

NAVIGATING TURBULENT WATERS: EVALUATING THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF TRAVEL AGENCIES IN MPUMALANGA

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic decreased tourism-related business by 49.2%, hence, travel agencies needed to develop crisis management strategies to remain operational post-crisis events. The aim of this study is to evaluate crisis management strategies adopted by travel agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Mpumalanga province, South Africa. A quantitative study was conducted by using Survey Monkey, which was distributed to 121 respondents who are working for travel agencies. The results revealed that 41% of travel agencies constantly monitor any signs and problems that may provide insights into any crisis, and 31% indicated that sharing of crisis management information with workers is essential. About 53% prioritise tourists and staff members, by allowing staff to work remotely and tourists to postpone their bookings without penalties. Only 51% of travel agencies indicated the importance of effective coordination with government institutions in the province of Mpumalanga. The travel and tourism sector should consider the significance of “evaluation” to increase effectiveness of the crisis management process. Future studies need to incorporate the 5IR on human interaction for business during the crisis management process.

Key words: Crisis Management, Crises Management Strategy, Travel agencies, Mpumalanga

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INTRODUCTION

Sharing of information related to crisis handling and responding to risks caused by crisis events in the tourism sector is minimally shared, due to the sector’s businesses operating in isolation from one another (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). The travel agency sector is prone to internal and external impacts that need to be addressed through crisis management tasks that involve the sectors stakeholders and workers (Jia et al., 2012). In South Africa and elsewhere in the world, the travel agency sector in 2020 was devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore minimising the damage by protecting staff and tourists to avoid a complete collapse became paramount (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020).

Paraskevas and Altinay (2013) mentioned that a crisis sends off repeated and persistent trails of early signals which could be picked up when there is still an opportunity to prevent it from occurring or employ measures that will minimize its impact. Early detection of crisis signals, and timely response might have saved a good part of the 49.2% tourism decrease in Africa (Matiza, 2021). Controlling the public image helps the travel agency sector to boost its revenue post the crisis, as it restores the confidence of tourists and workers (Santana, 2004). Crisis management and risk assessment have become and will remain a vital component of the travel agency sector in the province of Mpumalanga, therefore assessment of crisis management strategies helps travel agencies to draw conclusions and improve their shortfalls (Jia et al., 2012). The aim of this paper is to evaluate crisis management strategies that travel agencies adopted in one of South Africa’s most tourism-dependent provinces, Mpumalanga, in reaction to the COVID-19 crisis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background on crisis management in the travel and tourism sector

Crisis management is a technique used for both avoiding emergencies and planning for the unforeseen ones, as well as a method of dealing with them as they occur, and to mitigate their disastrous consequences (Jia et al., 2012). Crisis management is an ongoing integrated and comprehensive effort that tourism businesses effectively put in place to understand and prevent crisis, and to effectively manage those that occur, considering in every step of their planning and training activities, the interest of their stakeholders (Santana, 2004). Crisis management comprise of various stages namely: the pre-crisis stage, crisis

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stage and the post-crisis stage as suggested by Jia et al. (2012) and Baubion (2013). Mikusova and Horvathova (2019) are of the view that a crisis management process is a transformative system that is adopted by businesses for unforeseen circumstance. Figure 1 displays the three stages of the strategic management process as proposed by Ritchie (2004).

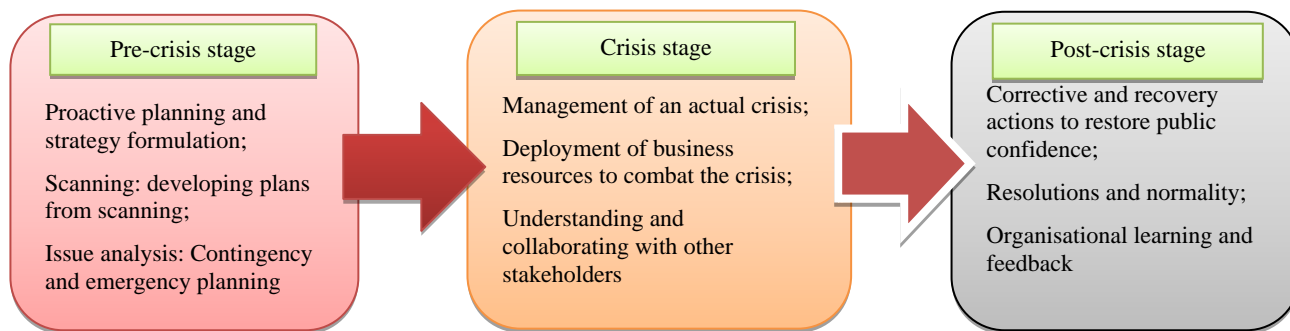


Figure 1. Strategic Crisis Management Process

The crisis management process provides a sequence that could be adopted in the travel and tourism sector when unpredictable events occur and threaten the sector and its stakeholders (Jia et al., 2012). The process defines how the travel and tourism sector are managing their resources and restructure their businesses to adapt to the crisis at hand (Baubion, 2013). Santana (2004) warns against the difficulty for the travel and tourism sector to have one single best crisis management strategy to restore the sector, because crisis events are often unique and difficult to predict. Çoban and Özel (2022) concur that crises are irregular occurrences affecting the travel and tourism sector and its stakeholders in different ways in each period. Therefore, in all the crisis management stages there needs to be flexibility, evaluation and potential modification to strategy development and implementation, depending on the nature of the crisis in magnitude, scale and time pressure, and stakeholder response strategies (Ritchie, 2004; Baubion, 2013; Giddy and Rogerson, 2021).

If the travel and tourism sector survives the stages of pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis, it will once again find itself in the stage of pre-crisis (planning for another crisis), only to be better ready, equipped and prepared for another crisis (Hamid, 2011). In this way, the travel and tourism sector and its stakeholders can react, recover, and reset the travel and tourism sector, and be ready to face upcoming crises and bearing in mind the past disruptive events (Aldo et al., 2021). The stages of crisis management are fundamental to ensuring the continuous existence of the travel and tourism sector (Mikusova and Horvathova, 2019). The stages mentioned in figure 1 assist the travel and tourism sector to navigate turbulent waters through proper planning and preparedness activities before a crisis, to respond or manage the pressure of the crisis as it occurs and taking resolutions to a new and improved state of the travel and tourism sector after the crisis (Mair et al., 2016). Table 1 presents different types of crises impacting the travel agency sector, at different points in time.

Types of crises impacting the travel and tourism sector

The common characteristics of crises in the travel and tourism sector is “disruption”, and that they are either internal or externally induced (Mair et al., 2016). The travel and tourism sector is vulnerable in nature, the vulnerability is reflected in its susceptibility to different types of crises, such as infectious diseases, natural disasters, economic crisis, terrorist attacks, wars and conflicts, industrial, political, social and cultural revolutions, and key technological advances (Zhong et al., 2021; Rogerson and Rogerson, 2022). Ural (2016) gives a brief overview of what major crises events affected the travel and tourism sector from the year 2000 to date worldwide, the crises events are labelled in Table 1.

Table 1. Crisis and their place of origin (Source: Authors)

Name of crisis	Place of origin	Time frame
Terrorist attack	USA	9 September 2001
SARS virus outbreak	China	26 February 2003
Sichuan Earthquake	China	12 May 2008
Haiti Earthquake	Haiti	11 March 2011
Typhoon Haiyan	Philippines	8 November 2013
COVID-19	China	13 January 2020

In addition, the travel and tourism sector experiences external shocks such as wars, extreme weather conditions (like cyclones, tornadoes, mudslides, hurricanes, droughts), political events (strikes and elections), adverse publicity, transport accidents, pollution, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, electricity shortages, recessions, and fluctuations in economic conditions (Chau et al., 2023). Crises are either natural or human-induced, a natural crisis can disrupt the supply and distribution for even the best prepared travel and tourism business, human induced crisis can equally impact the travel and tourism sector dramatically for example the September 9, 2001, crisis (Ritchie, 2004). Therefore, the travel and tourism sector is susceptible to both natural and human-induced crisis (Ritchie, 2004; Jia et al., 2012).

Travel agencies operation during times of crises

Travel agencies are defined as a network of tourism organisations engaged in different activities ranging from the supply of different components of tourism products and services (Jia et al., 2012). Those products and services range from

flights and accommodation to the distribution and marketing of products and destinations to the packaging of the final tourism product (Rogerson, 2021). Travel agencies represent the primary intermediary of travel-related products (Hamid, 2011). Travel agencies involve a wide range of participants and stakeholders in both the private and public sectors (Viljoen and Lombard, 2016). Travel agencies are seen as value chains that connect all services within the travel and tourism sector (Musavengane et al., 2022). Traditionally travel agencies have acted as intermediaries between airline companies and wholesale travel companies and the consumer (Khuja and Bohari, 2012). Today, the basic intermediation functions of travel agencies include information provision, logistics and risk mitigation (Viljoen and Lombard, 2016). As value chains and network systems of travel and tourism services, travel agencies are exposed to varied crisis impacts, that they might face at different points in time. Operational crises include travellers' mistakes or unforeseen misfortunes when making their own travel arrangements at the airline and hotel reservations on the internet (Hamid, 2011). The internet continues to present an ongoing threat for travel agencies as it eliminates the need for using travel agencies which decreases market share and profit level (Hamid, 2011; Rogerson, 2021). E-marketing and e-reservations have served to decrease the commission from bookings that travel agencies may earn (Hamid, 2011). The advent of the internet presents both opportunities and challenges for the travel agency sector. The opportunities and challenges presented by the internet are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Opportunities and challenges presented by the internet in the travel agency sector (Source: Authors)

Opportunities	Challenges
Increase in service delivery	Reduced travel agency business operations
Larger market audience	Limited interaction with travellers
Flexibility	Cyber security threats
Virtual job opportunities	Reduced travel commission
Wider range of holiday options to choose from	False news can be shared easier

The loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic was high due to the cross-provincial and cross-border ban in South Africa (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). By March 2020, 58% of the travel and tourism sector businesses in South Africa were unable to service their debts and 54% were struggling to cover fixed costs (Musavengane et al., 2022). The travel and tourism sector was forced to ask staff to take annual leave, and contracts of part-time employees were terminated, which affected the well-being of workers, quality of life, and livelihoods (Rogerson, 2021).

Professional's perspective in crisis management

In the event of managing a crisis, the carrying out of the crisis management process mandate lies with the professionals working in the travel and tourism sector. The professionals working in the travel and tourism sector understand what and how to carry out different activities at a certain point, they also have the experience, values, and beliefs of the travel and tourism sector (Racherla and Hu, 2009; Hamid, 2011). The crisis management process demands experience of individuals in the form of specific experience, expertise, knowledge, and intuition, which are closely related to professionals (Mikusova and Horvathova, 2019). Racherla and Hu (2009) proposed a management framework that individual "professionals" can use to combat a crisis; the process is as follows:

- Acquisition of strategy – crisis management strategy is identified, and the information is assigned to different personnel,
- Retrieval, dissemination, and use – relevant knowledge is distributed to employees and subunits of the business where and when is required,
- Evaluation and feedback – the framework is used and evaluated for its effectiveness, with feedback guiding further acquisition. When the crisis hits, and the travel and tourism sector identify a crisis management process (Figure 1), professionals should be at the forefront fighting the crisis, with the usage and application of the crisis management process (Baubion, 2013). The travel and tourism sector requires experienced people who can make sense out of the crisis management process and strategy and act accordingly (Racherla and Hu, 2009).
- Professionals are people with prior experience in managing such situations, and they are a human resource that cannot be replaced by any technological appliance (Çoban and Özel, 2022). Professionalism is specialised knowledge linked with experience to an individual who possesses it (Racherla and Hu, 2009).
- A clear crisis management strategy empowers the professionals to make decisions and handle crises with a clear approach (Ural, 2016; Nkwanyana, 2017). Consistent staff training programs is needed to ensure that employees are able to handle crisis situations smoothly (Racherla and Hu, 2009). It is, therefore, the responsibility of the travel and tourism sector to make sure that staff performance on crisis handling procedures is evaluated to ensure that they are trained and equipped to apply what they have learned to a real crisis (Baubion, 2013). With a well-oriented crisis management process being understood by professionals, the travel and tourism sector can change a crisis into an opportunity in the long term (Dube, 2021). However, crisis situations are unpredictable, unavoidable, and ambiguous, therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in the travel and tourism sector is explored in the following section.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged suddenly, did not give any warning signals before it hit the travel and tourism sector (Çoban and Özel, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic underlines the critical importance of an enhanced understanding of change in the travel and tourism sector (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2022). To save costs many travel agencies adopted cost-cutting practices including offering voluntary no-paid leave and terminating probation and contract staff (Rogerson, 2021). The economic impacts are because of expenditures in the absence of business revenue operations,

the expenditures include and are not limited to refunding the cancelled bookings and refunding clients for paid travel packages, the economic impacts are to pay fixed and variable costs such as wages, pay taxes, rental payments, loan payments, and payment of suppliers. With the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the travel and tourism sector experienced a steep increase in cancellations of trip bookings, flight, and holiday reservations, due to loss of customer flow and health concerns (Çoban and Özel, 2022). The outbreak of COVID-19 exerted massive impacts on the travel and tourism sector with the African continent suffering a decrease of 49.2% in normal business operation (Matiza, 2021).

When compared to the rest of the world the travel and tourism sector in South Africa experienced a radical decrease of 83% loss in revenue in 2020 (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2020). By March 2020, 58% of travel and tourism businesses were unable to service their debts and 54% were struggling to cover fixed costs (Musavengane et al., 2022).

The travel and tourism sector, after crises events including historical outbreaks in the past, usually recovers, which displays that the travel and tourism sector's resilience in alleviating the collapse of demand and supply (Nduna and Van Zyl, 2020). Management of a crisis through effective strategies is vital to reduce the impacts manifested by the crisis (Mair et al., 2016). Various types of crises require different crisis management strategies to recover (Mikusova and Horvathova, 2019). A discussion of generic crisis management strategies that assist the sector in coming back to normality follows.

Generic practices on crisis management strategies by businesses

Crisis management strategy refers to prevention, planning, testing evaluation and maintenance to mitigate and minimize the crisis consequences (Jia et al., 2012). Chau et al., (2023) identified one of the generic functions of a crisis management strategy which is to acquire objective information. For example, during and after the Ebola epidemic in 2014 in some parts of Africa, South Africa's travel and tourism sector discovered that they had fewer African tourists, therefore, the South African travel agencies sent all the latest news about Ebola to tour operators in the country, and assured customers from Kenya that South Africa was Ebola-free. This strategy determined how organised the travel agencies are in planning, decision-making, problem solving, administrative management and reaction in a crisis (Jia et al., 2012). Rogerson (2021) found the generic practices that most businesses in the travel and tourism sector adopted to remain afloat during the COVID-19 period, the practices are as follows:

- Modified cancellation policies;
- Product diversification;
- Forming new partnerships;
- Modifying target markets and markets changes;
- Applying for government relief packages.

Rogerson (2021) further claimed that the travel and tourism businesses applied a self-reliant approach which involved changes in revenue-generation, reduction in employment hours and staff rotation and mothballing certain operations. Çoban and Özel (2022) stated that providing transparency to employees and providing adequate information, as well as decentralised power to department levels was critical to deal with crisis impacts. The South African and New Zealand Governments introduced several initiatives to assist the travel and tourism sector, such as staff wage subsidies and providing stimulus packages to ensure the sector survives the COVID-19 induced impacts (Dube, 2021). Crisis management should be a core competency for the travel and tourism sector (Ritchie, 2004).

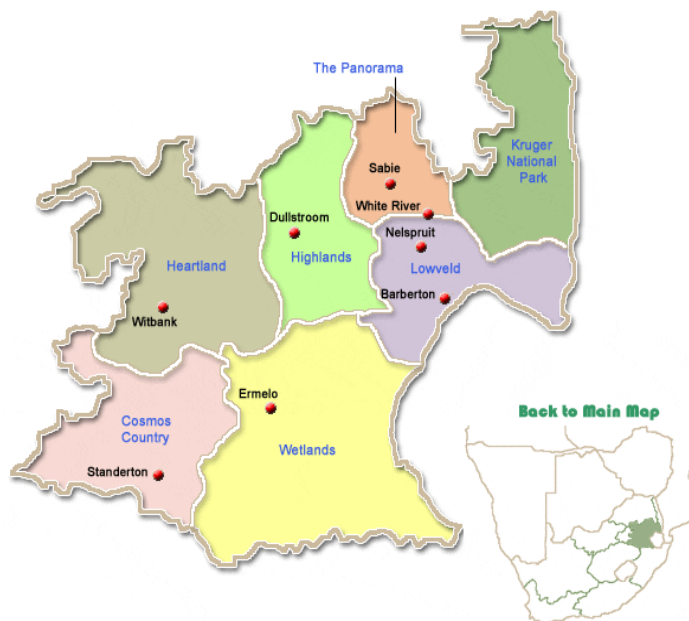


Figure 2. A detailed map of Mpumalanga (Rogerson, 2021)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study adopted a positivist research paradigm. A quantitative methodological approach was employed through a survey research design. The study adopted the quantitative research (survey), with descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) that could be extracted from the results.

Population

The population of the study was the travel agency community of the province of Mpumalanga, South Africa which covers the Ehlanzeni, Nkangala, and Gert Sibande Regions. The areas that are covered in the study are displayed in Figure 2. The Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency (MPTA) assisted by offering the travel agencies database (with emails and phone numbers), where e-mails of the questionnaire were forwarded to different travel agency professionals through Survey Monkey. For respondents to form part of the target population, they were expected to be above the age of 18 years, employed either part-time, full time or casual basis by any travel agency that is registered with the MTPA. The study population was the travel agency employees, employed either as: front desk managers, supervisors, key accounts, administrators or booking agents.

The research instrument

The research instrument used was a self-completion questionnaire, which was adapted from an existing instrument by Al Khalifa (2021) in a study that is titled "Crisis Management and Flexibility: The Moderating Role of E-Readiness the

Case of Government Authorities in The Kingdom of Bahrain". The overall questionnaire had 6 categories (pre-crisis stage, preparation for the crisis, emergency stage, intermediate stage, long-term recovery, and the evaluation stage). Five-point Likert scale questions were utilised, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree was used.

The questionnaire was circulated to the travel agencies in Mpumalanga province through Survey Monkey to the target population. The response rate of 65.76% is considered a positive response rate, given that the minimum standard threshold of 35% is satisfactory for most quantitative research surveys. Cronbach alpha values for each of the constructs were found to be meeting the required 70% threshold indicating internal consistency of the constructs.

Procedure

Census sampling, which is considered probability sampling was adopted in this study with the intention to include all the travel agencies registered under the MTPA. These travel agencies are on a mission to grow tourism, manage biodiversity and to stimulate sustainable economic growth that is inclusive and creates decent employment in Mpumalanga Province (MTPA), South Africa. The researcher sent the Survey Monkey link through e-mails to the travel agencies and sent follow-up e-mails to accelerate progress. In the first week, Survey Monkey reported 15 responses, the second week, the response rate improved by at least 50 responses, the third week Survey Monkey reported 36 responses and in the final week Survey Monkey reported 20 responses. The population size was 350, RoaSoft software generated a proposed sample size of 184 on a confident rate of 95% and 5% wrong margin. The study obtained 121 fully completed questionnaires, which is a 65% response rate.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was exported from Survey Monkey to Excel and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 was used to analyse the coded data. The SPSS software assisted with the inferential statistics to make it easier to study and interpret the data obtained from data collection. The researcher carried out the analysis of means, analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of relationships.

Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Tshwane University of Technology Faculty of Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (FCRE2023/FR/03/003-MS (2)). The questionnaire had an informed consent letter indicating that it was voluntary for respondents to participate in the study, and their rights to withdraw were respected. Anonymity was maintained and the data obtained was securely stored.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into two sections which is the demographics of the respondents and the descriptive statistics. The demographic data is important as it affects the credibility of the data in various aspects and the descriptive statistics focus on the summary of the picture of the population depending on the variables of interest.

Demographics of 121 respondents

Table 3 displays the demographic data obtained through Survey Monkey from travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga from the 1st of May 2023 to the 31st of May 2023. The results reveal that the travel and tourism sector in the province of Mpumalanga is run by qualified professionals with at least 32% of the employees holding a Bachelor's degree, followed by employees with a National diploma (17%), and Honours (16%). Mbatha et al (2021) argue that the travel and tourism sector is a service industry and therefore need qualified people who can translate the service into the real experience to the people. Based on the result, one may argue that the level of education that the respondents had, can assist the travel agencies to navigate turbulent waters during times of crisis.

There were few respondents from top management positions: Manager (10%), Front desk manager (4%), and Supervisor (4%), which indicates that most of the travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga has fewer managerial positions as it is a norm in small businesses (Nhamo et al., 2020). Majority of the travel agencies staff are occupying functional positions such as Key Accounts (4%), Administration (23%), and Booking agent (3%); this indicates that travel agencies focus is on their daily administration and function of the business.

Although most of the travel agencies are SMMEs in Mpumalanga, the results indicate that (46%) of their staff members have been involved with the same company for at least a period of 12 months in their occupation. This has a positive impact when dealing with any crisis since the staff members are active for a reasonable time in the organisation. The results are in line with Bhaduri (2019), who mentioned that a well-educated workforce and a good management team of travel agencies tend to a great effect on combating and controlling crisis.

Descriptive data and discussion

The following section presents the descriptive data obtained from travel agencies in Mpumalanga in relation to crisis management strategies during the times of crisis. Crisis management strategies for travel agencies in Mpumalanga were identified by the respondents in variables that were tested in a five-point Likert scale. The Likert scale was divided into six categories: namely, pre-crisis, preparation, emergency, intermediate, long-term recovery, and evaluation stages. Table 4

Table 3. Demographics of respondents

Demographics	
Attributes	Percentages
Qualification	
Matric	23%
N6 Certificate	7%
National Diploma	17%
Bachelor's degree	32%
Honours degree	16%
Master's degree	5%
Job title	
Manager	10%
Front desk manager	4%
Supervisor	4%
Key accounts	4%
Administration	23%
Booking agent	3%
Other	54%
Duration of service	
<a year	46%
1 – 5 years	46%
6 – 10 years	6%
>10 years	1%

depicts that 41% of travel agencies effectively monitor the potential impact of the crisis on business operations (PS1). The results obtained are not novel in managing crisis in the travel and tourism sector, particularly, the travel agencies, because they entered the online market in the late 1990s. Travel agencies understood the advantages of the cyber highway facilitated by the world wide web, and they were quick to adopt and move their business online (Çoban and Özel, 2022). One may argue that this could be one of the reasons why travel agencies regularly monitor the potential crises in business operations. The role of crisis management in the travel and tourism sector is to ensure that regulatory processes and plans to develop strategies and procedures in response to a crisis are all in place (Alhadi et al., 2018:2), it involves intense planning to prepare the travel and tourism sector to provide the most accurate response needed to deal with a crisis (Nhamo et al., 2020).

Table 4 shows that respondents rated the crisis management strategies to be moderately important, with all scoring means ranging from moderately important (3) to least important (0). Respondents ranked the following strategies as important strategies in the crisis management process:

- Constantly monitoring of any signs and problems – there is a thorough risk assessment and anticipation, which seeks to reduce crisis occurrence in the travel agency sector;
- Sharing of crisis management information with workers – the travel agency sector use relevant information to perform tasks such as rescue operations with involved stakeholders and workers;
- Prioritising both tourists and staff – minimising damage by protecting staff and tourists to avoid a complete collapse;
- Resolve reputational threats – controlling public impressions, recovering from the crisis, and re-establishing confidence and credibility;
- Precautionary measures – crisis management strategies assessment to derive conclusions and lessons from the crisis.

Table 4. Crisis Management Strategies for Travel Agencies in Mpumalanga

Crisis Management strategies	Strongly agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly disagree %	Mean %	Std. Deviation %
Pre-crisis stage							
(PS1) There is constantly monitoring of any signs and problems that may be an indication of a crisis.	3.81	12.38	24.76	44.76	14.29	3.53	1.010
(PS4) There is effective coordination between the travel agency and government institutions.	9.52	14.29	27.62	34.29	14.29	3.29	1.167
(PS6) The business has a plan to resolve reputational threats presented by a crisis.	23.81	54.29	14.29	5.71	1.90	3.69	1.008
(PS7) The services provided by the business prioritized both tourists and staff during the crisis period.	19.00	53.00	16.00	9.00	3.00	3.76	0.965
Preparation stage							
(PPC3) The business shares crisis management information and expected responsibilities of workers involved.	17.48	51.46	20.39	4.85	5.83	3.92	0.884
Long-term recovery							
(LTR5) The business long-term recovery strategies involve crisis precautionary measures.	15.00	56.00	21.00	6.00	2.00	3.76	0.915
Evaluation stage							
(EV5) The future crisis management plan is appealing to pandemic crisis situations.	21.27	48.04	17.65	7.84	4.90	3.73	1.042

The analysis on table 4 presents a strong emphasis on people, sharing, and reputation management as strong strategies and tools to resolve crisis events. This is supported by the 1.167% which is the highest standard deviation, whereas the lowest is 0.884%. This is a positive result, considering that the travel and tourism sector is largely dominated by small firms in South Africa, and the sector is at most the worst affected by different crisis events. The mean is 3.29 and the standard deviation on (PS4) coordination between travel agencies and government institutions is 1.167, which reveal that crisis management requires the involvement of government institutions, the private sector, and the public, which demands effective coordination for a successful combating of the crises to save the travel and tourism sector. Ineffective coordination raises governance challenges regarding operations of the travel and tourism sector.

The capacity to coordinate crisis management is fundamental to provide appropriate responses at the right time, to protect the collapse of the travel and tourism sector. The mean on (EV5) the future plan of travel agencies appealing to pandemic situations is 3.73 and the standard deviation is 1.042, revealing the level of resilience of travel agencies in the presence of crisis. Crises have challenged the travel and tourism sector mostly due to unexpected or unforeseen circumstances, but also due to links and breakdown of information flow (Baubion, 2013). Stakeholders must fully understand the crisis management strategy and crisis management process to prepare for further crises (Zhong et al., 2021). In times of crises, only a well-coordinated and concerted effort by these institutions will help to curb the impacts of the crisis. The results also reveal that travel agencies (LTR5) long-term recovery strategies involving precautionary measures which is the highest with (56%), a mean of 3.76 and a standard deviation of 0.915, recognises that for travel agencies recovery to an improved state, is through the travel agencies ability to learn from crises, make policy changes, adapt, and modify crisis management strategies that did not work effectively in the previous crisis (Musavengane et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Navigating turbulent waters during the times of any crisis event in the travel agencies increases their responsibility to consult with the stakeholders in the travel and tourism supply chain, to plan and prepare for crisis events in advance. It is critical to know what to do in times of a crisis to manage it successfully, and to improve the state of crisis management within travel agencies. The stages and results of crisis management should be evaluated consistently in a business operation to improve the preparation for the next crisis. The study found effects of crisis management on travel agency operations; they are mentioned on the Figure 3.

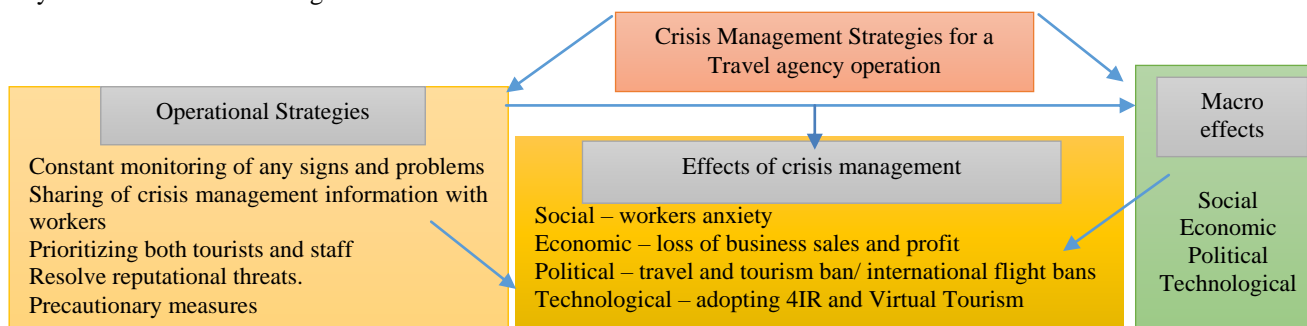


Figure 3. Effects of Crisis Management on travel agency operations (Source: Authors)

The results presented revealed that, every crisis is a source of learning to improve the handling of the next crisis, e.g., the adoption of existing technologies such as 4IR increases the level of information coordination and sharing during a crisis, which will improve the facilitation of information for the next crisis. Effective monitoring of warning signals, sharing of crisis management information with workers, prioritising both tourists and staff, resolve reputational threats, precautionary measures and coordination between the travel and tourism stakeholders which forms part of the crisis management process contributes massively to the minimal exposure of the travel and tourism sector to the dire impacts of crisis events. The study also reveals that professionals are an integral part of crisis management, since all the theories can be drafted and the planning is done, professionals are the ones who fight the crisis daily implementing the plans put in place by the travel and tourism sector. Evaluation of the crisis management strategies is critical to improving the ability of the travel and tourism sector to survive and thrive during crisis events. We argue that valuation is a critical factor in crisis management as it improves the state of both the travel and tourism sector and the crisis management process effectiveness, it helps the travel and tourism sector with planning, time, and allocation of available resources to be used to its fullest strength to deal with crisis events when they hit the sector.

Limitations

Due to the uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is limited empirical evidence that presents travel agencies perspectives on crisis management strategies in the province of Mpumalanga. The COVID-19 pandemic was not heavily explored by tourism researchers. The study was only limited to travel agencies in the province of Mpumalanga and the travel and tourism sector is a national and international phenomenon with hotels, restaurants, casinos, and theme parks to name a few forming part of the travel and tourism supply chain. The population was only limited to travel agency employees, the managers, supervisors, key accounts, front desk manager, administrators, and booking agents to define the narrative of crisis management.

Recommendations

The practical recommendation is that the travel and tourism sector should consider the significance of “evaluation” as a critical role during the times of crisis. Increasing effectiveness of the crisis management process in the travel and tourism sector needs different strategies that are implementable and widely understood for the organisation to stay afloat during the crisis events. The study also recommends that the relationship between the travel and tourism sector and government institutions be properly managed as a method to improve the level of information sharing and easy access to financial and other forms of aid assistance, also as a method to integrate the travel and tourism stakeholder’s ecosystem to improve the effectiveness of participation during a crisis event. The study recommends that future studies focus on the 5IR which focuses more on human interaction for business and crisis management purposes.

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