

From Crisis to Recovery: Navigating Sustainable Strategies by Hospitality Providers

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had a far-reaching impact on hospitality businesses and the world has continued along a path with multiple uncertainties, which reinforces the necessity to reevaluate crisis management strategies. Due to shifting hospitality operations and noticeable changes within the business model, there is a need to become more resilient to remain sustainable. This study aimed to determine how COVID-19 affected hospitality providers and to identify strategies operators have used, evaluating their effect going forward, which could be used to improve crisis management. A qualitative study was conducted, with a purposive sampling of hospitality managers or owners within an area of Johannesburg. A total of 15 participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview design. The collected data was examined using thematic analysis. The research revealed that hospitality managers in a cost-cutting exercise, reduced their costs by retrenching workers, closing businesses, adapting business models, and applying lockdown measures of social isolation and sanitisation. Owners pleaded with the government for financial support to maintain their operations. The management implications of this research encourage a greater awareness of preparation for future pending crises and will be useful to hospitality business owners as they create contingency plans and resilience strategies.

Keywords: Crisis management; hospitality operations; restaurants; pandemic; sustainability strategies

Introduction

The tourism and hospitality industry are vulnerable to crises whether natural or man-made, resulting in visitors evaluating whether they should select that location or go to another until the threat passes. Israeli et al. (2011) noted that various crises occur either simultaneously or consecutively, requiring management to be vigilant of the ever-changing operating environment. COVID-19 however had global repercussions, resulting in travel bans and general restrictions imposed on the general public's movement and interactions. Health crises and infections, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), and COVID-19 have occurred in recent years (World Health Organization, 2020). These have disrupted economies with continued implications for the hospitality industry (Gössling et al., 2020). Countries implemented containment measures like social distancing, wearing face masks, and introducing restrictions to minimise the spread of the virus (Baum et al., 2020). These impacted the hospitality and tourism (T&H) industry severely with respect to businesses, customers, and workers (Baum & Hai, 2020). Several scholars have looked at the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the worldwide economy (Ashraf, 2020; Farrokhnia et al.,

2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Others provided vital information on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the hospitality industry (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020). Measures to curtail COVID-19 resulted in huge financial and job losses due to hotel and restaurant closures, event cancellations and sports restrictions (Baum & Hai, 2020). Subsequently, research has helped to determine how hotels around the world deployed crisis management intelligence and skills to combat the modern economic stagnation and poor performance of typical hospitality businesses (Baum & Hai, 2020). These strategies can be further used as the basis for post-pandemic business regeneration and business recovery. This study therefore aims to understand and investigate the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality providers in Johannesburg, identifying strategies used by operators and attempt to identify those that assist the industry in recovering more quickly.

Literature review

In 2019, pre-COVID-19 there were approximately 10.2 million international visitors and 7.1 million domestic visitors to South Africa. The T&H industry employed around 725,000 people directly and 1.49 million indirectly. The lodging sector accounted for 19% of total jobs. In South Africa, T&H generated roughly R82.5 billion in coordinated outside consumption and approximately R126.7 billion in investments (Department of Tourism, 2020). However, these positive statistics were disrupted when the South African president announced a state of emergency and implemented a national lockdown in March 2020. During the lockdown, the government devised a five-tiered system to manage the well-being and economic reaction to the pandemic outbreak, with Level 5 having the strictest limitations (Carr, 2020; Department of Tourism, 2020; Sucheran, 2021), threatening thousands of businesses, jobs and therefore, livelihoods. Hospitality-related investments decreased by R748 million (Sperka, 2020), with losses still predicted to continue (Charles, 2020; Dube et al., 2020).

Between March and May 2020, the sector lost R54 billion, 438,000 jobs, and R80 billion in profits (Department of Tourism, 2020). Approximately 50 000 businesses closed temporarily, with more still facing permanent shutdown, resulting in the loss of 600,000 jobs (Department of Tourism, 2020). The South African accommodation occupancy rate had decreased to around 5% during lockdown Level 5. The accommodation facilities primarily became isolation or quarantine facilities (Department of Tourism, 2020), with the total income in South Africa's hospitality sector declining by 98% in May 2020 compared to May 2019 (Stats SA, 2020). A few financial specialists accepted that the 2021/2022 rise in unemployment would be temporary, with employment being slowly restored (Sao Joao, 2021). The number of job losses was dependent on the course of the infection, as well as the worldwide financial recovery, which affected the T&H sector (Kamarck & Stenglein, 2019). It is difficult to predict the true impact of COVID-19 because of hospitality business closures, COVID-19 related debt and changes in business operating models as the pandemic has had serious repercussions on society, leisure, and the hospitality industry. Customers reacting to the situation in different ways; workers who have been laid off, seeking employment away from the hospitality industry, or small business owners trying to remain profitable, and huge organisations experiencing losses by reacting to the crisis as best they can (Sao Joao, 2021).

Crisis management practices and strategic reactions and responses to the pandemic

Hospitality managers/owners have been compelled to alter their operating decisions in response to the pandemic and subsequent national and geopolitical uncertainties that have emerged. Some hospitality companies implemented cost-cutting measures while others reduced marketing campaigns to preserve funds and minimise costs until the pandemic was over (Lai & Wong, 2020). Besides terminating workers' contracts as part of their cost-cutting

initiatives, others modified their operations to control finances and invested in areas, such as food and beverages, where demands were projected to increase once operating constraints were removed. As part of cost-cutting plans, some hospitality executives chose to reduce variable costs. Regardless of the company's current weak profits at the time, all these initiatives were developed to ensure long-term viability.

Hospitality executives have been criticised for making hasty decisions about workforce arrangements due to a lack of preparation in adjusting to the widespread crisis (Sao Joao, 2021). Part-time and hourly employees, compared to those on month-to-month contracts, were impacted the most in the hospitality sector (Kurmman et al., 2020). Casual workers were the hardest hit by the cuts because of the inaccurate predictions that the restrictions would not last too long (Zhang et al., 2020). Despite the obstacles, several hospitality businesses focused on maintaining a consistent relationship with employees by providing online training and being open to employee ideas. Personnel and guests were less likely to contract the virus as a result of the training, and the hotel's and restaurant's reputations were improved. Training was not only focused on adhering to government-imposed restrictions but also on communication, standard safety measures, disease control, and cleanliness measures (Lai & Wong, 2020). The goal was to ensure long-term viability post-COVID-19.

Other lodging managers centred on clear communication with workers giving satisfactory information, and decentralising specialists to the departmental level to combat the impact of COVID-19 (Lai & Wong, 2020). As a result, the T&H industries needed to be flexible and technologically innovative in their offerings (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). The capacity to coordinate hospitality operations and administration with guests' needs was crucial to the travel and hotel sectors' long-term sustainability. The travellers' changing needs and desires needed to be met by T&H providers to ensure that their establishments would regain their occupancy numbers.

The impact, precautions and health risks of COVID-19 are well-documented in health journals and will, therefore, not be discussed in great depth here. It should be mentioned that the government-imposed protocols like curfews, 1.5 m spacing between people, compulsory masks that cover the mouth and nose, alcohol and cigarette bans, and restaurants with 50% capacity rules and regulations (Kang et al., 2021); these are highlighted as they directly affected occupancy in hotels and patronage numbers in restaurants. Kim and Lee (2020) noted that many people went to extremes to avoid other people which was detrimental to the hospitality industry. Both managers and owners had to come up with innovative strategies that complied with the government regulations but also ensured that they would still generate some revenue (Gunawan & Indrianto, 2021).

Government-imposed COVID-19 protocols and assistance for hospitality providers

Mitigating the predicted economic downturn in small, medium and micro enterprises (SMME) in South Africa, the SME Support Intervention Fund, which included the Debt Relief Fund and Business Growth Facilities, was established by the SME Development Ministry (White & Case, 2020). The small business development department set aside five hundred million rands to help SMMEs. The purpose of debt relief finance was to assist with existing debt and repayments, as well as to help SMMEs in acquiring raw materials, remunerating workers, and other operational costs. An additional two hundred million rands were allocated to support SMMEs in the T&H industry (Department of Tourism, 2020; Selisho, 2020).

Lodgings, resort properties, bed and breakfasts, and restaurants were among the businesses that benefited from the Department of Tourism's funds (Department of Tourism, 2020) but because of the industry's scale, this assistance was insufficient for all tourism and other T&H-related SMMEs. Therefore, the Department of Tourism set aside an additional R30

million in relief funds to help tourism and hospitality businesses. Even though the financial aid package was insufficient, they were able to support several hospitality industry SMMEs during the COVID-19 lockdown (Zeidy, 2020). As a result, the Department encouraged tourism enterprises that did not get money to apply for other government-sponsored assistance programmes (Visser & Marais, 2021).

Crisis management frameworks

The global uncertainties and crises, whether political, natural, health or technological, continue to highlight how the world is interconnected, with crisis management models and frameworks developed to encompass the various disasters (Cronin, 2016; Zech, 2016). The following discussion provides a brief outline of two commonly used frameworks and a list of practices for hospitality managers. Although often referred to as the first framework for tourism, Faulkner (2001) developed a generic model that highlights six phases of a crisis, all of which need to be addressed adequately by management to mitigate unnecessary damage. The second theory was developed by Ritchie (2004) who noted that crises are often unpredictable and less easily controlled. He considered a more strategic, holistic approach to crisis management, with planning before a disaster, then implementing strategies to mitigate the effect and then evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies (Cronin, 2016; Ritchie, 2004). Israeli and Reichel (2003) proposed a list of 21 practices that hospitality managers could use to stabilise the operation during a crisis, by reducing expenses and initiating actions to preserve the business. These practices are categorised into four themes, human resources, maintenance, marketing and governmental support.

Methodology

Qualitative research is generally used to understand human beliefs, experiences, and attitudes about a phenomenon or situation. It can be defined as a broad term for a wide range of approaches and methods for the study of natural social life (Miller, 2019). This study used convenient purposeful sampling which allowed participants to be grouped according to pre-determined requirements applicable to a certain research question (Yacoub & El Hajjar, 2021). The participants were the owners or managers of various hospitality providers, located within a five-kilometre radius of the Bunting Road Campus of the University of Johannesburg. This specific type of research method is generally used to conduct semi-structured interviews; in this case with business owners and managers (Gunawan & Indrianto, 2021). Some of the advantages of using interviews are they capture emotions and behaviours, they are focused and straight to the point, and they help with more accurate screening (Nieuwenhuis, 2019).

Ethical clearance was received from the University of Johannesburg's Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. The interviews were conducted in English, with participants who were at least 18 years old and employed in the hospitality sector (Davahli et al., 2020). Interviews were conducted between June and August 2022. Trustworthiness is used as a measure of validity and reliability (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the criteria of trustworthiness which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Two pilot interviews were conducted to improve the rigour of the study. Once the interviews had been conducted, they were transcribed and coded. The data were analysed using thematic analysis which results in concise descriptions and interpretations in terms of themes and patterns from a data set (Nieuwenhuis, 2019). The findings are not generalisable but do assist in identifying possible strategies for other hospitality providers.

Findings and discussions

To make the data analysis coding process easier, the participants were assigned a unique number from P1 to P15 which contributed to confidentiality. Most of the participants had more than three years of experience as managers. The questions were open-ended and designed so that respondents recalled what happened during those earlier COVID-19 months. This was followed by their reactions to the pandemic, while also considering what the future holds for the hospitality providers and their sustainability. The following paragraphs present the main themes that emerged from the analyses, as well as the participants' responses, which are then discussed in line with the literature.

COVID-19's effects on hospitality businesses

Two main themes emerged in response to this query: financial limitations and future uncertainty. *'It is and was a difficult time for the industry, and many lost jobs and closed restaurants' (P4)*. Hospitality providers stated that the COVID-19 pandemic put them at risk of bankruptcy and increased poverty within the country (P2). A few restaurateurs expressed concern about how long they could remain in business. *'So that's why a lot of businesses went under because it was unexpected, and they didn't have reserves. And then when they opened again, you have to pay back or pay the landlord the outstanding money' (P13)*. Participant 3 highlighted that *'They struggled to keep up 'alive' and keep their employees employed. The owner has done his best to invest in the company though he had to close his other business'*. The Department of Tourism (2020) supported these statements. Participants were concerned with their lower consumer spending and poor cash flow. The significant disruptions and other occurrences (Gossling et al., 2020), together with the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 has compounded the threat and sustainability of various hospitality operations. These comments were confirmed by Charles (2020), Dube et al. (2020) and Sao Joao (2021), requiring operators to develop contingency plans for future crises.

P15 and P13 both mentioned the difficulties in getting employees to focus on their jobs while P15 explained how sceptical people were; this resulted in a decreased turnover compared to what they were achieving before the pandemic. *'Honestly, it was difficult. It also took quite a long time for people to be comfortable to go out again. Even though we had those safety measures. We didn't have the same kind of vibe and people coming through' (P15)*. *'Even after the alcohol ban was lifted, we still struggled a little bit because we're not doing the same numbers in terms of turnover and the money we used to make' (P15)*.

P13 detailed how they had to arrange a payment plan with the landlord; this was the main reason why other establishments shut down because they did not have the funds to pay the landlord. *'And then obviously arranging with the landlord, like a payment plan to pay the landlord his money because they want their money. A lot of businesses closed down because of that' (P13)*. P12 and P10 mentioned that they opened for deliveries and frozen foods and that is how they managed to cope with the lockdown. P14 mentioned that they came up with events that would attract customers. These events were generally for couples, and this was done to stay within the government's maximum capacity regulation; also their uniqueness kept them afloat. *'So, we came up with some events, that don't require a lot of people, we did some date nights, comedy nights, quiz nights and game nights' (P14)*.

Government intervention

Participants stated that government relief was appreciated but they voiced concerns about the government subsidies (P5). Participants P2 and P3 were disappointed with the limiting requirements for government funding to businesses during COVID-19. Participants were not happy with the government's approach to supporting smaller companies during the pandemic,

as stated by P1. *'The government failed to handle the COVID-19 crisis ... We're done and have no idea what criteria the government used to assist SMMEs'* (P1). Some participants (P1, P3, and P5) supported the statement of the Department of Tourism (2020) about funds not being distributed fairly to SMMEs.

Participants explained how they used their savings to pay their employees and not all of them were compensated from the government relief fund; eventually, they had to retrench their part-time employees and a few of their full-time staff as a strategy to sustain and keep their business open (Lai & Wong, 2020). Although the country benefits from increased tourism numbers, the necessity for government to intervene and assist the industry is vital for its quick recovery (Israeli et al. 2011).

Impact on hospitality operations

Hospitality providers needed to be vigilant with operations, customer service, and sales; all of which have been affected by the pandemic. All participants confirmed that the sector is evolving to a new business model in terms of service delivery and customer support, which was confirmed by Baum and Hai (2020). *'The industry is going to pick up but it won't be as it used to be as the pandemic changed the way we used to do things'* (P1). *'It's been difficult because now, we have to learn new ways. It's as if we're starting a new business from scratch ... now we have to try new ways to introduce the customers ... to new ways of marketing with technology and it's costly. And then we must establish new supply chains because most businesses were liquidated or shut down. We have to re-engineer our supply chains, introduce our employees and customers to new engagement protocols, and adjust to new ways of doing things'* (P7).

Many of the adjustments concerning the use of information technology (IT) and workplace safety (Jiang & Wen, 2020) incurred additional costs (P7). Although self-service innovation and intelligent systems were already used in the sector (Baum & Hai, 2020), such components are now considered necessary to deliver exceptional services and enhance visitors' experiences. Participants noted that loyal guests continued to support the industry, with many managers keeping their employees for as long as possible in the hope that occupancies would be restored even though managers did not know how long the lockdown would last so there was and still exists a certain amount of uncertainty.

During the initial lockdown, there was immediate closure of businesses, alcohol sales were prohibited, and restaurants were closed. The restaurants in this study reopened at different times, depending on when they could start trading again. Some of them opened weeks into lockdown, while others reopened several months later. P9 and P11 both stated that they reopened for trade when the president announced (June 2020) that restaurants could now open for sit-ins and not just deliveries. On the other hand, P4 and P8 reopened for takeaways while P12 reopened months into lockdown, and P8 reopened after only two weeks into lockdown because they had planned. P15 and P11 stated that they had reopened while there was still an alcohol ban and P15 explained that they sold non-alcoholic beverages during that time. *'I think it took about three months ... because there was a point when the President allowed for restaurants to open but not sell alcohol. So that's what we did ... so, we were selling smoothies and food, but it wasn't great'* (P15). *'We opened for takeaways from Level 4'* (P12). *'The day the President said we must open was the same day that we opened'* (P9).

The restaurants that wanted to stay open, followed the protocols to build trust with the guests so that the guests would start to eat out again. Innovative ideas were initiated to remain viable. However, when restrictions were eased, some restaurants were still cautious to abandon all protocols. The question posed to the participants was which of the protocols were they pleased to get rid of. All the restaurant participants said they got rid of the 'no mask, no entry'

rule as quickly as possible as they believed this was a contributing factor to low occupancies and general customer fear. The masks represented a visual reminder of the COVID-19 threat and many employees and guests found it difficult to communicate with them. Some establishments did say they kept the sanitising station for those random customers who still wanted to sanitise. P15 mentioned they were not that strict about the number of people who could enter the establishment at a time. P12 mentioned a very interesting point; as they did not believe in the vaccine, they did not force any of their staff to vaccinate, they just had to make sure that they were always wearing a mask. *“Everything is back to normal. I did not force anybody to get vaccinated. I do not believe in the vaccination. My staff was not forced to be vaccinated”* (P12).

Fusté-Forné and Hussain (2021) noted three factors that emerged when protocols were eased. There were still self-service options, increased use of technology and an obvious awareness of hygiene and social distancing. This changed as the guests became less fearful of the pandemic and it becomes a distant memory. However, the increased implementation of technology may persist as hospitality operators observe the financial savings made because of reduced human resources.

Crisis management and recovery strategies

The purpose of the study was to establish which hospitality providers had crisis management plans in place. Two restaurant managers (P6 and P4) commented that they lacked disaster management and contingency planning systems. Two managers (P1 and P3) suggested having applicable arrangements and specific plans because of preceding experiences with pandemics, such as SARS. *‘I have personal experience dealing with SARS; we started our proactive disaster layout very early’* (P1). *‘I believe we performed admirably. Ensuring the viability of our business, we have taken every reasonable step’* (P3).

Most participants indicated that they had depleted their funds and were not likely to survive another crisis if there was one soon. P12 explained that if another crisis were to emerge now, the restaurant would be forced to close. P15 indicated that they are more financially aware of how they spend money and that they are better prepared for a future crisis. *‘More prepared for crises. I mean, we had to come together, and like the core group of us, kind of decided how we were going to try and make it work and then made it work’* (P11). P11 agreed but highlighted that the government needs to be more organised, and more effective and efficient in their assistance. *‘I think so. My boss is a very smart guy but he took a knock, financially’* (P15). P15 explained that they did apply to the Temporary Employer / Employee Relief Scheme (TERS) and did receive some financial assistance. *‘I don't know if we can survive another crisis. We've depleted all our resources completely ... we had to close one shop along the way, so we only left with one shop. We can't survive another lockdown ... I would close down’* (P12). *‘Are we more prepared? I think it's difficult to say because we've depended a lot on the Unemployment Insurance Fund [UIF], and that ran out a lot quicker than everybody was expecting ... unless the UIF gets its act together and gets things organised. If we have another crisis I'd be very, very concerned’* (P11).

Kim and Lee (2020) noted that restaurant owners' ability to survive decreased from 75% to 15%, indicating that small businesses are more vulnerable. It was noted during the data collection, how many small businesses, in particular restaurants, had closed down and most of those owners interviewed said they would not survive another pandemic. As a result of COVID-19, the number of occupancies decreased, functions were cancelled, and hospitality providers reacted, companies developed new procedures and subsequent training to ensure safety for both customers and staff. This confirms the work of Lai and Wong (2020) as well as

Israeli and Reichel (2003) and Isreali et al. (2011) who claimed the government intervention and support should be provided but may vary from country to country.

Predictions for the future of the hospitality industry

Managers' perspectives on the path to recovery differed. This could be attributed to their diverse contexts and organisational culture types. The hospitality sector was expected to recover with P5 predicting that *'once it's calm, all should be back to normal by the end of the second quarter of 2023'*, while P3 speculated the sector *'will be in survival mode for a couple of years'*.

Interestingly, it was mentioned that luxury hospitality brands would be the first to recover. *'I estimate that the luxury hotel sector will be 80% of what it was by 2023, and that is if airlines continue operations to meet travel demand'* (P2). According to the experience of hospitality managers, strong brands will survive and last longer (P7), and the weaker ones might shut down forever. *'COVID-19 prompted businesses to reconsider, and customer behaviour has shifted dramatically since COVID-19'* (P4). While P7 forecasted that *'people prefer specials and discounts, putting even more pressure on restaurants'*. Larger businesses are more stable than the smaller operators but the smaller operators in total, employ more staff. It would, therefore, be advantageous for the government to assist these operators to prepare for future crises.

COVID-19 prompted changes within the sector and has encouraged the use of technology and artificial intelligence to improve and provide excellent service. Kim and Lee (2020) supported that hospitality managers should value planning and allocate more time to getting ready for possible risk conditions, whereas Gursoy and Chi (2020) supported the comment from the participants about technology innovation being a way forward and the future of the industry. Israeli et al. (2011) proposed a list of 21 practices that could be useful to develop strategies and proactive actions that will support sustainability of the hospitality operation. These practices are grouped into four key areas: human resources, marketing, maintenance and government. Figure 1 summarises the negative effects and positive changes that have resulted from the pandemic.

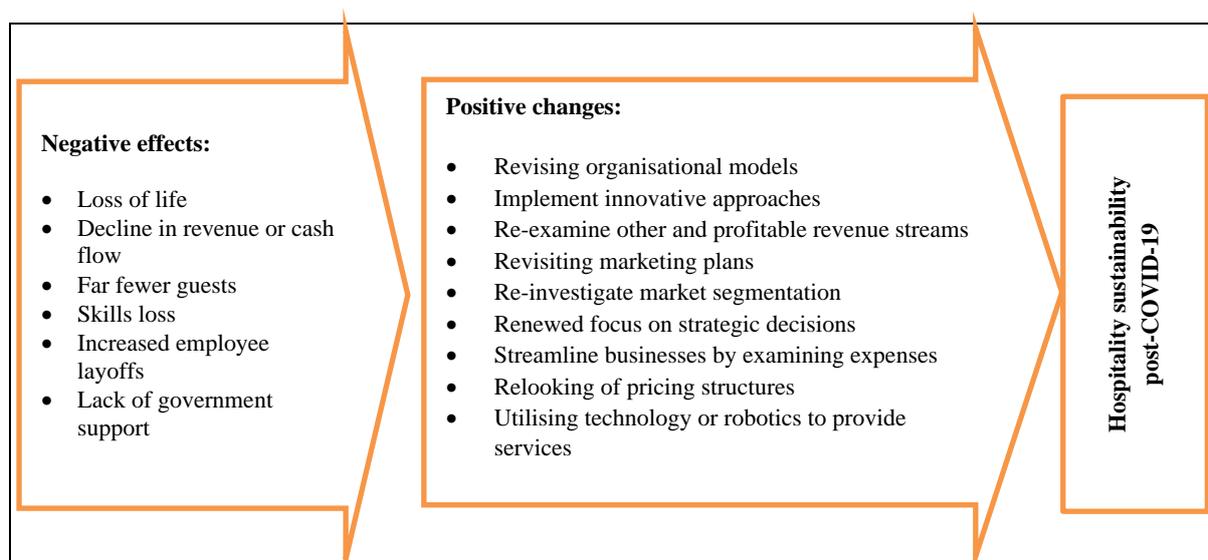


Figure 1. Negative and positive effects of COVID-19 on hospitality sustainability

In summary, COVID-19 posed several issues for hospitality companies. Several participants stated that they were unable to deal with the issue because they did not have a contingency plan in place. Hospitality managers have demonstrated that effective planning is required for the

industry's future to solve issues. The effects of COVID-19 on hospitality providers during March 2020 and August 2022 resulted in both negative and positive responses. The negative effects were a decline in revenue or cash flow, far fewer guests, and a lack of government support resulting in the necessity to revise business models. The positive effects were revising marketing plans and market segments, a renewed focus on strategic decisions to streamline businesses and relooking pricing structures.

Those in management also must analyse expenses to streamline operations and relook at possible revenue streams. The demands of guests have changed forcing managers to comply with these changes. Hospitality businesses must rethink their organisational models and implement innovative approaches by using technology or robotics to provide services. They must, therefore, take advantage of this chance to grow technologically. In addition, this requires the involvement of governments to provide financial assistance for the industry's adoption of innovations. This applies especially to smaller operators to assist them in preparing for possible future threats. Faulkner (2001) draws on other crisis management research but highlighted the importance of communication. The findings in this study confirm with the necessity for constantly communicating with employees and guests. Faulkner (2001) continues to state the need for planning, tracking and evaluating so to be better prepared for the next disaster.

Conclusion

Managers and owners had to develop tactics, like cost-cutting (closing and laying off staff), to maintain their business since COVID-19 triggered numerous changes. To stop the infection from spreading, the hospitality and restaurant managers and owners-maintained health and hygiene regulations, which resulted in additional costs. The South African government provided a relief fund to all industries, including T&H, to help with their operations during the pandemic, however, not all businesses were able to take advantage of the funding because they did not meet the criteria. This qualitative study investigated how COVID-19 affected the hospitality sector and found that the establishments struggled to control expenses, maintain occupancies, and adhere to government protocols. Unfortunately, several once-thriving businesses closed, while others have remained open but make only marginal profits. The present geopolitical uncertainties that exist, for example, the lingering effects of the pandemic, the Ukraine/Russian conflict, disruptions to energy supplies, rising inflation, global food insecurities and economic uncertainties, require countries and business operators to re-evaluate their operations to ensure that they become more resilient, to remain sustainable. The limitation of this study was the research was restricted to an area of Johannesburg due to funding options, time limitations, and the closure of many hospitality providers. Some participants were hesitant to share the required details because they were suspicious resulting in a small sample. But it is suggested that further studies be carried out to investigate which strategies contributed the most to sustainability. Another study could investigate the changes in guest- and employee expectations that have occurred now that hospitality businesses are back trading.

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