African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure **2025, Vol. 14 No. 2 pp. 274-281**
ISSN: 2223-814X

Recovery and Resilience Within The South African Niche Tourism Sector

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Abstract

This study revealed the recovery strategies employed by small, micro and medium enterprise owners or managers from three niche areas within the South African tourism sector. Using a semi-structured interview, 20 participants were interviewed to understand their views on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges they faced, and the strategies they implemented to deal with them. The participants were from the culinary, accommodation, sport and adventure tourism sub-sectors. The findings illustrated that each niche tourism area adopted creative and proactive recovery approaches. These approaches included digitisation, generating innovative and sustainable marketing solutions, and proactive planning activities. Business strategies and practices have been altered as tourism businesses have attempted to stabilise and survive. The participants showed resilience in their sense-making behaviours, collective efforts, and positive emotional tone. Emotional intelligence and crisis management training are suggested to enable the sector to enhance its ability to cope with future crises.

Keywords: Crises, niche, pandemic, recovery, SMMEs, tourism

How to cite this article: Townes, J.I., Fobosi-Klaas, A. & Mfazi, S. (2025). Recovery and Resilience Within The South African Niche Tourism Sector. African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure, 14(2):274-281. DOI: https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.607

Introduction

The onset of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in late 2019 marked the beginning of a global health crisis, subsequently declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation in 2020. The ramifications of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) were felt worldwide, with South Africa (SA) being the worst-hit country in Africa. The government responded with stringent measures involving curfews, lockdowns, and social distancing (Bruwer et al., 2020). The South African tourism sector faced unprecedented challenges due to the pandemic and associated restrictions. The cessation of tourism activities significantly impacted the tourism sector, already grappling with the global economic downturn before the onset of the pandemic (StatsSA, 2021). However, tourism remains a vital cog in the national economy. It significantly contributes to the economy, the livelihood of thousands of people, and the overall expenditure derived within the country (Malik-Nair, 2020). Tourism is vital in developing countries (Rosalina et al., 2021). The well-being of individuals in developing countries is linked to the survival of the tourism sector, particularly the small, micro and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs) tourism sector (Rasool et al., 2021). This is associated with the fact that such business initiatives are the heart of employment in these countries. This can be particularly significant in South Africa, where a large portion of the population is employed within the SMME tourism sector (Sucheran, 2021). SMMEs, like large corporations, are exposed to several risks, and their ability to survive and be resilient is essential for several economic-related factors, such as employment creation. However, SMMEs are not adequately suited for managing risks, and the available institutional support is primarily weak. SMMEs located in developing countries tend to have weaker risk management, poor business continuity, and a lack of a culture of crisis management (CM) (Gössling et al., 2020). Most of these SMMEs do not have the expertise and resources to focus on the above-mentioned activities and, therefore, are highly vulnerable to external and internal risks and disruptive shocks (Nicola et al., 2020).

Overall, tourism SMMEs had not experienced a global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, before. Therefore, most tourism SMEs have been caught unprepared by the pandemic as they are unaware of CM approaches (Varelas & Apostolopoulos, 2020). Many of these SMMEs entered a 'survival mode' and did their best to survive and work towards the continuity of their businesses (Nummela et al., 2020). The delicate nature of this tourism sector means that it should be closely analysed in capricious situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on the world and its economies is still under investigation. There has been a call for more empirical research aimed at minimising the impact of the pandemic through increasing knowledge of the phenomenon (Qiu et al., 2020). Only a few studies (e.g., Alves et al., 2020; Portuguez & Gómez, 2021) have investigated the impact of the pandemic within the tourism SMME sector. Little research is related to the CM practices of SMMEs in the tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pongsakornrungsilp et al., 2021). Specifically, the extant literature primarily focuses on how the global North businesses adjusted to this setting (Bartik et al., 2020). Given the evident lack of research on wellbeing and resilience, there has also been a call for a deeper study of these issues in the tourism sector, specifically looking at the practices and interventions used (Pocinho et al., 2022). There are also gaps in the niche tourism research within the country leading to calls for research in the medical, culinary, religious, sports and adventure tourism sub-sectors (Ilo et al., 2023). Consequently, the study sought to explore the recovery strategies implemented by SMMEs within a few of these niche areas in the South African tourism sector.

Literature review

Tourism in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa

The Eastern Cape (EC) province in South Africa is a diverse and culturally rich destination, offering a tapestry of landscapes from pristine coastlines to lush hinterlands. The tourism sector in this province has long been recognised as a crucial economic driver, providing employment opportunities, supporting rural development, and contributing significantly to the local economy (Komani, 2020). The EC's tourism sector is characterised by its labour-intensive nature, a high percentage of family-owned SMMEs, seasonality of demand, low profit margins, and intricate interdependencies with other sectors of the economy. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis highlighted the vulnerability of these tourism SMMEs to external shocks and disruptions (Bulin & Tenie, 2020).

Crisis management and adaptive approaches to crises

Literature provides several definitions of the term crisis. It is an unexpected, unpredictable, and severe incident requiring a response (Doern et al., 2019). By way of a broad definition, CM is the collective response and process adopted by a business to cope with a crisis that threatens to damage the company and/or its stakeholders. Three steps are essential to a business's survival during a crisis. These are pre-crisis preparation, a rapid response during the crisis, and a post-crisis recovery plan (McCool, 2012). CM, therefore, demands different reactive and proactive approaches. The crisis management of businesses is an essential agenda item for international tourism researchers as they investigate the impacts of COVID-19 (e.g., Assaf et al., 2022; Bressan et al., 2021). Implementing CM strategies by SMMEs in SA has been found lacking (Booyens et al., 2022). The adaptive capabilities of the SMMEs were limited, and their levels of resilience were low (Booyens et al., 2022). This contrasts with the current literature, mainly from the global North, that indicates that SMMEs in this country have entrepreneurial self-efficacy, which enables them to adapt and innovate through their proactive behaviour, thereby minimising the impact of pandemics (Alves et al., 2020; Bressan et al., 2021; Chokoe & Sao Joao, 2024).

Small businesses must propose various strategic alternative business models periodically (Hadjielias et al., 2022). Changes in some industries, such as the tourism sector, are inevitable, especially for SMMEs. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unexpected risks that call for more efficient business models with sustainable plans. In chaotic and uncertain situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, planning and long-term strategy are challenging, while on the other hand, short-term predictions are viable (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Kastenholz et al., 2022; Redjeki et al., 2021). Regarding crisis marketing, brand management is essential during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Dayour et al., 2021; Redjeki et al., 2021). The CM techniques employed post-COVID indicate that entrepreneurs deepened their customer relationship management, enhancing their resilience in overcoming the challenges (Portuguez & Gómez, 2021). Increasing operational efficiency and overall competitiveness was a critical adaptive strategy. A study investigating the CM techniques employed by Pakistani SMMEs revealed that the majority used creative methods such as reducing salaries, laying off employees, and limiting their business operations (Shafi et al., 2020). In navigating the aftermath of the pandemic, SMMEs were advised to embrace digitalisation as a survival strategy (Abhari et al., 2022). This involves leveraging digital technologies for supply chain management, operations, and marketing. Despite challenges such as high data costs, the adoption of digitalisation is crucial for the development and risk prevention of small businesses (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020). Specifically, the literature suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic primarily catalysed the tourism sector's journey toward innovation and digitalisation (Bai & Ran, 2022; Karunarathne et al., 2021). The measures introduced during COVID-19, along with the habits formed during that time, have spilt over into the post-COVID-19 era, leading to a continuous increase in digital adoption and consumption (Assaf et al., 2022; Okafor et al., 2022). Consumers have reached a point of expecting contactless technologies, among other requirements, as a fundamental prerequisite for a tourism experience that is safe and seamless (Akhtar et al., 2021). Additionally, cost-cutting strategies, innovation, and adaptation to changing market demands were emphasised as essential components for SMMEs in SA to survive and thrive post-COVID (Giddy & Rogerson, 2021; Malik-Nair, 2020). Offering discounted prices was a critical and creative strategy used within the tourism sub-sector to attract customers (Jurdana et al., 2020; Kastenholz et al., 2022; Murima & Shereni, 2023). Diversifying products and services, adopting new business practices, and aligning strategic marketing with the businesses' strengths were recommended measures to mitigate financial risks and enhance resilience (Portuguez & Gómez, 2021; Sithole et al., 2025). Many South African companies, therefore, introduced innovative business opportunities, such as upskilling of staff and virtual and hybrid events, as part of the survival and adaptation strategies to the pandemic (Bartis et al., 2021).

The resilience of the tourism sector

The term resilience refers to the ability of an individual, system, or community to adapt, recover, or bounce back from adversity, challenges, or significant stress. The term is rooted in ecology, which describes the affirmative response to return to an original form after a natural disaster such as a flood or drought (Biggs et al., 2020). There has been an increase in focus on the resilience element of the tourism sector to crises and disasters. This research has highlighted that crises and disasters have an immediate but relatively brief detrimental impact on tourism (Berbekova et al., 2021; Cartier & Taylor, 2020; Sobaih et al., 2021). Future research should, however, focus on developing an enhanced understanding of the specific elements that constitute the nature of resilience within tourism. There needs to be a deeper understanding of the ability to change and adapt (Berbekova et al., 2021). It is also suggested that resilience could be more positively viewed as "bouncing forward" instead of "bouncing back" to the pre-crisis state. This may assist in formulating a more holistic approach to future strategies in crisis planning and developing future resilience (Hall et al., 2024). Business resilience through creativity and innovation, effective planning and

leadership influence sustainable tourism development and performance (Fatoki, 2018). A study among owner-managers of Egyptian small hospitality businesses confirmed the direct and significant impact of resilience (planned and adaptive) on sustainable tourism development and performance. Business type significantly affected the results, as restaurant owner-managers were more resilient than their hotel counterparts (Sobaih et al., 2021). Beirman (2018) documented three critical elements of the tourism sector's resilience. These are proactive crisis management planning, cooperation between stakeholders, and the ability to make swift and appropriate responses. The value of social and human capital as part of the recovery and resilience process during a crisis is well documented (Hall et al., 2024). Collaboration and coordination appear to be effective mechanisms for unlocking the benefits of community resilience. This can develop a form of self-resilience within communities, facing and responding to a crisis, and help facilitate the recovery process. Communities can draw on the strength of their relationships, facilitating the effective transmission of information and resource exchanges (Hall et al., 2024; Harilal & Tichaawa, 2024; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2024). Constant, focused communication enables calm reactions to disasters (Cartier & Taylor, 2020).

Maintaining a positive emotional tone played a crucial role in helping the tourism sector adapt to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. It fostered resilience, creativity, adaptability, and collaboration, ultimately contributing to the sector's ability to navigate the challenges and emerge stronger on the other side (Hall et al., 2024). In the Portuguese wine route-related rural tourism sector, a positive emotional tone was represented by acceptance and resilience, but most significantly through optimism or hope (Kastenholz et al., 2022). The level of employees' well-being and psychological resilience and the ability to bounce back directly contribute to the tourism business' resilience and adaptive capacity. This was confirmed through a large sample of hotels and travel agents (Elshaer, 2024). Tourism and hospitality business owners' level of resilience during a crisis is also directly related to the continuity of these businesses. Specifically, it is suggested that they have high self-awareness and strong problem-solving and emotional intelligence skills (Elshaer & Saad, 2022; Pocinho et al., 2022). Sense-making has played a crucial role in demonstrating resilience during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector. Tourism organisations have enhanced their ability to adapt, innovate, and thrive by actively interpreting and making sense of the complex and dynamic environment (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Sense-making is the cognitive process of interpreting, understanding and creating meaning from chaotic and uncertain situations (Dervin, 1998). Instead of the linear decision-making process seen in most natural disasters, sense-making during the COVID-19 pandemic was more dynamic and cyclic, like riding a roller-coaster, within the tourism industry (Reinhold et al., 2022). Deliberate sensemaking assisted in initiating strategic innovations and comprehensive changes (Bichler et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023). Having reviewed the literature, the next section entitled the research methodology followed in this study.

Research methodology

A structured design outlined by Zikmund et al. (2017) was adhered to, thereby recognizing the importance of a systematic approach in research (Collis & Hussey, 2014). Drawing inspiration from Quinlan (2011), the research process replaced personal choice and random decision-making with informed professional decisions (Cooper & Schindler, 2014). Identifying the research problem involved narrowing the focus on the recovery strategies implemented by SMMEs in the South African tourism sector post the COVID-19 pandemic. The paradigm, design, and approach were strategically chosen, with an interpretivist paradigm guiding a descriptive research design, aligning with the qualitative approach to delve into participants' perspectives and social reality (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Collis & Hussey, 2014). Employing a non-probability snowball sampling technique facilitated participant recruitment from the EC province's tourism sector, ensuring representation from three niche tourism sub-sectors (Mnguni et al., 2019). The sample comprised 20 SMME owners or managers, including those from the culinary, accommodation and sport and adventure tourism sub-sectors. Given the qualitative nature of the study, a semi-structured interview served as the research instrument, which endured a rigorous peer-review process to improve its clarity and robustness (Bryman & Bell, 2015; King et al., 2019). The data collection process involved recording interviews and subsequent transcription. Thematic analysis was employed as the chosen data analysis method due to its capacity to identify patterns and themes in seemingly disparate data (King et al., 2019). Ensuring accuracy, the transcription process maintained factual integrity. Subsequently, interpretive codes were assigned, leading to the identification of overarching themes through a collaborative analysis approach, mitigating individual researcher biases. This methodological framework provided a comprehensive understanding of the recovery strategies implemented by SMMEs within the South African tourism sector, as detailed in the subsequent results section.

Results and discussion

In this section, the participants' demographic profiles are outlined, and the main themes are identified from the interviews with these participants.

Demographic profile of the participants

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the 20 participants in this study. The names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms, representing the alphabetical letters A to T. Most participants were male (55%) and over 30 years old (75%). The participants held the titles of owner-manager (45%), manager (25%), owner (15%), or franchisees (15%). Most participants are in the culinary industry (45%), with 30% in accommodation and 25% in sports and adventure-type businesses. Regarding enterprise size, 35% are micro, 35% are small, and 30% are medium-sized. Most of the companies are in urban areas (80%).

Table 1: Business and owner profiles

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Title or Role	Type of business	Enterprise size	Location
A	Male	28	Owner-manager	B&B	Small	Rural
B	Male	34	Owner-manager	Restaurant	Micro	Urban
C	Female	38	Owner-manager	Restaurant	Small	Urban
D	Male	38	Manager	Sport & adventure	Micro	Urban
E	Male	34	Owner-manager	Sport & adventure	Micro	Urban
F	Male	38	Manager	Guesthouse	Micro	Urban
G	Female	35	Owner-manager	Self-catering	Micro	Urban
H	Female	42	Owner-manager	Sport & adventure	Micro	Urban
I	Female	37	Manager	Restaurant	Small	Urban
J	Female	29	Owner-manager	Restaurant	Micro	Urban
K	Female	54	Franchisee	Hotel	Medium	Urban
L	Male	38	Manager	Restaurant	Small	Urban
M	Male	38	Owner	Sport & adventure	Small	Urban
N	Female	53	Owner-manager	Restaurant	Small	Urban
O	Female	48	Franchisee	Restaurant	Medium	Urban
P	Male	56	Owner-manager	Hotel	Medium	Rural
Q	Male	27	Manager	Restaurant	Small	Urban
R	Male	43	Franchisee	Restaurant	Medium	Urban
S	Male	59	Owner	Sport & adventure	Medium	Rural
T	Female	71	Owner	Hotel	Medium	Rural

Themes from the results

The thematic analysis revealed two core themes and six sub-themes, as depicted in Table 2. These are discussed in the subsections that follow.

Table 2: Themes and sub-themes

	Theme	Sub-theme
1	Novel approaches adopted by tourism businesses	Adaptation to digital requirements
		Generating creative marketing strategies and solutions
		The need for efficient, proactive planning activities
2	The resilience of the tourism sector to crises	The need for sense-making
		Importance of collective efforts
		Positive emotional tone

The two core themes were the approaches adopted by the tourism businesses and the resilience displayed by these businesses during and after the pandemic crisis. In the following sub-section, the former theme is discussed.

Theme 1: Novel Approaches Adopted by Tourism Businesses

The first identified theme centred on the novel strategies implemented by the businesses in these EC niche tourism sub-sectors. Specifically, three approaches were gleaned.

Adaptation to digital requirements

Firms within this sector were mindful of the vital transition to digitalisation as a solution to the effects of the pandemic (Bai & Ran, 2022; Karunarathne et al., 2021). As documented in other studies, contextual factors need to be considered when discussing this strategy, such as digital literacy and the necessary relevant infrastructure for digitalisation to thrive (e.g., Akhtar et al., 2021; Okafor et al., 2022). Concerning this issue, participants stated: 'Hosting digital/virtual events, ability to analyse demand and attract new customers through a new offer of service and creating online experiences.' (D), 'Skills that have become a necessity is the ability to operate your business digitally.' (G), and 'For quite a while my business survived because I could quickly get my products online so I could sell from there. If I had not done that, I am sure I would be closed like so many other restaurants in this town. And we are still doing that now.' (Q). All three niche EC tourism sub-sectors in this study agreed they needed a more digital approach. As found in other studies (e.g., Kaushal & Srivastava, 2020; Komani, 2020), digitalisation has become a permanent part of re-engineering most tourism SMMEs' business processes.

Generating creative marketing strategies and solutions

As found in other studies (e.g., Alves et al., 2020; Malik-Nair, 2020), the business owners or managers from this study also focused on increased market research and product/service diversification as survival strategies. In support of other studies (e.g., Chitsamatanga et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2020; Shafi et al., 2020), this study also found evidence of out-of-the-box thinking and creative solutions to problems experienced. Participants from the three niche tourism areas indicated how they had creatively and strategically changed the way they do business: 'We came up with different products during Covid, like online team-building sessions for companies. And we are still seeing that companies are needing this type of service. So, it's good for us. Our creativity during the lockdown period has meant our product range has changed – for the good going forward.' (M), 'We had to diversify during the lockdown - we started doing take-aways, which we didn't do before. We still do takeaways now. It's not our top money spinner – but our clients like the option so we keep doing it. It's another way of generating income.' (N) and 'To keep your business going during tough times, you have to try to diversify the business.' (F). In times of crisis, consumer behaviour is volatile, and businesses face sudden fluctuations (Jurdana et al., 2020). From this standpoint, the study revealed that crisis marketing played a role in steering the way for tourism businesses to survive (Dayour et al., 2021; Redjeki et al., 2021). Some sentiments that emerged from the interviews include: 'We really mostly used increased marketing and cost-cutting strategies to attract tourists back.' (P) and 'Even when the lockdown was over, people were scared to come out. We turned to

our trusted and loyal customers first to get them back in through our doors. We sent emails and other types of messages to them. Then we took photos of them enjoying a meal and posted that on social media. That really worked to get a good flow through our doors again.' (O). Another important creative strategy raised by the participants was providing discounted prices to attract customers to their establishments. This is similar to the findings of other research studies (Kastenholz et al., 2022; Murima & Shereni, 2023). The participants shared the following: 'We had many promotions and discounts. We used this to get more feet through the door.' (H) and 'We had many specials and promotions. More than we usually do. It worked.' (T)

The need for efficient proactive planning activities

The participants in this study consistently highlighted that while they were reactive at the start of the lockdown, they have become more strategic in their approach and now had sustainable plans for dealing with a similar crisis in the future (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Kastenholz et al., 2022). Participants illustrated this trend: 'Since the pandemic we have really changed the way we look at our business now. Who knows if this kind of thing can happen again. We are planning forward now.' (L), 'We had a strategic planning session recently and a key part of that was coming up with a more proactive approach to help us prepare for such crises like Covid.' (P). and'We are now planning ahead, and have a crisis management plan in place.' (D). Another creative and proactive strategy employed by the participants was using the pandemic time to upskill their staff. This is consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g., Alves et al., 2020; Bartis et al., 2021; Chitsamatanga et al., 2021). The SMMEs in all three EC niche tourism sub-sectors indicated the importance of implementing new skills: 'Initially, we used the down-time to train our staff. We have seen the difference this training made. So, now, we are doing training whenever we can.' (J), 'We taught our staff how to do one another jobs. Like the waitresses got to do some cooking and the cleaner got to answer the phone and take the take-away orders sometimes. Staff morale and customer service have improved as a result." (K) and 'Some of our staff need to have fairly specialised skills, like scuba diving, rock climbing and first aid. With staff off during Covid, we learned we had to do more multi-skilling. So now we train and upskill our staff whenever we can.' (S). These examples of proactive and adaptive strategies effectively lead to the following central theme: that of the resilience shown and built within the sector during and after this pandemic.

Theme 2: The resilience of the tourism sector to crises

Three aspects were noteworthy within the second theme on the resilience of the EC niche tourism sub-sector which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The need for sense-making

The pandemic was a difficult time for these niche tourism SMMEs, and making sense of what was happening to them and their business was a real need. This has been documented within other tourism organisations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bichler et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2023; Christianson & Barton, 2021). The participants succinctly summarised as follows: 'It was tough in the restaurant business. There was a lot of tension. Making sense of it all was important for me. I started asking some really important questions about my life and what I was doing with it.' (B), 'It was a real wake-up call for me. My awareness of my worry and uncertainty about others and their well-being pushed me into a good cycle of sensemaking. I started writing a daily journal. That helped me a lot.' (K) and'We should all be trying to make sense of this – by asking ourselves what we should do in the future to help prevent and better manage future pandemics.' (H)

Importance of collective efforts

Participants from the three niche tourism sub-sectors shared the belief that regular communication, teamwork and the collective approach to dealing with the demands and challenges they faced were most beneficial to them. This finding supports and builds on other researchers' work on the value of collaborative and collective efforts when responding to a crisis (e.g., Hall et al., 2024; Harilal & Tichaawa, 2024; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2024). Participants made this clear in the following statements:'We found talking to others so important. We reached out to other restaurant owners in ____, and we got onto a whatsapp group. This helped us share information, and ideas. And well just helped us feel better and not so desperate. We built one another up.' (I), 'I closely observed what my colleagues were doing. The other people in my franchise. We had many online meetings. It was great! I then adopted their model in the way we faced the pandemic at ….' (K) and 'I used to call up my competition on a regular basis. Makes me laugh now because we certainly wouldn't have done that before the pandemic. But we still mates now. We still share ideas. It's cool.' (E)

Positive emotional tone

The participants consistently displayed a positive emotional tone across the three niche EC tourism sub-sectors interviewed in this study. This was shown in their acceptance, hope, optimism and resilience. This opposes some South African research findings (Booyens et al., 2022). However, these findings support international research that indicates that the South African spirit of entrepreneurial self-efficacy would enable SMMEs to endure the impact of pandemics (Bressan et al., 2021). Hope was most evident in the participants, as shown in these responses: 'I believe it is going to get better. This too shall pass, as the good Bible says. I do think it will get better. We will learn to adapt. I am an optimist at heart.' (M), 'I am confident about our ability to overcome this pandemic.' (A) and'If there is one thing I know about South Africans. We face our challenges head-on. This pandemic thing is no different. Don't get me wrong it's been tough. But we will get the hang of it.' (R)

Implications and conclusion

The study aimed to develop an inquiry into the recovery strategies employed by SMMEs within three niche tourism sub-sectors during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The unique aspect of this study lies in the focus on the three niche sub-sectors of culinary, accommodation and sports and adventure tourism within this context. The findings suggest that, despite having different purposes in the tourism industry, the impact of the pandemic on these SMMEs was similarly severe, and these businesses were driven to adopt creative strategies. Business processes in the three niche sub-sectors have permanently altered as increased diversification and innovative product and service lines to new marketplaces have been embraced. Other creative marketing strategies implemented are cost-cutting, discounts, packages, and the proactive upskilling of staff through training and development. This study found that the adaptive capabilities of the SMME owners and managers in these niche EC tourism sub-sectors were adequate and that the owners and managers showed significant levels of resilience. However, the comments expressed by the participants also enunciate the deep sorrow and struggle experienced by these SMME business owners and managers. Whether dealing with the sickness or death of their staff and customers, the daily threat of the imminent closure of their businesses or the continuous pressure to be innovative and learn new skills, the owners and managers needed substantial stress tolerance and resilience. This study contributes to the knowledge of tourism SMMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the findings provide insight into how these three niche EC tourism sub-sectors have dealt with the post-pandemic recovery process. Whilst it is unclear whether another crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, will be faced again, the presented findings can assist in preparing the tourism sector for this event by providing new learnings and knowledge on the topic. Accordingly, the conclusions presented suggest several recommendations for stakeholders.

For SMMEs, we infer the following two suggestions. Firstly, tourism SMME owners or managers must focus on increasing their awareness and ability to apply CM techniques. CM awareness and training are a necessity. Appropriate recovery and resilience approaches need to be learned within the sector. Whilst comparing crises and predicting the future is relatively complex, the tourism sector should learn from the COVID-19 pandemic experience. Through the lessons learned and knowledge gained, SMMEs in the tourism industry can gain skills in CM. These skills should include a broad range of proactive techniques, such as enhancing creativity, deepening customer relationship management, and increasing operational efficiency and overall competitiveness ((Portuguez & Gómez, 2021; Shafi et al., 2020). When under significant pressure, creativity and innovation are often not easily manifested. Effectively dealing with stress and maintaining optimum performance requires resilience (Elshaer, 2024). This highlights the need for tourism SMME owners and managers to be upskilled in emotional intelligence. They must be proactive in enhancing their resilience to be more adaptable, better problem solvers, and maintain high-performance levels during unfavourable circumstances (Elshaer & Saad, 2022). These SMMEs will build their emotional strength, coping mechanisms, and psychological resilience by investing in emotional intelligence training programmes for themselves and their employees. This will positively impact their well-being, life satisfaction, and ability to consider and implement adaptive CM strategies during a crisis (Elshaer, 2024). The significant limitations of this study are the relatively small sample per niche tourism sub-sector and the limited geographical area in which it was performed. The study's findings reflect the opinions of these EC SMME owners or managers, and caution should be exercised when generalising the findings to different contexts. The main suggestion for further research is to extend the study to understand what recovery strategies SMMEs employ in these niche sub-sectors in other provinces of SA and globally.

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