

Recovery and Resilience Measures Taken by Travel Agencies in Mpumalanga, South Africa

Abstract

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The aim of the study is to outline the measures that travel agencies took to reduce the chances of permanently collapsing in the province of Mpumalanga during the period of COVID-19. A quantitative study was conducted 121 responses were obtained from travel agency practitioners in the province of Mpumalanga, South Africa. The results revealed that only 5% of travel agencies deal with uncertainties (suspicion, uncertainty, and ambiguity) associated with the changing business environment conditions. The results also revealed that only 9% of travel agencies allocate resources to assist businesses in recovering from a crisis. Travel agencies have an urgent need to improve their ability to capacitate, adapt, efficiently and innovatively deal with the recovery which will improve their resilience and so to avoid the risk of permanently collapsing. A proper recovery and resilience crises management strategy guarantees travel agencies less exposure to risks during and post-crisis events. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed travel agencies to business, environmental and social risks, demanding quick recovery and resilience to avoid closing permanently.

Keywords Recovery, resilience, uncertainty, crises, travel agencies

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Introduction

The emergence of the novel Coronavirus (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 SARS-Cov-2) that caused the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) posed a unique challenge to the travel and tourism industry across the world, including in South Africa (Musavengane et al., 2022). The economic risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were higher in the poorest parts of the developing world, and highest in sub-Saharan Africa (Rogerson et al., 2021). To curb the spread of COVID-19, most countries, including South Africa, imposed restrictive measures to flatten the curve of the spread of the disease and protect their citizens (Musavengane et al., 2022). These included curbing travel, mandatory COVID-19 tests, vaccination passports and quarantine or isolation restrictions for travelers arriving at their destination (Tasnim et al., 2023). The travel and tourism industry were accordingly faced with grounded planes, empty hotels, closed restaurants, deserted recreational facilities and parks, ultimately leading to high unemployment rates (Musavengane et al., 2022). Many businesses lost revenue; training programs, bookings, projects, and meetings were cancelled, employees had to work from home, and some employees even took ill themselves from COVID-19 (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). The sharp drop in travel and tourism in both domestic and global markets generated a cash flow shortage among travel agencies, hotels and other travel and tourism stakeholders (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022). The outbreak of COVID-19 triggered panic around the world amidst fears that it might be more contagious than any other historical virus and could not be contained (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). When no one travels there is no tourism. This significantly affects the income of people and communities who depend on travel and tourism for their livelihoods (Musavengane et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact not only on financial aspects of businesses, but also on employee welfare resulting in further issues arising such as the necessity to organize a hybrid workplace and follow government policies and protocols of social distancing (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022). In response to the chaotic nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the national government and the travel and tourism industry in South Africa, like anywhere in the world needed to chart initiatives to recovery and resilience (Rogerson et al., 2021). However, the industry's resilience was strong to begin a process to recovery. The focus of this study is to share insights into the recovery and resilience practices undertaken by travel agencies and provide recommendations for future research.

The travel and tourism industry as a pillar of the economy

The travel and tourism industry is seen as the value chain that connects all the service industries (Musavengane et al., 2022). According to the National Department of Tourism in South Africa, the country was poised for positive growth, and as early as February 2020, 40% of responding firms within the tourism ecosystem noted that they were growing, with a further 32% stating that they are performing at a constant level (South Africa, 2020; Musavengane et al., 2022). In terms of employment, the travel and tourism industry contributed 24.3 million jobs (6.7%) in Africa (Musavengane et al., 2022). The impact of crises in the travel and tourism industry in Africa is in any case often severe due to a general lack of preparedness, higher vulnerability, and a greater dependence on government and local agencies (Musavengane et al., 2023). The scale of disruption affected every nation and industry (Tasnim et al., 2023). While the travel and tourism industry has contributed massively to the economy and assisted in massive job creation and poverty alleviation for poor communities, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the industry to its knees (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). Understanding the extent to which COVID-19 impacted the travel and tourism industry, which has been long sieged with economic, environmental, and social challenges is critical. The travel and tourism industry makes a major contribution to the economy of South Africa in general and Mpumalanga in particular, and was heavily affected



by the COVID-19 pandemic, South Africa lost R674 million travel and tourism revenue from October to December 2020 and 2021 was similarly disastrous, with 97% of businesses operating at a loss for the last quarter of that year (TBCSA, 2021). From this standpoint, it is important to understand the level of damage that the COVID-19 has done to the travel and tourism industry.

Summary of the COVID-19 induced impacts on the travel and tourism industry

The travel and tourism industry is susceptible to crisis events (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). It is vulnerable to crises, including natural disasters such as pandemics, and artificial crises, like the recent war that resulted from the Russia-Ukraine invasion, terrorism, political instability, and health pandemics like Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and COVID-19 (Musavengane et al., 2023). COVID-19 worsened the current situation of South Africa as, the state of the economy of South Africa was already not ideal, as it was characterized by high unemployment and the degrading of the South Africa to junk status (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). A drop in tourist numbers, increase in unemployment, weakened market profits, reduced investment and less government revenue often exacerbate socio-economic conditions and may propel the country into a worsened state of disaster (Musavengane et al., 2022). In March 2020, 58% of travel and tourism businesses were unable to service their debts and 54% were struggling to cover fixed costs (Musavengane et al., 2022). As a result, many travel and tourism industry businesses reduced staff wages and some classified their staff as redundant (Musavengane et al., 2022). This is highlighted by the fact that by June 2020, travelling passengers by air had declined from 80% to 44%, casinos and conference venues were completely empty (UNWTO, 2020).

Recovery and resilience in the travel and tourism industry

From a business perspective, travel and tourism resilience is defined as the capacity of the business to survive and grow in the face of turbulent change (Ketter, 2022). Cheer & Lew (2017) concur that business recovery and resilience is the ability of an economic industry or individual enterprise to adapt, thrive, and often innovate in response to the changing business environment using the range of resources and capacities available to them. Recovery is attributed to anticipation and preparedness from shocks, both expected and unexpected, and its direct and indirect impacts (Baraero-Era & Rosario, 2020). According to Ketter (2022) recovery and resilience are complementary models; recovery provides a short term and concentrated remedy, while resilience actions are more focused on medium and long-term. Travel and tourism resilience focus more on agility and adaptability, supporting the travel and tourism industry in bouncing forward and shifting away from the crisis (Ketter, 2022). Pongtanalert & Assarut (2022) asserted that resilience is not the outcome, but it is the process that links resources (adaptive capacity) to outcomes (adaptation). Hall et al. (2022) mentioned that recovery and resilience post a crisis assists in repairing infrastructure, generating employment, and increasing investments and income. Several diseases that spread in the last two decades have profoundly damaged the image of several countries as safe tourist destinations; although it is evident from analysing the past histories after any epidemic or pandemic, like Ebola or SARS, the travel and tourism industry does not take long to recover the losses (Tasnim et al., 2023). The most critical stages of travel and tourism industry recovery are pre-crisis, crisis stage and post-crisis stage: post-crisis stage involves the recovery of the travel and tourism industry and restoring functionality. The recovery of the travel and tourism industry will provide the jobs people need to bounce back and drive economic growth that will help whole communities recover from a crisis (Musavengane et al., 2022). Recovery and resilience have been characterised by four key dimensions (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017; Ketter, 2022) narrated in Table 1. The key dimensions can be viewed in the context of the relationship between vulnerability and adaptability, with robustness and redundancy as the main characters of vulnerability and resourcefulness and rapidity being the main character of adaptability (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017). Resilience is integral to the reconstruction post COVID-19 pandemic in the travel and tourism industry (Musavengane et al., 2023).

Table 1: Key aspects of recovery and tourism resilience

Dimensions	Explanation
Robustness	The business elements and functions can withstand crisis without significant deprivation or loss of performance.
Redundancy	The extent to which the business elements are substitutable and thus adept at satisfying functional requirements when disturbances occur, and significant deprivation or loss of function transpires.
Resourcefulness	The ability to diagnose and prioritise challenges and implement solutions by identifying and mobilising material, monetary, informational, technological, and human resources.
Rapidity	The ability to mitigate losses and timely restore functionality to prevent future disruptions.

Source: Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray (2017)

Ketter (2022) argued that the concept of recovery and resilience provides a more holistic perspective on the complex and dynamic relations between crises and the travel and tourism industry. Recovery and resilience make the travel and tourism industry to be able to successfully absorb a crisis without collapsing or losing its long-term functionality; the industry can restore its tourism functions in a timely and efficient manner, the crisis serves as a stimulus for growth, making the travel and tourism industry even more competent and resilient (Ketter, 2022). Hartman (2018) elaborated guidelines for building resilience in the travel and tourism industry set up. According to Hartman (2018), the travel and tourism industry is a sensitive multifaceted industry, it requires innovation, creativity, good marketing, monitoring, evaluation and adaption in order to recover successfully from crisis events and be resilient to future ones, Figure 1 outlines the guidelines for building resilience in the travel and tourism industry in detail.

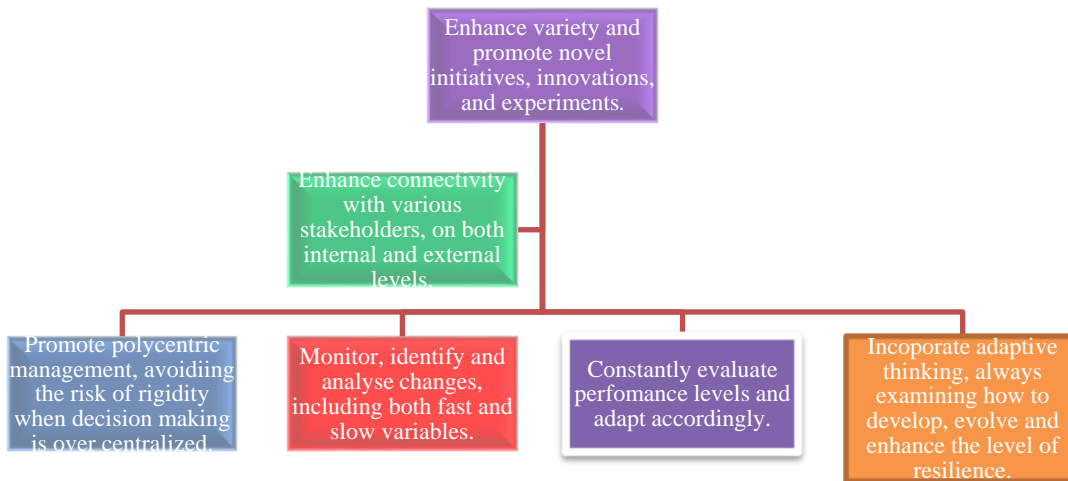


Figure 1: Guidelines for building resilience in the travel and tourism industry set up
 Source: Adapted from Hartman (2018) edited by the author

The COVID-19 crisis, according to Rogerson et al. (2021) inspired changes in consumers and entrepreneur behavioural patterns. To curb business uncertainties and instilling travellers’ confidence, Pongtanalert & Assarut (2022) proposed mechanisms such as: adaptive capacity, social capital, and the entrepreneur mindset. The mechanisms are explained in detail in Figure 2.

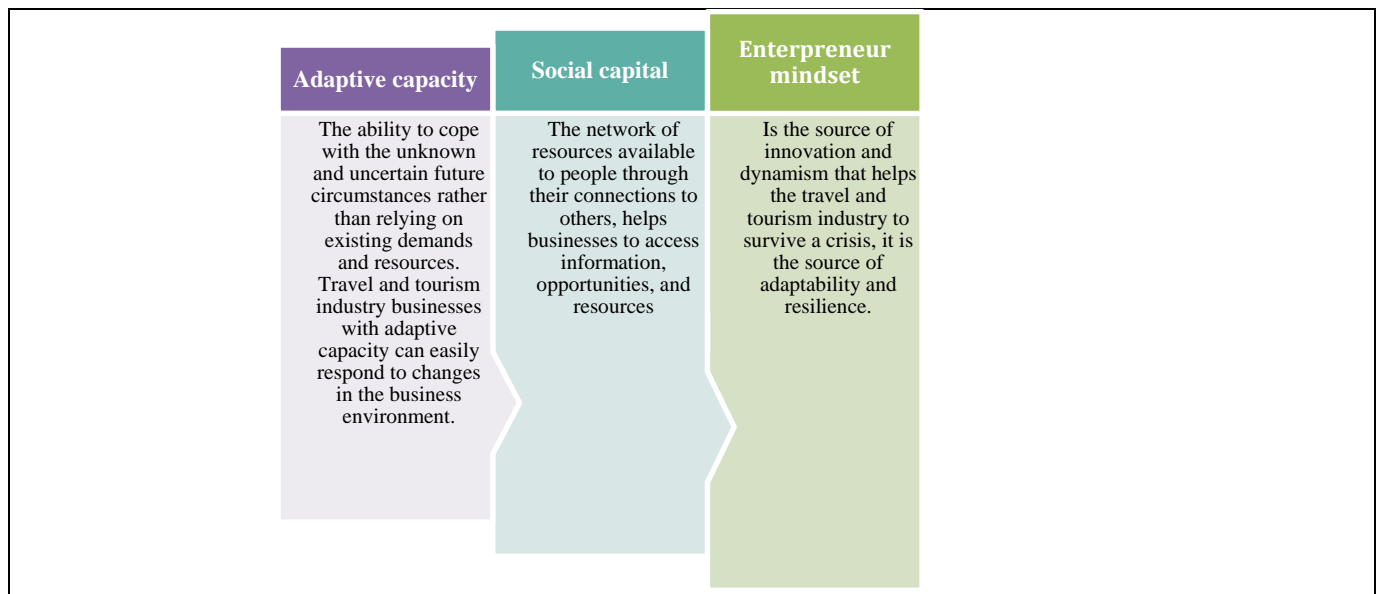


Figure 2: Curbing uncertainties and instilling traveller’s confidence mechanisms
 Source: Adapted from Pongtanalert & Assarut (2022) edited by the author

Pongtanalert & Assarut (2022) suggested that the collaboration with stakeholders, the transparency and communication to internal and external stakeholders is critical to be resilient and fosters quick recovery from a crisis. Collaboration should be inclusive and encompassing; meaning, it should not just rely on a handful of experts but also enable the involvement of stakeholders at different levels of the travel and tourism ecosystem (Baraero-Era & Rosario, 2020). The survival of the travel and tourism industry is dependent on business linkages and shared benefits (Musavengane et al., 2023). The recovery and resilience of the travel and tourism industry primarily relies on the business adaptation and innovation abilities, which involves shared benefits (Baraero-Era & Rosario, 2020). Shared benefits during contemporary effective coordination enable different industries to survive in the short term (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017; Promnil & Polnyotee, 2023). Therefore, collaboration of the travel and tourism industry is critical and the backbone of the survival of the industry during a crisis and post the crisis event.

Recovery and resilience measures by travel agencies

Ketter (2022) mentioned that the travel and tourism industry is a complex environment, and changes tend to involve uncertainty and non-linear dynamics, building resilience can therefore not be carried out in a one-size fit all manner. There is no standard



framework that can be used to guide the travel and tourism industry on how to respond to crises, understand the responses, and measure the level of resilience (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017). Hence, the recovery and resilience measures are not necessarily relevant to the entire world and country as the impacts differ from country to country, province to province and from region to region (Musavengane et al., 2022). Recovery measures taken by travel agencies during the COVID-19 period included: price reduction, capital borrowing, investing in upskilling staff to multitask, and temporary closures (Muavengane et al., 2022). Some of the mitigation measures taken by the travel and tourism industry in South Africa included temporary closure (69%), deferment of bookings instead of cancellation (60%), downscaling (58%), and cancellation of planned investments (51%) (Musavengane et al., 2022). This indicates that many of the factors were affected by the pandemic such as wages and salaries, investors, debts, and assets amongst others (Mkhonza & Sifolo, 2022). Tasnim et al. (2023) mentioned that part of recovery involves utilizing government assistance and support towards recovering losses due to the pandemic, coupled with public-private partnership (PPP). Several travel and tourism firms received government aid and support which helped them to reduce their operational costs (Tasnim et al., 2023). The government played a significant role to help stakeholders in the travel and tourism industry to survive, through stimulus packages and postponement of tax payments (Tasnim et al., 2023).

Apart from launching multiple stimulus packages for domestic travel and tourism businesses, the government allowed the travel and tourism industry to restart their activities, by loosening travel restrictions and international entry regulations and quarantine programs (Rogerson et al., 2021; Muavengane et al., 2022; Promnil & Polnyotee, 2023). The Tourism Business Council of South Africa committee in February 2021, at the peak of COVID-19, proposed measures of business recovery for the travel and tourism industry in South Africa. These measures were implemented based on the suggestions of the World Tourism Organisation and tourism experts, the measures are as follows (TBCSA, 2021):

- A government loan guarantee scheme should take into consideration the unique travel and tourism landscape;
- Vaccination of tourism frontline staff as a critical part of recovery;
- The country message must be managed to counter the COVID-19 narrative;
- Early communications on potential lockdowns;
- The need to adopt different lockdown approaches to avoid start and stop scenarios;
- There is a need to give confidence to both domestic and international potential tourists on regulations.

These measures inspired the travel and tourism industry's recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, supported by many workers who were dealing with their temporary financial pressure (Huynh et al., 2022). Resilience measures implemented by Hong Kong's travel and tourism industry to attain recovery and resilience according to Baraero-Era and Rosario (2020) is summarised in Table 2. Hong Kong was one of the countries that were heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the measures assisted in ensuring that businesses go back to normal and the country's travel and tourism was restored (Baraero-Era & Rosario, 2020).

Table 2: Hong Kong's resilience measures

Measures taken	Strategies
Increase in health and sanitation awareness	To ensure the health and safety of customers and employees, all were required to undergo infrared thermal scanning before entering the facilities.
Effective cost control measures	Several tourism-related businesses adapted several cost-cutting schemes to keep their operations such as no pay leave, and advance leave.
Creative marketing strategies during and after SARS	Travel agencies strengthened their packages to attract domestic clients because international visitors were scared to travel.
Best practices continued	The travel and tourism industry increased precautionary measures and standards and sanitation.

Source: Baraero-Era & Rosario (2020)

Resilience and recovery Measures centres on the travel and tourism industry's collaboration such as government financial aid assistance and the industry adhering to government regulations and protocols as a collective, industry message presented as a unit and coordination of the travel and tourism developments within the travel and tourism industry ecosystem (Musavengane et al., 2023). According to Baraero-Era & Rosario (2020) resources that stimulate recovery and resilience are:

- Economic resources – this includes budget allocation for the business, travel and tourism revenue, and access to markets. These resources ensure that travel and tourism businesses have sufficient funds and access to respond quickly to any events.
- Social and political resources – these will, include but is not limited to travel and tourism leadership, the government as well as the available assistance, political will, the existence of crisis management partnerships, early warning systems, and visitor evacuation plans.
- Human resources – the quality of human aspects, including their knowledge, as well as crisis experience, crisis awareness, and organisational skills are critical to mitigate and respond to crises appropriately.
- Natural and physical resources – the quality of the infrastructure needed during crisis events, emergency water supply, communication devices, electricity, emergency health care, as well as structural crisis protection.
- Visitor resources – The demand side of the travel and tourism industry, which includes visitor confidence and perceptions, having a positive brand and business reputation aids in the recovery and resilience following a crisis.

Having the above-mentioned resources give the travel and tourism industry higher resilience to crisis events. The travel and tourism industry businesses must mobilize and strengthen their old and new capacities to increase their chances of emerging



from the crisis (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022). There are four key elements of resilience proposed by Pongtanalert & Assarut (2022) for COVID-19, which includes: Digital transformation to cope with the lockdown and social distancing policies. The second is the decision-making process to be more decentralised so that businesses can achieve a higher flexibility, agility, and engagement from employees. The third is the leadership of top management that initiates structural change, makes timely decisive actions, and enhances organisational morale to create sense of belonging. The last element considers emotions and stress management for employees and their families due to the insecure business situation and policies of COVID-19. Another element suggested by Huynh et al. (2022) is to co-live with COVID-19 to foster the travel and tourism industry and its business operations to be more resilient.

Uncertainties during the COVID-19 pandemic

Uncertainties refers to something that is unclear or unsettled, often leads both businesses and employees to have doubts as they are unsure what they know and which direction they may head to (Wongmonta, 2021; Lai & Cai, 2023). The sources that cause uncertainties are usually derived from external factors such as unexpected changes, competitions, and crisis events (Lai & Cai, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic, without a doubt, created new business challenges for the travel and tourism industry (Baraero-Era & Rosario, 2020; Lai & Cai, 2023). Without the ability to travel, the future of the travel and tourism industry is uncertain (Musavengane et al., 2022). Losing jobs and earning less, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, severely reduced travel demands (Wongmonta, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic gave people around the world the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety (Wongmonta, 2021). The travel and tourism industry had to react quickly to the crisis so that they can stabilize their operations (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022:2). Peoples' mentality and traveling habits changed during the pandemic era, which affects travel patterns (Wongmonta, 2021). Travellers have thus changed their ways and patterns of travel, and therefore new travel and tourism strategies are needed to innovate the travel and tourism industry (Wongmonta, 2021). In the context of uncertainty, during a health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary for the travel and tourism industry businesses to engage customer relations to build customer confidence in a safe environment (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Promnil & Polnyotee, 2023).

It was challenging to create confidence among tourists and employees in the travel and tourism industry during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wongmonta, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a bold new direction to be charted by the travel and tourism industry (Rogerson et al., 2021). The links between uncertainty and adaptive capacities of the travel and tourism industry suggest that developing adequate responses to the changes of global and local events is key to enabling rapid rebound and at the very least efficient adaptation (Cheer & Lew, 2017). The travel and tourism industry face uncertainties in maintaining their activities due to the unpredictability of the market environment post the COVID-19 era, change of customers trends and product lines, and less bargaining power with customers and suppliers (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022). The travel and tourism industry's uncertainty inspires change within the industry with utmost respect, and safety protocols from one country to another (Tasnim et al., 2023). These changes impact the travel and tourism industry through the political, economic, and social drivers of change which are deeply intertwined with tourism uncertainties (Cheer & Lew, 2017). The political, economic, and social drivers are unemployment, bankruptcy, revenue loss, budget deficit, border closures, and government regulations (Rogerson et al., 2021; Huynh, et al., 2022). These unexpected and unprecedented changes in the travel and tourism industry resulted in massive challenges, for both the business and employees within the travel and tourism industry (Butler, 2020; Lai & Cai, 2023). Similarly, customers are adopting a new travel patterns whereby the travel and tourism industry businesses must reimagine their business and think of new ways to reform their business with the changing environment (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022). The travel and tourism industry change because uncertainties impact, shape, and form contemporary travel and tourism, and the emerging travel and tourism landscape in turn impacts travel and tourism businesses, customers, and the world (Cheer & Lew, 2017). The effective element of recovery and resilience are characterised by the ability to embrace change, turning adversity to advantage, adaptability, and increased innovation (Cahyanto & Pennington-Gray, 2017).

Traveller risks involved in the context of COVID-19 and solutions

Consumer perceptions of risks associated with the spread of the pandemic have caused shifting patterns of movements and radical changes in established patterns of consumer demands to which travel, and tourism industry businesses must adapt (Rogerson et al., 2021). Compared with other businesses, such as insurance companies where workers can work remotely, and perceive less risks from COVID-19 disruptions, a customer facing hospitality staff is more vulnerable in terms of the unpredictability of job security and health related issues (Baraero-Era & Rosario, 2020; Lai & Cai, 2023). Promnil and Polnyotee (2023) mentioned that majority of businesses to foster recovery and resilience during the COVID-19 period focused on improving human resources by providing training courses to empower employees' professional skills. This training enabled travel and tourism workers to ensure their operational practice aligns with disease prevention regulations as proposed by the government, the re-opening of the travel and tourism industry and minimising the spread of COVID-19 among employees and travel and tourism customers (Lai & Cai, 2023). This served to minimise the risk perceptions associated with the travel and tourism industry. One of the key changes in the mindset of the travel and tourism industry businesses is the co-living intention with the COVID-19 pandemic (Huynh et al., 2022). Butler (2020) mentioned that what is required is a re-thinking of established ways of travel and tourism operation and marketing, which enable both a wider participation in travel and tourism for many populations and reduced per capita environmental and social costs of travel and tourism generally. Huynh et al. (2022) mentioned that for travel and tourism industry businesses, it is critical to ensure certainty by restructuring human resources



towards compactness, quality, and efficiency, promote communication and exploit a disease-free market, create trust for customers, develop new products, and offer service discounts and promotions.

Materials and methods

In pursuit of the recovery and resilient measures of travel agencies, the study adopted a positivist research paradigm. A quantitative methodological approach was employed through a survey research design. Census sampling was adopted in this study with an intention to include all the travel agencies registered under the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MTPA), the database obtained after receiving a gate keeper letter from MTPA assisted with e-mails of the travel agencies. From 184 travel agencies in the MTPA list, only 121 responded leaving the response rate of 65%. The statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 was used to analyse the collected data. The population of the study was the travel agency community of the province of Mpumalanga, South Africa which covers the Ehlanzeni, Nkangala, and Gert Sibande regions. The MTPA assisted by offering the travel agencies database (with their emails and phone numbers), where e-mails of the questionnaire were forwarded to different travel agency practitioners through SurveyMonkey. For respondents to form part of the target population, they were expected to be above the age of 18 years, employed either part-time, full-time, or casual basis by any travel agency that is registered with the MTPA. The study population was the travel agency employees: front desk managers, supervisors, key accounts, administrators or booking agents.

The research instrument used was a self-completion questionnaire, which was adapted from an existing instrument by Al Khalifa (2021) in a study that is titled “Crisis Management and Flexibility: The Moderating Role of E-Readiness the Case of Government Authorities in The Kingdom of Bahrain”. The overall questionnaire had 2 sections (demographics and crisis management section). The second section had 6 categories (pre-crisis stage, preparation stage, emergency stage, intermediate stage, long-term recovery, and the evaluation stage). Likert scale of five points, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree was used. The questionnaire was circulated to the travel agencies in Mpumalanga province through SurveyMonkey to the travel agency practitioners. The response rate of 65.76 (66%) was obtained which is considered a positive response rate, given that the minimum standard threshold of 0.35 is satisfactory for most quantitative surveys. Cronbach Alpha values for each of the constructs were found to be meeting the required 0.7 threshold. Overall, the levels of internal consistency were exceeding the lowest possible theoretical requirement of 0.7. Census sampling was adopted in this study with the intention to include all the travel agencies registered under the MTPA (with their permission). The researcher sent the SurveyMonkey link through e-mails to the travel agencies and sent follow-up e-mails to accelerate progress. In the first week, SurveyMonkey reported 15 responses, the second week, the response rate improved by 50 responses, the third week SurveyMonkey reported 36 responses and in the final week SurveyMonkey reported 20 responses. The population size was 350 respondents, with RoaSoft software generating a proposed sample size of 184 on a confidence of 95% and 5% wrong margin. The study obtained 121 fully completed questionnaires, which is 65% response rate. The data was exported from SurveyMonkey to Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet and SPSS version 27 was used to analyse the coded data. The SPSS software assisted with the inferential statistics to make it easier to study and interpret the data obtained from data collection. The researcher carried out the analysis of means, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of relationships. Exploratory factor analysis was adopted.

Results and discussion

The findings are divided into two sections which is the demographics of the respondents and the exploratory factor analysis. The demographic data is important as it affects the credibility of the data in various aspects and the exploratory factor analysis focuses on the summary of the picture of the population depending on the variables of interest.

Demographics of 121 respondents

Table 3 provides composition of the respondents of this study according to three categorical variables: gender, qualification, and job title.

Table 3: Demographics

Gender	Attributes	Percentages of all participants
Gender	Male	27%
	Female	68%
	Other	2%
	Prefer not to say	1%
Qualification	Matric	23%
	National Diploma	7%
	Bachelor's degree	17%
	Honours degree	32%
	Master's degree	17%
	Doctoral degree	5%
Job title	Manager	10%
	Front desk manager	4%
	Supervisor	4%
	Key accounts	4%
	Administration	23%
	Booking agent	3%
	Other	54%



The data collected reveal that the travel and tourism industry in the province of Mpumalanga is female dominated with 68% of the respondents being female, followed by males which are only 30%, with “other” being on 2% and prefer not to say with lowest percentage of 1%. Table 3 displays the demographic data obtained through SurveyMonkey from travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga from the 1st of May 2023 to the 31st of May 2023. The results revealed that the Travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga is run by qualified professionals, with the highest number of employees in position an honours degree (32%), followed by people with Matric sitting on 23%. Based on the results, the study observed that contrary to the observation made by (Lai & Cai, 2023) that the “travel and tourism industry is an industry that employs low skilled workers” is not a factor in the province of Mpumalanga, which is a positive trait that can assist travel agencies in coping throughout the shock of COVID-19 pandemic and crisis in general, through the application of the government protocols. Employees that participated in the study comprised of administrators (23%), booking agents (3%), key accounts (4%), front desk managers (4%), managers (10%) and other (internships) (54%). The result on job title reveal that administrators are the second dominant employees, which is a positive trait because administrators are involved in dealing with the day to day duties of the business, administrators also dealt with the imposed restrictions and safety protocols as a result of COVID-19 and can carry the instructions given by the top managers.

Reliability and validity

The factors of crisis management strategies were tested for reliability and validity. The study’s internal consistency of each of the measurement scales was assessed by means of calculating Cronbach’s Alpha coefficients. Overall, the levels of internal consistency were meeting the requirement of 0.7, when the items in the research instrument were tested for reliability the values in Table 4 were revealed. The reliability of the variables was accepted; hence the items were considered reliable.

Table 4: Reliability: Cronbach’s Alpha

Cronbach’s Alpha	Pre-crisis stage	Preparation stage	Emergency stage	Intermediate stage	Long-term recovery stage	Evaluation stage
	0.80	0.81	0.79	0.79	0.84	0.80

The exploratory factor analysis

The purpose of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) is to establish whether a common factor or more than one factor is present in response to the items tested (Yong & Pearce, 2013). Exploratory principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was employed to identify the underlying structure or dimensions in the independent variables in this study (George & Malley, 2016). The factor analysis was performed for all six dimensions about: pre-crisis, preparation, emergency, intermediate, long term-recovery, and evaluation stages. In interpreting the factors, only a loading of 0.5 and above were considered. George & Marley (2016) mentioned that factor analysis is generally used to discover the factor structure of a measure and to examine its internal reliability. The ultimate objective was to minimize the number of insignificant loadings and to make sure that each variable is associated with only one factor (Beavers et al., 2013). To ascertain the conceptual linkages among the items used to measure the pre-crisis, preparation, emergency, intermediate, long-term recovery and evaluation stages, the Principal Component Analysis with varimax rotation and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was applied. Results in Table 5 reveal that the KMO measure of sampling adequacy value of .962 indicates that the items were interrelated and shared a common factor. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity was also found to be significant (Approx. Chi-square=5505.292) indicating the significance of the correlation matrix. Table 5 presents the KMO and Bartlett’s test.

Table 5: KMO and Bartlett’s Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy		.962
Bartlett’s test of sphericity	Approx. Chi-square	5505.292
	df	528
	Sig.	.000

To determine the factorability of the data, the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was used to justify that there is enough intercorrelation between the variables to justify the factor analysis. This measure quantifies the level of intercorrelation among the variables entered the analysis (Lai & Cai, 2023). The cumulative values were all above the value of 0.30, confirming each item shared common variance with other items. By performing EFA, the number of constructs and the underlying factor structure are identified (Yong & Pearce, 2013). To the study, the EFA was performed to gather information about the interrelationship among the observed variables to identify latent constructs of recovery and resilience. The investigation of the constructs aimed to produce results that were more significant by grouping variables that might reflect latent variables which are easier to understand and quantify in relation to travel agency recovery and resilience (George & Malley, 2016; Molefe et al., 2018).

A principal Component Analysis (PCA) of the remaining items using Orthogonal Varimax rotation was conducted for the purpose of appealing to rules of SPSS. The Kaiser’s criterion which recommends retaining factors with eigenvalues greater than 0.5 as important was performed (Beavers et al., 2013). All factors with eigenvalues of less than 0.5 were considered not as important and disregarded (Beavers et al., 2013). During the several elements, items that failed to meet the minimum criteria of having a primary loading of 0.5 or above were eliminated (Molefe et al., 2018). The exploratory factor loadings are outlined in Table 6. As displayed in Table 6, the item communalities of the variables retained in the analysis ranged from 0.455 to 0.844,



suggesting that the variables correlate with each other. The first factor (pre-crisis) with factor loading ranging from 0.455 to 0.826 represents six items that are related to each other, which made logical sense for the pre-crisis stage as that is the critical stage of the business to set itself up for any form of crisis. The second factor (preparation stage) with factor loadings ranging from 0.645 to 0.697 in the data. The majority of the items were removed as it was below the required 0.5 leaving the three items which made logical sense for the preparation stage as time is limited on this stage, which is the stage that is defined by resolving matters before the crisis hits. The third factor (emergency stage) with factor loadings ranging from 0.704 to 0.711 in the data, where three items are related to each other made logical sense for the emergency stage. The emergency stage was retained as it signifies the level of commitment from the business. The fourth factor which is (intermediate stage) was eliminated as its loadings was below the required 0.5. The fifth factor (long-term recovery stage) in the data represents the remaining items which highlights the importance of the business as it is the stage that signifies the future and existence of the business. The sixth and last factor (evaluation stage) in the data represents the only two items that are remaining from the deleted items, which contributes negatively to the business recovery plans as majority of the items were eliminated. Respondents also highly considered monitoring of signs, constant monitoring, and culture of dealing with crises to be important aspects of recovery and resilience, to move out of crisis situations without major damages.

Table 6: Factor loadings based on principal components analysis with orthogonal varimax rotation

Crisis management strategies	Pre-crisis stage	Preparation stage	Emergency stage	Long-term recovery stage	Evaluation stage
Monitoring of signs	0.826				
Constant monitoring	0.804				
Crisis events are planned for	0.720				
Resolve reputational threats	0.455	0.697			
Specialised unit	0.509	0.650			
Responsible workers	0.539	0.645			
Serious emergency response			0.711		
Resources to contain the crisis			0.704		
Uncertainties surrounding business environment			0.708		
Allocation of resources				0.760	
Adapt appropriate resources				0.752	
Future uncertainties				0.717	
Changed business environment				0.755	
Culture of dealing with crises					0.844
Appealing to pandemic situations					0.654

*Blanks represent loadings <0.4.

Discussions

The evidence from the study reveal that despite travel agencies being vulnerable to crisis events travel agencies do monitor signs and signals that might spark crisis events as both factor loadings (monitoring of signs and constant monitoring) are on 0.804 and 0.826 respectively, which suggests a positive correlation of factors on the pre-crisis stage. In South Africa, the travel and tourism industry started operating slightly on COVID-19 alert level 2 (interprovincial travel that allowed domestic travel came into effect, allowing airports and airline industries to operate together under strict adherence to the government protocols). The travel agency sector had already adjusted to the COVID-19 conditions as it had already established specialised units and allocated resources to deal with the challenges posed by the crisis, which highlights the significance of the preparation stage. The factor loading on the emergency stage reveal that travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga do put contingency plans for emergencies (serious emergency response) with a positive factor loading of 0.711 which is the highest under the emergency stage. The study also reveal that there is still a need for travel agencies to address business uncertainties to avoid permanent closure in the face of crisis events that come in any form and shape, as the intermediate stage was eliminated due to the factor loadings being below the required 0.5. The factor loadings on long-term recovery reveal that travel agencies do anticipate a changed business environment and are ready to deal with it. The future of the travel and tourism industry is highlighted by the ability of travel and tourism business to deal with pandemics (Butler, 2020). Travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga do have a plan that is appealing to pandemic situations (0.654) in their evaluation stage.

Conclusion

Travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga need to continuously monitor their crisis management strategies to recover quicker and remain resilient in times of any crisis. The financials and human resources need to be invested effectively and efficiently because they are very critical when the crisis hits the business environment. Travel agencies recovery and resilience is a necessity as the travel and tourism industry recovery and resilience will also be a great input to the local, regional, and national economy. Travel agencies are an integral part of the travel and tourism industry, the recovery practices adopted confirm that the networking and connection of the travel and tourism industry is easy and accessible. Travel agencies ability to address uncertainties and risks ensures the future of both the business and workers involved in the travel agency industry. Lastly, more preparation for crisis events exposed travel agencies to less exposures to the harsh economic, social, and environmental challenges posed by the crisis event.

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