



Unearthing Resilience of the Hospitality Industry Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic in Livingstone, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This research, following Creswell's research approaches, employs an abductive approach to qualitatively explore the resilience of the hospitality industry in Livingstone, Zambia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative methods, particularly in-depth interviews, are utilized to delve into the nuanced experiences of hospitality managers, providing genuine insights into their responses to the socio-economic impact of the pandemic.

The study, conducted in the tourism hub of Livingstone, involves 16 hospitality companies, representing diverse sectors such as hotels, lodges, leisure companies, and national parks. Through simple random sampling, key informants and staff share their perspectives, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how various segments within the hospitality industry have navigated the challenges posed by COVID-19.

The research aims to identify and analyze the strategies implemented by these hospitality businesses to adapt and thrive amidst the pandemic. Key themes addressed include crisis management strategies, shifts in consumer behavior, adoption of technology, government interventions, and community collaborations. By exploring the lived experiences of hospitality managers, the study seeks to provide valuable insights that can inform future resilience-building efforts, industry practices, and policymaking.

The findings contribute to the broader discussion on business resilience during global crises, offering practical lessons for the hospitality industry and related sectors. Understanding the specific challenges faced by businesses in Livingstone, Zambia, and their innovative responses can serve as a blueprint for similar destinations worldwide, fostering a more adaptable and sustainable hospitality industry in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: *Unearthing resilience, COVID-19 pandemic and Hospitality Industry*

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to the global economy, with a profound impact on the hospitality industry, encompassing hotels, restaurants, tourism, and event management. These sectors are vital contributors to economic growth and employment, playing a pivotal role in various economies worldwide (WHO, 2020). The ongoing disruptions caused by the pandemic, including travel restrictions and limitations on social gatherings, make it crucial to investigate and comprehend the resilience demonstrated by the hospitality industry in the midst of these adverse conditions.

1.1 Background

Preceding the pandemic, the hospitality industry thrived on principles centered around delivering exceptional service, creating memorable experiences, and catering to the diverse needs of guests. However, the sudden onset of COVID-19 disrupted these operations significantly, leading to widespread closures, travel restrictions, and a substantial decline in revenue. The pandemic induced a noteworthy shift in consumer behavior, with individuals becoming more cautious about travel and social interactions. Governments worldwide responded with stringent health and safety protocols, encompassing social distancing measures, travel bans, and capacity restrictions, directly impacting businesses in the hospitality sector. While these measures were essential to curb the virus's spread, they brought about severe consequences for industry enterprises.

Despite these challenges, the hospitality industry has exhibited resilience by embracing innovative strategies to adapt to the new normal. Many businesses have incorporated technology to provide contactless services, introduced online reservations and check-in processes, and elevated cleaning and hygiene protocols to ensure the safety of both guests and employees (United Nations, 2013). This adaptability forms a crucial aspect of the broader exploration into the resilience of the hospitality industry amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the specific context of Livingstone, Zambia.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The research work, focused on exploring the resilience of the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic in Livingstone, Zambia, underscores the importance of developing a well-structured theoretical framework. The Resilience Theory serves as a valuable lens for this investigation, concentrating on the ability of hospitality systems, organizations, or individuals to bounce back and adapt in the face of adversity. This framework allows researchers to dissect strategies and practices employed by hospitality businesses to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic, considering factors such as flexibility, resourcefulness, and the capacity to learn and change.

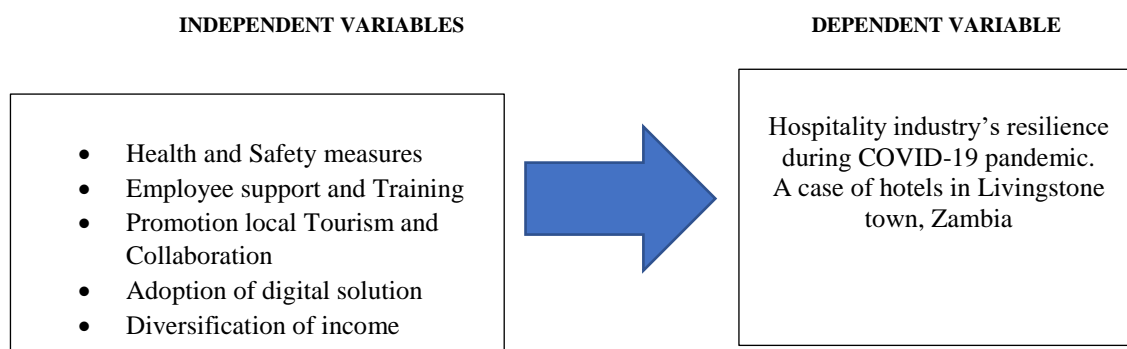
To address the research gap, the Resource-Based Theory or View (RBV) is introduced, providing insights into the strategic resilience responses of the hospitality industry. RBV involves analyzing a firm's strategic advantages through the examination of its unique combination of assets, skills, capabilities, and intangible assets. This theory emphasizes the significance of resources in the strategic implementation process and offers a new perspective on competitive advantage by viewing firms with superior systems and structures as profitable. Organizational Adaptation, another valuable theoretical framework, addresses how organizations adapt to changes in their environment. This framework considers factors such as leadership, decision-making processes, and organizational culture, enabling researchers to scrutinize how hospitality businesses adjusted their operations, modified business models, and made strategic decisions in response to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 crisis.

Stakeholder Theory, the final theoretical framework, centers on the relationships between organizations and stakeholders, encompassing employees, customers, suppliers, and the community. This lens allows researchers to examine how hospitality businesses engaged with and collaborated with their stakeholders during the pandemic, exploring initiatives supporting employees, maintaining customer relationships, and contributing to the local community. The choice of a theoretical framework depends on the specific research objectives and context, providing researchers with the flexibility to combine or modify frameworks to suit their research needs.

1.3 Conceptual framework

Drawing upon insights gathered from an extensive literature review, this study has constructed a conceptual framework rooted in resilience theory. This theoretical foundation is utilized to elucidate the experiences of hospitality managers, providing an understanding of how their decisions and actions reverberate in the socio-economic realm. The term "resilience," originating from the Latin word "resiliere," encapsulates the ability to rebound and retain significance across diverse circumstances, whether for individuals or groups. Scholarly discussions underscore the pivotal role of bouncing back as a fundamental element of conscious resilience (Aburn et al., 2016).

Within the framework, the study delves into the interplay among various independent variables, including social and economic performance, mental and physical well-being, work attitude, personal emotions, work resources, government policy, personal perception, and resources. These variables collectively influence the resilience of the hospitality industry, which serves as the dependent variable under scrutiny. In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the study aims to explore the strategies adopted by the hospitality industry in Livingstone Town, Zambia, to mitigate the adverse impact of this global health crisis.



Material and method

This study adopts a phenomenological design that focuses on people's perceptions of the world or the perception of the 'things in their appearing' (Langdrige 2007, P.11). The research site selected for this study is Livingstone Town, Zambia. The sample size comprised 8 managers, 4 staff, and 4 participants in focus group discussions (FGD) from hotels and other hospitality establishments, utilizing semi-structured interviews, observation, and focus group discussions. Employing a purposive sampling technique, the study aimed to explore the factors contributing to the resilience of the hospitality industry in Livingstone Town during the COVID-19 period (Cresswell 2018, Valerio et al., 2016). A total of 16 participants, including managers and staff from hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality establishments, were interviewed.

In terms of data generation, primary data, obtained directly from its source through interviews, experimentation, visual or audio materials, and sometimes surveys, observations, or focus group discussions, were used. Semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion guides, and observation guides were employed for data collection, conducted face-to-face, with participants' descriptions presented through verbatim.

Moving to data analysis, the process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the collected data involved sifting through the retrieved data to establish trends and themes. In this study, data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis using NVivo 12 Pro software. Thematic analysis involved coding of data, breaking down and re-assembling it into small pieces to identify and allocate it into categories and themes in relation to research objectives. Qualitative content analysis, facilitated by transcription analysis software Otter.ai (Michael Brein, 2016), was used on transcribed interviews to uncover meaning, relationships, and insights related to the research objectives. Observation data, vital for testing theories, was analyzed by describing observed behaviors, events, or physical characteristics in their natural setting.

Results and Discussion

The resilience of the hospitality industry in Livingstone Town during the COVID-19 pandemic can be attributed to multifaceted factors that showcase its adaptive capacity and commitment to both safety and sustainability. Central to this resilience is the sector's adaptability and flexibility, as evidenced by swift adjustments to operations to meet health and safety regulations. One participant highlighted, "*We quickly pivoted our business model to focus on domestic tourists and offer unique experiences tailored to their needs*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), showcasing the industry's agility.

The industry's embrace of innovation and technology, such as online booking platforms and contactless services, has not only provided a safer experience for guests but also streamlined operations. Another participant remarked, "*We launched an online ordering system and home delivery services to reach customers who were unable to dine in*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), emphasizing the role of technology in adapting to evolving customer demands.

Employee support initiatives, including health and safety training and flexible working options, underscore the industry's commitment to its workforce, fostering unity during challenging times. As one manager noted, "*We rigorously followed the guidelines provided by health authorities, including frequent sanitization, social distancing, and mandatory mask-wearing*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), indicating the priority placed on employee safety.

The pivot toward domestic and regional tourism, coupled with government support and industry collaboration, has been pivotal in sustaining revenue streams amidst international travel restrictions. Positive consumer sentiment, coupled with diversification strategies and resilient business models, has enabled the hospitality industry to navigate the uncertainties posed by the pandemic. Another manager highlighted, "*Culture change of operation... we should be able to advertise more daily and still be able to bring in people*", emphasizing the importance of marketing strategies during challenging times.

Findings and Discussion: Local Community Support, Adaptation and Innovation, Collaboration, Diversification, and Government Support

Through face-to-face interactions, five major themes emerged, emphasizing the local community's support, the industry's adaptability and innovation, collaboration and partnerships, diversification of offerings, and crucial government support. Domestic tourism played a vital role in sustaining the industry, with establishments modifying their offerings to cater to the needs of local tourists. As one participant noted, "*We quickly pivoted our business model to focus on domestic tourists and offer unique experiences tailored to their needs*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), illustrating the industry's responsiveness to changing market dynamics.

Collaborations and partnerships, exemplified by shared resources and knowledge, have promoted solidarity within the hospitality sector. A participant mentioned, "*We established a platform where industry players shared resources, knowledge, and insights, promoting solidarity within the hospitality sector*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), highlighting the collective effort to weather tough times.

Diversification, evident in offering long-term stays and renting spaces for remote work, showcases the industry's resilience. The participants expressed, "*We established a platform where industry players shared resources, knowledge, and insights, promoting solidarity within the hospitality sector*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), demonstrating collective efforts during challenging times such as the COVID-19 period.

The adoption of digital solutions and government support programs, including grants and loans, has provided critical financial assistance. A participant noted, "*We launched an online ordering system and home delivery services to reach customers who were unable to dine in*" (interviewed on 22nd August, 2023), emphasizing the role of technology in adapting to evolving customer demands.

These themes align with Brown's assertion that disaster resilience involves an organization's ability to analyze, innovate, adapt, and collaborate with stakeholders. Resilience, in this context, is viewed as essential for consistent performance and sustainable business development.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The exploration of the resilience of the hospitality industry in Livingstone Town amid the COVID-19 pandemic reveals a sector that has adeptly navigated unprecedented challenges. The adaptability and flexibility exhibited by businesses in quickly aligning their operations with evolving safety guidelines underscore the sector's resilience. Moreover, the strategic adoption of technology, including digital platforms and contactless solutions, has not only ensured the safety of patrons and staff but has also streamlined operational efficiency. The collaborative spirit among industry stakeholders has played a pivotal role, with businesses actively sharing best practices, resources, and support, fostering a sense of unity that has contributed to the overall resilience

of the hospitality sector. Despite these commendable efforts, it is crucial to acknowledge the ongoing challenges the industry faces, including a decline in tourism and the financial repercussions of the pandemic. However, the experiences and lessons learned during this period lay a foundation for future growth and sustainability.

In conclusion, the hospitality industry in Livingstone Town has proven its ability to not only withstand the profound disruptions caused by the pandemic but also to adapt, innovate, and collaborate in the face of adversity. While the road to recovery remains challenging, the sector's resilience is evident in its capacity to embrace change, prioritize employee wellness, and capitalize on technological advancements. The findings highlight the industry's commitment to continuous improvement and its role as a vital economic contributor to the local community. As Livingstone Town's hospitality sector looks towards the future, strategic collaborations, continued investment in technology, and a focus on sustainable and diverse tourism products will be essential for fostering long-term resilience and growth.

Recommendations:

Strengthening Collaborative Networks:

To enhance the resilience of the hospitality industry in Livingstone Town, stakeholders should continue and expand collaborative efforts. Establishing formalized networks, forums, or associations where businesses can regularly share insights, resources, and support will foster a sense of community. These collaborative platforms can serve as hubs for collective problem-solving, strategic planning, and knowledge exchange, contributing to the overall resilience of the sector.

Investment in Sustainable Practices:

A key recommendation is for the industry to prioritize sustainability and responsible tourism practices. Diversification of tourism products should include eco-friendly and culturally sensitive offerings that align with evolving consumer preferences. Businesses can invest in eco-friendly infrastructure, energy-efficient technologies, and community engagement initiatives to not only attract environmentally conscious tourists but also contribute to the long-term resilience of the industry by minimizing its ecological footprint.

Employee Training and Development:

Recognizing the pivotal role of employees in the industry's resilience, there should be a continued focus on training and development programs. Upskilling staff in areas such as digital literacy, customer service, and crisis management will enhance their adaptability to changing circumstances. Moreover, investing in employee well-being programs, including mental health support, will contribute to a motivated and resilient workforce.

Government-Industry Collaboration:

Encouraging collaboration between the government and the hospitality industry is essential for creating an enabling environment. Governments can provide targeted support programs, tax incentives, and policy frameworks that promote the sector's recovery and growth. This collaborative approach ensures that industry-specific challenges are acknowledged and addressed, contributing to the overall resilience of the hospitality sector in Livingstone Town.

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