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Evaluating the Role of Support Mechanisms During a Time of Multi-Faceted Crisis: The Case of UK Hospitality SMEs

Abstract

TOPIC: The United Kingdom's (UK) hospitality sector is currently experiencing a state of multifaceted crisis, a situation where numerous crises conflate to create a unique and unforeseen blend of challenges. While multifaceted crisis is having a profound effect on the sector as a whole, it is having a particular effect on hospitality Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs). UK based hospitality SMEs have needed to continuously adapt their business operations over previous years, responding to challenges such as decreased customer spending, increased utility bills, increased inflation and poor labour market conditions. In order to facilitate the survival of the business, UK hospitality SMEs are increasingly seeking assistance from both formalised and informalised support mechanisms.

Applying Baker & Nelson's (2005) resource bricolage theory as a theoretical lens, this study evaluates the role of support mechanisms in enabling resilience activity within UK hospitality SMEs. This study identifies the presence of several support mechanisms, all of which have varying impacts on the ability of SMEs to increase their resilience. This research finds that support mechanisms enable SMEs to more effectively re-configure available resources to create new situationally specific capabilities at the time of multifaceted crisis. This in turn enables UK hospitality SMEs to improve their resilience.

AIM: To evaluate the role of support mechanisms in enabling resilience within UK hospitality SMEs during a time of multifaceted crisis.

METHODOLOGY: This research adopts a qualitative methodology where a semi-structured interview acts as the research instrument. Qualitative methodologies offer the ability to collect rich data, which is advantageous when evaluating the experience of SMEs during a time of crisis. This is coupled with the fact that qualitative data allows for the close examination of small data sets, which is particularly useful within the context of crisis research where low participation is notorious. Further precedent for a qualitative methodology was drawn from existing SME crisis research, which predominantly deploys qualitative methodologies. Within the research process, the above was considered as a sound rationalisation for the application of a qualitatively based methodology.

After the decision was made to apply a qualitative method, a period of data collection was commissioned, with the research team conducting all interviews. These interviews were conducted with the owner managers of each business where the unit of analysis was the business. In total, 30 interviews were conducted, representing the experience of 30 UK hospitality SMEs. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, ensuring rigour in the transcription process.

After the transcription process was concluded, thematic analysis was applied to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis allowed for the interpretation of the

themes that emerged from the data which was subsequently represented by a thematic map. The thematic map allowed for a more effective understanding of the relationships between themes and how these contributed to answering the research question. Themes were identified through the use of two coding cycles, ensuring the validity and reflexivity within the analysis process.

CONTRIBUTION: This research contributes to the growing discourse examining the role of bricolage as a vector of resilience. Although current discourse identifies the application of bricolage behaviour as a form of resilience, little is known regarding its enablers. This study responds to this gap by identifying the important role of support mechanisms in enabling bricolage. Furthermore, this study contributes to existing literature that examines the role of support mechanism more broadly within crisis contexts (Smallbone et al., 2012; Runyan, 2006)

APPLICABILITY TO THE CONFERENCE THEME: The ISBE 2025 conference theme is ‘*Collaborating across Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: opportunities for inclusion, innovation, sustainability, resilience and growth*’. This research contributes to the conference theme by addressing the resilience of UK based hospitality SMEs within the context of multi-faceted crisis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY: This research focuses on several types of support mechanisms. Included within these are various forms of government support mechanisms including grants and educational initiative. Findings from this research are likely to guide policymakers when enhancing government policy to increase the resiliency of the SME sector.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: This research focuses on the enabling role of support mechanisms for bricolage activity. Findings from this study are likely to be insightful towards practitioners when developing resilience responses to future multifaceted crisis events.

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