

Change Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of a Major South African Hotels, Gaming, and Entertainment Group

Farai NYIKA¹
Stacy DAVID-SOOBRAMONEY²
Sindisiwe NZIMANDE³

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality industry comprises a broad array of service offerings such as accommodation, restaurants, bars, and entertainment (cinemas, concerts, theatres, casinos, amusement parks), among others. As a significant contributor to the tourism GDP of the South African economy, this once thriving sector experienced an unprecedented and devastating impact in 2020 due to the onset of the global pandemic (COVID-19). This paper explores a major South African gaming, hotels, and entertainment group's (Sun International) organisational performance, with specific emphasis on its Gauteng based properties. The purpose of the research was to understand the organisational shifts in business strategies, financial planning, marketing realignments, and employee behaviour among other changes to the operational environment in enduring the effects of the pandemic. The paper adopted a qualitative research approach using a non-probability sampling technique. Data was collected from a sample of ten participants using semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The participants were chosen from various departments and comprised permanent senior management employees of Sun International. The findings showed that Sun International changed its business strategy in response to the pandemic with respect to how it treated internal staff and external guests. The group also adapted its cost management, marketing, and communication strategy. Finally, Sun International has restructured its business with resilience and sustainability in mind, to be in a better position to weather future crises.

KEYWORDS: *hospitality, crisis management, tourism, South Africa, COVID-19.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *M10, M310.*

1. INTRODUCTION

During 2019, more than 10 million people visited South Africa and stayed in the then 63 000 available hotel beds around the country – and spent R27bn spent on hotels alone (Business Insider, 2020). As a direct consequence of the global COVID-19 pandemic, less than 5 million visitor arrivals were recorded in 2020 – a 71% decline compared to 2019 (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Many South African industries were negatively affected by the pandemic, with the tourism sector being the hardest hit. South Africa's tourism and hospitality sector was a significant contributor to job creation and to the overall economic GDP of the country (South African Government, 2022). Since the onset of the global pandemic, many industries have been negatively impacted globally, arguably the tourism sector being the hardest hit. Tourism products such as hotels, restaurants, car hire and entertainment-based activities such as restaurants, theatres, casinos, etc. were greatly reliant on travel to ensure their sustainability and profitability. The pandemic had a significant

¹ MANCOSA, Durban, South Africa, farai.nyika@mancosa.co.za, Corresponding author

² MANCOSA, Durban, South Africa

³ MANCOSA, Durban, South Africa

impact on Sun International, a major South African Hotels, Gaming and Entertainment Group for the year ended December 2020, with a combined loss of over R1 billion (Martin, 2021). The slow economic recovery for both the casinos and hotels and the significant decline in corporate and business travel to Sandton and Tshwane as business hubs of the province, compounded losses even further.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how the pandemic adjusted Sun International's business strategy, how Sun International managed the changes in their operating environment and analyse the strategies they used to resist the negative economic impact of the pandemic. Sun International had been recognised as one of largest tourism and hospitality entities in the sector, many properties situated in the Gauteng province, the focus area of this study. The study's research question is: how did Sun International use change management strategies to survive the harsh economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

We use a qualitative case study research approach (semi-structured interviews) to answer our research question. Firstly, we find that though Sun International was forced to reduce worker salaries, the group focused on ensuring the well-being of their employees by accommodating various requests, being flexible in working schedules and paying workers more frequently. Secondly, Sun International focused on ensuring the financial stability of the organisation by renegotiating long term supplier agreements and shifting to personalised, cost effective digital marketing methods that targeted a loyal customer base. Finally, we find that the group's diverse product offerings were effective in keeping the group financially afloat as the online gambling division grew during the lockdown when hotels and physical casinos were shut down.

While some scholars have focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the South African tourism industry in general with their focus being on how negatively the crisis was for businesses in general (e.g., Bama & Nyikana, 2022; Dube, 2021; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022), our focus is on understanding how Sun International managed to navigate through this period of great change. Given the limited literature available on change management in tourism and hospitality in South Africa, this study will also contribute to addressing the literature deficit. This study is related to Booyens et al., (2022) who focus on crisis management responses of small tourism firms - our focus is on a large tourism firm.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant changes to the hospitality and tourism industry, making change management crucial for adaptation. The industry has faced challenges such as unprecedented economic and regulatory issues, high employee turnover, and the need to address guest and employee needs while operating within a budget (Japutra & Situmorang, 2021; Booyens et al., 2022). The pandemic has also led to a shift in the hospitality industry's organisational culture, with a move away from mass tourism towards a more customer-oriented approach and intensified competition and cooperation with other enterprises and institutions (Moodley & Naidoo, 2022; Kakaroukas et al., 2023). Change management in the hospitality industry involves preparing for unforeseen challenges, adapting to emerging trends, and focusing on changes in customer experience (Kolar, 2023). It also requires a flexible approach to operations and continuous market analysis to ensure that establishments are equipped to weather future storms.

In the post-pandemic phase, crisis management in the tourism and hospitality industry has shifted towards recovery, resilience, destination marketing, and sustainable practices (Hajilo et al., 2023). The resilience of the tourism sector is highly linked to crisis management, which is essential for resetting the industry and implementing measures aimed at preparedness and planning (Aldao et al., 2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been sustained, leading to a need for crisis management practices to navigate the ongoing challenges (Permatasari & Mahyuni, 2022). The pandemic has caused a significant reduction in the demand for tourism, affecting the revenue of businesses and local economies, and has also led to disruptions in the utilisation of tourism resources. Additionally, the pandemic has affected the hospitality industry, the transportation industry, and the income of individuals working in the tourism and hospitality sector (Arlou, 2023).

The uncertainty of economic recovery and the continuous spread of COVID-19 have posed significant challenges to the industry, making crisis management and resilience crucial for the survival and sustainable recovery of tourism businesses (Chang & Wu, 2021). If there is one major tourism lesson learnt from the pandemic, it is how to manage and learn to deal with a crisis. Issues that organisations need to address include, but are not limited to (dealing with a workforce, cost control, marketing destination post-crisis (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Kukanja et al., 2020; Yeh, 2021). We acknowledge that different-sized tourism firms may be affected and react to crisis in different ways.

The tourism industry has been recovering post-pandemic through a combination of adaptive strategies, government support, and a focus on sustainable practices (Hajilo et al., 2023). Diversification, shifting to more sustainable tourism models, and investing in new technologies have helped shape the recovery (Babii & Nadeem, 2021). Governments have provided financial support to ease the economic shock for households and businesses, and technology has played an important role in the recovery process, with touchless service delivery and enhanced hygiene protocols likely to remain in place (Babii & Nadeem, 2021). The pandemic has also led to a shift in consumer behaviour, with tourists choosing safer and more sustainable travel destinations, thereby impacting the business models and strategies of stakeholders in the tourism and hospitality industry (Ivy Panda, 2023). As the industry adapts to the post-pandemic environment, it is crucial to create a new normal that ensures long-term growth and resilience, driving growth in emerging markets and regions (OECD, 2023).

2.1 Managing change in the tourism industry: change, resilience, and transformation

The tourism industry has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a need for change, resilience, and transformation. According to the OECD (2020), rebuilding the tourism economy requires structural change, resilience, and transformation to build a stronger and more sustainable industry. A resilience-based framework for reviving the global tourism industry post-COVID-19 has been proposed, emphasising the need for resilience, sustainable tourism, and transformation into a new global economic order (Sharma et al., 2021).

The concept of resilience in the tourism ecosystem is underdeveloped, and there is a need to understand and build systemic resilience to address both exogenous shocks and endogenous weaknesses (OECD, 2022). The pandemic has also created an opportunity to reset tourism and promote more sustainable and resilient practices (Pocinho et al., 2021). Additionally, the concept of resilience in tourism has been linked to the transformation into sustainable tourism to build resilience in the face of challenges, as highlighted by a bibliometric analysis (Lamour et al., 2023). To deal with mammoth changes and crises, the tourism industry must show

resilience. Hence, the resilience of destinations, organisations, and tourists alike is suggested as an important area for research and practice (Prayag, 2020). Several scholars (e.g., Brouder, 2020; Lapointe, 2020; Melián-Alzola et al., 2020) discuss several antecedents and capabilities (e.g., strategy and change management) to build resilience; However, studies exploring resilience have focused only on large organisations ignoring the small or family businesses.

The scale of tourism and the rate of change are the two dimensions that are related to the SCR model. Utilising the scale, change, and resilience paradigm is one approach to conceive change (Ketter, 2022). On the scale of tourism, the change's effects are either more localised and concentrate primarily on the industry, or they are more widespread and affect all members of the community as well as stakeholders, the environment, and social, political, and economic factors. The rate of change might range from a gradual shift brought on by small stresses to a quick shock brought on by terror acts or natural disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Four distinct scenarios can be developed by using these two dimensions as the points of a matrix: (a) slow change affecting the tourism industry; (b) slow change affecting the host community; (c) sudden change affecting the tourism sector; and (d) sudden change affecting the host community (Cheer & Lew, 2018). A few of the major low factors affecting tourism are changes in the macroeconomic environment, demographic shifts, and climate change. Natural disasters, geopolitical upheavals, terrorist attacks, shifts in consumer tastes, and disruptions brought on by new technologies are a few examples of rapid changes (Hartman, 2018).

2.2 Effects of change management on hospitality industry employees

“Change management involves two main parts—an engineering approach for enhancing corporate performance and a psychological approach for managing the human side of change” (Radwan, 2022). The discussion so far has focused on the first part of Radwan’s statement, and we now move to discuss how employees were treated and received the wide-ranging changes that occurred during the pandemic. Clear and effective communication from leaders about organisational change to employees, directly impacts how successful the proposed changes will be (Shulga, 2020; Nel, & Van Niekerk, 2023; Qureshi et al., 2024).

Belias et al. (2023) report that the levels of employee motivation significantly impact how employees engage and implement change management in the hospitality sector; this suggests that making large scale changes during times of crisis such as the pandemic, will likely lead to less employee commitment to the process, as the effects of the crisis itself may be overwhelming already.

Khan et al. (2021) explored the correlation between the COVID pandemic as it related to fear and uncertainty with employees in the hospitality sector. That study presented the concerning reality of economic hardship on employees, particularly in service-orientated environments. Whilst most businesses globally encouraged staff to work remotely, it is often unachievable for the majority of staff whose job function were of a physical nature e.g. chefs, maintenance, reception, security etc. staff in this line of work had to invariably continue their responsibilities whilst exercising great care and responsibility ‘in the line of duty’, whilst others had the pure misfortune of not being able to carry out their duties at all - hence having to accept salary reductions due to reduced hours of work. The above phenomenon was applicable to both the hotel and casino sectors where the number of “blue collar” workers (manual and physical duties) outweighs that of “white collar” employees (professional, administrative, and managerial). The prospect of financial disillusionment due to salary

reductions and social stress had been directly attributed to personal and social instability for those employed in this sector (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper followed a qualitative research design with an interpretivist philosophical worldview and the research instrument used was one-on-one semi-structured interviews. The target population comprised of senior management staff members employed at Sun International with a size of 37 in total.

A sample size of ten respondents was purposively selected and interviewed on a one-on-one basis, to understand the developments, criteria, and impacts surrounding decision making around a specific phenomenon, in this instance, the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling was used because the researchers had identified in advance, Sun International leaders who would be best placed to respond to the questions. The researchers accept the limitations of purposive sampling, as it is subjective and ambiguous. However, it would not have made sense to use random sampling because we would have interviewed people who cannot give detailed insights that only senior leaders can give. As this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to sample more than 10 people due to technical and logistical difficulties produced by hard lockdowns restrictions. In addition, the 10 senior managers were spread across Sun International's hotels and casino complexes in Gauteng, ensuring adequate representation. The researchers were satisfied that saturation was reached as the interviews contained open-ended questions and after comparing the received responses, no new insights were being revealed.

The questions were designed to seek answers to the research objectives in a manner that allowed respondents to feel a sense of ownership of the information being shared. The performance in question was not just commercially driven, but sought to understand underlying issues that were both directly and indirectly relevant, such as:

- a) Financial performance.
- b) Brand and reputational performance.
- c) Employees mental and emotional health and overall productivity.
- d) Individual asset performance (hotels vs casinos) and what were the differentiators and why.
- e) Management performance and courage.

The questions were administered through the digital platform, Microsoft Teams, to accommodate and adhere to the COVID-19 protocols. All interview audio recordings were captured for reference and transcription purposes after the interviews.

The first step in the qualitative data analysis was to transcribe the interviews. This was followed by a data cleaning step which included inspecting it, removing ambiguous information, and getting the transcripts ready for the data analysis step. Thematic analysis was used with an inductive approach that allows the transcripts to determine our themes. We then generated codes from words and phrases within the transcripts using different colours. We used these codes to highlight patterns between them, leading to the generation of the themes that are discussed in the following section. This study is limited by its sample size that makes it difficult to generalise its findings.

4. DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

To determine the shifts in Sun International's operating environment and the associated impacts on its internal and external stakeholders, the authors present selected questions posed to respondents, and the responses received.

Question 1: How has the pandemic adjusted Sun International's business strategy in relation to:

a) *Its Community (Internal (Staff) and External (Guests))?*

Participants 6, 9 and 10 indicated that "for staff, the adjusted business strategy meant facing the reopening of its operations with a significantly reduced workforce due to voluntary retrenchments and reduced operational hours imposed by government restrictions. Staff had to acclimatise to fluctuating salaries whenever lockdown restrictions changed".

Participant 6, 9 and 10 for guests, "the adjusted business strategy meant re-engineering the way patrons engaged with the property's offerings (hotels and gaming)". The quantum of slot machines and gaming tables that were made available at any given time – for example, at restricted level three lockdown (a harsher lockdown level), one in every three slot machines was active vs. in lockdown level one (the most flexible lockdown level), every second machine was active.

Participant 8 indicated "for staff there was a significant focus on returning to normal adjusted hours of working, so that staff could return to their full earning capacity. It was also cited that there for guests, that was an increased focus to stay abreast of changes in government regulations to ensure that customer communications and protocols around the Gauteng hotel and casino properties were adequately accommodated for".

Participant 7 highlighted "for staff the need to develop significant changes in staff administration which included being paid fortnightly instead of monthly and borrowing against your salary halfway through the month – interest free".

Participant 7 indicated "for guests, that COVID protocols were key in ensuring safety on the casino floor and sited some of the monumental requirements in Sun International ensuring that the casino floor/s comply with the changing regulations around COVID-19 for example, extensive manpower in moving slot machines, given their size and weight".

Participants 3,4,5,6 indicated "for staff, salary re-adjustments remained the focal point for the company as staff were still operating at 40% of their overall salaries since the start of the pandemic".

Participants 3,4,5,6 indicated "for guests the focus remained ongoing and targeted communications with its customer base, to ensure that they were not only regularly updated regarding COVID compliance and protocol standards but importantly that they continued to feel a high degree of brand engagement during this time to ensure top-of-mind brand awareness and a continued sense of loyalty".

Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 indicated that "for guests, it was the change in the level of value assigned to the local South African guest, regardless of whether they were

consumers of a hotel or casino. It is solely the South African public that have contributed meaningfully to the Gauteng based properties”.

b) Its Business Operations and its suppliers?

Participants 4, 6 and 10 highlighted that the adjusted business strategy compelled a greater degree of cost saving across every aspect of the business – regardless of the function. All participants lauded the way the Gauteng based properties (hotels and casinos), yielded significant operational efficiencies, because of stringent cost reductions without compromising productivity.

All ten participants stated that operational efficiencies were primarily realised through the extensive interrogation of supplier services agreements. Whilst supplier businesses were adversely affected by the pandemic, cost savings for the Gauteng based properties included but were not limited to:

- The extensive reduction in the delivery of core services;
- The termination of all non-essential services;
- Freeze period on long term contracts during periods when the Gauteng based properties were closed due to hard lockdown regulations;
- Stringent interrogation of existing core supplier services to ensure maximum efficiencies.

COVID-19 taught us the importance of safeguarding supply chains from disruptions and severe shocks. Lockdown conditions and demand destruction led to vulnerabilities in backward and forward linkages in supply chains. Sun International benefitted from flexibility in its relationships with its key suppliers such that they were able to renegotiate agreements and pause long-term orders that had been placed in advance. The group had to re-evaluate what supplies it considered to be vital for its core functioning and this led to reduced purchases of goods and services. While decreasing purchases from suppliers negatively supply partners, such decisions were essential to ensure Sun International’s financial stability as a going concern.

c) Its Marketing and Communications Initiatives?

Participants 1, 4, 7, and 10 collectively confirmed that Group X’s marketing and communications initiatives were more targeted and, as a result, more effective. All participants were optimistic about the new booking platform, which has been positively embraced by guests since its launch. Participants also indicated that the deliberate migration of marketing platforms from historical preferences such as above-the-line (television, radio, print, and outdoor) to alternative and direct platforms such as social media had yielded immense savings in its overall marketing spend.

Discussion for Question 1

During the pandemic, tough decisions that affected livelihoods were taken by management at many companies and organisations. These decisions were taken out of necessity, as the pandemic shut down the enterprise, stopping revenue generation and the ability of many businesses to pay salaries. It appears that Group X managed to avoid much greater job shedding than did Tsogo Sun Hotels, South Africa’s largest hotel group (Tsogo cut 1000 jobs in 2020 and reported a R3.3 billion loss) (The Citizen, 2021). Because Group X’s casino business has relatively inelastic demand, gambling by its addictive nature still drew customers with fewer slot machines available for patrons. Addictive activities tend to create loyal customer bases, and this may be useful in understanding why the numbers of jobs that were lost is less than what would have been the case otherwise.

Significant employee-related changes are easier to implement when workers are more willing to embrace them – in this case, they had no choice but to accept salary reductions of almost 60% and be paid more frequently (every two weeks rather than at the end of the month) to allow workers access to cash faster to meet their day-to-day needs. In addition, efforts to retain customers are essential in times of crises, and Group X succeeded in engaging its loyal patrons who kept the company afloat while it operated at reduced capacity. These findings contrast with those found for small tourism business by Booyens et al. (2022), who report that many small businesses could not cope financially, and they subsequently collapsed. It appears that Group X' ability to weather financial storms depended on having multiple revenue streams through a diversified offering – if it was only a hoteling company, it may have been forced to liquidate during the pandemic due to stalled cashflows.

The participants also confirmed the need to be more customer centric in marketing promotions and communications in general, by ensuring that data analytics and insights were well entrenched across the various disciplines of the organisation, to ensure targeted and meaningful communications. COVID-19 led to an industry move toward digital and virtual marketing mechanisms. However, it is not enough to simply change your marketing strategy without tailoring them for your unique clientele. Group X understood its customer base and managed to reach them during the pandemic through harnessing valuable customer data. Our findings related to marketing strategy changes are similar to what Moodley and Naidoo (2022) report, as they showed an increasing trend toward post COVID-19 tourism marketing strategies that are relevant for the 21st century and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (FIR) - strategies. These advertising mediums are cost friendly and are pandemic ready, in case of a future outbreak.

Question 2: Given that online casino gambling is illegal but online sports betting is permitted, was there any focus on the betting?

Participants 1 and 2 acknowledged the notable increase in subscriptions and activity on the betting platform, citing that whilst it was a platform available pre-COVID, the increase in its popularity has been significant during the pandemic.

Participants 6, 9 and 10 acknowledged the substantial financial returns that the betting platform delivered since the start of the pandemic, but cited that it would have been far more advantageous to have been able to deliver a complex specific gaming experience online, given the focus on digital communications and the update of digital platforms during this period.

Participant 7 indicated that “whilst sports betting had grown substantially over the lockdown period, it was not a true comparison to the normal gaming experience. In South Africa, online gaming is illegal and Group X had been lobbying government for some time to address the issuing of online gaming licenses. Had this been a successful endeavour – our casinos could have continued to deliver its online gaming experience during hard lockdown periods”.

Participants 3,4,5,6 and 8 acknowledged the increased focus and interest in the online platform, betting during lockdown.

Change management requires agility and flexibility in restructuring the business during times of crisis, and Sun International shifted their focus on increasing online betting activity as physical betting avenues had been shut down. This also highlights the importance of providing your customer base with multiple options to continue supporting your enterprise as Sun International did here, and the increased online revenue that was generated is evidence of

that. While the group already had online betting facilities in place pre-pandemic, it was easy to switch its focus fully online when the hard lockdown hit the country. The managers also lamented the inability to offer online gaming due to domestic legislation that blocks such activities.

The findings discussed in this section contrast with those reported by Stark & Robinson, (2021) who report an increase in online casino gaming in western markets during the pandemic. South Africa did not and has not allowed domestic online casino gaming, which may have allowed local casinos to remain profitable during the pandemic. Despite intense lobbying of government from different stakeholders on this issue, the status quo remains at the end of 2023, though South Africans can access international online casinos (South African Broadcasting Corporation, 2023). The literature on the effects of the pandemic is inconclusive, with some finding little to no effects of the pandemic on addictive behaviours while others report the opposite (Zamboni, et al. 2021; Sachdeva et al., 2022). While increased domestic online casino activity would generate more revenue, it remains to be seen what the government will do in the future.

Question 3: What learnings has the business adopted since the start of the pandemic? Please provide examples of these.

Participants 6, 9 and 10 highlighted that ‘key learnings centred around the business response to crisis management, particularly with reference to its Gauteng based properties’. They highlighted ‘the resolve of staff to perform at their best despite the internal adversities of reduced shifts and reduced salaries, mental and physical fatigue’ etc. Additional learning also came from the strides the business achieved when cross-functional teams collaborated for a common goal versus historically operating in silos. Business agility was cited as an imperative as regards to operational efficiencies. Participants 1 and 2 highlighted ‘business liquidity as a critical imperative to ensure access to reserves in unprecedented times.

Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 noted the immense strides the Gauteng properties have achieved due to unwavering leadership from its executive team. The participants also acknowledged that Sun International has always had depth of skill and capabilities, but that these skills seemed to be most notable during the pandemic. Additional learning included varying approaches to the business’s strategy and to core and non-core services with the three entities.

The importance of communicating differently with both staff and customers and the use of technology and innovation elevated the new ways of working. The pandemic forced the properties, The Maslow, Carnival City and Times Square, to crisis scenario plan and actively implement key priorities without hesitation, as delays had immediate impacts on business survival.

Question 4: Given that we are in the recovery stage, what are the strategic priorities for the 24 months to ensure that the business thrives in the next 5-10 years’ time?

Participants 1,2,6, and 8 indicated ‘that as a services business, staff are critical to ensure seamless business operations. Ensuring the wellness, safety and security of staff remain paramount into the future will result in long term success for Times Square, Carnival City and the Maslow’.

Participants 3 highlighted ‘the value of robust and continuous planning to best keep the business prepared for any crisis management incident and ensure that intelligence (data and insights) remains pivotal to the operations of the three Gauteng properties, to remain relevant and responsive to consumer trends and needs.

Participants 4, 6, 9 and 10 indicated ‘that the continued cost saving discipline be sustainable. It was highlighted that as the business stabilises and revenues increase, the tendency may be to return to greater expenditure and this needs to be avoided’.

Our findings on the importance of prioritising staff wellbeing during crises as part of change management show a key reason for why Sun International managed to survive the COVID pandemic. A people centred organisation will ensure that its employees are treated as the most vital of the enterprise. Appreciating and emphasising employee well-being during change management can result in more seamless transitions, enhanced creativity, and greater results (Nel, & Van Niekerk, 2023; Qureshi et al., 2024). Our findings also support what Malinen et al. (2020) report how for New Zealand employees were treated during the pandemic, where the authors highlighted the importance of transparent communications and a personalised approach to wellbeing.

The other findings related to data collection reveal a second key to Sun International’s change management as organisations attain a competitive edge in the modern economy by having the best information to make strategic decisions during crises. Finally, discussions about cost savings and ensuring that the future of Sun International remains financially sustainable are important because the South African government does not have the resources to bail out large companies during crises, the way that the United States government did during the pandemic. Our findings complement what Bama et al. (2022) highlight as innovations that the African tourist sector can adopt to be resilient. Resilience is essential for sustainability for tourism to thrive in the post COVID, FIR, digital economy that will likely face similar crises in the future as globalisation spreads.

Recommendations from the participants:

- i) The participants have highlighted the value of critical business imperatives such as centralised planning, property ownership, and execution, rigorous business routines, and operational simplification to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic since 2020.
- ii) Participants also emphasised the value of liquidity within the business and importantly having access to reserves at any given time is crucial in unforeseen emergencies.
- iii) Participants have highlighted the importance of business diversification, remaining streamlined from a human capital perspective and more agile.
- iv) Participants have openly shared the positive shifts in employee morale and the marked improvements in room occupancy for the Gauteng based hotels.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The primary data reflects substantial improvements in operation efficiencies in curtailing costs of supplier contracts and extracting value from the relevant agreements once re-negotiated. Divisional realignments, employee wellness, effective cost management, focusing on digital communication channels, have significantly contributed to the survival of the Sun International group.

The entrenched brand equity and value propositions created over decades of delivering memorable customer experiences have become a key area of focus within the three Sun

International properties that we studied, to make customer retention the core priority. Whilst the negative impacts of the pandemic are clear, it is significant to note that there were a few key positive outcomes for the three entities as regards to innovations, employees, and management. Innovation in communications and associated platforms and e-commerce became pivotal to the business and the adoption of the same highly successful.

This filtered into the enhancement of the employee value proposition and associated programmes, which were also hosted on the same platforms which staff found highly relevant and informative, and hence the widespread adoption. Finally, the presence and support of the senior management team was deemed to resonate across the properties which employees felt raised the overall morale of staff of a daily basis. Bearing the overall objectives of the research study in mind and considering the basis of the literature review and the outcomes of the primary research – all of which related to the performance of the three properties, which the study focussed on to ensure the outcomes were meaningful and relevant.

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