

CRISIS MANAGEMENT RESPONSE STRATEGIES OF SMALL-SCALE SPORT EVENT ORGANIZATIONS TO THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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This study explores the strategies utilized by small-scale sport event organizations to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, it helps inform future crisis management preparedness in small-scale sport event organizations. Using semistructured interviews, the crisis management experiences of eight participants from six small-scale UK-based sport event organizations were scrutinized. The interviews focused on a holistic understanding of their pre-, during, and postpandemic experiences. Three key themes emerged from the data. They were (i) the diversification of revenue streams and reduction of costs; (ii) ensuring a customer centric approach; and (iii) the importance of fostering entrepreneurial and innovative characteristics. The study proposes a framework of effective crisis response strategies to help inform small-scale sport event organizations to better plan, prepare, and prevent future crises. Through the theoretical lens of resilience studies, it advances knowledge on the COVID-19 experiences of small-scale organizations in the events industry.

Key words: Crisis management; Response strategies; Small-scale organizations; Sport event organizations; COVID-19

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the sports events industry in ways never seen before (Ratten, 2020) with cancellations, postponements, and enforced limits upon attendees to adhere to governments restrictions (Parnell et al., 2022). While significant media and academic coverage focused on elite large-scale and mega-sports events, organizations at lower levels were significantly impacted (Shipway et al., 2021), with very few studies

assessing the impact on local and community often small-scale and mainly participant-based sports events (Boden & Shipway, 2023). The element of smallness subsequently exposes sport organizations to vulnerability, pressure, demand, and detrimental effects of the external environment, such as a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic (Eggers, 2020). In the wake of these challenges, out of necessity small-scale local sport events were forced to develop new strategies to remain competitive and reinvent how sport events could be organized (Manoli, 2020).

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The study of crises and disaster response is progressively becoming an increasingly significant research area in event studies (Shipway & Miles, 2020), as how organizations respond to crises proves just as important as the initial cause (Ziakas et al., 2021). Exploring response strategies utilized by sporting organizations to survive the COVID-19 crisis not only allows valuable insight into effective mitigation of potential organizational losses, but also provides an understanding of crisis management strategies, processes, and lessons learned within the industry (Clarkson et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020). The ability to learn from experiences and reevaluate current practices contributes to potential future preparedness to crises, highlighting potential effective practical implications for future sport events management (Parnell et al., 2022). Through reevaluation, the sports events industry can develop and refine strategies and processes that will facilitate event sustainability and resilience within an increasingly uncertain world (Ziakas et al., 2021). Additionally, as small organizations play a vital role in economic recovery, knowledge of how they overcome crises is essential to help others survive and prosper in crisis situations (Marconatto et al., 2022).

To combat these challenges, the main research aim of this study was to explore crisis management response strategies of small-scale sport event organizations to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to help better inform future crisis management preparedness. The findings explore how disruptive events, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, increased the resilience of event organizers while also spurring entrepreneurial behaviors and innovative practices within the events sector (Mosey et al., 2022). This study also advances theoretical knowledge in the domain of the sport event resilience of smaller scale, community-based events. This echoes the calls of Miles and Shipway (2020) to investigate this research gap, and to diversify resilience studies in the events space beyond high profile major and mega-sports events (Shipway, 2024).

Literature Review

Understanding Crises and Disasters

The term crisis can be defined as “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of

events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals” (Seeger et al., 1998, p. 233). Studies by Shipway et al. (2021) highlighted that not all crises are alike, emphasizing their uniqueness. They argued that despite uniqueness, they possess the universal characteristics of being highly uncertain in nature, unpredictable as to their impacts, restrictive and unmanageable through routine procedures, significantly threatening, and instigative of a sense of urgency.

Although related and often used interchangeably, the terms crisis and disaster differ, with Parker (1992) defining disaster as:

an unusual natural or man-made event, including an event caused by failure of technological systems, which temporarily overwhelms the response capacity of human communities, groups of individuals or natural environments and which causes massive damage, economic loss, disruption, injury and/or loss of life. (p. 6)

Miles and Shipway (2020) argued that the fundamental distinction between the two concepts is that crises emerge from self-inflicted problems where situations are poorly managed or organizations lack ability to adapt to change, whereas disasters confront organizations with catastrophe changes they have minimum control over. Ziakas et al. (2021) suggested most of the recent literature refers to the term crisis, while noting that the interrelated nature of the two concepts is drawn from the belief that disasters are a catalyst of crisis. For example, they indicate that disastrous situations can entail natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and epidemics that lead to long-term crises such as financial loss, negative publicity, and organizational failure.

Crisis Management as a Process

Fink (1986) determined the life cycle of crisis management as *Prodromal*: when warning signals emerge, *Acute*: the occurrence of triggering factors and crisis damage, *Chronic*: with permanent effects of the crisis continuing while recovery begins, and *Resolution*: when crisis is no longer a concern. While Fink’s (1986) model proves insightful, it establishes crises as a start–stop linear process ending in resolution. According to Veil (2011), despite

acknowledging warning signals emerge before crises, the model disregards the relationship and need to manage signals to prevent the onset of crisis.

In contrast, Mitroff (1994) viewed crisis management as a continuous process with the ability to intersect the crisis life cycle through the addition of prevention and learning stages, which resulted in five key phases: (i) *signal detection*, the identification of warning signals which can be acted upon to prevent crisis; (ii) *prevention*, the operation of reducing harm and potential risks; (iii) *damage limitation*, the process during the crisis where organization attempts to limit damage; (iv) *recovery*, the commencement of returning to normal operations; and (v) *learning*, where the focus is on reviewing the crisis management process. The introduction of prevention and learning phases proposed movement from a previous reactive paradigm to a proactive, strategic approach, advocated by Vašíčková (2019), who proposed that crisis management should endeavor to achieve more proactive management approaches to create measures to protect organizations from future crisis.

Coombs (2007) suggested that the underlying consistent themes for managing the process of crisis management are precrisis prevention and preparation, crisis response, and postcrisis revision as mechanisms to better prepare for future crises. Jacques (2007) also advocated a more holistic and relational approach, proposing that elements of crisis management should be viewed as continuous and integrated disciplines, not necessarily as stages to follow in sequence. This is a useful progression from Fink's (1986) original linear concept of crisis management to an approach that incorporates clusters of activities that may occur simultaneously. These clusters culminate in four dominant crisis management factors: crisis preparedness, crisis prevention, crisis incident management, and postcrisis management. Developing from Mitroff's (1994) learning stage, the postcrisis cluster of activities hold significant value as a critical component leading back to proactive preparation for, and management of, future crises (Jacques, 2007).

The Crisis of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the inter-related nature of disasters and crises. Initially, as

a natural virus, the phenomenon was situated as an external disaster, although transmission of the virus subject to human intervention rapidly developed the pandemic into a global multifaceted crisis (Ziakas et al., 2021), and as it emerged as an internal crisis it instigated global uncertainty about how to respond, with most countries and regions inadequately prepared, underestimating the risks and with limited crisis management plans in place (OECD, 2020; Shipway & Miles, 2020). Beyond the health crisis, the pandemic prompted the most severe economic crisis since World War Two, with worldwide supply chains interrupted, demand for services lower, and small organizations and entrepreneurs suffering disproportionately (OECD, 2020).

Consequently, small organizations faced immense pressure to survive and were challenged to effectively respond to the COVID-19 crisis through reconsideration of organizational strategies and development of crisis management plans (Gorjian-Khanzad & Gooyabadi, 2021). In the context of sport events, there remains limited literature on the response processes of small sport event enterprises during and after the outbreak of the pandemic (Jeon et al., 2023). Rosenthal et al. (2001) identified that future crisis management research should establish frameworks that acknowledge and propose effective strategies of opportunity management and threat aversion.

While the impact and recovery for major sports events is more widely documented (Shipway et al., 2021), the economic and social crises and challenges facing small sports organizations is likely to increase along with a growing dependence on public funding (Garcia-Garcia et al., 2020). The lack of preparedness for the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic within civil society let alone the sports events industry further highlighted that limited crisis management plans were implemented throughout the process (Milic & Bhaumik, 2021). Although early emerging literature provided commentaries regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the sports event industry (Miles & Shipway, 2020), there is limited evidence to draw upon to understand the responses implemented by sport event organizations. More recently, a review of literature in the domain of leisure studies reveals resilience, innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship as recurring themes in relation to sport in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shipway et al., 2023).

Pandemic Responses Viewed Through the Dual Lenses of Resilience and Innovation

Creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship are significant to overcome crises (González-Serrano et al., 2023; Jeon et al., 2023). Likewise, Amankwah-Amoah (2021) highlighted the crucial role innovation plays in responding to new demands of stakeholders imposed by crises. Mosey et al. (2022) proposed that sport and leisure organizations that implement innovative and entrepreneurial strategies, not only survive crises but can become more resilient and effective compared to their precrisis status. In the context of sports events, Dragin-Jensen et al. (2022) highlighted the importance of placing customer values at the forefront while also understanding the role of events in society, which allowed them to react positively to unexpected changes.

Mosey et al. (2022) also emphasized the importance of digital technology as an innovative strategy to ensure sports events were feasible, while also redefining event space to virtual settings and enhancing the experience of virtual events. The pandemic highlighted the need to harness innovations and engage with uncertain situations to provide adaptive innovations and opportunities to prosper in changing markets (González-Serrano et al., 2023). However, Ratten (2021) found that resilience was required to gain new entrepreneurial opportunities, while Shipway et al. (2021) highlighted that the global impact of COVID-19 identified the need for a wider understanding of resilience within sport events context.

Central to crisis management is resilience. Originating from the Latin term “resilio,” meaning to jump back, resilience is the capability of systems to prepare for, respond to, bounce back, and recover from high levels of disturbance (Chandler & Coaffee, 2017). Acting as a catalyst of change, resilience commonly shapes responsiveness and therefore is a key concept to draw upon when researching response strategies to the pandemic (Miles, 2016). Likewise, the pandemic highlighted opportunities for reducing risk and vulnerability through implementing resilient strategies (Shipway et al., 2021), especially if event organizers could foster and create positive attitudes towards flexibility and adaptability (Kirby et al., 2023). Resilience strategies refer to the processes that assist

organizations in adapting rapidly to uncertain, complex change while taking advantage of new opportunities (Sadeqi-Arani & Ghahfarokhi, 2022). Their findings highlight strategies used within sport organizations to mitigate effects of the pandemic, but they also suggested that future research should focus upon appropriate solutions and the development of frameworks of activities which could be used to overcome crises within the sports industry.

Boden and Shipway (2023) drew attention to the foundational study by Shipway and Miles (2020) on the initial impacts of the pandemic, which was first published online in *Event Management* in May 2020, only a few months after the initial COVID-19 outbreak. At that early stage, a diverse range of challenges facing event organizers was identified. Their international sports events (ISEs) resilience continuum, informed by scholars publishing in the domain of resilience studies, provided a theoretical framework that incorporated guidelines on how event organizations could better understand the concept of resilience. It was well documented that the pandemic not only disrupted the global economy and life, but had a significant impact upon the sports events industry, especially small-scale sports events (Jeon et al., 2023). Shipway and Miles (2020) proposed that the ability to plan, prepare, and prevent crises at sports events varies depending on both spatial and temporal factors including the size, scale, global reach, frequency, and complexity. The continuum explored variations in both risk and resilience levels over time. While much attention was on large-scale and mega-sports events, Shipway et al. (2021) also detailed the importance of resilience for smaller scale sports events.

Through the theoretical lens of resilience, Miles and Shipway (2020, p. 541) highlighted eight key thematic areas that merited further investigation and identified a multidisciplinary research framework for advancing knowledge on managing crises in both sport and event management studies. They also proposed the theoretical concept of *sport and event venue resilience*, which was centered around their key thematic resilience areas. This study explores the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on small-scale sports events, through the theoretical lens of resilience, positioned at the intersection of crisis and disaster management and the sport and events industries (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Shipway

& Miles, 2020). In the context of sports events, the practical and theoretical focus is on the tripartite aspects of (i) planning, (ii) preparedness, and (iii) prevention (Boden & Shipway, 2023).

This study addresses the paucity of studies regarding crisis management within small-scale sport events, notably in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jeon et al., 2023). As highlighted above, previous crisis management literature in the context of sport events (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Shipway & Miles, 2020) has placed emphasis upon ensuring crises are prepared for, prevented, and responded to proactively. However, the existing literature lacks specific strategies to adopt throughout the crisis management process, and this study seeks to build upon the limited small-scale sport event crisis management literature by exploring response strategies and facilitating future crisis preparedness within the sport events industry.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

A qualitative research approach was most appropriate for this exploration of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the perspectives of small-scale sport event organizers. The researchers were interested in obtaining a deeper insight into participant perspectives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and how the participants working for sport event organizations interpret the meanings they assign to their experiences. As such, this study adopted a semistructured interviewing approach to gather data and further explore the response strategies of small-scale sport event organizers in response to the effects of the pandemic (Boden & Shipway, 2023).

Through the researchers' personal connections within the sport event industry, initial participants were identified, which initiated snowball sampling to gain further participants, allowing a deeper insight into the phenomena under study. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique in which the researcher obtains further samples who meet the characteristics of the research focus through their connections or referrals from the original sample (Skinner et al., 2021). Specific criterion of the sample was designed to ensure all participants had worked for a small-scale sport event

organization throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of snowball sampling, six organizations, all from the South East region of England, UK and a total of eight participants were identified and participated in semistructured interviews.

Both in-person and online semistructured interviews were undertaken to evoke experiences, perceptions, and feelings of participants (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The semistructured nature of interviews allowed the emergence of notable subjects and themes that may not surface in a structured, controlled format (Jones et al., 2012). The semistructured interviews followed a guideline of predetermined subject areas based on a review of existing literature, including open-ended questions about crisis management of the effects of COVID-19 on small-scale sport events and the response strategies through resilience, creativity, and innovation (Shipway et al., 2023). The interviews took place between January and March 2023, in the post-COVID-19 period. Contemporary pandemic studies by both Boden and Shipway (2023) and Kirby et al. (2023) suggested that postpandemic interviews and reflections allow participants to adopt a more balanced and holistic overview of the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on their own "lived experiences."

The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 min and were conducted at locations convenient to the participant, either in their offices or via Zoom. Interviews conducted in person were recorded using a voice recorder and then later transcribed by hand into Microsoft Word. Interviews conducted via Zoom, the online video conferencing platform, allowed the researcher to record, then automatically download audio files and transcripts (Gray et al., 2020). It has been suggested establishing rapport through online platforms compared to in-person interviewing may be more challenging, although research also shows participants are more responsive and build rapport faster than in-person interviews (Jones, 2022). Despite both suggestions, neither was an issue to the lead researcher due to their positionality "as an insider" within the sport event organizer community across the South East of England, where the event organizations were based. It is acknowledged that the UK-centric geographical context of this study is a potential limitation, and that pandemic restrictions

Table 1
An Overview of Study Participants and Sports Events

Name	Profiles of Participants and Sports Events
Organization A	The company organizes triathlons, running, sailing and cycling 'sportive' events. Their smallest event (sailing) ranges from 50–100 participants to their largest (running) event consist of 5,000–7,000 participants. They have three full-time employees, and both Amelia (Events Manager) and Greg (Managing Director) were interviewed.
Organization B	The company has two full-time employees, both of whom were interviewed; Cameron (Events Director) and Alexander (Events Director). Originally tasked with rebranding an existing Marathon (5,000 participants), the company has expanded into trail running events.
Organization C	The company organizes 18 small-scale events including running, cycling, and triathlons events with around 10,000–12,000 participants annually. The owner Katherine, who was interviewed.
Organization D	The company annually organizes three small-scale sport events (Half Marathon of 1,000 participants, 10/20-mile event of 900 participants, and a 10,000 participant Full Marathon). Adam (Events Director) was interviewed.
Organization E	The company originally provided personal training before transitioning to an events organizations hosting a Marathon for 2,000 participants. The company currently offers running, cycling, and kayaking events. It is run solely by Peter (Events Director), who was interviewed.
Organization F	A leading mass participation sports event company organizing a range of running events, kayaking events, and cycling sportives with a combined total of 10,000 participants. The company has 5 full-time employees. The founder of the company, Ben (Company Director) was interviewed.

and government financial support for the events industry varied globally. The six organizations and eight participants interviewed are detailed in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the informants (Jones et al., 2012). All participants received a detailed participant information sheet providing information about the study and specifying their involvement was voluntary and they could withdraw at any given time (Jones, 2022). To ensure participants consented to the study, a signed copy of the participant agreement form was required (Boden & Shipway, 2023).

Research Analysis

Data collected during semistructured interviews were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis process used to identify, analyze, organize, and report recurring themes. Thematic analysis provided a useful qualitative method to explore participants' perspectives through highlighting similarities and differences within data (King, 2004). Once data were transcribed, transcriptions were reread and checked for accuracy against audio recordings. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) it was crucial to immerse oneself within the data, to understand the depth of content. Once familiarized with data, an inductive thematic analysis approach was applied, developing

codes and then themes that directly linked to data (Patton, 1990). Using a qualitative approach proved suitable for exploring new, unexplored areas related to the response strategies of small-scale sport event organizations to the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, the lead researcher's position as an insider within the community of local sport event organizers allowed for a meaningful exploration into the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Holloway et al., 2010).

Although the researcher's perspective inevitably applies their personal theoretical lens to the analysis process, an inductive approach incorporates a data-led analysis (Holloway et al., 2010). Thematic coding was conducted using analysis software, NVivo, allowing identification of common occurring themes through double coding and color coding, highlighting areas of repetitive interest (Dhakal, 2022). An initial code framework was developed, before examining and collating codes to form themes (Terry et al., 2017). A thematic analysis map was produced providing a brief overview and clear understanding of each theme's characteristics, which in turn led to emergence of sub-themes (Terry et al., 2017). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) final phase, direct quotes that were representative of each theme and subthemes were selected to be presented in the results and discussion which follow.

Results and Discussion

Aligning with traditional qualitative research approaches, the results and discussion are integrated throughout (Holloway et al., 2010; Jones, 2022). Three key dominant themes emerged from the data, which were (i) diversification of revenue streams and reduction of costs, (ii) ensuring a customer-centered approach, and (iii) fostering entrepreneurial characteristics.

Diversification of Revenue Streams and Reduction of Costs

The need for the diversification of revenue streams and a reduction of costs was a common theme that emerged from the data. A series of response strategies identified and categorized into

three subthemes, which were (i) the use of technology to provide virtual events, (ii) making sustainable business decisions and the evaluation of suppliers, and (iii) event price adaptations (Fig. 1).

This main theme was predominately a response to mitigate the detrimental financial effects that the pandemic had imposed upon small-scale sport event organizations, as noted by Greg:

I can't understate how bad it was. It literally wiped out the entire business. So, we dropped down to about 10% of our revenue. We were roughly about £750,000 turnover and then dropped to £65,000 within the space of a year. So, dealing with that massive drop in revenue, which was a 90% drop, was just phenomenal.

The pandemic financial losses support Parker's (1992) characterization of disasters as an initiator of

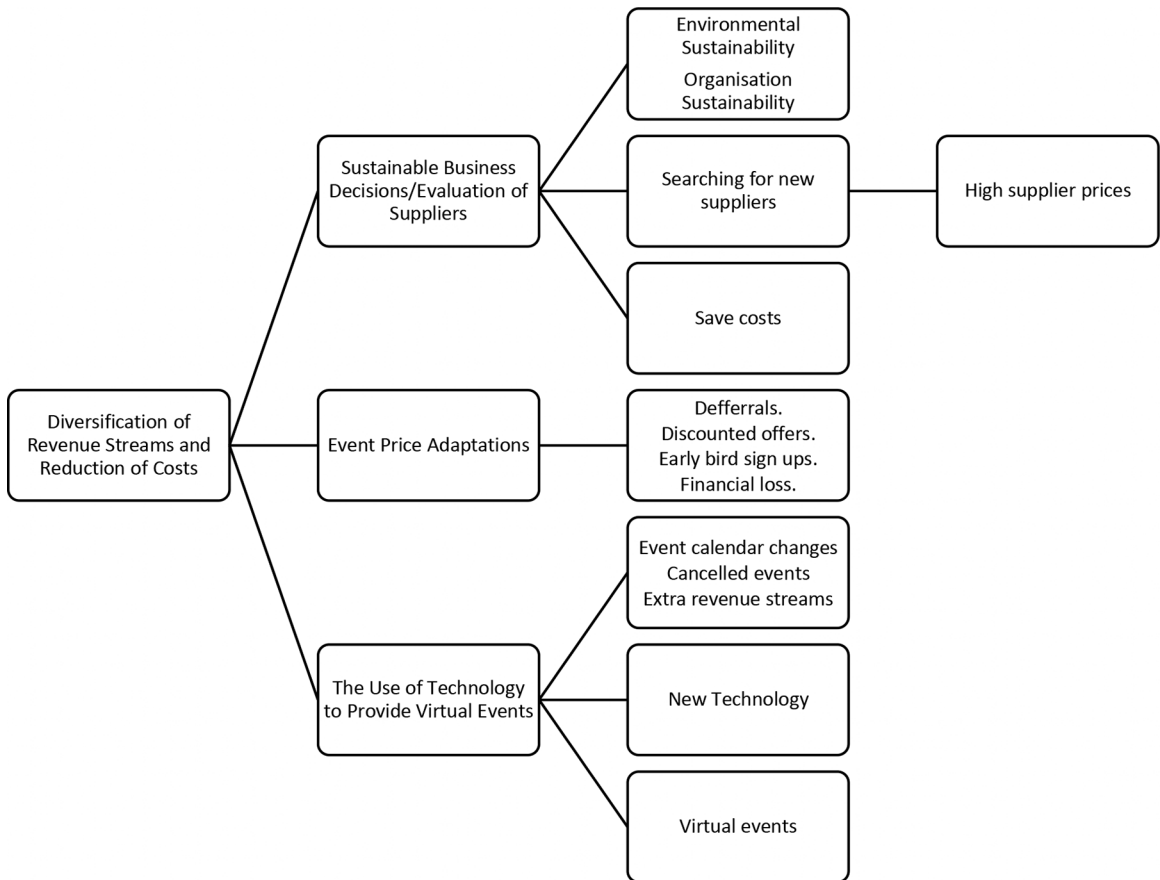


Figure 1. Diversification of revenue streams and reduction of costs.

economic loss, further congruent with the OECD's (2020) suggestions the COVID-19 crisis has prompted the most severe economic crisis since World War Two, with small-scale organizations most severely impacted (PWC, 2020).

Several organizations noted that other organizations in the sector did not survive the pandemic, as Amelia commented, "a lot of events haven't made it through." Thus, the need to address the significant financial losses of revenue became apparent to event organizers. Cameron stated, "in terms of business we've looked at other ways of revenue streams within the events. I suppose just to cover ourselves." The reduced demand for services due to event cancellations reduced income for organizers, causing an essential focus on financial resource management (Sadeqi-Arani & Ghahfarokhi, 2022). Greg identified that, "you had to look at other revenue streams such as virtual events." Introducing virtual events was a frequently occurring response strategy from small-scale sport event organizers, although there were contrasting perspectives on their effectiveness, as Peter explained:

I think the virtual were a nice addition, but it certainly doesn't replace the income that was lost. They were basically just a little "top up" to help us.

Mosey et al. (2022) identified that leveraging digitization through adopting new technology can increase small organizations' access to finances, improve resistance, and enable effective responses to crises (Klein & Todesco, 2021). Although, virtual events allowed access to finances for sport event organizers and proved a helpful response to the initial loss of revenue from event cancellations, their long-term effectiveness was challenged by Adam:

I mean we still offer virtual. I looked the other day, and we've probably got about 20 people running virtually this year. It just went off a cliff . . . virtually! Everyone was doing them at first and now they're either going to pay to enter an event or they're not. I don't really think virtual is, you know, a long-term solution really.

Like the findings of Dragin-Jensen et al. (2022), event organizers' reliance on digital technologies allowed their events to be feasible. However, they were not substitute alternatives, but more temporary solutions. As such, as longer term solutions,

the importance of implementing sustainable business decisions in a postcrisis era was expressed by Katherine:

I've had to make business decisions where I need to make sure the business is sustainable, because I think the whole of this year is going to be tough. So, I'm not renewing the lease on the van and will just hire a van as I go. I've had to make a redundancy too. I'm going to hand back the keys to the office so I'm making internal savings where I can.

Katherine's response measures align with those of Chanyasak et al. (2022), who illustrated that when organizations expect limited, or no, income revenue during economic crises it is imperative to reduce costs. Amelia further highlighted that throughout the pandemic, "we've had to be mindful of our budgets and cutting back where we need." While Waal and Mollema (2010) argued that monitoring costs is a standard business process, these findings indicate the pandemic crisis exaggerated the need to monitor costs to ensure long-term business sustainability. Katherine further explained that, "the effects of the pandemic has made me think I need to make changes now for us to survive the hard time(s) to come." This closely aligns and represents the integrated nature of Jacques' (2007) crisis management model as Katherine's experience portrays that evaluation of crises response also demonstrates the need for the modification of organizational operations, to contribute to future crisis preparedness and management.

Modifying organizational operations and implementing sustainable business practices also reflected approaches and impacts upon environmental sustainability. Peter was conscious of "reusing race numbers and envelopes" so to be "avoiding as much wastage as possible," while Amelia looked at removing specific dates from t-shirts and medals. This was not only responding to the uncertainty of potentially having to reschedule events, but also "from a waste point of view we can reuse T-Shirts again." When addressing the sustainability of event processes in the pre-pandemic era Peter noted that, "I think we were all a bit blasé, thinking that we'll get rid of it, and we can cope." However, the financial losses of the pandemic changed Peter's perspectives of sustainability, to an approach where, "you should put your business head on and realize it's a business and

that I need to tighten the purse strings.” The study results align with the findings of Kirby et al. (2023) and illustrate that implementing sustainable business decisions emerged due to attempts to reduce costs.

The reduction of costs was further highlighted through the evaluation of suppliers for events. Piercy et al. (2010) suggested postcrisis, to thrive, organizations need to adapt to the ever-changing economic environment. Following discussions with event organizers it became apparent that an increase in supplier prices was a long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Cameron noted, “the hangover we’ve got is the cost of everything going up,” while Katherine observed, “their prices are just crazy, and I don’t know whether that is a genuine cost of living increase, or because they’ve lost the revenue from lockdown.” Therefore, reevaluation of suppliers was essential to respond to the changing economic environment. This was reflected by Adam whose supplier quote for traffic management was “£19,700 in 2022 and last year for the exact same thing it was £27,900. It had gone up by £8000.” In response to this increase Adam further commented:

I try and use the same suppliers and build up a rapport with them but when they’re not flexible, you must work on your suppliers, and get some quotes from other places.

Building rapport and strong relationships with suppliers is valuable to produce economic advantages such as competitive price offerings (Díez-Vial, 2009). However, previous studies also suggested a positive correlation between evaluation of suppliers and small organizations growth and performance (Tonts et al., 2012). As Adam experienced when looking for alternative suppliers, sharing better prices offers with original suppliers resulted in them reoffering quotes to match and beat competitor pricing. This aligns with previous findings, which indicated that if small organizations purchase from fewer suppliers, which they share a close relationship with, it can result in increased sales loyalty (Tuli et al., 2010). Therefore, during times of crisis it is valuable for small-scale sports event organizers to reevaluate suppliers, shop around for competitive prices, and then effectively communicate with their current suppliers to maintain supplier loyalty.

Furthermore, in response to event cancellations, all organizers committed to making price adaptations to their events. They initially implemented a deferral process for any participants affected by canceled or postponed events. However, deferral processes placed financial burden on event organizers. This often led to a reevaluation of this strategy. As Peter explained:

we changed the structure around deferrals because there were so many. For one event 250 people deferred and that’s nearly £10,000 carried over again, so we’re now charging a £5 fee to defer.

Adding deferral fees were adopted by event organizers to help them increase turnover margins, achieved by streamlining sales processes and paying attention to pricing models (Waal & Mollema, 2010). Through a proactive, innovative approach and through implementing this process it is suggested that organizational recovery is driven, and long-term negative consequences are mitigated (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2020).

Ensuring a Customer-Centered Approach

The second primary theme to emerge from the data was the importance of ensuring a customer-centered approach. This consisted of three subthemes, which were (i) effective communication with participants, (ii) rebuilding customer trust and loyalty, and (iii) managing public perceptions (Fig. 2).

A significant challenge facing small-scale sport event organizers was the uncertainty of events taking place due to government restrictions, such as lockdowns. The main response to manage the uncertainty was to ensure effective communication with participants. Katherine commented that:

we made our terms and conditions very, very clear, to say what happens if we have another lockdown, so somebody entering knew exactly what would happen if we had to pull the event.

Through revising terms and conditions, participants were made aware of any potential changes. Ndlela (2019) states customer involvement during a crisis is crucial and requires incorporating strategies to distribute information to guarantee current and new customers are kept well informed of the

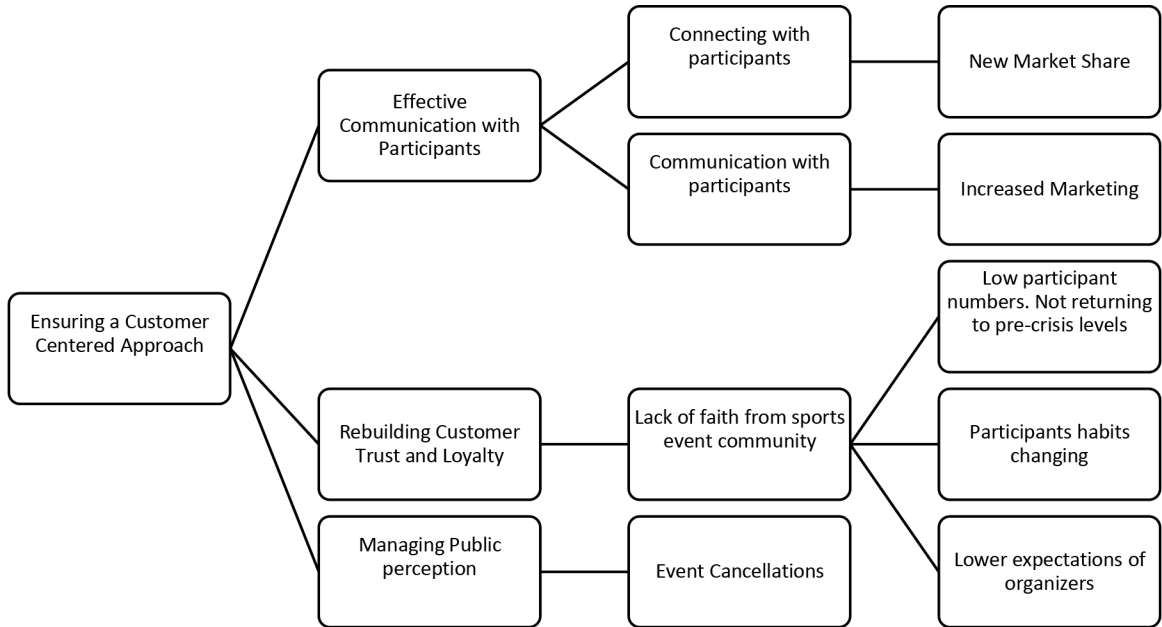


Figure 2. Ensuring a customer-centric approach.

organization's operations. However, the uncertain nature of the COVID-19 pandemic caused challenges for event organizers when communicating with participants, as the communication habits of participants changed. Therefore, event organizers had to adapt to cater to new participants needs. In terms of adapting, Greg recalled, they implemented:

We needed quicker communication, as the world had changed. We had more people messaging through Facebook or Instagram to ask questions rather than emailing. That was a massive shift during covid where people expected quicker answers. So, the speeding up of quick communications was something we had to alter and change as well.

Ben agreed that quick crisis communication was an effective strategy and "maintaining excellent levels of customer service was our main priority." To ensure this, he had "subcontracted in a team to entirely focus on delivering customer service, responding and managing any enquires." Ben's perspective of maintaining effective communication as a main priority supports Fleming's (2021) concept that customer service and responsiveness have always been integral to ensure organizational

success. However, their value was further established in challenging times throughout the COVID-19 crisis. To ensure good communication, Fleming (2021) highlighted it is essential that accurate and trustworthy information is issued from organizations to customers, and as Katherine recalled, "we have just been very, very honest whenever we communicate with people."

Maintaining communication and customer service was also evident when providing alternative options to participants when forced to cancel or postpone events. Katherine recalled:

We were communicating all the time. We started a Facebook group straight away and did something every day in the Facebook group, whether it was a HITT session, or we would do virtual cycling. We also ran a series of webinars on how to keep self-motivated. We were supporting people along the way and gave them something whilst we were waiting for the sport events to come back. We had over 500 people join straightaway.

The popularity of alternative options to replace events proved effective to maintain customer retention. The approaches of the organizations aligned with three of the resilience strategies indicated by Sadeqi-Arani and Ghahfarokhi (2022). First,

sustaining continuous interaction and communication with customers through various channels; second, motivating customers to use sport services; and third, by following and encouraging customers' health and fitness progress. These strategies provided a stable foundation and relation between the sport event organizers and their loyal customers and were useful for navigating crisis situations together (Fleming, 2021).

However, several organizers highlighted that the continuous uncertainty, cancellations, and postponement of events significantly affected customer trust and loyalty and instigated the need to rebuild relations. The importance of rebuilding relations was highlighted by Hawkins and Hoon (2019), as high rates of small organizations' failure is attributed to the lack of ability to create and retain a loyal customer base. Therefore, this proves critical in surviving crises. Arguably, the most challenging long-term effect for all event organizers, in the postpandemic era, was the significant reduction in the number of participants signing up for events, often due to the lack of faith within the sector. Greg explained that, "having no faith and trust that events will go on, and not be cancelled, meant people were signing up later and later." In response to low participant registrations Cameron observed, "I suppose it's trying to be more active, trying to reconnect with them again, and say that we're still here." Similarly, Greg acknowledged the vital need "to show that we were still here, where other companies went bust, disappeared or didn't host events. We still did the event and maintained customer trust and loyalty."

Fleming (2021) argued loyal customers can withstand the frustrations of organizational uncertainty and will support organizations by altering their buying behavior to continue their support. The event organizers provided evidence to support this view, citing loyal customers' support for virtual events. However, they also expressed concerns that buying behaviors were slow returning to pre-COVID-19 levels and suggesting that customer loyalty in the sport events sector only existed in the short term, and perhaps challenging Fleming's perspective. Adam observed, "this year I'm 50% down on entries from where I'd normally be," while also stating, "our events are all over the place with people entering later, and the no

shows are even higher." Peter indicated he was "between 30% and 35% down on numbers," while Greg explained, "before the event, about 3 or 4 months out, we'd normally have 70% of people signed up, but now about 40% of people sign up in the month before." The findings suggest that while customers supported small-scale sport event organizations throughout the initial stages of the pandemic, the long-term support is limited, which requires event organizers to adapt to changing buyer behaviors.

To adapt to changing buying behaviors several organizations responded through expanding market share. Greg noted that they, "expanded our region of where we offer, rebuilding our expectations and starting again." He further explained the limitations of this strategy as, "our events aren't as profitable, but we are doing more events too, in order to get more opportunities for runners, and to motivate them." Their logic was to encourage customers, and to regain their trust and loyalty. Additional strategies entailed offering incentives for participants to register for their events. Cameron highlighted that they provide, "more offers than we were previously offering."

Despite implementing strategies to mitigate this issue, it became apparent that low participant numbers remained a major challenge for event organizers. The explanation as to why participation was low remained unknown among event organizers. Our findings call for a deeper insight into the rationale behind low participant numbers at small-scale sport events in a postpandemic world. The importance of this is reflected by Fleming (2021), who suggested that dedicating time to understanding customers during a crisis is valuable for organizations to meet customer expectations. If the postpandemic expectations of customers are better understood and met, it could potentially facilitate business recovery. This logic supports Jacques' (2007) proposal that the postcrisis and business recovery stages will happen simultaneously and contribute towards effective overall postcrisis management.

Closely aligned with meeting customer expectations is managing public perceptions. Throughout the crisis of the pandemic, managing public perceptions was central to ensuring customers had a positive outlook upon sports events. Katherine highlighted:

We also thought about public perception. In our first triathlon back, we had 400 athletes participating. We were still socially distancing, and if a member of the public saw there was an event with 400 people, even though we were allowed to do it legally, I was still worried how this was perceived from the outside. Therefore, we made sure all our communication was public.

Concerns with public perception ensured that event organizers adhered to government standards and organized events safely during the pandemic. Regarding the adherence to social distancing restrictions, Amelia acknowledged, “we had to limit the number of people at the event, and to space people out, and making sure crowds weren’t being encouraged.” Adhering to government guidelines required organizers to adapt the format of their events. This restricted the extent to which they could provide a normal, atmospheric, positive event experience (Shipway et al., 2023). Traditionally, a poor experience may result in negative public perception; however, in times of crises it can also act as a catalyst for organizational innovative responses. As Christensen and Lægheid (2015) suggested, when confronted with crises organizations will often engage in strategies to repair their reputation. Amelia noted that due to restrictions:

we weren’t allowed to use inside spaces, so we cancelled our baggage drop places. No-one was happy so we had to hire an outside baggage tent, which was an extra cost that we wouldn’t normally have incurred, but it was something we had to adapt to.

Although this response entailed additional costs, it highlights how sport event organizations prioritized adapting to and meeting customer needs, and thus reflecting a customer-centered approach.

Fostering Entrepreneurial and Innovative Characteristics

The third theme to emerge from the data was the centrality of fostering entrepreneurial and innovative characteristics. This included two primary subthemes, which were (i) the ability to learn and adapt to situations quickly, and (ii) resilience and optimistic opportunity seeking (Fig. 3).

The need and ability to adapt to situations quickly was emphasized by all event organizers to overcome

the unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 crisis. Peter described the pandemic as “a big challenge of the unknown.” Escamilla-Fajardo et al. (2020) indicated the disruption and uncertainty of the pandemic will affect organizational models and entrepreneurial behavior. When operating in the unknown, sport event organizers had to adapt their management styles and behavior, as Amelia explained:

For many events organizers, it was like learning as you go, because it was such a new thing for everyone. No one really knew what they were doing, so it was learning new strategies, and the new things you had to do on the go. This was challenging.

It is understandable that in managing the initial effects of the COVID-19 crisis that small-scale sport event organizations did not focus on the crisis preparedness and crisis prevention stages (Jacques, 2007). The study findings align with the outcomes of both PwC’s (2020) Sports Survey and Milic and Bhaumik (2021) that the sport events industry was insufficiently prepared and had limited effective crisis management plans in place. Cameron noted, “I don’t think many companies had crisis management in place. A lot of it was reactive. However, although it was reactive, it was done quickly.” Similarly, Ben observed that, “we weren’t prepared for the effects of the pandemic and had to react quickly and accordingly.” The ability to respond quickly can partly be attributed to the smallness of organizations, with Cameron explaining:

for us it was quite easy, because there were only two of us. We talk it over and can make decisions quite quickly. It’s not like we’ve got tiers and tiers of management.

Katherine acknowledged she “learned . . . to make decisions, hard decisions, quickly.” According to Ratten (2021), the uncertain nature of crises means not making decisions can worsen circumstances. Morrish and Jones (2020) argued that in the recovery stages of crisis management, it is essential that entrepreneurs can make prompt decisions and help manage risks. All event organizers highlighted that organizing events in uncertain times was their main risk during the pandemic. When deliberating about holding an event Cameron explained prompt decisions were useful and having a “decision making

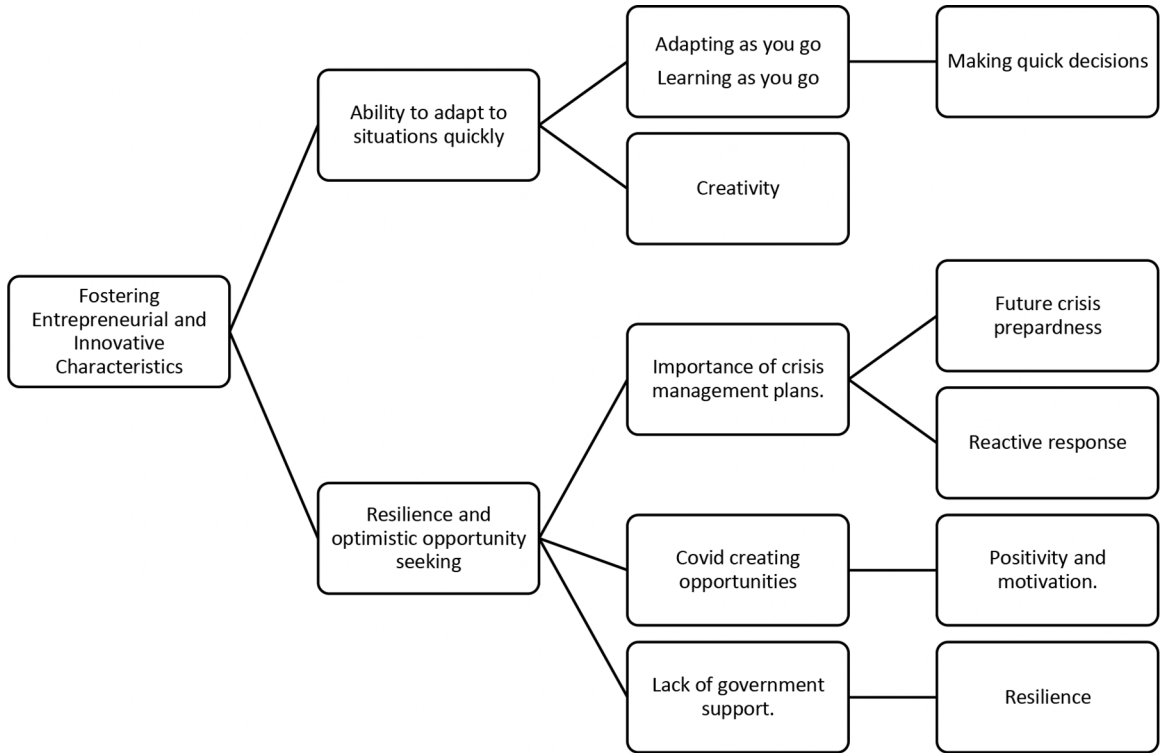


Figure 3. Fostering entrepreneurial and innovative characteristics.

process, looking at the fors and against, and trying to weigh it up” was effective.

In times of crises, it has been proven valuable for small organizations to have a small, streamlined team to enable quick decision making, and adaptability. This supports Eggers’ (2020) perspectives that the attributes of small organizations can prove beneficial in response to threats. Event organizers acknowledged that their small size meant that when adapting their events stakeholders could quickly and easily be contacted and made aware of any changes. Although attributes may prove beneficial in response to crises threats, the characteristics of small-scale organizations meant throughout the pandemic there was a lack of stakeholder support from the government. Katherine “was too newly self-employed and so I didn’t get any income” but “luckily because we had a premises, we got the grant that meant the rent would be paid.” Peter ran his organization individually, working from home and he explained, “because a lot of event organizers don’t have premises, they didn’t get any help at all.”

Central government support was recognized by all event organizers as a vital element in limiting the extent to which event organizers could effectively respond to the crisis. According to all the event organizers interviewed, government restrictions and lack of financial support limited the capacity and extent to which they could effectively implement entrepreneurial strategies to respond to the pandemic. They all highlighted that resilience was required to get through the challenging times. Resilience is an important entrepreneurial personal trait that guides behavior (Ratten, 2021). Cameron recalled that, “unless we took the bull by the horns, got going, and tried to get something on, then as a company it would have been disastrous.”

The entrepreneurial ability to bounce back and recover despite limitations indicated the importance of fostering resilience as an effective response to survive crises. Greg highlighted that, “covid was devastating. We are lucky to still be here, but we’ve also worked extremely hard to be here.” The findings indicate that the hard work, determination, and

resilience of event organizers undoubtedly helped to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. This aligns with the perspectives of Ratten (2021) that resilient entrepreneurs can endure hard times by overcoming challenges that confront them. However, the (alleged) lack of governmental support for the sport events industry did not go unnoticed. Alexander described government support as:

It was criminal. Where the rest of the country were being supported, sports events were the first to be shut down and they didn't receive any support. The biggest unfair thing was food festivals, hospitality, events, and music events were all given back-ups, but sporting events were just left! There was a line in the policy to say that sport events were not included which was never challenged.

Although the alleged lack of government support hindered event organizers, Cameron's optimistic perspective allowed an insight into how this motivated proactive and innovative responses from the event organizations. He acknowledged:

It made us respond which was good because I suppose in a lot of industries, they could just sort of sit back, as it didn't really affect them. So, if you look back at it positively, it made us respond, and made us be more dynamic. It was a big learning curve.

This highlights the importance of fostering an optimistic perspective to crises, and to perhaps acknowledge them as an opportunity to both develop and learn from. Regarding the opportunities linked to the COVID-19 pandemic Cameron noted:

The pandemic provided the chance to sit back and look at the event again. When you're amid it all, when things are working then you don't really explore different areas. However, when forced to look at your events because of revenue and everything, it's a good time to say right. . . . What's happening with this part of the event? How can we improve that? How can we make that a better experience for participants and better financially for the partners? So, I suppose it tightens the whole thing up. It's a big shake up, which was probably healthy, as it forced people's hand, which was good.

This supports the findings of Mosey et al. (2022), that desirable change is enabled through the

destruction and disruption of existing structures. Therefore, in future when event organizers feel their business model is moving away from normal operations, they can potentially apply optimism to facilitate opportunity. Rosenthal et al. (2001) suggested that effective management is required for these opportunities to materialize. Optimism was also reflected through several event organizers adopting new perspectives of crisis management. Greg indicated, "we're in a better position now because we've gone back to zero and are rebuilding in a stronger process." Similarly, Cameron noted, "how important it is to have crisis management strategies in place, and the scrutiny has made us sharper and more prepared for another crisis." Aligned to the findings of Jacques (2007), an evaluation of the crisis management experiences of sport event organizers helped to determine future crisis preparedness.

These insights align with the findings of Koronis and Ponis (2018), who established that as organizations are increasingly faced with small or large scale crises, traditional crisis management and business continuity and strategic approaches have failed to support event organizations. In times of disruptive events, Mosey et al. (2022) argued that the focus of events organizations should be on strengthening relationships with participants within their events communities and ecosystems and to focus upon creating new event-related opportunities that have arisen as a direct result of globally disruptive events, like the COVID-19 pandemic. Closely aligned with the perspectives of Aldao et al. (2021), the results of this study highlight those disruptive events, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, are complex and had wide ranging social, economic, cultural, environmental, and technological impacts on the events industry. The findings also highlight that preparedness, responsiveness, adaptability, and learning abilities constitute key drivers of sport event resilience among small-scale community-based events (Shipway, 2024).

Conclusions

This study fills a current gap in the sport event literature, as highlighted by Jeon et al. (2023), by exploring the crisis management response strategies of small-scale sport event organizations to the

effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, it also addresses the call for more detailed explorations of the experiences of sport event organizers, to determine how they overcame the COVID-19 crisis (Alam & Abdurraheem, 2023). The findings demonstrate that despite having limited initial crisis management plans and strategies in operation, the small-scale sport event organizers were able to implement a series of effective response strategies to help mitigate effects of the pandemic and survive the COVID-19 crisis. Similarly, to the findings of Boden and Shipway (2023), the pandemic left sport event organizers better equipped and extensively experienced for managing and planning for crises. As a theoretical contribution to knowledge, through the lens of resilience, this study proposes a framework of valuable response strategies to help inform small-scale sport event organizers of mechanisms and processes to navigate, mitigate and manage crises.

Both the proposed theoretical concept of *sport and event resilience* (Miles & Shipway, 2020) and the concept of an *international sports events (ISEs) resilience continuum* (Shipway & Miles, 2020) had a clear bias towards better understanding impacts on larger scale major and mega-sports events. In contrast, this study not only advances theoretical knowledge in the domain of sport event resilience, response strategies, and crisis preparedness of smaller scale community-based events, but also diversifies resilience studies in the events space beyond the higher profile major and mega-sports events (Jeon et al., 2023; Shipway, 2024).

The study findings illustrate that small-scale sports events are often more agile and responsive than more bureaucratic large-scale sports events. This reinforces the arguments proposed by Shipway and Miles (2020) that large-scale sports events face greater challenges due to the “multi-faceted implications of their scope, scale and structure and greater complexity” (p. 189). In contrast, small-scale events are agile and can learn and adapt to situations quickly, due to their smaller, less cumbersome size, which can provide opportunities to be more innovative in their crisis response strategies, with fewer considerations to be factored into crisis management planning. This agility extends to swift entrepreneurial behaviors and innovative practices and the ability to avoid much of the inappropriate

bureaucracy and excessive barriers facing large-scale sports event organizers (Mosey et al., 2022).

The framework highlights three key themes that emerged from the data and has identified three primary managerial insights, practical implications, and response strategies for sport event organizers when managing future crises (Fig. 4). First, the diversification of revenue streams and reduction of costs will require small-scale sport event organizations to mitigate the loss of income from canceled events and tackle increasing costs. This can be achieved by using technology to provide virtual events, by implementing sustainable business decisions, evaluating their suppliers, and adapting event prices.

Second, supporting the calls for more research on small-scale events (Jeon et al., 2023), the results highlight that when addressing future crises, the central importance of sport event organizers ensuring a customer-centered approach where they manage uncertainty around event cancellations and managing the long-term effect of not returning to precrisis participant numbers. The strategies employed should focus on effective communication with participants, rebuilding customer trust and loyalty, and managing public perceptions.

Third, in the face of future crises, small-scale sport event organizations should foster entrepreneurial and innovative characteristics to deal with the uncertainty and lack of government support. This can be achieved by learning and adapting to situations quickly, displaying signs of resilience, and being optimistic in seeking new opportunities to redesign their business operations during times of uncertainty. As recent studies suggest (Jeon et al., 2023), creativity is a key element of small-scale events, and this can often stem from entrepreneurial and innovative behaviors (Shipway et al., 2023). If these proposed guidelines are followed, as identified in the framework, then small-scale sport event organizations will not only survive but be better placed to manage future crises, as it is unlikely the COVID-19 pandemic will be the last crisis the sport event industry will encounter (Mosey et al., 2022).

Although the study sample size proved sufficient to explore the experiences of small-scale sport event organizers, a limitation is that the study is restricted to organizations within the UK. Given

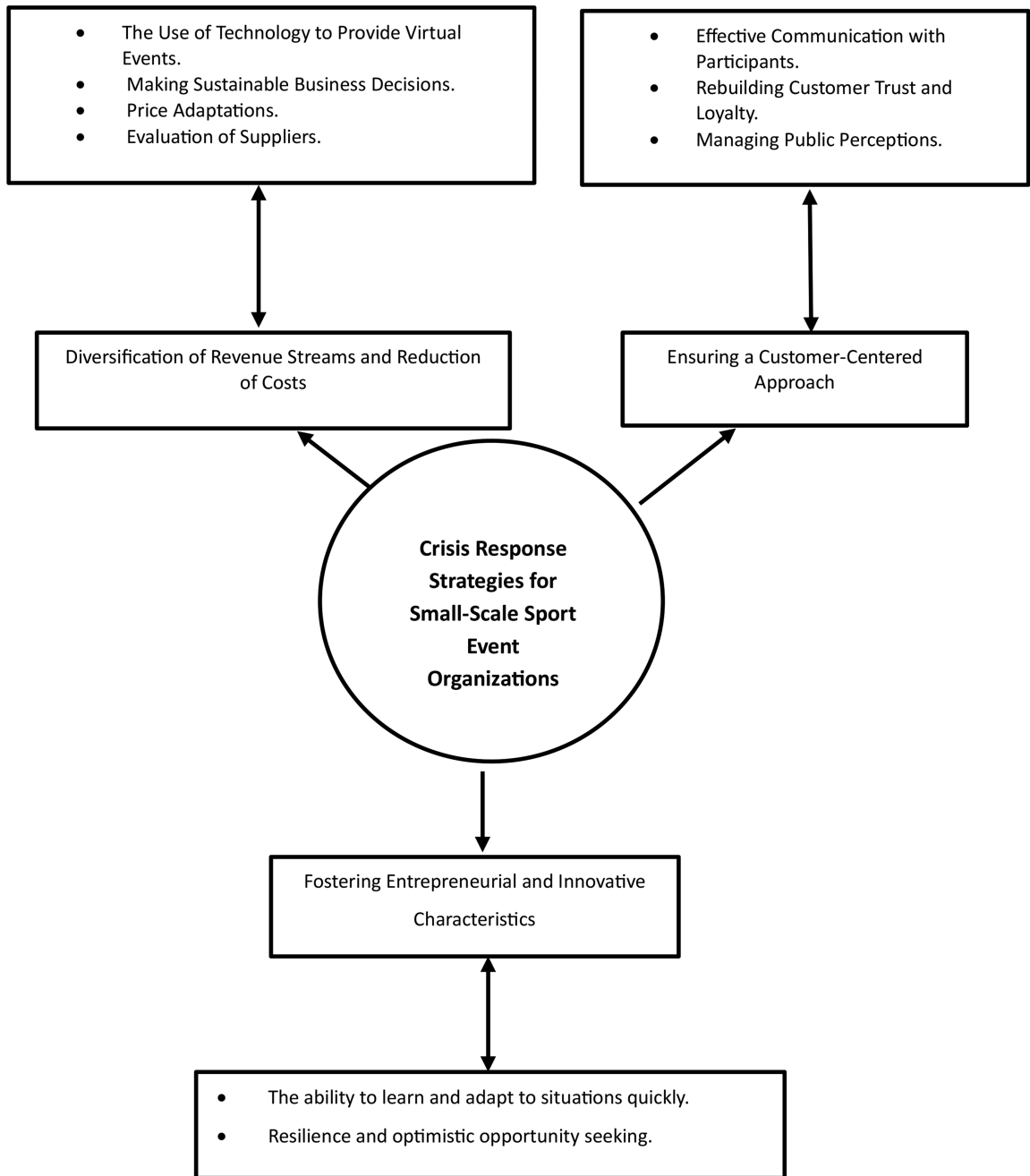


Figure 4. A framework of crisis response strategies for small-scale sport event organizations.

the effects of the pandemic were global and countries and governments adopted different strategic approaches throughout the pandemic, it is important to conduct similar studies into small-scale sport event organizations worldwide, to determine

if response strategies differed, and whether further lessons could be learned from the crisis.

To conclude, we propose a series of areas of future research and broader policy implications emerging from the findings. First, future research

should investigate the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis with regards to why participation numbers at smaller scale sports events had not returned to precrisis levels. At the time of data collection and analysis, this was unknown to event organizers, but if this pattern were to continue, it has broader policy implications for participation and engagement in sports events.

Second, there is scope to further investigate the business recovery of smaller scale sports events and their longevity in the postpandemic era, and whether many have thrived and survived, or withered and died (Mosey et al., 2022). Unfortunately, in this study we may have missed out on obtaining the perspectives of some small-scale sport event organizers, as their companies may not have survived the pandemic (Boden & Shipway, 2023). The findings contribute new insights and avenues for further research on the complexity of smaller scale sports events (on both practical and theoretical levels) and on recovery and mitigation strategies that sports events should develop to face future “disruptive events” (Aldao et al., 2021; Koronis & Ponis, 2018; Mosey et al., 2022; Shipway & Miles, 2020).

Third, the findings exposed wider implications for sport event stakeholders. These were notably the need to address issues relating to government policies and the societal and economic value and contribution of the events industry (Association for Event Management Education [AEME], 2023). Throughout the pandemic, small-scale sport event organizations appeared to lack financial support from government policies, which provided extra challenges for event organizers already attempting to manage the crisis during challenging and uncertain times.

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