

SMME Crisis Resilience: A Snap Literature Review of the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

This paper is a snap literature review on the crisis resilience of small and medium enterprises (SMMEs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. SMMEs are considered significant drivers of economic activity in both the developed and developing worlds. It is therefore important to keep an eye on what goes on in the SMME sector in the interest of preserving them as well as enhancing their performance thereby ensuring their continued contribution to economic activity. The recent COVID-19 pandemic provides an appropriate proxy for examining various business and management aspects, including SMME crisis resilience. This study examined sources, mainly peer reviewed journal papers, from around the world, focusing on determining the nature of challenges experienced by SMMEs during COVID-19, the crisis resilience strategies employed, and their effectiveness. This provided an evidence-based starting point for the formulation of robust recommendations to promote the building of resilience into SMMEs anywhere. The study found that the least researched contexts of SMME resilience are industry-specific, African, and the developing world. Additionally, SMMEs were found to be generally vulnerable to various challenges during crises. During COVID-19, SMMEs responded by adopting different strategies which were effective to varying degrees based on context-specific factors such as access, policies, and regulations. Consequently, more context-specific empirical resilience studies are needed especially in the least researched contexts like Africa and the developing world.

Keywords: SMME, crisis resilience, resilience strategy, challenges, strategy effectiveness, COVID-19.

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1. Introduction

SMMEs have long been recognised as significant contributors to economic development in both developing and developed countries (Altenburg, 2016). Their resilience and survival ensure the generation of employment, income, and tax revenue, which, in turn, stimulates economic growth. SMMEs play a significant role in poverty alleviation, a focal theme in many places around the world (ILO, 2015; United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

1.1 Scope of existing resilience research

The importance attached to the field of SMME resilience is reflected by the volume of research dedicated to that niche area. Part of the studies are global in scope (Pandya, 2012; Hadjielias, Christof, & Tarba, 2022; Simón-Moya, Revuelto-Taboada, & Ribeiro-Soriano, 2016; Aldianto, Anggadwita, Permatasari, Mirzanti, & Williamson, 2021; Naradda Gamage, et al., 2020; Yapicioglu, 2023; Alberti, Ferrario, & Pizzurno, 2018), others reflected a bias towards developed economies such as New Zealand (Fath, Antje, Noemi, Rudolf, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021), and the UK (Wedawatta & Ingirige, 2016). Yet others focused on the Asian and emerging markets (Shinozaki, 2012) such as Vietnam (Do, Pawan, Helen, Hai-Dang, & Bach, 2022), Iran (Zonouzi, Hoseyni, & Khoramshahi, 2021), Malaysia (Rahman, Yaacob, & Radzi, 2016; Lai, Abidin, Hasni, Ab Karim, & Ishak, 2020), and China (Liu, Wu, Wang, & Zhou, 2022). Some studies focused on the developing world and even fewer had an African orientation (Muriithi, 2017; Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Das, Kundu, & Bhattacharya, 2020), for example South Africa (Crick, Gannon, Diop, & Sow, 2018; Ramukumba, 2014; Fatoki, 2018), and Ethiopia (Engidaw, 2022). A couple of studies considered specific regional trade blocks such as NAFTA (Fietz, Hillmann, & Guenther, 2021).

Limited research focused on Industry-specific SMME resilience were conducted for such sectors as the software industry (Parry, Jones, Rowley, & Kupiec-Teahan, 2012), and perishable products industry (Ali, Nagalingam, &

Gurd, 2017). These tended to be global in nature.

The examined literature seems to imply that the least researched contexts of SMME resilience are industry-specific, African, and developing world research in that order. This finding is particularly important given that SMMEs play a proportionately bigger role in economic development and employment creation in developing economies in general and Africa in particular (Muriithi, 2017; Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Das, Kundu, & Bhattacharya, 2020). In that light, literature review indicates that there is not much SMME resilience research that has been conducted in emerging economies in Southern Africa and elsewhere implying that more research is required in these contexts.

1.2 COVID-19- a proxy crisis

In the dynamic and unpredictable landscape of today's global economy, crises have emerged as formidable disruptors of economic activities, and have exposed weaknesses in the resilience mechanisms and strategies of all businesses and especially SMMEs. In recent times, the COVID-19 pandemic has again reminded us of the lurking economic danger posed by all kinds of crises worldwide. The pandemic therefore provides an appropriate and convenient crucible for the testing and investigation of the resilience phenomenon to understand the myriads of factors involved, the different responses of businesses, and their effectiveness. Findings from such research could be applied to a wide array of contexts given the cross-cutting nature and similarities of impacts of different crises that may affect businesses in the future. This study aims to delve into the nuances of crisis resilience within using the lens of the COVID-19 era as a poignant case study.

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its profound and far-reaching impact on global economies, has brought to the forefront the imperative of understanding how SMMEs respond, adapt, and recover from unforeseen challenges. The crisis, while exacerbating existing resilience challenges, also presents a unique opportunity for a comprehensive analysis of SMME resilience mechanisms.

The literature review sections that follow are organized around four primary themes corresponding to the study objectives. The first examines the challenges faced by SMMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic and illuminates the specific stressors and disruptions experienced by these enterprises. Drawing on established frameworks and empirical studies, this section provides a foundation for understanding the multifaceted nature of challenges in crisis situations.

The second theme covers the crisis resilience mechanisms employed by SMMEs in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Building on seminal works in the field of organizational resilience and adaptability, this section scrutinizes the strategies and innovations adopted by SMMEs to navigate the complexities of the COVID-19 era.

The third theme of the literature review focuses on assessing the effectiveness of the resilience mechanisms, policies, and support frameworks implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative studies, this section critically evaluates the impact of various interventions on enhancing crisis resilience among SMMEs.

The literature review concludes by exploring existing recommendations for interventions, policies, and frameworks aimed at improving SMME crisis resilience. By synthesizing insights from academic research, policy documents, and industry reports, this section of the literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the actionable strategies that can contribute to the long-term sustainability and growth of SMMEs in different contexts.

The literature review aims to contribute not only to the academic discourse on crisis resilience but also to offer practical insights that can inform the decisions and actions of SMME owners, policymakers, regulators, and academics. It also aims to highlight the knowledge gaps in existing literature which the current research seeks to address with a view to pave the way for collective interventions that foster SMME resilience. Hopefully, this will help nurture sustainable economic growth, hinged on SMMEs, in both developing and developed economies, through SMME resilience in the face of future crises, regardless of their nature.

2. Challenges Faced by SMMEs in Crisis Times

Several studies show that SMMEs face a myriad of challenges during crisis times. Crises studied included natural disasters (floods/storms, earthquakes, droughts, etc), global economic crises (depressions), and pandemics (COVID-19, avian viruses, influenza, etc). SMMEs are vulnerable to economic shocks and disruptions due to several factors. These include having limited resources, including internal capital, compared to

larger enterprises (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Ali, et al., 2021; Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020; Eggers, 2020; Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021), dependence on trade, which exposes them when some exporters withdraw from international markets and shift focus on their domestic markets (Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021).

However, despite the varied nature in scope, response and effectiveness, parallels can be drawn between the different crises, and it is these commonalities that lend themselves to the development of universal interventions and strategies for their management and control leading to the much-desired resilience in any business including SMMEs. This study employs the most recent global crisis to impact businesses, COVID-19, as a proxy crisis to understand the operating environment, the challenges faced, the resilience strategies employed to manage them, and the extent of their effectiveness. This provides an evidence-based platform for the formulation and deployment of effective resilience strategies for use by SMMEs to respond to future crises thereby ensuring their survival and resilience for the purpose of fulfilling their traditional role as drivers of economic growth and employment creation.

2.1 Challenges paused to SMMEs by the COVID-19 pandemic

Reviewed literature emphasized the impending economic distress caused by the pandemic and highlighted the recovery strategies that were deployed to manage the crisis. SMMEs were impacted by the pandemic in different ways, depending on the nature of business, geographic location, local economic environment, and entrepreneurial innovative and adaptive capability during the crisis period (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022). Dependence on trade, in the era of globalisation, exposed them to economic shocks and disruptions (Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021).

The challenges faced included, operational disruption, supply chain disruption, shortage of internal funds (Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021; Fitriasar, 2020; Eggers, 2020; Ali, et al., 2021; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021; Herbane, 2019), risk of bankruptcy (for example around 60% of SMMEs were at risk of running out of their cash reserves in Hungary) (Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021), scarcity of government stimulation packages during the lockdown and movement control period (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021; Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021). In Bangladesh, for instance, studies revealed that cash flow shortages and supply chain disruptions were critical constraints for SMMEs during the pandemic, impacting their operations and financial stability (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022).

Some studies revealed a stepwise, rather than wholesale, impact on organisations by the COVID-19 pandemic starting with the operations function and later on the sales function as the crisis continued (Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021).

The pandemic created market uncertainties in the areas of consumer behaviour, market dynamics, and demand (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; Bak, Shaw, Colicchia, & Kumar, 2023; Fitriasar, 2020). Some exporters withdrew from international markets and shifted focus to their domestic markets during the pandemic (Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021). When foreign partners act in this way it leads to a breakdown of trust and loss of business. In response, SMMEs increasingly turn to host-country partners, potentially leading to a loss of control occasioned by increased power of suppliers and or buyers in a shrunk market space (Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021). Ultimately, international growth prospects are scuttled (Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021)

The economic climate obtaining under the pandemic made it difficult to forecast sales, plan inventory levels, and adapt marketing strategies to meet evolving customer needs, especially in the absence of trusted partners (Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021).

Studies revealed that deficiencies in capacity to adopt, adapt, and utilise digital technologies were an important challenge impacting SMME viability during COVID-19. The capacity deficiency may have emanated from a lack of experience with crisis management in comparison to larger enterprises (Herbane, 2019), or a potential lack of internal R&D capabilities technologies for digitalization (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020) leading to a reliance on external technologies which may be poorly understood or adapted to context. Consequently, some SMMEs were not digitally prepared to face the challenges inherent in transitioning to online operations, implementing remote work arrangements, and leveraging digital tools for communication, collaboration, and customer engagement (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022).

SMMEs also faced challenges in ensuring the health and safety of employees, implementing workplace safety measures, managing remote teams, and addressing employee concerns about job security and work-life balance (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021).

Additionally, SMMEs faced challenges with complying with some government regulations and restrictions, such as large-scale social restrictions affecting business operations (Fitriasar, 2020).

In conclusion, the above-mentioned challenges underscored the vulnerabilities of SMEs to external shocks and disruptions and highlighted the need for resilience-building strategies and targeted support to help small businesses navigate the impacts of crises including the COVID-19 crisis. Formulating and deploying such strategies is operationalised through the application of survival theories and conceptual frameworks, both existing and new.

3. COVID-19 SMME Resilience Strategies

Various theories have been advanced to explain how firms survive or can survive different negative impacts on themselves, including crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These include, but are not limited to Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), Environmental Uncertainty Theory (Mafini & Dlodlo, 2014; Duncan, 1972), Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece et al., 1997), Life Cycle Theory (Churchill & Lewis, 1983), Institutional Theory (Mwatsika, 2015; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), Resource-Based View (Barney, 1991; Penrose, 1959), and Resilience Theory (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). A detailed discussion of these theories is beyond the scope of this study. Below, the various strategies employed by SMMEs during the COVID-19 era are discussed.

3.1 Digital transformation

A general rise in digital transformation during the crisis was noted (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022) indicating that enterprises leveraging digital platforms, technology, digital marketing, and innovations could achieve success and profitability (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021). Implementation involved investing in e-commerce platforms, online marketing strategies, digital payment systems, and remote collaboration tools to maintain business continuity and reach customers in a digital-first environment (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; Fitriasar, 2020). Digital technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and online office software were employed to monitor the pandemic, enable remote work, and support crisis responses (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020). However, some studies note that there was room for improvement, especially in areas such as digital business models and management models (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020). SMMEs often relied on external technologies for digitalization, indicating a potential lack of internal R&D capabilities (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020). The extent to which developing economies utilised technologies in their response to is not fully appreciated, although there is evidence of some use of technology in such areas as remote working mostly involving the use of social media platforms like whatsapp, zoom, and Microsoft teams for the coordination and monitoring of work-related activities.

3.2 Harnessing relationships

Many SMMEs turned to their relational capabilities to stay afloat during the pandemic (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021; Herbane, 2019; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021; Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021). This involved collaborating with suppliers, distributors, employees, and regulators. Harnessing relational capabilities helped SMMEs to find innovative solutions to the challenges posed by the pandemic (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021; Ali, et al., 2021).

Encouraging positive employee relationships, including developing an entrepreneur mindset in employees seems to have been instrumental in building resilience for some SMMEs (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022). Additionally, proactive communication of the SMME's business purpose coupled to demonstrated care for employees, for instance health and safety measures, providing remote work support, and offering training and development opportunities helped to build trust and resilience within some organization (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021; Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017).

Other organisations improved their prospects by focusing on building customer relations through personalized communication, loyalty programs, online promotions, and responsive customer service. This helped to maintain

relationships, drive sales, and retain customer loyalty during the crisis (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017).

3.3 Building financial capacity

Some SMMEs focused on building financial capacity by implementing several initiatives including cost reduction, seeking financial assistance, exploring new revenue streams, including social capital (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Jalilian, Kirkpatrick, & Weiss, 2019; Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021; Fitriasar, 2020), financial planning, cash flow management, accessing government support programs, loans, tax payment extensions, loan delays and grants to stabilize their finances (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021). Robust financial plans included strategies to cover fixed costs and maintain cash flow during periods of low sales (Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021; Eggers, 2020; Herbane, 2019; Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020).

3.4 Creating competitive products and services

Some SMMEs tapped into their innovative reserves to develop competitive products and services to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on their businesses (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022). This involved introducing new products, services, and business models, coupled to repurposing existing resources (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017). An example is the SMMEs in the food industry adopted a strategy that focused on the production of food products with higher demand and profit margins, allowing for more efficient resource allocation, for instance the use of flexible manufacturing and volume strategies to address gaps in supply chain disruptions and meet fluctuating demand (Ali, et al., 2021).

3.5 Agility and reconfiguration

Workplace and logistics pipelines were also reorganized by other SMMEs as a way to adapt to the new normal and ensure business continuity (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021). Reconfiguration encompassed the optimization of supply chains through supplier diversifying, establishment of local sourcing options, implementation of inventory management systems, and enhancing logistics and distribution networks to mitigate disruptions and ensure product availability (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017). Other practices adopted included flexible work arrangements, remote work capabilities, and rapid decision-making processes to respond quickly to changing market conditions and customer needs (Tukamuhabwa, Stevenson, & Busby, 2017; Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021; saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021; Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Eggers, 2020).

3.6 Management practices

Some management practices were viewed as important for building resilience to the crisis. An example is decentralized decision-making which was thought to help business units to focus on environmental issues specific to their geographic location, thereby allowing for a more targeted response to disruptions (Ali, et al., 2021). Formal strategic planning and Business Continuity Planning (BCM) were also seen as instrumental to the improvement of performance and the SMME's ability to respond and recover from acute crises (Herbane, 2019).

The resilience mechanisms discussed above are not exhaustive, but highlight the importance of adaptability, innovation, and collaboration for SMMEs to navigate through crises successfully. Through these mechanisms, some SMMEs were able to navigate the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, adapt to the new business landscape, and position themselves for recovery and growth in a post-pandemic world.

4. Effectiveness of COVID-19 Resilience Strategies

The crisis resilience mechanisms employed by some SMMEs have helped in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak by enabling them to adapt to the changing business environment, enhance their competitiveness, and maintain operational continuity during the crisis (Fitriasar, 2020).

4.1 Digital transformation

Enterprises that effectively utilized digital platforms, technology, digital marketing, and innovations were able to achieve success and profitability during the pandemic, indicating the potential effectiveness of digitalization initiatives (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022; Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020). The promotion of digital transformation by governments and the adoption of new technologies have been demonstrated to help SMMEs in developing digital skills and tools to enhance their resilience and competitiveness (Fitriasar, 2020; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021).

4.2 Harnessing relationships

Strong ties between SMMEs and their network partners has been found to increase resilience, even under a negative outlook (Ali, et al., 2021). Effective collaboration can help SMMEs overcome their traditional financing disadvantages through innovative technologies (Bak, Shaw, Colicchia, & Kumar, 2023; Ali, et al., 2021). Collaborative efforts among supply chain actors, including SMMEs, play a crucial role in enhancing the reactive strategy for supply chain resilience (SCRes) (Ali, et al., 2021). Lastly, network partners have been shown to be critical to the successful internationalization of SMMEs, enabling market learning and playing an important role in crisis situations (Fath, Fiedler, Sinkovics, Sinkovics, & Sullivan-Taylor, 2021).

4.3 Building financial capacity

Enterprises that received pre-crisis financial assistance demonstrated significantly more optimism regarding their prospects, indicating a positive impact of support measures on SMME resilience (Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021). In Bangladesh and Finland, for instance, the governments offered a broad spectrum of stimulus packages, including direct lending, grants, subsidies, and instructions to commercial banks to promote SMMEs through loans at reduced interest rates. However, it was noted that most of these stimulus packages were primarily focused on the garments industry, in Bangladeshi, thus potentially leaving out other SMME sectors (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022). In the Finish context, government interventions may not have fully addressed the unique challenges faced by growth-oriented SMMEs (Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021). Other studies have shown that respondents expressed challenges in accessing the offered stimulus packages, citing barriers from conditions for eligibility and a focus on specific industries (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022). Additionally, there were concerns about the adequacy and specificity of support for growth-oriented firms in places such as Finland (Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021).

4.4 Agility and reconfiguration

Literature alludes to the fact that activation of SMMEs' dynamic capabilities allowed them to sense and respond to the crisis quickly and effectively, leading to better performance outcomes (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021).

Formal strategic planning and Business Continuity Planning (BCM) have been associated with improved performance and the ability of SMEs to respond and recover from acute crises (Herbane, 2019).

4.5 Management practices

Formal strategic planning and BCM have been associated with improved performance and the ability of SMEs to respond and recover from acute crises (Herbane, 2019).

Overall, the effectiveness of SMME resilience strategies varied with the specific context and implementation. While the efforts of governments in offering stimulus packages are acknowledged, the challenges in accessing the support are noted. There is therefore need for broader inclusivity across SMME sectors to effectively promote development during crisis times (Hossain, Akhter, & Sultana, 2022). Continuous evaluation and adaptation of these mechanisms are essential to ensure the long-term sustainability and growth of SMMEs in challenging times.

5. Conclusion

The relatively limited quantum of research on SMME resilience indicates an area of research in its infancy. Existing studies have been conducted in different geographic contexts to varying degrees. Studies conducted with a global scope seem to dominate followed by Asian economies, and lastly developing world contexts. African, industry-specific, and developing country-focused studies are rather scanty, but serve to highlight the desperate need for studies conducted in these contexts in view of the proportionately bigger role played by SMMEs in the developing world in general and Africa in particular (Muriithi, 2017; Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, Demystifying small and medium enterprises'(SMEs) performance in emerging and developing economies, 2018; Das, Kundu, & Bhattacharya, 2020).

The wide scope of themes covered by SMME resilience research suggests an emerging research area and may explain the seemingly chaotic state of the existing literature on SMME resilience characterised by divergent views on several areas, including a lack of standardised definitions of key concepts and research approaches/methodologies. Regardless, the existing research themes provide a good launch pad for further research and inquiry. The top three most researched themes are SMME resilience, Internationalization and Global Markets for SMMEs, and Resilience of SMMEs during adverse conditions.

The least researched themes are Adaptive Leadership for Small Business Survival, Networking and Resources for SME Survival, and Family SMEs & Social Responsibility, followed by MSMEs & Employment Generation, and Technology and Innovation for SME Survival.

The most researched sub-theme is Global Challenges and Internationalization Strategies for SMMEs, followed by Resilience of SMMEs during economic crises.

6. Research Gaps

6.1 Limited research in some contexts

Examined literature seems to imply that the least researched contexts of SMME resilience are industry-specific, African, and developing world in that order. This finding is particularly important given that SMMEs play a proportionately bigger role in economic development and employment creation in developing economies in general and Africa in particular (Muriithi, 2017; Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Das, Kundu, & Bhattacharya, 2020). In that light, literature review indicates that there is not much SMME resilience research that has been conducted in Southern Africa.

6.2 Limited research on some resilience strategies

The least researched areas worthy of research focus therefore are Adaptive Leadership for Small Business Survival, Networking & Resources for SMME Survival, Family SMMEs and Social Responsibility, MSMEs & Employment Generation, and Technology & Innovation for SMME Survival. The target sub-themes under these main themes should be Strategic Adaptation for Small Business Survival, Network Resources for SMME Survival, Family SMMEs & Corporate Social Responsibility, MSMEs in Employment Generation, SMMEs in Africa & Economic Development, Technological Innovation & SMME Survival, E-Commerce & Digital Transition for SMME Resilience, and Technology Adaptation & Sustainability in SMMEs. Areas of research focus for SMME studies roughly agreeing with the research foci suggested in this study can be found in literature. Zonouzi, Hoseyni, & Khoramshahi (2021) suggests further studies on policy making in SMME sector.

6.3 Limited research on business survival before performance

Some researchers have suggested the need for further research on business survival before performance (Li & Rama, 2015). Rahman, Yaacob, & Radzi (2016), and Lee, Kelley, Lee, & Lee (2012) felt a need for more empirical research to establish the connections between social networking, computerized record-keeping, online marketing, and SMME survival (including in different countries and using various technological innovation drivers).

6.4 Further research on context-specific understanding of resilience theories

Other authors have called for more empirical research on SMME resilience (in all its forms and manifestations), including research to further the context-specific understanding of theories underpinning resilience with a special emphasis on the developing world given the fact that SMMEs are often the least prepared for extreme events (Saad, Hagelaar, van der Velde, & Omta, 2021; Sullivan-Taylor & Branicki, 2011; Ahmed, Kilika, & Gakenia, 2021; Costa & Castro, 2021; Placeholder1; Das, Kundu, & Bhattacharya, 2020).

7. Recommendations

Different studies have proposed various interventions for enhancing SMME crisis resilience. Recognizing the importance of external factors as drivers of SMMEs' performance is proposed by some researchers (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, Demystifying small and medium enterprises' (SMEs) performance in emerging and developing economies, 2018). These factors may include policies such as those on infrastructural and energy services to encourage SMMEs' growth (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021; Herbane, 2019). Regulatory constraints that hinder SMME compliance with government policies and rules needs to be addressed (Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021), including incentivizing formal registrations of SMMEs and simplifying regulations and taxes (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018). Targeted tax breaks can be availed to encourage SMME growth, especially in challenging economic environments (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Fitriasar, 2020). The focus of policy responses should shift towards more structural measures aimed at promoting SMMEs' long-term resilience and further growth (Herbane, 2019), with a particular emphasis on innovation support schemes (Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021). There should be supportive policies that facilitate digital transformation, access to digital infrastructure, training programs, and regulatory

frameworks tailored to the needs of SMMEs to enhance their crisis resilience and long-term sustainability (Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020). Other authors felt that some SMME sectors such as food manufacturing, need targeted interventions (Ali, et al., 2021). Creating centers to help SMMEs access financial support for international and local activities can further their resilience (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018).

Empowering entrepreneurs through giving them knowledge of taxes and the legal system can boost performance (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018).

Digital transformation through the use of technology and innovation to stimulate SMMEs' performance needs to be promoted (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018; Fitriasar, 2020; Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020), including the role and interaction of dynamic capabilities and digital technologies in SMME crisis responses.

On the research frontier, academics need to do further research studies, longitudinal and/or cross-sectional, to understand the impact of crises on SMMEs and identify effective strategies for enhancing their resilience (Fitriasar, 2020; Eggers, 2020). More studies are needed to understand how strategies like SMME collaboration contribute to their resilience. Such studies may focus on barriers and drivers of collaboration, implementation strategies of collaboration and collaborative practices (Bak, Shaw, Colicchia, & Kumar, 2023; saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021; Fitriasar, 2020). Research should also aim to better understand the theories underpinning the relationship between resilience and its influencing factors, particularly focusing on the resource-based view and resource orchestration theory for building firm resilience in resource-scarce and vulnerable settings (saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021). Other research foci include the effectiveness of crisis resilience mechanisms, leadership strategies, and collaborative networks in enhancing SMME performance during crises (Eggers, 2020). Academics are encouraged to further explore the interplay between entrepreneurial activities, crisis resilience mechanisms, and organizational sustainability in SMMEs (Herbane, 2019). Ali et al (2021) advocates for research on supply chain resilience strategies, crisis management, and sustainable practices tailored to SMMEs in the food industry.

Practical interventions to enhance SMME resilience, especially in extremely vulnerable settings like developing countries, should be explored (saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021). Interventions should be tailored to address the specific challenges faced by SMMEs, considering differences across industries, firm sizes, and geographic locations (Nyikos, Soha, & Béres, 2021; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021). Factors such as entrepreneurial orientation, human capital, physical capital, and social capital should be considered in these interventions (saad, Hagelaar, Velde, & Omta, 2021). These should be based on findings from country-specific studies to be effective (Ndiaye, Razak, Nagayev, & Ng, 2018).

Policymakers and business leaders should focus on enhancing the adaptive capacity of SMMEs by promoting entrepreneurial mindset and proactive communication to build trust and resilience within organizations (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022). This should be coupled with employee training to be effective (Ali, et al., 2021).

Collaboration and networking among SMMEs should be promoted and facilitated to enhance crisis resilience, promote sustainable business practices, and access resources and capabilities (Pongtanalert & Assarut, 2022; Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021; Eggers, 2020; Guo, Yang, Huang, & Guo, 2020; Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021). Business leaders should prioritize collaboration and networking with other SMMEs, suppliers, and industry partners to enhance resilience and promote sustainable business practices (Ali, et al., 2021). Strong local networks and partnerships should be considered as a viable resilience enhancer for SMMEs (Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021). Local communities, businesses, and support organizations, enable SMMEs to access resources, expertise, and opportunities for collaboration (Zutshi, Mendy, Sharma, Thomas, & Sarker, 2021).

Continuous learning and adaptation through reflection on challenges, reactions, and learning experiences, can improve SMME resilience and readiness to face future crises. Developing a framework for explicit learning processes can aid entrepreneurs in navigating uncertainties and building sustainable business practices (Schepers, Vandekerckhof, & Dillen, 2021).

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