

MEETING THE TWO IMPOSTERS OF TRIUMPH AND DISASTER: SENIOR MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON GLOBAL TENNIS TOURNAMENTS

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This study uncovers insider perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic's impact from four senior management and organizers of two global tennis tournaments. The events are Wimbledon and the Queen's Club Championship; both annually recurring tennis tournaments played on grass in London, UK. Using an "elite event interviewing" approach, data were collected through semistructured interviews. The interviews were thematically analyzed, and four primary themes emerged from the data. These themes were (i) responding to the initial impact of the global pandemic on tennis events, (ii) planning and preparedness for the ongoing issues facing event organizers, (iii) pandemic implications for other tennis event stakeholders including sponsors, employees and suppliers, and (iv) prevention and learning from the pandemic to help ensure the prosperity of future events. Managerial implications and areas of future research are highlighted, followed by holistic recommendations for event organizers to help better plan, prepare, and prevent future crises and disasters.

Key words: COVID-19; Pandemic; Tennis; Crises; Elite interviewing

Introduction

Sports events play a key societal role due to the diverse impacts they have on those associated with them (Grix et al., 2021). However, since the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020, the events industry, most notably including sporting events, was drastically disrupted (Mohanty et al., 2020), with substantial numbers of postponements

and cancellations (Rajkotwala & Mittal, 2020). This resulted in event organizers creating and revisiting their contingency plans to cope with the financial losses should events not occur, or to go ahead behind closed doors. To mitigate these losses, event organizers explored new ways to diversify revenue incomes, develop fan engagement, and explore virtual technologies (Hall, 2020; Mosey et al., 2023). Given the unique situation presented by the

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COVID-19 pandemic, from here onwards referred to as “the pandemic,” it presented significant challenges for tennis event organizers dealing with issues arising from event cancellations, as well as planning for their future safe return. This led to tennis event organizers assessing both the risks involved with their event and suggesting strategies to manage these risks, while also ensuring public safety (Shipway et al., 2021).

Above the players’ entrance of the center court at Wimbledon, the oldest tennis tournament in the world (All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club [AELTC], 2021), is the inscription “if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposers just the same.” These words are from Rudyard Kipling’s popular poem “If,” which begins: “if you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you.” This study recounts the experiences and challenges of four senior executives of two global tennis tournaments, who have extensive lived experiences of both tennis triumph and disaster. It evaluates the impacts of the pandemic on international tennis events and explores potential strategies to both mitigate against future unforeseen crises and to ensure future prosperity, based on the insights of the study participants. In the context of two tennis tournaments, it addresses a key research problem for the sports events industry: how can organizers and senior management of international sports events better plan, prepare, and prevent future crises and disasters. The four research objectives were to (i) investigate how the pandemic initially impacted international tennis events; (ii) explore ongoing issues for senior tennis management and event organizers linked to the pandemic; (iii) highlight the impact of the pandemic upon a range of stakeholders including sponsors, employees and suppliers of tennis events; and (iv) scrutinize what senior tennis management and organizers had learned from the pandemic, to enable them to mitigate against future crises to ensure the long-term prosperity and sustainability of their events.

The findings incorporate the theoretical perspectives of sport, event, crisis, and disaster management scholars who have recently critiqued the impacts of event crises and disasters upon the events industry (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Shipway & Miles, 2020). The study makes a theoretical contribution with the introduction of a framework for

managing crises at international sports events. In doing so, it also provides practical contributions, insight and assistance for sport event organizers on various day-to-day logistical aspects of planning, preparedness, and prevention.

Overview of the Literature

There now follows an overview of the literature. This is a brief exploration, given the substantial coverage that the pandemic has already received in academic circles (Shipway et al., 2021). As such, the aim of the study is to give primacy to insights emerging from the empirical data that subsequently follows (Holloway, 2008), through the theoretical lens of event resilience.

Managing Crises and Disasters for Sport and Events Through the Lens of Resilience

Shipway and Miles’ (2020) foundational study on the initial impacts of the pandemic 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 were identified. Their international sports events (ISEs) resilience continuum, informed by scholars publishing in the domain of disaster management and resilience studies, provided a theoretical framework that incorporated guidelines on how event organizations could better understand the concept of resilience (Ritchie, 2009). They proposed that the ability and capacity to plan, prepare and prevent crises and disasters varies depending on both spatial and temporal factors including the size, scale, global reach, frequency, and complexity of sports events. The continuum explored variations in both risk and resilience levels over time.

Subsequently 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 and disasters in both sport and event management studies. They also introduced the concept of “sport and event venue resilience,” centered around their key thematic resilience areas. This theoretical framework has close synergies with the postcrisis

recovery strategies for tourism destinations proposed by Mair et al. (2014), which also placed emphasis upon planning, preparedness, and prevention.

It was well documented that the pandemic not only disrupted the global economy and life, but had a significant impact on the sports industry, especially sports events and the subsequent restrictions on large gatherings (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; O'Reilly & Abeza, 2020). The pandemic led to most national and international events, including tennis competitions, being postponed and canceled. As Mohanty et al. (2020) explained, such events were left in turmoil, a view echoed by Fallatah (2021) who commented on the "disruption and planning of governing bodies, organisers, teams and athletes" (p. 1). In the early stages of the pandemic, Shipway et al. (2021) highlighted that large gatherings of participants or fans at live sporting events would result in a higher risk of transmissions. As such, this meant that restricting mass gatherings became a crucial aim of public health care systems to prevent the further spread of COVID-19 (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020), resulting in the subsequent large-scale postponements and cancellations (Ozili & Arun, 2020). Consequently, this led to sport event organizers and suppliers exploring the logistics surrounding their events and the subsequent impact on their financial durability (Deloitte, 2020).

This study will explore the pandemic's impact upon two high-profile tennis tournaments 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 (Shipway et al., 2021).

Background Context: The "Road to Recovery" for Tennis Tournaments and International Sports Events

Tennis is one of the world's most popular and significant sports, as levels of participation and spectatorship demonstrate (Lake & Osborne, 2019), having faced crucial fractures of social class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity—both on and off court. However, the pandemic presented a series of contrasting challenges for the event organizers of the sport, as

they embarked on the road to recovery (Shipway & Miles, 2020). For tennis event organizers, there was a need for flexible approaches towards planning to reopen events. Bas et al. (2020) emphasized this need for flexibility by explaining that adaptations to sporting events were required to ensure the safety of employees, spectators, and athletes. As transpired, despite measures put in place to ensure fan safety, subsequent global travel restrictions precluded spectators from attending sports events (Fotiadis et al., 2021). For sport event organizers, including tennis, planning and contingency planning became problematic "due a chain of uncertainty, constant change and a lack of guidance from authorities" (Mirehie & Cho, 2022, p. 534), leading to subsequent financial pressure on sports events. Shipway et al. (2021) had already projected that the pandemic would decimate revenues in the sport events sector.

The All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club (AELTC) who host Wimbledon held insurance cover against crises including a pandemic, which meant their financial pressures were reduced. When the tournament was canceled in 2020, the AELTC annual report and consolidated financial statements for the year ending July 31, 2020 showed that the tournament received an insurance pay-out of £174,000,000 (AELTC, 2022), which enabled Wimbledon's organizers to plan with more financial confidence for the 2021 Championships. This insurance policy was somewhat of a rarity in the domain of global sports events. Subsequently, the pandemic had a significant impact on employment. Bas et al. (2020) stated that millions of jobs, both sporting professionals and those working in sport, whether in retail or services, were at risk. As the pandemic continued, Skinner and Smith (2021) observed that by April 2021, COVID-19 led to just under 1.5 million sport-related job losses in America alone. In the UK, Ecorys (2021) highlighted the pandemic had caused over 250,000 UK sport-related redundancies, while within the European Union Katsarova (2021) claimed this figure to be just under 1 million job losses. Even when sports events took place without spectators, it led to high levels of employee redundancies (Sheptak & Menaker, 2020).

Fallatah (2021) acknowledged the significant impact of event cancellations on sponsors. The cessation of live broadcasting resulted in an inability to launch advertising, marketing, fan interaction, or other

activities (Denton, 2020). Likewise, KPMG (2020) explained how sponsors had to deal with diminishing revenues, causing them to focus on conserving their funds. Skinner and Smith (2021) drew parallels to Adidas, who “because of event cancellations and affected sponsorship deals closed approximately 70% of their retail stores” (p. 324) at the worst point of the pandemic, to cope financially. Sponsors established solutions to counteract the negative effects of cancellations, notably by reducing global marketing budgets and reinvested funds into digital and social media marketing to maintain achieve high levels of fan interaction during the pandemic (Euromonitor International, 2020). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic Golf’s broadcast partners regularly replayed previous golf events, to provide sponsors with additional brand coverage and fan interaction (Campbell, 2020). Additionally, Campbell noted sponsor movements towards team or personal sponsorship deals, where the importance was determined by the team or person, rather than a certain sporting event. During 2020, he also advocated obtaining sponsorship rights for e-sports and other gaming sector competitions to capitalize on consumers being home-based during lockdown periods.

Towards the end of 2021, and beyond, the road to recovery for sports events was still unclear and challenging with event managers conscious of differing levels of risk for them to mitigate against (Drury et al., 2021). The unknown variables were plentiful at the time and Drury et al. even suggested that (i) singing and shouting should be limited, (ii) there should be increased ventilation and cleaning, (iii) one-way systems introduced, and (iv) fans should be served by employees from their seats. Skinner and Smith (2021) acknowledged that sports organizations had faced ethical dilemmas in terms of balancing their economic response to the pandemic and both athlete and spectator welfare. DiFiori et al. (2021) emphasized the need to prioritize the health of athletes and support staff first, by not putting their health at risk due to their worries about the economy recovering and entertaining the public.

In summary, event organizers were faced with multiple dilemmas throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and through the theoretical lens of resilience this study explores how tennis event organizers attempted to “bounce back” and mitigate against the potential of future crises (Shipway et al., 2021).

Research Methodology

Research Approach and Design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, addressing questions that focus on gaining an understanding of experiences and meanings (Fossey et al., 2002). In this context, these meanings, insights, and perspectives came from senior management and event organizers. The phenomenon and experiences under investigation was the impact of the pandemic on two global tennis tournaments. As we were exploring the lived experiences of event organizers during times of crises, in-depth semistructured interviews, conducted via Zoom, were best suited to this research design and approach (Jones, 2022). Interviews elicited an intimate understanding of the participants’ experiences and allowed the focus upon the “subjective meanings and context” of the research findings (Smith & Caddick, 2012, p. 61).

Roulston and Shelton (2015) highlighted that qualitative research and the use of semistructured interviews should be objective and impartial. Brewer (2000) indicated that building an individual bond and a shared interest with the participant can help improve the conversation. During this interview process, asking questions that were unrestricted and flexible helped to advance the dialogue as the participants were able to share their lived experiences during the pandemic more openly (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Ultimately, those measures aided the insightfulness of the research findings that follow. A further benefit of semistructured interviews was that participants could ask questions to clarify their queries, and this enabled the primary researcher to provide concise explanations when required (Holloway, 2008). This was particularly useful to help ensure the reliability, trustworthiness, and validity of the interviews (Van Manen, 2016). Following a review of literature and emerging issues linked to the pandemic, an interview guide was developed, which scrutinized sport event managers’ perspectives on planning, preparing and preventing future crises (see Shipway et al., 2021). The interview schedule was split into four sections focused upon examining the initial impacts of the pandemic, investigating their working relationship with event stakeholders, the ongoing challenges faced, and probing for deeper insight on their key learning areas and recommendations.

Sampling

This study used purposive sampling to select the participants and obtain a variety of viewpoints (Holloway, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2014) and was also based on the specific qualities they possessed, as senior key decision makers and leaders (Sheppard-Marks et al., 2020). The recruitment of specific participants allowed for ‘information-rich cases’ which provided ‘the greatest insight’ (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 264). Participants were selected because they were senior management and event organizers for major international tennis events, and Table 1 displays an overview of the sample. Although the sample size is small, it provides unique access to senior management perspectives from those involved in the planning and organization of globally recognized and respected sporting tournaments.

Data were collected from senior executives and event organizers of two global tennis tournaments. Both tournaments are annually recurring professional, spectator-based tournaments played on grass and hosted in London, UK. The first is “The Wimbledon Championship,” more commonly known simply as Wimbledon. It is the oldest tennis tournament in the world and is widely regarded as the most prestigious international tennis event. The tournament is one of the four global “Grand Slam” tennis tournaments, the others being the US Open, French Open, and Australian Open. The day-to-day operations of the Championship are led and conducted by the AELTC (Wimbledon, 2023). The second tournament is “The Queen’s Club Championship.” It is hosted at the Queens Club, a private sports club, and is an annual event on the men’s professional ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) World Tour series. The Queen’s Club Championships is currently commonly referred to as the “Cinch Championship,” after its title sponsor

(Lawn Tennis Association [LTA], 2023). While Queen’s Club is the host venue, the tournament is owned and operated by the LTA, the governing body of tennis in Great Britain. It was widely acknowledged within the social world of the tennis enthusiast (Lee et al., 2016) as “somewhat of a coup” that this study managed to gain unique access to such high-level informants who were willing to freely and candidly discuss such a contemporary, relevant, and commercially sensitive issue within the sports events industry.

“Elite” Interviewing in Sport and Event Spaces

A small but emerging area of social science research explores the intricacies associated with interviewing elite participants (Lancaster, 2017). This study explores the insights and perspectives of senior tennis organizers through what we have termed an “elite event interviewing” approach. Sheppard-Marks et al. (2020) advocated the use of small samples to gain insight into the world they inhabit. In an important area of qualitative research, researchers have a unique opportunity to understand the worldview of influential “in the know” people, who often have access to exclusive information that is not readily available to the public (Mikecz, 2012). Moston et al. (2015) suggested the term “elite” is traditionally used in the context of athletes, to refer to those whose qualities and abilities mark them out as superior within a group. However, this study is not interviewing high-performance athletes, but senior event management figures who work for what are commonly regarded as “elite” tennis tournaments.

Despite the relatively small sample, the interviews were important given the position and influence of these participants, the extensive knowledge that these elites possess, and the privileges they

Table 1
An Overview of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Job Role	Event Name
James	Chief Executive	Queen’s Club Championships
David	Head of Championships Operations	Wimbledon Championships
Michael	Committee Member	Wimbledon Championships
Sarah	Senior Event Operations Manager	Queen’s Club Championships

are afforded (Rice, 2010). When reflecting on interviewing elite, Rice debated issues surrounding the value and contribution of small samples and trustworthiness, rigor, and credibility. Elite event interviews provide a unique sample, offering a rare opportunity to understand the experiences and worldviews of senior tennis organizers who have significant influence (Sheppard-Marks et al., 2020). Access to elites can be challenging due to many barriers, whereby informants can protect themselves from intrusion (Lancaster, 2017). It is the existence of these establishment barriers that sets elites apart from others in society and contributes to defining them as elite (Shenton & Hayter, 2004). Duke (2002) suggested that these barriers act as shields, protecting them from public scrutiny and from the intrusive nature of research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected via four semistructured interviews using the video conferencing platform Zoom, which each lasted for approximately 60 min. The semistructured nature of the interviews enabled a depth of knowledge to be gained that otherwise may not have been achieved (Adams, 2015). This also allowed the primary researcher to have a “degree of flexibility” and uncover more about the participants’ experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 84). Given that all the interviews were conducted via Zoom meant that participants were in familiar environments. The importance of interview locations was highlighted by (Hennink et al., 2020) who explained that ensuring the comfort of participants without the presence of others helps to eliminate bias. Thus, participants may then reveal more insightful details about their personal experiences, as they would feel more relaxed (Jones, 2022).

Emerging themes ranged from how the pandemic initially affected tennis events through to the impacts on key event stakeholders and their postpandemic learning. The semistructured interview data were simultaneously digitally recorded and transcribed via Zoom’s cloud-based facility. Unfortunately, in-person interviews were not possible due to COVID-19-related risks present during the data collection period. There were some limitations undertaking online interviews in comparison to in-person interviews, aside from the obvious worry of unforeseen

technical issues occurring (Jones, 2022). Likewise, not interviewing face-to-face, but online meant that some physical cues could be missed given the interviewer was not able to observe the participant’s physical responses to certain questions (Cater, 2011). Given the interviews were undertaken (i) during times or crises and amid severe restrictions facing the informants, and (ii) the “elite” nature of the senior executives, data saturation could not be fully guaranteed (Hennink et al., 2020).

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to establish patterns from the results (Guest et al., 2012), and to allow participant experiences, views, perceptions, meanings, and representations of the chosen phenomena to be understood (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2019). This technique moves beyond identifying predetermined conclusive outcomes, synthesizing all patterns and themes that emerged from the data, and striving for optimum credibility (Jones, 2022). Once the transcribed interview data were exported from Zoom and converted into Microsoft Word, the data were checked for accuracy. This process of checking the transcriptions resulted in a high degree of familiarity with the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). As noted, researchers must be immersed with their data to understand the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Holloway, 2008).

Once checking the interview data’s accuracy was completed, analysis commenced by coding conversations from the interviews. One benefit of using coding was helping organize the data into key themes and allowing both researchers to interpret and draw conclusions from the whole data set (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). An inductive thematic analysis approach was undertaken as the themes were directly linked to the data itself (Patton, 1990). This technique involved the assembly of a basic code framework, before data were further analyzed to construct a more detailed code framework to decipher the final themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). A flow chart style document was developed to systematically structure themes in terms of significance, theme characteristics, and methodical order (Jones, 2022). Themes were then further refined, and substance was added to each theme to create a succinct narrative. A quote bank was also developed to organize integral evidence under each theme (Guest et al., 2012).

In abidance with ethical research policies, and to protect the participants, a full ethical checklist and documentation was submitted and approved to a university ethics panel before data collection commenced. Each participant received a participant information sheet and consent form before the interview, to ensure they had sufficient information to make an informed choice about whether to take part (Ennis & Wykes, 2016). In turn, participants gave their informed consent before each interview by signing the participant agreement form. When collecting interview data, undertaking and then transcribing the interviews safely and accurately was important to ensure reliability, validity, and participant anonymity. Indeed, anonymity is a way of ensuring confidentiality to “minimize the risk of harm to participants” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 215).

Pseudonyms were used, which was intended to ensure as much confidentiality was maintained as possible (Jones, 2022; Kaiser, 2009). However, the two global tennis tournaments in this study are quite recognizable. Despite the use of pseudonyms, by naming the event and the job role of the participants, there is a high likelihood that the individual participant could be identified. As such, following the first draft of the manuscript and prior to submission for peer review, each participant was sent a copy of the draft manuscript and asked if they were willing to allow it to be submitted, or whether they required any aspects amending or redacting. This process of “confirmation” from the participants was particularly helpful. Subsequently, all participants provided written consent that they were supportive of the content as a fair and accurate representation of their recollections of what had transpired during the pandemic. To illustrate this point, David read a draft manuscript and identified that we had significantly undervalued Wimbledon’s insurance payment following the cancellation of the 2020 tournament, and verified the payment was not \$142,000,000 as we had initially stated, but far higher at £174,000,000 (AELTC, 2022).

Results and Discussion

Four primary themes emerged from the data. These were (i) responding to the initial impact of COVID-19 on global tennis events; (ii) planning and preparedness for the ongoing issues facing

tennis event organizers; (iii) pandemic implications for other tennis event stakeholders; and (iv) prevention and learning from the pandemic to ensure future prosperity. These four themes and sub themes will now be explored.

Responding to the Initial Impact of the Pandemic on Global Tennis Events

The first theme to emerge from the data was the initial reaction and response of tennis events to the threat of the pandemic, incorporating three subthemes: (i) exploring the event cancellation insurance policy, (ii) communicating with key event suppliers, and (iii) decisions about cancelling the event. The initial emergence of the pandemic required tennis event organizers to respond in contrasting ways. The initial focus was to monitor the ever-changing event landscape and potential event implications, as David explained:

Our Chief Executive raised it [the developing COVID-19 situation] in the second week in January 2020. At that point, we quickly created a Business Resilience Group. This was designed to monitor the unfolding events and identify areas that we should concentrate on in terms of business resilience and potential impact.

It became apparent to event organizers they needed to examine any event cancellation insurance policies they may, or may not, hold in 2020. David recalled “the first call was to literally dust down our insurance policy.” This was important due to the financial implications that possessing a pandemic insurance policy would have for future planning, if in place. James explained:

we looked at what insurance we had in place, or not in place, just to give us an understanding of what the financial implications would be if the event did not take place.

Similarly, David recalled:

we were aware that we had comprehensive pandemic insurance that gave us a great degree of comfort in terms of moving forwards and, to a degree, the flexibility to make appropriate decisions.

Keshkar et al. (2021) highlighted that sporting companies can protect themselves from large

financial deficits by purchasing insurance. However, the need for pandemic insurance had been impossible to foresee, although the Wimbledon board members and directors had the foresight to pay for pandemic insurance, following the SARS outbreak of 2005, and received an insurance pay-out of £174,000,000 million after the 2020 tournament was canceled (AELTC, 2022). This represented the largest insurance payment in history ever made to a sports event. David explained that Wimbledon only received this compensation “once the insurers were convinced that there was no option but to cancel the event.” Makkar (2020) acknowledged that this “visionary” investment by Wimbledon would necessitate other sporting organizations to view pandemic insurance as a crucial investment going forward. Keshkar et al. (2021) indicated that this was perhaps one of the most financially prudent investments ever made by a sporting event.

While aspects of the insurance policy cover were explored, the event organizing committee were also initiating conversations with key suppliers. James explained:

from the outset, our initial thought was to engage with suppliers, and specifically the two big construction suppliers [who were responsible for the stadium and hospitality construction projects].

However, an initial challenge for Wimbledon organizers was the need to eliminate unnecessary costs, until it was confirmed they had insurance cover, reflected when David commented, “we did not want to incur unavoidable expenses for people if we could avoid it.” This importance was stressed by Sarah at Queen’s Club, who highlighted the difficult nature of their own initial conversations with suppliers:

We did all our communication with our suppliers which was difficult because we have a lot of suppliers who are small businesses, and the tournament is their livelihood. It is not an easy conversation to have when you are basically potentially taking away 20%–30% of their yearly income because their event is not taking place.

Event organizers were conscious they needed early communication with key suppliers surrounding a potential event cancellation, so suppliers had the opportunity to reduce their costs as much as

possible. Swart and Maralack (2020) advocated this point when discussing the cancellation of the 2020 Two Oceans Marathon at only 3 weeks’ notice, where suppliers incurred significant costs due to the late cancellation decision. David explained that Wimbledon’s initial target during the initial pandemic outbreak was to ensure that their suppliers’ “unavoidable expenditure and insurable costs were met.” Clearly, Wimbledon understood the importance of early communication with suppliers and the financial benefits for them. Xu et al. (2020) reiterated the benefits arising when they emphasized that during the pandemic companies spoke with all their suppliers early and provided the required financial support to ensure their future prosperity.

During the initial pandemic outbreak, discussions among event organizers focused on decisions about canceling events. Sarah explained:

we started meeting in February (2020) time. We were looking at contingency plans, looking in terms of what we could or could not deliver.

Similarly, David observed that:

we were beginning to look at what form of Championships we might be holding, [such as] if there will be a requirement to hold it behind closed doors.

As discussions progressed, some events began observing other similar events and benchmarking their decisions accordingly. For example, the Queen’s Club Championships were conscious that the feasibility of their tournament taking place was dependent upon whether Wimbledon went ahead. James acknowledged:

we are one part of a grass-court season so Queen’s as an event would never really take place if the bigger event, Wimbledon, was not to happen.

The pace of change and escalating impacts caused by the pandemic took event organizers by surprise. Whilst exploring different options, decision-making processes accelerated. Sarah recalled:

we did start looking at different alternatives that we could potentially deliver, but at the very beginning of the pandemic I do not think we really realized the full scale of what we were coming up against.

James explained that discussions were held early for the 2020 Queen's Club Championships as "we needed to establish a point when we had to decide." Prompt decision-making was advocated by Hoang et al. (2020) when examining the feasibility of hosting the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, the reality transpired that on a global level, governments took away the decisions from event organizers. For example, Sato et al. (2022) explained that hosting decisions on the 2020 Tokyo Games were taken by the Japanese Prime Minister, who requested the postponement from the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Likewise, for tennis events, the decision-making process surrounding the 2020 Queen's Club Championships faced a similar situation, with Sarah recalling, "the decision got taken out of our hands because the UK Government said—no events." Ultimately, it was apparent that COVID-19 required significant amounts of flexibility and adaptability from event organizers when making decisions, due to unpredictable pandemic developments (Shipway & Miles, 2020; Swart & Maralack, 2020).

Planning and Preparedness for the Ongoing Issues Facing Tennis Event Organizers

The second key theme emerging from the senior executive interviews were the ongoing issues and challenges with the pandemic, incorporating three subthemes of (i) constant contingency planning; (ii) changes in ticket sale processes; and (iii) variations and constraints in capacity.

One significant challenge facing tennis event organizers was the uncertainty about their events taking place, and one approach to deal with this uncertainty was to create contingency plans to prepare for multiple eventualities. Sarah recalled:

we put in place a Management Plan that has a lot of contingency plans for different things, with guidelines around how you follow it.

However, it was the constant changes to contingency plans which caused numerous challenges for event organizers, as different options had to be considered due to the unknowns and fast-developing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. James recalled, "I was scenario planning for a year in terms of the

likely different scenarios" surrounding the 2021 Queen's Club Championships. Likewise, Wimbledon 2021 event organizers had similar challenges when planning for different possible crowd capacities. Michael explained:

we went through, probably from about January 2021, something like thirty different seating plans depending on different capacities and different seating configurations that we might be allowed to use for each of the show courts.

The flexibility in contingency planning required by event organizers during the pandemic were significant. As Shipway et al. (2021) explained, COVID-19 forced sporting organizations to implement unique and unexpected plans. Indeed, Mirehie and Cho (2022) revealed that senior event organizers involved with global sports events found the uncertain nature of COVID-19 made planning exceptionally difficult. James supported this perspective, explaining that for the 2021 Queen's Club Championships, "I was planning for probably three core scenarios." This illustrated the need for adaptable and flexible event planning to overcome COVID-19 challenges, reinforcing perspectives from Shipway et al. (2021) on the importance of being agile and adjustable when dealing with a crisis.

An additional challenge facing tennis event organizers were the constant changes in the ticket sales process. Some organizers had already planned to move to paperless tickets, however, the arrival of the pandemic dramatically sped up this process. Michael explained:

we effectively had to collapse what was about just under a three-year plan and say we have got nine months to get this [online ticketing process] going, so that was significantly pressurized.

Similarly, Sarah observed that:

e-ticketing has been taken forward now anyway. It is something we wanted to move towards from a sustainability perspective, but I think that [COVID-19] sped up the process, so yes, we are now using e-tickets as much as possible.

In addition to this accelerated adoption of e-ticketing, some events, for example in 2021, the

Queen's Club Championships were dealing with ticket purchases and the rollover of tickets arising from the aborted 2020 event. Sarah recalled, "the team had to deal with the rollover tickets which was a challenge in itself." Likewise, Wimbledon was faced not only with implementing a new ticketing system but also selling tickets during the Championships. Michael explained:

for the first time ever, we were selling significant volumes of tickets online on a day-by-day basis, which again is something we have not done before.

Despite the significant challenge for event organizers to change their ticket sales process, it helped make their fans feel safer during the pandemic. As highlighted by Perić et al. (2021), automated tickets avoided the potential physical transmission of the virus and make customers feel more at ease during a pandemic, and therefore more likely to purchase tickets. The Wimbledon Championships made this change, as David explained, "we had a mobile ticketing system. For the first time we moved away from paper tickets." As Reade and Singleton (2021) explained, many organizations needed to create innovative digitalized ticketing policies to continue to produce revenue whilst recovering from the impacts of COVID-19.

The pandemic forced tennis event organizers to prepare for various capacity constraints and the subsequent uncertainty this caused by having to prepare for multiple eventualities. Michael noted:

we did not know what capacity we were going to be allowed to have, which was particularly challenging, not least because we had to model an awful lot of different capacities.

James supported this point when he observed:

we planned for everything from no spectators at all to a fully-fledged event in terms of full capacity (no restrictions), and then something in between which is kind of where we ended up, which was 25% capacity.

Michael recalled the pressure placed on event colleagues and that for the Wimbledon Championships, these differing capacity constraints meant there "was an unfeasible amount of work" for event

organizers. He further elaborated by explaining that for each different capacity eventuality, there was a different impact for different stakeholders which seemed to create a domino-like effect. Michael noted:

for every single capacity level, there is a different level of the amount of stewarding needed, the amount of police presence required, the amount of food and beverage you need, and so everything we did had a consequence.

In the context of global sports events, the need to plan for differing carrying capacities was not uncommon. At the time, Shipway et al. (2021) recommended that venue capacities should gradually increase once COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, meaning that event organizers could plan accordingly. For the 2021 Wimbledon Championships, Michael explained:

we used our 50% capacity plan at the start, but we were prepared for this to rise if operationally successful.

For many event organizers, it was standard procedure to plan for this natural progression from no fans to a gradual increase in capacity. As Tsuji (2020) explained, in the context of the Tokyo Games, despite no spectators eventually attending, Japanese event organizers had prepared for no fans in June, with an increase to 5,000 fans in July and then a further increase of up to 50% stadium capacity in September.

Pandemic Implications for Other Tennis Event Stakeholders

The third theme to emerge from the data was the pandemic implications arising for other tennis stakeholders aside of the organizers, including event sponsors, employees, and suppliers. Sub-themes included the (i) direct challenges created for event sponsors; (ii) increases and changes in employee workload; and (iii) financial issues for suppliers.

Arguably the largest direct challenge created for event sponsors was the significant reduction of benefits they received from their event sponsorship, should the event be cancelled. Sarah explained:

It was difficult for sponsors because the event is once a year, and that's what they are sponsoring. You have got a deal in place with someone and then you are not able to deliver everything that they bought into.

Event cancellation meant sponsors were unable to obtain the financial or commercial benefits they would have expected their investment to deliver. These benefits would have included significant media coverage to increase brand awareness, and substantial corporate hospitality to build commercial relationships. However, the pandemic prevented these from coming to fruition (Dreisbach et al., 2021). James identified that sponsors often have multiple benefits and objectives, explaining:

a lot of the benefits of corporate sponsorship are not just financial. There are the benefits in terms of corporate hospitality, which is relevant and important to headline sponsors.

The worry stemmed from brands potentially reconsidering the benefits of event sponsorship. As Cornwell and Kwon (2020) highlighted, sponsorship is a useful marketing ploy, but if companies feel the uncertainty the pandemic created might undermine the potential benefits of sponsorship, they may not feel the investment is worthwhile. An additional concern was the pandemic might have caused sponsors to lose faith in sport event sponsorship. However, Sarah acknowledged, "everyone [the sponsors] was very understanding" when told their event was canceled due to COVID-19. O'Reilly and Abeza (2020) noted, many sponsors chose to turn their focus toward strategies for pandemic recovery, rather than dwelling on the past, which they had no control over.

One group significantly affected by the pandemic were event staff who faced major increases and changes in employee workload. As Michael noted:

The finance team was unbelievably busy because they had to put together the insurance claim and all the documentation around what our expenditure had been and prove for each entity we were spending money with, or had spent money with, why the contract said we were unable to get that back.

The added workload was relentless and pressurizing for event employees, and James noted for the

Queen's Club Championships he could see "which staff could step up to the plate and effectively rise to the challenge." Likewise, employees at Wimbledon were under pressure managing everything from ensuring that the cancellation policy was fully delivered, to thinking innovatively about filling their 2-week British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) television slot in 2020. Michael recalled:

The Championships Team (the permanent team) were very busy with the cancellation, making sure that we had cancelled everything we could possibly cancel without incurring costs at the point of cancellation. Our Commercial and Media Team quickly, in consultation with the BBC, came up with the alternative *Let Us Celebrate Previous Championships* TV coverage, and they let us use our slot in the calendar.

The additional workload on event employees had the positive effect of prompting event organizers to prioritize employee welfare when dealing with the cancellations. While the pandemic put jobs at risk, as Lin et al. (2021) acknowledged, both the Queen's Club Championships and Wimbledon Championships prioritized employee welfare. James recalled "an immediate focus was on looking after our staff" for the Queen's Club Championships. Likewise, David stated that:

the office-based folk were very busy beginning to plan for the 2021 Wimbledon Championships, so they had to be protected for the benefit of the Championships going forward.

It is anecdotal, but some employees were apparently pleasantly surprised at their high degree of job security given the COVID-19 pandemic caused many redundancies in the hospitality and event industries (Sharma et al., 2021).

Event cancellation presented financial issues for suppliers, as a key event stakeholder. Each of Wimbledon's main suppliers was hindered in different ways. David indicated

we have got just under twenty official suppliers whom we have commercial agreements with, and it [the pandemic] affected them in different ways.

Event organizers were acutely aware of financial challenges for suppliers and tried to help and

support them as much as realistically possible. David was adamant Wimbledon wanted to “protect all those involved in delivering the event.” This financial support became a key focus for Wimbledon, who were keen to pay all their suppliers, regardless of their own financial situation. Michael elaborated on this noting:

the key responsibility was to make sure that our suppliers, where the contracts dictated, were paid in full, and it was a bonus that we were covered by insurance. However, meeting our legal obligations to people was the priority.

Many sport event organizers tried to financially support suppliers, realizing that if suppliers were unable to recover due to the pandemic, their future events could be in jeopardy. As Palrão et al. (2021) acknowledge, the strength of the relationship between an event and its suppliers is crucial to the event’s success. David recalled that, for the Wimbledon Championships, “we made arrangements to pay suppliers for all the costs incurred to that point.” Such monetary support was particularly important not only to protect suppliers but also to ensure financial stability in the future. As Davies (2021) explained, COVID-19-related event cancellations had a major impact on suppliers, so any actions to help return the industry to normal was perceived as paramount. While questioning issues surrounding accessibility and the long-term prosperity of the industry, Davies also highlighted that sports events, and events more generally, form an integral part of the cultural fabric of society.

Prevention and Learning From the Pandemic to Help Ensure the Prosperity of Future Events

The fourth primary theme to emerge during the interview process was the key learnings for tennis event organizers to ensure the future prosperity of their events and protect themselves against future crises and disasters. This incorporated three sub-themes that were (i) relations with other relatable sporting stakeholders; (ii) ensuring a financially stable event; and (iii) the need to adjust swiftly to developing situations.

Senior management and tennis event organizers emphasized the importance of communicating with other relatable sporting stakeholders, such as other

major sporting organizations, leagues, and events. Establishing good relationships were perceived as crucial when dealing with a crisis. David explained:

one of the things we learned as a group of sports was to talk more than we ever had before, so ourselves Silverstone, the R&A for The Open, the Premier League and others worked together as a group.

Similarly, Sarah observed:

we have learned you need to be open with all the different stakeholders [in the sporting events calendar], and try and give as much information as possible, as two minds are always better than one.

The benefit of communicating with other organizations in a similar situation meant everyone worked together to achieve the same goal. David acknowledged this point when recalling, “shared experiences and learnings when you are walking into the unknown is crucial.” This openness with other relevant stakeholders was crucial in allowing conversations to be as fluid as possible, as Sarah explained:

There are going to be challenges with all events and there is never going to be something to fix all the issues, but just being very open in terms of speaking to all relevant stakeholders and talking through those issues rather than hiding them is important.

Camilleri (2021) supported this perspective, citing digital technology as one area of co-communication with key stakeholders to address pandemic challenges. David recalled an advantage of close communication was “we were able to share learnings and think in a way that sport probably has not done yet.” As both Mirehie and Cho (2022) and Shipway et al. (2021) noted, organizations overcame pandemic challenges by communicating with each other, as well as sharing each other’s information and resources.

Tennis event organizers highlighted the importance of ensuring a financially stable event. James explained:

you must make your financial model for the Championship bulletproof, so that in the situation that there is no tournament, or a severely restricted one, you can still survive and still balance the books.

If an event or tennis organization is financially secure before any unforeseen pandemics or other disasters arise, this places them in a strong position for recovering from any crisis.

Michael recalled that for the Wimbledon Championships “on a financial metric, you would say that we well and truly recovered.” In addition to the insurance policy mentioned earlier, a major advantage was that Wimbledon was financially stable pre-pandemic, which perhaps made their recovery easier. David observed that:

much of the cancellation hinged on the fact that financially we were secure, so we could keep other people secure, making the decision-making process a lot easier.

Jackson and Schwarcz (2021) highlighted the significance of financial stability, as without it, pandemics and other disasters could trigger financial collapses for an unknown duration. James recommended that the best way for organizations to be as unaffected by these disruptions as possible is to “make sure you shore up your finances.” Without stating the obvious, the more that sporting organizations are financially resilient and economically secure, the less impactful future crises will be (Sharma et al., 2021).

A final subtheme emphasized by tennis event organizers and senior management was the need to adjust swiftly to changing situations during a disaster or crises, especially given the unpredictability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Tennis event organizers had to be agile and flexible, as David explained:

One of our lessons from 2021 was that we know how agile we can be. If we can get up to 10 days out from the tournament without selling a ticket, without knowing how many people are coming and still deliver, then that that leaves us in a good place with all the learnings that we can deploy in the years to come.

For tennis event organizers, the pandemic illustrated the importance of being flexible and adaptable during a disaster. James recalled, “you do learn from it [the pandemic] as you are exposed to a lot of different things.” Those learnings have led to people being quick adapters, as Sarah recognized when commenting, “I think everyone has just

learned to be able to adapt to things so quickly.” David observed:

we learnt that the more agile we could be (holding our nerve to the last possible minute) meant we had a lot more people come through the doors than we thought we might.

Sarah advocated this perspective observing:

I think the one good thing that has come out of it [the pandemic] is that everyone is flexible with their working.

One key emerging message when dealing with developing crises was the imperative for organizers to ensure their events' future prosperity. This aligns with the findings of Miles and Shipway (2020) on adaptability when faced with a crisis. James observed, “you should give yourself as much flexibility as possible [when making crisis decisions],” which perhaps anecdotally explains why many sport event organizations appear to now be more adaptable post-pandemic. Newfound flexibility remains crucial to ensure an event's future prosperity, should another pandemic or disaster occur. Responses in a crisis need to be agile and precise, with event organizers more aware of this now than ever before, and better placed to respond accordingly in the future (Lloyd-Smith, 2020).

Conclusions and Recommendations: Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Reflections on the Balance Between Triumph and Disaster

This study examined the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on two global tennis tournaments. In simple terms, when faced with planning and event delivery during the pandemic senior management and event organizers throughout the sport event sector, including tennis, learned the hard way (Shipway et al., 2021). As such, we propose the framework in Figure 1 as a tool for event organizers to better understand how to mitigate crises and disasters and ensure long-term prosperity and survival.

The results and discussions demonstrated that for tennis event organizers, the COVID-19 pandemic left them far better equipped and extensively experienced for managing and planning for crises

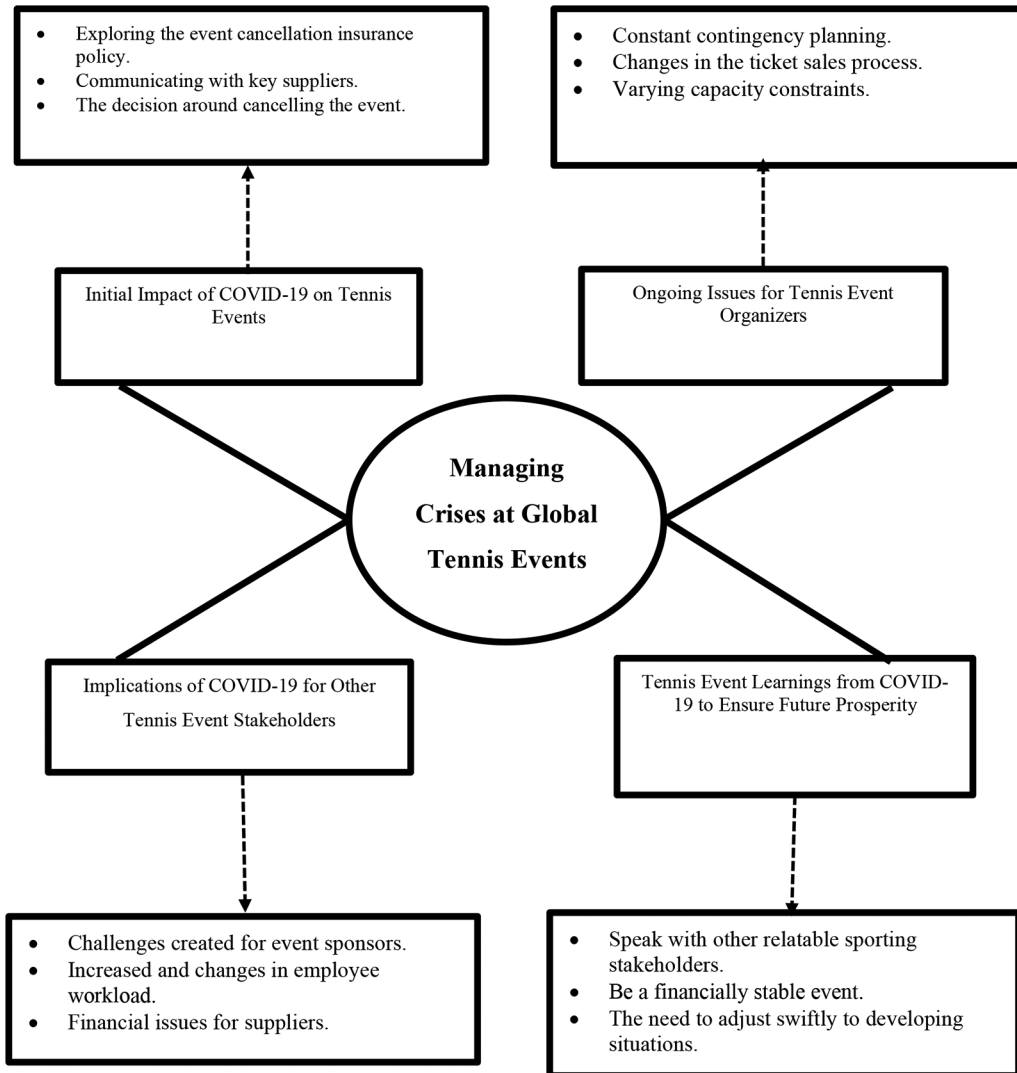


Figure 1. A framework for managing crises at global tennis events.

and disasters. From a managerial perspective, the study illustrated that during the initial stages of a crisis, such as a pandemic, it is vital to communicate with key event suppliers and make early and prompt decisions about cancelling the events. More fundamentally, a significant managerial implication for event planners, as advocated by the All-England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club at Wimbledon, is to ensure major and mega-sports events have a rigorous event cancellation insurance policy in place. As the results identify, Wimbledon received

an insurance payment of £174,000,000, as a direct result of their foresight (AELTC, 2022).

The findings provide managerial insights and practical implications for sports organizations and events dealing with ongoing issues during a crises or disaster, most notably the necessity for constant contingency planning, flexibility with ticket sale processes, and the need for adaptability and flexibility when negotiating variations and constraints in event capacity. Moreover, the study uncovered the wider managerial implications for sport event stakeholders

and the need to address issues relating to direct challenges created for event sponsors and the financial strain that crises place on event suppliers. However, a significant outcome was the extent that a crisis or disaster can increase and change employee workload, which clearly has significant managerial implications within the sport events industry.

One limitation to this study is the relatively small sample size of four senior tennis event organizers from two events, solely based in England. This UK-centric perspective might not necessarily represent the views and perceptions of the other three Grand Slam tennis tournaments, or ATP events. Only having four participants is rare as sample sizes of around 10 are what is expected for qualitative research (Sheppard-Marks et al., 2020). However, it must be noted that the study has gained unique access to four of the most senior tennis event organizers in global tennis. When accessing “elites,” both Lancaster (2017) and Mikecz (2012) argued, a compromise in sample size will be required to obtain access to the worldview of influential “in the know” people, and to break down the establishment barriers that are often protecting senior figures from public scrutiny (Duke, 2002). As Jones (2022) advocated for sports studies, supported by Holloway et al. (2010) in the context of event and festival studies, there is no correct sampling minimum number, as it is subjective.

Future research studies should investigate opinions and experiences of multiple different international sport event organizers to better understand the holistic impacts of the pandemic and allow for comparison, which is more diverse than the current tennis-centric perspectives. Likewise, an analysis of sports events of differing size and scale would be beneficial (Shipway & Miles, 2020). Within the context of tennis events, there is clear scope for investigation beyond the two current tennis events to perspective on the professional tours ranging from ATP/WTA (Women’s Tennis Association) events, to the Challenger/Futures Tour. This would provide researchers with a unique perspective on the impact of the pandemic on different types of tennis events. This current study does not provide this diversity.

In relation to broader sport event knowledge transfer and policy implications, the findings highlight the importance of facilitating good working relationships with other relatable stakeholders in

the “sport and leisure ecosystem” (Mosey et al., 2023, p. 122). More fundamentally, the study identifies the importance of senior sport event managers ensuring financial stability for their events and the need to adjust swiftly to developing situations. However, while the COVID-19 pandemic presented tennis event organizers with many challenges, it also created learning opportunities, specifically around the need for flexibility, adaptability, and thorough preparedness, which will hold event organizers in good stead should other similar crises or disasters occur (Miles & Shipway, 2020; Shipway & Miles, 2020). The insider perspectives helped inform sport event organizers on various aspects of (i) planning, (ii) preparedness, and (iii) prevention. As such, the findings make a theoretical contribution with the introduction of a framework for managing crises at international sports events, viewed through the theoretical lens of resilience. To conclude, the findings have illustrated that, in the paraphrased words of Rudyard Kipling, the senior executives and event organizers of both tennis tournaments when faced with crises and disaster were able to keep their heads while those around them were losing theirs, and to “bounce back” and triumph once again.

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