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RESEARCH NOTE



When governance trembles: resilience as contested terrain in urban tourism

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ABSTRACT

Resilience in urban tourism is often framed as a technical capacity or organisational attribute; however, this five-year longitudinal qualitative study of tourism governance in an emerging-economy urban context reconceptualises it as a contested terrain – a fragile accomplishment forged at moments when governance trembles. Drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with government and industry actors in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the paper demonstrates how resilience emerges not as a state of equilibrium but as a provisional and uneven outcome shaped by multi-scalar disruptions, institutional asymmetries, and politically mediated negotiations. Governance actors navigated cascading shocks by improvising, recalibrating mandates, and negotiating competing imperatives, thereby exposing the limitations of universalist and capability-driven models of resilience. The study contributes a critical, processual understanding of resilience, attentive to power, temporality, and institutional complexity in tourism crisis governance. It further demonstrates how longitudinal, interpretive inquiry illuminates evolving meanings, relational tensions, and bounded adaptive capacities through which governance actors make sense of uncertainty and sustain fragile forms of coherence.

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Resilience; crisis governance; urban tourism; longitudinal study; political ecology

Introduction

Crises in tourism cities reveal that vulnerability and resilience are not merely operational concerns but are constituted through politically mediated governance processes, where power asymmetries, institutional arrangements, and uneven access to resources shape differentiated outcomes (Faisal et al., 2020; Maxim & Morrison, 2024). However, dominant scholarship remains anchored in organisational capabilities, system recovery, or generic adaptive capacities, often paying insufficient attention to the governance settings in which resilience is enacted (Hall et al., 2018; Prayag, 2023). In tourism governance research, this gap has long been noted, arguing that governance arrangements are not value-neutral but are shaped by politics, interests, and asymmetrical distributions of power (Amore & Hall, 2016). Contemporary literature further emphasises the need to connect governance, complexity, and resilience more explicitly (Farsari, 2023), to interrogate whether tourism governance is locally grounded or conditioned by wider scalar forces (Sharpley, 2023), and to recognise tourism cities as particularly exposed

sites of crisis because of their dense institutional and socio-spatial complexity (Maxim & Morrison, 2024). Recent research has also drawn attention to the spatio-temporal dynamics through which crises unfold across tourism cities, further highlighting the need to situate resilience within broader questions of vulnerability, justice, and governance (Jiao et al., 2025; Rastegar et al., 2023). These concerns are especially salient in Global South destinations, where crisis response is frequently mediated by fragmented mandates, constrained fiscal capacity, overlapping institutional authority, and historically sedimented inequalities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Gössling et al., 2020). This study addresses the critical question: How do tourism governance actors, embedded within fragmented and asymmetrical institutional environments, interpret and respond to crisis conditions over time, and how do power relations, adaptive governance processes, and structural constraints shape resilience in urban tourism?

Dhaka, a large, institutionally dense, emerging-economy city in the Global South (United Nations, 2025) where tourism governance is shaped by

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overlapping agencies, strong political pressures, and uneven capacities for coordination, offers a revealing context. This paper, drawing on longitudinal data from Dhaka, advances a critical understanding of resilience in urban tourism as contested terrain, a political-ecological process in which governance actors negotiate authority, legitimacy, and resources under crisis. The emphasis on temporal layering and trajectory analysis aligns with socio-ecological understandings of resilience as dynamic reorganisation rather than equilibrium (Faisal et al., 2020; Folke, 2016; Prayag, 2023). It highlights the infrastructural role of governance actors, who mediate mobility, risk information, and inter-agency coordination during a crisis. Rather than treating resilience as an attribute that actors simply deploy, the paper asks how resilience is produced, constrained, and reworked over time within a fragile governance system. Methodologically, this paper advances tourism crisis scholarship by demonstrating the value of longitudinal, interpretive qualitative inquiry for examining destination resilience. While conventional models emphasise organisational capacities or post-hoc assessments, the longitudinal design employed here captures how institutional meanings, authority relationships, and adaptive possibilities evolve across sequential phases of disruption.

Methods

This study employs a longitudinal qualitative design to identify and understand the responses of tourism governance actors in Dhaka to crises from March 2020 to April 2025. Longitudinal qualitative research is particularly valuable in tourism studies for systematically tracking changes in attitudes, strategies, and practices over extended periods (Crossley, 2020; Decrop, 2010; Nunkoo et al., 2013). By addressing issues of temporality and continuity, this longitudinal qualitative approach captures changing interpretations, evolving institutional relationships, and temporally layered responses rather than relying on retrospective snapshots. The approach aligns with calls for temporally sensitive and interpretive crisis research capable of capturing evolving meaning-making, institutional negotiations, and systemic turbulence (Faisal, 2024; Folke, 2016; Prayag, 2023). Dhaka provides an appropriate context due to its emerging economy, overlapping mandates and exposure to recurrent global and domestic disruptions. A purposive, theoretically informed sampling approach traced shifts in interpretation, authority, and adaptive behaviour as the crisis unfolded. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis examined institutional fragmentation, conflicting mandates, adaptive improvisation,

benefit leakage, and evolving interpretations of the crisis. Participants held senior executive roles and were selected because of their involvement in interpreting regulations, mediating industry concerns, coordinating responses, or influencing crisis-related decisions.

Qualitative in-depth interviews across five phases captured evolving conditions, emotional registers, and changing interpretations over time, an approach congruent with socio-ecological and adaptive understandings of resilience. Interviews were conducted at intervals of approximately 6–12 months from May 2020 to April 2025. This iterative engagement aligns with Hermanowicz's (2013) approach to longitudinal qualitative interviewing, which emphasises relational continuity and thematic consistency while remaining attentive to emergent change. It also resonates with Rantatalo and Karp's (2016) focus on collective reflection in practice, whereby sustained longitudinal interaction fosters deeper interpretive trust and reflexivity among participants. Although a core cohort of participants was retained throughout the study, some attrition occurred due to organisational restructuring. Continuity was preserved by engaging successor representatives within the same organisations. Outgoing participants facilitated these transitions by connecting researchers with their successors and transferring relevant information about the study's scope and progress. This strategy enabled the research to balance longitudinal coherence with sensitivity to evolving organisational contexts. Consequently, the study comprised 23 participants representing 10 organisations, including four government agencies and six trade bodies (listed in Table 1). All participants were anonymised through pseudonyms.

Table 1. Research participants.

Organisations	Type of organisation	Participants	Position of participants
TB1	Tourism Trade Body	TR1, TR2	President
TB2	Tourism Trade Body	TR3	President
TB3	Tourism Trade Body	TR4	General Secretary
TB4	Tourism Trade Body	TR5, TR6, TR7, TR8	President
TB5	Hospitality Trade Body	TR9	President
TB6	Travel Trade Body	TR10, TR11, TR12	President
GA1	Government Agency	GR1, GR2, GR3, GR4	Chief Executive Officer
GA2	Government Agency	GR5, GR6	Chairman
GA3	Government Agency	GR7	Chairman
GA4	Government Agency	GR9, GR10, GR11	Director

Participants' reflections revealed emotional strain, interpretive ambiguity, and the bounded nature of agency. Such multi-voiced accounts were essential for examining resilience amid polycrisis. Participants described early experiences of acute uncertainties in post-crisis; a government official (GR7 of GA3) reflected, *'Every day felt like the system was recalibrating; nothing held still long enough for us to know what to do'* and a trade-body leader (TR9) recalled, *'Members expected answers, but we ourselves were navigating contradictions'*. Such accounts provided insight into bounded agency and meaning-making processes, which are central to interpretive crisis research.

A critical analysis of 56 documents, including ministerial circulars, policy amendments, stimulus package guidelines, inter-agency communications, public notices, and crisis management directives. Media reports and public briefings were used to contextualise shifts in macroeconomic conditions, political tensions, reopening debates, and cross-sector policy developments. Together, these materials enabled the reconstruction of how global disruptions cascaded into regulatory volatility at national and city levels. Importantly, they were not used merely as contextual background but were systematically triangulated with interview narratives to validate interpretations and capture the multi-scalar dynamics of crisis governance.

Data analysis involved iterative coding organised around structural constraints, governance asymmetries, institutional interactions, and adaptive responses. This approach aligns with interpretive crisis methodology, which foregrounds meaning-making and institutional negotiation (Faisal, 2024). The longitudinal design was analytically structured across five phases corresponding to distinct stages in the unfolding of the crisis and its governance responses: initial shock, response, coordination, policy volatility, and provisional consolidation. These phases were not imposed a priori but were derived inductively through iterative engagement with the data, reflecting shifts in policy environments and evolving crisis conditions over time. Conceptually, this phasing enables a temporally sensitive analysis of continuity and change, capturing how governance dynamics, adaptive practices, and interpretive frameworks evolve through successive stages of disruption.

Temporal trajectory analysis traced how interpretations, governance routines, and political tensions evolved across five phases of crisis: shock, response, coordination, policy volatility, and provisional consolidation (Brouder, 2020; Faulkner, 2001). These phases provided an analytical structure for tracing continuity and change in governance responses over time. Open coding identified themes related to structural

constraints, mandate conflicts, uneven access to resources, and improvised coordination. Consequently, axial coding examined relational and institutional dynamics, mapping how actors negotiated authority and legitimacy during moments of uncertainty. Throughout the analysis, reflexive memos documented interpretive assumptions, positionality, and emergent insights (Faisal, 2024).

Findings

Longitudinal data from this study demonstrate that, in emerging economies, resilience is profoundly shaped by political legitimacy, institutional fragmentation, and uneven access to policy levers. Rather than appearing as a coherent capacity, resilience in urban tourism emerged as a fragile and negotiated accomplishment produced through repeated efforts to interpret uncertainty, stabilise expectations, and manage contradictory mandates. The analysis underscores the need for contextually grounded theories attentive to power, history, and governance architectures. Government agencies and trade bodies in Dhaka navigated conflicting mandates, protecting public health, sustaining economic circuits, managing macroeconomic pressures, and maintaining public legitimacy. Participants indicated that these competing imperatives generated institutional tensions in tourism, producing resilience outcomes that were uneven and contested.

Crisis onset and institutional disorientation

In 2020, the onset of COVID-19 led to acute institutional disorientation in urban tourism governance. GR1, GR5, GR7, and GR10 explained that government agencies confronted simultaneous imperatives: enforcing mobility restrictions, assessing economic fallout, and responding to industry appeals for relief. Although governance actors demonstrated creativity and adaptability, their agency was bounded by structural forces: bureaucratic silos, limited fiscal space, technological gaps, and political pressures. These constraints challenge narratives that centre on agility or innovation without acknowledging underlying institutional realities. Interviewees recalled a sense of institutional disorientation; GR5 mentioned: *'trying to steer a vehicle while the road keeps disappearing under you'*. This phase demonstrates that crisis governance in urban tourism is inseparable from the wider institutional density and complexity. Even where governance actors displayed commitment and creativity, their room for manoeuvre was bounded by bureaucratic silos, limited fiscal space, technological gaps, and political oversight.

Multi-scalar fragmentation and policy volatility

The crisis unfolded across temporal layers, from immediate panic to mid-term improvisation to long-term restructuring and across scales (between 2020 and 2022). Global disruptions created cascading local effects. Sudden travel advisories, supply chain disruptions, and regime changes required constant regulatory adaptation (GR2). However, policy responses reflected deep governance fragmentation (TR3). TR9 shared the hospitality industry's experience, noting that government agencies issued overlapping directives, often without coordination. This fragmentation limited the coherence of national crisis strategies and contributed to uneven implementation across the sector. Trade bodies became frontline translators of uncertainties. Their members sought guidance on operating rules, financial survival, and labour obligations. Yet trade-body leaders (TR1, TR4, TR5 and TR10) themselves were overwhelmed. Trade bodies were inundated with requests for interpretation. TR10 mentioned: *'Every day, someone asked whether their event was allowed or banned. The rules kept changing faster than we could update members'*. GR6 explained, *'Every hour brought a new instruction from a different ministry, some contradicting the last. We were improvising in real time'*. These dynamics reinforce governance theory perspectives that emphasise the role of institutional fragmentation and competing mandates in shaping uneven crisis responses, particularly in complex urban systems. They further suggest that resilience is not an outcome of coordination alone but is contingent on how institutional fragmentation is managed, negotiated, and, at times, reproduced.

Adaptive improvisation and bounded agency

In 2021, the partial reopening created new governance pressures related to cross-border mobility, vaccination verification, reopening protocols, and the balance between public health and economic revival. Agencies and trade bodies increasingly formed ad hoc committees and informal coordination platforms to interpret directives, negotiate implementation, and communicate sector concerns (GR7). These efforts were adaptive, but they remained precarious. Participants repeatedly emphasised that resilience depended too heavily on personalities, informal ties, and improvised workarounds rather than durable institutional mechanisms. TR2, TR4, TR9, GR6 and GR7 highlighted the necessity of formalised, cross-agency platforms for mobility governance, crisis response, regulatory coherence, and data sharing. Capability challenges became acute. Agencies lacked

the staffing, technological systems, or clarity of mandate to manage hybridised tourism-mobility governance. GR6 admitted: *'We were learning pandemic governance while doing it. There was no playbook.'* Document analysis corroborated this pattern: circulars and directives changed rapidly, while public communications often lagged behind policy shifts. Such findings extend discussions on governance, resilience, and complexity by showing that adaptive capacity in crisis is not simply a matter of responsiveness but of whether coordination becomes institutionalised.

Among others, GR3, GR4, GR11, TR3, and TR7 argued that, without institutionalisation, resilience remains precarious and dependent on personalities rather than structures. Interviewees revealed emotional strain, such as *'every instruction for the travel and tourism sector in Dhaka contradicted another. We were firefighting without water'* (TR11); *'people [in hospitality and tourism businesses] expected certainty, but certainty was the scarcest resource'* (GR5). Contradictory policies signalled encouraging reopening of hospitality businesses to support economic recovery, while emphasising public health restrictions created operational whiplash. A government official (GR7) explained, *'it was a constant tension between caution and pressure to revive mobility. Every decision was political'*. TR6 revealed that policy inconsistencies, stemming from overlapping ministerial mandates, strained credibility. Government agencies struggled to assert coherent authority in an environment where science, politics, and economic pressures intersected unpredictably.

Inequality and structural reinforcement

In 2022, agencies and trade bodies adopted collaborative approaches, primarily forming ad hoc committees to interpret directives, negotiate implementation, and convey industry concerns to regulators. Yet this coordination remained fragile. Visitor economy in Dhaka remained in polycrisis, including inflation, supply-chain disruptions, slow recovery of tourism and political uncertainty. Agencies were required to stabilise the tourism and hospitality sector while managing broader macroeconomic risks. GR3 remarked: *'We were building bridges while walking on them'*. Trade body executives (including TR2, TR3 and TR9) and media reports noted that benefit leakage, unequal access to stimulus, and policy asymmetry illustrate how crises often reinforce rather than dismantle structural inequities. TR2 observed: *'Crisis in Dhaka's tourism and hospitality sector magnifies the existing inequalities. Those with access gain more access'*. Stimulus governance further exacerbated institutional inequalities. Relief packages were channelled through

commercial banks, creating barriers for firms lacking collateral or political legitimacy. TR3 explained, *'The firms that needed support most were the least able to access it. The system defaulted to its usual hierarchies'*. Early resilience was thus shaped by entrenched asymmetries in state – market relations.

Provisional consolidation and fragile stability

The study reveals governance actors evolving into infrastructural roles that have traditionally been unacknowledged in tourism literature. Trade bodies and government agencies acted as mobility nodes, risk mediators, and communication platforms, functions essential to urban resilience. In 2023 and 2024, government agencies reframed their role as arbiters of economic stability, issuing increasingly complex circulars to manage resource allocation. GR4, GR6 and GR11 mentioned that insufficient data, bureaucratic silos, and political pressures constrained their capacity to coordinate effectively across sectors. Despite these constraints, some agencies (such as GA2 and GA3) demonstrated adaptive governance. They developed templates for mobility protocols, facilitated interagency task forces, and coordinated public communications. However, coordination remained personality-dependent rather than institutionalised, leaving resilience vulnerable to leadership turnover.

By early 2025, tourism governance actors reached a state of *provisional consolidation*: systems stabilised, coordination routines became familiar, and institutional memory of the crisis produced incremental improvements in responsiveness. Trade bodies increasingly acted as infrastructural nodes synthesising information, facilitating legitimacy, and mediating between actors. Interviewees and industry reports emphasised that consolidation did not equate to sustained resilience. GR4 noted, *'We are more organised than before, but the ground keeps shifting'*. Resilience thus emerged as an adaptive but fragile system shaped by political priorities and enduring structural constraints.

Drawing on the longitudinal data of this study, the figure below illustrates resilience as an emergent and uneven governance process shaped by multi-scalar interactions between global disruptions, structural conditions, institutional contestation, and constrained forms of agency. Concentric layers represent the ecological depth of these influences, with outer layers exerting top-down pressures and inner layers feeding back into broader governance structures (Figure 1).

The annotations explain how global shocks cascade into fragmented national and urban governance arenas, where structural asymmetries, legitimacy

struggles, benefit leakage, and mandate conflicts shape the contested institutional environment. Within this landscape, trade bodies and government agencies engage in improvisation, advocacy, and policy translation, although their agency remains bounded by political-institutional forces. Resilience emerges at the centre as a provisional and uneven configuration reflecting temporal layering, hybridised routines, and ongoing negotiation of authority and legitimacy. The model highlights resilience not as a stable organisational attribute but as a political-ecological process emerging through recursive interactions across governance scales.

Conclusion and implications

Tourism resilience scholarship has increasingly argued for approaches that move beyond organisational capabilities (Hall et al., 2018; Prayag, 2023) to incorporate structural, political, and institutional dynamics. This longitudinal study advances a critical, empirically grounded conceptualisation of resilience as contested terrain and calls for theoretically recalibrated approaches to resilience-building frameworks. In Dhaka, global disruptions cascaded into governance systems already marked by fragmentation and uneven power; resilience in tourism emerged as a provisional and uneven political-ecological configuration, shaped by structural constraints, institutional contestation, and bounded agency. Organisational adaptation was deeply conditioned by power relations, benefit leakage, and policy volatility. Rather than reflecting organisational capabilities or system stability, resilience manifested as a negotiated equilibrium under continuous uncertainty (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Faisal et al., 2020; Folke, 2016). Trade bodies and government agencies played essential yet constrained infrastructural roles, translating policy, mediating risk, and improvising coordination amidst turbulence. The critical insights revealed that building equitable resilience in urban tourism demands institutionalised cross-agency collaboration that transcends sectoral silos and addresses the deep structural inequalities that crises reveal. By bringing urban governance into closer conversation with debates on politics, governance, complexity, and crisis (Amore & Hall, 2016; Farsari, 2023; Maxim & Morrison, 2024; Sharpley, 2023), the paper argues that resilience in urban tourism must be theorised as relational, scalar, and distributive. This repositioning moves beyond the extant literature on crisis and resilience in tourism by showing that what counts as resilience in urban tourism depends on who can access support, whose

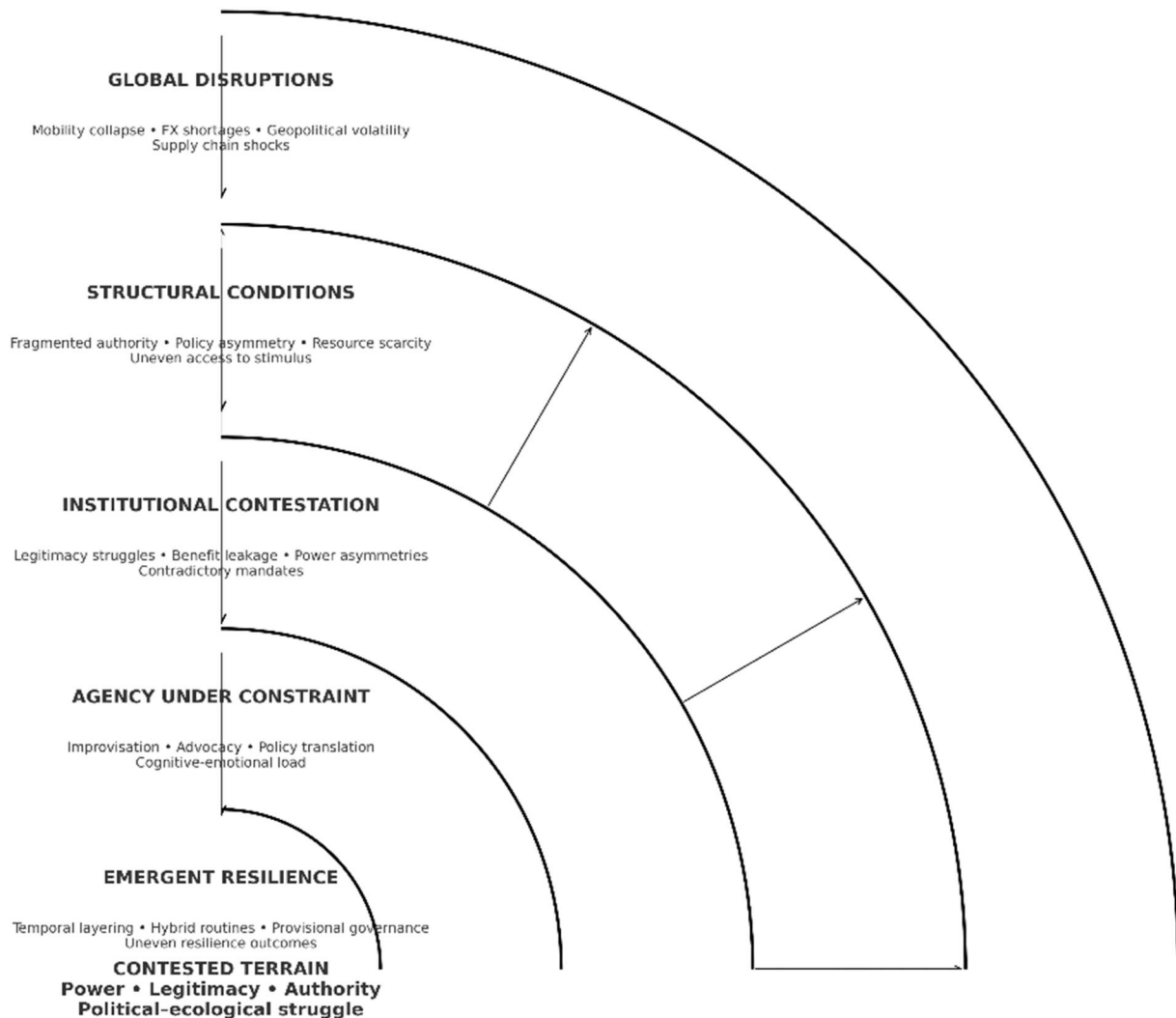


Figure 1. Nested ecological model of resilience as contested terrain in tourism governance.

interpretation of crisis prevails, and which forms of coordination become institutionalised.

Furthermore, the study illustrates how interpretive methods (Faisal, 2024) can illuminate the political and relational dimensions of crisis governance, particularly institutional contestation, mandate conflicts, and the bounded nature of agency under structural constraint. The integration of document analysis, policy tracking, and multi-scalar framing also underscores the need for methodological approaches that connect global shocks to national and urban governance dynamics (Gössling et al., 2020; Maxim & Morrison, 2024). By foregrounding governance actors' emotional registers, sensemaking processes, and evolving positionalities, this study demonstrates the potential of qualitative longitudinal designs to capture the resilience as contested terrain within complex political-institutional ecosystems of urban destinations. Such approaches offer a robust

foundation for future comparative and theoretical work on tourism governance amid chronic turbulence. Although the longitudinal design provides strong temporal depth, the findings are analytically rather than statistically generalisable.

For policymakers and practitioners, the findings underscore the need for institutionalised cross-agency coordination, clearer mandates, effective communication channels, and support mechanisms that do not reproduce pre-existing inequalities. Trade bodies should be recognised not merely as advocates but as governance intermediaries and infrastructural actors during crises. These dynamics resonate with calls to understand resilience in urban tourism as interwoven with wider political and economic structures. Equitable resilience-building in urban tourism, therefore, requires more than emergency response capacity; it requires reforms that address fragmentation, reduce selective

access to relief, and improve the legitimacy of crisis governance.

To advance a deeper, theoretically informed understanding of resilience in urban tourism, future research may address questions related to the following facets i) advancing resilience scholarship beyond universalist models toward a more critical, relational, and contextually grounded understanding of how tourism governance systems navigate and are reshaped by polycrisis; ii) illuminating convergent and divergent resilience pathways shaped by urbanisation patterns, state capacity, and political structures; iii) exploring governance actors as infrastructural systems responsible for information flow, mobility management, and risk communication; iv) applying political-ecological frameworks to examine how crises redistribute power, legitimacy, and authority among state actors, industries, and civic groups in urban tourism; and v) understanding how institutional memory, fatigue, and learning trajectories (re)shape resilience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Center for Project Management and Information Systems (PMIS) at the University of Dhaka (Ethics Approval No. EEL5/2020).

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage. All interviews were conducted with written consent and anonymised to protect participants' identities.

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