

Special call: Tourism and Covid-19

Live or let die: strategies for coping with COVID-19 from a business perspective in São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil.

Viva ou deixe morrer: estratégias para o enfrentamento da COVID-19 sob a perspectiva empresarial em São Luís do Maranhão, Brasil.

Viva o deje morir: estrategias para reaccionar ante la COVID-19 desde una perspectiva empresarial en São Luís do Maranhão, Brasil.

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the strategies developed by micro and small tourism companies to face COVID-19 crisis in São Luís, Maranhão, Brazil. In addition, the effects of the pandemic on business were examined. Therefore, a qualitative, cross-sectional, descriptive, and exploratory research project was developed with micro and small business in the following sectors: lodging, transportation, agency, F&B, consultancy, ceremonies, and events. Data were collected through a semi-structured script containing the categories crisis impacts, crisis planning, implementation of crisis management and post-crisis management. A content analysis technique was used. The results show negative impacts, such as 'financial difficulties', and positive impacts, such as 'professional qualification opportunities'. F&B companies achieved 'improvements in revenue' due to delivery. The strategies used to face the pandemic deal with marketing, finances, operational and HR management, and they vary according to the type of segments and stakeholders involved. In general, companies do not make contingency plans and act responsively to crises. Findings also point out the performance of public and private institutions in 'technical and financial support' to businesses, although 'slow access to financial subsidies' has been jeopardizing the future of businesses. For the post-crisis period, firms aim for strategies that are in line with the new normal and that strengthen consumers' sense of safety.

Palavras-chave:

Gerenciamento de crise.
Estratégia.
Pequenos negócios.
COVID-19.
São Luís do Maranhão.

Resumo

Este trabalho objetivou identificar as estratégias desenvolvidas por micro e pequenas empresas (MPE) do turismo ludovicense para enfrentar a crise provocada pela COVID-19. Adicionalmente, detectou-se impactos da pandemia sobre os negócios. Metodologicamente, desenvolveu-se uma pesquisa qualitativa, transversal, descritiva e exploratória com MPE de hospedagem, transporte, agenciamento, A&B, consultoria, cerimonial e eventos. Os dados foram coletados, por meio de roteiro semiestruturado contendo as categorias: impactos e

gerenciamento de crise. Utilizou-se a técnica de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados apontam impactos negativos, como “dificuldades financeiras”, e positivos, a exemplo das “oportunidades de qualificação profissional”. Empresas de A&B obtiveram “melhorias no faturamento” graças ao delivery. As estratégias para enfrentamento versam sobre gestão de marketing, finanças, operacional e pessoas, e variam conforme segmentos e stakeholders envolvidos. No geral, as empresas não fazem planos contingenciais e agem de forma responsiva às crises. Destacou-se a atuação de instituições públicas e privadas no “apoio técnico e financeiro” aos negócios, embora a “lentidão no acesso aos subsídios financeiros” venha comprometendo o futuro das MPE. Para o pós-crise, os empreendimentos almejam estratégias que estejam em consonância ao “novo normal” e fortaleçam a percepção de segurança nos consumidores.

Palabras clave:

Gestión de crisis.
Estratégia.
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Resumen

En este artículo se buscó conocer las estrategias de las micro y pequeñas empresas (MPE) del turismo de São Luís (MA) para reaccionar ante la crisis causada por la COVID-19. Además, se detectaron los impactos de la pandemia en los negocios. Esta investigación es cualitativa, transversal, descriptiva y exploratoria que utilizó un guión semiestructurado con las categorías: impactos y gestión de crisis. Las entrevistas fueron desarrolladas con alojamientos, agencias (transporte y turismo), restaurantes, consultoría, bodas y eventos. Se utilizó la técnica de Análisis de Contenido. Los hallazgos indican impactos negativos, “dificultades financieras” y positivos, como “oportunidades de calificación profesional”. Los restaurantes lograron “mejoras en el desempeño financiero” debido a las entregas. Para reaccionar ante la crisis realizaron la gestión operativa, de marketing, finanzas y recursos humanos, que varían según los segmentos y las partes interesadas e involucradas. En general, las MPE no presentan planes de contingencia y actúan de manera reactiva ante la crisis. Se destacó, aún, el “apoyo técnico y financiero” de instituciones públicas y privadas, aunque el “acceso lento a los subsidios financieros” ha puesto en peligro el futuro de las empresas. Para el período posterior a la crisis, los negocios buscan estrategias que estén en línea con la “nueva normalidad” y mejoren la percepción de seguridad en los consumidores.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020, the world has been challenged by a global pandemic, caused by a rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus – COVID-19 – whose unprecedented impacts range from a severe global economic crisis to a large-scale loss in human lives (Baum & Hai, 2020; UNWTO, 2020). This pandemic is the biggest public health crisis in living memory (OECD, 2020) and has resulted in a significant reduction and/or total stoppage of hospitality and tourism operations in many countries (Chinazzi et al., 2020) – a situation that has imposed enormous challenges on tourism sector (Bartik et al., 2020) and, in particular, on micro and small companies (SMEs) (Dube, Nhamo, & Chikodzi, 2020).

Despite the contributions of SMEs to the global socioeconomic system (Inan & Bititci, 2015), these companies are challenged by strong competition and market turbulence (Castor, 2009). In Brazil, 98.5% of the approximately 5 million enterprises are SMEs (Nassif, Corrêa, & Rossetto, 2020); therefore, these small businesses are susceptible to market fluctuations and to a fragile economic environment (Asgary, Ozdemir, & Özyürek, 2020), especially in adverse scenarios, such as the one caused by COVID-19.

Bearing in mind that tourism is susceptible to natural disasters and pandemics that result in substantial financial losses (Kim, Lee, & Tang, 2020), with COVID-19, smaller tourism businesses are facing an imminent collapse (Dube et al., 2020). SMEs are more vulnerable to crises than larger businesses (Hall, Scott, & Gössling, 2020) because they suffer from a lack of management mechanisms, a smaller workforce and limited inputs and financial resources to deal with unforeseen events (Bourletidis, 2013; Giannacourou, Kantari, & Christopoulou, 2015).

Therefore, the effects of this pandemic, whose ending is still uncertain (Wenzel, Stanske, & Lieberman, 2020), will be uneven in space and time for tourist organisations (Hall et al., 2020). It is estimated that more than 75% of European and American tourism SMEs will not reopen after the pandemic (Baum & Hai, 2020),

and a good part of them have already closed their operations (Bartik et al., 2020). In Brazil, the impacts of COVID-19 on businesses demonstrate that in segments such as corporate tourism, closures will be closer to 90%, as they are involved in such activities as transportation, lodging and insurance (ABRACORP, 2020). Other studies show that economic losses, compared to the sector's GDP in 2019, will be in the order of R\$ 116.7 billion in the 2020-2021 biennium, representing a loss of 21.5% in total production of the period (FGV, 2020).

Based on these figures, the tourism sector must develop measures that consider their idiosyncrasies, so that businesses will know how to act in the new normal (Dube et al., 2020). Since forming competitive strategies can be a process of learning and adapting (Whittington, 2002), an essential reactive posture of SMEs is both to respond to the pandemic crisis and to survive it (Alves et al., 2020).

Through this reasoning, the following question emerges: how are SMEs responding, in strategic terms, to the crisis caused by the new coronavirus? Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the strategies developed by tourism SMEs in São Luís do Maranhão to face the COVID-19 pandemic and to verify the impacts on SMEs resulting from this pandemic.

The justification of this paper is supported by Kraus et al. (2020), who recommended researching crisis management in different countries to deepen knowledge about the subject. Kim et al. (2020) suggested continuous studies on the impacts of pandemic illnesses, considering the increasing appearance of new diseases. Specifically looking at tourism, Tito and Araújo (2019) alleged a lack of investigations into crisis management (CM) for the Brazilian context; these studies are usually related to the hospitality sector. Thus, we also considered the research agenda of Silva et al. (2018), advising researchers to explore the strategies developed by tourist organisations, in different segments, to deal with moments of crisis.

This work is structured as follows: (i) theoretical framework on crisis management and SME strategies; (ii) methodology; (iii) results and discussions; (iv) conclusions, managerial contributions, study limitations and research agenda.

2 CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN SMALL BUSINESSES

From a conceptual point of view, a crisis is an unwanted, a commonly unexpected and a time-limited process, whose outcome is possibly ambiguous (Glaesser, 2006). A crisis is not just an isolated event but a process that develops and evolves in phases (Miranda, 2017). The longer the crisis lasts, the scarcer financial resources become (Wenzel et al., 2020). This situation leads to the possible bankruptcy of companies (Bartik et al., 2020), which requires immediate decision making (Glaesser, 2006) and adaptation strategies (Whittington, 2002).

In times of crisis, SMEs tend to be pioneers and the main victims (Bourletidis, 2013). SMEs suffer disproportionate impacts in the context of an economic slowdown due to their financial limitations and dependence on bank loans with high interest rates (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014). The financial fragility of SMEs is also linked to their vulnerability caused by the pressure from large suppliers and customers (Castor, 2009). In addition, deficiencies in technological, administrative, and human capabilities can reduce the competitive strength of SMEs to overcome crises (Bourletidis, 2013; Giannacourou et al., 2015). Thus, these companies face internal and external obstacles that make their survival harder (Miranda, 2017).

Yet some authors believe that SMEs are less vulnerable to crises than larger businesses (Bourletidis, 2013) due to their superior and faster adaptability capacity (Gregory, Harvie, & Lee, 2002) in exploring niche markets (Bourletidis, 2013) and copying best business practices (Wright, Kroll, & Parnell, 2015). SMEs' capacities are favoured by their reduced bureaucracy (Alves et al., 2020); thus, it is necessary for companies to manage crises (Tito & Araújo, 2019).

Crisis management (CM) refers to a set of strategies as well as planning and implementation measures, aiming at preventing and coping with crises (Glaesser, 2006). The CM is guided by processes (Hong, Huang, & Li, 2012) of continuous improvement, which incorporate past lessons to minimise risks in the next crisis (Alves et al., 2020). Crises generate anomalies in business performance (Kurschus, Sarapovas, & Cvilikas, 2015), and for SMEs, these turbulences can cause incremental or radical changes (Iancu & Ciubotaru, 2013).

CM comprises three stages (Kraus et al., 2020): pre-crisis prevention, implementation of crisis management and post-crisis results. For Ansoff (1957), trying to anticipate unpredictable events can be a waste of time and energy, which should be directed to other activities. Perhaps this explains Chien and Law's (2003) position that companies rarely have plans to face crises, which hinders preventive measures when they occur. This result was also found by Andirin, Moital and Cardoso (2017) in the events segment, in which crisis management is more closely related to spontaneous decision making than consulting contingency plans. Therefore, CM, in the strategy context, constitutes a more emergent characteristic (Whittington, 2002).

In the search for how to respond strategically to crises, studies on SMEs in different areas have been identified. At the international context, small South Korean businesses have excelled in strengthening technological innovation and marketing (Gregory et al., 2002). In Turkey, increasing expenditures related to sales and promotion operations was mentioned (Koksal & Ozgul, 2007). Hamdani and Wirawan (2012) asserted that SMEs in Indonesia needed to develop innovative strategies based on new products and marketing, in addition to redefining prices and forming partnerships to face periods of recession.

Looking at the resilience of New Zealand SMEs, Vargo and Serville (2011) recognised the importance of leaders who make cautious decisions and have a positive attitude, organisational cultures that value planning and innovation as well as responsive teams to deal with a chaotic situation. In research by Alonso-Almeida and Bremser (2013) looking at small Madrid hotels, they concluded that maintaining the quality of services and strengthening brand and consumer loyalty were the best strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of crisis. Projects that cut costs, in contrast, hurt their performance. For North American SMEs, the CM strategies focused on worker remuneration, transparent communication with suppliers and consumers and creativity in order to increase operational performance and market value (Wilson, 2016). All of these results were studied in the context of two major crises that affected world tourism: September 11, 2001 and the 2008 crisis.

As soon as the new coronavirus appeared and began to spread, Chinese SMEs acted to overcome the crisis, focusing on five areas: operations, finance, HR, products, and networks (Alves et al., 2020). These authors also suggested increasing customer relationships and focusing on products, finances, dynamic learning, and hardware. A large work of Bartik et al. (2020), examining 5,800 North American SMEs, showed that many companies had reduced financial capital in the beginning of the pandemic, which demanded drastic spending cuts, taking on additional debts or declaring bankruptcy. These are plausible strategies, especially for those companies that will probably not get financial assistance in a short time. In this sense, Alves et al. (2020) advised improving resilience strategies instead of waiting for government support.

Even so, Bartik et al. (2020) insisted on stakeholder support, such as government agencies, in consolidating economic and public health measures that mitigate the effects of the crisis. As an addendum, the study emphasised that internal procedures can generate greater competitiveness (Miranda, 2017) as well as relationships with customers, suppliers and partners (Wright et al., 2015). Among stakeholders, support institutions (SIs) — government organisations, business associations, funding agencies, universities etc. — provide technical-financial support, specialised services and they act as a repository of knowledge, which can improve business competitiveness (Hoffmann & Campos, 2013).

In the Portuguese pandemic context, small companies have used their dynamic capabilities related to entrepreneurship, innovation, accumulation of knowledge, and partnerships to develop new products (Dias et al., 2020). In five other European countries, an investigation with family businesses, including SMEs, identified managerial concerns about liquidity, reduced costs, and workload as well as government support. Specific adjustments to COVID-19 included the adoption of social distance, hygiene measures and communication with employees, aiming to overcome fears related to the disease (Kraus et al., 2020).

In the food and beverage (F&B) sector in several countries, Dube et al. (2020) observed some coping strategies: adopting personalised measures so that businesses can return under the new normal; taking care of customers and employees; developing and/or adopting health protocols; aiming to obtain certain certifications; making business adjustments such as resizing businesses; networking and collaborating; and accessing financial stimulus packages. Kim et al. (2020) emphasised that some corporate characteristics, such as brand reliability, protect businesses in the F&B sector, indicating such strategies as advertising aimed at clarifying sanitary conditions, remodelling packaging, and offering special menus.

In Brazil, Tito and Araújo's (2019) bibliometrics confirmed a small number of publications on the theme of tourist SMEs. Hoffmann, Vieira and Reyes Jr.'s (2015) and Silva et al.'s (2018) investigations were not carried out, specifically, with hotel SMEs, but also contemplated smaller companies in the sample. Both identified interorganisational relationships as a differential strategy to face crises, and in Silva et al.'s (2018) study, the findings suggested the following strategies: improving products, promoting on virtual channels, negotiating with suppliers and customers, reducing costs, developing trainings, and offering financial rewards.

Regarding the relationships cited above – translated as cooperation networks – Bouças da Silva, Hoffmann and Costa (2020) suggested their use in strengthening business competitiveness. Networking provides greater possibilities for raising and sharing complementary resources from partners (Costa & Albuquerque, 2013) – such as knowledge and information – reducing uncertainties, obtaining economies of scale and acquiring joint financing (Hoffmann et al., 2015). These partnerships can be motivated by the desire to achieve common goals (Balestrin & Verschoore, 2014), such as the need to solve costly problems, which, in isolation, the entrepreneurs would not be able to settle by themselves (Dyer & Singh, 1998). It should also be noted that these alliances, which can be initiated through the intermediation of SIs (Bouças da Silva et al., 2020), can accelerate the adaptive response to externalities (Costa et al., 2008), such as sanitary and economic crises.

Examining companies of various sizes, Wenzel et al.'s (2020) bibliometrics mapped out the following typical crisis strategies: reducing costs, keeping operations on track, developing strategic innovation and/or ending operations. Kraus et al. (2020) argued that crises offer opportunities for adjustment and available time for training and creating operational safeguards. For tourist cities, Wang and Lopez (2020) suggested that official promotional strategies, in times of pandemic, can highlight security in the destinations in order to strengthen their image. This position is validated by Golets et al. (2020), who verified that sense of security, absence of risk, and sanitation controls are the main conditions for consumers to travel again. In general, companies that adequately modify their strategies can maintain or improve their performance during crises (Koksal & Ozgul, 2007).

3 METHODOLOGY

This qualitative, transversal, descriptive, and exploratory investigation (Flick, 2009) follows the recommendations of Andirin et al. (2017) about the need for qualitative studies on crisis and of Kraus et al. (2020) who understand the present pandemic as an unprecedented crisis that demands exploratory approaches to better understand it.

São Luís do Maranhão was the chosen destination for this study. It is an important Brazilian destination (Santos & Flores, 2017) and is included in category A, designating it as one of the best performing cities in the national tourism economy (MTur, 2019). The capital of Maranhão is one of the spots of arrival and/or departure of travellers in the Route of Emotions (Rota das Emoções), especially Lençóis Maranhenses National Park and its anchor locations, Santo Amaro and Barreirinhas (Bouças da Silva et al., 2020).

For data collection, a semi-structured script was used, containing four categories – crisis impacts, crisis planning, crisis management and post-crisis management – whose creation was based on Glaesser (2006), Hoffmann et al. (2015), Silva et al. (2018), Bartik et al. (2020), and Kraus et al. (2020) (Table 1).

Table 1 - Research categories and subcategories

Category	Subcategories	References
Crisis impacts	Positive and negative impacts	Glaesser (2006)
Crisis planning	Preventive strategies	Kraus et al. (2020)
Implementation of crisis management	Coping strategies – employees and customers	Kraus et al. (2020)
	Coping strategies – suppliers and competitors	Silva et al. (2018)
	Coping strategies – support institutions	Bartik et al. (2020)
Post-crisis management	Post-pandemic strategies	Hoffmann et al. (2015) Kraus et al. (2020)

Source: The authors based on the theoretical framework.

The unit of analysis refers to the SMEs related to tourism, that is, companies with up to 19 employees (SEBRAE, 2014). We are aware that the number of employees is the most common indicator to differentiate SMEs from larger enterprises (Inan & Bititci, 2015). For sample determination, the criteria of adherence and theoretical saturation were used, following Falquetto and Farias' (2016) guidelines for data systematisation and treatment. According to them, the specific literature has identified saturation in the 12th interview and, in this study, two additional interviews were carried out to confirm the saturation point. Thus, we arrived at 14 SMEs from a total of 2,993 companies (SEBRAE, 2020) belonging to various segments of the tourism sector (Table 2). The number of SMEs interviewed fits the analyses, since the ideal qualitative sample is the one that reflects, in intensity and quantity, the different dimensions of the studied phenomenon (Minayo, 2017).

Table 2 - Sample characterisation

Company	Segment	Number of employees	Time of existence (years)	Respondent Position	Education
A	Exchange programs agency	15	21	Owner	Specialisation in business administration
B	Tourism agency	9	5	Owner	Graduate in tourism
C	Inbound/outbound agency	7	40	Manager	Graduate in tourism
D	Car rental / inbound agency	15	17	Owner	Graduate in tourism
E	Lodging (hostel)	3	4	Manager	Graduate in tourism
F	Lodging (budget hotel)	16	9	Manager	Specialisation in management and consulting
G	Food & beverage (contemporary food)	10	15	Owner	Graduate in law
H	Food & beverage (regional food)	19	1	Manager	MBA in marketing/sales
I	Food & beverage (Japanese food)	14	2	Owner	Graduate in tourism
J	Consulting and advisory	1	5	Owner	Specialisation in marketing/human resources management
K	Event producer	15	30	Owner	Specialisation in marketing
L	Events and ceremonies	2	15	Owner	Graduate in tourism
M	Events organisation	2	19	Owner	Graduate in tourism
N	Ceremonies	1	5	Owner	MBA in business management

Source: Research data.

The in-depth interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees (Veal, 2011), between 14 and 28 May 2020, through Google Meet, Skype, WhatsApp, and Zoom, following the preferences of the investigated entrepreneurs. The recordings, averaging 35 minutes each (494 minutes in total), were transcribed and resulted in a corpus of 37,046 words distributed in 115 pages.

The transcribed data were analysed according to Bardin's (2016) content analysis technique, of the a priori categorical type. This analytical procedure is recommended for research in the tourism field (Sousa & Tomazzoni, 2017), and it is guided by a mixed grid of categories, which can generate new possibilities in the act of analysis (Vergara, 2015). Thus, after reading the text, it was grouped by meaning and inserted in the predefined categories and subcategories (Table 1).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First of all, we aimed to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the SMEs (Table 3). Some negative consequences of the crisis are common to any economic sector, due to the need for social distancing as the most important protective measure in the absence of treatments and of a vaccine for the new coronavirus (Hall et al., 2020).

Table 3 - Crisis impacts

Subcategories	Variables	Testimonials	Who?
Negative impacts	Cancellation of the contracted services	In January, people started cancelling cruises and international trips [...] 60% of the packages were cancelled. Until July, our cancellations will be 100% because Lençóis Maranhenses [National Park] is closed. We can't sell anything that we don't know when it will open (Company C).	A, B, C, D, E, F, J, L, N
	Interruption and/or reduction in sales	Inbound tourism went to nothing, zero [...] in vehicle rentals [...] I had a reduction in the range of 35% to 40% [...] I am experiencing a reduction, but not a complete stoppage (Company D).	A, B, C, D, F, K, M, N
	Financial difficulties	14 customers are not paying their instalments. 14 postponed events [...] we won't have any money until September. The money we had, we have already spent [...] I can't afford rent, garage, property tax (Company L).	F, G, J, L
	Temporary suspension of activities	Events mean agglomeration [...] there is no possibility to organise events if there is no treatment or a vaccine (Company N).	E, M, N
	Company bankruptcies	In general terms, the pandemic is causing a lot of damage for events enterprises. Several companies are closing [...] declaring bankruptcy (Company N).	F, K, N
Positive impacts	Improvement in the relationships with external stakeholders	Our ties were strengthened [...] Some suppliers got together, helping us to overcome this moment [...] with competitors, we had a rapprochement for our own survival (Company A).	A, E, H, I, J, L, M, N
	Rethinking the business model	The positive impacts are reflection, learning and the challenge of finding solutions and mechanisms to adapt to the new reality [...] we will never have such a remarkable opportunity again to rethink our businesses (Company K).	A, F, I, J, K, L
	Professional qualification opportunities	[...] this is a moment of great learning [...] we've never seen tourism so much in discussion [...] there are lives about tourist products, wonderful classes (Company D).	B, D, J, N
	Benchmarking	[...] We do exchange [information about good practices] [...] companies are looking for what we are doing well. They take it as a good practice, and they copy it (Company H).	C, H
	Revenue improvements	Incredibly, our highest selling month was during the lockdown [...] we had an average increase of 35% to 40% (compared to) [...] our biggest selling month [...] due to delivery services (Company I).	H, I
	Legal changes that benefit business	The understanding about the joint liability that we've been suffering for ages with this provisional measure 948 [...] I think this is a gain that we won't lose.	D

Source: Research data.

Considering the specificities of the sector, the almost complete stoppage of tourism operations (Chinazzi et al., 2020), in businesses such as transportation, lodging, and travel, resulted in the 'cancellation of the contracted services' and in the 'interruption and/or reduction in sales'. For events and ceremonies enterprises, the pandemic meant the 'temporary suspension of activities'; in the SMEs context (Castor, 2009), diseases have the power to generate anomalies in the performance of businesses (Kurschus et al., 2015), leading to their imminent collapse (Dube et al., 2020).

In this sense, the highlighted negative impacts on SMEs refers to 'financial difficulties', an expected consequence in crises (Asgary et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020), but the impacts are deepened by the SMEs' limited capital and access to bank credit (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014). Although the entrepreneurs did not express the intention and/or need to close their businesses, the longer this crisis lasts, the greater the 'bankruptcy' risk (Bartik et al., 2020), according to several of the accounts. Company D mentioned that before the pandemic, it worked in two different segments and, therefore, could mitigate its initial difficulties. In this case, diversification can be a strategy that minimises the impacts of the crisis.

As regards positive impacts, there was an ‘improvement in the relationships with external stakeholders’, an action highlighted by Bartik et al. (2020) as essential to reduce the effects of the pandemic. In addition, ‘benchmarking’ was eased by the rapprochement with other organisations (Wright et al., 2015). These two practices reinforce that business competitiveness mean the companies’ capacity to overcome internal and external obstacles (Miranda, 2017).

An important finding refers to the ‘legal changes that benefit business’, arising from PM¹ N°. 948/2020, which released companies from reimbursing consumers for a certain period of time in the case of cancellations of services, reservations and events in the tourism and culture sectors due to the pandemic (Brasil, 2020). This provisional measure reduces the pressure from suppliers and customers on SMEs (Castor, 2009) and consolidates the relevance of governmental support in crisis contexts (Bartik et al., 2020; Dias et al., 2020). Company C supported this claim: ‘to adapt, we used all the provisional measures that the government issued. We grabbed PM 948 [...] and we could take a deep breath’.

‘Rethinking the business model’ and ‘professional qualification opportunities’ obtained a higher number of citations, which show that crises should be used for business adjustments (Dube et al., 2020) and to increase in training and development (Kraus et al., 2020). Two F&B companies claimed ‘revenue improvements’ due to the intensification of delivery services, a different result from what had been found in the other segments investigated. This is another example showing that the consequences of COVID-19 have been felt by tourist organisations unevenly in space and time (Hall et al., 2020).

Regarding crisis planning, Company A was the only one with a ‘preventive strategy’ – financial management – to face possible contingencies, as we noted below: ‘[...] I had a test of this situation. 9/11 gave some weapons to learn about now [...] I know what it is like not to have customers for five months. I learned to always be prepared to deal with scarcity, with limited resources’. According to this company, CM is a process of continuous improvement; it considers past lessons in the preparation of dealing with future problems (Alves et al., 2020). Accumulated knowledge was also used by Portuguese SMEs to react to the pandemic (Dias et al., 2020). Furthermore, 13 of the companies surveyed did not establish crisis prevention plans, which suggests that this is a common situation not only for event firms (Andirin et al., 2017) but also for the tourism sector as a whole (Chien & Law, 2003). Company F’s statement highlights this understanding: ‘we made our crisis plan in order to be able to anticipate what would come in the next months [...] a week before, in fact, this whole process starts’.

Regarding the implementation of CM, the companies’ coping strategies for dealing with the pandemic, based on internal changes, will be presented, as their decisions involve ‘employees and customers’ (Table 4), in addition to other stakeholders, such as ‘suppliers and competitors’ (Table 5) and ‘support institutions’ (Table 6).

Table 4 - Crisis management: coping strategies – employees and customers

(continue)

Subcategory	Variables	Sub-variables	Testimonials	Who?
Coping strategies (Employees and consumers)	Marketing management	Relationship and negotiation with clients	We start maintaining a better relationship with our customers [...] we’ve created tools which motivate our customers not to cancel [...] I speak as much as possible with our customers (Company N). 40% of the tour packages we could reschedule for the next semester, or we kept open tickets or we gave a credit for one year (Company B).	A, B, C, D, H, I, L, N
		Promotion in virtual and/or traditional channels	Now we have our app [...] [we do] radio promotions [...] it’s working (Company I). We are very active on our social network: Instagram [...] we invested a little bit more on social networks. I created a YouTube channel, a playlist on Spotify for my clients [...] my own hashtag (Company L).	E, F, G, I, L, N
		Provision of services to new consumers	We are hosting health professionals [...] who live with many people at the same place [...] when they start having symptoms [...] they quarantine at the hotel [...] professionals who live in the countryside (Company F).	C, D, F

¹ Provisional measure.

Table 4 - Crisis management: coping strategies – employees and customers				(conclusion)
Subcategory	Variables	Sub-variables	Testimonials	Who?
Financial management		Promotional packages sales	We are offering promotional rates for health professionals [...] a monthly fee and a daily rate for those who need to stay for a short period of time [at the hotel] (Company F).	B, F
		Product and service innovation	The main issue is offering new products [...] at Easter, we create sushi eggs [...] on holiday dates, we make something new and different.	I
		Cost management	We reduced our operating cost to ¼ [...] we suspended labour contracts (Company F). We removed products from our menu [...] and we reduced 60% to 70% of our costs (Company I). We had to close the office because we couldn't afford the rent [...] we cut costs, minimising our loss (Company M). Banco do Nordeste is a current partner [...] helping us to obtain financing with a very low interest rate and a 12-month grace period (Company H).	A, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N
		Third-party capital	We started researching sanitation protocols adopted in the Brazilian hospitality industry [...] We identified many processes that we could adopt [...] today, we have a good practices manual for hygiene and cleaning [...] but also for customer service (Company F).	C, D, H
		Home office and online customer service	Everybody is working from home [...] our communication with customers was already growing virtually, but now it is becoming even more virtual [...] before the pandemic, 95% of our contact was face to face (Company A).	A, L, N
Operational management		Strengthening delivery/take away	This crisis showed us that we have to promote our services in various sales channels [...] delivery used to be complementary sales. The drive-thru, practically, did not exist, nor did take away [...] delivery is now a non-return path (Company H).	H, I
		Motivational support	We've done some enchantment actions with our teams [...] in order to minimise the psychological impact, which is very heavy (Company F).	D, F, J
		Positions and salaries	We gave our team unpaid vacations. I paid overtime [...] and reduced the workday (Company A).	A, I
Human resources management		Technical support to outsourced workers	We guided our outsourced employees to seek government incentives [...] because most of them are self-employed (Company J).	I, J

Source: Research data.

Market penetration, found in the classic literature on strategy (Ansoff, 1957), was verified as the 'provision of services to new consumers' carried out by tourism agencies and lodging firms. Furthermore, some SMEs sought 'promotional packages sales', considering the financial difficulties of the consumers, which pressure decision makers (Giannacourou et al., 2015) to make adjustments in the fares offered (Hamdani & Wirawan, 2012). 'Product and service innovation' had fewer citations, but it is a CM strategy already identified in past (Hamdani & Wirawan, 2012; Vargo & Serville, 2011) and present (Dias et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020) studies on crises.

Financial management was an indispensable adjustment to SMEs, mainly due to their financial limitations (Bourletidis & Triantafyllopoulos, 2014) to deal with unpredictability (Bourletidis, 2013; Giannacourou et al., 2015). In this sense, interviewees decided to carry out 'cost management' by significantly reducing the payment of workers, rent, and production inputs in order to avoid their immediate bankruptcy (Bartik et al., 2020). Some businesses alternatively sought 'third-party capital' in order to increase their chances of survival (Dube et al., 2020). Financial adaptation measures have been adopted extensively around the world as a strategy to safeguard SMEs against the advancement of the new coronavirus (Alves et al., 2020; Bartik et al., 2020; Dube et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020).

Regarding operational management, the 'adoption of sanitation protocols' was identified in enterprises with active operations, though in a reduced way, in the segments of accommodation, transportation and F&B. These measures mirror the social distancing and sanitary measures observed around the world (Kraus et al., 2020). It is worth mentioning the recommendation to develop certifications (Dube et al., 2020), like the Clean

& Safe badge, which aims to inform travellers about the fulfilment of requirements for the prevention and control of COVID-19 in Portuguese tourist companies (CTP, 2020).

SMEs that restricted their activities – events, ceremonial and outbound travel agencies – moved from face-to-face interaction in their physical stores to ‘home office and online customer service’, motivated by the concern to keep in touch with their customers. In fact, virtual interaction is a past guideline to strengthen the competitiveness of outbound agencies (Sarquis et al., 2015). The third change for F&B companies refers to ‘strengthening delivery/take away’ through the adoption of new technologies and practices (OECD, 2020) and the exploration of niche markets (Bourletidis, 2013) – that is, a substantial change in F&B operations to react to the crisis (Alves et al., 2020).

The highlighted human resource (HR) practice was ‘motivational support’ to deal with the psychological impacts caused by COVID-19. This communication with employees helps to reduce the fears associated with the disease (Kraus et al., 2020). The review of aspects related to ‘positions and salaries’ – overtime and bonuses – has served to motivate and keep employees productive, even in adverse situations (Wilson, 2016). The last initiative for HR management identified was ‘technical support to outsourced workers’, which entails providing information about governmental labour measures, once it was necessary to take care of the company's staff (Dube et al., 2020). The sum of measures adopted shows that crises can cause incremental and radical changes to SMEs (Iancu & Ciubotaru, 2013).

The focus of crisis management directed at another group of stakeholders – suppliers and competitors (Table 5) – was ‘negotiating with suppliers’ (Silva et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2015); this was expressed in requests to maintain the prices of tariffs, rescheduling services, providing discounts, extending payment deadlines and implementing payment instalments. Yet these dialogues must take place with maximum transparency (Wilson, 2016) in order to reduce the vulnerability of SMEs due to the negative pressure from these actors (Castor, 2009).

Table 5 - Crisis management: coping strategies – suppliers and competitors

Subcategory	Variables	Testimonials	Who?
Coping strategies (Suppliers and competitors)	Negotiating with suppliers	We talked about maintaining the tariff for the first half of 2021, due to the rescheduling of the packages [...] we are managing to negotiate prices, the rescheduling. In the past, this action would have been difficult to implement (Company C).	A, B, C, D, F, G, I, J, K, L, M
		We talked to all our suppliers [...] we asked for more time to fulfil our payments [...] pay in instalments [...] our requests were taken into consideration (Company G).	
	Joint decisions about the future of businesses	With suppliers, mainly from the Route of Emotions [Rota das Emoções], everybody is looking for working together in this resumption. With regard to competitors [...] it's been a long time since we sought to know the strategies they are drawing up (Company E).	C, E, F, J, M, N
		Even the competitors got closer. We began to look for solutions for the tourism sector and not only for our individual business [...] some groups were created to generate ideas to face the pandemic (Company J).	
	Technical support to suppliers and competitors	We have a lot of online training with new customers [suppliers] who worked in international outbound tourism [...] with competitors, we are working together on training with tour operators (Company C).	A, C, D, H, J, L
I turned my Instagram into a content channel for entrepreneurs. I give ideas, tips and I talk about good practices. I shared an error management spreadsheet [...] many entrepreneurs have copied it (Company H).			
Exchange of resources	We have two close competitors who help us, when we need something [inputs] [...] We ask them and they lend to us. This also happens the other way around (Company I).	I, N	
Alliances to exert pressure on the government	With competitors, demanding some actions from the secretariat [of municipal and state tourism] to help our sector was what really brought us together [...] because they are responsible for the publicity campaigns.	C	

Source: Research data.

The other contingency strategies act as cooperation practices between companies, as recommended in previous crises in the hospitality sector (Hoffmann et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2018), which have contributed to how these companies have reacted to COVID-19. ‘Joint decisions about the future of businesses’ and ‘technical support to suppliers and competitors’ can be translated as informal cooperation (Bouças da Silva et al., 2020) – vertical (companies-suppliers) and horizontal (companies-competitors) – and these partnerships enable sharing commercial information and knowledge (Hoffmann et al., 2015), which can guide current and future strategies.

As mentioned by Company I, the ‘exchange of resources’ (Costa & Albuquerque, 2013), in this case inputs, illustrates the need for alliances, as SMEs suffer from a lack of fundamental resources in their operations (Costa et al., 2008). ‘Alliances to exert pressure on the government’ generated collective benefits and confirmed that cooperation can help to solve common problems (Balestrin & Verschoore, 2014) in which entrepreneurs, by themselves, would hardly be able to settle (Dyer & Singh, 1998).

The action of SIs is also relevant (Table 6). Support institutions can offer ‘technical and financial support’ (Hoffmann & Campos, 2013), mainly institutions with scope of helping SMEs – such as SEBRAE – by providing management guidelines in addition to the support of public banks, such as Caixa Econômica and Banco do Nordeste. This initiative highlights the role of government institutions, addressed by Kraus et al. (2020), in protecting SMEs in times of crisis. ‘Seeking subsidies from the federal government’ was also mentioned, considering its importance in reducing managerial concerns regarding finances and labour issues (Kraus et al., 2020). ABAV, ABIH, ABRAPE, Associação Comercial, BELTA, among others, were the mentioned SIs. This result highlights the role of business associations in reaching the collective interests that ensure the competitiveness of small companies (Hoffmann & Campos, 2013). In the investigated context, SIs exerted collective pressure on the government, resulting in benefits to the sector, including segments that do not have representative associations at the national level.

Table 6 - Crisis management: coping strategies – support institutions

Subcategory	Variables	Testimonials	Who?
Coping strategies (Support institutions)	Technical and financial support	ABAV and SEBRAE are giving us technical support [...] on how to define employee payments. If it's better to resign or seek government subsidies [...] how it's going to be the resumption of businesses [...] necessary trainings (Company C). SEBRAE offered [...] support so the entrepreneur did not have to mortgage something [...] [It] made his financial fund available so the bank could give credit (Company J).	C, D, F, G, H, J
	Seeking subsidies from the federal government	ABAV together with several tourism associations forced the federal government [...] to elaborate upon this provisional measure. In the beginning, it was only for airlines, but they also got it [credit] for travel agencies, lodging and event companies [...] Financial credit for the various tourist enterprises (Company C).	A, C, D, J, K
	Initiating joint actions	With the role intermediation of ABAV and BELTA, we got close to the other associates, so we could elaborate publicity campaigns for the survival of our sector.	A
	Slow access to financial subsidies	We are having a hard time accessing the credits promised by the federal government [...] in order to pay costs, employees, working capital [...] companies – in any economic sector – are not getting access to the credit promised by the government (Company A).	A, B, G, I, L, M, N

Source: Research data.

The SIs contributed ‘initiating joint actions’ (Bouças da Silva et al., 2020) among SMEs, such as promoting their business. Yet the complaint about the ‘slow access to financial subsidies’ promised by the federal government to ensure their economic viability and payment to their workers (Portal Panrotas, 2020) must be emphasised. One manager claimed that ‘as this delay occurred [...] we had to fire people because of force majeure’ (Company G). This occurrence proves the role of government agencies in technical and financial support in crisis situations (Bartik et al., 2020; OECD, 2020), although some authors addressed the concomitant improvement of other resilience strategies (Alves et al., 2020).

With regard to post-crisis management (Table 7), managers aim to improve operational management in terms of 'developing, adopting and communicating sanitation protocols', considering the fear that must permeate travellers' imagination nowadays (Wang & Lopez, 2020). We maintain that the most competitive destinations and businesses in the post-pandemic will be those who pay more attention to customers and service providers (Dube et al., 2020). Therefore, official promotional efforts in tourist cities should reinforce these messages in order to ensure an image of a safe place to visit (Wang & Lopez, 2020). This is, in fact, one of the conditions for Brazilian tourists travelling again (Golets et al., 2020). In addition, the recommended social distance leads to 'working from home more often' and, consequently, 'rethinking the need for physical stores', given the increase in operating costs. Baum (2020) believes that the need to review operating costs results in increased prices and, therefore, reduced travel for tourism purposes.

Table 7 - Post-crisis management: post-pandemic strategies

Subcategory	Variables	Sub-variables	Testimonials	Who?
Post-pandemic strategies	Operational management	Developing, adopting and communicating sanitation protocols	I am working hard on the elaboration of this sanitation protocol (Company E).	B, C, D, E, F, G, I, N
			Many of the safety and hygiene protocols we are adopting now, we'll keep working with them from now on (Company F).	
	Marketing management	Working from home more often	[...] we must show tourists that the destination is acting to prevent the virus from spreading (Company B).	C
			We think that employees will work more from home [...] it is not possible to attend customers face-to-face.	
	Cost management	Expand the participation in virtual channels	We'll keep working hard on social networks [...] Focusing on our application (Company G).	A, G, H, L
			[...] we'll work on new products, mainly on experience products [...] providing private services (Company C).	
	Intensifying interorganisational relationships	Rethinking the need for physical stores	We must rethink the need for physical space [...] Something smaller, more functional (Company A).	A, H, I
			-	
Human resources management	Flexibility of employment relationships	We will increasingly work with service contracts in salesforce [...] Commission percentage agreements.	C	

Source: Research data.

In order to improve marketing management, SMEs aimed to 'expand their participation in virtual channels', such as social networks and the development of their own applications, looking for the diversification of their communication and sales tools (Sarquis et al., 2015). Only one respondent said he had developed an app. The 'innovation of products and services' was essential, mainly in the event and ceremonies sectors, considering that their activities involve agglomerations, which urges the adaptation of these companies (Gregory et al., 2002).

From another point of view, the current and successful experience of jointly finding solutions to the crisis probably motivated managers to 'intensify interorganisational relationships' with suppliers, competitors and SIs, as previously stated by Balestrin and Verschoore (2014). In addition, the managers highlighted the 'flexibility of employment relationships' through commissioning instead of hiring. Temporary workers can distinguish success from failure in these enterprises (Miranda, 2017). The fear of new moments of crisis, besides the actual experience, drives these decisions.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to identify the strategies developed by tourism SMEs in São Luís do Maranhão to face the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, we verified the pandemic's impact on businesses. Following the instructions of Tito and Araújo (2019), companies from various segments were interviewed – lodging, travel agencies, transportation, F&B, consulting, events and ceremonies – regarding the following themes: (i) impacts of the crisis; and (ii) crisis management (crisis planning, implementation of crisis management and post-crisis management).

In relation to category (i), which follows the research suggestion of Kim et al. (2020), the negative impacts included 'cancellation of contracted services' and the 'interruption and/or reduction in sales', especially for such segments as transportation, lodging, and travel agencies. For event and ceremonies firms, the pandemic meant the 'temporary suspension of activities', once they require agglomerations. All segments suffered from 'financial difficulties', mainly for being SMEs, and some interviewees confirmed the 'bankruptcy of companies'. The positive impacts included 'improvement in relationships with external stakeholders', which facilitates 'benchmarking'. Managers also mentioned the 'legal changes that benefit business', in addition to 'rethinking the business model' and 'professional qualification opportunities'. For some F&B companies, there were 'revenue improvements' coming from the exploitation of delivery services, motivated by the closing of physical stores. Thus, SMEs were impacted by the crisis but with different degrees of exposure between the most different segments.

Category (ii) corroborates the research agenda of Kraus et al. (2020) and Silva et al. (2018) by highlighting the strategies at each moment of the CM. Regarding planning, it was noted that companies tend to show responsive attitudes instead of developing contingency plans. Only one of the entrepreneurs – Company A – mentioned having a 'preventive strategy' of financial management, motivated by its past experience of facing the 2001 crisis in the airline sector. This shows that CM is a continuous process of learning and organisational adjustment. In general, the COVID-19 crisis was unexpected, required a fast decision make and, consequently, demanded a reactive managerial attitude to face the threatening circumstances.

For implementing crisis management, the strategies were subdivided by group of stakeholders. As for consumers and employees, marketing directed to 'relationships and negotiation with customers' was identified by some SMEs, mainly event and ceremonies companies, because the fear of cancellations and the uncertainties of the ending of COVID-19 crisis enlarged concerns about the sharp drop in businesses performance.

The 'promotion on virtual and/or traditional channels' is translated through social networks, applications and radio broadcasts. Despite the focus on digital marketing, traditional media remains active in the business world. Commercial activities are aimed at the 'provision of services to new consumers', especially travel agencies and lodging companies and at 'promotional packages sales', a common practice to deal with an economic recession. 'Product and service innovation' appeared less frequently and illustrates a current gap.

Regarding financial management, there was 'cost management' related to labour, rent, and production inputs as well as access to 'third-party capital'. These typical measures are adopted by SMEs in critical periods, considering the financial constraints that quickly suffocate them and jeopardise their existence. The operational management required the 'adoption of sanitation protocols' for companies who kept working, mainly in lodging, transportation, and F&B. For those who faced more restrictive issues – events, ceremonies, and outbound travel agencies – the entrepreneurs started 'home office and online customer services'. Exclusive to those operating in the F&B sector, these protocols were fundamental to 'strengthen delivery/take away'. HR management practices involved 'motivational support', 'positions and salaries', and 'technical support to outsourced workers' in order to reassure employees.

For other stakeholders, the main strategies were 'negotiating with suppliers' through maintaining tariffs, rescheduling services, offering discounts, extending payment deadlines, and implementing payment instalments. Other practices included informal cooperation between companies, which amplify their capacity to respond to crises, such as 'joint decisions about the future of businesses', 'technical support to suppliers and competitors', and the 'exchange of resources'. In addition, 'alliances to exert pressure on the government' were highlighted, which shows that networking can achieve common goals. The strategies relying on SIs, mainly for public and private institutions, served as 'technical and financial support' to aid businesses.

An important finding referred to the proactivity of SIs, especially business associations, ‘seeking subsidies from the federal government’, which collectively benefited the varied segments of the tourism sector. Yet SIs reinforced their potential to raise cooperation networks in tourist territories. It is worth mentioning the ‘slow access to financial subsidies’, promised by the federal government, which jeopardises the future of Brazilian SMEs.

Regarding post-crisis management, entrepreneurs mentioned their desire to ‘work from home more often’ and ‘rethink the need for physical stores’; after all, COVID-19 has demanded social distancing and isolation. Some companies have already leased their physical space as a strategy to lower costs. In this context, there is a need to ‘expand their participation in virtual channels’, since consumers are increasingly interested and influenced by user-generated content. Furthermore, the search for ‘product and service innovation’ and the ‘flexible employment relationships’ – due to recent changes in the Brazilian legal framework – were referred.

As the most cited strategy, there was a concern to ‘develop, adopt and communicate sanitation protocols’ in order to attract new consumers and stimulate purchasing. Overcoming the fear of travelling depends on the destination as a whole – instead of part of the tourism companies – which must attend to the official health agencies requirements needed for the new normal.

These conclusions support some managerial strategies to face future crises: networking with other companies to raise common strategies and to access competitive resources; reducing costs without losing quality; innovating continuously and attending different consumers and niches; focusing on CM process with a clearer understanding of costs and revenues; investing in virtual tools that promote greater interactivity and amplify sales channels; developing, adopting, and communicating sanitation protocols; improving human resource management practices that motivate and value employees; seeking technical and financial support from SIs; and developing certifications attesting to the security in the companies.

Some limitations of this paper include the locus, segments, and economic sectors surveyed as well as the focus of the discussion. Furthermore, it was not possible to examine the effectiveness of the strategies adopted. As a research agenda, we suggest to investigate other economic sectors or different segments of tourism; to extend the research to other locations in Brazil and the world; to develop quantitative approaches considering the categories and variables of this study and/or using other qualitative techniques of data collection and analysis; and to conduct longitudinal studies on crisis impacts and CM.

It is also worth noting that future analyses on this topic will take place in the post-pandemic context of COVID-19, which will demand facing new challenges to destinations and organisations in an uncertain horizon; after all, ‘COVID-19 means the future of tourism is a blank piece of paper’ (Yeoman, 2020, p. 119).

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