


‘Where to now?’ A Re-examination of the MICE Events Sector from Attendees’ Perspective

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Abstract

This current study considers the regrowth and resilience of the meetings, incentive travels, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) sector in South Africa. The study examined the attendees’ emerging expectations of MICE events and their perceptions on sector resilience. Utilising a mixed methods approach, 500 completed surveys were collected from attendees of 2022 Africa’s Travel Indaba, and interviews were conducted with supply-side MICE event stakeholders. The findings of the study reveal safety and hygiene practices are crucial to satisfactory MICE events experiences going forward. Additionally, technological innovation, diversity of MICE attendees (and business), and embedding communication, sector collaboration, and crisis management practices contribute to the resilience of MICE tourism.

Keywords: MICE events, attendees, resilience, recovery, Africa’s Travel Indaba

Introduction

The meetings, incentive travels, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) sector is one of the fast-growing segments of tourism, globally (Lee et al., 2018; Christofle & Fournier, 2022). For destinations, this events sector contributes significantly to the tourism and economic development, with employment creation, destination branding and imaging, infrastructural developments (and urban regeneration), and local economic development recognised as some of the positive impacts of this sector (Davidson, 2019; Chan et al., 2023; Shereni et al., 2021). For the MICE event attendees, the significance of the events sector lies in its the satisfaction of their business and career needs, specifically, related to networking, information search on consumers and competitors, and promoting products and services (Silva et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2018). Jung et al. (2023) posit this sector has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability in the past two years since the Covid-19 pandemic, compared to related hospitality and tourism industries. The scholars go on to explain that, unlike the physical requirements of accommodations, restaurants, and travel, the MICE sector was able to maintain continuity through virtual events, even when the entire tourism system was shut down. Further alluding to its adaptability, recovery, and resilience of, recent data from the Events Industry Council (2023) reported the global MICE sector to have reached 80% of their recovery to pre-COVID-19 levels. The resilience of this sector could be, in part, explained by one of Getz’s (2012:382) six propositions on the events sector that “even if travel and tourism collapse, possibly because of the cascading effects of global warming, another energy crisis, war terrorism or global pandemics, events will still remain important globally because they meet fundamental human needs’. This proposition has been proven and supported by the COVID-19 pandemic, as while it greatly disturbed, challenged, and altered the global events industry,

it also demonstrated the ability of the sector to cope, recover, and innovate in times of crisis. Furthermore, Dimitrovski and Seocanac (2018) and Shereni et al. (2021) agree that the need for direct contact between participants in MICE events contributes greatly to the continuous resilience of the sector and its eventual full recovery from the Covid-19 crises.

Post-Covid-19 pandemic studies conducted on the events sector and has mostly focused on the impact (see Ho & Sia, 2020; Bartis et al., 2021; Foo et al., 2020); the changes adopted to suit the nature of the virus and regulations (see Dillette & Ponting, 2021; Steriopoulos & Wrathall, 2021), and the management considerations emerging from such changes (i.e. weaker content, overwhelmed and digitally fatigued staff and resulting deteriorating mental health) (see Chan et al., 2023; Kramer et al., 2023; Jung et al., 2023). Few studies have examined the perspective of the MICE event attendees. Through the lens of the resilience theory, we consider in this study considers South Africa's post-disaster phase in the MICE event recovery process and examine attendees' perceptions of how events could be better delivered as well as their perceptions regarding the future resilience of the sector. The study considers the changes implemented, and unpacks the changes that are expected to continue to shape MICE event experiences and operations. Using a mixed method research approach with data collected event stakeholders and event attendees, the study revealed factors that could reduce the long-term vulnerability of the sector to future crises, thereby enhancing the resilience of the MICE sector. The study found change to be embedded in the workings of the MICE sector, evident by the new procedures in the event space, the (high) use of virtual and hybrid events, and the emerging importance of integrating crisis management and resilience building in MICE organisational management. The following section of the paper unpacks the resilience theory, as well as its application to the study. Thereafter, the methodological section, results and discussion, and conclusions are presented.

Theoretical foundation - Resilience theory

Originally, developed in the ecology field, the concept of resilience has been adapted to the tourism industry to understand the ability of different systems, such as communities, organisations and industries, to respond to various shocks and disasters (Espiner et al, 2017; Kato, 2018; Biggs et al., 2012). Kato (2018) describes resilience as the capacity to not only cope with changes and shocks but to continue to develop and use these shocks to ignite renewal and innovating thinking. Biggs et al. (2012) argue the economic market linkages and flows of people and resources as one of the reasons why resilience learning is crucial, as disturbances in this regard rapidly spread in different parts of the world in novel and unexpected ways. The resilience theory recognizes that unpredictability and vulnerability are a norm in the globalized world with interconnected economic, social and environmental systems. Resilience theory provides a theoretical underpinning for developing ways to understand and address vulnerable and chaotic systems (Espiner et al., 2017).

The concept of resilience has evolved since its genesis and has been adopted by various disciplines (Davoudi et al., 2012; Knight-Lenihen, 2016). This has resulted in varying definitions and conceptualisations of resilience, including engineering resilience, ecological resilience, evolutionary resilience, community resilience, and organisational resilience. Scholars such as Davoudi et al. (2012) explain that these multiple meanings of resilience to emerge have each been rooted in their various worldviews and scientific constructs, and Rodriguez-Niki (2015) posits these definitions to generally include (i) the resistance (or robustness) of systems to unusual exogenous shocks, and (ii) the ability to recover. Further, a deeper investigation of the resilience literature suggests that the various conceptualisations are, in part, differentiated by their stance on the state of equilibrium particularly being related to system stability (Basurto-Cedeno & Pennington-Gray, 2018; Dahles & Susilowati, 2015;

Knight-Lenihien, 2016). Certainly, Cochrane (2010) underscored this to be the starting point for understanding the resilience theory.

On the one hand, resilience is viewed as the building of capacity to enable a system to return to its pre-disaster state (Dahles & Susilowati, 2015; Mithani, 2020). Under this lens, there is an acceptable degree of change to which a system can conform, in response to the disruptive event itself. On the other hand, the concept of resilience may refer to those systems that might have been forced over the threshold of change by having to cope with unanticipated crises, requiring them to adopt another state. Similarly, Mithani (2020) specifically points to learning and new models that make it challenging for a system to be able to return to its previous state. Supporting this perspective, Basurto-Cedeno and Pennington-Gray (2018) use the term ‘new normal’ to describe the new changes occurring in the system. In terms of socio-ecological and socio-economic systems, some scholars argue against having an equilibrium limit, reasoning that not having one allows for progression, and for moving forward in time (Basurto-Cedeno & Pennington-Gray, 2018; Knight-Lenihien, 2016). Further, Knight-Lenihien (2016) explains that the activity of bouncing back may prevent positive change from occurring, possibly resulting in the regression of the system.

The knowledge of tourism resilience is still underway and has moved from theoretical work (such as Cochrane, 2010; Lew, 2014; Traskevich & Fontanari, 2023; Pyke et al., 2021) to empirical papers examining this phenomenon (for instance Weis et al, 2021; Bangwayo-Skeete & Skeete, 2021; Chan et al., 2022). As such, this study broadens the scope of this emerging, and topical, theme by drawing focus to the MICE events and their resilience-building process. The current study considers resilience to refer to a new state for tourism, more especially the MICE sector owing to the collective sector’s response to surviving and returning to in-person events. The following section contextualises MICE tourism in South Africa.

MICE tourism and the case of South Africa

The MICE sector constitutes a dynamic and growing economic activity in South Africa (Rogerson, 2018; Zhou, 2021). Indeed, this international sector was reported by the South African National Convention Bureau. (2020) to have directly contributed US\$ 7.7 billion in 2019 to the national GDP, and supported approximately 252 000 jobs directly and indirectly. South Africa is a globally competitive MICE destination, having a remarkable record of hosting major international events (Marais et al., 2017; Bartis et al., 2021; Zhou, 2021). Indeed, since 1994, the country has been consistently ranked by the International Convention and Congress Association (ICCA) as the top association destination in Africa and the Middle East (Zhou, 2021). It is observed that employment opportunities, destination promotion, foreign exchange earnings, and tourism spending are some key reasons for the development of this sector (Fenich et al., 2012; Welthagen et al., 2022). Additionally, it is important to recognise the non-tourism benefits, such as foreign direct investment, enhancing career development, fostering and extending business partnerships, enhancing access to science and technology, and improving local knowledge which may not be well addressed in research on the country, but constitute a driver for the government support for this sector (South African Tourism [SAT], 2022). Some of the challenges facing this sector, that may either be exacerbated and/or supersede the pandemic include destination brand perception, safety and security, immigration regulations and costs (Bartis et al., 2021; Ngcaweni, 2019). Bartis et al. (2021) contend these challenges pose significant barriers to the global competitiveness of South Africa as a MICE destination.

In terms of the impact of the pandemic on the MICE sector, the existing research shows the financial losses, employment losses (and subsequently skills) to be among the dire economic consequences experienced (Bartis et al. 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). MICE organisations resorted to salary cuts, reducing operational costs, postponing events (as opposed

to cancelling), and obtaining financial relief from the Department of Labour through the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) to be some of the coping and adaptive measures taken by the sector (Bartis et al. 2021; Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022, 2021). Expanding and building operations in digital platforms through hosting virtual and hybrid events comprise some of the innovative measures taken to ensure business continuity, maintain client relationships, and generate revenue. In 2022, regulations imposed on the sector began to reduce and allow venues to accommodate 50% of their capacity, indoor and outdoor. This was a result of the collective lobbying efforts of the events sector. The process of building MICE sector resilience is demonstrated in the work that has been published thus far. This current study then considers the post-crisis phase and examines the factors that contribute towards resilience, from attendees' perspective. In doing so, the Africa's Travel Indaba was considered.

Africa's Travel Indaba

Before the onset of COVID-19, Africa's Travel Indaba (ATI) took place annually for over three decades, typically in Durban (South Africa. National Department of Tourism, 2022). Known as the largest marketing event for the African tourism sector, the May 2022 event attracted participants on both a national and international scale, including buyers and media representatives (SAT, 2022). Aside from serving as a promotional platform for regional tourism, the event featured educational sessions addressing key trends in the African and global tourism industry. Despite the event occurring under Alert Level 1 restrictions in South Africa, limiting venue capacity to 50%, it drew over 3700 delegates, including 655 exhibitors and 955 buyers from various African and overseas countries (SAT, 2022). This marked a decrease from pre-COVID-19 figures in 2019 when approximately 6200 delegates participated. Even with reduced numbers, the 2022 event was seen as indicative of the Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector's recovery and the renewed enthusiasm for in-person meetings and travel post-pandemic (Meetings Africa, 2022). The event's significance as a premier MICE gathering in Africa, held in compliance with established protocols, made it an ideal setting to assess MICE attendees' perceptions of the evolving nature of such events.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used in this study. Given that research on tourism recovery and resilience is complex and multifaceted, coupled with that this discourse is still growing in the Sub-Saharan African context, a mixed methods study enabled the comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon under question. The study took place in two phases. The first phase, the qualitative portion, involved in-depth interviews with key informants involved in the operations, planning, and development of the MICE sector in South Africa. These key informants, which were purposively selected owing to their involvement, expertise and role within the sector, included professional conference organisers (PCO), exhibition and trade show organisers, national (and provincial) convention bureaus, managers of convention centres, conference venues, audiovisual suppliers, and government representatives, as well as representatives of key industry associations, being Southern African Association of the Conferences Industry (SAACI), the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Association of African Exhibition Organisers (AAXO), Society for Incentive Travel Excellence (SITE) and the Event Safety Council. In total, 19 interviews were conducted over the period of March 2021 to June 2021. These interviews were conducted online and sought to unpack the strategies used by the sector to adapt and recovery from the pandemic. The information gained in these interviews was transcribed verbatim using an online software called Otter.ai and uploaded onto Atlas.ti version 9. Atlas.ti enabled the coding and thematic

analysis of the data. This analysis enabled the development of an instrument which could be used to test recovery and resilience indicators for the MICE sector.

The following quantitative phase involved the development and administration of surveys to the attendees of the 2022 Africa’s Travel Indaba. The researchers used a simple random sampling technique to ensure that all the attendees at Africa’s Travel Indaba had an equal opportunity to be selected to form part of the study. The data collection took place on all the days the event was held, from 3 to 5 May 2022 and a total of 500 completed surveys were gathered. These surveys employed a five-point Likert scale to gauge attendees’ perceptions towards the resilience indicators emerging from the interviews. As the respondents completed their surveys online, the quantitative data was downloaded from Google Forms, and it was, thereafter, uploaded onto the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 28. The following section of the paper presents the key findings of the study.

Results

Demographic profile of the respondents

Table 1 below illustrates the profiles of the respondents, in relation to the event frequencies and patterns. The dominant respondents are South African MICE attendees (75%), who attended the event to exhibit their tourism offerings (47%) and frequently attended MICE events prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (46%).

Table 1. Respondents’ events profile

Respondents’ events profile	In %
Geographic region	Domestic MICE attendees (75%); International MICE attendees (15%)
Region of international attendees	Africa (84%); America (6%); Europe (5%); Australia (4%); Asia (1%)
Role in the event	Exhibitor (47%); Buyer (17%); Tourism authority (11%); Event organisation team (7%); Media representative (6%); Event volunteer (3%); Other (8%)
Frequency of attending MICE events pre-COVID	Once a year (18%); Twice a year (19%); More than three times (46%); Have never attended before the COVID-19 pandemic (18%)
Attendance of MICE events during COVID-19	Attended MICE events (51%); Did not attend any MICE event (49%)
Types of events attended	Meetings (35%); Conferences (28%); Exhibitions & trade shows (28%); Conventions (7%); Incentive travel (2%)
Mediums used for attending events in 2020 and 2021	Fully virtual (54%); In-person (32%); Hybrid (14%)

Attendees’ perception of the changes in MICE events

This subsection of the findings presents the MICE event attendees rating how important the practices implemented in the last two years are post-COVID-19. MICE event planners implemented more stringent risk management protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic, with more emphasis on health and safety. Guided by national international, national and industry guidelines (such as the COVID-19 protocols for the tourism industry and Re-opening Guidelines for the South African Events Sector). Notably, in the interviews, event planners questioned why such protocols only grew in importance in times of health crisis.

“So there may be fewer people allowed on stands, depending on your stand size. Obviously, rotation of people in the halls, depending on the number of capacities that we are allowed, and sanitising stations. And now, if you think about all these protocols, you think to yourself, why weren’t they included before? Why did we take it for granted before?”

The above sentiments were shared amongst the event planners interviewed. As shown in Table 2, the importance of health safety protocols was also affirmed by responses from event attendees, particularly in relation to the availability of sanitisers (mean = 4.30), and disinfection of venues between programmes sessions (mean = 3.96). Interestingly, other health protocols adopted received mixed results, specifically temperature checks upon entry (mean = 3.47),



socially distanced seating (mean = 3.49), and small and limited group gatherings (mean = 3.40). Such results could stem from the questions on the effectiveness of such protocols in ensuring the safety of attendees. Specifically to smaller events, interviews revealed this to have been a strategy adopted to ensure a transition back to in-person events. However, subsequent challenges with this strategy related to the importance of attendee numbers in these events. See related responses below from an event planner and association representative:

“But there are a number of events starting now, with a new round of regulations on the levels that we're on now, in terms of the numbers that we're allowed. So, there are some people starting to do some small events.”

The only problem there is that, historically, exhibitions are always measured on [i.e. in terms of] numbers. And now, it is about changing that exhibitor mindset, that quantity is not about quality. So, now you're going to get a better quality visitor, but the quantity might not be there.

Similarly, mixed results were received on the use of rapid COVID-19 testing at the event (mean = 3.12) with some respondents going further to add the duplication of testing, from the entry to the country and the event itself. The introduction of this measure was a direct result of the industry's appeal to the government to allow for the hosting of large-scale MICE events. While testing for the virus is no longer a priority for MICE events, the findings suggest greater coordination in safety protocols, from a destination level. Other measures fast-tracked by the pandemic included the use of online registration, contactless payments and use of outdoor spaces which were positively received by the respondents, as shown by the means 4.34, 4.14, and 4.24 respectively. Clearly, the use of technology is expanding in the MICE sector, with the current study only illustrating uses related to greater efficiency in the attendee experience. Venue capacity constituted a major point of contention during the pandemic, as a result of the nature of the virus spreading and the regulations imposed on these places. This then explains the positive perceptions to the exploration of outdoor spaces. It is, however, interesting to find the use of unconventional rooms as MICE venues obtaining mixed views (mean = 3.60), suggesting a new strategy to explore in the recovery and development of the MICE sector.

Table 2. MICE event practices adopted during COVID-19

MICE practices	Mean	SD
Availability of sanitisers	4.30	1.116
Temperature checks upon entering the venue	3.47	1.570
Online registration	4.34	1.003
Sealed rooms (clearly indicating no previous use on the day)	3.49	1.353
Socially distanced seating	3.44	1.446
Contactless payments	4.14	1.101
Disinfection of venues between programme sessions	3.96	1.266
Unconventional use of rooms (e.g. bar areas) as MICE venues	3.60	1.280
Use of additional outside spaces	4.26	1.031
Limited small group gatherings during the event	3.40	1.437
Conducting of rapid COVID-19 tests on delegates	3.12	1.587

Attendees' perceptions of the recovery and resilience factors

Following, the respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions regarding the factors that contribute towards MICE sector resilience. As shown in Table 3, short lead times was one of the first variables measured. This is because the ATI was one of the first large-scale events to have been hosted since the start of the pandemic and represented hope for the ability to safely host and return to in-person events. Interviews with event planners uncovered this reopening of in-person events to have resulted in short lead times to planning these events, which could suggest that to be a temporary solution in cases of much uncertainty regarding the ability to safely host events. This is shown by a quote from a trade show organiser:

“But what we are seeing is that those events [are] quite last minute. There is a short turnaround [period], because you don't know whether you can go ahead with it or not. So, for me to plan something for six months' time, you don't really know if you've got the luxury of being able to host an event in six months' time, because you don't know what the regulations are going to be, so it's challenging.”

This approach was adversely received by the respondents (mean = 2.97) owing to the extent of planning and preparation for travelling, attending, and/or exhibiting at such events. However, the findings reveal respondents' preference to return to in-person events, as many respondents would make the financial investment to attend MICE events in person, as opposed to virtually (mean = 4.11). This coincides with responses from the interviews who emphasize the value of in-person interactions, with a representative of the South African Events Council and a conference facility manager concurring:

“But live events will always come back. As human beings, we are social creatures. And traditionally, we like working on a handshake, sign on the dotted line, it's that personal relationship. I don't think that will ever go away. But I think for the next few years, people are going to be super careful with live events, with in-person events.”

“But if you think you're like in 2023, or 2024, where this is all over? I think people will go back to the norm. And I don't think it would be such a change. Like when we had the water crisis in Cape Town, we were in a drought. And there were a lot of measures that we put into place. So people up north in Sandton, etc, could go to great conferences and not worry about the water. And when they came to Cape Town, they could only shower for five minutes, and each hotel had you know restrictions in place. We would only use bottled water, no one was allowed to even waste any water. And there were so many different activations, and now that there's no more drought, people have just reverted back to normal. So I think that, you know, after the shock, it will probably be 2023 24 I think the industry itself is going to take five years to recover. And to return to the levels that we saw pre-2020.”

Similarly, the study received mixed views on whether respondents were willing to attend international events virtually until the COVID-19 situation was stabilised (mean = 3.22). Clearly, there is still a question of whether to attend events in-person or virtually, which may be due to the benefits and challenges of both mediums that have become available to the attendees, with responses leaning slightly toward in-person.

These findings may also suggest that hesitation over MICE event attendance is linked to the event itself and the destination. Similar findings were found in the quantitative portion of the study, where respondents somewhat agree to only attend MICE events where every attendee was fully vaccinated (mean = 3.22). Interestingly, in 2022, after two years of the pandemic, many individuals were welcoming the return to in-person MICE events, as shown by the study's respondents' confidence in the ability of the MICE sector of South Africa to host large-scale events safely (mean = 4.33). Further, the respondents of the study supported such views, by agreeing on the importance of clear communication of COVID-19 protocols and strategy for sector recovery (mean = 4.27). Certainly, clear and consistent communication came out strongly in the interview process, with several participants underlining its importance to maintaining business relationships with clients, attendees, employees, and other stakeholders. The quote below from a trade show organiser encapsulates such views:

“So whether it's a small or big thing that you're busy with, whether it's a change in the company's structure, whether it's a change in terms of your offering, how you host events, the more you communicate with your clients, your partners, the industry as a whole, the longer you'll be able to sustain yourself because they will trust you. The more they hear from us, they know we are still around and they know we still care about their needs. They know that we are there doing things in their best interest.”



Related, collaboration emerged quite strongly in the interviews with MICE sector stakeholders, a sentiment that was concurred by the respondents of the study (mean = 4.40). Finally, the quantitative portion of the study highlighted some future considerations to be considered in the MICE sector as it recovers and redevelops post the pandemic. Largely, the attendees of the case event concurred on the importance of incorporating crisis management in MICE tourism planning and development, which entails continuously scanning for future crises or disturbances (mean = 4.32) as well as having strategies for when these crises do occur (mean = 4.35).

Table 3: Respondents' perception of MICE sector recovery and resilience indicators

	Mean	SD
MICE events should be planned with short lead times owing to the uncertainty due to COVID-19 waves	2.97	1.400
Clear communication of COVID-19 protocols and strategy is important for MICE sector recovery	4.27	0.890
There must be greater efforts to reach the regional (African) business market for MICE events	4.41	0.822
The MICE sector must continue to scan and prepare for potential future crises	4.32	0.919
The MICE sector must have a specific crisis management strategy for the future	4.35	0.934
The MICE sector must invest in new tech and continue to innovate to remain relevant in the future	4.45	0.863
MICE event resilience is dependent on collaborative work between stakeholders	4.40	0.811
In-person MICE events are important to contribute to broader economic recovery in South Africa	4.48	0.846
I am confident in the ability of the MICE sector to safely host large scale events	4.33	0.935
I would be willing to pay more for an in-person event than a virtual event	4.11	1.126
I would be willing to attend international (outside of South Africa) events virtually (for the near future) until COVID-19 situation is stable	3.44	1.382
I will only attend MICE events that are fully vaccinated sites	3.22	1.500

Discussion

Attendance is a crucial element to the success or failure of events with numerous other studies underscoring certain MICE event typologies to be evaluated and dependent on large numbers of attendees (see for example Chan et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2018). As such, understanding attendees' experiences, expectations, and perspectives towards resilience is crucial to the growth and redevelopment of the sector. In terms of changing expectations, the findings show the importance of more stringent health protocols, reaffirming the importance of risk management to event planning (Jung et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2023; Hooshmand et al., 2023). This could be owed to the heightened awareness of events super spreaders of a disease, with Mohanty et al. (2021) acknowledging this attribute of events to be the one leading reason for this tourism segment to be the first to be shut down. Similarly, Jiang et al. (2022) add that the past three years have led to intensified tourist anxieties. Interestingly, the matter of mandatory vaccination and conducting rapid COVID-19 testing generally received mixed results.

Another major expectation from event attendees emerging from the findings was related to digital transformation. Digital transformation in the sector was revealed in numerous ways, including the turn to online and hybrid events, and the exploration of technology to remain innovative and relevant. The digital transformation in events, spurred on by the pandemic, resulted in a surge of innovation in the MICE sector (Hagen, 2021; Hur et al., 2022). Hagen (2021) draws attention to digital tools such as artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, robotic process automation, cloud computing, and 5G to contribute greatly towards modernising or improving the event attendee experience. While the study did not delve deeper into the new technologies, the findings do suggest seamless experiences (such as online registration and contactless payments) positively influence the event experience. Indeed, the

results demonstrate not only the importance of this digital transformation to maintain continuity but also continuously improving consumer experiences. In application to the resilience theory, technology is one of the features that drive constant change and evolution in the MICE events sector (Hur et al., 2022). Resultantly, the landscape of the MICE sector has changed to include virtual and hybrid events, which will continue to remain used in future.

Interviews with participants revealed that while the focus since 2020 was maintaining the MICE sector's continuity through virtual and hybrid events, the recovery and resilience of the sector were determined by the ability to return to an in-person dominant format to this sector. This study found change to be embedded in the workings of the MICE sector, evident by the new procedures in the event space, the (high) use of virtual and hybrid events, and the emerging importance of integrating crisis management and resilience building in MICE organisational management. This falls in line with the first attribute of resilience, being the ability of systems (i.e., the MICE organisations and sector) to absorb shock and avoid further degradation to the operations of the sector (Basurto-Cedeno & Pennington-Gray, 2018; Knight-Lenihen, 2016).

The second attribute of resilience refers to the ability to recover, which includes reorganisation, transformation, and redevelopment, which is highly complex and dependent on many different and interrelated factors within the global environment. In terms of the redevelopment of MICE tourism and the ability to continuously transform and innovate, crisis management, sector collaboration, and communication were some of the resilience indicators emerging for the MICE sector. In the context of this study, attendees were of the view that building resilience within MICE organisations required a more concerted focus on embedding crisis management strategies and practices within business operations. The pandemic demonstrated the lack of crisis preparedness and management strategies for most tourism organisations (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). While crisis management is more focused on a crisis (and not necessarily a holistic process as compared to resilience), adopting these strategies are able to reduce the vulnerabilities of these MICE organisations and offset the consequences on their clients. Furthermore, communication and collaborations are more often heightened during a crisis (Filimonau & De Coteau, 2020), however, the findings point to continued communications and clarity post-crisis. This is especially important in the recovery stages the global MICE environment becomes even more competitiveness in efforts to regain business. Filimonau and De Coteau (2020) pinpoint the role of stakeholder collaboration and support in ensuring organisational and sector resilience. This collaboration and support is mentioned to provide access to assets and infrastructure. In the context of the study, it could be postulated this collaboration could lead to collective recovery, continued innovation in the event experience and planning, and destination development. These factors have been identified to not only reduce the vulnerability of the sector but also expose new and untapped opportunities. Certainly, this was further shown in the changing market focus to domestic and regional markets which was a key recovery and growth strategy for the South African MICE sector. While prioritising this sector was a temporary strategy, it demonstrates a new pathway for the redevelopment of MICE for the next couple of years. Furthermore, it fits one of the key goals of this sector, which is to provide spaces to tap into new market opportunities.

Finally, the role of the event and destination was found to influence the in-person attendance of events. Interestingly, the findings revealed the trust placed upon organisers to ensure the safety of attendees, which could be accrued to that these events display unique characteristics, compared to other event typologies, and movement and interactions are much more controlled and organised. In their study, Lee and Fennich (2018) found attendees' trust to affect event loyalty. In this study, trust (in the organiser) and loyalty (to the event) could be

related to the willingness to attend in-person events, where the responses from attendees underlined the importance of in-person events and their continued draw and preference over virtual and hybrid events.

Conclusion

Grounded on the resilience theory this study sought to examine the continuing progression and redevelopment of the MICE sector. There a monumental shift in the planning and hosting of events owing to the effects brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020. Lately, the MICE sector is recovering and moving back to predominantly in-person events. This study found that some of the changes adopted will be of continued importance to attendees' experiences in the event venue, more specifically relating to health and safety practices and seamless experiences. Additionally, the study revealed factors that could reduce the long-term vulnerability of the sector to future crises, thereby enhancing the resilience of the MICE sector. These factors include technological innovations in event planning and attendees' experiences, clear communications and collaboration amongst stakeholders, and adoption of crisis management strategies and diversifying event operations to target regional markets.

This study provides some theoretical and practical contributions to the event tourism and management discipline. The study uses the resilience theory to examine the process of changes in the MICE sector following a global crisis. By adopting the resilience theory, revealed the process in which the sector is able to cope and recover from a pandemic, highlighting indicators of this resilience which, if harnessed and strengthened are able to contribute to the sustainability of the sector. Further, the study provides empirical results that support one strand of research on resilience as there are some aspects of the sector that have irreversibly changed due to the progression of the MICE events which is (in part) shaped by technology, as well as the well-recognised need to be adaptable to changing circumstances. Moreover, the theoretical contribution of the study further lies in its contribution to the emerging discourse on event tourism resilience. From the perspective of attendees, resilience is determined by event and destination attributes and while the global conditions may hamper the ability to attend events, the value of these events has been strongly embedded that while the ways of meeting may change, the fundamental need to meet for MICE purposes will always remain.

Furthermore, the findings from event attendees hold several practical applications for MICE event planners. In-person event attendance is crucial to the development of MICE tourism in South Africa, more especially to support the development of tourism and the many other industries served in the MICE sector. As such, incorporating the findings, particularly relating to ensuring the continued health and safety of event attendees, the innovative event experiences, and the management strategies that should be strongly considered to ensure organisational and sector resilience.

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