

An Evaluation of the Strategies to Revive the Performance of the Tourism Sector Post COVID-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe

Josphat Nyoni and Tough Chinoda

Women's University in Africa

Corresponding Author's Email: jnyoni@wua.ac.zw

Abstract

The health crisis caused by the pandemic COVID-19 has been of such magnitude that the drop-off in economic and tourist activity in most countries is generating an economic crisis with consequences that are still difficult to measure. The influence of the pandemic on the global tourism sector and, more specifically, on its hospitality industry has been explored in depth. This study therefore focused on the strategies that may be adopted to revive the capacity utilisation, contribution of the sector to GDP and viability of the sector following the devastating effects of the COVID-19. The study was guided by the pragmatism research philosophy. The study adopted an explanatory research design. Data was collected through a survey and interviews. In view of this, questionnaires and interview guide were the data collection tools. Regression, correlation and thematic data analysis frameworks were used to analyse the data. The study noted that pro-active strategies, analysis strategies and focused strategies were key to the revival of the tourism sector following the devastating effects of the pandemic. The study noted the success of such strategies depended much on the availability of the targeted and stimulus funding from Government. The study concluded that the covid-19 pandemic was so devastating to the tourism sector such that companies requires a stimulus funding package to operationalise their revival strategies. The study therefore recommended that companies need to be creative and innovative in their strategic orientation to revive their operations. In addition, Government needs to provided significant and accessible stimulus funding package to the companies in the tourism sector.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; economic crisis; response strategy; tourism; strategy management

Introduction

COVID-19 is one of the most serious global health crises in recent history. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard on all economies including Zimbabwe and has resulted in closing of borders, redirecting of funds to curb spread of disease, closing of companies, and also lockdowns. COVID-19 has resulted in globally synchronized lockdowns and trauma of financial markets into unprecedented economic sudden stop (Boissay et al., 2020). The pandemic has affected some employees negatively since this has left employees retrenched,

exposure to risk and to be forced to adopt the concept of working from home, just to mention but a few.

The outbreak of the pandemic led to a quick introduction of travel restrictions in Asia and Pacific countries as first hit. By the end of April 2020, all countries across the globe had imposed some travel restrictions according to UNWTO (2020). Many tourists were afraid to travel. The sudden travel interruption, fueled by the fear of infection, led to a free fall in tourist arrivals in various countries. As international travel restrictions continue in several countries and international travel demand remains low, a quick rebound is far from being in sight. For tourism to recover, governments and policy makers need to develop a phased approach. In the early stages of the pandemic, several governments introduced extensive containment measures, such as strict lockdowns, which made tourism almost impossible. As the level of new infections decreases, governments and policy makers decided to relax some restrictions, especially regarding the movements of people within its own territory. International travel bans are usually kept in place longer. Domestic tourism can resume during this phase. However, due to continued containment measures, such as limiting the number of passengers in airplanes, the potential of domestic tourism remains constrained.

COVID-19's spread has been inexorable since its discovery, reaching virtually every country on the planet, affecting millions of people and resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths. COVID-19 had infected over 33 million people and killed over a million people as of September 29, 2020, and the toll is continuously rising. The virus's distribution has not been uniform, nor has its strength been consistent throughout all countries afflicted. The five countries with the biggest number of affected people as of that date are the United States, with more than seven million people and a rate of 21,281 per million, followed by India, Brazil, Russia, and Colombia. Qatar, Bahrain, Aruba, French Guiana, and Israel have the highest infection rates per million population, with rates above 26,000 infected per million people. Taking into account, deaths caused by COVID-19, the United States once again leads the rankings, followed by Brazil, India, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. San Marino, Peru, Belgium, Andorra, and Bolivia have the highest mortality rates per million population, with rates over 670 fatalities per million inhabitants (<https://covid19.who.int/table>). Although they have undoubtedly saved thousands of lives, prophylactic measures based on separation and social isolation, as well as severe restrictions on all modes of transportation, have caused an incalculable economic crisis in most of the world's countries, whether they have been severely affected by the virus or will be severely affected by its induced effects. The tourism industry was the first to be impacted by these restrictions and will be the longest to return to the "new normal" within the affected economic sectors. There is therefore need for research of this nature to explore the strategies that may be adopted to revive the sector in view of its contributions to economies of developing countries.

Tourism is a basic sector of the economy in Zimbabwe and, concurrently, the country is one of the leading tourism destination in Africa. This means that Zimbabwe is negatively affected by the pandemic caused by COVID-19 and thus it is vital to have an adequate recovery strategy particularly geared towards the tourism sector. Currently, there is a dearth of studies that have analysed the impacts of COVID-19 in Africa especially in Zimbabwe. In Africa, there is little experience in managing pandemic situations, and their consequences are unknown.

Studies on the impacts of COVID-19 and tourism industry recovery are under construction with most of the contributions being critical reflections (Gossling, Scott, and Hall, 2020;



Gursoy and Chi, 2020) or conceptual (Hao, Xiao and Chon, 2020; Nicola et al. 2020) and very scarce empirical research (Hu et al. 2020). At the moment, the pandemic is not yet under control and the situation is unpredictable. There is thus need for research to help recover the tourism industry in Zimbabwe. The main objective of the study is to examine the strategies to revive the tourism sector following the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the study seeks to examine funding strategies that may be adopted to revive the tourism sector. It also assesses the operational and marketing strategies that may be adopted to revive the tourism sector following the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to make policy recommendations.

In response to economic crisis, firms may use several strategies such as pro-active, analysis and focus strategies.

Proactive strategies

In response to the challenges of economic crisis, firms use various survival strategies and tactics. Firms have used pro-active strategies to survive during and after the economic crisis (Smallbone, Deakins, Battisti & Kitching 2012, Herbane 2019, Nyoni and Mago 2020). However, scholars have indicated that economic crisis may influence the effectiveness of business strategies. In view of this, researchers have focused on identifying successful and effective strategies for companies operating in economic crisis. Researchers suggest that strategies based on seeking new markets and customers and are pro-active in nature may lead to success in periods of economic crisis (Alonso-Almeida and Bremser 2013).

Various views have however emerged as to whether pro-active strategies may lead to survival of firms during periods of economic crisis. While some scholars have argued in favour of pro-activeness of firms during periods of economic crisis, some scholars have argued that the effectiveness of pro-active strategies depends on some other moderating factors (Sternad 2012, Kuckertz, Brändle, Gaudig, Hinderer, Reyes, Prochotta & Berger 2020, Lomberg et al 2017). This has created a research gap for this study in terms of its contribution to the knowledge on the relationship between pro-active strategies and performance in periods of economic crisis. This study further examined the influence of the dimensions of pro-active strategies on the performance of manufacturing firms operating in economic crisis. This area has not received much attention and hence forms one of the significant contributions of this study to the existing body of knowledge on the relation between pro-active strategies and performance in economic crisis.

Pro-oriented strategies

It is important for enterprises to be proactive in crisis circumstances, as they are looking to take advantage of all the chances that emerge from a crisis before their competitors (Nyoni, 2019, Tamás and Krisztina 2015), as well as higher inventive behavior by the firms. Companies that employ proactive tactics are better able to respond to the changing needs and demands of the business environment and hence are more competitive than their rivals in the marketplace (Ogbari, et al 2018, Nyoni 2019, Nyoni and Mago 2020). As a result, proactive measures can help businesses get a larger part of the market, increase sales, and turn a profit, especially if those businesses take advantage of all the new opportunities presented by the economic crisis (Nyoni, 2019)

It has been shown that adopting proactive methods can lead to an advantage in the market, which in turn leads to better performance even during economic crises, according to Ogbari and Tang. An economic crisis has necessitated the employment of proactive solutions. When the economy is in a slump, companies can take a number of proactive measures. Companies may devote time and resources to identifying and exploiting new requirements, demand, and markets that arise as a result of the current economic crisis (Uddin, Bose & Yousuf 2014, Sternad 2012). Companies can also get ahead of their rivals in the market by focusing on high-end customers and charging high rates. Profit margins rise and market segments expand as a result (Nyoni 2019, Nyoni and Mago 2020). Innovative solutions, such as reorganizing their operational procedures and requesting government money for resurrection, can help the tourism sector's businesses to survive. Proactive methods can include keeping a close eye on current market developments and acting quickly to take advantage of new chances that present themselves (Lomberg et al 2017). This allows businesses to stay one step ahead of their rivals, resulting in an increase in profits. Companies can maintain a sustainable market share and stay afloat during economic downturns by anticipating future demand shifts and altering product and service characteristics accordingly.

Some scholars have claimed that the effectiveness of pro-active oriented measures is regulated by other factors, and so are not always effective, despite the universal agreement that they are effective in economic crises. Others have also suggested that economic crises are dynamic and complex, which makes pro-active oriented measures less effective. With these conflicting views on the relationship between proactive tactics and performance, this research examines whether pro-active methods may help tourism firms recover from the pandemic crisis.

Systematic problem resolution in development departments (Nyoni, 2019, Nyoni and Mago 2020, Rodriguez and Ramirez-Fierro 2018; Morgan & Strong 2003) leads to more efficient resource allocation and greater performance. Following the COVID-19 epidemic, firms in the tourism sector may use the same analytical and problem-solving ability to re-establish their operations.

Analysis strategy

The analysis strategies represent problem-solving approaches, a deeper focus on understanding problems, thoroughness in all decision-making processes, and finding solutions to these problems (Espino-Rodriguez and Ramirez-Fierro 2018; Steven & Olubusayo 2016; Ogbari et al. 2018; Venkatraman 1989). Analysis strategies imply that all decisions made by firms in the tourism sector are based on critical thinking. This also implies that the marketing strategies used are the result of careful consideration. Thus, only strategies that contribute to revenue generation are taken into account. Espino-Rodriguez and Ramirez-Fierro (2018), Steven and Olubusayo (2016), Ogbari et al. (2018), Venkatraman (1989), Nyoni (2019), and Nyoni and Mago (2020) argued that analysis-oriented strategies that place a greater emphasis on comprehensiveness in all decision-making processes improve firm performance during crisis periods. The main elements of analysis-oriented strategies, such as information gathering and processing, strong research and development departments, and a systematic approach to problem solving, lead to better resource allocation and performance (Nyoni, 2019; Nyoni and Mago 2020; Rodriguez and Ramirez-Fierro 2018; Morgan & Strong 2003). As a result, firms in the tourism sector may use the same analysis and problem-solving abilities to restart operations following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Focus strategies



"Focusing" is a strategy that emphasizes cost-cutting techniques, as well as a strong focus on production efficiency and protection of the firm's service offerings, market, and technology (Ogbari et al. 2018). As a result of focusing tactics, organizations are able to get cost and differentiation benefits that lead to better performance (Nyoni 2019, Nyoni and Mago 2020, Gupta and Basu 2014; Steven & Olubusayo 2016). Firms in the tourism industry can now refocus their attention on the most important aspects of their business. In order to recover from the terrible consequences of the COVID -19 pandemic, streamlining will be required.

Literature therefore suggests that to survive in crisis periods such as the COVID-19 pandemic, firms may adopt pro-active, focus and analysis-oriented strategies.

The study was guided by the following conceptual framework:

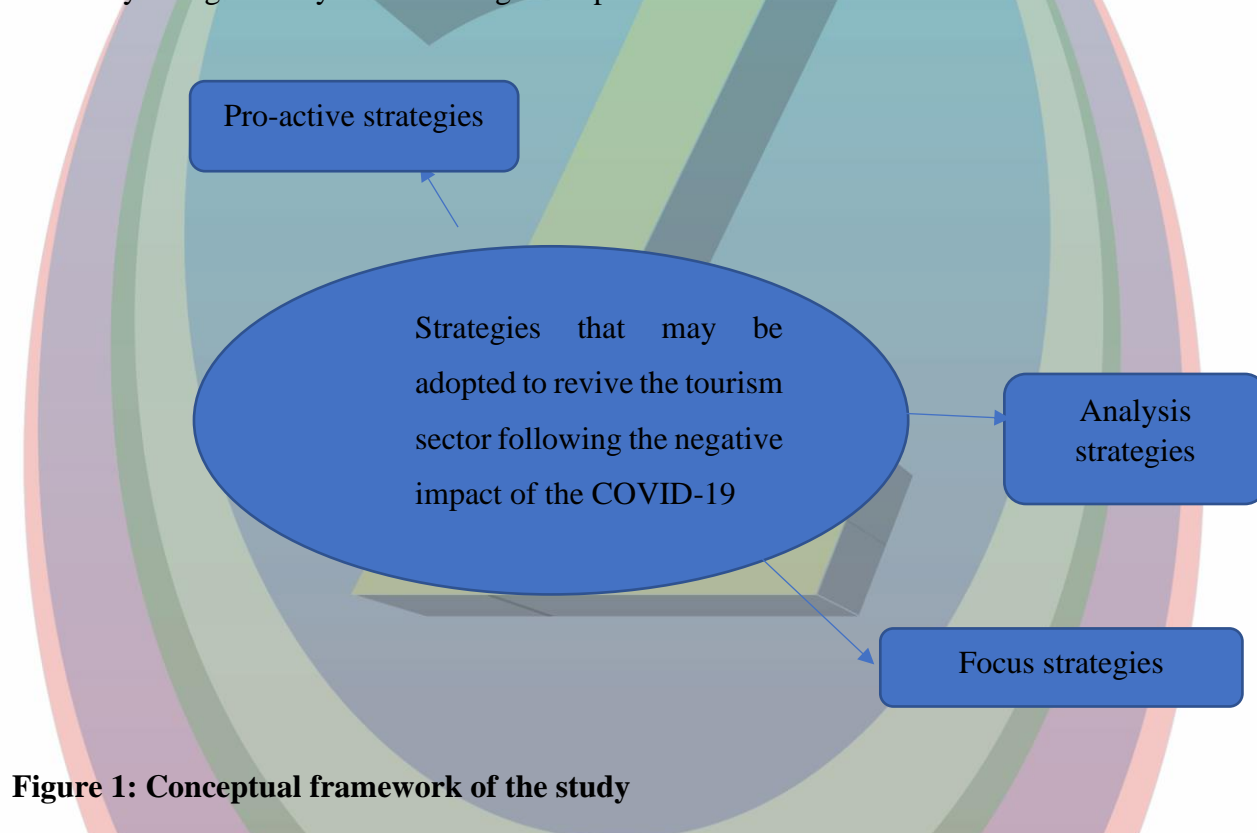


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Research Methodology

This study used the pragmatic paradigm which provides the philosophical underpinnings to the mixed methods research methodology. The use of mixed methods methodology was to gain more information and understanding on the most effective strategies to help firms in the tourism sector revive their operations following the COVID-19 pandemic. The quantitative approach helped the study to determine the strategies that may be effective during the current pandemic period. This required objective and measurable data and analysis and hence the suitability of a quantitative orientation. A qualitative orientation was also necessary to acquire detailed information on how each strategy may help the firms to recover or why some strategies may not be effective given the context of the tourism sector in Zimbabwe. A survey allowed the collection of objective, measurable data while the interviews provided opportunities for probing and hence collecting much more deeper knowledge on the most effective strategies to revive the tourism sector after the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study used concurrent research design which permits the concurrent collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. This type of mixed methods research design also allows for the results from both the qualitative and quantitative research strands to complement each other (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006; Gray, 2010; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) thereby enabling the researcher to get a fuller picture of the phenomenon under study.

The population of the study consisted of workers and stakeholders in the tourism sector. In specific terms, the study used managers of tourism companies from the hotels, transport operators in Harare and safari operators. In addition, directors from the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality were also used. Directors in the National Parks and Monument department were part of the population of the study. Individuals in the management structures were deemed to be significant given their strategic decision-making roles in their organizations. The total population of the study was 203 and the entire population was surveyed.

A sample was selected for interviews. The sample consisted of nine individuals picked randomly from the five categories created namely

- Companies in the tourism sector
- Ministry of Tourism and hospitality
- National Parks and Monument
- Transport operators in the tourism sector
- The Zimbabwe Tourism Authority

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics

Gender of respondents

Table 1 shows gender of employees drawn from the tourism industry of Zimbabwe. 65.4% were female and 34.6% were male. According to Ahuja (2019) the tourism sector has more females due to the view that the sector requires more ladies who can serve tourists hence females are favorites as they are naturally beautiful and attractive. On the other hand, there is need for males although they are few, they will be playing the role of driving as well as doing other duties which needs manpower.

Table 1: Gender of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	85	65.4
Male	45	34.6

Source: Primary data

Age of respondents

44.6% are less than 25 years, 33.1% are aged between 26 to 40 years, 16.9% are aged between 41 to 55 and the remaining 5.4% are aged 56 years and above (Table 2). The tourism sector has majority of the youth or economic active group of less than 26 years due to their energetic as well as innovative in driving the organization to greater heights and marketing the company (Ann, 2017).

Table 2: Age distribution of respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percent
Less than 25 years	58	44.6
26-40 years	43	33.1
41-55 years	22	16.9
56+ years	7	5.4

Source: Primary data

Education qualifications of respondents

Table 3 shows response to education qualifications of the respondents. 26.9% have a certificate as well as a diploma, 35.4% hold a degree and the other 37.7% hold a postgraduate qualification. According to The Zimbabwean Independent (2019) the tourism sector of Zimbabwe is an educational oriented as it encourages learning organization as evidenced by majority of the respondents with both degree as well as post graduate qualification.

Table 3: Education qualifications of respondents

Education Qualification	Frequency	Percent
Certificate or diploma	35	26.9
Degree	46	35.4
Postgraduate	49	37.7

Source: Primary data

Strategies to revive the performance of the tourism sector

Table 4 shows the correlation analysis of the relationship between strategies and performance of firms.

Table 4: Correlation coefficient results

	Pro-active Strategies	Analysis strategies	Focus strategies
Correlation Coefficient Values Performance of firms	0.900	0.876	0.778

Table 4 shows that pro-active strategies can have a positive and significant influence (Correlation coefficient of 0.900) on the performance of firms in the tourism sector in periods of the current COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that the adoption of pro-active oriented strategy may help revive the performance of firms in the tourism sector affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, proactively promoting domestic tourism may be a relevant strategy in view of travel bans. Domestic tourism may be a perfect substitute of foreign tourism by locals. This can be achieved by more investment in the local tourist attraction as well as price reductions as well as more promotions. Other innovative strategies may include

1. Identify Your Best Prospective Visitors to market to them
2. Tailor Your Marketing Efforts by Traveler Type.
3. Increase Exposure by Partnering with Influencers.
4. Create Destination Videos That Appeal to the Right Tourists.
5. Share What's New in Your Area with potential customers

Interview results also confirmed that the adoption of pro-active strategies was the only solution to survival of firms in the tourism sector following the devastating effects of the pandemic. The importance and effectiveness of pro-active strategies in crisis business environment was also highlighted in the existing literature (Ramírez-Fierro 2018, Steven & Olubusayo 2016, Ogbari et al. 2018 and Venkatraman 1989, Nyoni 2019, Nyoni and Mago 2020).

The table shows that the adoption of analysis-oriented strategies may have a positive and significant influence on the performance of firms in the tourism sector operating in crisis environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis oriented strategies may include vigorous customer research studies. This will help to identify the needs of clients and tailor make the services to the needs and expectations of the customers. It also emerged during interviews that the analysis strategic orientation was more effective in crisis business environment because it allows firms to manage their reassures well by managing cost. This finding is in line with views raised by Ramírez-Fierro (2018) and Nyoni (2019) who argued that in crisis business environment firms need to be more analytical and adopt a problem-solving strategic orientation.

The data presented in Table 4 shows that the adoption a focus-oriented strategies leads to a positive performance in environment affected by COVID-19 pandemic. This implies that each firm must identify what they can do best in the current crisis business environment and focus on that. It may also involve targeting market niches who are able to offer viable demand for the services. It may also involve closing off other business sections and remain with business units that offers better returns. The main idea behind the focus strategy is the company narrowing its competitive scope. In other words, the company should determine specific market niches in which it is going to compete and be better than other companies within that market niche. In the tourism sector firms may focus on accommodation to tourist. Interview results also supported what emerged from surveys in that it was indicated that focusing all firm resources on areas of competences in periods of crisis was more effective. The finding on the effectiveness of focus-oriented strategies in crisis business environment is also in line with arguments raised by Steven & Olubusayo (2016) who suggested that focus oriented strategies leads to survival and competitiveness of firms.

Conclusion

The study concludes that for firms in the tourism sector to survive in the current COVID-129 business environment, there is need for integrated strategies that involves being pro-active, analytical and focused on services that they can offer best.

Recommendations

In view of the need for more pro-activeness and creativity, it is recommended that government provides stimulus packages to firms in the tourism sector. There is need for firms to be more analytical in terms of which market segments they can serve best and adopt a more focused approach. A focus on the domestic market may help firms in the tourism sector recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Being innovative in terms of indemnifying the current needs of the market may be effective to enhance recovery.

References

- Alonso-Almeida, M.M. and Bremser, K. (2013). "Strategic responses of the Spanish hospitality sector to the financial crisis". *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 32 (1), 141–148.
- Herbane, B. (2019). Rethinking organizational resilience and strategic renewal in SMEs. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, 31(5-6), 476-495.
- Nyoni, J., (2019). The relationship between strategies and performance in the manufacturing sector in Zimbabwe during the economic crisis. *Thesis submitted for the Doctor of Business Leadership*. UNISA
- Nyoni, J. and Mago, S., (2020). Strategies and Performance Nexus in the Zimbabwean Manufacturing Sector during the Economic Crisis. *Global Conference on Business and Social Sciences Proceeding*.
- Ogbari, ME., Ibidunni, AS., Ogunnaike, OO., Olokundun, MA., & Amaihian, AB. (2018). 'Comparative analysis of small business strategic orientation: implications for performance', *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, 17, (1).
- Smallbone, D., Deakins, D., Battisti, M., & Kitching, J. (2012). Small business responses to a major economic downturn: Empirical perspectives from New Zealand and the United Kingdom. *International Small Business Journal*, 30 (7), 754-777.
- Sternad, D. (2012). Adaptive strategies in response to the economic crisis: A cross-cultural study in Austria and Slovenia. *Managing Global Transitions*, 10 (3), 257-282.
- Stephen, IA., & Olubusayo, H. (2016). 'Impact of Strategic Orientation Dimensions on New Product Development in Agro-based Nigerian Firms, Economics and Management Research Projects'. *Economics and Management Research Projects: An International Journal*, 3(1), 1-8.
- Tamás, G., and Krisztina, K. (2015): The Impact of Proactive Strategies on Market Performance in Economic Downturn: the Case of Hungary. In: Adamantios D., Bodo B. S., Arnold, S., and Udo, W. (ed.): "Convergence and Divergence in the New Europe: Marketing Challenges and Issues": *Proceedings Of The 6th Emac Regional Conference*. Vienna: Vienna University of Economics and Business.
- Tang, J., Tang, Z., & Katz, J. A. (2014). Pro-activeness, stakeholder-firm power difference, and product safety and quality of Chinese SMEs. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 38(5), 1129-1157