

**Sensemaking in crisis: An exploration among strategic leaders in small
businesses**

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ABSTRACT

The small business sector contributes significantly to driving the economy through the creation of job opportunities. Already constrained with limited resources, the sector has felt the impact of crises such as the Covid_19 pandemic. It is therefore up to the strategic leaders in the small businesses to ensure sound leadership during a crisis for business sustainability. The purpose of this research is to explore how the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role in sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role. Based on Weick's sense-making theory, this research contributes to the sensemaking body of knowledge, and it extends strategic leadership in crisis literature. The study followed a qualitative method and an exploratory approach in analysing the small business strategic leaders' lived experiences of sensemaking in a crisis. A total of 16 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually with the small business strategic leaders from various industries. This research found that the small business strategic leaders employ a cognitive process and social interaction approaches as enabling strategies in a crisis. The cognitive process of sensemaking encompasses using the current knowledge and experience (existing cognitive frames). Should the existing knowledge and experience not deliver the desired outcome, then they employ intuition as well as trial-and-error (experimental) strategies. Furthermore, considering that sensemaking is a socially rooted phenomenon, the participants interact with the environment, as well as with the internal and the external stakeholders to reinforce the sensemaking capacity. This is more so considering the negative emotions and the lack of social support, that are identified in this research that hinder the strategic leaders' capacity to make sense of a crisis. This research has therefore provided an understanding of how organisations can bolster sensemaking during crises. Additionally, a conceptual framework that articulates the key constructs and insights into the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis is another outcome of this research. The management can advance sensemaking by, developing knowledge and experience, strengthening intuitive and experimental decision-making, providing mentorship for strategic leaders, and sharpening environment awareness as well as through stakeholder management skills. Finally, as a limitation to the research, most participants shared their Covid_19 related experiences thus the research outcomes may be biased and skewed towards one crisis type.

KEY WORDS

Crisis

Sensemaking

Small business

Strategic leader

Strategic leadership

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Corporate Strategy at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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Name & Surname

Signature

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ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation / Acronym	Full Description
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COVID_19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NDA	Non-Disclosure Agreement
TMT	Top Management Team
SM	Sensemaking
SMME	Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprise

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

The world has experienced several global crises which include but are not limited to the financial crisis of 2007 – 2008, Covid_19, and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. These crises have not only had an impact on humankind but also on the businesses and the economies throughout the globe. The Russia and Ukraine conflict for example, has had a negative impact on global growth including employment, with countries in West Europe and North America revising downwards their planned growth for 2022 (Global Data, 2022). Moreover, Covid_19 has had a negative impact on the economies and the businesses especially in emerging economies where there are already prevailing economic weaknesses (The World Bank, 2022). South Africa as an emerging economy was not immune to the negative impacts as business turnover declined by 3% from 2020 to 2021 due to the impact of Covid_19 (Statistics South Africa, 2022). This decline was the first such negative impact on business turnover since the global economic crisis that impacted businesses (Statistics South Africa, 2022).

The global small business sector has felt the brunt of the Covid_19 crisis due to the limited access to resources (The World Bank, 2022). This sector generally operates under difficult conditions that affect its survival such as the challenges of accessing funding and appropriate infrastructure, the lack of skills, as well as the legal and regulatory barriers (International Finance Corporation & World Bank Group, 2019). In South Africa, the small businesses fail mainly due to the lack of funding. According to BusinessTech (2021), the rate of collapse of the South African small businesses is higher than most countries in the world with funding being the main cause.

The South African small business sector employs between 50% and 60% of the country's working population (Kalidas et al., 2020) thus it is critical to job creation as it has a higher labour absorption capacity (BusinessTech, 2021). The success of the small businesses is largely dependent on its leaders (University of the Western Cape, n.d.). This thus requires the leaders in the small businesses to act accordingly to ensure the sustainability of their businesses more especially in a crisis.

Sound leadership is an imperative in a crisis situation (Jacobides, 2020). A crisis calls for the leaders to move from an operational mindset to a more strategic one to be able to lead their businesses (Kalidas et al., 2020). The good leaders in a crisis need to be direct and bold (Jacobides, 2020). It is important for these leaders to be able to identify the crises in time to enable them to find response strategies that will limit any unwanted consequences on the business (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). The type and speed of the response strategies becomes crucial in a crisis (Jacobides, 2020). These response strategies are mainly spontaneous, and they require leadership behaviour and thinking that are action oriented even with limited available decision-making information (D'Auria & De Smet, 2020). A leader is thus tasked with making sense of what is occurring by taking bold steps to find appropriate response strategies to ensure business survival. This highlights the importance of how the leader makes sense of a crisis situation.

The significance of this research project to business is that it provides deep insights on how the small business strategic leaders operating in an already dynamic environment seek to understand and navigate a crisis. Furthermore, the findings will aid these leaders to understand how their role influences a crisis and subsequently the business itself. This will enrich the leader's understanding of their role in a crisis and more especially how they conceptualise a crisis situation as this has an impact on their crisis response strategies. South Africa as an emerging economy provides an opportune context to explore this phenomenon.

It is appropriate to define a small business as the focus of this research project is on small business strategic leaders. A small business in South Africa, also referred to as SMME is defined as "a separate and distinct business entity, together with its branches or subsidiaries, if any, including co-operative enterprises, managed by one owner or more predominantly carried on in any sector or subsector of the economy" (National Small Business Amendment Act [No. 29 of 2004], 2004, p.4).

Schedule 1 of the said Act further provides for the classification of the small businesses in terms of the employee numbers and the turnover (National Small Enterprise Act Schedule 1 Amendment, 2019). Considering that the small businesses include the micro enterprises that operate on an informal basis and are not formally registered and thus they are elusive to quantify (Department of Small Business Development, 2023), the focus of this research report is on the strategic leaders with experience in small businesses that are formally registered. These formally registered small businesses drive economic growth, and they contribute significantly to the GDP (Department of Small Business Development, 2023).

For the purpose of this research, the definition of a small business as legislated in the National Small Business Amendment Act [No. 29 of 2004] (2004) is amended. A small business is thus defined for this research purposes as a business entity that is primarily conducted in any of the industries of the formal economy and it employs no more than 250 permanent employees.

1.2 Research Problem

To study sensemaking in a crisis among the strategic leaders in small business, it is important to understand the role of these leaders in a crisis within the strategic leadership literature. Strategic leadership is understood to be an iterative process of learning, unlearning, and constantly adapting in an ambiguous environment which is performed by the leaders at the top layer of the organisation (Fernandes et al., 2022). Deep-rooted within the process of strategic leadership are the strategic leaders that perform these roles. The earliest citation on strategic leadership is by Hosmer (1982) who defines a strategic leader as a person who can influence the actions and the attitudes of the others to achieve organisational goals.

In a crisis, the role of these strategic leaders is brought to the fore (Wu et al., 2021). A crisis is defined as a process that occurs unexpectedly thereby, providing minimal time for preparation (Williams et al., 2017). It is disruptive to the organisation as well as to its stakeholders, and it requires an immediate response (Wu et al., 2021). In studying leader crisis response during the Covid_19 period, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) revealed that the strategic leaders were not ready to handle such a crisis. This thus begs the question of whether the strategic leaders understand their role in a crisis.

Remarkably, prior to Crayne and Medeiros's (2021) assertions, scholars such as Merendino and Sarens (2020) had already called for a further exploration of the role the leaders play in a crisis. The Covid_19 crisis provided evidence of the need for more research in this area. Furthermore, April and Chimanya (2019) elucidate that there is insufficient knowledge about how the strategic leaders make sense of crises, thereby opening a space for research work on sensemaking in a crisis.

Sensemaking is a process where an individual actively seeks to make sense of unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous situations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Samdanis & Lee, 2019). Covid_19 has provided an opportunity for the scholars to study sensemaking in a dynamic environment that is filled with uncertainty and disruption (Christianson & Barton, 2021). A research opportunity, according to Christianson and Barton (2021), is to consider sensemaking in a crisis within a different challenging setting such as that of a small business, as sensemaking is mostly explored in a corporate context. This call is supported by Crayne and Medeiros (2021) who highlight the importance of leader sensemaking in a crisis and invite further research in this area.

Finally, with there being an academic gap in the role of the leaders in a crisis and leader sensemaking in a crisis within the context of small business, it is thus an opportune time to explore the role of the strategic leaders in sensemaking in a crisis within the small business sector. This allows for the researcher to contribute to the sensemaking body of knowledge.

1.3 Research Question

This research report highlights the different elements of sensemaking and how they aid the small business strategic leaders in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role. Consequently, the main research question is:

How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The sub-research questions that support the main research question are:

Sub-question 1: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

Sub-question 2: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership roles?

A further discussion of the research questions is provided in Chapter 3.

1.4 Research Purpose and Aims

This research project explored how the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role in sensemaking in a crisis.

The aim of this research project was to firstly obtain an understanding and deep insights into the sensemaking role of the strategic leaders in a crisis. Secondly, the aim was to explore the process the small business strategic leaders follow to make sense of a crisis. Lastly, it was to propose a conceptual framework that articulates the main constructs and the insights into the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis.

1.5 Research Scope

As leader sensemaking in a crisis has been largely studied in the corporate world, there is limited research in the context of the small businesses (Christianson & Barton, 2021). This infers that there is also limited research within the South African context focusing on the small businesses.

Therefore, the South African small business sector is the setting within which the research's main question and the sub-questions are explored. Specifically, within this sector, only the strategic leaders with experience in formally registered small businesses are considered irrespective of the size of the small business, the number of employees and the years of experience as a small business strategic leader.

This research project follows a qualitative method and an exploratory approach. Moreover, an interpretivist philosophy is employed as the research seeks to understand the lived experiences of the small business strategic leaders. Finally, 16 semi-structured interviews are used as a data gathering method.

1.6 Research Contribution

1.6.1 Theoretical relevance

In considering leader inaction in a crisis, Merendino and Sarens (2020) suggest a further exploration of the role the leaders play in a crisis. The Covid_19 crisis provided the evidence of the need for such work. This is because in studying leader crisis response during the Covid_19 period, Crayne and Medeiros (2021) accentuate that the strategic leaders were ill-equipped to handle such a crisis. Additionally, April and Chimanya (2019) stress the lack of knowledge about how the strategic leaders make sense of the crises, therefore providing an opportune time to consider the role these strategic leaders play in sensemaking in a crisis. Lastly, Christianson and Barton (2021) suggest that a challenging setting such as that of a small business must be considered for such a study, as sensemaking is mostly explored in a corporate context.

Considering the above, the theoretical relevance of this research project is to contribute to the already existing sensemaking body of knowledge and by extension to the strategic leadership literature. This research project answers the call for additional research on the exploration of the role of the strategic leaders in sensemaking in a crisis within the small business sector (April & Chimanya, 2019; Christianson & Barton, 2021; Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Merendino & Sarens, 2020).

This research provides thought provoking insights of what is key in the mind of the small business strategic leaders as they reflect on a crisis. Moreover, the study reveals the important obstacles and the enablers of the sensemaking process. Furthermore, this research advances the understanding of how a business can reinforce sensemaking during crises. The research outcomes further add value to the current academic debate relating to the sensemaking theory. As sensemaking is explored within the context of an organisational crisis and strategic leadership, additional insights are obtained for contribution to the crisis and to the strategic leadership school of thought.

1.6.2 Business relevance

The small business sector is critical to job creation as it has a higher labour absorption capacity (BusinessTech, 2021) and thus it has a significant contribution to employment in South Africa (Kalidas et al., 2020). This sector already operates within a context of resource constraints (International Finance Corporation & World Bank Group, 2019) and it has felt the brunt of the Covid_19 crisis because of this (The World Bank, 2022). The success of the small businesses is, therefore, largely dependent on its leaders (University of the Western Cape, n.d.) more especially in a crisis where sound leadership is essential (Jacobides, 2020).

This research project provides valuable insights on how the small business strategic leaders operating in an already difficult environment seek to understand and navigate a crisis. This is especially so as an effective as well as a timely diagnosis and response has an impact on business sustainability and by extension on the livelihood and on the economy. This research adds value to business as it demonstrates the thinking and the actions of the small business strategic leaders when faced with a crisis. Furthermore, this research demonstrates where there are obstacles in thinking and acting, as well as how then the small business strategic leaders overcome these to be more effective and efficient in their role in a crisis. Therefore, lessons can be drawn by the other small business strategic leaders, and they may be used to enrich their own sensemaking and strategic leadership processes.

1.7 Roadmap

The structure of this research report takes the form of different chapters starting with Chapter 1 which is an introductory chapter that is aimed at clearly articulating the identified business and theoretical gap. The chapter also includes the research aims, as well as the study's contribution and scope. Chapter 2 has detailed discussions and a synthesis of the high-quality literature from various scholars that grounds the research work. Flowing from the literature review, Chapter 3 has the research question and the sub-questions that the report aims to explore. Chapter 4 gives a holistic account and a justification for the research methodology and the design that is used to respond to the research question thus addressing the identified research gap. The report continues to present Chapter 5 that clearly and concisely articulates the findings of the research. These research findings are critically discussed and systematically analysed in Chapter 6 with conclusions and recommendations reached in the final Chapter 7.

1.8 Conclusion

The current chapter articulated the theoretical foundation and the business case for this research project by focusing on the small business strategic leader's sensemaking role in a crisis. Furthermore, there is a clear and concise expression of the research purpose and the aims that add value to the sensemaking school of thought. The following chapter provides a critical review of the literature from various scholars with different arguments relating to the three key constructs underpinning this research project, which are namely, sensemaking, strategic leadership and an organisational crisis.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This research seeks to build on the work by Merendino and Sarens (2020) which explored the cognitive constraints that cause leader passivity during a crisis. It does so by exploring how the small business strategic leaders play a role in sensemaking during a crisis. Therefore, the research deepens the understanding of how the small business strategic leaders view their role in a crisis and how they use sensemaking as an enabling strategy during a crisis. The previous chapter articulated the identified theoretical and business gap together with the research aims, the study's contribution and the scope of this research report.

The current chapter critically builds an academic argument based on the literature from various scholars to provide an understanding of the current ongoing academic debate, the research gap and the key constructs embodying this research. The research question is explored within the strategic leadership literature in the context of the organisational crisis in the small business sector with an emphasis on the three key constructs as shown in **Figure 1**.

The first construct is strategic leadership. The literature review delineates between strategic leadership and a strategic leader as these terms hold different academic meanings and they can easily be confused. Furthermore, as the research report is about the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis, it is important to understand what the scholars view as the role of strategic leaders in a general and in a crisis context and how this role differs if at all, in the small businesses as opposed to the big corporates.

The second construct relating to organisational crisis focuses on crisis leadership, as well as the various categories of crises moving into crisis management with the different stages of the crisis process. Finally, the evolution of and the current academic debate on sensemaking is critically considered together with the key elements of sensemaking and the failure to meaning making. This literature review section is closed off with a synthesis of the various debates relating to the three key constructs which then feeds into the main research question and the sub-questions.

Specifically, the study is set within the context of organisational crisis, and it focuses primarily on understanding the sensemaking roles and the processes that are delivered by the small business strategic leadership role. This literature review section explores these concepts in detail.

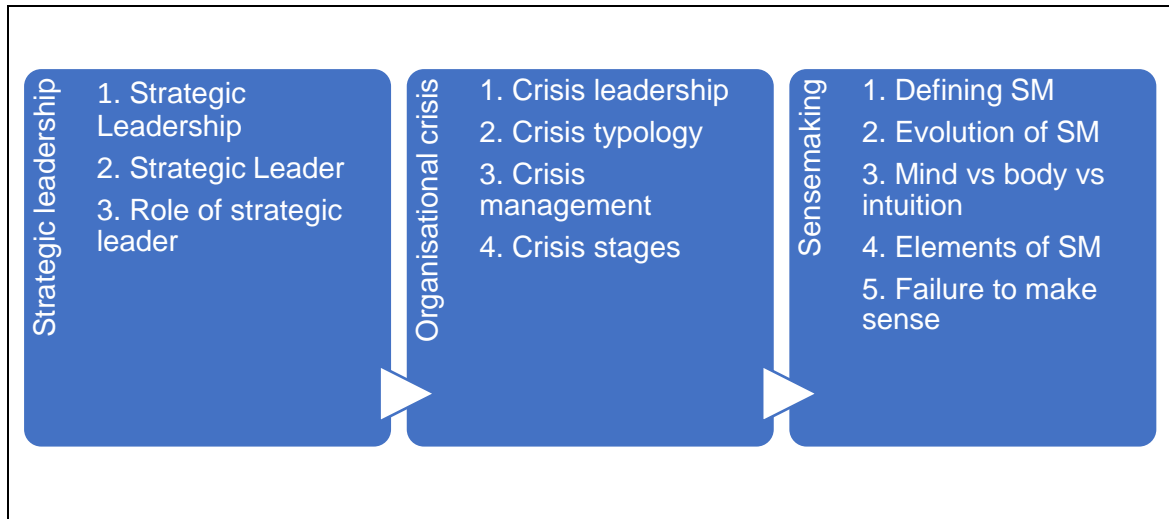


Figure 1: Literature review conceptual approach (Source: Author's own)

2.2 Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership literature is broad, and it includes but it is not limited to the process of strategic leadership, and the strategic leaders. Strategic leadership and strategic leaders are two separate notions that should not be confused, and they cannot be used interchangeably. In considering strategic leadership broadly and within the context of small business, the paragraphs that follow delve deeper into these notions and the key distinctions between the two.

2.2.1 Strategic Leadership Defined

In considering strategic leadership, this research report also considered this phenomenon within the context of the small business. Small businesses are highly inclined to business failure (Eggers, 2020). According to Quansah et al. (2022), strategic leadership is even more crucial in such instances. The first five years of a small business are the most crucial as new businesses collapse in the initial five years of their existence (Quansah & Hartz, 2021).

Furthermore, the small businesses operate in a dynamic environment where they struggle with resources, capabilities, cashflow, and an eco-system that is not conducive for the small businesses to optimally function (Salamzadeh & Dana, 2021). Most researchers consider the strategic leadership in big corporates, and they apply these findings in small businesses while failing to acknowledge the different contextual environments within which the small businesses operate (Quansah et al., 2022).

As opposed to the big corporates, the small businesses are essentially provided with limited strategic choices due to the lack of resources and resilience (Weaven et al., 2021) and thus they are more likely to fail in times of a crisis. This thus elevates the importance of strategic leadership in the small businesses (Quansah et al., 2022). In understanding strategic leadership within the small business sector, it is important to understand the broad concept of strategic leadership as articulated by various scholars.

The literature on strategic leadership is vast and fragmented as is highlighted by the variety in the definitions of strategic leadership (Samimi et al., 2022). These scholars consolidate the different views and define strategic leadership as "the functions performed by individuals at the top levels of an organisation (CEOs, TMT members, Directors, General Managers) that are intended to have strategic consequences for the firm" (Samimi et al., 2022, p. 3). Fernandes et al. (2022) in considering a holistic strategic leadership model, bring in a context of uncertainty and they view strategic leadership as an iterative process which is performed by the leaders of the organisation and it consists of learning, unlearning, and constantly adapting in an ambiguous environment. This definition highlights the importance of flexibility in leadership as it is not static due to the influence of environmental and contextual factors. Therefore, strategic leadership requires adaptability (Gardner et al., 2021).

Moreover, as an iterative process of influence, strategic leadership is purposefully driven and it seeks to alter firm performance (Fernandes et al., 2022). Such vision is achieved through the influence of others by the strategic leader to achieve a specific desired outcome (Oc, 2018). Gardner et al. (2021) share that strategic leadership involves the interactions between the strategic leaders and the others with the aim of influencing one another. Thus, the incremental influence of others by the strategic leader is essential in strategic leadership (Samimi et al., 2022).

Strategic leadership is therefore more relational as it involves influencing others. Simsek et al. (2018) summarise this point by stating that “strategic leadership of an organisation is a collective endeavour entailing a complex web of relationships between executives and other parties” (p. 281). Furthermore, Vera et al. (2022) support Simsek et al. (2018) by stating that strategic leadership is the leadership “of” an organisation. This is one of the defining factors in strategic leadership as opposed to supervisory or operational leadership which focuses on the leadership “in” an organisation (Vera et al., 2022).

What is apparent from the scholars is that strategic leadership is not stagnant, as it is a continuous process that is aimed at altering firm performance to achieve a specific desired outcome. Moreover, strategic leadership is highly interactive as it seeks to influence the behaviours and the actions of the others in moving towards achieving a shared vision. Therefore, relationships are also key in strategic leadership. The actions and the decisions that the strategic leaders take in the process of strategic leadership are influenced by the contextual environment and by the strategic leader's nature. Inferred within the definition of strategic leadership is that the strategic leader has more influencing power than the follower, thus placing the burden of strategic leadership on the strategic leader. At this point, consideration is given to what a strategic leader is and who are the strategic leaders of an organisation.

2.2.2 Strategic Leader Defined

The earliest citation on strategic leadership is by Hosmer (1982) who defines a strategic leader as a person who can influence the actions and the attitudes of other people to achieve the organisational goals. These are the individuals at the highest level of the organisation (Samimi et al., 2022). This view is supported by Singh et al. (2023) who contend that the strategic leaders are the people at the upper layer of the organisation including those that lead the strategic units of the business. Furthermore, these are the individuals with the ultimate accountability for the performance of the organisation (Luciano et al., 2020; Simsek et al., 2018). They also influence the creation of an innovative culture within the organisation and establish an environment of creativity that supports firm outcomes (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021).

As strategic leadership is about “wealth creation and better performance” (Fernandes et al., 2022, p.653), the strategic leaders drive such a process. It can be concluded that the strategic leaders are (1) The highest layer of the business, (2) Influence others to act in

a manner, (3) Drive firm performance in achieving a shared vision, and (4) Bear the ultimate responsibility for the organisation's performance.

Additionally, these strategic leaders include the senior executives (such as the CEO and the top management team) of an organisation who are ultimately accountable for the performance of the organisation (Martins, 2020). Excluding the senior executives, the individuals that lead the strategic units of the organisation also form part of the strategic leaders (Singh et al., 2023), as these individuals by virtue of their roles, form part of the strategic decision making (Fernandes et al., 2022).

Neely et al. (2020) extend that the strategic leaders include the non-executive directors, and this extended view is supported by Samimi et al. (2022). In the context of small businesses, the strategic decision maker is usually the entrepreneur, the owner, or the managing director mainly due to the small size of the business as they have less complex operational structures (Hoang et al., 2021). In summary, the strategic leaders are the people at the upper layer of the organisation which includes the executives and the non-executive directors, the strategic unit leaders, the entrepreneurs, and the business owners. These individuals are consequently the strategic leaders that the strategic leadership theory focuses on.

The distinction between strategic leadership and a strategic leader is that the former is a process, and the latter is an incumbent who forms part of and plays a crucial role in the strategic leadership process. This research report focuses on the strategic leaders within the small business context and their role in a crisis. At this juncture, it is important to explore the views of the scholars when it comes to the role that these strategic leaders perform in general and more specifically in a crisis.

2.2.3 Role of Strategic Leaders

While understanding that strategic leadership requires the strategic leaders to forge relationships towards better firm performance, it is also important to understand the other facets of their role in and out of the crises. The organisational leaders have shifted from the supervisory to the strategic roles (Fernandes et al., 2022). This is because these leaders' roles are more about the leadership of an organisation instead of about the leadership in an organisation (Vera et al., 2022). This strategic role entails making decisions about the strategic direction of the business together with the business model that is required to achieve the strategy to ensure sustainable performance (Fernandes

et al., 2022). According to Samimi et al. (2022), the strategic leaders are tasked with making strategic decisions that impact organisational performance. In doing so, the strategic leaders must ensure that the organisational resources that include both the human and the social capital, are managed efficiently (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022).

Similarly, in the small business sector, the strategic leaders play a role of being the ultimate decision makers thus making decisions about the strategic direction of the organisation (Hoang et al., 2021). Even though these strategic leaders are ultimately accountable for the business, collective decision-making is of outmost importance in the small businesses (Hoang et al., 2021). This may be attributable to the smaller size of the business that allows for flexibility (Eggers, 2020) and the family-like environment (Hoang et al., 2021).

Moreover, key to strategic leadership is the strategic leaders' task of influencing their followers, the stakeholders, and the environment (Fernandes et al., 2022). Through the process of influence, the strategic leaders motivate the followers to achieve the vision of the organisation (Samimi et al., 2022). This process must be done in a manner that builds trust and fosters collaboration (Fernandes et al., 2022). It is not just the followers that are influenced by the strategic leader but also the stakeholders that need to be managed, more especially those that are likely to have some influence on the operations of the organisation (Samimi et al., 2022).

Even though these strategic leaders have the power of influence by virtue of their position, this is not strictly enforced as the focus is more on collaboration (Hoang et al., 2021). This is made easier by the close proximity of the strategic leader to the followers (Eggers, 2020). Instead of a top-down influence approach, the small business strategic leaders empower both the followers and the stakeholders (Quansah et al., 2022).

When difficulties come, the crucial role of the strategic leaders is to take the organisation out of the “eye of the hurricane” (Fernandes et al., 2022, p.649). Such events relate to the periods that are characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty (Fernandes et al., 2022); such as in a crisis. In a crisis, the role of the strategic leaders is elevated (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022; Wu et al., 2021) as the organisation looks to the strategic leaders for guidance and thus the leader becomes a compass for the organisation giving direction to the followers (Collins et al., 2023). The strategic leaders' ability to make the right decisions in a crisis is important in maintaining performance (Fernandes et al., 2022).

This requires action-oriented strategic leaders that adopt a proactive approach in a crisis (Stam et al., 2018). Given the urgency of action that is brought about by a crisis (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022), this places a burden on the strategic leader to respond quickly.

Moving the organisation out of such events requires the strategic leader to facilitate the adaptation to the new conditions (Fernandes et al., 2022). The ability to innovate may allow for a quick adaptation to the ever-changing environment. Cortes and Herrmann (2021) contend that the strategic leaders drive innovation by establishing an atmosphere that facilitates idea generation or that generates those ideas themselves. Such an innovative environment must link with the organisational strategy (Fernandes et al., 2022) to avoid business failure.

In the small businesses, innovation is key for survival (Akbari et al., 2021) given the high risk of failure (Eggers, 2020). In responding to a crisis, the small business strategic leaders foster an environment of creativity and innovation to obtain opportunities (Thukral, 2021) that will ensure business sustainability (Quansah et al., 2022). This places a burden on these strategic leaders to recognise and exploit the opportunities in a crisis (Weaven et al., 2021).

Further, the small business strategic leaders practice agility and flexibility in their response strategies aided by the continuous learning within a dynamic environment that is filled with continuous challenges (Eggers, 2020; Quansah & Hartz, 2021). This requires these strategic leaders to take a proactive approach to navigating a crisis to survive (Weaven et al., 2021). Therefore, the strategic decisions and the actions that are taken by the small business strategic leaders that enable the adaptation to the evolving environment are critical for business survival especially in a crisis (Eggers, 2020).

The role of the small business strategic leaders in general is vastly understood, however, there is room for further exploration of this role in a crisis. According to Crayne and Medeiros (2021), due to the low chances of a crisis occurring, the strategic leaders were not ready to handle a crisis such as Covid_19. This brings to question whether the small business strategic leaders are aware of the role they play in crises. Furthermore, Thukral (2021) submits that there is an opportunity for detailed studies on how the small business leaders navigate a crisis hence the importance of this research report.

Finally, the small business strategic leaders are not only tasked with navigating a crisis, but they also limit the organisation's exposure to a crisis while preparing for the eventuality of experiencing any potential crisis (Wu et al., 2021). Merendino and Sarens (2020) invite a further exploration of the role the strategic leaders play in a crisis. It is now an opportune time for such exploration considering Crayne and Medeiros's (2021) assertion regarding the readiness of the strategic leaders in handling a crisis such as the Covid_19 pandemic together with Thukral's (2021) submission of the need for further studies on how the small business leaders navigate a crisis. Consequently, the next section explores the organisational crisis in greater detail.

2.3 Organisational Crisis

An organisational crisis provides an opportune time for leadership to be demonstrated, more especially with the Covid_19 pandemic that elevated the importance of leadership (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022). Research on crisis leadership is highly disjointed, especially on how specific levels of the leaders respond to a crisis (Schaedler et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2021). Moreover, there is a lack of consensus amongst the scholars on the definition of a crisis (Merendino & Sarens, 2020). Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018) view a crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (p.205). This view is supported by Kornberger et al. (2019) as well as by Wut et al. (2021) who contend that a crisis is an unexpected or a sudden event that is potentially disruptive and that threatens the firm's performance.

There is, however, another view where a crisis is described as a process. Williams et al. (2017) claim that a crisis is a process that occurs in stages over a period, where a "triggering event" (p.735) brings the crisis to the fore. Additionally, Merendino and Sarens (2020) contend that there is an established body of literature that views a crisis as a process "which suggests that it is impossible to encapsulate it as a single triggering event; rather; a crisis is a long process from unknown paths to known scenarios" (p.416).

Scholars agree that a crisis has a potentially devastating impact on a firm's performance. The area of divergence, however, is the point when a crisis occurs, whether it is at a specific point in time (event) or whether it is an accumulation of events (process) that leads to a devastating impact on the firm's performance. In summary, a crisis differs from any other event as it occurs unexpectedly thereby providing minimal time for preparation,

and it is disruptive to the organisation as well as to its stakeholders, and it requires an immediate response (Wu et al., 2021). This view is supported by Collins et al. (2023) who contend that, unlike an organisational event, a crisis is rare in its occurrence and comes with a significant amount of ambiguity with limited organisational experience on how to manage it.

A crisis is thus characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, urgency for action, and the rapid adaptation of the organisation to new conditions (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022). In addition, a crisis can cause fear and worry (Leta & Chan, 2021), which are counterproductive in a crisis (Pedersen et al., 2020). However, Kornberger et al. (2019) assert that the feelings that one experiences in response to a crisis do not relate to fear but to existential anxiety. This thus places a burden on the strategic leaders to act urgently and ensure a seamless adaptation to the new conditions thereby ensuring sustainability.

At this point, it is appropriate to reflect on crisis typology. Crisis typology which talks to the different categories, or the types of crises assists the strategic leaders in making meaning of the crisis they are dealing with as it provides a structure of how to navigate the crisis based on its type (Collins et al., 2023). Williams et al. (2017) highlight the internal and the external types of crises. These scholars further state that the normal organisational events can escalate into an internal crisis such as a systems error while the external events such as the acts of terrorism and disasters can have a severe impact on the organisation. Furthermore, in their review paper on crisis management, Wut et al. (2021) highlight the six types of crises namely, “political events, terrorism, health issues, financial crises, natural disasters, and human errors” (p.3).

Collins et al. (2023), however, borrowing from the 1996 work of Coombs and Holladay, identifies four crisis typologies. According to the authors, a crisis can occur because of an external or internal event which can either be intentional or unintentional. This position links to that of Wut et al. (2021) as the six types of crises in broad terms talk to both the external and the internal categories. The political, health matters, terrorism, financial crises, and the natural disasters emanate from the external environment while human error emanates from the internal environment.

The first type is an external-unintentional crisis which relates to a crisis emanating from the organisation’s external environment (Collins et al., 2023). The examples of such crises include natural disasters, health, and financial crises (Wut et al., 2021). A recent

example of an external unintentional crisis is the Covid_19 pandemic (Wut et al., 2021). In dealing with such a crisis, the strategic leaders must move with speed and act as a compass for the organisation to move out of the crisis (Collins et al., 2023). According to Angeli and Montefusco (2020), the decisions made during such a crisis are made quickly with limited information and without detailed consideration of the full impact of such decisions (Collins et al., 2023). The strategic leaders have to make proper decisions with limited information to maintain performance (Fernandes et al., 2022). Sensemaking becomes critical for the strategic leaders as the decisions are made under enormous time constraints and pressure (Collins et al., 2023; Medeiros et al., 2022). Jensen et al. (2023) suggest that in a crisis, a charismatic approach is best suited to manage such crises based on a study that was performed during the Covid_19 pandemic.

An external-intentional crisis comes from outside the organisation, and it is done maliciously by other parties (Collins et al., 2023). Such a crisis includes but is not limited to acts of terrorism such as the 9/11 bombing (Wut et al., 2021). This kind of crisis sends fear and panic as the organisation anticipates a possible reoccurrence (Collins et al., 2023). The strategic leaders dealing with this crisis are prone to be more charismatic in an attempt to alleviate the fears of the followers and they pose a more united front (Collins et al., 2023).

Turning towards the unintentional crises emanating from within the organisation, these can be caused by product harm (Collins et al., 2023) or by technical error (Wut et al., 2021). As highlighted by Williams et al. (2017), some organisational weaknesses can escalate into an internal crisis if they are not managed quickly. In this type of crisis, there is hardly much that the organisation can do (Wut et al., 2021). However, even though that may be the case, these crises can cause problems for the strategic leaders as the stakeholders hold the view that the organisational leaders ought to have known thus assigning the blame and responsibility to them (Collins et al., 2023). The stakeholder relations and communication become of paramount importance (Collins et al., 2023).

The other internal crisis relates to a crisis that is caused intentionally by those that are inside the organisation (Collins et al., 2023). This is typically caused by the strategic leaders within the organisation's wrongdoing, and it mainly deals with unethical conduct or criminality on the part of the strategic leaders (Collins et al., 2023). Human error, according to Wut et al. (2021), can also be viewed as an intentional internal crisis as the strategic leaders could have taken steps to prevent it.

Both internal crises impact the reputation of the organisation and the trust of the stakeholders (Collins et al., 2023) especially since the crisis originates from within. The external crisis, however, might not have such an impact as most of the organisations might be dealing with the same, such as the Covid_19 pandemic or a financial crisis. This means that the type of crisis that is being experienced has an impact on the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking.

Whether a crisis emanates from inside or outside the organisation, the small business strategic leader must step in and manage the crisis as part of their role. Furthermore, irrespective of whether a crisis is a process or an event, of paramount importance is that it is unexpected and it threatens to disrupt the business. With that said, this research takes the view of a crisis as a process as opposed to an event. In exploring the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis, this view provides an opportunity to unpack the strategic leaders' crisis identification as well as the mitigation process and it seeks to provide a linkage with how these small business strategic leaders make meaning of their experiences within the said process.

A crisis for this research is defined as an unexpected incident that occurs in stages that threaten to disrupt the operations of the organisation. Furthermore, Wu et al. (2021) argue that the crisis leadership scholars mainly focus on the research work that considers a crisis as an event highlighting a gap that exists in considering a crisis as a process. In the crisis process, different scholars articulate different stages or phases of a crisis, from its inception to its finality. Understanding these stages provides the insights into the nuances within the crisis process and it will aid the exploration of the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders throughout the crisis process.

Effective crisis leadership which is the leadership process that takes place in a crisis environment over the different stages of a crisis, includes some aspects of crisis management (Collins et al., 2023). Therefore, the different stages of a crisis form part of crisis management which broadly encapsulates the strategic leaders' efforts to lessen the risk of a crisis occurring, together with the destruction that may come from the disruption, and finally they attempt to restore normality after a crisis (Bundy et al., 2017). Furthermore, Pedersen et al. (2020) and Wut et al. (2021) define crisis management as the deliberate controlling of a crisis throughout its various stages.

The stages of a crisis vary from three, four, and five as articulated by the different scholars. Bundy et al. (2017) provide for three stages which are “pre-crisis prevention”, “crisis management” and “post-crisis outcomes” (p.1664). Coombs (2010) identifies four stages of crisis which include prevention, preparedness, response, and post crisis. These stages are more recently articulated by Wut et al. (2021) with the final stage termed revision. While James and Wooten (2005) focus on the 1993 work of Pearson and Mitroff relating to the phases of a crisis highlighting “signal detection” (p.143), “preparation/prevention”, “containment/damage control”, “business recovery”, and “learning” (p. 144) as the five crisis stages. Finally, in supporting the five crisis stages, Pedersen et al. (2020) contend that the process of a crisis focuses on “pre-crisis normality, emergence, occurrence, aftermath, and post-crisis normality” (p.315). These stages provide insights into the practices that are borne by the strategic leaders within an effective strategic leadership process during a crisis (Collins et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding the differing numbers in the stages of a crisis as highlighted by these scholars, the essence of what is entailed within the whole crisis process is the same. The various scholars show that a crisis process has three core elements which are pre-crisis (planning/preparation), during crisis, and post-crisis (recovery and learning).

The first core element which is the pre-crisis stage relates to planning and preparation with the intent of reducing the chances of a crisis occurring (Bundy et al., 2017; Pedersen et al., 2020). In this stage, the identification of any possible indicators of a crisis is key (Wut et al., 2021) as the early detection aids in crisis prevention (Bundy et al., 2017). Pedersen et al. (2020) talk about the emergence of a crisis when the indicators start becoming clearer, but the crisis has not yet fully landed. At this stage, there is an opportunity to prevent the crisis before it becomes a full-blown crisis (Wut et al., 2021).

In preparing for a possible crisis, the plans are put together for the anticipated crisis and they are communicated to all those that are involved (Wut et al., 2021). Even with proper planning and preparation, certain crises cannot be prevented (Wut et al., 2021). This is more so when the crisis emanates from the external environment as the strategic leaders have no direct control over it (Collins et al., 2023). Proper stakeholder relations and investing in good relationships are of importance for crisis prevention (Pedersen et al., 2020) as these aid in minimising the risk of a crisis occurring and the damage the crisis may cause (Bundy et al., 2017).

When the crisis hits, then there is movement to the second stage of the crisis process which is during the crisis (Bundy et al., 2017) or occurrence (Pedersen et al., 2020). This stage comes about due to a triggering event (Wut et al., 2021). In this stage, the actions taken to prevent the crisis as part of the pre-crisis stage have not yielded positive outcomes. This is where the strategic leaders need to move with the speed of action and make decisions even with limited information that is available in trying to resolve the crisis (Pedersen et al., 2020). This suggests the need for strategic leader sensemaking (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021) as part of effective leadership.

The aftermath of the crisis encapsulates rebuilding (Pedersen et al., 2020), recovery (Pedersen et al., 2020; Wut et al., 2021), and learning (Wut et al., 2021). In this post-crisis stage, the strategic leader starts to rebuild in the hope of bringing the organisation back to normality (Pedersen et al., 2020). The preparation and the management of the crisis impact the kind of normal (Pedersen et al., 2020) that the strategic leaders will be bringing the organisation back to. There are also learnings that are extracted for use in the future preparation for another crisis (Wut et al., 2021). This shows the continuous cycle of the crisis process as this last phase feeds into the first phase of the pre-crisis (Bundy et al., 2017).

The above supports the argument that a crisis is a process that occurs in stages because of a triggering event (Collins et al., 2023; Merendino & Sarens, 2020; Wut et al., 2021). In examining crisis leadership, a process view of a crisis is better placed (Collins et al., 2023) as it highlights the nuances the small business strategic leaders have to navigate throughout the crisis process. The aim, therefore, is for the small business strategic leaders to lead the organisation through the crisis process as opposed to ending the crisis (James & Wooten, 2005) as this will take away the learning and growth opportunities the crisis may provide. The small business strategic leaders therefore can use sensemaking with its various elements as one of the strategies that will enable them to go through a crisis (Neely et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). Therefore, the next section explores the meaning of sensemaking in a crisis.

2.4 Sensemaking

Sensemaking results partly from the conceptualisation by Daft and Weick in 1984 when they considered how the organisations obtain information about the environment (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Weick extends the concept in his seminal work on sensemaking in his 1988 paper on enacting sensemaking. In this paper, the author explores sensemaking in a crisis and contends that in attempting to resolve a crisis by acting, an individual concurrently performs a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1988). The author continues to add that action is imperative in sensemaking because to gain cognition, one must act thus action is a prerequisite for cognition. Sensemaking therefore is reflective (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Kornberger et al., 2019). This is a key unique feature of sensemaking, which is known as enactment, thereby differentiating it from the pure interpretation of the situations (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022).

2.4.1 Defining Sensemaking

There is an immense body of literature on sensemaking, however, it is fragmented, thereby offering various definitions and conceptualisation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Maitlis and Christianson (2014) in their review of the various definitions provide a consolidated definition that states that sensemaking is "a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending to and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action, and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn" (p. 67). Wang et al. (2019) draw from Weick et al.'s (2005) definition of sensemaking as a process of collecting information by connecting the dots of what is occurring, and by creating a plausible mental picture of the new reality.

In considering the definition of sensemaking within the context of individual identity, Zheng et al. (2021) highlight the continuous process of the retrospective reflections of the exchanges between the individual and the environment to portray a solid version of oneself. Sensemaking is thus the process an individual undertakes in actively seeking to understand unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous situations arising from violated expectations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022; Samdanis & Lee, 2019). These scholars suggest that sensemaking is a continuous, non-linear, and iterative process that seeks to reclaim a sense of order following a disruption.

Additionally, for the sensemaking process to be initiated, there must be a triggering event, issue, or situation (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022; Cristofaro, 2022) such as a crisis or a disruption to ongoing activities (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021). Weick et al. (2005) further state that when there is a significant paralysing disjuncture between expectation and the current reality or experience, that can act as a triggering event. To restore normality, a sensemaking process therefore begins (Hoyte et al., 2019).

Moreover, sensemaking is embedded in the social interaction with others (Cristofaro, 2022; Hoyte et al., 2019; Niemi et al., 2022; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). A strategic leader engaging in sensemaking interacts with other individuals and the environment to gain knowledge and to make sense of the situation (Hoyte et al., 2019). According to Kalkman (2020), interacting with the other individuals to come to terms with the event is crucial to individual sensemaking as it acts as a hindrance to the collapse of one's sensemaking. These interactions are not simply for individual understanding, but they are also for deciding on the next course of action to take (Kalkman, 2020). This interactive process influences the sensemaking process of the strategic leader thereby allowing them to better understand the situation at hand.

2.4.2 Evolution of Sensemaking

The sensemaking process has evolved. The initial process of sensemaking as coined by Weick in 1988 starts from an ecological change, to enactment, and to the selection followed by the retention (Weick, 2020). This has been modified by Thomas et al. (1993) who consider sensemaking as a process of scanning, interpreting, and action. Samdanis and Lee (2019) expand on Thomas et al.'s (1993) work by including the strategising and the adjusting elements. Kalkman (2020) introduces the heightened attention to detail as part of collecting cues and the belief in collective sensemaking to guard against a collapse in sensemaking.

Moreover, sensemaking has classically been framed to be retrospective as one of its fundamental aspects is that of being reflective (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Kornberger et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2021). There is a growing body of literature that considers prospective sensemaking which is significantly understudied (Wang et al., 2019). In contributing to the theory of prospective sensemaking, Wang et al. (2019) consider how the strategic leaders make sense of blockchain technology in shaping their future actions regarding using this technology in their businesses. The authors focus on the pre-adoption phase of the new technology by utilising the application of the principles of

sensemaking by the strategic leaders for strategic foresight. Other scholars such as Sakellariou and Vecchiato (2022) consider the interplay between foresight as well as sensemaking and how it affects an individual's thinking in the early ambiguous stages of developing a new product. Morais-Storz et al. (2020), however, in their paper on post-failure success using case studies applied both retrospective and prospective sensemaking in considering how the leadership articulates the problem that led to the failure (retrospective), and they further identify innovative solutions (prospective) by reformulating the problems that were identified in the retrospective analysis.

Since sensemaking is a process that an individual undertakes in actively seeking to understand unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous situations arising from violated expectations (Samdanis & Lee, 2019), it bears to reason that the scholars make use of the concept to inform the future and to understand future scenarios. Assessing the future actions flowing from the potential disruption of the current or the upcoming technology on business can be both ambiguous and unfamiliar (Sakellariou & Vecchiato, 2022). Therefore, utilising the sensemaking process to inform future decisions can assist in making meaning of the current novelty and it can inform future decision-making by the strategic leaders.

It is worth noting that the key difference between retrospective and prospective sensemaking is that retrospective sensemaking aims to assign meaning to past events to better understand and solve a dilemma (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021) whereas prospective sensemaking uses past and present information to inform the future (Sakellariou & Vecchiato, 2022). Therefore, retrospective sensemaking assigns meaning to the past whereas prospective or future-oriented sensemaking assigns meaning to the future. Even though there has been some evolution over time in sensemaking, its elements (discussed in 2.4.4) still bear expression in recent studies. Furthermore, within the evolution of sensemaking, the scholars hold conflicting views regarding where sensemaking occurs. This is discussed further in the next section.

2.4.3. Mind, Body, and Intuition

Different scholars view the process of sensemaking differently in terms of where it occurs. Some scholars view sensemaking as a mental process that occurs only in one's mind using built cognitive frames (Niemi et al., 2022) while others view it as a social process that requires a strategic leader to interact with others (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Outside just the mind (mental process), De Rond et al. (2019) consider the holistic

embodying of sensemaking with the view that sensemaking comes from the body, with the body being deeply linked with sensemaking instead of the body simply influencing the sensemaking process. Kalkman (2020) supports this holistic view of sensemaking by also considering the body in his paper on sensemaking in an extreme context of war by exploring how the soldiers operate in an uncertain context where sensemaking is essential and difficult. In taking this holistic view, the effect of bodily senses is considered as part of making meaning to the event (Kalkman, 2020).

There are, however, scholars such as Meziani and Cabantous (2020) who argue that looking at the mind and body separately provides limitations in the full understanding of sensemaking as the mind cannot be separated from the body. The scholars therefore consider an alternative view which is the simultaneous consideration of both the mind and the body which is termed as intuition. Intuition is placed at the center of the mind and the body, and it is thus defined as a tacit knowledge coupled with an inability to explain in words (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020).

The differing views are founded on the core elements of sensemaking such as social embeddedness which is a dynamic process that is triggered by uncertainty and it requires a constant effort of collecting cues to make events (Niemi et al., 2022). Irrespective of whether the collected cues and the enactment comes from intuition (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020), or from the senses of the body (De Rond et al., 2019; Kalkman, 2020), or from cognition (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020; Niemi et al., 2022); in making meaning, the strategic leaders need as much information as possible because in a crisis there is an asymmetry of information (Angeli & Montefusco, 2020) needed for sensemaking. Therefore, the literature seems to suggest that one of the roles of the small business strategic leader in sensemaking is to make meaning for the self and influence the sensemaking of the others through a dynamic process of social interaction while making use of all the available resources such as the mind, the body, and intuition.

In addition, it appears the role of the small business strategic leader as a sense maker is embedded within the broader role of the small business strategic leaders which encapsulates making strategic decisions and providing strategic directions for the organisation through the influence of the followers and the stakeholders. This is because in a crisis, the followers look at the small business strategic leader for direction (sense giving) thus speaking to the role of the small business strategic leader being a compass of the organisation to move it out of a crisis (Collins et al., 2023).

The core elements of sensemaking which include social embeddedness are further discussed in the next section as these assist the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. Also, these elements are critically evaluated together with the strategic leadership principles and the role of a strategic leader in a crisis.

2.4.4 Elements of Sensemaking

A deeper understanding of the process of sensemaking requires an understanding of the elements thereof. For this reason, this sub-section unpacks the various elements of sensemaking that appear in literature, and it critically evaluates these with the principles of strategic leadership and the role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. A significant understanding of the eight elements originates from Weick et al.'s (2005) and further highlighted by Hoyte et al. (2019).

Initially, for sensemaking to occur there must be a clear identity to disrupt (Hoyte et al., 2019). This disruption is because of the violated expectations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Samdanis & Lee, 2019) that are caused by a novel event such as a crisis (Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022). When a triggering event occurs, it must disrupt the sense of normality of the strategic leader (Hoyte et al., 2019). Kalkman (2020) in considering sensemaking in extreme contexts such as war, highlights the order that is given or the instinct to commence battle as a triggering event for the soldiers that starts the process of sensemaking. The sense of normality for these individuals is therefore interrupted thereby requiring sensemaking to be initiated. The same holds within the strategic leadership context. The identity of a small business is fundamentally connected with the strategy and the business model of the organisation. When a crisis occurs, whether it is caused by internal or external factors, it impacts the normal operations of the business (Wut et al., 2021) thus initiating the role of the small business strategic leader to restore normal operational order. Also, as the strategic leader is accountable for the strategic direction and the business model that delivers on that strategy (Fernandes et al., 2022), which is a burden that is placed upon the small business strategic leader to restore normality.

The strategic leader then starts a social process of interacting with the others and the environment to make meaning to this disruption by collecting cues, and by taking action with a view of normalising the situation and regaining the sense of identity (Hoyte et al., 2019). Utilising the mind, the body, and intuition as discussed above aids in this process of information gathering. These interactions with the other individuals foster the process

of information gathering that is essential for gaining a clearer understanding and for deciding on the next steps to take (Kalkman, 2020). This view is further collaborated by Angeli and Montefusco (2020) who contend that sensemaking is a social interactive process as the sharing of information leads to a better understanding and sustainable solutions. In this social process, the small business strategic leader as the sense maker is equally influenced by the others and by the environment in trying to make meaning through the exchanges of making sense and giving sense to the others. This links to the process of strategic leadership which involves the interactions between the strategic leaders and the others to influence one another (Gardner et al., 2021). One of the roles of the strategic leader is to make the right decision (Fernandes et al., 2022) based on the collected information and the obtained understanding. In collecting the information and cues, the strategic leader must recognise the opportunities that are provided by the environment (Weaven et al., 2021). The heightened attention to detail that is also triggered in a crisis (Kalkman, 2020) may aid in identifying such opportunities.

Moreover, the sensemaking process is a dynamic process that requires constant effort to make meaning (Niemi et al., 2022), and the meaning is only assigned after acting thus it is retrospective (Kornberger et al., 2019). Even though sensemaking is a backward facing process that requires past reflections, in a crisis the small business strategic leaders' role is to stabilise the business during the crisis while crafting its future sustainability (Fernandes et al., 2022). This also may require a futuristic understanding of the crisis. Morais-Storz et al. (2020) support the use of both retrospective and prospective sensemaking in solving a dilemma while obtaining innovative solutions to inform the future. Retrospective and prospective sensemaking are therefore intrinsically intertwined in a crisis as it is difficult to separate the two. This is because the past lived experiences are important for the information gathering that is used to inform future direction. The reflections on the past provide learnings that may be useful for future direction (Schaedler et al., 2022), hence the notion of history matters. As the strategic leader is acting and collecting cues, inevitably the crisis is being influenced either positively or negatively thereby consequently implying that the crisis can either be managed or exacerbated (Hoyte et al., 2019). Kalkman (2020) contends that this creates a continuous cycle of acting and collecting information while influencing the outcome and thus this is a repetitive process. The use, therefore, of both retrospective and prospective sensemaking in a crisis by the small business strategic leader may provide new insights for meaning making.

Additionally, in support of sensemaking as an iterative process, Angeli and Montefusco (2020) elucidate that as new information is obtained, this informs the leader's understanding, and it charts the way forward thus this requires the adaptation to this new understanding until such a time when additional new information is obtained, and the process starts again. This requires the leaders to employ a more flexible approach to decision-making bearing in mind that in times of a crisis, there is an asymmetry of information (Angeli & Montefusco, 2020). Included in the role of a strategic leader in a crisis, is making critical strategic business decisions that enable the adaptation to the evolving environment (Quansah et al., 2022). In doing so, the strategic leader practices agility and flexibility in their response strategies and they are aided by the continuous learning within a dynamic environment that is filled with challenges (Eggers, 2020; Quansah & Hartz, 2021). In addition, Fernandes et al. (2022) contend that strategic leadership is not static as it is flexible, and it is influenced by the environment as well as the contextual factors thus requiring continuous learning, unlearning, and adaptation in an ambiguous environment. This line of argument therefore supports sensemaking as an iterative process that is performed by the small business strategic leaders to gain cognition within a dynamic and complex environment. Sensemaking therefore is a never-ending function within strategic leadership that is performed by the small business strategic leader.

When a plausible but not so accurate account of the disruption is identified then there is information sharing of this lived experience with the others that will influence their sensemaking process (Hoyte et al., 2019). This is the introduction of sense-giving which is a process that is initiated at the end of sense-making by the individual where the leaders communicate their understanding of the crisis from their point of view (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021). Since sensemaking is initiated by a disruption in the strategic leader's known reality, it bears to reason that in regaining order, the small business strategic leader gets to a conclusion that their perspective is reasonable and it is as close as possible to their original known reality. Merendino and Sarens (2020) contend that in a crisis there is a shift away from an unknown reality moving towards multiple known possibilities.

Therefore, for plausibility, the small business strategic leader must decipher which of the known scenarios is the best new reality within a specific context thus linking to the role of the small business strategic leader to make the right decision. When the small business strategic leader can make meaning of a situation then sensemaking has been

successful. When meaning making cannot be achieved, then there is a failure to make sense which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

2.4.5 Failure to Make Sense

There are cases where sensemaking fails, that is, there is a failure to make sense of the meaning of a crisis. This occurs when an individual is unable to reach a plausible account of the disruption thereby suggesting that there has been a failure in the sensemaking process (Hoyte et al., 2019). Contributing to this failure is a disruption that is so severe that the sensemaking process becomes inadequate to facilitate the attainment of plausibility (Kalkman, 2020). This then means sensemaking has simply collapsed (Kalkman, 2020) and this is termed as a cosmology episode (Ganzin et al., 2020). Ganzin et al. (2020) state that a cosmology episode occurs when an individual's known world has lost rationality, and the person is unable to decipher the current occurrences. Sensemaking is meant to bring back rationality, however, at times this does not occur.

When rationality cannot be regained the other individuals experience inertia while the others lean into the belief of collective sensemaking (Kalkman, 2020). According to Kalkman (2020), in situations that are so severe that an individual is paralysed and is unable to make sense of the crisis, the belief is that the others can grasp what is occurring and make sense of it which enables the paralysed individual to move with the belief that the others understand what to do. This means one is ascribing to collective sensemaking instead of individual sensemaking (Kalkman, 2020).

Scholars appear to hold different views in terms of whether the collapse in sensemaking leads to organisational failure. Samdanis and Lee (2019) in looking at sensemaking in an art organisation highlight that organisational failure is dependent on individual sensemaking; thus, inferring that when an individual experiences a cosmology episode that cannot be resolved through sensemaking, this will lead to organisation failure. A different view is introduced by Kalkman (2020) who states that when there is collective sensemaking, the individual sensemaking failure will not lead to organisational failure. Further, the author continues to argue that sensemaking failure leads to organisational failure which only occurs when the organisational structures also fail.

Within the context of small businesses, the strategic decisions are usually made by the entrepreneur, the owner, or the managing director mainly due to the small size of the businesses which have less complex operational structures (Hoang et al., 2021). Small

business strategic leaders need to take care of their mental health in crisis as their capacity to lead may be impaired (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022). The collapse of a strategic leader's individual sensemaking may lead to organisational failure as per Samdanis and Lee's (2019) assertions. The importance of collective decision-making and a family-like environment in small businesses (Hoang et al., 2021) may aid in collective sensemaking when the small business strategic leaders experience collapse thus hindering business failure.

Most recently, the studies on sensemaking have focused on how to make sense of the disruption that was caused by the Covid_19 pandemic as a crisis (Visentin et al., 2021). Christianson and Barton (2021) state that Covid-19 provided an opportunity for the scholars to study sensemaking in a dynamic environment that was filled with uncertainty and disruption. Furthermore, Christianson and Barton (2021) contend that while making sense of the Covid_19 pandemic as a crisis, there are other crises that occurred that required sensemaking by the strategic leaders. This shows that sensemaking is a continuous cycle that never ends.

According to April and Chimenya (2019), there is insufficient knowledge about how the strategic leaders make sense of crises. This view is supported by Christianson and Barton (2021) as well as by Crayne and Medeiros (2021) who call for the scholars to consider sensemaking in a crisis. Additionally, Merendino and Sarens (2020) in exploring the cognitive constraints that cause leader passivity during a crisis call for further studies on the role of the leaders in a crisis. The research gap therefore identified the contribution to the sensemaking theory as well as the role that the strategic leaders play in sensemaking in a crisis with a specific focus on the social embeddedness of sensemaking. In answering the call, the small business sector is used as the research setting. This is in response to Christianson and Barton's (2021) invitation to explore sensemaking in crisis in a dynamic setting such as the small business sector.

This research therefore used the understanding from the literature of the nature, the importance, and the development of sensemaking to explore the role and the nature of sensemaking in the context of strategic leadership in the small businesses. The next section therefore looks at the conceptual framework that enabled the contribution of the small business strategic leader's sensemaking role in crises.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

To respond to the research questions and the aims, a conceptual framework as shown in **Figure 2** was prepared to illustrate the researcher's conceptualisation of the role the small business strategic leaders play in sensemaking in a crisis. This conceptualisation was based on the literature review as articulated above.

Sensemaking is the theory that this research work was grounded on. It is explored within strategic leadership focusing specifically on the functions of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis context. The functions that these strategic leaders perform impact the organisational crisis (Collins et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022). The crisis can either be managed or heightened depending on the small business strategic leader's actions (Bundy et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2023; Wut et al., 2021). These actions towards the crisis are influenced by the small business strategic leader's sensemaking (Collins et al., 2023; Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Medeiros et al., 2022). Hence there is a need to understand the role the small business strategic leaders play in sensemaking in a crisis. This relationship is shown in **Figure 2**.

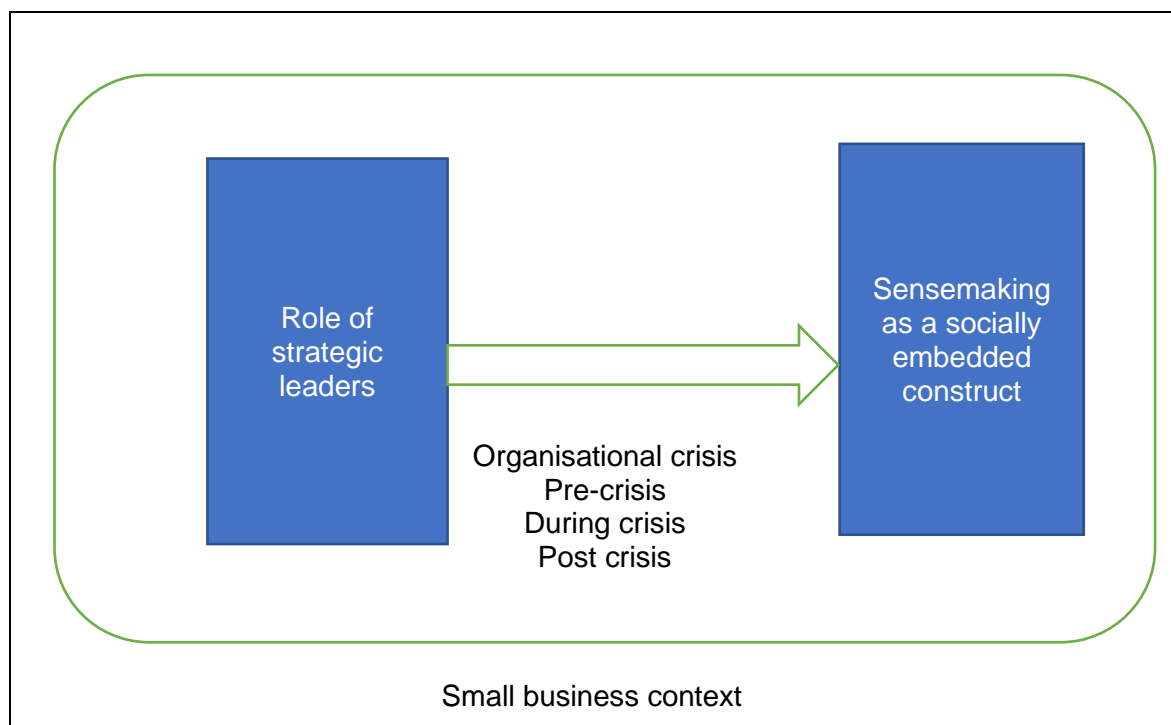


Figure 2: Research conceptual framework (Source: Author's own)

2.6 Conclusion

The literature review sought to understand the current debate in strategic leadership literature with a specific focus on the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking role in a crisis. A crisis is a process that occurs in stages, and it elevates the role of the small business strategic leaders as well as necessitates for these leaders to lead the organisation through the crisis process by employing enabling strategies such as sensemaking. The research gap that was therefore identified for the contribution to the sensemaking theory is the role the strategic leaders play in sensemaking in a crisis within the small business sector. The following chapter provides a consolidated and concise view of the identified academic gaps in the literature together with the research question and the sub-questions.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter critically evaluated the current academic debate by various scholars regarding strategic leadership, organisational crisis, and sensemaking in a dynamic environment of the small businesses. Furthermore, the research opportunity flowing from the literature was used to contribute to the sensemaking theory. The current chapter consolidates the identified research gap together with the research question and the sub-questions to make this contribution. The gaps in the literature demonstrate the need for further exploration of the role that is played by the small business strategic leaders in sensemaking in a crisis.

3.2 Research Questions

Strategic leadership is a continuous process that is undertaken by those at the highest level of the organisation to influence the organisational outcome (Fernandes et al., 2022; Samimi et al., 2022). The people at the upper layer of the organisation are the strategic leaders that perform these functions (Samimi et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). In a crisis, the role that is performed by these strategic leaders is brought to the fore (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022; Wu et al., 2021). Additionally, a crisis period is characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, the urgency for action, and the rapid adaptation of the organisation to new conditions (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022). Wu et al. (2021) argue that the crisis leadership scholars mainly focus on research work that considers a crisis as a process.

Furthermore, the universal role of the strategic leaders is vastly understood, however, there is room for further exploration of this role in a crisis. According to Crayne and Medeiros (2021), because of the low chances of a crisis occurring, the strategic leaders were not ready to handle a crisis such as Covid_19. This brings to question whether the strategic leaders are aware of the role they play in crises. An opportunity therefore exists to build on the work by Merendino and Sarens (2020) which explores the cognitive constraints that cause leader passivity during a crisis by further exploring the role the leaders play in a crisis.

Moreover, since a crisis is a novel event, experience alone is usually insufficient to deal with the crisis (Angeli & Montefusco, 2020). The decisions that are made during a crisis are made quickly with limited information (Angeli & Montefusco, 2020) and without detailed consideration of the full impact of such decisions (Collins et al., 2023). Sensemaking in such a context becomes critical for the strategic leaders as the decisions are made under enormous time constraints and pressure (Collins et al., 2023; Medeiros et al., 2022). Sensemaking is identified as a process that an individual undertakes to actively seek to understand the unfamiliar, complex, and ambiguous situations arising from violated expectations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Alvesson & Jonsson, 2022; Samdanis & Lee, 2019). April and Chimenya (2019) supported by Crayne and Medeiros (2021) call for the additional exploration of strategic leader sensemaking in times of a crisis.

The Covid_19 pandemic as a crisis has additionally provided an opportunity for the scholars to study sensemaking in a dynamic environment that is filled with uncertainty and disruption (Christianson & Barton, 2021). A research opportunity, according to Christianson and Barton (2021), is to consider sensemaking in a crisis within a different challenging setting such as that of a small business as sensemaking is mostly explored in a corporate context.

The theoretical gaps within the current scholarly debate that feed into the main research question and the sub-questions as identified above can be summarised in the manner that is shown in **Figure 3**.

Role of strategic leader in crisis	Sensemaking in crisis	Sensemaking in dynamic context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Merendino and Sarens (2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •April and Chimenya (2019) •Crayne and Medeiros (2021) •Christianson and Barton (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Christianson and Barton (2021)

Figure 3: Summary theoretical gap (Source: Author's own)

Consequently, the main research question is:

How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The sub-research questions that support the main research question are:

Sub-question 1: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

Sub-question 2: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter articulated the main research question together with the two supporting questions that were used to obtain insights into the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis and how sensemaking enables these strategic leaders in such circumstances. Furthermore, the research question and the sub-questions formed the basis for the data gathering that was part of the research methodology. The next chapter, therefore, delves deeper into the methodology that was used to respond to the main research question and to the sub-questions.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter detailed the research opportunity emanating from the literature together with the research question and the sub-questions with the identified gaps thereby demonstrating the need for additional insights into the role that is played by the small business strategic leaders in sensemaking in a crisis. The current chapter provides the research methodology and the design that was used to respond to the research questions. A qualitative method and an exploratory approach were used with semi-structured interviews for data gathering.

4.2 Choice of Methodology

The research aimed to understand the role of the small business strategic leaders in sensemaking in a crisis. In achieving this aim, this research report followed a qualitative method and an exploratory approach as there was a need to understand how the small business strategic leaders “interpret their social world” (Bell et al., 2019, p.19) when making strategic decisions. A qualitative research method is best suited for obtaining an in-depth understanding of a specific phenomenon from a participant’s personal viewpoint based on their experience (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This reasoning by Hammarberg et al. (2016) places credibility on the methodology that was used because the insights into the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis were gained from the participants’ perceptions of how they navigated a specific crisis.

Furthermore, Eisenhardt in Gehman et al. (2018) suggests that an exploratory approach is most useful in responding to the “how” question. This approach supports the research question. Furthermore, sensemaking is embedded in the social interactions with the others (Hoyte et al., 2019; Niemi et al., 2022), and it was thus understood through the small business strategic leaders’ story telling of their experiences as well as how they acted and felt in a manner that they did as these provided fruitful insights.

Moreover, an interpretivist philosophy was employed as the research sought to obtain deep insights into the socially and behaviourally connected phenomenon which required the exploration of the strategic leaders’ lived experiences for further comprehension. According to Bell et al. (2019), interpretivism “is based on the view that a strategy is required that respects the difference between people and other objects of the natural

sciences and therefore requires a social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social actions" (p.15).

In employing an interpretivist philosophy, this research project found itself taking an inductive research approach where the observed data drove the sensemaking phenomenon. According to Bhattacharjee (2012), an interpretivist method employs a data driven approach by moving from the data to the theory, thus the data drives the theory. This researcher therefore initially followed an inductive approach for first order coding, which is described by Bell et al. (2019) as a developing theory in qualitative research using primary data. Finally, a deductive approach was thereafter utilised to organise the data and to ensure veracity in terms of theory. Such an approach is defined as a process where the theoretical concepts are tested against the research data (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

4.3 Research Setting

Leader sensemaking in a crisis has largely been studied in corporates and there is limited research where this phenomenon has been studied in a small business setting (Christianson & Barton, 2021). This infers that there is also limited research within the South African context focusing on the small businesses. Additionally, South Africa provides a unique context for studying this phenomenon as the small business sector employs between 50% and 60% of the South African working population (Kalidas et al., 2020), thus any significant negative impact on this sector will have an impact on jobs, on the livelihoods, and on economic growth. This research was therefore conducted in the South African small business setting.

Furthermore, within the small business sector, only the formal and registered small businesses were considered irrespective of the size of the small business, the number of employees and the years of experience as a small business strategic leader. This is because such small businesses are formally accounted for, as they are traceable by the government and they have a significant impact on the economy (Department of Small Business Development, 2023). There was no specific focus in terms of a sector or industry, a province, and the size of the small business that the strategic leader has experience in. This provided rich contributions from the small business leaders within the diverse small business sector, and it safeguarded against bias.

4.4 Unit of Analysis

A unit of analysis is defined as the target of the research which may include individuals, companies, countries, or any object (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The unit of analysis for this research was the perceptions of the individual small business owners, the founders, and the executives. Both the level and the unit of analysis in this research work are the same. Thus this study is at an individual level of analysis.

4.5 Sampling Method and Size

A sample is defined as a "segment of the population that is selected for research" (Bell et al., 2019, p.442). The focus of this research was on individual small business owners, founders, and executives. Based on these targeted participants and on the lack of complete data of the individual small business strategic leaders in South Africa, the sampling frame could not be determined. Moreover, there were no specific selection measures that were applied in terms of the industry and the sector to avoid any restrictions and to ensure diversity. Therefore, the scope was opened wide with an understanding that securing interviews with these strategic leaders was going to be problematic due to their availability and the risk of sharing sensitive data (Merendino & Sarens, 2020).

Moreover, the timeframe for the specific crisis was set at four years starting from 01 January 2020 to the time of the interviews. According to Merendino and Sarens (2020), a four-year period is a mid-term timeframe that limits the risk of the participants not recalling the details of the crisis. Therefore, the sample included small business owners, founders, and executives in the period starting from 01 January 2020 to the date of the interviews who have experienced an organisational crisis during the same period while occupying a strategic leadership role. This position was specifically asked and confirmed in the interviews to guarantee the eligibility for participation.

Additionally, the sampling method that was used was a non-probability purposive method as the participants were selected based on their relevance to the research focus (Bell et al., 2019). Also, as the participants had to be enlisted (Josselson, 2013), the researcher made use of professional, academic, as well as personal contacts and through the attendance of the small business leaders' seminars. With regards to sample size, Boddy (2016) suggests that a sample size of 13 in-depth interviews is sufficient to reach saturation. The researcher conducted 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews which was

adequate for saturation and to draw conclusions. At interview number four the responses started to form a similar pattern with interviews 13 and 16 providing some new patterns. **Table 1** below provides a high-level overview of the research sample.

Participant Number	Title	Experience in Corporate	Industry	Years experience	Number of Staff
Participant 1	Founder and MD	Yes	Transportation Industry	> 10	26
Participant 2	Co-Founder and MD	Yes	Print Media Industry	> 10	8
Participant 3	Executive director	Yes	Gaming Industry	> 15	12
Participant 4	Founder and MD	Yes	Financial Services Industry	> 3	6
Participant 5	Founder and MD	Yes	Real Estate Industry	> 5	3
Participant 6	Founder and MD	Yes	Built Environment Industry	> 5	4
Participant 7	Part-owner and MD	Yes	Cash Handling Hardware Distribution and Service Centre	> 10	26
Participant 8	Vice-President of Customer Operations	Yes	Financial Services Industry	> 5	160
Participant 9	Co-Founder	Yes	Creative Industry	> 5	5
Participant 10	Co-Founder and MD	Yes	Geospatial Industry	> 5	6
Participant 11	Founder and MD	Yes	Industrial Consumables supply industry	> 5	3
Participant 12	Owner and CEO	Yes	Promotional Products and Branding Industry	> 5	5
Participant 13	Founder and MD	Yes	Services Industry	> 5	12
Participant 14	Founder and MD	Yes	Services Industry	> 3	8
Participant 15	Founder and MD	Yes	Services Industry	> 3	1
Participant 16	Founder and MD	Yes	Service Industry	> 5	7

Table 1: Overview of interview sample (Source: Author's own)

4.6 Interview Guide

In qualitative studies, the interviews are used when the type of data that is required relies on the individual experiences at certain points in their lives (Josselson, 2013). For the researcher to be able to achieve the research aim, a semi-structured interview protocol was used as a data-gathering instrument that assisted in obtaining deeper and more relevant insights into the research question. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to openly share as much information as possible for a richer contribution (Josselson, 2013).

Additionally, the semi-structured interviews "refer to a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the general form of an interview schedule but can vary the sequence of questions" (Bell et al., 2019, p.146). Furthermore, the semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher the space to explore the nuances of the participants' perceptions (Merendino & Sarens, 2020). Therefore, as part of the interview protocol, open or exploratory questions were used, and they provoked thoughts as well as provided meaningful insights that improved the data quality in an interpretivist paradigm. Further, the interview questions were purposefully linked to the research questions as articulated in Chapter 3 to ensure that there is an alignment in terms of the golden thread and achieving the research aim. The interview questions focused on the participants' lived crisis experience, as well as on how they navigated a crisis, how they saw their role in the crisis, and how the crisis impacted on their strategic approach. These elements provided insights into the small business strategic leaders' role in sensemaking in a crisis. The final interview protocol that was utilised for the research work is included as **Appendix One**.

4.7 Data Gathering Process

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online using the Zoom digital platform. One pilot interview was conducted prior to the commencement of all the other core interviews. According to (Bhattacharjee, 2012), this is a critical step of the research design that is normally overlooked as it guards against the potential issues with the research design, and it ensures the credibility of the interview protocol. A sample of one pilot interview was conducted with a small business founder and owner. There were no critical matters that came out from the pilot interview that required an adjustment to the interview protocol. The pilot interview participant understood all the interview questions and no further elaboration on any question was required.

The pilot interview, however, provided the research with an understanding of how to conduct the actual interviews and the estimated interview timeframe. The duration of the pilot interview was 23 core interview minutes as opposed to the planned 90 core minutes. Following the pilot interview, the researcher moved to conducting the core interviews for the research project.

All the interviews were conducted using Zoom and they were recorded. Each interview session took between 20 and 60 core interviewing minutes. The participants were requested to switch on their videos at the start of the interview to confirm that the researcher was not interviewing an artificial intelligence agent. Furthermore, the online transcription service was offered by the Otter platform for all the sessions. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. To confirm accuracy and the correctness of the transcription, the researcher reviewed all the transcribed documents by comparing the audios to the transcriptions and they made corrections where necessary.

The semi-structured interviews were the only source of primary data that was used. There was no secondary data usage as the research question was heavily reliant on the small business strategic leaders' individual perceptions and lived experiences. Finally, this research followed a cross-sectional approach instead of a longitudinal research approach as the data was collected at a particular point in time (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The data collection period was between August and September 2023. This approach was taken due to the time limitations and the constraints of performing a longitudinal study.

4.8 Data Analysis Approach

The data analysis approach that was performed is a thematic analysis method that assisted in identifying the themes from the research data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The six steps of thematic analysis were followed as a guide for the data analysis. These steps are "familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining; defining and naming themes; and write up" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.39). The data analysis approach yielded 132 first-order codes, 31 categories and seven themes which were all linked to the three theoretical constructs. This information is summarised in **Table 2**. Detail is provided in Chapter 5, **Figure 4**.

First-order codes	132
Categories	31
Themes	7

Table 2: Summary of data analysis outcome (Source: Author's own)

In attaining familiarity with the research data, the researcher listened to each interview recording, then compared the recording with the interview transcript and adjusted the transcript to ensure the validity of the research data. This process was only performed after all the interviews were concluded. This was done to allow the researcher to fully focus on one activity at a time and to perform the analysis without any distractions.

In cleaning up the transcripts, all the interview questions and the researcher probing questions were excluded from the interview transcript such that there were only the participants' response and reflections that were available for coding. This process allowed for free coding without being prompted by any researcher's interview questions. Furthermore, it allowed for the identification of any subtle nuances that would have been otherwise missed had the researcher's mind been focused on the interview questions.

Making use of the Atlas TI Web, codes were generated by means of an inductive approach without any reference to the literature using the words that were used by the participants. An inductive approach is described by Bell et al. (2019) as a process of developing theory in qualitative research using primary data. This approach assisted the researcher in better understanding the data. In this phase, 132 first-order codes were generated from the participants' responses.

The researcher moved to utilising a theoretical lens to organise the data to enable the grouping into categories and themes. This formed part of a deductive approach which is defined as a process where the theoretical concepts are tested against the research data (Bhattacharjee, 2012). This was done to enable the researcher to be more focused and organised in the analysis.

The first order codes were then grouped into categories based on the shared meaning of the individual codes. The grouping of the individual codes resulted in the generation of 31 categories. The process of grouping from the codes to the categories was an iterative process of referring to the codes and the quotations to ensure that the essence

of meaning was not lost. At this stage, the researcher was further assisted by Microsoft Excel to perform this analysis.

The themes were then actively constructed from the 31 categories that were generated in a Microsoft Excel document utilising the data that was exported from Atlas TI Web. In developing the themes, the researcher compared the different categories that were explored. This was done to identify the linkages between the categories to capture something meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A total of seven themes that capture the subjective truth were thus actively constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In constructing the themes, the researcher took a conceptual leap by using the research conceptual framework that was developed in Chapter 2 as shown in Figure 2. According to Klag and Langley (2013), a conceptual leap is based on abductive reasoning, and it is defined as the process of bringing together the research data and the theory by closing the gap that exists between the two.

The themes were thereafter reviewed and refined to ensure that they address the central idea coming from the data and to further capture something meaningful (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process again required the researcher to constantly go back to the individual categories and codes to ensure that the true meaning is not lost. Additionally, in reviewing the themes, the researcher ensured that each theme could stand on its own without any dependence on another theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Finally, the themes were linked to the constructs as per the research conceptual framework in Chapter 2 and the research sub-questions in Chapter 3 that enabled the researcher to respond to the main research question. A summary of the coding order as discussed above is shown in **Figure 4** and **Table 3** in Chapter 5.

4.9 Research Quality and Rigour

The researcher employed multiple strategies to protect the quality and the rigour of the research project. These strategies were aimed at ensuring the trustworthiness (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016) of the research findings and conclusions. To start with, the research project was encored in current literature from a high-quality journal where the scholars provided an invitation for future research. These high-quality journals provided credible information on the current debate within academia. Furthermore, there was a triangulation of different arguments from various scholars to avoid bias. Moreover, there was no specific selection measures that were applied in terms of the small business industry and the sector for sampling. This was done to avoid any restrictions and to

ensure the diversity of the participants. Additionally, a pressure test was performed using a pilot interview to ensure the quality of the interview protocol. Following the pilot test, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with saturation obtained together with sufficient compelling insights for thematic analysis and the final conclusions. Finally, as the interviews were transcribed by a transcription software, the researcher validated the transcription with reference to the recording to ensure the completeness and accuracy of the data to be used for analysis.

4.10 Limitations of the research design and methods

Personal bias is one of the risks that are associated with qualitative research. According to Cuervo-Cazurra et al. (2016), there is very little that can be done to limit the personal bias in a researcher's mind. The researcher made use of certain strategies to minimise this risk. These strategies included ensuring the adherence to the semi-structured interview protocol to avoid leading the participants in any way. Where the participants required further clarity, the researcher tried as far as possible to rephrase the question in a non-leading manner. With that being said, the research acknowledges that the rephrasing may have had the potential of leading the participant. This assertion is influenced by the researcher's lack of sufficient experience in research work which posed as a research limitation. The researcher, however, managed this limitation through the attendance of the research methodology course module and the Zoom sessions that were offered at GIBS. Moreover, due to the time constraints of conducting a longitudinal study, the researcher conducted a cross-sectional study.

Additionally, the researcher applied some judgement in the sample selection when employing the non-probabilistic purposive sampling method therefore not all the units had an equal chance of selection. This posed a risk of selection bias meaning the results may not represent the whole population. Furthermore, even though saturation was reached, the sample size was not sufficient to establish generalisation due to its lack of statistical significance (Cuervo-Cazurra et al., 2016). Lastly, in scoping the research project, the researcher did not specify the small business sector, the years of experience of the small business leader and the period the small business had been in existence. The limitation with the research design is that a more general approach was taken instead of a narrow approach that may have provided specific insights into a more restricted and boundary specific setting.

4.11 Ethical Considerations

As required by the University of Pretoria, ethical clearance was received from the Ethics Committee before the commencement of any field work. All the participants signed a written consent letter before each interview. A pro-forma consent letter is shown as **Appendix Two**. Furthermore, to ensure the confidentiality of the data, all the information is reported without any identifiers, however, only the industry, the position, the years of experience and the employee size details were used to provide context. Finally, the transcriptions and recordings are safely stored on a cloud, and they will be kept for a period of ten years, and they will be made available based on the University of Pretoria's approved ethical protocol.

4.12 Conclusion

In summary, this section provided the research methodology and the design that was applied in conducting the research. Further detailing the qualitative method and the exploratory approach that were followed with the semi-structured interviews that were conducted for data gathering and analysis. Most importantly, this section has detailed the process of data analysis that was used and how the validity and the reliability of the conclusions were safeguarded to ensure trustworthiness and qualitative rigour. The next chapter details the findings of this research project that flowed from the conducted data analysis.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter detailed the research methodology that was used for this research project. The purpose of the current chapter is to table the research findings flowing from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted during the data gathering stage. Furthermore, this chapter systematically details the research findings based on the themes that were constructed in the research analysis stage. The themes are linked to the main research question through the research sub-questions.

5.2 Themes Constructed

In the data analysis stage as detailed in Chapter 4, seven themes were constructed from the research data. A diagram depicting the process of moving from the first-order codes to the categories and to the themes is provided in **Figure 4**. A more detailed categorisation that links to the code numbers and to the category numbers detailed in **Figure 4** is provided in **Appendix Three**. The seven themes that were actively constructed include the nature of a crisis, a strategic leader's role in a crisis, hindrance to sensemaking - social support imbalance, the cognitive process in a crisis, collaborative and interactive social experience, small business environment dynamics and lastly being a strategic leader.

In this chapter, the researcher does not focus on all the seven themes. Only the first five of the seven themes were chosen for discussion as shown in blue in **Figure 4**. This is because themes number six and seven which are shown in green, provide the setting which is the strategic leaders in small businesses, and they do not provide deep insight into the three key theoretical constructs that this research project focused on. This position became evident following the data analysis.

Code Number	Category Number	Themes
1 to 5; 10 to 63; 65 to 69; 93 to 96 128 to 132	18 to 31	1. Nature of a crisis
117 to 127	13 to 17	2. Strategic leader's role in a crisis
64 87 to 88	11 to 12	3. Hindrance to sensemaking - Social support imbalance
84 to 86	9	4. Cognitive process in a crisis
6 to 9; 70 to 83 89 to 92; 97 to 101	4 to 8; 10	5. Collaborative and interactive social experience
102 to 109	3	6. Small business environmental dynamics
110 to 116	1 to 2	7. Strategic leader

Figure 4: Data analysis summary (Source: Author's own)

5.3 Research Findings

The research findings are presented by using themes and they are articulated by categories following the order of the research sub-questions that link to the main research question.

Main research question - How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

In Chapter 3, the research question was divided into two research sub-questions that are explored further in this chapter. Themes one and two respond to research sub-question one with themes three to five responding to research sub-question two. The linkage between the themes, the constructs and the research question is shown in **Table 3** below.

Research sub question	Theme	Construct
<p>Sub-question 1</p> <p>How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?</p>	<p>Theme 1: Nature of a crisis</p> <p>Theme 2: Strategic leader's role in a crisis</p>	<p>Organisational crisis</p> <p>Strategic leadership</p>
<p>Sub-question 2</p> <p>How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?</p>	<p>Theme 3: Hindrance to sensemaking - Social support imbalance</p> <p>Theme 4: Cognitive process in a crisis</p> <p>Theme 5: Collaborative and interactive social experience</p>	<p>Sensemaking</p> <p>Sensemaking</p> <p>Sensemaking</p>

Table 3: Linkage between research sub-questions, themes, and constructs
(Source: Author's own)

5.3.1 Research Findings: Sub-Question One

Sub-question one: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

5.3.1.1 Theme One: Nature of a Crisis

For a systematic articulation and for easy understanding of the research findings, theme one is presented in a manner that provides an understanding of how the participants defined a crisis based on their experiences. The response to theme one is thus grouped in terms of three focus areas that show how the participants view a crisis. These areas focus on what a crisis is, what it leads to and how the small business strategic leaders should respond to it.

i. What is crisis

The participants shared their experiences with a crisis, and they provided examples of a crisis they have experienced. **Table 4** shows a summary of the crises that were experienced by the participants.

Name of crisis experienced	Covid_19	Economic dynamics	Internal processes
Crisis emanating from	External environment	External environment	Internal environment
Participant 1 to 4; 6 to 12 and 14 to 16	X		
Participant 5		X	
Participant 13			X

Table 4: Summary of the crises experienced by the participants (Source: Author's own)

Most of the participants highlighted that the Covid_19 crisis was triggered by the announcement of the lockdown. Furthermore, according to the participants, the Covid_19 pandemic affected most business thus it was a crisis emanating from the external environment.

Participant 1: "The biggest one that affected most of the businesses we encountered was during Covid".

Participant 10: "2020 was a very difficult year, because it was during the time of the pandemic, and there wasn't a lot of work that was actually coming up".

Participant 11: "I think the crisis that most of us ever experienced was the Covid which took us by surprise".

Participant 15: "I was given permission to start practicing on the first of March 2020. And as you know, 24 or somewhere around there, we were hit with the lockdown. And my firm was like, what, three weeks if not two weeks. So, you can imagine now, as a family, man, and everything just went south".

The other participants, however, highlighted that the economic dynamics triggered by the rise in interest rates and the internal processes were part of the crises that were experienced, and they were triggered by the NDA not being signed. Similar to the participants that experienced Covid_19 as a crisis, the economic dynamics are a crisis that emanates from the external environment with the internal processes on the other hand stemming from the organisation.

Participant 5: "The economy as well is a crisis for us in terms of the market dynamics that we're operating in. Cause we have got interest rates that are higher".

Participant 13: "Like, why wouldn't you just sign an NDA? Just don't tell them the competitor's strategy...now you want to expose that strategy to direct competitor...that's one of the biggest cases that that I faced. It took, it took months for me to even be able to come back up. And imagine this is happening at the backdrop of Covid. Already, we have some clients that we're losing because their businesses are not working".

Noteworthy, Participant 13 highlighted the simultaneous occurrence of crises showing that two or more crises can be experienced concurrently.

Additionally, these experienced events were not expected by all the participants as these were new encounters.

Participant 8: "Did anybody anticipate Covid? I mean, the honest answer is no. I don't think anybody did anticipate it".

Participant 5: "I wouldn't say I anticipated this crisis".

Participant 9: "You know, and my experience is that we never I never saw it coming".

Participant 13: "Not at all. And to make things worse, this competitor, I did not anticipate it because I've known this girl her entire life".

However, there was acknowledgement that there are some events that can be anticipated.

Participant 4: "So we didn't anticipate Covid. But we could anticipate, like having fights with other insurance companies or, you know, having to talk to the ombudsman for your client. That's an anticipated crisis that happens".

There was further recognition that crises in business are inevitable. By virtue of being in business, one must be aware that a crisis may occur at one point or another.

Participant 5: "I wouldn't say I anticipated this crisis. But somehow, it's something that is probably inevitable when you're running a business that you know that there would be humps".

Participant 15: "I'm a Christian and I have this belief that if God will make you face challenges in order for you to make you succeed, so there is no smooth sailing in life".

There was concern, however, over the lack of information that was available about a crisis when it occurs. Thus, there was insufficient information to make an informed analysis and to draw conclusions about the crisis and the way forward.

Participant 6: "But there was not a lot of information".

Participant 8: "I think, given the situation and the information at hand at the time, like I think we did, like significantly well, considering".

Participant 14: "Yeah, so for me, I think I made a call that I'm going to survive this thing without, I mean, with very limited facts".

The participants moreover hold the view that there is limited control over a crisis. These participants are the ones that experienced a Covid_19 as a crisis that emanated from an external environment.

Participant 2: "But I think in 2019 and 2020, the problem was beyond our control".

Participant 12: "And so if something happens, and it's something that is beyond my control, we'll look at how else we can navigate it, if there is no way to navigate it, and we live within we look at something else".

The participants, however, experienced internal processes as a crisis that emanated from the internal environment, and they hold the view that the crisis could have been controlled.

Participant 13: "I'm like, at this point, they're holding me accountable. Why did you not protect your client, in your employer contracts? Valid. So, at some point, they're like, no, we'll come after you".

The differing perspectives highlight that an external crisis may not be within the control of the small business strategic leader while the internal crisis may be within their control.

Lastly, during the crisis period, the participants experienced raised emotions, panic, and anxiety.

Participant 2: "So we will know managing fear and other dynamics fear just fuelled by uncertainty, you know, anxiety, loss of loved ones, it was a different one".

Participant 6: "So I think as a person, one okay. I freak out. That's me. I freaked out. I when I freak out, I want to run away. Literally, I hideaway".

Participant 13: "And then yeah, so I think that's one of the biggest that caused a lot of stress and anxiety".

Participant 14: "...a crisis, what is created raises emotions. And when people are thinking emotionally, they're not thinking rationally".

Participant 16: "And yeah, then everything just everybody went into panic mode, and everything just started falling apart from there".

In summary, most of the participants were of the view that a crisis is an unexpected new occurrence that can emanate from within the organisation or from an external force. The new occurrence is characterised by a lack of information that assists in a better understanding of the situation. The novelty and the lack of information about the event causes panic and anxiety. Finally, unlike the externally influenced crisis, an internal crisis can be controlled by the small business strategic leader.

There seems to be a consensus on how the participants view a crisis. However, there are interesting views of a crisis from some participants. Noteworthy is that there are cases where a crisis can be anticipated which begs the question of whether an occurrence that can be predicted with some accuracy can lead to a crisis.

ii. What The Crisis Leads To

The participants highlighted that a crisis creates disruption, uncertainty, and an urgency to adapt to the new conditions while driving innovation and growth. These assertions by the participants are further detailed below.

The participants acknowledged that a crisis causes disruption in the business operations thus requiring some intervention by the small business strategic leaders.

Participant 1: "It really had an impact on the business because we had to change how we operate".

Participant 5: "We're struggling to get buyers for properties in the ones that are they're not qualified to get bonds and former rental space. The tenants that we have are struggling to pay down their dues".

Participant 10: "So there was a time where the projects that we were involved in, they ended in 2020, then that was a time where we actually didn't have projects, I think, from June, June 2020, up to March 2021 we didn't have any project".

Participant 15: "I was given permission to start practicing on the first of March 2020. And as you know, 24 or somewhere around there, we were hit with the lockdown. And my firm was like, what, three weeks if not two weeks. So, you can imagine now, as a family, man, and everything just went south".

Participant 16: "And some of the work, most of the work really required me to be on-site at client offices and all of that, it wasn't necessarily remote work. Even at that time, remote work was not necessarily a thing. Because we would go through even in project management consulting you, you still on a weekly basis, go to your clients to go check in most of the time you are based at a client site".

Additionally, the crisis causes disruptions in terms of the available resources for the proper functioning of the small business such as the cashflow, profitability and human capital.

Participant 10: "Because we didn't have enough money at that point in time, and we had to pay salaries. Even if there are no projects, if you have permanent stuff, you have to pay salaries".

Participant 1: "On the beverage side, as well, the demand went down for [customer name] so my business was about 60% affected because 40% were activities on this side which kept us going".

Participant 3: "And in our industry, we rely a lot on front-end businesses like casinos and other entertainment places where people go to gamble. Because those places were shut down to prevent an increase in infections. That means they weren't making money and if they weren't making money that we didn't have money to buy product from us".

Participant 4: "I am very dependent on production and an ability to meet clients and help. But if I can't do that, I don't get paid. My staff doesn't get paid. It was just that".

Participant 16: "So, it came at a time where I was still really building my profile and reputation as an entrepreneur which hit hard because when that happened, projects were frozen, meaning cash flows frozen. You have resources that are dependent on you that you now need to think about and plan for".

Participant 3: "Unfortunately, we had to retrench half of our company 50% of our company, so we had to do that".

Participant 8: "One, we obviously needed to downsize our team".

Participant 5: “We lucky we don't have a huge salary. So, it's only the admin person and one or two other team members, of which we've also reduced from five to about two, just to get to be able to get by and the others just we moved on over to a commission strategy not to get salaries, in order for them to also have to be the end of the day”.

Moreover, the growth of the business was highlighted by one participant as being another disruption that was caused by the crisis.

Participant 13: “It really affected my brain having meaning for eight, nine months, we kept the same client pool, there was no business development, there was no, we're just now like just turning out work for the people we have and that's it. and I couldn't launch my new business, which I still haven't, I'm only going to launch it this year. Because now, all of these plans have to go on hold, because this huge thing has now happened”.

Beyond the disruption that comes with a crisis, the participants highlighted that there is also the uncertainty that it created. The crisis caused a significant amount of uncertainty about the present and the future of the business operations.

There was uncertainty regarding the length of the crisis.

Participant 8: “I guess everybody was trying to figure out what is what's gonna happen, right? How long is this gonna last for? is it just a one, Three weeks, six months”.

There was further uncertainty regarding the decisions to be taken by the small business strategic leaders in the crisis.

Participant 4: “But, other things that happen in a business where we have no idea if it's having the ability to just calm down, slow down the situation, and figure out a possible solution, and, and what each decision will have and the ramifications of each decision”.

Additionally, the participants experienced uncertainty about the production timelines and the relevance of their product offerings.

Participant 4: "You know, there was some production has halted for 21 days. And so, I think that didn't land as well, because we were like, okay, so what happens during this period".

Participant 2: "Would it mean that, you know, there will be a need for printing. So, we were looking at the longevity of it, like what this thing mean, printing will be needed or not needed, you know".

Uncertainty was further raised over the business operations as the participants ensured the continuation of operations.

Participant 2: "The uncertainty created a lot of anxiety, the uncertainty, is this going to lead to me losing my business? Or sorry, my job position? What does this mean? So, it was a different dynamic".

Participant 10: "So now the president said everybody has to be, has to go home. And now what do we what's going to happen in the project? Will I be able to work from home? Will I be able to access the information that I need to ready to proceed with a project"?

Participant 11: "I was scared as well, because I didn't know how far-reaching this thing will go. And whether are we going to come back, you know, whether us as a business will survive, or when it comes back, maybe".

Participant 14: "But uncertainty was the biggest issue, because I think issue number one was, are we going to be able to do our work, right, the nature of the work is internal audit".

The participants identified that there is a crisis, but they were unsure of the level of impact.

Participant 7: "It was a little bit of like uncertainty as I said, but then kind of accepting and making peace that it is a storm that is coming your way".

Participant 11: "There we were in the dark. I must say there was nothing but wait, just wait and see. And it was just wait and see where this thing is going".

With the disruption and the uncertainty that comes with a crisis, there is a sense of urgency to better understand and respond to the crisis.

Participant 8: “And by doing that, meant that we knew the measures we needed to take fairly quickly and do things fairly quickly”.

Participant 16: “It was being thrown in the deep end you have to learn you have to learn quick”.

The response strategies had to be developed and actioned quickly to manage the impact.

Participant 8: “The ability to quickly get into, I think what is what was good for us was running into scenario planning very quickly...Things change all the time. So, to be adaptable, and I like you need to be adaptable and agile”.

Participant 1: “You should make sure that you quickly align your business processes, I mean adjust your business processes. And that's what I've learned and the quick response”.

Participant 14: “And then we had to quickly from an ICT ensure that every employee is capable to work from home in terms of all the teams and all the stuff that they need to be able to, to get home, both from our side as the consultant, but also from the client side, we had to ensure that everybody has everything that's ready to their ability to sign stuff in terms of PDF, so ICT had to do a bit of work”.

Moreover, there was an acknowledgement that the decisions had to be made quickly to manage the impact.

Participant 8: “You know, I think what we did, what we did well was we, we moved faster. So, we acted quickly, in terms of what needed to do in terms of business survival, over that time...and we move quickly, in terms of making decisions and understanding what's going on, and then navigating what we needed to do. To speed up as a survival mode”.

The crisis further creates the need for the participants to be adaptable to the changes in the environment and to the new conditions that were presented.

Participant 1: "We just have to reposition ourselves and see how are we going to respond".

Participant 3: "And just by making a few small changes here and there, we were able to come through 2020 and 2021 unscathed it even though we had to let a lot of people go and we had to make some changes in processes".

Participant 2: "So, that for me was like, No guys, you know, you know, when the cheese moves, you must move you know, when the cheese moves, you must move you".

Participant 6: "If you've got anyone that you've quoted on, phone those people during lockdown and say I am willing to reduce my rate to by 40%. If you pay me during lockdown, I will do whatever work I can do now and then we will implement when we are back after lockdown".

Participant 12: "We did have PPE, but our PPE was your construction PPE. So, your work suits, your reflective vests, your helmets, things that people normally use in construction. So, in Covid happened, we have now to include the hygiene PPE. And that kept the business going".

Furthermore, the crisis necessitated the participants' adaptation to the technological environment to continue to operate.

Participant 2: "So, that forced us, I remember that forced us to, to later on. But like in the initial stage talking after the hard lockdown to purchase laptops and try the okay Wi Fi, what happened? Do you have Wi Fi, you know, those kinds of things"?

Participant 9: "So, all these so I looked at all my database, the client, the clients that I had at the time, and I sent them a communication, stating that guys, now this is way given because of the pandemic, what our we also provide live streaming services. So that's how it started".

Participant 5: “I took it took us out of the box origin throw the box and we look at different ways of operating and also with the work of different tools, AI tools, more online work. So instead of going around, sending pamphlets traveling around, now you just have to find better ways of maybe using social media to your advantage because it doesn't have a lot of financial expenditure on it. So, it's just an issue of trying to find ways that we operate differently”

Participant 4: “And so I started you know, I did a lot of I tried some YouTube videos, I started writing a lot more content on LinkedIn, I set up pages just to keep me busy, but also keep client engagement going and also loves to kill, you know, my momentum”.

Remarkably, the crisis awakened the participants to the realisation that they had been complacent about growth.

Participant 10: “Because sometimes when you are working on a project that is paying, and you know that it's a long-term project. And so, you tend to relax a bit and not do a lot of marketing”.

Participant 7: “I'm not saying don't take anything for granted, but it was kind of like that don't take business for granted. Don't relax”.

Participant 16: “You can't just be complacent and say I have a strategy in place. And you know, things are working out. It's one thing having a strategy when things are working out. When they are not working out that's when your strategy gets tested. And Covid really forced us to reinforce whatever views and beliefs that we have”.

Participant 6: “Okay, I think most of the time you know you are relaxed with life you know you. Yes, you set goals, but you are not intense in not in intense in how I attacked my goals. I was going in knowing you know I've got few tasks to tick off my list and that's what I did on the daily”.

With the said realisation, the crisis pushed the participants to be innovative to drive growth and sustainability.

Participant 3: "It also forced us to innovate, you know, we had to think of new ways of doing the same old things. Like for example, the good thing was a year the year before we implemented a digital signing platform. So, whereas before we had to physically pass paperwork around to be signed. Now we could upload everything onto a digital platform, and it gets signed electronically and it gets distributed electronically".

Participant 4: "I think a lot of like companies but know, like [Company 1], [Company 2], [Company 3], they adopted a sign-ink sign. I could send you a link, you can sign using an OTP. So that kind of gave us some leeway saying okay, so at least now people can actually sign documents that we are dealing with".

Participant 8: "But that is that that changed our focus to really push that develop more products quicker that we think was going to be needed. And interestingly enough, like that was when we launched so we launched in like, May, we launched out like an, a gift voucher product that small businesses can start selling online".

Finally, in certain instances the crisis accelerated innovation.

Participant 8: "So we launched that if you had it in how we built most of it and we held in our beta running and we were planning to launch at some point. That obviously just accelerated how we launched this thing".

In summary, the participants' experience of a crisis is that it causes disruption, uncertainty, urgency, and the need to adapt to new conditions. An interesting perspective is that the crisis led to the participants recognising their complacency about the growth of their business thus pushing the participants to be innovative, to embrace technology and to focus more on growth.

iii. How Do the Small Business Strategic Leaders Respond

The participants provided key insights based on their experiences on how the small business strategic leaders should respond to a crisis. Some participants held the view that sound leadership is important in a crisis as it enables leading the business through a crisis.

Participant 10: "So I have to up my leadership skills, and I have to make sure that the business does not go down".

Participant 7: "If you have if you have good leaders around you that it is possible to navigate through a crisis like that".

Planning and preparation were also highlighted as being important in navigating a crisis as this safeguards the business from possible failure.

Participant 7: "So I think on the planning side, I think that's one side that that kind of like we've fed quite a lot, especially after this to make sure that we plan for the future very well knowing that it is it is unpredictable, but there's a part that you can that you can have certain control over".

Participant 9: "Having a succession plan of some sort and having a contingency plan from a business element strategically because, for instance, if let's say I had a contingency plan, or a strategic contingency plan for a crisis, whatever crisis it would, it would have been".

Participant 15: "So you must always plan for the future".

Additionally, in planning for the future, the participants shared that consideration must also be given to the environmental factors, to the resources, and to stakeholder management.

Participant 5: "You always need to be aware of your surroundings. Firstly, in terms of what is happening in the market".

Participant 2: “We all think there was some level of readiness, you know. There was some level of okay, a from a financial standpoint, there was some level of robustness in the business that allowed us to at least to overcome that challenge even though unwanted and unanticipated”.

Participant 11: “But at least, I think what was the saving grace from my end was when I started, I was a bit conscious on saving on building up the reserves. And that six months or eight months when the business was shut, at least I was able to pay the salaries of the guys that I have, and my salaries and at least we were not hit that much”.

Participant 2: “I think, building relationships that may not necessarily be within your space, building relationships with people that may or may not be currently yielding any financial input, building relationships with people for the long run for the unknown possibilities, you know”.

Participant 13: “And then client relationships are really important. If I did not have the relationship I have with that client. I probably wouldn't be here now. I would have to declare bankruptcy. It's fine so much. And, you know, so it's important to have good relationships with your clients. Because even when you screw up like I did, no matter how difficult, they'll find a way to help you out or still make it work, even, you know. So just always be working on those relationships with your clients and deliver so much great value that it's an incentive for them”.

Worthy of interest is that Participant 13 who experienced an internal crisis was more focused on stakeholder management when it comes to responding to a crisis. Whereas the other participants that experienced an external crisis focused on the environment and the resources. Participant 2 acknowledged the importance of building relationships; however, this was within the context of obtaining potential new clients.

Furthermore, the participants highlighted as part of the learnings that flexibility in approach is required when dealing with a crisis.

Participant 1: “Yes, there is a lot of lessons learned. Especially in terms of responding to crisis. I think what I've learned is flexibility. To be more flexible.”

Participant 5: “Also you don't need to be static in your approach. If there's something that is a dynamic that is coming, you just need to find ways to deal with it.”

Participant 14: “Also part of you has to learn not to force something that's not going to work, right. So, if you've got something that worked in a particular environment, and the environment has changed, leaders have to learn to fail fast, right”.

Moreover, within a crisis there are also opportunities that can be exploited for the benefit of the business. Where there are missed opportunities, the participants viewed these as areas of learning and enhancement for the future.

Participant 2: “We could have jumped into new opportunities because they were there were a lot of tenders out for PPE”.

Participant 6: “And then during the crisis, sure. Anything I will do better there? I will take opportunities. I think I will take opportunities”.

Participant 12: “But most importantly, I think it kind of showed us that the internet cafe side of things had potential. Because when people were at home, kids were sending out their homework to be assisted with research, to be assisted with printing of their schoolwork. And we were registering companies left, right, and centre. So, we had to plan around that and strategize on how we can make this bigger and advertise it more include all the things that made it the business that it is today”.

Finally, the diversification of a product offering is a strategy that can be employed in navigating a crisis.

Participant 1: “But in terms of business to be sustainable, we need to check what products can we distribute whether there's war or whether there's pandemic so that the business can be sustainable... So, our strategy has changed. We are kind of heading up on a pharmaceutical space where we can operate in the pharmaceutical space, which we are already there, but we want to expand”.

Participant 7: “How do we, you know, strategically I think, we also said that we should perhaps expand into different areas of products in our business. Because, you know, once again, with a volatility you don't know what's going to happen in the future and what kind of like products or not going to be needed for example”.

Participant 10: “So yeah, so. But one thing that I also thought of was, how can we pivot the way where we diversify? Because we were not sure what's gonna happen after the pandemic. So, so, we will also spend a lot of time in looking for other areas where we can generate revenue”.

In summary, in responding to a crisis, the participants highlighted sound leadership, planning and preparation, flexibility in the used approach and the diversification of the product offering. The participants further acknowledged that there are opportunities that come about because of a crisis and therefore the small business strategic leader must identify and capitalise on these as part of the response strategies. Lastly, for an external crisis the response's focus is on the resources and the environment whereas, for the internal crisis the response's focus is on stakeholder management.

Conclusion on Theme One: Nature of a crisis

Theme one explored how the participants define a crisis based on their experiences thereby providing a definition of a crisis. The response to theme one was grouped in terms of three areas that focus on what a crisis is, what it leads to and how the small business strategic leaders should respond to it. These three focus areas thus provided the participants' definition of a crisis.

5.3.1.2 Theme Two: Strategic Leader Role in a Crisis

In sharing their lived experiences of a crisis, the participants highlighted five key roles that were played by the small business strategic leaders in a crisis.

To start with, the participants recognised the importance of setting a strategic direction in a crisis.

Participant 1: "I think as a leader you have to lead from the front. To make sure, you're more than welcome to person to be able to manage the crisis. You need to champion that kind of crisis. to say look we are in the situation, I'm taking full ownership and I'm going to champion this issue until we are out of this crisis so as a leader that is my role".

Participant 3: "And we got to provide an example as well, the rest of the business in terms of strategy in terms of our culture, values and behaviours, we got to set the direction".

Participant 13: "So my role is really to set the tempo of what happens in a crisis or when not in a crisis. So good or bad. Now we smile, good or bad".

Furthermore, there was an acknowledgement of the need for a small business strategic leader that is action oriented during a crisis period as shown by the actions that were taken by the participants during a crisis.

Participant 10: "So we had to do to do we have to apply for a loan, there was the Covid_19 Relief Loans that we offered by banks and businesses then. So, we managed to secure a loan just to make sure that the stuff is getting paid".

Participant 6: "When the crisis hit, I went into survival mode. You know, I started acting as if I have twenty-four hours to save my business what am I gonna do"?

Participant 12: "I'm solutions-driven. So, when something happens, I look at, if there's a way to move around it, if there's no way to, to move around it, then we must think on Okay, what else can we do"?

Participant 13: "We can do this. This is an issue we're facing, but it's okay. Problem Solving. How do we solve this".

The participants further recognised the importance of making strategic decisions in a crisis and weighing in on the available options. Participant 8 further stressed making an informed decision. This position becomes interesting considering the lack of information in a crisis as highlighted earlier by the participants. Furthermore, Participant 12 highlighted shared decision making.

Participant 8: "Like spend time researching before you go into like, this is what we need to do and shoot from the hip type scenario. Because that's important".

Participant 6: "And then from there, I can start taking decisions do I keep the office running? Can actually manage to keep the office running, like paying rent while we're sitting at home? What do I do with the staff members? What other facilities are available for me to keep afloat while we're dealing with this".

Participant 7: "And you know, I get a lot of people on board with decisions that I make, because they trust me in those situations".

Participant 4: "But other things that happen in a business where we have no idea if it's having the ability to just calm down, slow down the situation, and figure out a possible solution, and, and what each decision will have and the ramifications of each decision. So even that is not even full proof, because it means you have to change if the thing doesn't work out".

Participant 12: "So I try as much as possible to get other people's opinions to get other people's advice. I mean, ultimately, the decision would lie with me, but I give people in here. And I encourage people to share their ideas, because you never know where that good idea is gonna come from".

Moreover, the participants played the role of influencing the others during a crisis.

Participant 4: "You know, and so the more you preach the vision in crisis mode, and even in normal circumstances, you know, they understand the gravity as the magnitude of what it is the big way".

Participant 2: "So for example, 2019 2020, I had to assure people that we had enough money to sustain the business. They didn't know how much I had like that. Let's say I didn't have enough, let's just say I had enough. Let's say I didn't have enough. That knowledge was enough to calm them down."

Participant 14: "So if your employees are at a point where they don't see the future, but they see the fact that they did zero work and you're paying them something because you saying I'm investing in you because the Still a business, then in time, they'll also respond in that manner".

Participant 13: "My role is to decide what the feeling in the company would be. Right. So even when all of this was happening, one of the things that I learned was, if my team saw that I was down, it was difficult for them to show up and show up the way they were supposed to the rest of the team because of this thing that's happening with one person. So now I know that when we have and we've had small, like crisis issues, since then, like small things, and I've seen that my role is to be upbeat, no matter what".

Finally, driving innovation was recognised as one of the responsibilities of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis.

Participant 9: “My role they, you have to be innovative. That's something that I realized in order to remain resilient...and hence, it was a matter of, you know, being innovative, being resilient”.

Participant 8: “But that is that that changed our focus to really push that develop more products quicker that we think was going to be needed. And interestingly enough, like that was when we launched so we launched in like, May, we launched out like an, a gift voucher product that small businesses can start selling online”.

Participant 3: “It also forced us to innovate, you know, we had to think of new ways of doing the same old things. Like for example, the good thing was a year the year before we implemented a digital signing platform. So, whereas before we had to physically pass paperwork around to be signed. Now we could upload everything onto a digital platform, and it gets signed electronically and it gets distributed electronically”.

Conclusion on Theme Two: Strategic Leader Role in a Crisis

Theme two explored how the participants understand their role as the small business strategic leaders in a crisis based on their lived experiences. The response to theme two offered five roles that were played by the small business strategic leaders in a crisis which included setting a strategic direction, being action oriented, making strategic decisions, influencing others, and driving innovation.

5.3.2 Research Findings: Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

5.3.2.1 Theme Three: Hindrance to Sensemaking - Social Support Imbalance

To start with, the participants showed a deep concern over the well-being of their employees during the crisis period, and they shouldered the responsibility of the employees' wellbeing. The concern was over the financial, the physical, the mental, and the emotional well-being of the employees as these matters also impact on the business operations.

Participant 2: “You've got staff members that began to lose loved ones, you've got staff members who became very anxious to a place that almost got depressed. It was not a different dynamic, because now you not just leading or navigating the economic space”.
Participant 10: “Because we had to check if your family members are safe in all those things, because they do those things to actually affect the performance of, of each and every one of us”.
Participant 8: “Then, the other piece, being sort of a senior leader within the business is obviously making sure that the teams feel that they have what they need”.
Participant 7: “Our first priority was to protect our staff during this time because it's very quick and easy to say sorry, we're going through this pandemic, there is no revenue”.
Participant 16: “So in that moment, the best thing I could do, as a small business intrapreneur was to really assist my staff to find alternative works, because I couldn't assist them, I had to make peace with them”.
Participant 14: “I sort of have, yeah, if I can take a bit of money from the business and fund them to pay a salary, it might be a salary that I would have paid them if they were fully productive”.
Participant 13: “So literally, I'd go out during the pandemic, when everybody's in lockdown, and do stories for BBC so that I can supplement my business to ensure that you know, we still have operating capital, we don't have to retrench anybody. We didn't retrench anybody”.

While the participants are striving to take care of their employees during a crisis, there is also the recognition of the fact that there is an imbalance in the scales because of the lack of support for the participants during the crisis. This was highlighted by the two participants who felt overwhelmed with making decisions. They were also depressed, and they experienced episodes of inertia as they were not present to provide direction thus impacting negatively on the business during the crisis period.

Participant 13: "This was in 2020. And when all of this is happening in 2020, most of 2021, I was just depressed, I couldn't get out of bed, I couldn't listen, I couldn't even open curtains in my house. I couldn't eat. I was just depressed. And that then made all of my other businesses suffer. And all my other clients also suffer because now I'm not showing up the way I normally do. It made my employees suffer because now they are sole present leader who is now not present. Like it's like I wasn't there".

Participant 16: "Because at the time I was working on my own I was I was solo. And you get overwhelmed with having to decide making decision or decisions all the time for everyone because you have to have foresight of the future and how you can mitigate your risks, right? Having to be the one that only one who gets to think about and decide for everyone, all of that gets overwhelming".

The participants hold the view that the mentorship and the support for the small business strategic leaders are important in a crisis as enablers to the hindrance in sensemaking. This research finding is discussed further in Theme Five.

Conclusion on Theme Three: Hindrance to Sensemaking - Social Support Imbalance

Theme three explored what goes wrong in sensemaking in a crisis by considering the social support imbalance that was evidenced by the participants' experiences and how this imbalance impacted on the participants' ability to make meaning and to navigate the crisis. This was thus a hinderance to the participants' sensemaking ability thereby impacting on how the small business strategic leader understands and responds to a crisis.

5.3.2.2 Theme Four: Cognitive Process in a Crisis

Theme four considered the process followed by the participants to enable sensemaking during the crisis experience. This theme specifically reflected on the cognitive process that was employed by the participants.

Firstly, there was an acknowledgement of the use of past knowledge and similar experiences to aid in the better understanding of and navigating the crisis.

Participant 10: “But in terms of, if I if I can talk about the cash flow before when there's this sort of like a pattern within our industry that between December and February, it's very dry. Because we're working with the government, so government closes in December. So,, whatever you were doing, have to do before the 15th of December and submit. And so, there's a lot of work around that time and then starting from April, the following year, then that is when the projects are starting to come up. So, it has been a sort of like a pattern”.

However, some participants recognised that prior knowledge and experience are sometimes not sufficient to enable the participants to deal with the crisis.

Participant 2: “In 2014 we could pinpoint the problem we could. We knew we were the reason why we were where we were and there were decisions we needed to do and action steps to do, and to change the narrative. But in 2019 and 2020, it was beyond my control”.

Participant 9: “And as I said, I had never anticipated it because also as part of my previous jobs, I was also an analyst, you know, so I really didn't see this. I had forecasted that it's just another bird flu”.

Participant 7: “So, navigating through the crisis was kind of like such you never expected it to be so big. There are crisis, a crisis and then there is obviously a pandemic, which no one ever anticipates, you know. So that's kind of like the experience that I have. We've had semi-mini crises in the past, but nothing of this scale, obviously”.

Moreover, the participants acknowledged that having experienced the current crises, the learnings would aid in better understanding and navigating the other future crises and operational experiences.

Participant 12: “And I hope it never happens again. So, lessons from Covid. They are not to be they are not to be repeated, and they should not be repeated”.

Participant 5: “I think it has helped me to be more aware and also have the emotional intelligence of dealing with situations when it comes to my team and also how I operate the business. Cause it also it has helped me to have a bit more level-headedness to be able to be proactive and think over what I would normally do if it's in a normal situation, and also to engage the team more as well”.

Additionally, the use of impromptu response strategies is another experience of the participants during the crisis.

Participant 1: "Because this was not something that we prepared for it to happen. I mean, and we respond as it happens".

Participant 10: "So there wasn't a plan, it was not planned, you just had to think on your feet, which is what we do on a daily basis. Because crisis can come anytime. And you have to think on your feet".

Participant 14: "I think it was more of a reaction. How do you make decisions as you go through...But yeah, I didn't plan for it, I didn't anticipate it was more of a reaction".

Participant 11: "You know, so it was just wait and see and, and just play by the ear with our customers to say where are they? How is their business? Any better, better understanding the environment, their business environment? They've got clients as well to say okay, where are the clients or the clients surviving?".

Lastly, the participants further highlighted the use of trial and error where there is no prior knowledge and experience to draw from during a crisis.

Participant 12: "Everything that was done during that period was trial and error. So, everything and everything that we did, no one knew how to do it better".

Participant 4: "There's no easy way of doing this. There are no shortcuts. There's no, this is the best way to do things. Like there's no formula. And the idea is to only be constantly working at it, you know, 24/7 all the time trying to figure it out for yourself".

Participant 3: "And we were all learning what the playbook is...But at the time, was totally unprecedented. And we're taking it one day at a time and analysing the environment to see, you know, how do we proceed?".

Participant 1: "We've tried to do a hybrid, kind of working environment. It didn't really work for us".

Conclusion on Theme Four: Cognitive Process in Crisis

Theme four considered the cognitive process that was followed by the participants to enable sensemaking during a crisis. The participants initially started with the use of prior knowledge and experience in understanding and navigating a crisis. Sometimes this knowledge is not sufficient to aid the participants in sensemaking. The participants then used impromptu response strategies as well as trial and error. Finally, the knowledge that was accumulated during this process enhanced the participants' core knowledge and it can be used as an aid in another crisis or event.

5.3.2.3 Theme Five: Collaborative and Interactive Social Experience

Theme five also considered the process that was followed by the participants to enable sensemaking during the experienced crisis. This theme specifically reflected on the collaborative and the interactive social process that was employed by the participants.

To start with, when the crisis occurred, the participants interacted with the environment by collecting signals that assist in making meaning of the occurrences. This includes news, research, government announcements, and the changed supply chain patterns.

Participant 3: "And you follow the news online. And I think from November 2019 to February 2020, all of a sudden, the world was focused in China. They said something's happening in China. Hang on, there's a big, there's a large-scale infection happening, what's going on".
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Participant 9: "So kept on seeing, what is it, bulletins. The likes of CNBC, and then you know, talking about this flu".
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Participant 7: "You know, you've already you have already felt the impact on the supply chain, for example, where it was kind of like just a little indication of, you know, doesn't matter where it is, it is going to it is affecting".

Participant 10: "The briefings from the President, the briefings from the Ministers that were giving us information in terms of what is happening about the vaccines and all those things".

Participant 12: "So I think the good thing about it is that as they were, as the lockdown was being announced from this stage to that stage, they were also saying that this is what can happen".

Participant 8: "Crowdsource information, and all information sources as much as possible and spend the time as much as you don't have much time".

Participant 6: "What helped is again, for me research, understanding what is it that we are in, you know... So, I empowered myself a lot with information so that I can make sense of the situation".

Moreover, in coming to terms with the crisis, the participants interacted with internal stakeholders such as the employees to share insights and understanding.

Participant 2: "Prior to that, we had a meeting, when we were just discussing it [lockdown] with a team just to say, You know what, guys, this is the situation".

Participant 10: "I think what we did was, at least on a weekly basis, at least that was what was planned. Let us get together, let us make sure that we know where each person is and how they are".

Participant 8: "Certainly, we also like we spoke to our team, right? And because everybody had an opinion in like, you can imagine everybody has an opinion. And so, you know, we actually had a team meet every morning".

Participant 13: "When this all blew up, I started looking to that competitor. I'm like, Hey, man, what's going on? In the past these people have become really good, because we're like, like that copying is really, really improved. Only for one of my employees to say, Yeah, cuz she's been there. And then she showed me the text and stuff that yeah, for four months before she can tell me officially that she's leaving. She had already been implementing my client strategy there".

Furthermore, the interactions were not only limited to the internal stakeholders, but they extended to the external stakeholders such as the customers, the clients, the networks, and the competitors. This was performed to enhance the understanding of the crisis and to craft a way forward.

Participant 3: “And that's pretty much how we made sense of it was because it affecting everybody else. And we picked up ideas as well, some other countries and other companies, in terms of how they were handling it. And then we but pretty much everyone has been handling it the same going into lockdown forming bubbles, minimizing contact between people, and also forcing and emphasizing hybrid work or remote working”.

Participant 4: “So it's, I think it landed when a lot of your clients started complaining and saying I can't get this done”.

Participant 8: “So we were all on calls with various different people across the world, into our sectors, and not even our sectors and just understanding like what's the views and what we should be doing”.

Participant 9: “And then I even called the guy that I spoke to you about that I mentioned at the JSE. And to get a bit of a risk because obviously, he was much more well-informed than I was. And he also gave me a couple of tips”.

Participant 12: “Because in this industry, we are many, but we are small, in essence, those who have been in business for a long in this space, and those who are 100%, dedicated, to this space, we have our own little group Whatsapp group, we have our own Facebook group, where we, we share ideas we share”.

Participant 13: “So my first step was to inform client. Let the client digest it, because I already knew it's gonna be an issue, the client digest it, let's get her console in the room. So, they can advise in how we make this transition that is happening”.

There was a mention of further collaboration with and learning from the other leaders, businesses, and suppliers.

Participant 10: “And fortunately, we are a business partner to one of the vendors of the software that we use for delivering our special services, and they had a program, which was Covid_19 program to help companies that want to map anything that was happening during that time, and they were giving us the software for free for six months”.

Participant 16: "So to assist myself with being overwhelmed, and then I decided I can't do this solo anymore. I need to find someone that I can partner with who has the same vision, the same values as me".

Participant 12: "And we looked at those who had financial muscle to get into the market and prepare those things for the industry meaning so we've got those who had the financial means they started stocking up on those things, and then they resold them to us within the promo space".

Moreover, the importance of collaboration and learning together with stakeholder management were recognised as being important in making meaning and in managing a crisis.

Participant 16: "...a crisis is like getting a cramp while you're trying to summit Kilimanjaro, or the comrades and you are running by yourself. Imagine getting a cramp in such a situation, and you're up on your own".

Participant 13: "And I think another thing I would go and learn from other small businesses before starting because I did not have business experience so I feel like I should have gone to other brand agencies and said to the founders can I just tag along for a month and see how you do stuff, whatever key stuff. Ask the kind of questions you're asking me now, how do I avoid this what would you do differently so that yes, I'm spending a month not earning because I'm just going for free. But that will save me so much trouble in the long run".

Participant 5: "The key lesson is that you, your strength is the people that are around you in terms of employees. That you need to probably involve them more in the running of the business, and also is to embrace the times that we're living in".

Participant 12: "And not just on the outside, but even internally as well, you can be the one leading the organization, but there are people that you work with, who might have better ideas than what you have".

Participant 13: "And then client relationships are really important. If I did not have the relationship I have with that client. I probably wouldn't be here now".

With reference to mentorship and support, the participants held the view that the mentorship and the support for the small business strategic leaders are important in a crisis. This starts with the knowledge that the small business strategic leader is not alone in a crisis.

Participant 3: "Because what was happening wasn't just unique to us, it was pretty much the whole world. So, we were in it together".

Participant 10: "And when you start talking to other business, small businesses, you find that you, you are in the same crisis".

Participant 6: "The first thing was for me, okay. Everyone is in this thing, you know, it's not just me. So, the whole world is in this thing".

Participant 7: "And one thing that I would say was comforting, almost on a comforting side it was that the whole world is experiencing that".

Participant 16: "I felt like it impacted all of us. Big, small, employed, one way or the other, we were all impacted by Covid".

Worth noting is that even though Participant 16 felt overwhelmed and struggled during the crisis, they recognised that the external crisis impacted everyone thus providing a sense of shared support experience. Participant 13, however, experienced the internal crisis and therefore did not have the same shared support experience.

Furthermore, the participants recognised that support is required by the small business strategic leaders in a crisis, whether in terms of religion or having people around that show support and provide reassurance. Participant 13 highlighted the importance of the support structures and taking care of oneself during a crisis.

Participant 3: "And we were able to come through it unscathed. Unfortunately, a lot of other businesses went out of business. Thankfully, Touchwood we know God willing, we were not one of them".

Participant 15: "I'm a Christian and I have this belief that if God will make you face challenges in order for you to make you succeed, so there is no smooth sailing in life".

Participant 13: "I think it's important to have like spaces to distress and taking care of your own mental health".

Participant 4: “Because, you know, me and my business partner felt like we needed it [reassurance] as well. But we kept telling ourselves the same thing. Don't lose focus of what we're trying to achieve, even though it doesn't seem as clear cut as it should”.

Lastly, the participants acknowledged the importance of the small business strategic leader's mentorship in a crisis. Participant 16 further shared that the small business strategic leaders do not know everything and therefore they also require mentorship and support. Over and above, Participant 13 highlighted the importance of support structures. Participant 16 further extended this support to include mentorship.

Participant 5: “Secondly, you need to also get mentors in the space that you're in that can that has been there or that are doing the same type of business”.

Participant 6: “I had a business coach. And so, we continuously throughout the lockdown, were checking he was checking up on me. How are you doing? How are you dealing? With the issue? You know, and this solutions that I'm actually talking about now, it came out of those conversation”.

Participant 12: “I've definitely learned the importance of leaning on other people”.

Participant 16: “You need a community of like-minded leaders that will help you as well because as leaders, we need to also remember that we are human. We do need the support; we do need that help. You are just in any position where you have the responsibility of caring for others, but you are not necessarily a know-it-all all”.

Conclusion on Theme Five: Collaborative and Interactive Social Experience

Theme five reflected on the collaborative and the social interactive process that was employed by the participants as a strategy in sensemaking during the crisis. The participants were aided by the social and collaborative interactions with the environment, the internal and the external stakeholders together with mentorship and the support in making sense of the crisis.

5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the current chapter provided the research findings per research sub-question and the theme together with the conclusion per theme. The following chapter provides a discussion of these findings drawing appropriate references from the literature and conducting a comparative analysis to draw conclusions.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter provided a systematic account of the research findings based on the themes that were constructed and the research sub-questions that link to the main research question. The current chapter discusses the research findings in relation to the literature. The discussion follows the same structure as that of the research findings in responding to the research question. **Figure 5** shows how the conceptual framework in Chapter 2 has been amended to include the research findings in line with the research sub-questions.



Figure 5: Conceptual Framework with Research Findings (Author's own)

6.2 Discussion of Research Findings

As articulated in Chapter 5, the main research question is supported by two research sub-questions that provide deeper insights in the exploration of the main research question.

Main research question - How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The research findings of each research sub-question are discussed next in relation to the literature.

6.3 Discussion of Findings for Research Sub-Question One

Sub-question one: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

6.3.1 Organisational Crisis

6.3.1.1 Analysis of Research Findings and Literature

In defining a crisis, the research findings show that it is an unanticipated occurrence that is disruptive to the small business. This is in line with Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018) supported by Kornberger et al. (2019) as well as by Wut et al. (2021) who view a crisis as an expected event that threatens to disrupt the business operations. Key to this definition is that a crisis is unanticipated. There is, however, a contrary view emanating from the research findings that a crisis can be anticipated. This position is inconsistent with that of Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018); Kornberger et al. (2019) and Wut et al. (2021) who view a crisis as an unanticipated event. Wu et al. (2021) provides clarity in stating that unlike a crisis, an anticipated occurrence is simply an organisational event. Thus, giving weight to the assertions of the former scholars and this is in line with the research findings that a crisis is an unanticipated incident. This therefore suggests that the alternative view from the research finding does not meet the definition of a crisis but rather an ordinary organisational occurrence.

Additionally, the research findings suggest that a crisis creates uncertainty for the small business strategic leaders and the urgency for interventions and the adaption to the unfamiliar environment. This is in line with Dasborough and Scandura's (2022) that a

crisis is characterised by uncertainty, the urgency for action, and the adaptation to new conditions. Moreover, consistent with Angeli and Montefusco's (2020) assertion that a crisis provides limited information for decision making, the research findings suggest that in a crisis there is insufficient information that is available to better understand the unfamiliar environment, make an informed assessment, and draw conclusions. The novelty of and the lack of information about the crisis is shown by the research findings to cause panic and anxiety. This supports the view by Leta and Chan (2021) that a crisis causes fear and worry. Kornberger et al. (2019) clarifies that the fear is basically existential anxiety. This further supports the research findings as the small business strategic leaders experienced uncertainty about the future viability of their business. This existential anxiety therefore aligns with the need to act urgently in a crisis to alleviate these negative emotions and to ensure business continuation.

In further exacerbating the panic and the anxiety that are experienced in a crisis, the research findings show that multiple crises can occur concurrently. This is consistent with the assertion by Christianson and Barton (2021) that a strategic leader may deal with multiply crises simultaneously. The research findings further highlight that a crisis in business is imminent thus the small business strategic leaders must be ready at all times. This supports the position by Crayne and Medeiros (2021), that due to the rare nature of a crisis, the strategic leaders were not ready to handle a crisis such as Covid_19. Acknowledging that crises are inevitable in business and that multiple crises can occur concurrently, this suggests the need for the small business strategic leaders to draw on sensemaking to support these strategic leaders' efforts during such crisis periods.

Furthermore, the research findings recognise that a crisis can originate either from within or outside the organisation with an internal crisis being within the control of and the external crisis being outside the control of the small business strategic leader. This is consistent with the views of Collins et al. (2023) and Wut et al., (2021) that a crisis can emanate from an external or an internal event that is either intentional or unintentional. Moreover, the strategic leaders have no direct control over the external crisis (Collins et al., 2023) whereas the internal crisis can escalate quickly if not managed timeously by the strategic leader (Williams et al., 2017).

Additionally, in support of Dasborough and Scandura's (2022) assertion that a crisis elevates the importance of leadership, the research findings suggest that leadership growth is required in a crisis. As part of good leadership in a crisis, the research findings further recognise the importance of planning and preparation together with post-crisis

learnings. According to Pedersen et al. (2020) supported by Wut et al. (2021) as well as by Collins et al. (2023), this forms part of effective crisis management which is crucial in crisis leadership. Moreover, this is consistent with the assertion that a crisis is a process that occurs in stages (Merendino & Sarens, 2020; Williams et al., 2017) as the research findings illustrate the various stages of a crisis.

These stages include the pre-crisis stage (Bundy et al., 2017; Pedersen et al., 2020; Wut et al., 2021) which includes planning and preparation as suggested by the research findings. Furthermore, in moving to the next stage during a crisis, the research findings highlight the occurrence of triggering events. This is in line with the views of Merendino and Sarens (2020) as well as Williams et al. (2017) that the next stage of the crisis process is triggered by the occurrence of a certain event. Moreover, as per the research findings, once the trigger has occurred then there is disruption and uncertainty that takes place during crisis. Moreover, in the same stage, there are some strategies that are employed by the small business strategic leaders to resolve the crisis such as driving innovation and growth through the identification of opportunities in a crisis, the diversification of product offering and the flexibility in a leadership approach. Finally, the post crisis stage (Wut et al., 2021) includes the learnings that are extracted by the small business strategic leaders from the crisis which are the creation of a safety net and the crisis management plan. These learnings are of importance as they feed into the planning and into the preparation for the next crisis.

Finally, the research findings recognise that the small business strategic leaders' have a lack of initiative relating to driving growth therefore the crisis has pushed the participants to be innovative, to embrace technology and to focus more on growth. This is consistent with the literature as there is a need to adapt to the new conditions (Fernandes et al., 2022) which influences the strategic leader to drive innovation to obtain opportunities (Thukral, 2021) that will ensure business sustainability (Quansah et al., 2022). This complacency about growth may further be linked to the position of Crayne and Medeiros (2021), that the small business strategic leaders are just not prepared to handle crisis. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen planning and preparation in a crisis.

6.3.1.2 Conclusion

The research findings are consistent with the literature in terms of how a crisis is defined by the small business strategic leaders. The research findings further support the assertion that a crisis is a process that occurs in stages, and it is triggered by the

occurrence of a specific event. Notwithstanding the similarities of the research findings with the literature, the research findings extend the body of knowledge on how a crisis is defined and understood by the strategic leaders within the context of a small business thus further expanding on the crisis leadership literature. A deeper understanding of the importance of planning and preparation for a crisis has now been obtained more so in the small businesses as the risk of business failure is high and the small business strategic leaders appear to be complacent about growth.

6.3.2 Role of Small Business Strategic Leader

Analysis of Research Findings and Literature

The research findings highlight the role of the small business strategic leaders in setting strategic direction in a crisis. This is consistent with the view of Hoang et al. (2021) that the strategic leaders are accountable for putting together the strategic direction. Additionally, the research findings suggest that in providing strategic direction, the small business strategic leaders lead from the front, and they champion the crisis. This is especially so in a crisis as the business looks to the strategic leaders for guidance and thus the leader becomes a compass for the organisation (Collins et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the research findings recognise the importance of the small business strategic leaders making strategic decisions in a crisis. In support of this research findings. Hoang et al. (2021) contend that the strategic leaders are the ultimate decision makers with Fernandes et al. (2022) further stating that the strategic leaders by virtue of their position, form part of strategic decision making. Moreover, the research findings highlight that the small business strategic leaders must not just make any kind of decision, but they must make informed strategic decisions in weighing in amongst the available options. This view is in line with the position by Fernandes et al. (2022) that the decisions that are made by the strategic leaders must sustain performance. This thus alludes to having sufficient credible information to be able to make right decisions. The research findings, however, show that a crisis is characterised by the lack of information to make an informed decision. This finding is in line with the views by Angeli and Montefusco (2020) that in a crisis there is insufficient information for decision making. In a crisis therefore, the asymmetry of information may hinder informed decision making, hence the need for the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking to enable the move from the "unknown paths to known scenarios" (Merendino & Sarens, 2020, p. 416).

Moreover, there is an acknowledgment in the research findings that the small business strategic leaders must be action-oriented during a crisis. According to Stam et al. (2018), a crisis requires action-oriented strategic leaders that embrace a proactive approach. This is because of the disruption and the uncertainty that is created by a crisis thus requiring urgent responses by the small business strategic leaders to manage the crisis. This supports the view by (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022) that a crisis requires urgent responses by the strategic leaders.

In being action oriented, the research findings highlight that the small business strategic leaders further drive innovation in a crisis. Cortes and Herrmann (2021) contend that the strategic leaders drive innovation by establishing an atmosphere that facilitates idea generation or that generates those ideas themselves. According to the research findings, in a crisis there are opportunities for exploitation. This aligns with Weaven et al.'s (2021) argument that the strategic leaders must recognise and exploit the opportunities that are presented by a crisis. Therefore, the small business strategic leaders foster an environment of creativity and innovation to obtain opportunities (Thukral, 2021) that will ensure business sustainability (Quansah et al., 2022).

Moreover, the role of influencing others during the crisis became evident as the employees had to be reassured about the future to enable them to be and to perform at their best. According to Samimi et al. (2022), in playing the role of influencing others, the strategic leaders motivate the followers to achieve the vision of the organisation. The research findings further recognised that the small business strategic leaders value collaboration and shared decision making. This supports the assertion by Hoang et al. (2021) that even though the small business strategic leaders have the power of influence by virtue of their position, this is not strictly enforced as the focus is more on collaboration.

Conclusion

The research findings are consistent with the literature in terms of the role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research findings suggest that the role of these strategic leaders in a crisis includes setting strategic direction, strategic decision making, driving innovation, influencing others and taking action. These roles are based on the lived experiences of and the reflection by the small business strategic leaders. While acknowledging the similarities with the extant literature, the research findings further

expand on the strategic leadership's current body of knowledge more so within the context of the small businesses.

6.4 Discussion of Findings for Research Sub-Question Two

Sub-question two: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

6.4.1 Hindrance to Sensemaking - Social Support Imbalance

Analysis of Research Findings and Literature

The research findings show that while the small business strategic leaders strive to perform their role in a crisis, there is also the recognition of the lack of support for these strategic leaders during the crisis as evidenced by being overwhelmed and depressed. These are the negative emotions that are experienced by the small business strategic leaders in a crisis that then hinder their cognitive process in coming to terms with the crisis. Dasborough and Scandura (2022) highlight the need for the strategic leaders to take care of their emotional wellbeing in a crisis as their capacity to lead may also be impaired. Sensemaking may therefore enable the small business strategic leaders in such cases. According to Samdanis and Lee (2019), supported by Aguinis and Glavas (2019) as well as by Alvesson and Jonsson (2022), sensemaking is a process where an individual actively seeks to understand a novel event such as a crisis. This barrier to the ability to come to terms with the crisis alludes to the failure in the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking process. This failure to make sense of a crisis occurs when an individual is unable to reach a plausible account of the disruption (Hoyte et al., 2019).

The research findings further suggest that the lack of support contributes to the small business strategic leader's inability to come to terms with the crisis. This view is in line with Angeli and Montefusco (2020) who contend that the social interaction with the others leads to a better understanding and sustainable solutions. The research findings suggest that these interactions are important for the data gathering process that leads to a better understanding of the crisis that then reduces the negative emotions thus unlocking the barrier to sensemaking.

Moreover, the research findings show that the inability of the small business strategic leaders to come to terms with the crisis further impacts on their strategic role of decision making, providing strategic direction and being action oriented. According to Kalkman (2020), when rationality cannot be regained, the other individuals experience inertia while the others lean into the belief of collective sensemaking.

Finally, the research findings recognise the importance of mentorship and support for the small business strategic leaders during a crisis to foster sensemaking. This supports Kalkman (2020) that when there is collective sensemaking, the individual sensemaking failure will not necessarily lead to organisational failure. The understanding that these small business strategic leaders' businesses were able to survive the experienced crisis illustrates that the leaders were able to enable their sensemaking process to avoid total collapse.

Conclusion

The research findings are consistent with the literature when it comes to the hindrance in the sensemaking process of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research findings further suggest that the negative emotions and the lack of social support acts as barriers to the small business strategic leader's sensemaking thus resulting in the collapse of the individual strategic leader's sensemaking. Notwithstanding the similarities of the research findings with the extant literature, the research findings further add to the current body of knowledge with better understanding of the barriers to the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking process.

6.4.2 Sensemaking Enabler

In understanding the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis, the previous sub-section critically reflected on the barriers to sensemaking as articulated by these strategic leaders and with reference to the extant literature. The current sub-section further explores the enablers in the sensemaking process that may be of strategic use to the small business strategic leaders. There are two sensemaking enablers that have been highlighted by the research findings which are critically discussed further below. These are the cognitive processes in a crisis together with the collaborative and interactive social experience.

6.4.2.1 Cognitive Process in a Crisis

Analysis of Research Findings and Literature

The research findings suggest that when sensemaking is triggered by a crisis, the small business strategic leaders start a process of trying to understand the crisis. To start with, the small business strategic leaders make use of prior knowledge and experience in understanding and navigating a crisis. These strategic leaders do this by making use of the already built cognitive frames that link the current reality to familiar past knowledge and experience (Niemi et al., 2022). The research findings further suggest drawing from the past patterns and the experiences similar in nature and utilise those in the crisis that is being experienced (Niemi et al., 2022).

At times, however, the research findings highlight that the past knowledge and experiences may be insufficient to enable the sensemaking of the small business strategic leaders. The small business strategic leaders then consider other approaches such as making use of the impromptu response strategies. According to Meziani and Cabantous (2020), the impromptu response strategies considers the use of intuition in trying to get to terms with a crisis. Furthermore, in making use of intuition, the small business strategic leaders draw from both the conscious and the unconscious knowledge and experiences (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020). The research findings further show that this pulling from the conscious and the unconscious knowledge as well as experiences is an immediate reaction of just knowing and thinking on one's feet. When prior knowledge and intuition fail, then the small business strategic leaders use trial and error or experimentation to make sense of the crisis.

According to Weick (1988), to gain cognition, one must act, thus action is a prerequisite for cognition. In employing experimental strategies, the research findings suggest that the small business strategic leaders decipher what is reasonable and what is not reasonable as there is no known formula of what works. This trial-and-error process aids the small business strategic leaders to better understand the crisis. According to Hoyte et al. (2019), this process of collecting cues and acting, aids in finding a plausible scenario.

Finally, the research findings recognise that the knowledge that is accumulated during this sensemaking process enhances the small business strategic leaders' core knowledge, and it can be used as an aid in another crisis or event. This is in line with the reflective nature of sensemaking (Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Kornberger et al., 2019) and the continuous update in the small business strategic leader's cognitive frames with new information (Hoyte et al., 2019).

Conclusion

The research findings are consistent with the literature regarding how sensemaking enables the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research findings provide insights into how the small business strategic leaders initially make use of prior knowledge and experience in coming to terms with the crises. When this strategy does yield satisfactory results, these strategic leaders use intuition and experimental strategies. Consequently, the research findings provide further insights into how the cognitive process can act as an enabler to the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking process thereby extending the current literature on sensemaking.

6.4.2.2 Collaborative and Interactive Social Experience

Analysis of Research Findings and Literature

The research findings suggest that the collaborative and interactive social experiences assist the small business strategic leaders in coming to terms with the crisis. This is because sensemaking in itself is grounded in the social interaction with the others (Cristofaro, 2022; Hoyte et al., 2019; Niemi et al., 2022; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Moreover, as highlighted by the research findings, when a crisis occurs the small business strategic leaders interface with the environment, the internal and the external stakeholders in collecting information that assists in a better understanding of the occurrences. This supports the position by Hoyte et al. (2019) that the strategic leader embarks on a social process of interacting with the environment and the others to make sense of a crisis and to regain order.

Additionally, as part of the social process, the research findings acknowledge the importance of mentorship and support for the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. According to Angeli and Montefusco (2020), the sharing of information leads to better insights and discovering feasible solutions. This information exchange and interactions has an effect of influencing both parties and the crisis itself thus managing or worsening

the crisis. This is because this sharing of information influences the sensemaking processes of both parties (Hoyte et al., 2019), which is also in line with the influencing role of the strategic leader which is aimed at influencing one another (Gardner et al., 2021).

Moreover, the research findings suggest that collaboration and learning together with stakeholder management aid in making meaning and managing a crisis thus they may deter the failure in the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking as there are other individuals that support the sensemaking process of the strategic leaders. According to Kalkman (2020), interacting with the other individuals is important to individual sensemaking as it acts as an enabler thus preventing the collapse of individual sensemaking. In line with the research findings, Kalkman (2020) further contends that the belief in collective sensemaking guards against sensemaking failure.

Conclusion

The research findings are consistent with the literature in terms of how sensemaking as a socially rooted phenomenon enables the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research findings further provide insights into how the small business strategic leaders interface with the environment and the others through collaborative and interactive social experiences, in coming to terms with a crisis. Even though there are similarities that are identified by the researcher between the research findings and the extant literature, the research findings further expand the current body of knowledge on sensemaking with social interaction being an enabling strategy for the small business strategic leaders in a crisis.

6.5 Integration of Research Findings

The current sub-section integrates the conclusions from the two research sub-questions to respond to the main research question. Furthermore, an amended conceptual framework is provided in **Figure 6**.

Main research question - How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The research findings highlight that when a crisis occurs because of internal and external unanticipated forces, it disrupts the business operations, and it creates uncertainty thus requiring urgent intervention by the small business strategic leaders. The research findings further show that, in these crisis interventions, the small business strategic leaders are tasked with setting a strategic direction. According to Wut et al. (2021), when a crisis occurs, it impacts the ordinary business operations thus requiring the strategic leader to restore normal operational order. Also, as the strategic leader is accountable for the strategic direction and the business model that delivers on that strategy (Fernandes et al., 2022), it is the small business strategic leader's responsibility to restore order. In restoring order, the research results suggest that the small business strategic leader makes use of sensemaking as an enabler in a crisis.

In doing so, the small business strategic leader must make critical strategic decisions for business survival that enable the adaptation to the new conditions that are presented by the crisis (Eggers, 2020). The research findings highlight the need for the small business strategic leaders to make data-driven decisions in a crisis. This position becomes difficult considering the lack of information that is available during a crisis as shown by the research findings. With the lack of information to better understand the new condition, sensemaking therefore becomes a strategy that enables the small business strategic leader to make better informed strategic decisions in a crisis. The small business strategic leader may follow the cognitive process as well as the collaboration and the interaction with the others and the environment to try and close the information gap. The research findings suggest that these strategies may enable the sensemaking process of the small business strategic leader in a crisis.

Additionally, for sensemaking to occur, there must be action (Kalkman, 2020) thus linking to the action-oriented role of the small business strategic leader as highlighted by the research findings. Moreover, as shown by the research findings, in acting, the small business strategic leader utilises the cognitive process of sensemaking together with the social interaction aspect of sensemaking. This enables the small business strategic leader to collect as much information as possible about the crisis to be able to inform strategic decisions, to set strategic direction, to influence others and to drive innovation in a crisis.

According to the research findings, the small business strategic leader needs to remain flexible during the sensemaking process. This may be attributable to the dynamic nature of a crisis (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022) and sensemaking (Niemi et al., 2022). In

doing so, the small business strategic leader practices agility and flexibility in their response strategies aided by continuous learning (Eggers, 2020; Quansah & Hartz, 2021).

Moreover, critical to these strategic leaders' role in a crisis is that of influence (Fernandes et al., 2022). This became evident from the research findings as the small business strategic leaders are tasked with reassuring the employees and interacting with the external stakeholders to come to terms with the crisis and the finding means of adapting to the new environment. This is consistent with Fernandes et al.'s (2022) assertion that the role of influence includes influencing not just the employees but the stakeholders and the environment too. Furthermore, in this social process of influence, the small business strategic leader as the sense maker is equally influenced by the others and the environment in trying to make meaning through the exchanges of making sense and giving sense to the others. This supports Gardner et al. (2021)'s view on the process of strategic leadership that the interactions between the strategic leaders and the others are aimed at influencing one another.

The small business strategic leaders, however, value collaborative influence (Hoang et al., 2021) instead of a top-down approach (Quansah et al., 2022). This position is further highlighted in the research findings as the failure to do sensemaking and it is influenced by the lack of social support that is referred to the social support imbalance which is a barrier to sensemaking thus further impacting on the roles of strategic decision making, providing strategic direction and being action oriented. Additionally, the small business strategic leaders acknowledge the need for more interaction, collaboration, mentoring and support in a crisis. Not only to be provided by the small business strategic leader but also to be received by these strategic leaders, hence the interactive process of influencing one another. Therefore, sensemaking through the process of social interaction further enables the small business strategic leader's influencing role in a crisis.

Furthermore, in collecting the cues by interacting with the environment and the others in a crisis, the small business strategic leader must be able to identify the opportunities that can be exploited in a crisis (Weaven et al., 2021). The research findings support this view by recognising that a crisis presents the opportunities that may be used by the small business strategic leader. It is therefore for the small business strategic leader to identify these and to drive innovation. In identifying these opportunities, the small business strategic leader may be aided by heightened attention to detail (Kalkman, 2020). The

research findings illustrate this as the small business strategic leaders were able to identify the opportunities and come up with innovative solutions to sustain their business in a crisis.

Additionally, the research findings suggest that when the small business strategic leader identifies these opportunities, the strategies such as the diversification of product offering and leaning into more stakeholder management are also utilised. This requires leadership growth which is in line with the view by Dasborough and Scandura (2022) that a crisis highlights the need for leadership. The process of sensemaking therefore enables the small business strategic leader to drive innovation in a crisis.

As suggested by the analysis of the research findings with the literature, sensemaking is embedded throughout the roles that are played by the small business strategic leaders in a crisis, thereby meaning that sensemaking enables these strategic leaders to better perform their strategic leadership role in a crisis. Sensemaking, through the use of the cognitive process and social interactive strategies, further facilitates the unlocking of the barriers to the strategic leader's sensemaking process such as the negative emotions that are caused by a social support imbalance.

Considering the above discussions, a crisis further impacts on the strategic approach of the small business strategic leaders. Firstly, these strategic leaders employ a more intentional approach to drive innovation and growth. Secondly, in driving innovation and growth, the small business strategic leaders further use the diversification of product offering. Finally, to enable a seamless adaptation to evolving conditions, flexibility is also employed. This shift in the strategic approach is aimed at ensuring long term sustainability and to provide protection against future crises.

6.6 Conclusion

In summary, the research findings provided five themes that assisted in responding to the main research question through the two research sub-questions. The research findings per research sub-question and theme show a similarity with the extant literature. The conclusions reached in the analysis between the research findings and the literature have been used to propose an amended conceptual framework to that presented in Chapter 2 as shown in **Figure 6**.

The five themes that were identified are still encapsulated in the amended conceptual framework. This amended conceptual framework further expands on the sensemaking, on organisational crisis and on the strategic leadership body of knowledge within the small business context.

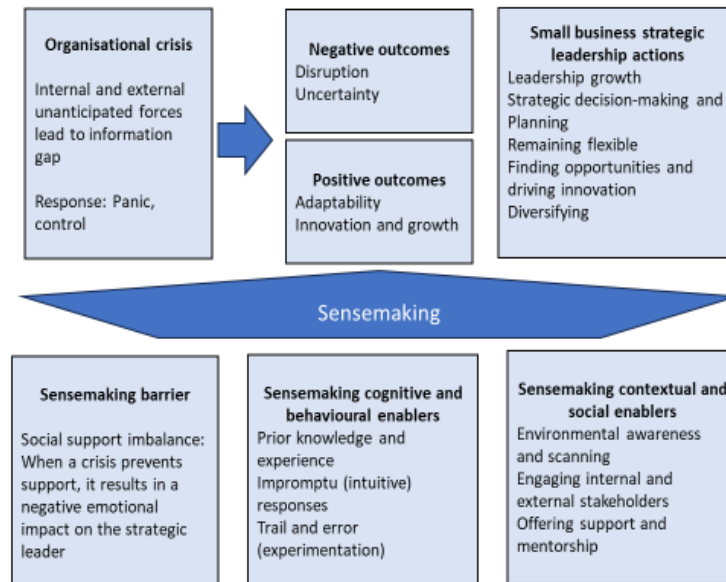


Figure 6: Amended conceptual framework (Author's own)

CHAPTER 7: RESEARCH CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter critically discussed the research findings with reference to the literature. The current chapter draws the research conclusions emanating from the research findings and the discussions as articulated in Chapters 5 and 6 above. The ultimate purpose of this research project was to explore how the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role in sensemaking in a crisis within the South African context. In so doing, this research project aimed to firstly obtain an understanding and have deep insights on the sensemaking role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. Secondly, the aim was to explore the process the small business strategic leaders follow to make sense of a crisis. Lastly, propose a conceptual framework that articulates the main constructs and insights into the sensemaking role of small business strategic leaders in crisis.

The research conclusions are presented according to the research sub-questions as articulated in Chapter 3. The research conclusions are further discussed with reference to the research findings and the literature. The final research outcomes are therefore used to update the conceptual framework as presented in Chapter 2 and the proposed amended framework as introduced in Chapter 6. This demonstrates the research contribution to the current academic debate. Furthermore, the recommendations that logically flowed from the theoretical conclusions are provided to the management. Lastly, consideration is given to the research limitations and the proposed areas of further research.

7.2 Principal Theoretical Conclusions

7.2.1 Research Sub-Question One: Organisational Crisis

Sub-question one: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

The research outcomes appear to be similar to the literature regarding how the small business strategic leaders define a crisis. The research outcome acknowledges a crisis as being an unanticipated incident that occurs in stages and that is created by internal and external forces that lead to an information gap thereby causing disruptions and an

uncertainty to the business, which requires urgent intervention by the small business strategic leaders.

This is in line with the position of Merendino and Sarens (2020) as well as Williams et al. (2017) that a crisis is a process that occurs over time. Further, the research outcomes are aligned with the position of Collins et al. (2023) as well as Wut et al. (2021) who contend that a crisis emanates from within or from outside the organisation. Finally, the research outcomes are further consistent with the views of the scholars such as Dhanesh and Sriramesh (2018); Kornberger et al. (2019) and Wut et al. (2021) who state that a crisis is unanticipated, and it is disruptive to the business operations.

Notwithstanding the similarities of the research findings with the extant literature, the research outcomes extend the body of knowledge on how a crisis is defined and understood by the strategic leaders within the context of the small business thus further expanding on the crisis leadership literature. Furthermore, a deeper understanding has now been obtained of the importance of planning and preparation for a crisis more so in the small businesses as the risk of business failure is high and the small business strategic leaders appear to be complacent about growth.

7.2.2 Research Sub-Question One: Role of Small Business Strategic Leaders in a Crisis

Sub-question one: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

The research outcomes seem to be consistent with the literature regarding the role of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research findings suggest that the role of these strategic leaders in a crisis includes setting strategic direction, strategic decision-making, driving innovation, influencing others, and taking action. This is aligned with the position of Hoang et al. (2021) as well as Fernandes et al. (2022) who suggest that the strategic leaders are in charge of putting together the strategic direction and ultimate decision making. Stam et al. (2018) further suggest that in a crisis a strategic leader must be action oriented.

This is because a crisis requires urgent intervention (Dasborough & Scandura, 2022). In taking action, the strategic leaders influence others (Hoang et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022) and drive innovation (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021) to ensure sustainability.

While acknowledging the similarities with the extant literature, the research outcomes further expand the current body of knowledge within the strategic leadership literature more so within the context of the small businesses.

7.2.3 Research Sub-Question Two: Hindrance to sensemaking – Social Support Imbalance

Sub-question two: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The research outcomes appear to be consistent with the literature when it comes to the barriers in the sensemaking process of the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research outcomes further suggest that the negative emotions and the lack of social support act as a hindrance to the small business strategic leader's sensemaking thus resulting in the collapse of the individual strategic leader's sensemaking. This is similar to the assertions by Dasborough and Scandura (2022) that the strategic leaders' inability to take care of their mental health in a crisis impairs their capacity to lead. Likewise, in support of the research outcomes, Angeli and Montefusco (2020) view the social interaction with the others as being key in sensemaking thus inferring that the lack thereof may weaken the strategic leaders' sensemaking process.

Notwithstanding the similarities of the research outcomes with the literature, the research outcomes further add to the current body of knowledge with a better understanding of the barriers to the strategic leaders' sensemaking process within the context of the small businesses.

7.2.4 Research Sub-Question Two: Sensemaking Enabler - Cognitive Process in Crisis

Sub-question two: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The research outcomes seem to be consistent with the literature in terms of how sensemaking enables the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research outcomes provide insights into how the small business strategic leaders in following a cognitive process to sensemaking initially make use of prior knowledge and experience in better understanding a crisis. This is in line with the views of Niemi et al. (2022) that

the strategic leaders make use of their existing cognitive frames to link the current reality to familiar past knowledge and experience. In addition, when this strategy does yield satisfactory results, the small business strategic leaders make use of impromptu response strategies and experimental strategies.

The impromptu response strategies considers the use of intuition in trying to get to terms with the crisis (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020) whereas the experimental strategies involve an iterative process of collecting cues and acting in finding a plausible solution (Hoyte et al., 2019). Further, in line with Weick (1988), to gain cognition, the small business strategic leaders must act, thus action is a necessity for cognition. Accordingly, even though the research outcomes are similar to the extant literature, they provide further insights into how the cognitive process can act as an enabler to the small business strategic leaders' sensemaking process thereby adding to the body of knowledge, specifically on sensemaking.

7.2.5 Research Sub-Question Two: Sensemaking Enabler - Collaborative and Interactive Social Experience

Sub-question two: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

The research outcomes appear to be consistent with the current literature regarding how sensemaking as a socially rooted construct enables the small business strategic leaders in a crisis. The research outcomes further suggest that the process of interfacing with the environment and with others through collaborative and interactive social experiences facilitates the small business strategic leaders' understanding of the crisis and it guards against a sensemaking failure.

In line with Hoyte et al. (2019), a strategic leader embarks on a social process of interacting with the environment and with others to make sense of a crisis and to regain order. Furthermore, Kalkman (2020) suggests that the process of interacting with the other individuals assists in individual sensemaking and it acts as an enabler to sensemaking thereby preventing the collapse of individual sensemaking.

Notwithstanding the identified similarities between the research outcomes and the extant literature, the research outcomes provide insights on how collaborative social interaction acts as a strategy to further reinforce the sensemaking process of the small business strategic leader in a crisis. The research outcomes further expand the current body of knowledge on sensemaking with social interaction being an enabling strategy for the small business strategic leaders in a crisis.

7.3 Research Contribution

The aim of this research was to obtain an understanding and the deep insights into the sensemaking role of the strategic leaders in a crisis by exploring the process the small business strategic leaders follow to make sense of a crisis. This research was grounded in Weick's (1988) sensemaking theory and it considered the cognitive process and the social embeddedness of sensemaking in a crisis (Christianson & Barton, 2021). This is done within the context of strategic leadership by considering the role of the strategic leaders in a crisis (Merendino & Sarens, 2020) and how sensemaking enables these leaders (April & Chimenya, 2019; Crayne & Medeiros, 2021). This research expands the current body of knowledge on sensemaking by providing further insights on how the cognitive process and the social interaction can act as enabling strategies for the small business strategic leaders in a crisis more especially considering the inhibitors to sensemaking.

Furthermore, while the expected research outcomes and the reactions were found in response to the organisational crisis, deeper insights have been obtained of what is top of mind for the small business strategic leaders as they reflect on a crisis. Moreover, the research has uncovered the important barriers and the enablers of the sensemaking process. The significance of the sensemaking process for the crises is already known, however, this research has now provided an understanding of how the organisations can bolster sensemaking during crises. Finally, the small business strategic leaders became aware of the need to grow as leaders in the time, and they practiced best practice in decision-making.

7.4 Recommendations for Management

The recommendations to management are drawn logically from the theoretical conclusions. The research outcomes can be used by the management to further strengthen the strategic leadership and the sensemaking practices that are employed in the organisations in a crisis.

The management can advance sensemaking by developing knowledge and experience as part of continuous learning within the organisation. In addition, intuition is important for decision making (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021) therefore the management should consider developing intuitive decision-making. Moreover, the management should consider practicing the art of experimentation to develop the cognitive and the behavioural components of sensemaking. According to Camuffo et al. (2020), the small business strategic leaders are more prone to follow an experimental approach to decision making. As sensemaking feeds into decision making, it will only aid the management to consider mastering the art of experimentation and to draw lessons for future decision making.

Additionally, the management should consider putting structures in place to further develop the mentorship for the leaders specifically on how to deal with a crisis. According to St-Jean and Tremblay (2020), mentorship is key in supporting the small business leaders as it has a positive impact on the leaders' self-confidence. These structures will play a role of strengthening the strategic leaders' sensemaking process and they will provide support to manage the risk negative emotions that play a role in hindering effective sensemaking.

Moreover, the management can develop sensemaking by developing skills in environmental awareness. In doing so, the management must constantly scan and assess the environment to identify the trends and the opportunities that may impact the business and aid decision making (Andersen et al., 2022). The management should not only focus on environmental awareness, but it should also focus on the engagement with internal and external stakeholders, more so in a crisis. Cardoni et al. (2023) contend that in times of a crisis, the small business strategic leaders should interact more openly and transparently with the stakeholders.

Finally, the management should spend time focusing on long term strategic planning and growing the business. According to Haarhaus and Liening (2020), this will aid in strategic flexibility and in rational decision making. Furthermore, the management should employ this approach as standard practice in reinforcing the business strategy. In doing so, the risk of complacency in growing the business is managed and the business is better prepared for any unexpected future incidences.

7.5 Limitations of the Research

In scoping the research project, the researcher did not segment the small business sector to allow for more segment specific research outcomes. A more generalised approach was used. This is because of the challenges in obtaining complete consolidated small business population data. Furthermore, the years of experience of the small business strategic leaders and the period the small business has been in existence were not considered as part of scoping.

The crisis experience timeframe included the period of the Covid_19 pandemic, therefore most of the research participants shared their Covid_19 related crisis experiences. The research outcomes may be biased and skewed towards one crisis type. It is acknowledged, however, that the experiences of the different participants may be different based on their personal dispositions.

Additionally, in considering the demographics of the research participants, 11 of the 16 participants are male with only one participant of the 16 being a white male. The experiences that support the research outcomes are more from a male and African demographic perspective.

Finally, the research outcomes may not be generalised as the purpose of this qualitative study was exploratory in nature thereby focusing on the individual lived experiences and the meaning of these shared experiences.

7.6 Suggestions for Future Research

In taking the research work forward, the other scholars may consider replicating this study by focusing on the strategic leaders with small businesses that have completed the first five years of business. This is because research has shown that when small businesses reach five years in operation, they are more likely to survive for a prolonged

period. Furthermore, the other researchers may consider segmenting the small business sector by providing comparisons and contrasts between the various segments. In applying this approach, additional rich insights may be obtained.

Moreover, the crisis experiences shared by most of the research participants relate to the Covid_19 crisis experiences. The other scholars may consider focusing on exploring a wide range of different crises experiences for more insightful and different perspectives. Over and above this, the scholars may further consider a demographically diverse sample which will also advance the body of knowledge and provide a more balanced view. Finally, this research has been conducted in an emerging economy within a South African and an African context. The other scholars may therefore consider replicating this study in a different context.

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APPENDICES

Appendix One: Interview Protocol

Title: Sensemaking in crisis: An exploration among strategic leaders in small businesses

Main Question: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

Sub-Question 1: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses identify their role as part of strategic leadership in a crisis?

Sub-Question 2: How do the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking as a strategy in a crisis as part of their strategic leadership role?

Administrative

Introduction of the topic and the research question to be addressed by the researcher.

1. Explain the research purpose.
2. Specify that the interview will be recorded via Zoom/Teams/GoogleMeet and obtain consent to record.
3. Explain how the data will be stored and used in the research work.
4. Explain the requirement and the purpose of the consent letter, confidentiality, voluntary nature of the interview, option to withdraw at any given point in time with no penalties and obtain recorded verbal or signed consent confirmation.
5. Give a standard and uniform definition of a crisis and sense-making.
6. Lastly, explain that the interview will take between 60 and 90 core minutes.

Introduction

1. Please describe your previous and current role and expertise.
2. Have you ever experienced a crisis in your business?

Body

3. Please tell me about a crisis you experienced in your business? What happened?
4. Did you anticipate the crisis? How?
5. When the crisis landed, how did you make sense of it?

Prompts:

- How did you change how you normally think about things?
- Did you follow a specific process to get to terms with the crisis?

6. How did the crisis change your strategic outlook?
7. How do you see your role as a small business leader in a crisis?

Conclusion

8. Looking back, what were your key lessons from the process for your strategic approach?

Prompt if needed: Would you do anything differently and why?

Appendix Two: Proforma Informed Consent

Informant number:

Informant job title:

I am conducting research on sensemaking, strategic leadership and small business facing a crisis. Our interview is expected to last a maximum of 90 minutes and will help us understand how the strategic leaders in the small businesses use sensemaking in a crisis. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Further, the information shared in the interview will be kept strictly confidential.

By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have given permission for:

1. The interview is to be recorded;
2. The recording to be transcribed using online transcription;
3. Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation;
4. The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
5. All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Researcher name:XXX

Research Supervisor name: Charlene Lew

Email: 23691141@mygibs.co.za

Email: lewc@gibs.co.za

Phone:XXX

Phone: N/A

Signature of participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____

Appendix Three: Code Listing, Categories, and Themes

Code No.	First Order Codes	Category Names	Category No.	Themes
112	Strategic Leader - Founder and Director	Strategic Leader - Owner	1	Strategic leader
113	Strategic Leader - Business owner	Strategic Leader - Owner	1	
114	Strategic Leader - Founder and Principal director	Strategic Leader - Owner	1	
115	Strategic Leader - Co-Founder and director	Strategic Leader - Owner	1	
116	Strategic Leader - Co-Owner and Director	Strategic Leader - Owner	1	
110	Strategic Leader - Vice President Customer Operation	Strategic Leader - Non Owners	2	
111	Strategic Leader - Legal and Compliance director	Strategic Leader - Non Owners	2	
102	In SB - Crisis everyday	Small Business Context	3	Small business environment dynamics
103	Unmet expectations	Small Business Context	3	
104	Difficulty with market penetration	Small Business Context	3	
105	Small business - lack of support vs corporate	Small Business Context	3	
106	In SB - weaknesses in processes	Small Business Context	3	
107	Lesson learnt - Importance of proper processes	Small Business Context	3	
108	In SB - Lack of proper pricing	Small Business Context	3	
109	In SB - Can't afford to attract good talent	Small Business Context	3	
6	Learning from other leaders	Collaboration and Learning	4	Collaborative and interactive social experience
7	Share crisis experience with others - lessons	Collaboration and Learning	4	
8	Collaboration with other businesses	Collaboration and Learning	4	
9	Collaboration with other people	Collaboration and Learning	4	
72	During Crisis - Interaction with external stakeholders: Customers	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	
74	Cement customer relations	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	
75	During Crisis - Interaction with external stakeholder: in class	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	

76	Lesson learnt - interaction with external stakeholders	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	
77	During Crisis - Interaction with external stakeholders: Suppliers	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	
78	During Crisis - Interaction with external stakeholders: Networks	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	
79	Pre-Crisis - Planning and preparation: build customer relations	Interaction with stakeholders - External	5	
80	Lesson learnt - More interaction with employees	Interaction with stakeholders - Internal	6	
81	Interact with employees - data collection	Interaction with stakeholders - Internal	6	
82	During Crisis - Interaction with internal stakeholder: business partner	Interaction with stakeholders - Internal	6	
83	During Crisis - Interaction with internal stakeholders: Employees	Interaction with stakeholders - Internal	6	
70	Lesson learnt - Involve employees more business decisions	Interaction with stakeholders - Internal	7	
71	Lesson learnt - Strong stakeholder relationships	Collaboration and Learning	7	
73	Cues - Watching and learning from others	Signal collection from environment	8	
97	Cues - Follow news	Signal collection from environment	8	
98	Cues - Listening and monitoring government announcements	Signal collection from environment	8	
99	Cues - Collecting data from environment	Signal collection from environment	8	
100	Cues - Research and reading	Signal collection from environment	8	
101	Pre-crisis indications	Signal collection from environment	8	
89	Not only business facing same crisis	Mentorship and support for strategic leaders	10	
90	Strong belief in Religion	Mentorship and support for strategic leaders	10	
91	Mentorship and support for leaders	Mentorship and support for strategic leaders	10	
92	Support - Mental health (Lesson)	Mentorship and support for strategic leaders	10	
84	Cognition - Impromptu response as crisis happens	Leader cognitive process	9	Cognitive process in crisis
85	Cognition - Trial and error situation	Leader cognitive process	9	
86	Cognition - Prior knowledge and experience	Leader cognitive process	9	
64	During-Crisis - Concern over employees	Employee wellbeing concern	11	Hindrance to Sensemaking -
87	Absent crisis leader - business suffered	Leader wellbeing	12	

88	Absent crisis leader - lack of direction for employees	Leader wellbeing	12	Social support imbalance
118	Leader - Decision making	Strategic leader role - strategic decision making	13	Strategic leader role in crisis
117	During Crisis - Action oriented	Strategic leader role - action oriented	14	
119	Financial scenario analysis	Strategic leader role - action oriented	14	
120	Reinforce strategy	Strategic leader role - action oriented	14	
121	Lesson learnt - to be action-oriented	Strategic leader role - action oriented	14	
122	Leader - Problem solver	Strategic leader role - action oriented	14	
126	Leader - Lead from the front	Strategic leader role - setting direction	15	
127	Leader - Set strategic direction	Strategic leader role - setting direction	15	
124	Leader - Influencing Others	Strategic leader role - influencing others	16	
125	Leader - Provide reassurance to employees	Strategic leader role - influencing others	16	
123	Leader - Bring innovation	Strategic leader role - drive innovation	17	
40	PreCrisis - not prepared for crisis such magnitude	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	Nature of crisis
41	Lesson learnt - preparation is key	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
42	Pre-Crisis - Planning and preparation	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
43	Long term planning	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
44	Lesson learnt - Create safety net	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
45	Lesson learnt - Crisis management plan	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
46	Crisis resistant industry	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
47	PreCrisis - Not prepared for remote working	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
48	PreCrisis - No opportunity to plan as new business	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
49	Pre-Crisis - Planning and preparation: Resources	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
50	Pre-Crisis - Planning and preparation: Know environment	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
51	PreCrisis - Not prepared, worked on Trust	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	
52	Lesson learnt - alignment of internal system	Crisis planning and key lessons	18	

68	Saving vs growth conflict	Crisis planning and key lessons	18
69	Juggle current and future	Crisis planning and key lessons	18
128	Different approach for different crisis	Strategies employed in crisis	19
129	Lesson learnt - Holistic view of a crisis is key	Strategies employed in crisis	19
130	Strategy - Diversification of offering	Strategies employed in crisis	19
131	During Crisis - Preserve cashflow	Strategies employed in crisis	19
132	Opportunities during crisis	Strategies employed in crisis	19
54	Crisis Name - Covid_19	Crisis Type	20
55	Crisis Name - Economic dynamics	Crisis Type	20
56	Crisis Name - Internal processes	Crisis Type	20
27	Crisis category - External	Crisis Category	21
28	Crisis category - Internal	Crisis Category	21
24	Crisis: Unanticipated event	Crisis anticipation	22
25	There are anticipated crisis	Crisis anticipation	22
26	Unanticipated crisis magnitude	Crisis anticipation	22
93	Lesson Learnt - Risk taking and daring	Nature of crisis	23
94	Crisis brings panic	Nature of crisis	23
95	Crisis beyond control	Nature of crisis	23
96	Crisis inevitable in business	Nature of crisis	23
38	Insufficient information on crisis	Crisis information gap	24
39	Unfamiliar event - no experience	Crisis information gap	24
57	Crisis caused disruption - impact on operations	Disruption caused by crisis	25
58	Crisis impact - decline profitability	Disruption caused by crisis	25
59	During Crisis - Downsizing	Disruption caused by crisis	25
60	During Crisis - Cashflow challenges	Disruption caused by crisis	25
61	Crisis caused disruption - violated expectation	Disruption caused by crisis	25
62	Crisis Impact - lost machinery distribution segment	Disruption caused by crisis	25

63	Crisis impact - no business growth	Disruption caused by crisis	25
10	Uncertainty - decision makings	Creation of Uncertainty	26
11	Uncertainty - production	Creation of Uncertainty	26
12	Uncertainty - products needed	Creation of Uncertainty	26
13	Uncertainty - business operations	Creation of Uncertainty	26
14	Uncertainty - Crisis length	Creation of Uncertainty	26
15	Uncertainty - general impact	Creation of Uncertainty	26
16	Uncertainty - environmental conditions	Creation of Uncertainty	26
17	Uncertainty - cashflow	Creation of Uncertainty	26
18	Lesson learnt - Quick response	Creation of urgency	27
19	During Crisis - Urgent Response	Creation of urgency	27
20	During Crisis - Urgent Decision Making	Creation of urgency	27
21	During Crisis - Urgent Understanding of crisis	Creation of urgency	27
22	During Crisis - Quick innovation	Creation of urgency	27
23	During Crisis - Quick Technology Adaptation	Creation of urgency	27
1	Adapt to the changing environment	Adaptability to new condition	28
2	Lesson learnt - adaptability	Adaptability to new condition	28
3	Lesson learnt - adaptability: lean operating model	Adaptability to new condition	28
4	Adapt to the changing environment - Social media	Adaptability to new condition	28
5	Adapt to the changing environment - Technology	Adaptability to new condition	28
29	Innovation brought about by the crisis	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
30	Lessons learnt - drive growth: more marketing	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
31	Post-Crisis impact - Increased productivity/revenue	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
32	Lesson learnt - Constant state of innovation	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
33	increase revenue/productivity during crisis	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
34	Complacent about growth	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
35	Growth - more intentional about business growth	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29

36	Innovative ways of operating	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
37	Crisis - Acceleration of innovation	Crisis drives innovation and growth	29
53	Leadership elevated in crisis	Crisis requires sound leadership	30
65	Flexibility - Dynamic approach	Flexibility in leadership	31
66	Lesson learnt - flexibility	Flexibility in leadership	31
67	Flexibility - Fluid approach	Flexibility in leadership	31

Appendix Four: Ethical Clearance Approval

**Gordon Institute
of Business Science**
University of Pretoria

**Ethical Clearance
Approved**



Please be advised that your application for Ethical Clearance has been approved.
You are therefore allowed to continue collecting your data.
We wish you everything of the best for the rest of the project.

[Ethical Clearance Form](#)

Kind Regards