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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of a pandemic on entrepreneurial behaviour: A qualitative study of wedding vendors

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to determine what changes wedding vendors had to make to survive the global COVID-19 pandemic. Specific focus was placed on how wedding vendor entrepreneurs use creativity, innovation, networking and advertising as a competitive advantage. Qualitative research was conducted which reflects individuals' perspectives, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. Semi-structured interviews took place electronically through online voice calling due to the global pandemic. The individual participants, each representing their own business, were interviewed to gain a better understanding of entrepreneurship in the wedding industry. It is evident that all the vendors adapted during the global COVID-19 pandemic, and that dealing with future opportunities by linking these to loyalty and creativity are essential aspects of entrepreneurship in the wedding industry. The global pandemic proved the importance of how the wedding industry is dynamic where individuals are required to wear different hats and be flexible, as businesses were forced to adapt and reposition themselves during and after COVID-19 as a method of survival. It is recommended that vendors ensure the utilisation of existing resources and branch off into new avenues—not necessarily entering into new markets or new industries, but rather focusing on complementary products or services.

Subjects: Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management; Service Industries; Events

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; wedding industry; wedding vendors; Covid-19; creativity; innovation; qualitative research

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1. Introduction and background

When the national lock down in South Africa started on 26 March 2020 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, a need to collaborate and facilitate knowledge emerged (Ratten, 2023). Although the COVID-19 pandemic created various challenges, for entrepreneurs it also created new opportunities in various industries (Harima, 2022), with one such industry being that of the wedding industry.

By focusing on an age-old analogy associated with the wedding day: “Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue”, a connection can be formed to entrepreneurship. “Something old” relates to experience, background and understanding the market. “Something new” conveys the future and the potential, “something borrowed” links to human capital—everyone involved in creating a unified vision across the team and “something blue” is the creative aspect that makes a business unique. In this study, specific focus will be placed on the “Something new” and the “something blue” aspects which portray the potential future opportunities, and creativity, respectively. Taking into account that the COVID-19 pandemic encouraged innovation (Trufin & Lucaci, 2022), Hamdi-Kidar and Vellera (2018) suggest that entrepreneurs are innovators that are not only seeking self-fulfilment but also have a desire to share their passion with others. These authors also mention that the entrepreneurial journey often starts as a hobby. Entrepreneurs being “innovators”, link to human capital as a form of intellectual property within any given industry.

2. Problem statement

Previous studies have shown that the wedding industry plays a prominent role in economies globally. It is a profitable industry and entrepreneurs are increasingly becoming part of this sector (Whitesell & Faria, 2020). Weddings were cancelled or delayed in the past years due to COVID-19 restrictions (Samoedra et al., 2021; Whitesell & Faria, 2020). The wedding industry was crushed overnight leaving thousands in the industry deeply concerned about the future. This created more questions than answers and in retrospect many asked: How did wedding vendors (i.e. venues, photographers, florists) operate their businesses in the midst of a global pandemic? Was there a change in perception towards the wedding industry since the global pandemic made its appearance? Initially all weddings were cancelled due to restrictions enforced by the South African government. In the rare cases where couples decided to tie the knot despite the global pandemic, the wedding celebration was much simpler. This non-fluff wedding approach that was forced upon people during the COVID-19 time frame is in contrast to what Carter and Duncan (2017) suggest, when they state that wedding celebrations and receptions became a pop culture thus resulting in more and more people following this “trend”. People view their wedding day as a once in a lifetime event and feel that their expenditure is justified. Couples argue that they invest in a lifelong memory and feel that they owe it to themselves, and one another (Carter & Duncan, 2017).

This research primarily focuses on vendors in the wedding industry and their entrepreneurial skills and behaviour. This is addressed in terms of the issue of the global COVID-19 pandemic and how their businesses have been affected. This study also strives to determine whether entrepreneurs had to adapt as the pandemic occurred, and if so, what these changes were. This study responds to the call made by Fotiadis (2018) who states that little research has been done on the wedding industry, and that the level of consumer perception in the wedding industry is influenced by importance, push and pull factors as well as decision-making.

This research is needed since there is a knowledge gap in academic literature regarding entrepreneurship during the pandemic, and more specifically within the wedding industry. COVID-19 is still not over and entrepreneurs are still dealing with this issue, constantly changing their approaches in order to adapt and survive. There is also inconsistent research on entrepreneurs within the wedding industry. This study will add value to academic literature and will highlight entrepreneurship as well as entrepreneurs’ creativity and innovation within the wedding industry (Hasan & Koning, 2019).

3. Purpose statement

The purpose of this generic qualitative research is to explore entrepreneurship in the wedding industry in South Africa. More specifically this study focuses on entrepreneurial skills and behaviours within the wedding industry and how entrepreneurs have responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic. A broad overview of vendors in the industry is needed, consequently, a variety of people that are involved within the wedding industry were interviewed. Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Venue owners, photographers, florists, caterers, graphic designers, an events-hiring company, as well as a hairdresser formed part of the interviewees to ensure the study is not confined to a specific group within the wedding industry.

4. Research questions

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the drivers for entrepreneurs/vendors to be involved in the wedding industry?
- RQ2: How did wedding vendors adapt and what changes were made in their approach in order to survive the global COVID-19 pandemic?
- RQ3: How important is creativity and innovation for wedding vendors in order to survive amongst the fierce competition in the wedding industry?
- RQ4: What entrepreneurial skills and behaviours do vendors in the wedding industry have or need to have?
- RQ5: To what extent does active advertising (specifically a social media presence and a creative approach) influence businesses in the wedding industry?

5. Academic value and contribution of the research

This study firstly contributes to academia since little research has been done on entrepreneurship in the wedding industry and, more specifically, adaptations during and after Covid-19. Secondly, this paper is aimed at practitioners within the wedding industry in order to give advice on how to survive but also on how expansion is possible as a small entrepreneur in the wedding industry.

This study gives insight to potential individuals desiring to join the industry and become wedding vendors. Possible barriers to entry into the market are addressed, as well as opportunities identified by wedding vendors which can stimulate entrepreneurial intention.

6. Literature review

6.1. Entrepreneurship, wedding vendors and wedding industry defined

Entrepreneurship is defined as the process through which innovation and creativity takes place where an opportunity is identified and action is taken in order to exploit that opportunity within a potential market (Zadeh, 2022). Kuratko and Morris (2018) confirm in their research that entrepreneurs capitalise an opportunity whilst that opportunity is of benefit to society.

In this study the “wedding industry” is defined as a broad industry that consist of multiple vendors, including photographers, videographers, venues, caterers, bakers, wedding planners, graphic designers, florists and event companies that are part of this field and adding value through providing products or services (Laycock, 2018). Therefore, entrepreneurship within the wedding industry can be seen as identifying gaps within this industry and adding value through action.

6.2. Skills and behaviours of entrepreneurs with a specific focus on wedding vendors

An encouraging influence for entrepreneurship in the wedding industry is the capabilities of individuals, in other words their skills and talents. It is easy to enter the market and the initial start-up capital is low (Bachtiar, 2018; Fadhilillah & Zpalanzani, 2020). Time and skill are mainly needed rather than substantial infrastructure, human capital (in terms of labour) or an extensive initial investment. A trend that however also emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic was that the management styles of entrepreneurs changed drastically (Montenero & Cazorzi, 2022) and in

terms of creativity, which will be discussed later in this study, individuals had to start sharing their capabilities and talents with others. Since the wedding industry is so vibrant and constantly changing, people's talents, visions and originality become an inspiration for others in the industry.

The real challenge with entrepreneurship is to have a business that is sustainable (Fadhlillah & Zpalanzani, 2020). Uniqueness and signature styles are needed to achieve competitive advantage which will result in long-run sustainability. Sustainability often requires change, which ensures competitiveness. Cortellazzo et al. (2020) formed a "change catalyst" which consists of entrepreneurs who remove barriers to change while realising and acting on the need for change. It is essential for entrepreneurs to be flexible where their businesses facilitate change (Samoedra et al., 2021) as well as utilise opportunities that arise which calls for change (Chetty et al., 2022).

Cortellazzo et al. (2020) mention that teamwork as well as a willingness to learn, form part of entrepreneurial behaviour. Entrepreneurs in the wedding industry need to work with other stakeholders in the industry although they are often the sole-owner or employee within their business. The wedding industry can be seen as a chain and each entrepreneur working in the industry is a valuable link in the chain. Other entrepreneurs' input, approach and strategies encourage individuals to learn from those around them and incorporate it in their own businesses. Collaborations have become increasingly popular in the industry where vendors work together to create bespoke styled shoots for marketing purposes which is a perfect example of how entrepreneurs work together and learn from one another.

6.3. Drivers for entering into entrepreneurship and applying it to the wedding industry

Time is a key resource when considering entrepreneurship (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018) as individuals need to have time available when engaging in a venture, which links to time management. An advantage of being an entrepreneur is being in control of your own time and not having to work fixed hours for an employer.

Some individuals have a desire to be their own boss. They want to express their creativity without being limited to a job description. Hamdi-Kidar and Vellera (2018) mention that entrepreneurs have the flexibility to work when they want and they often view their work as fun.

According to Ridzwan et al. (2017) unemployment leads to opportunities in self-employment for many individuals. Unfortunate circumstances might have forced individuals to become entrepreneurs. Unemployed individuals might have entered the wedding industry since they were desperate for income and their talent or skill was all they had.

Financial success forms part of extrinsic motivation which encourages individuals to become entrepreneurs. Ridzwan et al. (2017) mention that financing, training and economic conditions are all external factors which are critical to be successful. Other extrinsic factors include possessions, status, position as well as the fear of disappointment (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018).

Human resources form part of what drives individuals to enter into the wedding industry. These driving forces consist of internal, social as well as professional spheres (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018). Firstly, the internal sphere focuses on an individual's motivation. Entrepreneurs entering into the wedding industry definitely experience high internal motivation since it can be seen as a joyful and satisfying career. Secondly, family and friends form part of the social sphere and have an enormous impact on whether an individual enters the entrepreneurial world. Hamdi-Kidar and Vellera (2018) mentions that self-employed parents provide a stimulating entrepreneurial environment for their children. Thirdly, the professional sphere consists of the professional community who is involved through networking and marketing. These entrepreneurial experts encourage individuals to become entrepreneurs and join the wedding bandwagon (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018).

6.4. Entrepreneurship as a mindset

Kuratko and Morris (2018) conclude that entrepreneurship is much more than “just engaging in a new venture”. Entrepreneurship is a mindset of constantly renewing thoughts and perspectives. The entrepreneurial mindset encourages individuals to; take risks, tolerate failure, constantly seek opportunities, network with others, overcome obstacles and find solutions to problems (Kuratko & Morris, 2018). Having an entrepreneurial mindset in the wedding industry, where new thoughts and concepts are provoked, is essential since it is a competitive industry.

Entrepreneurs are regarded as heroes since they take action (Kuratko & Morris, 2018), and therefore the entrepreneurial mindset is very powerful since it is a process where new ideas and thoughts are stimulated, equipping and empowering oneself and others. Although entrepreneurs enter into entrepreneurship to create something for themselves—it spreads further and affects communities (Kuratko & Morris, 2018). Communities are involved in the wedding industry through businesses who employ people, and these employees are also educated through their jobs which ultimately improves their standards of living. It is evident that the entrepreneurial mindset can help businesses to get through COVID-19 (Maritz et al., 2020). The global COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed in detail in the next section.

6.5. Adaption and changes during the global Covid-19 pandemic

6.5.1. Covid-19 defined

Cao (2020) states that Coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) turned into a global pandemic and it is a respiratory disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Severe pneumonia as well as acute respiratory distress syndromes (ARDS), septic shock, as well as organ failure are symptoms of COVID-19 patients. Samoedra et al. (2021) mention that there has been a substantial decline in weddings which resulted in considerable losses for entrepreneurs involved in the industry.

6.5.2. Actions taken by vendors to survive

Samoedra et al. (2021) emphasise the importance of communication between stakeholders in the wedding industry during the global pandemic. Communication builds trust which is essential in the wedding industry. Open communication channels within the industry are essential to ensure clarity and understandability, thus resulting in well-informed individuals. Couples should be encouraged to postpone weddings rather than cancel weddings during Covid-19. It should be explained to clients that this is to help protect vendors, as well as local communities involved within the wedding industry (Samoedra et al., 2021).

The concept of adaptability and flexibility is critical in any business, and even more so, for a business to survive during a pandemic. COVID-19 forced entrepreneurs to find different channels through which their products and services could be offered (Maritz et al., 2020). Vendors need to stay up to date with the latest regulations implemented by the government. Changes should then be implemented around the regulations and restrictions imposed (Samoedra et al., 2021).

Maritz et al. (2020) highlight the importance of entrepreneurial resilience to facilitate growth. Entrepreneurs need to respond, adapt and transform their businesses’ strategy in extreme uncertain environments in order to survive. The authors mention that the global pandemic forced entrepreneurs to be proactive and adaptive where the reshaping of product and service offerings was needed.

Covid-19 highlighted the importance of the entrepreneurial mindset (Kuratko & Morris, 2018). As a result of the pandemic, a demolished economy occurred with a disrupted entrepreneurial ecosystem which resulted in the rise of new opportunities amidst the chaos (Maritz et al., 2020). The development of a new healthy entrepreneurial ecosystem is needed, where new opportunities arise for the event industry to reinvent itself (Seraphin, 2021). The “Necessity-Opportunity

Entrepreneur” was formed during Covid-19, who not only helps themselves and their communities, but also takes action by responding to the need created by Covid-19. Post-Covid-19 weddings will certainly look different since the industry was forced to reinvent itself.

6.5.3. How did vendors adapt their focus during Covid-19?

Covid-19 brought a shift and a “new normal” was and is still in the process of being formed. This “new normal” encouraged individuals to work from home, online shopping was promoted, crowds and queuing were limited and ultimately the “gig economy” was stimulated (Maritz et al., 2020). The “gig economy” involves part time or freelance workers and includes being physically present at a workplace, as well as doing remote work by means of online platforms (Wood et al., 2019). Within the wedding industry, a large number of vendors form part of the “gig economy”, freelance photographers are an example of individuals forming part of the “gig economy” (Bachtiar, 2018).

Well educated entrepreneurs were actively planning and acquired sufficient financial resources during COVID-19 (Khan et al., 2021). One can conclude that educated and informed entrepreneurs survived the pandemic since additional streams of income were identified and acted upon through their proactive planning approach which resulted in survival. During COVID-19 funding was, and still is, difficult since investors put funding on hold and financial resources were not readily available.

6.6. Creativity and innovation within the wedding industry

6.6.1. Using creativity and innovation as a competitive advantage

Runco and Jaeger (2012) suggest that creativity involves two aspects, namely “originality” as well as “effectiveness”. Originality is seen as a core value for creativity, where usefulness and appropriateness link to the effectiveness. According to these authors entrepreneurs should use a combination of these two words.

Hasan and Koning (2019) mention that creativity and innovation normally go hand-in-hand, and further describe an innovator as an individual who is open to experience as well as someone who captures creativity. The difference between a great product and an average product will also impact the product’s success or failure. Innovation is therefore needed to ensure that a great product or service is offered (Hasan & Koning, 2019). Innovators seek challenges and yearn to share their enthusiasm with others (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018).

In the past, few people had access to expensive white gowns which is classified as the traditional white wedding (Whitesell & Faria, 2020). Due to cheaper imports from China, today more brides have access to and can afford a white dress for their white wedding. This added to the popularity of an increase in white weddings in the last century (Koudou & Wu, 2018). Previous studies by Whitesell and Faria (2020) also show that entrepreneurs were able to combine bridal wear with modern fashion. This showcases how individuals became more creative and innovative in order to incorporate their wedding day into their normal day-to-day activities. This is the perfect example of the wedding industry integrating with other industries to create competitive advantage (Fotiadis, 2018). Another popular aspect was merging locally-made clothing with imported fashions. As a result, traditional wedding wear was combined with white weddings and new innovative styles and fashions were born.

Innovation is needed where new products, processes, marketing innovation and business practices are developed (Maritz et al., 2020). Innovative ideas of adding new elements or combining elements are generated when information is shared amongst different people and cultures which leads to “information sharing”. According to Koudou and Wu (2018) “information sharing” fills gaps in the wedding industry. A vendor’s talents and skills are the capabilities needed in the wedding industry and an individual’s creativity is one’s competitive advantage, which has significantly increased the competition amongst wedding vendors. The wedding industry has become a pop culture according to Carter and Duncan (2017).

Networking and culture go hand-in-hand since they positively influence one another. Hasan and Koning (2019) highlight the importance of social interaction to stimulate complementarity. One such complementarity is the aspect of networking within the wedding industry which has become very popular where vendors “collaborate” to learn and gain valuable input from one another. This stimulates innovation and is critical for idea generation (Bachtiar, 2018; Hasan & Koning, 2019). According to Fadhilillah and Zpalanzani (2020) collaboration is a reason for market leaders’ favourable position in the industry. Maritz et al. (2020) also address networking and how COVID-19 encouraged entrepreneurs to connect with network partners to strategically reposition their businesses amidst the global pandemic. These authors also discuss how individuals should “network with a purpose” where entrepreneurs intentionally network to equip themselves with tools learnt from others.

6.6.2. Marketing and the wedding industry (using a creative approach)

In order to find the best possible marketing strategy that suits their specific company, wedding vendors should look at their available resources and capabilities (Fotiadis, 2018). This author further states that marketing strategies for wedding companies are not well developed and should receive more focus as it can lead to a sustainable competitive advantage.

Fadhilillah and Zpalanzani (2020) show that businesses in the wedding industry have low brand awareness due to low marketing activity. Another weakness identified was limited human capital which negatively affects sales since there is a lack of employees who focus on marketing. Vendors are often the sole employees of their businesses which indicates that there is a lack of human capital, thus affecting marketing strategies and online presence. Low marketing activity and the lack of using e-commerce could be due to insufficient knowledge about e-commerce platforms. Barlian et al. (2018) suggest that entrepreneurs who lack knowledge do not seem interested in engaging or using e-commerce. It is evident that social media can be incredibly valuable to a business. However, being knowledgeable and using an innovative and creative approach, are needed.

7. Methodology

7.1. Research design

Generic qualitative research was used for this study since individuals’ opinions and experiences were studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Percy et al., 2015). Generic qualitative research is appropriate since it was based on personal experiences of wedding vendors in the wedding industry and there was a large pool of suitable wedding vendors, each representing a business in the wedding industry to sample from. The great diversity of entrepreneurs in the wedding industry also motivates why generic qualitative research was the most appropriate method since various entrepreneurs in different categories formed part of this study. A detailed description of participants’ experiences was given in the participants’ own language (Doyle et al., 2020; Percy et al., 2015).

7.2. Sampling

The units of analysis for this study were wedding businesses situated in the Tzaneen, Magoebaskloof, Haenertsburg and Letsitele regions of the Limpopo Province in South Africa. Thirteen businesses participated in this study, allowing for thirteen electronic interviews, one per participating business, which represents the sample size. Thirteen female entrepreneurs were the individual participants and are seen as the units of observation. The specified geographical location is a popular wedding destination for locals but also for people from the city because of the beautiful natural surroundings.

Maximum variation sampling was primarily used to select individual participants, since a diverse group of individuals formed part of this study, supplemented by convenience sampling. Wedding vendors, owning a business for more than one year in the wedding industry, were included in this

study. Businesses operating in different categories within the wedding industry were involved and consisted of four venue owners, three photographers, two florists, two caterers, two graphic designers, one events-hiring company and a hairdresser. This resulted in thirteen individual participants', each representing their own business, and ensuring that the study was not confined to a specific field within the wedding industry. In addition to maximum variation sampling, convenience sampling was used. One of the researchers had been personally involved in the wedding industry for the past seven years. Through this journey, the researcher built up network connections and has familiarity with well-known, established businesses within the industry.

Whitesell and Faria (2020) mention Traditional African weddings in their study, however for the purposes of this study Traditional African weddings are seen as a separate industry with their own entrepreneurial market and will not form part of this study.

7.3. Data collection

Data was collected through interview data; one-on-one semi-structured electronic interviews. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted electronically through the online voice calling platform: WhatsApp. All interviews were recorded so that data could be accessed again. One-on-one interviews were suitable for this study since generic qualitative data was used to determine individuals' opinions, perspectives, beliefs and experiences. Through interactive conversation the researcher gained a better understanding of entrepreneurship in the wedding industry, specifically during the pandemic.

Thirteen electronic interviews were conducted in total. The pre-test and the pilot interview took place in July 2021 and the remainder of the interviews took place during September and October 2021. The pre-test interview showed that the participant was able to answer the questions sensibly. The pilot interview was seen as the first interview of this study as data collected during this interview, applied to the main study.

A discussion guide was used as a guideline for the semi-structured interviews. Research questions were used as a foundation to formulate the interview questions. The reason for the discussion guide was to ask questions in "everyday" language which would not intimidate the participants as this could result in an untrue reflection. The interview questions as well as the probing questions linked to the interview questions and forms part of the discussion guide.

All interview- and probing- questions served as the building blocks for the research questions and were carefully formulated as open-ended questions to ensure that conversations were stimulated (University of Pretoria 2021a). The questions asked were flexible to certify provision for possible change or adaption. Semi-structured interviews allow for open-ended questions which enhance two-way conversation.

7.4. Data analysis

A thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in this study since it is regarded as an appropriate method of data analysis for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Thematic analysis, as a method of data analysis, is the identifying, organising and reporting of themes within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Initially all audio-recordings were listened to and transcribed. Thereafter, the researchers listened to the audio recordings again whilst reading the interview transcripts and this formed part of the preliminary exploratory data analysis in order to familiarise the researchers with the data. Inductive codes were then generated from the data. Applicable text segments were labelled to summarise the meaning of each segment. Iterative analysis was done where similar codes were combined. Thereafter, using the revised code list, patterns were identified through linking codes and discovering initial themes by adding meaning to the data. Final themes were then identified and these themes were then connected to the research questions. This process was done using Microsoft Excel, supplemented by Atlas.ti 9 which assisted with the initial coding.

7.5. Trustworthiness

The “gold standard” of Lincoln and Guba (1985) was used to address the trustworthiness of this study, which consists of credibility, dependability, confirmability as well as transferability.

Credibility deals with how well the findings and the outcome of the study reflect the true perspectives and experiences of the individual participants who were involved in the study (Lietz & Zayas, 2010) and was achieved as no assumptions were made. “Peer debriefing” was achieved to ensure dependability as both researchers provided feedback to one another in order to enhance the quality of the research. This generated new ideas and possible drawbacks were identified.

Shenton (2004) mentions that confirmability is the counter-part of objectivity. It is critical that the study is a true reflection of the various participants’ own ideas, experiences or perspectives. Research bias deals with the sensitivity of the researchers and how personal experiences, background, training and beliefs could have influenced the researchers and the research process (Creswell, 2016). This was eliminated. Transferability deals with how applicable a study’s findings are in settings outside of the study (Lietz & Zayas, 2010). Entrepreneurship in the wedding industry will apply to entrepreneurship in other industries despite differences in various industries.

7.6. Ethical considerations

All participants signed the informed consent form which is attached where background was provided on the purpose of the study. The study was transparent since the informed consent form provided the researchers’ contact details if participants required additional information. It also stated that the participant may withdraw at any point during the study.

Prior to the interview, permission was obtained to record the interview for research purposes. This study was treated as strictly confidential and this was explained to the participants before the interview was conducted. This study made use of voluntary participation and all participants participated of their own free will.

Participants were ensured that no information about themselves or their respective businesses would be disclosed to anybody apart from the researchers. Participants and their businesses will remain anonymous to ensure confidentiality was achieved to protect participants and their businesses.

8. Findings

This study identified five main themes related to the study’s research questions (RQ). Table 1 below summarises the research questions with the main themes and sub-themes connected to each research question.

The table above summarises the findings of this study, linking each research question relating to its specific main theme and sub-themes. These are discussed below.

8.1. Findings related to RQ1 (theme 1: potential in the wedding industry)

The first main theme is “potential within the wedding industry.” Participants mentioned that there is definitely great potential, considering that the wedding day is such an emotional day, decisions are often based on emotions and people long to get married at some point in their lives. Sub-themes identified include: strong emotions, drivers for entering into the wedding industry, size of weddings as well as choices in the wedding industry.

“Strong emotions” was the first sub-theme identified. The majority of participants mentioned that the wedding industry is associated with high levels of emotions. A bride dreams of her wedding day from a young age and it is regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime event.

Table 1. A summary of the research questions and related themes

Research Questions	<p>RQ1: What are the drivers for entrepreneurs/vendors to be involved in the wedding industry?</p> <p>RQ2: How did vendors adapt and what changes were made in their approach in order to survive the global COVID-19 pandemic?</p> <p>RQ3: How important is creativity and innovation for wedding vendors in order to survive amongst the fierce competition in the wedding industry?</p> <p>RQ4: What entrepreneurial -skills and behaviours do vendors in the wedding industry have or need to have?</p> <p>RQ5: To what extent does active advertising (specifically a social media presence a creative approach) influence businesses in the wedding industry?</p>
Main Themes	<p>Theme 1: Potential in the wedding industry</p> <p>Theme 2: The impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic</p> <p>Theme 3: Creativity and innovation</p> <p>Theme 4: Entrepreneurial skills and behaviours</p> <p>Theme 5: Preferred method of advertising in the wedding industry</p>
Sub-themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong emotions • Drivers for entering into the wedding industry • Size of weddings • Choices in the wedding industry • Adaptability, change and resilience • Using existing markets or resources to expand • Networking, specifically with competitors • Originality and signature styles • Competitive advantage • Skills and behaviours in the wedding industry specifically • Born Entrepreneurs • Exposure to entrepreneurship • Word-of-mouth • Social media • Other advertising • Marketing management

There was no distinct driver for these vendors entering into the wedding industry. Exposure to entrepreneurship as an extrinsic motivational factor can be seen as a driver for entering into entrepreneurship and, in this instance; the wedding industry. This will be discussed under the fourth main theme; “entrepreneurial skills and behaviours” specifically focusing on exposure through the social sphere of entrepreneurial families.

Furthermore, having only female entrepreneurs as participants, the assumption could be made that the drivers to join the industry stem from the emotional attachment and fantasy of the “wedding day”. However, drivers for entering the industry were a mixture of; by chance, geographical location, unemployment and simply making business-sense. Two of the thirteen participants mentioned that they entered the wedding industry as a result of their own weddings and another two participants mentioned that it was because of their passion for their work that they entered into the industry. These factors link to emotions and the emotional drive of why vendors wanted to work in the wedding industry. Participants also mentioned that brides suffer from emotional clutter since they are unsure of themselves and start second-guessing themselves in the build-up to their wedding day. The following quote from a participant highlights the theme - “strong emotions” attached to the wedding day:

I definitely think now, having been married myself, I understand the emotion so much more than I did before (P10, female, vendor: florist)

This result proves what Carter and Duncan (2017) mention about the bridal couple who feel that their expenditure is justified. One participant compared the wedding industry with the baby industry, based on the fact that people in these situations make emotional decisions.

People are willing to pay a lot of money in this industry, we need to make use of this potential. (P4, female, vendor: photographer)

The third sub-theme: size of weddings covers the fact that weddings are here to stay, regardless of the size of the event. The majority of participants stated that people will continue to get married although the event or the size of the event might look different. Twelve of the thirteen participants stated that there is potential in the wedding industry which highlights its value. The overall conclusion was that the future of the wedding industry in South Africa looks promising, and more specifically when addressing the size of the wedding, it will be a combination of big and small weddings.

One participant mentioned that brides now use COVID as an excuse to host smaller weddings, where another participant said that South Africans like to celebrate. However, the size of the wedding is mostly dependant on the finances available. In the instance where big weddings will remain one can draw the linkage to Stafford et al. (2020) who state that society stimulates the concept of the wedding day and all the fluff evolving around the day became a fantasy.

Participants confirmed that there is strong competition in the industry thus resulting in clients having more options to choose from (Koudou & Wu, 2018). It is also relatively easy to enter the wedding industry since low start up-capital is often needed (Bachtiar, 2018) and the following quote emphasizes this statement.

If you think about any other industry, it is normally strange when a 21-year-old already have their own business, whereas in the wedding industry, if you think, there are a lot of photographers who are like 21-, 22-years old and they have very established, successful photography businesses. (P4, female, vendor: photographer)

8.2. Findings related to RQ2 (theme 2: the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic)

The second main theme is the impact of the pandemic. COVID-19 is closely linked to creativity and innovation and therefore these themes cannot be seen in isolation. COVID-19 encouraged

participants to rest, recharge, re-strategise, organise and spend time with their families. Participants who are photographers mentioned that COVID-19 made people realise the value of family and therefore people wanted more family photoshoots. This also serves as a possible reason for why florists went into interior design; since people spent more time at home and therefore wanted to decorate their homes.

Sub-themes include adaptability or change, using existing resources and markets to expand, as well as networking. COVID-19 forced participants to adapt, move into new avenues within their respective fields and encouraged networking.

Vendors had to adapt to keep afloat as weddings were cancelled instantaneously (Samoedra et al., 2021; Whitesell & Faria, 2020). The following quote links to the “change catalyst” as explained by Cortellazzo et al. (2020) where entrepreneurs act on the need for change. This ensures entrepreneurial resilience needed to facilitate growth and in this instance survival (Maritz et al., 2020).

We definitely adapted with COVID, and I think every business that’s still around adapted in their own little way to keep everything running. (P9, female, vendor: caterer)

A participant also mentioned that one was suddenly forced to become the brides’ psychologist because so many brides were on the verge of suffering from emotional breakdowns. COVID-19 forced vendors to wear even more hats than what the wedding industry already expected. This will be discussed further under “entrepreneurial skills and behaviours”

The next sub-theme deals with expansion or alternative revenue streams. Most vendors used their available resources for survival and expansion during COVID-19 which supports the findings of Ridzwan et al. (2017) who mentions resource orchestration and effective management of resource utilisation. Examples from this study’s findings include; photographers went into new avenues of photography such as lifestyle- or product -photography, venues focused on smaller functions, offering take-away foods and picnics on site and the caterer started a frozen food line. This portrays the same concept suggested by Whitesell and Faria (2020) who state that entrepreneurs blended modern fashion with wedding wear in their shops. The majority of participants remained in their respective field or a similar field. Participants were however, forced to explore new avenues to survive or to reach a new market when all weddings came to a halt overnight, without warning.

The last sub-theme related to RQ2 involves networking. The overall feeling was that networking plays a vital role. The majority of participants agreed that networking is valuable and that communication is critical. Communication will be discussed under the fourth main theme: “entrepreneurial skills and behaviours”. An interesting topic raised was that due to networking competitors became supporters of each other during Covid-19. Participants mentioned that people had more compassion for one another and everyone was in the same boat—from the worst in the industry to the best in the industry. COVID-19 created common ground amongst everyone, especially amongst the competition.

I am part of a very sweet WhatsApp group that one of the other local photographers started and it’s actually so nice to be part of just a small community of photographers – just to know that if there’s a problem and you maybe cannot make a shoot that you can just post on there and ask them (P7, female, vendor: photographer)

Participants stated that vendors within the same field have different areas of expertise and this was used as a tool to learn from one another. Another fact raised was that vendors need a network to rely on especially since everyone was confronted with the reality of COVID-19 and potentially being infected and becoming very ill unexpectedly for a long period of time.

8.3. Findings related to RQ3 (theme 3: creativity & innovation)

The third main theme identified is “Creativity and Innovation”. The first sub-theme identified represents originality, linking to the development of a signature style. Participants’ creativity generally results in attaining competitive advantage which is the second sub-theme. One participant used the example of fashion magazines to compare different types of vendors where this participant mentioned that inspiration is mainly from overseas.

If you think about fashion; if you open a *Sarie* magazine, everything you’re going to see in there is going to be appropriate wear, everyday wear. If you open say a *Vogue* magazine, everything’s going to be fast forward and weird. So, it’s the same with the photographers, so most photographers in our country is like *Sarie*, but with these photographers they are more *Vogue-ish*. (P4, female, vendor: photographer)

A creative and innovative approach or “*Vogue-ish*” approach as mentioned by the participant is needed since the “*Vogue-ish*” vendors with “*Vogue-ish*” clients are normally the trendsetters of the next season. Trendsetting can lead to competitive advantage, however, the participant also mentioned that the majority of South African clients are somewhat conservative and not ready to set the trend.

This highlights what Runco and Jaeger (2012) state that originality is a core value of creativity. Based on this, one can draw the conclusion that the “*Vogue magazine*” is original and therefore accomplishes creativeness and innovativeness. To survive in the fierce competition within the wedding industry one can conclude that touches of the “*Vogue magazine*” are needed.

Other creative approaches included offering customers different choices and options, being trendsetters, unique and specific styles and always keeping up with the latest trends or introducing clients to something new. One participant mentioned: “we are dynamic” and that is exactly what the wedding industry is about, in fact not just the wedding industry but entrepreneurship in general. One cannot be static, and one needs to stay on top of the newest trends!

One participant is a water paint artist and certainly added a great deal of creativity and innovation to this research. The participant does wedding stationery and live painting at weddings. The entire concept of this business is implausibly unique and signifies original art. The following quote emphasizes the participant’s signature style as Cortellazzo et al. (2020) suggest is needed.

People can come to me and say they want in their artwork, that’s definitely something I can use as an advantage. The fact that it’s original and sentimental. I realised people are very sentimental and they want something that came from them. (P12, female, vendor: classified under graphic designer but more specifically water-paint artist)

Each participant definitely used creativity and innovation by applying their unique skills and talents ensuring sustainable businesses through realising competitive advantage.

8.4. Findings related to RQ4 (theme 4: entrepreneurial skills and behaviours)

The next main theme that was identified is; “entrepreneurial skills and behaviours.” This reflects all the skills and behaviours participants identified as needed for entrepreneurs in general. The most prevalent skills and behaviours mentioned were, the need for something new, communication skills, ability to cope with having different jobs and roles, people skills, willingness to learn and creativity.

Sub-themes include skills and behaviours in the wedding industry specifically, born entrepreneurs and exposure to entrepreneurship.

The first sub-theme signifies skills and behaviours of entrepreneurs in the wedding industry specifically including; communication skills, adaptability and being able to improvise, people skills, guiding clients and to love what you do. Cortellazzo et al. (2020) mention the importance of the

ability to interact with others which strongly highlights the significance of communication skills within the wedding industry. One participant, who is a venue owner, explained that they had to make a bouquet in the past and even had to bake a wedding cake minutes before the wedding started. This indicates how important adaptability, where one can improvise, is within this industry.

The second sub-theme deals with participants' viewpoint on whether entrepreneurs are born or if they learn the skills along the way. The most common result amongst participants was a combination of the two. However, one participant mentioned it is more beneficial if entrepreneurship is "in your blood" which can be linked to the internal, social as well as professional spheres (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018). This leads to the last sub-theme identified, which is exposure to entrepreneurship, more specifically family entrepreneurship portraying the social sphere (Hamdi-Kidar & Vellera, 2018).

My father was the biggest influence in my life, because he started from scratch and had nothing. He stayed in a caravan with my mom and then he started his own business. He built his business and started very small – he didn't even have money to buy meat. He started small and became a very big entrepreneur. Through the years I learnt from him that you have to have patience with everything that you do; nothing just falls from the sky. (P6, female, vendor: events hiring and caterer)

The vast majority of participants were exposed to entrepreneurship through their families. Although, most participants had entrepreneurial exposure from a young age it was not within the wedding industry. As a result, participants had to learn the minutiae of the wedding industry and familiarise themselves with the market. Most participants therefore felt they had to learn an ample amount by themselves as they moved along in their entrepreneurial journeys. Another highlight raised was that entrepreneurial parents assumed that their children knew more than what the children actually did know. Although family exposure was there, assumptions from parents led to children learning the hard way as indicated by the following quote

"That would have been nice if you told me." (P10, female, vendor: florist)

The quote above was aimed at a participant's entrepreneurial parents when they assumed that the participant knew something.

8.5. Findings related to RQ5 (theme 5: preferred method of advertising in the wedding industry)

The last main theme identified deals with advertising. Word-of-mouth, social media, other advertising as well as marketing management, form part of the sub-themes identified.

Seventy-six percent of participants (10/13 participants) emphasised the value of word-of-mouth advertising, which also proved the findings of Fadhlillah and Zpalanzani (2020). Word-of-mouth is the first sub-theme that will be discussed. The majority stated that word-of-mouth is the most important method of advertising since potential clients' regard word-of-mouth advertising as reliable. It is normally a trusted source who makes the recommendation based on a past experience and often these trusted sources have already walked the path that the potential client still needs to walk. The following quote highlights the value of word-of-mouth advertising.

I must say word-of-mouth is the best, best advertising I could have ever asked for. (P5, female, vendor: venue owner)

Besides word-of-mouth, there was a consensus from most participants that social media was also a very popular form of advertising. Social media is the second sub-theme and, more specifically, Instagram. The majority of participants mentioned that they have used paid or boosted advertisements on social media in the past, but came to the conclusion that it is unreliable since one

does not know what to expect or how one's business will benefit after the paid advertisement. As a result, the majority moved away from the paid or boosted advertisements on social media and continue to post normally, which is unpaid advertising.

“Other advertising” is the third sub-theme. Only two participants mentioned that they had good positioning on Google. Other possible forms of advertising mentioned include: advertising on screens or billboards in town, florists can donate flowers to churches or schools, photographers can benefit from printed photographs in the form of coffee table books.

The last sub-theme addresses marketing management. All participants (13/13 participants) are responsible for the management of their businesses' marketing, no one outsources their marketing. The majority of participants are, however, open to outsource their advertising, but the great expense thereof is a main barrier. All participants supported the need to connect on an emotional level with potential clients and a few vendors did not want to outsource their advertising. The reason being that those vendors believe that it is challenging for an outsider (who manages a business's social media) to connect emotionally with clients, as it is no longer personal. Personal relationships and interaction play a significant role which link to the emotional aspect discussed under the first main theme: “potential in the wedding industry.”

9. Conclusion

9.1. Summary of findings

This study focused on vendors in the wedding industry and how these vendors and their businesses have been affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. This study is a response to Fotiadis's (2018) call for more research in the wedding industry.

There is no common drive for why the participants entered into the wedding industry. It was a combination of location, by chance, making “business-sense”, having a passion for the specific field vendors are operating in within the industry and exposure to entrepreneurship. There was however, consensus that there is great potential in the wedding industry in South Africa.

The study confirms the findings by Liñán and Jaén (2022), that all the vendors adapted during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Most vendors turned to new avenues of revenue during the pandemic which were mostly associated with their respective fields within the wedding industry—almost a complementary product or service added to their original established business. Creativity and Innovation and using unique approaches often led to establishing a signature style which led to competitive advantage in a very competitive field.

The need for something new, communication skills, the ability to cope with having different jobs and roles, people skills, a willingness to learn and creativity formed part of the most common entrepreneurial skills and behaviours mentioned by participants. Advertising plays a prominent role in the industry, where word-of-mouth followed by social media were seen as the most effective methods of advertising.

The findings indicate that dealing with future opportunities as “something new”, and linking to loyalty and creativity as “something blue”, are essential aspects of entrepreneurship in the wedding industry, without which the wedding day would be incomplete. Therefore, entrepreneurship amongst wedding vendors would also be incomplete if these aspects are not taken into consideration.

9.2. Theoretical implications

The findings of Whitesell and Faria (2020) are confirmed as the wedding industry is a profitable industry and that there is an increase of vendors entering into wedding industry. The vast majority of participants indicated that there is potential in the wedding industry.

Hasan and Koning (2019) address entrepreneurs' creativity and innovation within the wedding industry and this study affirms these authors' results, since vendors are creative and innovative. Even when the global pandemic hit these vendors they adapted and adjusted, facilitating a flexible approach in order to survive.

This study adds to research done by Cortellazzo et al. (2020) who introduced the "change catalyst" as explained in the literature review. All participants offer something unique and creative within their businesses which adds to their competitive advantage in an incredible competitive industry.

This study is in contrast to Samoedra et al. (2021) and Fotiadis's (2018) since these authors focused on paid advertising, where, according to the participants of this study word-of-mouth is the most popular method of advertising. This study therefore sides with Fadhllillah and Zpalanzani (2020) who value the significance of word-of-mouth.

Within this sample size word-of-mouth advertising overshadowed social media. This study contradicts the finding of Barlian et al. (2018) who suggest that entrepreneurs who lack knowledge do not seem interested in engaging or using e-commerce, since the majority of participants of this study have a desire to be more active and engaged in social media.

9.3. Managerial recommendations

It is suggested that individuals who are not adaptable should not enter into the wedding industry. The wedding industry is dynamic where individuals are required to wear different hats and be flexible. There is prodigious potential in the wedding industry however, adaptability is a prerequisite. The global pandemic proved the importance thereof, as businesses were forced to adapt and reposition themselves during and after COVID-19 as a method of survival. Adaptability and a willingness to learn are words that are interwoven and should be seen in unity. Since there is great potential in the wedding industry policymakers are encouraged to develop new policies specifically aimed at the wedding industry and wedding vendors to support economic growth, as Ridzwan et al. (2017) recommend.

This study shows that seeking alternative revenue streams can be beneficial for growth or survival, in the instance of the pandemic. It is recommended that vendors ensure the utilisation of existing resources and branch off into new avenues—not necessarily entering into new markets or new industries, but rather focusing on complementary products or services. Using this approach ensures that existing resources are exploited where one already has a foot in the door. Another tool mentioned is to encourage governments to develop new policies to support economic growth and address income inequality (Albert et al., 2023).

Based on these study's findings it is highly recommended that a business develops a specific signature style which distinguishes it from its competitors. Using unique or innovative approaches should be stimulated and then implemented (Cortellazzo et al., 2020). A constant "need for something new" is where new trends are born from vendors who are willing to be distinctive, even frowned upon by society, especially during the initial introductory phase.

Entrepreneurs in general and, more specifically wedding vendors, should stop seeing competition as a threat. Competition can be used in a positive way where individuals can learn from one another, encourage one another and embrace one another's level of expertise. This study showed that competition can ultimately become one's support. Networking plays a prominent role and intentional efforts should be made to form network connections with a broad spectrum of different entrepreneurs which assert findings by Hughes et al. (2022).

Based on the findings of this study managers or owners need to realise the importance of word-of-mouth advertising and connect emotionally with potential clients. Social media is also very

important and vendors need to ensure that they are sharing and interacting with other vendors, as well as current- and potential clients.

9.4. Limitations and directions for future research

This study was based on a specific geographical location therefore the findings might not be an accurate representation of other geographical areas, cities and countries. As a result, this study might not represent the entire wedding industry in South Africa or globally. A practical limitation for wedding vendors is limited growth potential as a result of being tied to one geographical location and the number of calendar dates available. A limit can be reached when all dates are already booked and confirmed. Therefore, since location and specific calendar dates play an immense role in the wedding industry, vendors should consider engaging in entrepreneurial ventures which do not have limited growth potential. It is however suggested that vendors branch off into new avenues that complement the field they are already operating in. This study calls for research on how entrepreneurs can engage in entrepreneurial activities which do not have limited growth potential based on geographical location or calendar dates.

The second limitation identified was attributed to the fact that this study focused on qualitative research by nature. The sample size used for this study was a small compared to the vast number of businesses operating within the wedding industry in South Africa. Future research can therefore be done using quantitative research where a larger sample size can be used.

Other areas for future research could be to investigate the international industry norm of weddings compared to South African weddings. Specific focus can also be placed on “elopement weddings” and whether these weddings create similar job opportunities for wedding vendors where only the location differs or where eloping is a whole new industry on its own.

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