

Full length article

Resilience as a process: Long term effects of COVID-19 interventions

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ABSTRACT

While resilience is often framed as a positive capacity, this study highlights its potential controversial aspects. Building on the article published in *International Journal of Hospitality Management* by Lombardi et al. (2021) and framing resilience as a dynamic process, we investigate how hospitality leaders have crafted novel practices in the post-pandemic era. Drawing on qualitative data collected in Italy (in line with Lombardi et al., 2021) our findings highlight some unanticipated and counterintuitive outcomes of resilience and, in a novel way, reveal its hidden downsides, challenging its status as an unquestioned virtue. This study therefore contributes to organizational research on the unexpected side of resilience, offering critical insights into the long-term implications of adaptive leadership.

1. Introduction

Recalling Seneca's observation, "difficulties strengthen the mind, as labor does the body", most existing research on resilience suggests that enduring hardship is key to gain resilience, meant as the capacity to absorb adversities while learning from them, preparing and responding to changes (Giustiniano et al., 2018). However, despite the taken-for-granted 'bright side' of resilience, an emerging body of work questions whether resilience can have adverse effects (Chamorro-Premuzic and Lusk, 2017; Giustiniano et al., 2018), where adaptive skills may become maladaptive if pushed to the extreme, especially in social collectives (individuals, organizations, system, societies). In fact, despite the ability to remain functional while responding to difficulties via novel ways to operate is well-documented (e.g., (Frigotto et al., 2022)), research on the unexpected outcomes of resilience remains sparse, with limited empirical evidence addressing this issue (see Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021).

To bridge this gap, we follow up on Lombardi et al.'s study (2021) in the hospitality industry during the first COVID-19 jolt (and consequent lockdowns in many countries). In continuation with that research, we conceptualize resilience as a practice (see Adrot et al., 2022; El-Said et al., 2023) and investigate the effects of "long 'organizational' COVID"¹, i.e., the persisting or emerging organizational practices and

reactions to the urgency of COVID-19. In order to extend Lombardi et al. (2021), we seek to answer to the question: "How did hospitality leaders' responses to COVID-19 affect the practice of resilience in the post-pandemic era?".

We focus on the lessons learned in terms of leadership and managerial practices after the lift of all the restrictions on business operations which were introduced by regulatory authorities as a response to the outspread of COVID-19. Accordingly, we take a practice perspective on resilience, by emphasizing the efforts and actions undertaken by individuals through which it unfolds (Adrot et al., 2022). Drawing on qualitative data collected from hospitality managers in Italy, we examine how resilience unfolded after the pandemic, aiming to identify the tensions arising from hospitality professionals' resilience. Our findings indicate that resilience, once experienced, could result into the illusion of invulnerability if individuals 'forget' that crises even existed, questioning its inherently virtuous status (Liddle, 1994; see also Clegg et al., 2025). This research contributes to the resilience literature in many ways. First, by seeing resilience as a process (cf. Giustiniano et al., 2018; Hartmann et al., 2020; Luthar et al., 2000), we highlight its dynamic nature, emphasizing that resilience develops through response to stress and challenges (Solomon et al., 2007). Second, we extend current limited research on the potential long-term effects of the pandemic on the hospitality industry (El-Said et al., 2023), as a kind of organizational

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E-mail addresses: sara.lombardi@unifi.it (S. Lombardi), miguel.cunha@novasbe.pt (M. Pina e Cunha), lgiusti@luiss.it (L. Giustiniano).¹ The formulation we propose is a deliberate analogy to the expression "long COVID" used in the medical practice to refer to a range of health problems persisting after a SARS-CoV-2 infection.

“long COVID”. Third, we examine how individuals in leadership positions *currently* cope with the emerging practices that were adopted during the pandemic. In so doing, we respond to the call for more research on how resilience may affect daily practices (Britt et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2021). Lastly, we elaborate resilience as a potentially ambivalent phenomenon, a perspective that remains underexplored in the literature (Cunha et al., 2025; Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021). In particular, we develop the understanding of the nexus between learning and unlearning formulated by Giustiniano et al. (2020)—and recalled by Lombardi et al. (2021)—as we shed light on the contentious role of forgetting.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. Resilience as an individual practice

Resilience is the capacity to bounce back from failures, setbacks and adversities in the face of natural and human-generated adverse events (Giustiniano et al., 2018). At the same time, it is the ability to recover from (often extreme and prolonged) traumas, deprivation, threats, or shocks (Atkinson et al., 2009) or, more broadly, to cope with life's challenges.

Over recent decades, the concept of resilience has been predominantly framed within a positive, self-actualization perspective, emphasizing that “there is a right way to adapt to risk” (Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021, p. 147). Traditionally rooted in studies of human adaptation under stress, it has been understood as a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). Within this framework, psychological resilience refers to an individual's capacity to adapt, enhancing the likelihood of success, rather than to how environmental changes might facilitate personal transformation (Ungar, 2019; Zhang et al., 2024). However, this perspective often neglects the actions agents might adopt to achieve a new and improved level of adaptation characterized by learning and personal growth, rather than merely return to the status quo (Kaplan, 2005; Schaefer and Moos, 1992).

2.2. The undesired impact of individual resilience

The debate on the unintended outcomes of resilience is relatively recent but rapidly evolving, as scholars increasingly document its potential side effects (Giustiniano et al., 2018). For instance, Mahdiani and Ungar (2021) conceptualize resilience as both functional (i.e., focused on individuals' capabilities) and dysfunctional, when it conceals vulnerability or impedes effective responses to shocks or risks. For example, psychological research indicates that resilient adolescents exposed to violence may experience hidden long-term consequences, such as depression and post-traumatic stress, due to overburdened stress-response systems (Luthar et al., 1993). Building on this critique, Kuhlicke (2013) advances a constructivist view of resilience, showing that adaptability can emerge through complex and prolonged negotiation processes that may also enable undesirable behaviors, such as power abuse by privileged groups. Leadership studies offer additional insights, suggesting that strengths—when overused—can transform into weaknesses (Kaplan and Kaiser, 2006). Excessive resilience, for example, may lead individuals to become overly persistent in pursuing unattainable goals, overestimating their abilities, and making overly confident and ambitious judgments and decisions (Giustiniano, 2022; Pinheiro et al., 2022; Sadler-Smith et al., 2017). In the same vein, Chamorro-Premuzic and Lusk (2017) argue that excessive resilience can foster an undue tolerance of adversity, prompting individuals to remain in unfavourable conditions—such as unsatisfying jobs or under ineffective leaders—longer than they should. This aligns with research suggesting that “more is not always better” (Kaplan and Kaiser, 2009, p. 2), since extreme reliance on personal strengths can ultimately impair performance. Achor and Gielan (2016) further note that resilience is

often portrayed through a militaristic or hyper-masculine lens—evoked by imagery of soldiers enduring combat, boxers surviving another round, or athletes pushing through pain. Such depictions equate endurance with strength, reinforcing the belief that persistent struggle is synonymous with resilience and, by extension, success. Yet, when taken to the extreme, resilience may suppress self-awareness, distort realistic self-concepts, and ultimately hinder effective leadership.

In summary, resilience can produce unintended negative consequences—such as diminished self-awareness and impaired judgment—that are particularly detrimental to effective leadership.

2.3. Resilience as an organizational practice: the role of learning and unlearning

Duchek (2020) conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic process through which organizations respond to crises. The author distinguishes between actions aimed at anticipating, coping with, and adapting to disruptive events. This conceptualization enables a clear distinction between an organization's short-term survival strategies and its longer-term transformational changes. In a similar vein, complex adaptive systems theory (Marion, 1999) offers a valuable lens for understanding how crises-related responses enacted by organizations can significantly influence their ability to absorb and adapt to external shocks, especially when characterized by extreme novelty and uncertainty on how to deal with them (e.g., the global outspread of COVID-19 vs. an earthquake in a seismic area). Taking this perspective, El-Said et al. (2023) examine organizational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the lasting impact such a profound shock can have on organizations. Similarly, Macrae and Wiig (2019) argue that resilience can take shape across a broad spectrum of practices—from the real-time operations of air traffic controllers (Woltjer, 2019) to the long-term coordination of global humanitarian efforts (Kimber, 2019; Tjoflåt and Hansen, 2019). In turn, de Bruijn et al. (2017) identify a variety of practices that enable decision makers and policymakers to better manage extreme events and enhance resilience. Dabhiikar et al. (2016) further specify practices that support the recovery of operational performance following supply disruptions. Grounded in the dynamic capabilities literature (Teece et al., 1997), their study emphasizes the importance of practices as a means of linking abstract concepts to measurable indicators. In this regard, Yost (2016) explains the central role of practices—understood as actionable responses—in fostering individual resilience during adversity. Indeed, while personal traits and environmental factors are acknowledged as relevant, they are often beyond individuals' direct control. By contrast, focusing on practices provides a more agentic and pragmatic perspective, addressing the question many individuals ask in challenging times: “What can I do to keep going?”. Further, this author acknowledges that taking a practice-based perspective on resilience is crucial because it allows highlighting practices' potential to help all employees increase their resilience.

Frigotto et al. (2022) identify three forms of resilience: absorptive, adaptive, and transformative. Absorptive resilience reflects stabilizing learning, where organizations recover from disruptions by refining existing routines and restoring prior functioning. Adaptive resilience involves incremental learning within existing boundaries, enabling flexibility and adjustment without altering the organization's core identity. Differently, transformative resilience, entails generative learning that challenges foundational assumptions and drives renewal through co-evolution with a changing environment. Together, these forms of resilience represent a continuum of learning—from restoring what was, to adjusting what is, to reimagining what could be—highlighting how organizations evolve through and beyond adversity.

Building on Lombardi et al. (2021), adopting a practice perspective to examine organizational resilience foregrounds the concrete efforts and situated actions undertaken by individuals (Adrot et al., 2022).

Within this perspective, resilience can unfold in two interrelated forms: *adaptive* and *reactive* resilience (Giustiniano et al., 2018). Adaptive resilience reflects the capacity to absorb shocks through single-loop learning and first-order change (Argyris, 1999)—that is, to recognize, transform, and apply knowledge in pursuit of adaptive goals. By contrast, reactive resilience entails framing shocks and adverse events as opportunities for learning and growth across different organizational levels. It emphasizes cultivated preparedness and the ability to embed new practices emerging from experiences of disruption. This form of resilience corresponds to double-loop learning (Argyris, 1999), which requires individuals and organizations to critically reflect on their actions and integrate the lessons learned into ongoing practice.

As described by Giustiniano et al. (2018), even when boasted by individuals in leadership roles, resilience as a trait does not automatically affect other organizational members. In fact, the reading of resilience as a process requires the presence of specific organizational conditions so that resilience can diffuse via cross-level interactions. Among them, learning plays a crucial role both at the individual, team, and organizational level. Following Kayes (2015), resilience could be triggered by four types of learning mechanisms: (i) direct experience, (ii) counter experience, (iii) evidence, (iv) trial and error (or exploration). For example, the tracking of small failures (direct experience) facilitates collective situational awareness and develops higher sensitivity to the reading of reality and the understanding of situations (Giustiniano et al., 2018). When this happens, organizations can be more ready to anticipate and take all surprises by being able to exploit a richer problem formulation and the search for solutions in already experienced situations. To say with Frigotto et al. (2022), “the ways in which individuals, organizations, and/or societies respond, recover, and return to ‘normality’ always entails a change—if only because time has passed and experience (learning) has occurred” (p. 10).

Additionally, the development of the capacity of *learning to learn* (Andersen, 2016; Giustiniano et al., 2020), which includes the willingness to continuously engage in the search of novel solutions and the pursuit of experimentation, “facilitates resilience by helping people to come to terms with failing and to bounce back. Conversely, overconfidence and hubris may prevent [...] learning and lead to repeated disasters” (Giustiniano et al., 2018, p. 110). As formulated by Giustiniano et al. (2020), the development of resilience requires a constant process of ‘learning to unlearn and learn’. In fact, thanks to the illustration of an anecdotal case taken from the hospitality industry, they state that “to survive and thrive, businesses and other organizations need to transform stressors, crises and shocks into new and sustainable solutions. The process necessitates playing with the *unlearning-learning balance* to integrate the reactive and adaptive components of resilience [with reference to the reactive-adaptive resilience developed by Giustiniano et al. (2018); see also Lombardi et al. (2021)]” (p. 974, *italics is ours*). What is important to underline, following this contribution, is that “*Unlearning is not forgetting* but rather the ability to switch to an alternative mental model. Such ‘learning to unlearn and learn’ is about embracing experimentation and overcoming the resistance acting as barriers and obstacles to doing new things” (p. 974, *italics is ours*). This draws a clarification line between unlearning as a way for rethinking about new problems and solutions and other known psychological coping defensive mechanisms, such as forgetting, repression, avoidance, mental disengagement, denial, emotional decluttering. Therefore, the activation of practices supporting the process of ‘learning to unlearn and learn’ (Giustiniano et al., 2020) could help organizations to “find a balance between reaction and adaptation, and transforming stressors and shocks into new energy” (Lombardi et al., 2021, p. 3).

Building on prior research that conceptualizes resilience as the capacity to remain functional amid adversity through the development of novel ways of operating (e.g., Frigotto et al., 2022; Giustiniano et al., 2018), our study extends existing knowledge by addressing a critical gap in the literature. Specifically, as research examining the unintended outcomes of resilience remains limited (Mahdiani and Ungar, 2021), our

work seeks to explore the medium-term organizational consequences of the urgent resilience responses triggered by the COVID-19 crisis.

3. Research context

As argued by Lombardi et al. (2021), the hospitality sector was among the industries most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Confturismo (the Italian tourism confederation), Italy lost approximately 30 million tourists between March and May 2020 alone. However, a few years after the pandemic’s acute phase, the industry is undergoing a robust recovery. The Italian Hospitality Market Snapshot (PwC, 2024) reports that while 2022 marked a notable rebound in occupancy rates compared to the pandemic lows, figures still fell short of 2019 levels. By contrast, 2023 witnessed a return to pre-pandemic performance, with hotel demand reaching approximately 275 million nights spent and 86 million tourist arrivals.

Importantly, international tourism regained prominence in 2023, accounting for 51 % of total nights spent, thereby surpassing domestic tourism for the first time since the pandemic began. Furthermore, the economic contribution of the travel and tourism sector to Italy’s GDP nearly matched pre-COVID benchmarks. In 2023, the sector—both directly and indirectly—contributed around 10.5 % to the national GDP, totalling nearly 215 billion euros.² According to the Travel Innovation Observatory at Milan Polytechnic,³ 2024 marked a full recovery for international tourism, with travel expenditure surpassing pre-pandemic levels and traveller volumes approaching those of 2019. Drawing on previous studies (e.g., Alonso et al., 2020; Dogru et al., 2023; Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021; Suder et al., 2025), we follow Lombardi et al. (2021) in considering hospitality as an extreme case—particularly suitable for our aim to examine how leaders enact resilience in the *aftermath* of a major crisis. As El-Said et al. (2023) point out, the hospitality industry is largely centered on providing “non-essential” recreational and leisure experiences, which makes it especially susceptible to market disruptions (Foroudi et al., 2021). This structural vulnerability makes the sector a particularly suitable setting for examining how the experience of the COVID-19 crisis may have contributed to the development or strengthening of resilient leadership behaviors. Specifically, it provides a valuable empirical opportunity to investigate how leaders adapt, react, and learn in the face of extreme circumstances.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

To address the question “*How did hospitality leaders’ responses to COVID-19 affect the practice of resilience in the post-pandemic era?*”, we adopted a qualitative research design. As highlighted by Kozinets (2010), qualitative research is well-suited for exploring complex phenomena by capturing the diverse perspectives and meanings of those involved. This approach facilitates the development of new theories and the emergence of fresh, inspiring perspectives to better understand the phenomenon.

4.2. Respondents and data collection

Following Lombardi et al. (2021), this study aimed to gather post-pandemic insights into how hospitality managers responded to challenges related to resilience. We define the post-pandemic phase as the period during which COVID-19 was no longer considered a public

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/628849/tourism-total-contribution-to-gdp-italy-share/>

³ https://www.repubblica.it/economia/rapporti/osserva-italia/osserva-viaggi/2025/02/04/news/viaggi_cresce_in_italia_il_comparto_dell_ospitalita_5_per_un_totale_di_378_miliardi-423980720/

emergency by regulatory authorities, and all restrictions on business operations had been definitively lifted.

To explore this issue, we conducted 16 exploratory interviews with hospitality managers and general managers operating in Italy (data collection: Mak 2024–July 2025). In line with Corbin and Strauss (2014), we continued collecting data until we deemed that theoretical saturation had been reached. In particular, we found that the 13th interview did not bring any new data which was not already mentioned in the previous interviews. To ensure that data saturation was achieved, we conducted three more interviews which brought no incremental benefit either. Therefore, after 16 interviews it was deemed that the data collection had reached saturation point.

In order to follow up Lombardi et al. (2021), we initially contacted participants who had taken part in that research.⁴ Eight of the initial 18 respondents (re: Lombardi et al., 2021) accepted to take part in our follow-up study. Subsequently, we used snowball sampling to recruit additional participants through referrals, after having verified that even the new interviewees had experienced the managerial challenges triggered by the COVID-19 pandemics.

Before each interview, respondents were informed about the study's aim and its exploratory nature. Consent to record the conversation was requested and obtained, with assurance that all data would be used solely for research purposes.

Two main considerations led us to involve hospitality managers from various regions of Italy—specifically, the North, Centre, and South. First, certain cities, such as Milan, were more severely affected by COVID-19 than others. Including respondents from diverse geographic areas allowed us to capture the heterogeneity in both how the pandemic shock was perceived and in the strategies adopted in response. Second, the spread of the virus across the country was uneven, and the corresponding lockdown measures and reopening decisions—managed at the regional level—varied significantly. This likely influenced how local agents coped with the crisis.

Table 1 presents the demographics of the interviewees and key information about the hotels they manage. Reflecting the gender imbalance that characterizes the hospitality industry (Pinar et al., 2011), we made consistent efforts to achieve a balanced representation of male and female participants. However, despite numerous attempts, the availability of female respondents was limited, and we were unable to include as many female managers as initially intended. As shown, half of the respondents manage hotels that are part of a holding company. Moreover, with respect to organizational size, the sample includes hotels ranging from small to large ones. The size of the company or holding can be further appreciated by considering the annual revenues (see the last column of Table 1), which range from €1147,018 to €55,611,259. This diversity allowed us to capture significant heterogeneity in the informants' perspectives on practicing resilience.

Each interview lasted from 50 to 70 min, and was recorded and transcribed. Consistent with her/his expertise in tourism research, one of the co-authors conducted all the interviews. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the interviews allowed participants to narrate freely and provide illustrative incidents. Insights from early interviews informed refinements to the interview protocol for subsequent sessions (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

We devoted particular attention to the design of the initial interview protocol, ensuring that: (i) it was able to capture any longitudinal consistency with the research question and findings of Lombardi et al. (2021); (ii) it remained also tightly aligned with the new research question we wanted to address, comprehensive enough to anticipate relevant related issues, and free from leading or suggestive formulations. Further, equal attention was given to revising and refining the protocol

as the research progressed (Gioia et al., 2013).

The key guiding questions administered were aimed at capturing responses related to the following:

1. Unintended side effects, such as overconfidence, from enduring the pandemic.
2. Fears experienced during the outbreak, personally and professionally.
3. Managerial attitudes at the onset of the pandemic.
4. Practices or routines developed during COVID-19 now considered 'bad surprises'.
5. New practices or strategies retained post-pandemic.
6. Lessons learned, both personal and professional.
7. Tools or resources that facilitated learning.

Interviews were conducted in Italian to encourage open expression and later translated into English for analysis. Despite participants' fluency in English, this ensured a more comfortable and nuanced dialogue.

4.3. Data analysis

This study followed Gioia et al.'s (2013) methodological guidelines and employed a qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012), which is particularly appropriate for making systematic and replicable inferences from textual data to their contextual meanings (Maxwell, 2012; Wan and Chan, 2013). This approach enables researchers to interpret textual content subjectively through a structured and systematic classification process (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). By applying content analysis, researchers can therefore identify relationships among categories and themes, thereby enhancing their capacity to produce a comprehensive yet concise description of the phenomenon under investigation (Mak et al., 2010). To ensure the trustworthiness of our data, we employed the member checking technique (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nag et al., 2007). One member of the research team maintained prolonged exposure to the field, while the other two authors kept varying degrees of proximity to the industry, enabling both closeness and analytical distance (Langley et al., 2013).

4.3.1. Phases

Following prior research (Kao et al., 2016), the analysis proceeded through three main stages. Firstly, all materials were compiled by transcribing the interviews into a single database. Secondly, consistently with the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), with the aim to identify emerging and relevant themes, the leading author—who had several years of experience in hospitality and tourism before entering academia—conducted an open-coding process by carefully reading the transcripts line by line multiple times to identify meaningful units, while trying to adhere faithfully to informant terms (Gioia et al., 2013).

Following Schreier (2012), the segmentation of the material into units followed a thematic rather than a formal criterion, since this approach ensures a closer alignment between each coding unit and the coding frame. Therefore, coding units with similar meanings were grouped under the same theme, while units not fitting existing themes were treated as new ones (see Kao et al., 2016). This process allowed initial concepts to be inductively identified and organized into first-order categories, while preserving participants' original language. In the third step, an axial coding phase was performed in order to explore similarities and differences among first-order categories through both inductive and deductive reasoning (Corbin and Strauss, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013). This allowed to reduce the number of categories and relate them to a set of second-order themes. This step saw the involvement of one of the authors, an expert of organization theory and resilience. This phase was therefore characterized by a close confrontation between two of the authors of this study on the interplay between the data and

⁴ The authors had the privilege to access not only the list of the interviewees participating in Lombardi et al. (2021), but also the whole interviews' dataset collected by the authors.

Table 1
Interviewees' profile.

#Respondent	Gender	Age	Job position	Hotel/company type	Hotel rating	Belonging to a holding	Company/Holding size (#employees)*	Company/Holding revenues (year 2024; Euro)*
01	Male	50–59	General Manager	Hotel management company	4-star	Yes	199	16,698,574
02	Male	50–59	Hotel Manager	City hotel	3-star	No	19	2584,843
03	Female	40–49	Hospitality entrepreneur and consultant (<i>previously Hotel Manager</i>)	—	—	—	—	—
04	Male	50–59	Hotel Owner and Manager	City hotel	3-star	Yes	85	27,154,069
05	Male	40–49	Hotel Owner and Manager	City hotel	4-star	No	15	4966,166
06	Female	40–49	Hotel Owner and Manager	Beach hotel	3-star	No	N/A	N/A
07	Male	40–49	Hotel Manager	City hotel	4-star	No	10	1147,018
08	Male	60–69	EHMA member (European Hotel Managers Association); Hotel General Manager for his entire career (<i>now retired</i>)	—	—	—	—	—
09	Male	50–59	Hotel Manager	City hotel	4-star	No	14	7988,474
10	Male	40–49	Hotel Manager	City hotel	4-star	Yes	25	3932,892
11	Male	50–59	Entrepreneur; CEO	Hotel management company	4-star	Yes	199	16,698,574
12	Female	40–49	Hotel Manager	City hotel	4-star	Yes	33	5644,046
13	Male	50–59	Group Quality Manager & Operational Trainer	City hotel	4-star	Yes	288	55,611,259
14	Male	60–69	General Manager	City hotel	5-starL	Yes	28	1834,942
15	Female	40–49	Hospitality destination marketing specialist	—	—	—	—	—
16	Male	40–49	General Manager	City hotel	5-star	Yes	36	2210,358

* In cases the hotel belonged to a holding company, the figures for employees and revenues correspond to those of the holding company as a whole. Further, while most hotels involved in the research are limited corporations, one is a partnership company, for which no information regarding organizational size or revenues could be retrieved.

relevant literature (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia et al., 2013), using the framework of “resilience as practice” (Giustiniano et al., 2018) as a theoretical anchor. Finally, all identified themes were labelled and re-examined, also via the involvement of the third author (an expert of organization theory, leadership, and resilience), to ensure they accurately represented the domain of hospitality leaders' resilience practices.

4.3.2. Data analysis' validation

Through iterative triangulation between data and theory, and by leveraging the diversity of perspectives within the team, we pursued a critical and reflexive interpretation of the findings. These measures supported the plausibility and reliability of our interpretations for the purpose of theory elaboration (Lee et al., 1999). Consistently with this, the derivation of the second-order themes and overarching dimensions was therefore interpretive, rather than mechanical (Langley, 1999), involving continuous iteration data, theory, and collective sensemaking. More specifically, to make sure the reliability checks were not conventional, the first author organized and analyzed the data, after which the co-authors—at different stages of development—critically questioned and discussed the interpretations to assess their plausibility (Mantere et al., 2012). The aim was to mitigate the risk of becoming overly immersed in the participants' perspective and thereby losing the analytical distance required for robust theorizing (Gioia et al., 2013). Thus, aligning with Van Maanen's (1979) reminder to acknowledge the “fact of fiction”, this process yielded a *gestalt* (Clegg et al., 2012; Garud et al., 2011) that was collectively judged as coherent and convincing. As there is no single “correct” interpretation in such iterative qualitative work, our account should be viewed as one plausible representation of the phenomenon. Through this process, 33 first-order categories were classified into 10 s-order themes, leading to two overarching dimensions.

We further conducted participant checking by sharing the initial draft of our analysis with interviewees and soliciting feedback. Participants were invited to indicate whether the results reflected their

experiences and expectations, and whether they disagreed with any interpretations. All confirmed the accuracy of the findings and provided minor inputs that led to slight refinements in the coding structure.

4.3.3. Data presentation

In addition, as this study builds on Lombardi et al. (2021) and benefits from a rich empirical dataset, we propose a novel way to present and interpret the findings. In line with Reay et al. (2019), we adopt a more creative application of the Gioia methodology to address its known limitations—particularly its tendency to constrain authors in conveying the complexity and richness of qualitative data. This approach also allows us to better illustrate the dynamic nature of resilience. Specifically, we began by examining whether the patterns identified in the earlier study (Lombardi et al., 2021) remained evident in the new dataset. To capture this temporal development, we present an overview of the “then and now” findings in Fig. 1, and provide supporting illustrative data in Supplementary File 1.⁵ More specifically, we compared the results by distinguishing them into three different categories: (i) Contingent pandemic factors; (ii) Consolidation; (iii) Affirmation of the new normal.

Further, we created a brand new Gioia chart (see Fig. 2) to illustrate the new findings emerging from the new data collection, that capture new categories not already emerging from Lombardi et al. (2021). Further supporting evidence for such new results is reported in Table 2.

To show the way the authors progressed from raw data to categories and themes in conducting the analysis, Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 were organized as a traditional Gioia's data structure, illustrating the first-order categories in the left block, the second-order themes in the central one, and the aggregate dimensions on the right-hand block. Both figures are complemented by a table (see the table included in the Supplementary File 1 as a support for Fig. 1; see Table 2 as a support for Fig. 2), which, in turn, have been organized as follows: one column refers to primary data as collected during the interviewees (see column, “Representative

⁵ For the elaboration of Supplementary file 1, see footnote 4.

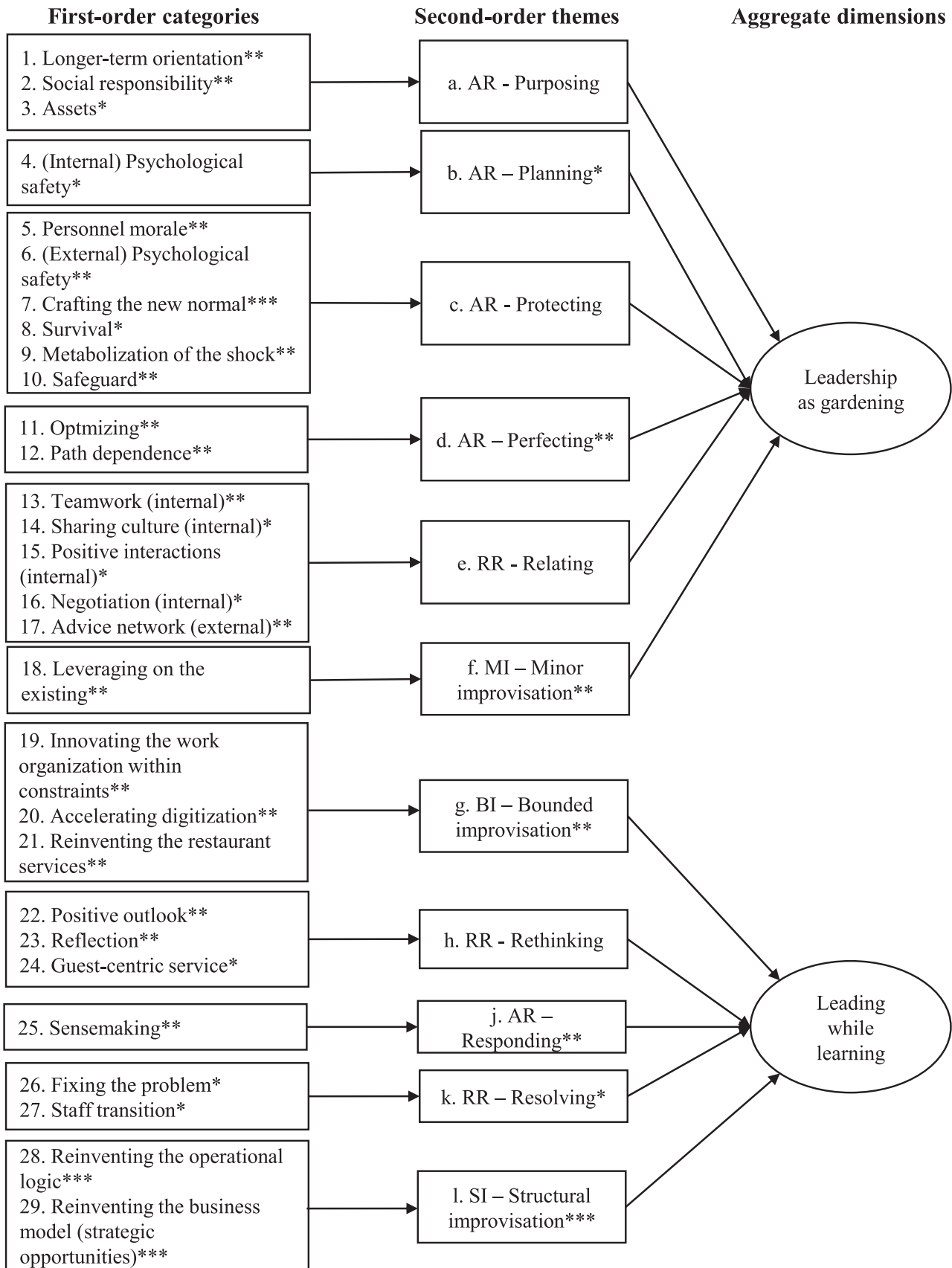


Fig. 1. Lombardi et al.'s (2021) findings vs. current study. (AR=Adaptive resilience; RR=Reactive resilience; MI = Minor improvisation; BI = Bounded improvisation; SI = Structural improvisation. *Contingent pandemic factors; **Consolidation; ***Affirmation of the new normal).

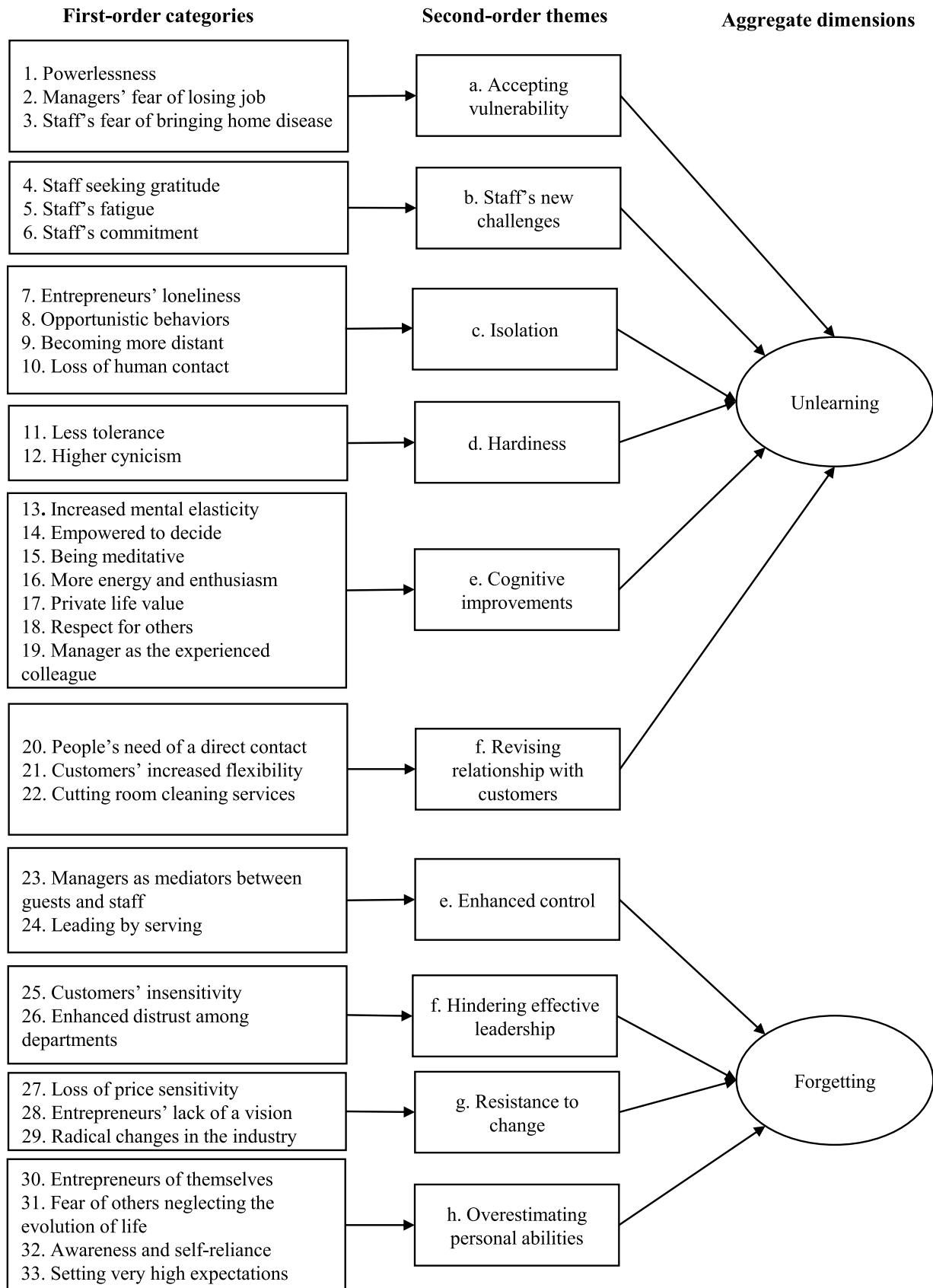


Fig. 2. New findings.

Table 2
New findings: representative data for each theme/category.

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
<i>Aggregate dimension:</i>		
<i>Unlearning</i>		
a. Accepting vulnerability	1. Powerlessness	“The outbreak of the pandemic created a feeling of <i>powerlessness</i> and the ineffectiveness of any kind of decision.” (Respondent#2) “...Things we could not manage.” (Respondent#2) “It was a leap in the dark.” (Respondent#6)
	2. Managers’ fear of losing job	“... <i>fear of losing your job</i> , especially for someone over 50, fear of having to question yourself.” (Respondent#1)
	3. Staff’s fear of bringing home disease	“Let’s remember that the staff at home have families, so work behaviors are a consequence of the <i>fear of bringing home a virus</i> or something.” (Respondent#1) “... the housekeeping staff is more careful.” (Respondent#6) “Employees are scared of getting too close to guests.” (Respondent#1)
b. Staff’s new challenges	4. Staff seeking gratitude	“I notice more and more that the employees, on one hand, care about showing me that they’re working well, and on the other hand, they increasingly <i>seek my gratitude</i> — but I’m not talking about financial recognition [...] it’s more the personal, emotional side, you notice that.” (Respondent#4)
	5. Staff’s fatigue	“I notice more stress — before the pandemic, maybe 10–20 check-ins were handled by the receptionists with one hand tied behind their back; now they still do it and they do it well, but with more <i>fatigue</i> .” (Respondent#4) “The receptionists decided to suspend the luggage storage service without informing me, explaining that they could no longer manage it.” (Respondent#4)
	6. Staff’s commitment	“ <i>Employees ask me to attend training courses</i> on safety, on biology basics to understand the components of the products we use [...] Some employees also wanted to take courses on hospitality/customer approach, even though they weren’t central to their department.” (Respondent#6) “For instance, our buffets — particularly the breakfast one — are now often planned by employees taking into account what happened during the pandemic.” (Respondent#1)
c. Isolation	7. Entrepreneurs’ loneliness	“The <i>entrepreneurs</i> , unlike hotel managers, perhaps <i>felt more isolated, more alone</i> .” (Respondent#1)
	8. Opportunistic behaviors	“Relationships (in this industry) are created, but they are not authentic ones — they are <i>relationships tied to an opportunity</i> [...] That was a surprise, one that

Table 2 (continued)

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
		left a bit of a bitter taste in my mouth.” (Respondent#3) “When you reach out to people who, just a few months before, were your professional friends, people you had close relationships with, you realize that once you step out of that system, there’s no reply.” (Respondent#3)
	9. Becoming more distant	“ <i>I started to be a bit more distant</i> , why is that? Because I never know what the person in front of me is thinking, so my approach has completely changed, so I don’t know if it’s a pleasure to talk maybe at a distance of 50 cm rather than 2 m, maybe I always wait for the person in front of me to make the first step.” (Respondent#6) “That wish to touch someone’s hand, to share even a simple gesture like a caress — it’s no longer there.” (Respondent#6) “... we tried to interact with that person as little as possible, or even avoid them completely when we could.” (Respondent#1)
	10. Loss of human contact	“Today the world lives on reviews due to the evolution of technology, because today it’s really sad, you don’t make phone calls anymore, you write on the chat to provoke a human contact... <i>the customer doesn’t tend to seek human contact</i> , even the customer themselves has become more isolated.” (Respondent#11) “The pandemic has made every guest a writer. Feedback used to be given verbally, but now that part is skipped — it all ends up in online reviews.” (Respondent#1) “The idea of negotiation no longer exists [...] The distance has increased.” (Respondent#11)
d. Hardiness	11. Less tolerance	“Honestly, I have to say that <i>I’ve started being a little less tolerant</i> at times: I gave heavy-handed answers to certain customers, because they were really unmanageable, unmanageable.” (Respondent#7) “What really gets on my nerves now is seeing the same mistakes repeated over and over [...] I’m a lot less patient now, more demanding.” (Respondent#5)
	12. Higher cynicism	“I used to listen a lot to things; in my office the door has always been open, so whoever wanted to take advantage took advantage. Instead now I deal with the problem when it arises [...] if you listen to all the bells... <i>A bit more cynical? Yes, in that sense, yes.</i> ” (Respondent#12)
e. Cognitive improvements	13. Increased mental elasticity	“The secret weapon was our ability to adjust [...] we adjusted to everything was needed [...] <i>I have acquired mental elasticity.</i> ” (Respondent#6) “I’ve learned to simplify problems — it’s made me much more

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Table 2 (continued)

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
		solution-oriented [...] ‘Okay, there’s a problem, let’s solve it.’ It’s actually improved the problem-solving ability of both myself and my staff.” (Respondent#1)
	14. Empowered to decide	“If before the pandemic I was a bit always waiting for decisions (from the top), when I know I am doing good for the company I <i>decide</i> .” (Respondent#12)
	15. Being meditative	“Now I listen more [...] <i>I’m a bit more calm, meditative</i> ; I meditate more [...] I’m a bit more calm. [...] I began to work on myself — after all, you can’t really change other people.” (Respondent#6)
	16. More energy and enthusiasm	“During the pandemic I had come to the ‘lowest ebb’, as I think many did. Now, however, <i>I have regained enthusiasm</i> , a working calm, <i>new energy</i> . We started off again with great momentum.” (Respondent#2) “The pandemic has created an enormous desire to travel.” (Respondent#1) “Guests started asking different questions — things like, ‘Where can we go? Can we spend time outdoors? Can we do some activities?’ At one point, I thought, ‘I want to do something new’, so I began updating the website and started new collaborations.” (Respondent#6)
	17. Private life value	“ <i>The work-life balance has shifted</i> [...] I feel lighter after facing the pandemic [...] I live it in a different, calmer way [...] I notice that we all live more from day to day, without many prospects for tomorrow.” (Respondent#2) “It’s become clear that staff now, generally speaking, think much more about their personal well-being.” (Respondent#1) “I’ve learned to slow down for myself, and I respect myself more.” (Respondent#6) “Because I’ve learned and realized that the most beautiful, most important part of our lives is those moments we spend at home, with our families — they’re what truly make up our existence.” (Respondent#5)
	18. Respect for others	“I have learned to be <i>respectful towards the others</i> .” (Respondent#6)
	19. Manager as the experienced colleague	“...because the <i>manager</i> who was me was no longer seen as a person in the company but was seen as the older, <i>more experienced colleague</i> who then gave advice on how to behave.” (Respondent#10)
f. Revising relationship with customers	20. People’s need of a direct contact	“Today, <i>people need human contact</i> , that is, to give you confidence but with human contact [...] The need to be together is a consequence of the pandemic, and has now become stronger.” (Respondent#10) “...people have rediscovered that

Table 2 (continued)

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
	21. Customers’ increased flexibility	you can book a hotel just by calling.” (Respondent#4) “ <i>Customers are more flexible</i> , they help us out.” (Respondent#1)
	22. Cutting room cleaning services	“I’ve seen how some companies, but also important hotel chains, have <i>taken advantage of the opportunity to cut room cleaning</i> if the customer doesn’t want anyone to enter the room during the stay.” (Respondent#4)
	Aggregate dimension: Forgetting	
	g. Enhanced control	23. Managers as mediators between guests and staff “We had to learn new skills, because you were caught in a vice: on the one hand, trying to make revenues and, on the other hand, the fear of losing staff at a time when it was also difficult to find them, so <i>mediation between the guest and the staff was key</i> .” (Respondent#1) 24. Leading by serving “I often become the secretary of my collaborators, in the sense that once I have given them the mandate, maybe it’s me who reminds them of what has to be done [...] It’s funny, because they should be the ones reminding me [...] <i>So it’s more me serving others in the end</i> .” (Respondent#5) “... <i>the client was not as sensitive</i> (to the difficulties of hotel management during COVID)... that shocked me the most [...] not everyone understood the technical/physiological difficulties that any facility had (e.g., umbrella distance, breakfasts, etc.).” (Respondent#2) 26. Enhanced distrust among departments “ <i>There is a little more mistrust between departments</i> , for instance between reception and rooms, reception and breakfast, breakfast and rooms.” (Respondent#4)
	h. Hindering effective leadership	25. Customers’ insensitivity “I see, however, that on the part of many of my colleagues <i>there is no longer any price sensitivity</i> , i.e., they are shooting into the hoard, even crazy figures, and this is something that I think will gradually diminish because we are already paying for it in terms of reputation. We are increasing prices disproportionately, but we are not improving services or quality, and in the long run you can’t fool the consumer that much.” (Respondent#4)
	j. Resistance to change	27. Loss of price sensitivity 28. Entrepreneurs’ lack of a vision “The real problem is <i>not having entrepreneurs who have a vision</i> on people, not on things [...] Let me repeat: 2021 was the year when, thanks to subsidies, lower wages, and reduced personnel costs, companies in the South made higher profits than ever. But that money wasn’t reinvested in the business — it went straight into their pockets. A truly disappointing entrepreneurial class, in the world of tourism [...] (Due to this) Today, employees no longer make sacrifices for

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
	29. Radical changes in the industry	entrepreneurs, which they would have done before [...] The entrepreneur acted like a thief, pocketed the money, and ran away, leaving the business in someone else's hands." (Respondent#10) "...From now to a few years from now, there will be real luxury, the kind we had never seen before. This is an important thing, but it will also change the way we do things, because [...] finding 450 employees... and they should be very well prepared [...] The institutions will have to lend a hand, and they will, because together with the players – who are above all the international investment funds – and the management companies, who will bring the know-how, <i>our hospitality industry will totally change in the next few years.</i> [...] and this is a consequence of the pandemic." (Respondent#8) "COVID-19 has pushed many family-run hotels out of the market. There are now many more highly qualified people trying to enter this sector — people coming from other fields or with different educational backgrounds. I think they see tourism as a fairly stable source of income." (Respondent#1) "The trend has definitely changed, because people who used to stay in hotels are now looking for holiday homes. What I see is that many agritourism places have sprung up — they didn't exist before." (Respondent#6)
k. Overestimating personal abilities	30. Entrepreneurs of themselves	"...because it's easy to say that it's hard to find personnel, but what are you doing to achieve that? Everyone has become a consultant, no one is doing the employee work anymore, so I say to myself, instead of thinking about others, actually you too have gone too far in your being. I repeat, I am no one to say what is right and wrong, but they have all become super mega CEOs, CFOs, <i>entrepreneurs of themselves.</i> " (Respondent#3)
	31. Fear of others neglecting the evolution of life	"So maybe the <i>fear</i> is not of myself, but of <i>the people who often then live this state of well-being as if it were the continuous line</i> [...] It's like when you start earning: you earn, you earn and you spend, you spend, but you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, you put money away, because something is going to happen anyway [...] ...because <i>it's the evolution of life.</i> " (Respondent#3)
	32. Awareness and self-reliance	"I came out of bullying, I came to success as a director and then I deliberately threw myself into being an entrepreneur, aware that

Table 2 (continued)

Second-order themes	First-order categories	Representative data
	33. Setting very high expectations	there would be no one there to pick me up, aware that no one would teach me how to be an entrepreneur, <i>aware that I would find no one to help me</i> or advise me or suggest me." (Respondent#3) "The thing is that you create the expectation, knowing that you can achieve it, because you know that you have all the skills, competences and resources to do it, but at the same time you never feel satisfied, because you know that afterwards there will be a drop again. And this is a mental thing of mine [...] I am aware of who I am and what I do; I always <i>set very high expectation</i> , discipline, perseverance, I put all my resources in doing that, I reach the result, but I don't enjoy it." (Respondent#3)

data"); column 2 reports the first order categories as identified via the data interpretation; while column 1 "Second-order themes" describes the pattern emerged via thematic association. Following Gioia et al. (2013), the graphical representation of the data analysis process serves as a crucial strategy for demonstrating rigor and transparency in qualitative research (Pratt, 2008; Tracy, 2010).

5. Findings

5.1. Evidence development between Lombardi et al. (2021) vs. the present study (data 2024–2025)

In line with a longitudinal perspective, we sought to trace how the evidence reported by Lombardi et al. (2021)—based on data collected in spring 2020, during the peak of the pandemic and the first major business lockdown in Italy—evolved into new forms of resilience practice. Drawing on data gathered between May 2024 and July 2025, our aim was not to perform a direct comparison with Lombardi et al. (2021), but rather to explore whether and how resilience practices have changed over time, emerging during or as a consequence of the pandemic crisis. This approach led us to classify our findings into three distinct categories:

(i) *Contingent pandemic factors* — These factors refer to categories and themes that were salient in Lombardi et al. (2021), but did not emerge in the more recent data. They appear to reflect conditions which were specific to the acute phase of the crisis and have since then lost relevance. As shown in Fig. 1 (marked with one asterisk: *), this category includes factors such as psychological safety, positive intra-organizational interactions, the need to strengthen negotiation skills, and an increased focus on guest-centric service. These findings align with the adaptive resilience dimension of planning, as well as the reactive resilience dimension of resolving.

(ii) *Consolidation* — This category comprises results consistently found in both studies, suggesting that certain factors have maintained their relevance over time and continue to shape organizational responses beyond the immediate crisis. In Fig. 1 they are indicated with two asterisks (**), and these findings include long-term orientation, the metabolization of the shock, path dependence, accelerated digitization, and the maintenance of a positive outlook. These categories resonate with the adaptive resilience dimensions of perfecting and responding, as well as with forms of minor and bounded improvisation.

(iii) *Affirmation of the new normal* — This final set of findings

encompasses categories and themes identified in both studies that require ongoing refinement and development, reflecting a shift toward novel, enduring organizational practices in the post-pandemic landscape. This includes the crafting of a “new normal” and the reinvention of both operational logic and business models (see Fig. 1, categories marked with three asterisks: ***). These findings underscore the importance of maintaining focus on structural improvisation, which appears essential for capitalizing on the new learning capacity discovered during the COVID-19 crisis, as a form of resilience via “learning to unlearn and learn” (Giustiniano et al., 2020, p. 973).

5.2. New findings

Along with discussing our results relating them to Lombardi et al. (2021)—with its theoretical framework—we also obtained novel emerging findings, that we consider to be idiosyncratic to the post-pandemic phase. As reported in Fig. 2, these were derived by using 10 s-order themes as a filter to 33 first-order categories, which eventually led to the identification of two key overarching dimensions. These dimensions show how hospitality managers practiced resilience in the post-COVID-19 time, representing a kind of “long COVID” effect in organizations (“long organizational COVID”). We labelled these two dimensions as unlearning and forgetting. In the following paragraphs we provide a detailed description of each of them.

5.2.1. Unlearning

Our first finding highlights the critical role of unlearning for hospitality managers as a means to *embrace experimentation and overcome barriers*, enabling them to discover new ways of operating after a failure or crisis (Giustiniano et al., 2018). Unlearning involves integrating the reactive and adaptive components of resilience (see Giustiniano et al., 2020; Lombardi et al., 2021) and transitioning to an alternative mental model. Unlearning, in this sense, represents the deliberate act of letting go of obsolete assumptions, routines, and beliefs that constrain organizational responsiveness (Fiol and O’Connor, 2017). It is therefore a necessary precondition for the development of new knowledge and capabilities, and a fundamental element of an organization’s capacity for change. As emphasized in Klammer and Gueldenberg’s (2019) review, unlearning obsolete practices or erroneous knowledge is essential when faced with environmental changes. This argument recalls recent studies related to the way decision makers and organizations deal with surprise. In this regard, research contends that this often entails more than sense-making and categorization, implying a rather a re-organization of mental representations of the world (e.g., Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011; Csaszar and Ostler, 2020; Levinthal, 2011). For instance, in moments of surprise, strategists are often compelled to *stop believing something* they once considered true — a process of cognitive and behavioral reframing that lies at the heart of resilience as ongoing renewal. One respondent illustrated this idea as follows:

“The pandemic prompted a significant reset of everything we used to do before.” (Respondent#2)

5.2.2. Forgetting

The second overarching dimension concerns the process by which hospitality managers regulate their mental content. As Payne and Corrigan (2007) demonstrate, people often wish to forget emotionally charged experiences, yet emotional memories tend to resist intentional forgetting because affective arousal strengthens their encoding and persistence. However, forgetting is not merely the passive decay of memories, but rather an active and adaptive process essential for psychological balance and cognitive flexibility (Gravitz, 2019). Neuroscientific research has revealed that forgetting involves inhibitory mechanisms that allow individuals to suppress unwanted thoughts and memories. From this perspective, forgetting serves a functional purpose: it prevents cognitive overload, allows mental representations to be

updated, and facilitates learning and adaptation in changing environments. Consistent with this view, Hulbert and Anderson (2018) found that individuals who had experienced trauma demonstrated enhanced inhibitory control over memory retrieval, suggesting that the effort to suppress intrusive memories may strengthen the very cognitive mechanisms that underlie resilience. Forgetting thus emerges as a key element of adaptive functioning, enabling individuals to move forward after adverse events by regulating the accessibility of distressing memories and maintaining focus on the present. In this sense, resilience does not solely rely on remembering how to recover, but equally on knowing *what to let go of*. This notion is captured in the words of one participant:

“I didn’t notice just any changes; I noticed significant ones, because we were truly forced during the pandemic—the lockdowns, those enforced closures, those incredibly difficult times. But then, I saw everything go right back to exactly how it was before.” (Respondent#7)

6. Discussion

Our findings reveal that the practice of resilience implies a tension between two seemingly opposing processes—*unlearning* and *forgetting*—which together shape its contradictory nature. While Giustiniano et al. (2020) posit that “The process [of resilience] necessitates playing with the unlearning-learning balance [...] with unlearning [being] *not forgetting* but rather the ability to switch to an alternative mental model” (p. 973, *italics is ours*), our study challenges this assertion. In fact, it suggests that forgetting could play a legitimate role in the process of resilience, as it seems to create mental space for new energies for the ‘new (post-pandemic) normal’ to unfold. However, a critical interpretation of this finding suggests that managers may adopt forgetting as a coping strategy to navigate shocks, reassuring themselves that no major changes are needed to continue thriving in the face of adversity, exploiting little or nothing of what learned during the pandemic time. From this perspective, forgetting could be understood as a form of denial, which might also cause the loss of tacit knowledge. One interviewee candidly stated several times during the interview:

“It is as if it [the COVID-19 pandemic] never happened.” (Respondent#16)

Forgetting can therefore be seen as a form of ‘memory loss’, most likely to happen when business performance returns to its past (i.e., pre-pandemic) values, or even better. Nonetheless, forgetting fundamentally hinders resilience. In fact, the dialectical understanding of resilience proposed by Giustiniano et al. (2018) reads it as the capacity to not only face adversities but rather to be more ready for the next to come, *even when they unfold in different or unseen forms*; i.e., individuals or organizations that found themselves able to thrive and learn in face of an event (e.g., earthquake, pandemics) can boast resilience if later they are more ready to deal with other crises (e.g., a drought, economic downturn).

A state of mind “as if it never happened” removes both the problems and the solutions related to the triggering shock, not only by turning the *flourished* (emerged) practices into a *desert*, but also, and even more dangerously, by exposing individuals and organizations to renewed and deepened vulnerability. In some fields (military, medicine, energy production), a ‘near miss’ is an avoided damage, not a regular situation. Forgetting as a memory loss turns ‘near misses’ into ‘never happened’, dissolving the very antecedents of any possible form of resilience. Kaminska and Ray (2024) proved that, when forgetting stems from people in leadership, it affects the whole workplace.

In general terms, the apparent contradiction between unlearning and forgetting calls for a deeper understanding of the ambivalent instances that appear to characterize some processes of resilience (see Giustiniano et al., 2020; Giustiniano, 2022). Among them, forgetting appears to be a relevant component of what could legitimately be considered a long (organizational) COVID effect.

6.1. Contribution to theory

Our study confirms that resilience embodies a tension between two intertwined yet opposing processes—unlearning and forgetting—which together shape its paradoxical nature. While prior research (Giustiniano et al., 2018, 2020) conceptualizes resilience as a balance between *unlearning* and *learning*—emphasizing that the former is not equivalent to *forgetting* but rather entails the ability to shift toward an alternative mental model—our findings challenge this view by showing that forgetting may play an ambivalent role in resilience: functioning both as a liberator of cognitive and emotional space and as a coping mechanism, or even a form of denial.

Doing so, we believe our study offers a novel contribution to the literature emphasizing the centrality of learning in resilience (Giustiniano et al., 2018; Frigotto et al., 2022), by introducing *forgetting* as a complementary yet potentially disruptive process. Since this appears particularly relevant when forgetting is influenced or deliberately initiated by leaders, we contribute to the field of leadership and of the diffusion of organizational dynamics triggered by leaders (see also Clegg et al., 2012, 2025). In fact, our data show that as forgetting is conveyed by leaders, it can diffuse throughout the organization, producing a form of collective “memory loss” that may erase not only memories of adversity (e.g., as problems) but—more importantly—the solutions (to those very problems) developed during the crisis. Such dynamics may jeopardize *reactive* (Giustiniano et al., 2018) and *transformative* (Frigotto et al., 2022) resilience, also via the loss of valuable “near misses”—that could be treasured from the past experience—into cases of “never happened”.

Additionally, the interplay between unlearning and forgetting reaffirms the inherently dialectical nature of resilience, leaving further room for examining resilience as a phenomenon shaped by potentially paradoxical forces.

6.2. Practical implications

Our findings offer valuable implications for managers, particularly in relation to the role of leadership in fostering organizational resilience. As previous studies have emphasized (Giustiniano et al., 2020), leadership plays a central role in shaping resilient organizations. This study builds on that premise, highlighting the critical leadership challenges that demand attention in volatile and uncertain contexts (Macrae and Wiig, 2019). Paramount among these is the leader’s responsibility to manage the delicate and ongoing tension between organizational stability and flexibility. Leaders must not only support this balance structurally but must also personally cultivate the ability to operate in multiple modes—adjusting rapidly to changing conditions and training their own adaptive capacities.

Moreover, because leaders model behaviors that often cascade throughout their teams and organizations, their approach to resilience has far-reaching consequences. Our findings echo Britt et al. (2016) in warning against an overemphasis on resilience as relentless endurance. Framing resilience as an imperative to withstand adversity at any cost risks pathologizing vulnerability, fostering a culture in which displays of weakness are stigmatized. In such settings, employees may feel compelled to suppress or ignore signs of strain, not out of strength, but out of fear of being judged as inadequate. Ironically, this can erode the very conditions—psychological safety, openness, and learning—that are necessary for genuine, sustainable resilience.

6.3. Research limitations and avenues for future research

Our study suffers from some typical limitations of qualitative research. In our case, although we believe that COVID-19 provided an extreme case of crisis for the hospitality industry, the specificity of the data collected hinders the possibility to extend our findings to other economic sectors, even within the large range of service businesses.

Moreover, despite the best intention and the generous availability of contacts and data provided by the authors of Lombardi et al. (2021), we are aware that the two samples do not perfectly match, which is a possible limitation to the longitudinal comparison between the two studies we provided. Nonetheless, thanks to the embracement of the grounded theory approach, we were able to move forward from Lombardi et al. (2021) and discover the presence and the relevance of forgetting that we offer to the academic debate on leadership and resilience.

Despite its limitations, this study opens promising avenues for future research. Given the significant role that forgetting appears to play in the post-pandemic era, future studies could investigate the processes through which it unfolds. For example, mapping the psychological mechanisms that lead individuals to discard or repress certain types of information could offer valuable insights into the factors that mostly influence this tendency. Individuals who have experienced severe shocks—such as workplace bullying, the events of 9/11, or forced displacement due to war—often tend to downplay or forget the associated fear and hardship, perceiving themselves as resilient in the face of future adversity. This phenomenon could be further examined through the lens of technical versus adaptive forgetting (Klammer and Gueldenberg, 2019), depending on the depth and nature of knowledge loss.

Further, some research has interpreted unlearning and forgetting as two distinct forms of unlearning (Klammer and Gueldenberg, 2019), differentiated by the intentionality of knowledge loss. While unlearning tends to be deliberate and purposeful, forgetting often occurs unintentionally. However, organizational scholars have rather pointed that forgetting itself can be involuntary or intentional (Martin de Holan, 2011; Martin de Holan and Phillips, 2004) and that it can be managed, as a key component of any organization change process. Future studies might enlighten whether this might also apply to the hospitality managers facing the consequences of COVID-19.

Finally, echoing Linnenluecke’s (2017) insights, our findings raise the question of whether organizing for resilience may itself foster resilience. Future research could therefore explore whether certain resources, capabilities, or organizational mechanisms contribute to developing resilience. This line of inquiry could also investigate whether leaders’ resilience—such as that examined in the present study—can be transmitted across levels, from the individual to the team and ultimately the organization.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to start from a longitudinal follow up to the pivotal study conducted by Lombardi et al. (2021), and to explore any novelty in managerial practices in the hospitality industry that could have been triggered by the pandemic times. In particular, we were animated by the invitation formulated by Lombardi et al. (2021) to take advantage of the “open lab’ for testing resilience” provided by the Italian hospitality industry and study “resilience as a process [and] show how resilient leadership may take very different forms in different moments” (p. 10).

In order to be as much adherent to that study, we applied the same research logic, trying to engage the very same respondents. Very luckily, we eventually managed to enrich the data collection via the inclusion of new sources. Our findings report that some of the categories identified by Lombardi et al. (2021) persisted, some of them disappeared, while some new ones emerged during the harshest crisis and now morphed into a “new normal”. At the same time, considering the exploratory nature of the study, we reported two novel practices that seem to matter after some years from the outspread of COVID-19: unlearning and forgetting. While apparently similar, these two categories are visibly contradictory (see Cunha et al., 2025; Giustiniano et al., 2020): removing the old for creating room to the new or doing it just for deleting uneasy memories? If so, does the Nietzschean “what does not kill me...” still hold? Or “[it] makes me dumber”?

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sara Lombardi: Project administration, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Miguel Pina e Cunha:** Supervision, Conceptualization. **Luca Giustiniano:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.ijhm.2025.104517](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2025.104517).

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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