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Effects of agritourism businesses’ strategies to cope with the COVID-19 crisis: The key role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) behaviours

Francesca Magno a, Fabio Cassia b, *

a University of Bergamo, Department of Management, Via dei Caniana, 2, 24127, Bergamo, Italy
b University of Verona, Department of Business Administration, via Cantarane, 24, 37129, Verona, Italy

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Evidence of the effects of tourism businesses’ strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis remains remarkably scarce. Drawing on the system resilience framework, this study suggests a model in which corporate social responsibility (CSR) behaviours encompassing five dimensions – community, employees, environment, heritage and products – and co-creation experience mediate the relationships between strategies and performance. Applying partial least squares structural equation modeling to a sample of 199 agritourism businesses in Italy, this study finds that proactive strategies have a positive effect on performance and that this effect is fully mediated by CSR and co-creation experience. Reactive strategies have both a negative direct effect and a positive mediated effect on performance. Hence, the strategies positively affect performance only if they first contribute to the resilience of the local system through CSR behaviours, enhancing the resources needed for tourism experience co-creation. This analysis emphasises the impacts of the community, environmental and heritage dimensions of CSR behaviours.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the global tourism industry, causing 900 million fewer international tourism arrivals (−72%) over January–October 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, pulling international tourism back to the levels of 30 years ago (UNWTO, 2020). After the initial lockdowns imposed by national authorities, the tourism industry has started to gradually and partially reopen, following different timings and modes related to waves of the ongoing pandemic and regulations in each specific country (Li et al., 2020; Seyfi et al., 2020). Still, tourism and hospitality remains one of the industries most affected by the pandemic (Skare et al., 2021). Since its early stages, countries have adopted a wide array of measures (ranging from financial aid to incentives to job retention) to support the tourism industry and mitigate the negative effects on tourism businesses (Kreiner and Ram, 2020). At the same time, tourism businesses have also started to implement specific strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of the ongoing crisis (Lai and Wong, 2020). However, while research on the effectiveness of public policies is growing (e.g. Sharma and Nicolau, 2020), evidence regarding the effects of the strategies adopted by tourism businesses to counteract the COVID-19 crisis remains remarkably scarce (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2020). In particular, there is a need to move beyond purely anecdotal and descriptive work and develop theoretical explanations and update existing knowledge, which may have experienced a paradigm shift in light of the pandemic (Zenker and Kock, 2020). In particular, several scholars have noted that the ongoing crisis may play a transformative role and contribute to a paradigm shift and new mindsets regarding sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the tourism industry (Sigala, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Ioannides and Gyimothy, 2020). These studies suggest that only those tourism businesses that invest in sustainability and responsible behaviours will survive the crisis and succeed in its aftermath (Zenker and Kock, 2020). Therefore, understanding the performance impacts of the adoption of CSR initiatives by tourism firms in the current pandemic scenario is a priority for tourism research (Lee, 2020).

This paper looks for early signals of this paradigm shift, by assessing the role of CSR in explaining the effects on performance of alternative strategies implemented during the May–October 2020 season by 199 of the 24,576 Italian agritourism businesses following their reopening in May 2020. Data were collected using a survey involving a list of 967 agritourism businesses identified through geographical sampling.
from the 199 respondents (20.58%) were analysed via partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM).

In particular, we develop a model that draws on the idea of system resilience elaborated by Scott et al. (2008) and on the distinction between proactive and reactive strategies to recover from tourism crises (Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015; Sigala, 2020). Our research draws on the idea that the success of agritourism businesses is related to their ability to find a ‘balance between economic performance and the sustainability of sociocultural and environmental values’ (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000, p. 379). In particular, we suggest that CSR, across its subdimensions (related to products, employees, environment, community and heritage; Wang et al., 2019), mediates the relationships between proactive and reactive strategies and performance. In other words, we maintain that the adopted strategies can positively affect firm performance only if they enhance CSR; that is, if they positively contribute to system resilience, thus enabling a successful tourism co-creation experience.

By highlighting the role of sustainability, the findings of this research can contribute to explaining rural tourism businesses’ higher levels of resilience compared with other types of tourism firms during the ongoing crisis (Vaishar and Stastná, 2020). In addition, while focusing on agritourism businesses, this research can inform the recovery strategies of other types of tourism businesses, by providing evidence of the key role of CSR (Tanjbari et al., 2021). Hence, the findings of this study contribute to advancing the debate regarding the need to design tourism recovery interventions following sustainable long-term approaches instead of reverting to short-term tactics (Gösling et al., 2020; Kreiner and Ram, 2020; Tiong et al., 2021). Therefore, from a broader perspective, this work provides an alternative view of the role of CSR in the post-pandemic future of the tourism industry, instead of the default view, which seeks only to determine how and when old, pre-pandemic states may resume (Sigala, 2020). In fact, this research argues that the implementation of responsible practices represents a necessary condition to translate business strategies into successful business performance. In addition, the findings from this research provide agritourism businesses with actionable insights for the selection and implementation of measures that can yield positive effects on their economic performance.

The remainder of this work is organised as follows. First, we present the theoretical background, introduce the research model and set the hypotheses. The empirical analysis is then described, starting from the methods and continuing with the illustration of the findings. A discussion and conclusion complete the study.

2. Theoretical background and research hypotheses

2.1. Covid-19 crisis and the tourism enterprises

A rich body of literature has examined the impacts of the multiple crises that have affected the tourism and hospitality industry over past decades, ranging from epidemics such as SARS to financial crises and natural disasters, and explored strategies to cope with such crises (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004; Prayag, 2018; Ritchie and Jiang, 2019).

Drawing on this prior research, much recent work has investigated the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on the tourism and hospitality industry (Foo et al., 2020). Overall, this stream of studies has concluded that the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the tourism sector will be more severe and long-lasting than previous pandemic crises (Skare et al., 2021; H. Zhang et al., 2021).

Several studies have specifically addressed the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on tourism enterprises. Among them, Crespi-Cladera et al. (2021) estimated that 25% of Spanish tourism enterprises would experience financial distress if revenues dropped by 60%. In another study, managers and owners of hospitality businesses, Alonso et al. (2020) found that 84.4% of participants considered the financial impacts the most negative effect of Covid-19 for their business, followed by the pandemic-related climate of uncertainty. However, available evidence also indicates that not all tourism firms have been hit by the Covid-19 crisis with the same intensity (Hu et al., 2021). Research involving a large sample of stock market-listed tourism companies highlighted that both firm-level (e.g. limited debt) and country-level (e.g. low level of individualism) characteristics as well as public policies (e.g. stay-at-home requirements) explain a large portion of the variation in firm values during the pandemic (Kaczmarek et al., 2021). In addition, a growing number of studies is mapping the specific innovation and crisis management actions taken by tourism and hospitality enterprises, such as marketing practices (e.g. marketing and promoting new products or services), cost cutting, organisational change and business model innovations (Lai and Wong, 2020; Breier et al., 2021; Hidalgo et al., 2021). Finally, some analyses have started examining the link between crisis management actions and tourism firms’ (perceived) performance (Sharma et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021).

2.2. Reactive versus proactive strategies adopted by tourism enterprises

Prior research has shown that some tourism organisations are more resilient and effective than others in terms of their speed of recovery and ability to adapt to the new normal in post-crisis periods (Scott et al., 2008). To explain such varied outcomes across organisations, scholars have drawn on the distinction between reactive and proactive strategies (Beeton, 2001; Ritchie, 2004; Pun, 2005). Reactive strategies aim to defend the firm’s market position through initiatives such as cost reductions (e.g. layoffs), cancellation of investment projects and closure of non-core activities (Pearce and Michael, 2006; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015). Proactive strategies focus on innovation and marketing activities, seeking new customers and enhancing value for existing customers, and investing in new technologies (Miles et al., 1978; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2015).

A remarkable stream of studies has shown that in ‘normal’ situations, proactive strategies have more beneficial effects on tourism businesses’ performance than reactive strategies (Avci et al., 2011; Kalipçi and Yay, 2018; Oktumus and Karamustafa, 2005). Despite a few exceptions, the same findings have also been extended to situations of crises (Bremser et al., 2018). For example, Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015) demonstrated that, during crises, only proactive strategies have a positive impact on the competitive performance of restaurants, while reactive strategies engender a vicious circle in which the reduction of costs and services reduces customers’ perceived quality, which in turn decreases performance. Similarly, hotels focusing on customer loyalty management and other proactive measures were found to be better equipped to handle crises while cost cutting negatively affected competitiveness (Alonso-Almeida and Bremser, 2013).

Research on the strategies adopted by tourism businesses to mitigate the negative impacts of the current COVID-19 crisis is still in its infancy and evidence regarding the effects of these measures remains very limited (Raki et al., 2021). However, we suggest that the distinction between reactive and proactive strategies may prove useful to interpret the current behaviours of tourism firms. Alonso et al. (2020) reported that, during the COVID-19 outbreak, small and medium-sized firms in the hospitality sector have taken varying courses of action to cope with the new challenges. Some have remained inactive, focusing only on compliance with health and safety measures, while others have shown proactive behaviours by innovating their product-service offering, searching for new market opportunities and generating new revenue streams. Even though the authors did not use the reactive/proactive strategies framework, it is evident that the latter group of firms are applying proactive strategies while the former have opted for reactive strategies. Similarly, Khan et al. (2020) found that hospitality firms such as hotels, restaurants and food services adopted reactive strategies mainly based on ‘touchless’ service, disinfection and distance between seating, but also adopted innovative technologies. Moreover, for these businesses, in the first months of the pandemic, the use of reactive strategies tended to prevail over proactive strategies (Khan et al., 2020).
Focusing on the hotel industry, Lai and Wong (2020) reported that, during the pandemic, actions such as cutting costs by postponing maintenance, closing some facilities and laying off employees, as well as strategies such as introducing new products and services and marketing to new segments, were both widely used. Again, these actions reflect the distinction between reactive and proactive strategies. The findings of Lai and Wong (2020) also suggest that, following the initial stage of the pandemic, hotel managers have gradually moved from purely reactive to more proactive behaviours. Another study conducted among hospitality and tourism businesses documents the adoption of both reactive (e.g., compliance with hygiene protocols and cost cutting) and proactive measures (such as investing in digitalisation and new technology adoption) (Kaushal and Srivastava, 2020). Finally, some restaurants, bars and hotels are pursuing innovation and digitalisation to enhance their business model and regain profitability, counteracting the limitations due to social distancing and other sanitary measures (Breier et al., 2021).

At this stage, evidence on the effects on performance of such proactive and reactive measures is not available. Moreover, the application to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis of findings from prior studies regarding strategies to cope with crises in tourism is not straightforward, given the uniqueness of the current context. In fact, the COVID-19 crisis is more complex and involves much more severe impacts than previous crises (Lai and Wong, 2020). Moreover, the current crisis has lasted a considerable duration, and it is difficult to predict when it will end (Jaipuria et al., 2020). Hence, tourism businesses are still in the ‘during the crisis’ stage and not yet in the ‘post-crisis’ stage (Richie, 2004).

Given the complexity of the current crisis, to examine the effects of proactive and reactive strategies on tourism firms’ performance, we draw on the framework of system resilience (Scott et al., 2008; Scott and Laws, 2006). This framework explains why some tourism businesses are more resilient than others to crises by adopting a system view; that is, by viewing the firm as a member of a network (Scott et al., 2008). Complex crises such as the current pandemic hit the whole network; therefore, the strategies adopted by one single firm should not be designed and evaluated without considering the relationships between the firm and the other members of the network (Scott and Laws, 2006; Alonso et al., 2020). Consistent with this system view, studies on firms’ resilience particularly stress the importance of having established a deep social fabric or social capital to resist such crises (Norris et al., 2008; Pal et al., 2014). This tenet has been proved particularly valuable in the context of tourism and hospitality firms (Sydnor-Bousso et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2018). Specifically, in this work, we focus on the role of CSR, which is introduced in the next section.

2.3. CSR and its five dimensions

CSR informs the identity of a growing number of tourism enterprises (Martínez et al., 2014). Prior research has highlighted two different approaches to CSR: the traditional or normative perspective, which argues that firms should embrace CSR because it is the ‘right thing to do’ (Donaldson and Preston, 1995), and the strategic or instrumental perspective, which maintains that firms should adopt CSR because it will enhance their performance (Porter and Kramer, 2011). According to Lee (2020), the ongoing pandemic emphasises the need to apply the instrumental perspective and demonstrates that the traditional view is no longer sustainable. In this work, we also embrace this perspective.

Some papers provide arguments and evidence in favour of the application of CSR by tourism firms to address the Covid-19 crisis. Among them, Im et al. (2021) found that the tourism destination Macao benefited from the initiatives of local large enterprises inspired by the government and informed by CSR (such as, for example, avoiding laying off their employees). Another study reported that hospitality companies listed on Chinese stock exchanges registered positive reactions from stakeholders within five days of press releases presenting companies’ CSR activities related to Covid-19 (Qiu et al., 2021). Other studies have highlighted the positive effects of hospitality firms’ CSR activities through the improvement of their employees’ attitudes and behaviours (J. Zhang et al., 2021).

Given that CSR is a multidimensional construct and that the impact of its dimensions varies with time and place, it is also interesting to explore which of these have the greatest effect on performance during the ongoing pandemic (Lee, 2020). For this purpose, in this study, we adopt the framework suggested by Wang et al. (2019), who specifically suggested a comprehensive, five-dimensional conceptualisation of tourism firms’ CSR behaviours encompassing aspects related to community, employees, environment, heritage and products. Following this conceptualisation, the CSR-community dimension refers to a firm’s support to the local community, by purchasing materials and resources from local suppliers, hiring local employees and promoting community initiatives and development (Garay and Font, 2012). CSR-employees reflects a firm’s care for its employees’ wellbeing, by establishing good relationships with them, paying reasonable salaries, guaranteeing flexibility and paying attention to their situation (Zhang, 2010). CSR-environment covers the firm’s efforts to reduce the environmental impacts of its activities; for example, by recycling materials and resources (Garay and Font, 2012). CSR-heritage expresses a firm’s contribution to the preservation of local heritage, by using local materials during construction, retaining original architecture and educating customers to help them understand the importance of protecting local heritage (LaPan and Barbieri, 2014). Finally, CSR-products describes the firm’s care regarding its products’ safety, healthiness and quality (Inoue and Lee, 2011).
elements of agritourism based on working farms, with the result that this can be defined as a new type of ecotourism (Choo and Jamal, 2009). In sum, agritourism entrepreneurs are interested in improving the quality of life of their communities, rather than merely their own profits (Bowen and Farrell, 2011), and this happens by preserving local values and sharing them with visitors (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000). Hence, for agritourism entrepreneurs, the sustainability of their local system is a priority, pursued by engaging in CSR behaviours across five aspects: community, employees, environment, heritage and products (Wang et al., 2019).

Therefore, we suggest a research model (Fig. 1) based on the system resilience view, in which the proactive and reactive strategies adopted by agritourism businesses cope with the effects of the COVID-19 crisis positively affect performance only if they first enhance their CSR behaviours concerning community, employees, environment, heritage and products. Given that, CSR behaviours enable a successful co-creation experience with visitors, which takes the form of active involvement of visitors in activities (such as agricultural activities) through which local values and heritage are shared (Rong-Da Liang, 2017). Therefore, contributing to the sustainability of the local system works for agritourism businesses as a means through which values related to the local rural way of life are preserved. These resources and knowledge are then contributed to the co-creation process with visitors, with beneficial effects in terms of the co-creation experience and performance (Brune et al., 2020; Tew and Barbieri, 2012; Leo et al., 2020). Drawing on these arguments, we suggest that proactive strategies can improve performance by contributing to CSR and hence state that:

**H1.** Proactive strategies have a positive effect on agritourism businesses' performance and this effect is fully mediated by CSR and the co-creation experience.

Reactive strategies are adopted by firms when they are forced to respond to particular circumstances and are usually associated with low levels of performance because of their unstable and short-term nature (Garrigos-Simón et al., 2005). However, reactive strategies may also be beneficial if their cost cutting and resource rationalisation aim to focus the remaining resources on the firm’s core values and activities (Avci et al., 2011; Miles et al., 1978). In this case, reactive strategies allow the firm to discontinue unprofitable activities and use its resources in a more productive way, with beneficial effects on performance (Avci et al., 2011; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). Therefore, we suggest that reactive strategies adopted by agritourism businesses have both direct negative effects but also positive indirect effects on performance by concentrating resources on core values; that is, on CSR. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

**H2.** Reactive strategies have both (H2a) a negative direct effect and (H2b) a positive mediated effect through CSR and co-creation on agritourism businesses’ performance.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Research context, data collection and sample description

A cross-sectional design relying on a questionnaire-based survey among a sample of Italian agritourism businesses was used. According to Italian law (law number 96/2006), agritourism is defined as ‘the hospitality activities practiced by agricultural entrepreneurs […] through the use of their farms, in connection with the farming activities, the forestry-related activities, and livestock activities’. The law specifies that such hospitality activities encompass offering accommodation services in lodgings and open spaces for agricamping; serving meals and drinks mainly based on the farm’s own products and on products from other local farms; organising tastings of farm products; and organising recreational, cultural, educational and sporting activities, excursions and horse-riding, aimed at educating visitors and enhancing the territory and rural heritage. Moreover, the same law provides that the time that farmers devote to farming activities must prevail over the time they spend on agritourism activities. Therefore, in the Italian context, agritourism must be strictly based on a working farm, with agricultural and agritourism activities strongly intertwined (Flanigan et al., 2014; Contini et al., 2009). In 2019 in Italy, there were 24,576 farms (+4.1% compared with 2018) authorised to carry out agritourism activities (Istat – Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2020); 82% of these farms offered hospitality services in lodgings, registering about 3.7 million arrivals in 2019, of which 1.9 were domestic arrivals (Istat – Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2020).

A sample of 967 agritourism businesses was created based on geographical sampling, using the public lists of authorised agritourism businesses. Data were collected at the end of the summer season 2020, between the end of October and the beginning of November. In Italy, the summer season accounts for the majority of nights spent in tourism accommodation over the year; for example, in 2019, the period June–September registered 59.53% of all annual nights spent (http://dati.istat.it/). In 2020, the government imposed a national lockdown from 10 March to 4 May, when ‘Phase II’ was started and travel was again allowed within regions. On 3 June, ‘Phase III’ began and restrictions on travel were further eased, to allow citizens to travel to other regions and abroad (Aiello et al., 2020). As for every other business, agritourism businesses were requested to comply with social distancing and other sanitary measures but were allowed to operate during the whole summer season. Each of the 967 agritourism businesses was sent

![Fig. 1. The research model.](image-url)
an e-mail with a description of the research project and an invitation to complete the questionnaire. Reminder e-mails were sent to non-respondents two weeks after the first invitation. Overall, 199 useable questionnaires were received, yielding a response rate of 20.58%. Early and late responses were compared via χ² tests and t-tests on several key variables, assessing the presence of non-response bias (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). However, it is not possible to exclude the presence of respondent self-selection, meaning, for example, that there could be an overrepresentation of participants with stronger, positive attitudes towards CSR. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample.

3.2. Measures and data analysis

The questionnaire included multiple-item measures derived from previous studies and adapted to the research context. Proactive and reactive strategies were both measured by four items from Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015) and BREMTER et al. (2018). CSR was specified as a second-order construct encompassing five lower-order components (LOCs) (CSR-community, CSR-employees, CSR-environment, CSR-heritage and CSR-products) by adopting the scale recently applied by WANG et al. (2019) in the context of small tourism businesses. After deleting non-significant items, the scale was composed of 17 items. Following WANG et al.’s (2019) conceptualisation, the type of hierarchical model was specified as reflective-reflective, in which the more abstract concept of CSR is manifested in five specific LOCs (Hair et al., 2018). The construct co-creation experience was measured on the basis of four items from Mathis et al. (2016) and ZHANG et al. (2019) describing visitors’ active involvement in designing and shaping their own tourism experience. All these constructs were measured on five-point Likert-type scales. Finally, firm performance was measured by three items (1 = very poor; 5 = outstanding) developed by O’Sullivan and Abela (2007) and often applied in tourism business studies (CASSIA et al., 2015). Consistent with the original scales, all the constructs’ measurement models were specified as reflective. Table 2 presents the complete list of items.

In addition, we included in the analysis the following control variables: number of employees and number of hectares of the farm as proxies for business size; years of operation as a proxy for experience; and presence/absence of lodgings services in the agrotourism firm, which may explain differences in business performance during the ongoing crisis, which has particularly hit overnight stays.

Data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), with SmartPLS 3 (Ringle et al., 2015). PLS-SEM is a nonparametric method and makes no distributional assumptions. The minimum sample size requested by PLS-SEM is equal to 10 times the largest number of structural paths directed at a particular construct in the structural model (Hair et al., 2017). Therefore, this requirement is largely satisfied by the sample of this study.

For the second-order construct CSR, the two-stage approach was applied. In the first stage, the scores of the five LOCs (CSR-community, CSR-employees, CSR-environment, CSR-heritage and CSR-products) were obtained, and in the second stage, these scores served as manifest variables for the second-order construct’s measurement model (Hair et al., 2018). Previous research has suggested two versions of the two-stage approach: the embedded two-stage approach and the disjoint two-stage approach (SARSTEDT et al., 2019; BECKER et al., 2012). In this study, we applied the disjoint two-stage approach, which in the first stage obtains the score of the LOCs without including the second-order component in the model, and then in the second stage uses these scores to measure the second-order construct. In the second stage, all other constructs in the model are estimated using their standard multi-item measures (SARSTEDT et al., 2019). This approach was selected because it provides additional information about the specific effects of each LOC and not only the overall effect of the second-order component. Thus, this approach made it possible to not only understand the effects of CSR but also to gain knowledge about the distinct impacts of its five components (CSR-community, CSR-employees, CSR-environment, CSR-heritage and CSR-products). Figs. 2 and 3 show the models estimated respectively in stage one and stage two.

4. Results

4.1. Assessment of the measurement models

As all constructs were reflectively measured, measurement models were evaluated by considering indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). The measurement models of the LOCs were evaluated in the first stage (SARSTEDT et al., 2019). All loadings were above 0.70, with the exception of four items that were slightly below that level (the lowest loading was equal to 0.671), thus revealing acceptable indicator reliability (Hair et al., 2017). Second, internal consistency reliability was assessed. For all constructs, the values of composite reliability were between 0.809 and 0.931, and thus within the suggested 0.70–0.95 range. Moreover, the values of Cronbach’s α and of the exact reliability PA were all between 0.70 and 0.90 (DIJKSTRA and HENSELER, 2015). Therefore, internal consistency reliability was confirmed (Hair et al., 2019). Third, constructs’ convergent validity was assessed by inspecting the values of the average variance extracted (AVE); these were higher than the cutoff of 0.50 for all constructs (Hair et al., 2017) (Table 3). Finally, we checked discriminant validity by considering both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of the correlations (HTMT). Data showed that the square root of each construct’s AVE was greater than its highest correlation with any other construct, thus satisfying the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In addition, all HTMT ratios were below the threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015) (Table 4). Therefore, discriminant validity was also confirmed (Hair et al., 2019).

The measurement model of the second-order component CSR was evaluated in stage 2. The values of the five LOCs were the CSR indicators and the relationships between CSR and the LOCs were the loadings (SARSTEDT et al., 2019). The values of Cronbach’s α (0.795), composite reliability (0.860), PA (0.816) and AVE (0.555) indicated that the construct had both internal reliability and convergent validity. Moreover, discriminant validity was confirmed through both the
Table 2
Measurement scales.

| Construct            | Item                                                                 | Source                                                                 | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|--------------------|
| **Proactive strategies** | PROACT1. We increased our communication activities (e.g., more effective use of social media) | Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015); Bremer et al. (2018)                      | 3.191 | 1.492              |
|                      | PROACT2. We introduced new services and/or improved the existing ones |                                                                       | 2.985 | 1.525              |
|                      | PROACT3. We enhanced service customisation to meet customer requirements |                                                                       | 3.146 | 1.498              |
|                      | PROACT4. We adopted additional measures to ensure visitor safety beyond the mandatory ones |                                                                       | 4.633 | 0.962              |
| **Reactive strategies** | REACT1. We cancelled/postponed our expansion plans | Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015); Bremer et al. (2018)                      | 3.543 | 1.486              |
|                      | REACT2. We cancelled/postponed some investment |                                                                       | 3.442 | 1.555              |
|                      | REACT3. We kept only the essential agritourism activities |                                                                       | 3.035 | 1.577              |
|                      | REACT4. We discontinued some of the services we previously offered to customers |                                                                       | 2.648 | 1.652              |
| **CSR-community** | CSR_COMM1. We try to buy materials or goods locally | Wang et al. (2019)                                                     | 4.658 | 0.719              |
|                      | CSR_COMM2. We actively participate in local community development | CSR_COMM3. We hire employees from the local community                     | 4.608 | 0.884              |
|                      | CSR_COMM4. We cooperate with the local community to assure its wellbeing |                                                                       | 4.553 | 0.980              |
| **CSR-employees** | CSR_EMP1. We pay employee salaries on time | Wang et al. (2019)                                                     | 4.588 | 0.962              |
|                      | CSR_EMP2. We arrange flexible work for employees |                                                                       | 4.608 | 0.917              |
|                      | CSR_EMP3. We pay attention to the situation of employees |                                                                       | 4.553 | 0.980              |
| **CSR-environment** | CSR_ENV1. We use energy-saving lights/lamps | Wang et al. (2019)                                                     | 4.523 | 1.014              |
|                      | CSR_ENV2. We recycle materials and resources |                                                                       | 4.080 | 1.104              |
|                      | CSR_ENV3. We introduce customers to environmental knowledge |                                                                       | 3.884 | 1.273              |
| **CSR-heritage** | CSR_HER1. We work to protect the rural heritage | Wang et al. (2019)                                                     | 4.799 | 0.558              |
|                      | CSR_HER2. We try to keep the original buildings architecture of our landscape |                                                                       | 4.814 | 0.576              |
|                      | CSR_HER3. We know and obey the rules of heritage protection |                                                                       | 4.744 | 0.593              |
|                      | CSR_HER4. We know the value of local heritage |                                                                       | 4.794 | 0.587              |
| **CSR-products** | CSR_PROD1. Our products and services are high quality, healthy and safe | Wang et al. (2019)                                                     | 4.759 | 0.651              |
|                      | CSR_PROD2. The price of our products and services is reasonable |                                                                       | 4.704 | 0.632              |
|                      | CSR_PROD3. Our products and services fit the unique flavour of the local area |                                                                       | 4.397 | 0.923              |
| **Co-creation experience** | COCR1. The setting of our agritourism business allows visitors to actively participate in rural activities | Mathis et al. (2016); Zhang et al. (2019)                              | 4.342 | 1.009              |
|                      | COCR2. Our agritourism business allows visitors to effectively interact with the owner and/or employees |                                                                       | 3.769 | 1.106              |
|                      | COCR3. Visitors have an active role in designing their agritourism experience |                                                                       | 3.759 | 1.148              |
|                      | COCR4. Visitors have the opportunity to experience the rural way of life |                                                                       | 3.774 | 1.184              |
| **Performance** | PE1. Sales growth | O’Sullivan and Abela (2007)                                            | 2.291 | 1.092              |
|                      | PE2. Market share |                                                                       | 3.211 | 0.975              |
|                      | PE3. Profitability |                                                                       | 2.663 | 1.204              |

a 5-point scale, 1 = totally disagree; 5 = totally agree.
b 5-point scale, 1 = very poor; 5 = outstanding.

Fig. 2. Disjoint two-stage approach: first stage.
Fornell-Larcker criterion (the highest correlation with other constructs was 0.481) and HTMT ratios (the highest HTMT ratio was 0.619).

4.2. Structural model assessment

Bootstrapping (5000 subsamples, bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap, two-tailed test) was used to assess the significance of the path model relationships in the first and second stages. Tables 5 and 6 show respectively the first and second stage estimates. While the suggested hypotheses consider CSR a second-order construct, and were therefore assessed in the second stage, the results of the first stage provided additional interesting information about the individual effects of the five LOCs (CSR-community, CSR-employees, CSR-environment, CSR-heritage and CSR-products). As shown in Table 5, three of the five LOCs (CSR-community, CSR-heritage and CSR-environment) have significant effects on co-creation, while the two other LOCs (CSR-employees and CSR-products) do not. In detail, CSR-community has the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.01$), followed by CSR-heritage ($\beta = 0.219$, $p < 0.01$) and CSR-environment ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < 0.05$).

The model estimates from the second stage were then examined to test the hypotheses. Before evaluating the structural relationships, the absence of collinearity was checked by examining Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. All VIF values were largely below the cutoff of 5 (the highest value was 1.223). We then assessed the significance and relevance of the structural model relationships via bootstrapping. The results are shown in Table 6.
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Table 5
Model estimates – first stage.

| Effects                                      | Path coefficients | t values | 95% Confidence Intervals |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Proactive strategies → CSR-Community         | 0.257             | 3.656*** | [0.082, 0.371]           |
| Proactive strategies → CSR-Employees         | 0.144             | 1.839*   | [-0.026, 0.287]          |
| Proactive strategies → CSR-Environment       | 0.198             | 2.879*** | [0.050, 0.320]           |
| Proactive strategies → CSR-Heritage          | 0.189             | 2.063**  | [0.027, 0.373]           |
| Proactive strategies → CSR-Products          | 0.334             | 3.849*** | [0.156, 0.49]            |
| Reactive strategies → CSR-Community          | 0.149             | 2.204**  | [-0.003, 0.263]          |
| Reactive strategies → CSR-Employees          | 0.146             | 1.962**  | [-0.020, 0.275]          |
| Reactive strategies → CSR-Environment        | 0.146             | 2.118**  | [-0.008, 0.269]          |
| Reactive strategies → CSR-Heritage           | 0.150             | 2.498**  | [0.007, 0.252]           |
| Reactive strategies → CSR-Products           | 0.146             | 2.355**  | [0.002, 0.254]           |
| CSR-Community → Co-creation                  | 0.225             | 2.959*** | [0.060, 0.364]           |
| CSR-Employees → Co-creation                  | 0.002             | 0.027    | [-0.138, 0.135]          |
| CSR-Environment → Co-creation                | 0.173             | 2.368**  | [0.020, 0.31]            |
| CSR-Heritage → Co-creation                   | 0.219             | 2.671*** | [0.059, 0.384]           |
| CSR-Products → Co-creation                   | 0.058             | 0.698    | [-0.121, 0.207]          |
| Co-creation → Performance                    | 0.085             | 5.254*** | [0.229, 0.517]           |
| Proactive strategies → Performance            | -0.011            | 0.147    | [-0.149, 0.133]          |
| Reactive strategies → Performance             | -0.253            | 3.662*** | [-0.380, -0.111]         |

*p < 0.01; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

Table 6
Model estimates – second stage.

| Effects                                      | Path coefficients | t values | 95% Confidence Intervals |
|----------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| Proactive strategies → CSR                   | 0.312***          | 3.663    | [0.131, 0.466]           |
| CSR → Co-creation                            | 0.481***          | 7.555    | [0.329, 0.586]           |
| Co-creation → Performance                    | 0.414***          | 5.594    | [0.249, 0.546]           |
| Proactive strategies → Performance            | -0.015            | 0.209    | [-0.169, 0.121]          |
| Reactive strategies → CSR                    | 0.197***          | 3.407    | [0.061, 0.299]           |
| Reactive strategies → Performance             | -0.238***         | 3.536    | [-0.363, -0.100]         |
| Specific indirect effects                    |                   |          |                          |
| Proactive strategies → CSR → Co-creation     | 0.150***          | 2.890    | [0.058, 0.252]           |
| Reactive strategies → CSR → Co-creation      | 0.095***          | 3.022    | [0.028, 0.153]           |
| Proactive strategies → CSR → Co-creation → Performance | 0.062*** | 2.632 | [0.022, 0.110] |
| CSR → Co-creation → Performance              | 0.199***          | 2.033    | [0.121, 0.274]           |
| Reactive strategies → CSR → Co-creation → Performance | 0.039*** | 2.709 | [0.012, 0.069] |
| Total effect                                 |                   |          |                          |
| Reactive strategies → Performance            | -0.199***         | 2.860    | [-0.329, -0.056]         |

***p < 0.01.

The results indicated that proactive strategies were positively related to CSR ($\beta = 0.312, p < 0.01$) which, in turn, positively influenced co-creation ($\beta = 0.481, p < 0.01$), which positively affected performance ($\beta = 0.414, p < 0.01$). Overall, the specific indirect effect of proactive strategies on performance was significant and positive ($\beta = 0.062, p < 0.01$), but proactive strategies did not have a direct effect on performance ($\beta = -0.015, p > 0.10$). Therefore, hypothesis 1 was supported, indicating that proactive strategies have a positive effect on agritourism business performance and that this effect is fully mediated by CSR and co-creation. The analysis also showed that reactive strategies had both a negative direct effect on performance ($\beta = -0.238, p < 0.01$) and a positive mediated effect (through CSR and co-creation) ($\beta = 0.039, p < 0.01$). Hence, both H2a and H2b were supported. The findings also highlighted that the total effect of reactive strategies on performance was negative ($\beta = -0.199, p < 0.01$). Finally, none of the control variables had significant effects.

In addition, the value of the coefficient of determination $R^2$ for the target construct performance was moderate (0.226). Next, the predictive relevance $Q^2$ of the antecedents of performance was evaluated via a blindfolding procedure with an omission distance of 7. The analysis yielded a $Q^2$ value higher than 0 (0.150), confirming the model’s predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019). We also used PLS-predict with 10 folds and 10 repetitions to further assess out-of-sample predictive power. The analysis via this procedure showed that, for all the target construct’s indicators, $Q^2$ was higher than 0 and the PLS-SEM analysis yielded a lower prediction error (in terms of root mean squared error) compared with the linear model benchmark. Therefore, the model had high predictive power (Shmueli et al., 2019).

5. Discussion

Tourism businesses are deploying different strategies in an attempt to successfully cope with the severe negative economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis. This study has shed new light on the path through which such strategies can positively affect business performance, by highlighting the moderating role of CSR in the case of agritourism businesses. Hence, the findings from this study advance existing knowledge by indicating that proactive and reactive strategies can have a positive effect on performance only if they first increase an agritourism business’s CSR behaviours in terms of community, employees, environment, heritage and products. These findings offer insights that may be useful in reconciling prior research on system resilience (Scott and Laws, 2006; Scott et al., 2008) and proactive-reactive strategies (Alonso-Almeida and Bremser, 2013; Bremser et al., 2018). In particular, they clarify that proactive strategies do not directly improve business performance but that they may be beneficial if they first contribute to the resilience of agritourism businesses’ local system through CSR behaviours, thus preserving and enhancing the resources needed for tourism experience co-creation (Campbell and Kubickova, 2020). The results also suggest that even reactive strategies may increase CSR behaviours and, in turn, tourism experience co-creation and agri-tourism business performance. However, the total effect of reactive strategies on performance is negative because the direct negative effect exceeds the positive indirect effect.

These findings regarding the role of CSR and system resilience also provide new insights to advance the ongoing debate about the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis on future tourism development. Several scholars have emphasised the need to reconsider tourism’s growth trajectory, suggesting that large-scale adoption of CSR practices such as those regarding food production and environment preservation will be central to the future development of the global tourism industry (Gosling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020). The findings from this study support this argument at the business level, by showing that agri-tourism businesses can obtain better performance by embracing CSR behaviours to cope with the crisis. They also suggest that such behaviours should involve the whole system that the agri-tourism business is part of. In particular, this is the first study to comprehensively address the role of all CSR dimensions (community, employees, environment, heritage and products) in mediating the relationship between strategies to cope with the crisis and business performance.

The empirical research presented in this study specifically considered agritourism businesses. Compared with other types of tourism businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, agritourism businesses are typically smaller and have more limited resources. This makes them particularly vulnerable to changes in the tourism market, such as the COVID-19 crisis. The findings from this study suggest that agritourism businesses can obtain better performance by embracing CSR behaviours and, in turn, tourism experience co-creation and agri-tourism business performance. However, the total effect of reactive strategies on performance is negative because the direct negative effect exceeds the positive indirect effect.

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businesses, agritourism businesses had more opportunities to select and implement dynamic behaviours to cope with the current crisis, thanks to their settings (Alonso et al., 2020). Some evidence also confirms that rural tourism businesses have been more resilient to the ongoing crisis (Vaishar and Stastná, 2020). A recent study showed that agritourism farms were a popular choice in 2020 because of their small scale and the limited number of tourists staying there simultaneously, leading tourists to perceive them as ‘safe’ (Uglis et al., 2021). This study suggests that the high levels of resilience of agritourism businesses are not only the result of the specific setting (e.g. the availability of large spaces where social distancing can be easily applied) but also the effect of their social capital (Pal et al., 2014). By maintaining and strengthening their relations with relevant stakeholders, agritourism firms were able to cope with the crisis by accessing the resources needed to support effective tourism experience co-creation. As highlighted by social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986), social capital takes time to accumulate. It seems reasonable that agritourism businesses would be better equipped in terms of social capital because of their natural strong linkages with the sociocultural and environmental context. In turn, social capital is a key resource that explains the success of agritourism businesses (Campbell and Kubickova, 2020).

Finally, this study drew on a conceptualisation of CSR that encompasses all of its dimensions (community, employees, environment, heritage and products), thus offering an in-depth understanding of the impact of each dimension. As highlighted by Lee (2020, p. 3), the intensity of the impact of each CSR dimension differs across type of tourism business and across time and place, and may even ‘evolve over the course of the pandemic and change again’. For agritourism businesses, we found that, in the first months of the pandemic, CSR aspects related to community, environment and heritage were the most important, while those regarding employees were not significant. Intuitively, this finding makes sense in light of the fact that the number of employees for such tourism businesses was extremely small.

The findings of this research also provide agritourism businesses with practical insights to mitigate the negative effects of the ongoing crisis. First, proactive strategies should be preferred over reactive strategies. However, agritourism entrepreneurs should note that proactive strategies have no direct impact per se on business performance. To positively influence performance, proactive strategies should be designed to first contribute to a business’s CSR behaviours. In particular, such strategies should focus on CSR behaviours related to support for the community, the preservation of the environment and the valorisation of the local, rural heritage. Despite the severe challenges posed by COVID-19, agritourism businesses should continue to maintain their social capital by contributing to the wellbeing of their community and protecting local values and heritage. For example, they should purchase goods and services locally and take part in initiatives that support local system resilience. As for other tourism businesses, agritourism businesses may also be forced to adopt reactive strategies, such as reducing their expenses, discontinuing services or cancelling projects. Agritourism entrepreneurs should be aware that reactive strategies have an overall negative effect on performance. However, as the findings of this study indicate, the direct negative effects of these strategies can be mitigated by focusing remaining resources on the core values and activities of the agritourism business; in particular, directing resources to CSR behaviours related to the community, the environment and heritage is highly beneficial.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has presented tourism businesses with unprecedented challenges and severe risks in terms of their survival. The effects of alternative strategies to cope with this crisis are still unclear because evidence of their impacts on business performance remains scarce. Drawing on the system resilience framework and on the distinction between proactive and reactive strategies, this study contributed to filling this gap. In particular, it showed that for agritourism businesses, proactive strategies have positive effects on business performance only if they increase CSR behaviours, thus enhancing system resilience, which enables successful tourism experience co-creation. In addition, reactive strategies have mixed impacts: they directly decrease business performance but they also have positive indirect effects by contributing to CSR behaviours. Overall, this analysis emphasised the key mediating role played by CSR in linking strategies to business performance.

This study adopted a comprehensive view of CSR behaviours, encompassing five dimensions: CSR-community, CSR-employees, CSR-environment, CSR-heritage and CSR-products. The analysis revealed that, for agritourism businesses, the most important CSR dimensions are those related to community, environment and heritage. At this stage, the findings cannot be extended to other countries or tourism sectors. However, future studies may evaluate the generalisability of the suggested framework to other tourism businesses (e.g. hospitality or tour operators) and identify differences in the relative importance of the five CSR dimensions in explaining the effects of proactive and reactive strategies. Future research could also assess the generalisability of the findings by replicating the study in different contexts. As noted, in Italy, the links between agricultural and agritourism activities are remarkably strong, as stipulated by the national law. In other countries, agritourism firms do not necessarily have to be based on a working farm and some farmers ‘simply’ offer hospitality services within an agricultural setting. Therefore, it is recommended to replicate the analysis in different contexts to assess the extendibility of the findings and specifically to ascertain the role of the different dimensions of CSR behaviours.

Another limitation of this study concerns the measurement of business performance. Self-reported measures of performance are widely used in tourism business studies and are particularly useful in the context of micro-firms such as agritourism businesses. However, the availability of objective performance measures would strengthen the external validity of the findings. Finally, when the study was conducted, the COVID-19 crisis was ongoing and there were no clear predictions about its end. The effectiveness of the strategies was measured in autumn 2020 and future analyses are required to assess the long-term effects of these initiatives.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Francesca Magno: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Fabio Cassia: Formal analysis, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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