




Lessons from the Crisis: accommodation strategies for coping with the COVID-19 pandemic in São Luís, Maranhão

Lições da crise: estratégias dos meios de hospedagem no enfrentamento da pandemia da COVID-19 em São Luís do Maranhão




Lecciones de la Crisis: estrategias de los alojamientos para enfrentar la pandemia de COVID-19 en São Luís, Maranhão

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ABSTRACT

Goal: To identify strategies used by micro and small businesses in the hotel sector of São Luís do Maranhão to cope with the impacts of COVID-19. **Methodology/approach:** Exploratory, cross-sectional, descriptive, and qualitative study conducted between January and August 2021, involving 12 micro and small lodging businesses. Data collection was carried out using a semi-structured script, and the transcribed statements were subjected to content analysis. **Originality/relevance:** Given the complexity imposed by COVID-19, the strategic adaptation of micro and small hotel businesses emerges as crucial in facing the challenges triggered by the global health crisis. **Main findings:** The results show diverse impacts: financial difficulties alongside improvements in stakeholder relations and revenue. Crisis strategies varied according to the groups involved. For employees and customers, promotions, cost management, adoption of health protocols, and layoffs were prominent. In relation to suppliers and competitors, negotiations and business cooperation stood out. Support institutions were crucial, providing subsidies and technical assistance for recovery. In the post-pandemic period, key learnings included health protocols, cost reduction, increased use of virtual channels, and strengthened partnerships within the supply chain. **Theoretical contributions:** This study advanced, compared to Gomes (2021), by presenting findings on the impacts and coping strategies related to COVID-19 in the hotel sector of a Brazilian destination that had not been previously investigated. **Management contributions:** The research highlights that pandemic experiences reinforced the educational nature of crises, driving organizational changes that promote competitiveness and help businesses face future adverse scenarios.

Keywords: Strategy; Impacts; Crisis; Hospitality Sector; COVID-19.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Identificar estratégias de micro e pequenas empresas do setor hoteleiro de São Luís do Maranhão para enfrentar os impactos da COVID-19. **Metodologia/abordagem:** Exploratória, transversal, descritiva e qualitativa, desenvolvida entre janeiro e agosto de 2021, junto a 12 micro e pequenas hospedagens. A coleta de dados utilizou um roteiro semiestruturado e as falas transcritas foram submetidas à análise de conteúdo. **Originalidade/relevância:** Diante da complexidade imposta pela COVID-19, a adaptação estratégica das micro e pequenas empresas hoteleiras emerge como crucial para enfrentar os desafios desencadeados pela crise sanitária global. **Principais resultados:** Os resultados mostram impactos diversos: dificuldades financeiras e, ao mesmo tempo, melhorias nas relações com stakeholders e no faturamento. As estratégias de crise variaram conforme os grupos envolvidos. Para colaboradores e clientes, destacaram-se promoções, gestão de custos, adoção de protocolos sanitários e demissões. Em relação a fornecedores e concorrentes, houve negociações e cooperação empresarial. Instituições de suporte foram cruciais, oferecendo subsídios e apoio técnico para a retomada. No pós-pandemia, aprendizados incluem protocolos sanitários, redução de custos, maior uso de canais virtuais e fortalecimento de parcerias na cadeia produtiva. **Contribuições teóricas:** Este estudo avançou, em relação ao de Gomes (2021), ao apresentar os achados sobre impactos e estratégias de enfrentamento da COVID-19 no setor hoteleiro pertencente a um destino brasileiro ainda não investigado anteriormente. **Contribuições para a gestão:** As contribuições da pesquisa denotam que as experiências na pandemia consolidaram o caráter educativo das crises nas alterações organizacionais que favoreçam a competitividade e auxiliem no enfrentamento de futuros contextos adversos.

Palavras-chave: Estratégias; Impactos; Crise; Setor Hoteleiro; COVID-19.

RESUMEM

Objetivo: Identificar estrategias de micro y pequeñas empresas del sector hotelero de São Luís do Maranhão para enfrentar los impactos de la COVID-19. **Metodología/enfoque:** Estudio exploratorio, transversal, descriptivo y cualitativo, desarrollado entre enero y agosto de 2021, con la participación de 12 micro y pequeñas empresas de alojamiento. La recolección de datos se realizó mediante un guion semiestructurado, y las declaraciones fueron sometidas a análisis de contenido. **Originalidad/relevancia:** Dada la complejidad impuesta por la COVID-19, la adaptación estratégica de las micro y pequeñas empresas hoteleras surge como crucial para enfrentar los desafíos desencadenados por la crisis sanitaria global. **Principales resultados:** Los resultados muestran tanto dificultades financieras como mejoras en las relaciones con los grupos de interés y en los ingresos. Las estrategias incluyeron promociones, gestión de costos, protocolos sanitarios y despidos para empleados y clientes, además de negociaciones y cooperación con proveedores y competidores. Las instituciones de apoyo brindaron subsidios y asistencia técnica. En el post-pandemia, se destacaron los protocolos sanitarios, la reducción de costos, el uso de canales virtuales y el fortalecimiento de alianzas. **Contribuciones teóricas:** Este estudio avanzó, en relación con el de Gomes (2021), al presentar hallazgos sobre los impactos y estrategias de afrontamiento de la COVID-19 en el sector hotelero de un destino brasileño que no había sido investigado previamente. **Contribución a la gestión:** La investigación destaca que las experiencias durante la pandemia consolidaron el carácter educativo de las crisis, impulsando cambios organizacionales que favorecen la competitividad y ayudan a enfrentar futuros escenarios adversos.

Palabras clave: Estrategias; Impactos; Crisis; Sector Hotelero; COVID-19.

■ INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused socioeconomic disruptions that resulted in severe repercussions for businesses across various countries and industries (Giunipero et al., 2021; Mwiinga & Mwanza, 2024; Tang et al., 2021; Wolfe & Patel, 2021). It is estimated that the negative impacts of this health crisis will persist for the next decade (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2020). Despite the easing of lockdown measures (Bella-Elliott et al., 2021), numerous factors have affected the resumption of activities and continue to pose challenges to entrepreneurs (Tsonas, 2020), particularly to small businesses, for whom COVID-19 meant an imminent collapse (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021).

The tourism sector, characterized as a complex and interconnected system (Santos & Moreira, 2021), faced challenges in achieving full recovery due to its reliance on external factors such as the health safety of nations (Fundação Getúlio Vargas [FGV], 2020). Therefore, the consequences and implications of this crisis are still unfolding (Mogaji et al., 2022), with predictions that recovery to pre-pandemic levels may occur by the end of 2024 (World Tourism Organization [WTO], 2024). Since the sudden emergence of the novel coronavirus — SARS-CoV-2 — countries heavily dependent on tourism have witnessed dramatic effects on employment, business closures, and consequently, on their incomes (Santos & Moreira, 2021). The effects were not limited to international travel but also extended to a sharp decline in domestic travel (Tsonas, 2020).

Estimates indicated that, in 2020, the decline in tourism activities due to the pandemic and unequal vaccination efforts resulted in an economic impact of US\$2.4 trillion (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2021), with global tourism losses projected to reach US\$4 trillion (WTO, 2021). In Brazil, tourism revenue decreased by 36.6% in 2020 compared to 2019, and 35.5 thousand tourism establishments with formal employment ties closed, a decline of 13.9% in relation to the businesses in operation in the country in 2019 (Ministério do Turismo [MTUR], 2021). In the COVID-19 scenario, the reactive and prospective stance of micro and small enterprises (MSEs) was highlighted through their adaptability to the “new normal”, driven by imperatives of survival (Alves et al., 2020; Dube et al., 2020). Despite facing continual exposure to market fluctuations, these companies have been advocating for the adoption of diverse strategies (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021; Hillmann & Guenther, 2020; Katare et al., 2021) to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Wenzel et al., 2020).

Aware of the hotel industry’s significant role within the broader tourism sector, the aforementioned pandemic has heightened greater vulnerability for lodging companies (LCs) (Jain et al., 2022; Mwiinga & Mwanza, 2024), especially in countries severely affected by the spread of COVID-19 (Hoang et al., 2021). Thus, seeking to contribute to understanding the underlying factors crucial for business survival (Supardi & Syamsul, 2020), especially during crises (Jain et al., 2022), this paper poses the question: how have MSEs strategically adapted to the new reality imposed by the current health crisis?

Therefore, the aim of this research is to identify the strategies developed by micro and small lodging companies in São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil, to cope with the impacts of COVID-19.

The relevance of this work is grounded in the research agendas of three distinct studies. Initially, Gomes (2021) recommended investigating crisis management (CM) in the hospitality industry, based on his quantitative research on the impacts and strategies of COVID-19 in Portugal. In this sense, the present study advances our understanding of CM resulting from SARS-CoV-2, however, within the Brazilian context and employing qualitative methods. Kim et al. (2020) examined the economic effects of epidemics on the restaurant sector prior to COVID-19. Thus, our work aligns with their research suggestion by focusing on the impacts of an unusual health crisis — a pandemic — on a different sector than previously investigated. It will also seek to verify the effects not only on financial performance but also in areas such as people management and marketing. Finally, Bouças da Silva et al. (2021) recommended exploring strategies of tourism organizations of various sizes to face crises. Therefore, this study aims to present managerial insights to micro and small LCs guided by a strategic perspective. Business actions to address the COVID-19 pandemic represent choices made by decision-makers, with ramifications for organizational performance. This perspective aligns with the concept of strategy as defined by Rumelt et al. (1995).

■ CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN THE REALITY OF TOURISM COMPANIES

Conceptual Aspects

For some time now, research has been undertaken to comprehend the impact of crisis episodes on entrepreneurial activity (Stephens et al., 2021). Conceptually, crises represent undesirable and commonly unexpected events characterized by limited duration yet with diverse and ambiguous implications (Glaesser, 2006) that economically debilitate companies (Wenzel et al., 2020). Crucially, crises unfold through phases, leading to financial constraints and business closures influenced by the duration of exposure (Bartik et al., 2020), a fact that requires immediate adaptation strategies (Glaesser, 2006) and imposes significant economic and social repercussions on enterprises (Stephens et al., 2021). Although all the stages of a crisis are significant — pre-crisis, crisis moment, and post-crisis — few studies focus on the second phase, with the majority concentrating on the aftermath (Doern, 2021).

Tourism companies are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters, pandemics, and other adversities that cause significant financial losses (Kim et al., 2020), especially for small businesses (Hall et al., 2020). MSEs, in particular, are disproportionately impacted due to their technological, administrative, operational, and human resource vulnerabilities (Bella-Elliott et al., 2021). The repercussions extend to suppliers and strategic partners (Stephens et al., 2021), pressures from customers (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021), as well as emotional and behavioral effects on entrepreneurs (Antwi et al., 2024). Paradoxically, despite these internal and external obstacles, MSEs are often believed to possess superior and more rapid adaptive capabilities, allowing

them to explore market niches (Bourletidis, 2013) and replicate effective business practices (Wright et al., 2015). Their dynamic capabilities and specific attributes (Clampit et al., 2022) foster innovation, reduce bureaucratic hurdles (Alves et al., 2020), and enhance crisis resilience (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021). Consequently, it is argued that organizations should anticipate the need for government support (Alves et al., 2020), as necessary assistance — such as access to financial stimuli (Dube et al., 2020) — may not arrive in time to safeguard them.

To mitigate and address adverse scenarios, companies engage in crisis management (CM), which encompasses a set of process, planning, and implementation strategies fundamentally divided into three stages: pre-crisis prevention, CM implementation, and post-crisis outcomes (Kraus et al., 2020). Although CM can lead to both incremental and radical changes (Iancu & Ciubotaru, 2013), the anticipation of unpredictable events is often perceived as a potential waste of time and energy (Ansoff, 1957), frequently assuming an emergent nature (Whittington, 2002). Unsurprisingly, previous studies have found that CM is more often characterized by spontaneous and reactive decision-making rather than by reliance on contingency plans (Andirin et al., 2017; Bouças da Silva et al., 2021).

For pre-crisis periods, it is recommended to anticipate likely hostile and unexpected situations by creating conditions to address them, such as composing financial reserves (Ponis & Koronis, 2012). During the second phase — the crisis itself — drastic changes demand urgent strategic initiatives, resulting in scenarios of high uncertainty (Prohorovs, 2020). In the post-crisis phase, managers must focus on recovering their image and consolidating organizational changes to enhance the lessons learned (Anttila, 2014). Therefore, crisis planning involves considering contingencies and previous experiences to prepare for continuous threat contexts (Muñoz et al., 2019), understanding the specifics of the emerging crisis and the need for rapid adaptation, and making adjustments to minimize losses, ensuring opportunities to restore performance as quickly as possible (Prohorovs, 2020).

Empirical Studies on Crisis Management in the Tourism Sector

Adverse moments, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, are characterized as crises due to their profound impact on society and organizations, as well as the complexity they present for management and control (Garcia et al., 2021). In this scenario, various studies have examined business responses to the rapid decline in tourism demand, which has generated significant losses across all tourism segments, including hospitality (Hoang et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2022; Mwiinga & Mwanza, 2024), events, airlines, and major entertainment centers (Tsonas, 2020).

In both national and international contexts, the strategies developed varied widely. For Chinese MSEs, responses to the pandemic encompassed several fronts: resilience, leadership, cautious decision-making that favored planning and innovation, relationship and negotiation with suppliers and customers, and a focus on products and finances (Alves et al., 2020). In North America, the limited financial availability of MSEs resulted in cost-saving measures, additional debt, or closure of operations (Bartik et al., 2020). A similar outcome was observed in the Malaysian hospitality sector, where

enterprises of different sizes resorted to salary cuts, reduced working hours, and mass layoffs (Foo et al., 2020).

In the Food and Beverage (F&B) sector across various countries, central measures included prioritizing the care of customers and employees, and developing and adopting sanitary protocols (Dube et al., 2020). Additionally, Kim et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of redesigning packaging and offering special menus, alongside publicizing information about sanitary conditions. In this regard, Golets et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of communicating with consumers about the implementation of biosecurity protocols, given the need to ensure sanitary safety during severe disease outbreaks such as COVID-19. Similarly, Zouain et al. (2022) stressed the importance of measuring occupancy rates at tourist attractions. In businesses of different sizes in Europe, contingency measures included seeking government financial support, reducing costs and workloads, and supporting employees to help them overcome the fear of contracting COVID-19 (Kraus et al., 2020). Among Portuguese MSEs, inter-company partnerships for developing new products were particularly noteworthy (Dias et al., 2021).

During the reopening of businesses abroad, several factors influencing performance were highlighted: cognitive characteristics of Chinese entrepreneurs (Tang et al., 2021); resilience in the USA and Australia (Katare et al., 2021; Zarghami, 2021); digital capability providing operational and marketing agility (Saputra et al., 2022), and organizational learning (Bhaskara & Filimonau, 2021) in Indonesia; collaboration with customers and competitors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Markovic et al., 2021); North American government assistance programs (Li, 2021), resource restructuring, cost reduction, loan acquisition, customer prospecting, and market opportunities (Giunipero et al., 2021); development of dynamic capabilities (Clampit et al., 2022), and promotional strategies (Wang & Lopez, 2020) in the USA; improvisation capability, identification and exploitation of new opportunities, and systematic adaptation in Spain (Peñarroya-Farell & Miralles, 2022); understanding of impacts in Nigeria (Mogaji et al., 2022).

In Brazil, Bouças da Silva et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of interorganizational cooperation — between competing or non-competing companies, associations, and governments — for MSEs in São Luís to face the pandemic. The advantages of these alliances included joint decision-making, exchange of informational resources, and governmental technical-financial support. Additionally, Nascimento et al. (2021) recommended that MSEs focus on understanding customer needs and promoting greater adherence to technologies. Freire et al. (2022), in their investigation of Brazilian social businesses of different sizes, found that these enterprises created new products, reduced costs, and strengthened their strategic alliances to withstand the crisis. Specifically focusing on the hospitality sector, Barbosa (2020) conducted a comparative study of the protocols adopted by Pernambuco's hospitality industry. The investigation identified several key measures: priority service to guests in risk groups; rigorous cleaning of accommodations; employee training to prevent COVID-19; use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE); and measures to avoid crowds. In Canoa Quebrada (CE), LCs sought to reduce costs and staff while investing in renovations. Additionally, they focused on offering competitive prices, conducting online promotional actions, modifying cancellation policies, and implementing strict hygiene and food service measures with social distancing (Vale et al., 2020).

Perinotto et al. (2021) noted that Instagram was particularly relevant for LCs in Jericoacoara (CE) in strengthening customer relationships and enhancing the visibility of the destination upon the resumption of activities. Zouain et al. (2022) recommended that destinations provide high-quality internet to ensure visitors remain connected to the virtual world during their stay. In Florianópolis (SC), the focus was on government provisional measures, the expansion of credit lines, the suspension of employment contracts, tax reductions, refunds for daily rates and travel packages, and the creation of a biosecurity practices seal (Dias & Feger, 2020).

Adherence to the above strategies suggests that COVID-19 shifted the objectives of MSEs from profit-seeking to ensuring their survival, necessitating adaptive strategies to cope with new contexts (Supardi & Syamsul, 2020). Based on this literature review, this study presents Figure 1, summarizing the key findings of the empirical investigations. Subsequently, it moves on to the explanation of the methodology and discussion of the results.

Figure 1.

Key findings from the studies on coping strategies

Key findings	References
Cost and loan management.	Bartik et al. (2020); Kraus et al. (2020); Giunipero et al. (2021); Freire et al. (2022)
Resilience; proactive leadership; cautious planning decisions and innovation; relationship and negotiation with stakeholders.	Alves et al. (2020)
Adoption of sanitary protocols.	Barbosa (2020); Dube et al. (2020)
People management and customer relationship management.	Dube et al. (2020)
Salary reductions, layoffs, and/or work contract suspensions.	Dias e Feger (2020); Foo et al. (2020); Vale et al. (2020)
Product and/or service improvement.	Alves et al. (2020); Kim et al. (2020); Freire et al. (2022)
Communication regarding the adoption of sanitary protocols.	Kim et al. (2020); Golets et al. (2021)
Control of visitor numbers at tourist attractions.	Zouain et al. (2022)
Reduction in working hours; emotional support for employees.	Foo et al. (2020); Kraus et al. (2020)
Business cooperation.	Bouças da Silva et al. (2021); Dias et al. (2021); Markovic et al. (2021); Freire et al. (2022)
Access to government subsidies.	Dias e Feger (2020); Kraus et al. (2020); Bouças da Silva et al. (2021); Li (2021)
Operational and marketing strategies.	Vale et al. (2020); Wang e Lopez (2020); Saputra et al. (2022)
Use of technologies.	Nascimento et al. (2021); Perinotto et al. (2021); Saputra et al. (2022); Zouain et al. (2022)
Prospecting new clients and/or market opportunities.	Giunipero et al. (2021); Peñarroya-Farell e Miralles (2022)
Adoption of biosafety seals.	Dias e Feger (2020)
Investments in business infrastructure improvement.	Vale et al. (2020)

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This investigation is exploratory, cross-sectional, descriptive, and qualitative, addressing the research agenda outlined by Andirin et al. (2017) for qualitative studies on crises. Data collection occurred between January and August 2021 — a period characterized by medium to high COVID-19 contamination levels — involving 12 small and micro lodging companies (LCs) in São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil. São Luís stands out in the Brazilian tourism economy (MTur, 2019) and its historical preservation zone is recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Cultural Heritage site, solidifying its status as a national inductive destination (Santos & Flores, 2017). The semi-structured script employed (Figure 2) was adapted from the instrument validated by Bouças da Silva et al. (2021) and allowed for in-depth interviews, a technique conducive to exploring investigative topics comprehensively, even with relatively modest sample sizes (Duarte, 2005).

Figure 2.

Summary of the semi-structured script

Categories	Subcategories	Questions
Impact of the crisis	Positive and negative impacts	1. How has the pandemic been impacting your business?
Pre-crisis management	Preparation and contingencies	2. In the company's planning, were strategies defined considering possible crisis moments?
Crisis management	Coping strategies – customers and employees	3. What were the main strategies adopted by your company to face the pandemic?
	Coping strategies – suppliers and competitors	4. What were the main changes in strategy to deal with each stakeholder (suppliers, employees, and customers)?
	Coping strategies – support institutions	5. Is any institution/organization supporting/could support your business in facing the pandemic? How?
Post-crisis management	Containment and prospecting	6. Which strategy(ies) will be necessary/maintained in the post-pandemic period?

For sample definition, adherence criteria and theoretical saturation were applied, following the guidelines set forth by Falquetto et al. (2018), who assert that studies in the Social Sciences typically achieve saturation by the 12th interview with homogeneous samples. To classify business sizes, criteria from the Serviço de Apoio às Micro e Pequenas Empresas (SEBRAE, 2013) were considered, based on the number of employees per company in the services sector: micro-enterprises (up to 9 employees); small enterprises (10 to 49 employees); medium-sized enterprises (50 to 99 employees); and large enterprises (100 or more employees). The semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or remotely, as preferred by the LCs (Figure 3), recorded, and averaged 25 minutes per interviewee. Subsequently, the data, totaling 26,806 words, were transcribed and analyzed using Bardin's (2016) content analysis technique. While allowing for the emergence of ex post categories, the study also incorporated ex ante categories established from the existing literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Figure 3.

Sample description

Company	Typology	Size	Belongs to a network/ scope	Interviewee's educational background	Position
A	Hotel	Small	National chain	Technical Diploma (Hospitality)	Manager
B	Hotel		Independent	Bachelor's degree (Business Administration)	Manager
C	Hotel		Independent	Bachelor's degree (Business Administration)	Manager
D	Hotel		Independent	Undergraduate Student (Hospitality)	Managing Partner
E	Hotel		Independent	Bachelor's degree (Business Administration)	General Manager
F	Hotel		Independent	High School Diploma	General Manager
G	Hotel		Independent	Bachelor's degree (Economics)	Manager
H	Hotel		Independent	Postgraduate Degree (Hospitality)	Reception/ Reservations Supervisor
I	Hotel		International chain	Bachelor's degree (Business Administration and Tourism)	Manager
J	Hotel		International chain	Bachelor's degree (Hotel Management)	Manager
K	Hostel	Micro	Independent	High School Diploma	Owner-Partner
L	Inn		Independent	Bachelor's degree (Economics)	Owner-Partner

In this regard, a floating reading of the data was conducted, categorizing them into cores themes to align with predefined thematic categories: Crisis Impacts, Pre-crisis Management, Crisis Management, and Post-crisis Management. This systematic approach facilitated a thorough exploration of the material, involving the decoding of data and the organization into subcategories (ex post), which corresponded to the ex ante categories established. This methodology enabled the interpretation and analysis of the contents derived from respondents' statements, forming the basis for the subsequent discussion of results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Firstly, the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on LCs will be presented (Figure 4). It is noteworthy that the pandemic's repercussions are ongoing (Mogaji et al., 2022) and are expected to persist in the coming years (WEF, 2020), particularly amidst potential emergence of more lethal variants and global disparities in vaccination rates (Lages & Costa, 2022). The negative effects observed affected all LCs examined, underscoring the hospitality sector as one of the most vulnerable segments in this scenario (Hoang et al., 2021; Jain et al., 2022;

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Mwiinga & Mwanza, 2024). Consequently, all LCs encountered *interruptions and/or reductions in sales, temporary suspension of activities, cancellation of reservations, and other contracted services* — such as hall rentals — due to complete or partial shutdowns mandated by lockdowns and other health measures, particularly during the critical months of March, April, May, and June 2020. The most immediate consequence of these impacts was *financial difficulties*, worsened by *increased operational costs* associated with bio-safety materials and diminished financial inflows. Additionally, a significant mention includes the *bankruptcy* of a large-scale hotel partner reported by one respondent (Company B), unable to sustain prolonged closure.

Figure 4.

Impacts of the crisis

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	Who said?
Negative impacts	Interruptions and/or reductions in sales	[...] we had zero revenue (for four months) [...] (After reopening) we are operating at only 50% [...] we had an 85% loss of what was planned (Company A).	A, C, D, E, G, I, J, K, L
		[...] (we had) reduced business in the mining sector, commercial representation, transportation [...] with no revenue during this period [...] from March to June (Company E).	
		[...] we relied on 60% international tourism, and it has been a year and a half since international tourists set foot here (Company L).	
	Temporary suspension of activities	The number of guests decreased so much that we had to close the hotel [...] two and a half months closed [...] despite being small with 70 rooms, keeping our hotel open was a loss (Company H).	A, B, C, E, H, K, L
	Cancellation of reservations, and other contracted services	We had to refund deposits already received for future reservations that reached their check-in dates [...] we had to suspend contracts (Company A).	A, F, H, I
	Financial difficulties	We faced financial difficulties. We have already closed two operations here [...] we had a guesthouse, pizzeria, and bar . Accommodation facilities remained because we decided [...] to focus all our energy and financial capacity on one business (Company L).	A, D, I, K, L
	Bankruptcy	[...] a large hotel (100 employees), our partner, shut down its operations [...] they were caught by surprise, and none of the strategies they applied were able to save the company (Company B).	B, C
Increasing of operational costs	[...] significantly raised the prices of cleaning products.	D	
Positive impacts	The improvement in relationships with internal and external stakeholders	We no longer have that difficult customer [...] today, they accept things much more readily [...] with our good suppliers, we have even strengthened the relationship . The employees understood [...] those who work with us do so because they want to see the hotel grow (Company C).	C, F, I, J
	Opportunities for professional qualification	There was staff training because it was no use putting them to work if there was no training to protect themselves [...] to avoid the risk of having the entire staff contaminated (Company I).	F, I, J
	Improvements in revenue	[...] it was good for our company because the pandemic changed the client profile . Today, clients look for more economical products (Company C).	C, K
	Reevaluate the business model	Positively, the pandemic [...] made us rethink our business model (Company L).	A, L

Upon observing the adverse impacts, it became evident that these were widespread across numerous national and international destinations, especially in the early months of the pandemic (Bella-Elliott et al., 2021; Wolfe & Patel, 2021). This decline in visitor arrivals reverberated in significant reductions in guest numbers across various tourism segments — ranging from leisure to business travelers — as outlined by Tsionas (2020). Consequently, financial losses emerged as the most immediate and prevalent consequence of such crisis contexts (Kim et al., 2020), impacting enterprises of all sizes indiscriminately. However, in line with the findings of this study, the closure of operations of a large-scale hotel, a scenario mirrored in many developed countries (Bartik et al., 2020), underscores the notion that MSEs often exhibit better survival prospects in crises due to their streamlined bureaucracy (Clampit et al., 2022).

Regarding positive impacts, *the improvement in relationships with internal and external stakeholders* was highlighted, namely, employees, suppliers, and customers who needed to support each other mutually amidst the collective difficulty of dealing with COVID-19. The period during which LCs interrupted and/or reduced their activities was utilized to *reevaluate the business model*, responding to the drastic shifts in business and consumer behavior. Furthermore, *opportunities for professional qualification* — many provided free of charge by business associations, municipal and state tourism departments, and industry professionals — proved pivotal in guiding LCs' response measures. Entrepreneurs capitalized on these interruptions and/or increased availability of time to engage with the significant offering of courses during that period. Despite business bankruptcies, two interviewees managed, following the initial impact of the pandemic, to develop strategies that led to *improvements in revenue*, driven by shifts in consumer behavior. Notably, Company C, within the economic segment, reported benefiting from the increased demand for more affordable accommodations, thereby confirming changes in travelers' spending patterns.

These findings initially corroborate that awareness of the detrimental and collective effects of COVID-19 enabled increased interaction and mutual assistance among individuals, a phenomenon also reflected in the business community (Alves et al., 2020; Freire et al., 2022). Furthermore, in response to the observed changes, business owners envisaged adjustments in accommodations, recognizing the necessity of organizational adaptations to manage the crisis, the duration of which was uncertain at that time (Dube et al., 2020). The pursuit of qualification in that scenario was highly valued, not only by LCs but also by various stakeholders in the tourism supply chain, as reported by Bouças da Silva et al. (2021). Although less frequent, the improved economic performance of two LCs can partly be attributed to their lower room rates, given that travelers had reduced financial resources within the crisis context under study (Golets et al., 2021). This finding aligns with the study by Yang et al. (2024), which revealed that the economic impacts of the pandemic were less severe on economy-category accommodations.

Figure 5 illustrates the pre-crisis strategies identified, which, according to the literature on small businesses, typically include maintaining a *reserve fund* (Ponis & Koronis, 2012), regardless of the sector (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021). Additionally, Company I reinforced what the literature on MSEs asserts: the longer a crisis persists, the higher the likelihood of businesses ceasing operations (Bartik et al., 2020). Therefore, managers need to adopt a more proactive and forward-thinking approach to ensure organizational

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survival. An intriguing finding was the implementation, by a small business, of pre-crisis planning strategies aimed at attracting customers through revenue management, given the heightened price sensitivity among the public. In this regard, Perinotto et al. (2021) recommended that LCs utilize their promotional/digital channels to establish swift communication with customers, informing them about more competitive rates and services compared to their competitors.

Figure 5.

Pre-crisis strategies

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	Who said?
Financial management	Reserve fund	[...] we always kept reserves considering the seasonality of visitor demand (Company B).	A, B, D, E, G, I, J, K
		[...] what really shielded us was the financial reserve that enabled us to navigate through adversities [...] the reserves accumulated in the pre-pandemic period (Company G).	
		[...] we have a reserve fund [...] to tackle crisis situations; however, this crisis must be temporary (Company I).	
Marketing management	Revenue management	[...] in the planning, there are promotions designed to address an economic crisis.	B

Regarding the implementation of Crisis Management (CM), strategies related to key stakeholders will be presented. Marketing management, focused on employees and customers (Figure 6), gained prominence during the pandemic. The strategy of *selling promotional packages* became the primary measure for attracting guests. To reach their actual and potential clientele, LCs utilized *promotion strategies through virtual and/or traditional channels*, especially on Instagram and on OTAs where they market their services, such as Booking.com, Hotels.com, and Trivago. Conversely, one company advertised its services on billboards throughout the city. *Relationship building and negotiation with clients* constituted another essential initiative for the financial health of LCs, facilitated by government measures which allowed changes in rules for reimbursements of stays and travel packages. Additionally, *the provision of services to new audiences*, as encouraged by health authorities' guidelines to confine COVID-19 patients and/or healthcare professionals, served as an alternative to overcome the absence and/or reduction of guests within the target audience of enterprises I and K, focusing on business and leisure, respectively. Furthermore, *innovation in products and services* was also highlighted, exemplified by investments that enhanced sanitary safety for guests, such as infrastructural changes and environmental certifications.

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Figure 6.

Crisis management: coping strategies – employees and clients

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	Who said?
Marketing management	Selling promotional packages	[...] many promotional packages are created, all aimed at attracting clients to our company and away from other hotels (Company I).	A, C, H, I, K, L
	Innovation in products and services	We observed an opportunity to offer new services to accommodate these changes brought by the pandemic [...] We created the room office [...] where we take out all the furniture from an apartment [...] and convert it into an office space [...] It includes internet, coffee, air conditioning, a bathroom [...] can accommodate one person for meetings while respecting social distancing [...] Previously, we used to buy bread from suppliers [...] now we have established our own bakery. We hired a baker, and now we have a bakery here at the hotel (Company I).	C, I, K
		For those looking to travel more securely, I enhanced the suites [...] just like a hotel setup: added safes, minibars, electronic locks [...] I pursued certifications for a safe and sustainable environment (Company K).	
	Promotion strategies through virtual and/or traditional channels	We strengthened the promotion of our services on our social network and through traditional methods (Company H).	H, I
	Relationship building and negotiation with clients	The pandemic strengthened the relationship with clients , especially those who were loyal to us [...] we also engaged in many negotiations with them (Company I).	I, J
The provision of services to new audiences	Last year, in May, we closed an entire floor to accommodate doctors here [...] those who were on the front line, treating COVID-19 patients.	I	
	[...] as I work with events, I offered tent services for lockdown, in collaboration with the Health Department [...] We had paying hotel guests come to the hostel [...] Previously, we only had bunk beds. Today, there are only single beds.	K	
Financial management	Cost management strategies	We adopted a very strong cost reduction strategy, and it was what saved us [...] all necessary measures to drastically reduce costs (Company L).	A, C, E, F, G, I, L
	Third-party capital	For carrying out small construction works, it was necessary to request a bank loan from Banco do Nordeste.	L
Operational management	The adoption of sanitary protocols	[...] we started using safety equipment, gloves, masks, hand sanitizer, and changing bed linens [...] to ensure the health of our employees (Company B).	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L
		[...] We implemented a specific protocol related to handling merchandise [...] all items are packaged, sealed [...] all materials, including towels, are delivered to guests sealed in plastic bags .	
	Renovation and facility improvements	[...] during the pandemic, we renovated a part of the inn , aiming to improve the infrastructure (Company L).	C, E, F, L
	Home office and online services	[...] We implemented remote work for administrative departments.	E
People management	Positions and salaries	We had to implement collective vacations for the employees [...] vacations that would be offered in the future. We did this during a period when the hotel had low occupancy rate (Company D).	A, D, E, F, I, L
		The hotel started bringing in people to do overtime [...] I can't hire more people to work the whole month (Company F).	
		[...] we started offering reduced hours contracts during the week and work suspensions (Company L).	
	Employee layoffs	The situation did not indicate a reversal of the pandemic, and we were forced to take the hard coping measures, which were employee layoffs (Company G).	B, C, D, E, F, G, H, L
	Motivational support	Meetings were held with employees both to motivate them and to brainstorm new ideas for coping with the pandemic (Company J).	I, J

In marketing management, multiple strategies similar to those found in the existing literature were observed. The price sensitivity exhibited by travelers, as highlighted by Golets et al. (2021), drove the offering of promotions, which were prioritized for attracting customers across various countries and tourism segments (Saputra et al., 2022; Vale et al., 2020; Wang & Lopez, 2020). To reach their audiences swiftly, businesses adhered to the guidance to use digital media as promotional channels (Perinotto et al., 2021), although advertising through traditional means — billboards — remains a current strategy (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021). This combination of strategies proved relevant for the context of rapid adaptation (Nascimento et al., 2021). Another key point was engaging with customers to reschedule their bookings instead of canceling them. Such as internationally (Dube et al., 2020), changes in refund policies for stays and packages were enabled by governmental measures aimed at supporting businesses (Dias & Feger, 2020). Recently, amidst the public calamity in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, some of the leading national tourism institutions have reinforced this strategy to mitigate negative effects on the sector (Panrotas, 2024).

By providing services to new audiences — patients and healthcare professionals — LCs employed the classic market penetration strategy (Ansoff, 1957), which remains acknowledged in the literature as a crisis management measure (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021). Finally, business innovation emerged as a widely adopted strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Alves et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020), encompassing enhancements in socio-environmental aspects and infrastructure improvements within LCs. Particularly within the realm of MSEs, innovative capacity flourished primarily in organizations with greater knowledge stock and solid relationships with external stakeholders (Cassol et al., 2022).

Regarding financial management, the sudden onset of COVID-19 delineated a scenario of significant uncertainty, particularly concerning the timeline for returning to “normal” operations. Consequently, urgent changes were necessary, prompting many LCs to adopt *cost management strategies* involving reductions in labor costs, production inputs, etc. Additionally, one SME accessed *third-party capital* to implement renovations, acquire equipment, and so forth. Here, it becomes evident that the “new normal” charted an uncertain future for entrepreneurs (Tsionas, 2020), demanding swift CM responses (Prohorovs, 2020). Immediately, the impact of activity cessation underscored the common financial constraints faced by MSEs (Bartik et al., 2020), driving decisions in this realm, particularly cost reduction efforts — as seen in other sectors and geographical contexts (Freire et al., 2022; Giunipero et al., 2021; Kraus et al., 2020; Vale et al., 2020) — and, when necessary, resorting to loans, as observed across the entire tourism supply chain (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021).

Renovation and facility improvements constituted a complementary strategy that attracted new clientele and services, referring to an action under the scope of operational management. Since the hospitality industry offers services through physical structures involving human interaction, particularly for administrative sectors — such as reservations — migration to *home office and online services* was possible to mitigate COVID-19 transmission risks. However, the most common strategy for companies, mandated by law and market conditions, was *the adoption of sanitary protocols* essential for ensuring biosafety for guests, staff, and others. Practices such as using

personal protective equipment (PPE), providing hand sanitizers, and enforcing stricter cleaning routines for equipment, linens, and physical spaces helped foster a sense of safety during the pandemic. In operational management, it is noteworthy that these measures were not only common in the national and international hotel sector (Barbosa, 2020; Dias & Feger, 2020; Vale et al., 2020), but also in segments such as F&B (Dube et al., 2020), ceremonies and events (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021). Sanitary protocols gained prominence, particularly because tourism entails individual and collective risks associated with the movement of people and their interaction with various environments (Zouain et al., 2022). It is emphasized that a more effective adaptation to these protocols was observed in the investigated LCs that were part of international hotel chains, which is a significant finding of this study. This contradicts the findings of Dogru et al. (2024), who argue that chain hotels exhibit less flexibility in brand and operational standards, hence responding more slowly to business disruptions caused by a global pandemic.

Among the practices focused on people management, particular attention was given to *positions and salaries*, guided by measures such as the suspension of service contracts, mandatory vacations, and the reduction of working hours without salary losses, permitted by governmental decrees. *Employee layoffs* were also observed, making *motivational support* for the workforce necessary. Additionally, the fear of contracting COVID-19 corroborated the negative psychological effects on employees. Specific literature confirms that measures potentially leading to labor law violations under normal circumstances received exceptional governmental endorsement (Dias & Feger, 2020). These measures provided the necessary flexibility for tourism businesses during this period of severe economic hardship (Alves et al., 2020; Dube et al., 2020). Workforce reductions were also a common strategy in the global hospitality industry (Foo et al., 2020), alongside the need for emotional support to help employees cope with the crisis (Kraus et al., 2020). With all these challenges, the emotional impacts on quality of life within companies were significant, especially for frontline workers (Antwi et al., 2024), who were more exposed to contamination risks (Garcia et al., 2021), particularly in areas such as Reception, Housekeeping, and F&B.

Crisis Management actions directed at suppliers and competitors were more limited and involved three main strategies (Figure 7). Firstly, *negotiations with suppliers* regarding prices, payment terms, and reductions in purchasing volumes and/or orders were crucial. The collective hardship likely sensitized partners to flexibilize agreements with LCs. Other significant initiatives included *vertical cooperation* — with non-competitors — to increase visibility and attract new clients, and *horizontal cooperation* — with other hotel businesses — to press government authorities for temporary crisis relief aids. It was also noted that LCs most engaged in business networks were those linked to large international hotel groups, even though they were small-scale subsidiaries (Companies I and J), underscoring the competitive strength of accommodations associated with well-established market brands.

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Figure 7.

Crisis management: coping strategies – suppliers and competitors

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	Who said?
Marketing management	Negotiations with suppliers	With suppliers [...] we negotiated to pay debts in five to six installments. We started purchasing supplies in smaller quantities [...] During the pandemic, purchasing habits changed, and the way we negotiate with companies changed as well, and vice versa (Company F).	A, C, E, F, G, I, L
		[...] we renegotiated with suppliers on prices, deadlines, supply of cleaning materials, food [...] internet, management system (Company L).	
Cooperation management	Vertical cooperation	[...] we partnered with companies such as travel agencies, shopping malls, hospitals, and taxi services [...] which helped mitigate the impacts caused by the current crisis (Company J).	I, J
	Horizontal cooperation	[...] when the government issued a decree, we in the hotel sector discussed and suggested adjustments to this decree [...] within 24 hours, they would make the adjustments.	I

The possibility of negotiating with suppliers was also observed in the USA and Europe (Li, 2021; Stephens et al., 2021), which significantly assisted LCs. This finding is relevant because, under normal circumstances, pressures from these stakeholders tend to be more intense on MSEs (Wright et al., 2015). Regarding business alliances, they were established not only among LCs but also with other enterprises within the tourism supply chain, a possibility suggested by Markovic et al. (2021) to address the pandemic. This illustrates that cooperation also occurs in high-competition environments (Bouças da Silva et al., 2023), albeit mitigated in adverse scenarios, as mutual aid is essential for achieving the common goal: business survival. It is also important to highlight that, at the onset of the pandemic, trade associations — such as the Brazilian Association of Hotels (Associação Brasileira da Indústria Hoteleira - ABIH) — were mobilized to pressure the federal government in drafting and/or adjusting decrees that benefited businesses. The same occurred during this period with representative entities from other segments such as travel agencies and F&B (Bouças da Silva et al., 2021).

The last set of crisis strategies involved partnerships with support institutions — SI — (Figure 8), characterized as governmental and business organizations, financing sources, etc., offering technical-financial support and specialized services to enhance the competitiveness of enterprises (Bouças da Silva et al., 2023). For the consulted LCs, the federal government provided the stimuli that facilitated meeting their financial obligations, although there were many complaints about the slow access to subsidies or even their insufficiency to ensure organizational survival. Lastly, *technical support* from SI was mentioned, especially in qualifications related to sanitary measures, which assisted in preparing for and resuming business under safer conditions for guests, similar to what occurred in other states in the Brazilian Northeast (Barbosa, 2020; Vale et al., 2020).

Figure 8.

Crisis management: coping strategies – support institutions

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	Who said?
Financial management	Access to federal government subsidies	Apart from government assistance , I did not receive any direct help from other institutions (Company K).	I, K, L
		Although insufficient, we accessed provisional aids provided by the government (Company L).	
Operational management	Technical support	SENAC offered the “Good practices for COVID Protection” course for free [...] institutions like SENAC and SEBRAE helped us.	I

The support from SI, as a CM strategy, proved essential for many companies and reinforces the technical-financial support as the very *raison d'être* of these institutions (Bouças da Silva et al., 2023). However, the reality for Brazilian MSEs was that resources from initiatives such as the General Tourism Fund (Fungetur) were insufficient for the sector, with evidence showing that only a small portion of the promised R\$ 5 billion was contracted (Trentin et al., 2022). In this regard, Li (2021) found that in North America, companies that received funds were less likely to experience revenue decreases and declines in employee work hours. Unlike Brazil, in other countries, access to government incentives was more prompt and ensured business continuity (Kraus et al., 2020). This highlights the urgency of decision-making during crises to overcome potential obstacles to obtaining government support (Alves et al., 2020) and recovering performance in the short term (Prohorovs, 2020).

The last point addressed by hotel managers concerned the intended strategies — or those to be maintained — post-pandemic (Figure 9), reflecting some of the crisis lessons that serve as learning opportunities for strategic management improvement (Anttila, 2014). Firstly, *maintaining and publicizing sanitary protocols* aligns with two understandings: first, because this measure was among the most demanded by travelers during the pandemic (Golets et al., 2021); second, due to the fear of contracting diseases while traveling, which is likely to persist in people's minds for a long time (Wang & Lopez, 2020). Regarding marketing management, especially for accommodations that invested less in digital media, *broadening activities on virtual channels*, particularly on social networks, will remain a key strategy aligned with specific literature recommendations (Perinotto et al., 2021; Zouain et al., 2022). *Customer prospecting* is another measure motivated by the sharp decline in hotel sales volume that should be maintained even in the post-crisis period. This initiative is crucial for LCs for two reasons: in cases of sudden disruptions in tourist flows, the hotel sector will be among the most affected, as verified by Hoang et al. (2021), Jain et al. (2022), Mwiinga and Mwanza (2024); behavioral changes among travelers create new commercial opportunities that, according to Peñarroya-Farell and Miralles (2022), should be leveraged by organizations across various sectors and not just tourism.

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Figure 9.

Post-crisis management: post-pandemic strategies

Categories	Subcategories	Statements	Who said?
Operational management	Maintaining and publicizing sanitary protocols	[...] sanitary protocols will continue [...] especially because, after this pandemic, concerns about viruses will be heightened (Company K).	H, I, J, K, L
Marketing management	Broadening activities on virtual channels	We will focus more on virtual marketing strategies because, as we are still a very recent hotel [...] once this pandemic is over, we will make significant investments in the marketing area (Company D).	D, H, I, K
		[...] We will utilize our social media platforms more (Company H).	
	Customer prospecting	[...] I can't wait to send my sales team out to prospect again [...] the first visits will be for those who helped us during the pandemic.	F
	intensifying interorganizational relationships	[...] It's crucial to strengthen relationships with the entire tourism sector , whether with suppliers or companies (Company J).	J, K
Costs management	Cost savings	We will continue with practices to save and reduce costs on materials such as PPE, disposable items [...] these are practices that the company will maintain.	C

Furthermore, two interviewed MSEs expressed a keen interest in *intensifying interorganizational relationships* with stakeholders in the tourism supply chain, aware of the benefits derived from such collaborative efforts. In the case under study, cooperation enabled the acquisition of new clients and bolstered competitiveness amidst challenging conditions. For instance, Markovic et al. (2021) suggested an additional strategy for MSEs, advocating collaboration with clients to foster mutual benefits, including service innovation. Additionally, *cost savings* on various inputs were highlighted as imperative for future planning, leveraging insights gleaned from the pandemic experience. This adaptive stance, as underscored by Bhaskara and Filimonau (2021), emphasizes the necessity of integrating these practices into everyday organizational operations, regardless of whether the market is plunged into crisis or not.

Reflecting on both empirical findings and existing literature on pandemic-era strategies (synthesized in Figure 1), the investigated MSEs generally aligned their initiatives with other national and international realities. Specifically, these initiatives encompassed marketing campaigns, adoption of health protocols, negotiations with suppliers to curtail operational expenses, and workforce adjustments. A notable departure from conventional wisdom involved supplier negotiations, typically perceived as exerting pressure on MSEs (Wright et al., 2015), which surprisingly saw positive outcomes during the COVID-19 scenario, potentially illustrating how catastrophic scenarios can sensitize or weaken multiple stakeholders, thereby fostering renegotiations of commercial agreements and strengthening the bargaining power of smaller enterprises. Disparities in access to government subsidies between domestic and international contexts were also evident, complicating matters for Brazilian organizations in dealing with the health crisis.

The diversity of negative impacts observed in the surveyed LCs — particularly manifested in financial difficulties — underscores that the hotel industry tends to be among the most affected segments of tourism,

regardless of the realities and target audience of LCs. This paradigm shifts when considering the category of the enterprise, as evidence during the pandemic suggests that more budget-friendly LCs were the least financially impacted (Yang et al., 2024). Alternatively, the lack of consensus in the literature regarding who is more vulnerable to crisis situations — whether large or small companies — found further evidence in favor of larger enterprises in this study, as the sole bankruptcy identified occurring in a larger business. However, without investigating other variables that may explain its underperformance, further studies may consider deeper analyses in future research. Similarly, LCs showing better performance may not have been favored solely by changes in consumer behavior and in response to adopted strategies. Therefore, future work may consider other variables that impact business performance.

Another contradiction surfaced in the adaptive performance to the pandemic, as in the researched context, LCs affiliated with networks were more effective in coping with COVID-19, contrary to international literature highlighting network-affiliated accommodations facing greater challenges due to operational bureaucracies in maintaining brand standards (Dogru et al., 2024). This distinction may stem from the managerial immaturity observed in many non-networked LCs and/or those managed as family-run enterprises. According to Bocato and Graciano's (2017) research, family-owned hotel groups in Brazil tend to exhibit lower management quality and lose ground to networks, which are more professionalized and established in the market. Given these findings, the study advances to its final considerations.

■ FINAL REMARKS

Based on the objective of identifying strategies employed by small and medium-sized hotel enterprises in São Luís, Maranhão, to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, this study aligns with the research agendas of Gomes (2021), Kim et al. (2020), and Bouças da Silva et al. (2021). Initially, concerning CM strategies, the focus was directed towards various stakeholders of these LCs, with customized measures tailored to each group. Employees and clients emerged as central targets, with strategies encompassing marketing, financial, operational, and people management aspects. Cooperation among suppliers and competitors became evident as a response to the common challenge faced across the supply chain: navigating the scarcity of clientele induced by the pandemic. Support institutions, particularly governmental entities, reaffirmed their critical role in enhancing business resilience and facilitating the recovery of accommodation activities. Given the significant impacts, LCs cannot afford to concentrate solely on one management front, necessitating ongoing development of emerging competencies to effectively address new challenges.

In terms of contributions to the literature, this study advanced beyond Gomes (2021) by presenting findings on the impacts and coping strategies specific to the hotel sector in São Luís, Maranhão, an area not previously investigated. The qualitative approach enabled a deeper exploration of categories identified in previous studies, such as layoffs, wage losses, business interruptions (impacts), and sanitation measures and skill enhancement (strategies), alongside newly identified strategies gleaned

from interviews with LCs managers. Moreover, this research expanded upon the insights of Kim et al. (2020) by examining the financial effects of epidemic diseases, focusing explicitly on the hotel sector during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic. It further highlighted impacts on people management and marketing, thereby broadening the spectrum of viable strategies for enterprises operating under heightened vulnerability. Lastly, building upon Bouças da Silva et al. (2021), who investigated strategies and impacts across various tourism segments (Agencies, F&B, Transportation, Consulting, Events and Ceremonies, in addition to Hospitality), this study specifically delved into the idiosyncrasies of hotel managers, enabling comparative analyses with specialized literature and offering managerial insights beneficial to LCs.

Focused on the impacts, the swift emergence of the pandemic demanded rapid adaptation to mitigate the negative effects, primarily stemming from partial or complete interruptions in sales and operations, immediately precipitating financial challenges for businesses. Although COVID-19 universally affected the hotel sector, each small and medium-sized LC uniquely encountered the sudden impacts, requiring prompt managerial responsiveness. This adaptation was starkly evident in light of two central reasons: i. MSEs typically lack contingency plans for crisis scenarios; ii. It represented a crisis of unprecedented scale likely to pose challenges for any organization. However, the abrupt disruption also catalyzed positive outcomes in the hotel sector of São Luís, including collaborative alliances, reflections, and strategic pivots that steered LCs toward new directions. This underscores once again the educative role of crises, where lessons learned can be integrated into the daily organizational routines of MSEs, bolstering their readiness to confront future adversities.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the limitations of this study pertain to the specific research setting, segment, and economic sector examined — namely, the hotel sector of a Brazilian destination — which constrain the generalizability of results to other contexts. While not a limitation per se, the qualitative approach may serve as a catalyst for future research endeavors employing larger quantitative samples of enterprises. Therefore, recommendations for future studies on CM include: exploring other economic sectors (such as agribusiness, mining, livestock, industry, the third sector, and other service sector organizations unrelated to tourism) and different tourism segments (including receptive operators, transportation, consulting, F&B, guides, etc.) to enable comparative analyses; encompassing other national and international contexts to develop these studies, considering the possibility of integrating new analytical categories and themes pertinent to CM; adopting quantitative approaches using varied data collection and analysis techniques, potentially integrating suggested approaches; and undertaking longitudinal studies to evaluate the enduring impacts of crises on businesses and the outcomes of strategies devised during such periods, coupled with lessons gleaned from these experiences.



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