

## RELIGIOUS TOURISM AND RESILIENCE BUILDING: AN OVERVIEW OF IMPACTS AND RECOVERY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**Abstract:** Intending to contribute to the sector's resilience in times of external shocks, this study unpacks the experiences of the religious tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. Through an exploratory qualitative approach with in-depth, interviews conducted with key role-players (n=50), the findings reveal significant financial losses suffered by the sector during the pandemic's peak, marked by widespread activity closures. Many organizations faced difficulties in maintaining their customary faith-based activities, travel, and commitments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study identifies valuable lessons from these challenges, emphasizing the importance of fostering collaborations with other stakeholders and embracing technological innovations. By shedding light on these experiences, the study offers insights for enhancing resilience in religious tourism amidst uncertainty, with implications for strategic planning and long-term resilience efforts within the sector.

**Keywords:** religious tourism; South Africa; resilience; COVID-19; tourism recovery, sustainability

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### INTRODUCTION

Religious or spiritual tourism has emerged as an important sector of the global tourism economy and an equally important field of study and research focus (Bhandari, 2022; Budovich, 2023; Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Nyika et al., 2022; Sharma, 2013; Timothy, 2012; Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Mzobe (2024) as well as the World Tourism Organisation [UNWTO] (2011) estimated that 300-330 million people visit religious places on an annual basis, with the Alliance of Religions and Conservation [ARC] (2011) further projecting that 140 million people travel annually to 32 different religious destinations around the globe. As a result, religious tourism stands out as a significant typology within the tourism sector, actively contributing to the growth and development of the global economy. Reports suggest its economic value to be in the region of 18 billion US Dollars (Griffin and Raj, 2018; Jha et al., 2024). In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature exploring the role of religious tourism as a socio-economic activity for destinations, focusing on the community benefits derived from religious activities (Bhandari, 2022; Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Nyikana, 2017; Nyika et al., 2022; Timothy and Olsen, 2021; Sadeghi et al., 2022; Shinde, 2018; Tabash et al., 2023; Thomas and Barbato, 2020). Accordingly, such literature outlines the benefits to include employment-creation opportunities, upgrades in infrastructure, increased revenue, and strengthened religious faith, amongst others.

Most of the benefits mentioned above occur in built environments within urban settings. As such, urban infrastructure becomes crucial for facilitating religious activities, events, gatherings and festivals, ultimately leading to the recognition of destinations as religious spaces (Burchardt and Becci, 2013; Kealotswe, 2004). For example, many historic churches and religious sites have hosted religious events and festivals annually over the years and as such, have attracted millions of religious tourists to local areas. This has contributed to the increase in revenues, granting these churches access to funds to support their projects and initiatives and to cover other expenses (Asthana and Pandey, 2019; Bhandari, 2022; Butler and Suntikul, 2019; Di Giovine and Choe, 2019; Griffin and Raj, 2018; Gulomjonovna and Sobirjonovna, 2019; Nyaupane et al., 2015; Nyika et al., 2022; Nyikana, 2017; Timothy and Olsen, 2021; Shinde, 2018; Timothy and Olsen, 2018; Romanelli et al., 2021; Verma and Sarangi, 2019). Budovich (2023) emphasizes the employment opportunities generated by religious tourism, suggesting that the sector tends to create increased opportunities for income generation for locals, thus fostering economic prosperity. Ultimately, religious tourism has grown to become an important part of the global economy with a significant emphasis on the travel aspect amongst religious tourists (Griffiths, 2011; Gulomjonovna and Sobirjonovna, 2019; Timothy, 2021; Tisdell, 2020; Zamani-Farahani and Henderson, 2010).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the broader tourism industry, with religious tourism experiencing no exception to this devastation (Timothy and Olsen, 2021). The onset of the pandemic initially resulted in

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little to no consumption of religious tourism, consequently rendering many of the aforementioned benefits imperceptible (Bama and Nyikana, 2021; Raja et al., 2021). In the African context, this was seen as a major concern given that, prior to the pandemic, the sector had been growing at a rapid rate (Apleni and Henama, 2020; Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Nkwatsi, 2019; Nyikana, 2017). This pre-pandemic growth was attributed partly to the emergence of mega-churches and their events which have continued to attract millions of visitors to the continent, including regional and international visitors (Chimbizikai, 2020; Korstanje, 2020; International Air Transport Association [IATA], 2020; Manhas and Nair, 2020; Nkwatsi, 2019; Raj and Griffin, 2020). The pandemic compromised this growth, restricting gatherings and leading to the cancellation or postponement of major events (Nyika et al., 2022; Nyikana and Bama, 2023). Equally, religious sites and churches were closed, unemployment rates surged, financial losses accrued, and a notable increase in psychological issues ensued (Manhas and Nair, 2020; Mzobe, 2024; Nyika et al., 2022; Vučetić, 2020).

Although the pandemic is no longer a threat, we argue in this paper that its impacts need to be understood and the coping mechanisms that were employed better analysed as this would assist in building up the resilience of the sector in times of uncertainty and future external shocks. Given that recovery strategies within the sector may vary across different geographical contexts, valuable insights can be gleaned from approaches employed within the African context. In terms of arrangement, the next section presents the theoretical grounding of the study as well as a comprehensive literature review on religious tourism. This is followed by a description and justification of the qualitative research design employed in the study. Later, the findings and discussions are presented, followed by the discussion of the implications of the study.

### **Theoretical grounding and literature review**

This study is grounded on the resilience theory to better understand the management of religious tourism in times of uncertainty and external shocks. According to Ledesma (2014), resilience as a concept relates to the capacity to recover from adversity, frustration, and misfortune. Ledesma (2014) further stresses that the ability to adapt to both "normal" or predicted stresses and strains as well as to unanticipated shocks and extraordinary demands is an implication of this term and concept. The concept encompasses both pre-event strategies intended to cope with and minimize disaster impacts, as well as post-event strategies designed to cope with disaster-related damage (Tierney, 2003).

The challenge with understanding resilience in different situations lies in its inherently multifaceted nature (Cochrane, 2010; Southwick et al., 2014; Tierney, 2003). Its significance as a construct can vary among individuals, businesses, cultures, and societies. In essence, the main challenge is that resilience can be experienced at differing levels and may change over time (Cheer and Lew, 2017; Southwick et al., 2014).

Despite the challenges mentioned, resilience has been used to better understand numerous social systems, including sustainable development as the interrelated systems of society, the economy and ultimately the environment (Cochrane, 2010; Southwick et al., 2014; Tierney, 2003). From a tourism perspective therefore, resilience is seen as an important concept, in terms of enabling the sector to bounce back from shocks and adapt to chance such that it can perform better than before the external shock occurred (Von der Weppen and Cochrane, 2012). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was considered a learning opportunity for the tourism sector, and the religious sub-sector in particular, for future coping mechanisms and strategies which would lead to a resilient sector going forward (Nyikana and Bama, 2023).

Religious tourism has been recognised as one of the drivers for tourism demand with an estimated 300-600 million people travelling domestically, regionally and internationally for religious and spiritual needs - this therefore makes the religious tourism sector the fastest-growing sector in the tourism industry (Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Griffin and Raj, 2018; Timothy and Olsen, 2020; Timothy, 2021; UNWTO, 2011). Religious destinations have played a significant role in attracting millions of religious travellers because of their sacred and symbolic nature (Ahmed and Memish, 2020; Apleni et al., 2017; Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Griffiths, 2011; Gulomjonovna and Sobirjonovna, 2019; Griffin and Raj, 2015; Huang and Pearce, 2019; Ives and Kidwell, 2019; Nyikana, 2017; Timothy and Olsen, 2020; Timothy, 2021). Some of the most prominent destinations for religious tourism include the Holy Land, Mecca, Jerusalem, Sensoji Temple and Varanasi, amongst others (Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Morss, 2015; Romanelli et al., 2021; Safar and Seurat, 2023; Sawant, 2022). According to Gedecho and Nyikana (2023), most research focus on religious tourism has been skewed towards the Global North and Middle East regions, as they have been prominent regions for this kind of tourism. In recent times, however, there has been a marked growth in the sector in Africa (Nyika et al., 2022).

The growth of religious tourism in the African continent has been linked to the creation and development of Independent African Churches [IACs] which formed because of political unrest and economic damage in African countries like Namibia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Malawi (Nyika et al., 2022). Religious tourists, believers and seekers migrated from their countries of origin to countries like South Africa for greater opportunities and greener pastures (Nyika et al., 2022; Settler and Mpofu, 2017). For instance, it was reported that in 2019, there were 4 million people comprised of regional and international migrants in South Africa with a large group of migrants settling in Johannesburg with 2 million of them coming from Zimbabwe (Nyika et al., 2022). Ultimately, this has led to the diversification of religions which has resulted in the development of new religious organizations and the expansion of religious activities, and festivals which has significantly contributed towards the tourism arrivals and receipts in South Africa (Gedecho and Nyikana, 2023; Gyekye et al., 2014; Henama and Sifolo, 2018; Nyika et al., 2022). When the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, the religious tourism sector was unprepared and subsequently suffered great losses (Mzobe, 2024).

Bama and Nyikana (2021) noted that the World Health Organization [WHO] announced COVID-19 as a global health emergency on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2020. According to Nyikana and Bama (2023), South Africa bore a significant brunt of the pandemic, prompting the implementation of stringent lockdown measures and safety protocols to curb the

virus spread. Considering the lessons that were learnt from previous outbreaks like MERS and Ebola in West Africa, it became imperative for the government of South Africa to consult with stakeholders about the management of the pandemic in different sectors (Nyikana and Bama, 2023). From a religious tourism environment perspective, the religious leaders and authorities would have also needed to be consulted about the implications of the measures for their activities. For example, some churches were against complying with some government measures as they felt that they were against their belief systems (Mzobe, 2024; Nyika et al., 2022). This led to numerous breaches of regulations, with religious authorities mostly focusing on faith, and what they perceived as the best course of action for their congregants, particularly among church leaders. In this regard, they continued to travel for religious purposes and congregated for prayers or to visit individuals who were unwell in their homes (Henama and Apleni, 2021; Nyika et al., 2022). Nonetheless, in the existing research, several strategies were employed in the religious tourism sector, which ended up contributing to the recovery of the sector as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Recovery strategies for religious tourism

Strategies	Reviewed literature
Offering psychological support to religious communities	(Henama and Apleni, 2021; Nyika et al., 2022; Timothy and Olsen, 2021)
Utilization of technology in religious tourism activities	(Olsen and Timothy, 2020; Raj and Griffin, 2020; Serra and Leong, 2020)
Reducing the capacity for welcoming tourists in tourism sites	(Irfan and Ali, 2020; Nyika et al., 2022; Olsen and Timothy, 2020; Raj and Griffin, 2020)
Building trust between religious communities, health officials and the government	(Mosier, Elhadary, Elhaty and Safaei, 2020; Olsen and Timothy, 2020; Raj and Griffin, 2020)
Religious authorities stepping in to ensure inclusivity in health care systems	(Korstanje and George, 2021; Moira, Mylonopoulos and Parasxi, 2019; Olsen and Timothy, 2020)
Encouraging the rollout of vaccines by religious organisations	(Nyika et al., 2022; Olsen and Timothy, 2020)
Creating the demand for religious tourism happenings	(Gerber, 2021; Nyika et al., 2022; Romanelli et al., 2021; Olsen and Timothy, 2020)
Prioritizing economic recovery plans	(Nyika et al., 2022; Olsen and Timothy, 2020; Raj and Griffin, 2020)

All of these initiatives and strategies were seen as important initiatives and strategies for informing the recovery of the sector, and ultimately contributed to a more resilient religious tourism sector going forward. The next section explains and justifies the research methods employed in carrying out this study.

### Research Methods

This study adopted an interpretive research philosophy, with the view to analyse data from the perspective of the research participants. To this end, qualitative research methods were employed when collecting and analysing data. The qualitative methods enabled the in-depth exploration of the impacts of COVID-19 as well as the recovery strategies employed to build resilience in the domestic tourism sub-sector. The use of this method was considered most appropriate for meeting the study's objectives as it would unearth the perspectives of key stakeholders in the domain regarding the impacts and the subsequent recovery strategies in place, and ultimately the best approach to building resilience based on the lessons learned. This follows the arguments made by scholars such as Teti, Schatz and Liebenberg (2020) that such a method is better suited for explaining, addressing, managing and planning for future external shocks and incidents such as pandemics. Accordingly, researchers can gain in-depth understanding and insights into the evolution of an external shock, whilst also obtaining information about future management plans for similar situations.

The population for this study consisted of key stakeholders responsible for the preparations and arrangements of religious travel and packages in Johannesburg, South Africa. Such stakeholders included church travel offices (CTO), selected transportation companies (TC), religious attraction sites (RAS), religious leaders (RL) and other religious authorities (RA) who were purposively selected and recommended to participate based on their experience, knowledge and involvement in the religious tourism sector (Table 2 below).

Table 2. Overview of study participants

Stakeholder group	Code used	Total number interviewed [N=50]
Religious Leader	RL [RL1 – RL30]	N=30
Transportation Company	TC [TC1 -TC5]	N=5
Religious Tourism Authority	RA [RA1 - RA5]	N=5
Church Travel Office	CTO [CTO1-CTO5]	N=5
Religious Attraction Site	RAS [RAS1-RAS5]	N=5

In the analysis of the findings below, these codes are used to denote the source of key quotations. As far as possible, reference is made to the most suitable quotation for each stakeholder group used in the discussion of the findings. Quotations are taken verbatim from the transcripts generated on the semi-structured interviews conducted. The semi-structured interview schedules were designed with reference to the literature review as well as the research questions of the study. The interview discussions focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on religious tourism and the recovery strategies that the stakeholders implemented to cope with the implications of COVID-19 whilst ensuring a resilient sector going forward. The interviews were conducted between December 2022 and April 2023 either via Zoom, Microsoft Teams or face-to-face based on the availability and convenience of each stakeholder. The meetings that were

conducted face-to-face took place in the work environments of the participants during a convenient time based on the appointments that were agreed upon by the researchers and the participants. On average, the interviews lasted approximately one hour long. In total, fifty (n=50) interviews were conducted after the data collection period.



Figure 1. Flowchart of research methodology

The collected data was then transcribed and key quotations were coded using Atlas.Ti which were then grouped into family codes. The steps followed in conducting this research are illustrated in Figure 1. Table 3 below outlines the individual codes found, alongside the group codes, and the research objectives relevant to the codes.

Table 3. Findings of the study

Research objectives	Group codes	Individual codes
Impacts of COVID-19 on religious tourism	Spread of fake news	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conspiracy theories</li> </ul>
	Cancellation and postponement of worship services, events, conferences, conventions and festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closure of operations</li> <li>• Closure of churches and public spaces</li> <li>• Cancellation of planned trips</li> <li>• Cost of travelling (reduced numbers)</li> </ul>
	Drop in revenue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Income losses</li> <li>• Affected church offerings (not able to do EFTs and debit orders)</li> <li>• Increase in the church expenses (virtual streaming conference)</li> <li>• Inability to conduct fundraising activities</li> <li>• Readjusted prices (affected profit margins)</li> <li>• Reduce capacity (occupancy in vehicles)</li> <li>• Offer single rooms only</li> <li>• Not able to do maintenance</li> <li>• Ability to sustain the church during COVID-19</li> </ul>
	Ban in domestic travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach programmes were affected</li> <li>• Permits for the vehicles and confirmation documents from churches</li> <li>• Inability to travel for pilgrimages, conferences and events</li> </ul>
	Increase in fear and anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in death rates</li> <li>• Absenteeism, avoidance and despair</li> <li>• Suffering from anxiety</li> </ul>
	Shift from physically services to online	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staying home and going online</li> <li>• Unable to fellowship together</li> <li>• Meetings moved to online platforms</li> </ul>
Recovery strategies for the religious tourism sector	Implementation of technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debit and stop orders (church offerings)</li> <li>• EFTs (Electronic Funds Transfer)</li> <li>• Point of Sale Swiping machines</li> <li>• Utilization of digital platforms</li> <li>• Visual services and live streaming</li> <li>• Response towards the use of technology</li> <li>• Data issues and inability to login</li> <li>• Spreading technological awareness</li> </ul>
	Adherence to health and safety protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adhering to the directives of the government and health officials</li> <li>• Following regulations</li> <li>• Wearing of masks</li> <li>• Social distancing</li> <li>• Disinfecting spaces</li> </ul>
	Resumption of projects and religious activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outreach programmes</li> <li>• Fundraising activities</li> <li>• Creating other sources of income</li> </ul>

## Findings

The findings based on the thematic codes above are presented in this section and a word cloud depicting the keywords that emerged from the data analysis is provided below (Figure 2). The first section of the analysis offers a discussion of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious tourism in South Africa. Later, the strategies that were adopted for the recovery of the religious tourism sector in South Africa are discussed in the context of building resilience for the sector. To protect the identities of the participants, codes are used in the discussion of the findings.

### Impacts of COVID-19 on the religious tourism sector

It has been documented that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about very crippling effects on tourism, with many consequences of the pandemic having a detrimental impact on the sector (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2021; Nyikana and Bama, 2023). One of the most significant impacts that were felt from COVID-19 is the decline of income for organizations that are involved in and make up the religious tourism sector. Corresponding with Booyens et al. (2022) who elaborated on how



Christian values, the school was seen as a strategic aspect of the church, making things easier for members. Beyond the finances, a myriad of other impacts was highlighted by the participants. These included psychological issues linked with depression, anxiety, loneliness and worry due to the increased mortality rates during the pandemic. These were seen as being particularly perceptible in a sector that is largely driven by faith in their activities. For example, many people who had contracted the virus and recovered from it were very reluctant to travel with others for fear of judgement and mistreatment. In particular, travelling for funerals, which has become a central part of domestic travel for religious purposes in the country, became a point of apprehension for many. To this end, one of the participants noted that *“we would normally travel to different places for funerals as big groups. But this was impossible because people had a sense of fear for funerals themselves but also travelling with a group of people was a problem”* (RL3).

Ultimately, the pandemic had several impacts on the sector and posed challenges for the recovery of the sector post-pandemic. Given that, unlike other types of tourism, the religious tourism sector is driven by faith motivations, changes in the macro environment were difficult to unpack in the face of the internal belief systems and faith. The next section explores the strategies and coping mechanisms that were put in place to deal with the abovementioned impacts. Such strategies are seen as crucial in the resilience building of the sector for future external shocks.

### **Strategies adopted for recovery and resilience of the religious tourism sector**

Religious tourism organizations had to invest in technology as one of their strategies to recover from the initial setbacks caused by COVID-19. In this study, many organisations argued that, while they are primarily driven by faith in their activities and had no time to trial technology, the onset of the pandemic compelled them to adopt technological solutions. Many interviewees argued that the pandemic helped them learn crucial lessons in terms of adapting to the times, by integrating technology in their operations. They felt that they had been very reactive with the use of technology and suggested that had they foreseen a scenario like the pandemic, they would have proactively prepared in advance. Importantly, they argued that since religious attractions and sites, as well as pilgrimage destinations, were strongly built on the spiritual connections that they invoke, having access through technological systems would bridge the gap that was exposed during the pandemic in times of future challenges. For example, a religious conference organiser from a church travel office argued that, *“we never put much thought in having technology in place. When we got instructions to stop all our operations, we could have gone online, but unfortunately, we did not have facilities, so had to deal with total losses. Whereas, we could have gotten some online attendance and registration for the online conference”* (CTO4). In this regard, they asserted that most of their conferences were organised in-house rather than being held at external venues.

This led to a lack of capacity and the necessary infrastructure, prompting subsequent efforts to establish them. There has been a notable shift in this aspect, with various stakeholders recognizing the necessity *“to move with the times, it's about time we invest in technology across board because we need to also reach out to the youth who are more comfortable in the technological space”* (RA3). Similarly, a religious attraction manager emphasised the need to *“attract more visitors to our site, and people share experiences on social media and having this in place would help us”* (RAS2). A transport provider noted that in their subsector, hard cash was the norm, but the pandemic had forced them to get point-of-sale swiping machines and encourage religious travellers to make use of electronic funds transfers and other digital payment platforms. This has helped them even beyond the religious market although they caution that *“some of the people we transport still want to use cash, saying they have connectivity issues or challenges logging into their banking systems”* (TC3).

In addition to the aforementioned insights into the heightened utilization of technology, there were also recommendations for lessons concerning collaboration and the imperative to enhance such efforts moving forward. As one leader of a mega-church argued *“we need to enhance our cooperation with other stakeholders. For example, the government made decisions without thinking about our unique situation and this did not help us or them”* (RL24). A manager in a travel office echoed this sentiment further suggesting that *“we learned that we need to collaborate with others in the sector. We can't work as an island and going forward we must all sing from the same hymn otherwise we will all be losers”* (CTO4). In the same vein, another travel office manager noted the *“need for complete packages for travellers, which will reduce the strain on one group like accommodation. If they are working better with transport and other role-players, it's easier to create trusted packages, simplifying the booking process”* (CTO2). This sentiment of collaboration also extended to the need for an inclusive sector, as indicated by a religious conference organiser from a mega-church, *“there is a big lesson for us in terms of being inclusive. We need more women and more young people involved in religious activities. We have missed out on the insights and creativity of these groups for too long”* (RA3). This feeling was shared by many participants, with calls for the greater sharing of power, responsibilities, opportunities, and decision-making. They argued that the sector could only grow more if inclusivity became a central pillar of operations going forward, as different approaches were needed to grow the sector and enable it to better cope with future external shocks. Ultimately, it was expressed that a more inclusive, representative sector would result in more flexibility and thus better resilience and adaptability.

### **CONCLUSION**

There has been a strong emphasis on the need to undertake context-specific research as a means of assessing resilience, both from an individual organization basis and an industry point of view (Lekgau and Tichaawa, 2024). This is especially the case for tourism. Based on the findings of this study, there are several key lessons that can be taken from the pandemic and applied to build a more resilient religious tourism sector.

In the context of South Africa, the sector had been growing at a rapid rate before the pandemic. Therefore, to sustain and surpass those achievements, greater emphasis should be placed on implementing strategies aimed at fostering its continued expansion. Essentially, stakeholders in the religious tourism sector should work closer together to build a more



resilient sector which can cope with external shocks. This notion finds support in the collaboration that was demonstrated during the pandemic. These lessons are invaluable and should be applied moving forward, as effective collaboration and cooperation among diverse stakeholders will be essential for managing future crises. Purposely, the religious tourism sector stands to gain by establishing a unified body comprising various stakeholders, dedicated to crisis management, recovery, and fostering cohesion within the sector. Notably other tourism sectors benefit from governing bodies and committees equipped with strategic documents. This underscores the need for the religious tourism sector to advance toward developing a draft strategy document outlining its activities and integrating them to ensure resilience and sustainability in the future.

In addition, the sector has historically failed to sufficiently engage the youth in its activities, programs, and structural set-ups. As such, there is a pressing need to reassess these programs, particularly in the context of ensuring the future sustainability of religious tourism. It is crucial for religious stakeholders to embrace innovation and enhance their adaptability to the evolving world. This necessitates the inclusion of diverse groups in decision-making and planning processes to leverage a wide array of perspectives. Furthermore, there is a need to integrate technological advancements which would enable religious tourism to overcome the constraints associated with physical travel. This is especially pertinent when considering the involvement of the youth in religious tourism, as they are highly accustomed to technology and are more inclined towards technological platforms. Appealing to this generation is essential to ensure readiness and preparedness for future crises, thereby enhancing overall resilience.

The contribution of this study stems from the fact that the theory of resilience in religious tourism has been neglected over the years. By investigating the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent strategies employed to cope with it, this study advocates for the valuable lessons that can enhance resilience in the sector. The findings from the study present key lessons that should form the basis for the management of future pandemics and external shocks to ultimately safeguard the resilience and sustainability of the religious tourism sector.

### Limitations

The study was limited to selected stakeholders within the Johannesburg, South Africa. Given that they were purposefully selected, some other stakeholders may have been excluded from the data collection. Additionally, the interviews were a mix of face-to-face and online platforms, as such, they may have been different in nature, based on the platform used as the face-to-face interviews were more detailed, and in-depth when compared to the online platforms.

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