

# Shaping the new Normal: Portuguese Hotel and Event Managers' Reactions to COVID-19

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has created a worldwide crisis, which has had an impact on all economic sectors, having transformed social and consumption patterns. This crisis has been particularly difficult for the tourism industry, with uncertainty and the emergence of new consumer profiles and demands prompting swift reactions from policymakers and stakeholders. Focussing on two sub-sectors of the Portuguese tourism industry – hospitality and events – this paper aims to identify the most relevant concerns and Crisis Management Strategies adopted in each of these sectors in the early stages of the pandemic, putting forward a multi-layered analysis, juxtaposing the different challenges faced by managers and how they were approached. Based on previous studies and on 14 semi-structured interviews with hotel and event managers, the authors adopted an exploratory qualitative approach as to record and categorize the interviewees' perceptions, having established the transversal importance of resilience, flexibility, and technology for each sector's recovery. Moreover, taking into account the singularity of each setting, the authors were also able to identify more specific sectorial categories, which have had an effect on both the decision-making and future outlooks for both the hospitality and events industries. Overall, despite being hopeful, hotel and event managers anticipate different recovery challenges, with the first highlighting the importance of soft skills, and the latter emphasizing the need to regain the public's confidence, at the same time they will have to rethink their offer as to better address current needs and concerns.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, crisis management, events, hospitality, operations

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## 1. Introduction

Described as unprecedented and severe, particularly given its “intensity, geographical scope, duration and degree of uncertainty” (Hidalgo *et al.*, 2022, p. 1), the COVID-19 pandemic has had overwhelming global effects, having been particularly detrimental to the tourism industry.

Considered to be “one of the main sectors of the economy to experience the damaging consequences of a disruptive event” (Aldao *et al.*, 2021, p. 930), the tourism industry has traditionally been very vulnerable to crises and disasters, ranging from health and environmental calamities to political instability and terrorist attacks (Aldao *et al.*, 2021; Berbekova, Uysal and Assaf, 2021). However, the structural complexity of the industry and its different subsectors, as well as the interconnectedness with different areas and players, make it “extremely difficult to monitor all possible interactions among variables and to design forecast models” (Aldao *et al.*, 2021, p. 930) that can help assess and rationalise the full extent of impacts and assist with both crisis management and recovery.

In line with current research highlighting the need for more studies on the effects of the pandemic in tourism “at both a micro and macro level” (Zopiatis, Pericleous and Theofanous, 2021, p. 275), this paper aims to reflect on current Portuguese hotels and event companies' state of the art by analysing and categorizing managers' initial concerns towards the pandemic, as to determine its main impacts, as well as their outlook on recovery and future prospects. Based on interviews, the paper relies on a purposive sample and content analysis to provide an inside perspective, that, on the one hand, establishes transversal concerns and strategies that can better inform managerial practices, and, on the other hand, reflects on more specific, sector-based

repercussions, and how these might become catalysts for future transformation and interaction with guests/audiences.

Following a brief background section, authors will put forward a comprehensive analysis of the interviews carried out in which they will categorize Portuguese hotel and event managers' initial concerns and responses, as well as their future expectations. In addition to finding common ground, this analysis will establish significant differences between the two analysed subsectors, particularly given their specific scope and the enforced restrictions and support.

## **2. COVID-19 in the Portuguese hospitality and events subsectors**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought tourism services to a halt, having "caused financial and economic predicaments attributed to internal lockdowns and border closures." (Torres, Ridderstaat and Wei, 2021, p. 89). In addition to health concerns and government imposed social distancing and confinement (with a direct impact on international mobility), with regards to tourism, the pandemic has resulted in a steep decline of market demand, having dramatically disrupted hospitality and tourism and events.

### **2.1 Hospitality**

Previous studies focusing on crisis management and the effects of pandemic outbreaks in hospitality have identified key emerging dimensions within this scope, most particularly: 1) Operations – referring to managerial changes, decision-making, costs, and overall organizational structure (Kukanja, Planinc and Sikošek, 2020; Lai and Wong, 2020; Le and Phi, 2021); 2) Marketing – with public awareness, safety and customer loyalty being the main focus (Chan, Gao and McGinley, 2021); 3) Human Resources – focussing on staff retention, turnover and motivation (Kukanja, Planinc and Sikošek, 2020; Lai and Wong, 2020); and 4) Health and Safety Procedures – both for teams/staff and for guests (Lai and Wong, 2020; Le and Phi, 2021). Concerns with Customer Relationship Management (CRM), and governmental assistance, though less evident in the literature, were also considered relevant by some researchers (Kukanja, Planinc and Sikošek, 2020; Lai and Wong, 2020; Silva *et al.*, 2021).

As the pandemic progressed, there was, however, a slight shift towards more specific issues, with certification (Chan, Gao and McGinley, 2021), CRM and technology (Sigala, 2020) becoming more expressive. Regarding the latter, the introduction of digital solutions, particularly self-service technology, mobile apps, artificial intelligence and robots (Kim *et al.*, 2021; Liu and Yang, 2021) was perceived as increasingly relevant. Ongoing research also draws attention to the transformational potential of the ongoing crisis, particularly when it comes to reshaping the servicescape and the increasingly importance of sustainable tourism (Sigala, 2020; Palacios-Florencio *et al.*, 2021; Zopiatis, Pericleous and Theofanous, 2021).

### **2.2 Events**

Regarding the events industry, the available literature highlights the devastating effects of the pandemic within this scope (Farmaki *et al.*, 2020; Aldao *et al.*, 2021; Palrão, Rodrigues and Estêvão, 2021), with authors such as Canhoto and Wei (2021, p. 9) going insofar as describing it as "an existential crisis, with cancelations and huge uncertainty".

Drawing from previous crises and official reports pertaining to event cancellations, successive postponements and governmental support aimed specifically at the events and entertainment industries, as well as the nature of the pandemic itself (i.e., the need to limit social gatherings and contacts), the most immediate concerns identified in the literature were related to: 1) Operations – mostly associated with decision-making and the need to cancel or postpone events; 2) Financial viability – as mass cancelations became the norm, having resulted in a long-term economic crisis that effected companies' cashflow (Madray, 2020; Sigala, 2020; Palrão, Rodrigues and Estêvão, 2021); and 3) Human Resources – with most companies being forced to reduce workforces and cancel contracts with outside workers (Madray, 2020; Drewes, Daumann and Follert, 2021). Moreover, as different rules and restrictions were being recurrently adjusted, health and safety and technology also became prominent dimensions. The first mostly due to the gradual shift to online settings (Palrão, Rodrigues and Estêvão, 2021), and the latter given the need to comply with sanitation and social distancing rules (i.e. limiting audiences, equipping rooms with hand-sanitizer dispensers and enforcing the use of face masks) (Drewes, Daumann and Follert, 2021; Khorasani, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite these findings, this subsector's interdependence with other sectors, makes it hard to effectively establish the effects of the crisis, particularly at a local level. The available studies focus mostly on mass and sports events, making it necessary to further develop studies focusing on other types of events. On the other hand, in addition to the expected repercussions, this subsector is currently undergoing a transformation prompted not only by the crisis and the shift towards digital and hybrid events, but also in what concerns consumer demands. Behaviours and consumption patterns have changed, as people feel less comfortable in attending gatherings (Palrão, Rodrigues and Estêvão, 2021). As a result, more and more companies are currently rethinking their business models and offerings, in order to better meet public demands, particularly when it comes to the use of technology, and the development of creative and meaningful experiences.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Data collection and analysis

The present study adopted a qualitative-based research approach with data being collected through 14 semi-structured interviews, conducted via Zoom.

The interviews were conducted in May 2021, with 6 event managers and, in December 2020 with 8 hotel directors (Table 1) and lasted an average of 40 minutes. The interviewees were selected based on convenience sampling methods (Robinson, 2014) trying to ensure the representation of different types of events (social, cultural, corporate), markets (international/national, regional/local), and in the case of hotels, geographical location (urban/city, countryside) and business model (independent, national hotel group, international chain).

**Table 1:** Participant's profile

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Type of Events/ Type of Hotel</b>	<b>Business Market/ Business Model</b>
<b>I1</b>	Social	National/International
<b>I2</b>	Corporate	National/International
<b>I3</b>	Cultural	Local/regional
<b>I4</b>	Cultural	Local/regional
<b>I5</b>	Corporate	National/International
<b>I6</b>	Social	Local/regional
<b>I7</b>	Urban/city	National Hotel Group
<b>I8</b>	Urban/city	National Hotel Group
<b>I9</b>	Countryside	National Hotel Group
<b>I10</b>	Countryside	Independent
<b>I11</b>	Countryside	Independent
<b>I12</b>	Urban/city	Independent
<b>I13</b>	Countryside	National Hotel Group
<b>I14</b>	Urban/city	International Chain

The interview scripts were based on the literature review, and despite having a common structure, were adapted to each of the subsectors analysed. All interviewees were asked about their perceptions and main concerns at an early stage of the pandemic, the strategies adopted to face the challenges that arose, and the perspectives for the future/recovery.

The data collected were analysed using WebQDA, a collaborative qualitative analysis software, which facilitates the organisation of data and the creation of relational maps crosscutting different categories and keywords (Souza, Costa and Moreira, 2010). In addition to giving the researchers full and flexible control over the analysis, the software was considered appropriate given its increasing use in qualitative studies in tourism (Costa *et al.*, 2017; Silva *et al.*, 2021).

Initially, the data from each subsector were analysed separately, according to pre-defined dimensions (stemming from the literature review), having then been crosscut as to identify new categories and subcategories (emerging from the retrieved data). Drawing from this segmented analysis, in this paper, the

authors revisit these categories as to further refine the analysis and identify which concerns and strategies were shared by both sub-sectors, and which reflect a more specific and sectorial perspective (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Analysed categories and subcategories by subsector

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	
	EVENTS	HOSPITALITY
Crisis Management/ Response	Health & Safety	
	Operations	
	Marketing & Sales	
	Human Resources	
	CRM – Customer Relationship Management	
	Decision-making	
	Sustainability	
	Community Involvement	
	Participants' Experience	
	Corporation & Stakeholders' Engagement	
Recovery/ Future	Events Recovery	Future/ Recovery
	Events Typology	
	Events Sustainability	
	Stakeholder Cooperation	
	Habits/Behaviours	

The results will be presented by category of analysis, highlighting both the convergent and divergent effects of COVID-19 on the two subsectors and reflecting on the common challenges faced by managers, as well as specific, context-based issues and how they were perceived.

#### 4. Findings

Regarding shared concerns, both subsectors highlighted the importance of CRM, particularly considering the implications resulting from the partial or total reduction of service provision, i.e., managing/cancelling service reservations, refunds and ensuring future earnings and revenue.

As for the management of commercial relationships, the interviewees from both sectors alluded to a new way of looking at business and the relationship with their clients, considering that the previously established paradigms had changed, as corroborated by the following statements: "We started to have cancellations and [because] the hotel had a rather rigid cancellation policy, we realized we would have to adapt. We would have to do something, because this was not being well received by the customer" (I7); "There were some difficult cases we had to deal with, but, in general, we managed to retain all the customers" (I1).

Another shared initial concern was Human Resources, particularly when it came to safeguarding jobs and salaries, as well as maintaining team cohesion when working from home. In order to address these issues, companies resorted to state funding and relief programs, particularly lay-offs and furloughs, as evidenced in the interviews: "Our priority were Human Resources, what could we do [to support workers]. Because if we closed, there would be legal issues arising; closing down implies the suspension of labour contracts." (I1); "[Our priority was] maintaining jobs, of course!" (I10); "It is very important that we take care of our own, not only of those outside the company [e.g., suppliers; clients]." (I14).

Adding to these dimensions and stemming from these concerns, several changes were implemented at both organizational and operational levels. These changes had a significant impact on procedures, which, on the one hand, must comply with sanitary standards and, concomitantly, inspire confidence in all stakeholders. Initially, the need to comply with sanitation and safety standards was a challenge for managers, who had to implement all the necessary measures and act with caution – "What we did was implement and interpret what was defined by law and adjust [that] whenever necessary" (I1); "We set some rooms aside, disinfected them, and continued to disinfect everything, including the drapes" (I13). However, these procedures varied and were contingent to the type of organization and their specific context, as is the case of the hotel manager who stated: "We are part of an American hotel chain, so our safety procedures and our culture are very linked to hygiene and safety in the workplace. Our culture already covered 90% of the measures." (I14). An event manager, however, considered there was an exaggerated interpretation of the risks, arguing that: "We live, in fact, under fear, which, in many cases, is not justified. I mean, viruses have always existed, and we will have to continue to live with them" (I2).

Managers from both subsectors also allude to the decision-making subcategory, considering it to be a key skill, not only because of the conjecture itself, but also due to specific, context-based structural reasons. This category is also highlighted by the interviewees when they make references to operational issues, the underlying day-to-day uncertainty and the need to constantly adapt procedures, as to comply with new legal requirements and mandates. As mentioned by hotel managers: "We had to relearn how to work, because we could not anticipate reactions" (I7); "We had to keep trying, making experiments, testing different solutions and products in different segments. If something didn't work, well... too bad. We had to think of something else." (I11). As a result, flexibility became a key asset, having made procedures more agile – "You need to be attentive and change at a moment's notice, that is, something that would traditionally take two days to change, would have to be changed immediately" (I13); "We don't have long or medium-term data, so we are working on a 15-day management basis, in which we implement different procedures as we go." (I14).

Uncertainty and unpredictability have become staples of hospitality and events amidst the pandemic. As a result, flexible products and activities have become the norm in both subsectors. However, according to the interviewed managers, this need to be flexible partially stemmed from the ambiguity of official policies, which were often contradictory – "There were differences between what was being announced publicly and the decrees being issued. It was very confusing. Then, the information issued by the Directorate-General of Health was also ambiguous and open to different interpretations." (I1); "In these situations, you need to take immediate decisions, there's no room for hesitation." (I2). The legal limitations brought about by sanitary regulations and the ensuing restrictions, also gave rise to a feeling of inequity, particularly in the events subsector. As highlighted by a corporate events manager: "There isn't much of a difference between going to a play or attending a conference in an auditorium. So, there is a certain feeling of injustice. Why can they still hold their events, while we must remain confined?" (I5).

In sum, operations of the two subsectors were highly influenced by the new procedures and legal requirements, with the use of protective gear emerging as a necessity and making its way into both hotel and event spaces. Furthermore, enforcing social and physical distancing was also vital, which resulted in the introduction of phased services as to avoid large gatherings of people. The uncertainty and the development of the pandemic also resulted in different operational rhythms and periods of inactivity for hotels and longer periods for the events sector. This situation has enhanced the role played by flexibility and adaptability, as these have become the basis for a new paradigm of organizational management and customer service.

Within the scope of these subsectors and the shift currently taking place, technology emerges as a resource that can help solve problems and enhance service, both by supporting activities and promoting innovation. In terms of support, one of the interviewed event managers mentions the fact that "It was not usual to work remotely." (I5). In a way, the pandemic gave rise to new outlooks and new ways of using technology, something that is perceived as a "great advantage [particularly] in terms of organization, because we found new, easier, and more agile ways of monitoring projects; we started doing it with immense ease and we were able to monitor ten projects in one day, which would have been impossible to do in person." (I3). In fact, technology was an option from the onset, particularly for event managers: "The first question was basically to check what solutions there were to change a face-to-face event into a virtual event." (I2). In fact, event managers consider that "the major transition was the migration to the online format" (I4), with technology proving to be an important means to "maintain team cohesion, reorganizing work, in virtual and digital terms, i.e., to keep the whole team working and to follow up projects." (I2).

These new methods and procedures have not, however, taken away the concerns regarding organizational sustainability, particularly when it comes to economic viability. This was a primary concern, of which managers from both subsectors were very much aware from the start. According to one of the hotel managers "there is the possibility that we may not break even and balance the books (...) in 2022, yes (...) but this year, if we can just break even, great. If we can't, it's very worrying, because it will be the second year of heavy losses." (I8). Besides the economic aspect, there is also some apprehension regarding the human resources that, in the meantime, have moved on to other activities – "The sector is going to resume its activities in the same way, all the people who are linked to events are going to be there; however, a lot of people who have since moved on to other sectors and activities, might come back or not. Some are looking forward to it, but others are not willing to return. Everyone is a little apprehensive about what is going to happen" (I1); "I believe that workers will not be willing to rely solely on one source of income, i.e., those working in the wedding business, for example, have put down roots in other markets, working with different targets, and they are going to keep that source of









income and invest in it. I don't believe, at least not one hundred percent, that everyone will return to work exclusively in weddings." (I6).

On the other hand, the health constraints imposed by the pandemic are also changing the habits of both providers and audiences, bringing about new challenges: "It's not very easy to get the public to come back to the venues. People are a little afraid, habits have been lost and the fact that we have to change showtimes doesn't make it any easier." (I4). For hotel managers, the recovery will be felt "as soon as customers have the confidence to travel again." (I7), an idea that is shared by an event manager that stated: "while there is no freedom of movement (...) and accessibility, [it] will take a long time. Those of us working in the segment of corporate events and incentive travel will only see some light at the end of the tunnel in 2022 or 2023." (I2). The rates of vaccination against COVID19 are also perceived as important for the recovery of these sectors, not only for customers in the domestic market, but also for the foreign market – "I think all of this will only change then. From the moment the client has the confidence to travel again." (I7); "We have already noticed the effect of the announcement the vaccination process in the United Kingdom; we have already registered an increase in reservations." (I9).

In the events sector, recovery, albeit at a slower pace, is expected to be more disruptive, since "it is an area in which technology will play a pivotal role, as part of the investment that was made in the organization of face-to-face events will necessarily be transferred to a new digital world; there will be a transfer from face-to-face events to hybrid and virtual settings" (I2). It is expected that this change will be more apparent in the corporate events sectors. As put by a representative of this particular segment: "I believe that virtual events will become more expressive than they were to date. (...) That's why we, for example, have a solution consisting of an online platform where we can have sessions, exhibitions and develop networking actions." (I5).

Regarding the future, as stated by I2: "We have to be able to live and face these situations, with the help of science and technology; in fact, the world has changed, it will change, but there are lots of events that can be held in hybrid or online formats. Then there are obviously many events that can continue to be held face-to-face, because there are things that will never replace the face-to-face experience, it is impossible!". As far as face-to-face events are concerned, the interviewees consider that "there will be a need to host smaller events, but in a larger number" (I3); as well as "to reduce the number of participants, with fewer events taking place within the meetings industry" (I2). In sum, drawing from the data, and as illustrated in Table 3, according to the perceptions of managers, even though most concerns are shared by the two subsectors, the strategies implemented vary slightly according to the specificities of each sector.

**Table 3:** Analysed categories and subcategories by subsector

Sub-sector	 HOSPITALITY	 EVENTS
 Customer Relationship Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Importance of CRM</li> <li>New ways of looking at business</li> </ul>	
 Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Major concern</li> <li>Importance of state funding and relief programs</li> </ul>	
 Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction of several changes, with significant impact on procedures (e.g., health &amp; safety)</li> <li>Adaptations varied according to the type of organization and specific context</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lower inactivity periods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Higher inactivity periods</li> </ul>
 Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impact of uncertainty and unpredictability</li> <li>Flexibility and adaptability recognised as key assets</li> </ul>	
 Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pivotal role of technology</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technology as a facilitating tool</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technology as trigger for service and business models innovation/ change</li> </ul>
 Future Perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Different paces of recovery, according to organization type and market</li> <li>Mild expectations about the future</li> <li>Emergence of new challenges (due to habits change)</li> </ul>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mostly dependent on customer confidence upturn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expected to be more disruptive</li> <li>Variations according to events typology</li> </ul>

In this context, the different periods of inactivity experienced by the two sectors had a significant impact on the strategies and perceptions of managers, who also anticipate different paces of recovery and challenges for the future. In both sectors there is a clear concern with the human component, whether related to human resources, customers, or business partners. In the hospitality sector, technology essentially facilitated the initial response, whereas in the events sector, it played a more pivotal role, having induced significant changes in the business models and services provided, with managers foreseeing a relative continuity in hybrid event models.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing from the main research findings it can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic and its immediate repercussions have generated a great deal of concern, having left indelible marks on the analysed subsectors, particularly when it comes to the operations and decision-making dimensions.

Even though managers are moderately confident about recovery, anticipating medium-term positive results, they also consider that this recovery is contingent on society in general feeling confident enough to travel and being able to experience different services. On the other hand, at the time of the interviews, vaccination rates were steadily rising, which is also perceived by managers as an indicator that people are committed to resuming their lives, which will include travelling and attending events.

The experience of managing operations in a pandemic has also prompted new paradigms in both sectors. In line with what is argued by Lai and Wong (2020) and Le and Phi (2021), sanitation and cleanliness will continue to be key, with managers highlighting the importance of complying with the mandated health and safety procedures, even when they are faced with ambiguous information.

In addition to operations, and in accordance with the studies of Kukanja et al. (2020), Lai and Wong (2020), and Le and Phi (2021), the uncertainty that characterized this period has also prompted concerns with human resource management, with interviewees alluding to governmental support and layoffs as instrumental measures in assuring economic sustainability. After safeguarding jobs and overall income, managers were able to focus their actions on motivating and training teams, as to ensure they were equipped to deal with ongoing challenges and procedures (as suggested by Drewes et al., 2021, Kukanja et al., 2020, Lai and Wong, 2020, and Madray, 2020). Nevertheless, both groups are apprehensive regarding the number of available workers and their willingness to return to both subsectors.

The findings also complement the work of Chan et al. (2021), Kukanja et al. (2020), Lai and Wong (2020); and Silva et al. (2021), in that managers from both subsectors transversally underlined the importance of CRM when reacting to a crisis. These concerns have prompted a change in paradigm when it comes personal relationships, and people's ability to adapt, particularly given the market's volatility, with constantly changing needs and demands. In addition to flexibility, adaptability and resilience from both managers and staff (whose importance is supported by the work of Zopiatis et al. (2021), technology was also key, particularly to support operational and managerial procedures (in line with the conclusions put forward by Sigala (2020)).

In fact, besides helping keep bonds within teams, technology also acted as a facilitator in stakeholder and customer interaction and is expected to play an increasingly important role in the future, particularly when it comes to cultural and corporate events and overall servicescape. In the events subsector technology has emerged as an important resource in facilitating problem-solving and innovation, with the pandemic having resulted in hybrid and online events being increasingly perceived as new event typologies.

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