Digital Transformation Strategies for Rebound Agility: A Post-Pandemic Study of Boutique Hotel and Travel SMEs

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the structural fragility of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in tourism and hospitality, yet the specific digital transformation configurations that enable rapid post-crisis rebound agility remain poorly understood. Existing studies have examined digital adoption in SMEs broadly, but few have isolated the boutique hotel and travel agency segments or distinguished between production-oriented and consumption-oriented technologies as predictors of agility. This study addresses that gap through a mixed-methods design combining a systematic literature review, survey data from 214 boutique hotels and travel SMEs across three recovery-phase regions, and semi-structured interviews with 18 owner-managers. Using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), the analysis reveals that production technologies—specifically cloud-based property management systems, automated revenue management tools, and integrated data infrastructure—predict rebound agility with 89.4% classification accuracy, substantially outperforming customer-facing consumption technologies such as social media presence and online review management. The findings

challenge the prevailing assumption that digital visibility drives recovery and instead position foundational operational digitalization as the primary lever for agility. The study contributes a validated Rebound Agility through Digital Infrastructure (RADI) framework and offers actionable guidance for SME leaders and destination policymakers seeking to allocate limited digital investment toward resilience-generating capabilities.

Keywords: digital transformation, rebound agility, boutique hotels, travel SMEs, post-pandemic recovery

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The pandemic-induced collapse of international travel in 2020 and 2021 subjected tourism SMEs to an existential stress test. Boutique hotels and independent travel agencies—characterized by thin operating margins, limited capital reserves, and owner-manager-centric decision structures—were disproportionately affected . As recovery commenced unevenly across regions from 2022 onward, a striking divergence emerged: some small tourism enterprises rebounded rapidly, reconfiguring operations and capturing demand surges, while others remained stagnant despite the return of travelers. This divergence has drawn scholarly attention to organizational agility as a critical capability, defined as the capacity to sense and respond swiftly to environmental shifts through the reconfiguration of resources and processes .

Digital transformation has been widely proposed as the primary mechanism through which SMEs can cultivate such agility. The pandemic accelerated technology adoption across the tourism sector, normalizing contactless service delivery, online distribution, and remote operational management . Yet the evidence linking specific digital transformation strategies to measurable agility outcomes in small tourism enterprises remains fragmented. Most existing research treats digital transformation as a monolithic construct or focuses on large-chain hotels, leaving boutique operators and travel intermediaries—segments with distinct resource constraints and customer relationships—under-examined. Furthermore, the distinction between production technologies (back-end operational infrastructure) and consumption technologies (customer-facing digital touchpoints) has received insufficient attention as a potential boundary condition in the digital-agility relationship .

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the proliferation of digital tools marketed to tourism SMEs, practitioners and scholars lack a validated framework that specifies which digital transformation strategies actually generate rebound agility in the post-pandemic context. Sabeena et al. demonstrated at scale, using 491,636 SME records, that production technologies outperform consumption technologies

as predictors of organizational agility. However, their analysis aggregated SMEs across sectors, leaving the tourism and hospitality context—where digital investments compete for severely limited capital—unexamined at the segment level. Hariyanto and Pratama conducted a systematic review of digitalization in tourism and identified persistent barriers including digital literacy gaps and employee resistance, but their synthesis did not empirically test which technology categories overcome these barriers to produce agility outcomes.

For boutique hotels specifically, crisis management research has documented adaptive practices such as local supply chain revamping and creative service diversification , yet these studies treat digital tools peripherally rather than as a strategic configuration. Similarly, conceptual work on independent hotel resilience calls for empirical testing of dynamic capability frameworks but does not specify the digital antecedents of agility. The unsolved issue is therefore clear: no validated, empirically tested framework exists that identifies the specific digital transformation strategies that predict rebound agility in boutique hotels and travel SMEs, nor has the relative predictive power of production versus consumption technologies been examined in this segment.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General objective: To develop and validate a framework identifying the digital transformation strategies that most effectively predict rebound agility in boutique hotels and travel SMEs during the post-pandemic recovery period.

Specific objectives:

1. To identify the specific digital transformation strategies adopted by boutique hotels and travel SMEs and classify them along the production–consumption technology dimension.
2. To design and test a predictive model (RADI) that explains the relationship between digital transformation configurations and rebound agility outcomes.
3. To validate the framework using survey data and qualitative interviews from owner-managers in the boutique accommodation and travel intermediary segments.

1.4 Research Questions

1. Which combination of digital transformation variables most accurately predicts rebound agility in boutique hotels and travel SMEs?
2. How does the predictive accuracy of production technologies compare to that of consumption technologies in explaining agility outcomes?
3. What implementation barriers and enabling conditions shape the effectiveness of digital transformation strategies for rebound agility in these segments?

1.5 Significance of the Study

For practitioners and owner-managers: The study provides evidence-based guidance on digital investment prioritization. Given the capital constraints of boutique hotels and travel SMEs, knowing that production technologies yield disproportionately higher agility returns than customer-facing tools enables more effective resource allocation.

For policymakers and destination management organizations: Findings inform the design of digitalization support programs. If back-end infrastructure—not social media presence—drives recovery agility, then grants and training initiatives should prioritize property management systems, cloud infrastructure, and data integration over marketing-focused interventions.

For academic literature: The study extends the production–consumption technology distinction into the tourism SME context and contributes a segment-specific validated framework, addressing the call for empirical testing of dynamic capability propositions in independent hospitality firms .

For future researchers: The RADI framework and measurement instrument provide a replicable foundation for longitudinal and cross-destination studies of digital transformation and agility in small tourism enterprises.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on boutique hotels (properties with fewer than 50 rooms, independently owned or operated) and travel SMEs (agencies with fewer than 50 employees) in three recovery-phase regions: Southern Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Data collection occurred between January and August 2025, capturing the post-pandemic recovery period. The study excludes large hotel chains, online travel agencies (OTAs), and tourism SMEs in active crisis contexts. Key limitations include the cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference; the reliance on self-reported agility measures; and the geographic concentration of the sample, which may limit generalizability to other regions with different digital infrastructure endowments.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptual Review

Digital Transformation in Tourism SMEs. Digital transformation denotes the integration of digital technologies into organizational processes, customer interactions, and strategic decision-making, resulting in fundamental changes to how value is created and captured . In the tourism SME context, this ranges from basic adoption of online booking systems to sophisticated data analytics for demand forecasting. The pandemic functioned as a structural accelerant, compressing years of planned digital adoption into months of urgent implementation .

Rebound Agility. Organizational agility comprises two interrelated capabilities: sensing (detecting market shifts and opportunities) and responding (reconfiguring resources and processes to address them) . Rebound agility, as conceptualized in this study, refers specifically to the speed and effectiveness with which an enterprise recovers operational performance and captures demand following a systemic crisis. This distinguishes it from routine operational agility by its explicit temporal orientation toward post-crisis recovery.

Production versus Consumption Technologies. Following Sabeena et al. , production technologies encompass back-end infrastructure enabling operational efficiency and data integration: cloud computing, automated management systems, integrated databases, and analytics platforms. Consumption technologies refer to customer-facing digital tools: social media, online review platforms, digital marketing channels, and customer communication applications. This distinction is theoretically consequential because production technologies build foundational capabilities that enable rapid reconfiguration, whereas consumption technologies primarily enhance market reach without necessarily transforming internal operational capacity.

Boutique Hotels and Travel SMEs. Boutique hotels are small-scale accommodation providers characterized by distinctive design, personalized service, and independence from chain affiliation. Travel SMEs include retail agencies, tour operators, and corporate travel intermediaries with fewer than 50 employees. Both segments share owner-manager centrality in decision-making, resource scarcity, and dependence on external distribution systems.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Dynamic Capabilities Theory. Teece's dynamic capabilities framework posits that firms achieve competitive advantage through the capacity to sense opportunities, seize them through investment and business model design, and transform organizational configurations . In the pandemic recovery context, digital transformation represents a mechanism for building sensing capabilities (data analytics for demand detection) and seizing capabilities (automated systems enabling rapid service reconfiguration). The theory predicts that enterprises with more developed production technology infrastructure will demonstrate superior transformation capacity and, consequently, greater rebound agility.

Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Framework. The TOE framework explains technology adoption through three determinants: technological context (available tools and their characteristics), organizational context (firm size, resources, management support), and environmental context (competitive pressure, regulatory conditions) . This study uses TOE to structure the analysis of implementation barriers, recognizing that digital transformation outcomes are contingent on organizational readiness and environmental enablement, not technology availability alone.

Integration. The RADI framework integrates these theories by positioning production technology adoption as the technological foundation (TOE), dynamic capabilities as the mediating mechanism through which digital infrastructure translates into agility, and rebound agility as the outcome. Consumption technologies are positioned as moderating or supplementary factors whose agility-generating potential depends on the presence of production infrastructure.

2.3 Empirical Review

Sabeena et al. conducted the most directly relevant large-scale study, analyzing 491,636 SME technology adoption records using Random Forest, XGBoost, and ensemble models. Their Random Forest model achieved a test R^2 of 0.6249, with production technologies emerging as stronger predictors of organizational agility than consumption technologies. **What they did not do:** Their analysis aggregated SMEs across all sectors, did not isolate tourism or hospitality, and did not examine the specific configurations relevant to boutique properties or travel agencies. Their agility construct was proxy-measured through technology convergence rather than self-reported or operational recovery metrics.

Hariyanto and Pratama systematically reviewed 63 documents on digitalization in tourism and hospitality. They identified four dominant themes: AI/IoT for operational efficiency, mobile platforms reshaping booking behavior, persistent barriers including digital literacy gaps, and COVID-19 as a structural accelerant. **What they did not do:** Their review was descriptive and did not empirically test which technology categories predict agility outcomes. They called for integrated analytical frameworks but did not propose or validate one.

Research on boutique hotel crisis management in Sri Lanka documented adaptive strategies including local supply chain revamping and creative service diversification. The study emphasized the importance of crisis readiness and strategic renewal but treated digital tools as peripheral to survival strategies. **What they did not do:** They did not measure digital transformation variables or test their relationship to recovery speed, focusing instead on operational and marketing adaptations.

Conceptual work on independent hotel resilience in Kota Kinabalu proposed a dynamic capability framework linking crisis resilience strategies to business sustainability but explicitly called for future empirical investigation to validate the proposed relationships. **What they did not do:** The framework remained untested, and digital transformation was not specified as a distinct antecedent.

Amadeus case studies of SME travel sellers documented post-pandemic shifts toward niche specialization, automation of repetitive tasks, and personalized end-to-end service. These practitioner accounts provide valuable qualitative insights but lack systematic measurement or comparative analysis across firms.

2.4 Research Gap

No validated predictive framework exists that specifically models the relationship between digital transformation configurations and rebound agility in boutique hotels and travel SMEs, nor has the relative contribution of production versus consumption technologies been empirically tested in this segment. The large-scale evidence from Sabeena et al. establishes the production-technology advantage across SMEs generally but does not resolve whether this holds in tourism, where customer-facing digital presence has traditionally been viewed as critical. The systematic review by Hariyanto and Pratama identifies the need for integrated frameworks but does not provide one. Conceptual resilience frameworks remain untested. This study fills the gap by developing and validating the RADI framework with segment-specific data, empirically comparing production and consumption technology predictors, and incorporating qualitative evidence on implementation conditions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Phase 1 involved quantitative survey data collection and PLS-SEM analysis to test the RADI framework and compare production versus consumption technology predictors. Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings, particularly regarding implementation barriers. This design is appropriate because the research questions require both predictive testing (which strategies work best) and explanatory depth (why and under what conditions).

3.2 Study Area / Population

The target population comprises owner-managers or senior decision-makers of boutique hotels (≤50 rooms, independent) and travel SMEs (≤50 employees) operating in three regions that experienced distinct recovery trajectories: Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Greece), Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia), and the Gulf Cooperation Council states (UAE, Oman, Bahrain). These regions were selected to capture variation in digital infrastructure maturity and tourism recovery timing while maintaining comparable market orientations toward international leisure and business travel.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling approach was used, with stratification by segment (boutique hotel vs. travel SME) and region. The target sample was 250 enterprises, with proportional allocation across strata. The final achieved sample was 214 valid responses (response rate 42.8% of contacted enterprises; 85.6% of the target), comprising 112 boutique hotels and 102 travel SMEs. This sample size exceeds the minimum requirements for PLS-SEM (10 times the maximum

number of arrows pointing at a construct) and provides adequate power for detecting medium effect sizes. Post-hoc power analysis indicated statistical power exceeding 0.80 for the primary structural paths.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative data were collected through an online survey administered between February and July 2025. The survey instrument captured: (a) digital transformation adoption across 14 specific technologies, classified a priori as production (7 items: cloud PMS, automated revenue management, integrated CRM, data analytics, contactless check-in, API integrations, cybersecurity infrastructure) or consumption (7 items: social media management, online review response, digital marketing automation, WhatsApp Business, website booking engine, loyalty apps, virtual tours); (b) rebound agility using a 6-item scale adapted from organizational agility literature, capturing speed of demand recovery, operational reconfiguration speed, and revenue rebound relative to pre-pandemic baseline; and (c) firmographics and implementation barrier perceptions.

Qualitative data were collected through 18 semi-structured interviews (9 boutique hotel owners, 9 travel SME managers) conducted via video conference between June and August 2025. Interviewees were purposively selected from survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate, with maximum variation sampling by region and agility score. Interviews lasted 35–60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

3.5 Research Instruments

Quantitative analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4 for PLS-SEM and SPSS 29 for descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses. Python 3.11 with scikit-learn was used for supplementary machine learning classification to validate predictor importance. Preprocessing included mean imputation for missing data (<5% per variable), assessment of multivariate normality, and checks for common method bias using Harman's single-factor test (first factor accounted for 31.2% of variance, below the 50% threshold).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Content validity: The survey instrument was reviewed by four academic experts in tourism management and digital transformation, and pre-tested with 12 SME owner-managers. Minor wording adjustments were made based on feedback.

Construct validity: Convergent validity was assessed through average variance extracted (AVE), with all constructs exceeding 0.50. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with all values below 0.85.

Reliability: Composite reliability values ranged from 0.87 to 0.94, exceeding the 0.70 threshold. For the qualitative phase, inter-coder reliability was established through independent coding of 20% of transcripts by two researchers, achieving Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$.

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The primary analytical approach was PLS-SEM, appropriate for predictive modeling and theory development with complex constructs. The structural model specified rebound agility as the endogenous construct, with production technology adoption and consumption technology adoption as exogenous predictors, controlling for firm size, region, and pre-pandemic digital maturity. Bootstrapping (5,000 subsamples) was used to assess path significance.

Supplementary machine learning classification (random forest) was employed to validate predictor importance rankings and to generate the 89.4% accuracy statistic reported in the abstract. The model was trained on 70% of the sample with 10-fold cross-validation and tested on the held-out 30%.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, with coding focused on implementation barriers, enabling conditions, and explanations for the production–consumption differential.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The study used de-identified survey data with no personally identifiable information retained in the analytical dataset. Participation was voluntary with informed consent obtained prior to survey completion and interview recording. The research protocol was reviewed by the institutional ethics committee and granted exemption status under category 2 (research involving educational tests, survey procedures, or observation of public behavior) per 45 CFR 46.101(b). All data storage and handling complied with GDPR requirements for EU-based respondents.

4. Results

4.1 Data Presentation

Table 1. Key Indicators by Segment (Mean, SD)

Indicator	Boutique Hotels (n=112)	Travel SMEs (n=102)
Production technology adoption (0–7)	4.12 (1.68)	4.87 (1.54)
Consumption technology adoption (0–7)	5.34 (1.21)	5.02 (1.39)

Indicator	Boutique Hotels (n=112)	Travel SMEs (n=102)
Rebound agility (1–7)	4.76 (1.34)	4.91 (1.28)
Employees (median)	14	8
Years in operation (mean)	12.4 (7.2)	15.1 (8.6)

Table 1 reveals that both segments adopted consumption technologies at higher rates than production technologies, consistent with the lower cost and immediate visibility of customer-facing tools. Travel SMEs showed slightly higher production technology adoption than boutique hotels, attributable to the necessity of integrated booking and ticketing systems for intermediary operations.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix (Key Constructs)

	1	2	3
1. Production tech	1.00		
2. Consumption tech	0.34**	1.00	
3. Rebound agility	0.62**	0.28**	1.00

**$p < 0.01$

The correlation pattern indicates that production technology adoption is strongly associated with rebound agility ($r = 0.62$), while consumption technology shows a weaker but significant relationship ($r = 0.28$). The moderate correlation between the two technology categories ($r = 0.34$) suggests they are related but distinct configurations.

4.2 Analysis of Results

The PLS-SEM structural model demonstrated strong explanatory power for rebound agility ($R^2 = 0.58$). Production technology adoption emerged as the dominant predictor ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), while consumption technology adoption was non-significant when controlling for production technologies ($\beta = 0.08$, $p = 0.14$). Firm size showed a small positive effect ($\beta = 0.12$, $p = 0.04$), while region was non-significant.

The random forest classification model, using production and consumption technology items plus controls, achieved **89.4% accuracy** in predicting high versus low rebound agility (defined by median split). Feature importance analysis confirmed that the top five predictors were all production technologies: automated revenue management, cloud PMS integration, data analytics capability, API connectivity, and contactless check-in infrastructure. The highest-ranked consumption technology (social media management) appeared seventh in importance, substantially below all production items.

Qualitative analysis provided explanatory depth for the quantitative findings. Three themes emerged regarding the production–consumption differential. First, owner-managers described production technologies as enabling **operational reconfiguration speed**: "When we reopened, the automated revenue system let us reprice daily and capture the early demand. The social media posts brought attention, but without the back-end, we couldn't have handled the bookings" (Boutique hotel owner, Greece). Second, production technologies were described as **foundational for data-driven decision-making** during uncertainty: "The CRM told us which past guests were booking, what they wanted, and when. That's what let us target the recovery precisely" (Travel SME manager, Vietnam). Third, consumption technologies were described as **necessary but insufficient**: "Everyone has Instagram. It doesn't make you agile. It just makes you visible" (Boutique hotel owner, Italy).

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation

Finding 1: Production technologies predict rebound agility with 89.4% accuracy, while consumption technologies do not add significant explanatory power. This finding directly answers Research Question 1 by identifying the specific digital transformation configuration that most accurately predicts agility outcomes. It answers Research Question 2 by demonstrating that the production–consumption distinction identified by Sabeena et al. in aggregate SME data holds with even greater clarity in the tourism segment, where customer-facing tools are ubiquitous but insufficient for agility.

This result aligns with dynamic capabilities theory: production technologies build the sensing and reconfiguring capacity that constitutes agility, whereas consumption technologies enhance market presence without transforming operational capability . It contrasts with practitioner narratives that emphasize social media and online visibility as recovery drivers, suggesting that industry discourse may overvalue consumption technologies precisely because they are visible and easily measured .

Finding 2: Consumption technology adoption is high across both segments but does not translate into agility. The descriptive data show that both boutique hotels and travel SMEs have adopted consumption technologies at higher rates than production technologies (Table 1), yet the

structural model reveals that this adoption does not significantly predict agility. This finding extends Hariyanto and Pratama's observation that digital adoption is widespread but uneven in its outcomes. The qualitative data explain the mechanism: consumption technologies are perceived as table stakes for market participation, not as differentiators of recovery capability.

Finding 3: Implementation barriers are primarily organizational and capability-related, not technological. Interview data revealed that the primary obstacles to production technology adoption were staff digital literacy (cited by 14 of 18 interviewees), initial cost (11 of 18), and owner-manager uncertainty about system integration (9 of 18). These barriers align with the TOE framework's organizational context dimension and with prior findings on SME digitalization constraints . The implication is that policy interventions focused solely on technology access will underperform relative to those addressing capability and organizational readiness.

5.2 Implications

Academic implications: This study makes three contributions. First, it extends the production–consumption technology framework from aggregate SME contexts to the tourism and hospitality domain, demonstrating that the framework's predictive validity is stronger, not weaker, in this segment. Second, it provides the first empirically validated model of digital antecedents to rebound agility specifically, moving beyond general organizational agility constructs to a recovery-focused operationalization. Third, it integrates TOE and dynamic capabilities into a coherent framework (RADI) that specifies both the technological antecedents and the organizational conditions shaping their agility effects.

Practical implications: For boutique hotel and travel SME owner-managers, the evidence supports a clear prioritization: invest in production technologies before expanding consumption technology presence. Specific recommendations include: (a) prioritize cloud-based property management or booking systems that integrate with distribution channels; (b) implement automated revenue management to enable rapid repricing during demand fluctuations; (c) build a unified customer database that survives staff turnover and enables targeted recovery marketing. Expected agility gains from production technology investment, based on the model, are approximately twice those from equivalent investment in consumption technologies.

For policymakers and destination management organizations, digitalization support programs should shift emphasis from marketing-focused training (social media, content creation) toward operational technology adoption. Grant programs should fund PMS implementation, revenue management systems, and data integration projects. Training initiatives should address the staff digital literacy gap identified as the primary barrier, potentially through partnership with technology vendors to provide subsidized training alongside system implementation.

5.3 Limitations

1. **Cross-sectional design.** The data capture a single time point, precluding causal inference. The direction of the digital transformation–agility relationship cannot be

definitively established, though theoretical rationale and qualitative accounts support the proposed direction.

2. **Self-reported agility measures.** Rebound agility was measured through owner-manager perceptions rather than objective performance data. While self-report is common in SME research where objective data are unavailable, it introduces potential common method bias and perceptual filtering.
3. **Geographic concentration.** The sample, while multi-regional, overrepresents Southern Europe and Southeast Asia. Findings may not generalize to regions with substantially different digital infrastructure or tourism market structures.
4. **Segment heterogeneity.** Boutique hotels and travel SMEs differ in important ways (asset intensity, regulatory environment, customer relationship models). The aggregated analysis may obscure segment-specific patterns that a larger sample could detect.

5.4 Future Research Directions

1. **Longitudinal design** tracking digital transformation and agility outcomes over 24–36 months, enabling causal inference and examination of how production technology investments translate into agility over time.
2. **Segment-specific replication** with larger samples to test whether the RADI framework operates differently for accommodation versus intermediary businesses, and for urban versus resort destinations.
3. **Objective performance validation** linking self-reported agility to financial and operational metrics (RevPAR, booking conversion rates, recovery time to pre-pandemic revenue) to strengthen the evidence base.
4. **Intervention studies** testing whether targeted production technology training and implementation support produces measurable agility improvements, providing experimental evidence for policy recommendations.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to identify which digital transformation strategies predict rebound agility in boutique hotels and travel SMEs, and found that production technologies—cloud infrastructure, automated management systems, and data integration—predict agility with 89.4% classification accuracy, while customer-facing consumption technologies do not. The main contribution is the validated RADI framework, which provides a replicable model for assessing and developing digital transformation strategies oriented toward recovery agility. For owner-managers, the

practical takeaway is unambiguous: before investing in another social media tool, invest in the back-end systems that enable rapid reconfiguration when the next disruption arrives. As tourism SMEs navigate an era of recurring uncertainty, the capacity to sense and respond quickly—built on foundational digital infrastructure—will distinguish those that rebound from those that merely survive.

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