

## Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on South African Tourism Industry - A Systematic Review

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**How to cite this article:** Ilo, S.O., Das, S. & Bello F.G. (2023). Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on South African Tourism Industry - A Systematic Review. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 12(2):766-782. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.398>

### Abstract

The need to systematically examine emergent literature focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South African tourism is prompted by the contributions of tourism to the South African economy. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA2020) protocols were used to understand and identify recovery strategies. This systematic review extracted literature from five databases: EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Sabinet, Scopus, and Web of Science. The sifting of identified literature was conducted with the aid of Rayyan, a web-based software, while COVID-19 thematic clusters of tourism research, niche tourism and methodological designs were used to synthesise the literature. Findings revealed disproportionate literature among three major clusters, with gaps in the South Africa niche tourism research. Based on the dominant adoption of qualitative designs of the reviewed literature, this study recommends a set of new tourism research agenda that particularly accentuates tourism recovery and resilience.

**Keywords:** Tourism; COVID-19; South Africa; systematic review; PRISMA

### Introduction

From the detection, spread, and subsequent declaration of the outbreak of Sar-Cov-2, abbreviated COVID-19, as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020, the world confronted an overwhelming devastating public health emergency. With its multifaceted impacts and implications for lives and livelihood, the spread of the virus and the consequential deaths were distributed unevenly across the world (WHO, 2023). Beyond the unprecedented consequences of the pandemic on public health, which have been widely documented in the literature (Del Rio et al., 2020; Kumar & Nayar, 2021; Sherrard-Smith et al., 2020; Stang et al., 2020), the global economy has been disastrously impacted by the pandemic. The impacts were consequent upon two predominant reasons: COVID-19-related deaths and hospitalisations deplete the global workforce and purchasing power (Botha & de New, 2020; International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2020; Pascale & Gianola, 2022; Zachara-

Szymańska, 2022), and restrictions in travels and national lockdown unprecedentedly declined the global GDP (Fernandes, 2020; Gazzeh et al., 2022; Olufadewa et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2020).

Global responses to the containment of the spread of the virus, as observed through bans on cross-border travels, cancellation and indefinite suspension of global and local flights and events, restrictions to domestic movements, and strictly enforced lockdowns by most countries, resulted in disproportionate impacts on different sectors of the global economy. In the tourism sector, to the implicit physical nature of its business activities, extant literature acknowledged that tourism is one of the most adversely affected industries by the COVID-19 pandemic (Harchandani & Shome, 2021; Jaipuria et al., 2021; Popescu, 2020; Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020; Vărzaru et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2021). In 2020, the global economy lost US\$4.5 trillion and 62 million jobs as a result of the direct impact of the pandemic (United Nations World Tourism Organisation, 2020), with vulnerabilities of national economies varying proportionately with their dependency on tourism (Dioko, 2022; Jana et al., 2022).

In the Global South, according to South Africa's Department of Tourism (2020), tourism contributed 9.2% to its gross domestic product (GDP) and employed 2.2 million people in 2019. While the extent of the impact of COVID-19 on the South African tourism industry continues to generate scholarly attention, existing studies, however, have evidence that the pandemic has caused a significant decline in South Africa's international tourist arrivals and foreign earnings (Kourentzes et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021), loss of jobs and cessation of employment creation (Köhler et al., 2021; Posel et al., 2021; Ranchhod & Daniels, 2020), and devastated local economies, which substantially depend on tourism (Christian M Rogerson & Jayne M. Rogerson, 2020; Rogerson et al., 2021). Globally, a new research agenda which reviews the nature, quality, and thematic diversity of COVID-19 scholarship in the tourism industry is emerging (Duan et al., 2022; Lončarić et al., 2022; Saengtabtım et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2021). However, for South African tourism, such research and reviews are still scanty, and this paper aims to fill this gap by undertaking this systematic literature review set out to identify, evaluate, and synthesize the literature on COVID-19 impacts on the South African tourism industry. It also undertakes a critical appraisal of the methodological approaches that underpin the evidence-based contributions of the extant literature for South African tourism research. The review adopted the revised PRISMA 2020 protocol as its systematic review and meta-analytical framework. The rest of the paper is structured in sections focusing on the materials and methods adopted for the systematic literature review, the result of the systematic literature search, results, discussion, and conclusion.

## Methods

This study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020), an updated set of guidelines for reporting systematic literature reviews. PRISMA 2020 follows the underlying pre-defined steps of PRISMA 2009, which guide the conduct of a systematic literature review as a sequence of four broad stages:

- (i) identification of research questions and adoption of core definitions,
- (ii) definition of structured search, delineation of selection criteria and selection of source databases,
- (iii) Execution of exclusions based on delineated selection criteria, and
- (iv) Syntheses of results and analyses of finding (Liberati et al., 2009). The guidelines from PRISMA2020 have three major updates:

- a. expanded checklists for detailed reporting,
- b. improved reporting protocols to reflect advances in methods for identifying, selecting, appraising, and synthesising the literature, and
- c. automated generation of flow diagrams for search results using a dynamic web-based application (Page et al., 2021).

As stated earlier, this systematic review explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the South African tourism industry based on the body of evidence from extant peer-reviewed literature. It, therefore, provides a series of research agenda occasioned by the pandemic's disruptive nature. The key definitions that this review relies on are:

- Epidemic: An outbreak of a disease which spreads and affects many persons at the same time within a geographical area (Rosenberg, 1989).
- Pandemic: is a type of epidemic with a much greater range and coverage, usually a continental or global spread (Hays, 2005).
- Tourism industry: A consortium of related sectors of business that provide products and services to tourists, namely, transportation, hospitality, ancillary services, and sale and distribution (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2018).

### ***Search strategy***

Systematic and structured literature searches were conducted in five scholarly databases, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Sabinet, Scopus, and Web of Science, on 31 December 2022. Three subject terms, namely, COVID-19, tourism, and South Africa were used to draw up the search words. COVID-19 was searched by using “COVID-19” OR “Coronavirus” OR “Novel Coronavirus” OR “SARS-CoV-2” AND “pandemic”. Tourism was searched by “Tourism” OR “Tourists” OR “Tour” while South Africa was searched by “South Africa” OR “South African”. The adopted inclusion and exclusion criteria for the selection of records from the search results were as follows:

- Only peer-reviewed and published scholarly articles were included.
- Only articles published since the official declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, specifically since 2020, were included.
- Only articles that scoped the South African tourism industry were included.
- Only articles published in English Language were included.
- Articles whose thematic areas were wider than or irrelevant to the activities in the South African tourism industry were excluded.

With the anticipation that new and relevant articles could be published between the time the searches were conducted and the end of the literature review process, search alerts were activated on each database such that new publications that matched the saved search criteria were received through authors' emails. The new publications were subjected to the inclusion and exclusion criteria before they were reviewed and used to update the synthesized literature review. They represent “*New studies included in the review*” in the literature search flowchart.

### Study selection

Rayyan (www.rayyan.ai/), an AI-powered systematic review software application, was used to manage the entire sifting process, which included the identification and removal of duplicated records and screening of records based on the adopted inclusion and exclusion criteria. A two-stage screening process was used to identify eligible records for the review: the first stage involved scanning the titles of the records to determine their eligibility for inclusion; the second stage involved perusing the abstracts of those whose eligibility was *inconclusive* in the first stage. The sifting processes were independently conducted by two authors. To eliminate personal bias, differences within the included and excluded records from the two authors during the sifting processes were resolved by an independent reviewer.

### Search results

Figure 1 shows the process flowchart of the sifting process.

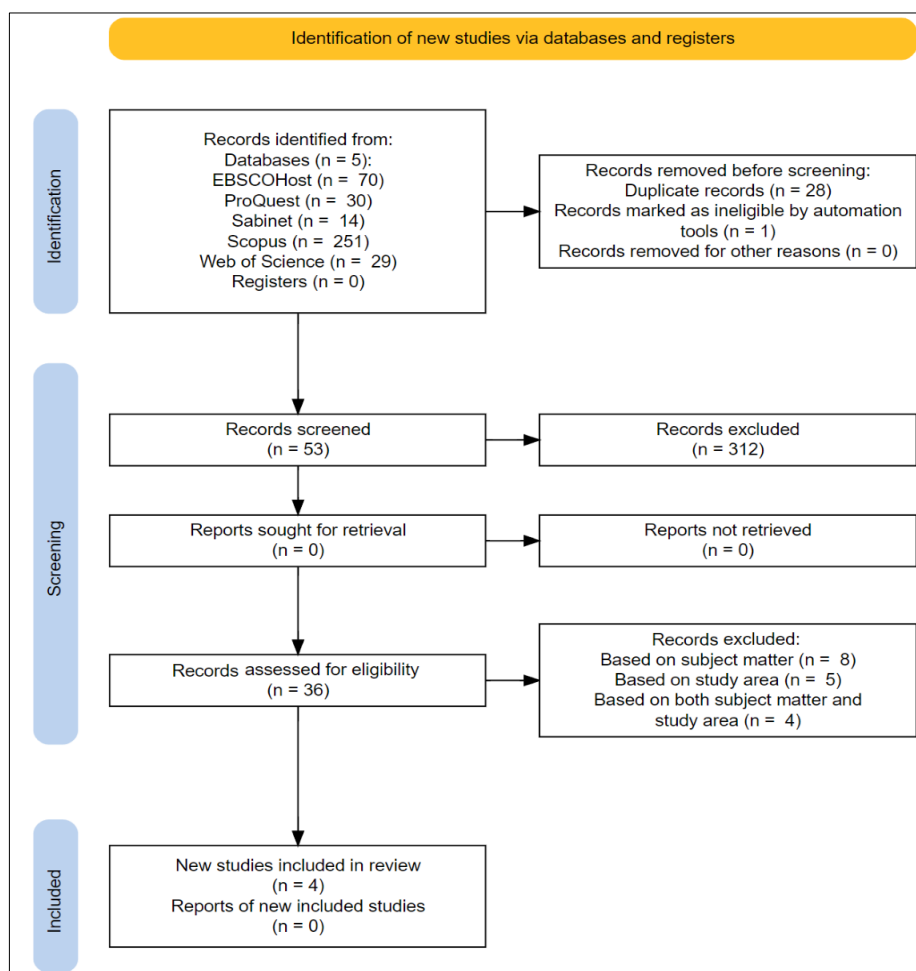


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart for the sifting process of the systematic review

Using the search terms, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and the structured literature searches across EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Sabinet, Scopus, and Web of Science databases up until 31 December 2022, produced a total of 394 matching records. The Rayyan software automatically flagged 57 records as duplicates, of which 28 records were actual duplicates,

while one record was declared ineligible due to automation. Thus, 29 records were deleted. The remaining 26 records were added to the eligibility list for screening, which brought the total eligibility to 365 records. Thereafter, the two-stage screening process (title and abstract) was conducted on the remaining 365 records, and 312 records were found ineligible and removed. Thematic and geographical scopes were employed as the criteria for excluding records with regard to their titles and abstracts. A literature review was conducted on 53 records; however, 17 additional records were further removed because they were found to be review articles.

From the new articles received through the activated alerts, four new records were found eligible and were used to update the systematic literature review. Accordingly, the total number of published articles used for this review became 40.

As part of the updated guidelines of PRISMA protocols for reporting systematic review and meta-analysis, the flowchart (Figure 1) was automatically generated using PRISMA2020, an interactive R package and Shiny app for producing PRISMA 2020-compliant flow charts for optimised digital transparency and open synthesis (Haddaway et al., 2022).

Table 1. Summary of review literature

S/No	Authors	Study Objectives	Thematic Area	Niche	Study Design
1	Adinolfi et al. (2020)	Explores the possibilities surrounding the revival and survival of the South African tourism sector via domestic tourism.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
2	Bama and Nyikana (2021)	Understanding of the effects of the pandemic on South Africa's domestic travel market.	Ramification	n. a.	Mixed Method
3	Bartis et al. (2021)	Explore some of the adopted strategies to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa.	Adaptation	MICE	Qualitative
4	Booyens et al. (2022)	Investigate the business management responses of small tourism firms to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and restrictions in South Africa.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
5	Chipumuro and Chikobvu (2022)	Model and forecast the flow of total tourist arrivals into South Africa for better planning, budgetary control and policy formulation in light of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.	Ramification	n. a.	Quantitative
6	Daniels and Tichaawa (2021)	Identify student perceptions of industry engagement in tourism and hospitality studies at various higher education institutions in South Africa.	Adaptation	n. a.	Mixed Method
7	Dube (2020)	Examine the potential reopening strategies that the South Africa tourism industry could adopt.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
8	Dube-Xaba (2021)	Effects of COVID-19 on Visiting Friends and Relatives.	Ramification	VFR	Qualitative
9	Giddy and Rogerson (2021)	Examining the adaptive responses of tourism businesses at the wake of COVID-19 pandemic in the global South.	Adaptation	Nature-Based	Qualitative
10	Giddy et al. (2022)	Examine the challenges of rural tourism firms in realizing the new potential opportunities offered in the COVID-19 environment of South Africa.	Adaptation	Nature-Based	Qualitative
11	Gumede and Mdiniso (2022)	Explore how tourist loyalty towards South Africa's cultural heritage tourism sites has been sustained amid COVID-19.	Ramification	Cultural Heritage	Qualitative
12	Hemmonsbey et al. (2021)	Identify the practical and policy-based implications of the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic for the South African sport tourism organisations.	Adaptation	Sports	Qualitative
13	Janssen (2021)	Investigate the changes in pre- and post-pandemic pricing decision factors in South Africa's luxury accommodation sector.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
14	Joao (2021)	Examine the difference between the implications of lockdown and collapse of both domestic and international travel.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
15	Lekgau et al. (2021)	Understand the perceptions of domestic tourists in South Africa on the use of virtual tourism.	Transformation	Virtual	Quantitative
16	Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021b)	Explores the strategic and policy responses of the South African MICE tourism governing bodies and industry associations.	Transformation	MICE	Qualitative
17	Lekgau and Tichaawa (2022)	Examine the impact of COVID-19 regulations on MICE tourism.	Ramification	MICE	Qualitative



18	Lekgau and Tichaawa (2021a)	Explore the response strategies employed by the MICE sector of South Africa in light of COVID-19.	Adaptation	MICE	Qualitative
19	Lewis et al. (2021)	Investigate the effects of COVID-19-induced decline in global tourism, using South African as a case.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
20	Martín-González et al. (2020)	Investigate socio-economic competitiveness of surf tourism in Cape Town beaches in order to provide solutions and alternatives for 'new normality'.	Adaptation	Sports	Mixed Method
21	Matiza and Slabbert (2022)	Examines the mediating effects of perceived risk on the relationship between South African domestic tourists' push and pull travel intentions.	Ramification	n. a.	Quantitative
22	Matiza and Kruger (2022)	Profile the South African domestic tourists towards predicting improved tourists' behavioural and demand responses with COVID-19 considerations.	Ramification	n. a.	Quantitative
23	Mbatha et al. (2021)	Investigate the impact of crisis associated with COVID-19 on tourist guides.	Adaptation	n. a.	Mixed Method
24	Ndaguba (2021)	Assesses the effect of COVID-19 lockdown on Airbnb performance	Ramification	n. a.	Quantitative
25	Nkwanyana et al. (2022)	Reflect on the negative impact that the Covid-19 pandemic on tourism and religious destinations.	Ramification	Religious	Qualitative
26	Nyika et al. (2022)	Explores the effects of COVID-19 lockdown rules on religious tourism activities in one of the tourism cities (Johannesburg).	Ramification	Religious	Qualitative
27	C. M. Rogerson and J. M. Rogerson (2020)	Identify the tourism spaces of vulnerability in South Africa	Ramification	n. a.	Quantitative
28	Rogerson and Rogerson (2022)	Explore of the geographical impacts of COVID-19 on tourism within countries.	Ramification	n. a.	Quantitative
29	Rogerson et al. (2021)	Investigate the responses and adaptations of South Africa's most tourism-dependent locality to the impacts of COVID-19.	Adaptation	n. a.	Qualitative
30	Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M. Rogerson (2020)	Examine the emerging impacts of COVID-19 upon the country's tourism sector and of the responses undertaken by government and the industry.	Ramification	n. a.	Qualitative
31	Christian M Rogerson and Jayne M Rogerson (2021)	Examine the importance of niche tourism and its re-emergence on the policy agenda of tourism stakeholders in South Africa.	Adaptation	n.a.	Qualitative
32	Rogerson and Rogerson (2022)	Examine the impacts of the pandemic on tourism flows and examine the comparative performance of coastal tourism destinations in COVID-times.	Ramification	Coastal	Quantitative
33	Rogerson (2021)	Analyses tourism business responses occurring in one of South Africa's tourism-dependent areas and thus most exposed to the radical effects of COVID-19.	Adaptation	n. a.	Qualitative
34	Sucheran (2021a)	Examine the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the cruise tourism industry with special attention on South Africa.	Ramification	Cruise	Qualitative
35	Sucheran (2021b)	Examines the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the South Africa hotel sector.	Transformation	n. a.	Qualitative
36	Van Der Merwe et al. (2021)	Assess the impact of COVID-19 on the South African private wildlife industry and the South African.	Ramification	Wildlife	Quantitative
37	Vermeulen-Miltz et al. (2022)	Investigate the impacts of COVID-19 on coastal tourism in Nelson Mandela Bay, South Africa in order to provide decision-support and inform tourism recovery strategies.	Ramification	Coastal	Quantitative
38	Visser and Marais (2021)	Explores the impacts of COVID-19 on safari lodge operators in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.	Ramification	Nature-Based	Qualitative
39	Woyo and Nyamandi (2021)	Examine the perceptions of Comrades Marathon runners towards adopting virtual reality technologies as a strategic response to COVID-19 in South Africa.	Transformation	Virtual	Qualitative
40	Young (2020)	Present the leisure pursuits in South Africa as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.	Ramification	Leisure	Qualitative

\*n.a – Not applicable; VFR – Visiting friends and relatives; MICE – Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions.

## Results

The full texts of the 40 included records (Table 1) were successfully extracted and reviewed. The following information was retrieved: *authors, year of publication, study objectives,*

*thematic areas, application to tourism niche, and study design* from the included records. The thematic clustering of included literature was adopted from Kwok and Koh (2021), which disclosed three underlying thematic areas of COVID-19-orchestrated tourism research, namely: *ramification, adaptation, and transformation*. *Ramification* represents a cluster of literature that evaluated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism. *Adaptation* research represents those that identified and analysed the varying responses of tourism stakeholders to the devastating impacts of the pandemic, with the responses predominantly focused on the implementation of capacity evaluation and building of resilience in the tourism sector by government and tourism businesses as the principal industry actors. *Transformation* recognised and grouped the body of literature that was reflectively forward-looking, documenting the prospects of using innovations in technology and governance in restructuring tourism as an outlook for post-pandemic tourism recovery and stability.

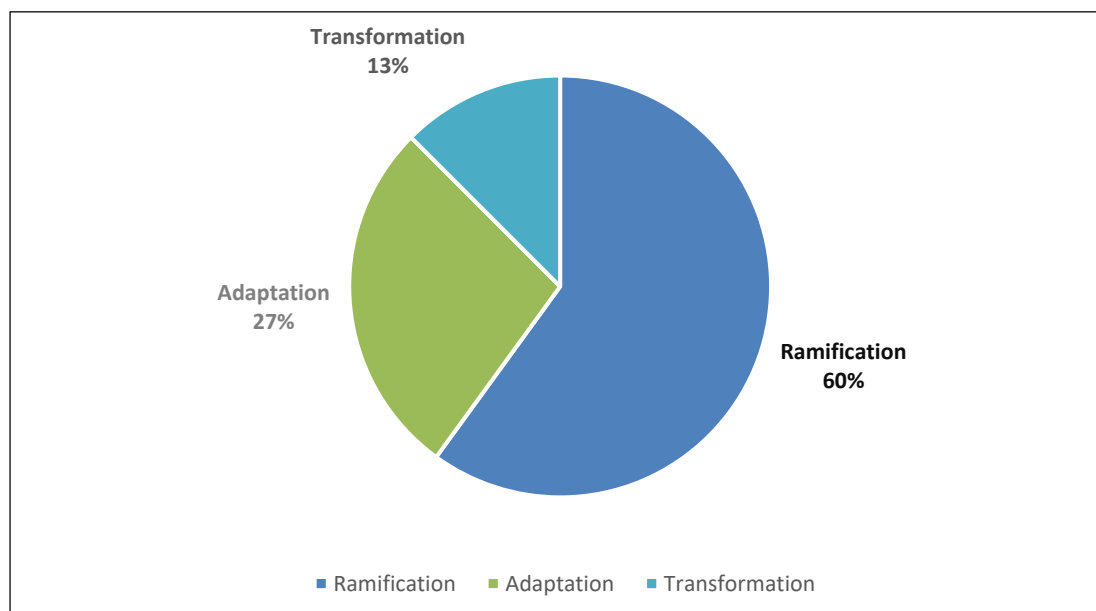


Figure 2: Thematic Clustering of South African Tourism Research on COVID-19 based on Kwok and Koh's (2021a) thematic classification.

For South Africa, as we found, the COVID-19-induced responses to tourism research were disproportionate across all three major thematic areas. As expected, the dominant literature focused on the impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry, representing more than half (60%) of the studies under this review. The various mitigations and resilience strategies adopted by tourism industry stakeholders, mostly the government of South Africa and tourism businesses, to cushion the effects of COVID-19 represent 27% of the studies, while a paltry 13% of the studies undertook inquiries on avenues, strategies, and platforms of transforming the service renderings of the sector within the disruptions occasioned by the pandemic.

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, niche tourism research was a growing area within the South African tourism space (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021a), particularly due to South Africa's notable ranking among countries in the Global South (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021b). This review revealed that the studies reviewed did not cover the entire niche tourism space within South Africa. For example, medical tourism, which is an important tourism niche in South Africa (Kunwar, 2019; Nicolaidis & Zigiriadis, 2011), is conspicuously absent,

indicating that any study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South African medical tourism remains unresearched. Other important tourism niches within the South African tourism space with no scholarly responses were culinary, religious, adventure, sports, and creative tourism.

The adopted research designs of studies conducted here were predominantly qualitative and represented 65% of the studies reviewed. As seen in Figure 3, studies which adopted quantitative and mixed-method research designs represent 25% and 10%, respectively.

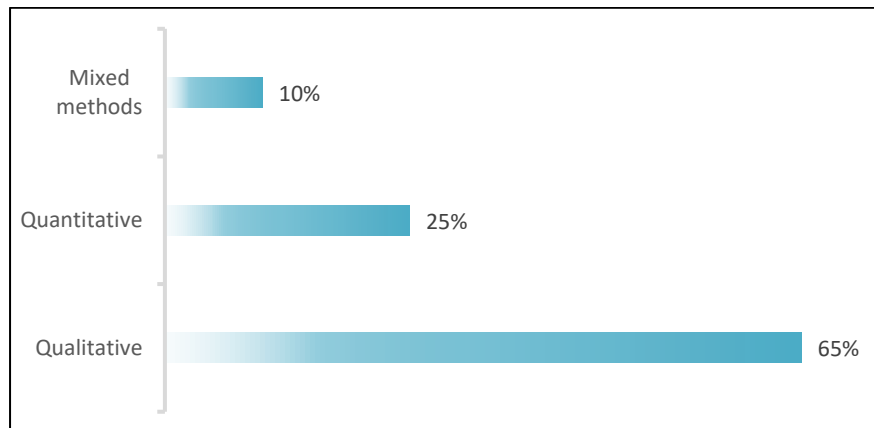


Figure 3: Adopted research designs of South African tourism research on COVID-19.

## Discussion

Evidence confirms that the tourism industry is one of the most impacted industries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the South African tourism industry attracted scholarly investigations and dominated tourism research in Africa, particularly the Sub-Saharan African region, where it leads as the choice destination for international tourists (Osinubi et al., 2022; Wenhardt, 2018).

Relying on the categorisation of the empirical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kwok & Koh, 2021), attention to South African tourism was dominated by the impacts and implications of the pandemic on the tourism industry. Although such is expected given the speed with which the virus spread across the globe, this review observed that it did not differentiate between the direct impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry and the tangential effects of various mitigations against the spread of the virus that caused the pandemic. While policies and measures instituted by governments in curtailing the spread of the virus, as seen in bans on international travel, impositions of lockdowns and shutting down business activities, adversely affected the tourism industry more (Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Kuščer et al., 2022; Mbatha et al., 2021), it was observed that empirical attention was drawn more to understanding the impact of the pandemic on South Africa tourism industry rather than in examining the effects of the mitigating measures and strategies to supporting the industry towards resilience against the pandemic and post-crisis recovery and stability.

Disasters of a global scale prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and advancements in technology popularised transformative tourism research. As noted by Gössling et al. (2021) and Sigala (2020), one of the opportunities availed by the COVID-19 pandemic is promoting transformative tourism and the attendant progression of the research agenda in transformative tourism. In South Africa's tourism research, transformative tourism research, however, attracted the least attention since the outbreak of COVID-19 virus. Incidentally, this finding



aligns with that of Nandasena et al. (2022) from a systematic review of transformative tourism literature.

The scope and depth of the South African niche tourism space are found to have been under-researched by this systematic review. Notwithstanding the visible developments in South Africa's special interest in tourism (Boekstein & Tevera, 2012), gaps still exist. For instance, as dominating as South African medical tourism is in Sub-Saharan Africa and its importance to South African tourism development (Nicolaidis & Zigiriadis, 2011), this review did not find any literature on the implications of COVID-19 pandemic on South African medical tourism. The review also found no research on culinary tourism, a gastronomic tourism niche comprised of special-interest tourism on food, wine, and beer. Rogerson and Collins (2015) had earlier noted that South African tourism research had witnessed a growing interest in wine and beer tourism due to the predominance of South African wineries within the region and the country's expanding craft beer micro-breweries, respectively. Also, findings from Singh and Bhoola's (2016) investigation of Durban, a South African coastal city famous for intercontinental cuisines, showed that the city is a developing culinary destination and a vehicle for culinary tourism for the country. Similarly, conspicuous by their absence was niche tourism related to religion, sports, and adventure.

Finally, the dominance of qualitative research design for the literature on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on South Africa's tourism industry has significant implications for the findings and conclusions drawn from the empirical investigations. As a major shortcoming, qualitative research studies are susceptible to concerns of sampling bias, representativeness, and generalisability (Ochieng, 2009; Seale et al., 2003). More so, with findings that the pandemic caused anxiety, panic, fear, and other mental health problems (Rwafa-Ponela et al., 2022; Workneh et al., 2021), relying more on the opinions of individuals whose perceptions, judgements, and experiences were also affected by the pandemic would naturally affect the findings and conclusions of the studies. With empirical data that cover the pandemic period, more insights are expected to complement the available findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

## **Conclusion**

The tourism industry stands out as one of the most impacted industries globally, triggering crises for tourism-sensitive economies such as South Africa. This systematic review, which adopted the PRISMA2020 protocol, examined the adequacy of empirical evidence of COVID-19 on the South African tourism industry. Findings reveal that the majority of the empirical investigations relied on a qualitative approach in arriving at their conclusions, with notable imbalance on the impact of the pandemic on tourism, responses from tourism stakeholders in mitigating the impact of the pandemic on the industry, and the tourism transformative opportunities from the pandemic. Gaps also exist within the reviewed literature on the spread of empirical evidence on niche tourism research in South Africa. The review, therefore, unfolds new research agenda within the South African tourism research space that addresses the gaps in the literature. Accordingly, further research which adopts an empirical approach to assessing the impacts of the pandemic on the tourism industry is recommended. Therefore, to support the long-term recovery process and build more resilience for the post-COVID-19 tourism industry, more transformative and future-thinking research in the South African tourism industry is also recommended.

## Acknowledgements

The authors express their gratitude to the University of Pretoria, South Africa, for supporting this research, particularly the first author, who is a recipient of the University's postgraduate bursary.

## Funding Information

This research is partly funded by the Department of Research and Innovation, University of Pretoria.

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