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The impact of Covid-19 on the restaurant industry in Malta

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Abstract

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This study examines the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic to the restaurant industry in Malta, how restaurants overcame these obstacles, and the impact on the industry's employees.

The research employed a mixed methodology, including semi-structured interviews with three food and beverage managers and a survey of 47 restaurant employees. The analysis revealed that the restaurant industry in Malta was affected by a number of issues, such as a staffing crisis, revenue loss, poor liquidity, and difficulty providing takeaway and delivery services. Adaptations such as cost minimisation, cautious investing, and ensuring customer safety to encourage them to visit restaurants, as well as government aid in the form of grants and implemented measures, helped restaurants overcome these obstacles. In addition, the analysis revealed that restaurant employees experienced elevated levels of stress, mental health issues, job insecurity, and financial concern. Due to these factors, many individuals do not consider a career in the restaurant industry. The findings indicate that while government aid helped restaurants remain in business, support for restaurant employees was limited. It is suggested that restaurants provide their employees with stress management and mental health resources, as well as more flexible working conditions and schedules. It is also recommended that policymakers include employee representatives in the design of employee support systems to ensure that they are substantial and fully support employees. This study contributes to the literature on the adaptations and management of the restaurant industry during crises and offers new perspectives from restaurants and employees in Malta.

Keywords

Covid-19, Restaurant industry, Issues faced, Adaptations, Governmental aids, Employee well-being

Declaration of Authenticity

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Programme   : Degree in Culinary Arts

Research Title   : The impact of Covid-19 on the restaurant industry in Malta

Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Mr Joseph Cassar.

29-9-2022

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Student's Signature

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1. Introduction

In late 2019, Wuhan, China, reported the first case of Covid-19, a novel respiratory disease. By early 2020, this virus started spreading to other parts of the world, especially China and Europe, then later America and other parts of the world, leading the WHO to declare this disease a pandemic on March 11, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). To prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, preventive directives, including the wearing of masks, social distancing, and sanitisation of hands were recommended and implemented but in many places lockdowns still followed to combat this virus' spread. These measures significantly impacted the economy's performance, especially the hospitality and tourism industry since it relies heavily on the movement of people, with the gross domestic product of several countries decreasing substantially (Kim, et al., 2021).

1.1 Research Background

1.1.1 Covid-19 in Malta

The first Covid-19 cases were reported in Malta on the 7th of March 2020, with an Italian family coming from Rome. The number of new cases started increasing gradually, initially imported from abroad, then being transmitted locally as well (Grima, et al., 2020). In Malta, similarly to many other countries, non-essential businesses including restaurants were forced to cease operation on the 22nd March 2020 and a travel ban was introduced on the 21st March amid an increasing number of active cases (Cuschieri, 2021).

Delivery services and takeaways were allowed to continue operating on the island, providing restaurants with the opportunity to remain in business through online orders and receiving calls for delivery (Grima, et al., 2020). With new and active cases declined and stabilised and the spread of the virus seemingly under control, the restrictions were eased and restaurants were allowed to reopen on the 22nd May with a number of restrictions such as; limiting the maximum number of people on a table at 6, increased space between tables to encourage social distancing, wearing of face masks by staff and checking of body temperature upon entry, while restaurants with outdoor seating, were encouraged to make use of it (Agius, 2020). On the 1st of July, the travel ban was dropped for a number of countries deemed safe, later being completely lifted on the 15th of July (Cuschieri, 2021). This led to a significant rise in new Covid-19 cases, resulting in the re-introduction of measures during the month of August (Cuschieri, et al., 2020).

Restaurants were again forced to close on the 11th of March 2021 as active Covid-19 cases were still high (Times of Malta, 2021), opening again on the 10th of May 2021, initially with a curfew till 5p.m and then till midnight from the 24th of May onwards (Farrugia, 2021). On the 17th of January 2022, valid vaccine certificates became mandatory for people to go to restaurants, an action that was met with much controversy from the catering industry (Galea Debono, 2022), and was quickly reversed on the 7th of February 2022 as Covid cases had stabilised and 75% of the population had received their vaccine booster dose (Borg, 2022).

1.1.2 Customers' Safety Concerns

Covid-19 has changed the regular life situations that our societies were accustomed to and people have been forced into a new normal way of conducting things and how they go through a day. In the beginning, without either a vaccine or a way to treat the virus, many people were hesitant to dine in restaurants with data showing that restaurants, in different cities and countries, were much less busy when compared to the same period of the year before (Song, et al., 2021). This is due to customers' concerns regarding safety issues as dining in restaurants includes being in physical contact with people as well as the risks present during the consumption period, which in turn urged restaurants to provide contactless services, such as contactless payments. The closure of restaurants and the strict regulations that followed, to comply with social distancing efforts, could have also played a part in this as consumers might have perceived food from restaurants as less safe than food in general, as some believed that Covid-19 could be contracted from food in the case that the person preparing it was infected, even though a number of entities stated that it was a respiratory virus and food did not provide a means for transmission. Food packaging for takeout food could have also been a source of concern for some consumers as studies showed that contaminated surfaces could be a source of transmission (Byrd, et al., 2021).

1.1.3 Impact on Restaurant Workers

As restaurants were severely impacted by this pandemic, with sales significantly reduced, a number of restaurants had to either reduce the number of hours their employees worked or let them go entirely, with some restaurants having to close their operations permanently (Song, et al., 2021). One should also note that restaurants often provide the first access to the labour market for many youths (Nhamo, et al., 2020).

1.1.4 Similar Past Events

The restaurant industry is seen as having a high level of business risk as it operates at slender margins, often has limited liquidity, and can be easily affected by disasters such as hurricanes and other natural disasters, epidemics, and pandemics (Nhamo, et al., 2020). Research by Kim, et al. (2020) on how past epidemics have impacted the restaurant industry's financial performance found that these disease outbreaks had negative effects, with Covid-19 likely to have a similar result. Business characteristics, including brand reliability, service types, and advertising effects, were found to be effective in controlling the negative impact of pandemic outbreaks on businesses' value, by assuring customers that food is safe to consume and encouraging people to visit restaurants.

1.1.5 Quality Signalling Markers

Due to the aforementioned risks and uncertainty of the safety of food consumption, customers were looking for some information to ease their risk prevention attitudes and behavioural patterns when choosing to eat from restaurants. Research (Kim, et al., 2021) has been carried out to see what characteristics of restaurants have positively impacted the survival of the restaurant industry in the midst of the ongoing business restrictions brought by the Covid-19 pandemic. People use a variety of information sources to check and ensure that a restaurant's product is safe and of good quality, considering several quality markers to come to a conclusion. Studies (Zhu, et al., 2019) (Weber & Schweiger, 2017) (Li & Hitt, 2010) have found numerous indicators from the customer's perspective, such as brand equity, price, advertising, online review, and discount, as quality signalling markers.

1.1.6 Financial Adaptations

During financial crises, such as the one Covid-19 brought, people opt to reduce their spending on non-essential products and services, leading to a decline in demand for dining out in restaurants and therefore, a decline in revenue. The measures implemented, restricting dining in restaurants, exacerbated this issue (Nhamo, et al., 2020). This leads the industry to establish new strategies to reduce fear, alleviate damage, and ameliorate financial conditions. These strategies such as revenue enhancement, cost reduction, capital structure and cash management, should focus on operational stabilisation, revenue generation, financial re-emergence, marketing policies and efforts, and coping mechanisms of employment structure (Yost, et al., 2021).

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to discover the issues that the Covid-19 pandemic presented to the restaurant industry in Malta, how restaurants managed to overcome these challenges, and how the employees working within this sector were impacted.

1.3 Research Methods, Material and Structure

The following chapter presents the literature review on customers' risk perception and restaurant visit intentions, restaurant adaptations, governmental aid, and the impact of restaurant employees. The third chapter outlines the mixed methodology employed, with interviews and questionnaires conducted, respectively, as qualitative, and quantitative research methods to fulfil the research objectives. The fourth chapter presents the findings and discusses the outcomes of the research and its significance. The last chapter identifies the limitations and recommends areas for future research

2. Literature Review

2.1 Risk Perception and the People's Intention to Visit Restaurants

The tourism and hospitality industry is without a doubt one of the sectors that has been most affected by COVID-19. Countries were forced to begin the adaptation towards a regulated social life to prevent a future economic crisis during this moment of complete uncertainty. Several countries have approved the reopening of hotel operations and restaurants provided that all essential safeguards and precautions are implemented, based on the declining number of cases and fatalities. These actions have been taken with the goal of guaranteeing the industry's long-term viability. Consequently, the amount of people going to food and beverage establishments has increased (Grech, et al., 2020).

2.1.1 Consumers' Risk Perception

As with earlier pandemics, it was expected that consumers' risk perceptions of COVID-19 would have a significant impact on the scale of mobilisation. Consumer perceptions of food safety risk have been proven in studies (Renn, 2018; Kivi & Shogren,2010) to influence purchasing decisions. To design effective customer-directed messaging, make necessary operational adjustments, and plan for any upcoming pandemics or similar situations, restaurateurs need comprehensive knowledge about how customers perceive the food safety of restaurants during pandemics. In terms of communication, the misunderstanding of restaurant food as a source of COVID-19 viral transmission may necessitate a louder voice from the restaurant industry to customers. The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and press sources did communicate that the spread of COVID-19 is not mainly due to food packaging, however, not all consumers grasped this message (Byrd, et al., 2021).

Another important issue was that COVID-19 elicited a sense of unease among the public, influencing consumers' risk perception. Research (Slovic, 2016) shows that pandemics dangers greatly raise risk perception with factors, such as extensive media coverage of the pandemic and a low sense of control, lead to an elevated risk perception of COVID-19 (Frewer, et al., 2002). In this situation, heightened risk awareness raises customer pressure on establishments to follow rules. Restaurant owners and managers must make every effort to keep their guests safe and secure. Customers' intent to attend restaurants may be increased as a result of such activities, reducing the pandemic's economic implications over time (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021). People's belief in the steps adopted by government authorities with the goal of lowering the perceived threat

will also impact customer behaviour. As a result, research Dedeoğlu & Boğan (2021) points to a corelation between consumers' risk perceptions and government trust in the relationship between dining out reasons and restaurant visit intention.

2.1.2 Motivations to Visit Restaurants

2.1.2.1 Social and Emotional needs

People have refrained from their typical social venues due to the curfew and prohibition of mass gatherings. People may have seen the reopening of eateries as a chance to fulfil their social needs by spending time with members of their social groups (Klaus & Manthiou, 2020). Furthermore, as part of the transition to a more regulated social life, customers who are emotionally exhausted as a result of the rising amount of cases and fatalities in the pandemic phase may seek emotional relief in restaurants (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). The relaxing of protection measures and favouring economic interests, may give customers a better sense of safety and control. Inappropriate practises may be linked to freedom-related behaviour (Koc, 2013). Meaning that since restaurants were opened and customers could socialise and occupy themselves, they would be able to make more free choices as their perceived control increases. Humans have a strong psychological urge for control (Bateson, 2000). Fulfilling this demand lowers their risk perception and boosts confidence. As a result, in situations where there are no restrictions, the consumer may overlook protective behaviours. In this situation, the customer is more likely to engage in liminoid behaviours, which are distinct from the norm. This behaviour appears to be a reaction to daily demands, allowing people to disregard established rules, conventions, and beliefs, resulting in dangerous behaviour (Koc, 2013).

People that deem risk as low were shown to be more likely to patronise upmarket restaurants for socialising, recreation, effect management, and public image. This situation reflected an increasing need for people to socialise. With the pandemic's sluggish decline, people attempted to improve their mental and emotional wellbeing (Stieger, et al., 2021). Furthermore, those that were emotionally fatigued due to increases of fatalities and infections believed that spending time in restaurants would help them recuperate. Consumers may have believed that going to high end restaurants would make them happy and allow them to treat themselves well (Dedeoğlu & Boğan, 2021). Given that public image was a major motivator before Covid-19 (Yang & Mattila, 2017), it is expected that people may visit restaurants to maintain or improve their public standing if risk is considered minimal. Research (Dedeoğlu & Boğan, 2021) showed that when the perceived risk is large, the visual attraction of food has a negative impact on restaurant visit intention. Consumers

may consider premium restaurants as hazardous because they assume attractive food draws a larger number of customers.

2.1.2.2 Solidarity toward the Hospitality industry

According to Piton Hakim, et al. (2021), the pandemic has revealed solidarity towards businesses and employees as a new, unexplored, and situational element influencing restaurant visit intentions. Being compassionate and supportive of individuals in need can help them overcome obstacles (Nurallah, 2012). Solidarity is a recurring issue in COVID-19 debates, and it was a prominent theme in certain presentations by WHO representatives, who recognise that it is one method to mitigate the pandemic's severe economic repercussions. Solidarity emerges when different people recognise the same identity. This identity emphasises the obligation to protect individuals who are part of this unspoken alliance, instilling sentiments of duty, responsibility, and joy (Coughlin, 1990). A study conducted by Aslam, et al. (2020) investigated positive and negative opinions of news articles concerning COVID-19. The words "working," "food," "aid," "markets," and "support" all elicited positive responses. Given consumers' solidary desire to aid restaurants, special attention to the factors above is critical. This aspect, which is only temporary, can benefit restaurant owners and managers (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021).

Businesses may need to emphasise emotional appeals over rational explanations when establishing food safety risk messages during a pandemic. Emotional arguments use subjective aspects to elicit affective responses, whereas rational appeals focus on objective, precise facts. In a health and safety communication environment, emotional appeals have been found to be more successful than rational appeals in influencing customers' crisis-related behaviour intentions (Kim & Cameron, 2011). During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers (Hang, et al., 2020) found that emotional appeals, such as advertising about hotel personnel and families being just as susceptible to the virus as customers, resulted in higher hotel attachment than rational appeals, such as messaging about cancellation policies and cleanliness. As a result, food safety risk messaging in the restaurant business should focus on emotional appeals based on how this pandemic is affecting everyone (Byrd, et al., 2021). This unity could be explained by fear of an economic disaster combined with positive feelings evoked by an appreciation for individuals who worked during the pandemic. Consumers' admiration of charity and sustainable businesses is stated and discussed in studies (Yen, 2018). Unemployed consumers, as one might anticipate, are not inclined to solidarity because they are in a bad condition, and socioeconomic inequity hinders solidarity (Mishra & Rath, 2020).

2.1.2.3 **Trust in Government and Disease Denial**

Individuals who have a high level of trust in government initiatives to combat the COVID-19 outbreak are more susceptible to the favourable influence of socialisation and public image on aims to go to restaurants, according to a study by Dedeoğlu & Boğan (2021).With people who have low levels of trust in government, conversely, the link is negligible. Research emphasises the importance of people meeting with others in their social surroundings in locations like restaurants, which can offer relief and pleasure. This, however, needs the development of belief in the administration. Given that government officials bear a substantial amount of responsibility for managing the pandemic, consumers' general trust in the government's policies has a significant impact on their behaviour (Dedeoğlu & Boğan, 2021).

Restaurant visit intentions are unaffected by age, while on the other hand, disease denial is, however, mitigated by age. The disease denial effect affects older consumers less, as they are mostly dependant on control methods to back their judgments (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021). This could be because the threats presented by the virus increase as one gets older (Jin, et al., 2020). Furthermore, risk perception for unpleasant circumstances which are believed to be manageable grows over time (Marsola, et al., 2020), which occurs due to younger people having more lenient moral principles and self-control as well as experiencing guilt less often compared to older individuals (Nivette, et al., 2021).

2.2 Restaurant Image Adaptations

2.2.1 Menu and Delivery Adaptations

Customers might have increased concerns about food safety from the onset of Covid-19 (Kitz, et al., 2020), studies (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021) emphasise the role of perceived safety and brand in raising customers' motivation to dine at restaurants throughout Covid-19. Despite their concerns about their health, consumers' restaurant choices are usually driven by other factors. Consumers do not have a complete understanding of the degree of food safety in a restaurant (de Andrade, et al., 2019) since this could only be more properly scrutinised from the internal perspective. Consumers' perceptions of food safety are often confined to sensory features of meals, such as the food's smell, and the restaurant' public areas (Bai, et al., 2019). Since many of the interventions against COVID-19 involve the main public area such as social separation, written signs, cleaning, and ventilation, they are obvious and apparent. Restaurant owners may need to redesign their menus to reduce the number of cold or uncooked items provided, as customers have higher levels of trust towards warm and cooked dishes' safety. Sales may need to be closely

monitored in order to make the required modifications. Restaurants may provide specific "anti-COVID" menus with dishes that claim to enhance clients' immunity, capitalising on the concern on health and building immunity. Restaurants that did not have delivery services in place looked to delivery companies as their sole method to maintain sales and keep operating at the start of the pandemic. However, because third-party delivery poses a bigger risk of food contamination than restaurant delivery, as the delivery person goes to several restaurants, therefore, increasing the possibility of contamination, restauranteurs should reconsider their food delivery strategy (Byrd, et al., 2021).

2.2.2 Communication and Portraying an image of hygiene

The reopening of restaurants presented a risk to the public due to health concerns. Exposure to Covid-19 in the food service setting is possible even with distance measures (Jones, et al., 2020), but due to the economic situation, reopening was seen as a way to restart the sector's economic growth. During the pandemic, consumer confidence decreased considerably, however, several practices, like ensuring transparency, eschewing luring customers into a false feeling of safety, strictly following safety protocols, showing integrity, using credible information, and prioritising consumer safety, can have been helpful the restaurant industry regain public trust (Wilson, et al., 2016). To address the pressures caused by fear of the pandemic, a business could increase its customers' perceived value and decrease their perceived risk of visiting restaurants by implementing a mixture of changes to its marketing mix and an emphasis on sanitation and hygiene. The most obvious strategy was to increase the food and service quality (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021).

As a result, it is suggested (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021) that restaurant owners invest in safety by following all suggested security standards. Customers must also be aware of safety precautions, which should be publicly communicated including on social media, posters, and television. If consumers discover that a restaurant's personnel and managers are careless with safety precautions, it may have a significant impact on their decision to patronise the establishment. Restauranteurs should also revise their crisis communication strategies to address customer misconceptions about food safety as well as any operational modifications that may be required in the event of another non-food-transmitted viral pandemic. Especially considering that, according to the World Health Organisation, future pandemics are likely. Making preparations now can aid restaurants in better managing any future pandemic or other disasters (Byrd, et al., 2021). Consumers infer quality from a restaurant's brand based on its reputation, which minimises their sense of risk and uncertainty about safety precautions in the case of popular businesses (Kim, et

al., 2020). The significance of word of mouth in restaurant choices should not be underestimated (Yrjölä, et al., 2019). A positive perception of safety will result in a restaurant being suggested to others and obtaining positive feedback.

2.2.3 Message Framing

Research by Thaler & Sunstein (2008) has examined how to use the message framing technique, which is a strategy for developing information and communications that successfully changes people's minds about a certain subject or product. As a result, their reactions to the same message can vary dramatically depending on how it is presented. The outcome of research conducted by Kim, et al. (2021) indicated that when restaurant customers were given clean, sanitary, and safe-oriented message framing, they were increasingly predicted to feel comfortable, which leads to higher favourable repurchase intentions and increased sales volume. Clean safety restaurant message framing impacts were beneficial and maintained sales, making it a cost-effective sales promotion approach during and after the pandemic period.

While restaurant operators should adopt tactics to re-establish consumer trust, studies also highlight the importance of the government in the sector's economic recovery. Authorities can raise the level of observance of security rules by customers and restaurant operators through honest communication regarding public health benefits (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021).

2.3 Restaurant Financial Adaptations

2.3.1 Pricing Strategy

The majority of basic and traditional sales marketing methods are centred on price discounting. However, rather than employing low price tactics, studies (Kim, et al., 2021) suggest that restaurants should establish a better message framing strategy emphasising on cleanliness, sanitisation, and safety to appeal to both cognition and emotions of customers. Another study (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021), on the other hand, suggests that

reasonable pricing is an important element in deciding whether to visit a restaurant. Efforts must be made to retain the service's ordinary price or apply minor increases throughout and after the pandemic's crucial phase. Consumer behaviour changes frequently during times of crisis. Consumer behaviour indicatated enhanced risk perception and the concern of not being able to meet their fundamental needs during the outset of the pandemic (Flatters & Willmott, 2009). Even if expenditure increases, consumption requirements change during and after crises. Consumers have become more cautious about their spending as insecurity, economic concerns, and unemployment have increased, deferring consumers' desire for long lasting products and unnecessary services (Sheth, 2020). This might be considered as a drive for more sustainable consumption in today's society (Mehta, et al., 2020). As in previous crises, these tendencies were not always temporary, and some traits could continue after the crisis has passed. As a result, discount and loyalty programmes may be a viable technique for acquiring customers (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Cost reduction initiatives

During a financial crisis, minimising costs to retain cash is a crucial approach for financial recovery (Israeli, 2007). Enhanced menu planning, purchasing procedures, storage, and staff training may be effective techniques for reducing food and beverage costs (Madanoglu, et al., 2019). Reducing advertising and promotion spending and delaying capital expenditures was a method that appears to be effective (Tse & Leo Sin, 2006). Negotiations with suppliers to reduce product costs and with employees to reduce pay or implement furloughs could also reduce variable factor costs. Limiting direct operational costs, rather than eliminating them, is a key short-term financial recovery strategy for unique financial conditions caused by disasters (Linassi, et al., 2016). Improperly managed menu planning, purchasing, storing, processing, preparation, serving, and usage can cause food and beverage expenditures to skyrocket. Businesses could soften the impact of lost revenue streams by applying diligent policies focusing on cost management, forecasting, and resource optimisation (Gössling, et al., 2012). Apart from cost control and reduction, supporting restaurant operations also requires large-scale organisational adjustments involving financial planning and budgets. Novoselov (2000) suggests prioritising fast-paying expenses while adopting a new budgeting standard. Essential costs should be paid first, based on a company's business activities. As part of revenue improvement methods, it's also important to release internal

reserves by using interest-free loans, fee postponement, and delayed repayment (Tse & Leo Sin, 2006). These activities may release internal reserves, enabling cash-saving crisis survival.

2.3.3 Capital structure and cash management

Short-term financial restructuring may be important to offer business continuity in times of crises. Restaurants should reduce their leverage and keep earnings during economic slowdowns like COVID-19 (Kizildag, 2015). Businesses can also extend their short-term and fixed debt obligations or retire old debt, when possible. Due to varying reopening dates, it's also important to simulate a number of different situations and establish cash management action plans (Gössling, et al., 2012). Creating a team analysing cash levels with staff dedicated to forecasting and optimization may also improve restaurant performance. In essence, corporate survival and continuity throughout a pandemic depend on methods including minimising variable costs, launching promotional initiatives to increase sales, and controlling capital structure and cashflow through forecasting plans (Campiranon & Scott, 2014).

2.4 Governmental Aid Packages

2.4.1 European Union's Approach

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has had disproportionate impacts, with some countries, those with heavily service based economies, suffering more than others (Fernandes, 2020). As a result, following a multilevel governance model, European Union countries have implemented distinct governmental initiatives in conjunction with those established by the EU. The member states established national measures that covered such lines of support after the EU decided to focus its tourism strategy on three different groups, these being tourists, companies, and destinations or countries, and developed a financial system to back the measures aimed at supporting them. Then, to build national strategies to assist their tourism businesses endure the consequences of COVID-19, member states implemented the Next Generation EU plan, which was specifically adapted to the size of their country's service industry (Sanabria-Díaz, et al., 2021).

Despite the virus's spread, EU destinations have relaxed most national quarantine and confinement policies. In addition, research (Sanabria-Díaz, et al., 2021) examined EU pandemic choices and weighed the benefits and drawbacks of both centralised and decentralised decision-

making processes. Given the reciprocal reliance of subnational and central administrations, some scholars (Aubrecht, et al., 2020) suggest smart mix of both. However, in the field of tourism governance, decentralisation can be more effective when districts experience comparable consequences in crisis conditions like those caused by the pandemic, despite the fact that there is various literature (Yüskel, et al., 2005; Pforr, 2006) that explores the respective advantages of centralization or decentralisation in decision-making in this field. This is owing to the collaboration that can develop amongst various regional tourism sites, as well as the multiplier effects that the confluence of these decentralised policies might generate (Candela, et al., 2015). Examining the labour policies implemented at the European, national, and independent region levels reveals that the plans involve a significant financial element that focuses on SME development, self-employment, and employment policies. Government assistance focuses on promotional efforts for various tourist brands in three ways: securing markets nearby and available to the early incentives implemented, instilling trust in people with new standards in all hospitality sectors, and market safe, refreshed sites.

2.4.2 Aid Packages in Malta

Malta announced the following measures to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on some sectors of the economy and to assist those people who are unable to work as a result of the pandemic. The total cost of this economic stimulus package is estimated to be around €1.81 billion, which was 12.9% of the country's GDP in 2019. Benefits included a weekly direct payment of €166.15 for full-time workers and €103.85 for part-time workers, with their social security contributions being paid and their future contributory pension entitlements being protected, unrestricted access to any disability assistance benefits, the rate of the children's allowance being modified in line with their new income generated up to a weekly maximum rate of €24.08 per child, continuing of any in-work benefits without deductions, any extra allowances being modified in accordance with the additional income earned, up to a weekly ceiling rate of €4.57 for singles and €12.54 for couples, and tapering of benefits being received without deductions. People eligible for any number of these benefits included employees in the private sector who lost their job due to the pandemic, those who because of the government's steps to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus, could not go to work due to medical reasons, including who were ordered to quarantine, and were unable to work from home from March 8, 2020. Dues for income tax, VAT, social security, and maternity

fund contributions by employers and self-employed people were postponed for the months of March and April. The government anticipated to spend between €400 million and €700 million on this policy (Grima, et al., 2020).

Bank Guarantees were extended for up to €900 million to facilitate the granting of soft loans or temporary moratoriums on personal and company loans, with estimations indicating that this could have led in an additional €4.5 billion in credit. Direct capital injection of around €210 million in the Maltese economy, including around €35 million going to the health authorities to combat Covid-19. The government also issued several efforts to assist businesses including employers receiving €350 for each employee on quarantine leave, covering employee earnings for 2 days per week for businesses who have completely ceased operations, as well as self-employed people, with those who also employ others seeing an increase to 3 days. Businesses and self-employed people whose operations had fallen by at least 25% benefitted from the coverage of a day's salary or revenue per week, with of self-employed individuals who employ others benefiting from 2 days of this measure. Third-country nationals were not permitted to replace absent personnel with work permit applications for new third-country nationals not being accepted, with an exemption for highly skilled workers. On the other hand, efforts were made to help all third-country nationals who were currently employed in Malta find new jobs. Facilitating teleworking operations by assisting employers who purchased teleworking technology. Malta Enterprise agreed to cover 45 percent of the installation costs, up to a maximum of €500 per employee and €4,000 per undertaking (Grima, et al., 2020). The Maltese Government twice gave citizens over 16 years old vouchers redeemable at restaurants and other businesses affected by the pandemic with the aim to restart their operation (Cuschieri, 2021; Farrugia, 2021).

2.4.3 Suggested Recovery Strategies

In terms of visitors, actions must be taken to ease travel, stimulate sales, and lower costs, as well as to instil consumer confidence, and give sanitary information and appropriate medical care. During times of travel restrictions, destinations and businesses should let customers adjust their itineraries or travel periods and provide incentives for advanced reservations. The current circumstance emphasises the significance of giving up-to-date

and easily accessible information to travellers in order to ensure compliance with health and safety regulations. Because the survival of SMEs is critical for national economies across the EU, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank Group have put together a comprehensive package to help them. Furthermore, the European Commission proposed a set of measures to enable the gradual and controlled reopening of tourism infrastructure and amenities, along with additional assistance for tourism businesses, such as solvency for small businesses. Included in these recovery actions are direct aid packages, tax relief, deductions, and assurances, along with subsidies to assist tourism and hospitality businesses quickly restart, with an emphasis on SMEs, employment retention plans, and financial assistance to cover business adaptation practices such as staffing, facilities, and technical or operational protocols (Sanabria-Díaz, et al., 2021).

2.5   Impact of Covid-19 on Restaurant Employees

2.5.1   Restaurants' Issues with Retaining Employees

While the tourism industry is frequently promoted as a source of employment and even as a tool for achieving sustainability, its vulnerability to health crises and natural disasters is concerning (Dube, 2020). Many people have questioned the restaurant and tourism industries' long-term viability because of their sensitivity. According to Nhamo, et al. (2020), the industry hit rock bottom in less than a month since many businesses were unable to pay their franchise fees and expenses, let alone pay their employees' salaries, despite years of growth in several nations. Many restaurant businesses' operations around the world were threatened by the virus, as many were either closed or running beneath sustainable levels to break even. As a result, several restaurants laid off personnel on unprecedented scales (Nhamo, et al., 2020). Ntounis, et al. (2022) show that not all businesses are capable of absorbing the catastrophic impacts of the pandemic's systemic shock. The tourism industry is especially at risk from to natural calamities, and the long-term consequences can be devastating to economic profit and livelihoods. The tourism industry could have a higher sensitivity to the Covid-19 pandemic than other industries with better developed socio-political, economic, and environmental relationships between resilience and sustainability (Ntounis, et al., 2022).

According to Nhamo, et al. (2020), in America, before the pandemic the restaurant industry was growing and creating jobs, but rapid job losses quickly reversed this. Restaurants were

experiencing a dramatically decreased level of business, due to them being closed to the public. Quick service and quick casual restaurants fared a bit better than other types of restaurants, as some were able to continue their operations through delivery and pick up. A number of restaurants considered closing indefinitely if the pandemic continued as they were running out of cash to continue their operations. Due to the decreased business, several restaurants either laid-off or furloughed a portion of their staff, as cost reduction measure, with some estimates indicating that 10.8 million employees in bars and restaurants might have lost their job due to Covid-19 (Dube, et al., 2021). Contrastingly, in Malta, full time employment in 'accommodation and food service activities' increased in the months of April and May of 2020 when compared to the year before. On the other hand, part time employment in this sector decreased during this period (National Statistics Office, 2021). The pandemic also raises concerns about vulnerability, as it has impacted low wage jobs in the restaurant industry and the effect on tourism is believed to greater in poorer nations (Sanabria-Díaz, et al., 2021).

2.5.2   Covid Induced Stress

Researchers have observed that hospitality employees frequently endure stress because of the insecure nature of employment, abusive client behaviour, and work-family challenges (Cheng & Yi, 2018). The unstable nature of hospitality employees' employment is a major source of stress. According to reports, hospitality workers frequently confront workplace bullying (Ariza-Montes, et al., 2017), lengthy and erratic work hours (Tromp & Blomme, 2012), excessive workloads (Mansour & Tremblay, 2018), and a high level of employment volatility (Wang & Xie, 2020). These working circumstances may induce anxiety and depression in hospitality professionals. Also, hospitality workers may be subject to abusive client behaviour. Employees in the hospitality industry are required to satisfy customers, including those who act inappropriately. According to studies, rudeness, violence, and deviance on the part of customers generate stress among hospitality employees (Boukis, et al., 2020). Work-family challenges could also be stressful for employees. According to studies, it is difficult for hospitality professionals to reconcile work and family duties because of the lengthy and unpredictable working hours, which limit time spent with family and time needed for themselves (Xu, et al., 2020). A challenging work-family balance can result in anxiety, depression, fatigue, and burnout among hospitality employees (Mansour & Tremblay, 2018). Due to this, hospitality professionals feel less capable and successful, and with a higher probability of quitting from the employment (Park & Min, 2020), posing a significant danger to the industry (Yan, et al., 2021).

A study (Demirović Bajrami, et al., 2021) found that increased job insecurity due to COVID-19 was a strong predictor of increased turnover intentions, as employees that are still working contemplate seeking for a new employment. While the source of job insecurity can be attributed to an external issue in a time of crises, employees may also blame internal difficulties for job insecurity.

Research (Iqbal Khan, et al., 2021) has demonstrated that the pandemic is amplifying the pressures of widespread layoffs and a heightened sense of insecurity among employees. Many employees said that the pandemic had a detrimental influence on their mental health, and as the economy slowly recovers, work-related stress among frontline restaurant workers continues to rise. This is due in part to uncertainty regarding prescribed health and safety protocols and inconsistent execution of these protocols. This, combined with a general disregard for occupational stress, has led to significant mental health repercussions among restaurant employees (Rosemberg, et al., 2021).

It is believed that human resource management practices satisfy a variety of psychological demands, including knowledge, autonomy, and belongingness, hence promoting psychological development and well-being. HRM policies can increase the job resources of employees, as well as reduce the negative consequences of job demands. Human resource management strategies improve psychological resources in the form of self-efficacy, positivity, hope, perseverance, and psychological safety, that is likely to increase well-being. Research (Luthans, et al., 2010) suggests that HRM strategies improve workers' wellbeing by activating their motivational resources, with studies (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2010) finding that motivation had the strongest negative link with turnover intentions out of the factors examined and motivation helped people deal with stressful situations more effectively.

Since the hospitality industry faces distinct issues, such as extended operation hours, rigorous job demands, and daily or seasonal swings, wellbeing in the hospitality industry is particularly pertinent. Due to the demanding nature of occupations in the hospitality industry, employees are at risk if their employer fails to support employee wellness (Ariza-Montes, et al., 2019). Wellbeing has business consequences for restaurants since service quality, which is dependent on staff wellbeing, influences its success (Agarwal, 2021).

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The aims of this study are to find out the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic presented to the Maltese restaurant industry, how restaurants dealt with these challenges, and what was the impact on the staff working within this sector. The research was based on a mixed methodology, with interviews with food and beverage managers, and a survey including restaurant employees, respectively, being employed as qualitative and quantitative research tools.

3.1.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is when an event or situation is being investigated rather than information being illustrated in numbers. Qualitative research includes all sorts of textual analyses, such as content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analyses, as well as any forms of social inquiry that largely rely on non-numeric data in the form of words. By characterising the intrinsic or fundamental qualities of social objects or human experience, qualitative inquiry seeks to explain the meaning of human behaviour (Jackson II, et al., 2007). Qualitative research relies on the participants to provide in-depth answers to questions regarding the topic under investigation. By design, a qualitative researcher will learn far more about a phenomenon while also being aware of the disadvantage of the fact that few people will participate in studies with this level of in-depth detail, which prevents the findings from being generalisable to the population. Additionally, the researcher is more likely to be aware of his or her personal than impersonal role in the study. The acknowledgment of subjectivity also results in improved member-checking and other measures to ensure reliability. By doing this, the researcher acknowledges that his or her study of other people's lives overlaps with their own experience, which has ramifications for how social scientists will interpret the data they have gathered (Jackson II, et al., 2007). Every researcher has their biases, that is why it is vital for the researcher to be professional, as well as being guided by a supervisor, so to remain impartial and not interfere with the participants' opinions.

3.1.2 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research deals with quantifying and analysing variables to obtain results. The aim of quantitative research is to gather data that can be quantified and statistically analysed to support or challenge conflicting views about the state of knowledge. Experiments and surveys are used in quantitative research, and data is collected using specified instruments to provide statistical data. Therefore, quantitative research can be defined as the process of explaining a problem or

phenomenon by the collection of data in numerical form and analysis using mathematical techniques, especially statistics (Apuke, 2017). The main limitations of quantitative research are that no data is provided as to why populations believe, feel, or act as they do and it could prove to be more difficult to contact certain demographic groups, especially those that are vulnerable or underprivileged (Goertzen, 2017)

3.1.3   Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research is a type of research where the researcher uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study to gather and analyse data, integrate the results, and draw conclusions. Instead of being constrained by using conventional data collection methods, research is instead directed by an underlying line of inquiry (Doyle, et al., 2009). The overarching purpose of mixed methods research is to expand and strengthen a study's results and, as a result, add to the body of the academic research. The implementation of mixed methods should help in every study to address the research questions. The researcher used mixed methods to study different parts of a single research issue. In every instance, combining methods, approaches, and perspectives will help answer research questions and improve upon a more foundational study design. The mixed methods study will yield a greater level of information (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). In this study, the researcher used a qualitative method to gather data on how businesses were impacted by the pandemic and how they dealt with the challenges presented to them and a quantitative research method to investigate how the people working within this industry were affected. This gave the researcher the possibility to combine the results of both methods, discuss them and reach a conclusion.

3.2   Research Design

3.2.1   Research Philosophy

For this study, the researcher adopted a pragmatic philosophy. The premise of pragmatism is that researchers should employ the philosophical and methodological approach that works best for the specific research subject being studied. It is frequently connected with mixed-methodologies research, where the focus is on the outcomes and study topics rather than the methods. As a research philosophy, pragmatism refuses to engage with disputed philosophical concepts like truth and reality. Instead, it acknowledges the possibility of single or numerous realities that are amenable to scientific investigation (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019).

3.2.2   Sampling Method

The target population investigated were food and beverage managers for the qualitative method and employees working in fine dining restaurants for the quantitative method. This research followed a purposive sampling technique for the qualitative method. Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which selections regarding the participants included in the sample are made by the researcher based on a range of characteristics, such as expert understanding of the research subject, aptitude, and readiness to participate in the study. The primary objective of purposive sampling is to concentrate on specific characteristics of the participants which are of interest, so that the researcher may effectively answer the research questions. The investigated sample is not representative of the general population (Taherdoost, 2016). The researcher chose this sampling technique as it could offer richer data regarding the chosen class of restaurants, which will be more effective in the exploratory research of this category of restaurants. Also, it is cost-effective and relatively time-efficient (Taherdoost, 2016).

For the quantitative method, a convenience sampling technique was used. Convenience sampling is a sort of non-probability sampling in which individuals of the target population who fulfil specific practical criteria, like ease of access, geographical vicinity, availability at a particular time, or willingness to participate, are selected for the research. The primary purpose of convenience sampling is to gather data from people who are readily available to the researcher (Etikan, et al., 2016).

3.2.3   Data Collection

The qualitative research instrument used was audio-recorded, semi-structured in-person interviews with 3 food and beverage managers working in fine dining establishments in 3 different business types: family-owned restaurant, investor-owned restaurant, and hotel restaurant. These businesses were chosen to see if there was any significant difference between ownership type. The researcher contacted the participants through email sent either to the human resources or directly to the business. The researcher chose to interview food and beverage managers as they have an overall view of the entire operation and therefore, can offer a more global insight of the business' performance and challenges faced. The interviews were semi-structured to allow the participants to fully express their views and experiences as well as discuss other relevant points while also directing the interview to answer the research questions associated with it. This also allowed the researcher to be able to compare and contrast the participants' answers, develop

arguments and draw a conclusion. This instrument used five questions based on those developed for the research of Yost, et al. (2021).

The quantitative research instrument used was an online survey, based on the questions developed for the research of Lippert, et al. (2021), distributed to the employees working in food and beverage, including chefs, waiters and bartenders and stewards, in 3 fine dining establishments. The survey was sent to the restaurants and then distributed to their employees, a total of approximately 150 individuals. The questions directed to the participants were mostly multiple choice with an option of expressing any other views to ensure that the data gathered is accurate and can be compared to the other businesses. The businesses where this survey was carried out were the same businesses where the interviews were conducted so that the researcher could analyse the relationship between the strategies that the management employed and its effect on the employees.

3.2.4 Pilot Study

To determine whether the questions were understandable, and the objectives were met, a pilot study was carried out with a number of individuals. To conduct the pilot study, interviews were held with 3 people while the questionnaire was given to 10 people. To achieve optimal findings, the questionnaire and interview were subsequently reviewed and amended. All the participants were employees within the food and beverage sector.

3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later reviewed so that a thematic analysis could be carried out. To achieve this, the data was first coded and then a number of themes were identified and reviewed. The themes were investigated to comprehend the perspectives and motives of the participants.

Thematic analysis is a technique for methodically detecting, organising, and providing insight into patterns of meaning, referred to as themes, throughout a dataset. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to comprehend common or shared meanings and experiences by concentrating on meaning across an entire dataset. This strategy detects and makes sense of commonalities in the way a topic is discussed or written about. However, recurrent things are not always meaningful or significant. There are various patterns that may be detected in any dataset; the objective of

analysis is to identify those that are pertinent to answering a specific research question (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

Thematic analysis allows the researcher to focus on the data in a variety of ways. Thematic analysis can be used to analyse the meaning of an entire dataset or explore a specific component of an event in depth. One can describe the apparent or semantic interpretations of the data, or investigate the deeper meanings, underlying assumptions, and concepts that lay beneath what is clearly stated. The researcher used thematic analysis because of its accessibility and versatility. It provides an entry point into qualitative research by teaching the mechanics of coding and carefully analysing qualitative data, which may subsequently be related to bigger theoretical or conceptual difficulties (Braun & Clarke, 2017).

The collected data from the surveys was prepared before analysis. The dataset was examined for missing data, outliers, and duplicates. The data was then evaluated using Google Forms' statistical software. The data was then organised and visualised in tables and charts, descriptive statistics were gathered so that frequency distribution and central tendency could be assessed, discussed, and compared.

3.4   Ethical considerations

The ethical code was followed throughout this study. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and aims, information gathered would be only used for the study, that participation is completely voluntary, and they can withdraw at any time. Participants were given an information letter and consent form to that they knew this information and willingly participated in the study. Participants answering the survey were anonymous and all participants and their place of work were kept strictly confidential. All academic papers or information sources were given their due credit and properly referenced.

3.5   Limitations

While the study tried to follow the best available practices to the researcher's knowledge and conducted diligent data collection methods, there were certain limitations in pursuing the study's aims. It is anticipated that these considerations will aid future researchers in avoiding the same flaws.

Firstly, data collection was conducted in the summer season, which is considered the peak season for tourism in Malta. It was also a time when restaurants were open and trying to recover from periods where their operation was largely restricted. This meant that potential participants involved in the study were busy and some were either unable or unwilling to take part in the research. Another limitation is that the research is focused on fine dining restaurants and the sample size of the total population of this category is overall small. The researcher chose to do this as the study was restricted to a word limit and the findings would have been diluted if not focused on a small part of this industry. Therefore, the findings of this research are not generalisable to the entire restaurant industry in Malta. The study was done in Malta, so studies done in other countries could yield different results due to the different conditions that were present in that country. Also, while the researcher tried to utilise the right tools and apply the best concepts to explore the research questions in the most effective manner, the limited experience in conducting complex studies and collecting primary data can be considered a liability as more experienced researchers might have employed better strategies.

4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

Data was collected by means of interviews and questionnaires. In total, three people were interviewed and all participants were working as managers in Malta before the start of the pandemic. At the time of the interviews, August and September 2022, Malta had completed the reopening plan for restaurants, and all restrictions, such as the obligatory wearing of masks and a minimum distance between tables, had been lifted.

4.1 Thematic Analysis

4.1.1 Theme 1: Staffing issues

The idea of finding and employing people in the restaurant industry becoming increasingly difficult was raised and argued by all of the participants. Participants noted that there seem to be much fewer people interested in working in restaurants leading to a shortage of staff throughout the industry in Malta, an issue which is also present in other countries (Messabia, et al., 2022; Perna, 2022; Butler, 2021).

All the participants mentioned perceived job security, or lack of it, for people working within this industry as a contributing factor to the decline in people looking towards the restaurant industry as a career. The participants noted that the uncertainty and number of other issues presented to employees working within this sector due to restaurant closures led several of them to leave the industry and go for other jobs, which as participant 2 stated, were "not as heavily impacted by covid". Participant 1 said that the lack of job security and uncertainty of when they would be returning to work developed "into something bigger", which resulted in affecting employees and their family. Participant 3 mentioned that the foreigners working in this industry left Malta when restaurants closed, as being given the minimum salary the government was providing was "a big issue" for some people and it "affected a lot of people", leading some to leave the island while participant 2 added that "people who have left Malta are still out of Malta". Foreigners leaving the restaurant industry and the country was also reported in the United Kingdom (Butler, 2021; Partridge, et al., 2021).

Two participants also discussed work life balance as a reason for the staff shortage that the restaurant industry is facing. Participant 1 said that "nowadays, this generation doesn't want to work weekends, people want to be with their family and its hard" to find people to work in this industry whilst participant 2 commented that "there is a bigger appreciation towards work life

balance" and that "previously there was a bigger dedication towards the workplace". This participant went on to say that the workplace in today's times had to adapt to employees' needs and wants more than ever before, noting also that flexible working is not as looked down upon anymore including in the hospitality industry. The importance of employees feeling valued by the business in order to be able to retain them was also discussed, participant 2 suggested that when employees were put on the government grants of €800 a month, some felt that they were not being valued by their employer and it prompted them to leave. Participant 1 remarked that by maintaining communication with employees and informing them about the business' strategy, they were able to retain a good part of their staff.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Financial Issues

All participants indicated that the covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their business' performance. The issues were the significant, almost total, loss of revenue, lack of liquidity, and the ongoing expenses and wastages.

The participants all mentioned that "revenue had stopped" and that there was "no income". Participant 2 explained that apart from cancelling approximately two years of operation, this went on to impact the investors' and employee's mind and thoughts and influenced their actions. Participants 1 and 3 also mentioned that they experienced losses due to spoilage as some perishable items expired after "months not operating". This came mainly from the kitchen, as participant 3 stated, there was "a good amount of money invested in food" so that the restaurant could be able to serve its customers. Restaurants did not plan for this, since they did not foresee closures, due to not perceiving Covid-19 as such a threat at the time.

Additionally, the "expenses kept on going", restaurants still had to pay either their rent or loan as well as their suppliers for items that were purchased when restaurants were in operation. Participant 3 noted that only a few landlords "managed at least to understand the situation and at least to help us", stating that if a restaurant is closed or only partially open, they "could never make the same amount of money" so it was a challenge to pay the expenses. The combination of these factors resulted in restaurants being in a poor liquid position, with all participants mentioning they had to obtain a loan or injection of funds so that "the business stays afloat".

4.1.3 Theme 3: Restaurant adaptations

Several measures were implemented by restaurants, due to the challenges that they faced. These included following the regulations and protocol issued by the authorities to make the customers feel safe, cost reduction, cautious investing, restructuring of the business, and offering take out or delivery options.

All participants mentioned that during the pandemic the strategy was to minimise costs as much as possible. To achieve this, participants 1 and 3 mentioned an increased awareness of managing perishable items in order to control the food and beverage cost, with participant 1 stating this was "crucial". Participants 1 and 2 also noted that they restructured the business, with certain functions or duties being done by other departments or members so that the business could minimise the costs. Participant 2 went on to say that although controlling costs should still be given its due importance, it is no longer the main priority. It is now more important to focus on generating revenue, so it is essential to give those functions that were absorbed the importance they deserve so that restaurants are well maintained and looked after in order to be able to "look ahead" and "win business".

All the participants indicated that although the restaurants still invested and would continue to invest in the restaurant itself, as this is important to keep the standard and be consistent, there is an increased sense of caution with participant 1 stating that "this was kind of a necessity as you don't know what is coming". Although cautious, restaurants are still committed to investing in what is needed for them to provide their standard of service now that covid has passed and we have been restored back to normality.

The participants all mentioned that the restaurants tried to operate either a takeaway or delivery so that they could have some revenue coming in. The restaurants were hesitant to do this as the participants did not perceive fine dining restaurants as being able to deliver what they normally provide, "the quality is not the same". The participants indicated that it is not part of their business model and that they were being "misunderstood", they explained that fine dining restaurants do not just offer food as it is only part of the "experience". With delivery and takeaway, the customer is "missing one the most important part of having the full experience", according to participant 2, as certain elements of the fine dining experience cannot be offered or provided. Participants also noted that it was not worth it as "it did not really help to bring much revenue" and restaurants

incurred additional costs to be able to provide it, adding that they would not be looking to try to do it again if a similar circumstance occurs.

To make customers feel safe, all the participants mentioned that the restaurants strictly followed the local protocol, making sure they complied with all the instructions, such as keeping the required minimum distance between tables, wearing masks, and limiting the number of clients in the restaurant. One participant stated that the restaurant continued to follow the directives even after they were reduced to give an image of safety.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Change in clients

A shift in the customers' mentality was mentioned by all the participants. It was noted that while some customers felt safe, many were still slightly hesitant to dine in restaurants, especially in the early stages of the reopening. The participants also noted that clients seemed to have an increased knowledge of food and drink with, participant 2 saying, they had a "bigger appreciation towards quality driven outlets". Participant 1 attributed this increase in knowledge to people using the time they had during lockdowns to learn about various subjects as well as them cooking more often. Participants 1 and 2 commented that clients seemed to prefer to spend a bit more and make sure that they receive a quality dining experience while participant 3 remarked that since restaurants had fewer clients, they could be a bit more demanding and ask for more.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Handling of Covid-19 by the Authorities

All of the participants discussed how the authorities handled the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants mentioned that the situation was dealt with effectively and the initial response and measures taken were successful. Participants also highlighted certain areas and actions that could have been implemented in an improved manner.

The participants all noted that the government grants helped the restaurants to keep their employees. Participant 1 said that "the strategy helped to not put all the burden on the employer" and gave them "energy" to keep people employed, which they believe would have been something significantly more challenging without the provided grants. Participants also mentioned other measures which they believed to be beneficial, with participant 1, saying that the vouchers given to public "gave customers extra incentive to go out and visit restaurants", participant 3 noting the restriction of travel and managing the number of cases, and participant 2, mentioning the

agreement between banks and the government to provide loans with low interest rates. Participant 2 stated that without policies several restaurants would have had to close their operation entirely.

Participants also mentioned that there were some things that they did not agree with or understand. Participant 1 commented that some of the policies implemented on restaurants when they reopened did not make sense or were overly restrictive. Participant 3 explained that while closing down and implementing preventative measures to stop the spread of Covid-19 was important, especially in the initial period, there were excessive levels of fear and caution which slowed down the reopening of restaurants and the resumption of normal life. Participant 2 also commented on this matter, recommending that instead of the entire population, only the vulnerable people are segregated, and receive the help that they need. The participant elaborated that many people still got infected, managed to recover, and continued their regular lives so most people did not need to be segregated as they could handle the virus, and that lockdowns could bring with them the closure of restaurants, which negatively affects people.

4.2   Survey Analysis

4.2.1   Respondent Overview

A total of 47 people, out of approximately 150, responded to the survey after the filtration process, where duplicate responses or surveys completed by people who were not part of the target population were removed. The population included employees working within the restaurant industry in Malta in three different business types: hotel, investor-owned, and family or owner run restaurants. Respondents included employees working in the kitchen and food and beverage service, with a variety of age ranges, both male and female.

4.2.2 Profile of the Sample
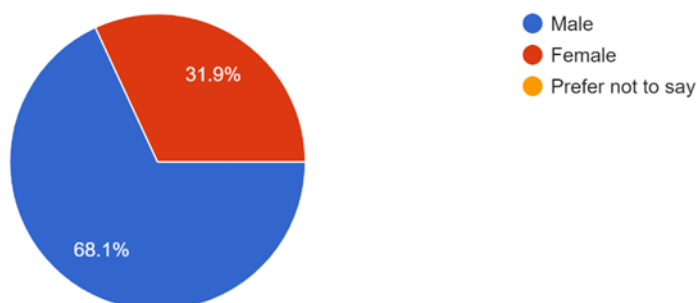
What is your gender?

47 responses

Figure 1: Gender

Figure 1 shows that male participants, 32, made up 68.1% of the sample, with the other 15 respondents identifying as female, making up 31.9%. The number of male participants being approximately double that of females was to be expected as the percentage of male workers in accommodation and food service activities in Malta was around the same figure (National Statistics Office, 2021)
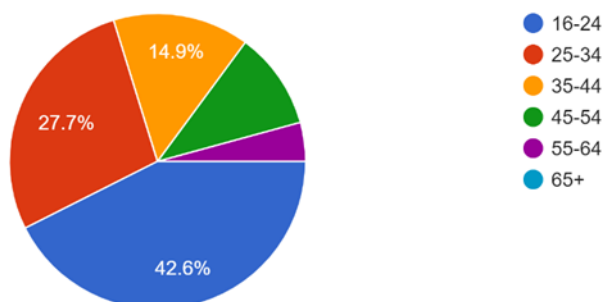
What is your age?

47 responses

Figure 2: Age range

Participants between the ages of 16 and 24 were the largest group with 20 respondents, followed by 13 respondents between 25 and 34 years old, making up 27.7%, 7 respondents, 14.9%, aged 35 to 44, 5 individuals aged 45-54 making up 10.6%, and 2 respondents aged 55 to 64 representing 4.3% of the sample.

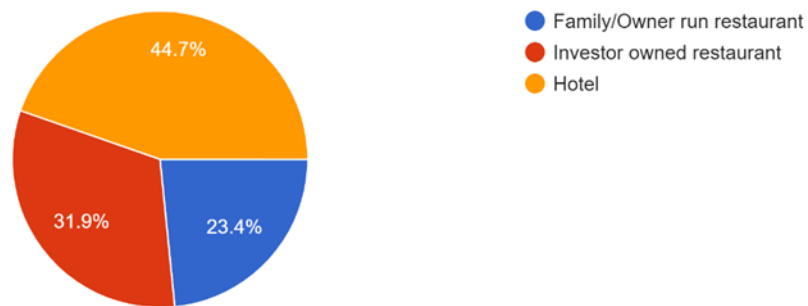In which type of restaurant do you work in?
47 responses

Figure 3: Restaurant type

44.7% of the respondents, 21 individuals, worked in a hotel restaurant, 15 respondents, making up 31.9% worked in an investor-owned restaurant, and 11 respondents worked in a family or owner-run restaurant.

In which department of the restaurant do you work in?
47 responses

Figure 4: Section respondents work in
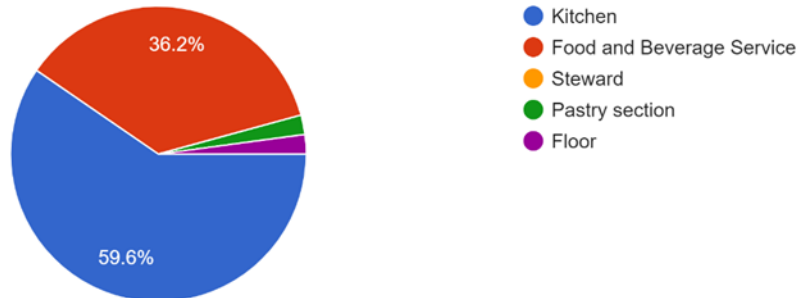
A total of 29 participants work in the kitchen, with 28 respondents choosing kitchen and another indicating they work in the pastry section, which is part of the kitchen, making up 61.7% of the sample. The remaining 38.3%, 18 respondents, is made up of food and beverage service employees, with one indicating that they work 'floor', another term for food and beverage service.

4.2.3 Respondents experience and perspective

Have you been experiencing higher levels of stress since the start of the pandemic?
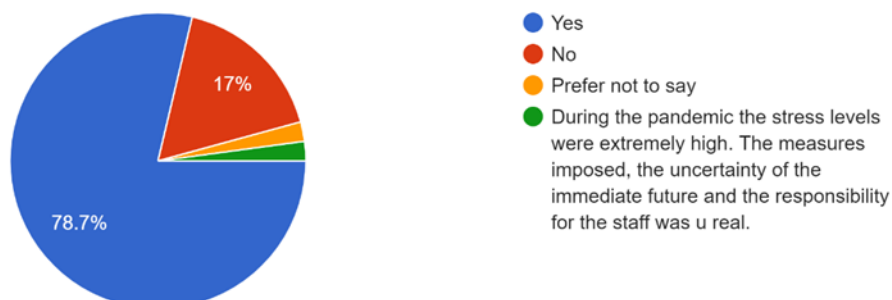47 responses

Figure 5: Respondents' strress level

The vast majority of the respondents, 38, responded that they experienced higher stress levels since the start of the pandemic, with one stating that "stress levels were extremely high", this totals to 80.8% of the respondents. Only 8 respondents, 17%, reported that they did not experience higher stress levels, with one respondent choosing not to disclose this information. This highlights that the Covid-19 pandemic was a significant source of stress for many of the respondents.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic have you been experiencing more mental health issues (anxiety, depression, etc.)?
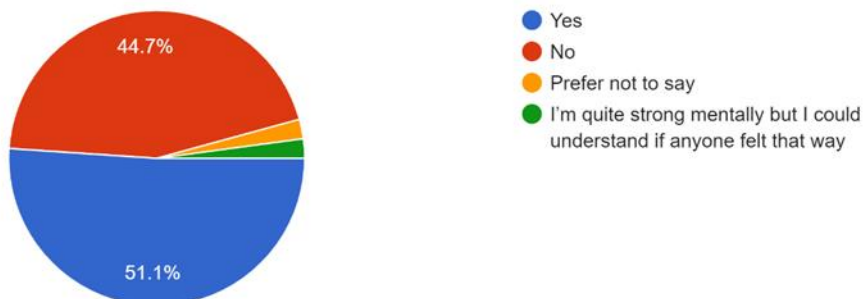47 responses

Figure 6: State of mental health

Over half of the respondents with 51.1%, 24 individuals, reported experiencing more mental health issues since the start of the pandemic. A total of 22 respondents, 46.8%, indicated that their mental health was not impacted due to covid, with a participant stating that even if they got through the

pandemic without these effects, it is understandable that some were affected. Only one participant, 2.1%, chose not to disclose this information.

Do you think that the customers' expectations have changed compared to before the pandemic?
45 responses
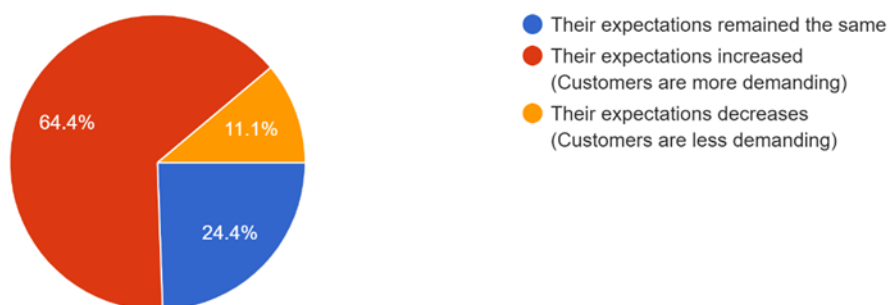
Figure 7: Respondents view regarding customers' expectations

The majority of respondents, with 29 individuals making up 64.4%, reported that customers' level of expectations has increased when compared to the time before the pandemic. 11 respondents, 24.4%, reported that they did not notice any change, and 5 respondents believe that expectation levels have decreased after the pandemic. 2 individuals did not answer this question.

Do you feel that your workload has been affected since the pandemic?
47 responses

Figure 8: Respondents' perception regarding their workload

Most respondents, 68.1%, answered that their workload has increased since the pandemic. 17% of the respondents believe that their workload decreased, and 7 respondents, 14.9%, feel that their workload has not changed.

Do you believe that the social structure of restaurants (being a close knit community/team) helped to keep you supported and connected during the pandemic?

46 responses
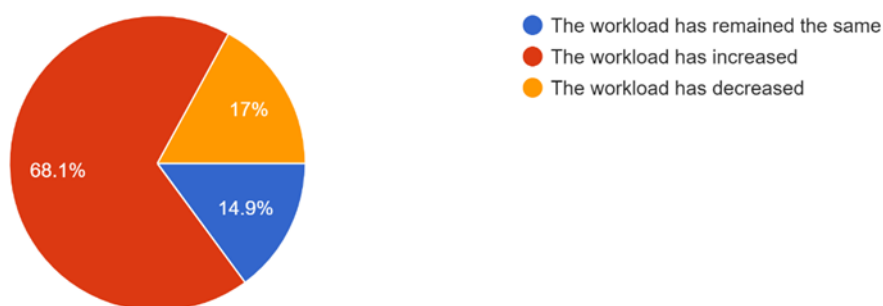
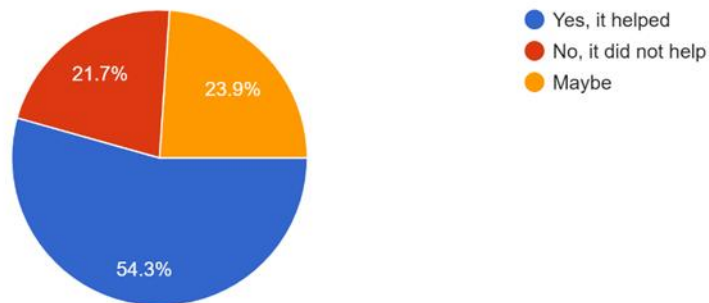

- Yes, it helped
- No, it did not help
- Maybe

Figure 9: Social structure of restaurants supporting and connecting respondents

54.3%, 25 of the respondents, reported that the social structure of restaurants helped them feel supported and connected during the pandemic. 10 respondents, 21.7%, did not believe that being a close team helped to keep them supported during the pandemic, while a further 23.9% indicated that they were not sure if this helped them. This supports the findings of Lippert, et al. (2021), although the connection seems to be weaker. An explanation to this might be that Malta is a small country, and people often have their friends and family to support them apart from their colleauges, while on the other hand the research by Lippert, et al. (2021) was conducted in America where employees might live away from their families, so their work social structure could be their primary support system.

Do you feel that the governmental grants given during the pandemic were enough to financially support you during those times?

47 responses

- Yes
- No
- Im not sure
- Not enough but they helped
- I have never received any since i had no employment, whilst compensated with vouchers
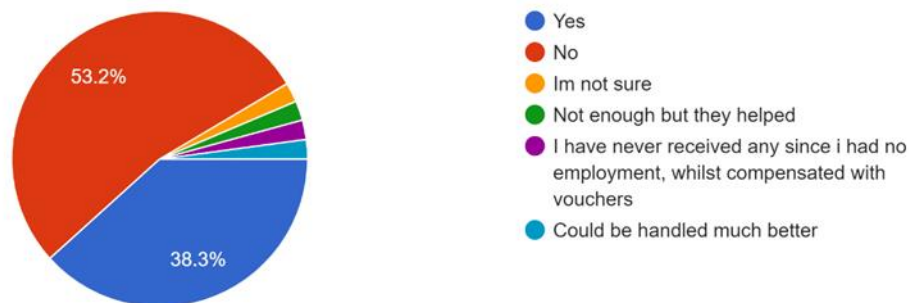- Could be handled much better

Figure 10: Views on government grants financially supporting respondents

The majority of respondents, 53.2%, answered that the governmental grants provided to them were not enough to financially support them during the pandemic. 18 respondents, 38.3%,

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answered that the grants did support them financially, with another respondent stating that whilst the grants were not enough, they did help. One respondent was not sure, another one reported that they did not receive any grants as they were not employed at that time, and one respondent believed that this could have been handled in a better way.

Once restaurants reopened did you feel safe to go back?
47 responses
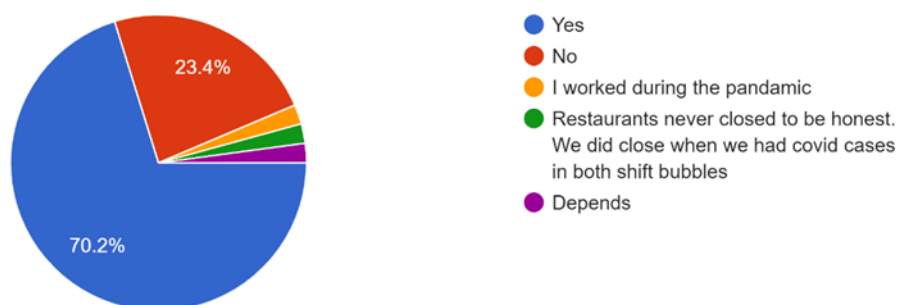
Figure 11: Respondents' perception of safety to return to work

Most respondents, 70.2%, reported feeling safe to go back to work when restaurants reopened, with 23.4% of the respondents not feeling safe going back. One respondent noted that they worked during the pandemic and one responding indicating that it depends. Another respondent stated that restaurants never closed, possibly referring that restaurants were able to operate takeaway and delivery.

Do you believe that the measures implemented were enough to maintain your safety at work?
47 responses
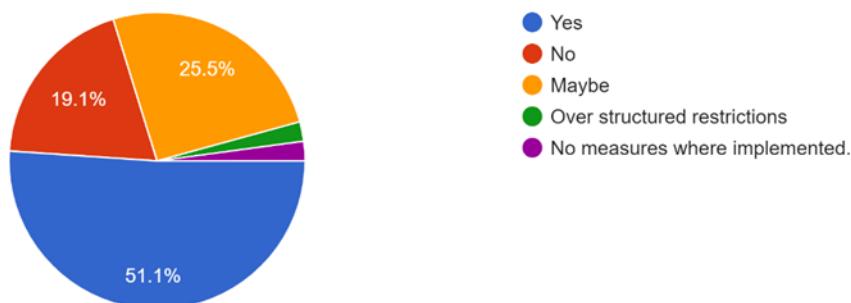
Figure 12: Respondents' view on the implementation of measures to retain their safety at work

Approximately half, 51.1%, of the respondents, reported that they believed that the measures implemented were enough to maintain their safety at work. 12 respondents, 25.5%, answered that the measures might have been enough, and a further 19.1% reported that the measures

implemented were not enough to maintain their safety. One participant reported that the restrictions were over-structured, and another reported that no measures were implemented.

What do you think about the timing of the reopening of restaurants?
47 responses
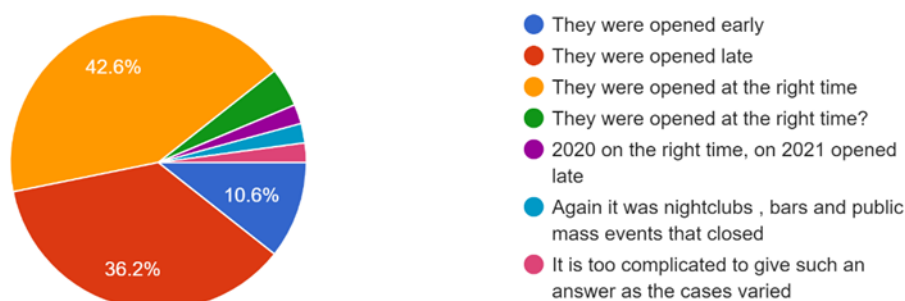
Figure 13: Respondents' thoughts on the timing of reopening of restaurants

22 respondents, 46.9%, reported that they believed that restaurants were reopened at the right time, 36.2% reporting that restaurants were opened late, and 10.6% feeling that restaurants were opened too early. One respondent had different opinions on the reopening that happened in 2020, stating that restaurants were opened at the right time, and in 2021, restaurants were opened late, with another respondent stating that it is complicated to answer this question due to the variance of cases. One respondent also indicated that restaurants did not close.

Do you consider the pandemic over?
47 responses
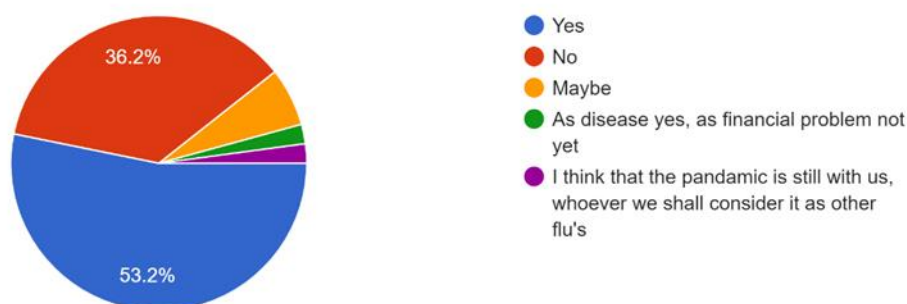
Figure 14: Respondents' views about the current state of the pandemic

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Most respondents, 53.2%, considered the pandemic to be over, while 36.2% reported that it was still ongoing, and 6.4% of the respondents answered maybe. One participant noted that Covid-19 was over, but its financial repercussions were still active, and another participant stated that the pandemic was still active, but the people started to treat like a flu.

Do you believe there might be more closures?
46 responses
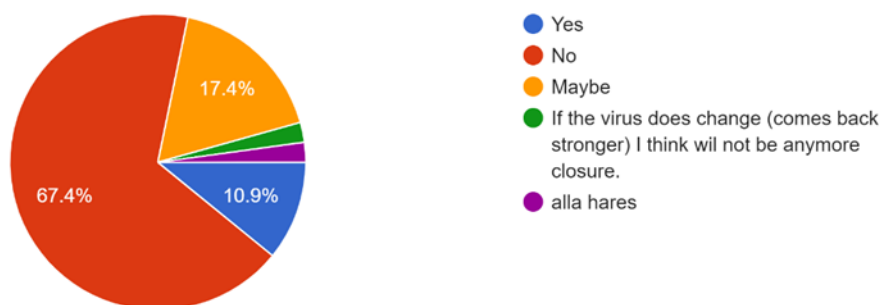
Figure 15: Possibility of further closures

The majority of respondents, 67.4% noted that they do not believe that there would be any further closures, with only 10.9%, 5 participants, answering that they believed that there would be more closures. 17.4% of the participants answered that it might happen, a participant, 2.2%, noted that they do not think there would be further closures even in the event that a stronger virus variant returns, and another exclaimed that they hope not.

The last question asked participants if they had any comments or suggestions that they would like to discuss regarding this subject. A total of 12 participants answered this question, with two of them stating that they did not have anything to add, leaving 10 responses to analyse.

Five participants mentioned that there were less people working or willing to work in the restaurant industry. One respondent explained that this led to an increase in workload as there were less workers during the pandemic and when restaurants started getting busier the number of staff remained the same. A participant stated that several Maltese employees left this industry as they were put on minimum wage. Another participant wrote that they hope that things would change and the people working in this industry start receiving more appreciation. A respondent noted that they believe that the lack of staff might lead to closures of restaurants as they will not have enough skilled people to operate.

Respondents also noted a decrease in quality of the tourism industry, with 3 individuals mentioning this. One respondent noted that the people willing to work in this sector often lack the experience and knowledge required, with another stating that due to the industry not having many Maltese people working within it, it was losing Maltese cuisine. A participant stated that they do not believe that the industry was not being as looked after as it should be, especially considering it is a leading source of income for the country.

The steps taken by the authorities were also mentioned by the respondents. Two respondents mentioned that they did not understand why certain business within the tourism sector, like snack bars and bars, were not allowed to continue their operation, with one stating that this was discriminating. Respondents also highlighted the importance of mental wellbeing, with one stating that the measures implemented did not help with this. One participant suggested that borders should have been closed at an earlier stage to prevent the initial introduction of the virus in Malta.

4.3   Discussion

This study aimed to discover what obstacles the restaurant industry in Malta faced due to the Covid-19 pandemic, how these businesses managed to overcome these obstacles, and what were the affects on the employees working in restaurants. The results indicate that the restaurant industry in Malta is suffering from a shortage of employees which was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, like other countries such as Canada (Messabia, et al., 2022), and the United Kingdom (Butler, 2021; Partridge, et al., 2021), as people left the industry for other jobs not as heavily impacted by the pandemic and many people were not looking to restaurants for potential careers. Also, Covid-19 presented restaurants with financial issues such as loss of revenue and insufficient liquidity, consistent with the findings of Messabia, et al. (2022) with restaurants having to obtain loans or injection of funds to stay in operation. The data suggests that adaptations such as offering takeout and delivery services did not really work for fine dining restaurants, as these did not provide any significant income while also requiring an initial investment.

The findings show that employees have been experiencing higher levels of stress and mental health issues since the start of the pandemic. In line with research (Cheng & Yi, 2018), this could be linked to several factors, such as inadequate work life balance, reported increases in customers' expectations, and employees' workload after Covid-19, with customers' expectations, possibly having a positive relationship with employees' workload. The results are consistent with studies (Wong, et al., 2021; Demirović Bajrami, et al., 2021), showing that increased workloads

without an improvement in compensation and job insecurity may lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, job motivation, organisational commitment, and turnover intentions. Similarly, the findings also indicate that respondents were not properly financially supported and experienced job insecurity due to Covid-19, which prompted them to leave the restaurant industry. These results could explain the reason why the restaurant industry in Malta is facing a staffing crisis. The results contradict the claim of Demirović Bajrami, et al. (2021) that "Covid-19 did not significantly reduce the attractiveness of tourism industry for employment", with the results showing that many people are not seeking employment in the restaurant industry and several that were working within it left for other jobs. The reason for this might be that this study and that of Demirović Bajrami, et al. (2021), were conducted in different countries with different mentalities, different stages of the pandemic, and the study was a survey including employees within hospitality in general, with restaurants representing only 19% of the sample, whilst this study was focused only restaurants and included interviews with food and beverage managers which could provide insight on those no longer in this industry.

The results show that financial losses were partly due to the spoilage of certain perishable products not used because of the unexpected closures, in line with the findings of Messabia, et al. (2022). The results are consistent with research (Israeli, 2007; Madanoglu, et al., 2019; Tse & Leo Sin, 2006) indicating that during a financial crisis, cost minimisation, through improvements in planning menus, purchasing and storage of ingredients, and reducing or postponing investments, is key to financially recover. The findings show that minimising costs, along with obtaining a loan or injection of funds, was the strategy that restaurants used to survive this difficult period, with restaurants managing perishable items, restructuring the business so that certain tasks can be done by other employees, and investing cautiously. In contrast with the findings of Yost, et al. (2021), the results show that the restaurants had limited success with takeaway and delivery services, with these not generating much revenue, and the restaurants having to invest in certain items, such as takeaway boxes to be able to offer these services. The restaurants were not able to provide what they usually do, as fine dining restaurants offer more than only food and beverage, which are not of the same quality when delivered. These restaurants were forced to provide these services as revenue had stopped, and they did not believe that they were providing the whole experience as customers were missing out on certain elements of the dining experience as they could not be delivered. The reason for the difference in results might be due to this study being focused on fine dining restaurants while the findings of Yost, et al. (2021) are on a group of chain restaurants of different classes. This would be in line with the findings of Kim, et al. (2021) that show that casual and fast casual restaurants had considerably higher sales compared to fine

dining restaurants even though consumers favoured to eat from restaurants with a higher price than fast food places to ensure food safety and quality. Fine dining restaurants are not often considered when people quarantine and are under stay at home measures, as customers have high expectations due to the high price and the perceived quality of delivered food is often deemed not to reach expecations, while financial uncertainty could have reduced the demand for fine dining restaurants during those times (Kim, et al., 2021).

While the results show that the governmental aid packages were helpful for businesses to stay in operation, especially the grant of providing a salary for employees during lockdown periods, the findings also showed that a number of employees did not consider the grants provided during the pandemic to financially support them during those times, contrasting other sources (Messabia, et al., 2022; Brendinger, 2021). An explanation for this contradiction could be that the government's aim was primarily to prevent businesses from closing down and keep people employed. By providing employees' salaries, the government removed a significant expense for businesses, although the amount provided was not substantial for employees as it was close to the national minimum wage, meaning that most people were receiving less money than they were before the pandemic whilst still having to pay for expenses. The results indicate that the pandemic was handled effectively overall, and that the government was cautious when implementing or reducing measures. Research (Byrd, et al., 2021; Dedeoğlu & Boğan, 2021) shows that people's trust regarding the government's handling of these measures considerably affects their behaviour, with it being able to decrease customers' risk perception, and that people that lived in areas with restrictions on dining in restaurants were less worried about being infected through food and food delivered by restaurants than those who lived in places without restrictions. Suggesting that restrictions instilled consumers with a feeling of security as the government was managing the measures needed to ensure their protection. This could explain why the results illustrate that the workload has increased, people have been increasingly visiting fine dining restaurants to preserve or enhance their social image since the perceived risk was low whilst on the contrary if the perceived risk was high, people would avoid fine dining restaurants, as they believe that visually appealing food would attract many people, making them high risk.

The results show that customers, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, were hesitant to dine in restaurants. This could be because customers were concerned about contracting Covid-19 through food, especially food served in restaurants, as customers might have assumed that food consumed in restaurants is of higher risk due to the food being exposed to more individuals and possibly contaminated surfaces. While consumers were concerned about contracting the

virus through contaminated food packaging, they believed it was a safer option (Byrd, et al., 2021). The findings exhibit that the restaurants strictly implemented the local protocol, observing all of the instructions, to ensure that the customers feel safe and encourage them to dine there. This is consistent with research (Piton Hakim, et al., 2021; Dedeoğlu & Boğan, 2021) that shows that these steps could lead to increased visit intentions amongst consumers, as risk perception significantly influences customer behavior and attitude during the pandemic process, and customers would know that there are rules which have to be abided to, providing them with an enhanced level of confidence. The results also indicate that customers were more appreciative of quality driven restaurants, and they did not mind spending slightly more for a better quality experience. An explanation to this could be that, according to Byrd, et al., (2021), people concerned about being able to buy food for the following two months were more concerned about being infected with Covid-19 through food, suggesting that people anxious about their financial situation could favour believing that restaurant food presented a higher risk than other food sources, as it costs more than food made at home and they wanted to maintain their self image. This would likely discourage them from visiting restaurants, meaning that the people dining in restaurants were those who are more affluent and could spend more.

5. Final Arguments

The current research aimed to identify the challenges presented to the restaurant industry in Malta, how restaurants dealt with these challenges, and what was the effect on the employees within this industry. The research questions for this study were:

1) What were the challenges that Covid-19 presented to fine dining restaurants in Malta?
2) How did fine dining restaurants adapt to continue operating during and after this period?
3) What was the impact on the staff working in the restaurant industry?

Based on the results of qualitative and quantitative analysis, with food and beverage managers, and restaurant employees, participating in an interview and survey, respectively, the researcher found that the main challenges that restaurants in Malta faced were a shortage of staff, financial losses, shortage of cash flow, and drastically reduced sales. To overcome these obstacles, restaurants opted to minimise costs, acquire loans or injection of funds, implement and follow the local protocol to encourage people to visit restaurants, and cautious investing. The results showed that the employees working in the restaurant industry were experiencing higher levels of stress and mental health issues, increased workloads, and a lack of financial stability.

5.1   Conclusions

The introduction of delivery and takeaway services was not as impactful as hoped, since they did not generate much revenue and required an initial investment to set up, which led to restaurants not making much profit as well as not representing themselves as they would have liked. This is due to certain elements of the dining experience not being possible to consume out of the restaurant as well as being restricted in what could be done. Fine dining restaurants often charge higher prices than other restaurants, leading customers to have high expectations which might not be met as the perceived quality of the delivered food does not reach their expectations. Based on these results fine dining restaurants should consider reviewing their menu and develop new simplified dishes which would be better suited to delivery and takeaway services, as a backup so that revenue could be generated in the event of a similar occurrence happening again in the future. The importance of government aid through the implementation of measures to mitigate the challenges presented by Covid-19 is shown, but certain issues were still present. The results show that while the measures helped restaurants keep their workers employed, these individuals felt that they were not properly financially supported. It is suggested that when governments design support systems, an employee representative or union is consulted so that the support system would be enough for these people to be able to cover their essential costs.

This study contributes to the literature on the adaptations and management of the restaurant industry during crises and provides new insights from both the restaurant and employee's perspectives in Malta. This research provides new findings, with the results indicating that the restaurant industry is not an attractive career for several people and that some people working within this industry left for other jobs outside the industry, contradicting the claims of Demirović Bajrami, et al. (2021).

5.2   Recommendations

Further research is recommended to determine the causes of restaurant employees' elevated stress levels and mental health issues, increased workloads, customers' expectations, and their relationship with turnover intentions. It is also recommended that restaurants offer more flexible working conditions and schedules, as well as provide resources for their employees to control their stress levels and manage their mental health by having support systems in place. The restaurant industry should invest further in these measures if it wants to attract employees in today's market. This could increase people's interest in the restaurant industry as both a current and prospective career, lessening the issue of staff shortages. Restaurants should also develop plans of action to

take in the event of any future similar situation presenting itself. Studies based in other countries are also recommended to investigate how different conditions impact the results.

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7. Appendices

7.1 Interview transcripts

7.1.1 Interview 1

1) What do you think was the biggest challenge the restaurant industry had to face during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The most challenging factor that happened during covid-19, especially the first lockdown, the biggest thing was that employees in catering establishments coming from both kitchen and front of house had their jobs at risk, there was no job security, and they didn't have a clear picture when they would return to work. It develops into something bigger, something emotional, this problem was taken to these people's homes, it effects their family, partners and financial situation. It puts you in a situation where you don't know where you're heading. At first it might be fun because the restaurant closes down and people think that they are going to spend a month with their family and you dedicate that time to your family and bond, many were baking their own bread, buying the best food and best wines, and simply enjoying themselves but after that it started getting a bit frustrating.

2) Do you consider staffing to be a bigger issue for the restaurant industry since the start of Covid-19, if yes, why?

Of course, this was the cherry on the cake for the industry to face a lack of resources. We still feel the effects of it today, a lot of people moved out from the catering industry and went into various other jobs such as sales, accounts, and working in offices so finding people to work in service and chefs is a problem, it is very hard to find skills nowadays, skills and supplies I would say. This issue had been coming for Malta from around 2014, give and take, however if you look on a global perspective these things happened as well in New York and in London when I was working there, the structure was pretty much like it is now in Malta. So I think what is happening is that we are following a format of business that it comes late maybe 15 or 20 years later but its there. Its like an economy's strategy that is happening, it depends on where the economy is heading, the structures and everything. There is a lot of jobs and nowadays this generation doesn't want to work weekends, people want to be with their family and its hard but it not just because of Covid, it was coming but Covid kind of accelerated the process, it was what made the bomb go off.

3) Was keeping staff a challenge during periods of lockdowns and what was done to mitigate this?

Obviously, it was, we started to do more maintenance tasks, training was carried out, we also took the time to recreate our concept somewhat. Also, the government helped, the government what it did was to help us obviously the employer, the employee both ways in a way to give that small amount of money, it was small but it was already something to help. The first time it was if I'm not

wrong for full timers then for the second wave, the second time we close it was for full time and part timers as well so yes it was help obviously for everyone working inside this industry.

4) Did the same people come back to work, or did you need to employ new people, how was your retention rate?

A bit of both, we had a lot of people that are passionate and love this place, so we kept in touch with a lot of them and kept communicating with them, informing, and involving them in shaping the strategy. They were very happy to come back to work after the lockdown.

5) Did the governmental policies make an impact, if yes how big of an impact did they make and how?

The government helped, the strategy helped to not put all the burden on the employer but took some of it on, taking pressure off the businesses. It gave extra energy to keep people on the payroll in these times and the vouchers gave customers extra incentive to go out and visit restaurants.

6) Do you think customers feel safe eating out, what actions, if any, did you take to make them feel safe?

There were mixed feelings, some felt really safe and some didn't care. It depends on different factors, their age, if they read a lot, the media. What we did to make them feel safe was follow the protocol even if some instructions did not seem to make any sense, such as you cannot setup tables in advance. We always wore a mask during the shift, even though it was challenging as customers don't see your face and smile and they have to recognise from the eyes, making sure that people keep their distance from each other, keeping tables at least 2 meters apart. Business is reduced like this and costs go up because of buying of supplies like sanitisers and their price increasing dramatically but it made people feel safer. Some disregarded the pandemic and protocols entirely, as if Covid was not real, and it was not enjoyable for them as they didn't want to comply with the rules, for example they have a table booked in the restaurant and they don't want to wear the mask to enter. So we had to be flexible and deal with the situation.

7) Did your clients change after covid-19, and did they have different expectations or demands?

Yes, I think that during the covid lockdowns, people had time to watch shows and movies, they were not able to eat out so they were cooking a lot, something that happened globally and people were not able to travel. Restaurants that were smart and had a good strategy and structure in place had time to revamp their concept, and this is what we did during the lockdown, we worked hard and thought about what we were going to come up with after that period and we had time to be creative and innovative and when we reopened we saw a huge influx of people because they nowhere else to go besides restaurants, there were no feasts, no weddings, no other activities and events so people were really up for dining. We saw a different crowd, we were fully booked for the weekend from Wednesday, with a smaller seating capacity of course but it was still

impressive. The people were all out, they wanted to take it to another level, pay a little bit more, and they appreciated more a lot of things, both the service and food. During the lockdown the mentality changed, they increased their knowledge and appreciation of food and drink. This led restaurants to not be scared to put their prices up. This is one of the advantages of covid-19, this is what I enjoyed, coming back to work, opening and having a smooth operation, with the guests appreciating all that we do with love and passion.

8) Do you believe that Covid-19 has changed in any way the way that restaurants operate or will be operating in the future?

Yes, it has. A lot of restaurants after Covid raised their prices due to the problems of the global supply chain. It teaches you a lesson, we worked on 5 different elements being the structure of the business, the strategy of the business, the people you employ, how you reward them and how you proceed with the plans. Covid teaches you a lot, not spending all your money, saving for the days ahead, being smarter on how you get business in and I think what Covid taught me most of all, since it was such a shock as you wouldn't know that in such a short time there will be a lockdown, is that you have to be alert of what is going to happen next.

9) What is the effect on your overall liquidity condition?

Revenue was impacted in a big way, there was much less cash coming in so the company had to adopt a number of measures, such as getting a loan and regulating and considerably cutting operating expenses, in order to protect and increase its liquidity and financial position.

10) What was your strategy for capital investments before COVID-19, and how is your company is planning to adjust to the degree of capital investment after COVID-19?

We have to spend funds wisely, plan what is needed and limit or delay capital spending where possible. Funds were limited and this was kind of a necessity as you don't know what is coming.

11) What kind of financial and nonfinancial recovery strategies has your restaurant implemented, or is going to implement?

We tried to give the employees their leave, minimised costs as much as possible, and emptied our stock, where we had some wastages because after 3 months not operating some items like perishables go off. So managing perishable items accordingly is crucial.

12) What was the first, sudden, and most apparent negative impact of COVID-19 shut-down on your overall operations based on your overall financial strategy?

It was disastrous, the first impact was that it was like you're not getting paid, it is true that the government helped, because it did help to make a small amount of money, but it was like everything was frozen, the income stops coming in. Although, I believe that you have to be positive and see the bright side, keeping the restaurant up and running and then open in the summer. As I said earlier, the government helped with the covid supplement for each employee so that at least we did not have to carry all the burden by ourselves.

13) How has the customer retention rate, take-out, and online orders affected operations performance before, during, and after COVID-19?

We tried to do take away, but we felt that our brand was being misunderstood when we deliver because for example, the restaurant is well known for steak and fresh fish, when you put that in a box and deliver it, the quality is not the same you know. It did not really help to bring much revenue, there was more cost to do it than actual revenue, because it was not selling much as we tried to change our concept a bit and people did not know about it, and you have to buy a lot of things whilst you are not selling much so the expense is higher than revenue. We were trying to do it in house because of the commission that the delivery companies charge, otherwise it was not worth it. So if it happens again, we will most probably close again and try to minimise costs as much as possible and take it as an opportunity to work on future projects to improve once we reopen.

14) Do you have any suggestions or comments on Covid-19, how it has been handled, and what should be done moving forward if we face another pandemic?

First thing first, never take anything for granted, these things can happen again before we know it. I reiterate that you always have to look at the bright side, life goes on, if it is not us it will be the next generation, you have to be ready for it and you have to be positive. We handled it, and I believe that once you do something you are prepared for the next level. It is like when you are working in the kitchen and you do a lot of people on a Saturday between 2 people and then the next week you are busy again and you kind of like tune in and brainstorm what went wrong, how you are going to do it better, how are you going to place things around. If another lockdown comes in, how will we be prepared for it, it depends maybe you think of a business plan B or you twist a little bit the concept, but its hard, if you are not up and running its hard to introduce a new concept, with the takeaway, and it did not work for us.

7.1.2 Interview 2

1. What do you think was the biggest challenge the restaurant industry had to face during the Covid-19 pandemic?

One has to remember that Malta specifically went from 4 exceptional years, 2016 to 2019 were some of the best years that we ever saw, and then all of a sudden there was a handbrake pulled. So I think this year's magnitude of how to handle the emotional, the financial there were a number of stresses, so COVID did not represent exclusively a financial stress on the businesses. It was a health concern it was what's to come in the future so there was a lot of factors that played and grew the magnitude of how we perceived the problem of covid actually was and how we dealt with it so the biggest challenge was to handle all the frustrations at one go I think, what was the next step to take there was a lot of these questions and no one had the answer, so this was a massive challenge not knowing that was coming from like different angles.

2. Do you consider staffing to be a bigger issue for the restaurant industry since the start of Covid-19, if yes, why?

Yes, I think there is a bigger appreciation towards work life balance there seems to have been a paradigm shift in how employees look at their work, I would dare to say that previously there was a bigger dedication towards the workplace. Nowadays the workplace has to adapt to our needs more than ever there was also the fact that with flexible working, Covid facilitated communications in a different manner, nowadays I do 80% percent of my meetings on teams and flexible working is not a dirty word anymore even in the hospitality industry and I say hospitality I don't say specifically restaurant I say hospitality because today certain HR function certain finance functions and commercial sales and marketing they can be done or part of it can be done teleworking.

3. Was keeping staff a challenge during periods of lockdowns and what was done to mitigate this?

I think it wasn't that much of a challenge in Malta. It wasn't that much of a challenge for the simple reason that you know there were a lot of government grants on keeping employees although I used to work at a large entity, we had 600 employees during COVID went down to 150, so one might say so you can't say that it wasn't a challenge keeping staff we shrunk because many of them left out of fear of health concerns they resigned on their own or they found an alternative job which was not as heavily impacted by COVID so it was a challenge to keep but not as much as it could have been shouldn't there have been the grants in my humble opinion. Regarding what was done to mitigate this I mean there was a lot of maintenance done there was a lot of training then there was a lot of reinventing a little bit yourself so many restaurants started looking at ways of operating take away, operating online you know so we kind of as an industry we try to shift a little bit away from the brick and mortar business and to doing something which I mean for some of us perhaps it didn't really pay off but to keep ourselves productive maintenance you know certain things that did not happen before because we were too busy we had the time to do it during Covid. Just being productive.

4. Did the same people come back to work, or did you need to employ new people, how was your retention rate?

If I had to look at the company I'm working for now the retention rate is phenomenal but I believe it is a very exclusive I mean it's you don't find other medium to large entities that have retained in the hospitality industry have retained the same percentage that we have we are talking about 90% retention. So the same people coming back, many people that left the industry are still out of the industry, people that have left Malta are still out of Malta if they have returned they would probably not return to the same properties. COVID brought about a little bit of animosity as well because an employee is working and you know you feel that you're being valued you feel that you're being considered as an employee and then all of a sudden your boss comes over and tells you listen

you have to go down €800 a month maximum so there's that little bit of pushback at times you know so I don't think I don't have the number so I can't be quoted it I don't have a scientific number to share with you but I from the feedback I get from other general managers of other properties and other HR specialists most of the people that have left a property would not have gone back to the same property if they remain in the industry. We did need to employ new people in our case we needed to employ new people because we are growing the business more than anything else but our retention rate here was 90% so very good retention rate.

5. Did the governmental policies make an impact, if yes how big of an impact did they make and how?

Yes, massive impact, if it wasn't for the government policies probably most of the restaurants most of the businesses would have closed down in Malta and I can bet on it. They paid for two years and a half of wages for the whole industry I mean let that sink in, most of those people would not have a job now, so coincidentally yesterday and I'm not doing a political rhetoric but yesterday there was news that there's only 900 something young people that do not have a job in Malta, unemployment I'm referring to, most of them are people that do not actually want to work I can assure you because we do try to do interviews to people from jobs plus etc so I think the policies have worked really well to keep people in work and keep businesses afloat apart from that there was also an agreement between the government and the banks to give loans at a very small at a very small interest rate so there was more than one policy all of them made a positive impact there were policy there were incentives from the Malta Tourism Authority there was massive improvement on our business take up when compared to other countries you know so everything helps everything little helps.

6. Do you think customers feel safe eating out, what actions, if any, did you take to make them feel safe?

From a study that I that I read last couple of weeks pre COVID to 2022 there is an evident improvement or an evident reduction in concern by customers eating out and using facilities but I don't think that we are back to pre COVID times and I don't I'm not sure any business should consider being back to pre COVID times and we took many measures I mean we followed international protocols along with the local protocols to make sure that the spacing between tables, the usage of equipment, the masks and all that by our team members, registering surnames and contact details so that we can do contact tracing in restaurants so all of the procedures were followed through even up until later on when the government reduced the measures, we still kept the masks for a couple of weeks extra we still you know kept a level of making sure that our team feels safe and comfortable as well around the customers as well as giving image of safety and not having too many tables packed tightly together, you know clustered on top of each other.

7. Did your clients change after covid-19, and did they have different expectations or demands?

No, I mean clients did not change what we notice is that clients seem to have a bigger appreciation towards quality driven outlets so I mean what we can see for example with our fine dining restaurants during COVID it really picked up why because people had X amount of money to spend and they wanted to make sure they spend it in the right manner as opposed to risking paying 150 euros in a questionable experience they would rather spend 200 in a guaranteed experience you know.

8. Do you believe that Covid-19 has changed in any way the way that restaurants operate or will be operating in the future?

I think it did, the fact that we're talking about it, the fact that when you entered this property there were hand sanitizers, there's hand sanitizers in the toilets, the fact that we as an operator keep the 1 meter distance per table throughout our restaurants as we are designing new outlets as well. I can't say that it will impact all operators, but it has impacted us for sure or at least the way that we want to be portrayed out there in the market you know.

9. What was the first, sudden, and most apparent negative impact of COVID-19 shut-down on your overall operations based on your overall financial strategy?

Well as I said in your in question one, you've just done a budget, 2019 was a record year for many, you've prepared your 2020 budgets, you're looking at an aspirational 3 to 5% improvement on your previous year and then all of a sudden you do 0 I mean the financial impact is huge. What is even more impactful or what was more impactful I think was the impact on the psyche of the of the investors of the employees you know, some employees did not need to leave because they had work to do but out of job security they just left and it happens it happened. So first and sudden for sure yes and most apparent negative impact on COVID-19 shutdown is the financial so all businesses working in the hospitality industry will tell you that we have lost, cancelled absolutely two years guaranteed boom boom no questions asked about that.

10. How has the customer retention rate, take-out, and online orders affected operations performance before, during, and after COVID-19?

I mean take away and online, as I had mentioned, were never big for our company and they tried it during COVID but not you know fast forward so now they're not part of our unique competing space we're not like some other restaurants where you know 50-60% of his business would be take out. So as such although we tried it during COVID so that we have some sort of revenue so that we can be productive but nowadays it's a waste of our time even to consider it it's not our it's not within our business model. I mean nowadays it has become pretty fashionable opening up ghost kitchens they're called and it's a very interesting subject that perhaps you should research as well upon because it's an emerging trend and this is something which we personally are looking

at developing as well because there is you know there is an interest in that. If your business model allows for it makes sense but if you've got a fine dining restaurant and you want to do I mean we try to do the Michelin at home but is it really, because if you're missing out on the principle of people are you know wearing nice clothes go to the hairdresser this that and the other and then going out you're missing one the most important part of having the full experience.

11. What kind of financial and nonfinancial recovery strategies has your restaurant implemented, or is going to implement?

Well the recovery strategy happened, part of it is still in the making but with regards to our business, we have restructured the company from a manning point of view, we have gone back to having basic functions given the due importance like having an HR function with an HR manager having a maintenance manager for the maintenance function you know there are there were certain functions that during COVID that other team members absorbed them so that we could keep the costs at a low and for example we had the purchasing manager doing maintenance for a couple of years now we're going back to you know we're not going back to the drawing board we're going back to structuring to make sure that the restaurants are well taken care of, so making sure that we are you know we're looking ahead and we're trying to win business. The strategy during COVID was cost cutting non COVID has to be revenue generating you know, I'm not saying that costs are not essential or it's not important what I'm saying is that you cannot lead a business exclusively through cost cutting it has to be a balance, a lean managed business that has the intent to talk about revenue before it talks about cost cutting.

12. What is the effect on your overall liquidity condition?

We had to take a loan, this company has to take a micro loan to make sure that from a liquidity point of view it remains afloat and there was a number of there was a financial consideration financial aid from the owners to the business to make sure that we remain liquid. An injection of funds additional funds so the owners sought to make sure that you know the business stays afloat.

13. What was your strategy for capital investments before COVID-19, and how is your company is planning to adjust to the degree of capital investment after COVID-19?

Capital investment, when we talk about capital investment we are talking new openings we're talking about putting in funds for capital expenditure in your brick and mortar business I mean pre COVID the company had stopped growing in 2019 you know they reached a level of growth and then coincidentally COVID happened so no growth would have been foreseen. Nowadays we're looking at three new outlets and two new properties to develop in accommodation as well so we're looking favorably towards investing, cautiously but favorably towards investing in the hospitality industry in Malta. albeit one needs to also remember that we do it our way, so to us we will never you know we don't aspire to have a 500 room hotel we aspire to have an 8 bedroom villa with all

the many things and facilities that can really be bespoke and curated, every moment needs to be curated.

14. Do you have any suggestions or comments on Covid-19, how it has been handled, and what should be done moving forward if we face another pandemic?

I think Malta has handled it pretty well nonetheless probably with hindsight I would recommend the authorities to segregate the weak and not segregate the whole the whole population. If you are a person that could potentially die or is prone to dying because of pre-existing conditions or because you're pregnant because I mean just like Sweden did it. We can't stop the world, we can't stop the economy, we can't put the world in another recession, people die out of recessions as well you know so I think life has to move on. Most of us got it anyways and we're here to talk about it so I think it's a matter of if I feel that I'm very ill the government should help the people who cannot work you know because there is a principle of there is a reasoning behind it and should alleviate the businesses off those individuals who really can't work with a pre-existing condition whether this with that but you can't just you know lock stock and barrel close again it will be the death of many businesses you know and when business die people die there have been stories in Italy happening where businessmen took their own life because they couldn't they couldn't handle the financial stress.

7.1.3   Interview 3

1. What do you think was the biggest challenge the restaurant industry had to face during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Obviously the biggest challenge was to keep the restaurant open and COVID-19 was something that I think it was never been experienced from nowhere something completely new and honestly all of us we didn't really know what was happening in that time especially when everything started so the biggest challenge was obviously getting people in the restaurant where there was the possibility to have the restaurant open since obviously we had to close we're talking about Malta a couple of months 2020 and 2021 so actually one of the biggest challenges was letting the people and especially the Maltese client or the local because obviously those two years of the COVID pandemic we were working mainly with locals Maltese or foreign but locals living on the island not tourists so let locals understand it was still safe coming at the restaurant even if we implemented all the security or the laws that were being implemented from the authorities so definitely the biggest challenge was to let people understand that you were still safe coming out to eat at the restaurant. The other problem was obviously talking about staff wise that was one another big challenge that we have to face not here but I believe everywhere in Malta like the Maltese

industries relied a lot on foreign people working front of house especially but in kitchen as well so having this pandemic a lot of people they left the island obviously for this reason some of them they went home some of them unfortunately they lost their job so they had to go back home so I think the manpower in the industry was another big challenge that we have to face.

2. Do you consider staffing to be a bigger issue for the restaurant industry since the start of Covid-19, if yes, why?

Yes definitely, also talking about how restaurant and over here one of the big challenges was obviously the problem is we always want to keep standards for what we were doing before as I said COVID hit it badly and the restaurant was opened just couple months before so even for us was everything new but you want always to keep high standard international our idea was never to put down the standard service wise and food wise so we have to face, yes less guest but as well I would say much less staff and that was the main issue keeping standard you need as well keeping staff and good staff working with you as well.

3. Was keeping staff a challenge during periods of lockdowns and what was done to mitigate this?

I'm going to be honest; it was a bit of a challenge but for a smaller high-end restaurant like ourselves I believe it was easier than larger businesses such as hotels. We kept the key players on, we started small and kept employees on the payroll for around 3 months by giving leave and with the help of the government initiatives. When we were getting the minimum salary that the government was giving to us, luckily it was a short period not long, but I believe that for some people, not for me, it was a big issue obviously the consequences of COVID it was like as well increasing a lot of prices and increasing not just in the restaurant but even for me the ordinary life. Slowly slowly we had a lot of increase of prices out of the restaurant just for the normal life, so I believe that affected a lot of people that's why I said before few people that left the island because they faced this issue.

4. Did the same people come back to work, or did you need to employ new people, how was your retention rate?

Luckily the staff was, we always had a small team of staff we are not a big restaurant, we're still talking about when we are doing 40 to 45 guests we are full, so the staff kitchen and front of house we are still talking in total for part timers and full timers is approximately ten people in total so that's why we manage with some sacrifice employer employee to keep the staff.

5. Did the governmental policies make an impact, if yes how big of an impact did they make and how?

For what I know there was always these rumours they were helping more for electricity maybe they were giving some discount but honestly I don't know if it ever happened. Then as well the other main impact on the restaurant I believe apart the staff and everything, depends as well if

you rent the restaurant or you own your own restaurant because if you own your own restaurant yes you have a loan to pay maybe or maybe luckily, they have already finished the loan. But talking about us we still have to pay rent that was one of the main issue, for what I know there were some good landlords that did reduce their rent because obviously restaurants had to close or in that time of covid restaurant had to reduce a lot their covers, we had to cut almost half of it by percent of the covers, so quite a lot of covers. Few we say landlords that managed at least to understand the situation and at least to help us as well but for what I know not everyone had this good point so the point is like, probably we were amongst the lucky ones so at least to have a bit of help as well not just I'm not saying full for free, close for free, because then we need to understand the situation but at least they understood that a restaurant that is closed cannot make profit. That is not our choice that we were closed and that's why if you're open but your covers could drop down by 50% we could never make the same amount of money coming in and as well it was a bit of a challenge so that's why talking about government yes they help a bit but I think for especially restaurants they could do a bit better honestly.

6. Do you think customers feel safe eating out, what actions, if any, did you take to make them feel safe?

Obviously, we tried as a restaurant to follow as much as possible the indications that they gave us about the number of people in the room about space between tables and chairs so we tried as much sanitizer whatever it was needed to reopen because obviously one of the points of the reopening of restaurant was to follow some new regulations some laws so we did as much as possible from our side then the guest will feel safe, as I said for after first time first year everyone was still a bit afraid of going out of eating out so 2020 summer it was a tough summer for us, I believe for everyone, and especially because people prefer to go maybe outside in an open area to eat and we have an inside restaurant so even if we manage or we tried to make the restaurant as safe as possible obviously some clients I believe they were still a bit afraid but not just to come at the restaurant at that time they were afraid to go out like to meet people as well so we tried the best the first year wasn't easy, summer 2020 wasn't easy.

7. Did your clients change after covid-19, and did they have different expectations or demands?

What covid did, especially in the beginning we had less customers less guests inside of the restaurant so unfortunate to say I think, not everyone, but a few people they thought they could be a bit more demanding in the restaurant that's just asking for more ask asking for not something usual or pretending what we couldn't do before maybe they thought we could do it now just because we weren't so busy as before and that was the main point COVID as well.

8. Do you believe that Covid-19 has changed in any way the way that restaurants operate or will be operating in the future?

But during COVID obviously change not for everyone as I said the point has always been on the people, they're working inside, do you want to achieve quality there is not too much compromise you need to keep high standards and you need to sacrifice on something else and most of the time what we have to do you need to sacrifice zone maybe revenue or number of clients that you can host obviously at the restaurant quality is not easy to keep high standard of quality so obviously on the other way to keep good numbers they have to decrease obviously lower down the quality so that's definitely yes.

9. What was the first, sudden, and most apparent negative impact of COVID-19 shut-down on your overall operations based on your overall financial strategy?

Talking about money and the restaurant closing the restaurant the main loss was coming from food cost obviously talking in a restaurant you could this time save whatever it was not open up mainly saying about bar or wine cellar you could always store properly something and save it but the main financial loss it was in the kitchen, we're talking about a good amount of money invested in food obviously the restaurant has to be prepared to host people. We are still talking about a good amount of money so the big the main financial immediately it was a losing of money and then obviously closing for months you lose a lot of profit that you could have made.

10. How has the customer retention rate, take-out, and online orders affected operations performance before, during, and after COVID-19?

Performance, we were closed so we had to be closed, as I said what we could do it was take away or delivery at the restaurant, we never saw our restaurant as a restaurant that can offer delivery we are not doing at the moment we never did before it was not even our plan to do it so we didn't want to do the first time we didn't see this type of restaurant and the food that we do as food that can be offered as take away food as well as we because you consider it our restaurant not just a place that our guests are coming to eat but as a place that our guests are coming and spend their own time enjoying their own evening so most of the time they're spending all night here talking about obviously 3-4 hours and is not just the food that we're serving them obviously it is the best the biggest part because we're still restaurant but it's just a part of the experience they're getting in a restaurant so we cannot offer them at home in a box so it was not our idea we tried honestly for the second shutdown but it wasn't worth it financial wise because obviously we had to buy a lot of products to deliver the food, to store the food, deliver the food but it wasn't obviously it was a loss for the restaurant.

11. What kind of financial and nonfinancial recovery strategies has your restaurant implemented, or is going to implement?

Obviously to minimise the cost in a way to try to control as much as possible the food cost, the beverage cost. We were always doing it, obviously we're still talking about restaurants so it is

something that has always been implemented in a restaurant but honestly to try to keep high standard or with best quality but then try to avoid obviously the extra costs, taking care of perishable items.

12. What is the effect on your overall liquidity condition?

The revenue stopped, we had 3 months with no income, and the expenses kept on going, we still had to pay rent, a few suppliers were calling us to pay some bills that we had not paid when we were still open. It was challenging and we work differently with different suppliers, some we pay on delivery and others we pay a few months later. It was tough, our liquidity was not great and we needed the backup, to use an overdraft.

13. What was your strategy for capital investments before COVID-19, and how is your company is planning to adjust to the degree of capital investment after COVID-19?

The strategy was always obviously to keep the restaurant how we want it, to try to not to give to the clients as if something happened. If you were coming here before, you were coming here now, during COVID, the place has to be the same so there shouldn't be any difference. We try not to give any difference on anything during this time so the strategy was to make the clients as happy as possible by investing in what is needed without spending too much.

14. Do you have any suggestions or comments on Covid-19, how it has been handled, and what should be done moving forward if we face another pandemic?

It was handled properly honestly, Malta is a small island, so especially the first time that everything started luckily we were not infected so badly. They acted in a good way closing as much as possible the island, they had the possibility always to be an island to close as much as possible, so in that time it was something new for all of us so they did a good job. Even closing the restaurant and closing everything, it was for me a move that they have to do or we had to do it was something completely new to the world. But then it could have been handled maybe a bit smoother, it was too much talking too much being worried, yes it's true, safety is important and we faced dead and sick people due to Covid so that was definitely something that happened but it could be released in a better way specially at the end we were still very afraid about something that maybe it could have been left behind our back much faster.

7.2   Permission Letter

INSTITUTE OF TOURISM STUDIES
IN ACADEMIC AFFILIATION WITH THE
EMIRATES ACADEMY OF HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT

Name and Surname of Researcher: Juan Magro

ID number of researcher: 0040400L

Email address of researcher: magro-2000@hotmail.com, juan.magro001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: 99267107

Course: Bachelor's Degree in Culinary Arts

Tutor name and surname: Joseph Cassar

Tutor office telephone number: 23793210

Title of the Dissertation: The impact of Covid- 19 on the restaurant industry in Malta

Aims of the research: To identify the challenges that Covid-19 presented to restaurants in Malta, how restaurants adapted to continue operating during these times, and the impact on the employees working in the food and beverage sector.

Type of participants: Full-time food and beverage employees working in your establishment

Number of participants required: 100

Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Juan Magro, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my degree, and I am carrying out research on the impact of Covid- 19 on the restaurant industry in Malta.

I would like your permission to send a questionnaire for the participants to complete. The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information so you can decide whether to participate in this study. Any questions you may have will be answered by the researcher.

There are no known risks related with this research project other than possible discomfort with the following:

- Everyone will be asked to be honest when answering questions.
- Any audio recorded data will be used for transcription purposes, after which it will be destroyed.

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference

will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity and the identity of the participants will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

Participants can terminate their participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. Participants do not have to answer individual questions if they do not want to. Your name and the participant's names will not be attached to the questionnaire, and this will ensure that everyone's information remains confidential.   Please, kindly contact me if you have any queries or any further information or clarification.

Participant's declaration

I have read this consent form and am giving the researcher the opportunity to carry out the research at my restaurant. I hereby grant them permission to use the information provided as data in the above-mentioned research project, knowing that it will be kept confidential and anonymous.

_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name	Participant's Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Researcher's Name	Researcher's Signature	Date

7.3   Consent Form

ITS INSTITUTE OF TOURISM STUDIES
IN ACADEMIC AFFILIATION WITH THE
EMIRATES ACADEMY OF HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT

Name and Surname of Researcher: Juan Magro

ID number of researcher: 0040400L

Email address of researcher: magro-2000@hotmail.com, juan.magro001@its.edu.mt

Mobile number of researcher: 99267107

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Dear Sir / Madam,

I, Juan Magro, a student at the Institute of Tourism Studies am currently in the final year of my degree, and I am carrying out research on the impact of Covid- 19 on the restaurant industry in Malta.

I had already sent you the information letter about my research and you had provided me with a signed information letter. If you have any further questions for clarification, please do not hesitate to ask me.

By signing this consent form, you are giving me your consent to use the data collected through the interview and questionnaires for the analysis of the results. I will send you a list of questions before the interview and questionnaire so you can prepare yourself beforehand. The questions asked will be about the imposed restrictions, challenges to continuing the operation, adaption to the new circumstances, and any governmental aid and policies.

The information collected will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored securely and will be made available only to those individuals conducting the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications that result from this study.

You can terminate your participation at any time without prejudice. Participation is voluntary. You do not have to answer individual questions if you do not want to. Your name will not be attached to the interview and questionnaire and will ensure that your participation remains confidential.   Kindly, contact me if you have any queries or require any further clarification.

Participant's declaration

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_____	_____	_____
Participant's Name	Participant's Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Researcher's Name	Researcher's Signature	Date