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**COMMUNICATING FOR SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY OF LOCAL ECOTOURISM:  
A STRATEGY FOR AN ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN THE NEW NORMAL**

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## Acceptance Page

This paper prepared by **MICHELLE. C. SALON** with the title “**COMMUNICATING FOR SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY OF LOCAL ECOTOURISM: A STRATEGY FOR AN ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN THE NEW NORMAL,**” is hereby accepted by the Faculty of Information and Communication Studies, U.P. Open University, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Development Communication.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



The author, Michelle Calanday Salon, was born on February 26, 1977 in Quezon City. She is the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Melecio and Cristina Salon. She has two brothers, Fernando and Ferdinand.

Michelle studied elementary and high school at Santa Isabel College Manila, earning the Bronze Academic Excellence Award upon high school graduation. She also received special awards in Leadership, Literary and Journalism. She studied BA Organizational Communication at the University of the Philippines Manila where she was a consistent college scholar. Michelle supported herself through university by writing for the school organ, The Manila Collegian. She was also active in student life through her affiliation with the Alliance of Enlightened Students and Organizations for the People (AESOP). For four years, she worked as the representative of her batch in the Organizational Communication Society's executive committee.

After college graduation, she worked as Academic and Student Affairs Officer at Punlaan School, a technical school for girls who are trained to work in the tourism industry. In 2007, she gained extensive marketing and human resource experience when she moved to Bacolod City where she worked for an eco-resort hotel, Nature's Village Resort. Upon relocating to Cebu City in 2013, she joined Kalinangan Youth Foundation, Inc. (KALFI), a private, non-profit organization committed to the wholistic formation of young women in the Visayas and Mindanao. She currently works as one of the management staff of one of KALFI's project centers in the country, Banilad Study Center.

*This master's thesis is dedicated to  
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## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a significant blow to the worldwide tourism sector, revealing the vulnerability of a specific form of travel: Ecotourism.

This thesis attempts to identify the ways where ecotourism can be made socially acceptable in the *new normal* which the pandemic has ushered in. With the hope to jumpstart the local economy, it seeks to find ways through various communication strategies to craft *a creative healing and recovery plan for ecotourism to bounce back* from what Covid-19 has come to bring. Relevant literature was used to come up with a recommended framework and communication model unique to ecotourism.

The Bojo River in Aloguinsan, Cebu is the case study area for this thesis. It is an ecotourism village that has gained acclaim as an ecotourism facility in 2009. Data was collected through the survey research design with a hundred respondents, i.e., guests of the ecotourism facility. The research revealed that there are various factors that make people seek ecotourism in the new normal, and that there are able indicators of social acceptability which contribute to the economic recovery of ecotourism. It has also revealed that word-of-mouth marketing (WoM) continues to be the best marketing strategy to sustain, strengthen and develop ecotourism resilience.

This thesis concludes that if we are to help the ecotourism industry to advance on its path to recovery, there is a need to strengthen and sustain its relationship with its various stakeholders and develop a crisis communications plan that would support it in times of adversity. Drawing commitment to ecotourism as a

social advocacy from among its satisfied guests would translate to overall social acceptability and prompt economic recovery.

## **Chapter I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The current health crisis has disrupted our plans, and dealing with Covid-19, even with the availability of vaccines and booster shots, has posed multifaceted challenges for humanity.

With a focus on creating a mutually beneficial scenario for the environment, wildlife, and local communities, ecotourism encounters an unparalleled challenge in the present circumstances.

The Covid-19-induced health emergency unquestionably inflicted significant damage on the tourism sector, resulting in job layoffs, business closures, and leaving a substantial number of employees in a precarious position.

Cebu province, relying on local ecotourism for economic support, faces a challenge. Traditionally, the yearly prospects have highlighted the growth of ecotourism sites as significant attractions and stable income sources, attributed to the health and beauty of its unspoiled natural resources such as white beaches, clean rivers, majestic waterfalls, lush mountains, and organic farms. However, with the absence of tourists, the primary income source for locals disappears, potentially pushing them towards less sustainable strategies.

Research addressing the containment of Covid-19 explored various aspects, including the therapeutic influence of nature. Scientists and public health experts have emphasized the importance of seeking relaxation and recreation in

environments where one can enjoy fresh air and connect with the offerings of Mother Nature.

Choosing an ecotourism destination remains a top preference for a secure and sheltered retreat amid the ongoing pandemic and the persisting new normal. However, encouraging individuals to change their mindset, motivating them to venture out and connect with nature, presents an unprecedented challenge. Educating and persuading people about the therapeutic benefits that ecotourism offers to individuals and families proves to be a difficult task. Given the fluctuating status of Covid-19 surges, it appears that ecotourism sites would need a substantial amount of communication and promotional strategies to raise awareness, influence, and bring about a shift in behaviour – convincing people to explore beyond their homes and rediscover the positive impact of a change in environment. Reassessing the dynamics introduced by the pandemic in the ‘new normal’ is essential.

### **Rationale of the Study**

This study aims to determine the ways by which ecotourism can be made socially acceptable in Cebu Province amid and beyond the health crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, ushering us into the new normal. Ecotourism suffered adversely due to lockdowns, community quarantines and human mobility restrictions following Covid-19 surges, thus, limping the economic livelihood of those who depend on it.

Numerous sectors are striving to recover from the adverse impacts the pandemic had on the global economy, and the ecotourism industry is no exception. It is endeavouring for a resurgence.

There has been considerable discussion about various approaches to combat the novel coronavirus. Notably, ecotourism is viewed as establishing a pathway for restoration, recovery, and rehabilitation. Revisiting an earlier document published by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on Tourism Crisis Communications (2015), four necessary stages have been identified which we all go through when we find ourselves in a crisis like what we are experiencing today with the Covid-19 pandemic: reduction, readiness, response, and recovery. Each stage has a corresponding set of things-to-do that guides all the stakeholders in a crisis to move forward and regain composure and calm amid the social disruption caused by the crisis itself. There are ways and means that we can actively use to respond and come out of a crisis sooner and with better conditions.

Exploring an ecotourism destination amid the pandemic is perceived as a means to stimulate the local tourism economy, strengthen family ties and leisure activities, and foster overall well-being both physically and mentally, by immersing oneself in nature's therapeutic power. Mother Nature is asserting her significance during this health crisis, and it is essential that we pay attention.

This research positions itself within the broader perspective of the local ecotourism industry's ability to adapt and endure the current health crisis. It emphasizes the potential of communication strategies to be a decisive factor in reshaping the situation, envisioning a resilient travel and tourism economy overcoming the challenges posed by the coronavirus.

## **The Research Problem**

The general research question that this study wishes to answer is: ***How can ecotourism be made socially acceptable in the new normal and help jumpstart the tourism industry in the post-pandemic era?***

Consequently, the following questions prove significant in gathering more relevant and meaningful answers: What factors comprise social acceptability? What elements in the ecotourism communication plan must be present in the marketing strategy for local ecotourism to recover? What advantages or benefits of local ecotourism could be highlighted in its marketing or promotion efforts in the new normal? What marketing platform can help the ecotourism industry attract guests back and increase patronage percentage of ecotourism sites in the new normal?

Working towards getting concrete answers for this study, an ecotourism site was selected from among the ones recognized in Cebu province, i.e., Bojo River in Aloguinsan, located in Southwestern Cebu. The following are the specific research questions which aptly correspond to the objectives of this research:

How did tourists learn about the ecotourism site? How is ecotourism communicated to the public? What made the tourists visit the ecotourism site? Are there new aspects about tourism which emerged during the period of the health crisis (Covid-19 pandemic) which can be highlighted to enhance the social acceptability of ecotourism? How can ecotourism be communicated to enhance its social acceptability in the new normal? Lastly, what elements constitute a model for an effective ecotourism communication in the new normal?

## **Objectives of the Study**

This study seeks to obtain the following objectives:

1. Determine the profile of the guests who visit an ecotourism site.
2. Determine the reasons why people visit ecotourism sites.
3. Describe how the guests learned about the ecotourism site.
4. Describe the communication strategies being employed to promote ecotourism sites.
5. Codify social acceptability of ecotourism in the post-pandemic era.
6. Recommend an effective communication model to promote ecotourism sites in the post pandemic era.

## **Significance of the Study**

This research holds significance as it advocates for collective efforts in revitalizing industries amidst the challenges of the pandemic and the new normal. Specifically focusing on the ecotourism sector, the study explores ways to positively impact the overall state of the local tourism economy, as well as the physical and mental well-being of individuals and families.

By assessing the social acceptability of ecotourism and examining communication strategies used to attract visitors, the research aims to provide a foundation for the ecotourism industry's resurgence. The ultimate goal is to contribute to the betterment of society and humanity by working towards the changing mindsets and perspectives, fostering conditions for improved living, thriving, and surviving in the new normal.

## **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study exclusively focused on the ecotourism industry and its actions amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing new normal. It aimed to understand the factors influencing the social acceptability of ecotourism, the advantages stemming from such engagement, and the future prospects for ecotourism in the new normal. Additionally, the research aimed to pinpoint the communication marketing strategies employed by ecotourism sites to advertise and draw individuals to their respective establishments.

The Social Marketing Theory (SMT) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) are the theories from which the study sought to create a meaningful interpretation of its results. This study explored and identified the different elements and principles of SMT and TRA.

This research limits itself to studying the social acceptability and communication strategies of one (1) accredited ecotourism site in Cebu Province, the Bojo River located in Aloguinsan, a municipality in southwestern Cebu, as it relates to helping jumpstart the local economy that seeks to recover from the pandemic in the new normal.

## Chapter II

### THE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### The Advent of the Covid-19 Health Crisis

In December 2019, the novel coronavirus outbreak began in Wuhan, China. From there, it has spread to reach every corner of the planet. Countless individuals globally have fallen ill, and hundreds of thousands have lost their lives.

According to Gilhooly (2020), the World Economic Forum (WEF) considers this new strain of the coronavirus unoriginal, but is simply part of a pattern of increasingly common epidemics. The only worthwhile action is confronting its actuality.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has announced the virus a global health emergency, assigning a very high rating to the global risk of Covid-19 spread and impact, the most severe designation provided by the organization (Schumaker, 2020).

Take a brief look at the global progression of the outbreak (ABC News.com and Wikipedia.com):

- Dec. 31, 2019: An unidentified pneumonia is causing illness in numerous individuals in China, according to WHO.
- Jan. 11, 2020: The 1st novel coronavirus death is reported by China.
- Jan. 23, 2020: A strict lockdown in Wuhan, China was imposed.

- Jan. 30, 2020: WHO declares global health emergency.
  - Feb. 11, 2020: The new name of the novel coronavirus is COVID-19
  - March 1, 2020: \$15 million released by the United Nations from the UN's Central emergency fund to help vulnerable countries fight the coronavirus.
  - March 19, 2020: The death toll in Italy has surpassed China's.
  - March 24, 2020: The Olympics is postponed in Japan.
  - March 24, 2020: A 21-day complete lockdown was announced by India.
  - April 2, 2020: Global cases hit 1 million.
  - May 4, 2020: A 7.4 billion Euro pledge by world leaders for Covid-19 treatment was welcomed by the World Health Organization (WHO).
  - June 1, 2020: A new illustrated guide on psychosocial skills for Covid-19 responders issued by WHO.
  - June 11, 2020: Over 200,000 Covid-19 cases recorded by Africa.
  - July 10, 2020: WHO reported a record increase in global coronavirus cases, with the total rising by 228,102 in the last 24 hours.
  - September 4, 2020: Brazil tops 4 million Covid-19 cases.
  - October 16, 2020: USA has now topped 8 million Covid-19 cases.
  - November 11, 2020: First local transmission case confirmed by Mongolia.
  - December 1, 2020: Today marks the one-year mark since the index case of the whole pandemic occurred in Wuhan, China.
  - January 7, 2021: One million doses of the vaccine developed by the University of Oxford and biotech firm Astra-Zeneca will be brought to South Africa.
- in January 2021, and another 500,000 by February 2021.

- February 6, 2021: A Covid-19 vaccination priority framework will be adopted by the Department of Health in the Philippines and its Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF)
- March 20, 2021: A recorded 7,999 new Covid-19 cases, the highest recorded single day case count, took place in the Philippines.
- April 7, 2021: Facebook, Google, TikTok and Twitter support the Philippine government's #CheckTheFAQs campaign to fight vaccine misinformation.

December 1, 2020 marked the first year since the novel coronavirus shocked the world. Since then, medical responses globally were subjected to ups and downs in trying to control and stop its spread. Vaccination was administered quickly for many countries, while some struggled to get their people to say yes to the vaccination solution.

The extensive and profound consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak have unquestionably reached far and wide. Nations grappled with an increasing number of cases and fatalities, with global figures registering approximately 79.2 million confirmed cases and 1.8 million deaths by the close of December 2020 (WHO, 2021). The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated losses in global working hours of about 255 million full-time equivalent (*Note: The ILO assumes a 48-hour working week*) jobs in 2020, four times higher than the recorded losses during the global financial crisis in 2009 (ILO, 2021). These outcomes were the factors behind the global economy experiencing its most significant recession since World War II, with an anticipated contraction of approximately 5.2 percent in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Every nation felt the detrimental effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, but the

extent and pace of recovery differed based on the crisis response of each country's private sector.

Nevertheless, because of the documented third wave of Covid-19, extended quarantines and intermittent lockdowns persist. Consequently, travel and tourism endeavors are indefinitely suspended, posing an ongoing challenge to kickstart the local economy. In this context, it is crucial to reconsider the future of ecotourism as a powerful method to rejuvenate both local and international landscapes.

### **Ecotourism Amid the Pandemic**

Absolutely, resilience is a key trait of the tourism industry. Adapting to challenges, fostering innovation, and preparing for recovery are vital steps in overcoming the current global health crisis and rebuilding the tourism sector (Cardona, 2020).

The tourism sector, greatly affected by the pandemic, is struggling. Worldwide, there was a 22 percent decline in tourist arrivals during the initial three months of 2020, resulting in a loss of \$80 billion in tourist receipts (Minh, 2020).

The Asia-Pacific region experienced the most significant impact, witnessing a decrease of 33 million arrivals. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) anticipates a potential 60-80 percent decline in international travel for 2020, putting 100 to 120 million jobs in the tourism sector at risk (Minh, 2020).

The ongoing crisis is impacting travel and tourism enterprises across the spectrum, affecting both major international airlines and small independent hotel

owners. The duration of this impact remains uncertain. Initially, businesses are concentrating on creating short-term survival strategies. As the crisis unfolds, the industry is collaboratively engaging with governments to identify crucial priorities and to foster recovery in the medium to long-term (Stacey, 2020).

Many tourism businesses, spanning various sectors, are uncertain about the conditions for reopening and operation. The viability of resuming activities under these conditions is a significant concern. To address this, industry participants are actively suggesting new operational standards and protocols. These aim to safeguard workers, rebuild travelers' confidence, enforce social distancing, and establish essential cleaning and hygiene standards (Stacey, 2020).

The global reach of Covid-19 has touched every part of the world, including the environment. Lockdown measures have led to a more leisurely lifestyle, resulting in decreased carbon emissions. Many people now have a renewed appreciation for outdoor activities, and the natural environment (Ellis, 2020).

In the early stages, local and regional tourism anticipated to recover more swiftly than international travel. Measures like movement restrictions have halted global tourism, prompting many travelers to explore options closer to home, seeking simpler joys and minimizing carbon emissions (Cardona, 2020).

The grounding of planes, cutting the number of flights short, or suspending operations are considered restrictions on non-essential travel. Although detailed data regarding the precise environmental effects of decreased aviation is not yet available, it is anticipated to exert a substantial influence (Berge, 2020).

Social media has portrayed Covid-19 as providing global nature with room to recover, depicting threatened wildlife returning to roam deserted cities, resting on vacant roads, swimming through uninhabited areas, and communicating without disturbance from the constant noise of relentless industry (Lamb, 2020).

The way to go during this health crisis is to be proactive. Adel (2020) writes that experts in ecotourism have shared their collective insights on the subject.

Amid the global transformations brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is essential to explore the positive development of local and international ecotourism experts convening to strategize and revamp the ecotourism experience for travelers in the emerging “new normal.” Urgent implementation of a recovery plan is crucial for the tourism industry to fully rebound.

According to Pilkington (2020), the substantial effects of Covid-19 have reached various industries and sectors. Conservationists, like others, have had to promptly address emergencies to support communities and reconsider how future objectives are accomplished.

Tony Charters, Vice-Chairperson of the Global Ecotourism Network based in Australia, and an international consultant with 25 years of experience in ecotourism, said the following in a webinar organized by the Masungi Georeserve in late May of 2020: “For ecotourism, the new normal is the ‘old normal.’ In walking treks and canoeing, for example, you’re dealing with quite small numbers in quite remote areas where the risk of Covid-19 is very low.” This idea was repeated by John Roberts, the group director of sustainability for Minor Hotels which operates more than 500

hospitality properties around the world. He says that those who work in ecotourism have a head start. They would like to see their recovery faster than mass tourism.

The founder of Grassroots Travel and a former tourism officer of Cebu province in the Philippines, Mr. Boboi Costas, said that ecotourism under the new normal will be based on trust paired with strong science. He also cited the crucial role of digital transformation. Costas believes that local communities must learn to innovate and repackage themselves, if not, they will go into extinction.

Providing digital skills training to local communities with the end of empowering them must be the thrust of the government and its private sector partners. Learning how to promote ecotourism sites online is seen to be beneficial in the new normal.

In previous readings, ecotourism development gathers local communities, tourists, suppliers, and managers to promote conservation of natural areas and economic growth in underdeveloped localities.

What the local government of Aloguinsan in Cebu, Philippines did is a prime example. They hired community leaders and tour guides as Covid-19 response front liners and marine sanctuary guards (Adel, R. via Philstar.com 2020). Ecotourism is an exciting and creative field because several options can be combined with wellness activities, like culinary and farm tourism, as well as nature-based activities such as bird watching. Seen as a need with the ongoing pandemic is that of limiting the experience of ecotourists to “day tours,” i.e., unless tourists have places to stay within the locality.

Camping is now considered as an “ideal way to travel” during this pandemic. According to ecotourism experts, “Camping seems to be ideal because you bring your own room with you. If one is staying away from everyone else, it may be the ideal way to travel.” Travelers can even bring their own tent. This suggestion promises to be feasible if proper guidelines are followed in this new normal.

Recently, ecotourism experts have concurred on the importance of adding precautionary measures like putting hygiene standards and social distancing measures set in ecotourism facilities. However, we need to keep an eye on the value of coordinating well with various local health practitioners because of the constant updates in the ongoing health crisis.

It is a frequent claim of developing countries that tourism or ecotourism is seen as a strategy for development, with special emphasis on improving the level of income and quality of life of local communities (Hussin, 2006). This can also be a strategy for economic recovery during this time of health crisis.

In the Philippines, its Department of Tourism (DOT) places a constructive and rosy outlook as it looks forward to the renewal of its ecotourism industry.

2020 Tourism Secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat related that, *“Ecotourism further instills in visitors the respect and appreciation for the culture of indigenous or local communities, while giving its people a viable form of livelihood. The situation brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic has opened our eyes to the fragile nature of our industry.”*

The pandemic hit the Philippine economy and society unprecedentedly. The economy slumped into a recession in 2020 and experienced the largest shrinkage of

about 9.2 percent (PSA, 2021), since the release of the first growth data in 1947. The imposed lockdowns on several areas created ripple effects as businesses were forced to shut down, and major economic activities were brought to a temporary halt. As a result, the unemployment rate spiked to 17.7 percent in April 2020, equivalent to about 7.3 million jobless Filipinos, from only 5.1 percent in April of the preceding year (Reyes, C., 2022). The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in the country reported that as of October 2020, about half a million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) were displaced from their jobs due to the pandemic. These economic consequences dragged down the country's performance in alleviating poverty and decreasing inequality. Reyes (2021) estimated that without the social amelioration program, poverty incidence among families could increase by 3.9 percentage points, which is equivalent to about one million families sliding into poverty.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 outbreak in the country in January 2020, the Philippine government had been using different strategies to contain the virus while lessening the pandemic's adverse economic impacts and allaying public concerns (Reyes, C., 2022). The national and local governments had been working together in implementing pandemic-related policy and health measures, such as travel restrictions, lockdowns, mandatory health protocols, (e.g., social distancing, wearing of face masks), contact tracing, and isolation among others. The government's plans, strategies, and actions are guided by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease, which was convened to serve as the overall recommendatory body to the government in addressing the pandemic.

What is set before tourism stakeholders today is the task of strengthening and improving the ecotourism industry. They need to find ways on how resilience can enter the picture and play a crucial role in making it fit to withstand an uncertain future.

It is seen that shareholders and travelers need to learn how to be responsible to assist in getting the ecotourism industry back on its feet, as tourism activities resume little by little.

### **Revisiting the Nature of Ecotourism**

As we live in the new normal, we are invited to revisit what ecotourism is.

One of the most important industries worldwide today is tourism. Its close relative, ecotourism, is becoming important due to massive tourism's harmful effects on the environment and social life (Kyriazi and Nilsson, 2017).

Ecotourism is defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) as:

*Traveling and visiting relatively undisturbed natural areas, mainly to enjoy and appreciate nature, with the view to being environmentally responsible. Travelers engaged in ecotourism are conscious of promoting nature conservation. Its negative visitor impact is low and requires the involvement of its locals to aid in their socio-economic advancement (Ceballos-Lascurian, 1996).*

Honey (2008) gives a holistic definition of Ecotourism which is travel to delicate, untouched, and areas that are safeguarded. It is usually low impact and often modest in scale. Ecotourism teaches the traveler, makes provision for conservation funds, impacts the development and empowerment of local

communities directly, and fosters regard for a mixture of cultures and the value of human rights.

According to McAllister (2017) ecotourism is described as a fast-expanding international export sector committed to promoting responsible tourism ethics through interaction with local communities and promoting environmentally conscious travel.

Kaplan (2013) notes that tourism is on the rise globally, contributing increasingly to national economies. The acceleration of tourism growth worldwide is attributed to the processes of globalization, advancements in transportation and technological developments.

The optimal ecotourism model adheres to this concept: Local communities create tourism initiatives that hire residents, safeguard natural flora and fauna, and enlighten visitors about the surrounding ecosystems. Apart from providing a consistent income for the community, ecotourism initiatives can contribute to financing conservation endeavors, including activities like reforestation, wildlife rehabilitation, and educational programs. Developing nations embrace and appreciate ecotourism as a promising approach to foster their progress without jeopardizing their natural environment (Jiang, 2008). Montes (2019) found that various organizations, such as the World Bank, USAID, Inter-American Development Bank, and the Worldwide Fund for Nature have advocated for ecotourism as a crucial development strategy in developing regions

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) originally defined ecotourism as “conscious travel to natural areas that preserves the environment and enhances the welfare of local communities” (TIES, 1990).

### **Ecotourism Plans for Recovery in the New Normal**

Roberto Cereno, an expert in ecotourism and forestry serving as Vice-Chancellor for Community Affairs of the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) and concurrently directing the Training Center for Tropical Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability (TREES) at the College of Forestry and Natural Resources, emphasized in an interview the importance of focusing on ecotourism as we resume traveling (Sun, C. via GMA Network.com 2020).

Cereno underscored the vital contribution of ecotourism to the local tourism economy. At its core, ecotourism is conscientious tourism, allowing visitors to appreciate nature remaining environmentally mindful.

As per Cereno, a genuine ecotourism destination adheres to five essential principles, known as the 5 E’s of ecotourism: enjoyment, economic benefit, engagement, education, and environmental protection.

**Enjoyment of Visitors.** Visitors find pleasure in experiencing, something unavailable in urban settings. The focus is on offering nature-centric enjoyment.

**Economic benefit.** Economic gain arises as the local industry benefits from the employment of local guides and other community members, contributing to the livelihoods and sustaining the local community.

**Engagement.** This pertains to ensuring the appropriate participation of stakeholders in tourism initiatives.

**Education** pertaining to conservation.

**Environmental protection.** This embodies the social commitment upheld by ecotourism.

While ecotourism is not a recent idea, it is crucial to emphasize that for a location to be genuinely considered an ecotourism destination, it must incorporate all five components. The principles of the "new normal" in ecotourism have been advocated long before the onset of the pandemic.

### **Domestic travel**

Despite some relaxation in quarantine guidelines, travel restrictions persist. While tourist destinations in low-Covid-19 areas operate within a travel bubble, many provinces countries maintain stringent border controls.

The recommended approach is to prioritize local travel, with ecotourism spots being the optimal destinations.

### **Safe and Healthy practices**

The adjustments brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have compelled individuals to embrace new habits. With restricted operations, planning routines in advance, adhering to schedules and following protocols have become essential. Large gatherings are prohibited, and practicing physical distancing is recommended, while outdoor activities reduce the risk of virus transmission.

Interestingly, these practices align with the norms of ecotourism, where pre-bookings and advanced trip arrangements are standard. Ecotourism emphasizes small group sizes, connecting individuals with nature and the outdoors.

In essence, ecotourism has long been imparting lessons on embracing the “better normal.”

### **Unique Selling Point**

What distinguishes ecotourism destinations from typical travel spots is the provision of a unique selling point (USP) --- an authentic experience unavailable elsewhere, particularly in the urban areas.

This aspect of ecotourism encourages industry participants to leverage the strengths of their region, emphasizing natural resources to attract visitors to a specific destination.

### **Community Involvement**

The adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism disproportionately affected local communities..

However, ecotourism provides an avenue for local stakeholders to actively participate and recover lost livelihoods and profits. This involvement spans from grassroots levels, including local tour guides, mountain porters, fishermen, farmers, restaurant worker, to artisans in the town.

## **Prevention of another Health Catastrophe**

Researchers have identified that the novel coronavirus originated from the consumption of wild animals, notably bats. The prospect of another crisis stemming from the irresponsible treatment of nature is something we must avoid. Ecotourism stands as a crucial element in averting another health catastrophe. Ecotourists serve as vigilant guardians of ecotourism protection. Properly implemented, ecotourism promotes sustainability and deters illegal and disruptive activities.

When conservationists seek income sources for nature protection, ecotourism typically tops their list. International tourism has often been viewed as the panacea for providing incentives and resources to safeguard iconic wildlife. The shortcomings of this approach have been laid bare by the Covid-19 pandemic. With an anticipated loss of 50 million tourism jobs in 2020, a return to 'normal service' seems uncertain. Urgent exploration of alternative means to fund conservation is imperative for both short-term and long term sustainability.

Refisch (2020) asserts that, as per the International Ecotourism Society, ecotourism entails "mindful travel to natural regions, aiming to preserve the environment and enhance the welfare of local communities." Through restricting visitor numbers and controlling tourist facilities, ecotourism seeks to reduce human influence on the environment while fostering awareness and respect for both the environment and local cultures.

An ecotourism strategy grounded in community involvement emphasizes giving local communities the authority to oversee every facet of the initiative. (Scheyvens, 1999). In principle, involving locals in ecotourism appears

advantageous, leading to economic benefits for the community alongside environmental preservation (Haddle, 2005).

Local communities gain advantages from employment, business prospects, and social initiatives, with ecotourism playing a substantial role in national economies. In 2017, Rwanda, celebrated for its mountains, volcanoes, and diverse wildlife, attracted 1.5 million international tourists. The parks alone, showcasing the country's natural wonders, hosted 94,000 visitors and generated \$18.7 million in revenue. Looking ahead to a post-Covid-19 era, digital solutions emerge as a potential avenue, suggesting initiatives that endorse virtual ecotourism.

Jiang (2008) explains that economically, ecotourism is seen as a significant avenue for fostering local economic growth. It has the potential to create employment opportunities for locals and stimulate the growth of associated sectors like services and accommodations. Furthermore, the economic gains from ecotourism can contribute to the enhancement of local infrastructure. Additionally, the development of ecotourism can boost both consumption and production, thereby providing an additional impetus to the local economy.

In the midst of the pandemic, conducting an ecotourism market study is opportune as it is poised to offer crucial insights into the key challenges that will impact market expansion in the upcoming years (ResearchMoz.com, 2020).

Despite the ongoing global health crisis, the outlook for ecotourism appears optimistic, highlighting the potential for solutions amid challenges. The role of communication and its strategies in addressing this situation should not be overlooked. The key may lie in the willingness of ecotourism stakeholders to venture

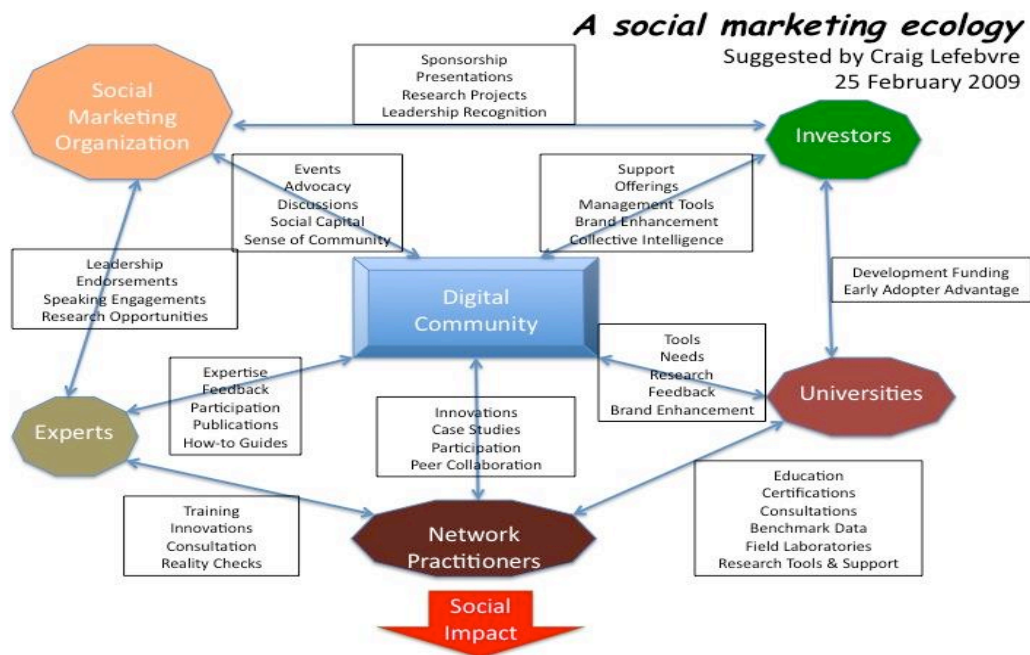
into innovative approaches, reshaping perceptions of this natural and organic solution to the Covid-19 crisis.

### The Social Marketing Theory (SMT)

This research aims to employ the Social Marketing Theory to analyze and revitalize the ecotourism sector within the tourism industry. Exploring the communication aspects of this theory is crucial to understanding its relevance to the study's objectives.

Figure 1.

*The Social Marketing Ecology*



The Social Marketing Theory centers on mass communication, emphasizing the promotion of socially valuable information and socially acceptable behaviors (Bajracharya, 2018). Social acceptability is defined by Quebec.ca as the outcome of a collective judgment or collective opinion about a project, plan, or policy. According

to the same website, some factors that can influence social acceptability include among others the public's participation in decision-making, trust in the promoters and institutions, values, beliefs, and expectations, real or perceived risks or uncertainty, impact on the living environment and the environment, and benefits and repercussions for local communities.

Figure 1 in the previous page shows us the intricacies of the social marketing ecology. It now includes the digital community in advancing its cause to reach as many stakeholders as possible.

Social and welfare organizations have applied the Social marketing Theory to encourage or discourage diverse behaviors. Utilizing a comprehensive framework, this theory aids in planning, designing, implementing, and assessing social campaigns, prioritizing information dissemination. Emphasizing creativity over public service announcements, it packages and distributes information systematically for optimal sharing and impact. By integrating marketing concepts and strategies, the theory leverages commercial principles to foster communication and advance socially beneficial behaviors (Odiase, 2020).

Social marketing seeks to comprehend the social and psychological elements that contribute to resistance to societal change. Its aim is to enhance the social acceptability, response, and adoption of specific social ideas within a targeted group. Leveraging marketing techniques such as market segmentation, exchange theory and consumer research, social marketing primarily focuses on social intervention.

Identifying the target audience is driven by their information requirements. Following this, information is organized and disseminated in a way that ensures easy accessibility for the intended audience.

The Social Marketing Theory (SMT) seeks a comprehensive understanding of societal and psychological factors, aiming to adeptly manipulate them to enhance the effectiveness of mass media information campaigns. Emphasizing the identification of social and psychological barriers hindering information flow through mass media, the theory proposes diverse strategies, ranging from indigenous approaches to the utilization of saturation advertising, to overcome these obstacles.

In the 1970s, Philip Kotler and Gerald Zaltman established social marketing as a discipline, recognizing that the marketing principles employed to sell products could be equally applied to promote ideas, attitudes, and behaviors. According to Kotler and Andreasen, social marketing "differs from other marketing domains solely in terms of the marketer's and organization's objectives. Social marketing seeks to influence social behaviors not to benefit the marketer, but to benefit the target audience and the general society." This method has found widespread application in global health initiatives, notably for contraceptives and oral rehydration therapy (ORT). Increasingly, it is being employed in the United States for a variety of subjects, including but not limited to drug abuse, heart disease and organ donation (Weinreich, 2010).

Social marketing comprises two types: Operational social marketing, which aims to alter behavior, and Strategic social marketing, utilized to shape new policies and development strategies.

Implementing social marketing initiatives is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process (Morvan, 2008).

The significance of social marketing is crucial as it frequently brings attention to broad-ranging issues that might be overlooked by the mainstream population.

Whether addressing the environment, public health, safety, or community development, marketing for positive impact is a strategy aimed at fostering change (Richtopia.com, 2020).

Social Marketing involves applying marketing principles and techniques to bring about behavioral change. It encompasses a concept, process, and application that revolve around understanding people's desires, organizing the creation, communication, and delivery of products and services to fulfill those desires, while also addressing societal needs, and solving significant social issues (Serrat, 2010). Professionals in the field of communication for social change collaborate closely with people in local communities worldwide to make a meaningful impact (Figueroa, Kincaid, Rani, and Lewis, 2002).

Social marketing is a dynamic and interdisciplinary cross-sector strategy aimed at fostering social good. Similar to marketing and various public sector domains like education, public health, and environmental development, social marketing requires integrating a wide range of disciplines, theories, and methodologies. In essence, social marketing exemplifies a new multidisciplinary approach that addresses social issues as interconnected systems (French and Blair-Stevens, 2010).

Social marketing emerged by merging two domains: social psychology and commercial marketing. This fusion resulted in a marketing concept extending beyond the traditional sales-focused objective of advertising. Social marketing examines the marketing mindset within socially conscious demographics, aiming to promote not just a product or service but also the social benefits associated with owning and using them (Reyes-Fournier via AZcentral.com).

Social Marketing involves applying marketing concepts and techniques to facilitate exchanges that lead to the accomplishment of socially beneficial objectives, ultimately benefiting society (Donovan, R. via The NSMC.com). It aims to bring about a change in people's behavior.

Behavior Change in public health refers to any alteration in human behavior which can occur spontaneously or involuntarily, or it may be intentional and systematic through conditioning. Regardless of the nature of the transformation, it significantly impacts one's overall functioning as an individual (Pam, 2013).

## **The Components of Social Marketing**

The 4 major elements of social marketing, also employed as techniques, are referred to as the 4Ps of social marketing.

### **Product**

The target population is motivated to adopt socially essential products such as family planning, clean drinking water, saving and credit organizations, nutritional foods, organic farming, etc. Social marketing aims for sustainable products that contribute to societal well-being, and these products must hold a meaningful place in

society. They can be tangible items like physical goods or intangible aspects such as services and practices.

## **Price**

In social marketing, the price can be either monetary or non-monetary. The monetary price is the cost of purchasing the product that could benefit the population. Non-monetary price encompasses psychological and social costs such as changing a habit, investing time, or putting in effort. A more profound change is often achieved when the overall price, whether monetary or non-monetary, is minimized.

## **Place**

The place in social marketing refers to the location where the target population in need can be located. It is the most effective and productive site for social marketing efforts, serving as the distribution point for the product or the location where implemented changes occur. The success of the campaign hinges on the accessibility of this place.

## **Promotion**

Social marketing involves promoting a product or habit through the dissemination of information. The methods of conveying this information are diverse, encompassing tools and techniques such as advertisements, charts, documentaries, as well as public relations, media advocacy, entertainment, and more. Effective promotion often requires creativity for optimal impact.

While not always regarded as a distinct component of social marketing, positioning is employed as a technique. It involves creating an image through the campaign, representing the socio-psychological aspect of the promoted product, aligned with consumer needs, empirical evidence, and objectives. Additional elements include public partnership, policy, and more.

The target audience for social marketing includes the public and various stakeholders. Collaborations among similar agencies or the community contribute to social marketing efforts. Significant changes, whether in policy or administration, are essential for effective change. Additionally, the availability of funds is a crucial component required to execute the entire process of social marketing.

Environmental health and social change are intricate matters often presented as challenges to be resolved. This presentation directs attention toward implementing solutions aimed at transforming systemic issues related to the environment, health, and society (Rundle-Thiele, David, Willmott, Pang, Eagle & Hay, 2019).

## **Features of the Social Marketing Theory**

### **1. Creating Audience Awareness**

When aiming to promote a novel concept, person, or behavior, the initial phase involves generating awareness of its existence. Utilizing various channels, including traditional ones like news media and contemporary platforms such as the internet, contributes to this awareness. While a saturation television campaign is an effective but expensive method, employing newer media allows reaching a broader

audience. The internet, in particular, facilitates connecting with younger demographics less reliant on newspapers or television for information.

## **2. Targeting the Right Audience**

When conveying messages, it is crucial to initially pinpoint the target audience and subsequently determine the most effective channels for delivering the message. This not only reduces costs but also ensures greater audience reach. For instance, if the message is intended for older individuals, disseminating information through the internet may be inefficient given that most elderly people do not use computers. A more effective approach would be to utilize radio and television for message delivery.

## **3. Reinforce the Message**

People often forget new messages after a single exposure, emphasizing the need for reinforcement. This involves ensuring individuals encounter the message through various channels repeatedly. Reinforcements can be achieved by promoting the message across different mass media, engaging in door-to-door outreach, conducting group discussions, and participating in televised debates. As individuals share the received message with others, they can become agents of change in promoting the message.

## **4. Cultivate Images or Impressions**

If the audience lacks interest in the person, product or service being promoted, image advertising becomes essential. In this approach, recognizable and easily comprehensible images are presented, with the new product or service depicted in connection to that image. This strategy establishes a positive context for promoting the new product. For instance, portraying an old couple fondly recalling

their college days and romance while enjoying a cup of coffee is a tactic that associates familiar events with positive emotions, enhancing the image of a new coffee product.

## **5. Stimulate Interest**

To prompt the audience to seek information, it is crucial to attract their attention and generate interest. Once accomplished, making information easily accessible to the public becomes key. Engaging in dramatic events or unexpected actions serves to capture the audience's interest effectively. For instance, a politician photographed cleaning a beach communicates a commitment to the environment. Similarly, a dishwashing product claiming to clean a thousand plates with one bottle could organize an event washing a thousand or more plates in real time using a single bottle, creating interest by breaking the Guinness Book of World Records. Similar strategies can be applied to promote social welfare schemes and products.

## **6. Induce Desired Result**

After information has reached the intended audience, it becomes imperative to take steps to ensure that the desired decision is reached. For example, an anti-smoking campaign aims to ensure people quit smoking, and the introduction of a new product should lead to tangible sales or usage.

The social marketing theory is a framework that utilizes concepts and strategies adapted from commercial marketing to encourage positive and health-promoting social behaviors. This encompasses various areas, such as promoting sexual abstinence in young individuals, responsible drinking, and the cessation of drug abuse.

The Social Marketing Theory (SMT) posits that the objective of marketing is to positively impact the target audience (consumers), motivating them to “willingly embrace, reject, alter, or relinquish a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups, or society as a whole” (Kotler, et al., 2002, qtd in Wymer & Basil, 2014, p. 58). Therefore, the overarching aim of social marketing is to attain a collective benefit for society.

### **The Downsides of Social Marketing**

Social marketing seeks to foster positive societal change and healthy behaviors. For instance, it strives to curb issues like binge drinking and substance abuse to establish stable families and decrease crime rates. While it can effectively raise awareness about the adverse effects of habits such as drug abuse, social marketing may inadvertently encourage undesirable behaviors. For instance, advocating condom use to prevent STD's unintentionally promote teen sex and promiscuity, illustrating instances where social marketing unintentionally influences both positive and negative behaviors.

Marketers aim to shape consumer behavior, and many health and social issues result from human conduct. Social marketing combines these elements, applying marketing insights to tackle societal behaviors. It acknowledges the impact of environmental factors on behavior and recognizes the significant role of commercial marketing in influencing it. Social marketing's grasp of both commercial and social realms enables it to offer insightful critiques of marketing practices and propose intelligent solutions (Hastings & Saren, 2003).

## **Social Marketing through Health Education: An Example**

As per the US National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, the duties and skills of a health education specialist encompass evaluating the community needs and orchestrating health education initiatives (NCHEC, 2010). Social marketing theory aligns with these responsibilities since its focus is on inducing behavior change in the target demographic. For instance, when assessing social needs, like addressing drug addiction issues, a health education specialist can leverage social marketing theory to determine effective placement and promotional approaches to persuade individuals to modify their behavior.

It's important to realize that achieving a lasting change in behavior is seldom straightforward; it typically demands a significant investment of time, energy, and emotions (Kendra, 2020).

The complexities of environmental, health and social change are often presented as challenges requiring solutions. This approach directs attention toward implementing solutions aimed at altering systemic issues in the environment, health, and society (Rundle-Thiele, David, Willmott, Pang, Eagle & Hay, 2019).

Social marketing theory aids in health education planning by directing the development of suitable messages and educational materials to encourage desired behavior. This could include conveying the adverse consequences of drug abuse, such as mental disorders, to convince the audience to refrain from drug use.

Social marketing employs similar techniques to Kellogg's cereal marketing, emphasizing the audience, market research, and a well-devised marketing strategy.

However, rather than urging consumers to purchase a product, the objective is to persuade the target audience to embrace a healthy behavior (Frogdog.com, 2019).

### **Theories and Models in Social Marketing**

Previous research reveals a plethora of theories and models for social marketing. Despite acknowledging the significance of the exchange concept in explaining social marketing, authors like Lefebvre & Rochlin (1997) and Novelli (1990) leave room for the application of various other theoretical models in the practical formulation of social marketing programs. Novelli asserts that marketing is grounded in theory, specifically relying on consumer behavior theories derived from the social and behavioral sciences. This mirrors the approach in the application of social marketing. Therefore, although examining theoretical models in social marketing appears pertinent for advancing the field, it also involves a degree of speculation. Numerous social marketers choose not to share their endeavors in professional journals or at conferences, and among those who do, only a minority specifically delve into the theoretical models influencing their decisions regarding target audience selection, formative research inquiries, chosen strategies, the process of selecting and developing program elements, intended outcomes, and the methods employed for measurement.

While theory holds significance as a guiding framework, numerous social marketers either neglect to explicitly employ theory in designing social marketing interventions or rely on familiar theories that might not precisely capture the essence of the behavioral issue. There is a lack of understanding among social marketing practitioners about how to effectively apply theory in crafting interventions,

campaigns, or tools, and scholars may not always comprehend the process of translating theories into practical applications (Manikam & Russell-Bennett, 2016).

By showcasing the application of social marketing theory-based approach in crafting interventions, campaigns, or tools, there is an aspiration to realize the intended outcomes for bringing about social change.

Within the expansive framework of SMT, the significance of communication strategies and their functionality becomes evident. A communication strategy, applicable to internal communications, marketing communications and public relations, is a devised plan to attain communication objectives. Comprising four key elements ---communication goals, target audience, communication plan and channels, a communication strategy is notably visible in businesses dedicated to employee development (Spacey, 2019). Fostering engaged employees committed to the success of the business is achievable through the potent utilization of communication, employing clear and consistent messaging to empower the workforce for optimal performance and elevate the business to new heights (Sprimont, 2020).

In conclusion, let us explore the endeavors of theorists and researchers as they strive to formulate theories aimed at predicting the mechanisms governing various phenomena. Their goal is to comprehend a phenomenon by delving into its underlying system. In its optimal state, this involves grasping the general principles that form the basis of the phenomenon, enabling them to elucidate not only the occurrences and non-occurrences but also the reasons behind them (Basil, 2019).

Armed with the foundational knowledge of the Social Marketing Theory (SMT), this research begins with the aspiration to explore and unveil how

ecotourism can recover amid the ongoing health crisis through the application of social marketing principles.

### **The Theory of Reasoned Action**

This research aims to incorporate the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) alongside the Social Marketing Theory to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the study's findings. The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) serves as a predictive model of human behavior, asserting that the strongest predictor of behavior in a particular situation is the individual's intention to carry out that behavior. Unsurprisingly, the intention to perform an action is shaped by the person's attitude (their feelings or evaluations) toward the behavior, as well as the attitudes of significant individuals and the perceived social pressures (subjective norms) associated with the behavior.

Understanding individuals' attitudes and emotions often enables the prediction of their actions, as demonstrated by certain psychologists. Following the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), people's intention to engage in a behavior (their behavioral intention) is the decisive factor influencing their actions, shaped by both their personal attitudes toward the behavior and the perceived social pressures (referred to in the theory as subjective norms) from individuals they seek to satisfy. Individuals are inclined to intend behaviors they view positively or that enjoy popularity among others. Conversely, they are disinclined to intend behaviors they perceive negatively or that lack popularity, especially among significant others like family, close friends, colleagues. Once the intention to behave in a specific manner is established, individuals typically follow through and engage in the behavior.

## Chapter III

### THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study wishes to use the elements of the Social Marketing Theory (SMT) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) of communication and the social sciences respectively in seeking to explain and explore the answers to the research problems as stated below:

How can ecotourism be made socially acceptable in the next normal and help jumpstart the tourism industry in the post-pandemic era, i.e., the new normal?

What factors comprise social acceptability? What elements in the communication plan must be present in the marketing strategy for local ecotourism to recover? What advantages or benefits of local ecotourism could be highlighted in its marketing or promotion efforts post-pandemic? What marketing platform can help the ecotourism industry attract guests back and increase patronage percentage in ecotourism sites?

The essence of the Social Marketing Theory (SMT) lies in promoting socially valuable and acceptable information to the public or the target audience in a communication event. Its objective is to provide a framework for designing, implementing, and assessing information campaigns. Additionally, it strives to comprehensively grasp how societal and psychological factors function to both enhance and assess the effectiveness of mass media information campaigns.

SMT also addresses the identification of social and psychological obstacles impeding the dissemination of information through mass media. It provides strategies

and solutions to overcome these barriers, encompassing approaches ranging from culturally specific methods to the application of saturation advertising.

SMT places importance on pinpointing the target audience, engaging in market research, and devising a strategic marketing plan. Drawing inspiration from commercial marketing approaches, it diverges by advocating for the adoption of behaviours that enhance individual or societal health and overall well-being, rather than promoting the purchase of a product.

The following are the six (6) main features of the Social Marketing Theory:

1. Creating audience awareness. This is the initial stage toward achieving the objective of social marketing. To propagate a novel concept, behaviour, policy, etc., it is essential to leverage diverse available channels.
2. Targeting the right audience. Focus on the appropriate audience by recognizing those in need of the message, and subsequently determining the most effective methods to convey the message to them.
3. Reinforcing the message. Consistently expose individuals to the message through various channels.
4. Cultivating images or impressions. This involves employing image advertising and crafting a narrative to promote a socially valuable or acceptable idea or behaviour.
5. Generating interest. This can involve emphasizing dramatic events or unexpected actions to enhance the attention garnered by an advertising campaign or the promotion of an idea or behaviour.
6. Induce desired result. Achieving the desired outcome involves assessing tangible results to determine the campaign's positive effects. This may

manifest in increased support from the target audience, a noticeable impact or resonance with the promoted message, ultimately resulting in a change in behavior.

### **Operational definition of terms:**

1. Promotion of an idea or a socially acceptable behavior such as patronizing or visiting an ecotourism site in the new normal and even during the pandemic: this refers to the behavior that will be offered to the target audience with the view to changing their mindset.
2. Communication Marketing Strategies: These involve the organized utilization of various media platforms to promote socially acceptable ideas or behaviors. This encompasses the content of advertisements or promotions employed by the ecotourism industry to attract visitors to their respective locations.
3. Compliance measures in the ecotourism facility: this refers to the various modes and means of assuring the target audience as to the safety of the ecotourism facility, i.e., safe from Covid-19. Examples of these are having a disinfection room, air purifiers, social distancing and wearing of face mask reminders, limiting guest capacity, etc.
4. Social Acceptability Indicators: what can be seen or observed in an ecotourism facility following promotion: considered a boon in the local tourism economy as a significant rise in the number of visitors of various ecotourism locations is seen; guest composition of those attracted to visit ecotourism site: age group, family, and friends, etc.; and job generation.

5. The environmental context of a communication event pertains to the circumstances in which the promotion of an ecotourism facility occurs, such as the presence of a global health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Along with the Social Marketing Theory (SMT), I found it helpful to also use the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) in interpreting the results of the study. TRA will mainly be used to explain why people do what they do, or why people decide to carry out a specific behaviour, what influences them in doing what they do, in this case, patronizing or visiting an ecotourism site amid the pandemic and in the new normal.

Considering the research problems cited above, the Social Marketing Theory (SMT) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) helped shed light in describing and explaining the extent of social acceptability *of ecotourism patronage* in the new normal. SMT can assist in identifying the communication marketing strategies employed by the ecotourism industry to attract their target audience and encourage patronage in the current era of the “new normal.”

TRA, on the one hand, can help explain the attitudes of people towards ecotourism, manifested in their patronage of ecotourism sites especially in the new normal.

This research additionally seeks to identify the elements influencing the social acceptability of engaging in ecotourism in Cebu Province and assess the

communication marketing strategies utilized by the ecotourism sector to draw visitors to their specific ecotourism sites.

A correlation exists between the social acceptability of visiting ecotourism sites, the communication marketing strategies utilized by the ecotourism industry to showcase their sites, and the subsequent reactions of the target audience upon receiving the promoted message.

## Chapter IV

### METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

This research aimed to explore the elements and indicators of social acceptability of participating in ecotourism and identified the communication strategies employed by the ecotourism industry amidst the ongoing health emergency crisis induced the Covid-19 pandemic, navigating the challenges of the new normal.

The survey research design was employed to fulfil the goals of this study, allowing the examination of 'naturally unfolding phenomena.' It aimed to gather data at a specific moment from a convenient sample chosen to represent a population at that particular time.

As outlined in the preceding chapter, this study focuses on the following objectives within the context of the ongoing health emergency crisis:

1. Determine the profile of the guests who visit an ecotourism site.
2. Determine the reasons why people visit ecotourism sites.
3. Describe how the guests learned about the ecotourism site.
4. Describe the communication strategies being employed to promote ecotourism sites.
5. Codify social acceptability of ecotourism in the post pandemic era.

6. Recommend an effective communication model to promote ecotourism sites in the post pandemic era.

### **Respondents of the Study**

There were one hundred (100) target respondents for this study. They are those who patronized the ecotourism facility from the time it reopened in October 2020 up to May 14, 2022, Saturday, the last day when all survey questionnaires were answered and collected.

This study also included the insights of two (2) members of the management staff and five (5) members of the operations staff of the ecotourism facility under study.

### **Locale of the Study**

This study was conducted in the Cebu province locality, specifically in a selected ecotourism site in southwestern Cebu's municipality, Aloguinsan.

## A Source of Ecotourism Pride: Bojo River in Aloguinsan, Cebu

**Figure 2.**

*Bojo River Cruise from Yooreka.com by Peter Parcon*



Aloguinsan municipality in Southwestern Cebu encompasses the Bojo River, situated along the coastal region of Barangay Bojo. This 1.4 km-long waterway is integral to the Bojo River Nature Reserve, a protected area conserving 61 bird species and 24 mangrove species. Recognized as a burgeoning tourist spot, it has received accolades such as being named one of the Top 100 Global Sustainable Destinations by Green Destinations for three consecutive years (2016, 2017 and 2018) and Best Community-based Tourism at the ASEAN Tourism Awards in 2017 (Amata, 2019). Most recently, in December 2021, they received yet another international recognition. The Bojo River was awarded as one of the Best Tourism Villages in the World, along with 44 other sustainable villages. This award was given to them by the United Nations' World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the tourism promotional arm of the United Nations.

The UNWTO's pilot initiative recognized 44 villages from 32 countries that stood out for their natural and cultural resources as well as for their innovative and transformative actions and commitment to tourism development in line with the sustainable development goals (SDG). This program was launched to advance the role of tourism as a tool for rural development, with its aim to value and safeguard rural villages along with their associated landscapes and knowledge system among others. The villages were evaluated by an independent Advisory Board based on a set of criteria covering nine areas: cultural and natural resources, promotion and conservation of cultural resources, economic sustainability, social sustainability, environmental sustainability, tourism potential and development and value chain integration, governance and prioritization of tourism, infrastructure and connectivity, and health, safety, and security.

The Bojo Aloguinsan Eco-Tourism Association (BAETAS), a community-centered eco-cultural tourism organization, offers tailored Bojo River Cruise tour packages designed for backpackers visiting their local community. The comprehensive package includes the environmental fee, snacks, lunch, a tour guide and the cruise experience (Abellera, 2016).

As of June 2022, walk-in rates are at P400 per person (river cruise and swimming), and group package rates or a full tour package are at P850 per person, inclusive of welcome leis, welcome drinks, lunch, snacks, handicraft demo, river cruise, and swimming.

Founded in October 2009, BAETAS consists of Aloguinsan community members who are primarily tasked with safeguarding the Bojo River and the Tañon Strait, recognized as the largest marine protected area in the Philippines (Miranda,

2020). The Bojo River Cruise initiative was initiated by the Aloguinsan local government to provide alternative source of income for the community. The local government invested in training local fishermen and housewives residing around the Bojo River in mangrove conservation, flora and fauna identification, and tourism management. Since the launch of the river cruise, it has attracted numerous tourists creating opportunities and additional income for members of BAETAS. According to a study by Murselovic (2013), which references a paper on Communication for Development, developmental projects like ecotourism, should emphasize empowering people to actively participate in decision-making processes that impact their lives, precisely what BAETAS is accomplishing.

Miranda (2020) reported that the residents established a compact nature reserve encompassing the mangroves at the junction of Bojo River and Tañon Strait. To preserve the river and minimize environmental impact, BAETAS enforces a daily limit of eighty (80) tourists. The community has embraced motor-free means of transportation along the river. Collaborating with various sectors in Aloguinsan, monthly clean-up drives are organized to safeguard mangroves and corals, fostering public awareness on waste management.

The entire Cebu province went into lockdown on March 15, 2020, impacting over 40 active members of BAETAS due to the closure of the Bojo River Cruise (Cebu Daily News, 2020). Fortunately, the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) cash subsidy provided by the Philippine government assisted the affected families in coping with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the initiation of the community quarantine in March, the Bojo River Cruise, among various destinations in the province, ceased its operations (Antojado, 2020).

The hardship faced by Aloguinsan residents relying on the Bojo River Cruise livelihood was brief. After eight months of community restrictions, on October 28, 2020, Cebu Governor Gwendolyn Garcia and Cebu 3<sup>rd</sup> District Representative Pablo John “PJ” Garcia spearheaded a brief reopening program, bringing joy to the local community. However, due to pandemic-related quarantine measures, the local government now limits daily guests to a maximum of thirty to forty (30-40), down from the previous capacity of seventy.

The Bojo River’s reopening is a positive change as its members find greater benefits as tour guides compared to their original occupation of fishing.

Established in 2009, the Bojo River has gained acclaim from national and international award-giving bodies as a prime illustration of a community-based ecotourism initiative (Erram, 2020).

The Bojo River Cruise, known for its captivating emerald-green waters, has drawn numerous visitors and has received support from both the national and provincial governments since its inception in 2009 (Saavedra, 2020).

## **Sampling Design**

This research employed convenience sampling, also known as availability sampling. It is a specific type of non-probability sampling method that relies on data collection from population members who are conveniently available to participate in the study.

Convenience sampling is a type of sampling where the first available primary data source will be used for the research without additional requirements. This sampling method involved getting participants wherever you can find them and typically wherever it is convenient.

Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where samples are selected from the population only because they are conveniently available to the researcher.

I decided to use this sampling technique mainly because it enabled me to collect data quickly and it is an inexpensive methodology. In consideration of the kind of data needed in the study, this sampling technique allowed me to have readily available samples in the locality under investigation, which was used as the subject of the case study on getting the pulse of ecotourism patronage in the new normal. Given my limited financial budget and owing to time constraints, this sampling technique was advantageous for purposes of my research because it enabled me to work within my initial timetable for the thesis, while getting all relevant data from my primary sources.

### **The Research Instrument**

This study used a survey questionnaire to gauge the social acceptability of engaging in ecotourism and to pinpoint the communication marketing strategies employed by the ecotourism industry in the current era of the “new normal.”

## **Data Gathering Procedure**

I undertook a site visit to the ecotourism facility for two full days, on May 11 and 14, 2022, a Wednesday and a Saturday. I was fortunate to have been granted an appointment with the core officers of their ecotourism association following an introduction letter that was sent to them via email. Several follow-up phone calls were also made with the former president of the association, to secure the dates of the site visit and the interview schedule appointments.

Upon arriving at Aloguinsan's tourism office, the tourism office's secretary received me warmly. I then introduced myself and handed the official letter and gave a quick background on the study to be undertaken at the ecotourism site for some days. I was glad to receive a positive response noting the secretary's openness.

My main contact for this visit readily gave instructions on how to travel to the ecotourism site via a public solo motorbike coming from the tourism office. Upon arriving at the ecotourism facility via the solo motorbike, I was greeted by the peace and quiet which characterize ecotourism sites: lush greenery found in the mangroves that line the bamboo bridge leading to the Bojo River itself, and lively bird chatter.

The former president of the ecotourism association introduced me to the current president, who was my first interviewee for the day. Next was the former president himself. Afterwards, I presented to them the survey questionnaire I prepared for this study on the social acceptability of visiting or patronizing ecotourism sites in the new normal. I was lucky to come across eight (8) walk-in guests on my first day of visit. I administered the questionnaire to the guests after asking if they are willing to answer the 1–2-minute survey.

Before the day ended, I sought the assistance of three (3) graduating tourism students from a technological university who all reside in Aloguinsan, to administer the survey questionnaire to the guests of the ecotourism site specifically from May 11-14, 2022 (Wednesday to Saturday). To get the target 100 respondents, the questionnaire was also administered to those who visited the ecotourism facility after it reopened in October 2020. They managed to do this by doing rounds of house-to-house visits to nearby areas in the locality.

The sections in the survey questionnaire sought to draw factors affecting the social acceptability of ecotourism patronage. There were choices provided as well as an option for the respondents to identify their own unique reasons of patronage of ecotourism in the new normal.

The interview questions, on the one hand, sought to draw first-hand information of the actual experiences of the management and operations staff in currently managing their ecotourism facility.

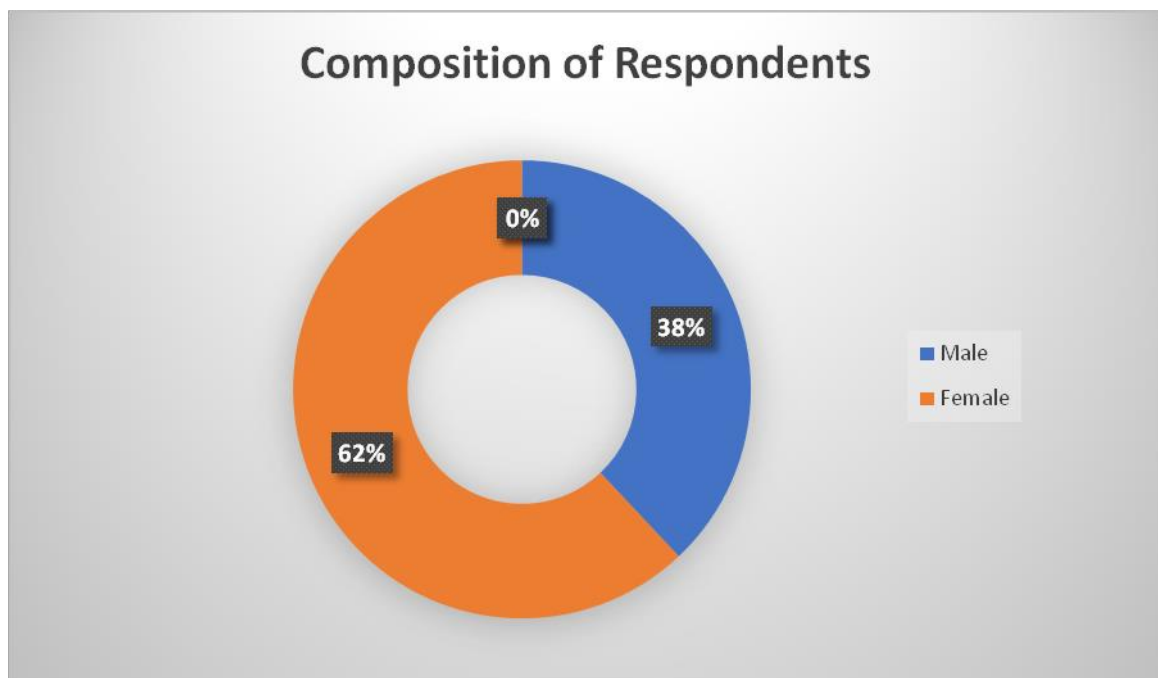
## Chapter V

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Presentation of Results

#### Demographics

**Figure 3.** *Respondents by Gender*

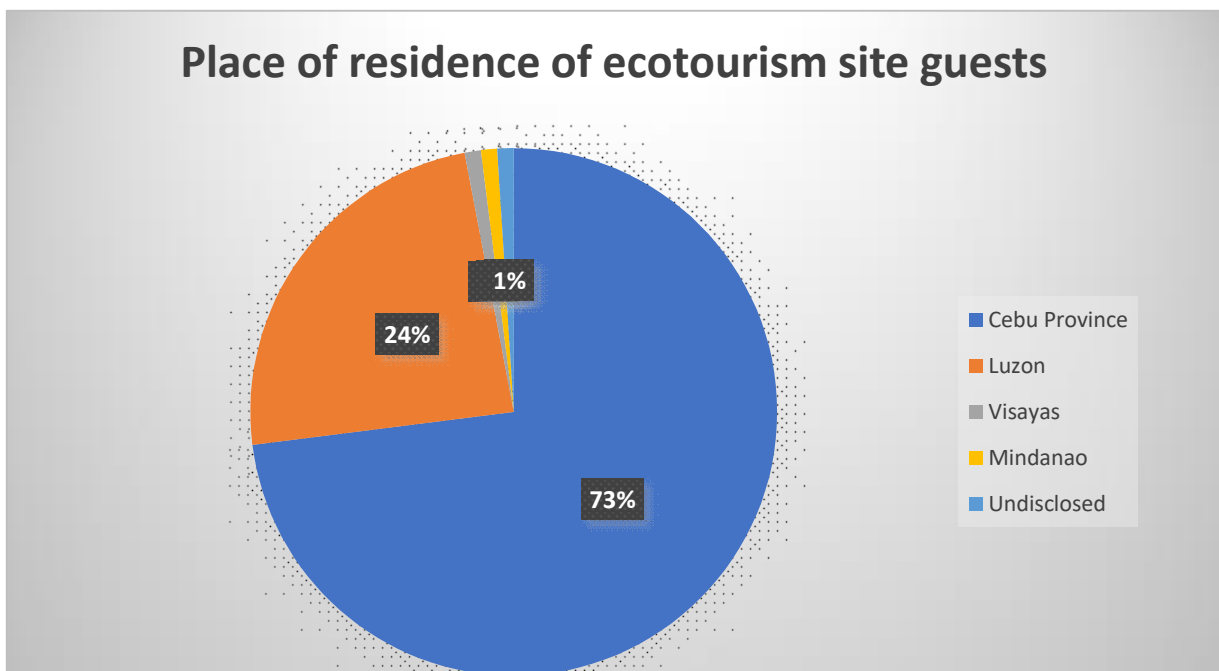


To answer research objective number 1 of the study, there were 100 target respondents, 62% were female and 38% were male. Of the female respondents, 64% (majority) come from the 21-30 age bracket compared to 57% among the male respondents from the same age bracket.

Furthermore, for the male group, 13% are in the 31-40 age bracket, another 13% in the 41-50 age bracket, 7% are between 51-60 years old, and 3% are above 61 years old. The percentage of the working age group among the male respondents is 97%.

For the female group, 20% are between 31-40 years old, 3% between 41-50 years old, 4% between 51-60 years old, and another 4% for 61 years old and above. The percentage of the working age group among the female respondents is 94%. Therefore, majority of the respondents are in the working age group and are active individuals.

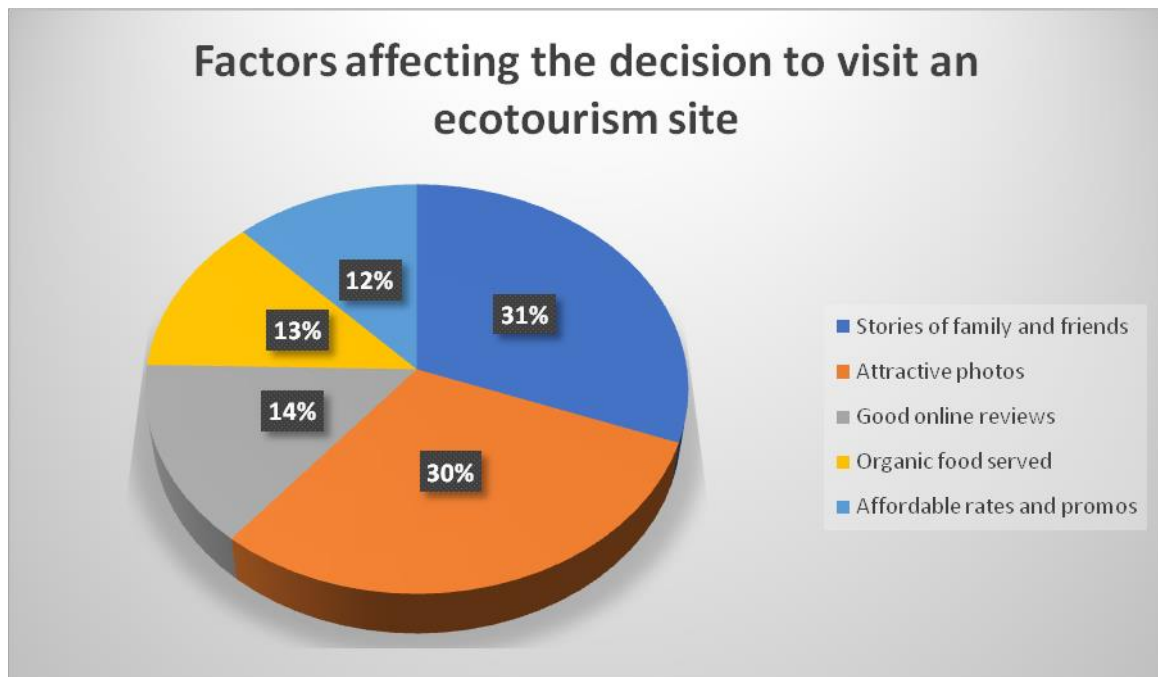
**Figure 4. Respondents' Locality**



The figure above further answers objective number 1 of the study. Among the target respondents, 73% come from Cebu (Aloguinsan, Balamban, Cebu City, Consolacion, Cordova, Lapu-Lapu City, Mandaue City, Minglanilla, Naga, San Fernando, Talisay and Toledo), 24% from Luzon (Cavite, Nueva Ecija, Quezon City, and Rizal), 1% from Western Visayas (Escalante, Negros Occidental), 1% from Mindanao (Compostela Valley) and 1% from an undisclosed locality.

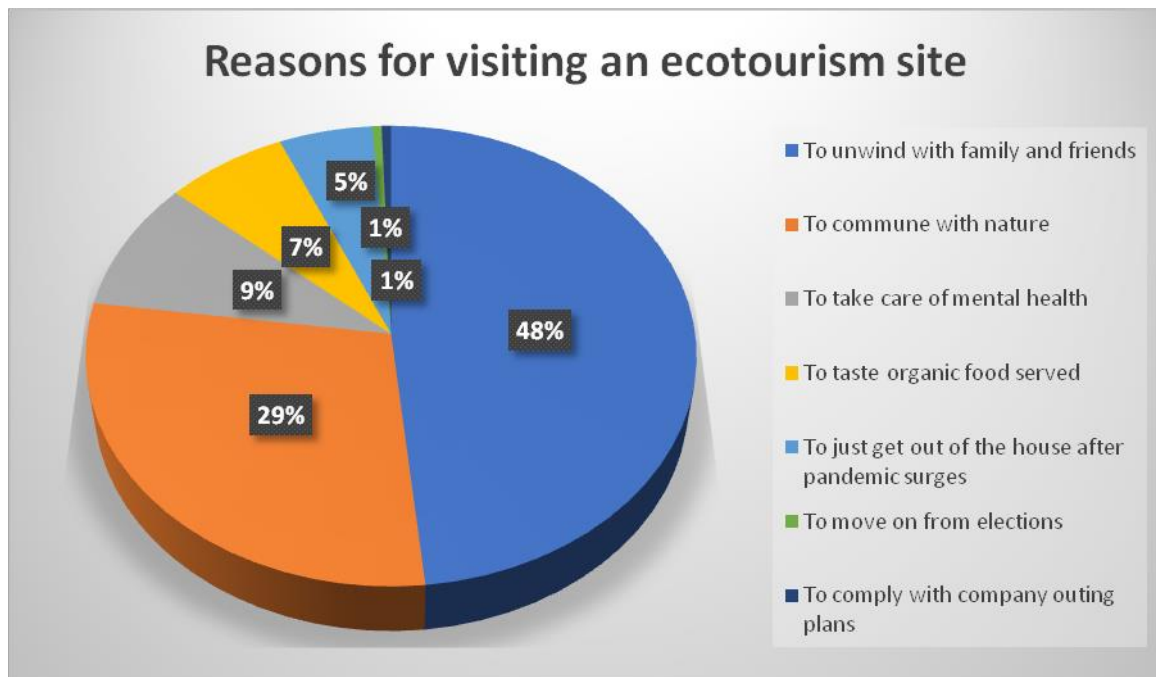
Majority of the respondents (98%) are nature-lovers while 2% said they not and were just in the facility because their relatives or officemates brought them.

**Figure 5.** *Factors that Affected the Decision of Respondents to Visit the Ecotourism Site*



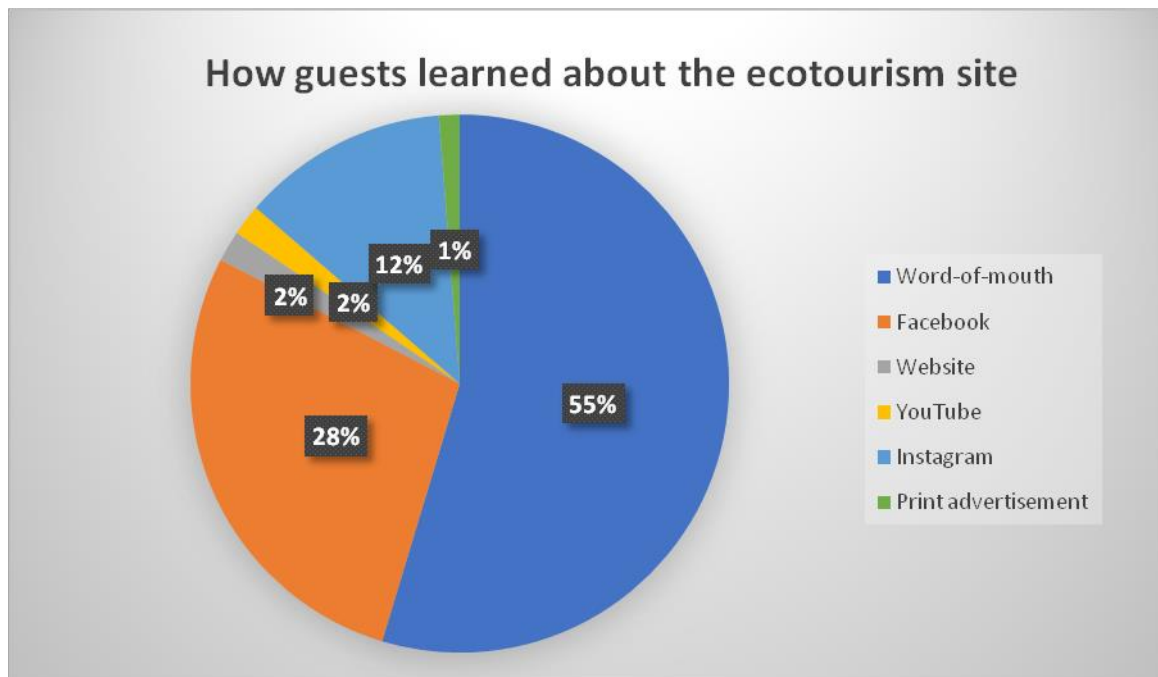
To answer research objective number 2, to determine the reasons why people visit ecotourism sites even during the period of the pandemic and right through the new normal, the following factors affected their decision: stories of family and friends about the ecotourism site gathered the most affirmations, ranking 1<sup>st</sup> with 31% of respondents choosing this answer. Next came the attractive photos or images online with 30%, followed by good online reviews with 14%, and then food served with 13%, and coming last is affordable rates and promos with 12%.

**Figure 6. Reasons for Visiting the Ecotourism Site**



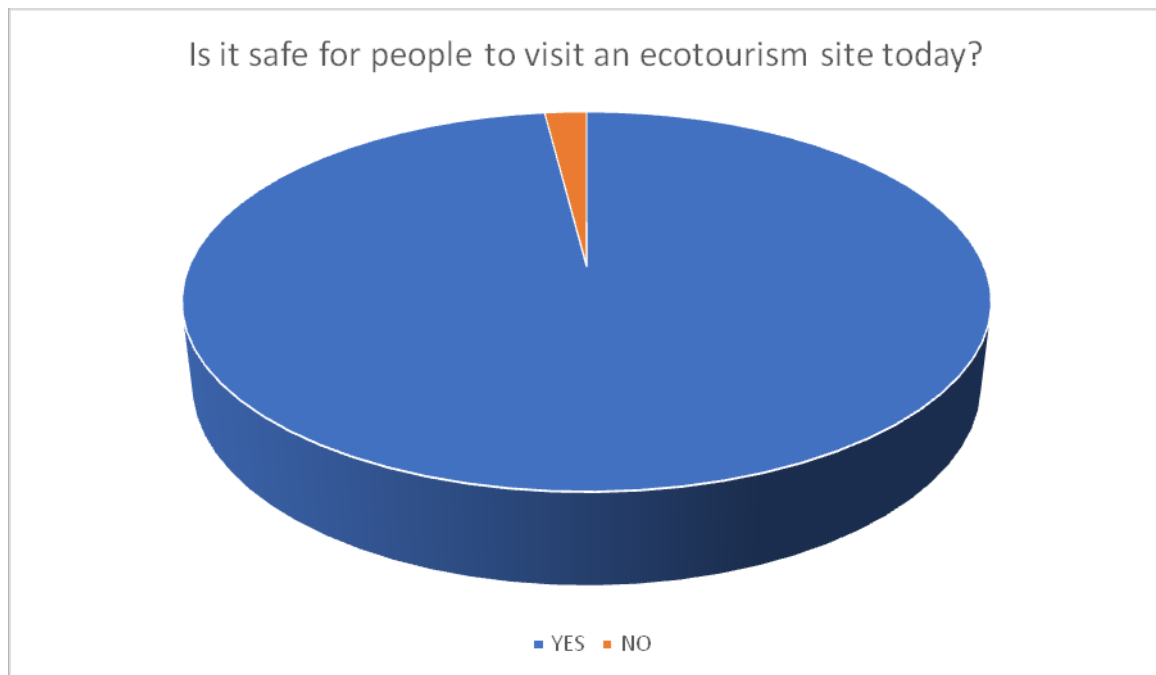
Further answers why the respondents specifically visited the ecotourism site even during the pandemic and up to the present, the overall result was 48% said it is for them to unwind with family and friends, 29% said they want to commune with nature, 9% cited it is good for their mental health, 7% said they would like to taste the home-cooked food being served in the site, 5% said they just wanted to experience the outdoors again since they have been cooped up too long during the pandemic, 1% cited moving on from the results of the recent elections, and 1% said it's because it is part of the itinerary of their company outing.

**Figure 7. Marketing Platforms Where Respondents Learned about the Ecotourism Site**



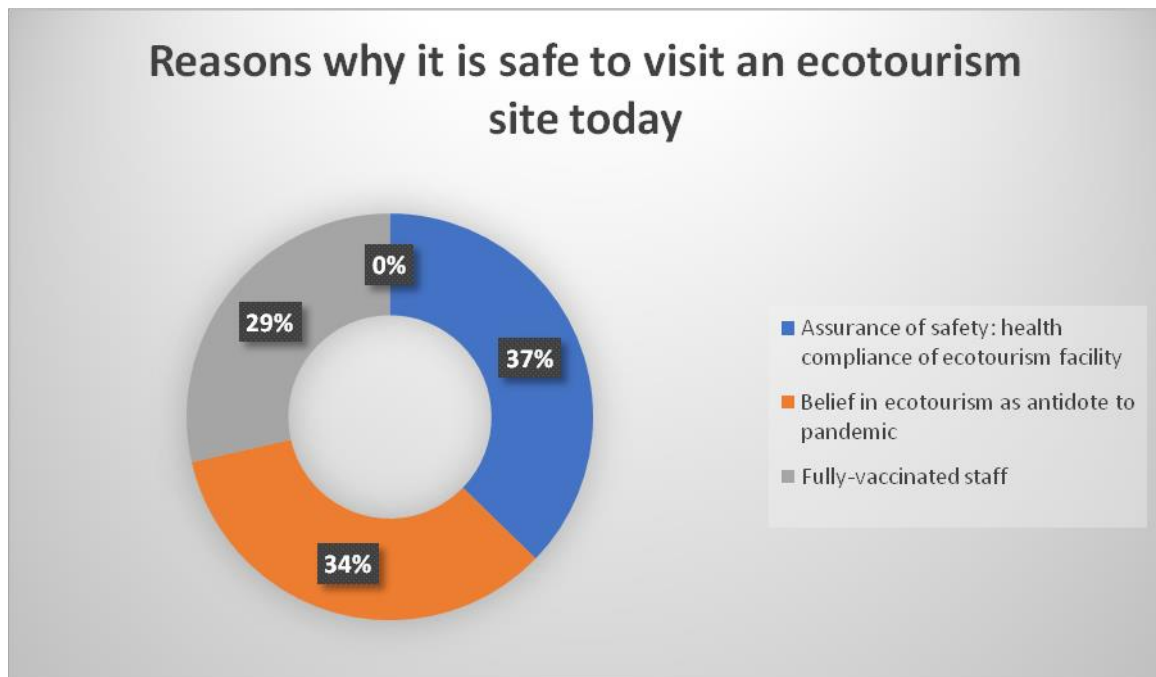
To answer research objective numbers 3 and 4: to describe how the guests learned about the ecotourism site and to describe the communication strategies or platforms by which ecotourism is promoted to the public, 55% said they learned about the ecotourism site through family and friends or by word-of-mouth advertising, 28% via Facebook, 12% via Instagram, 2% via website, 2% via YouTube, and 1% via print advertisement.

**Figure 8. Pulse of Ecotourism's Safety to be Visited**



To answer research objective number 5, to codify social acceptability of ecotourism post pandemic, question number 5 in the survey first asked if they think it is already safe for people to go out and visit ecotourism sites like the Bojo River. A total of 98% think it is safe for people to visit an ecotourism site. Among the respondents, 2% think it is still not safe because of the fear of getting Covid-19 despite having health protocols in place.

**Figure 9. Reasons Why it is Safe to Visit an Ecotourism Site**



The following were the reasons why the 98% think it is already safe: 37% said there's an assurance from the local government that the site is safe, i.e., acknowledgment of the compliance status of the ecotourism facility having a safety seal; 34% said it is safe because they believe that ecotourism, which is said to promote the healing benefits of nature, is an antidote to the pandemic; and 29% said it is safe because of the facility's fully-vaccinated staff. This gives us a glimpse of how we can codify the social acceptability of ecotourism post pandemic, the details of which are discussed in the succeeding pages. This further answers objective number 5 of the study.

Finally, to answer research objective number 6, to recommend a communication model of ecotourism that could effectively facilitate a dynamic exchange of information between communicators in the new normal, please see page 95 under the chapter on Conclusion and Recommendations.

## **Interview Schedule Results**

The interviewees for this study were the current and former presidents of the ecotourism association, selected fisherfolk, paddlers, tour guides, housekeepers, crafts demonstrator, and an ecotourism facility entertainer.

When the pandemic struck, the ecotourism association had to encourage their members to revert to the original means of livelihood: fishing. According to the president of the ecotourism association, “Operations were halted from March to October 2020, a period of eight (8) months. We could not do anything to resume operations as the mandate of the government was to prohibit all tourism facilities to operate due to the frequent Covid-19 surges which were mostly fatal ones, especially during the first few months since its arrival.”

The residents of their barangay, the caretakers of the ecotourism facility, accepted their fate during those trying times when their natural wonder had to rest from seeing throngs of people which were beginning to arrive with a certain regularity following international recognition. They just made it again to the Top 100 Global Sustainable Destinations in 2018, the third consecutive year for making it to the list, when Covid-19 reached Cebu’s shores. And what is more, even during the height of the pandemic, in December 2021, they received yet another award: the United Nations’ World Tourism Organization’s Best Tourism Village Award.

The reopening of the ecotourism site in October 2020 brought media attention in its wake because the governor of Cebu herself, Hon. Gwendolyn Garcia, led its reopening rites. Media outfits covered the event, such as Sugbo TV, and so, news of the ecotourism site’s continuance during the ongoing pandemic then spread far and wide.

The Municipality of Aloguinsan where the ecotourism facility is located has in its website a portal for bookings specific to the site. Their ecotourism association also operates its own Facebook Page where they mainly promote the ecotourism site, answer queries, and receive bookings. Apart from the website and Facebook, there are no other social media or advertising platforms being used officially by the management of the ecotourism association.

After their reopening, only 10% of their usual number of guests started going back for a visit from November 2020 to August 2021. However, starting on September 2021, they were already able to see 80% of guests finally arriving on a regular basis.

The maximum carrying capacity of the ecotourism site is only 70 pax per day. During the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, it went down to 30-40 pax per day. After Typhoon Odette, from January 2022 up to the present, they are little by little going back to the 70 pax daily carrying capacity.

As to the sales generated from the river cruise, only 10% of the tour fee goes to the local government, and 90% to the association.

After the community quarantine was implemented in March 2020, their ecotourism site was one of the many destinations in the province that has stopped its operation.

At least 43 tour guides of the ecotourism association were affected when the tourist site's operation was stopped.

One of the local tour guides, a father of four, was one of those affected. He said, "I was forced to go back to fishing for my family to survive. The reopening of the

ecotourism site meant a positive development for me since I get more from being a tour guide than being a fisherman.”

Local tour guides in the river cruise can take home an average of P200 to P300 a day. But during summer, they can earn up to P600 or more because of the influx of tourists. The ecotourism site’s initiative is an eye-opener when it comes to improving livelihood and capacity to earn a living through various means.

The peak season of the ecotourism site is from March to May yearly, while the lean season is from June to February. During the peak season, they could get more than 1,000 visitors per month, while during the lean season; only about 200 visitors come per month. A rough estimate of their association’s revenue, with a maximum of 1,000 visitors at P 400 per person, amounts to P 400,000, or close to half a million per month. This is discounting group package rates that are at P850 per person. This conservative estimate is a big amount of money that can support the needs of their organization.

This ecotourism site in the new normal needed to comply with strict health protocols such as designating a disinfection area for the life vests that they let the customers use, signage reminders on physical distancing and wearing of face masks/face shield. Air purifiers were also required in their enclosed spaces within the vicinity, i.e. multipurpose huts that serve as orientation and dining area for guests.

The ecotourism facility has a 2-3-hour eco-cultural river tour with well-trained local tour guides who will educate you about mangrove, bird, and wildlife ecology. Guests have an option to have a full tour, with locals giving handicrafts demonstration and singing of local folk songs, or a partial tour which just includes the river cruise and swimming.

Moving forward, the ecotourism association has plans of delving into two more natural phenomena: dolphin-watching and bird-watching. The former president of the association said, “We are working closely with the local government of Aloguinsan to complete the requirements needed to organize ourselves and operate the two added ecotourism activities around the facility. We also seek to get funding in reviving the nature walk in the facility, a boardwalk where people could tread and be closer to the mangroves while walking. This is because a big part of the boardwalk was damaged by strong rains and fallen trees and aggravated by overgrowth of vegetation in the area.”

## **Interpretation and Discussion of Results**

### **Do You Consider Yourself a Nature-Lover?**

This was intended to build simple rapport with the respondents as well as to introduce the theme of the study. Majority of the guests (98%) are truly nature enthusiasts, and only 2% found themselves in the ecotourism site due to their fellowship with family and friends. Those who found themselves in the ecotourism facility really sought the tranquillity that the place provides, its lush greenery, bird sanctuary and the overall ecological vibe of the entire place.

### **Where Did You Learn About the Ecotourism Site?**

The top answer to this question, family, and friends, received 55%, followed by the social media platform Facebook with 28%, Instagram with 12%, website and YouTube each getting 2%, and finally from print advertisements which got 1%. This item revealed that gaining knowledge of the ecotourism site or its promotion to the actual guests relied on the respondents’ significant others, i.e., family and friends’

word-of-mouth promotion or witnessing. It's the testimonial aspect that appeared to be in primary place when it comes to promoting this ecotourism site. The social media platform used, Facebook, confirmed by the interview results and revealed by the ecotourism association's management and staff as their main promotional tool, only came in second place. Very few respondents visited the website of Aloguinsan where the ecotourism facility is highly promoted.

### **Word-of-Mouth Marketing (WoM) as a Communication Strategy**

Interpreting the answers to question no. 2, using the principles of the social marketing theory, success in marketing for social good translates to word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing. The product is the behaviour of patronage of the ecotourism site amid the pandemic and in the new normal. The price pertains to the cost of the behaviour change which points to braving the risks involved, i.e., getting the virus when one decides to go out and visit an ecotourism facility. The place pertains to the strategies that will make the behaviour change, i.e., patronage to an ecotourism site, easy and convenient. The main example of this is the production of clear and creative content in the marketing materials that will be used. Since it is safety from the virus that people are after, being clear about compliance measures, or communicating the safety seal that the ecotourism facility has procured from the local government (certificate of compliance) needs to be present. Lastly, the promotion of the behaviour patronizing ecotourism in the new normal pertains to the platforms used in promoting and reinforcing the behaviour being marketed as desirable or socially acceptable. The study revealed how word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing as a strategy came out as the number 1 mode of promotion, while the official mode via social media (Facebook) just comes in second. This shows us that

WoM is the most effective strategy in communicating about the existence of the ecotourism site as well as its readiness to be revisited in the new normal.

Word-of-mouth marketing (WoM) is when a consumer's interest in a company's product or service is reflected in their daily dialogues. Essentially, it is free advertising triggered mainly by customer experiences, and usually, something that goes beyond what was expected. This happens when consumers talk about the company's product or service to their family, friends, and to others with whom they have close relationships. WoM marketing is one of the most powerful forms of advertising as 92% of consumers trust their friends over legacy media. Companies can encourage WoM marketing through exceeding expectations on a product, providing good customer service, and giving exclusive information to consumers.

This finding is important because, according to Nielsen, 92% of people around the world said they trust recommendations from friends and family (earned media) above all other forms of advertising. No wonder, it's an eye-opener that WoM marketing came out ahead as the best strategy to promote or to communicate to people or the public (target audience) about the ecotourism facility.

Word-of-mouth marketing reappears in the answers to question no. 3: What factors made the guests decide to visit the Bojo River amid the pandemic and the new normal. This time, using the Theory of Reasoned Action sheds light on this item. The top answer of the respondents was the word-of-mouth testimonial of their family and friends (31%), closely followed by attractive online images and photos (30%). The Theory of Reasoned Action tells us that the two elements that influence a person's intention to perform an action or behaviour are the attitude of the person himself or herself towards the action/behaviour and the attitudes of the people who

are important to the person, plus the associated perceived social pressures influencing someone to perform the action or not (subjective norms). In this study, we have seen that patronizing ecotourism (action) or actual visit to the ecotourism site is mainly due to what the important people around the respondents say about the ecotourism site, which helped them decide to visit the place. Enhancing this decision were the attractive online images or photos of the place. Good online reviews, an example of word-of-mouth marketing in digital form, come in third place. It is still somewhat relevant to the respondents because testimonials help in the decision to perform the action of doing an actual visit.

### **What are the Reasons for Visiting the Ecotourism Site?**

The top 3 answers were simply to unwind with family and friends, to commune with nature, and to take care of their mental health, owing to the long periods of on and off lockdowns and quarantine that characterized the pandemic. These answers confirm that rest and recreation involving nature through a visit to an ecotourism facility is a top priority among the respondents. Communing with nature and taking care of their mental health reveal the level of awareness of the respondents about the healing power of the natural environment.

### **Is It Safe for People to Visit an Ecotourism Site?**

Majority answered yes, and the reasons they gave to support their answer reveal that assurance of safety, translated to trust in the promoters of the ecotourism facility, is foremost in the mind of the guests. The second reason why they think it is safe, i.e., the belief that ecotourism brings with it the healing power of nature, is a good point to highlight. The respondents ticked that answer as they are aware that ecotourism is an antidote to the pandemic and the new normal. The third reason, the

health status of the staff who must all be fully vaccinated, reinforce the trust in the assurance they feel of the ecotourism site's compliance with the health protocols required by the local government. The respondents did not offer any other answer to the question provided. With only 2% saying that it is not safe to go out and visit the ecotourism site mainly due to fear of getting the coronavirus outdoors, this shows us that less and less people are afraid to venture out and expose themselves to nature once again. Fear in going out has lessened seeing how more and more people patronize ecotourism in the new normal. The range of where their guests come from is also an indicator of social acceptability. Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao have some representation somehow, although it is still dominated by those in Cebu Province. With all these, it is seen that it is socially acceptable to be doing ecotourism in this period, albeit with still a low percentage of guest turnout compared to pre-pandemic times.

### **What is Social Acceptability and its Indicators?**

Social acceptability is defined as the outcome of a collective judgment or collective opinion of a project, plan, or policy. It is a loosely applied concept in the social sciences which can take on a variety of factors and social indicators, depending on the context where social acceptability is studied.

**Figure 10. Social Acceptability Factors Influencing Projects**



Social acceptability is a relevant consideration for various projects, irrespective of their scale, encompassing residential and industrial developments, wind farms, mines, recreational facilities, and tourism projects, among others.

For purposes of this research, we shall define social acceptability as a phenomenon which could shed light on the aptness of an endeavour or project, in this case, local ecotourism patronage, to jumpstart the local economy in the new normal. Based on the policies and orientations on social acceptability from Quebec City, Canada's website, the factors influencing social acceptability of projects are the following: participation in decision-making; trust in the promoters and institutions; the social, economic, territorial and geographic contexts; local knowledge; values, beliefs and expectations; real or perceived risks, uncertainty; impact on the living environment and the environment; and benefits and repercussions for local communities.

This study has revealed the following factors and indicators of the social acceptability of ecotourism in the new normal: compliance measures are in place, assurance of safety in the ecotourism facility, this has engendered trust in the promoters of the ecotourism facility, and a high percentage of belief that ecotourism (which promotes the healing benefits of nature) is an antidote to the pandemic. These findings confirm the same set of factors referenced from Quebec City, Canada's social acceptability indicators. These coincide with trust in the promoters of the institution, local knowledge, values, beliefs and expectations, and benefits and repercussions for the local community. However, while it seems that the response of the target audience/public is picking up, the management and operations staff of Bojo River say that they are not yet seeing more than 50% of the volume of guests they used to have, especially during the yearly peak season (March-May). Promoting ecotourism in the new normal, palpably indicated by seeing the number of guests rise again, needs a more determined push from various stakeholders. Reinventing local ecotourism in the new normal, thus, enhancing its social acceptability for the public is therefore imperative.

## **Summary of Results**

Ecotourism, as a strategy for economic recovery in the new normal, shows much hope and promise not just for the local economy, but for humanity. The way forward points towards a dynamic, creative, and healthy adaptation to the social and living environment that require an assurance of safety and sound concession in favor of health and the good of all stakeholders.

In table form, the following are the findings of the study:

**Table 1. Communication Strategies, Factors, and Indicators of Social Acceptability in the New Normal**

| <b>Communication/Marketing Strategies Strengths by Rank</b> | <b>Factors Affecting Social Acceptability of Ecotourism</b>                                                                                                            | <b>Indicators of Social Acceptability in the New Normal</b>                                                            |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> : Word-of-Mouth (WoM) marketing             | The compliance measures are in place, giving an assurance of safety (fostering trust) via the safety seal released by the local government to all compliant facilities | High percentage of word-of-mouth marketing provided by family and friends vs. promotion via Facebook/website/print ads |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> : Facebook                                  | Positive word-of-mouth testimonials or good online reviews about the ecotourism facility                                                                               | High percentage of guests who believe that ecotourism is an antidote to the pandemic                                   |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> : Instagram                                 | Local knowledge of guests that ecotourism staff have been fully vaccinated                                                                                             | Increasing number of guests in the ecotourism facility                                                                 |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> : Website                                   |                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                        |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> : Print ads                                 |                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                        |

Interestingly, the official marketing strategies being used by the local government of Aloguinsan did not land as the top 1 marketing strategy for purposes of promoting the ecotourism site. The website is not even popular, and close to being non-existent to the respondents or guests of the ecotourism site. As to promoting ecotourism via print advertisements, the study revealed that it is now considered to be a weak marketing strategy in the current digital world. While it may exhibit only but weakness, I am still inclined to believe that print advertisements have its own set of strengths, proven by its longevity. Printed materials, unless it is drenched or burned, stay on the counters of tourism establishments for a long period. They are handy and easily accessible. It is prompt in giving the information one needs about the ecotourism site since paper as medium denotes the physical presence of the material, you can read it any time, without having to worry about connecting to the internet, or using your mobile data to search for an ecotourism site online. It may not be the best medium now to create effective foot traffic in the site, but it still delivers and is dependable in providing relevant information about the ecotourism site, which may come complete with attractive images and layout, colour scheme, and catchy titles and slogans, or what we now familiarly call as shoutouts or hashtags in digital culture.

The following table shows the reasons why the respondents visit an ecotourism site, as well as the ways by which ecotourism can be communicated to enhance social acceptability in the new normal:

**Table 2. Reasons for Visiting the Ecotourism Site and Ways of Enhancing Social Acceptability**

| <b>Reasons why people visit an ecotourism site by Rank</b>     | <b>Ways to communicate ecotourism to enhance social acceptability</b>                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> : To unwind with family and friends            | Promote existence of compliance measures in the ecotourism site more extensively to the public through various media                                                                                                                                     |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> : To commune with nature                       | Visibility in onsite marketing through live events held outside the municipality of Aloguinsan                                                                                                                                                           |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> : To take care of mental health                | Stress the unique selling point (USP) of the ecotourism site (experience) in the content of all marketing materials for release, alongside communicating compliance measures of the site; ultimately, improve customer experience through staff training |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> : To try out the organic food                  | Amplify the belief that ecotourism brings with it the healing power of nature; it is an antidote to the pandemic                                                                                                                                         |
| 5 <sup>th</sup> : To move on from ugly elections               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 6 <sup>th</sup> : To just comply with the company outing plans |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

Ecotourism reinforces our need to commune more with the natural world. We yearn for peace and calm that is why we work on immersing ourselves with nature. This also leads us to take care of our mental health, considering the belief that nature has its own unique healing powers. Being organic, there are no artificial elements around when it comes to enjoying oneself in an ecotourism site.

As to the ways by which ecotourism can be communicated to enhance its social acceptability, publicizing, or promoting an ecotourism site's compliance with health protocols is imperative. This is to assure the public that the site is a safe place to be, effecting trust and security in the process. Visibility in legacy media such as expos or bazaars is a good way to practice social marketing. The accessibility of people who can be asked in person about the ecotourism site is needed because nothing still beats face-to-face communication. Having people in a booth for several days for people to see or engage in is helpful to increase audience reach. Stressing the unique selling point (USP) of the ecotourism site by focusing on improving the customer service experience of all would-be guests would have powerful consequences. With the contentment that people deeply experience after having visited the ecotourism site, word will go around and spread like wildfire. And since we only want the good to spread, it is a need for ecotourism sites to keep on improving the physical condition of their destination, as well as how their people attend to all their guests. Finally, amplifying the belief that ecotourism brings with it healing powers is very important. Everyone wants the preservation of good health, and should one fall ill, the cure for the illness is preferably accessible and less costly. The healing power of nature which we find in ecotourism must find its way in the consciousness of more and more people.

## **Chapter VI**

### **THE PHILIPPINES' RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 HEALTH CRISIS AND THE ASEAN TOURISM CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS INITIATIVE**

#### **Introduction**

The disruption caused by the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) has heavily impacted households and businesses, threatening the health, income, and social routines of Filipinos (Orbeta, A., 2022). Since March 2020, the Philippine government has imposed various policies, such as community lockdowns and mandatory health protocols, to lessen the risk of spreading the virus while mitigating the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. The rapid spread and disruptive nature of the Covid-19 pandemic has moved the government to identify solutions and act decisively to protect the people.

The Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) took the lead in gathering the various responses made by the government to make sense out of our situation, to learn from the experience due to the health emergency crisis, and to emerge stronger to future shocks. The recently published book titled, "The Philippines' Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Learning from Experience and Emerging Stronger to Future Shocks," presents to the public evidence-based analyses of the various pandemic responses and recovery efforts of the government, with a focus on experiences, challenges, and lessons learned. It gathered insights of those who are experts in the field of development studies on matters relating to health, macroeconomy, food security, labor, social protection, poverty, education,

digitalization, fiscal response, and crisis and risk communication. For purposes of this study, the last specific theme will be dwelt upon, i.e., crisis and risk communication, which directly involves tourism response. Epidemics and pandemics are health-related risks that significantly affect tourism, with ecotourism occupying a big chunk of it.

At the height of the pandemic in March 2020, governments around the world were compelled to impose various mobility restrictions, including travel bans and community lockdowns. These measures posed great pressure on the daily operations of households and businesses (Reyes, C., 2022).

The national government's overall pandemic response is found in several pieces of legislation and planning documents. The President signed two major bills: the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act or Republic Act (RA) 11469 and the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act or RA 11494, in March and September 2020 respectively. These pieces of legislation primarily grant the President special powers to enable the government to carry out its plans and actions during the national health emergency. They contain provisions key to the pandemic response, examples of which are social amelioration programs, assistance programs for severely affected sectors, temporary operation of private establishments to serve as temporary lodging or quarantine facilities, transport modality of healthcare workers (HCW), and hiring of temporary health personnel (Reyes, C., 2022).

The implementation of stringent measures on mobility led to widespread unemployment and reduced work hours. There was a sharp increase in the unemployment rate to 10.3 percent (equivalent to about 4.5 million unemployed Filipinos) in 2020, the highest since 2005. According to the Philippine Statistics

Authority (PSA), the unemployment rate soared to 17.6 percent in April 2020 and went down to 8.7 percent in October 2020. Despite the significant decline in employment in 2020, the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) reported that jobs significantly increased to 2.2 million in the first quarter of the year 2021. As it shows promise of an improving economy, the tourism industry continues to inch its way towards economic recovery as human mobility is yet to restart and gain momentum, with recreational and touristic environments reopening bit by bit.

### **A Quick Look at ASEAN Tourism's Crisis Communications Initiative**

This study has led me to the existence of a highly relevant document, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) Tourism Crisis Communications Manual, an initiative published in 2015, five years before the pandemic struck the world. I consider this a most helpful find because it was a discovery that the ASEAN Tourism committee somehow had an updated communication plan and blueprint ready when crisis hits any country, especially thinking of its member-states.

The ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communications Manual provides us with clear-cut guidelines on what to do in the event of a crisis, involving health-related risks like epidemics and pandemics. It discusses in-depth what risks, issues, and emergencies are vis-à-vis the concept and reality of a crisis. It introduces us to crisis management and communications. The Philippines, being a member-state of the ASEAN, could have harnessed its resources to respond better to the health emergency crisis brought about by Covid-19, if it took to heart the points in the said manual published five years before the pandemic.

The introduction to crisis management and communications begins by giving us the key definitions of words and concepts such as risk, issue, and emergency which are used interchangeably with the word crisis.

This ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communications initiative works on the premise that communications should not take place only when a crisis hits the country. In managing risks, issues, and emergencies, communications with stakeholders should still take place to ensure that everyone is aware of what is being done to prevent or lessen any negative impact and maintain confidence in the tourism destination.

Further to the above, the crisis communication manual defines a crisis as an undesired, extraordinary, often unexpected, and timely limited process with ambivalent development possibilities. It demands immediate decisions and counter measures to influence the further development of the situation positively, in favor of the organization (or tourism destination) and to limit the negative consequences as much as possible.

Some key risk categories that affect tourism and tourism enterprises are economic (currency fluctuations, increase in interest rates), health-related (epidemics and pandemics), psychological/emotional (negative images and perceptions resulting from bad publicity, negative experiences from clients), environmental (damage to environment through natural causes or through human pollution), and natural hazards (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, storms, forest fire, tsunami).

### **The Role of Social Media in Tourism Crisis Communications**

Touted as the current “game changer” by the ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communication initiative, it upholds the first universal rule of crisis communication.

Be First. Be right. Be credible. It suggests that agencies at the center of a crisis must respond via social media. It is citizen journalists who are now breaking news before the media, and they are becoming the first credible sources of information, not officials of legacy media.

The advent of social media has dramatically transformed the landscape of crisis reduction, readiness, response, and recovery. The legacy media of TV, newspapers and radio are no longer the creators and disseminators of vital information in a crisis (ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communication, 2015). Today, anyone with a communications gadget with a mobile device to connect to the internet can be our breaking news correspondent.

Responsible use of social media can have a very positive effect on lessening the negative effects of a crisis by influencing the behaviour and actions of travellers in the industry, thus minimizing impact.

The tourism crisis communications manual discusses 4 stages when building a crisis management system for tourism destinations to survive a crisis. These are 1) Reduction: detect risks/incidents at source to improve preparedness/prevent crisis or to detect any residual/new risks arising at the tail-end of a crisis; 2) Readiness: prepare plans and run simulation exercises; 3) Response: execute operational and communication plans in a crisis; and 4) Recovery: implement plans and initiatives to return to normalcy after a crisis and conduct a post-mortem.

For purposes of this study, I would like to consider the action plans under stage 4 of the crisis communication plan which focuses on recovery. Living through a post-pandemic world, it will be helpful to keep the following in mind as we get acquainted with the new normal.

Some details of the recovery marketing process we are suggested to adopt are:

Step 1: Prime messages. Say: We are open for business. Tourists are welcome and it is safe to visit. Create value-adding incentives for visitation.

Step 2: Setting out the facts. Publicize improvements, enhancements, and changes since the crisis. Expand on benefits for visiting now. Explain what visitors can do. Assure that it's business as usual.

Step 3: Restoring confidence in source markets. Arrange familiarization trips for travel writers and travel agents. Share testimonials from opinion leaders. Allow flexibility to travellers who postpone or cancel due to concerns. Ensure that all stakeholders are fully briefed.

Step 4: Value-add instead of Discounting. Sustain profitability of your business instead of discounting. Offer incentives in conjunction with travel industry partners.

Step 5: Focus on the Future. A crisis presents opportunities to upgrade and re-image your business. Re-theme advertising and promotions. Focus on benefits of visiting now.

Step 6: Play on the Positives. Visuals of happy and contented visitors. Visitor testimonials. Resurgence of tourist arrivals, rebuilding and enhancing infrastructure.

Step 7: Progress Updates. Publicize to stakeholders and media how tourism has contributed to revitalizing the destination. Publicize changes and improvements made. Pre and post analysis, comparing status of destination at a time of disaster to recovery phase.

This additional information on tourism crisis communications enhances this study on communicating for the social acceptability of local ecotourism seen as a strategy for economic recovery in the new normal. It gives a creative and wider view of how we can play around the marketing strategies involved in promoting ecotourism under our present circumstances. It is with much hope that through our knowledge of how communication is done in a tourism-related crisis, we can get relevant and effective pointers and try out best practices that will make us more resilient individuals, as well as more effective communicators in coping with changes in our environment. As in all challenges, the motto we can adopt is fresh and optimistic: There is no other way to go but up.

## Chapter VII

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Conclusion

Ecotourism, as one of the main drivers of the tourism industry, remains to be an attractive area of study owing to the wide variety of what it offers: its pristine beaches, lush forests, majestic waterfalls, ragged mountain peaks, clean rivers and throbbing marine life. Cebu Province is home to all these natural resources of sustainable living for its constituents. As the coronavirus pandemic disrupted and crippled this top means of livelihood in the province, there must be a way out of the Covid-19 health emergency crisis when you talk about surviving a crisis. Surprisingly, the answer to the problem is not far at all from the picture. It is ecotourism itself, repackaged in braver and brighter notes.

*The main research question we must answer is: How can we enhance the social acceptability of ecotourism in the new normal?*

This study showed that the identified strength of the ecotourism site is its word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing, considered as an informal marketing strategy. The ways to go are the following:

First, improving customer service/person-to-person experience in the site: from booking inquiries to the actual visit of guests, until they bid goodbye from the ecotourism site. If the unique selling point (USP) present in all ecotourism sites is taken care of, satisfied guests will not stop talking about it with their family and

friends, creating opportunities for more decisions to visit the site. This plan of action includes retraining of personnel. Upgrading their skills in tour guiding could be an area needing improvement. Exploring the possibility of extending the training to young people, i.e., the children of the current tour guides, would be an avenue for development and succession planning. Junior tour guiding is an initiative of some businesses that could be adopted by the ecotourism industry. Improving the physical state of whatever facilities they have is important. Adaptations to the new normal must be strongly visible via the use of signages: social distancing reminders, wearing of face mask reminders, areas for disinfection purposes. An updated signage or information board on the ecotourism site in the new normal will be helpful. Faithful adherence to the principles of sustainability in the ecotourism facility, like avoiding use of plastic as marketing materials, i.e., laminated signages, must be practiced. The visibility of their compliance certificate or safety seal from the local government must be seen and placed in a prime location at the ecotourism facility. This will help establish a shared understanding between the promoters of the site and their guests that they are aware of the context in which they move and live.

Second, reinforcing the ecotourism site's use of digital communications technology and social media: Facebook, the Aloguinsan website, Instagram, plus introducing a digital intervention for receiving inquiries and bookings online.

This partly leads us to what the ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communications Manual suggests for a tourism facility to undertake in making sure that all stakeholders are in the know of what is happening in the tourism facility, especially in a period of recovery. Their social media platforms must be connected. Having an Instagram account would be advantageous as the ecotourism site is photogenic and its beauty is uniquely unmatched anywhere else in the world. The content of their

social media posts must be clear and simple: all the things they are doing in the ecotourism site that give evidence to their compliance to protocols in the new normal. Pictures and videos of these are most welcome. Playing on the positives must be done, e.g., happy faces, satisfied guests. Priming messages like: We are 100% compliant with health protocols, or This is a safe place to be, etc. Publicize improvements, enhancements, and changes since the crisis hit the site is basic. Expand on benefits for visiting now. Explain what worthwhile activities that visitors can do when in the ecotourism site. The ecotourism association must pursue their plan to include bird watching and dolphin watching in their program of activities for guests. These are added values that can bring in a different group of people, i.e., those who are bird or dolphin enthusiasts.

A dynamic communication plan can be adopted by the ecotourism site to prepare it for any eventuality, given that health-related risks, e.g., epidemic, or pandemic, and natural disasters, e.g., typhoons, earthquakes, etc. render the ecotourism destination susceptible to such catastrophic events.

Table 3 below shows us the communication plan template, specifically addressing health-related risks:

**Table 3. Communication Plan Template for Health-related Risks**

| Communication Goal                                            | Messaging                                                                     | Communication Tool                                              | Audience | Frequency                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| To inform about safety of operations<br>NO ALERT LEVEL raised | We are open: 7AM to 5PM. It is safe to come. Full capacity: 70 pax per day    | Facebook. Website. Email.<br><br>Onsite signage<br>Status board | Public   | 3x a week (MWF)<br><br>Until there are changes in alert level |
| To inform about safety of operations<br>ALERT LEVEL ONE       | We are open: 7AM to 5PM. It is safe to come. Half capacity: 35-40 pax per day | Facebook. Website. Email.<br><br>Onsite signage<br>Status board | Public   | 3x a week (MWF)<br><br>Until there are changes in the         |

|                                                               |                                                                                                |                                                                    |        |                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                               |                                                                                                |                                                                    |        | alert level                                                       |
| To inform about safety of operations<br>ALERT LEVEL TWO       | We are still open: 7AM to 5PM.<br>Come with extra precautions. 25% capacity: 17-20 pax per day | Facebook. Website.<br>Email.<br><br>Onsite signage<br>Status board | Public | 3x a week (MWF)<br><br>Until there are changes in the alert level |
| To inform about suspension of operations<br>ALERT LEVEL THREE | We are closed until further notice.<br>Stay safe and healthy.                                  | Facebook. Website.<br>Email.<br><br>Onsite signage<br>Status board | Public | 3x a week (MWF)<br><br>Until there are changes in the alert level |

The communication plan template below is specifically for eventualities like natural disasters, e.g., typhoons, earthquakes, etc. Depending on the actual situation of the ecotourism destination, the status of the site must be communicated to the public.

**Table 4.** *Communication Plan Template for Natural Disasters*

| Communication Goal                                   | Messaging                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Communication Tool                                                 | Audience | Frequency                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| To inform about status of the ecotourism destination | We have suffered minor (or major) damages due to the (typhoon/earthquake): We are open/will be open on _____, from _____(time). Until then, it is safe to come.<br>(Mention if accommodation is full/half capacity, etc.) | Facebook. Website.<br>Email.<br><br>Onsite signage<br>Status board | Public   | 3x a week (MWF)<br><br>Until there are changes in the physical condition of the site |

As we live through the digital communications age, it is imperative to adapt to the modes of communication and interaction facilities that people use today. Word-of-mouth marketing, which appeared as the number one advertising strategy useful for ecotourism, may continue as a powerful tool in advertising to increase reach and

guest turnout. However, there is a need to migrate it to a more functional role with the help of digital communications technology. Concretely, the use of an online system for bookings and inquiries could be set up. Currently, the ecotourism site is using Facebook to receive inquiries, something which is vastly used and visited by guests, both local and international. However, a simple booking and inquiries system could be devised via Google form or document. This is the simplest digital intervention that some establishments are using now, especially when it comes to enlisting themselves for an activity or tour, in the case of tourism-related events. The Google form will enable the operations staff of the ecotourism site to respond promptly and will enable them to book guests systematically. This will redound to properly schedule the visits of the guests, noting that there is a regulated carrying capacity per day. Observing that most of the operations staff are mature in age, I recommend that they get young people to help set up the Google form or document or train the current staff to handle and manage this booking and inquiries system.

May I note here that the ecotourism site's current email address is not well-managed. I have sent several emails but not one was answered. So, if there are specific people trained and assigned to strictly monitor and reply to email inquiries, this could be another mine of good marketing to further enhance the customer service experience.

Third, reinforcing the use of both legacy and new media, i.e., the radio, the television, newspapers, and the internet. A strategic plan on creating an effective media mix for ecotourism would be helpful. It would be good to set out work on getting media practitioners to write about their ecotourism site, highlighting the benefits and advantages in visiting or patronizing it in the new normal. Part of this is the work of restoring confidence in the tourism destination. Arranging familiarization

trips for travel writers and travel agents would be worthwhile. Creating a pool of ambassadors for the ecotourism site would also be a sustainable move.

With these, the social acceptability of ecotourism in the new normal could be enhanced more as clearer information, direct and simple to understand, on the status of the ecotourism site will be amplified. The use of social and legacy media, and communication artifacts in the ecotourism site itself, e.g., actual signages of health and safety compliance: wearing of face masks, observing physical distancing, etc., will be maximized.

The role of social and new media in the digital world can never be underestimated. As Facebook, Instagram and ecotourism websites are used extensively by the promoters of ecotourism establishments, word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing or advertising still came out on top of every marketing platform in this study. It is not to be denied that travel and tourism is highly dependent upon word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing for credibility, as this study has confirmed (ASEAN Tourism Crisis Communications Manual, 2015). Research further says that WoM endorsements remain to be the most trusted endorsements for consumers, particularly if delivered by a family member, friend, or business colleague. It has further confirmed the impact of what family and friends say about the experience of being in an ecotourism site, its unique selling point (USP). Personal testimonials have a drawing power that is unmatched for decades. The singular experience of a satisfied guest is multiplied a hundred times over, influencing choices and decisions for people to try the much-talked-about tourism destination, be it culled from online reviews or face-to-face interactions. This bears more significance in the context of the new normal when health protocols must be met for people to react not just with

mere booking inquiries but in the form of actual visits that create revenue for the ecotourism site.

The marketing strategies for the repromotion of ecotourism sites are very much in place. But what else can be done in rallying for a better reception of ecotourism when it is only bit by bit recovering from the ill-effects of the hopefully ending pandemic? There must be a way to reinvent local ecotourism to enhance its social acceptability among people and transform it into a strategy for economic recovery in the new normal. The way forward is to focus on the strengths of the ecotourism site, to improve and harness its potentials more, zeroing-in on excellent customer service or customer relations. Taking off from the top marketing platform, word-of-mouth marketing, *satisfied and highly pleased guests will not stop raving about the best experience they will have in any ecotourism facility.* Having attractive, updated, or well-laid out websites or Facebook pages matter, and they are important, but these will remain to be in second place if they are not backed up by real, first-hand personal experience of real people. This is when truth advertising hits its high. What is reflected in digital media must be in accordance with what guests experience in real life.

## **Recommendations**

Helping local ecotourism to jumpstart its economy in the new normal, as local businesses seek to make a comeback from a long period of community quarantines, lockdowns, travel bans and restrictions, is something I am set out to do through the able help of communication principles and models I have personally studied and been familiar with throughout this master's program in Development Communication.

The findings of this study paint a rosy future for ecotourism in the new normal, albeit its social acceptability comes in slow but sure --- sure in its mission to educate people about the benefits of immersing oneself in nature, and in protecting the environment while people enjoy its pristine beauty. But as we see it, things have changed in the new normal. Easing health protocols fresh from the almost nearing end of the Covid-19 pandemic allow us to take on new behaviours in new work contexts. Our social interactions will now be defined by its compliance with safety regulations, vowing the protection of human lives as its goal.

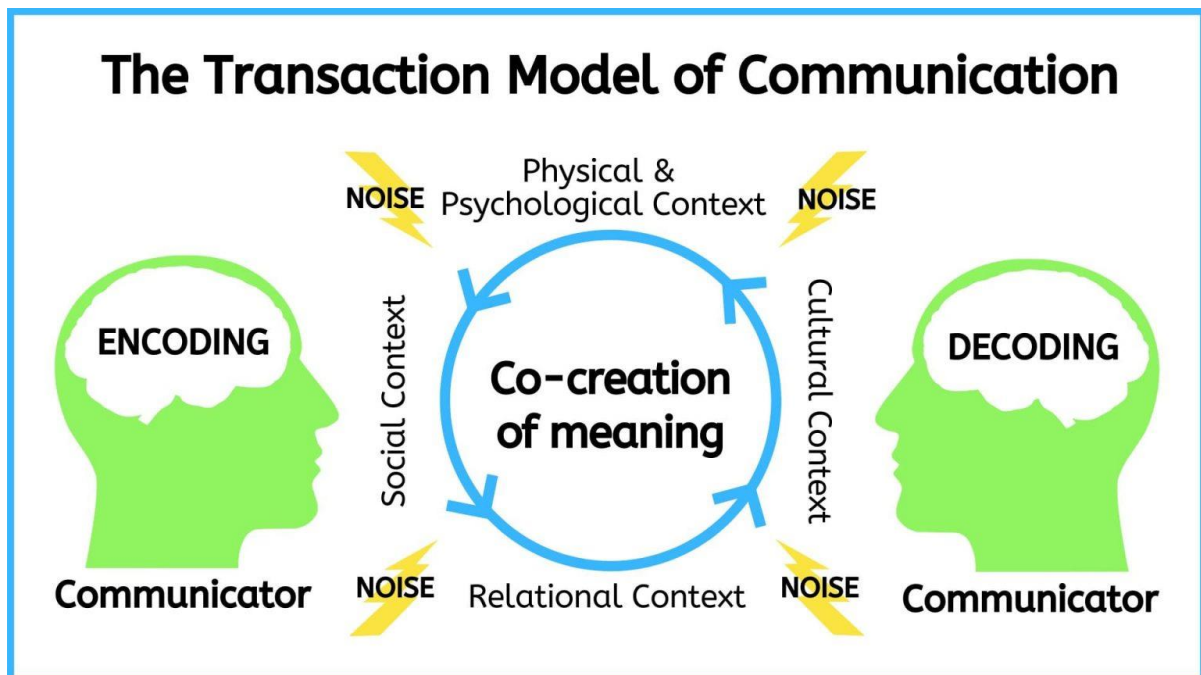
Taking off from the findings, a communication model for ecotourism that will need to include the different factors associated with its social acceptability in the new normal is recommended. This will be used as a framework for the social acceptability of ecotourism in the new normal.

The quest for an ecotourism comeback by focusing on how it can be made socially acceptable in the new normal --- as indicated by an increase in guest turnout, consequently an increase in sales, an increase in bookings and actual site visits, is a much-needed project not just by the local government where an ecotourism site belongs, but by the community that sustains it and lives by it. This recovery, repair, and rehabilitation project of the ecotourism economy is a subject that interests those of us who believe in the mission of ecotourism in a post-pandemic world. It heals and enlivens not just the body but the spirit as well. Ultimately, it speaks about conquering the fear of reinstating oneself to the natural environment while complying with the health protocols mandated to move around and live safely and responsibly in the new normal.

Social marketing, i.e., marketing for social good to promote socially beneficial and valuable behaviours, proved to be an apt strategy to boost ecotourism anew. Its theory suggests that a creative use of the principles of commercial marketing, i.e., selling products, can be used to also **sell ideas** that can promote socially valuable behaviours. The *“socially acceptable and valuable behaviour to sell”* is *patronizing or visiting ecotourism sites amid the pandemic and right through the new normal*, as it redounds to help increase guest turnout, and thus, improve sales performance, jumpstarting livelihood of the ecotourism site. The effect of this social marketing move gives a hint to seeing the dawn of economic recovery.

I then would like to propose a unique communication model for ecotourism in the new normal which I would like to call the Resilient Model of Communication for Ecotourism. It adopts some elements found in the Transactional Model of Communication. Let us revisit first what the transaction model of communication is all about.

Figure 11. *The Transactional Model of Communication*



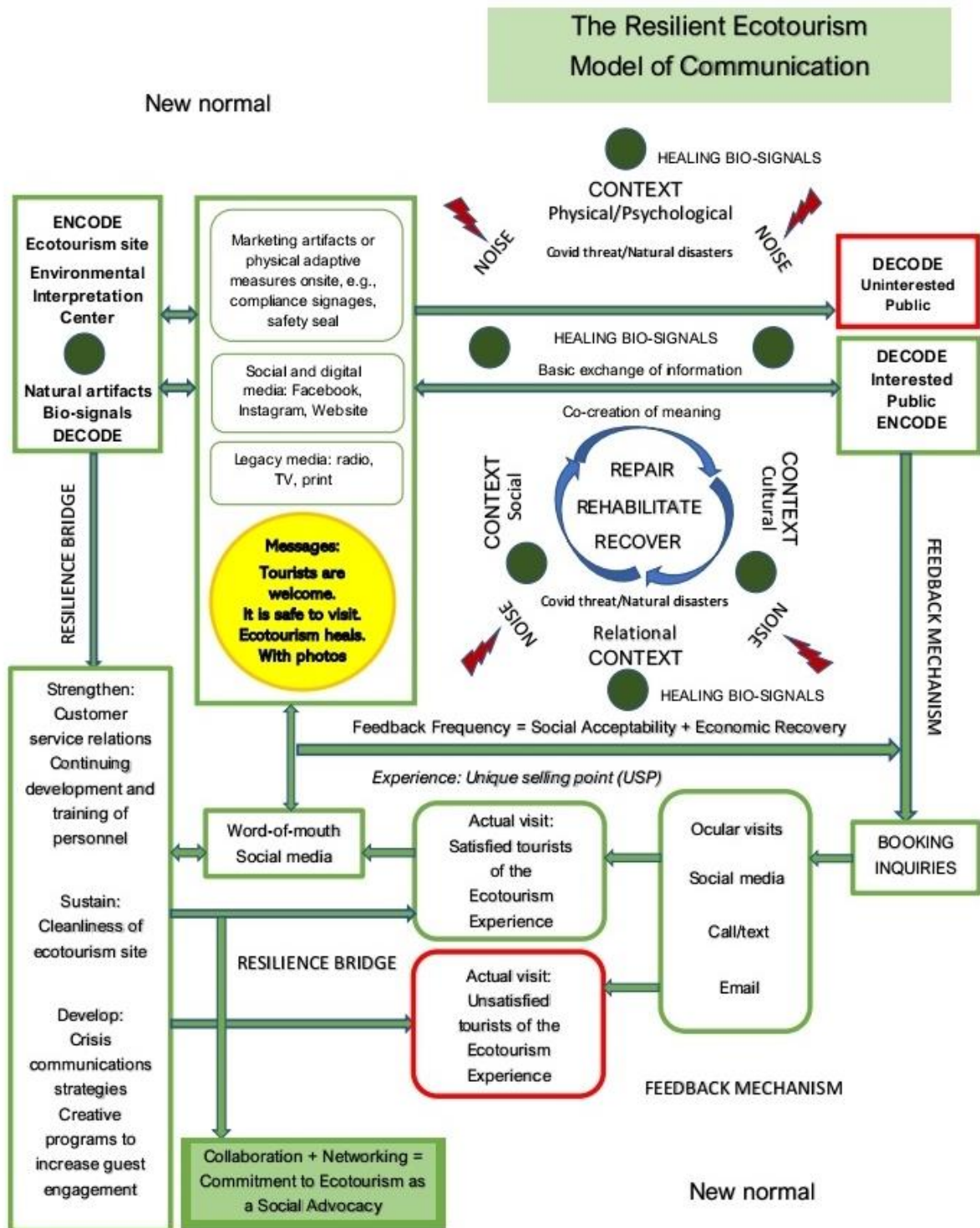
The Transaction or Transactional Model of Communication refers to the continuous exchange of information where both the sender and receiver are involved in the process and take turns to communicate messages. The participants in this communication model are known as communicators and can be either human beings or machines (Bhasin, H., 2021). This model describes communication as a process in which communicators generate social realities within social, relational, physical, or psychological, and cultural contexts. In this model, communicators do not just communicate to exchange messages, instead, they communicate to create relationships, form intercultural alliances, shape self-concept, and engage with others in dialogue to create communities (Lapum, J., St-Amant, O., Hughes, M., and Garmaise-Yee, J., 2020). The communication process of sending the message occurs at the same time. You are simultaneously a sender and receiver. The transaction model is a two-way process and not a one-way, linear model of communication. The element of feedback from the sender to receiver and vice-versa

becomes the link for a dynamic relationship to develop and create mutual alliances that strengthen the existence of the relationship.

There are 4 important factors affecting the Transactional Model of Communication: 1) social context: laws, values, norms, and restrictions in a society that govern communication; 2) relational context: manners and previous relationship or interpersonal history; 3) cultural context: identity and lifestyle of peoples; and 4) physical and psychological context: condition, mental state of sender and receiver, and the capacity to interact and encode-decode information shared.

I chose this communication model as a jump-off point for crafting an original communication model to be used to communicate for the social acceptability of local ecotourism in the new normal mainly because this model includes a more complete understanding of context. Context is very significant in my proposed communication model noting that we are navigating ourselves in the new normal, something which all of us are still getting acquainted with. The four given contexts mentioned earlier account for important aspects in the communication model that affect how both sender and receiver influence and affect each other simultaneously. The Transaction Model also focuses on message transmission and reception. It frames communication as a force that shapes your realities before and after specific interactions occur. It must account for contextual influences outside of a single interaction. A series of interactions is needed to provide a meaningful understanding of how the message or messages of a communication event is causing behaviour change or even just a change in mindset on the part of the primary receiver in the model.

Figure 12. The Resilient Ecotourism Model of Communication



In view of the results of this study and the discussions around the promotion of local ecotourism for its social acceptability in the new normal, I would like to

propose this unique communication model, ***The Resilient Ecotourism Model of Communication***. I believe that it captures the dynamics of the current environment, i.e., living in a post-pandemic-cum-new-normal world, the communication drivers in the presence of digital media, and it offers a fresh perspective of how interactions flow between and among the stakeholders in this delicate and risk-laden field of tourism. This is Development Communication in action.

**First, the source and receiver in this communication model are both considered communicators who simultaneously send and receive messages to and from each other.** Any ecotourism site can be your source which encodes its messages (Tourists are welcome; It is safe to visit; Ecotourism heals; ably aided by attractive photos and images of the current state of the ecotourism site) and decodes messages (responses of the public via booking inquiries, reactions in social media, etc.) from receiver via feedback mechanisms currently used. For a place to be considered an ecotourism site, it must have the so-called “Environmental Interpretation or Interpretive Center,” a facility for the dissemination of knowledge of nature (Flor, 2011). Sometimes called eco-museums, interpretation centers use different media to enhance the understanding of nature. It is recommended that the Bojo River come up with and maintain this environmental interpretation center (EIC), to aid and stimulate the discovery process and the intellectual and emotional connection to nature of its visitors or guests (Flor, 2011). Furthermore, the ecotourism site finds its strength in the natural artifacts which its flora and fauna or marine resources exhibit. This points to the beauty of these natural elements which make up nature and its organic effect: healing for both body and soul. Bio-signals, an attribute of ecotourism which the environment exudes and which living organisms, i.e., man, interprets and shares with its natural environment and other living

organisms, are key drivers of nature's organic by-product: healing. These are properly situated in the basic exchange of information happening between source and receiver, in the four contexts (physical/psychological, social, cultural, and relational) of any communication event, which envelop the threefold-aim of repair, rehabilitate, and recover. I would like to think that these healing bio-signals are like throbbing centers that promote healing for all living organisms engaged in the ecotourism site's environment. If the guests strongly believe that ecotourism heals from Covid-19 and other natural disasters, then, it needs to be visible and take on an active function in all four contexts where the communication event takes place.

The public (receiver) decodes the message communicated by the source, and afterwards, encodes its own message which is its response or feedback to what was communicated. The receiver may also opt not to do anything with the message, which is where the uninterested public fall under. As a result, no encoding activity happens. This is seen in the uni-directional message coming from the source to the unresponsive receiver.

**Second, the messages of the source (Tourists are welcome; It is safe to visit; Ecotourism heals; ably aided by attractive photos and images of the current state of the ecotourism site) are communicated within a channel capsule composed of marketing artifacts or physical adaptive measures found onsite such as compliance signages, especially the safety seal which is a requirement for ecotourism establishments; social media especially Facebook and Instagram, and legacy media like radio, television and print media. I** decided to enclose the channel and the messages together to stress that they share an intimate interconnectedness. This part of the resilient model of communication is where the elements of social marketing reappear, as heavily supported by the kind of

messages it carries. Marketing for good is reflected in the messages conveyed by the source using the different marketing platforms.

**Third, the area between the source and receiver is the core environment where co-creation of meaning takes place. *Its three-fold aim: repair, rehabilitate, and recover, is surrounded by the four contexts which influence the understanding between the source and the receiver (communicators).*** The physical/psychological, social, cultural, and relational contexts are at play in having a common understanding of how stakeholders find meaning in the whole repair-rehabilitate-recover process which the new normal is set to achieve through the marketing efforts of the protagonists in this communication event. The whole transactional process becomes meaningful for the communicators when it achieves a mutual understanding of what they are both setting out to achieve: repair, rehabilitation, and recovery enjoyed by all the stakeholders in the ecotourism industry. And as mentioned earlier, this is the area where the healing bio-signals can be found, ably creating a setting of recovery.

Additionally, I have adopted the presence of noise (from the Transactional Model of Communication) for the resilient model because we cannot discount the fact that there remains to be a Covid threat in the current environment. We consider it to be noise noting how it could create apprehension, fear, and doubt in accepting the messages that the source is trying to communicate. Also, the element of noise in the form of the resurgence of Covid-19 poses as a threat in the activity of promoting an ecotourism destination. It is a needed element in the entire process of repair, rehabilitation, and recovery from the pandemic because of the presence of uncertainty and precariousness involved in health-related risks such as epidemics or pandemics.

***Fourth, the downward and horizontal feedback mechanisms from the receiver show us how encoding is done as reflected by booking inquiries, and consequently developing into ocular visits, use of social media for further information, calling or texting the contact information provided by the source, and using email communication as well.*** Persistent and frequent inquiries are seen to swell into an actual patronage of the ecotourism site. Once there is actual patronage, this is where the magic of the ecotourism site can either make or break its guests' expectations, with the presence of its unique selling experience (USP). I have categorized actual patronage of satisfied guests and unsatisfied guests because the word-of-mouth element as feedback will only come from the sphere of satisfied guests. Those who were not satisfied will not participate in the cycle of generating a new set of guests who will patronize the ecotourism facility. Once the satisfied guests talk, they will get reconnected to the messages of the ecotourism site, amplifying them further. Then the booking inquiries will happen, followed by ocular visits, inquiries in social media, calling or texting, and sending email inquiries, too. The frequency of this process repeating itself develops into a clear picture of ecotourism being socially accepted by people, and consequently, it will spell economic recovery as patronage equates to an increase in revenue in favour of the ecotourism site.

**Lastly, the significant element I would like to introduce in this communication model, which makes all the difference when we compare it with other models, is that of the resilience bridge.** It consists of the concrete action plans that the source (ecotourism site) will prepare to provide regardless of word-of-mouth marketing or social media marketing courtesy of their guests happening after each actual patronage to their ecotourism facility. The resilience

bridge brings us face-to-face with three action plans: strengthen --- customer service experience by training its staff to improve customer service relationships; sustain --- the beauty and cleanliness of the ecotourism site; and develop --- crisis communication strategies such as activating a crisis communications team that crafts holding messages about the site and communicates with all stakeholders to give timely updates about the situation of the ecotourism site in the event of a crisis, and develop creative programs that will keep guests engaged and come back for future visits. These creative programs can give birth to further networking and collaboration with more and more satisfied guests who can adopt their ecotourism site as a jumping board for a meaningful social advocacy they can support for the rest of their lives. This is how relationships are created, how alliances are formed, and how communities are created through constant engagement.

Ecotourism is one advocacy that is truly worthwhile. It is organic and lends a holistic perspective and approach to how one can be a productive individual. One's sense of fulfilment can be bolstered by one's involvement in this kind of advocacy.

This resilient model of communication for ecotourism wishes to extend its sights beyond the pandemic as it continues to brave the challenges of the new normal, making itself relevant for the times.

The other ideas connected to the elements of the resilient model of communication are the following:

- The intervention of digital technology (social media and legacy media) is one of the new elements added in the model, as reinforcement for strengthened customer service, improvement in the site, maintenance of cleanliness, digitalizing bookings, redounding to the unique selling point (USP) of all

ecotourism establishments: experience. This facilitates word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing.

- The context where this communication of ecotourism's social acceptability takes place is the new normal, a period of relative calm and ease following the absence of a resurgence of Covid-19 cases.
- Social acceptability will serve as a feedback element to the source (ecotourism facility) that indicates how effective the promotion of ecotourism is in the new normal. When social acceptability is strong as feedback, it will redound to an increase in guest turnout largely due to word-of-mouth marketing, an informal yet effective way to market ecotourism. When this happens, ecotourism, as the sustainable community's source of livelihood, will easily be transformed into a strategy for economic recovery in the new normal. Hence, the frequency of feedback reflects social acceptability and economic recovery all together.

Here is a summary of the elements found in the Resilient Ecotourism Model of Communication:

1. Source (Ecotourism site): the sender of the message in the communication event of ecotourism promotion. Its attributes include natural artifacts from which 'healing bio-signals' emanate, and the presence of an Environmental Interpretation Center (EIC), a facility for the dissemination of knowledge of nature. It is sometimes called eco-museums, which use different media to enhance the understanding of nature.
2. Message: this pertains to the primary content of what the source wishes to convey to its identified audience or receiver. For purposes of this study, the

messages involved are: Tourists are welcome. It is safe to visit. Ecotourism heals.

3. Channel: this is enclosed in a capsule together with the messages of the source to stress their interconnectedness. It is comprised of marketing artifacts or physical adaptive measures found onsite, e.g., safety seal, health compliance signages, status boards, etc. It also features both social and legacy media.
4. The Four Contexts of Physical/Psychological, Social, Cultural and Relational within which the communication event takes place: these contexts situate the stakeholders in the process of information exchange between source and receiver. These are factors that affect how a message is received and fed back to the source.
5. Co-creation of meaning: the three-fold aim of repair, rehabilitate and recover are understood by stakeholders in the communication process as something shared, dynamic, and relevant to the entire endeavour of bouncing back from adversity. With the four contexts' able support, the meaning of the three-fold aim of this communication event will redound to a sustainable way to live and thrive in the new normal.
6. Noise: this element pertains to what stakeholders in the communication process consider obstacles or hindrances in receiving the messages of the source. Fear of getting Covid-19, and the natural disasters that occur which affect the condition of the ecotourism site.
7. Healing Bio-signals: these are breakthrough centers where the perception of healing or cure of both body and soul occur. I chose round or circular, green icons to embody and signify robust health (symbolized by green) and

dynamism (symbolized by the round shape). They are positioned along the two-way directional arrow of the basic exchange of information, and near the four contexts of the communication event. I imagine them to be throbbing centers that radiate health and healing that nature produces and provides living organisms in its environment: birds, fish, other land, sea and air creatures, and human beings.

8. Feedback mechanism: this is a set of communication platforms composed of booking inquiries, ocular visits, calls, texts, emails, and actual visits that translate to social acceptability and economic recovery for the ecotourism site. The frequency by which actual visitors talk about their experience in the ecotourism site (via word-of-mouth marketing and social media mechanism) would spell social acceptability seen in high guest turnout and high revenue or improvement in the economic livelihood of the ecotourism site's primary beneficiaries, its community members.
9. Actual visit of satisfied tourists: this is a very important element in the communication model because from it would depend the ecotourism site's recovery after a crisis. Amplified by word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing, satisfied guests will not stop talking about their positive experience (the unique selling point of ecotourism) to their family members and friends, who will cause a ripple effect in their social circles.
10. Actual visit of unsatisfied tourists: this is an element that shows us what happens when there are unhappy customers. They will not help generate revenue to the ecotourism site and could even spread their negative experience to their own set of family and friends, which could be harmful to the reputation of the ecotourism site.

11. Resilience Bridge: this is another breakthrough element in the communication model as it contains the three action plans for all ecotourism sites to be resilient when health-related risks or natural disasters occur. These action plans are: strengthen customer service relations and continuing development and training of personnel; sustain the beauty and cleanliness of the ecotourism site; and develop crisis communications strategies and creative interventions to increase guest engagement. The resilience bridge is directed to both satisfied and unsatisfied tourists or guests of the ecotourism experience.
12. Commitment to Ecotourism as a Social Advocacy: this element pertains to the by-product of the word-of-mouth marketing being done extensively by the satisfied tourists of the ecotourism experience. This implies a high level of engagement on the part of the satisfied guests because they are seen to be going a step higher in their involvement with the ecotourism site's thrusts or reasons for being. Getting the commitment of your guests means that they are willing to be your loyal followers who will be part of your cause or social advocacy for years to come. This spells positivity and progress not just for the concerned ecotourism site but for the ecotourism industry.

Undertaking this study on communicating for the social acceptability of local ecotourism seen as a strategy for economic recovery in the new normal is more than just worthwhile --- it is life-uplifting. It is with an optimistic and hopeful note that I intend to conclude and close this study, relying on the strength of the recommendations raised earlier to aid local ecotourism to thrive, live, and survive in the new normal.

As in any crisis, an attitude worth as much as gold is one of a can-do, brave, and open mentality and disposition. In the context of this study, recovery has a name. It is **ecotourism** in its pristine and purest form. It can be made socially acceptable and socially valuable noting how a sustainable and resilient community backs it up --- all for the good of priceless humanity, in the eyes of God, Creator and Maker of all things visible and invisible.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

#### *The Social Acceptability of Ecotourism in the New Normal*

Dear Respondent,

Thank you for participating in this survey. Rest assured that your answers will be treated with utmost confidentiality.

This 1-2-minute questionnaire hopes to get a picture of ecotourism's social acceptability in Cebu amid the health emergency crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Your time is greatly appreciated.

MICHELLE C. SALON  
Researcher

*University of the Philippines Open University*

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Name (optional): \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Male  Female Place of Residence: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you consider yourself a nature-lover, i.e., an outdoor enthusiast who visits 1-2 (or more) ecotourism sites in and outside Cebu?

\_\_\_\_\_ YES  
\_\_\_\_\_ NO

6. Where did you learn about the Bojo River/Bojo River Cruise?

\_\_\_\_\_ Family/Friends  
\_\_\_\_\_ Print ads  
\_\_\_\_\_ Email  
\_\_\_\_\_ Facebook  
\_\_\_\_\_ Instagram  
\_\_\_\_\_ Website  
\_\_\_\_\_ YouTube  
\_\_\_\_\_ Others, please specify:  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. What factors made you decide to visit the Bojo River or try the Bojo River Cruise?

- Attractive photos/images online
  - Affordable rates/promos/discounts being offered
  - Food/cuisine being offered
  - Good reviews online
  - Word-of-mouth advertising from family and friends
  - Others, please specify:
- 
- 

8. What reasons do you have for visiting this ecotourism site, i.e., the Bojo River?

- To unwind with family and friends
  - To commune with nature
  - To just find a way to get out of the house because I have stayed home/indoors too long during this pandemic
  - To take care of my mental health
  - To try the organic food/cuisine/delicacy of the ecotourism facility
  - Others, please specify:
- 
- 

9. With health protocols easing up, do you think it is safe for people to already go out and visit the Bojo River or experience the Bojo River Cruise?

- YES
- NO

If YES, please check the possible reasons below why you think that way: IT IS SAFE ...

- Because the members of the staff are fully-vaccinated.
  - Because there is an assurance of safety due to the ecotourism facility's compliance with health protocols.
  - Because I believe that ecotourism, e.g., Bojo River, which is said to promote the healing benefits of nature, is an antidote to the pandemic.
  - Others, please specify:
- 
- 

If NO, please check the possible reasons below: It is still NOT SAFE because ...

- I fear getting Covid-19 in an ecotourism facility like the Bojo River. You can still get it regardless of following protocols.
- There are people who do not follow health protocols in an ecotourism facility like the Bojo River.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not trust the credibility of Bojo River's adherence to the health protocols.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not believe that ecotourism, which is said to promote the healing benefits of nature, is an antidote to the pandemic.

\_\_\_\_\_ Others, please specify:

Thank you very much!

## **Appendix 2 : The Interview Schedule Questions**

Apart from the survey questionnaire above, interview schedules were conducted with the Management Staff and Operations Staff of the selected ecotourism facility, i.e., Bojo River. There were 2 management staff members and 5 operations staff members interviewed, a total of seven (7) representatives from the ecotourism facility. The questions in the interview included the following:

1. When the pandemic struck, what measures did your ecotourism facility employ to keep operations afloat?
2. Did you have to close for some time? If yes, when did you reopen?
3. What were the strategies and media platforms you used to promote or campaign for your reopening?
4. What were the responses you got from your target market?
5. How did your sales fare after the repromotion of your ecotourism facility?  
What percentage was the increase in sales?