

An Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19 on the MICE Industry in Zimbabwe

Solomon Munyeruki^{*1} and Forbes Kabote²

^{*}Chinhoyi University of Technology, Chinhoyi

¹sodsmunyeruki@yahoo.co.uk , ²kabote123@gmail.com

^{*}Corresponding Author

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of unprecedented damage on the tourism industry disrupting every value chain activity. However, there is minimal attention being given to the global and local impact of COVID-19 on the MICE sector of the tourism industry. The MICE industry sustains many livelihoods and economies, yet with COVID-19 still ravaging, the industry is at risk globally as it depends mostly on human traffic and interactions. This study sought to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Zimbabwe's MICE industry. Qualitative data was collected using quota, convenient and purposive sampling techniques from twenty-six (26) people representing exhibition centres, conference organizations, policy makers and event organisers using questionnaires and interviews. With the aid of Atlas ti.9, data was analysed thematically. The major findings are: - The current state is characterized by weak value chain, loss of business ethics, myriad challenges, suppressed demand and high costs. Covid-19 had some positive impacts such as innovativeness, operational efficiency, focus on domestic tourism and adoption of trending technologies. There were also negative impacts such as loss of revenue, cancellations, racial discrimination, stress and anxiety. Strategies suggested minimizing the impacts of COVID-19 and other related future pandemics were to develop a better understanding of the MICE industry, adherence to government policies, co-opetition and innovativeness. In conclusion, COVID-19 affected Zimbabwe's MICE industry both positively and negatively giving hope that despite challenges brought by pandemics, development and adoption of right strategies will ensure continued survival of the MICE sector. It is recommended that MICE sector players should learn to cooperate in times of crises to leverage on combined strengths to protect their industry.

Keywords: Crisis, COVID-19, MICE, Pandemic, Tourism.

1. Introduction

The world is battling a pandemic – The Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19). This global health pandemic has triggered unprecedented crisis in the global tourism industry in the 21st century (Woyo, 2021). It is estimated that the industry will lose more than US\$2.1 trillion in revenue due to the closure of national borders and lockdowns (Gossling *et al*, 2020). COVID-19 spells disaster for the tourism and hospitality industry (Butcher, 2020). Tourism essentially ended in March 2020, with international travel bans affecting over 90% of the world's population and widespread limitations on public meetings and community mobility (Al-Qasem, 2021).

Humanity has battled some of the worst pandemics. Pandemics can be traced back to the early stages of civilization (Duncan & Scott, 2005; Carrasco, Lee & Chen, 2011). From the Antonine Plague, Japanese Small Pox. Plague of Justinian, Black Death, Great Plague of London, Yellow Fever, the Russian, Spanish and Asian Flus, HIV-

AIDS, Swine Flu, Ebola, MERS, with high fatalities of between 770 – 200 million people (WEF, 2020).

There were warnings that pandemics pose a major threat to society and tourism (Gössling, 2002; Hall, 2006, 2020; Scott & Gössling, 2015), with their occurrence being spurred by globalisation, environmental change, overpopulation, animal and plant contact and lifestyle changes (Gössling, 2020; Ivanov, 2020; Connolly *et al.*, 2021). However, the world is not adequately prepared and will be heavily affected by future pandemics as there is minimal progress on preparedness (Fan *et al.*, 2018; Gates, 2018). From the year 2000, a wide range of crises have impacted global tourism directly; for example, September 11th terrorist attacks (2001), the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, the global economic and financial crisis that began in 2009, and the 2015 outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) (Gössling *et al.*, 2021).

The latest pandemic (COVID -19) was first detected in 2019 in the Chinese Hubei Province, in Wuhan its Capital City. It was first declared a Health emergency on December 31st 2019, and pandemic on 11th March, 2020, and is transmissible through saliva droplets or any nose discharge from the sneeze of an infected person (Disimulacion, 2020; WHO,2020; Matsungo & Chopera, 2020). Covid-19 outbreak is a sharp reminder that pandemics, like other rarely occurring catastrophes, have happened in the past and will continue to happen in the future (Gustafsson, 2020).

Tourism is a global industry with more than a billion international trips taken annually which was forecasted to expand to more than 1.8 billion by 2030 (UNWTO, 2017). The UNWTO (2019) indicates that international tourist arrivals worldwide grew by 4% in 2019 to reach 1.5 billion, and it was another year of strong growth, although slower compared to the exceptional rates of 2017 (+6%) and 2018 (+6%). The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant business disruptions around the world, with travel and tourism being particularly impacted as governments responded to reduce the impact of the pandemic (Kenny & Dutt, 2021).

The Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is multi-sectoral, broad and encompasses all hospitality related service providers such as entertainment, transportation, convention centres, catering, tourism, retail, accommodation, finance, travel (Yang & Gu, 2012, Smagina, 2017). The MICE industry has been booming with high growth recorded over years, as there is prioritization of this product by tourism players who are viewing it as a way of diversifying their offerings (Kerdpitak, 2019, Rwigema, 2020).

Despite the growth projections, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected this industry. In the United States, the growth of the exhibition industry plunged during the first quarter of 2020 as 72.6% of events originally scheduled for the second half of March were cancelled, the remaining 27.4% were postponed and some of those events may eventually be cancelled, UAE experienced its most notable drop on June 1, 2020, wherein the number decreased by 82% compared to the flights on the same day of the year 2019 (Al-Qasem, 2021). Dubai, a global MICE hotspot recorded considerable fall of scheduled flights by 82%, many events scheduled were either postponed or cancelled, with exhibitions, and conferences suffering a significant setback as travel restrictions were being implemented to curtail the spread and effects of the pandemic (Aburumman, 2020).

Renowned African tourism destinations such as Rwanda, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, recorded losses of between US\$48 million and US\$200 million between November 2019 and July 2020 (Rwigema, 2020). By July 21, 2020, Rwanda's MICE industry recorded US\$48 million loss, with premium events such as Rwanda Automobile Club (RAC) and the 2020 Mountain Gorilla Rally being postponed (Rwigema, 2020). In South Africa, various event planners either cancelled or postponed their events such as sporting events (cricket matches, the university Varsity Cup, the Two Oceans Marathon and the ABSA Cape Epic), cultural events (Bloemfontein Show, Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees), and others such as Cape Town International Jazz Festival and World Summit (Bernal, 2020; Chothia, 2020; More, 2020).

Zimbabwe's first COVID-19 case was detected on the 21st of March 2020 in Victoria fall, which resulted in multiple measures being taken to curb its spread (Dzobo *et al.*, 2020). The government promulgated Statutory Instrument 83 of 2020, which brought a slew of lockdown measures that curtailed the movement of the public, goods and services and banned the utilisation of many public facilities such as hire venues, hotels, restaurants, liquor shops (S.I.83/2020) and implemented the lockdown on the 30th of March 2020, first time for twenty-one days. Lockdown extension was for yet another thirteen days until May 16, after which it was extended indefinitely until it was suspended towards Christmas holidays. In 2021, the first lockdown was introduced soon after the December 2020-Janauary 2021 festive season due to spiking numbers of new cases and deaths, all blamed by government on complacency and negligence as indicated by the Deputy Minister of Health and Child Care (VOA News, 2021).

Since 2020, major MICE business in Zimbabwe, was either postponed, cancelled or went virtual due to pandemic restrictions. Premium Events such as ZITF, Sanganai/Hlanganani Travel Expo, Mine Entra, HIFA, Carnival were either cancelled, postponed resulting in huge losses (Chronicle, 2020). The Sanganai/Hlanganani 2020 switched to virtual tourism left many stakeholders in the MICE industry counting losses, from hotels, lodges, car rental businesses, airlines, tour operators and travel agents, depriving them of incremental revenue generation, as it is a Hallmark Event (Chronicle, 2020). National Arts Council of Zimbabwe called for cancellation of events nationwide, public gigs were suspended and all musical shows were shelved (NACZ, 2020; Chronicle, 2020).

Carlsson-Szlezak *et al.*, (2020) reviewed that there is no figure that can be relied upon in ascertaining the economic impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on tourism, even on the MICE industry that heavily relied on international and local public events. It is extremely difficult to assess them due to the lack of sufficient statistical data and unwillingness of some companies, industries and countries, especially the developing ones, to disclose the level of economic decline (Stock, 2020).

2. Statement of the problem

Policymakers and tourism practitioners do not have a full understanding of the scenarios and effects of the crisis, which will have an unprecedented impact on the tourism industry with a chronic lack of empirical studies (Skare et al, 2021). MICE tourism is a segment that demands specific attention in research due to its singularity and importance (Bueno et al., 2020). Research has been done on the impacts of the

COVID-19 pandemic on Tourism in general, and MICE in some countries such as China, Rwanda, Thailand, United States, Malaysia, Italy, United Arab Emirates (Aburumman, 2020 Ayithey et al., 2020; Baum & Hai, 2020; Disimulacion, 2020; Hall et al., 2020; Jamal & Budke, 2020; Ranasinghe et al., 2020; Rwigema, 2020), but in Zimbabwe, at the time of research no dedicated research specific to the MICE industry has been undertaken. Research brings timeous updates, provides critical information for stakeholders. Absence of research and statistical information makes it difficult to assess the impacts of this pandemic (Stock, 2020). As such, the research assessed the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the MICE industry in Zimbabwe.

3. Methodology

The study explored the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the MICE industry in Zimbabwe. Guided by an interpretivism research philosophy, the research methodology was qualitative with an explorative research design as inquiry continues as scholars and practitioners seek to understand, assess and strategize in responds to the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure validity, reliability and consistency of this research, triangulation was adopted.

Data was collected from twenty-six respondents in the MICE sectors out of seventy-six potential respondents using quota, convenient and purposive sampling techniques. Eleven In-depth interviews were conducted while fifteen open-ended questionnaires were administered. Identified quotas were Exhibition Centres, Accommodation and Conference Organisations, MICE policy makers /coordinators and Event Organisers. Face to face, zoom, skype and telephone interviews were adopted given the current COVID-19 restrictions.

Both the interview guide and open-ended google questionnaires had sections seeking information on the levels of business operations that existed prior to the pandemic, the lowest achieved due to COVID-19 and current levels of operations, challenges currently being faced, impacts of the pandemic and strategies recommended for adoption to mitigate the risks. The research instruments were guided by literature on previous studies done in other jurisdictions (Ayithey, 2020; Rwigema, 2020, Aburumman, 2020; Gössling *et al*, 2020; Atlanta & Gok, 2021). They were pilot tested before full roll out of data collection and feedback gathered led to adjustments mainly to eliminate ambiguity, double barrelled questions and ensured clarity and easy of understanding. Data was captured into Atlasti.9 and analysed thematically.

The response rate was 81%. Data was collected from 35% males and 65% females aged between 20 and 65 years. Respondents' ages ranged between 30 to 60 years, with majority having 41-50 Years. Their industry experience ranged from 5 to 25 years with the bulk having about 20 years MICE industry experience. The respondents are generally educated with at least a certificate whilst the bulk 76% were master's degree holders.

4. Results presentation and discussion

The study assesses the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the MICE sector in Zimbabwe. The specific objectives were firstly to establish the current state of MICE Tourism operations in Zimbabwe in the light of COVID-19 pandemic, secondly to explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on MICE tourism in Zimbabwe and lastly to suggest strategies to mitigate the impacts of future global pandemics on the MICE industry.

4.1. Current state of Zimbabwean MICE industry

The first objective of this research was to establish the current state of MICE business operations in Zimbabwe. Six themes emerged as shown in Figure 1 below.

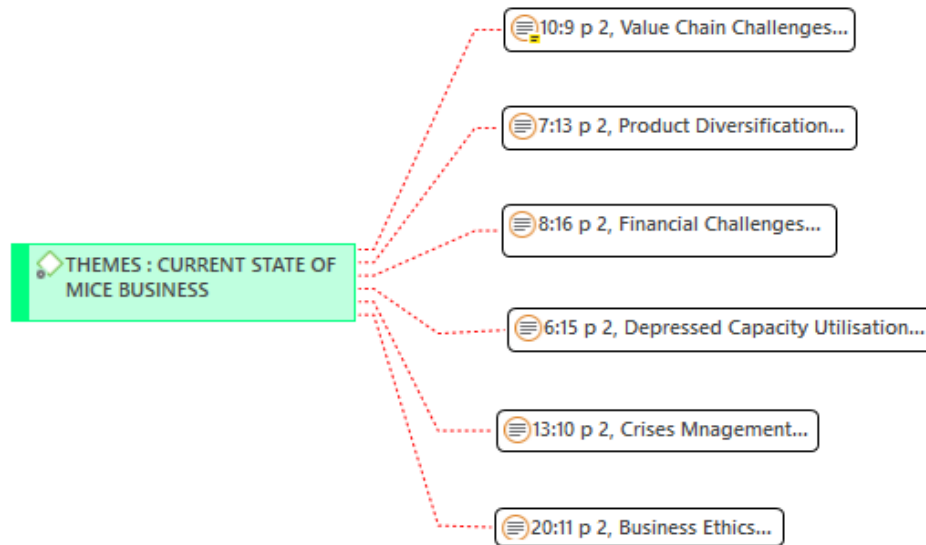


Figure 1: Current State of MICE Industry

Figure 1 shows emerging themes under current state of MICE industry, these are capacity utilisation, product diversification, financial challenges and business ethics, crises management and Value Chain Challenges.

i) Capacity utilisation

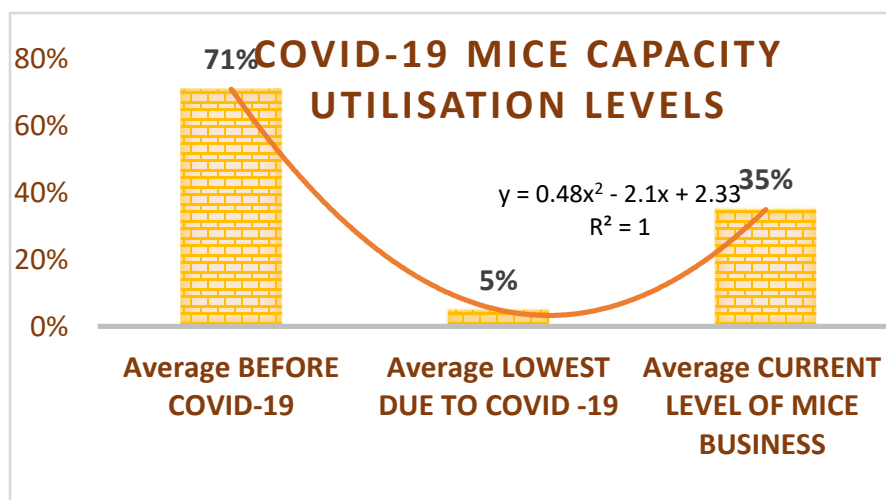


Figure 2: MICE Industry Capacity Utilisation

Results indicate that business plunged from an average of 71% to the lowest of 5% and business is now on recovery averaging 35% at the time of the study. Cancellations, postponements of MICE business events, compliance with government policies on public gatherings, social distancing and the adoption of hybrid events negatively

affected revenue generation propensity and capacity utilisation. Respondents indicated that businesses that had better occupancies were the ones that quickly responded to government's request for quarantine centres, with adherence to WHO Guidelines. On recovery, the results are in sync with the UNWTO (2020), which had forecasted that early 2021 will exhibit good signs of recovery, and further confirms submissions by Fotiadis *et al.*, (2021) who postulates international tourism will recover after the summer of 2021.

ii) Product diversification

Respondents indicated that as government directed the closure of public facilities, and in compliance with WHO public health guidelines, operators realised the importance of diversification as a mitigatory measure. Facilities were used as quarantine centres so they could generate revenues, a strategy which Ranasinghe *et al.*, (2020) recommended in Sri Lanka at the inception of the outbreak. Some invested in outside catering businesses, virtual conferences to organisations. Events organisers and those in entertainment switched to virtual and hybrid platforms to survive, a position they indicated they never considered prior to the onset of COVID-19 (Butcher, 2020; Rwigema, 2020). Diversification allows effective risk management as it enhances prosperity during booming seasons and assists when times are bad (Gichuki *et.al*, 2020).

iv) Financial challenges

Three sub- themes emerged under financial challenges:

Liquidity Crunch - Participants indicated that they are facing liquidity challenges, with a bleeding dashboard showing current liabilities overtaking current assets. In the absence of revenue generation, rentals, staff, security and other obligations were due. This is exacerbated by the limited funding from both private and public sources and traditional financiers as they are hesitant due to uncertainty. Debtors are not paying on time; there is increased pressure from creditors who are demanding payments from MICE operators, resulting in some suing them. Below are two verbatim quotes from selected respondents:

Respondent 2 – *‘There were no revenues, yet we are expected to meet monthly costs such as rent, insurance, security, so liquidity crunch is obvious. We tried to chase our debtors for payments, most of them advised they were dry and also having challenges in getting payments from their own debtors.’*

Respondent 16 – *‘Revenues are highly subdued; all critical accounts are not paying citing financial challenges. We are struggling to meet short-term obligations and some of our suppliers do not understand. As we speak, one supplier is threatening to sue us for delaying their payments.’*

The finding is consistent with Ayittey *et al.*, (2020) and Gössling *et al.*, (2020) who observed tourism players are facing liquidity challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cost management pressure - Respondents outlined that while revenues are subdued due to periodic lockdowns and public gathering related limitations. Players created a lot of capacity prior to the pandemic, hoping for incremental growth. As the capacity increased, so were the revenues and costs. Fixed costs in terms of rates, rents, insurance costs and paying of statutory requirements such as operating licenses, human labour. Compliance with WHO guidelines on public facilities demanded more resources such as masks, sanitizers and disinfectants offered daily. The adoption of

new trending technologies is also costly yet this was not part of the strategic game plan. Cost Management pressures were highlighted as a major challenge facing tourism players (Mora, 2020), with Gursory and Chi (2020) outlining the hospitality industry generally has relatively huge operational costs as noted by a much higher break-even point.

Value chain challenges - Half the respondents indicated that soon after the introduction of lock downs, the market went jittery and dynamics completely changed due to uncertainty. Speculative buying was rife, resulting in scarcity and artificial shortages as stakeholders piled commodities. The implementation of border controls resulted in disruptions of the MICE value chain as Zimbabwe imports most of its products, with an import value of USD 4,787,446.79 (World Bank, 2021). Relatedly, the bargaining power of suppliers increased, with few suppliers having imported goods dictating prices and general business terms.

Respondent 1 – *‘This pandemic disrupted our supply chain. When COVID – 19 came, we experienced scarcity of products that really used to be available. Remember we import a lot. Imagine now, prices of commodities are increasing even in USD dollars.’* The findings on overall value chain is in line with what other scholars submitted that the COVID-19 disrupted the tourism value chain (Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Disimulacion, 2020; UNWTO, 2020).

v) *Business ethics issues*

Respondents are bemoaning the erosion of business ethics, a state of affairs that is hostile to the MICE industry.

Respondent 3 – *‘The pandemic affected and disrupted all norms, customs, and best practices in the industry. No application of ethics except that players are just focusing on survival. Dishonesty and integrity issues resurfaced. Stakeholders falsified information expecting to gain sympathy even when the business started picking up. There is a lot of cheating on compliance with WHO regulations.’*

The results concur with Sneeger (1997) as well as Jaffe and Tsimerman (2011) who posit that it is normal for unethical behaviour to surface during periods of instability and crisis and such behaviour will change when the wave passes. However, this finding contradicts Hooker (2003)’s recommendations that there should never be compromise in business ethical practices, whether in normal or difficult circumstances as ethical values are universal and consistent.

vi) *Crisis management issues*

Zimbabwean MICE industry does not have a crisis management framework.

Respondent 25 - *‘Currently The MICE sector, just like tourism industry in Zimbabwe does not have a specific blueprint on how best we can manage situations like these. Yes, there are workshops being held, but a clear response strategy in my view could have assisted. It is a learning curve; once we are done, we should sit down as stakeholders and agree on a framework on how best we can manage future pandemics.’*

MICE stakeholders were not prepared and lack knowledge of pandemics or crises despite several warnings proclaimed on risks of pandemics on global economies, the tourism industry in particular and the need for preparedness (Gössling, 2002; Hall, 2006, 2007; Gates, 2018; Fan *et al.*, 2018).

4.2 Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

The second specific objective of the research sought to explore the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on MICE tourism in Zimbabwe. It was observed that COVID-19 had both positive and negative impacts on the MICE industry.

4.2.1. Positive impacts of COVID-19 on MICE business

Three themes emerged that exhibit the positive impacts of COVID-19 on the MICE business. These are boosting the MICE Technology, Focus on domestic tourism and innovativeness.

4.2.1.1. Boosting of MICE ICT technology

Banning of social gatherings and physical meetings promoted the use of online platforms and gave rise to the use of virtual or hybrid MICE events, which forced MICE players to invest in the use of virtual trending technologies such as Zoom, Google, Skype, and Facebook. This was an inevitable MICE survival response. This finding is line with the contributions of a number of authors who emphasized on the adoption of trending technologies for tourism players who are involved in MICE businesses (Matcha, 2020; Panache, 2020; Hootsuite, 2020; Rwigema, 2020).

4.2.1.2. Focus on domestic tourism

Respondents highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic pushed for a new focus on domestic tourism, forcing the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority to shift its campaigns and promotional activities to the local market, a segment that it never gave priority.

Respondent 19 - *‘This pandemic pushed ZTA to refocus. They have been using most resources in overseas and international markets at the expense of the local cheese, but with COVID-19, they had no option. That’s why they are now focusing on the ZimBho Campaign’.*

Respondent 24 - *“Have you ever seen ZTA pushing the local market like this before? We thank this pandemic to some extent for opening new understandings by the DMO that local MICE business is equally important as international business.”*

Stakeholders observe that the pandemic pushed for a balanced tourism conscience on the part of the DMO and all stakeholders boosting campaigns for domestic tourism business, a strategy recommended by some scholars given the closure of international borders (Felinas & Metaxas, 2020; Tourism Research Network, 2020).

4.2.1.3. Innovation and improvement on management efficiencies

Most respondents outlined innovation and improvements on management efficiencies as the pandemic challenged traditional business modus operandi. New revenue initiatives were implemented; cost management strategies reviewed as the top line had been suppressed, resulting in increased performance on cost management. Retrenchments were effected, which trimmed excess staff resulting in new ratios and efficiencies, maintaining a lean staff of permanent staff while employing on fixed term to casual employees when needed. Creativity and innovation became the new mantra. This dovetails with works by Ivanov *et al.*, (2020), Assaf and Scuderi (2020) and Hall, (2020) who emphasised the significance of innovation under COVID-19 as the panacea to business survival.

4.2.2 Negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on MICE business

Four themes emerged that explains the negative impacts of COVID 19 on the MICE industry. These are financial impacts, social impacts, technological and closure of business.

4.2.1.4. Financial impacts

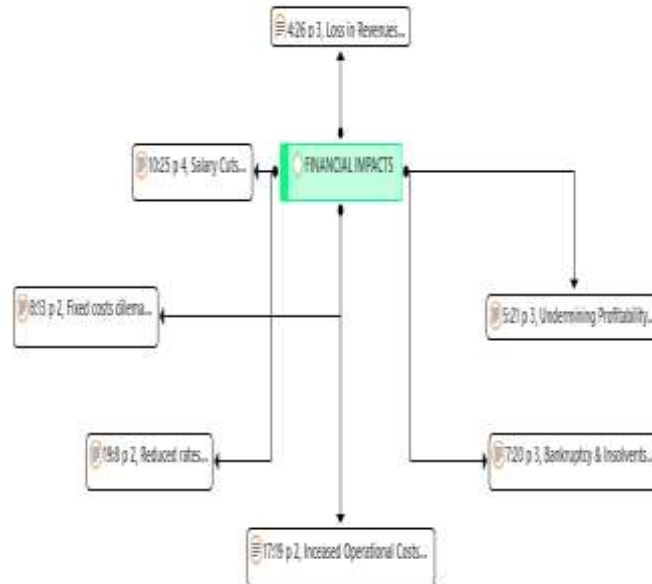


Figure 3: Financial Impacts of COVID-19 on MICE

COVID-19 pandemic had a number of financial impacts. A lot of revenue was lost in the MICE industry due to event cancellations and postponements. The pandemic resulted in increased operational costs, especially the need to procure additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) items that have never been part of the traditional costs. These include masks, sanitizers, regular disinfections and inspections. Prices were slashed given the suppressed demand in order to boost uptake and occupancy as capacity utilisation challenges emerged. This undermined profitability of the MICE industry. This finding supports earlier work by Ozili and Reiseliv, (2020); Arun, (2020); Butcher, (2020); Gössling, (2020) and Woyo, (2021) who argued that pandemics have caused huge financial losses that left some organisations facing bankruptcy and insolvency issues.

4.2.1.5. Social impacts

Human freedoms were curtailed due to restrictions and respondents outlined they really did not like it. Ala`a and Albattat (2019) observed that the spread of infectious diseases, such as SARS, swine flu, and Ebola through human travel always results in prohibition on international movements. Massive retrenchments happened as investors and management resort to cutting human labour costs to streamline operational costs each time they are faced with costs management challenges. Apart from retrenchments, there were also deaths recorded since the inception of this pandemic, with some respondents linking them to stress and anxiety especially on the retrenched members. Discrimination was rife.

Respondent 4 - “Yes, I observed discrimination last year (2020) around May, and was disappointed honestly. Our staff segregated two Chinese nationals, all saying they were afraid of serving them, as they are the ones suspected to have brought this Corona thing.”

The social impacts findings support earlier work that also highlighted that due to association between pandemics and certain people, discrimination is common during pandemics as fear and uncertainty sets in people (Jamal & Budke, 2020; Li, 2020; Vincent, 2020; Vincent Musavengane *et al.*, 2020).

4.2.1.6. Technological impacts

Seventeen respondents outlined that the new normal demands MICE players to invest in ICT for survival. The associated costs of acquisition, usage and continuous updating in line with modern trends are high (Hind, 2020a). Respondents indicated the adoption of Virtual Events, while celebrated, undermines revenue generation for different revenue centres within MICE Facilities such as Food and Beverages, Entertainment, Banqueting and other streams as few guests will make use of such services.

Respondent 22 – *‘Zimbabwe imports most of its electrical equipment that are used in MICE. Landing costs are unfavourable. Duty at the border and transport costs give us headache in adopting new technology. Stakeholders have complained often about tariffs on data, but who listens.’*

This finding is consistent with other earlier researchers also found that the switch to webinars, teleconferences, Augmented Reality technologies and adoption of ICT in tourism industry is hindered by high costs (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Kotze, Anderson, & Summerfield, 2016; Disimulacion, 2020; Mora, 2020).

4.2.1.7. Closure of MICE businesses

Stakeholders were of the view that a number of MICE business, temporarily or permanently closed when they stopped operating upon the onset of COVID-19 induced lockdowns in 2020.

Respondent 11: *‘I know a number of MICE businesses who have since auctioned their equipment and other essential resources. Even if things are to get back to normal they will not be anywhere to compete.’*

This finding dovetails with the submissions of Disimulacion (2020) who established that the global border controls, involuntary quarantining and general restrictions collapsed the MICE sector. Lack of financial support worsened the situation as respondents indicated they had not received the promised bailouts from treasury.

4.3 Strategies to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 and future global pandemics mice sector

The third and last specific objective of this research was to come up with possible strategies to mitigate the impacts of the current and future global pandemics on the MICE industry. The following MICE strategy mix was extracted from Atlas ti9. The mix emphasises that each stakeholder has a huge role to play, with strategy coordination being key.

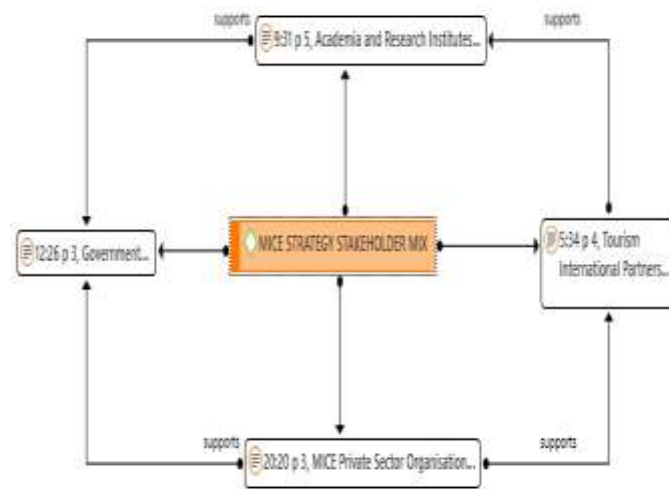


Figure 4: MICE Stakeholder Strategy Mix

4.3.1 Government MICE sector strategies

There are different strategies that respondents highlighted as critical in managing the pandemic. These are discussed as follows;

4.3.1.1 Public health strategies, controls and interventions

Eight respondents recommended that success in the tourism sector is interdependent with efforts in other sectors, notably the health sector and called for massive investment in the health sector.

Respondent 8 – *‘We have a very weak health system that needs upgrade. Wilkins Hospital was upgraded just as we had the pandemic and that is not ideal. Good public health facilities are good for everyone, every industry and sector. Public Controls must be reinforced without fear or favour, government itself must be exemplary. You saw the Christmas of senior government officials last year at a function, controls must be ubiquitous!’*

Government should take an active lead in designing deliberate policies that ensure prior to pandemics, public health facilities are in place, also strategically located in proximity to every MICE hotspot, well-staffed and well equipped. If MICE destinations achieve herd immunity and have less cases and deaths recorded, with a clear policy and tourists will prefer to travel to destinations with good facilities and COVID-19 cases. (Gursory and Chi, 2020; Vij, Upadhyya & Abidi, 2021). Ataguba (2020) expressed that poor health facilities on Africa would be an obstacle in the fight and recovery against this pandemic hence need for massive investments in public and health facilities.

4.3.1.2 Government financial strategies

Government should have had financial strategies in place that are implemented in three stages; prior, during and after the pandemic.

Respondent 9 - *Government must realise that strategic funds are set aside for the MICE industry as it a key sector of the economy. Also, why then not make serious adjustments on the tourism sector taxes and statutory obligations such as VAT, levy.*

As noted, this demands setting aside of strategic funds for MICE pandemic emergencies, ensure there is availability of early bailouts, subsidized Personal Protective Equipment. Scrapping of some taxes or serious reviews of taxes and levies so that MICE industry operators have less burden (Ranasinghe *et al.*, 2020). Provide interest free or subsidised capital borrowing schemes, tax holidays, social nets, and review corporate levies as being done in other jurisdictions such as the US, Thailand and Malaysia. (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020b; Ho & Sia, 2020) and the UAE government in Sharjah hospitality (Vij, Upadhy and Abidi (2021). Financial challenges demand financial interventions.

4.3.1.3. Balanced national tourism policy

Every respondent emphasized on the need to have a balanced tourism policy, that ensures both domestic and international tourism are resourced, supported and promoted equally as stakeholders generally feel that the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority pushed more of international campaigns and promotions, with little focus on domestic market.

Respondent 15 - *'Look at how other countries have survived the scourge of this pandemic because of their balanced approach. Zimbabwe Tourism Authority as the Destination Marketing Organisation must reflect and address this weakness. Charity begins at home. This mistake of having strategic events internationally without pushing enough for domestic tourism must be aborted.'*

Domestic tourism should be equally prioritized as International Tourism and government should actively make deliberate policies to boost local MICE business as implemented by other governments such as Dubai, Malaysia and Singapore. (Borneo Post Online, 2018; The Star Online, 2017; Ho & Sia, 2020). Destinations who have a strong domestic tourism policy could withstand and recover the severe impacts of a global pandemic. (Kabote, 2020; Musavengane *et al.*, 2020).

4.3.2 MICE private sector strategies

The study observed that while there is always a need for stakeholder collaborations, the private sector should have specific strategies that it should implement intra and inter organisations. Below are key strategies for adoption.

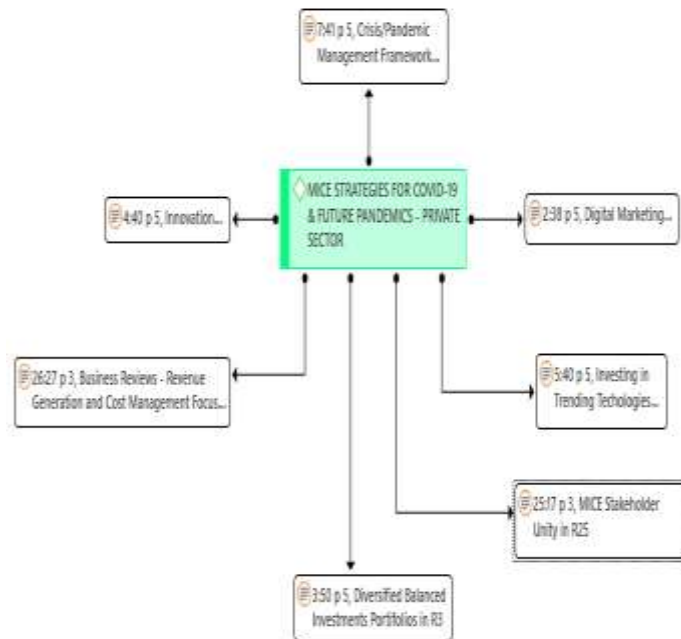


Figure 5: MICE private sector strategies

Data analysis indicated that the private sector has a huge role to play just as the government in various ways. The strategies are discussed further from the emerging themes.

4.3.2.1 Crisis management systems and resilience

On the first objective, it was established that the Zimbabwean MICE industry does not have any industry specific pandemic/crisis management framework. Respondents outlined the haphazard reactive approach to strategy defying a systematic approach.

Respondent 3 – ‘I recommend that the private sector, in liaison with government, must lobby for the establishment of a National Task Force on Emergencies. Every sector must have a representative in that committee which is well resourced with strategic funds mobilised by the private sector as the government is often overwhelmed with other priorities.’

Respondent 21- ‘As you look at it, are you impressed by both the private sector and the government’s response on the tourism sector before we talk about MICE in particular. My take is we need a committee that steers and I believe this committee will mobilise resources for responding to the pandemic, coordinate every strategy and provide feedback.’

The agrees with Pearson and Mitroff (1993) and Kaushal and Srivastava (2021) who recommended the adoption of Crisis Management blue prints. Glaesser (2003) espoused that crisis management is critical for poor countries and destinations that heavily depend on tourism. Zimbabwe is one such. There is need to at least have a pandemic crisis management framework, and then move on to have a resilience-building framework. Resilience builds from the foundations of a basic crisis management framework, is more robust and gives a stronger resistance to any external shocks to the MICE industry and transformation (Ranasinghe, 2020; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Sharma *et al.*, 2021).

4.3.2.2 Digital marketing

Respondents noted that the absence of physical interactions due to prohibitions emanating from border controls, lock down compliance is a clarion call for digital marketing. Below are some Verbatim Quotes:

Respondent 23 – *‘Our view as policy makers is that any serious MICE player must embrace digital marketing and maintain that grip on the market. This may appear a burden now, trust me soon there will be dividends’*

Digital Marketing ensures electronic local, national, regional and global outreach, and is an integral part of the contemporary and future marketing activities with the internet proving to be a powerful marketing tool. (Kerdpitak, 2019; Vij, Upadhya and Abidi (2021). Ho and Sia (2020) recommended the use of mobile apps in the promotion of interactions given the COVID-19 outbreak. MICE players should adopt this strategy.

4.3.2.3 Diversified balanced investments

Half the respondents outlined that the era of putting all eggs in one basket is over, calling for a prudent diversification strategy for all MICE players given the COVID-19 pandemic experience.

Respondent 1 – *‘We all should accept that for strategic reasons, every MICE investor must have investments in other sectors. This helps to manage the risk as this sector is very vulnerable’*

Respondent 9 – *‘Diversification should be our way forward. I believe that all our players can reflect and see this as a viable strategy given our challenges as an industry. Without diversification the risk of business failure due to these pandemics is inevitable.’*

There are two types of diversifications strategies, related and unrelated diversification, both should be implemented, but more importantly, the unrelated diversification where MICE private operators can have investments in other sectors such as real estate, ICT or even Transport and logistics. This will help to reduce the industry sectoral impacts when tourism takes a dive amidst crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Diversification boosts chances of survival and growth during hard times (Gichuki et.al, 2020).

4.3.2.4 Innovation

Innovation is vital in the response against pandemics. Respondents outlined as follows:

Respondent 3 – *‘As private players, we have to innovate. Gone is the era where you focus on just minor innovations. It’s time for disruptive or radical innovations.’*

Respondent 11 – *‘COVID-19 demands that you have to innovate in order to survive. As it stands, we should provide incentives for our teams that come up with brilliant innovations as part of motivation especially in revenue generation and cost management.’*

Innovation must be a priority and there must be incentives for innovation (Gates, 2018; Thomas, 2020). Individual organisations must champion innovation, as it will

help them break into new horizons. The innovation mantra transcends across all stakeholders and ensures new systems, strategies, skills, styles, structures, staff are implemented which all speak to McKinney's seven 's' framework on a continuous basis. With the various mutations and different interventions, the pandemic seems far from over, adaptive innovative strategies are an indispensable reality.

4.3.2.5 Business strategy reviews

Most respondents acknowledged that the business landscape has changed giving rise to a new business environment that defies primitive approaches, hence the need to review business strategies both on the top line in revenue generation to cost management. MICE business operators must strike a delicate balance between revenue generation and cost management.

Revenue generation focus - Practical revenue generation strategies that focuses more on the formation of strategic alliances, cooperation to boost chances of getting business opportunities through different streams. Respondents highlighted that given the restrictions per venue in terms of public gatherings, alliances make it easier to distribute business across centres for one individual function that may be virtually connected. Information management, coordination and collaborations are integral during crisis. The strategy concurs with the submissions of Ho and Sia (2020) who outlined till the pandemic is over, MICE operators must focus on small lucrative MICE events.

Cost management focus - With the suppressed demand and reduced capacity utilisation, cost management focus calling for a review of both fixed and variable costs. Streamlining costs through adoption of the 'Triple R' model - Reducing, Removing and Re-align are critical practical strategies that should be implemented. Re-negotiations and new leases, insurances costs, royalties and remittances, and contracts that are in line with the new business and operational dynamics is key. Retrenchments are part of the strategy on labour costs, while adopting a few fixed staff component and majority being engaged based on business activity on fixed term, casual labour with flexible contracts while hourly rates should be implemented to ensure revenue and costs are matched consistently.

4.3.2.6. Technology

Technology adoption is key in managing pandemics.

Respondent 2 – *'With the fourth industrial revolution aboard, MICE stakeholders have an overriding obligation to invest massively in the adoption of new technologies. ICT platforms such as Zoom, Facebook, YouTube, Google and Skype as well as the use of new technologies in public facilities such as automatic sanitizers and new cleaning machines to help us to be at par with global trends'*

As Hall *et al.*, (2020) outlined that technology can do many tasks in the fight against COVID-19, such as online education, tracking contacts, screening travelers and even discovering of COVID-19 Cases, private sector can actually coalesce and push government to review policies on importation and costs of acquiring these technologies in order to boost adoption. Malaysia introduced 'Technology Innovation Sandbox' strategy to push for innovation and technology adoption (Ho & Sia, 2020). Rwanda's MICE sector quickly adapted to the COVID-19 pressure as they had years of massive investments in ICT infrastructure. Trending technologies are important in the hosting of Virtual and Hybrid in navigating the business landscape during

pandemics. Innovation, robotics, automation and Artificial Intelligence for MICE Tourism are critical imperative technologies for adoption in the face of global pandemics (Ivanov *et al.*, 2020; Assaf & Scuderi, 2020; Thomas & Chopra, 2020; Hall, 2020).

4.3.3. Academia and research institutes

There is minimal attention being given to the global and local impact of coronavirus disease on the MICE industry (Aburumman, 2020, p.2). In Zimbabwe, there is limited literature on this, over a year later after the manifestation on this pandemic, with few researches having been undertaken for tourism in general. Six respondents recommended that ZTA lacks the precision and swiftness needed in gathering information, conduct timeous scientific research and process it quickly for the benefit of stakeholders. They recommended an independent privately owned MICE research institute, that can be named for example 'Centre for MICE Business Research' (CMBR). Sigala (2020) submitted that the Covid-19 pandemic could be a transformational opportunity for researches in tourism considering a myriad of challenges caused by this pandemic with a rethinking on research priorities and topics. Brouder (2020) notes the pandemic as an opportunity for many writers to provide a new direction to review the whole tourism system to make it focus on sustainable tourism.

4.3.4. Tourism international partners

Global pandemics demand global responses and global strategies. The Zimbabwean MICE industry cannot swim and make it alone. International networks are a must for any local copying mechanism. The Zimbabwean government through the Ministry of Climate Change, Hospitality and Tourism, and through the DMO, should, on a continuous basis forge strategic partnerships and enhance global networks and cooperation with international tourism and non-tourism players like the UNWTO, SADC, and African Union among others. This helps in getting periodic updates on cases and strategies as well as strategic direction from a global perspective. Strategy benchmarking will be key, so that Zimbabwe benefits from global think tanks.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to make an assessment of the impact of COVID 19 on the MICE Industry in Zimbabwe. In conclusion, COVID 19 affected Zimbabwe's MICE industry both positively and negatively giving hope that despite challenges brought by pandemics, development and adoption of right strategies will ensure continued survival of the MICE sector.

5.1. Limitations and future research

Although the study provides insights on the impacts of COVID-19 on the Zimbabwean MICE industry, the results must be treated with caution, as the pandemic remains a moving target. The study focused on Victoria Falls, Harare, Bulawayo and Kariba, there is need for a balanced national research. More research can be done incorporating other stakeholders such as Tourists/Customers, and lower level stakeholders as this research focused on getting insights from Executives in the MICE industry.

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