

Entrepreneurial Experiences on Food Business Recovery amidst the Pandemic: A Transcendental Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

The impact of the pandemic befell the enterprise and the entrepreneurs affected every facet of the business including sales, profitability, operations, and human resources. The purpose of this study was to find meaning in the lived experiences, coping mechanisms for recovery, and insights of entrepreneurs of food businesses in Davao City as they brave the effects of the pandemic. Using transcendental phenomenology, the study was viewed from the perspectives of the entrepreneurs without the bias and input of the researcher. The qualitative approach created an interview guide, validated by qualitative experts used in the conduct of in-depth interviews of seven entrepreneurs selected through snowball purposeful sampling method. The study found that the extensive experiences of the participants brought about by the ability of the entrepreneurs to adapt hastened the fast business recovery. During the pandemic, the entrepreneurs implemented a variety of coping strategies that directly responded to the issue of declining sales and increasing costs including financial, sales, marketing, human resource, and operations-related strategies. The various motivations of entrepreneurs both internal and external pushed them to recover soon. These motivations include ensuring unhindered work for employees to support their families, personal resilience, social impact, the opportunity to innovate, and the opportunity to pursue passion, even in challenging times.

Keywords: Business management, recovery, sustainability, entrepreneurs, Davao City, Philippines,.

INTRODUCTION

It is a reality that businesses and entrepreneurs were heavily affected and challenged by the Covid-19 pandemic, and its impact varies from simple to complex. The effect includes profitability decline, lack of customers, and business closures (Looze & Desai, 2020). Enterprises experience closures worldwide from different industries, including the food industry and among various sizes of companies. The food industry in Canada was affected (Hailu, 2021), in the USA (Walmsley, 2021), and Asia (Fan et al., 2021), among others. One problematic area among businesses is the need for recovery programs to ensure the ability of businesses to survive (Yadav et al., 2022). Secondly, entrepreneurs need help to handle enterprise recovery after the pandemic (Shaikh et al., 2022). In addition, the recovery effort is extensively challenged by financial capability, lack of strategies, and the lack of digitalization skills, among others (Afshan et al., 2021; Alhothali & Dajani, 2022; and Javier-Cueto et al., 2022). The challenge thus for businesses is how to recover from the pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The pandemic allowed entrepreneurs in the food industry to learn new sustainable strategies for managing

enterprises' recovery efforts, drawing from their motivations and challenges. This study is essential to understand how entrepreneurs and enterprises have shaped their recovery efforts. In addition, the entrepreneurs must learn how businesses implemented the strategies amidst a turbulent business environment during the pandemic in managing the supply chain and the financials (Montoya-Torres et al., 2021; Zahra, 2021), business disruptions (Zahra, 2021), risk mitigations (Miroudot, 2020), establishing collaboration (Crick & Crick, 2020), and resilience and innovation (Li et al., 2021), and most importantly recovery efforts (Loose & Desai, 2020; Alhothali et al., 2022; Javier-Cueto et al., 2022; and Pattinson and Cunningham, 2022).

This study will help entrepreneurs, enterprises, and academics understand what recovery efforts and best practices were implemented (Lungu & Bogoslov, 2020; Haltiwanger, 2022; Storr et al., 2022). In the study of Maritz et al. (2020) in an Australian setting, entrepreneurs who brave the pandemic were thought of as unsung heroes. The pandemic was a catastrophic event. However, the entrepreneurs were found to have shown resilience to balance the role of entrepreneurship and surviving the pandemic through recovery strategies. Entrepreneurs are at the crossroads between helping society and struggling to keep their businesses afloat. The significance of this study may be life-changing for enterprises and entrepreneurs alike. Furthermore, women in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have realized that digitalization would hasten recovery efforts (Afshan et al., 2021 Alhothali et al., 2022).

The literature reviewed showed that studies on entrepreneurs during the Covid-19 pandemic were already studied from various points of view. It studies on the impact of the Pandemic on large corporations, the impact on supply disruptions, changes in customer behavior, and changes in entrepreneurial characteristics, among many others. The first gap therefore identified is related to the knowledge gap where few studies related to MSMEs and their recovery strategies to cope with the effect of the pandemic specifically on the food business. There is also a need to re-assess entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial characteristics or personal attributes on how to succeed amid the pandemic. There is a need to contextualize which entrepreneurial skills are essential for business recovery. Another gap is the empirical gap in the context of recovery. The studies provided in the literature are more often recovery perspectives before the pandemic. However, some literature found that new perspectives were created as a lesson learned from the pandemic experience. This study will further understand business recovery from the fresh views of entrepreneurs.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative approach using a transcendental phenomenological approach. Phenomenological qualitative research helped determine the participants' experiences to understand the meaning of people's lived experiences. Phenomenology was developed as a theoretical approach to qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological study explores the experience of the people and in the context of this study, the entrepreneurs, and how they experienced running business operations before the pandemic, during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the recovery efforts after the pandemic.

In addition, this study uses a transcendental type of phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology attempts to understand the experiences of a particular phenomenon; moreover, Sheehan (2014) described transcendental phenomenology in detail as bringing added dimensions to human experiences meaningfully. These are direct responses from research participants, and this type of phenomenology uses descriptions in presenting lived experiences. It also uses the epoche technique in describing the experiences, setting aside the previous knowledge and experience of the researcher (Wa-Mbaleka and Rosario, 2022).

Research Participants

The study's research participants were entrepreneurs and business managers in Davao City who successfully recovered from the impact of the pandemic. The inclusion criteria in choosing the participants included businesses operating for more than five years, beginning in 2023 and 5 years before 2023, and going through the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, the business has continuously operated, surviving the impact of the pandemic. The businesses of the entrepreneurs were in the food industry in sub-categories such as restaurants, catering, and online food businesses. The participants excluded were the entrepreneurs who have been operating for less than five years. This ensured the homogeneity of the responses of the participants of the study.

Sampling Procedure

This research used purposeful sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research. Creswell (2014) explained that the purposeful sampling strategy involved the researcher selecting the participants purposely for a particular reason, especially those who experienced and understood the phenomenon. The phenomenon under scrutiny is the decline of the business performance of entrepreneurs due to the pandemic and the recovery efforts. There were seven participants involved in the study which has established the saturation of the study. The participants are entrepreneurs, four women and three men with meaningful 963 years of entrepreneurial experiences before the pandemic. Purposeful sampling refers to a group of non-probabilistic sampling techniques in which units were selected because they have characteristics needed to conform to the needs of the sample to make it heterogeneous (Benoot et al., 2016). More specifically, the researcher used snowball sampling, a purposeful sampling method, since more data was needed to help the researcher identify participants immediately (Naderifar et al., 2017). Snowball sampling expands the sample by asking one participant to recommend the study to other participants. In this study, the researcher began the interview with two known participants who were acquaintances in the food business and then received recommendations from them until the seven participants were completed.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection methods for phenomenological studies primarily involved indepth interviews (IDI) with participants (Creswell, 2014). The purpose of a phenomenological interview is to describe the meaning of a phenomenon that several research participants share (Showkat & Parveen, 2017). Frequently, in phenomenological studies, multiple interviews are conducted with each research participant. Moustakas (1994), as quoted by Alase (2017), suggested that phenomenological interviews could start with a social conversation to establish a favorable environment that is both relaxing and trusting. The method employed in this study was primarily IDI to reflect the busy character of the entrepreneurs who may be unable to gather at a specific time and place for an FGD. Other methods included observations and writing those observations on field notes. Before the IDI, the research established preconceptions about entrepreneurs' experiences. The researcher described the phenomenon of the recovery of the entrepreneurs to get a grasp of what the participants might share, as well as adapted a definition of recovery, precisely that of BCI (2023).

The collection procedure refers primarily to the IDI conducted following the steps.

First, In-depth Interviews (IDI) were conducted with each participant. The interviews were recorded using a voice recording tool. Field notes were established. The researcher sent letters to the participants, and as soon as he/she agreed, the IDI was scheduled. The second step was the conduct of transcribing activity using Hyper Transcribe software. The transcription was reviewed for purposes of ensuring transcription accuracy and language accuracy. The third step followed, which was to establish accuracy. Member checking was also conducted. The participants were asked to sign the transcription documents. In the fourth step, upon

completion of the member checking, the transcribed data were immediately subjected to first level coding in a thematic analysis. The researcher used the Hyper Research software application to conduct thematic analysis. Steps 1 to 4 were repeated iteratively for each succeeding participant. As soon as theme saturation was established, the researcher stopped conducting IDI.

Data Collection Tool

The researcher used an interview guide to gather the data and a panel of experts validated the interview guide. The panel with qualitative research experiences validated the interview guide to ensure inputs were relevant. The survey tool provided in Appendix A has four parts. The first part is the demographic profiling questions, the second part is the section with questions related to the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, the third part is questions related to coping strategies, and the last part constitutes information related to insights that entrepreneurs can share.

DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis followed the following steps using the Heidegger Framework which includes horizontal, reduction of experiences, thematic clustering, and comparison of responses with other data sources. The thematic analysis focused on thematic clustering to create core themes. In this step, the researcher clustered the sub-themes into major themes and schematized the invariant constituents. This process, which is the creation of horizons, is defined as the core theme of the experience of the phenomenon as posited by Moustakas (1994).

As a process, the interview utterances were transcribed, and the transcripts were saved so that themes and structures were examined in greater depth. The researcher made every effort to keep a detailed record of the process by taking notes. The goal is to preserve the most important phrases and thoughts from the participants in this study. The researcher further examined and compared the participants' answers based on the data gathered. The researcher took notes of common and unique answers that could give a different perception of the study. The researcher came up with a summary of the review data gathered from the participants. In addition, when the themes were already created, the researcher interpreted the patterns shown in the data to make meaning of shared experiences, coping strategies, and learning. The result of this process was to create insights into the experiences of the phenomenon, which is recovery. Then, the summary of codes, sub-themes, and themes was presented in the manuscript.

Ethical Consideration: The ethical consideration ensured that the rights of the research participants were protected both during the conduct of the IDI and during the dissemination of the study results. The ethical elements of the study were observed, including social value, Informed Consent, and the participants' vulnerability, among others. The researcher will observe these elements in the implementation throughout the research process.

Results and discussion: The participants of the study are experienced restaurant operators in Davao City with extensive experience even before the pandemic. During the interviews conducted, the researcher found that the lowest number of years of operation is nine years while the most extensive/experienced restaurant operator is 63 years. The extensive years of operation were found later in the study to be useful for businessmen to survive the pandemic. All food businessmen and women were into casual dining and none from the fine dining and take-out-only food segments. All of them are owners of their businesses and could be described as hands-on owners and managers at the same time. They make the strategic decisions of their operations however they vary from their respective operational practices. Some are hands-on in total business including dining, kitchen, financial operations, sales and marketing, and human resources.

Table 1
Profile of the Participants

PARTICIPANTS				
	PSUEDONYM	AGE	TYPE OF FOOD	YEARS IN OPERATION
1	Maris	58	Spanish, Filipino, Asian Food Restaurant Fine Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery	12 Years
2	Lisa	46	Fast Food Restaurant Casual Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery	9 Years
3	Leonora	47	Seafood Restaurant Fine Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery	11 Years
4	Jerome	54	Seafood Grill & Barbeque Restaurant Casual Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery Function Hall - Accept events like birthday, ect. & Live Band	40 Years
5	Greg	45	Filipino Buffet Restaurant and Catering Services Buffet Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery Function Hall Accept events like wedding , ect.	13 Years
6	Men-Ying	57	Chinese, Filipino, Asian Food Restaurant Fine Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery Special Diets. Vegetarian Friendly ; Meals Function Hall - Accept events like birthday, ect.	63 Years
7	Rhomamia	52	Seafood Grill Restaurant and Catering Services Fine Dining , Take Out Order and Food Delivery Function Hall - Accept events like birthday, ect.	21 Years

RQ1. What are the living experiences of food business entrepreneurs before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and business recovery after the pandemic in Davao City due to the impact of the pandemic?

The unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the restaurant industry are disruptive, requiring entrepreneurs to possess adaptation, resilience, and recovery. This dynamic sector, known for its diversity and innovation, saw restaurant businessmen navigating through distinct phases of pre-pandemic stability and success, financial turmoil during the pandemic, and determined efforts toward post-pandemic recovery and business improvement. Within these phases, essential themes emerged, encapsulating the experiences and strategies of restaurant entrepreneurs. This exploration delves into these crucial themes, shedding light on the complexities of maintaining stability and success, grappling with financial adversity, and forging a path toward recovery ultimately to business growth. In the study, the entrepreneurs had varying perceptions of their recovery status based on the utterances.

However, using the standard definition provided by the BCI (2023), it was determined that all participants had recovered to some extent. This includes that they had perceptions that they responded to the challenges brought about by the pandemic and were managing the challenges of their businesses. The duration of closure during the pandemic varied too, with some businesses recovering after three months and others taking a little longer. Based on the triangulation with documents, all entrepreneurs were able to show evidence of renewed business permits and the resumption of face-to-face operations indicated their recovery.

In various studies conducted on the businesses in different industries after the pandemic, the focus had always been recovery. This is similar to this study where the focus is recovery. In the study of Javier-Cueto et al. (2022) in the Philippines, the authors studied recovery strategies among entrepreneurs affected by the pandemic. The study was able to point out the need for digitization as a strategy for recovery. This is somewhat similar in some respects as this study also found digitalization as a need however contextualized in marketing where restaurants make use of social media, technology, and digitalization.

The result of this study is similar to Fabeil et al. (2020) where the study was focused on business recovery similarly in the food industry after the Covid-19 pandemic which was conducted in Malaysia. A similar study by van der Gaast et al. (2022) focused on business recovery to establish a recovery framework for

business.

Table 2

Lived Experiences of Business Entrepreneurs on Business Recovery

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Pre-Pandemic Restaurant Sales Stability and Success	Demonstrating good business performance
	Dealing with high-customer count and crowded restaurants
	Running a successful catering services
	Finding ease in hiring employees
	Long-standing business for 9 – 63 years
	Maintaining financial stability
Pandemic Financial Challenges and Struggles	Falling restaurant sales performance
	Declining customer number
	Struggling financials, financial sourcing, and cost control
	Experiencing decreased employee workload
	Increasing competition compounded by pandemic challenges
Post-Pandemic Recovery and Business Improvement	Facing resource challenges including limited supplier availability, delayed deliveries, and stockouts of raw materials during the pandemic
	Recovering business through increasing sales at pre-pandemic levels
	Increasing customer count
	Intensifying marketing strategies and embracing digital marketing
	Implementing financial strategies to ensure financial sustainability
	Enhancing operations through mechanization

Pre-Pandemic Restaurant Sales Stability and Success: Before the pandemic, restaurant businesses were characterized by their ability to demonstrate good business performance. This involved maintaining a positive track record in terms of revenue, profitability, and customer satisfaction. Successful restaurants were adept at handling high customer counts and crowded dining spaces, indicating their popularity and ability to manage demand effectively. Running successful catering services added revenue streams and showcased the restaurant’s versatility. Ease in hiring employees reflected a strong labor market, making it easier to find and retain talent. Long-standing businesses, with histories ranging from 9 to 63 years, indicated resilience and the ability to adapt to changing market conditions. Finally, maintaining financial stability was crucial, as it provided a safety net and resources for future investments.

Moreover, the businesses were also noted to be high in customer count before the pandemic. Food businesses are successful with dine-in, catering services, or counter-type food businesses. Before the pandemic, hiring employees was relatively easy, and businesses were operating with ease ranging from 9 to 63 years. It is also characterized by financial stability. The results of this study are aligned with the findings of Yadav et al. (2022).

Pandemic Financial Challenges and Struggles: The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant financial challenges to the restaurant industry. Falling restaurant sales performance was a common issue as restrictions and safety concerns led to reduced customer traffic. Declining customer numbers further exacerbated revenue declines, making it difficult for businesses to cover operating costs. Struggles related to

finances, financial sourcing, and cost control emerged as restaurants grappled with the need for emergency funds, cost-cutting measures, and managing debt. Decreased employee workload was a consequence of reduced operations and workforce adjustments to match lower customer demand. The pandemic also intensified competition as restaurants vied for a smaller customer base, which was compounded by challenges such as limited supplier availability, delayed deliveries, and stockouts of raw materials, disrupting the supply chain.

In the study of Yadav et al. (2022) businesses before the pandemic aligned their business goals to the SDG for sustainability. Primarily businesses are focused on business growth, high sales, high profitability, and controlled costs over time. The results of the study on the pre-pandemic experiences of restaurant owners provide support to the study of Yadav et al. (2022). The study compared the challenges of entrepreneurs before and during the pandemic and found more challenges during the pandemic where the challenges were described at the organizational level. The result of this study is similar to it where the results compared the experiences of the pre-pandemic and the pandemic. The difference however is that this study is qualitative as compared to the quantitative study of Yadav.

The results of this study noted falling or declining sales performance: This finding is similar to the findings of the study by Haltiwanger (2022) in the USA where the authors noted a sharp decline in food sector businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. The decline in sales is primarily due to the decline in customer counts owing to the various restrictions employed by the government. Similarly, the result of this study is similar to the study of Garcez et al. (2021). The authors were also able to note the decline of the food business during the same pandemic. Another similarity between the said study and the results of this study is that both studies took it to answer the important business questions of how food businesses will recover from the pandemic. The main difference is that this study is qualitative, and the said study is quantitative in approach.

Another finding of this study is that most businesses are struggling financially, financial sourcing is hard, internal controls are challenged, and it is characterized by challenging employee morale, productivity, and maintaining necessary skills. Another challenge is increasing competition, and resource availability challenges, delays in delivery, and stock outs. The results of this study are similar to the studies of Kartseva and Kuznetsova (2020) in Russia, Madeira et al. (2020) in Portugal, and Alessa et al. (2021) in Saudi Arabia. The results of this study are similar to the studies mentioned where incidences of labor vulnerabilities and economic downturns. In the study of Kartseva and Kuznetsova (2020), Russian workers were found to be vulnerable employees either they were experiencing reduced labor income, or they were terminated with economic implications, and limited capacities due to government-mandated lockdowns.

In addition, the results of this study and the studies mentioned deal with how businesses will be able to recover from various factors. The said studies found ways of recovery. This is also similar to the findings of Shepherd & Williams (2020) and Storr et al. (2021). The said studies concluded that during the COVID-19 pandemic, entrepreneurs need to provide goods to the employees and support one another for fast recovery. The results of this study provided support indicating the need for entrepreneurs to value customers, employees, and suppliers.

Post-Pandemic Recovery and Business Improvement: In the post-pandemic phase, restaurant businessmen focused on recovery and improvement strategies. Recovering business through increasing sales at pre-pandemic levels was a primary goal, requiring efforts to attract customers back to dining establishments. Increasing the customer count was essential for revenue growth and included measures to enhance the dining experience and adapt to changing customer preferences. Intensifying marketing strategies and embracing digital marketing played a vital role in reaching a wider audience and adapting to the digital shift in consumer behavior. Implementing financial strategies aimed at ensuring financial sustainability involved managing debt, optimizing costs, and building cash reserves. Enhancing operations through mechanization

indicated a move towards efficiency and automation to streamline processes and reduce labor costs. Innovation was found among business enterprises as a reason to survive entrepreneurial activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors Utomo (2020), Thukral (2021), and Messabia et al. (2022) highlighted similarities to the findings of this study. One common interest is the need for innovation as an important element to survive the pandemic. Similarly, this study also supports the findings of the said study indicating the need for digitalization, technology use, and innovation. However, the dissimilarity is that, in this study, innovation was only very specific to kitchen and food production and marketing and not as a total business.

In this study, it was revealed that entrepreneurs have various coping mechanism strategies including financial, human resource, innovation, and sales and marketing coping strategies. The result of this study supports Doern (2021). The said study identified entrepreneurial factors that greatly help recovery efforts including geopolitical, social, and economic factors. These results were highlighted in the study by Ratten & Jones (2021). These themes and core ideas represent the multifaceted challenges and strategies that restaurant businessmen encountered and employed during and after the pandemic. They reflect the industry's resilience, adaptability, and determination to recover and thrive in a postpandemic business landscape. The major findings from the lived experiences of food business entrepreneurs on business recovery may be summed up into the essential themes including pre-pandemic restaurant sales stability, and success, pandemic financial challenges and struggles, post-pandemic recovery, and business improvement.

Recovering business through increasing sales at pre-pandemic levels: The recovery status of the entrepreneurs was viewed differently by the participants. Some perceived their condition to have recovered from the effects of the pandemic, while others did not. However, using the standard definition of recovery offered by BCI (2023), which highlighted that business recovery is the ability of a business organization to respond effectively to a disruption, recover critical functions, and restore operations to a predefined level within an acceptable time frame. It focuses on the implementation of business continuity plans and the restoration of core business activities.

The definition of BCI would render that all entrepreneurs who participated in this study had recovered but to varying degrees. They have responded to the COVID challenge that disrupted their businesses and are now practically operating. Most of them only closed for about three months during the pandemic period when the government mandated the total lockdown at the beginning of the pandemic. Some others recovered after 3 to 6 months. On the specific functions of the business, all participants were already operating face-to-face, and their business permits can triangulate. These were all renewed in 2021, 2022, and 2023 as observed during the interviews conducted in their respective restaurants. The business permits for 2023 were hung on the walls, while 2021 and 2022 were kept on file and observed.

RQ2. What are the coping mechanisms in the form of strategies for sustainable business operations?

Coping Mechanism Strategies of Restaurant Business: The restaurant industry, renowned for its capacity to innovate and adapt, deployed a myriad of coping mechanism strategies in response to the formidable challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies were instrumental in navigating the complexities of the crisis and sustaining the restaurant business during tumultuous times. In some studies globally, such as those of Storr et al. (2021) and Shepherd & Williams (2020), the authors enumerated several reasons for business closures and recommended strategies to recover. The aforementioned studies were very clear and direct of the reasons including its financial inability to meet obligations owing to the fact of high fixed cost and declining sales.

Thus, business requires coping mechanisms to recover. This study was able to identify primarily financial coping mechanisms to play an important role in the recovery efforts. Restaurants seek additional financial resources to mitigate the impact of plummeting sales and increased costs. This often involved availing loans to ensure operational continuity and employing financial planning to control costs effectively. Many turned

to alternative sources, such as family, friends, and co-workers, to secure additional funding.

The findings of the study by Storr et al. (2021) are similar. Both the study of Storr et al. and the results of this study highlighted the importance of the ability to maintain adequate cash reserves which emerged as a significant strength during the pandemic and provided a cushion to weather financial uncertainties. Additionally, cost-cutting measures were implemented, including minimizing food costs, as restaurants strove to optimize their financial health.

Table 3

Strategic Business Coping Mechanism

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Financial Resource Coping Mechanism	Requiring additional financial fund sources to mitigate financial needs
	Availing of loans to survive increasing costs and lower sales
	Having enough cash as an emergency fund
	Minimizing food costs as a strategy during a pandemic
Human Resource Coping Mechanism	Having good relations with fellow workers, friends, and partners
	Strengthening the learning and development program as a strategy
Innovation Coping Mechanism	Differentiating product offerings through new product development
	Innovating food by the kitchen crew
	Improving the restaurant’s look with minor repairs during the pandemic
Pandemic Sales and Marketing Strategies	Having common friends as marketing agents
	Implementing digital marketing as an innovation strategy
	Having take-out counters as a marketing initiative

Human resource coping mechanisms were equally crucial. Building and maintaining positive relationships with employees, fellow workers, friends, and partners became paramount. The result of this study and those of Shepherd & Williams (2020) found the challenges in maintaining high manpower costs at decreasing sales. Similarly, the two studies explored innovative approaches to address workforce challenges, such as hiring employees laid off by other restaurants or enhancing their learning and development programs to upskill their teams. Some businesses adopted a skeletal workforce strategy to manage costs while still delivering quality service. The utilization of skilled workers was another notable aspect of human resource coping, highlighting the industry’s ability to harness talent in creative ways.

Innovation coping mechanisms played a vital role in adapting to the new normal. Restaurants focused on differentiating their product offerings through new product development and innovating food preparation processes. The result of this study on coping mechanisms was aligned with the studies of the authors Utomo (2020), Thukral (2021), and Messabia et al. (2022). All the studies highlighted prioritizing the quality of food and raw materials to be a business mantra, ensuring that customers continued to receive exceptional dining experiences. Moreover, minor repairs and improvements to restaurant aesthetics were undertaken during the pandemic to enhance the overall customer experience and maintain a competitive edge.

Another strategy to cope with the pandemic is the pandemic sales and marketing strategies. The entrepreneurs were found to leverage personal networks and word-of-mouth marketing. They were all found implementing digital marketing channels to expand customer reach and engage with a bigger number of

customers. The authors Lose and Desai (2020) specifically highlighted that the recovery efforts of entrepreneurs while facing surmountable challenges have to deal with sales strategies to cope with the challenges such as finding new consumers.

Financial Resource Coping Mechanism: The major findings on the coping mechanisms for business operations to recover include financial coping mechanisms. It was found that seeking additional financial funds from external sources, attracting new investors, or exploring partnerships to infuse capital into the business were practiced. Another is the utilization of financial services such as loans to cover operational expenses like salaries and increasing raw materials costs to help bridge the gap between costs and reduced sales. This is in line with the study of Rahman et al. (2022) where the authors recognized the importance of entrepreneurial skills, specifically financial skills as an important factor of development specifically in capital creation, accelerating economic growth, and recovery efforts of enterprises. This finding also supports the study of Shaikh et al. (2022) on the need for sustainable business operations through financial vigor.

Human Resource Coping Mechanism: The coping strategies for human resources include the building of good relationships with different stakeholders including the employees, colleagues, and business partners. A good practice shared by an entrepreneur was the hiring of skilled employees during the pandemic period who were laid off by other restaurants. The results of this study support the findings of the study by Ptak (2022). The said study highlights the need for human resources to stay robust to ensure people in the organization will help in crafting solutions to organizational challenges.

Another HR practice during the pandemic is strengthening the learning and development program which would help enhance employee skills and job satisfaction. Other strategies include operating with a skeletal workforce focusing on the essential roles and responsibilities and encouraging innovation through skilled workers. This finding supports the findings of the study by Boccia and Cseh (2021).

Innovation Coping Mechanism: The coping strategies related to innovation include differentiating product offerings through new product development. The findings of this study revealed that entrepreneurs in the food business did food innovation during the pandemic period. This is in the form of encouraging the kitchen crew to experiment with new flavors, ingredients, or cooking techniques. Moreover, prioritizing good food as a business mantra and maintaining quality in ingredients and preparation is also another innovation strategy of the entrepreneurs. Some others made minor repairs and enhancements to improve the restaurant's ambiance and facilities during the pandemic period maximizing the low customer turn-out and improving the restaurant facilities. These findings revealed similarities with the findings of the study by Li et al. (2021). The author highlighted that innovation initiatives would help entrepreneurs leverage against challenges in the environment.

Pandemic Sales and Marketing Strategies: There were some strategies employed by the entrepreneurs of the restaurant industry during the pandemic. One of which is having common friends as marketing agents. During the pandemic, many businesses sought innovative ways to reach their target audience since traditional marketing methods like inperson events and promotions became challenging due to lockdowns and social distancing measures. One strategy that some businesses adopted was leveraging their customers' networks, often through common friends or word-of-mouth marketing. One example is referral marketing through the help of families, friends, relatives, co-workers, and business partners from wet markets. Businesses encourage their existing customers to refer their friends or acquaintances to the business. Incentives, such as discounts or rewards, were often offered to both the referrer and the new customer. The finding of the study is similar to the findings of Heshmat and Neustaedter (2021). The authors pointed out the need for friends and families for business purposes during the pandemic. Specifically, the authors found out that people during the pandemic observed a shift to new communication practices including increased

communications with family and friends.

Another strategy is implementing digital marketing as an innovation strategy. Entrepreneurs ask their customers to share their products or services on social media platforms. This can create a ripple effect as the content gets shared among friends and followers. More specifically, these encourage customers to write positive reviews or provide testimonials that could be shared with their networks. The idea behind these strategies was to tap into existing social connections to expand the customer base more cost-effectively. This finding is similar to the findings of Shepherd & Williams (2020) and Storr et al. (2021). The authors pointed out that during the pandemic, businesses to create resilience developed online social connections through the internet while others organized internet-based societies to provide mutual support between businesses.

Finally, some other businesses addressed sales and marketing needs by having takeout counters as a marketing initiative. For businesses in the food and beverage industry, takeout counters became a crucial marketing initiative during the pandemic. Some businesses provided the option to dine-in due to restrictions and health concerns offering take-out and delivery services which allowed restaurants to continue serving customers safely and conveniently. Restaurants used take-out counters to promote special deals, discounts, and family meal packages to attract customers. This finding of the study supports the findings of the study by Zhong et al. (2021).

RQ3. What insights can be drawn from the entrepreneurs as regards business resilience?

Table 4

Entrepreneurs’ Insights on Business Resilience

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Insights from Pandemic Experience for Business Recovery	Being goal-driven to improve performance despite the pandemic
	Valuing people (employees, customers, suppliers) despite the experience
	Having enough leverage to combat business challenges
	Having extensive experience and business acumen
Insights on Risks and Mitigation from Pandemic Challenges	Having plans for future risk
	Having risk assessment to mitigate the impact on business
	Implementing service quality as a mitigation strategy
Insights on Motivation Amidst Business Disruption	Valuing Family as the core of motivation
	Having personal growth as a motivation during the pandemic
	Having a positive outlook motivates an entrepreneur to do business during challenging times

Insights from Pandemic Experience for Business Recovery: The insights gleaned from the pandemic experience hold valuable lessons for business recovery, particularly within the context of the restaurant industry. Firstly, being goal-driven emerged as a resounding theme. Despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, restaurant entrepreneurs recognized the importance of setting clear and achievable goals to guide their recovery efforts. This finding aligns with the findings of the study by Afshan et al. (2021) recognizing the criticality of goals, especially during the pandemic. These goals served as beacons of motivation and direction, compelling businesses to strive for improvement and innovation. Whether it was

enhancing safety protocols, diversifying menu offerings, or expanding digital marketing efforts, the pursuit of well-defined objectives drove restaurants to adapt and excel in a rapidly changing landscape.

Insights on risks and mitigation from pandemic challenges: The insights on risk and mitigations from pandemic challenges involve multifaceted risks, encompassing health, economic, social, and cybersecurity challenges. The health risks include overwhelming healthcare systems and employees’ and owners’ health, while economic disruptions resulted in job losses and business closure for a few months. Supply chains face vulnerabilities in raw materials delivery, customer orders delivery, and food preparation challenges. Financial risks caused a bigger chunk of the concerns of the participants where challenges in financial availability resulted in the deterioration of profitability compounded by sales reduction. Consequently, restaurants need additional funds to meet operational costs. Some businesses resorted to borrowings from friends, families, and even external fund sources. This finding is aligned with the findings of Nakat and Bou-Mitri, (2021) where knowledge and information also serve as an assessment tool to ensure business continuity and to determine the level of food industry readiness providing reassurance to all stakeholders during these unprecedented times of the pandemic.

Insights on Motivation amidst Business Disruption: The insights into motivation amidst business disruption offered a glimpse into the driving forces that propelled restaurant entrepreneurs forward. Valuing family as a core motivation is particularly relevant during the pandemic, as it emphasizes the importance of one’s loved ones. The crisis has underscored the significance of spending quality time with family, supporting one another emotionally and financially, and ensuring their well-being. For many individuals, the pandemic has reinforced the idea that family provides a strong anchor in times of uncertainty and serves as a driving force to prioritize health, safety, and stability. The findings of this study are aligned with the findings of the authors Kolodny-Goetz et al. (2021) pointing out that family and community engagements are important elements in fast recovery. Similarly, the findings of this study also pointed out that during the pandemic distress, entrepreneurs resort to family, friends, and work associates for support, morally and financially.

Having personal growth as a motivation during the pandemic reflects a resilient and adaptive mindset. While the pandemic has brought about numerous challenges and disruptions, individuals driven by personal growth are more likely to see these difficulties as opportunities for learning and self-improvement. This motivation can lead to the acquisition of new skills, the pursuit of educational opportunities, and the development of resilience and adaptability, ultimately empowering individuals to navigate the crisis more effectively and emerge stronger and more capable on the other side. These findings of the study are in parallel with the findings of Cueto et al. (2022). The authors posited that improvement or recovery may be categorized into intrinsic which includes personal and professional growth while extrinsic factors include mobility restrictions, market conditions, and household economic status motivations. The similarity between the said findings and the findings of this study is that both recognized the importance of personal growth. However, the study of Cueto et al. (2022) identified many other factors that would help recovery efforts.

Table 5

Entrepreneurial Experiences on Recovery

Major Categories	Essential Themes
Lived Experiences of Business	Pre-Pandemic Restaurant Sales Stability and Success
Entrepreneurs on Business	Pandemic Financial Challenges and Struggles
Recovery	Post-Pandemic Recovery and Business Improvement

Strategic Business Coping Mechanism	Financial Resource Coping Mechanism
	Human Resource Coping Mechanism
	Innovation Coping Mechanism
	Pandemic Sales and Marketing Strategies
Entrepreneurs' Insights on Business Resilience	Insights from Pandemic Experience for Business Recovery
	Insights on Risks and Mitigation from Pandemic Challenges
	Insights on Motivation Amidst Business Disruption

Having a positive outlook motivates an entrepreneur to do business during challenging times by fostering optimism and creative problem-solving. Entrepreneurs with a positive mindset are more likely to identify opportunities amidst adversity, pivot their business models, and find innovative solutions to meet evolving customer needs. This outlook not only helps sustain businesses during crises but also inspires confidence in employees, investors, and customers, ultimately contributing to the long-term success and growth of the entrepreneurial venture. Having a positive outlook as a result of this study was also earlier identified as a recovery element in the study by Zhao et al. (2022). The authors highlighted normative findings that positive psychology is useful in intrapersonal empowerment, interactional empowerment, and behavioral empowerment among entrepreneurs. Similarly, the findings of this study also pointed out the need for positivity among the entrepreneurs for fast recovery of the business enterprise.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the implications instead of the conclusion in qualitative research. These are implications contextually on the lived experiences of food business entrepreneurs, coping mechanisms, and entrepreneurial insights in Davao City. These implications include implications for business practice, implications for research, and implications for theory.

1. Implications for Business: The pre-pandemic stability and success of restaurants highlight the importance of maintaining good business performance, managing high customer counts, running successful catering services, and ensuring ease in hiring employees to build resilience in the face of unexpected challenges. The pandemic financial challenges underscore the need for businesses to be prepared for disruptions by having financial contingency plans in place like securing emergency funds, managing costs effectively, and seeking alternative sources of funding when faced with declining sales and increased competition. Post-pandemic recovery and business improvement strategies emphasize the importance of adaptability, innovation, and digital marketing to attract customers back and achieve pre-pandemic sales levels, while also focusing on strengthening relationships with employees, customers, and suppliers to ensure long-term sustainability.
2. Implications for Academe: Academics can use the lived experiences of food business entrepreneurs as a case study to teach students about resilience, adaptability, and recovery strategies in entrepreneurship courses. Research in academia can focus on further exploring the specific challenges and coping mechanisms of restaurant businesses during and after the pandemic to provide valuable insights for future crises.
3. Implications for Research: Future research can delve deeper into the financial coping mechanisms adopted by restaurant businesses, such as the impact of loans, partnerships, and external funding sources on recovery and even further to long-term financial sustainability. Researchers can investigate the role of innovation and digitalization in the post-pandemic recovery of restaurant businesses and explore how these strategies can be optimized for different types of food establishments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restaurant entrepreneurs should prioritize the development and maintenance of clear and achievable goals to guide their recovery efforts, fostering motivation and direction during challenging times.
- Valuing employees, customers, and suppliers should remain a core principle in restaurant businesses, ensuring that the well-being and satisfaction of stakeholders are upheld to maintain trust and loyalty.
- Entrepreneurs should leverage their networks such as family, friends, and work mates, implement digital marketing strategies, and engage with customers actively through social media to expand their reach and adapt to changing consumer behaviours.
- Financial planning cost control and the maintenance of adequate cash reserves should be ongoing priorities for restaurant businesses to navigate financial challenges effectively.
- Businesses should explore opportunities for innovation in food offerings, preparation processes, and customer experiences to differentiate themselves and remain competitive in the post-pandemic landscape.

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