COVID-19 Crisis and Indian Kirana Shopkeeper’s Business Continuity and Sustainability Initiatives: Study During the First Unlock Stage

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Abstract
This research study ascertained how street corner small shops (called kirana shops in India) in Indian urban landscape adopted resource-based view (RBV) and dynamic capabilities view (DCV) perspectives to strategize regarding unlocking initiatives, process, operational change, and business continuance post COVID-19 pandemic and economic lockdown. The authors used qualitative research method with a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire to collect the data. Thematic content analysis was applied for data analysis. The data was collected in June 2020 in India when the initial unlock process was going on. The application of Situation Actor Process–Learning Action Performance (SAP-LAP) framework in conjunction with strategic management theories such as RBV and DCV provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This study was also a demonstration of how a critical crisis situation like COVID-19 could relate to the SAP-LAP framework. The author found that shopkeepers developed new sets of valuable and rare and inimitable resources and capabilities. While all the aspects of sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration were attained to while devising the shops reopening strategies, new sets of resources and capabilities to attend to customers were also developed.

Keywords
Small enterprise, kirana shopkeepers, COVID-19 pandemic, resource-based view, dynamic capabilities view, SAP-LAP framework, business continuity and sustainability

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**Introduction**

Indian government initiated an unprecedented economic lockdown and physical social distancing given the context of COVID-19 pandemic (Behl, 2020; *The Economic Times*, 2020). Large and small business both were exposed to a unique situation of complexity, chaos, and uncertainty (Bhattacharyya & Thakre, 2021; Nayak & Bhattacharyya, 2020). Indian shopkeepers who ran their shops as stores selling a variety of goods along the lane and by lanes were challenged beyond their comprehension. In different parts of India, the businesses were allowed to reopen from the month of May and June 2020 in a phase-wise manner termed as ‘unlock’ phases (*The Times of India*, 2020). When the economic and physical lockdown happened, the street corner shops (commonly known as *kirana* stores) shopkeepers had to shut down their shops within a matter of few hours. Thus, they were in for an abrupt closure. Shopkeepers also did not have any idea as to when their shops would reopen as the lockdown period extended gradually. Once the lockdown period was over spanning a few weeks, shopkeepers started understanding the new realities. The shopkeepers like small business owners had to figure out how to initiate business in the short to medium term. For such a shock, there was lack of strategic management literature regarding business continuance and business sustenance. Thus, the authors in this research set about the objectives to evaluate how shopkeepers strategized based upon the resource-based view (RBV) (Newbert, 2008) and dynamic capabilities view (DCV) (Teece et al., 1997). Furthermore, the authors were also interested in this research to apply the Situation Actor Process–Learning Action Performance (SAP–LAP) framework (Sushil, 2000). This was carried out to fulfill the objective to ascertain the shopkeepers’ managerial mechanisms to cope with the challenges based upon new business ways change and continuity (Sushil, 2005). Based upon interviews with 42 shop owners and managers in Tier 1 cities in India, the author gathered the data. To derive insights, the authors content analyzed the data for thematic analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2004). The subsequent section presents the theoretical discourse. Thus, the contribution of the research was twofold. First, the study evaluated how shopkeepers strategized based upon the RBV (Newbert, 2008) and DCV (Teece et al., 1997). Second, this research applied the SAP–LAP framework to ascertain the initiatives of shopkeepers towards reopening and continuance (Sushil, 2000).

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Street corner shops (commonly known as *kirana* stores) have been an integral part of the Indian society since the British era (Rani, 2013; Shukla & Shukla, 2013; Sinha et al., 2015). These ownerships or sublet shops have provided to the local needs of customers in a geographical area. The shop owners and their assistants and helpers were a known comforting face in a colony (Yadav et al., 2016). An array of small shops catered to the entire needs of any family household right from grocery, pharmaceuticals, FMCG, white goods, toys, fruits and vegetables,
hardware, comestibles, and all other goods and items (Sinha et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2016; Zameer & Mukherjee, 2011). The advents of large-scale retail marts with the change in the business landscape from the early 2000s altered the shop–society–colony equation (Shukla & Shukla, 2013). The scale, scope, and financial and logistical muscle power of large stores had tremendous potency to erode the market share of the local shops dotting the street sides of any residential colony (Shukla & Shukla, 2013; Yadav et al., 2016). One needed to understand that these small shops were owned or sublet by small businessman or traders traditionally. These owners either self-managed these shops or had given the management charge of the shop to a trusted family or friend who would manage the shop. The shop owners and the managers of the shops would strategize so as to plan regarding what products to stock, how often to source, which supplier to choose what rent agreement to carry forward, how to interact with shop helpers or assistants, what salaries to be paid to the helpers, when the goods to be received for delivery, how to educate customers about new products, how to manage disgruntled customers, how to handle returned products, how to manage supplier payments, how to provide credit to certain customer segments, and such others (Rani, 2013; Shukla & Shukla, 2013; Sinha et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2016). In a nutshell, the shop owners were like a chief executive managing the show. These owner–managers of shops scanned the market and business landscape so as to change the nature of the shop product range and variety, way to handle customers, so as to be best tuned to the requirement of the market and the customers.

The authors also would like to ascertain the point that these shop owners and managers would also engage in decisions regarding whether the shop size had to be expanded, the shop needed to expand to other localities, shop need to enter into a specialized set of products or niche market segments, or need to streamline the operations of the shop (Rani, 2013; Shukla & Shukla, 2013; Sinha et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2016). Thus, a shop owner manager managed a shop just like a small business. Thus, RBV perspectives as advocated by Newbert (2008) would be applicable. Thus, shop owners and managers would develop such resources and capabilities that would be valuable to customers, rare in the local business context, not easily copied by the competitors (inimitable), and such that there are not many strategic equivalents to it (that is non-substitutable) (Wernerfelt, 1984). RBV entailed the organizational resources and capabilities (small shops in this case) would be subjected to the same treatment of strategic management discourse like large organizations (Wernerfelt, 1995). Thus, small shop owners would also think in developing such resources and capabilities that were valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Newbert, 2008).

Strategic management literature was also well endowed with the notion of dynamic capabilities that organizations had to change its repository of resources and capabilities so as to suit the business, industrial and market condition (Teece et al., 1997; Winter, 2003). Thus, the shopkeepers had to change the resources and capabilities by reducing or increasing its levels. Further, shopkeepers also had to eliminate certain sets of resources and capabilities and create certain new sets of resources and capabilities to survive in the COVID-19 era. It would also be pertinent to note that shop owners and managers would engage in sensing the
business environment (Scharmer, 2001) so as to seize the right market and business opportunities (Joshi, 2010). Finally, the shop owners would have to reconfigure their shops resources and capabilities for seizing the mentioned opportunities (Wilden & Gudergan, 2015). These notions of sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration were well embedded in the theoretical foundations of dynamic capabilities theory (Teece et al., 1997). Thus, the author figured out that both the RBV and DCV could be applied in the study context. The SAP-LAP paradigm consisted of six elements: Situation, Actor, Process, Learning, Action, and Performance (Sushil, 2000). The events which were happening at present and were predicted to occur in near future were the Situations. Shop owners and managers had to recognize and assess the situation in order to identify the opportunities (e.g., the demand and supply spread) and threats involved. An Actor was an entity who had to analyze the situation and act appropriately in order to adapt the existing business to the changing needs of the market. Processes were set of standard procedures followed by the shop owners and managers. When the situations changed, the actor (shop owner) had to act accordingly to regenerate the process as per the changing needs.

The shop owners and managers were expected to monitor the SAP process and use LAP in order to improve the business processes in their shops. Once SAP was applied, the shop owners and managers had to make note of the key issues related to Situations confronted, the actions taken by the Actor(s) and Process(s) had to be followed. They could then ascertain the potential improvements possible in SAP and the flexibilities involved. This was known as Learning. In the Action phase, the shop owner and manager were required to vet what actions could be taken in order to improve the SAP and make it flexible in order to quickly respond to dynamic market changes (e.g., during COVID-19 unlock phase). Finally, the shop owners and managers had to ascertain the impact of the above changes on the Situations, Actors and Processes and monitor the performance.

The coronavirus crisis (COVID-19 pandemic) and its associated economic and physical lockdown altered the shop owners and managers business context (Bhattacharyya & Thakre, 2021). To comprehend the way shop owners and managers altered their strategies needed to be examined from both RBV and DCV perspectives like in many others streams of Strategic management (Bhattacharyya & Verma, 2019; Verma & Bhattacharyya, 2019). In conjunction to the RBV and DCV perspectives (Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2015; Lin & Wu, 2014), the SAP-LAP framework was also applied (Sushil, 2000). There was no past context like what was unraveled by COVID-19 context and the economic and physical lockdown. The intensity of this shock in which shops were closed for many weeks in India was unparalleled (The Economic Times, 2020). The physical goods supply chain, the market demand upheavals, the working capital management system, the ways of carrying out operations, and these aspects, all were contested by the new context (COVID-19) realities. The objectives of the research were to ascertain how, during COVID-19,

- The strategic initiatives of shop owners and managers could be explained from an RBV perspective,
The strategic initiatives of shop owners and managers could be explained from a dynamic capabilities' perspective, and

Were the shopkeeper’s strategies aligned with the SAP-LAP framework.

Research Methodology

In this section, the research methodology of this study has been presented.

Sampling

The sampling details are presented in this subsection. The authors undertook the research to comprehend how shopkeepers in the trying times of COVID-19 post the phase-wise unlocking of economic shutdown and physical restrictions reasoned their shop’s business strategies. The authors towards this end engaged in carrying out an exploratory study as advocated by scholars (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Stebbins, 2001). The author undertook telephonic interviews with 44 shop owners and managers. The sampling method was non probabilistic purposive sampling (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). The data was collected in the month of June 2020. The minimum duration of interview was 22 minutes whereas the maximum duration was 44 minutes. The average duration of interviews was 36 minutes. The average experience of the respondents were 17 years while the maximum experience of the respondents was 22 years. The minimum experience of the shop owners cum managers were 15 years. The authors prepared a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire to capture the perspectives of the shop owners cum managers. The questionnaire had questions regarding: (a) What changes would your shop require for opening up during COVID-19 unlock phase? (b) How would your shop manage the unlock phase based upon the shop resources and capabilities? (c) What would be the key initiatives that shopkeepers have to follow to be successful? (d) How your shop managed change and ensured business continuance (e) Any other point you would like to mention? The semi-structured open-ended questionnaire helped the authors to capture insights which were beyond the extant literature knowledge base as advocated by extant researchers (Reja et al., 2003; Johnson et al., 1974; Harland & Holey, 2011). Further, this questionnaire allowed the authors to probe certain aspects in depth.

Content Analysis Method

The semi-structured open-ended questionnaire was thus prepared in line with the guidelines provided by Harland and Holey (2011) and Reja et al. (2003). The face and content validity of the questionnaire was tested with two academics engaged with teaching marketing and retailing while two shopkeepers were also provided the questionnaire for its mentioned validity. This was as discussed by (Appleton,
The shopkeepers cum managers were from a diverse background of shops such as electrical, hardware, grocery, kitchen products and utensils, apparels, electronics, paper and stationery, furniture, multi-items, stores, and others. The data was collected from the urban Indian context. The questionnaire responses were content analyzed for category themes as advocated by Mayring (2004) and Hsieh and Shannon (2005). In this regard, first response paragraph themes were created followed by categorization of the paragraph content with themes. The category themes were derived from extant literature as prescribed by Schreier (2012). The data collection was stopped post reaching thematic saturation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The SAP-LAP theoretical codes consisted of factors Situation (S), Actor (A), Process (P), Learning (L), Action (A), and Performance (P) as defined by the works of Sushil (2000).

Reliability and Consistency Measure of Findings

The data collected was transcribed within 48 hours and the content analysis (thematic) was undertaken simultaneously with the collection. Intra-rater reliability was checked with a gap of 72 hours from the first coding by the author and its value was 92%. The inter-coder reliability was checked with an academic expert with simultaneous analysis with the coding analysis by the author. The value was 90%. Thus, both the inter-coder and intra-coder reliability values were well within the values acceptable of past studies in terms of rigor (Appleton, 1995; Mackison et al., 2010). The next section presents the findings and discussions. Generality was ensured by testing the questionnaire experts as advocated by Mayring (2004).

Findings, Discussions, and Conclusion

The authors developed the study context during the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated unlocking phase post the strict economic and physical lockdown. The study domain was regarding the strategies towards the methods and means of reopening small shops by shopkeeper owners and managers. As mentioned, the basis of thematic codes were from literature on RBV (Hart, 1995; Wernerfelt, 1984), DCV (Winter, 2003; Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000) and SAP-LAP (Sushil, 2000). The responses of the shopkeepers in total consisted of 486 response sets. Given the paucity of space, the unique responses have been presented in Table 1. This was just a representative list of responses.

The thematic codes as derived from RBV, DCV and SAP-LAP literature has been presented in Table 2.

The thematic analysis of respondents’ data with respect to the thematic codes has been tabulated in Table 3.

The research objectives were regarding how shop owners and managers were coping with the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and focusing towards reopening
| S. No. | Response |
|--------|----------|
| 1      | ‘I am basically an electric goods shop owner, but I figured out that there was a demand of fruits and vegetables. So I started selling these items because the demand for electric goods was very less’. |
| 2      | ‘The big players on internet were doing good because they had delivery facilities; we small shopkeepers never had such elaborate delivery facility to venture beyond 5–6 kms and distribute goods. Now I have one person who would do the distribution and delivery at homes. I think I am going to continue doing it’. |
| 3      | ‘I have now got myself a very good mobile phone with camera; I take a picture of the products that customers seek and send them the products range that my shop has stocks of. So, my shop has become virtual as my customers could get to know what products my shop has through the pictures that I send’. |
| 4      | ‘I have now arranged for a temperature scan reader so that whoever customers entered my store would be checked for high temperatures. I know that living is more important than earning. So, safety and security of health is of primary concern both for me as well as my helpers’. |
| 5      | ‘Customers are interested to buy now inexpensive and sturdy products. Customers are not interested to buy products which are luxury. Only durable products which are value for money are selling’. |
| 6      | ‘For products which are costly the customers are requesting for easy instalments. This is a major challenge for my shop because my suppliers are asking for payment of supplies even before delivery so I have to part with cash. However, my customers are telling me that they will make part payments like instalments. How do I survive in this situation, I don’t know. If I get money from the customers then only I can pay salary to my staff and run my household and also pay my suppliers. The situation is very difficult. I can’t even say no to my customers also. These items specially being expensive is making life challenging’. |
| 7      | ‘In my shop, previously, I had five helpers, now I have only one helper. I have to manage the suppliers, the shop as well as the customer deliveries. With one helper and me now, I am on my own going out of shop and my helper is also out so we have to close the shop when both of us are out’. |
| 8      | ‘We are all friends, we shopkeepers; if a customer is asking for a product that their shop is not having then they immediately refer the customer to my shop. So, we all shopkeepers are helping each other like never before. We are all referring our customers to other shops who are looking to buy items that we don’t have’. |
| 9      | ‘Getting some bridging loans from banks is very challenging so working capital management is a big challenge.’ |
| 10     | ‘In these difficult times, there is lot of trust among the shopkeepers in our locality. If someone needs any finances, we are providing. We are even taking turn to manage each other’s shops. We are giving each other customers also; we are united against the fight on post-corona recovery’. |
‘Only shopkeepers who had maintained good relationships with customers are getting business. If you had a shop and you were known for relationship then you are not going to thrive; when customers are not visiting your shop then they only remember the behavior they had received from the shop owner in the past. You can only thrive if you had been a good relationship person in the past’.

The times in future are going to be tough and challenging for demand estimation. In normal times one can understand what is going to be the demand, but during these times we have to be very careful and jurisprudent in understanding the demands so that there no excess supplies coming as well as shortage of supply’.

‘Customers are constantly asking for goods that are sanitized; this is becoming difficult as shopkeepers as how much sanitization one can do for products. There is a limit to it. This has become a psychological challenge’. 

‘There is going to be challenges in selling out the old stock as customers are asking for fresh products only. My shop capacity is limited and so is my cash position. How can I stock new products when my old goods have not moved? I am worried that if customers insist for fresh stocks only, the poor shopkeeper would be undone’.

‘Shopkeepers like us have no idea about what the future is going to be like. We are asking each other how we can move forward. We are depending on each other’s wisdom. But if the government could help us through our association regarding the do’s and don’ts going forward, it would be good for many of us’.

‘Lot of us, to be very honest with you, are extremely worried, but we are taking courage and inspiration from each other. We are constantly talking to each other. This feeling of brotherhood, I think, will help us all shop owners to sail through these difficult times.’

‘In the past, we used to accept return of goods but now we don’t. Some customers insist but given the virus context it is risky. I tell the insisting customers that I cannot, in the present-day context, resell the product to another customer’.

‘I have now segmented my customers into two categories: one being reasonable and other being unreasonable. People talk about rich and poor customers now in these difficult times; customers who are poor but are reasonable and understanding to the needs and requirements of small shopkeepers like me are okay for us. Rich customers who don’t empathize with us shouldn’t be given priority. We shopkeepers are also human beings’.

‘Every customer is asking for mask and sanitizers, so I have started keeping the stock of these items, and these items are selling well even gloves also’.

‘Most of the boys who asked to work in the shops are gone so I had to hire new boys. I don’t know them well, but what to do I have to do business anyway. These boys also need work and pay so we have to build a new future’.
(Table 1 continued)

| S. No. | Response |
|--------|----------|
| 21     | ‘The new way of doing business was the way we handled the customer calls because the customers bought products through telephonic or other calls. So, if we were able to speak to the customers well in the call, then we made business; if we were not good understanding the customer needs or able to express the customers what product we had in the shop, our sales dropped’. |
| 22     | ‘Our shops used to run major on cash transactions. Now we have to re-organize our business so that we can almost become a cash transaction free shop both on the supply and customer side’. |
| 23     | ‘Since customers are not going to visit our shop so we need to eliminate all expenses towards shop beautification for attracting customers. Our shops just has to clean and maintain for hygiene. Decoration of shops and expenses related to it I am going to curtail immediately.’ |
| 24     | ‘We are not very certain what kind of demand growth will be there during the Dussehra and Diwali season. Will this be a washout year we don’t know; things are very uncertain not just now but also for the next 6–9 months, I must say’. |
| 25     | ‘This is the biggest shock in business we are witnessing. Only those shopkeepers who would be quick to change and find comfort in the new ways of doing business would flourish. All others would be tested beyond their stretchable limits. Perseverance and fast quick learning and change would be critical action is important not worrying about the future’. |
| 26     | ‘I observed that certain set of customers were not obeying social distancing. It was a very difficult state as a shopkeeper because if I told something to the customers then they would have felt bad. Further, if I did not tell these customers anything then the health safety of my own worker and other customers could get affected. Some customers who were window shopping could not even wish to visit our shop because there was a crowd inside the shop’. |
| 27     | ‘If a customer coughs and sneezes, we become alert. For my workers, I am also insisting that they don’t meet anyone without any necessary need if they have to work in the shop. If a worker reports of fever or high temperature, I tell them not to show up for the coming days. It’s difficult for them as well because these boys also want to work, not be at their homes’. |

**Source:** The authors.

their shops. The intent was to ascertain how shop owners and managers strategized their future based upon the extant level of resources and capabilities at their disposition, and what nature and capabilities would be required going into the future. The study also aimed to encompass and comprehend how shop owners and managers sensed, seized, and reorganized shop capabilities towards attaining success. Thus, the research objectives were to study how shopkeepers were managing with their extant resources and capabilities to navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic unlock phase of slow economic opening up. Further, how shopkeepers were sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring their shop capabilities during the opening up phase was also analyzed. In Table 4, the theoretical mapping of respondent responses is analyzed and presented.
Table 2. RBV, Dynamic Capabilities, and SAP-LAP Theoretical Codes.

| S. No. | Term                                                                 | Remarks                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources and capabilities | The shop-level resources and capabilities that are valuable for customer in the market, rare in the marketplace, not easily to be copied as well as could not be easily substituted. |
| 2      | Sensing                                                               | The ability of the shop owners and managers to comprehend the business landscape post COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown.                                                                      |
| 3      | Seizing                                                               | The ability to spot an opportunity to gain in future for attainment of business benefits, market advantage, or reduction of risks.                                                                  |
| 4      | Reconfiguration                                                       | The ability to change shop operations right from customer engagement, supplier interaction to the way of managing the shop operations. This is based upon the sensing and seizing carried out. |
| 5      | SAP-LAP framework                                                     | The ability of managers to read, recognize, and assesses the current market, business, and industry situation by monitoring and learning continuously. Adaptation in the current business process in sync with the dynamically changing needs of the market is of existential importance. Although this business continuance and change, management would be assured for better organizational performance. |

Source: The authors.

Table 3. Shopkeeper Thematic Findings.

| S. No. | Themes                                                                 |
|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1      | Shop managers have to create a virtual store by clicking photographs of the items that the shop has in inventory. |
| 2      | Shop owners have to have a telephonic line of communication so that they could comprehend and order customer requirements. |
| 3      | Shop owners have to streamline their working capital management in such a fashion that they could operate their shops with negative working capital. |
| 4      | Relationship with customers, creditors, bankers, and suppliers would be a very critical element going into the future. |
| 5      | To do business with customers, the element of trust would become extremely crucial to be the way of doing business by shopkeepers. |
| 6      | Shop owners and managers have to make their shops function with minimum cash-based transactions at both the customer’s and supplier’s ends. |
| 7      | Operation at shop have to follow social distancing norms at worker–worker, worker–customer and customer–customer levels. |

(Table 3 continued)
In Table 4, in addition to the discussion of VRIN and DCV perspectives (Lin & Wu, 2014), the resources and capabilities positioning were also carried out. Further, SAP-LAP framework analysis (Sushil, 2000) was also undertaken for pre-COVID-19 era and during COVID-19 era unlock phase; this has been presented in Table 5.

This entailed the shop owner’s ability to develop or create new resources and capabilities, maintain certain set of resources and capabilities, reduce the intensity of certain set of resources and capabilities, or eliminate or destroy certain set of

| S. No. | Themes |
|--------|--------|
| 8      | For shopkeepers, demand estimation is going to be a very difficult task. |
| 9      | Shopkeepers have to run their operations with minimal product stocks. |
| 10     | The health of the workers for body temperature and fever and even for customers would become critical. So, monitoring of health would become crucial. |
| 11     | Investments towards decoration of shops have to be minimal or none. However, the functions related to maintenance of shops need to be continued. |
| 12     | Products such as masks, sanitizers, face shield, soups, and such others need to be stored in the shop. |
| 13     | Shops have to be managed in such a manner that crowding doesn’t happen. |
| 14     | The migration of labors have forced the shopkeepers to work with new staff. The onus is on the shop owners/managers to bring these new staffs into the shop fold. |
| 15     | Shops need to be regularly sanitized and the goods to be sanitized before delivery to customers. |
| 16     | Shop owners have to bear special focus towards the sale of goods which are from the old stocks. |
| 17     | Shortage of labor has resulted in the new reality that shop are run by very few helpers or assistants. |
| 18     | Customers are demanding for low-cost good quality items rather than luxury ones, so shopkeepers have to stock such items. |
| 19     | Shopkeepers have to manage with customers asking for easy instalments or deferred payments. |
| 20     | Shopkeepers have to cross sell by cross reference each other’s items so that all shopkeepers are benefitted |
| 21     | Shopkeepers have to store products which are unique to their shop and not present at other shops in the locality. |
| 22     | Shopkeepers have to give priority to such customers who have more humane needs like the elderly or the differently abled in door-to-door product delivery. |
| 23     | Customers who are considerate towards the shopkeepers’ challenges have to be also reciprocally valued by the shopkeepers. |

Source: The authors.
Table 4. Theoretical Mapping of Respondents with RBV and DCV Perspectives (Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2015; Lin & Wu, 2014) and SAP-LAP Framework (Sushil, 2000).

| S. No. | Valuable capability | Rare resources | Inimitable capabilities | Non-substitutable capabilities | Resources and capabilities to be increased | Resources and capabilities to be created | Resources and capabilities to be destroyed | Resources and capabilities to be reduced | Resources and capabilities to be maintained | Sensing capabilities | Seizing capabilities |
|-------|---------------------|----------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| 1     | • The trust that extant customers had with the shopkeepers.  
      | • Door-to-door timely delivery by the shop.  
      | • Getting to know the products virtually without going to the shop. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 2     |                    | The products that only the shop has and other shops in the neighborhood doesn’t. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 3     |                    | The relationship that the shop owner/managers have with customers, creditors, and suppliers. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 4     |                    | None of the initiatives that the shop owner or manager were undertaking was non-substitutable. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 5     |                    | The ability to establish trust-based relationship with customers, suppliers, and creditors. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 6     |                    | • The ability to understand customer needs over telephonic interaction.  
      | • To develop a virtual store of and to update the store in real time.  
      | • The ability to provide door-to-door delivery systems for customers.  
      | • The ability to take customer orders and then place it with suppliers so that the shop inventory level as well as time is minimal.  
      | • Develop shop operations such that the norm of social distancing is followed. |                    |                                            |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 7     |                    | The capabilities and resources for the beautification of the shop for physical store visits. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 8     |                    | Cash payment to be greatly reduced so the need of digital payment transaction is increased. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 9     |                    | The physical cleanliness of the shops had to be maintained. |                    |                               |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 10    |                    | • Opening up to be a gradual process so shop operations to step up in a gradual fashion.  
      | • Shop operations to be physical distance abiding so shop operations processes to alter. |                    |                                            |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
| 11    |                    | • Delivery to become an integral part of shop’s business.  
      | • Customer orders are going to be placed through telephonic or internet-based calls; so dedicate a person who would only pick up customer calls and provide product details. |                    |                                            |                                            |                                            |                                                |                                            |                                                |                    |
S. No.  
12 Reconfiguration capabilities  
- Develop a virtual store by taking good quality snaps of products and, importantly, the product features so as to send customers the details of the products.  
- Develop digital payments processes.  
- Develop a delivery setup so that the goods could reach customers at their respective homes.  
- Develop a 24×7 customer service so that customer orders could be taken.

13 SAP-LAP framework  
- Shops would no longer be a shop wherein customers would make a visit, but shops have to have a delivery person who could go and deliver the goods required by customers. These customers would first book the goods required over phone and WhatsApp call. Thus, shops would now sell goods plus offer delivery services.  
- Shopkeepers have to make their shops like a virtual shop, taking photographs of the product stocks that the shop have, so that customers could get to know the products available online and then place orders online.  
- Shops have to be able to check body temperature of customers visiting. Shopkeepers and their staff have to keep themselves fit and stay secured, so they don’t get the disease and or pass it onto others.  
- Shopkeepers had to start stocking the items such as masks, sanitizers, and gloves as these items had high demand. Irrespective of the fact these items were matching the theme of the shop, the shopkeepers needed to stock these in order to increase their revenue.  
- As the customers preferred to buy inexpensive and sturdy products, the shopkeepers maintained more stocks of products that were value for money. Luxury items weren’t being preferred by the customers.  
- Fresh products were preferred and demanded by the customers. In order to tackle with the problem of piling up of old products, the shopkeepers had to act dynamically and tactically to manage their stocks and satisfying the customers at the same time.  
- The shop owners and managers started to use digital modes of payments in order to minimize cash transactions both at the customer’s end and supplier’s end.  
- Shopkeepers who were ready to adopt to the new ways of doing business and quick to change themselves flourished. The two philosophies that most of the shopkeepers followed in this regard were quick learning and making dynamic business decisions.

Source: The authors.
| SAP-LAP Framework Work Factors | Pre-COVID-19 | During COVID-19 Unlock Phase |
|--------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|
| **Situation (S)**              |             |                            |
| • The shopkeeper owners and managers made strategies to expand their business in their domain of expertise. |             | • Shopkeepers moved to the most demanded and essential goods as the demand for non-essential goods was very less. |
| • There was a lot of competition between the shops of the same locality, and nobody was willing to give their customers to other shop owners. |             | • There was a lot of trust among the shopkeepers. They shared customers and managed each other’s shops too as and when it was required. |
| • The shopkeepers had a lot of experience and expertise regarding the prediction of future sales. |             | • The shopkeepers didn’t foresee a clear future regarding their business and sales and depended upon each other’s wisdom for the same. |
| • Mostly the shopkeepers didn’t interact with each other and focused on their own ways and philosophies for business. |             | • Due to lack of customers, most of the shopkeepers were extremely worried but took courage and inspiration from other shopkeepers. |
| • Most of the shops only sold the goods of daily and regular use which included very less hygiene items. |             | • The customers had high demand for items such as masks, sanitizers and gloves. So, the shopkeepers started stocking these items too. |
| **Actor (A)**                  |             |                            |
| • Most of the customers had their own choice of brand which they would prefer while buying the products and price point didn’t bother them as well. |             | • The shopkeepers kept more stocks of products which were value for money as the customers bought inexpensive and sturdy products. Customers weren’t interested in buying luxury products. |
| • The shopkeepers had sufficient number of helpers for the smooth day-to-day operations. |             | • The shopkeepers were left with a smaller number of helpers and thus the shopkeepers themselves had to do most of the work. This hampered the day-to-day operations. |
| • The shop owners and managers used their expertise to understand what was going to be the demand in near future. |             | • They had to be very careful and jurisprudent in understanding the demand to prevent excess or shortage of supplies. |
| • There was no issue of stock pile up as the demand was regular and the material planning was also smooth. |             | • Most of the customers asked only for fresh products amid the pile up of old goods. The shopkeepers had to act dynamically and tactically to take out the old stocks. |
| • Most of the shopkeepers accepted the return of goods and resold the same to other customers. |             | • Shopkeepers didn’t accept the return of goods now as they couldn’t resell the same products to other customers, as it was risky in COVID-19 context. |
| • Shopkeepers didn’t care about the health of their workers/ helpers. Also, they didn’t pay attention to the health of the customers who visited their shops. |             | • Shopkeepers were alert regarding the health of their workers as well as the customers. If any worker was ill and had high temperature, they were told not to show up for some days. |
| SAP-LAP Framework Work Factors | Pre-COVID-19                                                                 | During COVID-19 Unlock Phase                                                                 |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Process (P)                    | • Most of the shopkeepers didn’t provide home delivery facility beyond 5–6 kms of their store.  
• The shopkeepers only focused on earnings without caring much about their and their helper’s health.  
• Shopkeepers had tight competition between them and didn’t refer customers to each other’s shop.  
• Shopkeepers had no pressure from the customer’s side regarding hygiene of the product. | • They appointed people at their stores who would be responsible for distribution and home delivery of goods.  
• They had arranged for temperature scanners and scanned each customer who entered their store as safety and security of health was now the primary concern.  
• They referred customers to each other’s shop if they ran out of stocks and helped each other like never before.  
• The shopkeepers had to continuously sanitize the products in order to satisfy the customers psychologically. |
| Learning (L)                   | • The shopkeepers were not much technology friendly and didn’t use technology to sell products.  
• The customers didn’t ask the shopkeepers for payments of the goods as easy instalments. Mostly they paid the complete amount during purchasing of the goods. So the shopkeepers didn’t have trouble in paying to the suppliers and their working staffs.  
• Banks provided easy loans to the shop owners and working capital management wasn’t such a major issue.  
• As the demand was more and supply was limited, the customers were forced to visit the shopkeepers who didn’t behave nicely with them.  
• The shop owners spent a lumpsum of money on beautification of the shops along with cleanliness and maintaining shop hygiene. | • The shopkeepers started using smartphones to click photos of the stocks they had and converted their stores into a virtual one.  
• Customers asked for payments in the form of easy instalments. But, at the same time, the suppliers needed full payments in cash and the shop owners had to pay their workers as well. This was a challenging situation for them.  
• Banks didn’t provide easy loans to the shop owners and working capital management emerged as a major challenge.  
• Customers only visited the shopkeepers who had behaved nicely with them in the past. Only the well-behaved shopkeepers got considerable business.  
• As the number of visiting customers decreased considerably, the shop owners were forced to only spend on cleanliness and hygiene of the shops. |
**SAP-LAP Framework**

**Pre-COVID-19**

- The workers (boys) were mostly satisfied with the job and stayed for long periods of time at the shops where they worked.
- Most of the customers didn’t use telephonic medium to enquire about the goods at the shop and order/purchase the goods. They visited the shops and bought the goods they needed.
- Some of the shops were very crowded due to the nature of the goods they had. Along with the customers buying the goods, many customers were window shopping as well.
- Most of the rich customers did not treat the shop owners well. But the shopkeepers had to bear with them as they needed to make money and do business.

**During COVID-19 Unlock Phase**

- The old boys left the shops due to COVID-19, but the shopkeepers had to hire new boys to run their business and build a new future.
- The shopkeepers had to attend to the calls of the customers as most of the buying was done through the phones. Shopkeepers had to handle the phone calls effectively in order to convert the call to a purchase order.
- Shops were overcrowded and the customers weren’t following social distancing rules. This was dangerous for them as well as the shop workers. Shop owners had to tell them to follow social distancing rules.
- Shopkeepers had segmented the customers into two categories, that is, reasonable and unreasonable. The reasonable customers (poor or rich) empathized with them in tough times and thus they got priority from the shopkeepers.

**Performance (P)**

- Shopkeepers were not much accustomed to face the unforeseen circumstances and dynamic changes in the market. Most of the shopkeepers hadn’t developed flexible business methods.
- Shop owners had a fair idea regarding seasonality and trend in the demand of goods. They monitored their stocks accordingly and did material planning.
- Most of the transactions of the shop owners happened in cash, be it at the customer’s end or the supplier’s end.
- Customers didn’t care much about the cleanliness or hygiene of the products and packaging.

- Only those shopkeepers flourished who were quick to change and adopt to the new ways of doing business. Quick learning and making dynamic business decisions were now a part of their routine work.
- Due to COVID-19, everything had changed, and estimating the demand patterns for the next 6–9 months was near to impossible even for the experienced shop owners.
- Shop owners started using digital modes of payment in order to minimize cash transactions both at the customer and supplier end.
- Customers demanded for sanitized products and packaging. So, it became practically impossible to sanitize all the products, but the shop owners tried their best.

**Source:** The authors.
resources and capabilities altogether. It was evident from the findings that the shop owners cum managers were deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated physical and economic lockdown. To reopen their shops, shopkeepers devised a new set of strategies. The availability of slack resources became less as the shop financial resources buffer which was critical for small businesses was not present post shop closure of months duration. The lack of slack was influencing the shopkeeper’s strategies. Shopkeepers worked with a new level and nature of shop resources and capabilities. They were thinking in terms of new sets of resources and capabilities during COVID-19 unlock phase reopening. Trust, which has been viewed as an intangible resource, became strategic resource during the COVID-19 unlock phase. In extant literature, trust was a critical resource as advocated by Wernerfelt (1995) but, during this unlock phase, it became a more critical resource. During the COVID-19 reopening phase, shopkeepers were delivering goods through new delivery assistants to new customers outside the usual neighborhood. Given this, the ability of shopkeepers to generate trust right from the first transaction was critical. As noted by Chen and Wang (2008) and Fainshmidt and Frazier (2017), trust development as a capability became important. The ability to hire delivery boys who were earlier not known to the shopkeepers was also challenging. As established by the works of Prasad and Aryasri (2008) and Goswami and Mishra (2009), shops ran well if the shop workers were good with human relationship management. During the COVID-19 crisis, delivery boys or the boys who were handling the telephone calls were the key, thus salesmanship over telephone as a capability became important. The works of Bhattacharyya and Jagadeesh (2018) had indicated the importance of working capital management in small business ventures in India.

In this study, it was found that most shop owners cum managers confronted unprecedented challenges because of sustained closure of shops towards balancing the cash inflow with the cash outflow. Shop owners and managers who could negotiate with banker, creditor, or suppliers to secure bridge funding or credit could manage the time period of unlock well. This became a vital essential capability. Demand planning has been viewed as a critical capability for small businesses during economic upheavals. In this context also, demand planning became critical as excess demand would lead to higher cash outflow as well as higher inventory costs, as Tripathi and Tiwari (2014) had indicated. Cashless transactions had often been viewed as the way to move forward for business in the future (Gautam & Kavidyal, 2017; Rakesh et al., 2018). The present COVID-19 pandemic hastened this phenomenon. Shop owners cum managers had to develop capabilities and infrastructure so that they could carry out their shop operations both at supplier’s and customer’s ends without the need to undertake cash-based transactions. Extension of scope of business has always been deemed challenging (Prasad & Aryasri, 2008; Sinha et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2016). In the COVID-19 context, when physical and social distancing norms became commonplace, all shops had to develop the capability of not only taking telephonic calls of customers but also to deliver the goods to the customers home as a door-to-door service. This capability had to be developed fast. Shopkeepers also had to keep products that customers were asking for but were not available around the locality. Thus, the
ability of the operating workers who were managing the telephone calls with the customers and suppliers was to ascertain customer needs as well as market supply positions. The results of the study thus indicated that although valuable (i.e., trust), variety (products unavailable in neighborhood locality), and inimitability (relationship with customers, creditors, and suppliers) were there in the VRIN elements, none of the shop resources and capabilities had non-substitutability. Thus, shopkeepers didn’t have the full potency of the VRIN characteristics. The resource and capabilities that shop owners and managers were required to enhance were relationship and trust with suppliers, creditors, and customers. While the resources and capabilities that were needed to be created were physical contactless shop operations, tele calling with customers, doorstep delivery service, cashless shop transactions, and such others. While shopkeepers had to reduce operational inventory costs by linking customer orders with supply provisions, they also had to reduce cash outflow towards the show of the shops. Monitoring the body temperatures or sneezing or coughing symptoms of shop workers (specially) and also of customers might become pertinent. Shopkeepers also followed the SAP-LAP framework (Sushil, 2000) in order to make some changes in strategy, such as selling essential goods in spite of non-essential ones, taking orders from customers through telephonic conversations, carefully understanding the demand of goods to prevent excess or shortage of supplies, making virtual stores by clicking the photos of the stocks of products available in the shop and sending it to the customers, adopting to the new ways of doing business by quick learning and making dynamic business decisions, and such others.

Implications

In this research, the authors deliberated how street corner small shop (commonly known as kirana stores) owners cum managers strategized during the unlock phase when they opened up their shops. The shops were closed for months because of COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic and physical lockdown.

Theoretical Implications

Shopkeepers’ (owners cum managers) perspective strategies for reopening were analyzed based upon the two well-established theoretical notions of RBV and DCV (Lin & Wu, 2014) and SAP-LAP framework (Sushil, 2000). The context of these small street corner shops have been important for theoretical development (Rani, 2013; Shukla & Shukla, 2013; Sinha et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2016). The RBV-based VRIN analysis was carried out regarding the shop owners’ and managers’ resources and capabilities. One must note that the shopkeepers demonstrated strategic leadership capabilities during the crisis (Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2018; Bhattacharyya et al., 2012). Shopkeepers as entrepreneurs knew what was to be done and what was not to be done (Bhattacharyya, 2020a). Shopkeepers,
as entrepreneurs, knew that given the challenging realities, technology had to be deployed fast, but it had to be humanistic (Bhattacharyya, 2020a).

**Managerial Implications**

Trust that the customers had with the shopkeepers was a valuable capability. The products that the shops had which other shops were not able to offer in a given timeframe in a locality was the valuable resources. Shop owners had different levels of relationship with customers, suppliers, and creditors. It was important that the same shop worker handled calls with both the customers and the suppliers. Shopkeepers deployed the DCV perspectives of sensing. This entailed opening shops in a gradual fashion and designing shop operations with physical distancing between coworkers and customers and between workers and customers. Further, seizing would entail developing mechanisms to make telephone-based customer calling and order processing, telephone calling for order placement with customers, and finally delivery of good to customers at their preferred drop location. Finally, shopkeepers engaged with reconfiguration based upon creating a virtual store of their shops by taking a number of quality snaps of the products available at the shop. Order processing through cashless mechanisms have been developed by shopkeepers. Further, 24×7 customer order placements became important.

In this research, the authors provided the reopening strategies of retail small shops from an RBV and DCV (Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2015; Lin & Wu, 2014) and SAP-LAP framework (Sushil, 2000). The author deliberated upon what the new VRIN resources and capabilities shop owners cum managers had to develop. Further, the resources and capabilities that the shop owners and managers have to reduce and eliminate was presented. Thus, strategic resources and capabilities have to be the focus of reopening strategy as well as the non-strategic resources and capabilities that have to be done away with. A cross analysis of VRIN with resources and capabilities development, creation, elimination, and reduction were done. As entrepreneurs, the Indian shopkeepers did comprehend the power of web-based technologies (Bhattacharyya, 2011; Jha & Bhattacharyya, 2020).

In the COVID-19 context, this theoretical aspects coverage was novel. Further, from a DCV perspective, what shop-level resources and capabilities had to be developed was analyzed from the sensing, seizing, and reconfiguration aspects. For shop owners and managers, the study findings provided insights regarding what specific actions were to be taken to design appropriate strategies. The resources and capabilities that needed to be intensified or de-intensified was deliberated upon. The way shop operations and customer servicing had to be carried out through shop process and operations changes were discussed. This was from the SAP-LAP framework perspectives. Shop owners and managers would thus get to know how they could restart/resume their operations and generate cash inflow without much of cash outflow. Specifically, this study provided managerial inputs regarding the changed way of doing business required going into the future. This study was conducted in Indian urban market setting during COVID-19 unlock phase to arrive at an integrated understanding as a
well-established practice in strategic management (Bhattacharyya, 2020c; Bhattacharyya & Malik, 2020). In future, studies could be conducted in rural areas of India to ascertain what ways rural shopkeepers undertook. Further, survey-based studies could be conducted to ascertain better generalizability of the study findings as this study was more focused towards developing a theoretical exploratory generalization as has been the norm of qualitative studies. In the context of small street corner shops (known as kirana stores; Rani, 2013; Shukla & Shukla, 2013; Sinha et al., 2015; Yadav et al., 2016), which play an important role in Indian society, this study was a contribution in securing an integrated perspective on RBV and DCV (Lin & Wu, 2015) and SAP-LAP (Sushil, 2000) streams of literature during a crisis. The authors hope that this would encourage other scholars to apply these theories in an integrated manner.

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