

EXAMINING THE GLOCAL FORCES THAT DETERMINED THE MICE TOURISM RECOVERY POST-COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Refiloe Julia LEKGAU 

School of Tourism and Hospitality, College of Business and Economics,
University of Johannesburg, South Africa, e-mail: rlegkau@uj.ac.za

Tembi Maloney TICHAAWA 

School of Tourism and Hospitality, College of Business and Economics,
University of Johannesburg, South Africa, e-mail: tembit@uj.ac.za

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the determinants of MICE tourism recovery post the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the case of South Africa, empirical data were collected by way of in-depth interviews with 19 key stakeholders in the MICE sector. The study findings reveal five key determinants of the recovery, (1) change in focus of geographical markets, (2) varied recovery of the different economic industries, (3) limited airline access and connectivity, (4) destination image and (5) level of confidence of MICE attendees to travel. The paper's theoretical significance lies in its timely contribution to studies on MICE tourism recovery and resilience, focusing on the developing nations' context. Further, the findings of the study, which delineate the recovery process of MICE events post-COVID-19 provide insights into building a resilient MICE sector.

Key words: COVID-19, crises, MICE tourism, recovery, resilience, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The meetings, incentive travels, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) sector is recognized as an important part of international tourism (Rogerson, 2015). Indeed, these events are strongly sought after to develop local industries (both tourism and non-tourism) and boost the national economy (Kim et al., 2022; Welthagen et al., 2022; Kourkouridis et al., 2023). In South Africa, the National Convention Bureau reported the MICE sector to have contributed US\$13.6 billion to the country in 2019 (South African Tourism, 2022). However, similar to the rest of the world, South Africa was severely affected by the pandemic, with the country's COVID-19 regulations stifling the entire tourism system (Rogerson and Rogerson, 2022). While government interventions and the focus on domestic tourism had helped reduce the impact of the pandemic, the MICE events sector was forced to not only pause operations but re-alter their structure to comply with regulations (Dragin-Jensen et al., 2022).

Bartis et al. (2021) point out that the sector was one of the most regulated tourism activities. In fact, from the very start, the (changing) regulations in place had restricted the hosting of in-person MICE events, as for the most part, the sector was limited to hosting events with only 50 and 100 persons (maximum) capacity (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2022). An early nationwide study by Republic of South Africa National Department of Tourism (NDT), Tourism Business Council of South Africa (TBCSA) and International Finance Corporation (IFC) (2020) reported that from March to June 2020, the MICE subsector lost approximately US\$49.8 million in revenue due to cancellations, while 75.4% of permanent employment had relied strongly on reduction of operational costs, deferments (as opposed to cancellations) of events and adjusting business models to include virtual (and later hybrid) events (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021).

Notably, the adaptations of the industry, as well as the easing of travel regulations worldwide, have shifted the focus to MICE recovery efforts (Dillette and Ponting, 2021; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021; Seraphin, 2021). Beyond its importance to the economic contribution to a destination, MICE tourism recovery plays a greater role in broader economic recovery (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2022). In focusing on recovery, however, it is important to consider Rogerson and Rogerson's (2022) warning that the pandemic's impact will be experienced for many years to come, particularly within the broader tourism system. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been much speculation and many predictions of when MICE tourism will recover to pre-2020 levels (see for example United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), 2020; SAT, 2022). Understandably, the erratic COVID-19 environment, together with the unfolding impacts of the pandemic on the economy and society, and the emerging local (e.g. energy crisis) and global concerns (such as the Ukraine and Russia war) have played a role in the pace of the MICE sector recovery. In the current study, we explore and unpack the factors influencing the recovery of MICE tourism in South Africa. The study is premised on the notion that MICE tourism recovery is situated within and influenced by (global) macro-level dynamics,

* Corresponding author

thereby making the recovery a complex and multifaceted process. As argued by Mena-Navarro et al. (2022), the success of the MICE sector is not dependent only on national development efforts (i.e., effective tourism policy formulation and implementation) but also on the effective response to both local and international dynamics and factors. These factors, we postulate, play a role in the recovery process of the MICE sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, MICE tourism was a fast-growing economic sector in both developed and developing regions (An et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2023). Several studies have explained the interconnectedness to the globalised world which has resulted in MICE tourism being one of the most dynamic and leading aspects of global activities (Rogerson, 2015; Tichaawa, 2017; 2021; Draper and Neal, 2018). Indeed, the widening of economic relations, advancements in modern air travel and technology, the growing importance of the knowledge economy, and the increasingly connected networks of cities and urban areas represent some of the reasons for the expansion of the MICE sector (Rogerson, 2015; Weru and Njoroge, 2021). Accordingly, the sector has grown to be an important part of business operations with literature averring the attendance of MICE events to be related to information sharing, problem-solving, decision-making, participating in educational discussions, and sharing common interests (Becken and Hughey, 2022). It is important to note that such reasons are often dependent on the type of MICE event (Becken and Hughey, 2022; Kim et al., 2022).

The MICE sector is established to be a tool for economic development and strengthening tourism destinations (An et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022). Understandably, a significant portion of the MICE tourism research considers the role of government (at various levels) in the development of the MICE sector (see for example Weru and Njoroge, 2021; Mena-Navarro et al., 2022; Kourkouridis et al., 2023). In the same breath, there has been a significant amount of research acknowledging the impact of MICE tourism on tourism and (broader) economic development, with reasons cited including destination branding benefits, tourism growth (and buffer against seasonality), job creation, strong multiplier effects on local economies, tourism-induced urban regeneration as well as the contribution of this form of tourism to expanding knowledge of economies and assisting local businesses (Rogerson, 2015; Marais et al., 2017; An et al., 2021; Suwannasat et al., 2022; Welthagen et al., 2022; Kourkouridis et al., 2023). These studies underscore the importance of the sector and justify numerous public investments toward developing attractive MICE destinations. This is particularly evident in the case of sub-Saharan Africa (a growing MICE region), in which Rogerson (2015) notes the investment in infrastructure, conference and facilities, business hotels and the establishment of convention bureaus. Additionally, Kourkouridis et al. (2023) mention the impact of MICE visitor spending on local goods and services.

According to Kim et al. (2022), the MICE sector represents the socio-economic and cultural aspects of the host destination and thus requires the support of key stakeholders, including governments, suppliers, and visitors. As such, the MICE sector of a destination cannot be examined in isolation from its host country (Kim et al., 2022). This is seen in the numerous studies that have examined the factors that determine the site selection for MICE events, in which destination attributes play a crucial role in the selection process and destination competitiveness (see for example Nolan, 2020; Welthagen et al., 2022). While the discussion of destination competitiveness and site selection factors are beyond the scope of the current study, it is important to note that the overwhelming assertion is that competitiveness is determined by both tourism-related factors as well as a wider range of factors that influence tourism service providers (Welthagen et al., 2022). It could be postulated that the recovery of a destination post-COVID-19 is determined to a certain extent by its competitiveness and how it responds to global dynamics and forces, which is explored in the current study.

Becken and Hughey (2021) opine that MICE tourism is a resilient sector. Indeed, studies published on the sector during the pandemic revealed that despite the halt of most MICE tourism activities, the need for MICE events was seen through its continuation during virtual platforms (Becken and Hughey, 2021; Dillette and Ponting, 2021; Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021). MICE events represented one of the most regulated sectors of tourism (Dillette and Ponting, 2021) during the pandemic, more especially in South Africa where all restrictions on the sector were lifted only in mid-2022 (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2022). Nevertheless, virtual events became the most widely used means of hosting events from 2020 to 2022 (Hooshmand et al., 2022). Notably, Kim et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of the traditional mode of MICE events (i.e., high human touch), extending the contribution by Becken and Hughey (2021) who suggested that virtual events were most effective when the goal was sharing information while nurturing relationships (amongst stakeholders) and that advancing business interests requires in-person events that provide opportunities for immediate feedback and a personal atmosphere. Indeed, "human connectivity will always be at the forefront of human needs" (Steriopolous and Wrathall, 2021:81) and events are essential in meeting this need (Seraphin, 2021; Yamashita and Oshimi, 2023), which underlines their resilience to changes in the external environment.

MICE events are recognized to lie at the heart of international tourism (Rogerson, 2015; Tichaawa, 2017), which necessitates some examination of international tourism during COVID-19. International tourism was arguably one of the hardest-hit sectors, with the UNWTO (2020) reporting that by mid-2020, all countries had imposed travel regulations to varying extents. To make the situation even more challenging, the slow and gradual reopening of destinations was regulated with travel restrictions, such as mandatory COVID-19 testing, quarantining, and later proof of vaccinations and/or negative COVID-19 test (Gössling, et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Chan et al., 2023). Moreover, in broadening the challenges of international travel, Kim et al. (2022) go further to add that many countries would suddenly change their travel restrictions and quarantine policies in line with the state of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the recovery of international tourism is arguably complex, as seen in the projected timelines of recovery which are constantly changing as per the changes in the global tourism system. This undoubtedly affects the MICE sector of many destinations.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

In addressing the research question, ‘What determines the recovery of the MICE sector during COVID-19?’ the current study employs a purely qualitative research design which allowed the researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the study context. Using the qualitative approach allowed for the in-depth exploration of the factors determining the recovery of the MICE sector and enabled the researchers to set up the context of the study phenomenon and understand the environment that MICE stakeholders were planning for their recovery. The study was inductive-driven, as the factors affecting the MICE sector recovery were identified from the data collected.

Data collection

The target population for this research was representatives of the respective subsectors of the MICE industry. Bueno et al. (2020) approach the structure of the MICE sector using the tourism distribution channel, presenting that the sector can be broadly divided into three subsectors, being demand (clients), supply side, and intermediaries (i.e., MICE planners). More recently, Bartis et al. (2021) expanded on the supply side to include support structures, such as convention bureau and industry associations, and government bodies. Data were collected from interviews with representatives of the MICE sector. Specifically, the study included MICE event planners, MICE suppliers, professional associations, and governing authorities. A mixture of purposive and snowball sampling was utilized, where representatives of industry associations and event planners were approached, interviewed, and thereafter provided information about other potential participants who could address the research question.

The potential participants were individuals that worked closely with the initial participants identified. In total, the study conducted 19 interviews virtually, using Microsoft Teams, from February to May 2021. The interview duration averaged approximately an hour. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded and thereafter transcribed verbatim. Table I below lists the participants interviewed and their role in the country’s MICE sector.

Table 1. Participant codes

Code	Participant	Province
P1	Representative from SITE (Society for Incentive Travel Excellence)	Western Cape
P2	Representative from SA Event Council	Western Cape
P3	Professional Conference Organiser	Western Cape
P4	Representative from ICCA	Western Cape
P5	International conference venue manager	Western Cape
P6	AV Supplier	Western Cape
P7	AV Supplier	Western Cape
P8	Trade show organizer	Gauteng
P9	Representative from the Association of African Exhibition Organisers	Gauteng
P10	Representative from the National Department of Tourism	Gauteng
P11	Trade show organizer	Gauteng
P12	Owner of exhibition stand supplier	Gauteng
P13	Representative of the South African National Convention Bureau (Bidding support personnel)	Gauteng
P14	Venue supplier (Cape Town International Convention Centre)	Western Cape
P15	Venue supplier (hotel group)	Gauteng
P16	Representative from Johannesburg Convention Bureau	Gauteng
P17	Representative from the Southern African Association for the Conference Industry	Gauteng
P18	Representative from South African National Convention Bureau (destination marketing personnel)	Gauteng
P19	International convention venue manager	Western Cape

Instruments

The interview questions were open-ended to provide for in-depth discussions and probing to explore the current shift in MICE events, due to the pandemic. The interview questions focused on understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the operations of the MICE sector, the opportunities and challenges arising from the pandemic’s effect on the sector, and the long-term changes adopted.

Data analysis

The transcriptions were uploaded on Atlas.ti version 9 for analysing the qualitative data. The software allowed for coding and grouping of similar codes to create themes. The analysis of the results revealed five key determinants, which relate to (i) changes in key MICE markets, (ii) the recovery of other economic sectors serviced by the MICE sector, (iii) the global destination image of South Africa, (iv) the recovery of international travel and, (v) the significance of boosting travel confidence in attending MICE events in South Africa. These key determinants are presented and discussed in the following section of the paper.

Findings and discussions

Changes in geographical MICE markets

While virtual events are one of the most well-known diversification and adaptation strategies, the discussions with participants of the study revealed that the gradual reopening of the MICE sector in South Africa led to changes and refocus of the key markets, shifting to local and regional markets. Such views are exemplified by the following response:

A lot of industry people are speaking to [i.e. about] focusing on the domestic market and regionally on the African market. So, maybe, get African companies to travel or African associations to come to the destination. That is what a lot of the world is doing, at the moment, focusing on local and focusing on regional in their area until next year, when borders are more open, and more people have been vaccinated. (P8)

The immediate shift to the domestic market coincides with many studies on COVID-19 and tourism as one of the common recovery measures implemented by many destinations globally (Bartis et al., 2021; Dragin-Jensen et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022). Interestingly, the focus on the domestic market raised a number of concerns and challenges. On one hand, some participants viewed the transition to the domestic market as an opportunity. Specifically, a representative of one of the governing MICE authorities mentioned the lockdown (more especially the 'hard lockdown' in which people could only leave their homes for essentials goods and services) increased the need to travel:

So it made us realise as an organisation, the importance of doing it the other way around, which would be which becomes domestic, to get your low-hanging fruit. From this, when things are getting stabilised, then Africa will be open. Then after Africa, you can then look at the globe at large. And the communication we needed to send out to say [that] most of these [MICE] companies have always been looking at Europe as a source market for [their] business, Asia, and America. But what this [COVID-19] has done is forces MICE businesses to start looking at South Africans as the first bet, because they are tired also of being indoors, they want to move they want to get out. [P18]

The findings indicated that many of the participants had refocused their business on the domestic market. However, a few of the participants cautioned that the targeting of the domestic market required some MICE destinations in the country to re-examine how they had repositioned their MICE offerings. Speaking to the need to change the perception of the domestic market, one participant, representing the leading conference association in Cape Town mentioned:

And we've had to look for new markets, if I can call it that, there's been a huge focus on domestic travel and domestic tourism. So that has been, that has been a great, I think, specifically for Cape Town, it's been a great opportunity to change people's perception of Cape Town, a lot of locals think of Cape Town as an incredibly expensive destination. So I work very closely with Cape Town Tourism [organisation] to try and change that perception. (P5)

On the other hand, some participants raised concerns about the focus on the domestic market, with particular reference to the differences in spending power as compared to international markets. For example a respondent had this to say:

....another thing is that we've had to drop our average daily rate quite considerably to be able to accommodate the local market. And so that has been quite a challenge because we need to try and keep that average daily rate at a level that we can slightly push it up again. By not being greedy but covering overheads [costs]. [P15]

While international markets hold more economic opportunities for the MICE sector, the study, together with studies such as Bartis et al. (2021) and Weru and Njoroge (2021), raised concerns that the tourism industries (specifically the MICE sector) in the region had become dependent on international tourists and the pandemic re-emphasised their inherent vulnerabilities and the missed opportunity of the sector to diversify its offerings to local and regional (African) markets. This could suggest this market should be a priority not only in the recovery strategies and efforts but in building sector resilience.

Variation in MICE sector recovery

Some participants of the study added that within the MICE sector, recovery may differ according to the type of MICE events and economic sectors they serve. Regarding the former, a number of the participants noted exhibitions and conferences to be a MICE subsector that may recover at a quicker pace owing to the purpose and nature of such events. For instance, a representative of the exhibition sector had this to say:

There's been so many job losses as a whole in the country. And they come from different industry sectors. So, all of that affects the economy, because there's less demand for products. And if there's less demand, there are those companies that can't supply, and they're not buying from their manufacturers so that ripple effect on the economy is huge. And then it affects us on the bottom line, because they [are] operating on a skeleton budget, skeleton staff, just to survive, so we are not a top priority for them right now, but we still have to nurture that relationship. Because that exhibitor could start growing again, and, when it's time to come back on, they will come back on. So that is a big part of it. We have to look at those sectors and watch the recovery in those sectors. (P9)

The findings indicate that while MICE events comprise a key business activity, the growing popularity of virtual meeting platforms, coupled with that many businesses are facing (and recovering from) the economic consequences of the pandemic, mean that there will be differences in how various types of MICE events recover, according to the functions and objectives concerning these event types. Exhibitions, for instance, have the main purpose of bringing several stakeholders for a specific industry together for several reasons and form an important part of businesses' communication strategies (Qi et al., 2019; Shereni et al., 2021). Accordingly, with many businesses recovering from the pandemic, these events become important to rebuild and grow professional relationships. Also, trade shows will become crucial in rebuilding market demand. In the same light, some of the participants mentioned that certain sectors of the economy may recover much faster and therefore have a greater demand for MICE events. For instance, a trade show organiser stated:

My take on it is that you will have certain sectors, which are quite strong at the moment, that will still have big exhibitions and big conferences. So, the likes of the mining industry is very strong. They will have these big events.

And there'll be a lot of traction on that. The industries that have been really impacted by COVID, like the tourism sector, talking very much business tourism and leisure tourism – they're going to have very small shows, and they're not going to have a lot of budget. So, you're going to have a situation [in] that certain sectors will be very strong and have big shows, and some will be a lot smaller. (P11)

The participants mentioned that broader economic recovery would be varied and, therefore, MICE organisations serving economic sectors that have been severely impacted by the pandemic (such as tourism) may have a longer path to recovery. Furthermore, beyond the geographical classification of markets, some participants added that recovery would also differ according to the type of business (i.e., government, corporate and associations).

In this regard, participants agreed that international markets would be the last to recover (for several reasons), and association markets would kickstart the MICE activity, as explained by a representative of the national convention bureau, *...the associations is where the demand is coming from. The associations still need to be financially viable and conferences and meetings are a huge part of their revenue* (P18).

Destination image of South Africa

The study found that the pandemic had increased the perceived risk in South Africa as a long-haul MICE destination. The recovery of the sector depends, to a certain extent, on the destination image of South Africa. The participants explained that unfortunately there had been several events that had adversely affected the global perception of South Africa. During the middle to the latter parts of the pandemic, the country was red-listed by the global community:

And then the other problem is that obviously with our borders, now being open and we being on the third, three top countries that you should not visit. We have been red-flagged [along with] Brazil, [and] India, are some of them. (P7)

Furthermore, in December 2020, South Africa discovered another variant of the virus which led to the erroneous labelling of it as the ‘South African variant’, which further degraded the image of South Africa, particularly as an international MICE destination. Many participants concurred that this affected the willingness of international travellers to come to the country, as seen by an exhibition planner's assertion, *Because the variant we have, all our international visitors and exhibitors won't be able to attend* (P12). Widely, crises and disasters adversely affect the image of the affected destination (Hopkins, 2021; Weru and Njoroge, 2021). Indeed, Neuburger and Egger (2021) found the increased risk perceptions to have affected travel behaviours. In the case of the MICE sector, Becken and Hughey (2021) and Kim et al. (2022) discovered that many businesses stopped all forms of corporate travel for MICE events owing to this increased risk in travelling and potential cost implications. In the current study, South Africa's red list status as well as ensuing crises in the country had a detrimental effect on the international MICE image of the destination, and subsequently hampered recovery efforts. Concurring with such assertions, one participant underlined:

I think the international market is probably going to be the one with the slowest recovery, because of all the travel bans. You know, our major markets are from the US, the UK, Europe, and a bit of Australia, and New Zealand. So if most of those markets are going to have travel bans to South Africa, so that affects us badly. It doesn't help that the PR around is around COVID, the South African variant, it doesn't help us either, that puts us on a big back foot. Because people don't say it's the C1235 variant, they actually say the South African variant, but there are 1000s other variants around the world. And now, all of a sudden, people are scared to come to South Africa. (P11)

This association of South Africa with the COVID-19 variant required the scientific community as well as the tourism industry stakeholders to contest this association. In addition to the variant, South Africa's destination image was also negatively affected by the Durban civil unrest in 2021, which undermined the efforts that were in place to change the global perception of South Africa, with one participant lamenting, *Unfortunately, the so-called SA variant ... the recent unrest as well, those slowly put us at the at [i.e. on] the back foot of the work that we are doing for recovery* (P9). It is important to consider that this is against the backdrop of the continent's prolonged negative image and perception (Weru and Njoroge, 2021). Interestingly, MICE events are continuously used to favourably position destination images.

International air travel

Undoubtedly, the recovery of the MICE sector relied on the recommencement of international tourism. To a large extent, the participants concurred on the importance of this sector in the recovery of the MICE economy in the country, as well as in stimulating broader tourism recovery, as seen in the responses below:

I hope, because we want internationals to come to South Africa. I mean, even like business tourists. When internationals come to South Africa for business, they spend a lot of money. They spend in foreign currency, like euros and dollars, and they also, when they come to South Africa for business, they extended their trip for leisure as well. So I do feel that, if the borders are open and with international conferences, it will help in travel and tourism, and just the whole of Cape Town as a destination. It was really – it really helped our situation. (P6)

The study participants were of the view that access to the country constitutes one of the reasons for the delay in the resumption of international MICE event activity in the country. Importantly, many participants highlighted the effect of the pandemic on the aviation sector and the consequences to international tourism as well as the various border regulations in many countries during COVID-19. Referring to the latter, one participant reflected:

But it's more in terms of the governments internationally not allowing their travellers to travel. So, in the UK, at the moment, it's illegal to travel. You're not even allowed to travel within the UK and let alone to travel internationally until I think it's May or June [2021], sometime there, that you're allowed to travel. The reality is that, like coming out of Germany, for example, when you go back to Germany, you have to quarantine. Everywhere across Europe, when you go back from anywhere, you have to quarantine, and often that is at [the] people's own expense, so they're not going to travel right now. Yeah, not until international governments change the plans on [i.e. of] how we [are] 281 facing travelling as an entity. So, until that happens, you're not going to get any movement of people to any degree. (P17)

The findings presented align with previous studies that also found that international border restrictions have made travel complicated and demanding, thereby affecting tourism systems (Seraphin, 2021; Gössling and Schweiggart, 2022). The MICE sector operates in the global economy and relies on (eased) international travel. However, the past two years of COVID-19 were characterised by the emergence of variants and subsequent waves of infection (Gössling and Schweiggart, 2022; Santos et al., 2022). In many countries, including South Africa, this meant imposing more regulations on the travel and tourism sectors. This made the resumption and recovery of the MICE sector very complicated owing to the different regulations placed by different countries on international travel. As seen in the response above, many participants argued the need to move away from closing (or tightly regulating) international travel as an immediate response to the various COVID-19 waves. This is because while substantial uncertainty existed about the pandemic, MICE events require substantial planning times for delegates, more especially international delegates.

In addition, airline access was noted by many participants to be another factor affecting the recovery of international tourism. A representative of SAACI summed it up as:

And another thing, that's something that I think all of us experienced, depending on where you are located in the country, airline access has also become problematic. So, the fact that we, for a large extent, only have to fly Safair and now Airlink has tried to pop up wherever they can. Airlink is going to come back online, in [the] coming week's time. I mean, our international routing has been something that the other countries has [i.e. have] experienced, so we're not unique in our challenges. So, our approach has been that we need to drive local meetings, get people to meet locally. And that's why I mean, I sort of keep saying that hybrid is an option to do that. (P1)

Many international and national airlines ceased their operations during COVID-19 (Smith, 2021). Sun et al. (2021) elaborated that changes in travel demands, vulnerabilities in profit-driven airlines, and border control measures represented some of the challenges facing this sector. This impacted international MICE travellers adversely. Gradually, airlines are resuming their operations and flights to the country, however, the sector is now facing increased costs in air travel, which is in part due to the global economic situation. This emphasises the relationship between air transportation and tourism recovery.

Boosting confidence

Overwhelmingly, the study's participants believed the recovery of the sector (particularly in-person events) could only truly begin with the distribution of COVID-19 vaccinations. This is supported by the following observation:

But I think that we are seeing now, there's going to be a few shows that are within the UK, for example. They're going to be doing a few UK marketing events from, I'd say, probably September, October time, again, when they feel that there's more of a group of people that have been vaccinated, and [who] will be happy to get together. (P11)

Studies such as Gössling et al. (2021) and Hall et al. (2020) opined that the administration of the vaccination represented a turning point for tourism during the pandemic. As such, many participants pinned their hopes for MICE recovery on the uptake of the vaccine in South Africa and other parts of the world. The underlying contention was that the vaccination would assist in restoring confidence in the tourism industry as well as boosting the confidence to travel. Such contentions are exemplified in the quotes presented below:

So, I think there is going to be more travel, but people need confidence, right? They just need to be confident that they can travel. So, that's where the vaccination programmes are so critical. (P18)

With the vaccinations, people will say if Africa gets 20 million people vaccinated, it will boost the confidence of people coming to South Africa, international travel in South Africa, etc. And I think those are the major things. I think the vaccinations, the travel restrictions, and the gathering restrictions, if those are lifted or done with, I think that will aid in the recovery. (P9)

The vaccination was opined to tackle the risk perceptions related to MICE events as well as lessen the complicated process of international travel. Largely, the participants believed the vaccination was crucial in boosting the confidence of the MICE demand to attend in-person events, which re-emphasised their continued assertions of MICE events as organised and safe spaces during the pandemic but the public perception of gatherings was a major setback for the recovery of the sector. As alluded to in the above quote, the attractiveness of a destination was further reliant on the rate of vaccinations in the country. Unfortunately, despite the role of vaccinations to return to normal (i.e., the ability to meet and interact in person), the study found a general hesitation concerning the vaccinations. WHO contended that the most effective way to manage the virus was through achieving herd immunity (Williams et al., 2021). This was met with several debates surrounding vaccinations, such as whether to make them mandatory. Some participants cautioned against such policy measures, with one drawing examples of civil disputes of such measures:

So, you can't make vaccination mandatory, because that's something that the country had not considered yet. But, in other parts of the world, I mean, I use the football example. But you can also research and check, and see some of the citizen marches and sort of, not necessarily unrest, but marches that took place from the anti-vaxxers, or the rest of the population. Because, should we have gone and visited France, and you wanted to go to a coffee shop, they'd have requested proof of vaccination. So on that part, definitely a policy change. (P17)

Indeed, the matter of making vaccinations mandatory gave rise to numerous debates globally (Gössling et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2021). Interestingly, some of the participants noted that the next step towards recovery was based on individuals' willingness to be around large crowds. Taking a football match as an example, one participant responded:

I think it's a societal issue. We've been using the UK as an example. If you are a football fan, there was the Barclays Premier League, which is watched by many people around the globe, [and] you might have seen the Tottenham and

Manchester City game, in one of many other cases. But we've been using that is [i.e. as] an example. They had 6,000 people in the stadium now. You then have to ask yourself a question: as an individual, 'if I'm vaccinated, will I go to a game like that?' So, if you had the privilege of having a ticket to go to the game, a fully paid expense, if you are not from that country, would you go, not knowing if anybody else has been vaccinated in that stadium, for instance? (P17)

As such, there will continue to be hesitance amongst many individuals in attending any form of gathering. In responding to this, some participants stressed the importance of simply starting to travel, *So, it's about that restarting. Once you do that, it's easier to remember why you're doing it and get ... back to the habit of doing it* (P18). Nevertheless, the vaccinations played a large role in easing the restrictions on the MICE sector, as by early 2022, the government of South Africa had allowed for 50% capacity within MICE venues and by June of that same year, all restrictions were lifted.

Moreover, some participants acknowledged the importance of consistent marketing and communication during the crisis to assist in destination recovery. In terms of marketing, one participant mentioned the need for collaborative marketing within MICE tourism in South Africa:

So that's going to be a whole education and marketing awareness drive recovery. I think South African tourism would have to do because as a PCO, besides telling our clients and besides telling the delegates, it would have to be [done] on a much bigger, top-level scale than anything else. It's I think a lot of money is going to have to be pushed into marketing from a government point of view. (P3)

Drawing an example from Dubai, a representative of the destination marketing department within the SAT mentioned:

We asked: what makes us different? We went to the likes of WTM [World Travel Market]. We asked them, "Okay, help us understand [how] you pull ... off this." They said, "The reason we were even able to stage the show, it's because we had the backing of Dubai and the country. We had all our ducks in a row. Our messaging, since the pandemic started, has been out there to say, 'We are open, all you need to do meet our requirements', which is around vaccination. Come with a COVID test there [that] is negative, go on quarantine and if need be." So, it's the messaging has always been there. So, I think what most of the countries missed, was to remain top of mind about communication. And communicating where are we as far as the virus [goes]. (P18)

Crisis communication is essential in assisting destinations in combatting crises affecting their tourism industries as well as minimising (or avoiding) negative destination images and stereotypes (Hopkins, 2021; Neuburger and Egger, 2021). The current case study found that while there was some communication around the COVID-19 pandemic in the country and how it is being managed, the quote above alludes to a missed opportunity in maintaining destination image during the pandemic which would have assisted in fast-tracking recovery once the sector had reopened. Understandably, there are limits to how the sector can position itself within the global market (regarding minimising risk perceptions and boosting traveller confidence) owing to circumstances that are beyond the control of the sector.

CONCLUSION

The current study sought to explore the recovery process of the MICE sector with a focus on South Africa. The findings revealed that the lockdown measures employed to minimise the spread of the COVID-19 in most destinations led to a refocus on domestic and regional markets which had previously not been a strong priority. This refocus may require the repositioning, certainly in the case of the South African MICE destination image to these markets. Additionally, the study found that there would be differences in the recovery of MICE event typologies according to their specific functions and purpose. Similarly, the recovery of the markets served determined the recovery of different MICE businesses. As the restart of the MICE sector recovery depends on international tourism, factors such as airline connectivity and availability were found to be challenging in the reopening of international travel. The study found that some of the key priorities in sector recovery are related to the destination image (which has been adversely affected by numerous local events) and boosting travellers' confidence to attend MICE events in the country. This is further supported by the presence of South Africa in global MICE events to entice more MICE business to the country.

The study presents theoretical and managerial contributions to the event management field. With regard to theory, the study contributes to the scarcity of literature surrounding the event recovery process following a global crisis. For much of the pandemic, the events sector had arguably paused most of its operations, as large-scale events were largely restricted globally. As such, this is one of the few studies that examined the reopening and recovery of a niche events sector (MICE). More importantly, the focus on a developing nations' perspective was equally important owing to the importance of the sector to tourism and economic development, as well as the differences in which the pandemic was managed. The study thereby illustrates the emerging factors that affected MICE sector recovery, which to a varying extent, could comprise factors determining MICE tourism recovery of other destinations in similar contexts.

This study, therefore, advances the knowledge of the MICE sector in a developing nations context. Furthermore, the current study contributes to the ongoing research on resilience within the events sector. As such, the study can provide insight into the transition period of the MICE sector which could be valuable lessons for building and embedding MICE sector resilience, which is of importance to MICE event managers to ensure their business sustainability.

In this regard, the authors argue the lessons learned in recovering from the pandemic could assist in lessening the vulnerability of the sector to the next crisis.

It is important to note that a limitation of the study is its focus on five determinants of MICE event recovery.

This is ascribable to the period in which data were collected, as the five determinants presented emerged as important considerations at that time. The authors suggest future research be directed toward emerging determinants of

recovery as all COVID-19 regulations have been removed. Specifically, a longitudinal study could provide valuable insight into the various phases of MICE sector recovery.

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