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SMEs' Sustainable Development Challenges Post-COVID-19: The Tourism Sector

REVIEW

SMEs' Sustainable Development Challenges Post-COVID-19: The Tourism Sector

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This paper reviews the changes in the relationships between Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism industry and sustainability dimensions (social, economic and environmental) following the COVID-19 crisis. It offers some reflections on changes in the relationships between SMEs' sustainable development in the tourism industry and sustainability.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: The paper describes how COVID-19 impacted several sectors in tourism (hotels, tour operators, restaurants) and reviews how the COVID-19 crisis is likely to negatively impact sustainable development efforts for SMEs in this sector.

FINDINGS: This exploratory review of SMEs' sustainability challenges reveals that it might be harder to maintain or adopt any sustainable practices, whether social, economic or environmental, under the financial stress and sharp decline of revenue resulting from the COVID-19 crisis.

ORIGINAL/VALUE OF THE PAPER: The paper is the first to investigate how the COVID-19 crisis might impact SMEs' sustainable development in various tourism sectors.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS: This review paper presents a theoretical outline of the crisis and opens up promising research opportunities for enhancing our understanding of the changing relationships between sustainability and SMEs in the tourism industry.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: The paper fills the current gap in the literature in sustainable tourism challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis, and demonstrates the importance of governments and policy-makers supporting SME survival and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We hope that this paper will become inspirational for academic researchers, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers who are involved in the sustainable development discourse.

KEYWORDS: *SMEs; COVID-19; Sustainable Tourism; Corporate Responsibility; Sustainability Challenges; Sustainable Development*

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and has become responsible for various aims and impacts on a global and local scale. In general, tourism development has a positive economic and social impact on societies. According to the latest World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) report (2021), tourism accounts for 10.6% of jobs worldwide; it contributes towards the alleviation of poverty and employs vulnerable groups such as women, migrants, seasonal and low skilled workers (Del Mar Alonso-Almeida, 2013; Salazar, 2020). However, tourism is also believed to have a negative impact on the environment and sometimes creates competition between tourists and locals over natural resources.

The origins of sustainability within the tourism and hospitality industry and the role of entrepreneurs have been extensively discussed in research (Mackenzie and Gannon, 2019). In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), chaired by Brundtland, stated that development is only considered sustainable if it “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987). This concept of sustainable development was launched as a ‘global objective’ to guide policies orientated towards balancing the economic, environmental and social conditions that are considered the dimensions of sustainability (Seghezze, 2009).

The term “sustainable tourism” is defined by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) as:

“Sustainable tourism that meets the needs of present vacationers and host districts while securing and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is visualized as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and esthetic [sic] needs can be satisfied while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, and biological diversity and life support systems” (WTO, 2018).

According to the WTO, sustainable tourism should:

- 1) use nature and environmental resources that are elements in tourism development while maintaining ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity;
- 2) respect the socio-cultural authenticity and values of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage;
- 3) ensure long-term economic operations, providing fairly distributed socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, including stable employment and income to the local host communities that contribute to improving life conditions and reducing poverty (WTO, 2004).

SMEs account for more than 90% of firms worldwide (Hillary, 2017) and are considered the backbone of the tourism industry. The definition of an SME differs from region to region and

there is no international agreement on size (Thomas *et al.*, 2011). In Europe, SMEs are defined as firms with fewer than 250 employees with an annual turnover of up to €50 million or a balance sheet of €43 million or less (Muller *et al.*, 2019). SMEs make up 99.8% of all enterprises and two-thirds of employment in the European economy (Muller *et al.*, 2019). Although tourism SMEs are characterised by their small size in terms of capital investment or operating size, and are sometimes family businesses or run by owners with non-economic motivations, they play a crucial role in the employment of local people and protecting local culture (Thomas *et al.*, 2011; Zhang and Zhang, 2018).

Despite the growing attention on SMEs' sustainable development worldwide and the emergence of concepts such as the green economy and entrepreneurial eco-systems in literature (Kansheba and Wald, 2020), there are some arguments that SMEs tend to underestimate their environmental impact and responsibility towards being sustainable due to their small size (Coles *et al.*, 2014). They may even be unaware of this impact (Hillary, 2017) although some studies argue that the collective impact of SMEs in the accommodation sector on the environment is higher than that of larger firms (Williams and Schaefer, 2013). It is more difficult for SMEs than larger companies to achieve sustainable progress due to a lack of management expertise and understanding of environmental strategies and standards (Revell *et al.*, 2010). They also have a shortage of resources (e.g., financial and human resources), which are common features for many SMEs (Crals and Vereeck, 2005). Therefore, it is argued that when SMEs make a decision to invest in sustainable development, they consider their own characteristics to more effectively use their resources (Hsu *et al.*, 2017).

The size of an SME plays many roles in strategic planning and development of the firm, and can also be a factor influencing its ability to change. The small size of the enterprise enables it to be more receptive to change, allowing it to deploy strategic tactics swiftly (O'Gorman, 2000; Morrison and Teixeira, 2004). Nevertheless, as an enterprise grows from small- to medium-sized enterprise, it can become 'bureaucratised' with administrative procedures as a consequence of a greater need for control of the business. With expanding hierarchies and lines of demarcation, this can lead to a growing lack of flexibility and receptiveness to change (Kotey and Sheridan, 2004).

SMEs in the hospitality industry might be less pressured than big chain hotels, operators or franchises to adopt sustainability practices; this is because they are not under the spotlight or criticised in the same way as big players in the industry. Research demonstrates that the main motivation for independent hotels or restaurants to adopt sustainability practices are the owner's beliefs and personal ethical values or cost reduction reasons (Tzschentke *et al.*, 2004; Abaician *et al.*, 2019; Musavengane, 2019). Effective governance structures and stakeholder's participation have also been identified as important factors in the implementation of sustainable tourism (Gill and Williams, 2014; Farmaki, 2015).

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared coronavirus a global pandemic in March 2020, governments across the world have closed their borders for non-essential travel. The tourism

sector suffered a loss of almost US\$4.5 trillion to reach US\$4.7 trillion in 2020, with 62 million jobs lost and contribution to GDP dropping by a staggering 49.1% compared to 2019; relative to a 3.7% GDP decline of the global economy in 2020 (WTTC, 2021).

Research has shown that SMEs have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic with mass lay-offs and business closures in 2020, and they face difficulty in adjusting without external support (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry so far is extensive and has hit small businesses even harder. Tourism SMEs' primary focus during the pandemic has been to control their costs and workforce to keep their business running (Kukanja *et al.*, 2020). This is because the decline in revenue and cash flow continue to pressure SMEs and creates additional challenges to maintain daily operations during the pandemic (Lu *et al.*, 2021).

In this paper, we examine how different types of tourism SMEs are affected by the COVID-19 crisis and draw some conclusions based on the current available information: how this crisis might influence sustainable development efforts of tourism SMEs in the future from different aspects. The impact of this crisis will vary substantially across different types of SME and cannot be fully evaluated since the crisis was not over by the time this paper was written; this will require detailed analysis in future studies.

This paper makes three contributions to the extant literature. First, we make the first attempt to investigate how the COVID-19 crisis might impact SMEs' sustainable development in various tourism sectors. Second, we demonstrate the importance of governments and policy-makers' support for SMEs' survival and SDGs. Third, the paper opens up promising research opportunities for enhancing our understanding of the changing relationships between sustainability and SMEs in the tourism industry highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

HOTELS

In their research, Goldstein and Primlani (2012) traced the origins of sustainability in the hotel sector back to the 1960s, suggesting that "the past several decades have seen a growing awareness amongst hoteliers and investors regarding the environmental and social impacts of hotel development and operations".

As they are more prominent and criticised for their unsustainable practices and negative impact on the environment and natural resources, big hotels are more pressured to show commitment to sustainability principles and use sustainability as a marketing tool for their brands. It has been recognised in the last two decades that sustainability is a source of future competitive advantage; therefore, investment in sustainability and the adoption of sustainable practices are increasing in all industries (Hopkins *et al.*, 2011).

On the other hand, small hotels are less pressured to display a commitment towards sustainability as they are not in the spotlight like chain hotels. The reasons why small hotels adopt sustainable practices vary; some are voluntary, and some are obligatory under governmental regulations and legal pressure or demands from different stakeholders, such as customers or suppliers (Ayuso, 2007).

Small and medium size hotels are often built or exist on small sites. Therefore, energy saving policies requiring large open areas cannot always be implemented, as in the case of large hotels with extensive site plans that can accommodate solar fields (Parpairi, 2017).

Other common sustainability practices for hotels include using energy saving light bulbs, room thermostats, water efficient taps and showerheads, biodegradable cleaning products, use of local products, staff training and waste management (Parpairi, 2017). Waste generation is one of the most visible environmental impacts of the hotel industry (Mensah, 2020) and considered a major challenge for tourism SMEs (Hoogendoorn *et al.*, 2015). This is because small hotels lack the resources and managerial knowledge regarding waste management (Radwan *et al.*, 2010; Mensah, 2020), or simply believe that waste management activities are costly and time-consuming (Chan and Lam, 2001).

On average, tourists produce twice as much solid waste per capita as local residents (IFC, 2007) because, by the very nature of tourist accommodation's characteristics and services, guests consume substantial amounts of non-durable products (Zorpas *et al.*, 2015). However, the amount of waste generated is dependent upon the size and type of hotel.

Waste management practices include, but are not limited to, purchasing recyclable materials and products for rooms and hotel restaurant(s), separating waste and sending it to a recycling plant or waste management facility, installing water-efficient taps, showers and other equipment, donating leftover foods, etc. (Mensah, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on the hotel and accommodation sector has been extensive. The accommodation sector is one of the hardest hit sectors in tourism as it was declared as “non-essential” business by governments during the pandemic. Hotels and smaller accommodation units were forced to close since governments across the world imposed lockdown in April 2020 for a few weeks, extended later into months. Many hotels fell into debt after the sharp drop of occupancy rates or imposed lockdowns, forcing them to shut down and file for bankruptcy. In addition, many hotels all over the world laid off employees and reduced their workforce to cut their operating costs. In developing countries, workers rarely have the sort of government funded income support and organised labour protection available in developed economies, and consequently needed to survive without income (Jones and Comfort, 2020). This rise in unemployment rate has a devastating medium- and long-term impact on social and economic sustainable development in developing and under-developed countries.

As countries began to ease lockdown restrictions, hotels were allowed to operate again under certain regulations, such as reduced capacity, only allowing breakfast in rooms, and stricter cleaning standards (Rutynskyi and Kushniruk, 2020). Hotels may find it hard to re-open under these regulations if the cost of operation is higher than their revenue. Hotels must now adapt to new cleaning protocols and health guidelines (Smart *et al.*, 2021). These include the mandatory wearing of a face mask in all indoor businesses, placing alcohol-based hand sanitiser at the entry and key points in the hotel, daily disinfection of rooms and all public areas, appropriate training for all staff

on maintaining social distancing, performing cleaning, laundry, and handling trash with minimum touch points. The increased pressure to comply with strict COVID-19 measures and running with reduced capacity created extra pressure on hotels' financial resources and increased the cost of operations. Many small hotels also found themselves under pressure to lower their prices to attract travellers and remain competitive with larger or chain hotels that reduced their prices by up to 50% or more.

The COVID-19 crisis may have a significant negative impact on the voluntary adoption of sustainable practices at small hotels and other types of accommodation; sustainability is unlikely to be a priority in short- or medium-term goals. The environmental aspect of COVID-19 measures at hotels has not yet been investigated in the literature. Hotels and other accommodation were reported to use disinfectant excessively in their establishments, not only in rooms but also in public areas, such as the reception, pool area, and restaurants. Sanitisers are also used to wash towels, linens and other laundry items. To reduce costs, SMEs may tend to purchase cheaper disinfectants and detergents that might be more toxic or environmentally unfriendly, especially in countries where there are no regulations against hazardous chemical use. The ingredients of the majority of disinfectants are corrosive chemical compounds, including chlorine-releasing agents (Bonin *et al.*, 2020), and the application of such high volumes of disinfectants on products and surfaces on a daily basis could contaminate food and water resources when washed away (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). The environmental impact of disinfectants approved against COVID-19 and increasing amounts of waste generated from single use items in hotels such as facemasks, gloves, wipes and plastics, has not yet been assessed. It has become necessary to develop a framework and strategies to minimise the damaging impact of COVID-19 measures on the environment.

Although research suggests that smaller hotels may recover faster than bigger chain hotels (Krishnan *et al.*, 2020), hotels that survive this crisis will have many more challenges to maintain their operations and cash flow, while at the same time fulfilling their commitment to sustainability. Although some hotels already have some energy saving devices installed, such as water meters, that help to reduce operational costs, the current financial situation makes it harder for new hotels to install such technologies because of the initial cost of installation. In addition, many hotels may no longer be able to afford to purchase recyclable products as these cost more.

TOUR OPERATORS

Sustainability becomes strategic for tourism companies as nature is a vital asset of their business (Iraldo *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, unspoiled nature is an asset that has impact on destination performance and visitor satisfaction (Mihalič, 2013). Big tour operators are often criticised over the unsustainable behaviour responsible for mass tourism that stimulates rapid and irrational development where little or no consideration of the environmental impact is taken, and where local people are unable to exercise any influence over the pace of development and resulting environmental destruction (Coccossis and Nijkamp, 1995). In comparison, specialist operators are small- to medium-sized

independent companies, specialising in organising tours and activities at particular geographical areas. They are a rapidly expanding sector of the industry, reflecting the increasing fragmentation of tourist markets where consumers want to experience something different (Curtin and Busby, 1999).

As with the hotel sector, manager awareness of the importance of sustainability often plays a role in SME tour operators. Managers' lack of understanding regarding sustainability principles, and lack of staff education and training on sustainability values and practices, is often a barrier in the adoption of sustainable development strategies and sustainable supply chain management (Xu and Gursoy, 2015). The tour operator sector arguably lags behind in the integration of sustainability in business practices and does not always take a long-term view of destination development. This is because they claim a lack of control over impact in destinations, and the nature of their activities means that it is easier to move between destinations or change their activities compared to suppliers such as hotels and restaurants (Zapata *et al.*, 2018).

Tour operators' sustainable practice approaches include using social, economic and environmental criteria, such as selecting their local partners based on local community involvement, offering environmental training for tour guides in wild areas, hiring local workers, collaborating with local authorities at the destination in environmental protection programmes (Tepelus, 2005), and dealing with sustainable green hotels (Lozano *et al.*, 2016).

Following the WHO declaration of COVID-19 as global pandemic, the majority of travellers cancelled their holidays by choice or were forced to cancel their trips after their holiday destination closed borders for international travel; travellers then demanded refunds from their tour operators. In 2021, European regulators ruled that travel companies must offer customers cash refunds, rather than vouchers, for trips cancelled because of the COVID-19 crisis; this left thousands of operators struggling with cashflow difficulties. In Malta, the EU member country where tourism is the most important sector of the country's economy, the chamber of small- and medium-sized businesses announced that operators and travel agents, who were among the businesses worst affected by the pandemic, faced difficulties in issuing refunds to customers because travel companies were not refunding the fares and the cancelled packages (Spiteri, 2020).

According to the Eurostat report released in June 2020, travel agencies and tour operators fell the most (-83.6%) compared to other tourism sectors, and were the slowest recovering compared to others, such as restaurants that were the fastest recovering service sector, followed by accommodation. The CEO of the American Society of Travel Advisors president (ASTA) Zane Kerby, declared that more than 90% of ASTA members reported a decline in revenue of 75% or more in 2020 versus 2019, and 71.3% of travel advisors may be out of business in six months or less if they did not receive additional relief from Congress and the federal government. ASTA conducted a survey in August 2020 that showed that more than 43% of members had laid off or furloughed three-quarters or more of their staff (Christoff, 2020).

The struggle in the tour operator sector was likely to continue even after the ban on non-essential travel was lifted because the emerging sentiment towards supporting local tourism and

short trips was gaining momentum (Kourgiantakis *et al.*, 2021). Recent research by Orîndaru *et al.* (2021) demonstrates that in the medium term, tourists are likely to avoid travelling with large tour groups and being in crowded places for their own safety. These changes in travel behaviour are likely to hurt many operators and agencies that depend on international travel.

Amid the ease in lockdown restrictions in some countries, and domestic tourism or international travel re-opening as long as travellers had a negative COVID-19 test on arrival, tour operators were given instructions by governments to limit the number in tour groups and to main social distancing between tour participants. The regulations also included providing everyone with single use face masks, gloves, alcoholic and disinfecting gel and wipes, and a specific container in which to deposit this material once used. Most of the single use face masks, gloves and wipes materials are non-recyclable or non-biodegradable. It is still unknown where the huge amount of discarded waste resulting from COVID-19 measures will end up, especially in countries with no adequate waste management policies or treatment systems. The environmental impact of COVID-19 generated waste has not yet been fully assessed but it is expected to be considerable.

The COVID-19 crisis is more likely to diminish sustainable development in the tour operator sector. On a social level, SME tour operators are expected to reduce their work force or close some of their offices and work online to reduce operational costs. With the significant drop in demand for tour bookings, if companies do not receive government assistance to pay wages they may need to lay off their customer service, reservation agent employees and tour guides, leaving hundreds of thousands of individuals and families without income.

However, there are many cost-free practices that tour operators can follow to enhance their contribution in sustainability development and improve their brand reputation as a responsible travel company. These include encouraging tourists to help local communities recovering from the economic crisis following COVID-19 by purchasing from locally owned shops and eating at local restaurants. They could also educate tourists about the local culture and raise their awareness of the destination's challenges, for instance, asking tourists to limit their water use in water scarce destinations and destinations known for conflict between tourists and locals over natural resources. Tourism could be a great opportunity and effective tool to educate people about global sustainability challenges and encourage them to change their daily behaviour, both while at the destination and when they return to their everyday lives at home (Moscardo, 2015).

RESTAURANTS

Over the past decade, the ever-increasing competition between tourism destinations has led to the development of more appealing attractions to catch the attention of prospective tourists; many destinations began to use food as a source of attraction to strengthen their tourism marketing (Lin *et al.*, 2011) and destination branding. Previous literature suggests that a positive restaurant experience influences tourists' decisions to revisit a destination (Sparks *et al.*, 2003). The term 'food tourism' is defined as:

“visitation to primary and secondary food producers, food festivals, restaurants and specific locations for which food tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of specialist food production region are the motivating factor for travel” (Hall and Sharples, 2004).

Today, food tourism is one of the growing trends and key tourist attractions in many destinations, especially in countries such as Thailand, Taiwan and Vietnam (Lin *et al.*, 2011; Park *et al.*, 2019).

The growth of local gastronomy as a tourist product involves strengthening the sustainable development of local economies and empowering the relationship between local agriculture and tourism, clearly enhancing the environment in two different ways. First, it increases the level of both organic production and local distribution, and second, it guarantees respect for tradition and the values that make up the authenticity of the local host community (Jiménez-Beltrán *et al.*, 2016) and rural community development (Csurgó *et al.*, 2019).

Although restaurant managers recognise the importance of sustainability, they also do not see the benefit of being a green innovator in their industry. Implementing sustainability practices in restaurants, such as energy- and water-saving equipment, food and other waste management, and the use of green and ecological products, brings some benefits such as increasing customer satisfaction and a company's competitiveness (Cantele and Cassia, 2020). However, being green, although becoming increasingly important to the industry, is seen as unprofitable (Kasim and Ismail, 2012). In terms of competitiveness, a clear managerial vision and holistic approach to the sustainable management of SME tourism businesses is more important than stand-alone “green” initiatives, such as energy saving (Iraldo *et al.*, 2017). This indicates that as long as there is no stakeholder pressure, particularly increasing demand from customers or government regulations to project a green image, the motivation to adopt and implement sustainable practices will remain laggard (Kasim and Ismail, 2012; Perramon *et al.*, 2014; Raab *et al.*, 2018). DiPietro *et al.* (2013) suggest that people believe that restaurants should utilise green practices but at the same time they are not willing to pay higher prices for those green practices. This means that restaurateurs, while potentially receptive towards environmentally friendly products, have issues with the shortage of the range and variety of competitively priced organic products in the market (Kasim and Ismail, 2012).

Natural disasters and epidemic disease outbreaks have a drastic impact on gastronomy and restaurant businesses' financial performance (Kim *et al.*, 2020). According to data from OpenTable (a famous dining online platform), dine-in restaurants experienced a total shutdown marked by a 100% decline in dine-in bookings and registrations at restaurants, pubs and inns in March 2020, a week after the WHO's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Nhamo *et al.*, 2020). According to CHD Expert (a global marketing intelligence in the food service industry), over 42,500 restaurants in 8 European countries permanently closed due to COVID-19 between June and August 2020, with half of them located in Italy and Germany (Demeyer, 2020).

The National Restaurant Association (NRA) in the United States announced that more than 110,000 restaurants have closed permanently or long-term across the country as the industry grapples with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gonzalez, 2020); in addition, at least eight million restaurant employees have either been furloughed or laid off since the beginning of the pandemic. The NRA reported sales of US\$659 billion in 2020, US\$240 billion lower than its pre-pandemic forecast for the year of US\$899 billion. At least 40% of restaurants had closed down with some having no prospects of re-opening (Nhamo *et al.*, 2020).

Although dine-in restaurants worldwide slowly re-opened, the imposed COVID-19 measures, such as reducing capacity, threatened the survival of most restaurants, some to the point of failure to recover post-pandemic. Restaurants are also expected to focus on cleanliness, sanitisation and safety rather than implementing low pricing strategies in order to adjust to the new normal and appeal to changing consumer needs (Chang *et al.*, 2021; Kim *et al.*, 2021). Financial shortages and increasing costs have been the main barriers of adopting green practices in restaurants and the COVID-19 crisis is likely to increase these barriers. The major problem that faces restaurant businesses in a crisis is cash flow, leading to job losses (Tse *et al.*, 2006). There are currently no data available for the number of workers in gastronomy who lost their jobs worldwide but it is expected to be very high, especially in countries and destinations relying on tourism as a major source of income.

The surviving restaurants may not have sustainability as their short- or medium-term goals as their primary aim would be improving their financial performance and generating cash to pay overdue creditors. Many restaurants are likely to adopt some cost cutting strategies, such as reducing advertising and promotion, negotiating with suppliers to lower costs for foodstuff and with landlords to reduce rents, and reducing the number of staff working or implementing wage cuts (Tse *et al.*, 2006).

The related job losses and wage cuts mainly affect chronically vulnerable societies, largely women and youth who make up the bulk of restaurant employees. The majority of restaurant workers are usually underpaid and often have their salaries subsidised by tips from clients; this exacerbates the vulnerability and financial hardship of this group (Nhamo *et al.*, 2020).

Implementing green and sustainable practices might be costly in some cases or reduce costs in others. The literature demonstrates that restaurants' motivations for initiating sustainability practices vary, with the top reason indicated being to reduce operating costs (Baloglu *et al.*, 2020). Post-COVID-19, restaurants are expected to increase practices that might help them reduce costs. They will be expected to focus on implementing green practices that reduce costs and provide a favourable impression to customers, such as reducing food waste and installing energy efficient equipment, and avoid other practices that involve higher costs, such as purchasing organic food and ecological products.

The role of governments is critical in a crisis to support survival and the sustainable development of restaurants and the gastronomy industry. Governments may offer relief aids that allow restaurants to rehire staff and offer benefits, such as tax reductions for restaurants adopting any environmental

sustainability practices. Some countries acted early to promote sustainable recovery for the gastronomy industry; for instance, Germany announced a VAT reduction for restaurants from 19% to 7% for 2020-2021, while other European countries delayed VAT payments or temporarily waived late payments. Germany and Austria also had aid programmes to pay furloughed workers' lost wages, allowing financially distressed employers to reduce worker hours while still preserving jobs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

One of the aims of this paper was to review changes in the relationships between SMEs in the tourism industry and sustainability dimensions, social, economic and environmental, following the COVID-19 crisis. On a social level, the tourism sector employs vulnerable groups such as women, migrants, seasonal and low skilled workers (Del Mar Alonso-Almeida, 2013; Salazar, 2020). COVID-19 has worsened the situation of the vulnerable tourism workforce that already suffers from low salaries, lack of benefits and labour rights; it is also expected to reverse gender equality efforts and women's empowerment in society.

Economically, tourism SMEs worldwide reported a decline in revenue of up to 90% as a result of lockdown and border closures. The mass cancellations and refund requests left SMEs struggling with unsustainable debt burdens that forced many businesses to temporarily or permanently close, leaving millions of people unemployed. This has resulted in a rise in the unemployment rate and economy shrinkage, especially in developing and under-developed countries that rely heavily on travel and tourism, leading to an increase in poverty and loss of GDP (UN, 2020).

Environmentally, it is unlikely that any SME will adopt any new energy or water saving technology or environmentally friendly practices that require investment. It is still unknown where the huge amount of discarded non-recyclable waste resulting from COVID-19 measures will end up, especially in countries with no adequate waste management policies or treatment systems. The environmental impact of waste generated by COVID-19 has not yet been fully assessed but it is expected to be extensive.

This exploratory review of sustainability challenges for SMEs reveals that it might be harder to maintain or adopt any sustainable practices within the social, economic or environmental dimension under the current financial stress and sharp decline of revenue. With the argument that there is a conflict between sustainability and economic growth (Jones *et al.*, 2014), SMEs are currently unlikely to make sustainability a priority without external financial aids or stimuli, such as increasing customer demand for sustainable products and services. SMEs' focus post-COVID-19 will be financial recovery from the crisis and resuming economic growth; sustainability initiatives will only be of value if they are profitable, reduce costs or lead to benefits such as competitive advantage or tax reductions (Wiesner *et al.*, 2018).

Governments and policy-makers need to be aware that sustainability development in a post-COVID-19 world should be built on a win-win situation and mutual benefits. The financial crisis that hit tourism may make entrepreneurs and business owners refrain from making additional

investments in sustainability practices that do not bring economic benefits. SMEs that employ the majority of the workforce in the tourism industry must receive financial relief to keep them operating and curb rising unemployment. Governments need to follow similar schemes to the German government and offer SMEs additional benefits, such as tax deferrals if they adopt any environmental sustainability practices.

Sustainable development post-COVID-19 might have slowed down but it is expected to recover over time, although faster in some sectors than in others. New studies suggest that the COVID-19 crisis and the resulting scarcity in some products and facilities will shift consumer behaviour to be more responsible and sustainable (Anker, 2021). Despite being the most affected and slowest recovering tourism sector according to EU data, it might be easier for tour operators to resume sustainable development since there are many cost-free practices that will enhance their contribution to sustainability development and improve their brand reputation as responsible companies. These include encouraging tourists to help local communities recovering from the economic crisis following COVID-19 by purchasing from locally owned shops and eating at local restaurants. Also, educating tourists about the local culture of the place they are visiting and raising their awareness of the challenges facing sustainable development in these destinations.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study makes some contributions to scarce literature regarding sustainable tourism challenges arising from the COVID-19 crisis, it has a number of limitations that can be seen as the directions for future research; these include the lack of available official data and studies investigating the impact of COVID-19 on SME sustainability performance in the service sector. This review paper presents a future research agenda to fill the current gap in literature and opens up promising research opportunities for enhancing our understanding of the changing relationships between sustainability and SMEs in the tourism industry highlighted by COVID-19. First, we call for further research on how COVID-19 has negatively impacted environmental and social sustainability by increasing pollution and deepening social problems such as poverty and gender inequality. Further investigation is required to assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on SMEs' sustainable development using case studies of individual hotels, tour operators and restaurants pre- and post-COVID-19 at particular destinations. The sustainability performance for each SME could be measured using sustainability indicators to assess the changes in performance and the reasons behind it (e.g., financial reasons). A comparative study analysis could be made to further refine the performance in the context of developed and developing countries to highlight the role of local policy and governmental support. Future studies could also examine how SME owners or managers view the importance of sustainability practices after the pandemic, and whether there are any changes in their commitment to sustainability. We hope that this paper will become inspirational for academic researchers, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers who are involved in the sustainable development discourse.

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BIOGRAPHY



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