

## **Marketing Mix Strategies used by lodges and hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic era in Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe**

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### ***Abstract***

*The study investigated the marketing mix strategies used by lodges and hotels during the COVID 19 pandemic in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe. The study contributes to an in-depth understanding of how the lodges and hotels survived during the COVID 19 pandemic. The literature on this area is still limited and this study sought to add knowledge on the marketing mix strategies used by the lodges and hotels. The study adopted a quantitative descriptive research approach in which a structured self-administered questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. A sample of 50 respondents was used. The seven marketing mix strategies were the variables and each variable had four measurement items with five-point Likert scale responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. An SPSS was used for data analysis and measures of central tendency (the means) and measures of variability (standard deviations) were used to present the results. The results indicate that the lodges and hotels in Masvingo province employed all the seven marketing strategies, albeit, with varying levels of application. Price, promotion, process physical evidence, and people were the most used strategies by lodges and hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic in Masvingo province. Product was the least used strategy during the COVID 19 pandemic. In conclusion, marketing mix strategies are handy in mitigating and surviving the devastating effects of the COVID 19 pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, Marketing Mix, Marketing Mix Strategies, health crisis, Zimbabwe.*

### **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a global meltdown of the tourism industry. The virus has brought the biggest health crisis in the last 100 years that has impacted the whole world. The tourism industry is the hardest hit of all sectors given its people-centered and movement-dependent peculiarities. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic by governments around the world comprised of lockdowns and various forms of travel restrictions. Borders were closed, airlines were grounded and the world came to a standstill as the virus caught the world by surprise and engulfed the whole world in a matter of few months. To make matters worse, there was limited knowledge concerning the virus to the extent that all nations were caught in sixes and sevens by the pandemic. Consequently, the COVID-19 induced lockdowns brought unprecedented impacts, including affecting the behaviour of customers in terms of their spending patterns and their requirements (Sirkeci, 2020). Faced with such a health crisis of huge magnitude both individual buyers and institutional customers reconsidered their buying habits in the face of lockdowns leading to customers preferring online shopping, home deliveries and online payments that do not involve the use of cash (Pantano, Pizzi, Scarpi & Dennis, 2020). Additionally, firms needed to change their business value chains to meet the changing consumer behavior being influenced by the COVID-19 induced economic crisis (Ritter & Pedersen, 2020). Some of the obvious traits that

consumers exhibit in the face of an economic crisis include reduced spending, becoming more price-sensitive, cut spending on luxury products, increased preference for durable product items, and increased demand for lower-priced products (Nikbin, Iranmanesh, Ghobakhloo, & Foroughi, 2021).

Globally, the tourism industry lost billions of dollars, more than 100 million jobs have been lost, livelihoods have been lost and economies are tinkering and stuttering as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, tourism enterprises faced an unprecedented business situation that required a rethink in terms of business models due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptive firms that adopted and implemented proper business strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic stood a better chance to survive the health crisis and look set to thrive in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. One of the crisis-busting measures is the implementation of an effective marketing mix strategies model informed by the changing customer requirements through such tactics as developing affordable innovative products that provide superior value to customers (Nikbin et al., 2021). Thus, during a crisis, tourism firms should keep on moving forward; remain adaptive and highly flexible to survive the crisis such as the COVID-19 induced one. Nikbin et al. (2021) asserted that implementing effective marketing mix strategies during a crisis positively impacts business performance and taking appropriate marketing mix decisions is important for the recovery, survival, and growth of tourism enterprises during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study investigated the marketing strategies employed by accommodation tourism enterprises, that is, the lodges and hotels, in Masvingo province in Zimbabwe. The study contributes to the literature on COVID-19 busting measures that may help to address the present and future effects of pandemics and disasters from a marketing mix strategies perspective. The study question is; how did lodges and hotels respond and survived the COVID-19 pandemic-induced impacts from a marketing mix strategies perspective? Tourism enterprises managers might want to know the pandemic busting marketing mix strategies that can be implemented for the sustenance of the business performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence this study.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 COVID 19 pandemic**

COVID 19 was first detected in China's Wuhan City around October 2019. The virus engulfed the world in a very short time (Baum & Hai, 2020) such that by March 2020, the whole world was under siege from the COVID-19 virus. The World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 virus a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The pandemic has impacted people's lives across the whole world with no exception (Chirisa, Mutambisi, Chivenge, & Mbasera, 2020). COVID-19 virtually shut down the tourism industry as all forms of travel ceased (Baum & Hai, 2020) as nations across the globe imposed lockdowns to curb the spread of the virus. Certainly, as a people industry, the tourism sector was the hardest hit. More specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic had more consequences to the tourism industry as measures taken by governments led to the following; closing of borders, curtailment of travel including intracity travel, closure of attractions and tourism facilities, confinement to places of residence with penalties for non-compliance in place and loss of employment. The tourism industry globally came to a standstill and is fighting for survival due to the effects of the COVID 19 crisis (Jiang & Wen, 2020).

## **2.2 The accommodation sector**

The accommodation sector of the tourism industry comprises hotels, lodges, guesthouses, caravan parks, tented accommodation, campsites, backpacker accommodation, all the facilities whose main objective is the provision of overnight accommodation to transitory visitors or tourists on a commercial basis. The COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc among all the productive sectors of the economy and the tourism sector was among the hardest hit given its people-dependent nature. In this study, lodges and hotels were the main focus of the investigation.

## **2.3 COVID 19 pandemic and the accommodation sector**

The accommodation sector of the tourism industry has been hit hard by the COVID 19 health crisis. Occupancy rates, revenue per available room (RevPar) of hotels and lodges across the globe have plummeted mainly due to COVID 19 induced lockdowns, as travel restrictions took a toll on the industry (Courtney, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted severe blows on the accommodation sector worldwide (Jiang & Wen, 2020). The accommodation sector was severely disrupted and in some cases destroyed by the Covid 19 pandemic (Jiang & Wen, 2020). Therefore, there is a need to investigate how the lodges and hotels survived the COVID-19 pandemic from a marketing mix strategies perspective, hence this study

## **2.4 Marketing mix strategies**

The marketing mix is a handy toolkit that a firm uses to pursue its marketing objectives in the target market (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Designing an effective marketing mix strategy is critical during pandemics such as the COVID-19. The marketing mix strategies consist of the seven controllable variables that are key to marketing strategy formulation and implementation. They originate from the seminal 4 Ps by McCarthy in 1960, which comprised product, price, promotion, and place. These 4Ps were considered insufficient for services marketing. Henceforth, Booms & Bitner (1981) added three elements to cater for services marketing, including tourism. The elements are people, process, and physical evidence. Thus, in this study, the seven marketing mix variables are considered, namely product, price, place, promotion, process, people, and physical evidence. These variables should be combined in a way that positively influences consumer demand and leads to profitable relationships with the market (Naidoo, Ramseook-munhurrin, Seetaram, & Maurice, 2011). These elements are explained below to provide a contextually comprehensive meaning to the study.

### **2.4.1 Product**

Product refers to any market offering with need-satisfying capabilities including services, goods, ideas, organisations, events and even people, among others (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2014). A product is a package of benefits offered to a market to satisfy particular needs. A product can be tangible or intangible. In the tourism industry, the product is a combination of goods and services but the outcome is largely a service that is characterized by intangibility, perishability, variability, and inseparability (Smithson, Devece, & Lapiedra, 2011). Product is associated with quality, design, features, brand name, image, and size (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Moreso, a product has three levels namely the core product, the actual product, and the augmented product (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2014). The core product is the reason for being, the main benefits the consumer is looking for such as rest and sleep in the case of a hotel. The actual product in the case of a hotel refers to the guestrooms and meals and the augmented product comprises of brand name, the design features, and image which differentiates one hotel from the others. The product is the core variable

of the marketing mix strategy in that all the other marketing mix variables are built around it. A product is a key determinant of the business performance of tourism enterprises (Supawan & Deebhijarn, 2020).

#### **2.4.2 Price**

Price is the exchange value of a product expressed in monetary terms. It is the amount charged and paid for obtaining a product (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2014). Price represents the cost to a customer of acquiring a product or service. It is also a quality indicator and one of the key determinants of purchasing decisions by customers. Most customers make their purchase decision based on the price and this implies that tourism enterprises should set the right prices for their market offering. Price can make or break a tourism business performance-wise. Price is the only marketing mix variable that brings revenue to an organization with all other variables associated with costs only. There are different pricing methods namely cost-based, competition-based, and demand-based pricing, market penetration, market skimming, psychological pricing, discriminatory or differentiated pricing among others. Tourism firms need to use a cocktail of pricing methods to achieve effective pricing given the heterogeneity associated with the tourist market which they serve. Price determinants include demand, competition, costs, location, and customers' perceptions of value, time, and season among others. Tourism firms use several price adjustments strategies such as price discounting, price bundling, volume-based pricing, and price discrimination (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Price is a key determinant of business performance given that it is a powerful force in attracting and retaining customers plus a major tenet in building customer loyalty, even during pandemics such as COVID 19.

#### **2.4.3 Place**

Place refers to the distribution channels through which a tourism product is delivered to the target market in a way that is convenient and affordable to the customers. Place serves to make products and services available and accessible to customers and thus enhance consumer purchase and demand (Dolasinski, 2019). The functions of place include the provision of travel information, travel arrangement services, allowing tourists to make reservations, allowing tourists to confirm bookings, and allowing tourists to make payments for services rendered (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2012). The several distribution channels in the tourism industry include the internet, travel agents, and tour operators, visitor information centres, sales representatives, national tourist offices, and the actual hotel locations. The internet has revolutionized tourism distribution by bringing great disintermediation to the tourism industry, along with a host of business development opportunities at a low cost (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2012). Place is a key determinant of the business performance of tourism enterprises, even during pandemics such as COVID 19.

#### **2.4.4 Promotion**

Promotion plays the role of the spokesperson of the marketing mix toolkit. Its main role is informing, educating, advising, and persuading the target market about the tourism firms' market offerings. Promotion is about communicating the market offering to the target market for purposes of creating adequate demand for the tourism business enterprise. The promotion has its toolkit called the promotion mix or marketing mix which comprises elements such as personal selling, advertising, sales promotions, direct mail, public relations, exhibitions, and sponsorship (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2014). These promotion elements are designed to influence consumer behavior through informing, convincing, and triggering purchases regarding products and services. These

elements should be congruently and complementarily combined to drive the tourism enterprises' business performance, even during the COVID 19 pandemic.

#### **2.4.5 Process**

Process refers to all the procedures, mechanisms, and activities that help to serve the target market better, effectively, and efficiently. Process can be considered as the how part of providing the product or service portfolio to target markets. According to Zeithaml et al. (2010), process is the actual procedures, mechanisms, and the flow of activities by which the service is delivered. Process can be referred to as the actual standard operating procedures designed to serve the customers. It is important for tourism business enterprises such as hotels to design processes that are customer-centric to achieve superior business performance. The developments and advances in information communication technologies have brought about immense opportunities to redesign hotel processes effectively and efficiently for the benefit of customers and the hotel business. Automation of processes promotes service excellence for the delightment of the target market. Thus, process is a key determinant of tourism business performance, even during the COVID 19 pandemic.

#### **2.4.6 People**

People refer to all human actors who play a role in service and product provision and thus influence consumer behavior and perception regarding a particular service or product. People element includes not only the staff or hotel employees but includes customers and even the wider society (Pomeroy et al., 2011). Every human element within the service environment of a tourism business enterprise has an impact on the total service experience in one way or the other (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2010). This notion highlights the important need to judiciously and carefully select, educate and manage both staff and employees for purposes of promoting customised service excellence provision. In the tourism industry, employees are service providers due to the intensive human contact nature of the industry. Customers are co-producers of the tourism service (Pomeroy et al., 2011) as their behavior has a profound impact on the whole service experience (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2014). It is imperative to view people as one of the key variables of the marketing mix strategy such that the success of a tourism enterprise is dependent on people. For example, customer orientation and market orientation, the two philosophies that drive contemporary marketing mix strategies are all based on the people element. Thus, marketing begins and ends with people. Every marketing activity is dependent on people. Hence, the people element is the alpha and omega of successful tourism marketing.

#### **2.4.7 Physical evidence**

Physical evidence is everything that beholds the customer's eye regarding the organisation. Everything that a customer sees about the organisation shapes the customer's perception, attitude, and behavior towards the tourism enterprises' products and services. Physical evidence is the whole environment in which the service is delivered and where guest host interactions take place including all the tangible, visible, audible components that form part of the environment as well as the components that facilitate performance or delivery of service (Zeithaml et al., 2010). Physical evidence forms an essential ingredient of the tourist gaze (Urry, 1992). It is a vital component that determines the success and business performance of the tourism business. Physical evidence role is highlighted through the functions of servicescapes, which among them include, "providing ease for personnel and customers to move within, deliver, and consume the service

performance efficiently, respectively, and important to communicate with customers"(Pomeroy et al., 2011). Physical evidence can help drive performance, even during pandemics such as COVID 19.

## **2.5 Marketing mix strategies used by hotels and lodges during the COVID-19 pandemic: An empirical literature review**

The marketing mix strategies remain a handy tool in mitigating the negative effects of the COVID 19 pandemic. During periods of a business slump like the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, customers change their buying behaviour (Sahani, 2020; Notta & Vlachvei, 2015). In particular, the demand for luxury goods, for instance, those in the tourism industry, sharply declines during recessions (Sahani, 2020) because the aggregate demand is negatively affected by the fact that unemployment, salary cuts, and reduced incomes become the order of the day. All this leads to reduced demand, sales, and profitability for companies (Notta & Vlachvei, 2015), requiring a change in business marketing models through adopting concomitant marketing mix strategies to survive the crisis. The adopted marketing mix strategies should positively impact demand and promote customer satisfaction and retention at all costs (MacDonald & Dildar, 2020). This can be achieved by competitive pricing, offering better services, and increasing the promotion budget (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2014). Additionally, during an economic crisis, companies that invest in research and development (R&D) do better than those companies that choose to cut their marketing budgets (Salman et al., 2017). This is so because investment in marketing mix strategies and R&D creates unique opportunities to increase sales, demand, and profitability (Nikbin et al., 2021). Some scholars (e.g. Singh & Dev, 2015; Ramon-Jeronimo & Herrero, 2017) argue that it is relatively easier to increase market share during a crisis than during an economic boom. Thus, companies that invest in marketing mix strategies during a crisis increase their sales and profitability and tend to recover faster and stronger (Currim et al., 2016), from a crisis. Cutting marketing budgets during a crisis weakens the company during the crisis and makes it difficult to recover post the crisis (Deleersnyder et al., 2009). However, during a crisis, most companies resort to retrenching employees to cut labour costs with the hope that this strategy would enable them to survive (Srinivasan et al., 2005).

Moreover, viewing a crisis as an opportunity for growth and development by tourism enterprises usually help them to make positive strides and reap benefits from such a crisis (Lilien and Srinivasan, 2010). Ideally, tourism enterprises should review and implement appropriate marketing mix programs during a crisis given the fact that consumer behavior changes in tandem with the crisis. Despite the crisis, firms should keep on moving forward, thinking, adapting, and implementing crisis-busting measures to survive. Thus, implementing effective marketing mix strategies drives business performance during a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Fuciu, 2020). According to Seric & Seric (2021), marketing is the main driver of consumption such that it is of paramount importance for tourism businesses to prioritize marketing even during a downturn and recession periods. However, organisations repeatedly make the mistake of cutting back on marketing budgets during a crisis to the further detriment of business performance. Sahani (2020) argues that economic recessions caused by health pandemics such as the COVID-19 pandemic result in reduced spending, significant losses, loss of jobs, and even bankruptcies. Therefore, organisations should as a matter of priority implement competitive marketing mix strategies that give the business the much-needed resilience to withstand and survive the crisis induced by the health crisis.

Additionally, Rollins, Nickel & Ennis (2014) concluded that the most effective strategy to survive a crisis is to develop customer-centric marketing mix strategies to serve customers better. This means that in times of crisis the marketing mix is a great tool to navigate the health crisis such as COVID 19 pandemic for tourism businesses. Moreso, Salman et al. (2017) found that tourism firms in Egypt survived the negative impacts of the ARAB Spring uprisings of 2011 by focusing more on refining their marketing mix to serve their markets better. Moreso, Notta & Vlachvei (2015) concluded that business organisations make important adaptations and adjustments in terms of their marketing mix during a crisis. Firms in Greece increased their marketing budgets during an economic crisis of 2010 (Notta & Vlachvei, 2015). Sharma, Rangarajan & Paesbrugghe (2020) believe that it is important for tourism firms to build the competencies of staff to enable them to be adaptive to changes during a crisis. Similarly, Ritter & Pedersen (2020) assert that organisations, to a larger extent changed their business models in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for survival reasons. The change in business models encompassed the changes in operations, administration, management, and marketing mix, with firms aligning their operations to the health crisis for the survival of the firms. Hence, adaptive firms and those that implement crisis response strategies stand a greater chance of surviving the COVID-19 pandemic, and those that remain rigid closed shop or faced viability challenges.

Furthermore, Nikbin, Nibkin et al. (2021) argued that marketing budgets should not be reduced during a crisis as firms must scale up their marketing activities to withstand a crisis such as the COVID-19. There are several marketing mix strategies used by tourism firms during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nikbin et al., 2021). In terms of product strategies firms should withdraw non-profitable products, invest more in research and development (R&D) activities, redesign product lines, offer affordable products and services, focus on durability and functionality attributes of the product, resize both food and non-food products and improve services (Nikbin et al., 2021). Pricing strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic include keeping the same prices but offering superior value products, avoiding reducing the price and quality of the products simultaneously, reducing the price by making smaller product sizes and keeping the original price, and offering temporary price discounts (Nikbin et al., 2021). Moreso, promotion strategies used during the pandemic include offering price discounts, increasing promotions budget, investing more in digital marketing, incorporating aggressive innovative marketing campaigns, using affiliate and influencer marketing strategies as well as adopting more interactive communication strategies with customers (Nikbin et al., 2021). Lastly, place strategies used during the COVID 19 pandemic included finding markets that are profitable, resorting to digital channels, disintermediation and reallocation of scarce resources to markets with better business growth prospects. (Nikbin et al., 2021). Similarly, Chan & Muthuveloo (2020) support increasing marketing budgets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the marketing mix is a useful tool to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic for recovery, survival, and possibly growth. This paper unravels the marketing mix strategies used by hotels and lodges during the COVID-19 era from April 2020 to March 2021.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Study area**

Masvingo province is located in the Southeastern part of Zimbabwe and is known for tourism, mining, farming, and other activities. From a tourism perspective, Masvingo province is home to the world-famous heritage site, the Great Zimbabwe National Monument among other seminal

tourist attractions such as Gonarezhou National Park, Lake Tugwi Mukosi, Lake Mutirikwi, Kyle Recreational Park, and Communities to mention a few. Masvingo was chosen for this study given that it is one of the key tourist destinations in Zimbabwe.

In this study, a quantitative methodology was used to identify the marketing strategies employed by hotels and lodges in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe from April 2020 to March 2021. A structured questionnaire, designed in Google forms was sent via an online link to 80 managerial respondents of hotels and lodges in July 2021. The questionnaire measurement items were adapted and modified from the empirical literature. The seven Ps marketing mix, which is, product, price, place, promotion, process, people, and physical evidence were the key study variables. In total, 50 fully completed questionnaires were returned yielding a response rate of 62.5%, and were put to analysis using the SPSS 21.0 version. In terms of reliability, the Cronbach alpha was .927 for all the measurement items indicating a high level of reliability. Results were presented by way of means and standard deviations put side by side in tables.

## **1. Results**

In this study, there were more males (60%) than females (40%) and the majority aged 31 and above (98%) with almost an equal number of respondents coming from both lodges (48%) and hotels (52%). Respondents from facilities with 60 rooms or less dominated the sample (96%) with 56% of the respondents coming from facilities with 30 rooms or less. All respondents had at least a tertiary qualification distributed as follows; diploma (44%), Bachelors (44%), and masters (12%). In terms of position within the organisation, general managers (46%) and marketing managers (34%) dominated the sample with owners (6%) and managing directors (14%) forming part of the sample. The majority of respondents had more than 11 years of experience (72%) in the tourism industry, implying that they had enough experience to provide valid answers to the questions of the study.

Table 1: Demographic information

Variable	Respondents: N = 50	
	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	30	60.0 %
Female	20	40.0 %
<b>Age</b>		
30 years and below	1	2.0 %
31 – 39 years	13	26.0 %
40 – 49 years	20	40.0 %
50 years and above	16	32.0 %
<b>Type of organisation</b>		
Lodge	24	48.0 %
Hotel	26	52.0 %
<b>Number of rooms</b>		
5 – 30 rooms	28	56.0%
31 – 60 rooms	20	40.0 %
Over rooms	2	4.0 %
<b>Level of education</b>		
Master’s degree	6	12.0 %
Bachelor’s degree	22	44.0 %
Diploma	22	44.0 %
<b>Position in the organisation</b>		
Owner	3	6.0 %
Managing Director	7	14.0 %
General Manager	23	46.0 %
Marketing Manager	17	34.0 %
<b>Experience in Tourism</b>		
0 – 5 years	4	8.0 %
6-10 years	10	20.0 %
11 – 15 years	25	50.0 %
16 years and above	11	22.0 %

Source: Study results, 2021

## 4.1 Marketing mix strategies used by lodges and hotels in Masvingo Province during the Covid-19 era

### 4.1.1 Product Strategies

Table 2: Product Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

TP	Tourism Product (TP) strategies	<i>n</i>	M	SD
TP 1	Offered accommodation to frontline health workers	50	1.28	.607
TP 2	We closed the facility during lockdown	50	1.30	.839
TP 3	Improved the quality and variety of our services	50	4.50	.614
TP 4	Turned our facility into a COVID 19 isolation centre	50	1.62	.725
	<b>Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>2.18</b>	<b>.696</b>

Results indicate that hotels and lodges improved the quality and variety of the products and services during the COVID-19 pandemic era (M=4.50; SD=.614) to survive the negative impact of the health crisis. However, the lodges and hotels in Masvingo province did not offer accommodation to frontline health workers (M=1.28; SD=.607), they persevered in business despite the COVID onslaught (M=1.30; SD=.839) and they did not use their facilities as COVID-19 isolation centres (M=1.62; SD=.725). Overall, the lodges and hotels in Masvingo province were below average in terms of using the product strategies (M=2.18; SD=.696) to drive their business performance during the COVID-19 pandemic as shown in Table 2 above.

### 4.1.2 Price Strategies

Table 3: Price Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

TPR	Tourism Price (TPR) strategies	<i>n</i>	M	SD
TPR 1	Used different prices for different market segments.	50	4.56	.644
TPR 2	We offered price discounts to our markets	50	4.56	.675
TPR 3	Our lodge/ hotel pricing was based on customer budgets.	50	4.52	.707
TPR 4	We priced our services as packages	50	4.42	.785
	<b>Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>4.52</b>	<b>.703</b>

The results show that lodges and hotels in Masvingo province used price strategies to drive business performance during the COVID-19 pandemic era (M=4.52; SD=.703). The respondents mostly used different prices for different market segments (M=4.56; SD=.644) and offered price

discounts to target markets (M=4.56; SD=.675) to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19. Moreso, results show that respondents based the pricing of products and services on what customers were willing and able to pay (M=4.52; SD=.707). Finally, hotels and lodges priced products and services as packages (M=4.42; SD=.785), offering convenience to customers as shown in Table 3 above.

#### 4.1.3 Place strategies

Table 4: Place Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

<b>TPL</b>	<b>Tourism Place (TPL) strategies</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
TPL 1	Our lodge/hotel used direct sales representatives to reach markets.	50	4.38	.780
TPL 2	Our lodge/hotel used travel agencies to reach markets.	50	4.04	1.068
TPL 3	Our lodge/hotel used tour operators to reach markets.	50	3.86	1.161
TPL 4	Our lodge/hotel used digital channels such as hotel websites, social media, and emails to reach markets.	50	4.30	.814
	<b>Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>4.14</b>	<b>.956</b>

In terms of place or distribution strategies, results indicate that lodges and hotels mostly used direct sales representatives to reach markets (M=4.38; SD=.780), and used electronic distribution channels such as websites, social media, and emails to reach markets (M=4.30; SD=.814) to different market segments. Respondents also used travel agencies (M=4.04; SD=1.068) and least used tour operators (M=3.86; SD=1.161) to distribute products and services during the COVID-19 pandemic era from April 2020 to March 2021 in a bid to survive the unprecedented impacts of the health crisis. Overall, the average mean rating (M=4.14; SD=.956) indicates high usage of place strategies by lodges and hotels in Masvingo province during the COVID-19 pandemic as shown in Table 4 above.

#### 4.1.4 Promotion strategies

Table 5: Promotion Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

<b>TPRO</b>	<b>Tourism Promotion (TPRO) strategies</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
TPRO 1	Our lodge/hotel used direct selling via telephone and email to attract clients.	50	4.24	.744
TPRO 2	Our lodge/hotel used public relations and publicity to promote the facility	50	4.38	.753
TPRO 3	Our lodge/hotel used social media to promote the hotel	50	4.40	.756
TPRO 4	Our lodge/hotel used sales promotions to attract clients	50	4.60	.756
	<b>Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>4.41</b>	<b>.752</b>

Results in Table 5 above, show that lodges and hotels in Masvingo province mostly used sales promotions to attract clients (M=4.60; SD=.756), followed by used social media to promote the hotel or lodge services (M=4.40; SD=.756) and used public relations and publicity to promote the

facility (M=4.38; SD=.753). Lastly, the lodges and hotels used direct selling via telephone and emailing to attract clients (M=4.24; SD=.744). Overall, the average mean rating (M=4.41; SD=.752) shows high usage of promotion strategies by lodges and hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic era from April 2020 to March 2021.

#### 4.1.5 Process strategies

Table 6: Process Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

<b>TPRC</b>	<b>Tourism Process (TPRC) strategies</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
TPRC 1	Implemented standard operating procedures (SOP) in line with COVID 19 prevention guidelines.	50	4.34	.745
TPRC 2	Online payments were mostly encouraged	50	4.46	.676
TPRC 3	We adopted the use of information communication technology to minimise physical contact.	50	4.34	.658
TPRC 4	We regularly fumigated all our facilities	50	4.40	.808
	<b>Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>4.39</b>	<b>.722</b>

In terms of process strategies, results in Table 6 above, indicate that the lodges and hotels encouraged the use of online payments (M=4.46; SD=.676) in compliance with COVID-19 operating guidelines and protocols. Respondents regularly fumigated all their facilities (M=4.40; SD=.808), used information and communication technology to minimize physical contact (M=4.34; SD=.658), and implemented standard operating procedures in line with COVID-19 prevention guidelines (M=4.34; SD=.745). The average mean rating (M=4.39; SD=.722) indicates the high usage of process strategies by lodges and hotels in Masvingo province during the COVID-19 pandemic era from April 2020 to March 2021.

#### 4.1.6 People strategies

Table 7: People Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

<b>TPEO</b>	<b>Tourism People (TPEO) strategies</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
TPEO 1	Trained our staff to best handle clients in line with COVID 19 operational guidelines	50	4.36	.749
TPEO 2	We provided our staff with personal protective equipment (PPEs)	50	4.34	.848
TPEO 3	We regularly screened and tested our staff for COVID 19	50	4.20	.857
TPEO 4	We offered our staff support during the COVID 19 pandemic	50	4.38	.878
	<b>Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>4.32</b>	<b>.833</b>

Results in Table 7 above, indicate that respondents offered support during the COVID-19 pandemic (M=4.36; SD=.749), trained staff to best handle clients in line with COVID-19 operational guidelines (4.36; SD=.749), and provided staff with personal protective equipment (M=4.34; SD=.848). Lastly, lodges and hotels regularly screened and tested staff for the COVID-19 pandemic (M=4.20; SD=.857) in a bid to navigate the operational challenges brought about by the COVID-19 health crisis. The average mean rating (M=4.32; SD=.833) indicates the high usage of people strategies by lodges and hotels in Masvingo province during the COVID-19 pandemic era from April 2020 to March 2021.

#### 4.1.7 Physical evidence strategies

Table 8: Physical Evidence Strategies Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

TPHE	Tourism physical evidence (TPHE) strategies	n	M	SD
TPHE 1	Our lodge/hotel environment was kept COVID 19 free through frequent fumigation	50	4.24	.847
TPHE 2	Conference room facilities such as tables and chairs were arranged in line with social distancing rules.	50	4.46	.762
TPHE 3	COVID 19 awareness messages were displayed at the facility	50	4.46	.762
TPHE 4	Our lodge/hotel employees dressed in uniform with COVID 19 awareness message.	50	4.30	.789
	<b>Averages</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>4.37</b>	<b>.790</b>

Results in Table 8 above, show that, in terms of physical evidence strategies, lodges and hotels in Masvingo province followed COVID-19 health guidelines and protocols. They made sure the tables and chairs within conference rooms were arranged in line with social distancing rules (M=4.46; SD=.762), they displayed COVID-19 awareness messages at their facilities (M=4.46; SD=.762) and dressed staff in uniforms bearing COVID-19 awareness messages (M=4.30; SD=.789). Lastly, the lodge or hotel environment was kept COVID-19 free through frequent fumigation (M=4.24; SD=.847). The average mean rating (M=4.37; SD=.790) indicates high usage of physical evidence strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic era by lodges and hotels in Masvingo province from April 2020 to March 2021. Table 9 below shows the ranking of marketing mix strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 9: Marketing Strategies during COVID-19: The ranking

Rank	Tourism Marketing Mix Strategies	n	M	SD
1	Tourism price	50	4.52	.703
2	Tourism Promotion	50	4.41	.752
3	Tourism Process	50	4.39	.722
4	Tourism Physical Evidence	50	4.37	.790
5	Tourism People	50	4.32	.833
6	Tourism Place	50	4.14	.956
7	Tourism Product	50	2.18	.696

The results in Table 9 above indicate that based on the means, the most used marketing mix strategy during the COVID-19 by lodges and hotels is price, followed by promotion, process physical evidence people and place respectively. The least used marketing mix strategy is the product.

## 5. Discussion

The study investigated the marketing strategies adopted by lodges and hotels in Masvingo, Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic era, specifically from April 2020 to March 2021. To the researcher's knowledge, it is one of the first studies that examine the marketing mix strategies used by lodges and hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic era in Zimbabwe. The results of the study indicate that the lodges and hotels used all the seven marketing mix strategies of product, price, place, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence, albeit with varying degrees, in mitigating the unprecedented negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The top five most used marketing mix strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic are; price, promotion, process, physical evidence, and people. The least used marketing mix strategy was the product. This agrees with previous studies in which marketing mix strategies were used during economic crises or recessions for recovery, resilience building, defense, growth, and development of tourism enterprises (Nikbin et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2017; Naidoo et al., 2011).

The study provides empirical support for the 4Ps (McCarthy, 1960) and 7Ps (Booms & Bitner, 1981) marketing mix models as important marketing frameworks upon which tourism enterprises, particularly the lodges and hotels, can draw their crisis busting strategies. The main contribution of the study lies in identifying the marketing strategies used during the COVID-19 pandemic. The identification of the strategies may help other tourism enterprises with crisis-busting measures from a marketing perspective. Moreso, the study adds to COVID-19 related empirical literature that may help in having a deeper understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The study implications are that lodges and hotels should invest in marketing mix strategies to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic for recovery, growth, and development. Thus, investing in marketing during a crisis leads to better business performance. However, the study results should be generalized with caution because it focused on lodges and hotels in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe only.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Lodges, and hotels in Masvingo province, Zimbabwe used the seven marketing mix strategies during the COVID-19 era from April 2020 to March 2021. The used marketing mix strategies were product, price, place, promotion, process, people, physical evidence, albeit with varying degrees. Price, promotion, process, physical evidence, and people were the top five strategies used by lodges and hotels to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Product was the least used marketing mix strategies by lodges and hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic era. The marketing mix strategies framework remains a handy tool in promoting better business performance during pandemics.

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