



OPERATING IN A DISRUPTED ENVIRONMENT: LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract:

The study, which sought to find out the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to the business operations of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, and the lessons thereof, adopted the interpretive paradigm, a qualitative approach and a case study design. Data was collected from a sample of 30 purposively selected SME owners using electronic semi-structured and physically distributed questionnaires. Data were thematically analysed. The study found that the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic included restrictions on physical movements and face-to-face interaction; loss of revenue; failure to operate businesses in a disruptive environment and changes in consumption patterns. The lessons derived from the pandemic were that SMEs need to embrace technology and should be innovative and creative; the need for networking and the need to study the environment and adapt accordingly. The study thus concluded that despite the disruptions caused by the pandemics, there were lessons derived from the experiences. The implications provided by the study were that SMEs should acquire new technologies and new skills for doing business; seek guidance from mobile service providers; work in partnership with bigger companies so as to copy best practice; be creative and innovative and re-adjust strategies in order to adapt quickly. Policymakers should disseminate information to SMEs on the environmental challenges that they are likely to face.

Keywords: pandemic, coronavirus, disruption, innovation, adjust, environment

1. Introduction

Plagues and pandemics have occurred throughout human history but the seriousness of COVID-19 caught people by surprise (Waltner-Toews, 2020). The Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic provided a rude awakening all over the world. Most businesses did not for-see the COVID-19 pandemic coming and the disruption that it would cause and yet it

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has changed the business landscape as businesses have to adjust and adapt to the environment termed 'the new normal'. Sheth (2020) concurs that the lockdown and social distancing necessary to combat the COVID-19 virus, has generated significant disruptions in consumer behaviour and caused massive income losses. According to Makaroun, Bachrach, & Rosland (2020), the disruption by the COVID-19 pandemic has forced businesses to see opportunities that they were unaware of, and have had to transform business models and implement new technologies to support their businesses.

2. Background of the study

According to Jefferson (2020), it is alleged that the COVID-19 virus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology as early as October 2019. The disease outbreak was recorded on 12 December 2019. By 12 July 2020, over 560 000 deaths, and over 12,5 million cases had been attributed to it and rising. The same author further asserts that in many countries, preparedness and speed of responses were inadequate.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the business environment. According to Badenhorst, Cant, Cronje, du Toit, Erasmus, Grobler, Kruger, Machado, Marais, Marx, Strydom & Mpofo (2006:115):

"...the business environment refers to all those factors or variables, both inside and outside the business organisation, which may influence the continued and successful existence of the business organisation or the internal and external factors that impact on the business organisation, and that largely determine its success. Together they form a complex dynamic business environment where change in the environmental variables continually determines the success or failure of a business."

As has been alluded to, the environment and the business depend on each other (Badenhorst et al., 2006), and any disruption in the environment is likely to have a negative impact on the business. Gregurec, Furjan and Tomicve-Pupek (2021) assert that businesses have been exposed to various challenges during the global pandemic, and their response to this disruption has impacted their resilience as well as their chances to overcome this crisis. Disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were experienced at various levels. Most businesses regardless of their sizes succumbed to the effects of COVID-19. Most of the SMEs in the services and retail industries were directly hit, had fewer resources and were not even insured. Formal and informal industries were operating at low or no capacity due to the lockdown which made them less viable. This disruption generally meant a loss of income and possible loss of employment for people who relied on these sectors. Although some industries have shown a certain level of resilience or even found a new operating niche, most SMEs have had to adjust to the new normal. The negative impacts of the pandemic have been reported in all spheres of life and have had economic, political, social and psychological consequences. Chitsamatanga

& Malinga (2021) concur that the pandemic added to the country's macroeconomic challenges such as the high inflation rate, unstable exchange rate and unemployment.

According to a study conducted in Zimbabwe to assess the COVID-19 related disruptions in the food environment by Murendo, Manyanga, Mafungautsi and Dube (2021), food consumption behaviours changed during the COVID-19 lockdown. The changes in food-related habits were associated with a reduction in eating out at restaurants (89%) and ordering fast foods (71%). Food stocks were depleted in shops due to disruptions in the transportation of goods and services induced by lockdown restrictions. Late deliveries were noted as it took longer for haulage trucks to get cleared at the points of entry. Murendo et al. (2021), further assert that respondents indicated a generally high level of anxiety and uncertainty about future food supply and availability. Where individuals became anxious, panic buying and hoarding became the cycle of instinctive behaviour and these disrupted the food supply chains and were evidence of the anticipatory nature of respondents to enable coping in the event of a total lockdown. These behaviours exerted an uncharacteristically high demand on the supply chain leading to a depletion of food stocks in some supply shops.

3. Statement of the problem

One thing that the history of pandemics has taught us is that more pandemics should be expected and we should always be prepared (Waltner-Toews, 2020). The tendency is that once a pandemic has subsided; people just let it pass like any other disease. However, taking into cognisance, the catastrophe the COVID-19 pandemic caused globally, there is a need for mankind to have derived some lessons from the disease. The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have futuristic implications. The business environment continues to be unpredictable, requiring businesses irrespective of size, to readjust, and realign themselves to the requirements of the new normal or a total renewal. Mahmood and Sanchez (2020), assert that one of the lessons learnt from COVID-19 is that contemporary societies are able to act with 'necessary force' when required and Jefferson (2020) argues that COVID-19 is going to be with us for some time. Lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic have not been extensively analysed in the context of SMEs in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province in Zimbabwe. This study, therefore, sought to establish lessons that SMEs in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe derived from the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in order to hedge against future pandemics. These invaluable lessons from the COVID-19 era are expected to help business owners, leaders and governments to come up with strategies to mitigate the impacts of future pandemics and crises so as not to experience the same scale of pandemic-related disruption and destruction in the future.

4. Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

- To ascertain the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of Small and Medium Enterprises in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe.
- To find out the lessons derived from the COVID-19 pandemic by Small and Medium Enterprises in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe.
- To determine the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the future operations of Small and Medium Enterprises in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe.

5. Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a lot of destruction on its trail, but, as with every crisis, there is always room for optimism and lessons to be learnt. The pandemic has presented on a global scale, both an economic and health catastrophe. The wisdom and lessons gleaned from this pandemic could influence all aspects of business and life for years to come.

5.1 Disruptions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic

Over 314 million cases and over 5.5 million deaths had been recorded since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic as of 12 January 2022 with cases per million people ranging from 7410 in Africa to 131,730 in Europe. On the other hand, deaths per million population ranged from 110 in Oceania to 2740 in South America (Assefa, Gilks, Reid, van de Pas, Dereje Gedle & Van Damme, 2022). The world has experienced similar epidemics in the past, some of which include the Swine flu, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Ebola, the Zika virus and many more. However, it is evident that COVID-19 is nothing like these previous health crises in terms of its devastation on the global economic and health systems. It is also logical to assume that COVID-19 will not be the last global epidemic (Eklund, 2021; Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

The coronavirus has presented a global health and economic crisis like never experienced before, severely affecting societies in all aspects of life, crippling economies, increasing unemployment and further widening the divide between the rich and the poor. According to the World Bank (2020) estimates, the pandemic will push approximately 40–60 million people globally into extreme levels of poverty. In line with the World Bank (2020) estimates, the sub-Saharan African region is expected to lose between US\$37 billion and US\$79 billion in output losses through government control measures to cover COVID-19 related costs. The region is also forecasted to experience its first-ever recession over a period of 25 years as the virus brings the whole world into a recession.

The Corona Virus Pandemic came and caused massive disruption in supply chains globally (Kumar, Luthra, Kumar Mangla & Kazançoğlu, 2020; Buff, 2022). Due to the outbreak of the virus, several industries suffered from a severe decline in the demand for their products. Meanwhile, demand for COVID-19 related products such as thermal scanners, ventilators, face masks, sanitizers, personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as essential food items skyrocketed. Many businesses either failed to access raw materials or supplies did not arrive timeously (Kumar et al., 2020). The disease has caused an incalculable negative impact on national economies. However, not all countries, industries and companies were affected equally. Companies in the non-essential services sector were affected the most, while some companies in the essential services sector experienced a surge in sales and profits. Both these positive and negative impacts were experienced within a short space of time, in a matter of months after the outbreak of the virus. Oil, gas, travel, transportation, hospitality, entertainment, automobile, real estate, construction and sports are some examples of sectors that were hit the hardest by the outbreak of the virus (Podstupka, 2020). Sectors that required the physical presence of patrons faced the brunt of the pandemic (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020).

5.2 Challenges faced by small businesses: empirical evidence

Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen, Glaeser & Stanton (2020) carried out a survey in the United States of America (USA) on the early effects of the coronavirus, investigating how small businesses were adjusting to the COVID-19 outbreak. The survey data was collected between March and April 2020 on 5800 small businesses. The findings revealed that 43% of businesses had closed temporarily, employee numbers had been reduced significantly by 40%, and the majority of businesses were financially fragile with less than a month of cash reserves on hand.

A survey of European SMEs, from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK, conducted by McKinsey & Company, revealed that the revenues of 42% of the SMEs that took part in the study were somewhat reduced, whilst 29% experienced a sharp decrease in their income at the beginning of COVID-19, 28% of SME participants showed concerns over the hindrance of growth initiatives and lastly 11% anticipated bankruptcy due to the pandemic (Dimson, Mladenov, Sharma & Tadjeddine, 2020).

In India, Pravakar & Ashwani (2020) conducted a study on the impact of COVID-19. The authors concluded that the MSME sector was dismally affected. The lockdown affected small firms in terms of both demand and supply. The lockdown disrupted the supply chain by affecting the importing of raw materials, hence making it difficult for small businesses to survive. A study by Butt (2022), was conducted in China on what firms were doing and needed to do to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The study highlighted that there had been massive disruption to the business operations and firms' supply chains as well as adverse effects on both firms and the consumer. The virus outbreak led to businesses failing to operate at par.

Engidaw (2022) conducted a study on the challenges faced by small businesses in Ethiopia. The findings showed that many small businesses faced extreme difficulties

operating during the crisis and many had collapsed. The lack of government support and funding further exacerbated these challenges compared to small businesses operating in countries whose governments provided financial aid to businesses. Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) confirm that some countries with the financial muscle managed to provide businesses with financial aid in order to help them keep their workforce intact, while others with less financial strength could not do the same.

In Kenya, Schmid, Raju & Jensen (2021), in a study on COVID-19 and business continuity discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread disruption to businesses regardless of the organizational size or sector. This disruption left the majority of organizations scrambling to implement reactive, partial and survival-focused efforts. The findings showed that SMEs were particularly affected due to their lack of preparedness caused by limited resources and short-term planning.

Chirume & Kaseke (2020) conducted a study on the impact of COVID-19 on SMEs in Zimbabwe. Their findings highlighted that the effects of the pandemic were more severe for SMEs because of financial limitations compared to bigger companies. SMEs struggled to continue business operations under the COVID-19 environment whereby restrictions and measures to curb the spread of the virus had financial implications.

5.3 Lessons derived from the pandemic: empirical evidence

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly left many lessons for all and sundry, but specifically SMEs. From an economic perspective, businesses across the globe will take what they have learned from the year 2020 and better equip themselves to handle similar future scenarios. Some of the business lessons derived from the pandemic include the following:

5.3.1 Leveraging technology and innovation

Small businesses across the world have relied on the internet in order to remain afloat during the pandemic (Engidaw, 2022). The COVID-19 period also increased social media adoption by small businesses which have helped them in evaluating the behaviour and consumption patterns of their customers (Kumar et al., 2020). The advent of the Corona Virus Disease has more than emphasized the need for digitalization, cybersecurity, flattening organisational structures as well as shorter decision-making lines to enable quick decision-making during unfamiliar times (Schmid, Raju & Jensen, 2021; Eklund, 2021) The pandemic has indeed taken the role of an innovation accelerator. Countries, business organisations as well as individuals have been forced to leverage modern technology and innovation. Such innovations are not anticipated to end with the COVID-19 pandemic (Prakash Narain, Sodani & Kant, 2021). The likelihood that entrepreneurship in the post-pandemic era will further amalgamate with the digital economy is very high. For example, the presence of small businesses and entrepreneurs on social media and other digital platforms selling their products and services will only escalate (Belitski, Guenther, Kritikos Thurik, 2022).

5.3.2 The need for government support

In the advent of the Corona Virus outbreak, many developed countries announced that they would provide significant monetary assistance to SMEs. However, SMEs from emerging and developing markets were provided with very little or no financial aid at all (Markovic, Koporic, Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, Kadic-Maglajlic, Bagherzadeh & Islam, 2021). Significant and timely financial support from the government is vital in helping SMEs from emerging markets find innovative solutions for COVID-19 related problems, (Markovic et al., 2021). However, emerging markets lack the resources necessary for dealing with crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, hence resulting in a slow and inefficient reaction by the government to the crisis.

5.3.3 Collaborations and partnerships

A qualitative study by Markovic et al. (2021) on COVID-19 lessons for small and medium-sized enterprises from emerging markets conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, reveals that SMEs were forced to cope with the COVID-19 crisis by collaborating with business partners after failing to collaborate with their government. Other business partners unlike the government, were able to provide relevant resources timeously. The same study reveals that partnerships with competition became imminent for some SMEs that were badly hit by the pandemic. This also required higher levels of innovation in order to be successful. Despite the risks involved in collaborating with competition, findings reveal that SMEs have embraced this by relying on each other, offering additional support and being closer in their interactions. Such collaboration not only provides SMEs with the necessary resources but may also present an opportunity to use the resources with more agility than when obtaining them from other business partners, thereby, turning competitors into key external partners for innovation during crises. Collaborations do not seem to have been only an ad-hoc survival strategy in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is quite likely that most SMEs will continue to embrace innovation and strategic partnerships even post COVID-19 (Markovic et al., 2021).

5.3.4 Growth of online businesses

As lockdowns were introduced across the globe, most business sectors were badly affected, though others flourished, However, some managed to convert their businesses from purely brick and mortar to online offering home deliveries as consumer movement was inhibited. Businesses that turned online managed to survive the brunt of the lockdowns. According to Jayakumar, Brohi & Zaman (2020), in Malaysia, many online delivery businesses emerged, as ordinary people got creative with business offerings such as food delicacies, and homegrown fruits and vegetables. Hand-made accessories amongst many others became a source of income while abiding by the COVID-19 lockdown regulations. In the post-COVID-19 era, agile and adaptable businesses should be able to exploit their entrepreneurial orientation and identify business opportunities in the mayhem caused by the global pandemic (Zahra, 2020). Dynamic capabilities (DC) as

well as resilience will be the differentiating factor between the survival and failure of small businesses and entrepreneurs.

5.3.5 Working from home

Due to the COVID-19 induced lockdowns, a work from home (WFH) policy was birthed where employees resumed work from the comfort of their homes whose main requirement is the availability of Internet connectivity. This proved indeed that working from home is actually possible and can be done comfortably, successfully and with convenience (Jayakumar, Brohi & Zaman, 2020). Although it was received with mixed feelings pertaining to employees' productivity, working from home appears to be an opportunity that can actually improve the performance of small businesses amidst the crises caused by the pandemic. Working from home should not be approached with resentment and anxiety about the future (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). Small businesses and individual entrepreneurs can develop new business models by adjusting to new business conditions such as working from home in order to leverage the drastic impact of the pandemic (Belitski et al., 2022).

5.3.6 Moving supply chains closer to home

The pandemic resulted in the closure of borders at a global level, insinuating that the threat is from the outside. Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) posit that it is highly likely that firms will rethink their supply chains and possibly move supply chains closer to home where to avoid glitches in operations or stoppage in production in the case of similar pandemics in the future.

6. Methodology

The study adopted the interpretive paradigm, through a qualitative approach and a case study design to establish disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons derived from the experiences of businesses, particularly SME owners in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province. This crucial information could be used for the benefit of SMEs to increase their chances of survival in similar future crises or pandemics.

The authors deemed a qualitative approach as most appropriate for this study so as to gather rich data from the respondents in their natural settings. This is in line with the opinions of Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016), who cite that a researcher must be immersed in the phenomenon under study and gather in-depth and detailed data which provide a description of events, situations and interactions between people and things. The COVID-19 pandemic is still a contemporary phenomenon, hence necessitating the adoption of a case study design where rich in-depth data could be obtained. This is supported by Yin (1993), who states that a case study is an empirical inquiry that aims to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context.

The research instruments used in this study entailed questionnaires with both open-ended and semi-structured questions, hence enabling the researchers to collect

descriptive qualitative data from SME owners who had experienced the disruptions of the pandemic first-hand. The responses to the open-ended questions were captured verbatim so as to fully understand participants' experiences of the pandemic.

The researchers adopted both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. According to Cooper and Schindler (2008), in purposive sampling, the selection of research participants is done in an arbitrary manner on the basis of their unique characteristics, experiences or perceptions while in snowball sampling, participants are referred by those respondents that have been purposively selected. The sample comprised 30 SME owners operating in different business sectors as shown in Table 1.

Prior to the actual data collection, a pilot study was conducted on five randomly selected SME owners, so as to eliminate any ambiguity and ensure that the questions were simple and easy to understand. The results from the pilot study proved that the instrument was both credible and unambiguous, and then actual data collection commenced.

Data was collected in full regard for ethical considerations. The purpose of the study was made known to all research participants and respondents took part in the study freely and willingly. Non-disclosure of respondents' identities was observed through coding, participants were given codes such as SME 1, SME 2 up to 30 in order to conceal their identities.

7. Results and Discussion

The results of the study are presented and discussed under the appropriate objectives and themes. Similar sentiments expressed by SMEs in Retail, Agriculture and Transport were put together.

7.1 Objective 1: To ascertain the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic on the operations of Small and Medium Enterprises in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province

Participants were asked how the pandemic had disrupted their business operations. The following themes emerged from the findings: restrictions on physical movements and face-to-face interaction, loss of revenue, lack of entrepreneurial skills to run businesses in a disruptive environment and changes in consumption patterns.

7.1.1 Restrictions on physical movements and face-to-face interaction

Most of the participants disclosed that it was difficult to move during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, they had challenges with customers reaching their premises.

When asked whether they were able to conduct their businesses from their premises, the following answers were given:

SMEs 2, 3, 19 & 20 in the retail sector remarked as follows:

"Borders were closed. We could not go out of the country to buy goods. We were always out of stock. We had to rely on runner boys who would also be delayed at border posts for days and that resulted in a loss of revenue."

Sahoo, Ashwani & Pravakar (2020) and Kumar et al. (2020) corroborate these findings, highlighting that businesses were affected by both domestic and international lockdowns hence limiting their ability to import raw materials and intermediates because of disrupted supply chains.

7.1.2 Loss of revenue

What emerged from the findings was that due to the pandemic, there was a decline in income for most businesses as shown in the remarks that follow.

SMEs 6, 11, 13 & 18 in the transport sector had this to say:

"Our income was drastically reduced as a result of reduced demand."

SME 5 affirmed:

"I sell gas to domestic users and due to travel restrictions, I suffered severe loss of revenue partly due to delays in delivery or none at all."

These results are in line with those by Podstupka (2020) who also reported a disruption in the supply of gas during the pandemic. These findings also resonate with those by Kumar et al (2020) and Butt (2022) that industries suffered from a severe decline in the demand for their products and a delay in the arrival of supplies and ultimately a loss in revenue.

The results of the study also show that revenue nosedived for most SMEs in non-essential services as confirmed by the statement that follows.

"There were very few customers who patronised our shops. As a result, my revenue dwindled 7." (SME)

Such findings confirm experiences that due to the pandemic, there was revenue loss (Dimson et al., 2020) and financial fragility (Bartik, et al., 2020).

On the other hand, as a result of lack of face to interaction, some businesses had to close as confirmed by the statement that follows.

"At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most SMEs had to be completely closed." (SME 1)

"I run a personal body care service. There was no way I could operate without face-to-face interaction." (SME 15)

These findings corroborate those by Donthu & Gustafsson (2020), that sectors that required the physical presence of patrons faced the brunt of the pandemic and that some SMEs collapsed (Engidaw, 2022).

7.1.3 Lack of skills to run businesses in this type of environment

Results revealed that some of the disruptions were a result of not knowing how to conduct business in such an environment. This was shown by the following responses. affirmed:

"I found it extremely difficult to operate in such an environment because I am used to operating my business where everything is normal." (SME 9)

"I have never experienced COVID-19 before. Some customers were saying that I should buy and sell online. So, I didn't even know what to do." (SME 8)

"If only I had the skills to operate in times of such diseases, I would not have had such problems." (SME 4)

7.1.4 Change in consumption patterns

The pandemic meant that consumption from eating places such as restaurants and eating houses was banned. People were only allowed to buy food and prepare it at home. The remarks cited below to confirm the disruptions caused by this.

"I operate a restaurant and people were not allowed to eat from eating places of whatever form." (SME 21)

"My spaza shop had to be closed throughout the COVID-19 lockdown." (SME 24)

These results are consistent with those by Donthu and Gustafsson (2020), that sectors that required the physical presence of patrons faced the wrath of the pandemic and that those businesses in non-essential services were affected the most (Kumar, et al., 2020).

On the contrary, SMEs in essential services indicated that they experienced a surge in sales and profits. These sentiments were captured from the following SMEs: 10, 21, 29, and 27 in agriculture.

"We experienced a boom in sales as our customers demanded door-to-door service deliveries."

These findings corroborate the findings of Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) and Jayakumar, Brohi, & Zaman (2020), who highlight that while some businesses were

struggling, others were thriving particularly internet-based businesses such as online shopping, online entertainment, food delivery and other delivery services.

7.2 To find out the lessons derived from the COVID-19 pandemic by Small and Medium Enterprises in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province

As previously alluded to, SMEs were undeniably affected by the disruptive environment characteristic of the COVID-19 pandemic but when looked at from a more positive perspective, there were lessons which the entrepreneurs derived from the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.2.1 Embrace technology

Lessons are espoused in the verbatim statements that follow. SME 16 in the non-essential service:

“Every difficult situation results in lessons. I learnt that I should move onto new ways of doing business, such as, using WhatsApp for buying and selling and for advertising my products and services.”

SME 23 had this to say:

“I had to conduct my consultancy sessions online.”

SME 12 & 14 in the Marketing Agency echoed similar sentiments by saying:

“We had to resort to online platforms as medium of communication, for, example, Video calls and Zoom in some cases.”

SMEs 10, 26 & 29 made the following statements:

“In situations where movement is banned and customers have to stay at home. For us to survive, we had to think of other ways to do business. We had no choice but to use smartphones to do our business.”

SME 22's lesson was as follows:

“I have learnt that I should think of alternative ways of communication with my customers, such as using social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook.”

What emerged from this study is similar to the findings by Engidaw (2022) that small businesses had to rely on the internet to remain afloat.

7.2.2 Creativity and innovation

SMEs 17, 30 & 25 made the following remarks:

“The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a change on how we do business. We need to be creative and innovative.”

SMEs 17, 18, & 27 summed up the lessons as follows:

“The pandemic taught them to adapt and adopt new ways of doing business and that companies should digitise, be more online than ever before.”

These results resonate with those of Schmidt et al. (2021) & Belitski et al. (2022), who emphasized the need for digitalisation to do business and for quick decision-making.

7.2.3 The need to network

SME 28 had this to say:

“I have learnt that I should network so that I get to know what is happening around from others.”

SME 27 affirmed:

“Some of us have this tendency of keeping to ourselves. Small businesses have to learn to increase relationships so as to share information.”

The need to collaborate in times of pandemics was also suggested by Markovic et al. (2021). Donthu & Gustafsson (2020) concur with these findings as they highlight the need for a partnership strategy through collaborating with other businesses that were less affected by the pandemic.

7.2.4 The need to study the environment

SME 30 had this to say:

“Time has come for us to think of how we will continue in business if this disease does not go away. We have to assess ourselves; what we are capable of doing and what skills we need to acquire in order to survive in this environment.”

These results emphasize the need for small businesses to acquire skills that will help them conduct their businesses even if there are pandemics.

8. Conclusion

It is evident from the findings that while businesses suffered an onslaught from the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that there are some businesses in operation shows that SMEs in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe derived valuable lessons from the pandemic which they have implemented to remain operational. This points to future sustainability in the event of future pandemics. The research assists the SMEs on how to continue with businesses since it appears COVID-19 is likely to remain with us as the virus keeps mutating.

9. Future implications

Based on the findings of the study, the implications for SMEs in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe is that they should:

- acquire new technologies and new skills of doing business and seek guidance from mobile service providers.
- work in partnership even with bigger companies so as to copy best practice.
- be creative and innovative.
- re-adjust strategies in order to adapt quickly.
- policymakers should disseminate information to SMEs on environmental challenges that they are likely to face.

10. Areas for further research

Since the current study used a small sample, it is recommended that a quantitative study with a bigger sample size be conducted in the Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Zimbabwe so that the results can be generalised to the rest of the country.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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