

ASSESSING ECOTOURISM STAKEHOLDER POWER IMBALANCES IN COVID-19 RESILIENCE STRATEGIES IN GHANA'S UPPER EAST REGION

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Abstract:

The tourism industry's susceptibility to crises, rooted in its dependence on environmental services, necessitates effective resilience mechanisms for recovery during challenging times. This study explores the impact of power and interest imbalances on resilience strategies in Ghana's tourism sector during COVID-19. Using a mixed-method explanatory sequential approach, 297 respondents from fringe communities engaged in tourism were surveyed via lottery sampling, while 10 key informants were interviewed using purposive sampling. The participants for the quantitative survey included tour guards, Basket weavers, site managers, employees of the tourist's destination and hotel managers. Officials of the Ghana tourism authority and sectional leaders of the various tourism businesses in the destinations satisfied the qualitative survey. The results indicate minimal imbalances among stakeholders, enhancing recovery efforts. However, stakeholders operating in natural attractions who were, excluded from government aid, resort to harmful practices like charcoal production and poaching, threatening environmental sustainability. To foster fairness and eco-friendliness, the study advocates for inclusive decision-making and cooperation within Ghana's tourism industry.

Keywords: Power and interests imbalance, ecotourism, COVID-19, resilience strategies, Ghana.

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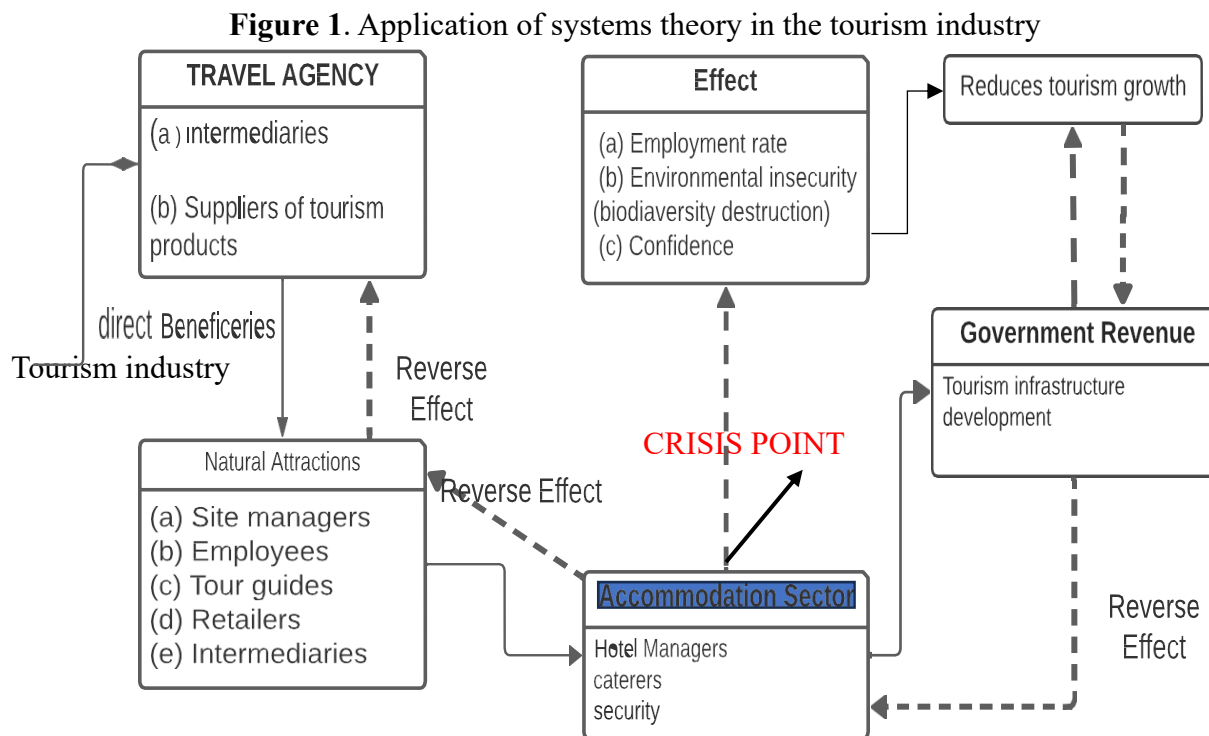
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1. INTRODUCTION

Power and interest imbalances have long been a subject of concern in various sectors, including the tourism industry. The tourism industry plays a vital role in economic development, cultural preservation, and social integration in many regions across the globe (Asif et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to the tourism industry, requiring the implementation of coping strategies to mitigate its impacts (Patil, 2022). The success of these strategies depends not only on their effectiveness but also on the dynamics of power and interests among stakeholders. It is increasingly recognized that power and interest disparities persist, limiting the full potential of key stakeholder participation and contribution in the tourism industry (Alswat, 2017). Power imbalances often result from unequal distribution of resources, decision-making authority, and social norms that favor certain groups over others. When power and interests are unequally distributed, coping mechanisms become skewed, with disadvantaged groups, particularly women, facing greater challenges in accessing resources and exercising agency (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). The resilience of business activities relies heavily on the influence and engagement of stakeholders (Rigon, 2014). Power imbalances are a common feature in societies across the world. These imbalances often intersect with gender inequalities (Patil, 2022), and affect the implementation of resilient strategies during disasters (Rogerson, 2020). In many societies, the disadvantaged are not granted the same opportunities as compared to the proletarians (Marx, 2020). This manifests in various forms, such as unequal pay, limited access to education, and a lack of representation in decision-making processes (Olivetti et al, 2008), making it difficult to achieve full potential. When power imbalances intersect with these challenges, the underprivileged become more difficult to cope and recover (Olivetti et al, 2008). The Upper East Region stands out as a unique setting, abundant with captivating tourist attractions that predominantly attract key stakeholders (GTA,2015). The attractions provide opportunities for basket and smock weavers to engage in various tourism-related activities, such as handicraft production, hospitality services, and cultural performances (GSS,2018). The study aims at exploring the dynamics of power and interest imbalances in the tourism sector during natural disasters, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on the execution of resilience strategies in Ghana, with a specific look at the Upper East Region. Understanding the power and interest dynamics of tourism stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic risk is crucial in designing all-inclusive, comprehensive, and effective future resilience strategies for the industry. Exploring the power and interest dynamics in Ghana with regards to disasters offer lessons for global tourism in terms of building resilience and preparedness for future crises (Ansell et al., 2010). The research aimed to address the following inquiries: What are the categories of power and levels of interest of stakeholders? How was the implementation of COVID-19 resilience strategies influenced by power and interest among tourism stakeholders? What are the impacts of the collaboration of tourism stakeholders on the sustainability of businesses in the post-COVID-19 pandemic? addressing these questions will help bridge gaps in the current literature and serve as a roadmap for delivering valuable insights into power and interest imbalances among stakeholders in Ghana's tourism industry amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, it will assist in policy formulation on ways of improving collaboration among tourism stakeholders for the sustainability of businesses in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era and future natural disasters in Ghana.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The foundational systems theory, conceptualized by Ludwig von Bertalanffy in 1950, provides a crucial framework for comprehending how organizations function cohesively. This theory sheds light on the intricate interdependence among diverse components within an organization, illustrating that changes or influences in one unit can trigger counterbalancing forces in other units within the system. Essentially, it presents a holistic perspective on the dynamic interactions among different facets of an organization, showcasing their collaboration and responses to maintain equilibrium amid internal and external influences. Critics of the theory, such as Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn in their 1950 work "The Social Psychology of Organizations," contested its oversimplification of complex social phenomena. They argued that systems theory lacked the necessary depth to capture the complexities inherent in human organizations. Nevertheless, when applied to scrutinize the tourism industry, this framework unveils valuable insights into the interconnectedness among diverse stakeholders. It highlights their potential to either enhance or impact the industry, particularly in times of crisis (Figure 1).



Source: Modified from Von Bertalanffy (1950) foundational systems theory

1.2.1: Application of systems theory to the tourism industry

The tourism industry operates as a complex and interconnected system, encompassing various sectors such as travel, natural attractions, and built attractions. The collaborative dynamics among the different participants are integral for the industry's smooth functioning. Key interactions between travel agents, intermediaries, and tourism product suppliers play a crucial role in supporting the operations of natural attractions, particularly in attracting inbound tourists. In accordance with systems theory, disruptions like a decline in the demand for hotel services, often triggered by crises or natural disasters, initiate a chain reaction of effects within the system. This downturn not only affects employment levels in the industry but also gives rise to concerns about environmental sustainability, creating a ripple effect that erodes confidence in the entire tourism sector. These consequences directly impact the overall growth and revenue of the tourism industry. Moreover, the financial impact on revenue has cascading effects on the accommodation sector, limiting its potential for expansion and the adoption of diverse business models. The interconnected nature of systems theory is evident as this financial strain also reverberates through services in both natural and built attractions, impacting the demand for tourism products due to a decline in inbound visitation. The nuanced understanding of the tourism industry as a system allows policymakers to go beyond generic resilience strategies. Instead, they can develop targeted and sector-specific initiatives that address the unique challenges faced by each component of the industry. This approach enhances the effectiveness of policy interventions, fostering a more resilient and adaptive tourism sector in the face of diverse challenges.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Below is the presentation of the study area's profile and the methods utilized:

2.1 Overview of the Study Area

The research was conducted across three geopolitical areas within the Upper East Region of Ghana: Bolgatanga Municipality, Kassena Nankana West District, and Talensi District. These districts are situated between latitudes 10°15 and 10°10N and longitudes 0° and 1°4W.

Figure 2. Picture Depicting the Friendly Nature of Crocodiles at Chief's Pond



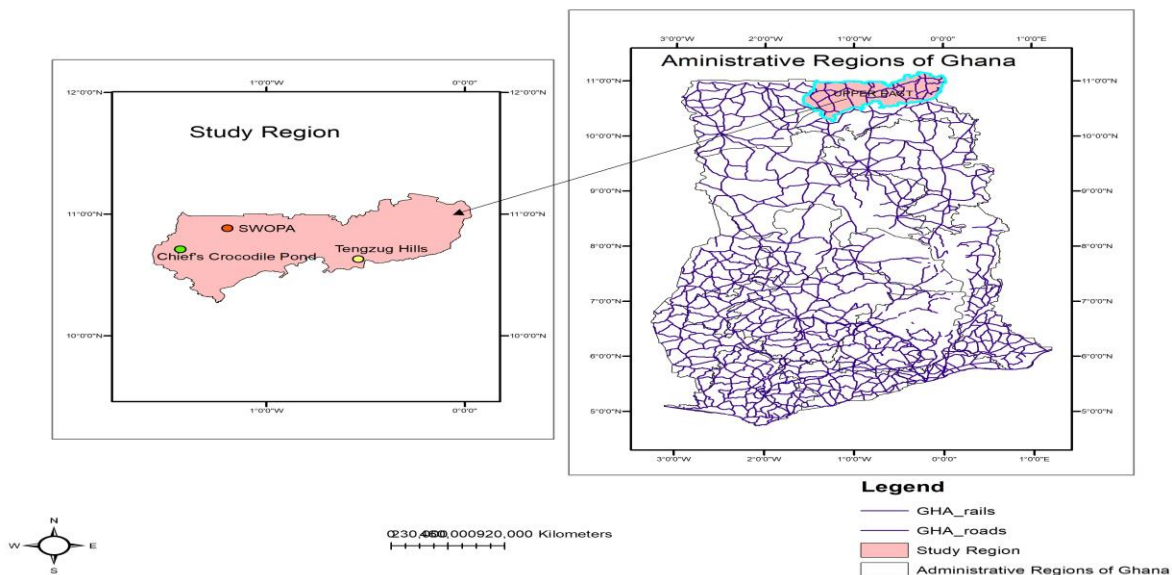
Source: Authors

The Upper East Region of Ghana was selected because it contains various tourist sites that are worth investigating.

The Bolgatanga Municipality, for instance, is host to the regional museum, a modern craft village, basketry and leatherworking businesses, and five-star hotels that provide jobs and income for a number of stakeholders, notably females. Hundreds of business people in the sector offer tourist items in the tourism value chain, such as hats, smocks, sculptures, and other artifacts, to make a livelihood. The Pikowro Slave Camp, which maintains black Africans tied to their ancestry, the Zenga and chief crocodile ponds, which are home to hundreds of amiable crocodiles, and the Sirigu women's pottery and basketry, which elegantly and delightfully reflect nature, are all natural attractions that the Kassena Nankana West is proud of.

Figure 2 depicts the esteemed Crocodile Pond situated within the study area. This body of water, situated in Paga, is home to a diverse population of West African crocodiles and has gained recognition as a sought-after tourist attraction due to the amiable demeanor of these reptiles. The municipality's tourism-related initiatives have not only contributed to the creation of employment opportunities but also hold significant importance for the majority of the local population, particularly those engaged in the supply chain for tourism commodities.

Figure 3. Map of Upper East Region indicating the study sites.



Source: Author's Construct, 2023

The administrative regions of Ghana, including the tourism destinations of interest in the study, are illustrated in Figure 3. Specifically, the study focuses on Sirigu Women's Pottery and Art (SWOPA), Tengzug hills, and Chief's Crocodile Pond, which are marked within the designated study region.

2.2 Methodology

Based on a pragmatic perspective and a better comprehension of the topic under investigation, the study utilized a blend of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and concepts (Abdul-Kadri et al., 2022). This approach holds significance in the study as it taps into insights from various dimensions, enabling a more thorough analysis of the formulation and implementation of resilience strategies. In mixed-methods research, it is acknowledged that there exist numerous valid approaches to social inquiry (Greene, 2007). Similar to this, mixed-method researchers explore several ways to gather and analyze data rather than adhering to any particular form (Klassen et al., 2012). Therefore, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative data to enhance comprehension of the research issues.

2.2.1 Sample Size Stratification of Fringe Communities Based on Household Size

As shown in Table 1, a total of 297 participants were sampled from a population of 1140, using Yamane’s sample size determination formula (1967): $n = N / (1 + N(e^2))$. Where: n = sample size N = total population size, e = margin of error (expressed as a proportion), and 1 = constant.

$N = 1140$ (total population size), $e = 0.1$ (margin of error)

$n = N / (1 + N(e^2))$,

$n = 1140 / (1 + 1140(0.05^2))$, $n = 1140 / (1 + 1140(0.01))$, $n = 1140 / (1 + 0.05)$ $n = 1140 / 3.85$. $n = 297$.

The response percentage (%) = $(297/270) * 100 = 90.91\%$.

The target population consisted of various fringe community stakeholders involved in tourism activities. They include site managers, tour guides, producers of local smocks and baskets, wholesalers, and retailers. To ensure fairness and representativeness, the study employed proportionate and simple random sampling techniques to determine which individuals participated in the survey process in each of the purposively selected districts for the study

Table 1. Apportionment of Sample Size Based on Proportionate Sampling

<i>District/Municipal</i>	<i>Name of Community</i>	<i>Number of key stakeholders</i>	<i>Target Sampled Size</i>
Bolgatanga Municipal	National Centre for Arts and Culture (NAFAC Grounds)	350	$350 / 1,140 * 297 = 91$
Kassena-Nankana West	Sirigu pottery site Zenga crocodile pond	290 225	$290 / 1,140 * 297 = 75$ $225 / 1,140 * 297 = 58$
Bolgatanga East District	Kumbosigo- Blue sky hotel	110	$110 / 1,140 * 297 = 29$
Talensi District	Tengzug	170	$170 / 1,140 * 297 = 44$
	Total	1,140	297

Source: Field Survey, 2023

A simple random sampling technique was employed in the study to sample 297 respondents using the lottery method, where participants randomly selected a number from a thoroughly mixed assortment placed in a basket. Inclusion in the study was determined for those participants who drew an even number.

2.3 Data Collection

The study was conducted from February 2022 to July 2023, utilizing a combination of primary and secondary data. Through the administration of a semi-structured questionnaire, the primary data was gathered from wholesalers, intermediaries, retailers of tourism products, restaurant owners, hotel managers, and drivers of tourist sites as well as District Planning Officials, and representatives from the Ghana Tourism Authority (GTA) using interviews and observations. These interviews were conducted with a homogenous gender approach, with the aim of providing a comfortable environment for females to express their ideas about implementing future resilience strategies effectively, as they may often feel intimidated by their male counterparts. The collection of primary data occurred in two phases: first, during the height of the pandemic, and then after the relaxation of safety protocols. Descriptive statistical techniques, including linear correlation, regression analysis, and percentages, were utilized to analyze the primary data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. In addition to the primary data, secondary data on the subject was collected from magazines, peer-reviewed journals, records from the Upper East Regional Tourism Authority (UERTA), and management of tourist attractions. The secondary data was analyzed, and transcribed into themes and contents to facilitate easy understanding.

3. RESULTS

The demographic information of participants and empirical findings are presented as follows:

3.1 Bio-data of Respondents

Table 2, indicate that respondents are in the youthful or active age brackets of 20-29 years and 30-39 years, making up approximately 25.9% and 41.5%, of the total respondents. This implies that many of the tourism stakeholders such as local basket weavers, smock weavers and producers of tourism products in the study areas are within the youthful age category.

The participation of young people in the industry's activities provides opportunity to inject fresh resilience ideas towards recovery of the tourism industry. They are also more likely to be tech-savvy and able to keep up with the latest trends and innovations. This can help the tourism industry stay competitive and create new job opportunities for young people. In addition, 20.4% of participants are between the ages of 40 and 49, and 3% of respondents are 60 years of age or older. The rare participation of the elderly in tourism activities, indicate the existence of social stratification in tourism destinations, particularly in Ghana, where most elderly people are confined to their homes and are unable to actively engage in tourism business activities due to inability to afford the needed capital to invest in tourism activities; they also lack the physical and mental fortitude to participate in such activities. Additionally, many elderly people are not mobile and do not have the necessary support networks in place to assist them to participate in tourism related activities.

Table 2. Age distribution of respondents in tourism business activities

Respondent Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
20 – 29	70	25.9	25.9	25.9
30 – 39	112	41.5	41.5	67.4
40 – 49	55	20.4	20.4	87.8
50 – 59	25	9.3	9.3	97.0
60 +	8	3.0	3.0	100.0
Total	270	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2023

3.2 Empirical Results

The results, in line with the study objectives, are presented as follows:

3.2.1. Categories of power and interest levels of stakeholders

The study evaluated power and interest imbalances among tourism stakeholders using the hierarchical approach of Martijn et al. (2012). The method evaluates stakeholders in the industry based on their access to resources, influence, authority, and socio-economic status within the industry. The approach allows policymakers to grasp the dynamics in implementing resilience strategies and adapt future recovery approaches accordingly.

Table 3. Stratifications based on levels of power and interests

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>High Power, High Interest</u> <u>stakeholders (HPHI)</u></p> <p>a. Ghana Tourism Authority b. Business owners c. Chiefs d. Tendaana e. NGOs</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>High Power, Low Interest</u> <u>Stakeholders (HPLI)</u></p> <p>a. National Banks b. Micro-finance companies c. village susu box</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Low Power, High Interest</u> <u>Stakeholders (LPHI)</u></p> <p>a. security b. smock, basket and hat weavers c. Employees, suppliers d. Transport owners</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Low Power and Low Interest</u> <u>Stakeholders (LPLI)</u></p> <p>a. Disc-jockeys b. Table decorators</p>

Source: field survey, 2023

3.2.1.1 High-power, high-interest stakeholders

Table 3 indicates that the Ghana tourism authority, large business establishments and traditional authority were the key stakeholders with high power-high interest stakeholders in the tourism industry during the pandemic. They were responsible for setting regulations, health guidelines, and travel restrictions that directly impact tourism operations. They played a critical role in developing and implementing resilience strategies to ensure the safety of tourists, workers, and local communities. They enforced capacity limitations in ecotourism sites, establish COVID-19 testing protocols, and provided financial support to most struggling businesses in the sector.

3.2.1.2 High-power, low-interest stakeholders

Furthermore, Table 3 revealed that funding institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Microfinance Institutions, and the National Board for Small-Scale Industry, had significant financial power but a limited direct interest in the daily operations of ecotourism sites. However, they offered essential financial assistance and support to tourism businesses impacted by the pandemic, prioritizing broader economic recovery within the tourism industry and implementing initiatives to alleviate the pandemic's effects.

3.2.1.3 Low-power, high interest Stakeholders

Moreover, Table 3, unmasked that clients of tourism services, employees, security, drivers, and producers of tourism products were those who fell within the group. Their livelihoods heavily depended on tourism and were deeply affected by reduced visitor numbers and economic hardships.

3.2.1.4 Low-power, low-interest stakeholders

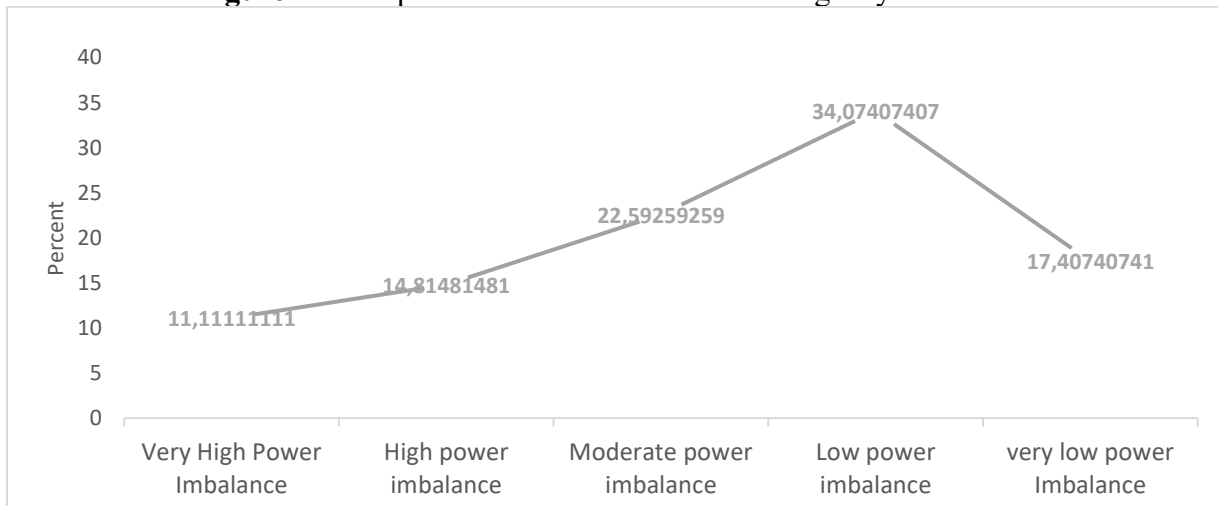
To draw the curtains down, Table 3, unearthed those tourists who visited the ecotourism sites during the pandemic and had no significant power or interest beyond their personal travel experiences. Their engagement with the industry was limited to adhering to safety guidelines and enjoying their vacations.

3.3. Collaboration between key stakeholders of the tourism sector amid the era of COVID-19 pandemic

The aim was to explore potential power relationships that existed among the key stakeholders in the tourism industry in relation to the adoption and implementation of resilience strategies during the pandemic. Figure 4 depicts the power dynamics among key stakeholders in the tourism sector amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data from Figure 4 presents insights from 270 respondents in tourist destinations, illustrating perceptions of power dynamics during the pandemic's peak across a spectrum from "Very High" to "Very Low." A dominant perception among participants, at approximately 34.1%, revealed a characterization of the power and interest imbalance as low-power imbalance. Following this, 22.6% of respondents identified a moderate power imbalance, while 17.4% observed a very low power imbalance. Additionally, roughly 14.8% of participants perceived a high-power imbalance, with 11.1% noting a very high-power imbalance.

Figure 4. Perception of Power Imbalance Among Key Stakeholders



Source: Field survey, 2023.

The analysis demonstrates a range of perceptions regarding power imbalances at these tourist sites. The highest percentage falls within the category of low power imbalance, indicating that a substantial portion of respondents viewed the power dynamics as relatively balanced or minimally imbalanced. However, perceptions vary among individuals, with noticeable percentages across different levels of power imbalance. This suggests a diverse spectrum of opinions regarding the extent of power imbalances at these specific tourist sites. This highlights the complex nature of power dynamics in society, work places and the tourism sector in the wake of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4: Impact of Power and Interest Dynamics on Tourism Business Resilience

A regression analysis was performed to examine how the decision-making actions of high-power, low-interest stakeholders affect the business sustainability of low-power, high-interest stakeholders, encompassing restaurants, smock, and basket industries within the tourism sector at the chiefs and Zenga crocodile ponds, taking into account government financial support. The model used in this analysis is represented as $y = mx + c$, where (m signifies the slope of the line, denoting the rate at which y changes concerning x), and (c represents the y-intercept, signifying the point where the line intersects the y-axis).

Table 4. Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.173 ^a	.030	.026	.794	.030	8.289	1	268	.004

a. Predictors: (Constant), High power, low interest stakeholders

Table 5. ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5.225	1	5.225	8.289	.004 ^b
	Residual	168.938	268	.630		
	Total	174.163	269			

a. Dependent Variable: Low power, high interest stakeholders

b. Predictors: (Constant), High power, low interest stakeholders.

Table 6. Summary of Regression Analysis

Hypothesis	Regression Weights	Beta coefficient	R ²	F	t-value	P-value	Hypothesis supported
H1	HPLI → LPHI	-.173	.030	8.289	-2.879	.004	Yes

Note: * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, ***p<0.01

Hypothesis

H1: There is significant impact of high power but low interests’ stakeholders on the business sustainability of stakeholders with low power but high interests.

H0: There is no significant impact on the business sustainability of stakeholders with low power but high interests by stakeholders with high power but low interests.

As shown in Table 4, the linear regression model adopted is $y=mx+c$. Table 5 presents the results of an ANOVA analysis examining the impact of stakeholders with differing levels of power and interest on businesses that possess high power but low interest during the pandemic. This analysis delves into whether there are statistically significant differences in these stakeholder groups' effects on these particular businesses during this challenging period. Table 6 is a summary of the ANOVA analysis. $R^2=.030$ indicate the coefficient of determination. This indicates that 30% of the variability in the dependent variable can be accounted for by the independent variables in the model. The F-test ($F(1, 268) = 8.289, p < 0.05$) indicates that the model is statistically significant at a 5% level of significance, indicating that high-power, low-interest stakeholders is an important predictor of the business sustainability or otherwise of low-power high interest stakeholders in the tourism industry during the pandemic. In other words, the power and interest of high-power, low-interest stakeholders negatively impacted on the businesses and social life of low-power, high-interest stakeholders such as female basket weavers, and restaurant operators which could lead them to engage in other economic activities to offset the pandemic. The regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between the independent variable, high-power, low-interest stakeholders, and the dependent variable, low-power, high-interest

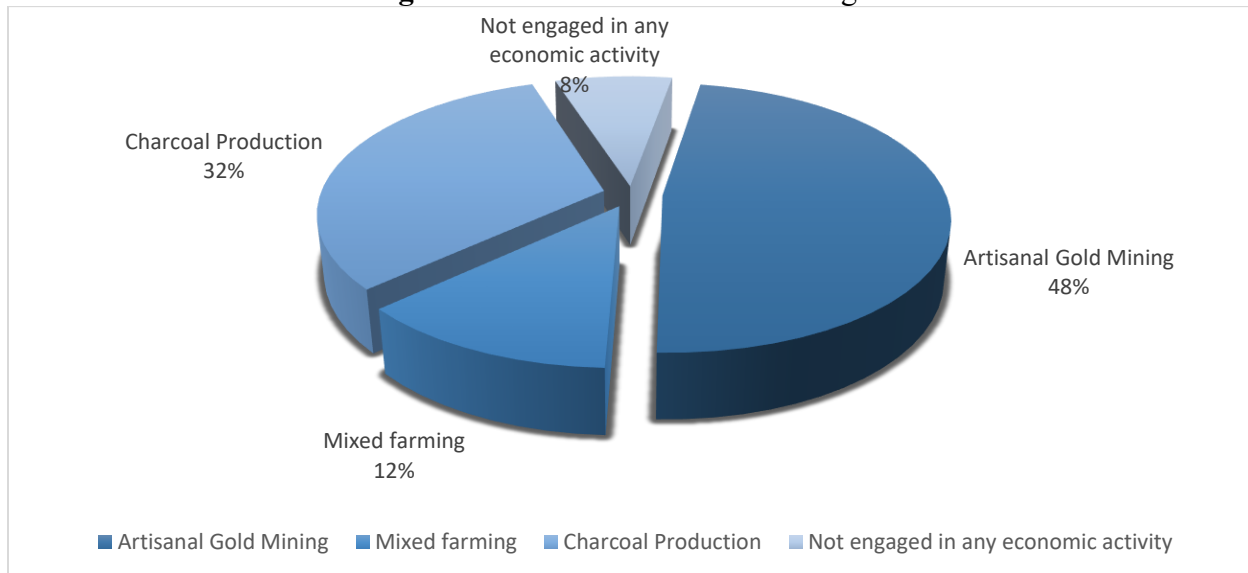
stakeholders ($\beta = -.173$, $t = -2.879$, $P < 0.05$). These findings indicate that the power and interest dynamics of high-power, low-interest stakeholders have a notable impact on the sustainability and survival of businesses of low-power, high-interest stakeholders. This analysis is supported by the claims of key informants during the interviews which states:

“The government's COVID-19 loan facility had strict eligibility criteria, primarily targeting large establishments in the tourism industry, which my business could not meet. The lack of sufficient capital adversely affected my business's output, resulting in its total collapse. Fortunately, my son's involvement in artisanal mining activities provided some support during these challenging times” (SWOPA-20th May, 2023).

“Unfortunately, individuals like me, operating on a small scale with limited influence and production capabilities, were not informed about the government support scheme for industry members until much later. By the time we learned of it, it was already too late. The delayed awareness and lack of financial assistance prevented me from producing and selling my products, as I didn't have the necessary funds to acquire the raw materials needed for weaving baskets. This situation had a profound impact on me, making it extremely challenging to operate effectively in my business” (Centre for arts and culture Bolgatanga-18th June, 2023)

3.4.1. Risk management practices employed by Vulnerable Stakeholders to counter the impact of COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 5. Risk Diversification Strategies



Source: Field survey, 2023

The data provided in figure 5 shows the distribution of risk management strategies in the tourism sector employed by key stakeholders during the pandemic. The responses were categorized into four main activities: Artisanal Gold Mining, Mixed farming, Charcoal Production, and not engaged in any economic activity. The most prevalent economic activity among the

respondents was Artisanal Gold Mining, accounting for 47.8% of the total responses. This suggests that a significant number of individuals were involved in gold mining as a means of economic sustenance during the pandemic. Mixed farming was reported by 12.6% of the respondents, indicating that a smaller portion of individuals were engaged in agricultural activities involving a variety of crops or livestock. Charcoal Production was reported by 31.9% of the respondents, indicating a relatively high participation in the production of charcoal as an economic activity. Lastly, 7.8% of the respondents reported not being engaged in any economic activity, suggesting that a small proportion of individuals were not involved in any specific economic pursuit during the pandemic.

4. DISCUSSION

Power and interest imbalance in the tourism industry was perceived to be less among key stakeholders in the implementation of resilience strategies. The absence of significant power struggles among diverse stakeholders in implementing resilience strategies during the pandemic presents a unique opportunity for the tourism industry's recovery and future crisis management. This lack of power play signifies a potential for collaborative action and inclusive decision-making regarding the implementation of post-COVID-19 recovery strategies. This fosters an environment where stakeholders, irrespective of their power levels, can engage in cooperative efforts toward recovery. This inclusivity in strategy implementation ensures that a wider array of voices is heard and considered, leading to more comprehensive, innovative, and adaptable approaches. Moreover, it builds trust, cooperation, and a sense of shared responsibility, laying a foundation for a more united front against future crises. Ultimately, this collaborative and inclusive approach not only aids in the post-COVID-19 tourism recovery but also establishes a resilient framework for facing and mitigating future challenges within the industry. The findings presented diverge from the assertions made by Abou-Shouk et al. (2021), who contend that men wield significant power in the decision-making process within the context of the tourism industry. While this study suggests limited power play among stakeholders during the implementation of resilience strategies amid the pandemic. The disagreement with the claims of Abou-Shouk et al. stem from variations in the specific contexts, methodologies, and populations studied. The study however, aligns itself with Von Bertalanffy (1950) foundational systems theory which posit institutional functionality as a web where an effect on one unit poses a countervailing impact on other sectors of same web. The study's findings further revealed that the influence exerted by high-power stakeholders with low interest on low-power stakeholders with high interest with regards to government financing had adverse effects on the latter's businesses. Stakeholders such as wholesalers and site managers, had significant advantage in accessing resources, financial aid, and support during the pandemic compared to low-power, high-interest stakeholders, due to the wide array of influence and lobbying. The situation compelled them to explore artisanal mining as a means to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on their livelihoods. These findings align with the research by Manuel et al.'s (2020), which suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated societal inequality by disproportionately underfunding vulnerable stakeholders. Insufficient funding during the pandemic has exacerbated the disparity between high-power stakeholders and low-power, high-interest stakeholders, leading to increased inequalities within the tourism sector amid the pandemic. This could potentially impact the country's efforts toward achieving Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) 1 and 3, which focus on eradicating poverty (Goal 1) and ensuring good health and well-being (Goal 3). The adverse effects on businesses, especially those of stakeholders with high interest but low power, may hinder progress toward poverty eradication (SDG 1) by impeding economic growth and livelihood improvements within these groups.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Over time, the Ghanaian government, notably through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, has actively pursued deliberate measures to promote equality among individuals within society, with a particular focus on addressing issues faced by the girl child. Remarkably, in the historically discriminatory Upper East Region of Ghana, there are observable indications of decreased discrimination across various sectors as, 34.1% of participants perceive the power and interest dynamics in implementing resilience strategies during the pandemic to be low. Power is transient in the tourism industry with regards to decision-making and is shared equitably among individuals at various levels. Tourism has traditionally been based on the idea that men are the decision-makers and the ones in charge. This created an environment where females felt they had to conform to traditional gender roles in order to fit in and be accepted. However, this long-term myth has been broken, creating more opportunities for female empowerment in society. The positive trend reflects the impact of government initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity and mitigating discriminatory practices, contributing to a more equitable and fairer environment for individuals in fringe communities. The trend has led to an effective post-COVID-19 pandemic's recovery in the fringe community's destinations due to less power and interest imbalance. Again, power and interest balance in the tourism sector can lead to a reduction in teenage pregnancies as the vulnerable in society are empowered to take decisions against actions that may undermine their economic, health, and marital interests. Additionally, the exertion of power by stakeholders with high power but low interest with respect to financing schemes has had a detrimental impact on the environment and ecosystem. In response to the business failures in tourism due to low financing from the government, low-power, high-interest stakeholders resorted to diversifying their risk by engaging in the overexploitation of natural resources such as charcoal production and artisanal mining. This led to significant consequences such as biodiversity loss, ecosystem destruction, and deforestation.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Building upon the positive trajectory observed in the Upper East region of Ghana, where reduced discrimination is evident, it is imperative for the Ghanaian government to continue and strengthen its initiatives through the Ministry of Gender and Children Affairs. To sustain and further enhance this trend, there should be continued efforts to dismantle traditional gender norms in the tourism industry and beyond. Specifically, targeted awareness campaigns and educational programs should be implemented to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity. Moreover, the government should collaborate with stakeholders in the tourism sector to ensure the equitable distribution of decision-making power, fostering an environment where both genders are equally represented. Additionally, ongoing efforts to empower women economically, socially, and educationally should be intensified to enhance their ability to make informed decisions and contribute meaningfully to society. This comprehensive approach will not only promote gender equality but also contribute to

the broader socio-economic development of the Upper East region and serve as a model for fostering inclusivity in other sectors and regions across Ghana and beyond.

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