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Toward sustainable tourism practice in the post-COVID-19: Perspectives from Nha Trang, Vietnam

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\textbf{Abstract:} Although the impact of tourism and COVID-19 has been paid much attention, limited research considers the perspectives from local people working in tourism, especially those affected by the pandemic the most. This article examines the perspectives of tourism laborers in Nha Trang, Vietnam on the dual impacts of tourism and the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and the local economy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 participants working in different fields in a tourism sector. Results revealed that that before the COVID-19 hit Nha Trang, tourism had both positive and negative impacts on local people and economy. These impacts are differently among local people and economy. While tourism had improved the quality of local people lives who ran business relating to tourism activities such as hotels, restaurants, the tourism had damaged the local economy such as overloaded infrastructure and tourist facilities, lack of quality control of tourism, unfair competition between tourism companies, traffic congestion and floods in the city, and “zero-dollar tour”. When the COVID-19 hit, the local tourism firms had broken down, particularly firms target their services at foreign visitors. To

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Tourism is one of the important industries in many countries worldwide. But, when tourism is developed, it has both sides. On the one hand, tourism creates jobs and income for local people, on the other hand it also impacts negatively on the tourist destination such as the overloaded infrastructure and tourist facilities, lack of quality control of tourism, unfair competition between tourism companies, traffic congestion, etc. When the COVID-19 hit Nha Trang, a touristic city of Vietnam, the tourism industry has broken down, particularly the local tourism companies target their services at foreign visitors. This paper explores the impact of tourism and COVID-19 on the local tourism sector in this city through listening the voices of local people working in tourism. This study also suggests solutions toward the development of tourism in a long-terms way, particularly in the post COVID-19 pandemic.
deal with these challenges of tourism under the impact of COVID-19, this study also found out sustainable approaches such as diversifying sources of tourists, multiplying local people’s sources of income, and improving the local government’s tourism management. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Subjects: Asian Studies; Anthropology; Tourism

Keywords: COVID-19; local people; local perspectives; sustainable tourism development; Vietnam

1. Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 has brought the globe in chaos, both economic and health-wise. The World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 declared the COVID-19 as a global pandemic. Many countries worldwide closed their borders for safety precaution, and many businesses suspended their operation considering that the effects of COVID-19 are economically disruptive. Over 169 million people were affected, in which approximately 3.5 million deaths reported globally since the pandemic spread (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). The pandemic has impacted severely both the global and sectoral economy. Among sectoral industries, the tourism and hospitality sectors experience the hardest hit as they are deemed to be the most vulnerable sector in a pandemic.

Like many other countries worldwide, Vietnam is also facing with the impact of COVID-19. On 23 January 2020, the country reported its first known case of COVID-19 (Coleman, 2020). Since 22 March 2020, entry of all foreigners is temporarily suspended until further notice to limit the spread of the virus. Although Vietnam is recognized as one of the best countries in terms of containing and controlling the pandemic, together with other key countries such as Taiwan and South Korea (Walden, 2020), the country still has to cope with another wave of the pandemic. As of 30 May 2021, the Ministry of Health (2021) has reported 6,856 confirmed cases, 2896 recoveries, and 47 deaths. To stop the outbreak, the government has to enforce social distancing guidelines all over the country. This has impacted considerably on the economy in general, and in the tourism industry most especially.

Nha Trang city, the most attractive destination for both domestic and international tourists in Vietnam, has reportedly been impacted severely by this COVID-19 (Khanh Hoa Department of Tourism (KHDT), 2020). According to the local authorities, in the first quarter of 2020, hotel and travel services have lost 17,100 jobs in which the accommodation segment and travel services contributed 30% and 60% to the loss, respectively (KHDT, 2020). This is because both numbers of international and domestic tourists are decreased by 52.6% and 66.3%, respectively. In particular, Nha Trang as well as Vietnam lost the Chinese tourists which accounts for more than 70% of the total number of international tourists. This leads to the average occupancy of hotels to plunge. Many small and medium sized hotels have been closed or for sale from early March 2020 (Thesaigontime, 2020).

According to the tourism-led growth hypothesis, tourism drives economic growth because it provides foreign exchange earnings, which are required to purchase capital goods, pay for imports, and maintain international reserves (Ehigiamusoe, 2020; Narayan et al., 2010). Tourism not only stimulates other economic sector such as agricultural, manufacturing, construction, services, boost investments in new infrastructure, labor, technology, and environmental resources but also enhances the lives of local people in many ways such as creating jobs, improving income, and alleviating poverty (Mbaiwa, 2003; Truong et al., 2014; Uslu et al., 2020). Therefore, when the COVID-19 outbreak happened, it has hit seriously the tourism industry as well as the lives of people, especially those who directly involve in tourism businesses around the world.

While many studies have investigated the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on a global, and national levels of the tourism industry, there’s a lack of study on the magnitude of COVID-19's
effects on a particular tourist destination and on the local tourism businesses (Gössling et al., 2020; Haywood, 2020; Ioannides & Gymóthy, 2020; Romagosa, 2020; Sigala, 2020). Therefore, Sigala (2020) calls for more empirical research to be undertaken on a local residents’ perspectives on tourism and COVID-19 nexus. Furthermore, a number of research considered the economic and environmental impact of tourism on the lives of people and these research were mainly conducted at many tourist destinations national and regional scales (Bekhet et al., 2017; Ehigiamusoe, 2020; Ehigiamusoe & Lean, 2019; Mbaïwa, 2003; Uslu et al., 2020). However, there is no study considering the impact of tourism on a specific destination before and under pandemic at the same time.

To fill in the above-mentioned gap, this study explores the impact of tourism on the local people’s lives and local economy before and under the COVID-19 outbreak in a city of Nha Trang, Vietnam. In particular, this study aims to investigate the impact of tourism activity on the local people’s lives and local economy before and under the pandemic outbreak. As an exploratory nature of research, this study addresses research questions: How and why does tourism impact differently on local people’s lives and local economies before and under the pandemic outbreak? How do the local people deal with these challenges of tourism sustainably?

The city of Nha Trang is chosen for this study because the city is considered as the earliest and most affected by the pandemic since China, the market which dominates the tourism industry, is the first market to decline. Therefore, we chose this touristic city to examine the impact of tourism and COVID-19 on local people’s lives and local economy as a case study.

This study makes several contributions to the extant literature. First, this study is among the studies which focus on the voices of local people in the context of low-income countries where the influence of COVID-19 is likely to pay close attention due to their vulnerability (Alang et al., 2020; Gössling et al., 2020). Second, this study provides the empirical contributions to extend the current understanding of tourism activities and the impact of COVID-19 in a specified destination. Third, the study suggests strategies for sustainable tourism development post-pandemic period in the case of Nha Trang, Vietnam and it could also be a lesson for other touristic cities in the context of Vietnam.

The remaining part of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review; Section 3 provides the context of Nha Trang city; Section 4 reports the research design; Section 5 provides the findings; Section 6 contains discussion and conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1. Impact of tourism

Literature shows that tourism industry has direct, indirect and induced impacts on many aspects of a destination (Andereck et al., 2005; Khan et al., 1990; Mayer, 2014). The positive contributions of tourism have been highlighted to the destination economy and society such as job creation, investment, production, and socio-economic development (Alam & Paramati, 2016; Ehigiamusoe, 2020). Despite these profound effects, negative impacts of tourism have also been discussed widely such as its interference with the social and economic well-being of residents in a tourist destination (Jordan et al., 2021; Weaver & Lawton, 2001). These impacts raise concerns about the consequences of mass tourism or over-tourism development (Gössling et al., 2020; Koens et al., 2018) as well as the aggravated negative effect of tourism in the times of crisis and disaster. However, the impact of tourism on local people’s lives and local economy before and under COVID-19 outbreak has not been thoroughly explored.

2.2. Tourism under crisis periods

During the past few decades, the world had experienced a wide range of crises, which included: natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, and Tsunamis); terrorism (e.g., September 11 attack, the Bali bombings); political instability and war (e.g., wars, energy shocks, economic crises);
and epidemics (e.g., Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), foot-and-mouth disease, swine flu, the Ebola virus, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS), COVID-19; Kuo et al., 2008; Shi & Li, 2017; Wang, 2009). Among these external crises, the external events of epidemics could be considered as the most dangerous due to their wide and unpredictable spread. In modern societies where exchanges and mobilities amongst countries are high, epidemics’ impacts are greater than expected (Iaquinto, 2020; Jamal & Budke, 2020). This spread of epidemics is faster and wider, not only limits the individual’s activities but also results in a country’s economic loss (Jung & Sung, 2017).

Previous studies showed that tourism industry is highly vulnerable to disasters and crises (Biggs et al., 2012; Irvine & Anderson, 2006; Pavlatos et al., 2021). Several studies have identified risks and threats to the tourism industry as a result of the crisis. For example, Page et al. (2006) explored how VisitScotland managed the flu pandemic and provided the best lessons learned in practice. Kuo et al. (2008) have revealed that the demand for international tourism has been severely affected by SARS-affected countries, but not by Avian Flu-affected countries. Novelli et al. (2018) looked at the impact of Ebola on the Gambia tourism crisis. Other studies have focused on the impact of SARS on the tourism industry at national level, such as China’s tourism industry (Z. Wen et al., 2005), Australia’s tourism industry (Dwyer et al., 2020), and the United States’ tourism industry (Chi & Boek, 2013).

It could be argued that the tourism sector is suffering the most from the pandemic crisis. This industry also provides various strategies to deal with the crisis, although these strategies are contextually targeted (Fung et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2005; Lo et al., 2006). For example, Kim et al. (2005) looked at the effects of SARS on the Korean hotel sector, using a case study of six Korean five-star hotels. The results indicated that, although the SARS outbreak had a negative impact on the Korean hotel industry, a number of adaptive solutions were used, such as minimizing operating costs and offering staff education programs on health awareness, training and the operation of new hygiene equipment. Meanwhile, Lo et al. (2006) and Fung et al. (2020) have proposed strategies to overcome the SARS crisis in the Hong Kong hotel industry. Lo et al. (2006) found that hotels in Hong Kong had adopted strategies for survival at different stages of the SARS crisis, in which industry-wide recovery efforts and mutual support were essential. Fung et al. (2020) focused on crisis management practices for hotel image recovery, suggested four phases of the crisis management framework, including reduction, readiness, response and recovery.

### 2.3. Tourism under the COVID-19

Since the emergence of COVID-19, there has been a number of research on the spread of COVID-19 as it has severely devastated the global tourism industry (Gössling et al., 2020). Previous research focused mostly on the impact of the COVID-19 on tourism in comparison with previous pandemics and crises (Gössling et al., 2020), the relationship between tourism and sustainable development under the COVID-19 crisis (Ioannides & Gymiôthy, 2020; Nepal, 2020; Niewiadomski, 2020; Romagosa, 2020), the future of tourism of post-COVID-19 (Haywood, 2020), and tourism recovery strategy (Yeh, 2020). Some studies went to explore the impact of COVID-19 on tourist arrivals among countries, and on rural tourism (Silva, 2022; J. Wen et al., 2020). In addition, emerging literature also focuses on the impact of the crisis on tourism businessperson at tourist destinations, their safety, well-being and economic impacts (; Qiu et al., 2020). For example, Qiu et al. (2020) looked at the social costs and willingness to pay for the risk reduction of local residents in three urban destinations in China. Their results have shown that locals are willing to pay social costs and to participate in tourism recovery strategies. Locals are recognized but neglected in practice, which is why this study suggests that the role of residents’ involvement in crisis recovery action is recognized as important. Quang et al. (2020) promptly assessed the economic impact of COVID-19 on the Vietnamese tourism industry and the response of its stakeholders to the pandemic. According to their findings, Vietnam’s tourism sector and the government reacted positively in the early stages of the pandemic, but subsequently responded successfully to the impact of COVID-19. It also demonstrated that several strategies were put in
place by government authorities and tourism companies to encourage domestic tourism and boost the economic recovery of the sector. However, these studies have largely ignored the direct impact of the crisis on local people’s lives and strategies for the development of post-pandemic tourism in a particular tourist destination.

It is argued that the above-mentioned studies measure only the impact of tourism on local economy and the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry in general and are carried out on a national and global scale. They overlook the impact of tourism and COVID-19 on people’s lives, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, who rely mainly on tourism activities (Carr, 2020; Williams & Kayaoglu, 2020). As such, Sigala (2020, p. 314) suggests more pandemic research, and the research “should lead the refocusing, repurposing, reframing and re-interpretation of research questions, methodologies and outcomes, so that tourism stakeholders can, in turn, re-direct their actioning, conduct and evolution”. Taking up these challenges, this present study explores local people’s perspectives on the impact of tourism as well as COVID-19 on the local people’s lives and their strategies to overcome the crises toward sustainable tourism development.

3. The context of Nha Trang city
Nha Trang is the capital city of the province of Khanh Hoa, located on the Southern Central Coast of Vietnam. The city has a population of about 800,000 and is well known for its beaches and scuba diving, as well as its historical and cultural sites. Popular attractions include the Oceanography Museum, the Po Nagar Tower, the Buddhist Long Son Temple, and the Nha Trang Bay (KHDT, 2020). According to (KHDT, 2020), Nha Trang is the nation’s largest tourist destination (i.e., one-third of Vietnam’s inbound tourism) and the first attraction affected by COVID-19 in Vietnam.

The tourism activity in Nha Trang has been growing since the 1990s but has increased rapidly in recent years. In the period 2016–2019, the growth rate was extremely high, accounting for about 10 million international tourists, three times higher than in the period 2011–2015. The proportion of international tourists in the period from 2016 to 2019 was 40% (period of 2011–2015 was 22%). Total tourism revenues for the period 2016–2019 amounted to VND 115,126 billion (USD 4,930 million). The total number of tourists increased relatively quickly to reach an annual total of 7,000,055 by 2019. However, this number has begun to fall significantly to 642,594 in the first quarter of 2020 and continues to decline sharply as the pandemic progresses (KHDT, 2020); (Figure 1).
4. Research design
This research used a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews to examine the perspectives and experiences of local people on the impact of tourism activities on their lives and on local economics before and during the outbreak of COVID-19. According to Creswell (2013), this approach is best suited to the understanding of people's feelings and perspectives in their social life. It also allows for a better interpretation of the meanings of findings that are not directly measurable. Semi-structured interviews have been used in this study (see Supplemental Table Online 1). Data were collected from February to March 2020. All authors conducted online interviews (i.e., telephone, Skype, Viber, and Facetime) due to the restriction of social distance as well as the safety of both interviewers and respondents during the COVID-19 period (Abildgaard, 2018; Salmons, 2015). This study used snowball sampling methods to approach the respondents (Bernard, 2011; Creswell, 2013). The respondent selection respondent from different professions related to tourism industry because it provides wider voices of tourism labors. Moreover, tourism is considered as an integrated sector that has close relationship with other supporting sectors, thus the perspectives of different professions make clearer understanding of the tourism’s impact and tourism development strategy in this present research.

In total, there were 26 interviewees participated in this research, which address the criteria of sufficiency and saturation (Alang, 2021; Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2006). Of the 26 interviewees, eight were male (30.8%) and 18 were female (69.2%) (see Supplemental Table Online 2). On average, the respondents were 33.6 years of age. More than half (15) of them had been married. Of those who were married, each had an average of two children. One respondent had completed a master’s program, 22 had completed college or university, one had only completed high school, and two had only completed secondary school. In terms of residence, 13 respondents were born in Nha Trang, while 13 were from other areas. Every respondent had a long history of tourism activity, from one year to 27 years.

All these interviews were completed and digitally recorded which ranged from 25 minutes to 45 minutes in length. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, translated into English by the first author, and checked by other authors to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were read several times and analyzed manually, focusing on coding and interpreting the texts’ meaning (Kvale, 2007). We analyzed and compared the different parts of the text in the relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the various parts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Texts were compared to each other to identify words, phrases, or expressions that provided insight into the experiences of the respondents (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Kvale, 2007). The authors also compared the informants’ statements to the respondents in order to find similarities and differences. Words, expressions, or statements describing the same phenomenon were assigned to the coding group before the themes were developed (Hesse-Biber, 2010; Kvale, 2007). Respondents’ pseudonym has been used in the presentation and discussion of findings to ensure the privacy of respondents.

5. Findings
This section presents themes justifications which were developed from the 26 narratives of this study to address the research questions. These themes include the positive impacts of tourism on local people’s lives, the negative impacts of tourism on local economy before the pandemic, the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on local people’s business and economy, and sustainable approaches to tourism development.

5.1. Positive impacts of tourism on the local before the pandemic
The tourism activities have positive impact on individual lives and the development of local economies. Most of the respondents reported that their living conditions had been improved thanks to the benefit from tourism activities. This improvement is described as a number of luxury houses and cars of local people had been increased. Also, the tourism activities had given the local peoples a sense of well-being. For examples, a report from manager of a travel company, explained that her life had
been enhanced economically since her involvement in tourism services for 10 years. This job had brought her higher income, comfortable mentality, and more dynamic life. The good side of tourism also have been recognized by tour guides and restaurant owners. Evidence reported that when tourists came to the town, especially Chinese tourists, they spent a lot of money on shopping for souvenirs, tea and coffee, agarwood, arts and crafts. As a result, local tourism businesses benefited more from these services. Another evidence is presented as below:

I only worked for a travel company before, and now I am operating homestay services. My income has become higher though the initial costs for investing in the homestay have not been returned yet. Since I had more opportunities to communicate with tourists, my mental life has also improved (Dâi).

Since participating in tourism, I have saved money enough to buy a house and car. My child […] was sent to one of the best kindergartens in Nha Trang. Before that, I worked as an accountant with a low wage. It was about VND 3,000,000-5,000,000 (US$150-250) per month. Now I can earn almost VND100,000,000 (US$5,000) per month. I was very satisfied with my current income (Hau).

Regarding the contribution of the tourism industry to the local economy compared with other sectors, most respondents stated that tourism played a key role in the development of the local economy. It made up a large proportion of the local government’s budget and created many job opportunities for the locals. Evidence stated:

The local economy here is mostly based on the tourism industry […] I suppose that the tourism activities may contribute about 70% of the local economy. It generates huge jobs for the local people (Lan, a manager of a travel company).

5.2. Negative impacts of tourism on local economy before the pandemic

Despite the bright sides above, it has also had several negative impacts on environmental and socio-economic aspects. Evidence reported that tourism had led to overloaded infrastructure and tourist facilities, lack of quality control of tourism, unfair competition between tourism companies, traffic congestion and floods in the city. For example, a respondent stated:

I think that the local authorities and businesses overlook the negative impacts of tourism activities in Nha Trang. They just focused on the demand side and economic benefits from it. The tourism development was not followed the master plan. This led to traffic jams, floods in the city, which I have never seen before (Thom).

Other respondents recognized that due to the construction permit was issued easily, the hotels were built vastly (Figure 2). This not only caused the oversupply in the accommodation sector but also affected the quality control of the hotel standards (i.e., international standards and local standards are undistinguished clearly, or the hotel standards are certified easily). This would lead to unfair competition among local tourism enterprises.

Another concern about the negative impact of tourism on the local economy is that the “zero-dollar tour” has flourished in the city, which is illegal tourism activities carried out by China-based tourism companies. Zero-dollar tour in this case of Nha Trang occurred as below. Foreigner tourists were often sent to shopping at malls and gift shops (e.g., pearl, agarwood, bird nest, and silk shops) instead of seeing beautiful places. They were persuaded or sometimes forced to buy goods at inflated prices. Tour companies got commissions from shops and supermarkets, and they could keep running the tours. Evidence reported:

I think there should not have any types of the tour called “zero-dollar tour”. It depends on each tour which offers a sightseeing tour or shopping tour. The latter is sold at cheaper
prices, but the tourists have to go shopping, and the tour companies receive kickbacks from the shops (Nhung).

These results suggest that the “zero-dollar tours” might leave little room for local tourism companies, while the local government also loses out on huge tax revenue. This can be considered as economic leakage of tourism benefits in Nha Trang.

In short, the development of tourism has already had many negative impacts on the local tourism industry in Nha Trang. When the outbreak of COVID-19 hit this tourist town, the local tourism sector became more serious. To better understand how COVID-19 affects tourism in general and respondents’ businesses in particular, the next section explores the perceptions of the impact of COVID-19.

5.3. Negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism firms which target their services to foreign visitors

The impacts of COVID-19 varied from person to person since it depended on the type of work people performed and their particular circumstances. While some hotels and resorts maintained the businesses, others had to close. The policies adopted were applied with respect to businessmen who were significantly affected by COVID-19. More specifically, to cope with the reduction in the number of customers using the services, they had to lay off their staff. Others had to reduce the monthly payment or reduce a certain number of their employees. Some examples of evidence are presented as below:

My homestay is still operating. But from mid-January, when people heard about the disease, there were booking cancels from China. Other bookings from Europe, Korea, and Malaysia still remain (Đài).
Currently, the resort is still running. It is not affected seriously because we [the resort] did not focus on one certain tourist market. However, the room occupancy rate is lower, accounted for 10-30% compared to the same period last year due to some booking cancels (Sáng).

Currently, I let my staff off, asked them to go to the office on their duty, or examine several new tourist routes to prepare for the tours in the post-pandemic period. When tourists come back, we will have diverse tours for their choices (Nhung).

When the disease outbreak happened, nearly 100% of the hotels in Nha Trang lost a certain number of customers immediately. Thus, the hotels’ staff were encouraged to rotate taking their break without receiving a salary, to wait for the pandemic gone (Son).

The impact of COVID-19 on tourism in Nha Trang this time was perceived as the damage caused by the war. Since this pandemic has been damaged twice or three times and more severely compared to SARS. During COVID-19, the border had been lockdown. As such context, the companies focused much on foreigner tourists, particular Chinese tourists had been impacted seriously. Evidence reported as below:

I think the travel companies which depend 100% on Chinese tourists will be heavily impacted. Despite the big companies, without tourists, they have to close their business (Đào).

I observe that the most vulnerable groups were the companies that rely mostly upon Chinese visitors. In Nha Trang, I think if the hotels, the souvenir shops, or even the restaurants just serve Chinese visitors, they would be closed earlier (Phúc).

Likewise, the accommodation and transport sectors also suffered from the pandemic as half of the respondents identified it (Figure 3). Evidence stated that most accommodation and transport services were due to huge debt to the bank. For examples:

I think many hotels have to close their business to reduce the operating cost or even are sold to pay a debt for the bank (Sớn).
The hotels were impacted extremely by the pandemic. Lots of hotels were just completed their construction, not operated yet, but the disease happened. Many tourist buses were bought by an installment purchase method. But they were stopped using due to no tourists (Nhung).

Overall, the COVID-19 has impacted local tourism enterprises differently, creating a huge gap before and in the time of the pandemic outbreak in terms of their businesses.

5.4. Sustainable approaches to tourism development

To deal with challenges like COVID-19 in the future, sustainable development for the local tourism has been developed from the interviews. This approach was not only for the local government and tourism authority but also for individuals and businessmen. Firstly, diversifying sources of tourists was essential for businessmen. For example, tourism firms could change their focus of promotional programs from China to other countries such as the EU, South Korea, Russia, and Thailand. Evidence stated:

Currently, we [homestay services] are serving some guests from Europe, so I think that my business will focus our advertisement on other countries such as European countries, South Korea, and Thailand. During the city lockdown, we take time to repair and upgrade the homestay facilities, which I could not do at the peak season of tourism (Đài).

Our resort has stopped running some services such as an entertaining area due to the absence of customers. However, we take this chance to repair and improve the degrading tourist facilities. We also refocus on Russian and domestic tourists, although which accounted for a small portion but less than nothing (Đào).

Secondly, residents should be taken part in a variety of occupations concurrently to multiply their sources of income and mitigate the possibility of work cuts when the crisis is unpredictable. For example, people work in the sales department also have several jobs at the same time (e.g., doing online business). It could also ease the effect of the pandemic on their lives. Although some may not have other sources of income, they either had to find another temporary job or take a break before the crisis situation got better. As reported by a Hotel Saleswoman explaining that she began selling fruit online to make a living on a temporary basis, even though she had not been engaged in any part-time work before. Similarly, an inbound tour guide reported that he had to stop working since January 2020 because there were no Chinese visitors, searching for another job, hoping to become a Chinese language teacher, a real estate salesman, or a tour salesman.

Thirdly, with regard to the local government and the tourism authority, it was proposed that tourism management should focus on three issues: (1) the diversification of the tourism sector, (2) the management of tourism production and (3) the restructuring of human resources. Many respondents stated that tourism in Nha Trang has been relied on one or two major source of tourism markets, such as China or Russia. Instead, the source of visitors from other countries should be extended. By doing so, the city will be in a position to deal with the crisis. Evidence shown as below:

I think diversifying the tourism market is needed. Previously, Nha Trang had high yield markets from Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Australia, Canada. But, due to the immediate profits come from Chinese tourists, Nha Trang has lost its traditional markets (Sáng).

The pandemic has made the local tourism authority reconsider their strategies for developing the tourism market for long-terms periods. Europe should be the market target for the city. In general, if the city focuses on all tourism markets equally, it will not lose the customers from other markets (Minh).
Figure 4. Three pillars of sustainable tourism approach in Nha Trang.

The necessity of improving tourism management in Nha Trang also should be taken into consideration by local government because it has developed so fast that it caused several negative impacts. Evidence stated:

I think building a strategy for tourism development is not the local businesses’ job. Instead, the government must take this role to make a tourism master plan for sustainable development. I feel that Nha Trang’s tourism has developed massively so far but lacks a long-term vision (Tham).

In terms of tourism management, the state needs to strictly manage it so that tourism facilities do not grow too fast (Hoa).

Reforming human resources employed in the tourism sector was required for higher yield markets. Respondents reported that the quality of current tourism human resources was only eligible to serve Asian tourists in general, Chinese tourists in particular. However, to meet the higher requirements of other Western markets, they may not be eligible. Many respondents pointed out the lack of technical experiences and skills for the next generation of human resources to work with European tourists in the future.

In short, a long-term strategy for tourism growth is required in the study site, which focuses on diversifying sources of tourists and involving businessmen in multiple jobs; expanding the tourism market; better managing tourism development; and improving the quality of human resources in the local government and local tourism sectors.

6. Discussions and conclusions
This article explores the experiences of local people working in the tourism sector in Nha Trang as a case study of how tourism affects their lives and the local economy before and under the outbreak of COVID-19. It addresses the questions of ‘how and why does tourism impact differently on local people’s lives and local economy before and under the pandemic outbreak? How do the local people deal with these challenges of tourism sustainably? This study found that before the COVID-19 hit Nha Trang, tourism had both positive and negative impacts on local people and economy. These impacts are differently among people and local economies. While tourism has improved the quality of local people lives who ran business relating to tourism activities such as hotels, restaurants, the tourism has damaged the local economy such as overloaded infrastructure and tourist facilities, lack of quality control of tourism, unfair competition between tourism companies, traffic congestion and floods in the city, and “zero-dollar tour”. When the COVID-19 hit, the local tourism firms has broken down, particularly firms target their services to foreign visitors. To deal with these challenges of tourism under the impact of COVID-19, this study also found out sustainable approaches such as diversifying sources of tourists, multiplying local people’s sources of income, and improving the local government’s tourism management.

This study is among the first studies to consider the perspectives and experiences of local people impacted by the tourism operation and the COVID-19 pandemic in the Vietnamese context. This
research is also significant as it raises the importance of hearing the voices of affected people under the pandemic to understand deeper their lives in the crisis time as well as to propose the strategies toward sustainable tourism development than previous studies (e.g., Haywood, 2020; Yeh, 2020). It shows that while tourism has a vital contribution to the lives of local people and to the local economy, its negative impacts on the lives of local people are also recognized, such as overdevelopment, issues of quality control and economic leakage. These negative impacts are compounded by the spread of the pandemic. As a result, the tourism industry in the study site needs to approach sustainable growth to mitigate the negative impact of tourism as well as to overcome the COVID-19 crisis as similar to previous studies suggested (Song et al., 2019; Qiu et al., 2020).

Despite the positive effects of tourism on the lives of local residents and on the local economy, this paper examined some negative impacts of tourism on the study site that need to be taken into account. Overdevelopment, lack of quality control and economic leakage (i.e., zero-dollar tour) may have had the effects of tourism growth without following the tourism master plan. This suggests that as tourism grows in the region, as long as it can help local people (by improving their quality of life) and local governments (by collecting revenues from tourism), business people and local governments tend to invest more and more in it without taking into account the negative effects of tourism as well as the possible risks.

With regard to the effect of COVID-19 on local tourism companies, the respondents expressed that they have suffered from the pandemic in different ways. However, stories about local people’s understanding of the effects of COVID-19 vary from people to people depending on the type of work and on their own specific circumstances (i.e., length of the participant, loans from the bank). For example, for those who already had a long history of their establishment and did not need to borrow loans from the bank for their business were impacted less than others. Although some of them were able to retain their jobs (e.g., hotel manager, salespersons) as normal at the earlier stage of the outbreak of the pandemic, many had to restructure their companies by cutting off their employees, considering that their services had been closed. This may be evidence of the widespread effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on any local tourism business. In addition, the respondents noted that local tourism firms, which concentrated mainly on Chinese visitors, had a serious effect on COVID-19. This statement highlights three main aspects of the growth of tourism in Nha Trang at the time of this study. First, COVID-19 is known to have occurred for the first time in China. Second, Chinese tourists have been the most foreign tourist arrivals in Nha Trang in recent years. Third, because of its high tourism receipts, several local tourism companies are concentrating on China’s tourism market. As a result, since the outbreak of the pandemic reached Nha Trang, the local tourism sector has almost collapsed. Therefore, many respondents suggested to expand tourism market in the study site.

This study also recognized strategies that individuals (local people and business person) employed to overcome the crisis period's difficulties. Firstly, they are diversifying their job opportunities to eliminate the risk of job loss (e.g., as the case of Chau and Minh). This finding suggests that tourism itself is a vulnerable business to the crisis (Biggs et al., 2012), and the involvement of multiple jobs in various industries simultaneously could mitigate the crisis’ impact (Lee & Warner, 2005). Secondly, businessperson takes the closed time of COVID-19 to upgrade and install new facilities preparing for their post-pandemic operation (Nepal, 2020). Due to the pandemic came suddenly, most individual and businessperson did not prepare for adaptive solutions. In concurrence with the studies of Lo et al. (2006), Haywood (2020), Fung et al. (2020), and Yeh (2020), this result indicates that it is important to develop a strategy to resolve the crisis properly and to draw up a crisis management plan to avoid future tourism crises.

This research also outlines several strategies for the sustainable growth of the tourism industry in the context of the crisis era of COVID-19 for Vietnamese tourism. These techniques include the diversification of the tourism sector, the management of tourism growth and the restructuring of human resources. First, it could be argued that the expansion of tourism markets is important for
locals and countries, as this not only mitigates the risk of reliance on a single tourism sector but can also bring more tourism revenues from high-yield markets, similar to the Quang et al report (Quang et al., 2020). In the case of Nha Trang, this could help to re-attract its conventional markets from European countries. This suggestion seems to reinforce the study by Le and Dong (2017) which focused on diversifying the source of tourists with a focus on high-spending customers towards high-quality tourism growth in Nha Trang. Second, tourism growth should concentrate on long-term strategies by reducing mass tourism or avoiding over-developed tourism. This will reduce the negative effects of tourism and contribute to a more balanced and sustainable approach (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2020). Third, it argues that workers working in the tourism sector in Nha Trang need to be retrained with technical skills and experience to meet the high-yield markets of the future. The three solutions suggested above may be three pillars of sustainable tourism in the context of Nha Trang after COVID-19 (Figure 4).

Since the COVID-19 has been gradually controlled thanks to the widespread vaccination of the Vietnamese Government, tourism in Vietnam also slightly recovered and reopened its border for international tourism from March 15 2022. Thus, tourism practice in the post-pandemic period in Vietnam also should be adapted with the “new normal” situation through approaching a number of ways such as the reposition of the strategic market (i.e., high-yield market), the policies of visa exemption or longer visa for those markets to not only catch up the tourism market but also towards long-term strategy development.

This study has some weaknesses that need to be discussed in future research. First, this research explores the preliminary effect of COVID-19 on the initiation of the outbreak of the pandemic. The impacts listed above can therefore be updated, depending on how the situation of COVID-19 is going on. Second, the analysis is limited to the use of a small sample size qualitative testing tool. Despite the usefulness and reliability of the results, it would be more interesting if the quantitative analysis approach can be used to provide broader insights from other tourism stakeholders. Future research should therefore analyze the effect of the crisis on tourism in Nha Trang or elsewhere in the long term by considering the perspectives of all stakeholders in the tourism sector.

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**Supplementary material**

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here

**Correction**

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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