



An exploration of social networks in homestays: A case study of Bhutan



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Abbreviations

ABTO: Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators

AUD: Australian Dollar

CBE: Community-based Ecotourism

CBT: Community-based Tourism

CSU: Charles Sturt University

DMPR: Daily Minimum Package Rate

GAB: Guide Association of Bhutan

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

GNHC: Gross National Happiness Commission

HREC: Human Resource Ethics Committee

NGO: Non-governmental Organisation

PCF: Participant Consent Form

RSPN: Royal Society for Protection of Nature

SN: Social Network

SNT: Social Network Theory

TCB: Tourism Council of Bhutan

TIES: The International Ecotourism Society

UNWTO: The World Tourism Organisation

USD: United States Dollars

UWICER: Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment Research

VHS: Village Homestays

MICE: Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions

WTTC: World Travel and Tourism Council

Non-English terms

Dzongdag: Governor

Dzongkhag: District

Gewog: Block (sub-local administrative body under the district)

Gup: Community Headman

Tshogpa: Community Council member

Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institutions, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services, or nominee, for the care, loan, and reproduction of this thesis.

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Abstract

Limited studies have been conducted to investigate homestays in Bhutan, and therefore little is known of how these homestays operate and the challenges they face. This study aimed to address this limitation by focussing on a Bhutanese case study, addressing three broad research questions: i What are the benefits and challenges from homestay operations to local communities? ii. How do networks influence the functioning of homestays? and iii. How has COVID-19 influenced the network of homestays? The study followed an interpretivist approach, generating qualitative data through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Four categories of participants (key informants, homestay households, non-homestay households, and uncertified homestays) were involved. Forty-six interviews were undertaken via online platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Messenger, and emails due to COVID-19 travel restrictions. The research revealed that tour operators and national tour guides were key entities within the social network for homestay households to access guests. Relationships with local hotels and among homestay households have also supported access to homestay guests. Among the entities in the homestay network, maintaining connections and relationships with national tour guides was perceived to be the most important, followed by tour operators. Homestay operations have benefitted homestay households economically as the supplementary household income and aided in preserving local culture, enhancing sanitation, and augmenting social cohesion in the community. The opportunity to operate homestays relied on the financial capacity of interested households in the community as the start-up of homestay costs was significantly high. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the networks with external entities, it has strengthened internal connections within the community and thus, changed the dynamics of networks. Therefore, the study builds on the limited information about homestays, which may allow the concerned authorities in Bhutan to develop feasible interventions to address the prevailing challenges of homestay operations. The empirical findings may also be useful to other regions with similar cultural and geographical contexts, although it may not qualify to generalise to the global context.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

Tourism refers to activities where people travel to a place and spend less than one consecutive year for holiday, business, and other reasons (UNWTO, 2019). Tourism plays a significant role in the global economy (Dwyer et al., 2020; Nicolaides, 2020) and is one of the fastest-growing industries internationally (Riddhagni & Taylor, 2019). Travel and tourism accounted for 10.3 percent (US\$8.9 trillion) of the global GDP in 2019 (WTTC, 2020). More importantly, in the contemporary era, the tourism and hospitality sectors play important socioeconomic roles (Konovalova et al., 2018). Tourism provides social benefits in the form of employment, investment opportunities, accommodation services, natural and cultural attractions, festivals, recreational opportunities, improvement of people's living standards, and the development of the region (Mehdiabadi et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021).

Tourism as an industry involves socio-economic entities at different levels within a network. These may include tour operators, tour guides, tourists, accommodation proprietors, tourism institutions, and local residents with diverse livelihood occupations (Coathup, 1999). Like other businesses, networks are important for access to guests and resources (Grauslund & Hammershøy, 2021; Lynch, 2000; Tabassum et al., 2018). A social network (SN) can be regarded as the platform within which information sharing occurs through communication (Sørensen, 2007; Zinke-Wehlmann et al., 2021). A SN denotes the form of the relationship built between individual members of society due to interactions that may affect the social behaviour of people (Li et al., 2021).

Similarly, in tourism, a network refers to interactions among the multiple stakeholders at different levels among individuals, groups, organizations, and countries as nodes that allow for access to resources and information (Grauslund & Hammershøy, 2021; Lynch, 2000; Tabassum et al., 2018). According to Nowiński and Rialp (2016), networks are dynamic and evolve from the inception of the business and function throughout the venture. The SN notably offers new opportunities that can be used in tourism to promote local resources more innovatively, thereby playing a critical role in attracting new tourists while maintaining the existing ones (Di Pietro et al., 2012). With the use of social networks in the tourism industry, it is inevitable for community-based ecotourism (CBE) operations to maintain networks with

relevant tourism stakeholders to reap a sustainable flow of supplementary household income, including the country like Bhutan.

Conceptualised in the 1980s, ecotourism was first started in Bhutan to address human-wildlife conflicts to compensate the losses for farmers (Gyeltshen, 2019). Bhutan emphasises promoting ecotourism in the local areas to involve the local inhabitants in operating and managing ecotourism activities (trekking, birdwatching, homestays, local festivals) to upkeep Bhutan's environmental sustainability, while supporting local livelihoods (Azzali et al., 2021; Gyeltshen, 2019). Ecotourism programs, such as homestay operations in rural settlements, have benefitted the local people to generate supplementary income to support their livelihoods (Rai, 2019). Homestays in Bhutan are concentrated mainly in western region followed by eastern and central regions, with least in the southern region (1 percent of 158 homestays). Past studies have focused on assessing the environmental impacts (Rhama et al., 2020; Rinzin et al., 2007), Since CBE focuses on the engagement of local residents to benefit them economically and sustain their livelihoods, it is imperative to study how social networks can foster the operation of CBE, which has not been conducted to date in Bhutan. This is important because little is known, especially on how networks influence homestay operation in Bhutan. Given limited investigations on village homestays, this study aimed to explore how networks influence the functioning of homestays.

1.2 Community-based ecotourism and participation

As the name suggests, CBE is a form of tourism that is managed by local communities. Ecotourism refers to responsible travel to natural areas that seek to preserve the environment and sustain the wellbeing of the local communities (Cobbinah et al., 2017; Singh, 2021). CBE contributes to rural economies, particularly in developing countries, by generating employment, selling local products, and biodiversity conservation (Kiss, 2004). This form of tourism (ecotourism) tends to support the sustainable use of environmental resources while at the same time generating economic opportunities for the local people (Poudel & Joshi, 2020). Hence, ecotourism tends to transform the lives of the local communities (Yeboah, 2021).

CBE is regarded as the mode for sustainable ecotourism development mainly because of local community participation in planning and implementing CBE projects at the community level (Yeboah, 2021). The involvement of local communities is crucial for sustaining benefits in the

long run as they know more about their locality and tend to decide what is best for them. The recent study conducted by Kunjuraman (2021) has revealed the importance of community participation and implementation of CBE in Malaysia. The author claims that community participation is necessary right from the inception, planning, and implementation of projects to build confidence, motivate participation, and support rural livelihoods. Similar studies have been undertaken regarding the participation of local people in CBE in other Asian developing countries such as Thailand, India, Vietnam, Laos, and China (Bhalla et al., 2016; Gui et al., 2004; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Ounmany, 2014; Ping; Poudel & Joshi, 2020). They have found that generally, the participation of local communities in ecotourism is in the form of labour contribution (employees) and not in decision-making; thus, there is no sense of ownership among the local people. Participation is often hindered in CBE due to several factors such as limited awareness and knowledge about tourism, lack of financial resources, high cost of participation, and domination of elites (Kunjuraman, 2021; Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017).

Homestays are a form of CBE and involve the participation of local communities. There is no universal definition for a homestay (Janjua et al., 2021). However, many tourism scholars define homestay as a type of accommodation for visitors. Visitors stay in private homes (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015), interact with the host family to experience the local culture and generate income for the host, and indirectly enhance the living conditions of rural communities through associated income-generating tourist activities (Janjua et al., 2021; Ly et al., 2021; Shah et al., 2020). Homestays signify the commercialisation of one's home, intending to utilise residential space for economic benefits (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). The terminology for homestays is applied differently in different contexts. For example, in Australia, it is called farm stay, cultural and heritage homestay in Canada, agriculture and educational homestay in the United States of America, educational homestay in Japan and South Korea, urban homestay in Singapore, leisure stays in South Africa, and village homestay in Bhutan (Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021a). Homestays enhance the local economy and provide opportunities for the guests to interact with host families to experience the local culture, traditions, customs, and livelihoods (Thanvisitthpon, 2021), while the host families derive economic benefits as their supplementary source of income for their households (Galbreath, 2017; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Samati & Boonmee, 2017). Similarly, homestays¹ in Bhutan have been aimed at providing supplementary income for the

¹ *Homestay in this thesis refers to village homestays*

rural population. There were 158 homestays as of June 2021 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021a). Homestays play important roles in providing accommodation to tourists, particularly in tourist destinations where accommodation facilities are in deficit.

Although CBE modes such as homestays contribute to the local economy through the generation of supplementary household income, success tends to depend on the networking among the tourism entities (Marques & Gondim Matos, 2020). Networking is crucial in ventures such as homestay operations as in any businesses. Social networking enables accessing opportunities that one might not find by oneself. Thus, networking helps identify entities in the tourism sector that are more influential. However, poor networking is still prevalent in CBE, affecting marketing (Asuk & Nchor, 2018).

1.3 Purpose of the study

Social networks (SN) can nurture teamwork to achieve common goals through interactions and connections that develop shared norms, trust, and reciprocity (Jones, 2005), crucial for CBE. According to Ávila-Foucat et al. (2021), social networks are vital for community development through CBE. Despite the importance of SN, research has not explicitly examined them. A recent study revealed that ecotourism ignores the local community in particular areas, resulting in fewer interactions and networking with relevant tourism entities (Ismail et al., 2021). Therefore, there is an empirical need to undertake studies on community-based ecotourism, especially the roles of SN in operating CBE across the globe.

This study empirically explores the role of SN in Bhutanese homestays. The outcome of this research provides both theoretical and practical significance to Bhutan in homestay development. From a theoretical perspective, this study builds on the limited empirical database in homestay operations in Bhutan, with special focus on how networks influence the functioning of homestays. This study makes an important theoretical contribution in that the results help in articulating the underlying factor such as the connections and relationships with homestay entities, which influence accessing homestay guests and success of homestay operations. This study also adds on the existing homestay literature wherein application of the social network theory is limited.

Regarding the practical contribution, this study has broken the ground on how networks influence homestay operations in the Bhutanese context. Furthermore, the insights generated by this case study can be useful for the country (Bhutan) to develop training modules for homestay operators (perhaps unique to Bhutan) and provide support such as formation of management committee to enhance the existing homestay network in the case study area, which can be helpful to deal with the distribution of guests among homestay operators. The relevant government authorities in Bhutan such as the Tourism Council of Bhutan may decentralise the certification, monitoring and evaluation of homestays to the local government. Understanding the roles of SN would help to initiate relevant networking events for homestay operators in the country. Lack of studies on the dynamics of social networks in Bhutan homestays warrants empirical investigations.

1.4 Research questions

The following three research questions guided this study:

1. What are the benefits and challenges of homestay operations to local communities?
2. How do networks influence the functioning of homestays?
 - a) Who are the various entities in the social network, and what role do they play?
 - b) How are homestay households' access to guests influenced by networks with external entities such as tour guides and tour operators?
 - c) What are the barriers and opportunities for non-homestay households to be involved in homestay activities, and how is this influenced by their social networks?
3. How has COVID19 influenced the network of homestays?
 - a) How are the homestay and non-homestay households impacted by COVID19?
 - b) What are the collective roles played by the community during the pandemic?

1.5 Content outline

This thesis contains seven chapters. This chapter explains the research background, CBE and participation, the purpose of the study, research questions, and outline of the thesis.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review, which covers the overall state of tourism, its socio-economic and environmental benefits, and types of tourism, including CBE. This chapter also explains the definition of ecotourism as this terminology is widely used in the context of conserving the environment while supporting the wellbeing of local people in perpetuity. It then explains CBE and its types. The context of CBE and its challenges and opportunities, and community participation in CBE are also included. Finally, an overview of homestays with economic, environmental, social, and cultural dimensions is covered. Further, SN and types of networks are incorporated, followed by a brief conclusion.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology that outlines research questions and research paradigm, research approach, case study method, participant recruitment and data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 4 covers the Bhutan context, highlighting the country's background and tourism development, including the Bhutan homestays.

Chapter 5 presents research findings. This chapter covers the benefits and challenges of homestay operations, entities in the homestay network and their roles, social networks among homestay operators and other entities in homestay networks, barriers for non-homestays to operate a homestay, and impacts of COVID-19 on the network of homestays. COVID-19 was not the focus, but the author has considered it given the environment of the case study location within which data was collected. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the influx of tourists in the case study location, which had consequently hampered homestay operations.

Chapter 6 contains the discussions of the main findings in relation to the existing literature, and,

Chapter 7 draws the overall conclusion and limitations of the research with practical and theoretical contributions. The direction for future research is also indicated, considering some of the limitations of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Tourism has the potential to contribute economic benefits, particularly in developing countries where it is regarded as a tool for economic growth, poverty alleviation, and promoting food security (Pillai, 2011; Richardson, 2010; Sharma, 2013). The importance of incorporating local communities in tourism, enhancing local economic development through foreign exchange earnings, and generating employment opportunities has been acknowledged (Nkemngu, 2012). This has led to the emergence of different forms of *alternative tourism* such as adventure tourism, cultural tourism, community-based tourism, sustainable tourism, pro-poor tourism, volunteer tourism, justice tourism, and ecotourism (Budeanu, 2005; Isaac, 2010; O'Neill, 2002; Pillai, 2011). *Alternative tourism* refers to any form of small-scale tourism locally owned and operated with low negative impacts to the natural environment while enhancing the preservation of natural and cultural heritage; and maintaining economic activities in rural areas (Lantitsou, 2017; Prince & Ioannides, 2017; Triarchi & Karamanis, 2016). Arguably, *alternative tourism* emerged to benefit the local communities by providing management skills, revenue, and maximised income while preserving the local traditions, culture, and environment (Gaitho, 2014). *Alternative tourism* at the grassroots level can include community-based tourism (CBT) and community-based ecotourism (CBE) that have become popular since the 1970s and 1980s. CBT embraces matters of a social and economic nature, while the CBE incorporates sustainability issues, mainly concerning ecology, nature conservation, education about nature with significant emphasis on environmental sustainability (Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2019). However, focus is confined to CBE in this study. This is because homestay is a type of ecotourism program, which aims at sustaining the rural livelihoods without compromising the surrounding nature.

2.2 Definition of ecotourism

Many tourism scholars have defined ecotourism in numerous ways. However, all definitions relate to nature, benefits to local communities, environmentally and culturally sensitive activity, and a platform for the host communities and visitors to learn from each other (Agarwal & Mehra, 2019; Gurung & Seeland, 2008b). Further, the definition varies according to scope, criteria, and how it is planned and operated (Neupane et al., 2021). Ecotourism refers to

responsible travel to relatively undisturbed natural areas to appreciate nature (Gurung & Seeland, 2008). Ecotourism is a form of tourism that motivates visitors to generate a sense of appreciation for nature, culture, livelihoods, and wellbeing of local people of an area (Cobbinah, 2015b; Russell, 2000; The International Ecotourism Society, 2018; Triarchi & Karamanis, 2016; Ziffer, 1989). Ecotourism is the fastest-growing component of the universal tourism industry (Fennell, 2004). Ecotourism provides direct or indirect benefits by protecting natural habitats and sustaining local livelihoods (Goodwin, 1996; Valentine, 1993).

2.3 Community-based ecotourism (CBE)

Compared to previous forms of ecotourism, CBE is regarded as a holistic and sustainable approach to local development (Sen & Walter, 2020) as it encompasses aspects such as environment, culture, local incomes, social equity, and control of the tourism activities. According to Mtapuri and Giampiccoli (2019), CBE can be used as an umbrella definition for community-based activities related to tourism. It incorporates environmental and sustainability of socio-cultural benefits to the local people through their involvement.

CBE focuses on ecotourism activities being owned, controlled, and managed by the local communities for positive livelihood impacts (Curcija et al., 2019; Durkin et al., 2017; Jones, 2005; Mensah, 2017; Ndlovu et al., 2018). A community in this context refers to a group of people who share a common culture, values, interests, and work together for a common purpose in particular geographical setting (MacQueen et al., 2001; Ndlovu et al., 2018). Ecotourism ventures may vary depending on countries and their geographical context. Common ecotourism activities may include homestays, trekking, eco-camping, birding, and hiking (Duan & Yang, 2020; Montes & Kafley, 2019; Moran & Abad, 2020), which are managed by the local communities.

CBE is often challenged by environmental and social issues such as land, water and air pollution, and the exclusion of local ecotourism groups by other social entities (Butler, 1991; Gaitho, 2014). The following section discusses the opportunities and challenges of CBE.

2.4 CBE opportunities and challenges

CBE ventures can transform the lives of poor people, particularly in developing countries. This is because CBE enables the local people to access cash income, which is fundamental for household livelihood enhancement (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015) and may provide further incentive for residents to conserve the natural environment to attract visitors (Cobbinah, 2015a). Research on CBE (Bhalla et al., 2016) has revealed opportunities for host communities to benefit from CBE ventures because of substantial control, ownership, and community involvement, thereby maximising benefits for the participating communities (Lema, 2018). Thus, CBE is regarded as responsible and sustainable tourism (Kumar et al., 2012; Lema, 2018; Mensah, 2017; Wearing et al., 2020).

However, CBE may also carry hidden ecological and cultural costs while reaping economic benefits (O'Neill, 2002). CBE is like a double-edged sword for conserving natural resources and improving the livelihoods of host communities (Mensah, 2017). For example, extraction of firewood, uncontrolled visitors, over-crowding, noise pollution, waste generation, and introduction of exotic species of plants are some of the environmental problems that might occur through CBE (Bhalla et al., 2016; Gaur & Kotru, 2018; Nepal, 2002; Pillai, 2011). Unequal distribution of economic benefits (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015), scarce community financial resources, pseudo-participation, limited markets, and market access are common problems in CBE ventures (Govender & Giampiccoli, 2018; Park et al., 2018). Lack of local capacity is also considered an inhibiting factor for local communities to derive maximum economic benefits (Beza, 2017; Hamzah & Mohamad, 2012; Nair & Hamzah, 2015; Rodrigues & Prideaux, 2018). Nonetheless, communities may benefit if they participate in ecotourism programs such as homestays.

2.5 Community participation in CBE

Community participation is the process wherein individuals and families engage with community development with certain responsibilities, enhancing effective participation and empowerment (Albrecht, 2016; Pookhao Sonjai et al., 2018; Wasilwa, 2015). Thus, community participation is essential for ecotourism planning, implementation, and sustainable flow of income to supplement rural livelihoods.

Although community participation is vital for sustainable development, support from the government and other relevant institutions remains crucial to motivate and support the local communities (Bello et al., 2016). According to some scholars (Bello et al., 2016; De Los Angeles Somarriba-Chang & Gunnarsdotter, 2012; Nault & Stapleton, 2011), community participation has the potential to derive the maximum degree of control and benefits from ecotourism. Community participation in ecotourism projects requires support from outsiders such as Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and government institutions until the community gains the necessary experience and confidence to manage ecotourism activities by themselves (Leksakundilok, 2004).

CBE can be suitable for developing countries with scarce capital. However, there are several inhibiting factors affecting community participation, such as lack of coordination, inadequate financial resources, low education level, lack of information, unfair distribution of benefits, centralised administrative power, lack of trained people, and human-wildlife conflicts are known to be driving factors for ineffective community participation (Bello et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2018).

A study conducted in Laos about the success of CBE projects (Park et al., 2018) revealed that community participation in CBE projects was avoided because the government failed to engage local people during the planning and development of tourism programs. Government authorities may sideline communities when developing ecotourism plans mainly because of cost implications for including communities (Bello et al., 2016). Community participation is also directly linked to the extent of benefits to the community that may contribute to the successful management of local institutions (Stone, 2015) and are dependent on many factors. The degree of trust in outsiders such as government agencies and non-governmental organizations remains the driving factor of community participation because people tend to participate if they are known to each other (Nault & Stapleton, 2011). Participation is also associated with the perceived economic benefits the community expects to receive. Thus, benefits can be more influential for community participation (Sood et al., 2017).

On the other hand, it is possible to succeed in ecotourism projects in communities if strong social cohesion exists (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). Further, community participation may be hindered due to the absence of capital, resources, ownership, skills, poor organisation between different government departments, and limited training and education in various disciplines, including tourism development (Tantoh & Simatele, 2018; Towner, 2016).

For example, in Thailand, communities failed to take up significant roles in ecotourism operations as the ecotourism resources were in protected areas with limited access (Leksakundilok, 2004). This was because ownership of the protected areas was with the government and the government-controlled access to natural resources. In some cases, protected areas and traditional lands were indiscriminately owned by wealthier people and politicians, where communities had no access to such areas. Therefore, community participation in ecotourism depends on the degree of access to resources and the economic benefits of a community (Suich, 2013; Wunder, 2000).

Further, a one-way flow of information, lack of transparency in benefit-sharing, and weak fund management hinder community participation (Mensah & Ernest, 2013). Food security status also affects participation in ecotourism projects, wherein communities with good food security show less interest in participating in rural development projects as they have enough to support their livelihoods (Namgyel, 2011). Nevertheless, policy changes and the adoption of relevant institutional strategies to create an enabling environment for collaborations among communities and private agencies can enhance community participation (Wood, 1998), which is vital for community development. Essential roles of community participation include planning, decision-making, collective execution of activities, seeking external funding supports, and gathering and application of local knowledge and skills (Sahai, 2015).

Participation may also depend on the social networks that a particular community possesses. Social networks may significantly influence community participation and outcomes in local tourism development (Diani, 2004; Jones, 2005; Łopaciuk-Gonczaryk, 2019). According to Liu et al. (2014), participation in ecotourism management enhances social networks and strengthens social cohesion, thereby generating a sense of collective community. People tend to participate in social networks depending on the nature of social activities (information sharing, traveling, and interactions) in a community (Kim et al., 2018). Interactions among local community is crucial for the sustainability of ecotourism development (Kia, 2021).

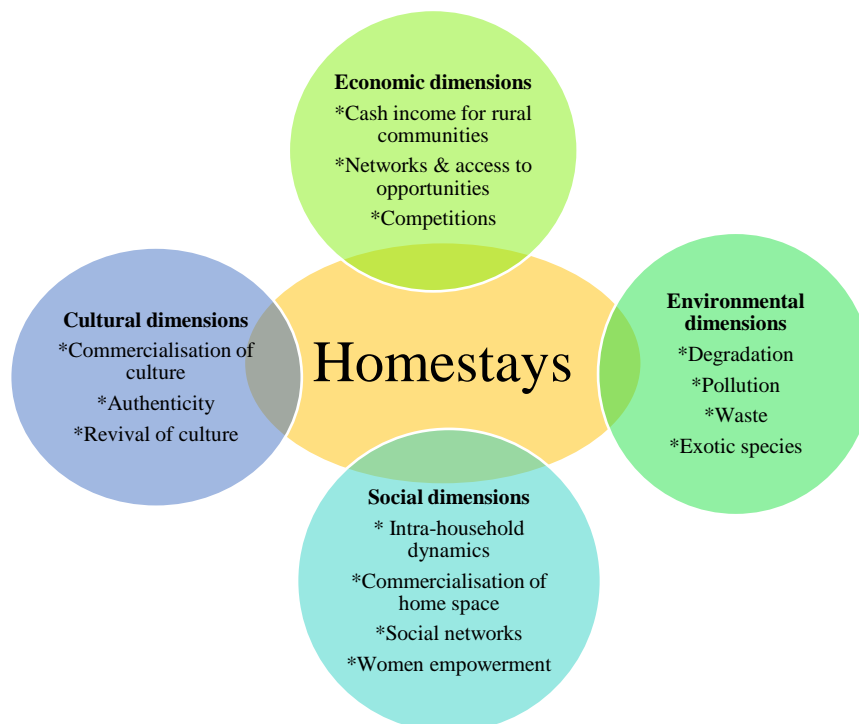
It is, therefore, essential to understanding social networks, which is discussed after the following section on homestays.

2.6 Homestays - An overview

Homestay as the ecotourism activity is regarded as one of the promising ventures at the community level from where residents generate supplementary household income for their livelihoods (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Neupane et al., 2021). Ecotourism activity (homestays) allows local communities to reap benefits that support their local livelihoods directly (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Anand et al., 2012; Budhathoki, 2013; Pusiran & Xiao, 2013; Ranasinghe, 2015; Tavakoli et al., 2017). Homestays have therefore been promoted in developing countries to provide supplementary economic benefits to local communities contributing to the sustainable development of these communities (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Peaty, 2009). The homestay literature covers four significant impacts: economic, environmental, social, and cultural, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Overview of homestay literature.



Note: Adapted from (Abdul Razzaq, Hadi, & Mustafa, 2011; Carnaffan, 2010b; Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Tavakoli et al., 2017).

2.6.1 Economic dimensions

Homestay programs are mainly driven by economic benefits in the form of cash earnings by the rural homestay operating households (Beedle et al., 2013; Bhalla et al., 2016; Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Dorji et al., 2014; Salleh et al., 2014). These economic benefits have resulted in an increasing number of homestay enterprises in developing countries; and competition among homestays and other accommodation providers (Nepal, 2002; Tavakoli et al., 2017). According to Salleh et al. (2014), homestay programs increase the purchasing power of rural communities and improve the living conditions of those involved in homestay operations (Agarwal & Mehra, 2019). The success and promotion of homestays are mainly focused on the economic benefits for local communities participating in homestays (Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Budhathoki, 2013; Macek, 2012; Yong & Hassan, 2018).

Economic benefits from homestays depend on participation in operating homestays. The benefit is associated with the networks that a particular homestay household maintains in the society, particularly with external entities such as tourist guides and tour operators (Giampiccoli & Saayman, 2018; Paul A Lynch, 2000; Park et al., 2018). The entities within the networks may also have better access to economic opportunities since connections to external tourism entities such as tour operators, and tour guides may receive more guests and subsequently high economic income (GNHC, 2018; Paul A. Lynch, 2000). Hence, networks play a crucial role in homestay operations, which may lead to competition for economic benefits ((Haveman et al., 2017; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015).

Homestays may also alter the consumption pattern of local people and other livelihood activities of homestay households (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Truong, 2014; Truong et al., 2014). For example, some families of Mae Kampong in Thailand abandoned agriculture because of the income from a homestay operation (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). Homestay activities in Nepal are handled mainly by women contributing to female empowerment (Karki et al., 2019). However, their participation may multiply their labour burden as they attend family chores and tourism activities (Beedle et al., 2013). Other advantages of homestays include creating employment for residents to become local guides, enhancing rural livelihood (Rojulai et al., 2018) through income generation.

2.6.2 Environmental dimensions

The success of homestay programs often depends on the quality of the physical environment of a particular locality, as environmental aesthetics is regarded as a major attraction for the visitors (Salleh et al., 2014; Thanvisitthpon, 2021). Some scholars (Chin et al., 2014; Salleh et al., 2014), state that homestay programs motivate and empower local communities to conserve nature (Abdul Razzaq et al., 2011; Arevin et al., 2014; Macek, 2012). Conversely, past studies have revealed several negative impacts on the environment due to homestay operations, such as water and air pollution, and the generation of waste (Bhalla et al., 2016; Koiwanit & Filimonau, 2021; Nepal, 2002).

2.6.3 Social dimensions

Social dimensions are equally important as economic and environmental dimensions to sustain homestay tourism. Homestays enhance social benefits such as increased community pride, women's empowerment, and more robust community relationships (Karki et al., 2019; Mahato et al., 2021; Nepal, 2002). As in any businesses, social networks and relationality play crucial roles for homestays to emanate inspiring temporary relationships that shape the tourist experience beyond accommodation services (Marques & Gondim Matos, 2019).

A community with better social cohesion is likely to implement projects through coordinated efforts as it helps develop a sense of team spirit amongst homestay operators (Julien, 2015; Salleh et al., 2014). Homestays may, however, have negative impacts, such as a lack of privacy due to commercialisation of private homes (Tavakoli et al., 2017).

2.6.4 Cultural dimensions

For the guests, homestays offer a subtle form of accommodation, providing rich experiences of local culture and traditions (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Agyeiwaah, 2013; Bachok et al., 2018; Bhalla et al., 2016; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Macek, 2012; Mapjabil et al., 2015; Ramli et al., 2018). However, homestay programs can have both positive and negative impacts on local culture and identity. Some of the advantages of homestay operations include preserving tradition and culture and reviving local culture (UNWTO, 2016). Showcasing cultural events in a community can promote cultural heritage that may attract visitors.

Homestays encourage significant community participation because of direct interactions with tourists (Gu & Wong, 2006) and provide opportunities for both the host and guests to learn from each other (cultural exchange) and become part of the family (Musa, 2010). The host communities also become part of the homestay program when cultural events are staged (Tavakoli et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, homestay tourism is a double-edged sword because even when communities succeed in operating a homestay enterprise, this success involves eroding the authenticity as they (homestay operators) become more dependent on tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). According to Carnaffan (2010), cultural authenticity can be eroded when cultural events become staged for tourists with increasing visitation due to mass tourism (Sarker, 2016). The movement of many organised tourists to any popular holiday destinations for recreation is referred to as mass tourism (Naumov & Green, 2016; Vanhove, 1997). Further, interactions with guests from diverse cultural backgrounds may also change the local lifestyle of rural residents. With changing times, it is inevitable for the culture and traditions to degrade. However, its pace can be slowed down (Karchung, 2011). Though cultural degradation can occur with globalisation, the form of culture can be retained with some modifications with the advent of mass tourism. People tend to showcase events with some modification (falsifying the culture), purposively for tourists. This type of event shown for the tourists is referred to as staged authenticity (MacCannell, 1973; Pookhao Sonjai et al., 2018). Authenticity can be perceived and achieved even when an event is staged for tourists in a faraway destination where the staged cultural and traditional event actually originated (Chhabra et al., 2003; Źemła & Siwek, 2020). Thus, staged authenticity is not a problem as long as the tourists perceive events as authentic, while it also helps to retain the culture and tradition of a particular community.

2.7 Social Networks

The term ‘social’ refers to relationships among the members of the societies (Doreian & Stokman, 1997), and a network is a set of actors (nodes) along with a set of ties of a particular type that connect them (Stone, 2018). A social network refers to a set of social entities, such as individuals, group of people, and organisations, with some relationships or interactions among each other (Tabassum et al., 2018) based on communal interests, friendship, information, and other mutual benefits (Huang et al., 2018; Peng et al., 2018). According to Wasserman and

Faust (1994, p. 20), ‘a social network consists of a finite set or sets of entities and the relation or relations defined on entities’. Network concepts have been applied in social research traditions in various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, business administration, statistics, mathematics, information sciences, education, psychology, history, and other fields (Jaideep, 2008; Nooy, 2018; Van Duijn & Vermunt, 2006). A social network is crucial for sustaining entrepreneurial activities (Rodgers et al., 2019), which may change with evolving situations. The network evolves under changing circumstances, meaning that a particular link may form, while in some instances, a link may deteriorate depending on the changing conditions (Ehrhardt et al., 2007).

As in other entrepreneurial activities, social networks are crucial for the tourism and hospitality businesses (Coles et al., 2021). Thus, social network theory and social networks in tourism are covered in the following subsections.

2.7.1 Social Network Theory

Social Network Theory (SNT) is a theory that focuses on forms of relations among relevant entities and the relational position of entities in the resource distribution in the network (Marques & Gondim Matos, 2020). SNT refers to how people are connected (relationships) to one another and how these connections produce and define human society at different levels such as the individual, the group, and the institutional (Eisenberg & Houser, 2007). Barne’s research of 1954 provided the framework for social network theory explored in organisational structures and numerous business settings emphasising social relationships (Cote, 2019).

SNT explains the relationships between people, groups, or organisations with similar interests and dislikes (Li et al., 2021). SNT helps to provide an in-depth view of relationships in a particular network. SNT also explains how networks influence behaviours of entities (Erikson, 2021). According to Neumeyer and Santos (2018), it is not only the factors at organisational level that might influence the social connectivity of sustainable businesses, but individual-level factors are also important to be considered. Thus, the success of a business entity can rely on the types of actors that are part of a network. Different actors can play influential roles at various levels in the network depending on their positions such as *gatekeepers*, *pulse takers*, and *hubs* (Waldstrøm, 2001). These (*Gatekeeper*, *pulse taker*, and *hub*) are the important components in SNT, which can determine the flow of information and resources of an

organisation (Stephenson, 1997; Waldstrøm, 2001). *Gatekeepers* act as brokers to enable the exchange of information, and or bottlenecks when the flow of information is barred (Muñiz & Cuervo, 2018; Stephenson, 1997). As such, *gatekeepers* can either be brokers or bottlenecks in the network. *Pulse takers* tend to know what everyone is saying and doing in the organisation and are also known as information filters (Stephenson, 1997). Similarly, *hubs* refer to those actors who are centrally connected to the maximum number of people in the network (Muñiz & Cuervo, 2018; Stephenson, 1997). Each of these components is explained in subsection 2.7.2 (Social networks in tourism).

SNT may support understanding the overall relationships and connections among the homestay households and tourism stakeholders in accessing guests, knowledge, and information. SNT was applied as the theoretical framework and analysis for this research. Arguably, the operation of homestays is linked to relations and connections within and among other relevant entities (Marques & Gondim Matos, 2020), and thus related to social network theory (SNT)’.

2.7.2 Social networks in tourism

Social networks (SN) can be categorised into formal and informal networks (Kim, 2012; Wang et al., 2019). For example, professional relationships with colleagues within the same agency or among the agencies as networks. Formal networks can also include relationships with entities from other organisations, such as government bureaucrats and other professionals who meet at the meetings held among the agencies and other formal events. According to Prell et al. (2010), formal networks are those that are organised intentionally, and each individual has specific roles and is collectively bounded by a common purpose. Governmental and non-governmental agencies, farmers’ unions, and universities are some of the examples of formal networks.

In contrast, informal networks are characterised by relationships beyond professional aspects that may include personal relationships and contacts beyond formal work settings. In other words, informal networks refer to the social relations formed by themselves (Klitsounova, 2020). Relationships in this type of network may have been formed through one’s work contacts but do not have a direct relationship to one’s work (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2010). Informal networks include family, clans, friends, previous colleagues who have become friends through work, and past employers, who would more likely be willing to listen and give advice

(Birley, 1985; Liu et al., 2021). Unlike in the formal network, meetings of people in the informal network do not happen in the formal situation but rather in a social context.

Informal networks are generally differentiated into ‘strong ties’ and ‘weak ties’ (Fairchild & Robinson, 2004; Kadushin, 2012). The ‘strong ties’ refer to the networks build on common attitudes, values, or social status (homogenous), and ‘weak ties’ on the contrary, are characterised by heterogeneous entities, involving fewer or fewer exchanges or interactions. (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2010). Strong ties tend to develop socio-emotional relationships, which may help to live in solidarity and build a coherent community, thereby generating confidence and security. On the other hand, weak ties tend to have the advantage of transferring information and make more unique connections than the strong ties of individuals (Fairchild & Robinson, 2004). Weak ties are more important than strong ties in terms of understanding the network-based phenomena since weak ties tend to connect with heterogeneous entities of networks (Krackhardt et al., 2003).

Informal networks can occur in a formal workplace setting because individuals behave as social beings (Waldstrøm, 2001). Informal structure tends to fill the gap of a weak formal structure when the organisation is not highly formalised in the absence of a defined communication channel (Waldstrøm, 2001). In other words, the weak formal structure can lead to the development of informal networks as essential means of communication with the organisation. Nonetheless, formal and informal structures have intertwined relationships as they tend to exist interdependently (Yang, 2021). Informal relations enable flows of resources and information across the network that enhances norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness (Park et al., 2021; Sohail & Shoaib, 2021), which may become essential for successful collaboration. Informal networks can also play influential roles or alter information flows, dynamics, and even technical aspects (Waldstrøm, 2001). At the same time, relationships are formed depending on the types of positions in the network (Benatti et al., 2021). The three important positions of the networks such as *gatekeepers*, *pulse takers*, and *hubs* play different roles in networks (Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005; Reeves, 2006; Strines, 2002; Waldstrøm, 2001). Each of the positions is presented separately below.

Firstly, the roles of the *gatekeeper* may vary with the nature of networks, but generally, gatekeepers act as the bridge for the flow of information, knowledge, and resources (Ballon & Walravens, 2008; Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005; Nikulainen, 2007). For example, as the

gatekeeper, the Chamberlain of the Palace can control access to the King. As the *gatekeeper*, the Chamberlain can decide the inflow and outflow of information in the Palace. Similarly, gatekeeping roles can determine either access to or denial of information from one network to another. Thus, *gatekeepers* in both formal and informal networks play pivotal roles in controlling access to information and resources (Corra & Willer, 2002).

Secondly, *pulse takers* have the maximum number of indirect contacts and are the key individuals who tend to have their fingers on the pulse of the network (Abramek & Rizun, 2020; Townsend, 2008; Waldstrøm, 2001). Therefore, the *pulse taker* tends to know better what is happening in the network.

Thirdly, *hubs* are connected to many people and significantly influence the networks (Waldstrøm, 2001). If it is within a particular institution, *hubs* tend to know everyone and multitask effectively. Thus, if the information is conveyed to the *hub*, the entire people in the particular institution or the networks of people in the society will know.

Having better networks may determine good access to resources and opportunities for employment that may consequently enhance economic prosperity in tourism (Cantner & Joel, 2011; Koput, 2010). According to Kristiansen (2004), the quality of social networks tends to depend on many characteristics such as network size, type of ties (strong and weak ties) of networks. Since a social network refers to connections among individuals, groups, and organizations (Smith, 2009), the network is crucial for sustaining entrepreneurial activities (Rodgers et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the nature of social networks has been regarded as the main element for marketing in business (Ansari et al., 2011). According to Cantner and Joel (2011), the economic success of business firms depends on networks. Successful networks require diverse international, national, and local entities (Millar & Choi, 2009; Montes & Kafley, 2019).

Therefore, understanding the nature of social networks has increasingly been regarded as the core element for marketing in tourism as in other forms of businesses (Ansari et al., 2011), and homestay tourism is no exception. Better networks with external entities (tour operators and guides) in homestay tourism tend to be instrumental in sustaining alternative income from homestays. (Beedle et al., 2013; Carey et al., 1997; Leslie, 2012).

2.8 COVID-19 pandemic

The global marketing chain was disrupted due to the COVID-19 outbreak (WHO declared it a pandemic on 12th March 2020) and brought the tourism industry close to a standstill position (Khalid et al., 2021). Health measures such as social distancing, travel and mobility restrictions, community lockdowns, stay at home directives, mandatory quarantine, and crowding discouragement affected global travel, leisure and transportation of goods and services (Gupta et al., 2021; Sigala, 2020; Soliku et al., 2021; Zayed et al., 2021). Consequently, social networks were disrupted at the global, national and local levels, which had significant negative impacts on the global economy, including the livelihoods of local people who relied on *alternative tourism* such as homestays (Gauthier et al., 2021; Kovacs et al., 2021). Generally, international tourist arrivals were estimated to drop by 78% incurring a loss of US\$ 1.2 trillion in export revenues from the tourism industry and 120 million direct tourism job cuts, which account for the biggest decline in global history (Sigala, 2020).

While the networks among relevant tourism entities were disrupted severely, a recent study conducted in Italy revealed that lockdown made the local community focus on their local environment, community strength and problems, which made them feel much closer to their neighbourhood again (Gatti & Procentese, 2021). Similarly, Bhutan homestays are optimistic about the post-pandemic circumstance and have emphasised maintenance works and farming during the pandemic period (Lhamo, 2020).

2.9 Conclusion

The tourism industry is regarded as one of the main drivers of economic prosperity globally. Therefore, it can provide economic benefits, particularly in developing countries where it is considered a tool for economic growth, poverty alleviation, and promoting food security. Homestays as one of the CBE activities have benefitted local communities in developing countries to generate economic benefits. Community participation is an essential aspect of many forms of CBE that includes homestays. This form of tourism has become popular, particularly in developing countries.

As in any form of business, participation and the success of tourism ventures often relies on the form and type of social networks between and among the relevant tourism entities (Baggio,

2011; Casanueva et al., 2016). Understanding social networks can enable us to explore how pertinent entities of the tourism sector manage to access resources, including guests and information.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research questions

This research was conducted based on the following research questions.

RQ1. What are the benefits and challenges of homestay operations to local communities?

RQ2. How do networks influence the functioning of homestays?

- a) Who are the various entities in the social network, and what role do they play?
- b) How are homestay households' access to guests influenced by networks with external entities such as tour guides and tour operators?
- c) What are the barriers and opportunities for non-homestay households to be involved in homestay activities and how is this influenced by their social networks?

RQ3. How has COVID-19 influenced the network of homestays?

- a) How are the homestay and non-homestay households impacted by COVID-19?
- b) What are the collective roles played by the community during the pandemic?

3.2 Research paradigm

This study adopted the interpretivist research paradigm to capture the subjective views and realities of the research participants. This paradigm is relevant for this thesis to undertake in-depth investigation of local people's perceptions and experiences in the case study locations. According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), the interpretivist paradigm requires researchers to delve further into the experiences and perceptions of a certain social setting. The application of this paradigm can help the researchers to understand humans or events within unique social contexts, enabling the collection of data that offers deeper insights for further action in the future (Pham, 2018).

3.3 Research approach

A qualitative research approach was applied to explore how social networks influence accessing homestay guests by homestay households in the case study location. The purpose of qualitative research is not about drawing significance from numbers but rather explore themes that occur from narratives; and seeking meaning and understandings about processes and phenomena (Coyle & Tickoo, 2007).

Given this, thesis focuses on understanding the role social networks play in homestays gaining access to guests in Bhutan. Hence, a qualitative method was considered appropriate. The qualitative method can capture the network's 'insider' view (McKeever et al., 2014), which was essential to understanding the network's cultural and communicative processes. Unlike in quantitative research, which is inflexible (participants are asked to respond to structured questions) and provides a limited understanding of the people's actions, the qualitative approach is flexible (participants are asked open-ended questions) and interviewing and observations enable to know the meaning of what the participants say (Zawawi, 2007). The qualitative approach allows delving deeper into a particular study area. In contrast, the quantitative approach is guided by sets of structured questions that prevent participants from expressing beyond what is being asked. More importantly, the qualitative approach can enable understanding participants from diverse contexts and provides the opportunity to nuance situations (Austin & Sutton, 2014).

3.4 Case study method

The case study method was chosen to draw insight into the homestay operations, especially into how social networks influence the functioning of homestays. Çakar and Aykol (2021) argue that researchers can use case studies for investigating unexplored topics wherein little is known empirically. According to Yin (2014), case study research is chosen by researchers when the main research questions are "how" or "why" questions.

Researchers choose the case study method (qualitative research) to generate in-depth understanding of situations and meaning of those involved (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Thomas, 2021). The case study method is appropriate to explore unexplored areas empirically within some specific context (Rashid et al., 2019). Furthermore, it is possible to understand the underlying dynamics of the relationships among entities in the network by analysing a case through case study method (Marques & Gondim Matos, 2020). Case study research can help the researcher to experience vicariously unique situations and individuals even within our own culture (Donmoyer, 2000). Generalisation is possible from good case studies (Alam, 2020; Donmoyer, 2000).

Since little is known empirically about homestay in Bhutan, case study method was found appropriate for this study to generate in-depth information on operation of homestays and how networks influence accessing homestay guests. Homestays in the chosen case study location (Phobjikha valley) were initiated for the first time in Bhutan and therefore had been in operation for the longest period. Therefore, case study method was applicable to collect in-depth information from this study as a case from Bhutan.

The Phobjikha valley, comprising Phobji and Gangtey *Gewogs* (local administrative blocks), was selected as a single case study site. They share the administrative boundary and are located in the same geographical setting, the Phobjikha valley. The case study site falls under one of the western districts called Wangdue Phodrang (refer to figure 6).

The primary reason for choosing the case mentioned above is that homestays have been in operation longer in the Phobjikha valley than in other parts of the country. Thus, the probability of generating rich information from the households operating homestays (selected purposively), including non-homestays (snowballing), was relatively high, and Phobjikha valley was chosen as the case study site. Homestay operators in the Phobjikha valley had more experience operating homestays. This was the basis for selecting the said case study location to elicit a deeper understanding of benefits, challenges, and how networks influenced the functioning of homestay operations.

As part of the case study method, in-depth semi-structured interviews were administered for four categories of participants such as key informants, homestay households, non-homestay households, and uncertified homestay households. The author had initially planned for three categories, and through the research, it became apparent about a fourth group (uncertified homestays) and was incorporated. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted as the data collection method. This type of interview allowed the author to prepare a few key questions to probe during the interviews. The author used key questions to ask the participants to share in-depth information. This type of interview had been useful to keep the discussions on track aligning with the overall purpose of the study. Further, this type of interview made participants generally feel comfortable expressing themselves freely when they talk to the author. The focus group would have been effective in collecting data as it is an established research method. However, the focus group interview was not applicable due to travel

restrictions. Since interviews had to be conducted online, and it was not appropriate for the participants to attend focus groups because of the lockdown in Bhutan.

The author had the interview guide for the in-depth semi-structured interview to keep discussions aligned with the research questions (interview guides are attached as appendices). To make participants comfortable talking, the author introduced himself briefly and thanked each participant for their participation. The author reiterated the confidentiality of the interview data to make participants comfortable expressing their views honestly. Participants were also asked to introduce themselves, followed by asking their permission to start the interviews. Each interview took between 30 and 90 minutes.

3.5 Participant recruitment and data collection

The research participants for this study were homestay households (those households certified as homestays by the Tourism Council of Bhutan), non-homestay households (such as farmers, carpenters, taxi drivers, local singers, local hotels, youth, and local astrologers), key informants (representative from relevant tourism stakeholders such as the Tourism Council of Bhutan, locally elected leaders, Royal Society for Protection of Nature, Guide Association of Bhutan, Tour Operators, Tour Guide, former project manager of Community-based Sustainable Tourism Project of Phobjikha), and uncertified homestays (households without the village homestay license but functioned as homestay). The author did not have the fourth category in the initial plan, however, this had to be included later when few non-homestay participants were found to have offered homestay services to guests. Thus, a new category was incorporated later as uncertified homestays. This was the reason why four categories of research participants were interviewed in this study. A total of 46 interviews were conducted for this research (Table 1).

In-depth semi-structured interviews were arranged in this study with all the participants as this type of interview provides the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of people's perceptions of their lives (Longhurst, 2009; Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). The main aim of including four categories of participants was:

Key informants were interviewed to know their perceptions of the overall operations of homestays in Bhutan. Interviews with this category were also helpful to generate ideas on the type of questions the author needed to use as probes during the interviews with other categories. Homestay households were interviewed to collect in-depth information on the overall operations of homestays and to understand their perceptions on homestay operations.

Non-homestay household interviews were aimed at understanding their perspectives on homestay operations and benefits to the community and impeding factors to start a homestay.

As explained earlier, there were initially three categories of interview participants. The author came across few uncertified homestays while conducting interviews with non-homestay households. Two participants who were initially recruited as non-homestay households were later classified as uncertified homestays when it became apparent that they also hosted guests despite not having the required certification. The participants explained that it was easier said than done to get certified since it was expensive to arrange the facilities needed to meet the certification standards. Though uncertified, this category of participants was a part of the homestay network and were interviewed to examine the impeding factors that prevented them from becoming certified homestay operators.

Table 1

Categories of research participants

Sl.No.	Participant category	Number (n)
1	Key informants	11
2	Homestay households	16
3	Non-homestay households	17
4	Uncertified homestays	2
	Total	46

Note: Extracted from the qualitative data of this study

Data collection was initially designed to visit the research case study site for face-to-face interviews and field observations. However, the field visit timing coincided with the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the fieldwork plan was adapted, and an online mode of data collection was applied. The fieldwork and variation approval was

granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Data collection was done by administering interviews via available digital tools such as WeChat, messenger, emails, and WhatsApp, depending on the conveniences of the participants.

Key informants were contacted first via email to determine their interest in participating in this research. Participants were selected purposively depending on the nature of roles and expertise in tourism, especially in homestay operations. The purposeful sampling was relevant as the researcher already had an idea of the institutions that were involved in the homestay sector for a longer duration and or those who had the expertise and are currently dealing with homestay accommodation. Purposive sampling is helpful in qualitative studies to identify and select information-rich cases to make the best possible use of the limited resources (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). This category of participants included representative(s) from the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), Guide Association of Bhutan (GAB), Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), Tour Operator, Tour Guide, Gups (Head of the locally elected administrative block), and two village homestays from Paro (a town 188 kilometres away from the case study site) with rich experiences in homestay operation. Participants were provided with the Participant Information Sheets (PIS) and Participant Consent Form (PCF) (see appendices A and B) to make an informed decision about participating and asked to nominate a day, time, and mode of communication that would best suit them. The author used separate PIS and PCF for each category of participants but was similar. Following this, an email reminder was sent to those who did not respond to the initial email.

The email addresses used were publicly available on the websites of concerned agencies (Tourism Council of Bhutan, Royal Society for Protection of Nature, Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators, and Guide Association of Bhutan). The WeChat name cards of *Gups* were collected from the author's contacts within the case study area with appropriate consent. The WeChat name cards/contact cards were used to send requests to the Gups to establish a connection as WeChat friends, to enable further contact with respondents to conduct interviews. WeChat contacts were used to interview the participants through chat so that the audio is recorded automatically in the chat for transcription. Interview appointments were scheduled as per the convenience of each participant. Interviews were conducted in WeChat, WhatsApp, Messenger, and email, as shown in Table 2 below.

A total of eleven key informant interviews were conducted. The researcher discontinued interviewing once no new ideas were seen to emerge, suggesting theoretical saturation had been achieved. Interviews with key informants were instrumental for the researcher to understand the overall picture of homestays and prepare for interviews with other categories of participants. This category of participants was asked key questions such as - In your opinion, how are homestays operated across the country? Could you share your opinion about who are the stakeholders involved in homestay operations? (Interview guide is attached as appendix)

Table 2

Details of key informants

Participant	Interview mode	Gender	Roles
KI01	Video call in Facebook messenger	Male	President cum Founder of GAB.
KI02	Video call in Facebook messenger	Female	Project Officer of CBE
KI03	Video call in WeChat	Male & Female	Chief Tourism Officer and Senior Tourism Officer
KI04	Voice call in Facebook messenger	Female	Former Project Manager, CBST Project in Phobjikha.
KI05	Voice call in Facebook messenger	Male	Tour operator
KI06	Voice chat in WeChat	Male	Gup of Gangtey
KI07	Email	Male	Tour operator
KI08	Voice chat in WeChat	Male	Gup of Phobji
KI09	Voice chat in WhatsApp	Female	Village homestay operator, Paro
KI10	Voice chat in WeChat	Male	Village homestay operator, Paro
KI11	Voice chat in WeChat	Male	Tour guide

Note: Extracted from the key informant interview data of this study

Homestay households were contacted first via telephone to determine their interest in participating in this research as per the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB) list. Since most of the participants failed to respond to phone calls (except one homestay household), local leaders

were requested over the WeChat conversation to make initial contact with potential participants. The author contacted homestay households (who consented to participate) over WeChat. Purposive sampling was applied to interview homestay household participants. The PIS and PCF were explained to interested participants who were unable to read and write. This was also done for those participants who could read and write but wanted these documents to be explained verbally. Despite both PIS and PCF being translated in *Dzongkha* (the local language), all the participants opted for verbal explanation. Those interested in being interviewed were asked to nominate their preferred date, time, and technology. Interviews were then conducted as per their availability and convenience. Table 3 below shows the list of homestay participants. Some of the key questions asked were –how do you access guests? What are your views about the benefits and challenges associated with homestay operations? (Interview guide is attached as appendix).

Table 3

Details of homestay household participants

Participants	Interview mode	Gender	Age	Homestay operation(years)	Gewog
HH01	Voice Chat in WeChat	Male	36	13	Gangtey
HH02	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	62	8	Gangtey
HH03	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	51	10	Gangtey
HH04	Voice Chat in WeChat	Male	53	8	Phobji
HH05	Voice Chat in WeChat	Male	45	7	Phobji
HH06	Voice Chat in WeChat	Male	46	7	Phobji
HH07	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	46	7	Phobji
HH08	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	54	8	Gangtey

HH09	Voice Chat in WeChat	Male	45	20	Phobji
HH10	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	26	4	Gangtey
HH11	Voice Chat in WeChat	Male	55	8	Gangtey
HH12	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	53	2	Gangtey
HH13	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	51	6	Gangtey
HH14	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	43	6	Gangtey
HH15	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	55	9	Gangtey
HH16	Voice Chat in WeChat	Female	58	8	Gangtey

Note: Extracted from the homestay interview data of this study

Non-homestay households comprised participants from diverse livelihood occupations such as farmers, taxi drivers, carpenters, local astrologers and hoteliers, *Tshogpa* (community council member), and youth. After seeking their verbal consent, the researcher requested *Gups* to provide the list of non-homestay households of different occupations with their WeChat name cards. Non-homestay households were then contacted through WeChat and asked to provide the phone numbers or WeChat name cards of those households who don't operate village homestays in their villages through snowballing technique. They were reminded to seek verbal consent from the interested potential participants before providing their contact details to the author. Participants in this category were contacted through WeChat as all of them opted for this mode of communication and explained the PIS and PCF to make them aware of the purpose of the interviews. The participants were asked to nominate their convenient day and timing for the interviews. Table 4 summarises the non-village homestay households, which were interviewed. This category of participants was asked few important questions such as - Have you considered offering a homestay at your house – if yes, why and if not, why not? How do homestay operations in your locality benefit the community as a whole? (Interview guide is attached as appendix).

Table 4*Details of non-homestay household participants*

Participants	Interview mode	Livelihood occupation	Gender	Age
NHH01	Voice chat WeChat	in Resort owner	Male	66
NHH02	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer/Carpenter	Male	34
NHH03	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer/Carpenter	Male	46
NHH04	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer/Tshogpa	Male	38
NHH05	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer	Male	24
NHH06	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer	Female	39
NHH07	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer	Male	37
NHH08	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer/Tshogpa	Male	47
NHH09	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer	Male	47
NHH10	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer /local singer	Female	48
NHH11	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer /local singer	Female	47
NHH12	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer /local singer	Female	47
NHH13	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer /youth	Male	18
NHH14	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer	Male	56
NHH15	Voice chat WeChat	in Farmer/local singer/youth	Female	22

NHH16	Voice chat in Farmer/local Astrologer	Male	34
	WeChat		
NHH17	Voice chat in Farmer/Taxi driver	Male	46
	WeChat		

Note: Extracted from the non-homestay interview data of this study

Unregistered homestay households were interviewed to investigate why they have not been registered or certified as homestays. Their details are reflected in table 5. Some of the key questions asked to this category of participants were – Why were you not able to get your house registered as a homestay? Could you elaborate on the problems you have encountered to apply for homestay certification? (Interview guide is attached as appendix).

Table 5

Details of uncertified homestay household participants

Participants	Interview mode	Gender	Age	Homestay operation duration (years)	Gewog
UNHH01	Voice chat in WeChat	Female	37	1	Gangtey
UNHH02	Voice chat in WeChat	Male	45	3	Gangtey

Note: Extracted from the uncertified homestay interview data of this study

3.6 Data analysis

Each interview participant was allocated a unique code. For example, homestay household participants were given HH01, and KI01, NHH01, and UNHH01 for key informants, non-homestay households, and uncertified homestay participants accordingly. All interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo 12. Transcripts were coded through content analysis. Further, the codes were then categorised into distinct themes with sub-themes. The focus of these themes was aligned with the research questions. Themes were formed regarding i) the benefits and challenges of homestay operations, which were described particularly in the form

of economic, environmental, social, and cultural impacts; ii) the entities involved and the types of networks such as formal and informal networks, and how the network influenced the functioning of homestays, and iii) how COVID-19 influenced the network of homestays. The author made efforts to enhance the rigor of this qualitative study, as outlined in the following section.

3.7 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is regarded as the primary parameter for ensuring the rigor of qualitative research (Kygäs et al., 2020). The following criteria were considered to make this study trustworthy.

3.7.1 Clarification and justification

Clarity refers to the lucidity of research questions embedded in the aims of any intended studies as in all forms of research, which is crucial to evaluate results and interpretations (Kitto et al., 2008). Thus, it is essential to have questions that suit the aims and selection of methods that tend to enhance the theoretical rigor of a qualitative study (Mays & Pope, 1995). In this study, research questions were developed to explore and unpack the benefits and challenges of homestays and how networks influence access to guests and resources by homestay operators and COVID-19 in Bhutan. The case study approach was designed to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews as an exploratory investigation. Snowballing technique was followed after the initial participants were interviewed. Research questions were framed and finalised after a series of iterations with the supervisory panel through supervisory meetings, which resulted in choosing appropriate methods.

3.7.2 Procedural or methodological rigor

Procedural or methodological rigor pertains to the transparency of the description of how the research was conducted (Kitto et al., 2008). While potential participants for key informants and homestay households were chosen purposively, non-homestay household participants were selected as per the list provided by local leaders. The interview was conducted in *Dzongkha* (the national language of Bhutan) with all the participants as per their preferences. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and assigned a unique name for each participant to maintain confidentiality. All the interviews were directly translated to English by the author.

Interview transcripts and audio recordings were crosschecked randomly by two Dzongkha-speaking colleagues to ensure interviews were transcribed adequately. Further, interview guides translated from English to Dzongkha were crosschecked by the same persons. Any missing and additional information was then added in transcripts. Transcripts were categorised into different themes to conduct thematic analysis for each category of participant.

3.7.3 Representativeness

The qualitative data collection was conducted from a single case study. According to Eisenhardt (1989), the case study is a kind of research strategy that focuses and enables understanding the dynamics existing within a single situation. The case study approach was chosen in order to generate rich information for a thick description of the social networks in the homestay business. The particular case site was selected because this location was the first place where homestays were started in Bhutan. Although research findings from this case study may be applicable to other *Dzongkhags* in Bhutan and other regions with similar cultural settings, results may not qualify for generalisations beyond the study context.

While the research findings may be applicable to other districts in Bhutan and the region with similar cultural settings, results may not qualify for generalisation to the global context. Homestay and non-homestay household interviews were conducted and stopped when the point of saturation was realised. For homestay household interviews, the point of saturation was reached when the 15th participant was interviewed. Similarly, the point of saturation was realised when the 17th non-homestay household participant was interviewed. The author stopped the interview for key informant interviews after interviewing the 11th participant as no new themes or ideas were found. Regarding uncertified homestays, there were only two participants.

3.7.4 Interpretative rigor

According to Kitto et al. (2008), interpretative rigor refers to the involvement of researchers in the analytical process to conduct triangulation as an attempt to enhance the validity and reliability of the study. The participants were asked confirmatory questions during the interviews to make sure the author understood what the participants actually meant to say (Kitto et al., 2008).

3.7.5 Reflexivity and evaluative rigor

Since the qualitative research is subjective, the researcher had to contemplate how values, beliefs, and attitudes may have influenced the investigation. Notes were maintained by the author of his feelings and perspectives of research processes to remain reflexive (Kynğäs et al., 2020).

Evaluative rigor denotes assuring proper ethics approval from appropriate committees envisaging vital components such as confidentiality, informed consent, and steps to evade potential adverse effects on the subjects (Kitto et al., 2008). The involvement of participants was entirely based on their willingness and consent. The local leaders were consulted and made fully aware of the research objectives and approvals from relevant authorities to convince them about the legality of the study. The participants in the case study site were only contacted for interviews after the local leaders granted the verbal consent.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY CONTEXT - BHUTAN

4.1 Country background

Bhutan is a small landlocked Himalayan country. The country is popular for its monasteries, fortresses, and dramatic landscapes, stretching within the geographical area of 38,394 Sq.km, located in the central Himalayan Mountains between China and India (Dam et al., 2021) (refer to figure 2). The country is divided into 20 districts, called *Dzongkhags*, in the Bhutanese national language. *Dzongkhags* are further divided into 205 sub-districts, called gewogs in the national language. The tiny Himalayan country is mainly mountainous with a complex system of rivers and streams. The overall topography is rugged and steep, with elevation ranging from less than 200m in the south to as high as 7,500m in the north (Namgay & Rinchen, 2021). The country can be categorised into three broad physiographic zones: the high Himalayas containing alpine meadows and snow-capped mountains, the inner Himalayas consisting of main river valleys and steep mountains, and the southern belt made up of the Himalayan foothills with a narrow belt of flatland along the Indian border.

Figure 2

Bhutan location map



Note: Adapted from the map provided by Deanna Duffy, Spatial Data Analyst, Spatial Data Analysis Network of Charles Sturt University.

The country's population is 735,553 (NSB, 2021), out of which 69 percent live in rural areas and depend primarily on agriculture (Namgay & Rinchen, 2021). About 80% of the households rely on agriculture and livestock, supporting their livelihoods (Namgay & Rinchen, 2021)

Development in Bhutan is guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNHC, 2021). Hydropower and tourism are the two major sources of revenue for the country. The Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC) is the government institution mandated to coordinate and spearhead policies to build cohesion between sectoral policies and align with national development objectives and gross national happiness (GNHC, 2021). Gross national happiness is regarded as more important than gross national product (Santos & Dorji, 2021).

4.2 Collectivist society

Generally, Bhutanese people regard the need and goals of the group as more important than their individual needs and desires. The Bhutanese culture asserts importance on social interdependence rather than oneself and tends to maintain strong loyalty and mutual respect for all (De, 2017). They tend to give priority to lending help to other groups and individuals, which is also associated with Buddhist culture and beliefs (Phuntsho, 2013). The people not only take care of themselves and their families, but they also believe that they belong to the community and expect to help each other. The Bhutanese society, thus, emphasises on social cohesion (De, 2017).

4.3 Evolution of tourism in Bhutan

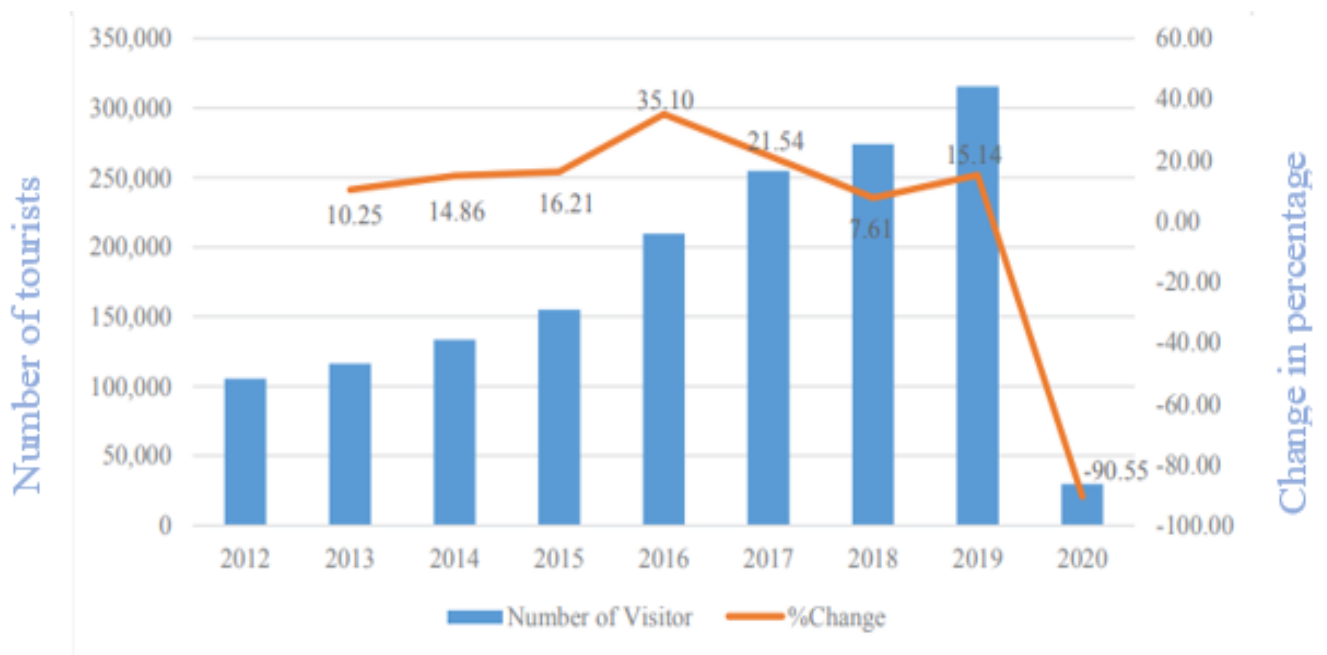
Bhutan was opened to tourism only in 1974 (GNHC, 2018; RSPN, 2017; Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2019c), coinciding with the historic national event- the coronation of His Majesty the Fourth King. Bhutan's tourism sector is guided by the unique policy '*High Value, Low Impact*,' which helps create an image of exclusivity and high yield for the country (Dam et al., 2021). For decades, Bhutan adhered to this policy without having a written document until the 'Tourism Policy of the Kingdom of Bhutan 2021' was endorsed on 5th January 2021 (Rinzin, 2021; Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021c). Bhutan is well-known for its cultural authenticity, remoteness, intact cultural heritage, and natural environment (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021d). Bhutan built a tourism industry on sustainability, which denotes that tourism must be socially and culturally acceptable, ecologically friendly, environmentally, and economically viable (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021b). Bhutan has experienced increasing tourists over recent years, except in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (refer to figure 3). Bhutan continues to gain popularity in terms of attractive tourism destinations. The lonely planet

named Bhutan as the best travel destination for 2020, leading among the top ten destinations (Trafalgar, 2021).

Bhutan currently has a total of 309 certified accommodation providers, which includes 158 village homestays. Further, 3,020 registered tour operators and approximately 4,500 licensed tour guides operate tours and guiding services in the country (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2020). Bhutan is renowned for cultural tourism, besides other unique activities such as trekking, wellness, and nature-based tourism. Tourism is the second-highest revenue earner for Bhutan that generated USD 88.63 million in 2019, which is 3.77 percent more than 2018 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2020). The total visitor arrivals recorded in 2019 was 315,599, with a growth rate of 15.14% over the records of 2018 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2020). The tourists visiting Bhutan have to pay the daily minimum package rate (DMPR) in US dollars.

Figure 3

Tourist arrivals to Bhutan 2012-2020



Note: This was adapted from the Annual Monitor of the Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2020.

4.4 Minimum daily package rate (MDPR) for the tourists

The Royal Government of Bhutan sets the minimum selling price for packages from time to time, which international tourists intending to visit Bhutan must pay before they arrive in Bhutan. This minimum package rate was introduced to regulate the tourists according to Bhutan's 'high value, low volume' tourism policy (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021c). There are two categories of tourists- the regional and international. Regional tourists refer to nationals from Bangladesh, India and the Maldives, and international tourists imply to nationals from other countries, excluding those regarded as regional tourists. The MDPR is applied only on the international category. The MDPR differs depending on the season one visits the country. The MDPR for tourists travelling in a group of 3 persons or more is USD 200 per night per person if he/she is visiting in January, February, June, July, August, and December. USD 250 per night is levied for those visiting in March, April, May, September, October, and November. The USD 65 from each international tourists from the MDPR goes to the government of Bhutan as the sustainable development fund, which may change in the near future. While potentially appearing expensive, the MDP covers the following services:

- A minimum of 3-star accommodation is provided. However, additional costs will apply if the tourist opts to stay in 4 and 5-star accommodation.
- All meals are covered throughout the stay, including breakfast on the departure day.
- A nationally certified tour guide is provided for the entire duration of the stay
- All internal transports are arranged except the internal flights, and
- All the required camping equipment and haulage for trekking tours are covered in the price package.

On the other hand, regional tourists are required to pay only Nu. 1200 (approximately USD16.00) per night per person as the sustainable development fund. International tourists must get their visas approved by the Bhutan government before making the flight reservation, whereas regional tourists need not apply for a visa to visit Bhutan (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021b). Nonetheless, they (regional tourists) must get a permit, which they can process at the point of entry on producing their passports with a minimum validity of six months.

4.5 Bhutan and CBE

According to the Tourism Council of Bhutan (2020), almost all tourists visiting Bhutan undertake some form of cultural sightseeing activity during their stay. This indicates potential for CBE activities such as those provided by rural residents, which pertain to local culture and tradition.

Bhutan started embarking on CBE in 2012 (GNHC, 2018; JICA, 2014). The Bhutan government emphasised promotion of homestays in recent years to enhance the livelihoods of the rural population to diversify the supplementary sources of income for the rural communities. Evaluation reports of homestays, such as that generated by the Gross National Happiness Commission of Bhutan in 2018, indicated the economic benefits of homestays to local communities.

4.5.1 Bhutan homestays

The total number of homestays in Bhutan is 158 (refer to table 6), spread across 13 districts such as Bumthang, Haa, Mongar, Paro, Punakha, Thimphu, Trashigang Wangdue Phodrang, Gasa, Lhuentse, Trongsa, Trashiyangtse, and Zhemgang (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021b).

Table 6

District-wise homestays

Dzongkhag (district)	Number of homestays	Region
Bumthang	20	Central
Gasa	9	Northern
Haa	20	Western
Lhuntse	19	Eastern
Mongar	2	Eastern
Paro	23	Western
Punakha	17	Western
Thimphu	4	Western
Trashigang	3	Eastern
Trashiyangtse	7	Eastern

Trongsa	1	Central
Wangdue	30	Western
Zhemgang	3	Southern
Total	158	

Source: Adapted from (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021b)

Homestays in Bhutan are located mainly in the villages in rural settlements and operated by local rural residents. TCB is the apex tourism authority in Bhutan, which certifies and registers any interested household as homestays. Certification is done after proper verification of basic facilities such as house space; access to adequate drinking water; a clean kitchen; a western toilet; safe paths to walk; and suitable sleeping arrangements to provide standard services (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2017). The homestays are exempted from tax to encourage homestay operations for local livelihood enhancement. Homestays in Bhutan are meant to allow guests to experience the traditional lifestyle and culture of local settlements. A homestay household can have a maximum of five rooms and accommodate not more than ten guests at a time. Following are some of the basic requirements of private houses to operate as homestays (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2019a):

- A homestay (HS) should be in a traditional house, and according to the locality's architecture (refer to figure 4).
- A HS should be in rural areas or outside the municipal boundary. This is to reduce the impact of HS on the tourist accommodation facilities in the urban areas.
- A house to be operated as a homestay should be spacious enough to accommodate guests comfortably,
- There should be a minimum of one and a maximum of five rooms for the guests that exclude the altar and living rooms,
- Each guest room shall accommodate a maximum of two adult guests only. Each homestay house can accommodate a maximum of 10 guests at a time,
- The hosts should have free time to spend with the guests to provide the guests with the much-desired traditional experiences. This experience may include kitchen gardening, village walks, ploughing the field, crop cultivation, weeding, harvesting, milking cows and making cheese and butter, fodder collection and feeding cattle, traditional games and sports, and participation in the cultural festival, and cultural songs and dances.

Figure 4

A typical traditional house and inner setting for guests



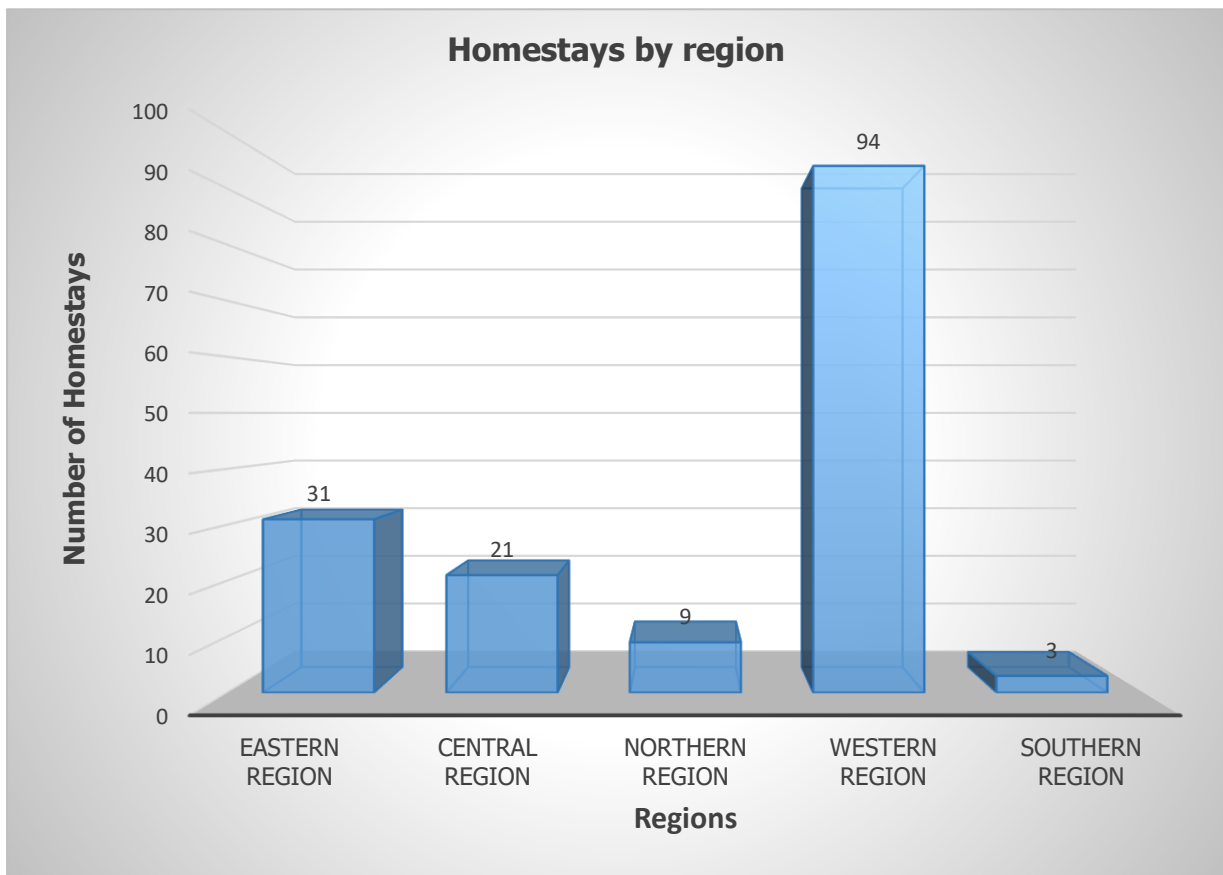
Note: Included with the consent of the participant HH07.



Note: Included with the consent of the participant HH01.

The western region has the maximum homestays and the least number in the southern region (refer to figure 5). Wangdue Phodrang district in the west has the maximum homestays and is concentrated only in Gangtey and Phobji Gewogs out of 15 gewogs. The main reasons for the least number of homestays in the southern belt are due to long-distance, the safety of the guests, and road condition. However, efforts are being put by the government to diversify ecotourism products, and three domestic airports have been constructed in Bumthang, Gelephu, and Yonphula to ease travelling for the tourists (Department of Air Transport, 2021). Bhutan currently has four airports that include the international airport in Paro.

Figure 5
Region-wise homestays



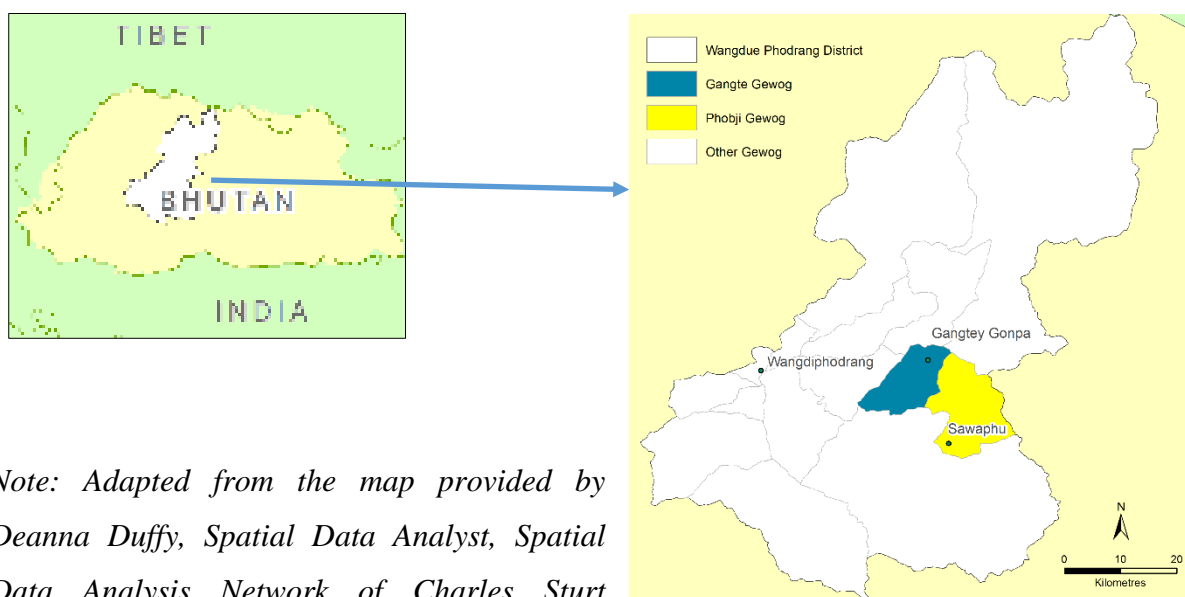
Note: This was adapted from the official website of Tourism Council of Bhutan (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021b).

4.5.2 The Phobjikha valley

Amongst 15 *Gewogs* under Wangduephodrang *Dzongkhag*, Gangtey and Phobji falls within Phobjikha valley (refer to figure 6). Rest 13 *Gewogs* did not have any homestays during this study. According to research participants, other *Gewogs* were not interested because of long travelling distance, and differences in natural and cultural significances compared to Phobjikha valley. This valley is the winter roosting habitats for the Black-necked cranes. In an effort to educate visitors about the significance of crane conservation in the area, the black-necked crane centre was constructed in the valley by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN). Furthermore, the annual crane festival was introduced by the RSPN to celebrate the significance of this endangered bird species. This annual event draws increasing numbers of visitors in the valley. As a form of incentive to the residents for their supports in conservation, the RSPN initiated the homestay programs in the valley.

Figure 6

Map of study location in Wangdue Phodrang District



Note: Adapted from the map provided by Deanna Duffy, Spatial Data Analyst, Spatial Data Analysis Network of Charles Sturt University, 2021.

The geographical area of the valley is about 187.90 km², which provides alluvial space for about 708 rural households, out of which 30 are certified village homestays. The population in the valley is 5,387 (DAW, 2021). The main occupation of the people in the Phobjikha valley is farmer, who depend on potato cultivation as the main cash crop, yielding 10,493 metric tons

annually. The village settlements are connected with farm roads and telecommunication networks.

To conclude, Bhutan is well known for its cultural richness that attracts tourists. With the increasing number of tourists looking at experiencing the local culture and tradition through their firsthand interactions, homestays can showcase their cultural richness in respective settlements. Limited empirical studies on homestays in Bhutan, especially how networking impacts access to guests by homestays, warrant further investigation to understand the on-ground realities in operating homestays and their overall effects on rural populations.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The study revealed that there are benefits from homestays to local communities. Most of the homestay operators believed that homestays not only provide supplementary income for the family hosting; but can also enhance the local community by improving sanitation systems, promoting local culture, and increasing interactions in the community, thereby strengthening community cohesion. A homestay participant said:

“Homestays do benefit the household family. The income from the homestays helps to spend on our children’s education. We need not have to avail loan or borrow from others for the education of the children. There is no adverse impact on the environment when we have guests. It instead benefits us because some guests bring one or two sack-full of their wastes such as plastics, bottles, etc., and we keep them at our place. Not only homestays, other households also take care of their waste to make surroundings clean and showcase our local culture so that guests can feel happy to visit our locality. Many guests say they like our place and culture when we see them off.” (HH03)

The excerpt above indicates the benefits from homestay business. Thus, operating homestays can support educating children despite other benefits such as maintaining the local environment clean, and up keeping the local culture and tradition.

Therefore, this chapter firstly presents the benefits and challenges of homestay operations and the perceived importance of social networks. The entities involved in homestay networks are then introduced and discussed. The chapter then explains other components such as social networks between homestays and other entities in homestay operations, factors that influence the access to homestay guests, barriers for non-homestay households to operate a homestay, and finally, impacts of COVID-19 on homestay network.

5.1 Benefits and challenges of homestay operations

This study revealed that homestay operations provided direct and indirect benefits in many forms, such as economic, environmental, social, cultural, and governance. However, as discussed below, there are also challenges associated with each of these dimensions.

5.1.1 Economic dimension

Homestay operations provide direct economic benefits to households that operate homestays. The homestay participant said:

“The income we get from farmhouse² is good to support family as the supplementary source. This is why farmhouses have increased in our locality in recent years.” (HH16).

The above quote indicates that homestays have also increased over the years because of the economic benefits from homestay operation.

A homestay can earn an average annual income of approximately Nu. 170000.00 (Nu. refers to the Bhutan currency -*Ngultrums*), which is around USD 2267.00. Non-homestay households also tend to get economic benefits by participating in homestay cultural programs such as singing and dancing. In relation to the economic benefits, a local singer expressed:

“Farmhouses do give us meals and refreshments. Guests provide us with money ranging from 700 to little more than 1000 ngultrums as tips each time we sing and dance. We feel that it is beneficial to us when we get money as we are villagers.” (NHH12)

Another homestay participant said non-homestay households also benefit from homestay operations when they come to help them by providing cultural experiences for their guests:

² Farmhouse means homestays as per the local people

“They help us arranging things for the hot stone bath. We pay them as per the existing local labour rates depending on the duration. Sometimes guests also pay them as a gesture of appreciation, which is rare though.” (HH09)

The important message from the quote is that homestay households maintain relationships within the community that tend to be of mutual benefits. Relatives of homestay households and their neighbours can offer assistance such as arranging hot stone bath, demonstrating carpentry works, and distillation of local wine when needed and are paid cash in return. However, those non-homestay households who have taxi and local astrologers do not directly benefit economically as they are not directly involved in the homestay network. A farmer owning a taxi said:

“I have not provided services to homestay guests because they drive their own tour company cars. They don’t hire vehicles from the locality. Certainly they would not hire our taxi as they have better cars. They would not prefer to hire vehicle that we use for local passengers.” (NHH17).

There are also negative effects of the economic benefits from homestays. For example, a key informant believed that homestays tend to become money-minded; and providing satisfactory experiences is then neglected. The key informant mentioned that:

“...they don’t know how to do the business. They only look at the profit motive. They never care of providing satisfaction to the guests. And they never think of providing the satisfaction like trip, memories. They never think of creating the memories.” (KI02).

The quote contains the concern over the current scenario where homestays tend to become financially motivated, which might compromise the authenticity of local life experiences.

The homestay operation can also stimulate youth employment and reduce youth migrating to urban areas thereby minimising brain drain. Generally, all homestay operators perceived that homestay business can be one of the means to create youth employment. Many homestay operators believed that youth have the advantage of having the English speaking and writing skills to communicate with guests. They can operate much better especially in terms of connecting to relevant tourism entities and through social media such as Facebook. One of the

youth operating a homestay said she has a Facebook page, which helps to do marketing of her homestay.

“Despite the importance of providing better services to guests, I do believe that connections with as many people as possible is important to operate farmhouse, among which we have direct link with guides and operators, that helps to get guests. In addition, I have a Facebook page and posting information about my farmhouse on the Facebook does also help. This is because the Facebook is one of the popular social media platforms, which is used by the people all over the world.” (HH10).

Most homestay operators believed that youth can take advantage of their language skills in terms of marketing and managing the overall homestay operations by using the social media platforms such as the Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, and telegram.

Currently, the majority of homestay operators face a challenge when communicating with guests as they cannot speak or read in English. This linguistic problem diminishes homestay enterprises’ ability to generate supplementary income by accessing more guests. Most participants believed that homestay operators with English language skills (speaking, reading and writing) tend to get more guests, which has direct impact on economic income.

5.1.2 Environmental dimension

Travellers often choose to travel to attractive places. Thus, residents tend to keep tourist destinations clean. Research participants generally believed that scenic landscapes and clean places influence visitors. Homestay operators collectively work towards keeping their homes and surroundings clean. Participants believed that sanitation in their locality has improved by introducing homestay programs in the Phobjikha valley. The *Gewog* administration coordinated regular cleaning of their surroundings (once a month), and this had helped to maintain their local areas clean. Non-homestay households support to keep the local environment clean and appealing by participating in the monthly cleaning program. They believed that it is shameful to present their surroundings full of garbage to visitors from other countries and to those people coming from other *Dzongkhags*. Thus, the residents adopted the waste segregation practice.

Individual households segregated their waste into degradable and non-degradable waste. While degradable rubbish goes to the landfill, non-degradable waste such as plastic bottles are stored at homes and taken to the *Gewog* for recycling. A homestay household participant talked about the transformation of their ways of thinking in relation to waste:

“We are able to maintain the surroundings clean when we have guests. We used to throw wastes everywhere when we did not have homestays. Nowadays, we need to maintain cleanliness.” (HH03).

As per participant (HH03), the effects of homestay operation have resulted in changing the way people in the community think. The homestay operation has influenced other community members to adapt to new but positive changes and tended to maintain their local environment, always appealing to outsiders. It was evident from a homestay operator who talked about using part of the fallow government land around his house to develop into an aesthetic space. The homestay operator said:

“I have fenced and included a part of the government land around my home, which the government is opposing. I have developed it into a beautiful space by planting ornamental plants and gardening to make my surroundings more appealing for guests. I feel this should not burden the government. I would be delighted if the government looks into such matters and grant needful considerations to use without transferring ownership.” (HH01).

The above quote clearly shows that the homestay operators have realised the value of conserving the environment for homestay operations. Making investment on part of the government land to convert into an appealing space is a positive transformation of their attitude to keeping the surroundings appealing because of homestay operation experiences.

Similarly, one of the non-homestay participants mentioned:

“The operation of farmhouses benefits the farmhouse households and maintains the cleanliness of the surroundings in the locality. Bhutan being a GNH country, we need to present a clean place to the guests from other countries. Each household in the village takes care of their wastes and sends them to the landfill once a month. As such, there are no adverse effects, and it helps farmhouses and the local environment.” (NHH13).

The quote denotes that homestay operators have realised the importance of maintaining their environment clean for their guests. This can have positive impacts on accessing homestay guests. Though they emphasised on having been able to maintain their local surroundings clean, increase in garbage volume indicates their environment already being impacted by the homestay operations. Some of the participants (both homestay and non-homestay participants) mentioned that despite the coordinated regular cleaning, they find garbage being disposed of indiscriminately in their villages. Most of the participants have come across domestic and regional visitors (mostly from India) who leave their garbage wherever they travel and halt. This contradicts their ideas of maintaining the local areas free from garbage to attract visitors.

5.1.3 Social dimension

In Bhutanese context, women are homemakers, and the household decisions are mostly made by women as the head of the family. Since homestay operation is confined to providing authentic cultural and traditional experiences to guests, it was revealed from homestay participants that homestay operation was coordinated and managed by women. Further, the advent of homestay operation has increased the interactions among local residents, especially those households operating homestays. The relationships and connections within the community tended to become stronger when they interacted more. Homestay households helped each other when they had guests and also shared guests. This reciprocal relationship tended to enhance social cohesion in the community. The non-homestay households also helped their relatives when in need to arrange activities and manage tasks such as fetching firewood or dropping lunch for homestay guests when guests partake in a local excursion. The collective role of the community to maintain the cleanliness of their local environment and to make it presentable to the visitors is also an indication of building a strong society. According to a homestay participant:

“At times, we also get guests from other farmhouses when they have excess numbers. I also share guests to those who share guests. This is how we help each other.” (HH16).

The reciprocal relationship represents a strong sense of belonging to a social network, enhancing cohesion among homestay operators. Some non-homestay households believed that homestay operators tended to enjoy better lives because of homestay operations.

Another benefit related to the social aspect is family members of homestay households tended to work collectively to showcase the best they can in terms of behaviour. According to a homestay participant

“I and my husband work together to make arrangements for guests. We also present the friendliness atmosphere to guests and never have arguments in front of guests.” (HH15).

The quote above indicates that homestay families tend to cooperate and present their best behaviour in front of their guests.

5.1.4 Cultural dimension

Most participants believed that Bhutan village homestays can provide enriching experiences of village life to homestay guests. Homestays can offer unique experiences such as churning of milk, milking cows, preparing meals, and eating together with the host, like a family in a traditional house as shown in figure 4. This could attract high-end tourists because of the unique culture and tradition.

As the subtle form of accommodation with traditional settings, homestay primarily aim to provide rich cultural experiences (cultural authenticity) through host-guest interactions. The host family arranges cultural programs by inviting relatives to sing and dance for their guests. Thus, singers interact with guests, guides, and drivers. In the process, each one of them exchanges their culture through this platform. This arrangement can also enhance the relationship within the community when they help each other in homestay operation activities. A homestay participant said:

“We arrange singers if guests ask us. We have a few group of people who often sing in group for the guests. I request them and they perform the cultural program. We provide them meals whereas, guest pay them in the form of tips as the token of appreciation. I think this is good to upkeep our tradition and culture. Singers are also benefitted when they attend such program.” (HH16).

Homestays can have both positive and negative impacts on local culture. Some of the participants mentioned the unauthenticity of the local Bhutanese cuisine. For example, the

typical dish '*Emadhatshi*' (Chilly and cheese) is modified to suit the taste of guests by the homestay hosts. Modification of dishes to suit guests' taste appears as a kind of creativity to sustain the homestay business because if a guest cannot eat the real *Emadhatshi*, it becomes useless to include something neglected by guests. This tends to contradict village homestays' purpose to provide true rural Bhutanese life and culture to guests. However, homestays tend to adapt to the changes with some modification but without making it completely inauthentic or fake.

5.1.5 Governance dimension

The study revealed a number of issues related to governance of homestays, such as gaps between policy and on-ground implementation.

5.1.5.1 Gap between policy and on-ground implementation

In this study, most of the key informant participants believed that the current governance system lacks regular monitoring of homestay operations by the TCB. The key informant participant stated:

"....on the other hand there is also no check and balance from tourism. TCB is not able to monitor at all" (KI01).

According to the TCB and homestay operators, although there is a monitoring system, it is not implemented consistently due to staff shortages and long distance. The homestay participant confirms that monitoring is conducted but not regularly.

"TCB visits the area about once a year and interrogates guest arrivals and how host-guest interactions are conducted." (HH04).

The above quote indicated that there is a monitoring system in place. In contrast, another homestay participant said they were not aware of the monitoring being conducted by the tourism authority.

"I don't remember TCB monitoring farmhouses in our village." (HH16).

The officials from TCB confirmed that monitoring is conducted but not regularly carried out.

“Monitoring is the mandate of quality assurance decision, so it is same with every government agencies. Shortage of staff and understaff issue. So we are not able to conduct monitoring regularly, especially far flung dzongkhags like east and central, we are not able to go. But nearby dzongkhag, Paro, Punakha, Wangdue, we are able to go twice or thrice. But we go to the east once in a year. So, it is due to shortage of staff and not able to cover up. For 156 homestays in the country are spread all over the places. Then, in some cases, distance between one homestay to another takes hours to travel and it is practically a challenging one.” (KI03).

The quote explains that homestays in western regions are monitored regularly, but those in the central and eastern regions are monitored once a year only due to distance and shortage of staff. This indicates the lack of formal networking strategies between TCB and local governments in 205 Gewogs.

As a result, there is speculation among some of the tourism entities who were interviewed, that some non-homestay households are operating as homestays without a certificate issued by the TCB. A small number of these uncertified homestays are suspected to be owned by tour operators. The homestay participants were reluctant to talk about this and declined to provide the details. Many of the homestay participants said they are not aware of non-registered households operating as homestays. However, two uncertified homestay household participants admitted that they provided homestay services to guests, but not international guests. These uncertified homestays mentioned that their neighbour homestay household shared domestic guests. They are unregistered as their facilities are not up to the required standard to apply for a homestay certificate.

Due to the prevailing monitoring system, the key informants believed that a rising number of non-registered homestays would contribute to mass tourism, compromising the quality of services to guests. A few tourism entities believed that mass tourism could have ill effects on authenticity in terms of cultural richness, food, and tradition. This can have detrimental impacts on Bhutan, as the approach to tourism is based on cultural authenticity and low impact. According to a key informant:

“I think the gap between the policy and implementation is not good as it is like a mass tourism because this will lead to compromise the quality of services and rather focus on the quantity if not controlled effectively through monitoring. If this keeps unchecked, it will have implications on pricing and would result poor quality of the accommodation services. If they have more people they will lower the accommodation rate to as low as Nu.500.” (KI01).

The excerpt indicates the likelihood of mass tourism as the negative effects of weak monitoring system. He (KI01) mentioned that service quality will be affected with increasing visitation in the absence of regular monitoring and regulation system.

5.1.5.2 Lack of collaboration

Some of the non-homestay household members trained as local guides by NGOs such as the Royal Society for Protection of Nature are not certified by TCB. This implies that limited collaboration among relevant entities in the planning and coordination of basic trainings such as local guiding. According to a key informant participant:

“...regarding the local guides, we train and give certificate of completion but TCB is not certifying because they were saying like it's contradicting like national guide's norms because the travel agents they have to pay extra money to local guides.” (KI02).

The above excerpt shows that collaboration among the relevant tourism entities in planning and implementing projects at the local level is weak. In this case, RSPN seem to have not consulted TCB before the local guide training was provided. The matters on the requirement and possibility of local guide certification should have been discussed during the planning processes. Similarly, lack of creativity was among homestay operators was revealed from this study, which could have been due to inadequate trainings for homestay households by relevant authorities.

5.1.6 Tourism experience

Most key informants perceived that homestays are lacking creativity. The key informants mentioned that most homestays tended to focus just on arranging accommodation to their guests, which is not enough to provide enriching experiences of rural Bhutanese life.

According to the officials from TCB, as opposed to homestay operations:

“...some organise cultural program, some arrange village tour, and some they take to the orchard and engage in orchard activities and cooking. Likewise, we encourage them to give additional activities and services to the guests. However, many homestays are limited to rooms. Similarly, if they can arrange multiple activities, village homestays itself become a product. So the guests can stay in community for more days. Otherwise guests travel during the day, conducts tour and they come back only for night halt. So, therefore, they have to go beyond rooms, go beyond accommodation, incorporate additional services such as archery, local wine making, and milking cow. If they arrange these, guests are interested. Likewise, if creative, innovative activities are incorporated, then the homestays will become a product by itself.” (KI03).

The excerpt above pertains to the practical experiences of the tourism regulatory organisation who monitors the on-ground implementation. The quote explicitly mentions that majority homestay households are not doing enough to provide enriching experiences to their guests other than accommodation. This also indicates the gaps in providing basic homestay operation trainings, including short courses on organising multiple activities for the guest to develop homestay itself as a product and assist in marketing. Thus, there is a need for the concerned authorities such as the TCB to emphasise on strengthening the formal roles and networking with relevant institutions at the local level such as the local governments across the country.

5.2 Introduction of different entities in homestay network and their roles

Social networks were seen as an essential aspect of being able to access homestay guests by all four categories of participants in this research (key informants, homestay households, non-homestay households, and uncertified homestay households). Homestay households believed that networks with relevant entities such as the Tourism Council of Bhutan, Royal Society for Protection of Nature, Tour Operators, Local Government, tour guides, tourists (guests), non-homestays, and hotels are generally important for accessing guests. The excerpt from the participant illuminates the importance of maintaining networks:

“Regarding the access of guests, it is entirely dependent on the relationship you maintain with as many relevant people as possible.” (HH01).

The above quote shows importance of building ties with many networks to access resources (guests). Similarly, links within and outside a particular network enable sharing information and knowledge, which can ultimately contribute to better access to homestay guests.

Entities involved in homestay networks are introduced below with their roles. The information was adapted from respective websites, and official documents of the concerned entities as presented below.

The Tourism Council of Bhutan, as the apex tourism organisation, assesses and issues village homestay certificates in collaboration with local governments (*Dzongkhags* and *Gewogs*) and capacity building training such as cooking, bed-making, and first aid, including the safety of guests. Further, monitoring and evaluation of homestays are conducted. Renewal of homestay certificates is sought from this entity by homestay operators every three years. Other important roles include promoting homestays on its website and other online platforms and printing registration certificates.

Royal Society for Protection of Nature's key focus is coordinating guest distribution during the annual crane festival in Phobjikha valley. This non-governmental organisation liaises with other relevant tourism entities to impart basic trainings to homestay operators on basic cooking, housekeeping, and safety.

Tour operators are private business entities in the tourism industry, marketing and promoting tourism products and supporting Brand Bhutan. Further, they identify homestays and make homestay reservations.

National tour guides are those who are professionally trained and certified by the Tourism Council of Bhutan to conduct guiding in the country. Tour guides accompany guests to homestay households. Since most homestay operators are not able to speak in English, guides play crucial roles in between homestay hosts and guests as the interpreter.

Local guides refer to those native to particular communities in rural areas and are trained as local guides.

Tourists (guests) can choose a particular village homestay depending on the location and services. This tends to take place when they (guests) are already in the local destinations.

Local Government refers to district and sub-district administration, which are headed by *Dzongdag* (Governor) and *Gup* (Head of the local administrative block). The *Gup* forwards the homestay applications to the *Dzongdag* for further compilation and submission to the Tourism Council of Bhutan. The *Gewog* (local administrative block) coordinates a regular cleaning program with homestay operators.

Local hotels are a form of accommodation in local areas. They send guests to their relatives operating homestays. They also send guests to other homestays when their relatives have already got guests.

Homestays are those households certified by the Tourism Council of Bhutan as homestays. These are a modest form of accommodation but intended to provide unique experiences to guests through their first-hand interactions with host families. They reciprocate sharing of guests and help each other among homestay households. They invite local singers when their guests ask for a cultural program and other non-homestay households to showcase local wine distillation, carpentry works, and making puffed rice.

Non-homestays comprise different livelihood occupations such as farmer, carpenter, local hotel, taxi driver, local astrologer, and local singers, who participated in this study. They collectively support maintaining the local surroundings as clean and appealing to the visitors. Some of them partake in cultural activities when homestay operators, usually their relatives, invite them.

Uncertified homestays are those households not certified by the Tourism Council of Bhutan as homestays, but providing homestay services.

5.3 Social networks among homestay operators and other entities in homestay networks

Homestay networks involve many entities who are perceived as important partners in the network to assist homestay operators in accessing information on tourism events, capacity

development trainings, and, more importantly, guests. In contrast, many entities are connected indirectly to homestay operations. The type of network and relationship between homestays and each of the entities, which have direct connections and relationship in the network are discussed in the following sub-sections.

5.3.1 Social network between homestays and national tour guides

Building connections and relationships with national tour guides was perceived as being crucial. Most homestay households believe that guides play significant roles in bringing guests to their homes compared to tour operators. National guides are vital to homestays because they are the entities who spend most of their time with the guests and are influential in making recommendations to other guides and tour operators. The quote of one of the homestay participants below asserts the importance of maintaining relations with guides:

“I do feel that having good links with guides can help to get guests, although services are also very important. Guides tell their friends and other people they know about our farmhouse. I think they can also talk to the tour operator to book farmhouses they already know. Guests may also listen to guides as they don’t know about the places and farmhouses.” (HH11).

The statement above indicates that national tour guides are more important than tour operators. Guides disseminate information on better homestays to other guides through word-of-mouth. Most participants have also indicated that guides can act as *gatekeepers* in the formal network to influence tour operators to decide homestay reservations. One of the homestay participants explained the influential roles of national guides in accessing guests by homestay operators:

“In my opinion, connections with tour companies are also helpful to get guests reservations but guides are more important because they are the in charge of guests from the day they receive guest from the airport until their departure from the country. They have more connections with many people whom we don’t know. I heard from others saying that tour operators can change travel plans based on what guides decide. Therefore, guides are influential to decide where to take their guests.” (HH15).

5.3.2 Social network between homestays and tour operators

Tour operators play crucial roles in the network for homestay operations as they have a direct link and access to tourists. Tour operators tend to book those homestays they already know and have taken guests to in the past. Tour operators said that they consider the quality of services and experiences for their guests. A participant who operates a tour company, shared his opinion related to services:

“The policy of our company is for instance we need to ensure there is a proper toilet with modern facilities and the toilet has to be in condition even if they don’t have modern facilities. Secondly, there has to be inner settings as per the tradition like the Altar room. Another things that we look into is traditional hot stone bath. If all these things are present, then we consider as our identified homestays.” (KI05),

The excerpt above indicated that reservation of homestays can depend on the facilities of homestay households, which can add to provide enriching experiences to their guests.

5.3.3 Social network between homestays and non-homestay households

Informal interactions such as the consecration of a house, house construction, singing and dancing, herding of cattle, local festivals, and agricultural works take place between homestays and non-homestay households in their day-to-day activities in the community. Homestay households invite local singers when their guests show interest in local cultural programs such as singing and dancing. According to the local singers who were interviewed as non-homestay participants, they go to those homestays who are their relatives. The informal networks among these entities tend to help non-homestay households to access information about homestay operations. Thus, homestays act as the *hub* that connects to a range of other entities and networks and acts as the *gatekeeper* for those non-homestays. The non-homestay participant said:

“Farmhouse operators share information about the benefits and how they take care of their guests. We are able to know more about farmhouse operations from them. They have connections with many outside people such as guides, drivers, tour operators, people working in tourism offices, and many more.” (NHH06).

The above quote shows how information is disseminated via informal networks in the community.

5.3.4 Social network between homestays and local hotels

Surprisingly, homestays generally perceived local hotels as a useful entity in the network, which is commonly the opposite in the business realm. The local hotel operator who participated in the research said that they send guests to homestays who are their relatives. Therefore, they give priority to their relatives, followed by other households. Some of the homestay participants mentioned that they get guests if they have connections with local hotels. The participant said:

“It is helpful to maintain relations with national guides as they accompany guests. It is also helpful to keep good links with local hotels as they send guests to their relatives operating farmhouses, and to those they have good relationships as well.” (HH07).

The quote represented the strong informal ties that helped to access guests. Thus, sharing of guests is driven by the type of ties that prevails within the informal networks. This generally indicates that not every homestay household can expect to receive guests from local hotels.

A participant who owns a hotel in the case study area, said:

“I do also help my relatives by sending guests to their homestays. If they have guests already, we give them to other homestays.” (NHH01).

Notwithstanding, local leaders who were interviewed shared a different opinion mentioning that the increasing number of hotels is a threat to homestay operations. This is because other entities in the same business network are usually considered competition in any business operation. The participant shared his opinion:

“If I look at the current situation in my locality, I think it won’t be possible to operate and manage homestays in the future. This is because of companies constructing more hotels in the area which can affect flow of guests to homestays. This is my concern about the future.” (KI06).

5.3.5 Social network among homestays households

Many of the homestay households believed that maintaining connections and relationships among themselves helps them to live in solidarity. They share guests when they have surplus guests. This reciprocal relationship among homestay households is similar to a saying, “You scratch my back, and I will scratch yours.” The homestay operator said:

“We help each other when we have more guests. I have a sister who also operates a homestay. I share the guests to her when I have more guests. I also get guests from her when she has many.” (HH03).

It is clear from the quote that sharing of guests takes place amongst homestay operators, based on their strong ties of having common interests. Thus, those homestay households located far tend to get excluded from the network.

5.3.6 Social network between homestays and Tourism Council of Bhutan

Generally, all participants perceived those relations with this government organisation have no bearing on how a homestay access guests. The link between homestays and TCB is in terms of monitoring and capacity-building courses. However, the relationships and connection of this organisation to other entities such as the Guide Association of Bhutan, tour operators, local government, and tour guides can have indirect but positive effects on the overall operations of homestays through the development of relevant tourism policies and strategies. TCB is a *pulse taker* as it is aware of what other entities in the network are doing. The key informant participants indicated that TCB imparts trainings to homestay operators.

“Therefore, we at TCB even we have annual budget for human resource capacity building. So, every year, we look at the homestays in the country. If some homestays have already attended trainings, we prioritise and give trainings to new homestays in specific locations.”(KI03).

5.3.7 Social network between homestays and the local government

The local governments (*Dzongkhag* and *Gewog*) have no important connection with homestays. They have formal networks with the central agencies such as the TCB in planning

ecotourism projects. They play facilitation roles for monitoring, evaluation, and reporting to concerned authorities. The only direct link with homestays is the compilation and submission of homestay applications to *Dzongkhag* for onward submission to TCB for homestay certification. As long as the requirements of the homestay guideline of 2019 are fulfilled, none of the applications can be refused by the *Gewog* administration. Once the households become a homestay, there is no formal connection or support from local governments. The key informant participant said:

“As to date, they have not received any involvement and kind of supports from dzongkhag. We have not provided any supports either. We don’t know whether there is no need to provide support because homestays have not sought any form of support. On this, we have not received any instructions from Dzongkhag and TCB. We, the Gewog administration have also not received any reports from individual homestay operators. Therefore, we are not able to understand their problems since each of the homestays are operated depending on their capacities, and networks being developed and maintained with relevant stakeholders. I think there is no major problem as such because the main component is the guests and as long as they have guests, there is not much problem.” (KI06).

As highlighted in the above quote, *Gewog* and *Dzongkhag* have played limited formal roles in homestay network such as collection and forwarding of homestay applications and coordination of waste management in the *Gewogs*. The local governments seem to be not concerned and believed homestays are accessing guests and have no problems.

5.3.8 Social network between homestays and tourists (guests)

Guests are the most important entity in the homestay network. Guests have direct connections with tour operators and guides. Therefore, those homestay operators maintaining relationships with tour operators and national guides tend to access more guests. On the other hand, key informants and homestay operators believe that providing better services to guests would also help them access guests because of the word-of-mouth channel of information dissemination. The key informant said:

“....more than fifty percent of the tourists will choose that, you know, even seventy, eighty percent will want to try and go back and tell their parents, friends, spouses and say I went to

Bhutan and slept this way, you know, it was a wonderful experience, you know. A unique and living experience!” (KI01).

As reflected in the quote, the word-of-mouth channel of information may help to relay the information to other networks informally through the family members. This may eventually help homestays to see their guests again or other new guests connected to their past guests.

Another key informant (KI04) indicated the experiences of word of mouth:

“Another is words of mouth because besides tourists who visit from outside, expatriates or foreigners working in Bhutan, they also tend to, go to the house which is well-recommended by those who have a good experience earlier. This is how homestays mostly connect.”

The above quote shows the evidence of receiving guests linked to word-of-mouth. Guests can also influence entities like tour operators in the network for reservation of a particular homestay.

5.3.9 Social network between local guides and national tour guides

The study found that local guides in the homestay network tended to get excluded from their roles once national guides get information such as local stories and significance of the local destinations from local guides about the local places. Although local guides were trained by the Royal Society for Protection of Nature, national guides find local guide not useful when the national guides already know about the local places. A key informant said about how national guides tend to collect information from local guide:

“For example today I am the local guide of your guests. You are the national guide ok, and I have explained all the stories so and so. Next time you will say my story on behalf of me. In that way local guide task is lost.”(KI02).

Further, it was revealed from a key informant (a national guide) that local guides are not required as the national guides as professionally trained can conduct guiding by themselves:

“As to date, I have not heard of local guides in Gangtey and Phobjikha. We have also not hired any local guides anywhere in the country. We would not hire local guides even if

available. Since we are professional guides, we need to maintain the quality of guiding services for our guests.” (KI11).

He (KI11) clearly indicated that local guides are not required as they are professional guides and their priority is to maintain the service quality for their guests. Thus, local guides are excluded from the network, and the quote indicates that local guides will remain neglected.

According to a key informant participant:

“Regarding local guides, firstly we have not heard of local guides been trained in Phobjikha and Gangtey. Secondly, TCB did not inform us about this as they usually inform us if any new products or information are available. Thirdly, in my opinion, I do not find the need to hire local guides as the national tour guide can handle everything starting from guest reception at the airport to till the guest departs the country. Further, it is an additional cost for the tour company if we hire local guides.” (KI05).

The excerpt above is an indication of weak coordination among relevant entities in planning, implementation, and sharing of information at the national level through formal network.

5.4 Other factors that impact the access to homestay guests

While access to the network is important, there are general factors that impact the access to homestay guests and the network, which are beyond the control of the homestays.

5.4.1 Travelling distance and attraction of the destination

The majority of participants believe that travelling distance affects homestays to get guests. They also believed that the inflow of guests tends to depend on the attractiveness of the destination in terms of landscape and the presence of cultural sites. As believed by most of the participants, those homestays located in far distances tend to get fewer guests even without much difference in terms of facilities and quality of services. The homestay participant said:

“Receiving guests is not only dependent on connections with relevant tourism actors, but also on the distance to reach a farmhouse. This is because guides and guests tend to choose those

which are not far away. We don't get guests compared to other farmhouses as my home is located far from Gangtey.” (HH07).

Further, the non-homestay participant shared similar views:

“If one has to access more guests, we need to have good road connections. It is also because of the long distance to travel. Drivers and guides prefer a shorter distance to take their guests. It is vital to keep better relations with guides and drivers to access the guests.” (NHH08).

Quotes from homestay and non-homestay participants pinpoint to distance and quality of roads. As reflected, national guides and drivers tend to avoid distant places. However, this may depend on the interests of guests, but most guests would not have longer stay duration, and tend to consider shorter travel distance. In such case scenario, strong ties cannot impact the decision of guests to visit places considering their short duration of stay in the country.

Other factors such as the attractiveness of the destinations can also influence the inflow of guests. Majority participants expressed that accessibility, culture and natural landscape of the Phobjikha valley have resulted homestay operations.

“I think homestays under Wangdue district are concentrated in Phobjikha valley simply because of accessibility, cultural richness, and overall beautiful landscape and crane conservation program in the area. Tourists prefer to visit scenic places and also where they can experience local culture and events.” (KI06).

This quote stresses the destination attractiveness, which influences the decision of guests to visit a particular place. The attractiveness of the place is also linked to the richness of cultural components such as monasteries, which tend to attract both international and domestic guests. For example, the reason why Gangtey area receives more guests is because of the popular Gangtey monastery. Other areas have also got monasteries but not as big and famous as Gangtey monastery. The homestay participant mentioned the differences in receiving guests because of the place's cultural sites and natural significance.

“As I look, I think benefits are better in Gangtey Gewog. This is because of the sacred Gangtey monastery as guests prefer to stay close to that monastery. Another thing is during the winter, as most of the roosting areas for Black-necked Cranes fall under Gangtey, guests are interested

to observe the activities of cranes right from morning to evening until cranes move to their night halt places.” (HH08).

The excerpt above indicates the important roles played by the cultural popularity and significance of the place in terms of natural richness. Notwithstanding, there are also other means to build relationships in the networks, as mentioned in the following sub-section, which is within the individual homestay operators’ control.

5.4.2 Building relationships with the network through services

Providing better homestay services to guests is perceived by most homestay participants as the factor that also tends to determine access to guests. Furthermore, homestay participants also believed that services to guides and drivers could also impact the flow of guests. Accommodation and meals for guides and drivers are provided for free, which helps maintain relationships.

A homestay participant expressed the importance of providing free accommodation and food to drivers and guides. The excerpt below shows that building relationships with guides matters when it comes to accessing guests as they play the roles of *gatekeeper* to homestays and other formal networks at the national level:

“We do provide free accommodation and food to guides and drivers. I assume they are treated similarly in other form of accommodations like hotels and resorts. This is a kind of business strategy as they are the people who deals with guests. If they are satisfied and happy with the services, it is likely to get guests in the future.” (HH09).

Generally, homestay operators believe that it is important for them to provide better services to their clients to get guests. Another homestay participant said:

“It also depends on the quality of services one can provide to their guests. Even if guests do not tell us about the quality of services we offered them, they inform the tour companies after leaving our place. Some guests prefer to stay in our house if they had stayed before and sought arrangements from the tour operators. So, getting guests would indicate the quality of services and vice-versa. We should understand in that way.” (HH03).

The quote above captures the vitality of providing quality services to guests, which can help those getting repeat guests.

Regarding guests, facilities such as hot stone bath, which can help differentiate homestays are regarded as part of providing better services. Thus, according to most homestay households, the availability of a hot stone bath tends to attract more guests. Tour operators tend to book homestays with a hot stone bath facility and avoid ones without the hot stone bath even if they have strong relationships. This is why the homestay households include this facility in their homes. The key informant (KI05), who operates a travel company, said:

“Secondly, there has to be inner settings as per the tradition like the Altar room. Another thing that we look into is traditional hot stone bath. If all these things are present, then we consider as our identified homestays. We book other homestays with hot stone baths as many guests would prefer to experience it.”

The above quote implies that tour operators regard quality of services to their guests as the priority. The homestay participant (HH05) said:

“Availability of hot stone bath attracts more guests. Tour operators book those homestays, which have hot stone bath facility.”

This quote succinctly explains the advantage of hot stone bath to attract guests in homestay operations.

Services to national guides is also regarded by homestay operators as important for accessing guests. National guides tend to take advantage of their position in the network as the *gatekeeper*. Few homestay operators said despite free accommodation and meals, guides complain about the quality of meals. The homestay participant (HH03) said:

“Guides and drivers are provided the same accommodation and meals but for free. It isn't easy even if we offer them free services and meals. Some guides tend to take this as their entitlement and do complain about the meals.”

The excerpt above implies that homestay operators are faced with challenges to maintain relationships, which might hamper access to guests. It is also possible that guides can choose

homestay households as per their taste and personal interests. Therefore, there are chances of some homestays miss opportunities even in the network.

5.4.3 Limited stay duration of guests

Generally, tourists visit Bhutan for only a short duration, an average of five to six nights. This was revealed to be one of the factors that contribute to getting fewer guests by homestays. The participant elaborated on the relationship between duration and access to homestay guests below:

“Many tourists don’t go beyond Bumthang because their holiday duration is short. It depends on the number of days. One thing is, if we look at the average length of stay of the tourists, most tourists would come to Bhutan, they spend about 5-6 nights. So, they are all busy people. So they have no time. That is why they would only have 5-6 days in Bhutan.” (KI03).

The excerpt above shows that homestay guests would travel to destinations which are not far away because of their limited duration to stay in the country. Thus, those homestays, which are far from Thimphu (capital town) and Paro international airport would not receive guests as other homestays under Wangdue Phodrang, Punakha, and Paro *Dzongkhags* access.

5.5 Barriers for non-homestays to operate a homestay

Non-homestay household participants expressed their interest in operating a homestay, but a range of barriers hindered them from applying for a homestay certificate. Some of the barriers include lack of funds (financial barrier) and lack of awareness of the procedures to become certified.

5.5.1 Lack of funds

In general, non-homestay participants expressed their interest in operating homestays. However, they have not been able to apply for the certificate due to a shortage of funds to build the toilet and arrange other required items (mattress, bedsheets, pillows, quilts, and kitchen items). According to homestay operators, toilet construction is expensive, costing approximately Nu.300000.00 (Ngultrums - Bhutan currency), equivalent to USD 4000.00. Compared to an average annual household income from potatoes of around Nu. 500000.00

(USD 6667.00), the difference amount of Nu. 200,000.00 (USD 2667.00) can barely meet the expenses to set up the toilet and other required items for homestay and meet household living requirements. The cost can even rise depending on the quality of materials used. Thus, every household cannot afford to become homestay operators.

Thus, the core reason for the presence of uncertified homestays is attributed to financial barriers to be part of the formal homestay networks. Some uncertified homestay households host domestic guests to accumulate funds to set up for a homestay operation in the future, functioning as an uncertified homestay household in the meantime. They are mindful of the safety and comfort of international guests and stick to domestic guests who mostly come for pilgrimage purposes. The participant uncertified homestay participant said:

“I was interested long ago to operate a homestay. Still, since we have to set up the required facilities for guests, it wasn't easy to arrange as I had to spend whatever money I had on house construction and could not buy necessary things for homestay. I could not construct a suitable toilet and had to lease the house for rent for about four months. I was interested in establishing a homestay but had to halt due to financial problems to arrange mattress, plates, blankets, etc. I want to arrange things gradually and start a homestay business as this was the most awaited household plan. Starting from a couple of months, I kept domestic guests.” (UNHH01).

The participant (UNHH01) was interested but failed to start a homestay due to a financial barrier. Hence, only financially capable households are benefitted from homestay operations. A non-homestay participant reiterated that:

“In my opinion, farmhouses benefit those wealthy households. Economically poor families like us cannot start one even if interested to operate a farmhouse.” (NHH13)

This shows that although they are in the network, they miss the opportunity to welcome international guests from where they can reap more benefits. Non-homestays cannot keep guests, especially international guests, without being approved by the TCB to operate as village homestays. This is an indication of a lack of support from the formal networks among the local government and other relevant tourism entities at the national level. Therefore, findings indicted the need of financial support to join the network.

5.5.2 Lack of awareness on the procedures to become a homestay

Generally, all the non-homestay household participants said they are not aware of the procedures to apply for a homestay certificate. A non-homestay household participant said:

“I am interested in establishing a farmhouse, but we have no idea how to start one, didn’t know before. I have also not been involved in any of the activities related to farmhouses”.

This quote indicates the weakness of the formal roles of the relevant tourism entities. Homestay operators perceived a lack of adequate awareness imparted by relevant entities on homestay operations and associated benefits. Most of the information about homestay operations and benefits are conveyed to non-homestay households by homestay operators.

5.6 Impacts of COVID-19 on the network of homestays

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamics of homestay network. A series of lockdowns had negative impacts on the arrival of guests to homestays in the case study locations. Thus, interactions among the entities of the homestay network, especially tourists, guides, drivers, and tour operators, came to a sudden halt. Consequently, this unexpected intervention transformed the ways of doing things within the community. Since homestays stopped receiving guests, they used the opportunity to embark on their agricultural farming and livestock rearing activities.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has weakened the networks with external entities to homestays, it has strengthened internal connections within the community and thus, changed the dynamics of networks. The homestay operators regarded this pandemic as an opportunity to carry out maintenance of their houses, especially toilets. The homestay participant explained about the maintenance works carried out:

“Since we did not have guests during this pandemic, we were able to spend time on taking up some repairing works, especially the toilet”. (HH08)

Homestay households believed that they have not been affected severely by the pandemic. One participant expressed the extent of impacts:

“This pandemic has badly affected the farmhouses in terms of getting guests. However, we are not affected as other hotels. We manage our farmhouses ourselves, and the income we get is to supplement the household income. For hotels, they have employees working for whom payments have to be given. Some hotels might be renting a building and pay monthly rent. So, they must be facing greater challenges.” (HH14).

The excerpt above explains the degree of impacts and tells us that homestays have alternative form of income, unlike other tourism entities, which they can fall back on when needed. Homestay operators indicated farming as a reliable source of rural livelihoods. Therefore, this shows the commitments to promote agricultural farming as the primary source of household income in the long run and would maintain informal networks within the community. Some of the homestay participants explained that they were able to generate some income from domestic guests who were on pilgrimage to their locality. The inflow of domestic guests helped them to at least generate some money during the pandemic, which is authenticated by the following quote:

“We kept on receiving few domestic guests during this pandemic. Many people from other Dzongkhags came on pilgrimage to visit Gangtey monastery and nearby religious places in our Gewog. The income from the domestic visitors helped us to at least generate some money for the family.”(HH08).

Another interesting findings from this study in relation to COVID-19 pandemic was that homestay operators mentioned that they have been primarily engaged with their agriculture farming and livestock, the income from homestay operation was just to supplement their household income generated from agricultural crop such as potatoes. Homestay participants explained that since tourists (guests) mostly come to their locality during off-farm season, homestay operation becomes a convenient activity to generate some money for their families. The homestay participant said:

“We rely on agriculture farming to support family livelihood. We cultivate potatoes as the primary source of income for the family. Homestay is also good but cannot get much income. Income from homestay is just to supplement our income from potatoes and sale of dairy products. We operate homestay because more guests come when we are free from agricultural farming.” (HH07).

The homestay operators have not only engaged with the agriculture farming, they mentioned that they conducted cleaning campaigns to keep their local environment clean. A homestay participant explained that homestay operators were engaged collectively to carry out cleaning activity during the pandemic.

“The good thing homestay operators collectively did was the cleaning of the local surroundings during the pandemic.” (HH12)

Regarding non-homestays, they were generally not as impacted as those living in urban areas. They had enough rice and other essential household groceries at their homes. However, some non-homestay households relied on casual employment in the construction industry in the local areas, pre-COVID, as their supplementary household income, which was affected by the pandemic. The construction of hotels stopped, and they could not earn money. In general, non-homestay households believed that they had the opportunity to focus on their agricultural and livestock activities, especially vegetable production, due to banning imports during the lockdown.

The participant (NHH02) mentioned the impacts of the pandemics in rural areas.

“The impacts from this pandemic is minor in villages compared to towns, although this has impacted everyone at all levels. We have not faced problems in terms of groceries as we had enough in stock.”

Similarly, another participant (NHH04) said:

“We have not faced major problems during this difficult time as we had enough to meet daily household consumption. We have been able to upscale vegetable production through the supply of greenhouse from the government. There is better opportunity to promote organic farming and marketing in the future.”

Another participant (NHH05) said income from casual works was affected.

“We used to get works in the hotel construction sites before the pandemic. After the outbreak of this pandemic, hotel construction had to stop, and we have not been able to get works for economic income.”

The positive impact of the pandemics was that the community as a whole has been able to adapt to the sudden changes in communicating through WeChat group. In addition to the existing homestay network, this WeChat group further strengthened the interactions in the community. Homestay and non-homestay household participants mentioned that they respected and followed instructions conveyed through the WeChat group by their village *Tshogpa* (a separate group). The participant (NHH03) expressed that:

“The local leader made a WeChat group and Tshogpa disseminated information through the group. All the local residents paid due respect to the instructions and abided by the rules.”

The quote asserts how everyone in the community responds to change collectively. Informal networks respect the information conveyed by local leaders through formal networks. The strong ties within the community were further strengthened as the interaction through the common communication platform (WeChat) was formed. Thus, strength of these ties can affect interactions and wellbeing among the members of the community.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Since little is known about the overall operations of homestays in Bhutan, this study explored i) the benefits and challenges of homestay operations, ii) how networks influence the functioning of homestays, and iii) how COVID-19 has influenced the network of homestays. Accordingly, this chapter begins by discussing the benefits and challenges in the form of economic, environmental, social, and cultural themes, followed by issues related to governance. The chapter then discusses how the network influences the functioning of homestays. Since roles played by different entities influenced access to guests, formal and informal networks are covered to enable an understanding of interactions among various entities in the homestay network. Lastly, the influence of COVID-19 on the homestay networks is discussed.

6.1 Benefits and challenges of homestay operations

Benefits and challenges of homestay operations are discussed in the following subsections.

6.1.1 Economic impacts of homestay operation

There are economic benefits from homestay operation, which have resulted in more homestay operators. The income generated from homestay operations was revealed to have enhanced the livelihoods of homestay operators. This was evident from the research findings, where homestay participants expressed on the positive effects of homestay operations on the rural livelihoods through economic income. This is consistent with the existing literatures, which showed homestays are driven by economic benefits in the form of cash earnings (Beedle et al., 2013; Bhalla et al., 2016; Bhuiyan et al., 2013; Dorji et al., 2014; Salleh et al., 2014; Takaendengan et al., 2022). The economic benefits have led to an increase in the number of homestays in the cases study area (Phobjikha valley). The data from TCB showed that number of homestays increased from 149 in 2019 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2019b) to 158 in 2021 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021a).

The income from homestay operations is known to have supplemented the household income in meeting household expenses and improving the living conditions of homestay operators (Nepal, 2002; Swangjang & Kornpiphat, 2021; Tavakoli et al., 2017). Similarly, findings from

this study showed that homestay operators generated income to supplement their household income from agricultural farming, which is consistent with results of similar studies conducted in Malaysia (Kunjuraman & Hussin, 2017; Sen & Walter, 2020; Shukor et al., 2014), India (Macek, 2012; Salleh et al., 2014), Bhutan (Brunet et al., 2001; Gurung, 2008; Karst & Nepal, 2021; Montes & Kafley, 2019; Rai, 2019; Suntikul, 2018), Nepal (Nepal & Karst, 2016; Poudel & Joshi, 2020), and Thailand (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015; Ping). However, not every interested household can become homestay operators because of variations in financial capability (Musavengane & Matikiti, 2015; Pasanchay, 2019).

Economic benefits from homestays are reliant on factors such as financial status, language capabilities, which is consistent with the existing literature on factors affecting participation in CBE (Bello et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2021) This study revealed that homestay operators were those with the financial ability to meet the start-up cost of homestays that could approximately cost Nu.300,000 (USD 4000.00), which is expensive in the Bhutanese context. The arrangement of required homestay facilities, especially the western-style toilet costs significant amount of money. Thus, access to homestay operation is hindered by the financial status of households, which contribute to unequal economic benefits from homestays. The situation is similar to the rural population of Jammu and Kashmir, where interested people cannot operate a homestay as they cannot renovate their properties to welcome tourists as their homestay guests (Shah et al., 2020). Further, incomes from homestay operations tend to vary among homestay operators depending partly on the communication skills.

Homestay operators are challenged by their inability to speak and read English, which is believed to have hampered the marketing of the homestays and, more importantly, communication with their guests. Homestay operators with English language skills, especially youth, tend to promote homestays better than those without English language skills as they are believed to take advantage of linguistic skills in marketing. Thus, the existing literature on homestay operations commonly indicates advantages of English skills (Bachok et al., 2018; Bhattarai & Adhikari, 2021; Parveen, 2016). There are also other aspects such as distance and attraction of destinations, which are beyond the individual operator's control.

Travelling distance to the tourist destinations affected the homestay operators to access guests in the Phobjikha valley. Among two *Gewogs*, those homestays in Gangtey received more guests than those homestays in Phobji *Gewog* because the distance between the East-West highway

junction and Gangtey is shorter than Phobji. The majority of participants believed that travelling distance affects homestays to get guests. This could possibly be due to the limited stay duration (average of 5-6 nights, as revealed from this study) of tourists who are mindful of their time and resources. Thus, tourists tend to choose the destinations that involves less travelling.

A study conducted in the United States have also revealed that travel distance influenced the decision of tourists negatively to travel to nearby destinations particularly in rural areas (Cai & Li, 2009). This study also revealed that the inflow of guests tended to depend on the attractiveness of destinations. As confirmed by the participants, those homestays located in far distances tend to get fewer guests even without much difference in terms of facilities and quality of services. As indicated earlier, another aspect is the attractions of the destinations.

In this study, attractiveness refers to the natural and cultural richness of destinations (Sadowski & Wojcieszak, 2019). The reason for more visitors in Gangtey Gewog was revealed to be because of the popular Gangtey monastery that adds to cultural richness in the locality. Furthermore, roosting habitat of the endangered bird species- the Black-necked crane falls within the Gangtey Gewog, and the Black-necked crane centre (BNC) is also located in Gangtey area. The BNC built by the RSPN currently serves as the environmental education centre for the visitors. This centre also acts as the pull factor for more visitors in Gangtey area. The homestay household participants mentioned the differences in receiving guests because of the place's cultural sites and natural significances. Therefore, Gangtey receives more international and domestic visitors.

Homestay operators believed that connections and relationships with relevant entities such as national guides and tour operators, and connections with hotels in their locality are important to ensure influx of guests. Homestay participants also mentioned that providing better services and enriching experiences to their guests as equally important to access guests. Some of the homestay participants mentioned that guests tend to visit their homestay again if the services they provide are up to guest's satisfaction worth spending. A study conducted by (Ly et al., 2021) revealed that guests make repeated visits if they had learning opportunities before.

6.1.2 Environmental impacts of homestay operations

The homestay operators believed the homestay operations have not impacted the local environment negatively except the increasing volume of garbage going to the landfill. According to the homestay participants, the sanitation in the case study locations has improved because of homestay operations. Homestay operators believed that improvement of sanitation in their local area is a significant positive change to the environment. However, the increase of garbage going to the landfill itself shows the negative environmental effects of visitors. This is consistent with the recent studies conducted in the Philippines, where it was revealed increasing garbage as one of the negative impacts of tourism in local destinations (Loverio et al., 2021). Although homestay operators are not aware of the likely negative consequences of more visitors in their locality, some of the key informants were concerned on overcrowding in the future that might compromise the cultural authenticity as it is already happening in other popular destinations, such as Paro Taktshang (popularly known as the tiger's nest).

6.1.3 Social impacts of homestay operations

Homestay operations are known to have both positive and negative social impacts in the community. While the operation of homestay enhances the community cohesion, there are other negative effects on homestay household members, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The findings from this study in the Phobjikha valley revealed creating a strong bond within the homestay and non-homestay households through enhanced interactions, thereby building community cohesion. Non-homestay households cooperate to assist homestays to showcase cultural programs for the guests. Other household activities such as the arrangement of hot stone baths, carpentry works, the distillation of local wine, and regular cleaning programs in their locality also help build the community bond as they tend to interact more. This is a similar finding as compared to the existing literature on homestays (Ngo et al., 2021; Sood et al., 2017; Tavakoli et al., 2017), where enhancement of social cohesion in the community was revealed. However, sharing of guests among homestays have not been revealed in their findings. Thus, sharing of guests among homestays in Bhutan case study site (Phobjikha valley) appears to be a unique finding in this thesis.

This study also found that women in homestay households coordinated homestay management. Women usually bear the overall household responsibilities (homemakers) and take decisions on household economic matters in the Bhutanese context. Based on gendered division of labour, men, in contrast, are responsible for more physical activities such as house construction to generate economic income for the households and are most of the time away from their homes. Since homestays are mostly managed by women (Bidin et al., 2021), they are empowered to take decisions on financial matters of the households. Hence, homestay activities empower women in terms of financial matters. A recent study conducted by (Khan & Bhat, 2022) in Kashmir valley of India revealed that microfinance-backed entrepreneurship such as homestay tend to empower women holistically (economic, social and cultural levels), although they (women) often compromise their leisure time. According to Pérez Albert et al. (2021), host families sacrifice their leisure time and get disconnected from their relatives and neighbours as they avoid coming to homestay houses because of homestay guests. However, in contrast to this, investigation of Bhutanese homestays has revealed that relatives and neighbours visit the homestays and render assistance when there are homestay guests.

As such, the homestay activities further assert burden on women as they have usual household chores to perform (Beedle et al., 2013; Hillman & Radel, 2021; Karki et al., 2019), but also helps to provide authentic experiences to guests.

6.1.4 Cultural impacts of homestay operation

Generally, Bhutan's approach to tourism is very different from other countries. The 'high value, low volume' tourism policy guides the tourism development in the country by regulating the inflows of tourist to prevent adverse effects of tourism, such as deterioration of culture, destruction of the landscape, air and water pollution (Nepal & Karst, 2016; Schroeder, 2015), and provide authentic cultural experiences and quality services (Dorji, 2001). A country that cannot rely on its economic and military power has no other option than to preserve its rich culture (Brunet et al., 2001).

It was revealed from this study that homestay operators organised the cultural program for their guests wherein non-homestay households of the locality participate in a cultural event as singers, specifically arranged for guests. Cultural exchange takes place when the hosts and guests interact through household activities. This finding is similar to the existing tourism

literature that has found that a community's culture and tradition can be promoted by showcasing cultural events (Musa, 2010; Tavakoli et al., 2017). These studies have indicated that an exchange of culture can occur among guests and hosts.

Conversely, homestay tourism is a double-edged sword because even when communities tend to succeed in operating a homestay enterprise, this success can erode the cultural authenticity as they become more reliant on tourism (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2015). The host-guest interactions can influence the host family members to follow the western culture, which can lead to the transformation of the local culture.

The recent increase of the maximum number of rooms for a homestay from three to five also contradicts with the current tourism policy of Bhutan, and can have irreparable impacts on local culture, tradition, and environment. Modification of the internal setting of a traditional house by making partitions can destroy the traditional outlook. Therefore, maintaining the limited number of rooms with high prices can possibly upkeep service quality and control the number of guests. While homestay operators can generate better incomes from increased prices, this can also prevent mass tourism.

With the increasing number of guests and irregular monitoring, mass tourism may take place in the future in Bhutan. Although the national tourism policy of 'high value, low impact' can regulate the overall inflow of tourists in the country, tourists from neighbouring countries exceeding the carrying capacity of a particular community in the rural areas can have detrimental impacts on the local culture, tradition and environment. Ecotourism is also meant to provide positive and enriching experiences for visitors and hosts while assuring tangible benefits to the local people, thereby contributing to the unique development policy of the Gross National Happiness (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2021c). Nonetheless, the combination of irregular monitoring and lack of adequate awareness on negative impacts of tourism, and altering the traditional settings inside the homestay house to create more rooms can potentially hamper providing enriching experiences for the visitors. According to Sarker (2016), mass tourism can destroy the local economy, culture, and tradition of a country.

However, this study revealed that local culture and tradition would not be destroyed. Homestay participants have realised that guests wanted to experience local culture and tradition, but the authenticity of cultural experiences might be compromised with mass tourism. As it is

inevitable to undergo cultural changes with increasing visitors in the future, it was revealed that homestays would adapt to the changes but minimise inauthenticity of their local culture and tradition. As discussed in the following paragraphs, changes in authenticity have already shown in homestay operation.

The findings of this study have indicated that modification of culture is taking place while attempting to attract guests by the homestay operators. For example, the typical Bhutanese curry, popularly known as *Emadhatshi*, is made of chilly and cheese (spicy), which foreign guests can find it difficult to eat. However, this curry is modified to suit the taste of the guests, and thus while the name remains the same, the taste is different, which becomes a staged authenticity. Staged authenticity is where a cultural practice, event, or activity is staged mainly for the tourists (Pookhao Sonjai et al., 2018). However, the modification of taste is made only for the guests. The host families tend to prepare the actual *Emadhatshi* for themselves. Similarly, the local traditional events can take place as per the annual local calendar, and singing and dancing takes place in local events such as consecration of houses, annual rituals, and marriage. Guests who may coincidentally visit the local destinations on those specific event days can have an authentic cultural experience from local perspectives. Though the homestay operators believed it to be helpful to conserve their culture and tradition, this practice can actually erode the cultural authenticity of the local destinations (Carnaffan, 2010). Authenticity is subjective and can depend on how individual guests perceive things and experience (Corsale, 2021). Though modification of culture may not be a concern for the tourists as long as they feel authentic (Corsale, 2021), it is of a grave concern for the country like Bhutan, which depend on cultural and natural richness as the tourist's attraction.

Findings from these studies can be considered the wake-up call for Bhutan when it comes to the regulation of regional tourists. Unlike international tourists who pay the daily minimum package rate (DMPR), there are no caps on tourists from the neighbouring countries. The cultural sites often get overcrowded with those tourists who do not pay DMPR and create problems due to limited space for other tourists. If regional tourists are not regulated, the sanctity and authentic experiences of the cultural sites can be destroyed in the long run.

Furthermore, unregulated tourists can damage the cultural sites and defeat the whole purpose of having the 'high value, low volume' tourism policy. However, the research participants were not aware of the likely adverse impacts of unregulated flows of regional tourists. They were

driven by the economic income generation by accessing more guests. According to Groizard and Santana-Gallego (2018), the destruction of cultural heritage sites, regarded as non-renewable resources, can cost irrecoverable damage to the economy.

6.1.5 Issues related to the governance

One of the key findings in this study related to a lack of regular monitoring on homestay operations. This is consistent with a recent study in Sri Lanka that revealed a lack of monitoring from the government as one of the challenges of homestay businesses (Danthanarayana et al., 2021). Participants, especially key informants believed that lack of regular monitoring might have led to uncertified homestay operations in the Phobjikha valley. While the finding from this study has found that the homestay operators do not regard uncertified homestays and local hotels as their competitors, unregistered homestays in Sri Lanka are considered competitors by homestay operators. The reason for the differences is potentially due to Bhutan's compassionate and collectivist culture of caring for others (Lester et al., 2018). As Buddhists, people generally tend to avoid activities that can create disharmony in the community. It is quite common in a Buddhist society that people tend to support each other even if they come across a stranger in need of help. Therefore, people within the same community would always be mindful of what they do and the likely social consequences such as getting blamed for being against someone in the community. Therefore, uncertified homestays and local hotels are not regarded as competitors by homestay operators although in reality, they can pose threats to homestay operations.

Generally, previous studies on community-based ecotourism have revealed the lack of efforts on capacity building and effective marketing strategy in implementing community-based tourism activities (Mohd Noh et al., 2020a, 2020b). It was mentioned by key informants that homestays are lacking creativity in providing enriching experience to guests, meaning that homestays have to offer diverse activities to provide authentic experiences in terms of the culture and tradition of rural Bhutanese life. Upon interviewing homestay operators, it was found that a range of activities such as cooking, gardening, milking cows, making local wine and puffed rice were arranged for their guests. It was revealed that homestay operators are doing their best to provide rich experiences to their guests. However, creativity can emerge if homestay operators have some basic knowledge and skills in homestay management (Dube & Sharma, 2018). Homestay participants mentioned that beyond linguistic constraints, they lack

skills and confidence in dealing with guests from diverse cultures. Therefore, the concerned tourism authority such as the Tourism Council of Bhutan and other non-governmental organisations have crucial roles in training homestay operators in homestay management such as simple basic courses on different culture depending on maximum nationalities who have visited homestays, maintaining feedback forms, keeping a register to record guests, and overall etiquette of dealing with homestay guests.

Another issue with the governance is the centralisation of roles and responsibilities concerning the certification of homestays (Moynihan, 1985). As per the homestay guideline, homestay applications are compiled by the concerned *Gewog* and forwarded to *Dzongkhag* for further submission to the Tourism Council of Bhutan for further review and approval. Unlike in other developing countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, where the interested households form a group of at least ten to become eligible to apply for homestay certification (Kunjuraman, 2021), it is different in Bhutan. Any interested individual household can apply anytime without having to form a group. This is the advantage in the Bhutan context, but there are other challenges, mainly related to education and awareness of the overall process of getting certified as a homestay.

Currently, most non-homestay households are not aware of how to apply for homestay certificates. In addition to limited awareness and education about the procedures involved in applying for a homestay certification, it is a lengthy process if the application has to route through the *Dzongkhag*. As long as the requirements are fulfilled, there is no need for the applications to be sent to *Dzongkhag* by the concerned *Gewog* for onward submission to TCB. If decentralised to each *Gewog* to verify and forward the applications straight to TCB with a copy to their respective *Dzongkhag*, the processing time will be shortened drastically. Potential households can start generating supplementary income from homestay operations without waiting for long.

6.2 Influence of networks on homestay operations

The homestay operations tended to rely on the connections and relationships with entities in the network, which is consistent with the social network theory. The social network theory claims that people can benefit from a social network as it provides advantages to its members

(Yang & Horak, 2019). The flow of information, knowledge, and, more importantly, accessing guests as the resource varied among homestay operators. The findings from this study revealed that those homestay operators with more connections with different entities in the network operated successfully.

Homestay operation involves a number of relevant entities from network perspectives. Each entity plays specific roles, which can be discussed separately under the two broad categories of networks- the formal and informal networks.

Informal and formal connections are considered platforms in business to collect information, collaborate, and influence policy, affecting access to information and resources through the social network (Viren et al., 2015). This study showed that roles played by different entities in formal and informal networks influenced access to guests. The formal and informal networks are examined, enabling an understanding of the interactions among various entities and limitations discussed in the following subsections.

6.2.1 Roles of formal networks

A formal network refers to an organisation with defined goals (Allen et al., 2007). In this study, the formal network comprises the TCB, tour operators, national guides, local government, and RSPN. Among entities in the formal network, tour operators and the national guides play crucial roles in accessing guests by homestay operators. Tour operators and guides hold influential roles related to market trends, demand for new areas, and the marketing efforts of a destination (Carey et al., 1997; Leslie, 2012). Similarly, participants believed that tour operators and national guides are important entities in the network. Tour operators play crucial roles in the marketing and promotion of tourism products. Since they are linked to relevant tourism entities at the national level, tour operators tend to play influential roles either directly or indirectly with individuals and other networks. They also make direct contact with homestay operators to confirm bookings for the homestay guests. Therefore, they (tour operators) act as the *pulse taker*. According to the social network theory, *pulse taker* are people or the key individuals, who have maximum influence using the minimum number of direct and indirect contacts (Abramek & Rizun, 2020). Tour operators also act as the *hub* for disseminating information and knowledge about tourism in Bhutan to the international platform as they undertake various promotional activities such as participation in international tourism events, and through their tourism websites.

Similarly, national guides play influential roles in the formal network. As the *gatekeeper* in the network, national guides tend to have more influential roles in booking homestays. According to social network theory, the *gatekeeper* act as the bridge for the flow of information, knowledge, and resources in the network (Ballon & Walravens, 2008; Barzilai-Nahon & Neumann, 2005; Nikulainen, 2007). The homestay reservations are made by the tour operators mainly based on the recommendation of their national guides. Tour operators, especially when they have limited knowledge about a particular destination, tend to trust national guides about the information of homestays, as they (national guides) know better about the destinations. The national guides, as the *gatekeeper*, tend to reserve those homestays with whom they have better connections and relationships. The national guides influence homestay bookings by tour operators, but they also tend to influence other national guides through word-of-mouth communication. This mode of communication can affect whether or not a homestay would access guests, as it tends to depend on the connection and relationships maintained between a particular national guide and homestay operators. Strong ties between national guides and tour operators are not just professional ties but personal relationships, which are soft ties within a network (Gligor & Autry, 2012), thus, play a vital part in the network in enabling homestay operators to access guests and even barring other entities such as local guides from participation.

According to Bayram (2020), tour guides conduct guiding and interpretation, undertake duties as mediation, serve as cultural ambassadors, and act as bridges between tourists and local people. This study revealed that local guides remain in the homestay network for their local knowledge and information, but national guides tend to prevent local guides from participating in activities with guests. According to one of the key informants of this research, the national guide collects information from local guides and excludes them from the network once national guides have the information of a locality, appropriating their knowledge and then barring them from participation. The other reason for not involving local guides was the additional costs involved in hiring local guides. Some key informants (tour operators and national guides) reiterated that they find it unnecessary to hire local guides as the national guides know about most tourist destinations. Homestay and non-homestay participants confirmed that trained local guides have mostly moved to other areas searching for better alternative employment. Consequently, local guides are excluded from their roles in the network. Thus, national guides as the *gatekeeper* appear to have barred local guides from guiding and providing local information to guests. The gatekeeping roles played by national

guides are consistent with roles in the existing social network literature, which state *gatekeeper* controls the flow of information, knowledge, and resources in the social network (Nikulainen, 2007; Townsend, 2008).

Guests can choose to move to another homestay if they are not satisfied with the services at the homestay the particular national guide took them to. In such cases, it is not only connections and relationships that matter, but the quality of services also makes differences in accessing guests by homestay operators.

Roles of other entities in this network, such as the Tourism Council of Bhutan and local government, pertains to assessment and certification of homestays, monitoring, and imparting basic capacity building training to homestay operators. This study revealed that the monitoring and evaluation of homestays are irregular that may have led to the operation of homestays by some uncertified households. TCB acts as the *hub* for information and policy interventions related to tourism development, including homestays and implementation. In social network, the *hubs* refer to people who have significant influence over the network (Townsend, 2008). Since TCB has connections to other relevant entities in the formal networks at the national level, it has influential roles in collaborating and enhancing service delivery at the local level. The procedures involved in the assessment and certification of homestays during this study were found lengthy. This showed the need for decentralisation of formal roles to local government such as the *Gewog*. The *Gewog* administration can collect and forward the homestay applications directly to TCB with a copy to the concerned districts, which would shorten the processing time. The monitoring of homestays can also be conducted by concerned *Gewogs*, which would become convenient for TCB with staff shortages. The other possible option could be to decentralise certification of homestays and monitoring to the concerned *Dzongkhags*. The formal networks at the local level can effectively deliver support and services to homestay operators and other local residents, which has not happened to date.

The formal roles of local government authorities such as the *Gup* can be crucial to facilitate the flow of information, resources (funds), and capacity-building courses for homestays through the formal networks. The information about homestay operations and prospects is currently being disseminated through informal networks. According to Waldstrøm (2001), the informal structure tends to fill a weakness in formal structures. Similarly, the weakness of formal network was revealed from this study.

The social network theory focuses on the ties between actors within a particular network, and relationships play critical roles (Chang, 2021; Viren et al., 2015). The *Gup* of the *Gewog* administration as the *gatekeeper* acts as the bridge for inflow and outflow of information to other formal networks both at the local and national level. However, the *Gup* cannot reject the homestay application of non-homestay households if interested households have unhealthy relations with the *Gup*.

6.2.2 Roles of informal networks

Informal group homestay operations involve informal interactions among family members, relatives, and local hotels, which influences access to guests. Access to guests is directly linked to generating economic income for homestay households, which tend to depend on connections and relationships in the network. While most interactions tend to occur among homestay operators when they have homestay guests, non-homestay households are also involved in cultural programs arranged for guests. While most tourism literature has covered the relationship among homestay operators in exploring host (homestays) social relationships with other forms of accommodations and non-homestays (Tavakoli et al., 2017), this has not extended to the reciprocal relationships in terms of sharing guests.

This study found that homestay operators share guests among themselves. This reciprocal relationship has further strengthened the ties among homestay households enhancing the sense of belonging within the community. Additionally, informal links with local hotels help some homestay operators to access guests. Local hotels send guests to those homestays who are their cousins and relatives based on strong ties. This shows that it is not just to their ‘friends’ but to their ‘family’ first. According to the social network theory, strong ties prevail among kin or close friends (Liu et al., 2017). The strong ties within the network tended to help to form network cohesion (Tortoriello et al., 2012). Thus, every homestay cannot expect guests from a local hotel as it depends on the relational link. This signifies the importance of informal connections and relationships in homestay networks for accessing guests by homestay operators.

Homestay operators also act as *gatekeepers* in the informal network in relation to information sharing about homestay operations with non-homestay households. Non-homestay households interact with homestay operators informally and tend to get information about homestay

operations, such as economic benefits, and challenges. As they (non-homestay households) depend on strong ties, they tend to get limited information. According to the social network theory, weak ties are better for obtaining more information than strong ties (Yang & Horak, 2019). This is because weak ties refer to connections with diverse (heterogeneous) groups or individuals which tend to have new and diverse information (Zehrer & Pechlaner, 2010).

The findings from this study have revealed that the success of homestay operations in generating supplementary household income depended on connections and relations among relevant entities in the homestay network. Homestay operators with more connections with entities such as tour operators and national guides generated more economic benefits from homestay operations than those homestays with minimum connections because of fewer homestay guests. Therefore, overall findings from this study support the social network theory.

6.3 Influence of COVID-19 on homestay network

Regarding the influences of the current global pandemic (COVID-19), this study found that entities in the network (national guides and tour operators) with whom strong ties developed were weakened. This was due to travel restrictions across the globe that have affected the inflow of guests, whereas connections and relationships within the community were strengthened because of the fact that focus was shifted more on agricultural farming activities. Interactions related to homestay operations were limited though, increased interactions within the community have, thus, changed the dynamics of the network. Despite the changes in network dynamics, homestay and non-homestay households were impacted at varying magnitudes, which are discussed below.

6.3.1 Impacts of COVID-19 on homestay and non-homestay households

The COVID-19 pandemics impacted everyone irrespective of the gender, social background, and geographical setting. Similarly, local residents of the Phobjikha valley were also affected by the pandemic. Firstly, impacts of the pandemic on homestay households (homestay operators) are discussed, followed by impacts on non-homestay households.

6.3.1.1 Impacts on homestay households

The outbreak of the worldwide pandemic resulted a series of lockdown in Bhutan. Consequently, inflow of tourists to Bhutan vis-à-vis Phobjikha valley was severely disrupted. Since income from homestay operations rely on influx of tourists in the locality, homestay operators stopped generating the supplementary income for their families. In the absence of international and regional guests, some homestay operators resorted keeping domestic guests who were mostly on pilgrimage to Gangtey area because of the Gangtey monastery and presence of Black-necked cranes. The inflow of some domestic guests were helpful to homestay operators in Gangtey, whereas, those homestay operators in Phobji were not benefitted from domestic tourism as that of Gangtey because of the long travelling distance and absence of popular cultural sites.

As briefly discussed earlier, connection between homestay operators, national guides, and tour operators was disrupted. Interactions among these entities in the network was unexpectedly put to a halt because of travel ban. As revealed from homestay participants, the only practical option found was to put extra efforts on agricultural farming. Since potato is the main cash crop in the Phobjikha valley, homestay operators had the opportunity to emphasise more on potato cultivation. Supports were also provided from the government in the form of greenhouse supplies for vegetable production. Some of the homestay participants said that they were carrying out maintenance works such as toilets in particular. This showed that they were rather optimistic of welcoming guests in post pandemic period.

According to homestay participants, they were not affected to the extent local hotels were affected. They mentioned that their income from homestay was just to supplement household income, and they had enough ration stock for the family. This showed that focus of their efforts will be always on agriculture and this pandemic has taught them lessons about the unreliability of income from homestay tourism.

They collectively remained optimistic on the post pandemic situation to be more rewarding because they believed that this pandemic has put everyone under tremendous stress and people would prefer travelling to a scenic destination such as their locality. In line with government's efforts in promoting domestic tourism, the homestay households remained united in spirit and

action to prepare for the post pandemic period. They regularly carried out cleaning campaigns to maintain their local environment clean and appealing for the visitors.

6.3.1.2 Impacts on non-homestay households

Unlike homestay operators, non-homestay households were not affected because of the pandemic. As that of homestay households, they also said that they were not worried as they had enough food stock for their own family. They were actively involved in their usual agricultural farming and livestock. They were mainly worried of the risk this pandemic posed to their health. Except the natural aspects such as the changes in climatic conditions, their primary source of income from potato cultivation was not threatened by this pandemic. However, they feared the shortage of agriculture inputs such as weedicides and fertilisers because of the lockdown.

6.4 Collective roles played by community during COVID-19

Generally, people in the locality always tend to live in harmony. While they perform their usual activities, they lend their helping hands to other households in the locality and promote the sense of belonging to a community. They tended to maintain the best status of the community collectively.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has further taught them lessons to stand united. Although connections with the homestay network entities such as tour operators and national guides was hampered due to frequent lockdowns and travel restriction both at national and international level, the community as the network became stronger (network cohesion) during the pandemic. They formed a WeChat group to communicate among the local residents, which enhanced the community network. Network cohesion generally refers to enabling communities to develop a sense of belonging to a community with shared values, responsibilities, and challenges (Martí et al., 2017; Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, 2021)

It was through the WeChat group that information on health and safety of the people were disseminated easily. Every household in the local community adhered to the instructions and directives passed by the local leader. The lockdown was successfully implemented and

minimised the risk of local transmissions. This is one of the outcomes of counteracting collectively through an effective network.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Recap of research questions

My research questions for this exploratory research were:

RQ1. What are the benefits from homestay operations to local communities?

RQ2. How do networks influence the functioning of homestays?

RQ3. How has COVID-19 influenced the network of homestays?

This study was exploratory in nature as there was little empirical research on homestays in Bhutan in relation to how networks influence the functioning of homestays. The qualitative approach through a case study method was designed to collect in-depth information. The social network theory was applied as the theoretical framework as it was found suitable in this context, given the collectivistic ideology of Bhutan, and how homestay operates. Bhutanese generally believe in caring for each other, which is strongly supported by the Buddhist belief to remain compassionate. The qualitative data was collected by administering interviews from four categories of participants such as semi-structured interviews with i) homestay operators, ii) key informants, iii) non-homestay households (comprising of different livelihood occupations), and iv) uncertified homestays. The interviews were conducted online through WeChat, messenger, email, and WhatsApp in accordance with human research ethics because of travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

My conclusions in relation to research questions are discussed below.

RQ1. While homestay operators have benefitted in terms of generating supplementary income for the family livelihood, the local communities have also benefitted in different ways. The local singers have been benefitted economically from their participation in cultural events, and those households involved in showcasing local cultural and traditional activities such as local wine distillation, carpentry works, and making puffed rice have also been able to generate some cash income. Other benefits to the community were revealed in the form of up keeping the local culture, improvement of sanitation, enhancement of local livelihoods and building the sense of belonging to a community (social cohesion).

RQ2. The networks influenced the functioning of homestays in the case study locations. Each entity in the network played influential roles differently. It was revealed that homestay operators depended on both formal and informal networks to access guests. The connections and relationships with tour operators and national guides were found to be influential to access guests among the entities in the formal networks. The homestay operators believed that national guides (*gatekeeper*) are more important than tour operators for accessing homestay guests. The strong ties among their relatives, cousins and friends have helped homestay operators to get guests. Homestay operators shared guests to each other, and this reciprocal relationships among the homogenous group have not been revealed in the existing literature. The findings revealed that homestay operations tended to rely on both strong and weak ties. While non-homestay households relied on their strong ties to gain information about the homestay operations from homestay operators (*gatekeeper*), homestay operators relied on both strong and weak ties to access information and resources (guests).

RQ3. The COVID-19 pandemic had influenced entities in the network (national guides and tour operators). The strong ties, which were developed through weak ties among homestay and entities such as national guides and tour operators have been weakened due to travel restrictions across the globe. Thus, travel restriction have affected the inflow of guests. Nonetheless, connections and relationships within the community were strengthened because of the fact that focus was shifted more on agricultural farming activities. Increased interactions within the community have, thus, changed the dynamics of the network.

The outbreak disrupted the influx of homestay guests that has affected homestay operators' ability to generate supplementary income for the households. Nonetheless, they were not affected as that of other accommodation such as the local hotels. The homestay operators focussed more on potato cultivation during the pandemic. Further, they remained connected among themselves in carrying out cleaning campaigns to maintain their local environment clean and appealing to the visitors. The pandemic period provided them an opportunity to do maintenance works, especially the toilet.

Regarding the non-homestay households, they were not affected by the pandemic badly as they were able to do their agricultural farming as usual. However, those households who used to earn supplementary income from off-farm activities (construction works), taxi driving and

singing for homestay guests have been affected. Nonetheless, they managed to survive as they had enough ration for their families.

The local community as the network responded collectively to the pandemic via WeChat group, which was found effective to communicate among the local residents. This indicates the social cohesion in the community during difficult times.

Although COVID-19 has affected this exploratory study in many ways, especially travelling for fieldwork, the quality of data and its richness were not compromised. While the research team (author and supervisors) did not get to travel and conduct face-to-face interviews because of COVID-19, the author is still quite confident that he was able to get rich data through alternative methods such as WeChat, messenger, and WhatsApp, which is locally and culturally appropriate in the Bhutanese context. The variation for such mode of data collection was approved by the Human Resource Ethics Committee of Charles Sturt University.

7.2 Contribution and generalisability of the findings

Generally, findings from this study are similar to past studies, especially in developing countries on community-based ecotourism such as homestay operations. Past studies have also revealed that operations of homestays tend to depend on connections and relationships among different entities in the network (Tavakoli et al., 2017). However, limited studies have applied the social network theory (SNT) as the theoretical lens to investigate networks in homestay tourism. Further, a systematic literature review conducted by Janjua et al. (2021) showed limited studies on homestays, especially regarding application of SNT.

Therefore, this study on homestay adds another perspective for research and presents what happens in homestay operations in Bhutan. Homestays in Bhutan are operated by individual households without forming a group as in other countries such as Malaysia. It is consistent with the SNT that operation of homestays relied on networking among relevant entities in homestay network. Since success of homestays depended on accessing guests, it was revealed that those homestays who generated more economic benefits than others had better connections with tourism entities such as tour operators and national guides. Those homestay operators with better connections with national guides were able to access more guests and generated more

economic benefits accordingly. In general, homestay operation in Bhutan tend to rely on formal and informal networks. Homestay operators were mostly dependent on informal networks, which consisted of three important elements such as *gatekeepers*, *pulse takers*, and *hubs*, which are discussed in the subsection 7.2.1. This study is the first of its kind to investigate homestay networks using SNT in Bhutan, and thus this thesis makes a unique contribution in filling the gap. Contributions from this study are categorised into theoretical and practical contributions as below:

7.2.1 Theoretical contribution

SNT postulates that people are connected to one another as actors and these connections bring people together in human society at the individual, the group, and the institutional level (Eisenberg & Houser, 2007). SNT explains that all individuals depend on one another as per their likes, dislikes, attitudes, and behaviours in social networks.

As in any kind of business or organisations, connections and relationships tend to take place at two types of networks – formal and informal networks. While formal networks pertains to collective actions of individuals in an organisation to achieve the agreed common goals and objectives, informal networks are formed out of informal ties among individuals based upon personal characteristics, and not essentially related to formally specified patterns of relationships (Kuipers, 1999).

This study applied SNT as the framework to investigate the dynamics of social networks in homestay operations in Bhutan. Based on the overall findings, it was concluded that accessing guests to generate supplementary economic benefits was subjective to social networks among homestay operators (strong ties) and more importantly with relevant tourism entities such as tour operators and national guides (weak ties). It was revealed that accessing guests by homestay operators depended mainly on informal networks in the absence of a strong formal network.

Gatekeepers, *pulse takers*, and *hubs* are the three main elements or positions of social networks. Different entities in the social network (comprising of formal and informal networks) tend to take positions depending on their roles. In the formal network, national guides as *gatekeeper*, influenced the flow of information about homestay operations. On the other hand, TCB acts as

the *hub* for information and policy interventions related to tourism development, including homestays and implementation, and it has influential roles in the formal network. TCB also acts as *pulse taker* as it has the maximum influential roles with minimum contacts (direct and indirect), and is also in a better position to monitor the information flow with the best visibility of what happens in the network. Similarly, tour operators also act as *hub* for dissemination of information and knowledge about Bhutan tourism to the international platform since they carry out various promotional activities. At the local level, *Gup* (locally elected leader) controls the flow of information to other entities at local and national level. Thus, *Gup* acts as the *gatekeeper*.

Similarly, *gatekeepers*, *pulse takers*, and *hubs* are the vital elements in the informal network. Each of these elements played important roles on the overall operation of homestays. Different entities in the homestay network shouldered the roles of *gatekeepers*, *pulse takers*, and *hubs*. Among tour operators and national guides, better networks with national guides were uncovered to be more useful in accessing guests. National guides played influential roles in the network to provide guests for the homestay operators with whom they knew more or with good relationships.

Since national guides were revealed to have played influential roles, homestay operators provided meals and accommodation for free to build up a strong connection. This is because tour operators mostly relied on national guides to decide which homestays to book for their guests. Since national guides are with the guests throughout their stay in the country, in-situ decisions are made by national guides. In Bhutanese context, national guides either act as brokers or bottlenecks to homestay operations. Thus, national guides played the roles of *gatekeepers* in the homestay network.

Homestays act as the *hub* because they have connections to a range of other entities and networks. Similar to other entrepreneurs, homestays tend to develop connections with relevant entities both at the local and national level. Non-homestay households relied on homestay operators for the information about homestay operations. Thus, homestay operators also act as *gatekeepers* in the network.

Application of social network theory in this study and in the Bhutanese context has revealed the importance of social networks for homestays to sustain their economic benefits. While

formal networks had minimal interference except for certification of homestays, informal networks played influential roles in homestay networks. SNT aligns with the Bhutanese culture of maintaining relationships and connections and helping each other.

7.2.2 Practical contributions

In terms of practical contribution, this study has broken the ground on how networks influence homestay operations in the Bhutanese context. The insights provided by this case study can be useful for Bhutan to organise networking events at least once in a year since networking and building relationships were uncovered crucial for homestay operations. TCB as the apex tourism authority can organise annual homestay networking forum in the country, which may help homestay operators to do networking and marketing.

While social medias such as Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, YouTube and Twitter are useful for marketing and promotion of homestays, networking events would gather all the relevant tourism entities in a single platform to have face-to-face talk and build up connections. For instance, events such as *Talking Homestays*, which is similar to *Talking Tourism* event being organised across Adelaide and other regions in Australia could be hosted by TCB. Talking tourism is the popular networking event, which enables the members of the tourism industry council of Australia to listen and learn from business leaders and champions of the tourism industry, which also connects them. Similarly, *Talking Homestays* can be initiated as a networking series for the homestay operators to interact and do networking. Trust and confidence on each other can be built through first-hand interactions. The insights of the homestay networks revealed that there is a need to provide support such as formation of a management committee to enhance the existing homestay network in the case study area, which can be helpful to deal with the distribution of guests among homestay operators, without having to form a new homestay association. Another practical contribution is to decentralise the certification, monitoring and evaluation of homestays to the local government. This can be the solution to the staff shortage of TCB that was revealed prevalent during this study.

7.3 Limitations and future research directions

7.3.1 Research limitations

This study adopted qualitative research approach to investigate the dynamics of social networks in Bhutanese homestays. The research project was designed accordingly to collect qualitative

data through case study method. All the required research formalities of the university were arranged, and the human resource ethics approval was granted on 1st April 2020. Accordingly, field visits in Bhutan were scheduled in April and May 2020. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted travel, research methodology had to be reconceptualised. The mode of data collections was amended and varied to online mode. Variation approval was sought from the Human Resource Ethics Committee (HREC) after a series of discussions with the supervisory panel. The HREC granted the variation approval in June 2020.

Since in-situ data collection was not possible because of travel restrictions, every effort was made to involve wide range of participants despite the homestay households in the case study locations. Qualitative data collection was done by administering in-depth semi-structured interviews via available digital tools such as WeChat, messenger, emails, and WhatsApp, depending on the conveniences of the participants. There were three categories of participants as per the initial data collection method such as the key informants, homestay households, and non-homestay households. Later, during interviews with non-homestay households, uncertified homestay operators were revealed, and was included as the fourth category. The author failed to get email responses from few tour operators including Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO). ABTO represents all the tour operators in Bhutan in any international tourism forums. While the views of those tour operators, who did not respond, may have been represented by the ones who participated in this study, it was unfortunate to have missed the expert views of ABTO, who could have shared in-depth information on the overall challenges in tourism and more importantly homestay operation in the country. The author could have been able to visit ABTO office and conduct the interviews had there been no travel restrictions. Although two experts from TCB were able to participate, from whom rich information on the overall tourism and homestay operations was generated, participants from ABTO might have had different views from the guest bookings and actual on ground implementation perspectives. Initially, field observation was planned as the means to conduct data triangulation, but this had to be omitted from the reconceptualised methodology. It was also proposed to talk to the homestay guests while conducting fieldworks, but this also became impossible with the revised methodology. Homestay participants may have shared other interesting and valuable information if the author interviewed face-to-face. This may depend on the interviewer, but Bhutanese people tend to share more information if they become familiar and gain confidence. On the other hand, the author may have revealed more uncertified homestays if in-situ visit

was conducted as planned. Interviewing more than two uncertified homestays could potentially have generated rich information on why they have not opted to be certified by TCB.

The author was satisfied with the overall qualitative data generated in this study. However, data triangulation could not be undertaken robustly in the absence of field observations, and official reports related to tourism and homestay operations in Bhutan. This is because most of the official reports are not accessible from websites. A few documents were accessed through the TCB websites, but the author could have had the opportunities to get more relevant documents if the author had visited offices in person.

7.3.2 Future research directions

The overall findings from this study supports the social network theory since the success of accessing the resources (guests) relied on social networks among relevant entities in homestay tourism. Although this study makes unique contributions to the existing homestay literature, there are other interesting potential areas to investigate in the future.

One of the findings related to environmental aspects revealed that the local residents of the case study locations that includes homestay households, non-homestay households, and local authorities conduct regular cleaning in their locality on voluntary basis. It is interesting to investigate whether this voluntary activity of homestay households affect the local policy. Another potential area is future research may focus to quantify based on this study. Future research may focus on these topics as indicated above.

In conclusion, the findings of this study support the social network theory and would have significant effects on policy developments in the future in tourism sector for Bhutan, especially in homestays. This study not only adds to the existing homestay literature, but it is the first of its kind to have undertaken the exploratory research on dynamics of social networks in homestays in Bhutan. Hence, the findings of this research are expected to influence the relevant tourism entities including government, private and civil society organisations to develop plans and guidelines while promoting homestays in Bhutan. This thesis is a unique contribution to Bhutan that builds on the limited literature on homestays, especially from the social network perspective. Furthermore, this study may provide useful empirical information to other countries in the region with similar cultural and geographical contexts.

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Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet (sample)

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(Key informants)

An exploration of the dynamics of social networks in homestays: A case study of Bhutan.

You are invited to participate in the research study on homestays in Phobjikha and Gangtey gewogs under Wangdue Phodrang district. The study is being conducted by Mr. Phenden Gyamtsho, research student from the School of Environmental Sciences at Charles Sturt University, New South Wales, Australia, under supervision of Associate Professor Rosemary Black, Dr Jennifer Bond, and Dr. Clifford Lewis from Charles Sturt University.

It is important for you to read this sheet carefully and understand why the research is being conducted. Please feel free to ask questions or seek additional information from the researcher at contact number +61 0405117067 or email: phengyamtsho@hotmail.com.

1. What is the purpose of this study being undertaken?

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand opportunities and problems of homestays, perception of homestay operations, and how the social networks influence homestay households' access to homestay guests.

2. Why have I been invited to participate in this study?

You are invited to participate in this study as you have some expertise and knowledge of homestays in Bhutan and we would like you to share your perceptions about the challenges and opportunities of homestay operations

3. Are there any risks and or benefits to me in participating in this study?

Participation in this research is entirely based on your willingness and availability to share your views about homestays. You also have the rights to decide the time and place of the interview as per your convenience and preference. The information that you share with the researcher will be kept confidential. All the data will be stored securely in a computer and will only be accessible to the researcher with a password. Any publications that may include presentations, posters, journal articles, etc., will not identify you by name. Any benefit to you will be in-direct and long-term, such as through improved ecotourism policy development.

4. How is this study being paid for?

The funding for this study is being privately arranged by the researcher driven by his strong commitment to the research topic in collaboration with the Charles Sturt University.

5. Will taking part in this study cost me anything and will I be paid?

Since interviews will be purely based on willingness and availability, you will not be paid for participating in this research. It will not cost you as the researcher will conduct interviews online of your convenience and time. As such, you will not be required to travel to participate in the interview and there will be no cost to you.

An interview might take about 30 to 60 minutes. It is possible that the interview might take up to a maximum of 90 minutes depending on individual participants.

6. What if I don't want to take part in this study?

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Non-participation in this study will not affect your relationship with the researcher and Charles Sturt University. Even if you participate, you may also withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason, even to the extent of withdrawing your data. This should however, P.O. Box 789, Albury, NSW, 2640, Australia be withdrawn before the completion of fieldwork in Bhutan (May 2021). You are requested to contact the researcher directly and withdraw your information via phone call or email as per your convenience.

7. What if I participate and want to withdraw later?

You have the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Nevertheless, it may probably not be possible to withdraw all of your individual data if the researcher has completed the fieldwork in Bhutan (refer point 6).

8. How will the information that I provide be handled?

The researcher will transcribe audio recording of the interview followed by analysis which would ultimately be presented as outputs in the form of a thesis and scientific journal articles. The researcher of this project or other researchers may use de-identified data in the future depending on research needs. However, only the de-identified data will be made available.

9. Will the information be kept confidential?

The researcher is obliged to maintain anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of information being shared with the researcher. All the information will be saved in a password protected file which will be accessible to the researcher only. Therefore, confidentiality will be strictly maintained.

10. What should I do if I want to discuss this study further before I decide?

Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee on (02) 6933 4213 or ethics@csu.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Supervisors:

Associate Professor Rosemary Black (email address: rblack@csu.edu.au; Phone: +61 2 65829381)

Dr. Jennifer Bond (email address: jebond@csu.edu.au; Phone: +61 2 6051 9352).

Dr. Clifford Lewis (email address: cllewis@csu.edu.au; Phone: +61 2 6338 6364)

Thank you for considering this invitation. This information sheet is for you to keep.

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form (sample)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

(Homestay household participants)

An exploration of the dynamics of social networks in homestays: A case study of Bhutan.

Researchers: Phenden Gyamtsho, Research Student, School of Environmental Sciences at Charles Sturt University, Australia.

Associate Professor Rosemary Black, Associate Professor, School of Environmental Sciences at Charles Sturt University, Australia.

Dr. Jennifer Bond, Lecturer in Human Geography, School of Environmental Sciences at Charles Sturt University. Australia.

Declaration by the participant:

I have read and understood that the project will be conducted as described in the participant information sheet, a copy of which I have retained. I hereby agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand I can decline from participating in the project at any time during interview. I have understood from the Information Sheet that I can also withdraw my data from the project before the completion of fieldwork (May 2020) and do not have to give any reasons for withdrawing.

I consent to (circle yes or no): • Participating in an interview (approx. 1.5 hours) Yes/No • Having the interview audio recorded Yes/No • Conducting observation of homestay environment (internal and external) Yes/No I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researchers, and that I will be consulted about my preference for anonymity or acknowledgement in regard to reports or other material published from this research.

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction. Signing or giving a thumbprint is an indication that I have consented to participate in this research project.

Name of the participant: _____

Signature or Thumbprint: _____

Date: _____

Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee on (02) 6338 4628 or ethics@csu.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Local contact numbers: Gangtey Gup: 17749004 (M) and Phobjikha Gup: 17846906 (M)

Appendix C: Approval Letter from the Tourism Council of Bhutan



TCB/QAD/QS-1C/ 4885

February 18, 2020

TO WHOM IT MAY CONERN

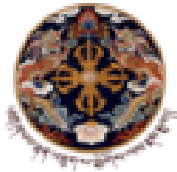
Tourism Council of Bhutan is pleased to recommend Mr. Phenden Gyamtsho, HDR Student, ID No. 11639459 of Charles Sturt University, Australia to undertake a research on home stays in Bhutan from March to May 2020.

This research is related to tourism and also anticipated to generate data useful for TCB and other relevant institutions in the near future.

Dorji Dhradhul
DIRECTOR GENERAL



Appendix D: Research Permit from Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment Research



ལྷོན་དབང་ཕུག་མཐའ་འཁོར་དང་ཉམས་སྲུང་གི་བ་འཚོལ་སྤེལ་ཁང་།

Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research
Department of Forests and Park Services
Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
ROYAL GOVERNMENT OF BHUTAN



RESEARCH PERMIT

Date: 2020-01-03

Applicant ID : 10236671005E08053AEEAEA

Name of Researcher : Phenden Gyamtsho

Address : Charles Sturt University,

With reference to the approval of the Research Steering Committee and in accordance with Forest and Nature Conservation Rules and Regulations, 2017, this permit is issued to the above applicant to conduct research in State Reserved Forests/Community Forest/ Protected Areas/any other management regimes w.e.f. 2020-03-01 till 2020-08-31.

Research Site : Phobjikha and Gangtey Gewogs under Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag

Research Topic : Community-based Ecotourism: An exploration of the dynamics of social networks in homestay: A case study of Bhutan.

Note : The researcher is instructed to meet the CFO of the above Park/Division office before start of his/her research work in the field. The researcher is also instructed to submit the set of his/her research data and a copy of his/her research thesis to UWICER.

The research work shall adhere to the provisions of the Forest and Nature Conservation Rules and Regulations 2017.



OFFICIAL SEAL

Signature of Chairman

Appendix E: Approval Letter from Wangduephodrang District Administration



དབལ་ལྷན་འབྲུག་གཞུང་།
ཚོང་ཁག་བདག་སྐྱོང་དབང་འདུས་པོ་བླང་།
ROYAL GOVERNMENT OF BHUTAN
DZONGKHAG ADMINISTRATION
Wangduephodrang: BHUTAN



Planning Unit

DAW/Plg-35/2019-2020/ 6655

17th February, 2020

Mr. Phenden Gyamtsho,
HDR Student (Student ID-11639459),
Charles Sturt University,
Australia.

Sub: Permission to conduct research on Homestay at Gangtey & Phobji

Dear P. Gyamtsho,

The Dzongkhag Administration is pleased to accord permission to conduct research on above cited subject as per your proposal. However, you are requested to adhere with the rules, regulation and laws of other stakeholders/offices existing at the place.

Since, your research is on "An exploration of the dynamics of social networks in homestays" at Gantey and Phobji, you are requested to submit a copy of your research finding/thesis to this Dzongkhag Administration for our record.

Thanking you

Yours Sincerely,

(Sonam Jamtsho)
DZONGDAG

1. Dzongrab, DAW for kind information.
2. DPO, for necessary collection of research thesis.
3. Office Copy.

**Appendix F: Research Approval Letter from Human Resource Ethics Committee,
Charles Sturt University**

-----Original Message-----

From: Human Ethics Team [mailto:ethics@csu.edu.au]

Sent: Wednesday, 31 March 2021 2:59 PM

To: Gyamtsho, Phenden <pgyamtsho@csu.edu.au>

Cc: CSU Human Research Ethics <ethics@csu.edu.au>; Gyamtsho, Phenden <pgyamtsho@csu.edu.au>; Bond, Jennifer <jebond@csu.edu.au>; Lewis, Clifford <cllewis@csu.edu.au>

Subject: HREC Variation Approval - Mr Phenden Gyamtsho Reference: H19358

Dear Mr Gyamtsho,

Project title: An exploration of the dynamics of social networks in homestays : A case study of Bhutan

Protocol number: H19358 (Please refer to this number in all contact or correspondence relating to this application)

Approved until: 31/03/2022

Thank you for submitting your request to vary the research proposal detailed above to the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee. Your request was considered on 12/03/2021.

Based on the guidelines in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research the Committee has APPROVED your request.

As previously notified, you must report to the Committee at least annually, and as soon as possible in relation to the following:

- anything that might impact on the ethical acceptability of the project (including, but not limited to, adverse events, unexpected outcomes or additional information coming to light);
- amendments to the research design and/or any changes to the project (Committee approval required);
- extensions to the approval period (Committee approval required); and
- notification of project completion.

This approval constitutes ethical approval in relation to humans only. If your research involves the use of radiation, biochemical materials, chemicals or animals, separate approval is required by the appropriate University Committee.

Please contact the Governance Officer on (02) 6933 4213 or ethics@csu.edu.au if you have any queries. Further information regarding human research ethics at CSU can be found at the HREC webpages <https://research.csu.edu.au/ethics-and-compliance/human>

The Committee wishes you well with your research.
Sincerely,

Presiding Officer,
Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix G: Interview Guide for Key Informant

In-depth semi-structured interview guide for key informants

Interview date: Interview ID No.

1. In your opinion, how are homestays operated across the country?
 - a) Could you explain why homestays in Wangdue Phodrang are only in Phobjikha and Gangtey?
 - b) In your opinion, how should homestays be different from other forms of accommodation, for example, hotels and resorts?
2. Could you share your opinion about who are the stakeholders involved in homestay operations?
 - a) Who are involved and in what ways?
 - b) What role does your organisation play in homestay operations?
 - c) Are there any problems related to coordination among relevant stakeholders? Why, could you explain further?
3. In your opinion, are homestays in Phobjikha and Gangtey doing economically better than those in other districts? If so, how? If not, why?
4. Could you share your views about the future of homestays in Bhutan?
 - a) Has COVID-19 impacted on local people? If so, how? Have there been particular impacts on homestays? If not, why not?
 - b) What are the lessons you have learned from this pandemic for a similar outbreak in the future?
5. Is there anything that you would like to share about homestays in Bhutan or questions about this project?

Appendix H: Interview Guide for Homestays

In-depth semi-structured interview guide for homestay household interview

Date: Interview ID No.

1. Could you tell me about the types of tourist accommodation in your locality?
2. How did you find out about homestay business?
3. Could you explain why you have chosen to operate homestay?
4. How do you access guests?
 - a) Who contacts you for booking your homestay?
 - b) Who are your reliable sources for accessing guests? Could you explain further?
5. Whom you think are the important persons to get guest bookings?
 - a) Do they make changes over bookings?
 - b) Have you ever come across those tour operator/guides cancelling your homestay and visiting other homestays?
 - c) What could be the possible reasons for cancellations?
6. In the network of people involved in homestays whom do you think has the most influence when it comes to homestays getting guests?
7. As per your experiences, what are the challenges and problems in homestay operation?
8. What are your views about the benefits associated with homestay operation?
9. In your opinion, what could be the reasons for other households for not operating homestays?
10. Do non-homestay households in your village participate in homestay activities? How? Could you explain further about the types of activities?
11. Have you received support for your homestay from any governmental agencies, Non-governmental Organisations, and other tourism associations? If so which one?
 - a) Could you elaborate on the types of supports you have availed?
 - b) Are those supports useful in the daily operation of homestay activities? If so how?
12. What are the activities that you organize for the guests?
 - a) Are those activities different from those provided by local hotels?
 - b) What are some of the homestay activities which most of the tourists enjoy?
13. Has the COVID-19 affected your homestay?
 - a) How have you dealt with the pandemic situation?
 - b) How did the community as a whole respond to the unexpected situation collectively?
 - c) What are some of the lessons you have learned from the current situation for the future?
14. Do you have any further comments you would like to make about homestays?

Appendix I: Interview Guide for Non-homestays

In-depth semi-structured interview guide for non-homestay households

Interview date:Interview ID No.

1. Could you tell me about some of the significant aspects of your place?
2. Are you aware of any homestays in your locality?
3. What are your views about homestay operations in your area?
 - a) Have you observed any challenges being confronted by homestay households?
4. Have you considered offering a homestay at your house – if yes why and if not why not?
5. In your opinion, how significantly does the homestay operation contribute to the economic security of that household?
 - a) Is it possible to generalise the economic situation of homestay vs. non-homestay households in relation to economic situation? If so, what is your opinion on this?
6. Whom do you think seems to be the most influential actor or group of actors related to whether a homestay gets guests or not? - Could you elaborate on this further?
7. If you were operating a homestay enterprise, how would you access tourists?
 - a) Why would you do it that way? b) Who would you contact to get the most access to guests?
 - b) If you operated a homestays, how would you maintain good connections with other households in your community and external agents? Could you explain further the importance of maintaining good networks?
 - c) In your opinion, do you think social networks in your village or elsewhere influence the distribution of guests? In what ways and why?
 - d) Do any of your relatives have homestays? If so, do you give help to your relatives when they have homestay guests? If yes, in what ways?
8. Have you heard of any governmental agencies, Non-governmental Organisations, or other tourism associations providing support to homestay households? Could you explain the types of support they provide?
9. Have you been involved in activities related to homestays?
 - a) What was the nature of this involvement?
 - b) What implications did this involvement have on you? i.e. any benefits or impositions?
10. In your opinion, are there benefits to the community at large from homestays?
 - a) Could you explain a bit more about the types of benefits?
 - b) How do homestay operations in your locality benefit the community as a whole?
 - c) Could you explain the types of benefits in addition to economic returns?
11. Have you got anything to say about the homestays in your locality?
12. How has COVID-19 impacted homestays you are familiar with?
 - a) How have you managed to cope with the situation?
 - b) How did the community as a whole respond to the unexpected situation collectively?
13. Do you have any further comments you would like to make about homestays?

Appendix J: Interview Guide for Uncertified Homestays

In-depth Semi-structured interview guide for non-homestay households

Interview date: Interview ID No.

1. Could you tell me about some of the significant aspects of your place?
2. Are you aware of any homestays in your locality?
3. What are your views about homestay operations in your area?
 - a. Have you observed any challenges being confronted by homestay households?
4. Have you considered offering a homestay at your house – if yes, how long have you been operating homestay? Are there any difficulties in getting certified by the TCB? If not, why not?
5. Are there any advantages and disadvantages of getting your homestay certified by the TCB?
6. In your opinion, how significantly does the homestay operation contribute to the economic security of that household?
7. As per your experience, whom do you think seems to be the most influential entity or group of actors related to whether a homestay gets guests or not? - Could you elaborate on this further?
8. How do you access guests?
 - a) Why would you do it that way?
 - b) Who would you contact to get the most access to guests?
9. Could you tell me how you maintain good connections with other households in your community and external agents? Could you explain further the importance of maintaining good networks?
10. In your opinion, do you think social networks in your village or elsewhere influence the distribution of guests? In what ways and why?
 - a) Do any of your relatives have homestays? If so, do you give help to your relatives when they have homestay guests? If yes, in what ways? Do they come to assist you?
11. Have you heard of any governmental agencies, Non-governmental Organisations, or other tourism associations providing support to homestay households? Could you explain the types of support they provide?
12. Have you been involved in activities related to homestays?
 - a) What was the nature of this involvement?
 - b) What implications did this involvement have on you? i.e. any benefits or impositions?
13. In your opinion, are there benefits to the community at large from homestays?
 - a) Could you explain a bit more about the types of benefits?
 - b) How do homestay operations in your locality benefit the community as a whole?
 - c) Could you explain the types of benefits in addition to economic returns?
14. How has COVID-19 impacted homestays you are familiar with?
 - a) How have you managed to cope with the situation?
 - b) How did the community as a whole respond to the unexpected situation collectively?
15. Have you got anything to say about the homestays in your locality?

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