



Swedish Recreational Businesses Coping with COVID-19 Using Technologies

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Abstract. Restrictions imposed on societies across the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic have had direct and indirect consequences to the public's health and well-being. Unlike many countries, Sweden's restrictions were significantly milder. Businesses offering recreational services provide activities that are important to the well-being of the public. This study explores the status and perspectives of 34 Swedish businesses that provide recreational activities during COVID-19 and the role of technology on recreational services. Results show that businesses comply with guidelines and recommendations, have trust in the government despite lack of sufficient support, and have special considerations for youth. Technology was significant in aiding businesses to cope with COVID-19. Trends reported are: adoption of new remote technologies, increase of digital tools use, offerings of online services, and openness to new solutions.

Keywords: COVID-19 · Recreational activities · Well-being · Sweden · Technology · Digitalization · Coping with COVID-19

1 Introduction

COVID-19 and Sweden. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented crisis, and to this point (March 2022) there are approximately 450.23 million confirmed cases and over 6 million deaths worldwide [1]. Presently in Sweden, it is reported that there are 2.46 million confirmed cases and over 17.7 thousand deaths [2]. Around the world, there have been tight regulations and restrictions implemented to tackle the COVID-19 infection spread. Sweden was a special case, since it is known for not implementing tight restrictions unlike its neighboring countries. The government of Sweden encourages the public to take responsibility to follow guidelines and recommendations, without coercion, thus demonstrating its trust in the public. The impact of COVID-19 has not only adverse effects on the physiological health of individuals, but also indirect health effects as it may seriously affect the mental health and well-being of individuals [9]. Recreation businesses are at risk of pent-up demand during times of crisis and

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often as a result of denied access to a market; meaning demand shifts from discretionary products and services [15]. Businesses and services such as restaurants, bars, sports, concerts, movies, and entertainment are at risk of facing an economic downturn even outside of lock-downs or pandemic-related operational restrictions. The government of Sweden has offered financial support, SEK 175 million, to increase supervision to ensure eating and drinking establishments adhere to restrictions. However, funds were also released by the government to support other services, at this time a total of SEK 3,53 billion was to go towards culture [3] and a total of SEK 1,995 billion towards sport [4].

Technological Trends Among Businesses. Despite the COVID-19 consequences on businesses, COVID-19 effects are shown to present digitalization opportunities for businesses [8]. In the wake of a pandemic, healthcare and retail have found ways to provide goods and services and to keep afloat. To overcome the limitations that come with COVID-19, consumer behaviors have changed to the use of modern technology to easily access and acquire products from the comfort of their homes [15]. Technology may have also benefited recreation businesses, but technology can be expected to have a limited impact on a number of these businesses. Beauty salons, spas, bars, theaters, movie houses, and entertainment places, for instance, can take bookings online, but cannot, for the most part, offer their products and services online. For example, gyms can offer virtual cardio exercises, but the use of gym equipment requires one to be in the gym premises [14]. COVID-19 has sped up the uptake of technology-based service offerings and has made the public more aware of technological options that can make their lives easier. “Innovation processes that would previously have been incremental and taken years have been forced by the global health crisis to move to a more radical model” [8, p. 4]. Many of the technologies used have existed before the COVID-19 pandemic but the limitations brought about by COVID-19 have expedited their adoption and use. COVID-19 has contributed to the acceleration of digitalization trends, and is thought to be a “catalyst” for the adoption of technological solutions for work places and organizations [5]. However, one main consequence is the restrictions imposed on people’s lifestyles, limiting their activities, and therefore it poses a risk to their overall well-being. Inactivity leads to sedentary lifestyles which can have serious consequences to one’s physical and mental health [6, 12]. Studies show recommendations to help counter risks to physical and mental well-being [12, 13]. Recreational activities, often considered as leisure activities, are essential for the overall well-being. Recreation does not only associate with cultural activities, but according to Metin et al.’s categories recreational activities include, to name a few, basic entertainment, mental activities, sports and exercises, music, art, and dance [11]. Since public health is given precedence over recreational activities during this crisis, our interest is to explore how recreational businesses cope with the COVID-19 restrictions and whether technological innovations or solutions have been adopted.

Research Objective. In this study, we explore the effects of COVID-19 on businesses, how they cope with the crisis, and the role of technologies, e.g., digitalization in Sweden. Specifically, we target businesses providing recreational/

leisure services and activities in effort to explore the support for such activities, essential for well-being.

2 Methodology

The study was conducted as an online-targeted survey, using the Survey & Report tool supported by Karlstad University. The survey consisted of 18 questions. Five demographic questions which collected information on which municipality the business is located, whether the business is municipality owned or private, the type of recreational business, the type of services offered, and the professional position of the participant. We asked close-ended questions about type of business and recreational activity provided, impact of COVID-19 on the business, measures and conformity to guidelines, and the role of technology. We also included comment-fields (open-ended responses) for most questions. The recreational businesses that were approached include the following categories: gym/pool, restaurant/pub, theatre/opera/cinema, museum/gallery, cafe/bakery, spa/hairdresser, and games/sports. The list of recreational activities was based on the activities and classifications by Metin et al. [11]. Two businesses were selected in each category in each of the 21 municipalities and these businesses were contacted by email containing information letter as well as the link to the online survey, provided in both English and Swedish. Two consecutive reminders were sent to non-respondents. Participation was voluntary, and a consent form was included at the beginning of the survey and participants proceeded only upon giving consent. No personally identifying information were collected¹. Descriptive analysis is used to present the results of the closed-ended questions, and thematic analysis [7] is used for the open-ended responses, i.e., comments. Data was translated to English and Nvivo software was used to code the results and preliminary categorize data. During each stage of the analysis (coding, categorization, theme generation), both authors would process the analysis independently and then meet up to discuss and resolve conflicts. This study was conducted during the pandemic, this negatively affected the response rate from the relevant types of businesses. Despite the limited responses, the results are consistent with literature and can be assumed to give an accurate depiction of the state and experiences of businesses at the time of the survey.

3 Results

3.1 Statistical Descriptions of Closed Ended Questions

Our study yielded 34 responses sharing businesses' perspectives from 20 Swedish municipalities, see Fig. 1. The voluntary responses are from individuals holding managerial and executive positions at their recreational businesses. Twenty-five (73.5%) of the businesses are private businesses and 9 (26.5%) are municipality-owned. We asked participants about the categories of activities they provide, and

¹ This study received the approval from the ethical advisor at Karlstad university.

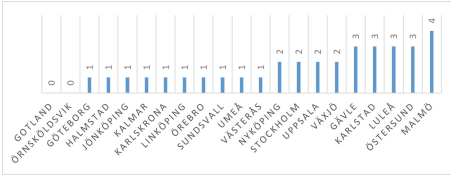


Fig. 1. Responses per municipality.

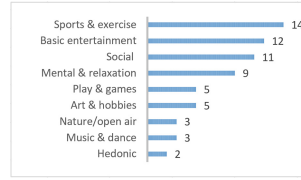


Fig. 2. Recreational activities provided.

the following activities are reported by the corresponding number of businesses: sports and exercises 14 (41.2%), basic entertainment 12 (35.3%), other social activities 11 (32.4%), mental activities 9 (26.5%), art & hobbies 5 (14.7%), play & games 5 (14.7%), music & dance 3 (8.8%), nature activities 3 (8.8%), and hedonic activities 2 (5.9%), as depicted in Fig. 2.

The results show that both the national guidelines (31, 91.2%) and municipality-specific guidelines (22, 64.7%) are being followed by the recreational businesses to ensure safety. The majority of the participants (28, 82.4%) indicate that their businesses were operational at the time of the survey (peak of restrictions), while 6 (17.6%) were closed. Five of the closed businesses indicate that closures were due to COVID-19 restrictions as opposed to revenue loss or resource unavailability.

It is reported the significant decrease of: the number of operating hours 25 (80.6%), number of staff 19 (63.3%), number of services 18 (60%), number of customers 29 (90.6%), and revenue 27 (90%). However, a small number of businesses, in the categories gyms/pools, and museum/gallery, report a positive outlook: 3 (9.7%) cite an increase in operating hours, 2 (6.7%) cite an increase in the number of services, number of customers, and increase in profits respectively. When asked about the importance of remaining open, 5 (14.7%) responses indicated “no” for moral consciousness e.g., public safety reasons. The rest indicated “yes” with the following reasons: 25 (73%) responses were for social well being purposes, 21 (61.8%) for economical purposes, and 4 (11.8) stated there is no reason to be closed. 19 (55.9%) of the responses mention that they have adopted new technologies to aid their work during the COVID-19 pandemic and 14 (43.8%) have adopted new remote services specifically. It is also reported that there is a need for technological development to serve new demands 8 (23.5%). Twenty participants (5, 14.7% strongly agree and 15, 44.1% agree) express having trust in the government, 11 (32.4%) remain neutral, 2(5.9%) disagree, and 1(2.9%) strongly disagrees. The majority (22, 64.7%) feel safe in Sweden, 10 (29.4%) are neutral, and 2 (5.9%) disagree. Though a few participants (3, 8.8%) are doubtful about the future of their businesses, many (22, 64.7%) remain positive. To the statement that the support from the state is sufficient participants: strongly disagree (6, 17.6%), disagree 8 (23.5%), neutral (10, 29.4%), agree (9, 26.5%), and strongly agree by 1 (2.9%).

3.2 Thematic Analysis of Open Ended Responses

Business Safety Measures. In addition to the majority indicating that they follow national and municipal guidelines, 2 participants mention following recommendations from authoritative bodies such as the Swedish Sports Confederation and the Special Sports Federation. One participant adds that their business also performed a risk analysis and made the necessary adaptations for staff and customers, while another highlights that the business added its own considerations to the national and local guidelines. According to one participant, their gyms reduced the number of visitors allowed at the time to ensure social distancing (10 sqm rule). They also reduced group training from 20–28 to 10–12 people.

COVID19 Impact on Business Status. Though only about a handful of participants (6) indicated that their businesses were closed at the time of the survey, 7 operated under special conditions. One business had closed and reopened on 2 different occasions. Of the businesses that operated on certain conditions, 3 participants mention that they were open for shorter than usual operating hours (2 businesses, operating at 20% and 33.3% of their usual work week). Two participants mention that they faced partial closures where certain services ceased and others continued to operate, such as providing outdoor or digital alternatives. Nine comments indicate that some institutions also continued to provide services where certain exceptions applied, such as for the youth (18 and younger), schools, rehabilitation, and associations. Other comments cite facing reduced services (1), reduced customers (2), and reduced revenues (1). The closures and restricted business operations resulted in a loss of revenue but businesses remained hopeful that they would soon open their doors to the public again. One participant cites that the loss of revenue was about 30% every month compared to 2019. According to 2 participants, businesses received financial support which went towards temporary lay-offs and staff retention. Three participants elaborate that financial support, reduction of services and conversion of operations to digital offerings are means by which businesses continued operations.

“Thanks to redundancy support (permitteringsstöd), we have been able to retain the staff so far. However, it is starting to get tougher now that we continue to lose revenue...” - PID07

The Importance of Remaining Open. Two participants express that as long as safety measures were followed and that there was no risk of contagion then businesses could remain open. Priority to children, youth, and associations is indicated (2), as one highlights the importance to be available for schools and one mentions the importance of movement and exercise.

“It is important that children/young people have the opportunity for exercise/movement, it benefits all forms of motor skills and the social community is also important.” - PID06

Adoption of Remote Services. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, recreational businesses adopted the use of technology to keep their businesses running. Fifteen participants list the adoption of remote services as a way in which technology has played a role during the pandemic, and one highlights that the

pandemic encouraged more use of existing digital services. Digital team meetings intra- and inter-organizationally as well as the tools to facilitate digital meetings constitute over 50% of the additional comments given by participants regarding technology use. The businesses have used remote services such as online booking and queuing systems (2), broadcast lectures and programs (2), app-based delivery food service (1), posting of training films (2), and digital meetings and tools (8).

Required Technology Development to Serve New Needs. Participants identified the need for technology development to serve new needs that became apparent during the pandemic, which can be used in the recreational setting in the future. The key highlights are the digitalization of services and processes (13) and the need for alternatives (6). Online content sharing such as webcast workouts (1), video on demand (1), web training (1), digital concerts (1), online screenings and lectures (1), online games (1), hosting a Spring market online (1) are some examples technology serves new needs of recreational businesses. The need for digital equipment to support digital services is also highlighted (2) and using technology as a means to reach more customers (1). Furthermore, an opportunity is presented during the pandemic to learn from others how technology can serve their businesses.

“The digital can be developed and it is going on right now... We take part in other people’s methods and see where we land... For example, the National Heritage Board, which collects good examples and broadcasts via its website.”
- PID32

Expectations of Vaccination on Business Operations. The plans of the vaccine starting brought some recreational businesses hope, 2 participants cite getting back to normalcy, 7 participants looked forward to people (and especially the elderly) going out more again, 1 participant highlights that it would result in less services, while 3 participants still viewed it with uncertainty.

4 Discussions

The Swedish government’s unique approach during COVID-19 with restrictions is to trust the public. Though the COVID-19 measures are known to not have been very stringent in Sweden, our results show that guidelines from respective authorities, are taken seriously by recreational businesses, thus prioritizing the health and safety of the public. No differences are seen between private and municipality controlled recreational activities. However, municipal recreational areas are more likely to oblige with closure recommendations. Our results indicate that the majority of our participants have trust in the government, feel safe in Sweden and have a positive outlook for the future. This is the case despite that businesses suffered a decrease in revenue and did not all receive financial aid, yet followed measures and remained hopeful for better days to come. Our results additionally enlighten that a small number of recreational businesses experienced more customers and more revenues, and offered more services during COVID-19

- an interesting outcome that highlights that the public continued to visit operational recreational establishments that contribute to their physical and mental well-being, even during a pandemic.

Inactivity or high level of sedentary lifestyle is associated with poor physical and/or mental health, and possibly lead to serious illnesses [6,12]. One of the major COVID-19 health concerns due to isolation is the overall inactivity of the public [12]. Our results illustrate the considerations to the public's well-being through recreational activities. The need for keeping recreational businesses running follow the important consideration on the effects of sedentary behaviors that result from measures enforced to maintain social distance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, psychological benefits are expected derivatives from the consumption of products and services of recreational businesses. However, the COVID-19 safety measures take precedence. Sweden considered continued social and physical activity in youth and children a benefit outweighing the potential risk of COVID-19 in children [10]. Thus the national public authorities allowed continued access to recreational activities such as sports for children born in or later than 2002. Another important consideration highlighted by our participants is continued access to recreational services for rehabilitation purposes. Thus at the regional, municipal, and at business level, exceptions were made that would accommodate these groups, also confirmed by our results. It must be noted however, that the political system in Sweden is such that regions and municipalities can make their own rulings on a matter and variations to the stringency or leniency of restrictions may exist. In addition, alternatives such as outdoor activities, online exercise activities and access to gyms based on bookings and limited allowable numbers that allowed for sufficient spacing, allowed individuals the opportunity to maintain active lifestyles. These measures contribute to society wellness during a daunting pandemic.

The pandemic opens doors to new technology aids and uses. In endurance sporting events in Sweden, for example, digital alternatives started to gain traction during the pandemic, and are likely to open up new opportunities in the future, albeit being viewed as less satisfying by some of the participants of digital races [16]. Our results show that during COVID-19, technology has played an important role in keeping the businesses running and forcing businesses to consider alternatives to the norm. Participants have indicated that they have found technology useful in aiding communication, better reaching customers, and providing online content. Many highlighted the adoption of new remote services, digitized internal processes, and digitized services thus offering new solutions that could continue after the COVID-19 pandemic.

5 Conclusions and Future Work

Our study gives insight on how recreational businesses cope with COVID-19 with the aid of technology. Given the unique governmental approach in Sweden to restrictions, trust is shown to be reciprocal from the majority of the participants' responses. Considerations to public's well-being are significant given

public's safety is in place. Overall, participants express significant adoption of new digital solutions, and openness to future digital solutions for various recreational activities. Future studies could further investigate other contexts, i.e., countries with tighter restrictions. Upcoming innovative solutions could facilitate remote recreational activities especially for priority groups such as youth and associations.

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