

Exploring Sustainable Entrepreneur Creativity in Post Covid 19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Some Selected Businesses in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

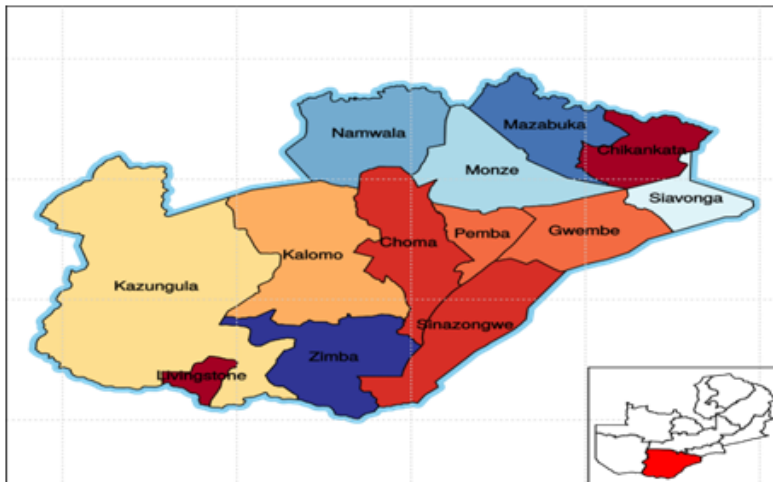
In most developing countries like Zambia, entrepreneurs contribute largely in a society's economic growth and major interruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic can have a negative impact on the well-being of its citizenry and businesses. The onset of the COVID 19 pandemic found many entrepreneurs unprepared and hence several businesses in societies were profoundly disrupted. During this crisis, entrepreneurs faced unexpected new challenges of creating sustainable business strategies. As a result, due to uncertainties of whether the COVID-19 pandemic would end soon or not, most of the businesses had limited choices of either to lay off workers or to close because they had not planned for creative and resilient entrepreneurial strategies that allowed businesses to form stronger growth approaches during these challenges. The objective of the study was to identify sustainable entrepreneur creative strategies in the Post-COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia. A theoretical framework to back the study was formulated. The study employed a descriptive research design, through a purposeful face-to-face interview from selected entrepreneurs in the Southern Province of Zambia. The findings suggest that entrepreneurs need to apply creative factors that are technologically innovative so that they can move away from the standardized norms of physical mortar and brick that lack sustainability. The recommendation to explore further creative entrepreneurial sustainable strategies for future business improvement in the Post-COVID-19 era and beyond are still required.

Keywords: Post-COVID-19 era, COVID-19 pandemic, entrepreneur, sustainable, technological innovation, economic growth, business creativity

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable entrepreneur creativity in the post COVID-19 pandemic has become a critical concern by most of the businesses in Zambia. This is because the effects of the pandemic disrupted most areas of Zambian life especially that of businesses. Due to its unpreparedness, Zambia's government reacted decisively to the threat, shutting down many businesses, schools, and other social gatherings prior to the first confirmed cases (Kafula, et al. 2021). As a result, entrepreneurs seemed to have no means of coping with this unexpected situation. Haefele, et al (2021) resonates that there is need to change this aspect by obtaining competences that can enhance business growth. When it happens, entrepreneurs can access local knowledge, and will be alert to the changing necessities of their communities. Thus, local commercial and social entrepreneurs need to position strategically in providing the goods and services that community members need. They should then apply creative factors that are technologically innovative in order to move away from the standardized norms of physical mortar and brick that lack sustainability. According to Nawa, (2017) the population of the province was 1,589,926 accounting to 12.08% of the total Zambian population of 13,092,666. Southern Province is a predominantly rural district and hence there are not a lot of city or municipal councils. The government stipulates 63 different functions for the councils with the majority of them being infrastructure management and local administration. The Southern Province is the fifth largest province in terms of area, while the fourth largest province in terms of population. Southern Province ranks third with GDP contribution of 11.1%. The figure blow illustrates the main economic towns of Southern province.

Figure 1



Southern province is the fifth largest in Zambia (population 1,589,926) on Lusaka-Livingstone road running through its towns: Livingstone, Kalomo, Choma, Pemba, Monze, and Mazabuka. (Nawa, 2017)

Several researchers have conducted studies on the social and economic challenges faced by small businesses during the COVID-19 crisis in different nations of the world (Castro, Gomez, and Macela 2020; Gorzelany, Magdalena, 2021; Belitski and Kalyuzhnova 2021). A limited number of studies have focused on small medium enterprises (SMEs)'practices for survival post COVID-19 pandemic. Adam and Alarifi, (2021) showed that SMEs have used financial and marketing strategies for survival when faced with the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis. Their findings are significant because they focused on SMEs' long-term, rather than short-term, performance. However, the impact of these strategic responses on SMEs' long-term performance and their potential for efficiency need further study. Hence, a gap in the literature still exists concerning the sustainable entrepreneur creativity in the post COVID-19 pandemic strategies adopted by businesses in Southern Province, Zambia. Zambia, like many other countries faced the unexpected announcement of the onset of COVID-19 crisis in March 2020. In response to the crisis, severe restrictions imposed on public gatherings included closure of schools and all other types of businesses. This experience affected the small businesses and entrepreneurs in that most of them had to cease operations because they lacked sustainable strategies that allowed businesses to form creative growth approaches during this period. Research has identified the influence of entrepreneurial action on the outcomes extended by external conditions like new technologies, economic and natural environments associated with the pandemics like COVID-19 (Buck, DeWaal and Maritz, (2020). Since the end of the crisis is unknown, it is crucial for entrepreneurs and other sectors to create strategies that can affect sustainable business growth. As noted above, the Covid-19 crisis disrupted societies and intensely altered lives in Zambia because of its unexpected onset. The present life's circumstances have been extraordinarily shaped by persistent societal realities such as entrenched social and economic uncertainties. In trying to chart a path forward, entrepreneurs and business owners are anxious on how they can apprehend the crisis by seeking sustainable creative strategies that will be resilient in the post COVID-19 pandemic. In light of the aforementioned, the objective of the article is to explore sustainable entrepreneur creativity in the post COVID-19 pandemic from selected businesses in Southern Province, Zambia by posing the following study questions:

- To what extent did COVID-19 pandemic cause an economic-social crisis to entrepreneurs in Southern province, Zambia?
- Which technological innovations can be adopted to improve business strategies in the post COVID-19?
- What type of sustainable entrepreneur creative strategies can be practiced in the post COVID-19

pandemic?

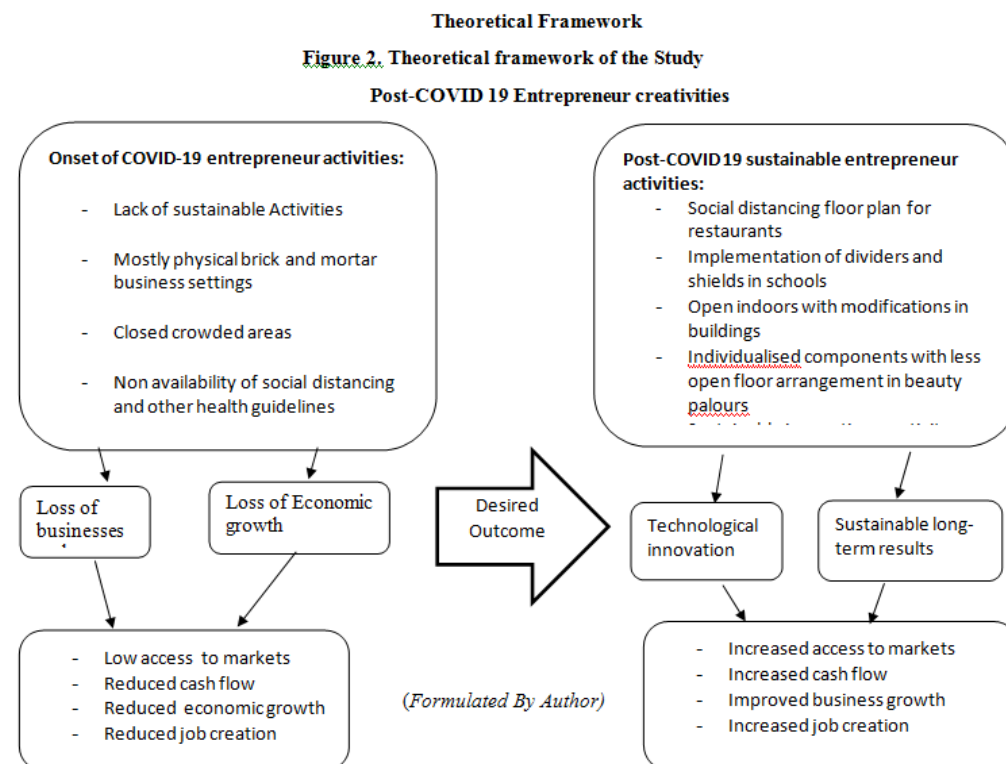
METHODOLOGY

The approaches followed in this study to achieve the established objective were descriptive research and purposeful sampling. In purposeful sampling researchers, thoroughly think through how they will establish a sample population, even if it is not statistically representative of the greater population at hand (Alchemer, 2021). The purposeful sampling was to understand the critical factors leading to utilization of network relationships and innovative technology to overcome business interruptions during the Post-COVID-19 pandemic era. The data collected used a structured face-to-face interview questionnaire from fifty business owners purposefully selected from the various businesses of Livingstone, Choma and Mazabuka. The fifty business owners selected were employment providers to the vast population of Southern Province and had adequate information on experiences learned; had evidence on experiences during periods of both the onset and the post-COVID-19 pandemic periods. The target population comprised of entrepreneurs involved in small service businesses in Southern Province, specifically restaurants, beauty parlors (salons and barbershop) and private schools. Fifty respondents fully responded to the questionnaires, which were constructed and administered verbally on site. The questionnaire also consisted of a demographic section used to capture respondents' length of time in business to get a more depth information on the subject. A theoretical framework model was formulated based on the variables in the study. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and interpreted by continuous bar charts.

Theoretical Framework

Figure 2. Theoretical framework of the Study

Post-COVID 19 Entrepreneur creativities



RESULTS

The data findings show that of the 50 respondents, 46 entrepreneurs indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic caused an economic-social crisis to entrepreneurs in southern province. 3 respondents who indicated that their businesses were not affected were foreign based chain restaurants and had support to survive the crisis and one responded indicated ‘somehow (see figure 3 below).

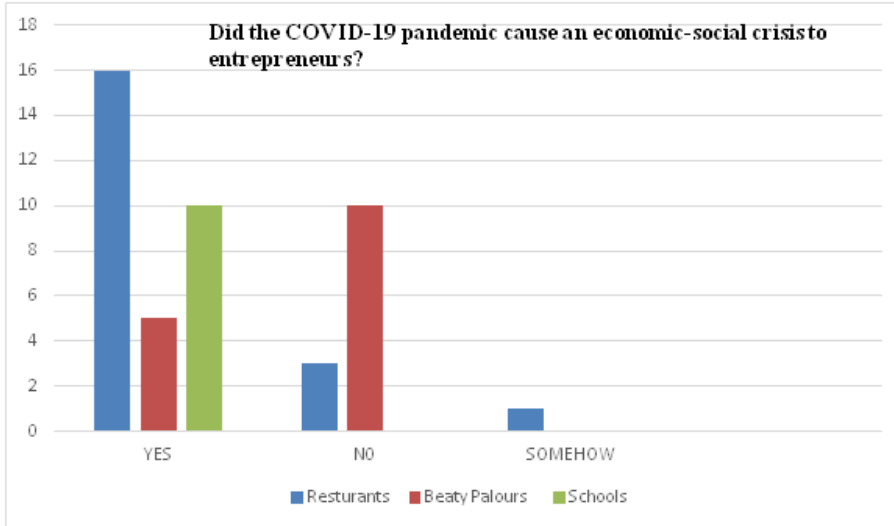


Figure 3: Data showing how the COVID-19 pandemic caused economic-social crisis to entrepreneurs.

The data findings below show that out of 50 correspondences 48 entrepreneurs indicated that they believe there are technological innovations that can be adopted to improve business strategies in the post COVID-19. (See figure 4 below)

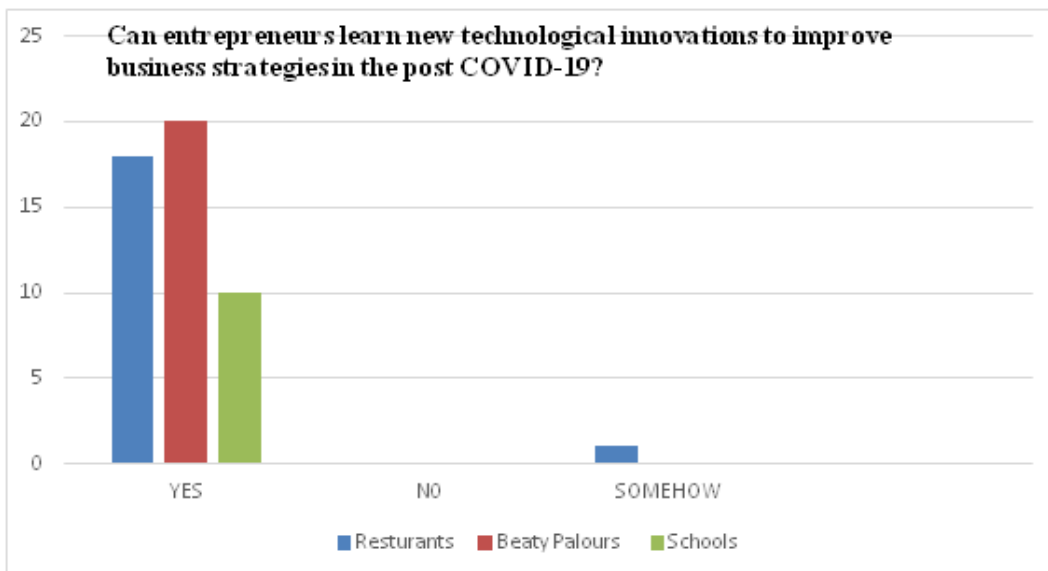


Figure 4: Data indicating how far entrepreneurs are willing to learn new technological innovations to improve business strategies in the post COVID-19

The data findings below show that out of 50 respondents, 48 indicated that while the onset of COVID-19 brought about business disruptions, at the same time, the crisis has also initiated a strong drive of creativity and innovation in doing businesses (see figure 5).

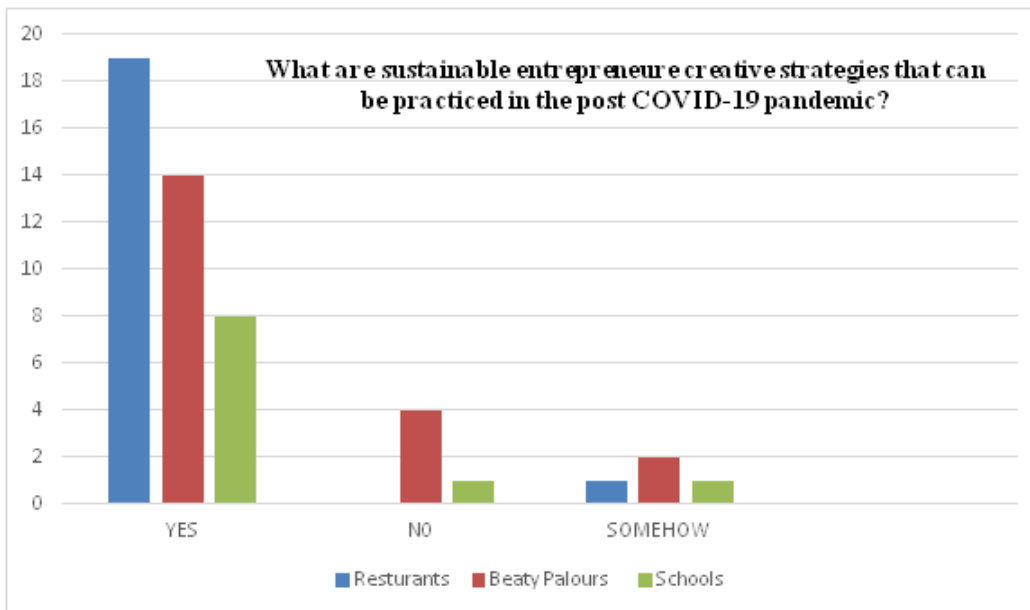


Figure 5: Data showing that there are sustainable entrepreneur creative strategies that can be practiced in the post COVID-19 pandemic

The data results below comprehensively demonstrate years of business existence; as can be observed, the vast majority 75% were between five and ten years in business existence (see table 1 below).

Years of business operation		
Years	Frequency	Percentages
Less than 3	0	0%
5 – 10	25	75%
6 – 12	15	10%
13 – 15	10	0.9%
More than 20	2	0.6%
Total	50	100%

Table 1: Data showing respondents’ years of business operation to evidence experience in business

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Results to the question as to whether entrepreneurs learned new technological innovations to improve business strategies in the post COVID-19, indicated that the government instructions to immediately close the businesses also led to significant actions of economic-social dilemma for the entrepreneur ‘world’ and the surrounding environment. All the three types of businesses: restaurants, schools and beauty palours fell into a similar crisis and had no choice but to close the premises while waiting either for the COVID-19 pandemic to end or for further guidelines from the government. The findings suggested that current business strategies are not sustainable and lack technological innovations to continue operating, thus causing

an economic-social crisis to the entrepreneurs. Hence, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic brought about lessons of change for entrepreneurship in Southern Province, Zambia to adapt technologically innovative business strategies that are resilient so that they can continue to exist during any other unforeseen pandemics. In addition, the post COVID-19 has opened doors of opportunity on how the utilization of innovative digital platforms can lead to business success; innovation can significantly contribute to adaptability. According to Estrin et, al. (2020) innovation can be defined as the introduction of a new product, production method, opening a new market, access to a new source of materials and reorganization of a business. In addition, (Dziadkowiec 2021) states that innovation is a new idea that when implemented, leads to a more effective process, product, service or technology.

The restaurant business in Zambia was generally the most economically impacted especially in Livingstone, which has the most tourist populace. By nature of its operation in food handling and exchange of utensils such as plates and paper menus, it attracts easier spread of germs. In the post COVID -19 pandemic, restaurants are learning to lessen printing of paper menus and instead are introducing technological mechanisms that are uploaded on customer applications (APPS). Such creativity is new to Zambian restaurants; therefore, it will require user friendly and simplified menus coupled with ongoing training so that older customers can be encouraged to continue patronizing the restaurants. In this aspect, restaurants, are responding to creativity in post COVID-19 through social distancing by changing floor plans for restaurants to meet COVID-19 guidelines and optimizing the seating capacity. That way, customers who desire to eat from restaurants can seat comfortably while spaced. Additionally, restaurants have also continued to utilize online order strategies and creative food packaging for deliveries. The schools and other learning institutions are rethinking post-COVID classrooms with furniture to promote social distancing in order to limit transmission of germs. Schools in Zambia have learned to implement innovative dividers and shields while spacing students out to ensure proper spacing. Further, most schools are now taking e-learning to a higher level by means of online syllabus from primary to tertiary level. This entails that the e-learning process should have a platform that equips the learners with tools that provide clear course content and learning material (Mayadas, 2015).

In the same vein, the instructors are being accorded with detailed systematically of creative online teaching information. In as much, beauty parlour businesses in Zambia face more challenges because of the nature of business activities; it is difficult to socially distance the customer and the service provider. Despite these challenges, there has been innovative strategies that are being adopted to enhance creativity in the post COVID- 19 pandemic. Additionally, beauty palours are employing innovative means of open indoors with modified individualized components that have less open floor arrangement and set in one meter apart. For example, to restructure buildings to make the waiting area larger. Ideally, customers make online service reservations to avoid crowding the reception area. In addition, payment modes through mobile money and any other cash transfer mediums have increased to avoid exchange of germs. Furthermore, entrepreneurs in Zambia are beginning to understand that innovation provides better solutions that meet advanced, unaddressed or existing business needs. Innovation can be considered as a breakthrough that provides a different way of thinking, consumption or living. However, the key element of innovation is the precondition noted above: “*when implemented* “. Without implementation, “*innovation*” turns back to the “*idea*” status (Galanakis, 2016). Thus, when applied, innovation ensures entrepreneurs economic survival regardless of the environmental changes that may occur. Innovation involves applying creativity that brings with it unique solutions and ideas. Innovation is a technological or digital invention that positions an entrepreneurial to do things that could not previously be done (Mitzkus, 2022). Hence, in the post COVID-19, technological innovation should take the center stage. Digital space infrastructure is now replacing the physical workplace; technology has leveled the playing field to amplify human insight and talent. Digital adoption has taken a quantum leap at both the organizational and entrepreneurial level (McKinsey 2021).

Thus, the expectation is that innovation will now be the backbone of every business growth; a business that

does not embrace innovation is likely to sink in profits. Angwenyi (2020) indicated that COVID-19 has had adverse effects on the African continent and in particular businesses and SMEs. This entails that the entrepreneurs were limited in reserved cash flows that could have easily acquired technological devices to penetrate into new markets during the pandemic. For example, when the Zambian government announced the discontinuity of businesses, there were no immediate technological strategies to remain in business. The innovations of business strategies that entrepreneurs have adopted include, for example, digital technologies. These approaches allow employees to remain in employment and businesses to maintain continuity; thus avoiding extreme decrease in capacity utilization by having their employees work from their homes and continue to earn an income. Consequently, in order to enhance technological innovation of businesses in the post COVID-19 pandemic, respondents outlined the following strategies: to be proactive and to restructure the restaurants by modeling social distancing floor plans to meet the COVID-19 health guidelines as well as optimizing capacity. This way, patrons can still safely seat and eat in the restaurant. The restaurants are also creating online APPS for food orders and home deliveries (refer to Figure 5). On the question that was asking on how entrepreneurs can learn new technological innovations to improve business strategies in the post COVID-19; the respondents indicated that entrepreneurs had no contingency budgets to purchase the urgent needed hand sanitizers, hand washing techniques, take-way, and other necessary utensils. In addition, infrastructures lacked adequate space to accommodate the patrons in restaurants. This response indicated to some extent, that most businesses in Southern Province need strategic financial planning for emergency crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. That way, they would not have closed for a much longer time; instead, they would have economically revived sooner. Amadeo (2017) defines economic growth as how much more the economy produces than it did in the prior period. To this regard, if the economy is producing more, businesses are more profitable and stock prices rise. Economic growth, is an important concept of development economics, it is a crucial step in the development ladder. According to Chirwa & Odhiambo (2016), the achievement of high and sustainable rates of economic growth is a central theme in many economies in the world.

One of the significant facts arising from empirical growth studies is that economic growth rates vary a great deal from country to country and over long periods of time (Mankiw *et al.*, 1995 as cited in Chirwa & Odhiambo, 2016). Thus, Zambia needs innovation to enhance economic growth, wealth creation, employment creation and ultimately to make profit in post COVID-19 periods. Furthermore, in Zambia, economic growth in the post COVID-19 will be triggered mainly by lessons learned during the highest of pandemic peak periods. The COVID-19 crisis has brought about years of change in the way companies should now do businesses. Thus, the results show that innovative strategies can be learned through reading, research, observation from other businesses both locally and globally to improve business strategies in the post COVID-19 pandemic period. On the question, that was asking on how sustainable entrepreneur creative strategies can be practiced in the post COVID-19 pandemic; the results, show that there are sustainable entrepreneur creative strategies that can be practiced in the post COVID-19 pandemic. While the onset of COVID-19 brought about business disruptions, at the same time, the crisis has also initiated a strong drive of creativity and innovation in doing businesses. As earlier stated, the onset of COVID-19 pandemic found most entrepreneurs in Zambia unprepared in the hard environmental conditions, an aspect that has motivated creativity. Creativity is a crucial skill for an entrepreneur, and helps in delivering interesting processes and products (Artiga, Waweru and Lopez (2021). Thus, entrepreneurs need to learn innovative creativity in the post COVID-19 era by adopting sustainable strategies that will enhance continuous business survival. The respondents' sentiments were also expressed in the literature above, "the successful entrepreneur is able to marshal sufficient resources to start a business and then learn how to develop the new venture's capabilities to achieve prolonged sustainable growth" (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). Creativity is a skill that an entrepreneur must have to generate some inventive ideas and make the entrepreneurial process a big success. It allows the business to devise some interesting strategies that give advantage to the entrepreneurs.

Exploring new niches and generating new ideas lead to efficiency and eventually gave an entrepreneur the

required edge over the competition. To this regards, creativity enables an entrepreneur to get new perspectives towards business processes. Eventually creativity helps an entrepreneur to discontinue the old methods of doing business and begin a path of new discoveries that are likely to be resilient in the post COVID-19 era. This also means that entrepreneurs are learning every day to invest in utensils that are suitable to these new menu types. While the post COVID-19 era seems to promise normality and patrons are beginning to dine out more, restaurants are fitting creative safety measures such as installing Plexiglas barriers between customers and staff, just for more safe precautions. The COVID-19 pandemic mistakes are daily teaching restaurant businesses in the region to use innovative sales strategy of contactless deliverables, For example, they prepare and package meals and deliver around the neighbourhood and office buildings without prior orders. This strategy has also taught employees to accept changes that businesses are adopting, for example, the use of pre-cooked packed meals for students, working class and other demographics in Southern Province.

The verbatim responses of three respondents are included as follows:

First respondent stated:

“Even though COVID-19 was devastating, it taught entrepreneur management skills”.

A second respondent said: *“technologic innovations are the ‘new life’.*

That every business must endeavour to embrace innovation; it plays a very critical role in the success of entrepreneurial management when applied correctly”.

The third respondent:

“To ensure creative strategies, sustainable use of digital business should be the now future; businesses should budget for the unforeseen pandemics so that they can be resilient to disruptions like that of COVID-19”.

The above responses are in line with the view that it is important to explore sustainable entrepreneur creativity in the post COVID-19 pandemic that can significantly improve economic growth.

Implications of the study

The findings of this study have implications and insights for entrepreneurs, business managers and researchers interested in gaining an understanding of technological innovative strategies in economic growth. Therefore, this study adds to both theory and practice of sustainable creativity practices of managing businesses in the post COVID-19 pandemic era and beyond. It underscores the point that resilient entrepreneurs are likely to face fewer risks in the management of their businesses in the future if they keep learning on more and better creative business strategies.

Limitations of the study

The study had some limitations:

Firstly, the study was service industry specific, that is, data collected was from three types of businesses in Southern Province only. The findings are thus applicable to the service sector only and cannot be generalised beyond this sector. Secondly, the sample size of the study was small and this would affect the generalisability of the results to the restaurants, beauty palour and schools as a whole.

Thirdly, the research findings reflect the views or experiences of the respondents who participated in the

survey and do not necessarily represent those of the businesses.

CONCLUSION

The sustainable entrepreneur creativities can successfully improve in the post COVID-19. The novel techniques as indicated in the theoretical framework formulated in this study should include: Restructuring the restaurants by modeling social distancing floor plans to meet the COVID-19 guidelines as well as optimizing capacity. Schools and other learning institutions to rethink post-COVID classrooms with appropriate furniture that promotes social distancing in order to limit transmission of germs. Implementing dividers and shields while spacing students out to ensure proper social distancing. Additionally schools should plan to offer blended learning so that students can access online schooling. Beauty palours should create open indoors with modifications for individualized components with less open floor arrangement. That way, each client can have customized space and washing basins to avoid sharing equipment. Thus sustainable innovative entrepreneurial creativity strategies will in the long-term result in improved business growth, increased job creation and increased access to local and international markets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following are the recommendations:

- The entrepreneurs and business communities ought to be empowered with sustainable innovative technologies to improve the economic growth of Southern Province.
- The government through the Ministry of Education to set up sustainable infrastructure such as classrooms and secured facilities that can stand any type of pandemics.
- Ministry of Technology and Innovation to collaborate with the researchers to commence local sensitization programs on the impact of sustainable business creativities and their impact on the economic to the communities.

This study is not conclusive, because more information is still required to understand if the suggested creative strategies are sustainable for all businesses in both rural and urban towns of Zambia. Thus, research on entrepreneurial creativity in the post COVID-19 pandemic should be an ongoing process for as long as businesses exist and unforeseen pandemics are likely to recur.

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