

Tourism SMMEs Recovery from COVID-19: A Case of SMMEs in the City of Polokwane, Limpopo province, South Africa

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Abstract

The tourism industry is dependent on travel and factors that inhibits travel, including pandemics such as COVID-19, may have a profound impact on the industry. Although the precise scope and long-term effects of COVID-19 have not yet been determined, industry analysts predict that some irreversible changes will occur in the future. SMMEs, which represent approximately 80% of licensed tourism and tourism-related businesses worldwide, were acutely affected by the crises. Tourism SMMEs have been more directly affected, as people who live in vulnerable communities who depend on tourism for their livelihoods have been adversely affected by the collapse of SMMEs. This research investigated the recovery possibilities of tourism SMMEs from COVID-19 in the city of Polokwane in Limpopo province. This research adopted a qualitative approach with in-depth semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool from 13 owners of tourism SMMEs registered in the Polokwane Local Municipality database, the inclusion condition for these SMMEs was that they should have been in operation for a minimum of five (5) years and to have been formally registered with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission of South Africa (CIPC). The key findings of the study shows that tourism SMME owners believe that their businesses will recover to the state they were before COVID-19, though the recovery would be slow and that SMME owners are of the view that the recovery is subject to rooting out of corruption activities withing government. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of SMMEs resilience and recovery from pandemics and disasters.

Keywords: Tourism; SMMEs; resilience; recovery; COVID-19; tourism competitiveness

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which was the greatest threat mankind has faced since World War II, set off a significant global crisis. The pandemic's extent and effects were unparalleled compared to the previous pandemic. The tourism sector was the most severely impacted by this epidemic because of international travel restrictions (Gossling et al., 2020). Gossling et al. (2020) further noted that in the first half of 2020, international travel decreased by 72%. Despite this, the tourism sector has proven to be more resilient to various crises (Hall, 2010). Small Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) are extremely significant to the tourism industry because they are crucial to national development (Martnez-Roman et al., 2015; Motta & Sharma, 2020). The COVID-19 tragedy has had a negative impact on many tourism SMMEs, and as a result, they are currently suffering from severe revenue decreases (Lu et al., 2020). SMMEs, which account for over 75% of all indirectly impacted jobs, were particularly hard hit by the long-term COVID-19 lockdown measures (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Building the ability of tourist SMMEs through resilience planning can unquestionably make a big contribution to their post-disaster recovery (Orchiston, 2013).

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, tourism SMMEs have continuously looked at ways in which they can recover from the impacts of the pandemic. Therefore, an urgent need exists to redirect the research focus toward the resilience and recovery of the tourism industry due to the magnitude of COVID-19 impacts. The current literature in South Africa focussed on the impacts of COVID-19 on SMMEs. As a result, there

is a need for an in-depth investigation of the resilience and recovery of tourism SMMEs from COVID-19 pandemic. The current study attempts to close the literature gap, through focusing on tourism SMMEs resilience and recovery.

Literature review

Tourism resilience

The ability of systems to withstand change and disruption while maintaining the same linkages between populations or state variables after change was introduced by Holling in 1973. Walker et al. (2004) defined resilience as the ability to absorb disturbance and reorganise while experiencing change to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback, in other words, stay in the same basin of attraction. Resilience can also be conceptualised in a variety of ways. In the corporate world, resilience is recognised as a crises management technique or strategy for guaranteeing organisational stability and flexibility to all forms of hazards, during catastrophes and natural disasters.

An organisation must be able to adjust to its surroundings and new circumstances in order to decrease the incident's effects (Supardi et al., 2020). Resilience solutions call for collaboration, a range of crises management techniques, good relationships among all stakeholders, a large network, an understanding of risks and opportunities, and quick, scalable intervention (Alves et al., 2020; Fitriasaki, 2020). Resilience can be proactive, absorptive/adaptive, reactive, or dynamic (Supardi et al., 2020). The tourism industry has in the past recover from natural disasters, pandemics, and epidemics like Ebola, Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

Hall et al. (2017) claim that the concept of resilience has gradually evolved, been adopted by various disciplines including psychology, ecology, and economics and employed in reference to a number of entities including people, ecosystems, and urban systems among others. The growing number of disasters and crises affecting the tourism industry internationally has brought attention to the necessity of resilience development (Prayag, 2018; Sobaih et al., 2021). Resilience tactics that can help tourism destinations endure hardships, crises, and slow-onset changes have received attention in recent years (Fang et al., 2020; Gretzel & Scarpino-Johns, 2018; Jiang et al., 2019; Paraskevas & Quek, 2019; Sobaih et al., 2021).

Resilience is a vast concept and can be seen through different levels. According to Luthans et al. (2010), resilience is related to employees' ability to bounce back in the face of enormous issues. On the other hand, and from a psychological standpoint, resilience is a skill revealed when managing difficulties successfully (Tarba et al., 2019). However, it cannot be only a single action itself, but a sequence of actions that neutralize threats, including elasticity, learning, and rejuvenation (Mithani, 2020). Linnenluecke (2017) perceives resilience as a key to overcoming external threats within organizations, such as unexpected events and extreme variations that shock organizations. The same author reveals that some organizations are not even capable of surviving such challenges, while others become stronger. Resilience is the reason why some companies have the power to respond faster to unfamiliar events (Linnenluecke (2017), which is why it is seen as a crisis management tool for business stability and adaptability (Sharma et al., 2021).

Any nation that relies heavily on tourism aims to maintain its adaptability. It is essential to investigate how the tourism industry recovers from a crisis, including tourism SMMEs, particularly in developing economies, and their potential to find an alternative solution, due to the vulnerability of tourism destinations to the crises. Dauphine and Provitolo (2007) highlight resilience as a strategic support tool and a factor in organisational performance. Three positive factors, which are diversity, self-organization and learning that increase a system's resilience

in the face of disruption were the focus of their research. Based on the synoptic perspective, Altintas and Royer (2009) describe resilience as an organisation's ability to ward off threats or recover from them after they have been encountered. A system is robust, in accordance with Vickers and Kouzmin (2001) if it can tolerate shocks and interruptions from both the internal and external environment.

Tourism sector and tourism crises

Prior to March 2020, the tourism sector continued to grow continuously at a faster rate than other sizable industries. The sector is crucial to the socioeconomic growth of many countries, especially those in the global south (Sigala, 2020). The creation of jobs for residents, raising their standard of living, and reducing poverty have all been significantly aided by the tourism sector (Siakwah et al., 2019). Based on its track record of recovering from previous crises, the tourism industry has also established a reputation for being a robust one.

It is well known that dangerous events like earthquakes, bushfires, volcanic explosions, tsunamis, or floods, as well as worldwide occurrences like disease pandemics, can cause disruptions in the tourism industry (Laws et al., 2007; Ritchie, 2009; Hall, 2010; Buultjens et al., 2017; Lenggogeni et al., 2019; Ritchie & Jang, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic created difficulties for the tourism industry that were worse than those experienced during prior financial crises and the 9/11 terrorist events in 2001 (OECD, 2020: 3). According to Cheer (2020), COVID-19 was comparable to one of the most severe economic downturns of the 20th century, the Great Depression of the 1920s. Additionally, the sector has established a track record of resilience by overcoming previous crises brought on by infectious diseases including Ebola, MERS, Coronavirus, and the Zika virus (Hall et al., 2020; Henderson, 2020; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic, according to Zenker and Kock (2020: 2), is a result of a confluence of natural disasters, socio-political crises, economic crises, and problems related to tourism demand. COVID-19 stands out above all the difficulties that have hampered tourism and its development because it is largely dependent on mobility and sociability, both of which were gravely hurt by the pandemic (Butcher, 2020; Huijbens, 2020; Qiu et al., 2020).

Depending on how much the human aspect has been involved, tourism crises can be categorised into three groups, according to Karagiannis et al. (2006). These are crises where no human action is taken, crises where action is taken indirectly by humans, and crises where action is taken directly by humans. Further to this Peters and Pikkemaat (2006) divided crises into manageable and unmanageable crises. Manageable crises can happen due to several causes, such as financial miscalculations, inability to meet customer expectations, a lack of security, unprepared workers, and a failure to adapt to change. These crises can be expected and are simple to plan for before they occur. On the other hand, some crises are deemed to be uncontrollable due to their nature, the extent of their impact, and the reality that organisations have little control over them. The tourism business may be negatively impacted by these events in several ways. War, religious strife, terrorism, political unrest, pandemics, natural disasters, environmental catastrophes, recessions, and diminishing economic levels are just a few of the causes that might lead to these. Although the industry has successfully recovered from earlier crises, it is unclear when and how the COVID-19 situation will be resolved (Sucheran, 2021). Another significant distinction between this crisis and others that have affected the tourism industry was its duration, which cast doubt on the prospect of a speedy recovery (Iastremaska & Kononova, 2021). Building industry resilience and crisis management received attention because of the way this situation was handled. The latter is a deciding factor that cannot be disregarded any longer. Jones and Comfort (2020) claim that industry resilience influences how well and how rapidly tourism stakeholders can adjust to change to maintain their existence. It

is crucial that the restoration of the industry is founded on the idea of sustainability to lessen the susceptibility of tourism stakeholders during a crisis (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017).

Government support for tourism businesses during the crises

The state is crucial to the structure and functioning of the economy, as many economic studies stress (Schmidt & Woll, 2014; Stahl, 2019). As a result, the state is crucial to the design and operation of the economic system. This job entails striking a balance between guaranteeing the optimal market circumstances, such as those for the provision of tourism services, and, above all, minimising the negative effects of these crises, such as financial limitations and the COVID-19 outbreak (Farzanegan et al., 2020; Zohlnhöfer et al., 2018). The efficacy of different types of state assistance is a topic of continuous discussion among economists. Large-scale economic interventions, according to Berry (2021), are consistent with neoliberalism and might even be one of its most significant traits. The scholarly literature examines state assistance for the tourism industry in several different ways. Kuklina (2017) asserts that state support formulates strategic orientations for the implementation of public administration efforts depending on a variety of external circumstances. Demchenko and Kabirov (2013) describe a state-supported tourism sector as a group of strategies employed by state authorities to specifically affect the actions of economic entities and market circumstances.

The formation of the best conditions for the market mechanism to work requires the realisation of state socioeconomic priorities, the formulation of a coherent concept of development, and the creation of these conditions. Support for tourism demand, support for tourism supply, and general support measures are the three types of state assistance for the tourism industry (Amosov & Ashinova, 2021; Desyatnichenko & Kuklina, 2016; Kuklina & Desyatnichenko, 2017). The state promotes the nation's tourism brand, influences prices, ease access to tourist attractions, and promotes social tourism to stimulate the demand for travel (Amosov & Ashinova, 2021). State support methods for tourism supply include both research and planning for tourist-related activities (Desyatnichenko & Kuklina, 2016). The general assistance offered by the government includes grants for the development of specific types of tourism, soft loans from government agencies, sales, and leases of land plots at prices significantly below market value, preferential tax treatment for investors, as well as subsidies for the advancement of transport and communications (Desyatnichenko & Kuklina, 2016).

Despite disparities in state support to SMMEs during crises, each nation takes specific steps to support its tourism industry when it faces financial hardship because of pandemics. Turok and Vissagie (2021) assert that there appears to be a general lack of support for tourism enterprises in South Africa. These authors claim that whereas some governments were able to put in place remarkable business assistance initiatives to lessen the consequences of the pandemic, South Africa's reaction was constrained by the dire state of its public finances. The government of South Africa is commonly thought to have failed to support the country's tourism-related businesses (see Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson et al., 2021). The mismanagement of finances at all levels of government, as well as the rife corruption linked to the phenomenon of state capture, were largely to blame for the emasculated status of the fiscus (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Mlambo & Masuku, 2020; Rogerson, 2020b). Giddy and Rogerson (2021) noticed that there was a general mistrust of the government and government backing in their study on the adjustments of nature-based tourism firms to COVID-19 in South Africa. Several study participants offered suggestions on how the government should provide financial support to tourism firms in the event of calamities and pandemics. Direct financial aid or loans backed by the government were mentioned as feasible remedies by the participants. SMMEs that received compensation said it was meagre and did not even come close to covering operating expenses, let alone giving personnel support. Both Black and



White business owners felt let down by the government because of their ineligibility for the tourism relief fund, according to Rogerson et al. (2021). Due to Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE) requirements, White businesses were typically ineligible for relief business support; nonetheless, most Black business owners were wary of getting help.

Methodology

The current study used a qualitative research approach. The premise of a qualitative study is to comprehend the meaning that individuals or groups attach to a social or human problem (Mametja et al., 2023). With in-depth semi-structured interviews serving as the primary method of data gathering, this study utilised a qualitative methodology. The study's participants were all of the tourism SMMEs listed in the Polokwane local municipality's database in the province of Limpopo. Furthermore, to be included in the study, the SMMEs needed to have been in operation for five years and to have been formally registered with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC). To identify the sample, a request was made to Polokwane Local Municipality for registered tourism SMMEs on their database. The database had thirty registered tourism SMMEs but only 13 of them met the inclusion criterion and were contactable and they were recruited to be participants in the study. Table 1 shows the type of establishment, number of years of operation and the number of employees in the study sample.

Table 1: Sample profile

Identifier	Type of establishment	Number of years in operation	Number of employees
P1	Tour operator	6	3
P2	Snake/Lion Park	18	5
P3	Tour operator	10	1
P4	Guest lodge	9	4
P5	Travel agency	20	6
P6	Tour operator	5	0
P7	Travel agency	8	2
P8	Village accommodation provider	6	2
P9	Bed and Breakfast accommodation	12	4
P10	Shuttle services	9	3
P11	Tour operator	8	2
P12	Shuttle services	7	2
P13	Guest House	15	4

* 'P' in column one stands for 'participant', which is accompanied by their allocated number.
 * The number of full-time employees given in column four excludes owners/managers, while '0' indicates enterprises without full-time employees.

The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. At the heart of such interviews is the desire to learn about a participant's beliefs regarding, or perceptions or accounts of, a particular topic and the significance that they might have. The semi-structured interviews conducted used an interview guideline, which governed the administration of specific open-ended questions. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews also allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions, to prompt the giving of detailed and specific responses by the participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted for approximately 30 minutes on average. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed with the assistance of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (NVIVO) to generate the themes discussed in the results section.

Results discussion

Snail pace recovery of SMMEs recovery

The results of the study infer that owners of the tourism SMMEs believe that their businesses will recover but it will be a slow recovery process. This perception was given credence by affirmations narrated by participants as follows:

"I think my business will recover but the recovery will be very slow. I say this because the tourism industry depends on tourists who must decide to travel. Many of the people who

are supposed to be tourists around the world have lost their jobs and therefore they will not have money to travel for holidays for a very long time to come.” (P2)

“So, the people who are travelling now are only those who are fortunate enough, who have enough money, but then you know, the majority of people who were able to travel then, are no longer able to travel because the holiday has become a luxury and not a necessity anymore since the loss of jobs have made people have less money to travel for holidays. South Africa as a country, I think, should start looking at promoting domestic tourism and more especially to rural areas where people may feel safe from the congestion of urban areas because I think the experience from COVID-19 has led people to believe that they are safe in areas which have few people.” (P3)

“This pandemic has destroyed the industry, to be honest, they have changed the mentality of the people, people are no longer eager to go out, people have got that thing of just wanting to stay in a house like it’s still under COVID-19 and this makes the prospect of the recovery of tourism SMMEs to be very difficult I must say. So, for me, I see a snail pace recovery of our tourism SMMEs.” (P7)

“People don’t have money anymore because some of them are no longer working, they are unemployed as well, and then people are no longer going for trips, holidays or even weekends away and short vacations and this makes the prospect of the recovery of our small businesses very difficult, but we will recover slowly as people will get jobs again, that’s my hope and belief. I think we are on a long road of difficulties ahead and the recovery of the industry will be extremely difficult but eventually, we will recover as small businesses.” (P10)

“Yes, I believe that our tourism SMMEs will recover after some time, though right now our focus is on recovery of financial losses during COVID-19. Do you know how many jobs have been lost, to build up a business like this takes many years and if that business closes in one month, hey there’s a problem it’s going to take a long time for it to recover again, so yes, businesses in the tourism industry will recover as well, it might not be very soon but in the long run, it will happen.” (P12)

The findings of the study above of those who predict a delayed recovery of the tourism SMMEs are supported by the views and opinion of Sucheran (2021), who asserts that although the sector has recovered admirably from previous crises, there has been discussion over when and how the sector could start to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are further supported by Iastremska and Kononova (2021), who noted that the prolonged length of the crises was also a significant distinction between the COVID-19 pandemic and earlier crises that the tourism sector has weathered, casting doubt on a speedy recovery of the industry.

History of the tourism industry resilience will triumph again

Whilst the results of the previous participants pointed to slow recovery, other participants were upbeat about the recovery, and they referred to the history of the tourism industry recoveries in the past. This is noted in the responses from participants below.

“Whilst the situation looks bleak now, the situation also looks very bad because the business is very slow in its recovery and we are still recovering from financial losses, but I am hopeful that we will recover as time goes on. In my company, we are beginning to see that for our tours, we are getting around seven people while we were used to getting fifty people, you see it is a huge difference, but this shows a slow growth moving in the right direction.” (P1)

“To be honest with you, the tourism industry can never be down and out. Our industry has survived many shocks in the past and I believe the industry will once again come back stronger and so will our SMMEs in the industry. The income level for many businesses is very low now but this is a great sign of the road to full recovery, it will take longer but we will get there.” (P9)

“You know what, the tourism industry will recover, the tourism industry has got too much support from our government because they see it as an industry with few boundaries of entry and as an industry that can contribute to the creation of employment and reduction of poverty. I believe that the government will put further measures for the industry to recover and support businesses that operate in the sector. Our country is also well known around the world and people are interested in coming to our country to experience and explore our culture and heritage, this gives me hope of welcoming the world again to South Africa and our rural area and our income levels will rise again because currently, business is very slow.” (P13)

The findings above concur with the views of Hall et al. (2020), who noted that the tourism sector has also earned the title of a resilient sector, given its track record of recovery from previous crises that afflicted the sector. The recovery of the tourism industry from previous global crises was noted by Hall et al. (2020), Henderson (2020), and Ritchie and Jiang (2019). These authors noted the recovery of the tourism industry from the negative effects on public views of safety and security brought on by the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America and the numerous earthquakes and tsunamis that devastated South Asian nations over the previous two decades. Additionally, the industry has bounced back from prior crises brought on by deadly diseases like the Zika virus, MERS, and Ebola. However, it should be highlighted that a sector's resilience affects how well its stakeholders can adjust to change to ensure their survival and how quickly they can recover (Jones & Comfort, 2020). To lessen the susceptibility of tourism stakeholders in times of crisis, it is crucial that the reconstruction of the industry be built on the idea of resilience (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017).

Conditions for the tourism SMMEs to recover fully in South Africa

The results of the study suggest that the participants feel that for the full recovery of the tourism industry, social ills, politics, corruption, and crime in South Africa should be eliminated. Participants felt social ills and political agendas can negatively influence the recovery of the tourism sector and their businesses. These participants also felt that high levels of crime and corruption will deter international tourists from visiting and as such crime and corruption needed to be mitigated if not eradicated. The opinions above are reflected in the participants' responses below:

“The recovery of the tourism industry in South Africa will not happen anytime soon unless our country can stop corruption, if corruption could fade away in South Africa and businesses could be run not politically, then definitely, our SMMEs will recover.” (5)

“There is too much crime in our country, and this is limiting the number of international tourists who would like to visit our country. Our country's tourism industry recovery depends on international tourists visiting in large numbers. If we do not receive enough international tourists, then our tourism SMMEs will still experience problems in their recovery.” (P6)

“The full recovery of our tourism SMMEs requires full support from the government with interventions that cover everyone. What the government offered to tourism businesses as support during the COVID-19 pandemic was nothing short of disgrace as many businesses were closed outside. I was unable to apply for the tourism relief fund because I am a White person and the criteria used to apply blocked me from making the application.” (P11)

The findings above are consistent with those of Vissagie and Turok (2021), who observed that there appeared to be a lack of support for tourism businesses in South Africa as a whole. They suggested that while many governments had implemented exceptional support programs for businesses to lessen the effects of the pandemic and restrictions, South Africa's response was constrained by the country's dire state of public finances. Other researchers who came to the same conclusion in their research (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson, 2021; Rogerson et al., 2021) also support this point of view. Financial mismanagement at all levels

of government and widespread corruption linked to the phenomena of state capture are major issues that need to be resolved for the recovery of the tourism industry (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Mlambo & Masuku, 2020; Rogerson, 2020b). The findings of Rogerson et al. (2021), who conducted research and discovered that both Black and White business owners felt let down by the government during COVID-19 based on eligibility to qualify for the tourism assistance fund, provide additional support for the results mentioned above. This also means that criteria for qualification for tourism SMMEs during a crisis must not have qualifying requirements that exclude other businesses from applying for support.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was unlike any other disaster and crisis that previously impacted the tourism sector (Hall et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). The recovery time will be lengthy, and it will take years until things return to normal. Currently, businesses are focusing on paying back debts incurred during the time of the pandemic. In addition, the delay in recovery is affected by people who are still reluctant to travel. In South Africa, social ills, corruption, political leadership, and crime will also affect the recovery period of the tourism industry. While there has been some progress in assistance and support from the South African government, corruption, maladministration, and nepotism will be the major impediments to the effective and efficient return to normal of the tourism industry.

The implications of this study are that tourism SMMEs should adopt long-term and sustainable strategies to enhance resilience. While short-term measures like government financial assistance and cost reduction are important in dealing with disasters, they are not sufficient in contributing to long-term resilience. Instead, strategies such as diversifying services, tapping into local and diverse markets, and embracing digital technologies could be effective strategies in helping SMMEs survive, recover, and thrive. These findings have practical implications for policymakers, providing insights into how they can support SMMEs during crises by facilitating their response and recovery strategies. By recognising the unique characteristics, limitations, and opportunities of SMMEs, policymakers can provide targeted support that caters to their distinct needs. This support can take various forms, including financial assistance, regulatory flexibility, capacity building, and access to resources. By fostering an enabling environment and offering tailored support, policymakers can facilitate the response, recovery, and long-term sustainability of tourism SMMEs.

Regardless of this, tourism SMME owners in Limpopo province are optimistic about the recovery of their SMMEs based on the previous history of the tourism industry's recovery from other pandemics. Strong emphasis was placed on conditions that would enable the recovery of the industry and of the SMMEs and South Africa must focus on overcoming issues of social ills, political deficiencies, crime, and corruption.

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