

Issues and Challenges Faced by SME's in Sultanate of Oman during COVID-19: A Case Study of the Tourism Sector

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ABSTRACT

The world economy has been greatly affected by Covid-19 and Oman has been among the countries facing challenges in the operation of SMEs in handling of business needs and meeting regular fixed costs. The SMEs most affected are those in the tourism sector where travel restrictions and lockdowns could not allow the businesses to receive visitors as expected who are the customers to the services and products offered. Using the sample size of 187 participants who own or work at the SMEs in tourism sector, it was established that the applied legislations and restrictions of movement had a positive correlation to SMEs business operations with a positive correlation coefficient of 0.478. However, a recommendation to the issues and challenges were issued stating that SMEs should invest in technology & tools, creation of an oversight of SME financial status, prioritising of value over culture, and trusting & empowering the people that deal with SMEs.

Keywords: Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), SME and Covid-19, Oman Tourism, Oman SMEs

INTRODUCTION

When Covid-19 struck the world, there were so many businesses that were affected in a positive or negative way depending on the products or services offered. The study was focusing on how SMEs operating and offering service in the tourism sector are affected by Covid-19 and how they can be helped to continue being in business despite the faced issues and challenges. After analysing and finding out that there are more than 42,000 SMEs operating or offering services in different sectors within Oman, the tourism sector recorded 364 SMEs (Wahaibi and Abri 2020). Those offering services and products in the tourism sector were identified and used in the research due to the great effect in terms of travel restrictions and lockdowns that limit movement within Oman and everywhere in the country. There are different ways that SMEs have been affected and the issues and challenges prevailing during the pandemic are to be addressed in the research.

Rationale of the Study

When Covid-19 was discovered, a majority of businesses were disrupted and some forced to shut down such as the SMEs which do not have enough finances to keep operating or those that

deal with products and services that have been restricted or limited from taking place during the pandemic (Sharma 2020). The study is undertaken because it can help to come up with better ways that SMEs can apply and become productive even when the tourism sector is affected the most.

SMEs in Oman and any other country play a major role in building an economy which makes it a serious concern that enabling businesses to resume operations can help greatly in promoting and allowing economic activities to continue taking place (Buraiki and Khan 2018). Instead of watching small businesses close down while others slow in operations, the pandemic is not certainly known when it can come to an end but resuming of business activities to help boost the economy is a major aim that every government and the public can focus in creating ways of succeeding.

Tourism contributes to the national gross domestic product whereby its failure is a concern that must be observed and corrected before the country can go into recession. Instead, the study will be trying to come up with alternatives to business that can promote and enlighten SMEs management on ways that can work even under the strict legislations and imposed restrictions within the country and the world (Patten and Newhart 2017). Apart from playing a contributory role to the national grid in terms of revenues, society depends in SMEs whereby the business owners and employees need to earn income through the various activities carried out. Instead of society suffering due to the slowed down operations of SMEs that operate in the tourism sector which has been the most affected, the study will come out with solutions that will help promote businesses in continuing with operations hence promising of income to the SMEs.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

SMEs take the first initiative of making an economy better by reaching out to the low class consumers through the smaller packages which can be afforded by a majority of the population within a region. In Oman, there are various ways that SMEs have been affected during Covid-19 which calls for studies that can help in coming up with ways of handling and promoting the operations of such businesses (Wahaibi and Abri 2020). Their sustainability and maintained operations can help in moving the country forward by the efforts applied in generating revenues. The aim of the study is to find out the issues and challenges facing the SMEs operations in the tourism sector during COVID-19 and come up with favourable solutions that can make the conditions better.

Objectives of the Study

1. To evaluate on whether the legislation has made SMEs operations more complicated during COVID-19.
2. To determine ways of enabling SMEs operations in managing to accommodate local and few international tourists to keep operations and flow of revenue.
3. To evaluate ways of diversifying business target points to maintain generating income to the SMEs whose main sources of revenue is tourism which is currently restricted.
4. To recommend possible solutions to the identified issues and challenges for better SMEs operations in the tourism sector during and after COVID-19.

Research Problem

A major issue and concern of the SMEs is the lack of resources that can be used in meeting the demands of the routine operations. Tourists' demands fail to be met due to the insufficient funds and lack of enough manpower to execute transactions or processes (Chuang 2020). The lack of manpower is due to the inadequate resources that can be used in remunerating the employees and low business turnout due to the restriction of tourists coming into the country during COVID-19.

Research Questions

1. Have the issued COVID-19 legislations affected SME operations in Oman and complicated its operations in the market?
2. What ways are applicable in enabling the SMEs in meeting the set minimum requirements and remain economically effective?
3. Are there business diversification options available to the SMEs in the tourism sector so that they can remain to generate income during COVID-19 despite the imposed restrictions?
4. What possible remedies are available to the identified issues and challenges faced by SMEs in the tourism sector during COVID-19 that can make the situation better?

Hypotheses

There were three hypotheses which were aligned with the research objectives and they stated that:

If legislations are issued, they cause an implication in the market operation during Covid-19.

If the management of SMEs is changed due to remote working, it causes an effect on revenue flow during Covid-19.

If the target point of the SMEs changes, it causes an effect on revenue.

The hypotheses were issued as a result that indicate an occurrence of one factor causes an effect on another. For example, legislations were found to causing operational challenges among SMEs. The possible resulting conditions or situations were structured in the hypotheses where they were tested using various questions under the performed survey. Legislations are in combination with travel restrictions and lockdowns while management issues are coined in remote working. The hypotheses were all tested and found to be holding a true statement on how the identified issues and challenges face SMEs operations within the tourism sector. The results of the tests are given in the data analysis section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework on Issues and Challenges of SMEs Operations during Covid-19

The concept of the research was based on the issue sand challenges caused by Covid-19 on SMEs that operate under the tourism sector that has experienced a drastic drop in the number of visitors coming to Oman. The issues are concerned about a collapsed demand in the sector, the management of work environment by staff working from home, uncertainties of policies that keep being revised and a disruption of supply chain Figure 2 1: Concept Framework (Arezki and Nguyen 2020). The challenges associated with the situation include the high costs of meeting safety regulations, the cost of providing for staff to work from home, and wondering on the right time employees can resume as no exact period the pandemic is anticipated to be fully managed and contained. The issues and challenges are as illustrated in the figure below.

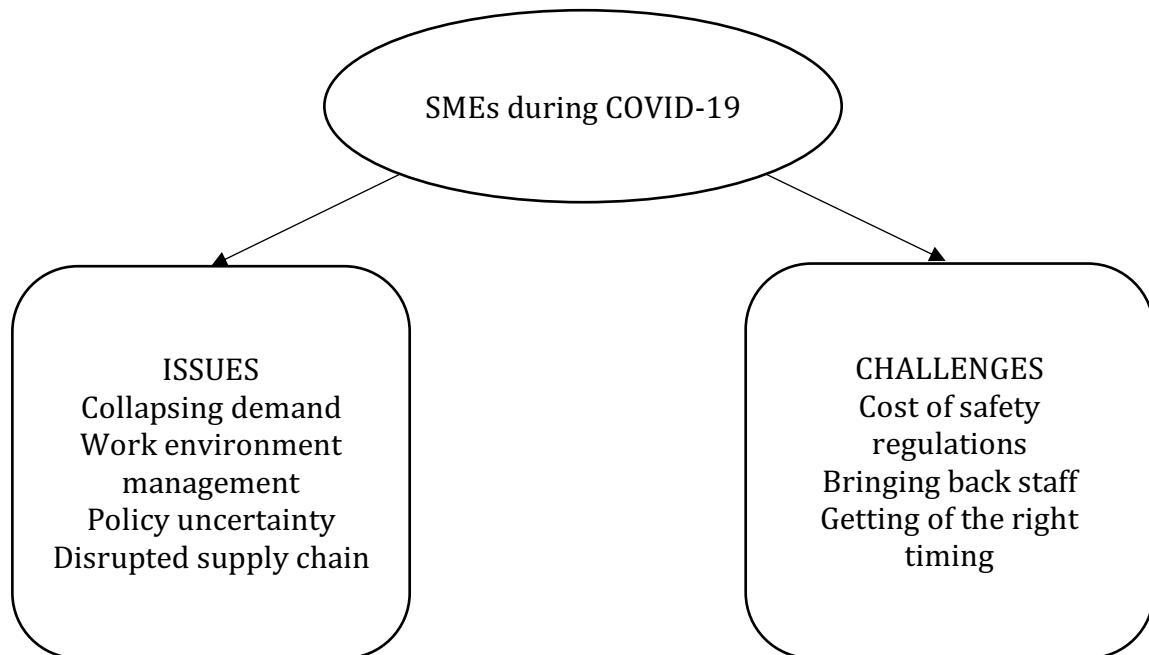


Figure 1: Concept Framework (Arezki and Nguyen 2020)

The Impact of Legislations to SMEs Operations during Covid-19

Legislations were issued during Covid-19 that caused delayed payment of taxes to the revenue authorities. The extended period of taxes payment cause slowdown of projects funding that cause poor management of projects. Villiers et al. (2020) found out that the government of South Africa set a relief of on how to make tax payments and offer levy payments for holidays. However, the delaying of tax payments were not to make taxpayers who are individuals and businesses like SMEs to prolong the payment period. Regardless of the payment period extension, the same amount of taxes due were supposed to be paid at the end of the given period. In Europe, envelope wages were issued by the government but delayed for several months due to the effect of Covid-19. The government offices as per the regulations set to slow down business (Nicola and Agha 2020: 73-112).

Transport sector offers services to a majority of businesses carried out within a country. The pandemic caused a halt and restrictions in transport and tour operators hence leading to SMEs within the tourism sector to lack business. For example, Russian SMEs were hardly hit as transport and tour operators could not engage in the activities anymore. The aviation sector that is meant to facilitate international tourists was closed and restrictions imposed on travellers from severely affected countries. The governments issued restrictions on the number of customers that can be served within hotels or restaurants by keeping social distancing rules. Through such, the tour operators could manage to offer the travel services which could engage them in promoting business despite the difficult times.

SMEs in business had borrowed loans to finance various projects such as the purchase of tourism trucks and vans for business. Unfortunately, the coming up of the pandemic was a blow to the many businesses which means they cannot obtain the projected revenues in repaying the debts and earning income to sustain operations. Despite measures to delay paying of interest on borrowed funds, the operations of businesses cannot continue due to the lack of customers

(Loayza and Pennings 2020: 17-31). Mitigations and containment measures that were imposed by various governments to help reduce the burden of tax payment so that the economy can manage to stabilize in their research about fiscal policies to control and manage the pandemic economic crisis (Loayza and Pennings 2020).

Issues and Challenges of SMEs in Tourism during Covid-19

Governments put measures such as the restriction of movement as a survival strategy to help safeguard their citizens. SMEs in the tourism sector in Oman greatly depend on the free movement of their target tourist to ensure constant business practices (Omar et al. 2020). Oman's tourism sector was also hit badly forcing SMEs to cut down employee pays while other small businesses opted to lay off their employees for sustainability. Governments put measures such as the restriction of movement as a survival strategy to help safeguard their citizens. SMEs in the tourism sector in Oman greatly depend on the free movement of their target tourist to ensure constant business practices. The current pandemic has made global managers not certain of the best strategies to apply since the consumer demands have significantly changed (Sharma et al. 2020). SMEs in Oman face the same dilemmas as most of their customers have opted to save the little they have and reduce their expenditures, posing a great threat to the tourism sector in the country. This demand reduction has also been impacted by the restricted movement posed by the Omani government on its citizens and tourists traveling into the country. The global pandemic has significantly left every global sector in a more financial dilemma as most of the global SMEs were ill-prepared for such pandemic and or did not put proper measures in place for instances such as the one witnessed globally. SMEs form the backbone of every economy and hugely rely on smallness with a lack of adequate resources to shield them from external shock such as presented by the pandemic. The SMEs in the tourism sector in Oman are significantly reliant on small transactions and business activities which puts them at a risk of closure in case they go without business for a few weeks since they have no proper financial muscle to ensure business sustainability. SMEs face financial constraints, bureaucracy, lack of knowledge and interest communication problems, and high employee turnover as some of the employment challenges. The SMEs in the tourism sector in Oman also underwent high employee turnover since most of them could not afford to pay their staff. The restriction of movement by the governments and total lockdown saw corporations and or businesses opt for other digital solutions for their management and business processes (Bailey et al 2020). Most global governments had to offer stimulus packages to keep stable employment and small and medium businesses.

Opportunities of SMEs in Tourism Sector during Covid-19

The pandemic presented the SMEs with the best opportunity and a chance to experience a pandemic, its implication, and effects which gives the SMEs to anticipate any future disaster and move swiftly by mobilizing their resources to help sustain their operation (Morgan et al. 2020). Covid-19 presented the SMEs with the best opportunity and a chance to experience a pandemic, its implication, and effects which gives the SMEs to anticipate any future disaster and move swiftly by mobilizing their resources to help sustain their operation. SMEs in particular which have a lean financial base and limited resources have been unable to carry on their daily operations, forcing some to permanently shut down due to lack of enough technology tools. The lockdown process has seen many businesses laying off their employees in an attempt to minimize their costs (Akpan et al. 2020). The market demands became more unpredictable, resulting in reduced businesses for the tourism sector and SMEs in Oman. Technological

readiness is seen as the most significant impact on a firm's readiness or ability to cope with volatility. The Omani tourism sector SMEs have the great opportunity to fully embrace technology and ensure they streamline their operations with the necessary technologies to gain a significant competitive edge. By embracing these state-of-the-art technologies, SMEs can easily retrieve their data from cloud computing without having to waste time commuting to the workplace thus help the same SMEs from unnecessary expenditure which can help the businesses significantly cut their operating costs. Corporations and SMEs in particular had to swiftly adapt to the changes in business trends to ensure sustainability. This culture has ensured most SMEs in the tourism sector more adaptable to poor market demands by formulating strategies to help sustain them through any disaster, thanks to the pandemic (Kuckertz et al 2020). SMEs and other small businesses have a significantly lower resilience and cannot survive more than three months of the pandemic hence must have strategic measures in place to help minimize their operational costs if they are to remain sustainable (Effendi et al. 2020). SMEs in the tourism sector in Oman have resorted to strategies such as strict shifting of its employees to ensure they manage the current conditions with a lean workforce. This is an opportunity that has been created by pandemic for the SMEs in Oman's tourism sector to help adapt to different cost-cutting measures to ensure sustainability in the face of any pandemic or disaster.

Possible Solutions to the Issues and Challenges Faced by SMEs during Covid-19 Pandemic

Opening in phases can help to start over with businesses in ways that can promote and encourage the performance of economic operations. Industries most affected like tourism should begin by offering limited services such as tour vans carrying half the number of tourists from the previous capacity before the pandemic (Penglin and Honghao 2020). A majority of the SMEs have the ability to aim for high yields while state-owned enterprises depend on government funds which does not make the employees productive. During the pandemic, SMEs have put in more efforts to stay in operation while state-owned enterprises closed down and the employees continued to be paid even without working because the funds are provided by the government which is from the share of taxes. SMEs can turn the tourist vans and trucks into mobile food supplies that can move within estates and relief people locked down in homes with food that can promote the act of staying at home.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in a setting that is controlled by various variables that contribute to the effect of the economy through the performed activities. The designed research questionnaires have questions that can measure both qualitative and quantitative measures during the research (Snyder 2019). An application of Saunders' research onion was applied in obtaining understanding and the applicable research techniques. Among the applied attributes from the research onion included research philosophy, research approach, research choice, research strategy, time horizon, and research technique (Saunders et al. 2007). Realism research philosophy will be applied in the study because it will greatly concern how those involved in the affected businesses done by the SMEs have had difficult times. The reality of Covid-19 within the various operations and areas of businesses that have been affected can be quantified as the SMEs operating within the tourism sector have been identified and quantified (Queirós, Faria, and Almeida 2017). The choice of using primary takes lead due to the collection of information from the individuals involved in the SMEs operations that have received severe consequences of Covid-19. A survey research strategy was applied where a selection of SMEs

working in the tourism sector will be identified and participants from their businesses issued with questionnaires to fill. Because of restrictions, the questionnaire research instruments were the only applicable instruments during the conduct of the research study (Buraiki and Khan 2018). The questionnaires were structured in a simple way where close-ended questions are issued for the participants to select the most appropriate options from the given choices. Questionnaires were used as research instruments in the data collection exercise and some interviews were conducted. A stratified random sampling technique was applied where the SMEs were divided and put aside to focus on tourism sector that has been greatly affected by Covid-19. The population of the SMEs operating in the tourism sector were put in divisions where random SMEs were selected to give feedback on asked questions and respond to raised concerns related to the effect of Covid-19 and their business operations. The population of the study was 364 SMEs that were found to be operating within the tourism sector which was the chosen case study. A stratified random sampling technique was applied the data collection exercise where the calculated and determined sample size was 187 participants who could be SME owners or employees (Vasileiou et al. 2018). The 187 participants were engaged using questionnaires and interviews conducted during the research process of collecting data. The collected data was analyzed using an SPSS tool and a consideration of ethical, legal, social, and sustainability issues done. A stratified random sampling technique was applied where the SMEs were divided and put aside to focus on tourism sector that has been greatly affected by Covid-19. The population of the SMEs operating in the tourism sector were put in divisions where random SMEs were selected to give feedback on asked questions and respond to raised concerns related to the effect of Covid-19 and their business operations.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysed data was collected from individuals related to SMEs operating within the tourism sector in Oman where owners and employees of various businesses were contacted and took part in the performed survey. After introducing the research topic and stating the aim and objectives in the first chapter, the reviewed literature material in the second chapter gave guidance on the kind of information to focus on when doing the survey. Instead of presenting the entire data in the analysed document for the reader, it is essential to make a summary of the data using various selected statistical tests that can estimate and give the number of responses of the participants to each questionnaire question (Omar et al. 2020). The obtained results are evaluated and checked before presenting so that they can create a summarised form of the information representing participants' feedback and experience in the operation of SMEs during Covid-19.

Demographic Information

Gender

Table 1.0: Gender

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Female	54	41.2	41.2	41.2
	Male	77	58.8	58.8	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 1 above, the participation was represented by both female and male in the percentages of 41.2% and 58.8% respectively. It is an indication that SMEs as a way of earning or generating income is almost an equal measure in terms of representation and participation by both genders. However, the male gender seem to be more into business than the female where the slight margin difference in the representation can indicate that the male gender greatly dominate the operations and assignments within SMEs activities. Among the received 131 responses, 54 were female and 77 were male. Since the SMEs operating in the tourism, sector offer hospitality services, the services can be handled by both genders and they all have the potential to ensure they have taken part. The representation was fair and an illustration that anyone can be involved in the operations of SMEs within the tourism sector. Therefore, both female and male are affected due to Covid-19 results of negative impacts to business operations.

Age

Table 2.0: Age

Age		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	20 - 30	99	75.6	75.6	75.6
	31 - 40	21	16.0	16.0	91.6
	41 - 50	11	8.4	8.4	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

To be allowed to get all the requirements of running a business (SME) in Oman or any other region in the world, age is a factor that must be considered. An individual prospecting to open and run a business or be employed in a business must have attained ha adult age. The adult age in Oman is 18 years but the research focused on individual participants as from the age of 20 years and above. The obtained results from the participants who were directly involved in SME business within Oman in the tourism sector showed that 75.6% of the 131 participants (99) were aged 20-30, 16% (21) were aged 31-40, and 8.4% (11) were aged 41-50. Significantly, the results indicate that a younger age population is into business hence starting with the small and medium enterprises due to lack of enough capital. The young people have not accumulated much wealth that can be used to start big. Hence, they can face difficulties in periods such as the current Covid0-19 pandemic that has caused business operations to be stopped as movement restrictions have bene set and lockdowns imposed.

Occupation

Table 3.0: Are you an employee at an SME or the owner of the business?
Occupation

Occupation		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Employee	65	49.6	49.6	49.6
	Business owner	66	50.4	50.4	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

The surveyed participants could be either employed by the SMEs or owning the businesses. It was found out that they almost balanced because 65 participants (49.6%) were employees at

various SMEs and 66 participants (50.4%) were SMEs owners within the tourism sector. The chances of starting an SME in Oman and the chances of being employed within an SME form of business can be said to be equally same because of the almost percentages of representatives. It is evident that the probability of being employed by an SME and that of owning an SME form of business is 0.5 on either.

Nationality

Table 4.0: What is your nationality?

Nationality		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Omani	64	48.9	48.9	48.9
	Expat	67	51.1	51.1	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Operating a business sin Oman is allowed to both native and expats. In this case, the number of Omanis and expats that took part in the survey were analysed where it was discovered that in an almost equal measure, the opportunities of doing business sin Oman have been allowed with fair means. The number of Omanis doing business in the tourism sector SMEs as owners or employees were reported to be 64 which represented 48.9% of the total participants. In the same case, 67 responses were representing expats which was 51.1% of the total participants to the survey. It can be summed that a majority of the individuals dealing in the tourism industry are dominated by expats who have invested in Oman. The tourism industry attracts visitors from different nations hence requires the skill of offering service and the kind of products available. The number of individuals in the tourism SMEs as seen can be suffering due to the slowed down economic activities that have caused lack of income generating activities such as receiving of tourists that would be willing to see the beautiful scenes and enjoy the Omani culture. Therefore, the results indicate that both natives and expats have been affected due to the pandemic who are associated with SMEs in the tourism sector.

Effect of Legislations in Complicating SMEs Operations during Covid-19

Table 5.0: At the discovery of Covid-19, various governments issued legislations that regulated the manner of conducting businesses including the relief of extending loan repayment periods. Such an extension without reducing the amount of interest paid complicated SMEs operations as they have no tourists coming hence making almost nil revenues during Covid-19. The loan repayment extension periods only complicated operations.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	24	18.3	18.3	18.3
	Neutral	21	16.0	16.0	34.4
	Agree	64	48.9	48.9	83.2
	Strongly Agree	22	16.8	16.8	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

The legislations issued by the government of Oman and other governments in the world have caused complications in meeting the expected repayment of interest and loan principal amounts borrowed by the businesses. The legislations require the loans amounts and interest

to be repaid within an extended period than the initial agreed time. However, extending the period without any business activities going on will render the SMEs in a worse situation after the expiry of the extended period. Among the surveyed participants, a Likert scale measure on how they agree or disagree with the complications caused by legislations was done (Zhang et al. 2019). The participants that were in agreement were 64, those that disagreed were 24, those who strongly agreed were 22, and those who were neutral were 21. Based on the obtained results, it is evident that legislations issued during Covid-19 have caused complications in the operations of SMEs that operate in the tourism sector and other sectors.

Table 6.0: Business activities boom where there are crowds as more people can be approached to do business. However, preventing people from meeting in large numbers complicated tourist operations where various groups could tour together. The restrictions on number of individuals in a crowd affected the expected revenues from offering crowd services.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	56	42.7	42.7	42.7
	Neutral	32	24.4	24.4	67.2
	Agree	43	32.8	32.8	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Question 6 addressed the fact of lockdowns and social distancing that has led to prevention of having many people crowded together. Activities such as tourism take place when groups, families or friends move together but Covid-19 lockdown has created a sense where people do not get out of their homes or houses hence making it difficult to get visitors who can be seeking for SMEs services that operate in the tourism sector. Imposing lockdown and not allowing people to move or meet in huge crowds reduced the demand force in the market hence leading to slowed down business activities. However, it is not the movement and meeting of individuals that create business. For example, people can be in huge groups but fail to create business for SMEs because they may have gathered for other reasons apart from doing business. Even if such crowds lead to business, it is not common. From the obtained results, 56 respondents disagreed, 32 were neutral, and 43 were in agreement that preventing people from meeting in large numbers complicated tourist operations where various groups could tour together. The restrictions on number of individuals in a crowd affected the expected revenues from offering crowd services.

Ways of Enabling SMEs to Keep Operating

Table 7.0: Due to the temporary restrictions imposed due to Covid-19, SMEs should accelerate the use of digital transformation in creating an agenda to apply when normal operations resume to help generate more to recover the lost time

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	21	16.0	16.0	16.0
	Neutral	22	16.8	16.8	32.8
	Agree	64	48.9	48.9	81.7
	Strongly Agree	24	18.3	18.3	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

After discovering that the imposed legislations, lockdowns, and movement restrictions have an effect on business, the need of deriving ways that can enable SMEs to keep operating under the difficult times of Covid-19, question 7 addressed the acceleration of using digital platforms in creating an agenda to apply when normal operations resume to help generate more to recover the lost time. It was well illustrated that using such a way to promote the services offered by SMEs within the tourism sector at the time so that visitors can seek for the same will be encouraging. Creative online adverts can be formed that are necessary to attract more people to enjoy the services and see the available wildlife and other things offered by the SMEs (businesses) in the tourism sector (Vignola and Tucci 2014). From the collected data, 64 respondents were in agreement, 24 strongly agreed, 22 were neutral on the issue and 21 were in disagreement. Therefore, the question was concluded that an accelerated use of digital transformation in creating an agenda to apply when normal operations resume can aid in promoting for making more income through increased turnout of customers.

Table 8.0: Covid-19 test certificates for travel are available and tourists with great intensions of touring can be convinced to make efforts of meeting set standards and travel to enjoy vacations and other activities. An increase of productivity can be done by targeting to reach out to tourists with long-term say periods and help them in the travel process.

		<i>by</i>			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	24	18.3	18.3	18.3
	Neutral	21	16.0	16.0	34.4
	Agree	32	24.4	24.4	58.8
	Strongly Agree	54	41.2	41.2	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Despite Covid-19 causing slow down on operations and restricting visitors, the tests conducted are supported with certificates that can be used for travel so that people can make movements and conduct business and other activities. An increase of productivity can be done by targeting to reach out to tourists with long-term stay periods and help them in the travel process. The certificates can help to know that whoever is being dealt with in business is safe from the virus and can be allowed to make tour or other business the certificates can help the SMEs by focusing on visitors with the certificates so that when they engage them in tour activities, they can be safe hence supporting business even under fewer customers (tourists). The support for such a way of keeping SMEs in operation during Covid-19 was supported by 54 participants who strongly agreed, 32 participants that agreed, 24 participants disagreed, and 21 respondents were neutral on the issue of making use of Covid-19 test certificates.

Table 9.0: Take the new norm period as a time for promoting and advertising the SME businesses more so that awareness can be created and attract more customers (tourists) when the restrictions are lifted

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	21	16.0	16.0	16.0
	Neutral	24	18.3	18.3	34.4
	Agree	64	48.9	48.9	83.2
	Strongly Agree	22	16.8	16.8	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Since the word and Oman is experiencing a new norm caused by Covid-19, it is recommended by many to have an opportunity to utilise the time in promoting and advertising their businesses to create awareness among the people. Because a majority are staying at home idle, they make use of the internet to get news and find more exciting offers within various areas of interest. The results of the responses of participants from the collected data showed that 64 participants were in agreement, 24 were neutral, 22 strongly agreed, and 21 disagreed. Despite having few that disagreed, a majority of the respondents were supporting SMEs to make use of the time in promoting and advertising their services and products.

Business Diversification Methods to Keep Generating Revenue for SMEs

Table 10.0: Since the travel restrictions have been issued and tourism sector does not receive more visitors, the SMEs in the tourism sector should divert to offering transportation services of delivering customer orders from shopping malls to doorsteps at reasonable charges. Through doing so by the offer creating value to the target customers, the SMEs can manage and continue operating.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	22	16.8	16.8	16.8
	Neutral	21	16.0	16.0	32.8
	Agree	53	40.5	40.5	73.3
	Strongly Agree	35	26.7	26.7	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Ways of diversifying SME business activities have been suggested and the methods applicable for making the diversification were issued. In question 10, it was suggested that the SMEs in the tourism sector should divert to offering transportation services of delivering customer orders from shopping malls to doorsteps at reasonable charges (Yong and Pearce 2018). Through doing so by the offer creating value to the target customers, the SMEs can manage and continue operating. The diversification method suggested was received by respondents where 53 agreed, 35 strongly agreed, 22 disagreed, and 21 remained neutral on the method. Due to a majority falling on agree and strongly agree point on the Likert scale, the method can help in creating an opportunity for generating income to the SMEs.

Table 11.0: While shifting or diversifying into different business categories may take time and be capital intensive, it is better for the affected SMEs in the tourism sector to look into the untapped opportunities such as advising of tourists on the best areas to visit and the estimate economical charges to expect. Such can be offered as a consultation service to tourist as they can make little payments for the advice.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	24	18.3	18.3	18.3
	Neutral	22	16.8	16.8	35.1
	Agree	64	48.9	48.9	84.0
	Strongly Agree	21	16.0	16.0	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Another method was to make use of less capital intensive which can be better for the affected SMEs in the tourism sector to look into the untapped opportunities such as advising of tourists on the best areas to visit and the estimate economical charges to expect. Such can be offered as a consultation service to tourist as they can make little payments for the advice (Tavakol and Dennick 2017). The obtained results showed that 64 participants agreed, 21 strongly agreed, 24 disagreed, and 22 were neutral. Making use of the tourist vans in offering different services will contribute by creating more income.

Table 12.0: If the SMEs we retargeting to promote sales in a physical way such as approaching visitors at the airport, they can diversify their sales promotions by taking it to the digital space. Through technology, tourists can be convinced to make early bookings so that they can receive huge discounts. The early booking deposits can help the SMEs to keep operating as they prepare to receive the tourists when travel restrictions are lifted

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	34	26.0	26.0	26.0
	Agree	65	49.6	49.6	75.6
	Strongly Agree	32	24.4	24.4	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

Setting staff at entry points at the airports can help the SMEs in acquiring few visitors that may be willing to take tours hence promote the business despite the poor turnout of travellers. Being at the airports to approach the arriving visitors and convincing them to take some rides within the country's most beautiful places can yield fruits. A majority of the respondents totalling to 65 were in agreement, 32 strongly agreed, and 34 disagreed. The majority who were on the agreement side indicated that having representatives at the airports can bring cause some business.

Solutions to Discovered Issues and Challenges for Better SMEs Operations in Tourism Sector during and after Covid-19

Table 13.0: Making use of the vans in transporting light luggage and purchases to customers from groceries or shopping malls can be a good idea to help solve the stalled business operations. Such ways can be done through leasing the vans to the businesses that have been forced to make deliveries due to lockdown and they have no delivery means

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	43	32.8	32.8	32.8
	Agree	56	42.7	42.7	75.6
	Strongly Agree	32	24.4	24.4	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

A solution of converting tourist vans into making deliveries of light-weight luggage from shopping malls to customers was suggested by the respondents. The conversion was supported by the respondents in different ways where 56 of them were in agreement, 32 strongly agreed, and 43 were neutral. The section of those who agreed were many hence leading to the solution taking a lead and making SMEs to convert to delivering items like groceries from shopping malls.

Table 14.0: During Covid-19, exchange of money has been termed a way of transmitting the disease. However, a change of the payment methods from receiving cash to use of swiping of debit cards and online money transfer can be a better way of doing business. Apart from change of payment model, an adjustment of pricing can be done downward to attract more people who have been hit by the difficult economic times.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	45	34.4	34.4	34.4
	Neutral	11	8.4	8.4	42.7
	Agree	53	40.5	40.5	83.2
	Strongly Agree	22	16.8	16.8	100.0
	Total	131	100.0	100.0	

The pandemic caused a slowdown in the use of liquid cash due to avoiding touching of money which can exchange hands hence transferring the virus from one person to another. Instead, a solution to that was issued of using a digitalised way of making payments such as online money transfers. The solution was supported by 53 respondents who agreed, 45 disagreed, 22 strongly agreed, and 11 were neutral. Hence, it should be considered a factor of payment because the world is turning everything into the digital system due to technology advances.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, as much as the legislations were issued to help prevent the spread of Covid-19, it affected the SMEs operations whereby 64 and 43 participants were in agreement according to Q5 and Q6 respectively where they condemned the government travel restrictions and other legislation. The results were illustrated that Q7 received 64 responses, Q8 received 32 responses, and Q9 received 64 responses who were in agreement that such ways can be the best option to the prevailing conditions (Yong and Pearce 2018). The representation of the objective was done in Q10, Q11, and Q12. Among the respondents that opted and agreed that

the diversification ways were relevant and most appropriate were 53, 64, and 65 on the questions representation respectively. Considering the obtained correlation coefficient between Q11 and Q12 of 0.478 which is positive is a great idea. When working for the regular or recurring costs or expenses of businesses such as rent and insurance premiums that do not change and are billed regularly, the SMEs need to come up with better ways of handling and promoting operations that can lead to generating little income to support and promote the existence of the businesses by supporting small activities. It was administered and promoted by the participants to the research that a diversification into offering transport services for malls, taking up some of the untapped opportunities, and retarget in setting positions at the airports to receive the few visitors that are arriving so that they can get little business going on. In conclusion, the issued legislations in the operations under Covid-19 was found to be greatly affecting SMEs whereby the lockdown made customers not to be available. More of the activities that need to be promoted and encouraged were supposed to be stopped and put aside due to the pandemic precautions and requirements (Connelly and Peltzer 2016). Acceleration of SMEs activities into digital platforms can be a way of securing more sales by the tourism business but it will require the point of physical meeting and travel activities which are restricted under lockdown period. The shift to digital platforms cannot offer a solution that can lead to real income earning activities because it can create awareness but it cannot offer services online because of the need to have physical appearances of things like wildlife and other structures. It does not enhance nor promote the use of technology in offering tourism services because technology can be only applicable in promotional activities hence cannot meet the entire procedures required in meeting visitors and offering services to earn income to the SMEs (Hardoon et al. 2016). The shift to digital platforms cannot offer a solution that can lead to real income earning activities because it can create awareness but it cannot offer services online because of the need to have physical appearances of things like wildlife and other structures. The untapped opportunities within the country can be tapped by making use of the tourism vans in making deliveries of light-weight items (Grayson et al. 2020). It can be a door delivery of simple purchases at a fee that can enable the SMEs and other employees like drivers to keep busy and earn some little income to facilitate meeting of needs. The use of the available resources that can offer service to the public even during an application of the issued legislations and restrictions of lockdown, it was discovered to being a better way of handling and promoting business continuity among the Omani people depending on SMEs for a living.

The issued recommendations included making investment in technology & tools, creation of an oversight of SME financial status, prioritising of value over culture, and trusting & empowering the people that deal with SMEs (Razumovskaia and Shelyakin 2020). It might be a great move if the SMEs operating in any field, not only the within the tourism sector to embrace technology and ensure they have allocated and designed ways of using digital tools on delivering service. Even if the Covid-19 pandemic took place when the SMEs had not prepared for uncertainties financially to enable sustaining and enabling the use of reserve funds, it might be of great help in future if they promote and enhance the use of the little savings the SMEs can manage to make so that meeting financial obligations for fixed and regular expenses can be an easy task as they fight to regain financial stability. SMEs should not only focus on Covid-19 pandemic but forecast on any uncertainty that may befall business operations. It needs to be promoted and assured of the ways that can be promoted into the conditions and ways that must be engaged by all business owners and entrepreneurs. Culture has a way of aligning and dictating events that need to be promoted within business sin tourism but when it lacks the focus on how businesses

can operate and be handled when things fail to work as expected, it is a way of creating and allowing other values in business such as wealth accumulation, reserve funds creation, and grabbing of various opportunities that fall within a wide perspective of the operational focus of SMEs. Service to customers can improve and enable many creating sense of other services and products provided by the SMEs so that they can make the customers to stick regardless of any situation or condition that may prevail in the market. The pandemic can persist but I there are other products traded by the businesses, it will enhance and facilitate shipping and delivery to the various destinations. Some of the value making activates may be the sale of jewellery which can be ordered using the digital platforms and create sales that provide revenues for business (Da Silva and Núñez 2021). When circumstances fail to indicate proper ways of keeping to remunerate and pay staff, the personal investments can keep generating little income that can be used to support during periods like Covid-19 pandemic when no business activities are allowed to take place apart from those providing essential services like healthcare facilities, security, and food handling businesses.

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