

## The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown Measures on Restaurants in Durban, South Africa

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### Abstract

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Durban's restaurant industry contributed substantially to South Africa's tourism economy, by catering for the various eating preferences of domestic and international tourists. Journalists reported the negative impact lockdown measures have had on restaurants in South Africa. This micro qualitative study is located in an upper-class suburb (Umhlanga) which is renowned for their variety of restaurants and cuisines available. The analysis of 15 in-depth interviews illustrates the economic impact of the lockdown regulations on restaurant employers and employees from March 2020 to July 2021. Data revealed that lockdown regulations such as the alcohol bans and the social distancing protocols were deterring factors for citizens not to dine out. The national curfew legislation during this year was also influential, but when curfews were eradicated, restaurant patronage remained at a minimal. The temporary and intermittent closure of restaurants and the alteration of dine-in meals being sold as takeaway meals negatively impacted the revenue and profits of these businesses. Therefore, even well-established local restaurants and international franchises experienced substantial financial losses which resulted in many job losses and permanent closures. This micro study compliments and contributes to other studies on restaurants in KwaZulu-Natal and South Africa.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; lock down regulations; Durban restaurants; Alcohol ban; closure of restaurants; hospitality employees

### Introduction

Vital to the global tourism industry's sustainability and existence has been the mobility of people. The global tourism economy has been identified as one of the fastest-growing economic sectors (Ndlovu, 2015). The halting of the mobility of people has brought about new global challenges. The tourism industry has experienced one of the worst effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the continual necessity to practice social distancing has resulted in the closure of entry points of many countries around the world to control the spread of the disease (Dube, 2021). Between 2000 and 2010, South Africa ranked amongst the world's top twenty-five tourist destinations (Ndlovu, 2015). In the year 2019, it has been recorded that approximately 15.8 million international tourists visited South Africa, and in the year 2020, the country received only 5 million international tourists (Statistics South Africa, 2021). These numbers declined drastically as on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, and the first lockdown regulation was imposed on South Africa. These regulations continued for the remainder of the year, with varying levels being adjusted so that measures can assist to curb the spread of the virus.

The Covid-19 global pandemic and its lockdown regulations have been detrimental to the hospitality sector. The intent of the study was to investigate the experiences of both employers and employees employed at middle to upper class restaurants in Durban. This investigation was motivated by a lack of evidence of empirical research in literature of business performances and challenges of South African small to medium enterprises during the lockdown periods (BusinessTech, 2021; Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2021). Other related studies

(Rogerson et al., 2021; Dube, 2021) pay attention to the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown regulations on tourism services such as tourist agencies, varying types of accommodation and an array of tourist activities. None of these studies pay attention to employees and employers of restaurants located in a middle to upper class area. The perceptions and experiences of restaurant employers and employees during the lockdown phases are documented and analysed. The national regulations include; social distancing, intermittent restaurant closures, minimised operational hours and the alcohol ban, which was implemented intermittently since the commencement of lockdown last year.

The value of this study lies in its capacity to review the economic challenges experienced by restaurateurs and it can serve as a catalyst for the development of similar studies located in other provinces of South Africa. The collation of such studies has the capacity to impact policy formation in the fight to recover this industry post the pandemic in 2022. This micro qualitative study is one of few studies that documents the economic challenges of restaurants located within an upper-class suburban area in South Africa. The discussions presented below include perceptions and experiences from both employers and restaurateurs as well as employees employed at establishments on Chartwell Drive, Umhlanga, and Durban. Scholarly studies that pay particular focus on the challenges imposed by lockdown regulations experienced by food establishments located in middle to upper class suburban areas in South Africa are scarce. Therefore this study intends to fill the gap in this regard. Many media reports (Felix, 2021; Mbonambi, 2021; People's Dispatch, 2020)

A qualitative approach facilitated the process to retrieve personal insights from both employers and employees which are presented below within the findings. This in-depth research approach contributes towards the full comprehension of the impact investigated on those employed within the hospitality sector. The qualitative approach which entailed open-ended questions in a face to face interviews allowed for in-depth discussions to take place. Therefore the data retrieved from this study is rich in description, perceptions and experiences of study participants. Prior to the pandemic, it has been estimated that 2.2 million South Africans have been both, directly and indirectly involved in the tourism industry (Smith, 2021). There are approximately 30, 000 restaurants in South Africa, and each establishment employs about 30 people (Mbonambi, 2021). The country's food and beverage industry generated approximately 72 billion Rands in 2019, and after the onset of the pandemic, this revenue has more than halved (Toyana, 2021). In recent years, Durban embarked on marketing themselves as a culinary tourist destination through varying initiatives. This too proved to be a viable income generator for the city and the province of KwaZulu-Natal at large.

### **Durban's culinary tourism initiatives**

In the year 2018, Durban was acknowledged on the world food map. Durban was ranked as the world's best food city in the world. Steinmetz (2018) explains that the bunny chow is a meal that has to be sampled by international tourists. In 2019, the city's street food varieties were renowned globally through televised and print media platforms. Durban Indian cuisine and other African infused Indian dishes were marketed continuously before the pandemic, and the city gained recognition for good quality foods at affordable prices. (Steyn & Zietsman, 2019). Moodley (2021) explained that South African travel companies have marketed unique foods of Durban and Cape Town through bespoke travel packages. Research studies stipulate that Durban can be successfully marketed as a halal food tourism destination because of the city's wide variety of cuisines and restaurants and its large population of people of Islamic faith (Bhoola, 2020). The need to now focus on marketing Durban's cuisines and restaurants can lure international tourists in the quest to recover South Africa's tourism industry after the impact of the pandemic.

Post the pandemic, Durban's tourism sector has not been aggressively marketing their cuisines or restaurants. Additionally, Durban citizens experienced turbulence through political violent acts and natural disasters. In July 2021, KwaZulu-Natal experienced political motivated riots which resulted in the looting of a number of businesses and structural damage to the city itself. This too impacted livelihoods and caused the city great economic strain. People lost family members, their jobs and businesses. During the first 6 months of 2022, the city experienced 2 bouts of flooding which caused damage to the city's infrastructure and residential areas. Durban citizens once again encountered trauma caused by the erosion of soil, landslides, the collapse of buildings and homes, death of peoples and limited or no access to basic resources such as water and electricity. The economic pressure to restore and repair infrastructure after the riots and floods have become a priority at this stage for eThekweni municipalities (Harper, 2022).

### **A brief overview of South Africa's lockdown trajectory (March 2020 till July 2021)**

South African lockdown regulations were initially implemented in March 2020 and were in place at varying levels for the remainder of the year. At various intermittent periods (levels of national regulations) from March 2020 to July 2021 restaurants had to adhere to principles of social distancing which resulted in the prohibition of trade, dine in services and alcohol sales. People were forbidden to host and attend events and gatherings including traditional and spiritual gatherings, funerals and weddings. At later stages, gatherings were limited to small numbers of people, restaurants were permitted to sell takeaway meals, serve patrons up to 50% capacity of the venue seating capacity and sell alcohol with the meals. This was permissible with stringent health protocols in place. At adjusted level 4, restaurants were allowed to seat no more than 50 people per sitting (Felix, 2021). A third alcohol ban was reinstated from mid-December 2020 till February 2021. Patrons were not allowed to dine at restaurants, as the national regulation stipulated that every person's mouth and nose had to be covered in a public space. Infections were on the increase, so the government believed that these measures would help curb the spread of the virus (Carruthers, 2021). The consumption and sale of alcohol at food establishments and night venues were banned for the fourth time from the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2021 till the 25<sup>th</sup> of July. From the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2021, retailers and restaurateurs were permitted to sell alcohol for on-site and home consumption. Restaurants re-opened but with a 9 pm curfew imposed (Kiely, 2021). There were long periods of night time curfews which meant that restaurants had to be closed at least an hour before the curfew time to allow hospitality employees to close doors and reach their homes before the curfew began. Initial curfews were from 6 am to 6 pm and gradually shifted during the year to 10 pm to 4 am daily (Mbonambi, 2021).

The intermittent closing of restaurants and limitations imposed by lockdown regulations indicate the irregular and unusual circumstances during which restaurants were trying to be profitable and successful. This was difficult considering, South Africans too were becoming thrifty due to economy declining in all spheres.

### **How South African and international restaurants managed the Covid-19 lockdown regulations**

Scholarly literature that pays particular focus on the economic impact of lockdown regulations on restaurants in South Africa are few. Many publications discuss and investigate the impact of the Covid 19 on the South African Tourism and Hospitality sector at large (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022; Wessels & Tseane-Gumbi, 2022), and other studies (Song et al., 2021; Salama & Mansour, 2022) have been located in several countries globally. Dube et al., (2021) found in their conceptual study that the number of patrons at restaurants have been declining since

the onset of the pandemic. Their sample included the OpenTable platform and included restaurants from Australia, the USA, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Mexico and the United Kingdom. Yost and Cheng (2021) discuss and investigate the motivation for patrons to dine out during the pandemic. They identify a number of variables such as restaurant policy in relation to hygiene and safety, personal financial circumstances and consumer desire that motivate an individual to dine out during the pandemic. A study titled " Dining with distance during the pandemic: an enquiry from the theory of proxemics and social exchange" indicated that regardless of the practice of social distancing measures, protective wear and the varying social interactive levels are central determinants of consumer behaviour. The study focuses on psychological perceptions and reasons as to why patrons dine in or out during the pandemic (Song et al., 2021).

Similarly, Zhong et al. (2021) focus on the demotivational factors that influence consumer decisions when dining out. These factors include perceived psychological and physical risks as well as the perceptions of health safety regulations of restaurants. This study is located in China and Korea. Byrd et al. (2021) highlighted the need for public health officials globally to engage with restaurants to disseminate accurate information to the public about food safety regulations and the possibility of the Covid-19 virus being transmissible through the preparation and consumption of food in public spaces. This study revealed that misperceptions of the above have contributed to the financial hardship of restaurants located in the United States of America. International media reports have been effective in documenting the eating trends of restaurant patrons during the lockdown phases. These reports are available in digital newspapers such as the Detroit Metro Times, The Economic Times and The Washington Post.

A publication that discusses the negative trajectory of leisure activities during the lockdown phase in South Africa discusses the impact the pandemic has had on the tourism and leisure sector. Many restaurants were forced to shut down due to economic hardship, and other establishments such as hotels, guest houses and wineries were forced to close temporarily because of lockdown regulations (Young, 2020). National and local media reports (Carruthers, 2021; Felix, 2021; Kiely, 2021) have been pivotal in disseminating information about the challenges restaurants have had in South Africa. The central issues brought to the fore by journalists were the financial challenges restauranters faced when they were prohibited from trading and the negative impact on employees employed in restaurants. Other concerns documented included the impact of the shift of levels, which at times prohibited restaurants from being operational, and the sale of take away meals by sit down restaurants. In an attempt to attract patrons, a restaurant located in Umhlanga, Durban, became innovative in its approach to serve dine-in consumers. The Ocean basket Fish food franchise was the first in KwaZulu-Natal to adopt a roadhouse model to accommodate patrons who prefer an on-site dining experience. A long piece of wood that stretches across the driver and passenger windows is used as an in-car dining table to serve the meal in their vehicles (Daniel, 2021).

The roles and efforts of South African restaurant associations or unions were also documented in the media. In July 2021, The Restaurant Collective, attempted to alert the government of the negative impact of the continued lockdown regulations on restaurants. These included curfews, the ban on dine-in services, and the limitation to the number of people seated in a restaurant. A pertinent shift in restaurant trade regulation took place during level 4 and 3 lockdown phases which allowed restauranters the option to trade as take-away eateries only rather than being completely closed. The Restaurant Collective explained that this permissible shift was not always profitable for restauranters, as the income accrued from take-away meals was substantially less and could not sustain their restaurants in the long term. Naidoo (2021) explained that restaurants that could retail takeaway meals did so with a skeleton

staff cohort. Many restaurants were closed for long periods of time and The South African restaurant associations pleaded with the government to allow restaurants to be operational to prevent extreme food chain damages and financial losses (Mbonambi, 2021). The Restaurant Association of South Africa emphasised that the ban on dine-in meals has resulted in the temporary closure of restaurants at adjusted level 4 in June and July this year. This organisation, too, requested that the president ease the lockdown regulations for restaurants (Mbonambi, 2021). It was deemed as detrimental to the survival of restaurants in South Africa post the pandemic. Many restaurateurs struggled to sustain their businesses after a full year (2020) of lockdown regulations. There were several small to medium-sized establishments that were forcibly shut down due to debt and unaffordability. Large restaurants and fast-food outlets owned by famous Brands and the Spur Corporation located in South Africa survived impact of the pandemic (Ramalepe, 2020).

Approximately 300, 000 restaurant employees were permanently unemployed since the lockdown regulations throughout South Africa (Lepule, 2021). A restaurateur of five restaurants dismissed 50% of his permanent employees. These statistics only contribute to the escalating unemployment statistics. South Africa's unemployment rate increased to the highest on Bloomberg's list of 82 countries. In the second quarter of 2021, it was recorded that almost 35% of South Africans are unemployed, according to Statistics South Africa (Naidoo, 2021). Therefore, this study plays a pivotal role in documenting the challenges faced by individuals employed in this sector in Durban, South Africa.

### **A qualitative approach**

Thirteen telephonic interviews and two in person interviews took place during the first 6 months of 2021. Babbie and Mouton (2002: 289) describe a qualitative interview as a conversation that allows the interviewer to direct specific discussions. The face to face interview intended to document personal and truthful experiences of employers and employees employed at these restaurants. A purposive sampling approach was adopted to select participants from five restaurants in Chartwell Drive, Umhlanga, Durban (middle to the upper-class suburban area). This street is home to a variety of restaurants, pubs and night venues and has always served as an attraction for entertainment for both tourists and local citizens. Participants had to be employed at one of the five restaurants for 3 years or longer. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 7 were managers or restaurateurs and the remaining 8 were waitrons. Waitrons and managers or restaurateurs were selected to participate in this study because of their responsibilities at these establishments. Managers for instance were primarily responsible for the payment of wages to employees, assessing the revenue of sales for the day, evaluating the running costs on a monthly basis, overseeing the purchase of meal ingredients as per demand amidst other integral responsibilities.

Waitrons were selected for this study with an intent to retrieve and document the fiscal challenges of a waitron. The intent was to develop scholarly literature to support the media reports which illustrated the hardships temporary and casual employees in the hospitality sector experienced. Washinyira (2021) reported that many waitrons had no work during the lockdown period and that they earn the bulk of their salaries from tips given to them from patrons.



Table 1. Demographic profiles of waitrons

South African	Other African nationals	S.A Race group categories	Male	Female	Age group Below the age of 30 years	Age group 30yrs-40yrs	Age group 40 yrs-50
3	3 Malawian	2 Indian	4	4	3	3	2
	2 Zimbabwean	1 White					

Table 2. Demographic profiles of restaurateurs/managers

South African	Other nationality	S.A Race group categories	Male	Female	Age group Below the age of 30 years	Age group 30yrs-40yrs	Age group 40 yrs-50
6	1 Polish	2 Indian	4	2	1	3	3
		1 White					
		3 African					

## Findings and discussion

The findings of this study have been categorically collated and discussed according to 4 lockdown regulations. They are the temporary closure of restaurants, the impact of the curfew, the alcohol ban and the social distancing regulations. Responses were collated under each of the 4 lockdown regulations.

### *Temporary closure of restaurants*

#### *Temporary or permanent unemployment and financial obligations to staff*

Restaurateurs interviewed described their initial perceptions experienced at the onset of the level 5 lockdown regulations in March 2020. Two restaurateurs explained that they had heard rumours of a temporary closure of all restaurants but chose to ignore this. More than half of the restaurateurs interviewed indicated that they were not given sufficient notice about the intended regulation for all restaurants to close temporarily at the initial onset of the pandemic. Restaurateurs were under excessive strain to accommodate this change. A restaurateur explained that supporting a cohort of 15 staff members during the lockdown levels of 4 and 5 was challenging. He explained that many of his staff were casual and temporary employees, and the financial support received from the South African Insurance Fund was inadequate for these individuals and their families to survive. This has been affirmed by Mbonambi (2021) One of the biggest challenges of this regulation was the financial responsibility of aiding temporary and casual waitrons and kitchen staff for these extended periods without any income from the business.

Data revealed that employers had permanently dismissed a total of 18 employees (table runners, waiters and kitchen staff) employed at the 5 restaurants to decrease business expenditure. Three months into the lockdown phase last year, it was estimated that 70% of jobs within South African restaurants were already lost because of restaurant closures (People's Dispatch, 2020). By April 2020, employees in this sector were already retrenched (Ramalepe, 2020). Restaurateurs explained that they had done their best to support their staff financially, but it was impossible to subsidise full salaries (Felix, 2021).

The South African Insurance Fund only paid some restaurateurs a proportion of their requests. Three restaurateurs explained that they only received funds for few employees and the rest of their staff had to go without aid. The fund was only valid for South African citizens and many of the foreign waitrons are employed on a casual basis without work and or temporary resident permits. All 7 restaurateurs explained that during the lockdown period they were unable to employ all their staff and that their businesses ran at a loss.

All eight waitrons explained their feelings of shock and being utterly unprepared for their inability to work during lockdown levels 5 and 4. One waiter explained:

Every week before the pandemic, I took home about R1300 to R1500 or more a week with the shifts that I used to do. However, that was also with the tips. During the lockdown, when we were not allowed to work, it was hard. Our bosses helped us but could not give us full wages because the restaurant was closed.

Another waitron explained that both he and his partner are employed at restaurants, and they both had tough times last year. He said:

Even when the regulations changed to restaurants being allowed to be open, we worked less as there was not a need for so many waiters. People were not eating out, so no tips too.

Some waitrons only received stipends or groceries from their employers, considering that restauranteurs themselves had limited resources to equal portion amongst their entire staff cohort. An Indian South African waitress informed me that she was addressed by her boss personally to request to be patient for financial support because she is still primarily supported by her parents. Therefore, her plea for financial aid was not treated as an emergency in comparison to her Zimbabwean co-worker who had to pay for rent, food and all other necessities by himself. The waitrons from other African countries explained that throughout 2020 they had not earned enough to meet expenses. One Malawian participant described in detail the emotional stress he experienced because he was financially responsible for his ailing mother living in Durban as well. The remaining South African waitrons expressed similar experiences of stress, psychological and emotional distress.

In addition, relationships between employers and employees were strained and becoming unhealthy. Participants explained in detail and affirmed these experiences. “We found ourselves getting so angry on our employers, because we were really dependent on him. For the first time, I couldn’t even find another job elsewhere or do something else” (Participant One)

Waitrons explained it was difficult for them to support their families after the implementation of the lockdown regulations. Mahlokwane (2020) reported similar personal incidents of waitrons in the Pretoria News. The Tshwane Tourism Association indicated that the restaurant employment sector experienced payment delays and that only a portion of restaurant employees received aid from this fund. The government published a list of restaurants that accessed the fund but conveniently failed to indicate that not all employees at these restaurants were recipients of this aid (Mahlokwane, 2020). All the waitrons experienced financial challenges during this period. Discussions with participants reiterated the capacity of Durban’s hospitality sector to generate an income by means of salaries and tips from patrons. Waitrons indicated that they had the capacity to earn up to R15 000.00 (approximately 900\$) a month (tips and a basic) prior to the pandemic, despite the minimum recommended wage of approximately R3500.00 (approximately 205\$) per month. They explained that their location of employment usually attracted middle to upper class patrons, and they were therefore tipped well. A South African legislation on gratuity fees is non-existent, and the lack of this legislation allows for waitrons to increase their earning capacity on a daily basis. It has also been reported that because Johannesburg residents earn better salaries than Durban residents, they reward their waitrons generously (Businesstech, 2019). It is evident that restaurant patrons have the capacity to contribute directly to the salaries of waitrons in South Africa, because of a normative practice of tipping their waitron after the meal at dine in restaurants.

When restaurants were forced to be closed due to lockdown regulations, waitrons in particular had no work and no income. During the phases when restaurants were able to sell takeaway meals, managers, kitchen staff and chefs still had opportunities to be employed, but not waitrons. However, interviews revealed that the sale of takeaway meals was not as lucrative as it should have been during March 2020 and July 2021.

*The lack of viability of takeaway meals served by restauranteurs*

Two of the 7 restauranteurs explained that they opted to sell takeaway meals rather than close their establishments. Other restauranteurs opted to close when the lockdown regulations prohibited citizens from dining in. The shifting of lockdown levels meant that restaurants were forced to close and open sporadically throughout 2020 and the most of 2021. In July 2021, South Africa adopted alert level 4 lockdown regulations after being on level 2, which permitted restaurants to serve patrons dine in meals. Restaurants were instructed once again to close their dine-in facilities and deliver takeaway meals instead. "Hearts broke, and there was immediate outrage." (Mbonambi, 2021). Restauranteurs explained that the revenue generated from takeaway meals was insufficient to contribute towards their business running expenses, such as staff wages, delivery costs and property rental bills.

The head of the Restaurant Collective, Grace Harding, indicated that a sit-down restaurant makes less than 15% of its income from takeaways and therefore restauranteurs will be unable to meet their financial commitments such as wages for staff, rentals, and other utility bills (Konco, 2021). Four restauranteurs indicated that they temporarily dismissed most of their waitrons as their services were not required during this period. It was reported that most restaurants for this period only employed up to 30% of their complete staff cohort (Mbonambi, 2021). "The minute we hear that on-site eating is not allowed in restaurants; we just know that sore feeling. It just means we will not be working or if we are, we going to earning so little", the Malawian waiter said. Local restaurants were also forced to lower the prices of their takeaway meals to compete with global food franchises that specialise in fast foods and takeaway meals. A restauranteur said, "I'm not sure how to price our food competitively, so that we can be affordable as a takeaway place. This is difficult as I still have overheads".

In-depth discussions with restauranteurs revealed that it became difficult for them to sell their restaurant meals as take-away meals because of their prices. They explained that restaurant meals cannot really be compared to fast food take-away foods that are generally priced at a lower price than restaurant dine in meals. Take-away meals have become synonymous with fast foods in South Africa. This has been achieved through aggressive advertising approaches. Many South African children of middle-class homes have developed a palatable preference for KFC or McDonald's meals as a result this meal has become a favourite take-away meal (Lewis, et al., 2020). One restauranteur explained:

It was really not possible for us to compete with the prices of these fast-food outlets, and I also think people were expecting lower prices on the whole of my takeaway meals. Also these international franchises whom we were competing against have extensive and established marketing approaches.

Consumers were inundated with special priced meals from local and global fast-food outlets advertised on multiple mass media platforms (Lewis, et al., 2020). Wasserman (2021) stated that a study conducted by the Restaurant Collective indicated that most sit-in restaurants suffered losses when they only served take-aways because of all the costs involved and smaller profit margins.

A restauranteur explained:

The takeaway meal cannot be appropriately compared to the restaurant meal. The takeaway experience of a restaurant meal offers the client a good quality meal which is tasty and it is not fast-food. But some people prefer the ritual.

All the restauranteurs interviewed were under the perception that most people have become penny savvy about buying prepared meals and dining out. A government survey conducted during the first 3 months of last year indicated that South Africans were earning less during this time and that they were forced to curb their expenses (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Companies such as Uber Eats request as much as 30% commission for their delivery services (Thompson, 2021). This then decreases the profit margins of each takeaway meal sold by restaurants. Therefore, the decision to replace dine-in meals at restaurants with take-away meals was deemed as unprofitable for many Durban citizens by all the restauranteurs.

The tendency to dine-in at restaurants has been primarily motivated by affordability and cultural lifeways which is motivated by the quest to experience another culture through the experience and taste of food. The consumption of food and tourist activities have become interdependent. A restaurant offers the patron not just a palatable meal, but an opportunity to travel to another country through the consumption of different cuisines (Singh & Bhoola, 2016). This is further enhanced by the restaurant furnishings, its ambience and the hospitality often managed by both waitrons and managers. “Customers return to a restaurant not merely because of the food, but more importantly because of the atmosphere and experience created by restaurant staff” (Song et al., 2021: 1). Therefore the marketing of Durban’s restaurants and its many cuisines to international and domestic tourists will be central to the recovery of these establishments.

#### *Monthly rentals of premises*

The data indicated that 4 of the 5 restaurants found it a challenge to meet their monthly rental premiums. One restauranteur explained that negotiations and payment concessions with the landlords were ongoing, and sometimes they were unfruitful, especially after the year 2021 began. Interviews revealed that some restauranteurs considered approaching the South African restaurant associations but failed to do so because he believed that these organisations were not influential at all.

From what I heard from other guys that own restaurants, these organisations are useless and that they not in a position to intervene in the contract between the lessor and lessee. A friend of mine that has a restaurant in Hillcrest said that his landlord still expected him to pay the full rental but allowed for a smaller payment instalment during the month. I too have been doing the same even though I asked for the rental fee to be discounted. That request has been ignored.

Therefore, the sporadic closures and the sale of take-away meals was insufficient to meet the restaurant’s expenses. There has been continual permanent closures of restaurants in Durban due to the pandemic regulations in place that attempt to curb the virus (Pasiya, 2021). Some of these establishments have not reopened since. This loss means that Durban will have fewer restaurants and less varieties of cuisines to market to international and domestic tourists. This can undermine Durban’s existing marketing strategy to attract the culinary tourist.

#### *The impact of the curfew*

All the restauranteurs expressed dismay that they were forced to adhere to curfew regulations very often. Three waitrons expressed their views that the daily curfew influenced people not to

dine out. Interviews with restaurateurs revealed a dominant perception that the curfew was partly responsible for people not wanting to enjoy dining out. This has been reaffirmed by (Liedtke, 2021), who explained that the revenue recovery was slow at restaurants last year because of the seating capacity restrictions, the curfews and the general apprehensiveness of consumers.

During lockdown regulations of alert level 3 in July 2020, restaurant and bar owners protested in Johannesburg on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2020. They demanded an end to the curfew and the alcohol ban. This protest resulted in the curfew being extended from 9 pm to 10 pm for alert level 3 nationally (Reuters, 2020).

This change of regulation did not improve patronage numbers in Umhlanga, Durban as indicated by all 15 participants. Waitrons interviewed stated that a curfew later than 10 pm would allow people to dine out at a leisurely pace and could perhaps encourage people to dine out. Most employees during this period had fewer work shifts. Some waitrons only worked two to three shifts a week, whereas prior to the pandemic they had daily shifts and the opportunity to work additional hours. These curfews impacted the earning capacity of employees. A waiter said, “Sometimes, there would only be 3 of us on one shift, and on the weekends maybe only one more person”.

The impact of the curfew meant for many waitrons that there were fewer shifts to work at restaurants because of the low patronage numbers during these periods. Restaurateurs experienced a decline of patrons because of the curfew regulations. Although this pandemic regulation was temporary, its impact on the industry was daunting. Both employers and employees within this sector had to survive on minimal incomes. Caboz (2021) states in his media report that the curfew regulation is one of the contributing reasons as to why many restaurants closed which contributes to the present high unemployment rate in South Africa (Naidoo, 2021).

### ***The alcohol ban***

The majority of study participants expressed that the intermittent alcohol ban served as one crucial deterrent for people opting to dine out. One participant explained that since people were permitted to consume alcohol at home, this encouraged them to dine at home instead. Six restaurateurs indicated that there was a noticeable difference when the alcohol ban was removed; people were opting to sit in at restaurants for their meals. One participant explained, “There were a lot more people coming to eat when the alcohol ban was lifted. I think a lot of people like to have alcohol especially when they eat out. It’s part of their treat”. Another participant said, “Some people are just used to eating out and drinking booze. It’s the way it is”. “Some people cannot eat out and have no alcohol!”

Thompson (2019) indicated that South Africans spend more time drinking alcohol in a restaurant than in a pub. This estimate was documented in 2019, just a year before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. One restaurateur explained,

When people come dine with us, they drink as well and have at least 3 to 4 alcoholic drinks with their people and even one with their dessert. That has been very common behaviour of a lot our customers. Alcoholic desserts like Irish coffee and Don Pedro are very popular, even on weekdays. Even the ladies like it” said another waitress.

Another restaurateur explained that the foods and drinks consumed at his restaurant often are very different to what the patron consumes in his home. Lucy Long (2004), in her book titled *Culinary Tourism*, describes the eating out experience as exotic for individuals. She further explains that the restaurant offers the patron an ambience, a cultural experience,

especially if the cuisine choice is different to their daily habitual preference and an opportunity to taste unique and exotic foods.

Fine dining restaurants offer patrons a meal complemented with an appropriate wine to enhance the exotic experience. A waitron explained that:

Both red and white wines are popular, but we tell our customers to drink red wine with ostrich, beef and lamb. For seafood dishes we suggest white wines. Some customers like to try different brands with their meals, but sometimes we not sure ourselves, so we have to ask our manager.

Popular culture of food and drink preach that wine and food are very compatible. Wine can effectively modify and enhance dominant flavours of a meal to create an exotic experience for the patron. This is reiterated by scholars, mass media and food bloggers or journalists (Nygren, et al., 2001). These experiences are primarily achieved at fine dining restaurants. Mbonambi (2021) stated that the meal at the restaurant is about more than the food. A fine dining restaurant makes its profits from both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. According to Wendy Alberts, the chief executive of the Restaurant Association of South Africa, the cost of the alcohol ban on restaurants in 2020 was approximately 5 billion Rands (Toyana, 2021). Young (2020) notes that South Africans have adapted their leisurely activities to accommodate the various lockdown regulations that have been implemented. In-depth interviews revealed that all the participants believed that the alcohol ban was partly responsible for the declining number of restaurant patrons during the lockdown periods.

### *Social distancing regulations*

The majority of participants agreed that it was essential for the social distancing regulations to be upheld at all times at the restaurants. Six participants expressed their views that these regulations were not a deterrent to clientele wanting to dine out, whereas the remaining eight believed that it was. These discussions raised concerns that focussed on negative and positive perceptions held by restaurant patrons in relation to how well social distancing measures are maintained. Interviews revealed that the upkeep of appropriate and well managed social distancing measures could be effective in luring clientele to dine in often. Four restauranteurs explained that they believed that their excellent social distancing practices need to be widely advertised to attract clientele. They hoped that they could attract regular clients under these lockdown phases that can trust them and their meals. “Clients need to feel safe in their restaurant and eventually feel confident to return there frequently” One restauranteur explained that it was important for patrons to trust restaurants. He said, “Trust that we are safe, that our food preparation process is hygienic and that we uphold good social distancing practices”. Other restauranteurs also affirmed these perceptions. Another participant said, “I’m not sure whether I am being too positive, but I sincerely am hoping that the advertising of good social distancing practice can attract people to this restaurant”.

“Restaurants need to redesign sitting arrangements and operations in a manner that offers some measure of security and a sense of safety to customers. Such measures include the use of contactless menu boards, payment systems, routine sanitization of tables, screening of dinners, offering of discounts and institute promotions to drive and generate more customers” (Dube, et al., 2021: 1489).

Yost and Cheng (2021) state that safety is a primary motivator for people to eat out. People's perception of "feeling safe" can be influenced by many factors such as trust, loyalty and transparency in food handling and supply processes. Restaurants around the world are yet to achieve this. The spread of the Covid-19 virus can interrupt the supply of food through the

various food chains. Yost and Cheng (2021) suggest that the restaurant patron needs to be informed should a chef decide to replace fresh produce with frozen produce due to its unavailability and affordability. These new catering and dining approaches in a world which is post Covid-19 calls for new avenues of research within hospitality studies.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study documents the challenges experienced by both employers and employees of restaurants in an upper-class suburban area in Durban. Restauranters discussed in detail the difficulties they experienced to sustain their businesses and support their employees through periods when they were unable to open for trade. Restauranters shared that they had insufficient resources to run their businesses, and waitrons explained that the wages they earned during this period were insufficient to meet their needs. The temporary and sporadic closure of restaurants, the alcohol ban and the regulated curfew have all contributed to the dire financial positions of locally owned small and medium-sized restaurants. However, none of the restauranters that participated in this study permanently closed their establishment.

The data revealed that The South African government did not prioritise the financial needs of those employed in this sector. Data collated for this study which was affirmed by media reports revealed the many irregularities of the dispersion of grants. Participants explained that payments from the Unemployment Insurance Fund were sparse and delayed. It is also noted that since this study was located in an upper class area of Durban, it is a possibility that the irregular dispersion and access to government grants was unique to these employers and employees. However, research and published literature does not reveal if preference was given to employers and employees of restaurants located in low to middle income suburban areas. Media reports (Mahlokwane, 2020) indicate the irregularity, but fail to articulate exact details.

The South African government was also accused of being non-communicative and authoritarian in the manner in which lockdown measures were implemented. Participants believed that government's decision not to inform stakeholders of the hospitality sector compounded the impact of the pandemic. This was further affirmed when South African Restaurant Associations admitted that they too were not consulted before the lockdown regulations were put in place (Mbonambi, 2021). The lack of public participatory or inclusive approach with one of the most financially lucrative sectors of the South African economy has been detrimental and further compounded the impact of the lockdown regulations. In response, these organisations attempted to negotiate to nullify the alcohol ban and alleviate the curfew hours, but to their detriment, these attempts were unsuccessful with the exception of one incident in 2021. In pursuit of a collective recovery approach, these organisations should strengthen communication amidst them and with government aim to develop strategies to aid the recovery process.

Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) indicate that there needs to be commitment from private, public and government stakeholders to aid the recovery process of restaurants so that Durban's culinary tourism initiatives have longevity. There is capacity to attract culinary tourists to Durban, but this is also dependent on hygiene measures and ardent Covid-19 protocols that are in place at restaurants. People have to feel safe dining at a restaurants soon and this can be achieved by restaurants adhering to a new normality of hygiene and social distancing protocols. The quest to understand how social distancing practices, stricter hygiene measures and minimal social interactive experiences change dining experiences in the new normal of a Covid-era has only begun (Song et al., 2021). The adherence and practice of the new normality of protocols at restaurants needs to be aggressively marketed to support Durban's existing culinary marketing campaigns to attract international tourists. This step is

crucial to financially improving this sector as South Africans are still not going out as much in comparison to pre-Covid days. Restaurants are still accruing 35% less on their monthly turnover in 2022 (BusinessTech, 2022). The continual unpredictable lockdown regulations and its modifications delayed the possibility of a timeous financial recovery period for restaurants. (Felix, 2021; Kiely, 2021 & Toyana, 2021). A recent media publication explains that Durban citizens were victimised through financial changes of the pandemic, the political riots of 2021 and the floods in 2022 which has resulted in lesser disposable income for leisurely activities such as dining out (BusinessTech, 2022).

Scholars (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2021) have reiterated that international scholars are of the perspective that domestic tourism will be central to tourism sector recoveries post the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a definite need for a restaurateurs to adopt a ‘money for value’ approach when pricing their dishes. The recent inflated costs of household expenditure and fuel, also impacts the frequency of people eating out and where they choose to eat. Durban restaurateurs should consider the affordability capacity of the city’s citizens in the interim until the economy has recovered fully. This strategy can further supported by the national restaurant organisations. Through a public participatory approach, restaurants in cities can be categorically divided and classified so that certain prices are maintained for an agreed period of time. For instance, restaurants that are located within the vicinity of low to middle income suburban residential areas should aim to have certain meals priced less than restaurants located near upper class areas of residence. This approach can continually lure local patrons and can contribute positively towards longevity of their establishments. This approach can also compliment an aggressive culinary tourism marketing strategy to attract both domestic and international tourists.

Scholarly publications and journalistic reports have stated that the tourism and hospitality industry has been identified as one of the worst-hit sectors of the pandemic, despite the huge economic contribution this sector makes to the national economy. Reflections of those employed in the sector have been sparsely documented. The narratives presented above illustrate personal experiences and perceptions of the impact of the lockdown regulations imposed. Richards and Morrill (2020) affirm that research that investigates and documents the impact of the pandemic on tourism businesses is valuable (Rogerson et al., 2021) and can contribute towards the development of adaptation and fiscal recovery processes to assist the tourism sector post the pandemic. The outcomes can vary from policy development to implementation of thereof and defined guidelines for the restaurant sector in South Africa. The widespread dissemination of this data also challenges the assumptions that restaurants located in upper-class areas in South Africa were hardly impacted by the Covid-19 lockdown measures. This study also aims to serve as a catalyst for other researchers to articulate the challenges other restaurants in upper class suburbs in South Africa experienced during the lockdown phases. Multiple studies that can indicate spending priorities of patrons that eat in upper-class suburban restaurants and the dining preferences of wealthy South Africans can possibly be important indicators to guide the restaurant sector in the post-pandemic era. “As such, there is need for each destination, tourism sector and subsector to have customized measures aimed at conducting business under the new normal” (Dube et al., 2021: 1489). Other similar studies located in other South African cities are recommended to strengthen the value of this qualitative micro study.

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