviewee #2 who expanded to the domestic market also sought work with external technology experts to introduce virtual reality (VR) technologies to his business:

For my virtual travelling project, I worked with A [pseudonym]; he is a giant in VR and he came back from overseas ... prepare for the future to bounce back.

Interviewees proposed to seek government support packages to ease their financial pressure together with other coping strategies. Government support took different forms, including grants from local governments (e.g. interviewee #11), wage subsidies from the central government (e.g. interviewee #3), and emergency housing from the Department of Social Development (e.g. interviewee #12).

Using diverse coping strategies under uncontrollable situations

Some interviewees were more pessimistic about the impact of Covid-19 on their businesses. They perceived the situation as a long-lasting event with a magnitude of devastation to the tourism industry that is beyond the capability of individuals for turning it around. Interviewee #11 also asserted:

There is no hope for the next 3 or 4 years in my opinion. A global crisis like this, we just don't know when it will end.

The impacts of the pandemic on businesses unavoidably made entrepreneurs emotionally distressed and the perceived uncontrollability of the crisis seemed to exacerbate the disturbance in psychological well-being. Thus, the interviewees turned to rely on emotion-focused coping strategies. One of the prominent emotion-focused coping strategies is acceptance. For instance, interviewee #12 said 'It's not something one can change; just accept it ... Life needs to continue ... Wait for the 'Spring' of the industry'. By accepting the uncontrollability of the event, these interviewees were able to orient their focus. Moreover, almost all interviewees said that they tried to think more positively by focusing on the positive elements in their life or the pandemic.

For example, interviewee #4 compared himself with others in the same situation and felt fortunate:

Financially I am okay and can last 3–4 years as I am mortgage free, fortunately ... The same situation for everyone ... I didn't have much time for a break [before] ... Now see it as a long holiday and spend time with families.

Moreover, interviewees adopted various approaches to distance themselves from thinking about the crisis to maintain emotional equilibrium. These strategies include engaging in leisure activities such as exercising (e.g. interviewee #3, #7, and #15) and outdoor activities (e.g. interviewee #5, #13, and #18); reducing media consumption such as reducing the frequency of watching online news (e.g. interviewee #10); and undertaking personal development like doing a PhD (e.g. interviewee #5 and #15).

Interestingly, this research identified an extreme form of emotion-focused coping strategy. Five interviewees closed their businesses temporarily and shifted to different jobs. They all expressed that this was just a remedy for sustaining their living and maintaining well-being, and they would restart their businesses after the crisis. For example, interviewee #17 said:

I come back to my previous job – a tour guide; I work 3 days per week (only for domestic visitors) ... At least this allows me to maintain life. I don't want to feel depressed. When the border re-opens, I'll continue my business.

Interviewees who tried to reduce their emotional distress commonly took a variety of emotion-focused coping strategies. Just to name an example, interviewee #15 not only stayed positive by engaging in leisure activities but also closed her business temporarily and used this 'quiet' time to pursue a PhD.

Changing coping strategies due to situational change

Data analysis demonstrated that interviewees modified coping strategies when they perceived the changing situation and the initial coping strategies were ineffective. For example, interviewee #10 changed to a domestic tourist cycling business when the border closed and international tourists could not come, but it turned out that local tourist cycling was a very small market, so he closed the business and started a part-time job. Additionally, a restaurant owner in Wellington (interviewee #1) turned the business into a takeaway during the lockdown period, but soon found out that it did not generate sufficient revenue to keep the business afloat, so they joined the online order platform as an extra remedy. As the Covid situation was a long process, entrepreneurs' coping strategies appeared to be revolving constantly to overcome many dynamic challenges. Especially, when the situation was perceived as less controllable, more emotion-focused coping strategies were deployed to diminish the distress of a previous coping attempt that ended up useless. Interviewee #16's comments illustrate this dynamic way of coping:

We change our minds all the time – initially, we thought it is just a temporary thing and we can get a wage subsidy; we will be fine ... Later, we think it is a 6-month thing ... then we realise that's not the case; we constantly readjust our thinking. That's the hard part. Our current thinking is to keep things along and plan to relaunch in 2022.

Resourcefulness

This research identified that interviewees who demonstrated psychological resilience were able to seek and utilise various resources in dealing with the challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data analysis reveals two dimensions of resourcefulness, including personal and social resourcefulness. Personal resourcefulness includes knowledge, perseverance, and optimism that are important ‘fuel’ for implementing both problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. For example, interviewee #15 applied his knowledge and experiences in social media marketing and kept updating his business’ social media to prepare for the relaunch in the post-Covid period. Similarly, interviewee #4’s optimism enabled him to reframe the business challenge in a positive way so he could remain emotionally healthy. Personal resourcefulness led to both problem-focused coping strategies as well as emotion-focused coping strategies.

Social resourcefulness also played a key role in coping with the Covid-19 crisis. Some of the interviewees sought social support from their business partners (e.g. interviewee # 15 and # 11); some applied for government grants or wage subsidies (e.g. interviewee #3 and #12); some reached out to external technology and marketing experts for getting new ideas that could help them advance and expand their businesses (e.g. interviewee #2); others resorted to family members for getting emotional support and understanding (e.g. interviewee #1 and #7). Most of the social resourcefulness strategies adopted by individuals mainly sit within problem-focused coping aspect.

Psychological resilience

Most interviewees expressed that they were able to remain positive about the future although at times stress struck them when new disruptions to the business (e.g. lockdowns and the discovery of new Covid variants) were noted. However, for those who coped flexibly, psychological resilience was evident by demonstrating the ability to maintain a stable level of psychological and emotional functioning despite the challenges caused by the crisis. The normal psychological and emotional functioning manifested in interviewees’ narratives of their well-being and taking actions to grab the opportunity in the future. For example, interviewee #3 commented on the enhanced family and personal well-being:

I feel good because I have more time to accompany my kid. I was always busy with my business and barely had time to play with my kid. Now I can spend more time with my family ... Personally, doing more exercise and outdoor activities let me stay sharp.

Data analysis also identified that the positive attitude towards learning and development reflects some interviewees’ psychological resilience. For instance:

John (anonym) came back from overseas, and I worked with him on VR projects ... VR technology will be a main trend for the tourism industry in the next few decades ... need to prepare for that. (Interviewee #17)

Discussions

This study investigates how small tourism entrepreneurs achieve psychological resilience by coping flexibly and under what conditions coping flexibility arises in the Covid-19

pandemic using New Zealand as a research context. Based on our findings, we developed a conceptual framework of coping and psychological resilience. Psychological resilience is conceptualised as a positive well-being state in which the person can effectively function after recovering from stress (Kennett et al., 2021). As indicated by our framework, resourcefulness has an indirect effect on psychological resilience through coping flexibility that manifests in various forms. Our research contributes to the resilience literature by illuminating resourcefulness as a key promotive factor and coping flexibility as a crucial pathway to psychological resilience during crises. We outline three specific contributions of this research below.

Firstly, unlike previous studies that focused on the effect of a specific form of coping flexibility (e.g. Cheng et al., 2021; Lam & McBride-Chang, 2007), this qualitative research demonstrates that psychological resilience during a major crisis stems from the combined use of all three forms of coping flexibility: a broad repertoire, fitness, and variability in coping strategies. The broad repertoire manifested in using different coping strategies simultaneously for resolving problems or/and regulating emotions. This is in line with previous research showing the multiplicative effect of using a wide range of coping strategies (e.g. Freire et al., 2018). Furthermore, the findings in this research affirm the existing evidence that the strategy-situation fit of coping strategies has a strong predictability of psychological adjustment (Cheng et al., 2014; Eatough & Chang, 2018). Furthermore, this research supports the variability of coping strategies, in line with studies showing that individuals who are more aware of environmental changes and are willing to adjust their coping strategies accordingly tend to experience less anxiety and depression (Kato, 2020). Our findings highlight that actively engaging in different forms of coping flexibility is especially important in crisis contexts, where entrepreneurs frequently face uncertainties (St-Jean & Tremblay, 2023).

Secondly, this research advances resilience theory by reaffirming the significance of resources while emphasising that active personal engagement with these resources is crucial for fostering psychological resilience. Traditionally, resilience theory recognises the importance of resources (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), but it overlooks the difference between resources and resourcefulness. Social and personal resources, such as family, social networks, self-efficacy, and knowledge, are considered promotive factors of psychological resilience (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Zimmerman, 2013). In contrast, resourcefulness describes a person's cognitive and behavioural ability to creatively explore, create, and utilise resources to tackle a problem or situation (Musil et al., 2021). It is a two-dimensional concept, including personal resourcefulness and social resourcefulness. While personal resourcefulness refers to 'the ability to independently perform daily tasks despite potentially adverse situations', social resourcefulness is defined as 'the ability to seek help from others when unable to function independently' (Zauszniewski et al., 2006, p. 57). The mere existence of resources may not always lead to psychological resilience. For instance, studies on job resources, such as job control and social support, have shown inconsistent effects in reducing strain (e.g. Hu et al., 2011; Parker & Sprigg, 1999). Yet, Duan et al. (2024) found that organisational leaders who proactively crafted new resources by leveraging their existing resources could cope with challenges effectively. Our research complements the resilience theory by demonstrating that resources or promotive factors are effective in protecting resilience only when the individual knows how to utilise them.

Thirdly, while existing studies show that resourcefulness can predict psychological resilience, our research sheds new light on coping flexibility as an important process that bridges this relationship. Our research shows that small tourism entrepreneurs who were resilient during the Covid-19 crisis tended to actively utilise personal and social resources to cope flexibly. Researchers argue that both self-help and seeking-help behaviours are important for coping (Alhamed, 2023; Gergis et al., 2023). Demerouti and Bakker (2023) assert that in a crisis environment where the boundary between work and personal life becomes blurred, the flexibility of leveraging resources in other domains to cope with job demands becomes more important. Similarly, Klokgieters et al. (2024) found that in the Covid-19 crisis, when social support and social contact are less accessible, elderly individuals sought new resources, such as social cohesion, to cope and maintain resilience. For entrepreneurs, in a routine business environment, potential resources such as weak social ties or government support, may go unrecognised (Sonenshein & Nault, 2024). However, in times of crisis, innovative thinking in identifying and creating resources is important for implementing coping strategies flexibly and safeguarding psychological resilience. While knowledge of resilience, coping, and resourcefulness remains fragmented, our research incorporates these concepts into a cohesive framework, providing a holistic understanding of how psychological resilience develops during a major crisis.

Conclusion

This study explores how small tourism entrepreneurs achieve psychological resilience by coping flexibly and under what conditions they cope flexibly. This study finds that coping flexibility plays a key role in maintaining psychological resilience during a long-lasting crisis. This was sustained by the broad repertoire, fitness, and variability of coping strategies, which work in a complementary rather than compartmentalised manner. Also, personal resourcefulness and social resourcefulness are two key conditions for coping flexibility to emerge. This current study offers valuable insights into the mechanism of how small tourism entrepreneurs develop their psychological resilience during a major crisis.

The findings provide a foundation for small business entrepreneurs and policymakers to better understand how entrepreneurs cope with stress during global crises. At the individual level, entrepreneurs should actively engage with communities, professional networks, and government agencies to stay informed and access crisis-related resources to enhance their coping flexibility. At the governmental level, stress interventions for business owners should include training on coping flexibility, such as developing stress management skills and critically assessing coping strategies. Policymakers should collaborate with entrepreneurs to tailor social policies and resources to their needs and ensure clear communication about available aid. Regular reviews of support measures are essential, as crises evolve over time, and updated policies can better align with entrepreneurs' resource needs. These initiatives can together increase small business entrepreneurs' resourcefulness and facilitate their coping flexibility.

This qualitative study is subject to the following limitations. The data collection was conducted in the early stage of the crisis. Although the investigator has intentionally emphasised the 'future perspective' in the interviews with participants, coping strategies

may differ at the different stages of the crisis and coping results may take time to reveal. Entrepreneurs' resilience in this research is for a relatively short period and may only capture the temporal aspect of resilience. We recommend that future research adopt a longitudinal approach to better assess the impact of coping on resilience. Moreover, tourism entrepreneurs are the focus of this research, and individuals from other industries may experience the crisis differently. Future research can investigate entrepreneurs from diverse sectors to gain a more nuanced understanding. Furthermore, as this study is based in New Zealand with effective government responses to the pandemic, the social resourcefulness for coping may be salient in this national context but less salient or may take a different form in other national contexts. Further studies in cross-cultural backgrounds can be conducted to examine the applicability of the conceptual framework of coping and psychological resilience proposed by this research.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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