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Crisis? How small tourism businesses talk about COVID-19 and business change in the UK

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ABSTRACT

There has been much speculation about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector. Common narratives have variously depicted an unprecedented crisis, a time of opportunity for innovation and transformation and a chance to build a 'new normal'. The aim of this paper is to investigate how owners and operators of micro- and small enterprises in tourism and hospitality in the United Kingdom made sense of the pandemic and its effects on their businesses. Situated in long-term research engagements with the businesses, three interlocking interpretative repertoires emerged from the analysis of 16 semi-structured interviews conducted between March and May 2021. Participants did not share a progress-driven approach to business change, there was no evidence of a radical 'new normal' emerging and COVID was not perceived as a crisis. While these findings appear counter-intuitive, their principal contribution is as a valid counterpoint to policy and academic discourse about COVID as crisis and opportunity. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of developing more nuanced accounts of the tourism business during and relating to the pandemic. Terms like 'crisis' and 'opportunity' used by policy-makers, practitioners and academics only partially reflect the deliberative efforts and practical perspectives of owners and operators of tourism enterprises.

Introduction

Travel and tourism have a curious relationship with the Coronavirus pandemic. They have been a vector for the spread of COVID-19 (Iaquinto, 2020), but they have also been among the most heavily impacted sectors of economic activity. In 2020, the UNWTO estimated 900 million fewer international arrivals and US\$935 billion in lost export revenues, ten times the magnitude of the 2009 global economic crisis (UNWTO, 2020). This vulnerability has been further amplified by the scale of the contribution of travel and tourism to economies and livelihoods, and the proliferation of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises within the sector. In the European Union prior to the pandemic, 98% of businesses in the 'tourism industries' were small businesses and 87% were micro-enterprises under nine employees (Eurostat, 2021).

While these statistics articulate the unprecedented nature and effects of the crisis, the pandemic has also been framed as a moment to reimagine the sector (Constantin et al., 2020). The pandemic is an 'opportunity' for tourism businesses to 'grow back better', involving 'preparing for tomorrow'

while 'managing the crisis and mitigating the impact' (UNWTO, 2020, n.p.). Specific innovations have been required of businesses to counter the spread of COVID-19, but the intermission has also enabled projects that were blocked by the imperatives of everyday operations in the 'old normal' to go ahead. More optimistically, the pandemic has afforded the chance to build towards a 'new normal' that eschews the negatives of unsustainable practices in the past (Benjamin et al., 2020; Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020; UNWTO, 2020).

The emergence of these two strands of discourse – relating to the magnitude and importance of the crisis and the opportunities it affords for a more principled and managed recovery – comprise distinctive interpretative repertoires appearing from communities of policy-makers, practitioners and academics. Interpretative repertoires are 'routines of connected arguments, explanations, evaluations and descriptions which often depend on familiar anecdotes, illustrations, tropes or clichés … ' and provide ' … the building blocks through which people develop accounts and versions of significant events in social interaction and through which they perform identities and social life' (Wetherell, 2011, p. 154). The power of discourse for understanding the multiple and sometimes contested interpretations of, and reactions to, the pandemic has been acknowledged in tourism and hospitality studies (cf. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). A distinctive body of knowledge has started to emerge exploring the effects of the pandemic on, and interventions to support, tourism and hospitality businesses (Sanabria-Diaz et al., 2021). However, a key gap has started to emerge in the body of knowledge. To date, very little work has examined the lived experiences of those operating organizations in the sector, especially the smaller and smallest enterprises (but see Fuchs, 2021; Rogerson, 2021).

The central aim of this paper is to examine how owners and operators of micro- and small enterprises in tourism and hospitality in the United Kingdom (UK) have made sense of the pandemic and its effects on their businesses through a study of their interpretative repertoires. It seeks to contribute to tourism scholarship on the Coronavirus pandemic by focusing on two connected research questions: first, how do these business people talk about business change and characterize the situation their business has been in? Second, how does this relate to the way in which business change and the COVID-19 pandemic is considered in the literature? Unlike many studies of tourism and hospitality businesses during the pandemic, this paper benefits from long-term research engagement and dialogues with nature-based tourism enterprises that started before, and continued during, the pandemic. This enables the pandemic, its potential and the rhetoric around its possible effects on business (i.e. transformation) to be put into much wider personal and organizational contexts. Depicted by the UK government in its 2021 *Tourism Recovery Plan* as 'one of the UK's great success stories' prior to the pandemic, the high levels of uptake of support measures in official data (HMRC, 2021) evidence the view that the tourism sector has also been 'one of the hardest hit … . by COVID-19' (DDCMS, 2021, p. 4).

The principal contribution of this paper is to critique policy and academic discourse about COVID as crisis and opportunity, arguing it does not fully reflect how some micro- and small enterprises in tourism describe how they handled business change through the pandemic. Terms related to crisis and opportunity in business literatures, such as 'innovation' and 'transformation', invoke progressivist and managerial ideals of business change. In contrast, businesses participating in this research described change through an interpretative repertoire of embodiment and emergence. We contend that the interpretative repertoires of policy-makers and academics can obscure significant alternative ways in which business change in a crisis is experienced and operationalized by micro- and small enterprises. Moreover, it is important to understand how businesses talk about business change in their own terms, and here we offer insight into, and explore implications of, the way they do this.

Literature review

We approach our discussion of the literature connecting tourism business with COVID-19 in three parts. In the first, we outline a nexus of related concepts, namely: 'crisis', 'opportunity', 'innovation', 'normality' and 'transformation'. These concepts are widely invoked in business and management

studies, including tourism studies. The meaning of these concepts is often unclear, but together they form a normative framework through which business change is understood. The second part explores the challenge of making more precise definitions as a way to resolve this difficulty of normative bias. We focus more closely on one of these concepts, 'crisis', because it has been subject to the greatest effort. Our analysis suggests that unexamined assumptions in the approach taken to such definitions have resulted in a failure to create greater clarity. Thus, in the third part, we turn to discourse analysis, in particular the analytical concept of interpretative repertoires, to provide a more useful framework to approach the study of tourism business change in the context of crisis.

Vocabularies of tourism business and pandemic

As elsewhere in the social sciences (Markusen, 1999), tourism studies are replete with fuzzy concepts. Among these, terms like 'innovation' (Coles et al., 2008; Hall & Williams, 2008) and 'transformation' meet with multiple and juxtaposing interpretations among scholars and practitioners. Closely tied to 'crisis', 'opportunity' and 'normality', they have contrasting meanings in everyday usage and business discourse. In a sector that connects localities and global institutions, tourism businesses are simultaneously involved in a range of situations that can be, and are, described as crises (Hall, 2010; Ritchie, 2009). These present potentials and imperatives for change that may pull policy-makers and businesses in different directions, as in the cases of Brexit and climate change (Coles, 2021) or those surrounding the ecological impacts of tourism (King et al., 2021) illustrate. As soon as the significance of COVID-19 was clear, tourism scholars were keen to discuss its transformational potential on a sector that has not only been at the heart of the global health crisis (Iaquinto, 2020) but is also implicated in a series of chronic economic, social and ecological problems (cf. Lew et al., 2020). Some of the more hopeful visions for a 'new normal', a sustainable and responsible future for tourism after COVID, came into conflict with concerns about the economic survival and performance of tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). The meaning of 'crisis', 'opportunity' and 'normal' were mobilized in a discussion about the future of tourism.

Arguably, normality is one of the most valuable 'currencies' within the tourism-COVID literature. The value of normality grows during times of crisis (Milstein, 2013). 'Normal' was how things were done before the pandemic (Benjamin et al., 2020; Grofelnik, 2020), and the 'new normal' is both to live with COVID (Qomariyah et al., 2020), as well as a vision of a changed world after COVID (Ateljevic, 2020; Brouder, 2020). It is perhaps no surprise that 'normal' should form such a key part of scholars' response to the pandemic, as tourism is a key mediator of normality (Milstein, 2013), for instance in considering the juxtaposition between home and away (Barr et al., 2011). This is especially so in a crisis, where the return to a situation of steady-state is largely viewed as desirable (Ritchie, 2009). Yet searching for 'normal', new or otherwise, in the form of an estranged place (Shim & Santos, 2014) and/or time, projects a certain gaze upon the situation in view. A gaze that privileges 'normality' frames 'crisis' as something detached from the way people usually live; put another way, as separate from their contribution to the situations that are described as crises. As a consequence, when it comes to projecting 'new normals', the contributions involved in achieving the change remain amputated, and our discourse becomes an instance of extended proprioception: either we talk as if the new (unwanted) reality is one no-one had a hand in or we talk as if we have a hand in making a new (desired) reality, when we do not.

The rhetoric of 'normal' sits in tension with its common counterparts in the tourism literature, 'opportunity', 'transformation' and 'innovation'. 'Transformation' has recently been used to refer to some broadly outlined end states in which tourism is finally widely responsible and sustainable (Brouder, 2020; Cheer, 2020). COVID-19 is represented as an 'opportunity to reshape tourism into a model that is more sustainable, inclusive and caring' (Cheer, 2020, p. 514) rather than a situation in which opportunities may or may not appear depending on the conditions people find themselves in and their own dispositions. But the term 'opportunity' is untheorized in tourism studies and presents significant epistemological challenges, as some commentators have noted. The chief difficulty

is how to know when an opportunity really is an opportunity (Goodwin & Jasper, 1999, p. 31). Many a successful project can claim to have benefitted from an 'opportunity', but for such opportunities to be analytically meaningful, it must be possible to identify missed opportunities in failed projects. Uncovering 'what might have been' requires access to other possible worlds, yet such access probably cannot be had. Perhaps alternatively, opportunity and its corroborating terms – transformation, innovation and crisis – are part of a trend towards grandiosity within business and management literatures that is linked to a wider culture of narcissism (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2016) to which catchy terms appeal but which belies a damaging impatience with or a casual disregard for, flaws and uncertainty.

Applied as part of a sectoral, strategic imagination – such as in recent discussions around COVID – or at the scale of the individual business, 'transformation' is a discursive attribution of value – usually positive. It is either about the direction of change (Brouder, 2020; Cardoso, 2020; Cheer, 2020; Lew et al., 2020) or about the scale of change, whatever the direction (but mainly in the direction of profitability) (Choe & Pattnaik, 2007). Nevertheless, for change of any scale to occur, it must be achieved by some means. The prevailing term for this across management and business studies (Bessant & Tidd, 2015), including tourism (de Larrea et al., 2021; Hall & Williams, 2008), is 'innovation'. Some studies have shown that businesses that proactively adapt and extend their business models during a crisis tend to fare better through it (Martin-Rios & Pasamar, 2018; Naidoo, 2010). Conversely, others have argued that there is a tendency for the number and range of businesses investing money and effort in changing practices through crises to contract (Archibugi et al., 2013; Medrano & Olarte-Pascual, 2016; Paunov, 2012). While there may be advantages to 'innovating' during a crisis, it may be unappealing to businesses if the conditions are not right for them. Some studies have started to explore innovation as a response to COVID among tourism businesses, and all highlight the contrast between the creative, technological and entrepreneurial connotations of the term and the socially- and structurally-embedded realities of making changes (Bărbulescu et al., 2021; Breier et al., 2021; Corsini et al., 2021; Ebersberger & Kuckertz, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Those with good social networks, whether with clients, other businesses or other sources of support tend to be able to adapt and extend their business models more.

'Normal', 'opportunity', 'transformation' and 'innovation' form a nexus of terms which, with 'crisis', span both business practice and business-related scholarship, in particular as it relates to tourism. Yet, the unmistakeably normative character of this nexus begs questions about the real relevance of discourses constructed with it for people confronted with the everyday challenge of running businesses (i.e. the practitioners, the owners, operators, the employees). One way around this might be to establish clear definitions of what constitutes a 'transformation' or an 'innovation' and so on, with a view to making scientifically-valid objects capable of measurement. However, the difficulties inherent in this and the associated habit of 'conceptual stretching' among academics (Sartori, 1970) suggest a different approach is necessary. We now turn to our discussion of 'crisis', which in tourism studies has been subject to the most concerted effort to define its meaning and scope. Through this discussion, we argue that a discursive approach to understanding the valences of situations and practices provides a helpful springboard for relevant research questions.

'Crisis' in tourism

Attempting to construct a definition of a widely-used term, like 'crisis', for scientific use and academic endeavour is a risky business. However, attention needs to be paid to ordinary language if academic studies are to be effective in reducing confusion. Unfortunately, this has not been a characteristic of tourism studies grappling with the concept of crisis, as a close inspection of the 18 definitions offered by Scott and Laws (2006), Ritchie (2009), Hall (2010) and Mair et al. (2016) reveals. Many definitions have left unresolved tensions of subjective perception and objective reality in their referencing of popular usage (Selbst, 1978; Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1987), silencing of popular usage (Faulkner, 2001; Keown-McMullan, 1997), contradiction of common understandings of crisis (Hermann, 1972;

Laws & Prideaux, 2006; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Preble, 1997; Reilly, 1993; Scott & Laws, 2006; Selbst, 1978) or conflation or over-emphasis of links with disaster (Beeton, 2001; Sönmez et al., 1994). Others have introduced distractions, such as reference to causes (Faulkner, 2001; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Prideaux et al., 2003; Robert et al., 2007; Sönmez et al., 1994), consequences (Fink, 1986; Keown-McMullan, 1997; Pauchant & Douville, 1993; Robert et al., 2007), what is required to respond to crises (Pauchant & Douville, 1993) and other characteristics that describe the scale and scope of instances of crisis, but not what unifies them (Brewton, 1987; Darling, 1994; Hermann, 1972).

The shared characteristic which connects these attempts at definition is unexamined essentialism and an aversion to acknowledging the agency of human interpretation. We only find acknowledgement of the importance of interpretative agency in Selbst's (1978) reference to perception, Scott & Laws' (2006) reference to human views, and, more fully, Hall's (2010, p. 403) extension of this. The latter reports empirical associations between events and perceptions: in its detail, it sends out a hostage to fortune, as 'any period where international tourism numbers only increase by 2% or less often appear to be described as a crisis'.

Thus, building a consensus, baseline definition of crisis from relevant material in previous attempts at definition leaves us little further forward. For instance, we might offer that crisis refers to 'the perception that a situation or event is disruptive and has high magnitude impacts on one or more entities'. However, not only does this perception fail to distinguish between crisis and disaster (Aliperti et al., 2019) but also in specifying the qualities of the event, it fails to take account of human linguistic ingenuity, overlooking the rhetorical ways in which 'crisis' can be used for effect. Reducing further gives us 'crisis refers to a human view of an event'. In the following section, we argue that a discursive analytical framework offers more fruitful possibilities for analysis of all of the terms of concern under scrutiny here.

Interpretative repertoires and doing business in tourism

Within discourse analysis, several different terms circle around the similar analytical ground as authors have focused on the ways people sustain and modify broader societal discourses. Among these are: 'interpretative repertoire', 'discursive repertoire', 'discursive strategy', 'discourse' and 'ideological dilemma'. Of these, 'interpretative repertoire' is perhaps the most clearly-defined and it has been used in a range of contexts, including studies of political talk, racist discourse, gender and medical practice (Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Saunders & Klandermans, 2020; Seymour-Smith et al., 2002; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; White, 2009) and tourism (Hollinshead et al., 2009). Potter and Wetherell (1987, p. 149) defined interpretative repertoires as comprising:

> … recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena. A repertoire … is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes) … It is not, however, sufficient for analysis to simply identify these different forms of language in the abstract. We need to know, first, the uses and functions of different repertoires, and second, the problems thrown up by their existence.

Three broad elements comprise the analysis of interpretative repertoires: the characterization of the repertoire; the 'uses and functions' of these repertoires; and a critical element in which 'problems' or contradictions, are identified. The latter two are closely related. Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) early analysis of scientific discourse observed that scientists operate with two contradictory repertoires: one more formal 'empirical' repertoire; and another less formal, 'contingent' repertoire where the actual, messy pathway of scientific research is discussed. The more formal repertoire is used in scientific publications and presentations, and the use of these contradictory repertoires functions to sustain an impression of scientific objective authority while allowing scientists to get to grips with their tasks between themselves. A critical note is introduced by Gilbert and Mulkay's questioning of the validity of claims (in their case) to scientific authority, and their suggesting that more scientific writing should take a 'contingent' approach. As such, the analysis of interpretative repertoires

heightens our attention to relations of power among different ways of doing and allows us to raise questions about what benefits accrue (and to whom), if any, of singular progressive frameworks to describe and evaluate doing business in comparison to plural, socially embedded ones.

The nexus of terms we have already noted above are elements of a progressivist repertoire that suggest businesses 'travel' in one direction (even if what direction is contested). Within this discursive framework, then, crisis is an element of interpretative repertoires that qualifies ecological interactions as failing and problematic. Here 'ecological' refers to the gamut of heterogeneous participants in constructive interactions, be they natural, technological, human, non-human or social agents. Normal is a claim made within discourse that asserts the stability and/or generality of a given situation or practice. Opportunity is a claim about the affordances of a situation that asserts it offers gains. As stated above, transformation is a discursive attribution of value about the direction of (putative) change or about the scale of change, whatever the direction. Innovation is a discursive attribution of invariably positive value to changed practices.

Methods

To summarize the argument to this point, following the declaration of the pandemic, predominant discourses emerged offering particular representations of tourism under COVID-19 relating to 'crisis', 'normality', 'transformation', 'innovation' and 'opportunity'. Authored by academics, policy-makers and major practitioners (i.e. trade associations and bodies), these seek to make sense of how the pandemic has been, and may be, experienced by travel and tourism businesses. In the process, such discourses function as a form of authority, for instance, by explaining to stakeholders – including government, consumers and businesses – why the pandemic is important (for instance, for soliciting support and solidarity). If we adopt Gilbert and Mulkay's logic, a more contingent or qualified approach may be more appropriate. As such, this raises the issue of how the dominant discourses and repertoires were present in the lived experiences, and unfolding perceptions of, the pandemic among micro and small tourism enterprises?

This paper now turns to report on results of 16 interviews with operators and owners of nature-based micro and small tourism and hospitality enterprises in two UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in the South and the South West of England. By 'nature-based', we mean that nature was a central component in the value proposition offered to customers. Specifically, the research was concerned with how the pandemic was being experienced among businesses in the context of their prior commitments to innovate and transform their operations through co-production of change with the research team. The interviewees were drawn from a group of approximately 60 UK-based businesses engaged in an existing European Union-funded initiative from August 2018 to December 2021. Designed to provide further impetus to sustainable tourism development in destinations where it has been a long-standing commitment, businesses in North Devon and the South Downs were identified from local listings and mailed invitations to participate in the initiative. For each participating business, the initiative provided access to applied research, training and a range of other knowledge exchange activities and assistance. Formal interaction with the businesses had to be suspended from March to November 2020. Thus, as the major discourses described above started to appear in Spring and Summer 2020, independently, we had already started to question how the pandemic would impact on participants in the initiative. For instance, would it be a moment to innovate further or would planned innovations and those under way, be suspended, curtailed or cancelled?

Unable to research these questions further for a time, the emergent academic literature became an increasingly pertinent backdrop when we were eventually able to resume contact. The benefit of this setting was that our ongoing relationships with the businesses had *not* been solely motivated and framed by COVID-19 – the 'crisis' – like some other studies (c.f. Fuchs, 2021; Rogerson, 2021). Rather, we were able to examine experiences during the pandemic contextualized by longer-term, pre-existing intentions for business development. Moreover, in participating in the EU-initiative, the businesses were committed to the principles and practices of sustainable tourism

development. Hence, they were more likely to be receptive to narratives of beneficial change and exhortations to 'build back better' (cf. Constantin et al., 2020; UNWTO, 2020). Put another way, the concepts identified so far had a good chance of existing as 'live' issues for them.

To investigate the experiences of the pandemic, a programme of semi-structured interviews was designed. An initial interview schedule was developed in January 2021, as we sought to reshape business engagement oriented towards the design and piloting of new tourism experiences within lockdown restrictions and changed business priorities (Appendix 1). At the start of 2021, all businesses participating in the project were emailed and invited to take part in this new work. There was no obligation on existing participants to engage in this work (which paralleled the restart of the existing initiative); rather, the process sought to afford equal opportunity to participate and secure engagement with those comfortable discussing the issues. Given the ethical sensitivities around the topic, other sampling strategies, such as stratification of the sub-sample to reflect the profile of participants in the main initiative (which requires follow-up requests), were deemed inappropriate and discounted. The exploratory nature of the research also mediated this decision in the sense that the research did not seek to establish representativeness or wider generalization. Rather, it aimed to explore and document experiences of a global pandemic at the level of individual businesses. The final interview schedule comprised 14 questions and covered the topics of the businesses' experience, perception and responses to the recent situation, views on pathways to sustainability and specific questions about their own plans to develop new tourism products within the scope of the wider project (see Appendix 1). In the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on their experiences from March 2020 to the present.

With respect to the over-arching research questions (see introduction), the purpose of the interview questions (Appendix 1) was to allow respondents to present their own experience and ways of talking about business change. The interview questions therefore started by posing broad 'tell me about' questions about interviewees' own experiences, perspectives on the situation and general plans, avoiding the introduction of any specific terminology, for instance, around 'crisis', 'normality' or 'innovation', to avoid leading participants towards particular discourses. Interviews included probing where necessary to explore the character, scope and scale of participants' responses and worked towards their specific plans for product development, while continuing to do so in plain, neutral terms (Kvale, 1996). In this way, we avoided presenting any particular discourses about business change to participants, crucially excluding any lead into the COVID-19 pandemic and allowing them to address the second research question on their own.

The interviews took place around Easter 2021 before major restrictions to mobility started to be lifted in England as part of the UK government's four-stage roadmap. Prospective interviewees read an information sheet and completed a consent form before the interview proceeded by telephone or video-call. In most cases, the interviews were conducted with a single person – the owner/manager – but in one interview, two equal partners in a family-run business responded together, as befits such a typical small business operation. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and entered into NVIVO. On average, the interviews lasted 60 minutes, and they generated in excess of 100,000 words of raw data in total. Transcripts were read and discussed by the authors, prior to final coding. The analysis was informed by, and looked for clues and instances of, the major discourses outlined above. We compared business experiences with these major discourses. Unlike Grounded Theory and other forms of inductive research where themes emerge from the data, the analysis of the interviews and the generation of the codes from the businesses could not occur *in vacuo* from discourses already published. This is a common issue in discourse analysis where repertoires are socially- and culturally situated. We worked with a broad coding scheme, which aimed to elicit sets of emic – 'close-to-the-data' – codes under the headings outlined below:

- Situation terminology: specific language about the pandemic.
- Impact terminology: specific language used to describe the impact of COVID on respondents' businesses.

- Change terminology: specific language respondents use about business change.
- Situation narratives: coding narratives about the context (COVID or anything else) and how respondents have been affected by it.
- Change/impact narratives: coding narratives of what businesses have done or had to do in response to the situation.

This approach to analysis allowed us to identify themes of normality, business change and situation and, within these, emergent codes (Layder, 2013). These emergent codes reflected thematic similarities among the range of emic codes collected under the headings of the scheme. We present the most prevalent of these as interpretative repertoires in the results section. Table 1 provides thumbnail sketches of the businesses as context for the analysis. All bar one respondent operated a private sector business. One operated a trust (social enterprise) that raises money for its activities via external funding, rents, donations, selling and tours. The types of enterprises ranged from limited companies and nationally-significant attractions to sole traders and ephemeral workshop/tour providers. Eleven of the sixteen interviewees had received business coaching support (see below) since April 2018, comprising an initial discussion with a business coach, a feedback report and guidance and support towards developing new tourist experiences. Across all of the businesses interviewed, seven were actively planning to bring to market new products or experiences during 2021; three delayed their plan until 2022. As small, and in some cases micro-enterprises (Table 1), the businesses were also likely to be among the most vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, to feel its effects most acutely and to be able to access a very wide array of support measures to combat the perceived existential threat of the pandemic to businesses, jobs and livelihoods (cf. DDCMS, 2021). Together, micro-, small- and medium-sized tourism enterprises comprised over 99% of the 230,000 tourism and hospitality businesses registered in the UK in 2019 (DDCMS, 2021, p. 10), and at its peak, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme provided salary support (up to 80%) for workers in the sector (to September 2021; DDCMS, 2021).

Table 1. Thumbnail sketches of respondent businesses.

Enterprise	In a nutshell description
Attraction 1	Trust, employs 2, offers talks, exhibitions, sales and education. Planning new tour for 2021 season.
Bike Hire	Individual, self-employed, hires bikes. Planning new tours for 2021 season.
Brewery and workshops	Limited company, venue, employs 4, sells drinks as part of integrated eco-production system and community network. Planning new workshops, delayed until 2022.
Gardening workshop provider	Self-employed individual runs herb garden supported by c.10 volunteers. Planning new workshops for 2021 season.
Nature experience provider	Self-employed individual offers nature experience workshops. Planning new exploratory workshops for 2021 season.
Spa and wellbeing experiences	Sauna pop-up, limited company, employs 17.
Attraction 2	Company, employs 17. Transport attraction. Planning new event for 2022.
Camping and organics	Family-run business, employs 11. Camping and caravan site, also growing and selling organic food.
Caravan and camping site	Family business receives tents, caravans and static caravans. Employs 10.
Caravan site	Small family business running static caravan site. Employs 3–4.
Foraging tour operator	Self-employed individual running food foraging tours, planning new value-added experience for 2021 season.
Wildlife tour operator	Self-employed individual runs wildlife tours of nature reserve. Planning new tour/experience for early spring 2022.
Outdoor activity provider	Limited company, outdoor activity centre. Employs 16–45 depending on season.
Photography tour provider	Self-employed individual planning wildlife photograph tour for 2021 season.
Wildlife contact experiences	Self-employed individual planning wildlife contact experiences for 2021 season.
Accommodation and wildlife contact experiences	Couple-run business, accommodation with animals. Employs 7.

Results and findings

Below, we describe a set of interlocking interpretative repertoires that are quite different from the nexus described in the literature review. Put simply, our respondents do not share a 'progressive' interpretative repertoire about business change, there is no radical New Normal and COVID is not a crisis. Participants used everyday language talking about change as embodied emergence, normality as something of the past returning in the future (i.e. not a grand transformation) and the pandemic as a temporary structure that conditions their lives and work. These findings have implications for the way tourism studies approach considerations of disruption and change. Language borrowed from business and management studies may not be the most appropriate lens for understanding how change and the management of uncertainty are experienced in a sector so dominated by micro- and small enterprises. Instead, the interpretative repertoires we describe invite more empirically-nuanced frameworks for considering the complex nature of business change within tourism during the pandemic.

Change as embodied emergence

Our participants discussed business change in terms that reflected the extent to which they lived in and through their businesses. In many cases, as lifestyle entrepreneurs (Peters et al., 2019), this was hardly surprising. However, this is in contrast to the more grandiose vocabularies of the business literature in which 'transformation' is a formal process or managerial operation 'done to' a business. More than discussing data or formal sources of information as a basis for their judgements, participants conveyed how they sensed their way forward. They made formal plans when they had to – for example, when applying for government COVID-19 support – but more often, business change was improvised, provisional, experimental and contingent. They described their actions not as achievements on a journey of business transformation, but with reference to the embodied effort involved. In the following illustrative quote, a respondent discusses visitor experiences they were developing involving contact with wild ponies,

> The guided walks feel like they're nearly there. And they feel a little bit more maybe more straightforward, a bit more controllable. The therapy stuff you never quite know which direction it's going to go in. There's always that feeling stuff that's quite big and it's exciting, you have to dig quite deep. And it's amazing work. But I feel I'm less tapped into those audiences, the market for that, I'm less tapped into that. But that's you know I haven't done that work yet so that's waiting to be done.

> (Wildlife contact experiences)

In the above quote, the respondent describes feeling their way into how much more needs to be done, and how difficult it is to do. The work of business development (in contrast to the work of delivering the activities themselves) is represented as a labour of connection, of 'tapp(ing) into'.

Business change was presented as a form of improvisation. One participant illustrated this when asked about their business goals for the coming year, saying: 'We tend to slightly run with things and not have goals (laughs). All I can think of is get back trading again and see where it takes us' (Spa and wellbeing experiences). Another participant observed, 'it is very much a case of we're playing a lot of it by ear this year' (Caravan and camping site). Here, business goals are not formalized strategies, but emergent and extemporary forms of preserving through the pandemic, a 'muddling through', as a third participant put it:

> You know, we've sort of muddled through this winter without shelter and people are queuing in their cars and, well, they're not queuing round the car park, they're just staying in their cars and being very good about who's next and so it's so worked out alright, really.

> (Camping and organics)

In this semi-unplanned engagement with the pandemic, dynamic and short-term adaptation was given priority over longer-term aims. The formality of a prescribed process for business

development, and implicitly formal planning, was rejected and gently made fun of by one partici-pant, discussing how they develop a new experiential tourism product,

> I don't really have a process, really. I come up with the idea. Think about it for a little bit. Start putting it down on paper. Think if I feel like it can work and it can work and then putting it out there and seeing if there's any takers really. I don't really have a market research arm that will go out and [laughs] put like surveys to people and things. I just run with an idea and if it catches, it catches, kind of thing.

> (Bike hire)

Rather than moving in a scripted way towards a grand 'transformation', businesses expressed a trial-and-error form of business change. Notions of 'run(ning) with things', 'playing by ear' and 'mud-dling through' all seem to celebrate informal and practical means of enacting business change.

Along with opportunities for experimentation, the pandemic provided some time and space to think: 'And these all came from ideas, just, you know, mulling everything over in the last very quiet period' (Attraction 1). This informal mode of business planning is dislocated from the fanfare of 'innovation' and 'transformation' in policy documents, the managerial rationalism of the textbook and academic discourse where 'visions' and 'strategies' abound. There was a non-linear dimension to handling change and moving forwards – a kind of 'happy accident', where positive out-comes were serendipitously taken from unexpected connections. As one interviewee put it, when discussing networking events,

> … I've always found that those meetings and those network opportunities provide you with opportunities that you didn't think you knew you wanted – they sort of spark other things … for example, I didn't go into that con-versation thinking that was the outcome, but there's a completely different outcome and a good positive one that would come out of that.

> (Attraction 2)

Yet, articulating business change as improvisation does not mean that the businesses were not thinking through changes; nor does it suggest that improvisation is an inferior version of formal stra-tegizing (cf. Manucci et al., 2021). Rather, it is a practical and embodied mode of negotiating the pan-demic. Thus, while many of the business changes our respondents discussed involved adaptive change, responding to the changed circumstances presented by COVID, they also expressed a sig-nificant change in everyday terms. Even new business developments that were new for the whole sector were discussed in plain, practical language, as in the following quote,

> What we have therefore done is we started up a new business during lockdown last year, recruited for it and I think it has a team supporting it now of about half a dozen or so … . So we've made that a dedicated wing of [the business] now, a new brand. And we worked with [an industry body] and various other lobby groups - education groups, to create [a new education and employment programme]. So this is something that the outdoor indus-try been trying to do for years … So think like anyone, me of all my DIY at home, suddenly I've got a glut of time to actually do R&D and get these good ideas manifest. So we did that.

> (Outdoor activity provider)

Notions of business change as a form of improvisation, lived through the businesses and expressed in everyday language, are at odds with narratives of transformation and innovation in business literatures. We now describe how participants discussed ideas of normality and crisis, which are shaped by this articulation of business change.

Normality as a shifting baseline: differentiating past and future normal

For our respondents, how things were before the pandemic was the main reference point for describing and understanding the character of business change. Respondents discussed pre- and post-COVID differences in when they opened their business; in how much time they had for business development and housekeeping tasks; in capacity, staffing, expenditure, turnover, supply, crowd

management, waste management, personal contact and hygiene protocols; they even discussed the market, types of product and the nature of their offer. But there was no projection of grand ideals like business transformation.

Future-oriented visions were conveyed more rarely and were articulated in the context of a stronger concurrent sentiment to 'get back to normal'. The range of future-facing elements discussed was far narrower, referring in a more limited way to some element of the business that carried the burden of confidence or recognition. In this repertoire, then, the pandemic separates the past from the present. For example, during 2020, the following respondent bought a new business to add to their existing enterprise, installed new infrastructure, changed the product offer and pricing, introduced new hygiene protocols and in 2021, they faced losing their original site for a period of months to make room for building works. Nevertheless, they drew on a sense of a return to a cut-down version of normality,

> We're hoping that when we open in May -we're not allowed to open until May- that we'll be five weeks of two households inside and then in June we should be back to normal with all our events and things, and it's the events that make the money where we kind of cram them in.

(Spa and wellbeing experiences)

Another respondent reflected ambivalently on the value of the notion of getting back to normal, and operationalizes a limited version of it with reference to his practise:

> But my view is that whether the coronavirus is expunged as a concept in the years to come or not, I suspect it will be the latter, and it will be a learnt feature that we will live alongside, much like rising sea levels and the rest of it. I think returning to normal will be an image of that … So I'm not sure what that means, but I think returning to normal for me as a as a practitioner will be allowing to deliver to school groups again. It means that we have reopened and there will be a new awarding body, much like insurers or safeguarders that come down to make sure we tick all the boxes and we are safe. There may be a corona-proof, you know, 'Ready to Go'; you know, that sort of green sticker that that we've seen feebly awarded to businesses around, that there may well be some sort of quality badge saying that this centre is COVID-secure or corona-secure or whatever, and please bring your 80 youngsters to us to deliver. I think that that's been my very generous use of the word normal in our call [i.e. interview].

(Outdoor activity provider)

By 'Ready to Go', the respondent was referring to VisitBritain's 'We're Good to Go' certification scheme from 2020, which in the end awarded a brand mark to over 45,000 businesses demonstrating their adherence to UK government COVID-secure guidelines (DDCMS, 2021, p. 26). In a sense, this should be a *de minimis* position for any responsible operator. However, its invocation makes more tangible the sense of the concept of normality as a shifting baseline; the details of what comprises a 'normal' condition are not as important as the use of the lens of normality through which to understand business change.

Here, we have highlighted the way in which some of our respondents retrieved from a period of considerable change some markers of normality with which to think about the future, and that such 'back to normal' indicators were the only apparent means for thinking about the future as a condition. Some of the more grandiose language and intentions for the pandemic to be a time for re-imagining business may have been clarion calls to sector leaders, but they did not translate into thinking about new visions for micro- and small enterprises. Among the interviewees in this research, the shift in status from normality to pandemic conditions brings out in clear relief the extent to which people in micro and small tourism enterprises operate by feeling their way forwards into an unlit future (rather than 'boldly going'). Indeed, feeling our way forward into an unlit future is perhaps a more accurate representation of reality even when we are working with a definite and formally scripted plan. We might plan change, but there are no guarantees change will happen as planned.

Earlier, we argued that a normalizing perspective makes it more difficult to see contributory connections between 'normal' times and times of crisis. Yet what is our understanding of agency when

there is no interpretation of a situation as a crisis? How does this influence our view of what a crisis is? And what implication can we take from this analysis for the prospects of a vision-driven pathway to a different kind of tourism in the future?

COVID as temporary structure

Set against the backdrop of commentary and rhetoric surrounding the pandemic and its effects on tourism, none of our respondents referred to COVID as a crisis. At times COVID was discussed as an event; however, far more commonly, 'COVID' or the 'pandemic', was referred to by participants as a context or condition that influenced the work or operation of the business. We describe how businesses talked about COVID as a 'structure', because it reflects both the sense of it being beyond influence while also being associated with a wide range of different experiences. The sense in which the pandemic presented an intractable structure to our interviewees was emphasized by the scarce reference to the pandemic as an opportunity. On the range of different experiences of the pandemic, a number of respondents were able to find positives. Here the respondent speaks of COVID as an event:

> But the positives, there's been some positives from that and that the council actually liked almost pedestrianizing that area. So that's something that we're working, continuing to work with them, sort of post-COVID now about looking at that as a more long term arrangement.

(Attraction 2)

In contrast, another respondent speaks here of COVID as a condition with negative consequences:

> I think we were supposed to think it was good for our industry. But I don't think it was good for any industry. So we were worried about that to start with. But COVID's taken over, I think that's dominated everyone's worries really, meant that in our downtime we couldn't get any time away because, you know, [of] lock down.

(Caravan site)

The range of experience is very wide, from gaining time and opportunity to develop the business, gaining customers and increasing turnover, to losing capacity, revenue and family members. The repertoire of interpretation that spans these varieties of experience that our interviewees reported is of COVID as something that affects businesses, but that cannot be affected by them, and crucially, the absence of statements that more needed to be done about the pandemic and its impacts. Instead, businesses talked about their business goals in terms of taking responsibility for their own survival, focusing on practical steps that would improve their immediate situation, rather than framing those actions as part of a large-scale business transformation or global response to the pandemic:

> Obviously, the first one has to be survival. The second one, obviously, is to maybe get back on track for moving, taking small steps forward. Had it been a normal year, we had planned on two new caravans replacing two of the old ones with two new ones. We've just about managed to stretch ourselves to one. But so, yeah, it would it would be nice to get back on track.

(Caravan site)

The absence of the qualification of the situation as a crisis among our respondents combined with the absence of attribution of responsibility for failures or for improvements is consistent with the discourse-based definition of crisis that we have offered above. Hindsight may determine that – hypothetically – a lockdown should have been introduced in the UK a week earlier or that the medical response or social and business support should have been organized more equitably. But in accordance with our definition of crisis above, a strong sense of lack or failure in governmental response *at* that moment would have been needed to enable our respondents to interpret the pandemic as a crisis *in* that moment. Any brief survey of news coverage of the pandemic, like the array of

academic studies about it cited above, demonstrates how routinely the pandemic is presented as a crisis. Yet what these portrayals highlight – consistent with the picture of business practice and change as embodied, emergent, and exploratory – is that the reference points for micro- and small enterprises are considerably more spatially situated than the frequently globalizing perspectives found among journalists, academics and other commentators. Indeed, they are not merely quantitatively different, they are qualitatively different modes of spatial practice. Where one is particularizing and aims to create something unique, another is generalizing, aiming to collect many things into one unit.

Discussion

Our study reveals the experimental, looking-forward-to-normal, and self-reliant nature of the small businesses' responses to COVID-19, and it resonates with findings of other similar studies that have started to emerge (Fuchs, 2021; Rogerson, 2021). Importantly, our analytical framework gives access to interpretative repertoires through which businesses' responses were carried out and presented a challenge to some taken-for-granted understandings of small business responses to COVID-19 emerging in the literature. Our account of interconnected interpretative repertoires among nature-based micro and small tourist enterprises conveys an embodied and emergent sense of business change, in contrast to repertoires of crisis, transformation, innovation and opportunity. Why did participants talk about business change as embodied and emergent? This may be understood as connected to business size, organization and experience; in other words, characteristics and features of small enterprises and lifestyle enterprises that have long been documented (Thomas & Ormerod, 2018). Operating alone or with a small number of employees, micro- and small businesses do not have the functional separation of roles that characterize larger organizations. Anyone involved in the business is likely to perform multiple roles or different tasks within it. This is especially true for those with managerial responsibilities who remain closer to day-to-day operations and have less time for strategic thinking. Yet even where, with some of the (comparatively) larger businesses that we spoke to, functional separation of roles and clearly-defined oversight of the business was in place, strategic decision-making was conveyed as extremely cautious and business development serendipitous.

We might also point to the preponderance of personal projects and family businesses within our dataset. As in other studies (Li et al., 2020), while participants had a great deal of knowledge about the activities to which they wished to draw tourists' attention, most did not have any formal business training. Yet even where this was the case, informal, improvised repertoires of business emergence are used alongside more formal knowledge and business repertoires. As a consequence, questions are raised by this research about the extent to which progressivist repertoires of business change are appropriate in either understanding or seeking to shape businesses' responses to events and episodes like the pandemic. The distance between repertoires of business change used by academic and policy-makers, and micro/small tourism businesses also presents a challenge in the context of recovery from COVID (cf. Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). Policy discourses focus on 'transformation' and progressive business change. In contrast, we found that micro- and small businesses are talking about business change as emerging from their process of living in and through the business. There may be a need for greater integration of these two parallel repertoires if we are to 'build back better' from COVID (Tourism Recovery Plan 2021).

Another explanation of why participants discussed business change as embodied and improvised is the contribution of values to business practice. Values about nature can drive how tourism businesses operate (Bredvold & Skalen, 2016). As businesses with some reliance on or basis in nature, all our respondents have strong sympathies and commitments to nature and concerns about environmental issues. In many cases, nature provides them with their key motivation for entering business and doing business *per se* is the necessity that affords them a livelihood while pursuing goals related to their interests. Progressive ideals and growth are not necessarily priorities. Consequently, one implication of the presence of an alternative set of business change repertoires

among idiosyncratic and localized enterprises is that business responses to the pandemic should be differentiated on the basis of their values.

Finally, the ways that participants talked about COVID and the situations that their businesses were in, may have been influenced by the large domestic market that was temporarily prevented from accessing overseas destinations. The UK tourism industry has also benefitted from access to an established welfare system run by a relatively efficient civil service that delivered a raft of emergency measures within a short space of time (DDCMS, 2021). Not every business, however, has survived (Cao et al., 2020), and failing or failed businesses would not have participated in the research. But the character of COVID-19 and the pressure of the lockdowns in a predominantly urban population has resulted in increased interest in, and greater demand for, leisure time in green and rural spaces (Day, 2020), which many of our respondents' businesses were well-placed to capture.

Conclusion

The study set out to examine how micro and small tourism enterprises talked about business change and the situation their business has been in, and to relate this to the way business change and the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed in the academic literature. We found that micro and small tourism enterprises expressed a business change in embodied, emergent and practical ways; they did not present the pandemic itself, or their businesses in relation to it, in terms of 'crisis'. In stark contrast, discourses of 'transformation', 'innovation' and 'crisis' are common in both tourism and management studies, as well as in policy literatures where the pandemic is often viewed as a crisis and recovery through a grand transformation of the sector is envisaged. At any scale of imagination, there are reasons for describing COVID-19 as a crisis, and while academics, journalists and business strategists are involved in scanning widely and picking out what seems to be significant, observations in this manner are, in themselves, a form of specialized practice borne of a need to establish their authority and legitimacy in a domain. Others, particularly those involved in setting up and running micro- and small enterprises, have specialisms of their own, with their own repertoires for interpreting the situations they are in. These are due at least as much attention within the study of tourism as the universalizing practices of 'experts'. Yet the dominant vocabularies of business change fail to recognize micro and small tourism businesses on their terms, instead projecting a uniform vocabulary of business progression. This cultivates an unfortunate disjunction between experts and small businesses, which seems likely to present problems for post-COVID tourism recovery, and wider ecological crises.

The problem of this disjunction remains if we replace values of business progression (and its revenue-oriented logic) with values of sustainability or, more stringently, values that demand a response to the climate and ecological crisis. There are a wide range of different values in play in business; the values and concerns of the vast majority of businesses (which are micro- and small enterprises) are tied to the particular embodied challenges of doing that business (Bredvold & Skalen, 2016; Thomas & Ormerod, 2018). While such enterprises may make interventions to address serious ecological crises that result in a restructuring of practices within their field of activity (e.g. accommodation, connection to nature, outdoor activities), their work is far from likely to restructure economic practice more broadly. What can be done towards the resolution of such profound crises by small businesses within an embodied emergence discourse of business change must fall short of what needs to be done by them unless sufficient action is taken to create the conditions in which business can do enough. Creating the conditions is the responsibility of government and pseudo-governmental corporate giants. Ensuring those responsibilities are properly taken is the purpose of participation in democracy, for citizens and their businesses.

Limitations and directions for future research

For some readers, the finding that, among our respondents, there was an absence of a sense of crisis may be counter-intuitive in the simplest possible way: surely, COVID *is* a crisis. Indeed, this research

was conducted within the context of a global health crisis of unprecedented scale during which businesses struggled or failed. We did not interview those who had gone out of business or who were failing; to some degree, participant availability to take part in the research was a marker of their success in handling change and uncertainty. The research also took place as part of engagements with micro and small tourism enterprises in the wider context of an initiative seeking to foster more sustainable tourism. As highlighted in the discussion, respondents were invested in nature and environmental issues, and there may have been distinctive views of the situation and notions of change as a result of their particular personal and business values.

However, this study is not weakened by these points. Rather, it responds in a targeted fashion to the emerging literature on tourism and COVID-19, especially those studies offering visions of the future that privilege theoretical and political perspectives ahead of empirical work. Instead, this study conveys the locally-contingent and messy business responses to the COVID in a manner akin to Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) study of science. In other words, they are unlikely to be repeated exactly in other contexts. This is the basis for cautioning against some of the major discourses and for advocating approaches that are more sensitive to the variety of everyday business discourse.

As such, future research could seek to understand whether responses to crisis and disaster are differentiated on the basis of values by engaging with micro and small tourism enterprises for whom sustainability is not a key part of their business model or personal value system, and by exploring the wider extent to which the experiences, views and interpretations of the pandemic identified here are evident among other such businesses. Future research may also wish to consider eliciting micro and small tourism enterprises' responses to tourism policy documents to find out more about their understandings of the discourses of 'transformation' and 'innovation' widely-used in the sector. What types of micro and small tourism enterprise relate to these discourses, and how might small businesses whose discursive frameworks go unrepresented in policy discourse articulate their understandings, needs and perspectives within this sphere? These avenues are suggested by the key theoretical and practical contributions of this paper.

The theoretical contribution of our findings is the challenge they pose to grand narratives about a profound transformation of the tourism sector as it recovers from COVID-19. We have illustrated the ways in which micro and small tourism enterprises in the UK express and conceptualize business change during a 'crisis', highlighting the embodied, emergent and practical ways that businesses managed business change. These findings highlight that language like 'transformation', 'innovation' and 'crisis', often used in business and management studies, may not be the most appropriate lens for understanding how business change is experienced by micro and small tourism enterprises. The practical contribution of the research is that this understanding can be put to use informing tourism policy and facilitating its implementation. Policies involving micro and small tourism enterprises in the recovery from COVID-19, or other crises, may be better communicated in less grandiose, more everyday terms, and take more account of such enterprises' real concerns, so they better align with the ways these businesses see themselves operating.

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