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Title: The challenges faced by coffee/food truck small business entrepreneurs during the
Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

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Abstract

Alon, Farrell & Li (2020) explain that the COVID-19 pandemic remains one of the most significant crises in modern times. Chandra (2020) describes the pandemic as a catalyst for first time food entrepreneurs. Usman and Sun (2022) describe how adversity created by the pandemic trigged behavioural changes that made some look for alternative ways to make a living. The aim of this study was to discover the challenges faced by small business entrepreneurs (food/coffee trucks in particular) during the pandemic, and how faced with Covid-19 restrictions, they set up new businesses and what contributed to their success or failure. The aim involved trying to establish if there is a particular pathway/ formula to follow in a crisis to ensure business success or is it down to individual drive, personality, and outlook.

Design/methodology/approach

The author conducted a literature review and in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs who set up coffee/food truck businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. Ribbons (2007) claims that it is only by listening to peoples' voices that we really find out what it is like to be that person. Creswell (2003) describes the qualitative research interview as a construction site for knowledge.

Findings

The research findings show that the pathway/formula to follow in a crisis to ensure success in setting up your own business during the pandemic is linked to a personal drive to work, the need to be doing something and having a good idea for a business that you know could work. All four business owners who set up their coffee/food truck businesses saw an opportunity arise because of the pandemic. Three of the entrepreneurs had no experience of running their own businesses before the pandemic. Storr et al (2021) point out that "entrepreneurship is a course of action available to anyone". The study explores challenges, fears and rewards that can potentially provide motivation and learning to others. The research provides insights and further supports existing writing on attributes of successful entrepreneurs, the recommendation being to think twice before embarking on a business adventure especially if you think you might not have the right opportunity, time, drive, passion, and commitment to working hard. The research supports the recommendation that if you have a good idea for a business and you know based on a particular set of factors it could work, you should go for it and make it work.

Declaration

I declare that the work submitted for examination is wholly my own work and all materials consulted and ideas garnered in the process of researching the dissertation have been properly and accurately acknowledged.

Seanán Hession

02/07/2023

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This research provides new knowledge, insight and understanding of the success and challenges faced by small business entrepreneurs in the hospitality/food service industry in the face of covid-19 restrictions. Gov.ie (2022) describe entrepreneurs as a key element for the health and wellbeing of a growing economy. OCED (2022) describe small to medium sized businesses and entrepreneurs as part of Irelands challenge in creating growth and prosperity. Boettk & Coyne (2006) define entrepreneurship broadly as the means by which progress, and economic and social change occurs. Storr et al (2021) describe it as the act of adapting old or finding new processes to create new goods and services.

The report of the SME Growth Taskforce (2021) sets out recommendations to help start-up companies, improve digital capabilities and proposes a long-term vision for SME growth. During Covid-19 SME's and entrepreneurs faced extreme economic conditions. This research is a study of the success and challenges faced by entrepreneurs who reinvented themselves and set up new food truck/coffee vans businesses during covid-19.

The research aims to look at

· Choices small business entrepreneurs faced during the Covid-19 crisis and those involved in the hospitality/food service industry in particular

· Dealing with the unexpected, flight or fright, crisis and improvisation

· Setting up a new business during a pandemic i.e. Food trucks/coffee vans

This researcher's interest in this topic arose due to their employment experience during the pandemic. Originally in part-time employment in a small event management company that organised student social events, because of the pandemic the event industry practically closed down. Some small business entrepreneurs saw the situation as a business opportunity and when their original businesses closed, instead of joining social welfare schemes they set up food trucks/coffee vans to offer outdoor food services.

Literature Review

On 16th January 2020 RTE (2020) reported on unusual pneumonia outbreak in China. On 28th February a woman who travelled through Dublin Airport on her way from northern Italy to Northern Ireland tested positive in Belfast. On 29th February the first case of coronavirus is reported in Ireland, a male student in the east who had returned from Italy. On 1st March a secondary school in the east closed for 14 days. On 2nd March google advised its staff to work from home. On 4th March four more cases were reported. On 8th March Irish people are advised not to travel to Northern Italy. On 9th March the decision is made to cancel the St. Patrick's day parade. On 12th March the Taoiseach announced that schools, colleges and childcare would close until 29th March. On 15th March all pubs and bars closed until 29th March. On 17th March the Taoiseach advised that coronavirus would go on until after 29th March and could go into the summer. On 24th March the Taoiseach asked all to stay at home unless they could not work from home and for schools, colleges and childcare to remain closed until 19th April. On 28th March a mandatory order was issued to stay at home until 12th April with some exceptions. On 10th April lockdown was extended for three weeks. On 1st May 2020 the Government announced the roadmap for reopening society and business. On 29th June hairdressers, gyms, cinemas, and churches reopen. On 24th December 2020 Ireland returns to Level 5 restrictions/lockdown until 5th April 2021. Hao, Xiao and Chon (2020) describe the Covid-19 pandemic as a disaster that was neither predicable nor avoidable.

The CSO conducted business impact surveys throughout the pandemic. The first in May 2020 covered the five-week period between 16 March and 19 April 2020, 3000 enterprises were survey. 23.9% of those who responded had ceased trading temporarily or permanently. 76% continued to trade. Over 54% indicated that their turnover was significantly lower than normal for that time of year due to Covid-19. Over two thirds indicated they introduced remote working. Approximately 34.6% indicated they had temporarily let staff go and 32% reported decreased working hours. 46.9% of those who responded had availed of the Government wage subsidy scheme. The CSO reports that in the period 20 April to 3rd May 2020, 51.4% of responding enterprises availed of Government support, 53.2% were SME's. The table on the

next page covers level of impact on different aspects of business e.g. reduced domestic demand, cashflow difficulties, supply chain interruptions.

COVID-19 impact on enterprises by level of impact, 16 March to 19 April 2020

	% of responding enterprises				
	No impact	Low impact	Moderate impact	High impact	Don't know
Reduced domestic demand	18.8	10.4	19.2	46.8	4.7
Reduced international demand	42.6	10.5	12.5	20.7	13.7
Cashflow difficulties	19.7	20.9	24.3	31.1	4.0
Liquidity issues	31.7	21.1	20.9	16.9	9.4
Lower productivity	22.5	18.7	20.3	32.6	5.9
Logistics issues	20.3	26.0	24.8	20.9	8.1
Supply chain interruptions	20.4	26.9	24.0	20.6	8.1
Restrictions on business operations	10.5	21.1	24.0	41.3	3.1

https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofcovid-19survey16marchto19april2020/

The results of the CSO business impact survey covering the period 20th July to 23rd August 2020 were released by the CSO in September 2020. 63.3% of respondents advised they were trading as normal, 33% indicated trading at partial capacity. 50.5% indicated a lower-than-normal turnover for the period. An average of 7% of staff returned from remote working to the workplace during the period. 18.4% indicated that they deferred or changed revenue payments to help manage cashflow. 19.9% indicated that cashflow as an ongoing concern. 45.7% available of Government supports for the four-week period. 48.7% of SME's availed of Government supports compared 33.3% or large enterprises. i.e., wage subsidy scheme and restart grant from local authorities.

(Source: https:// www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/bic19/businessimpactofcovid-19survey27julto23aug2020/

Bord Bia in its 2020 Irish Foodservice Market Insight Report describes the industry as 'an industry disrupted'. They describe coffee shops/cafes/trucks as quick service restaurants with an emphasis on coffee and hot drinks. Bord Bia (2020) explains that as a result of Covid-19 various levels of restrictions, businesses saw a shift to off premise trade, with suburban

locations reporting strong sales, and city centre locations being hard hit due to lack of footfall caused by restrictions such as working from home.

Turner and Endres (2017) define small business owners as individuals who conceive, launch, and assume the risk for new economic activities in the form of a business venture. Hansen, Shrader, and Monllor (2011) report that small business owners display the personal characteristics of a strong internal sense of control and the need to achieve. Surdez-Perez et al (2014) argue that personal attributes of successful small business owners include creativity, hard work, self-discipline and good negotiation skills. Jackson and Jackson (2016) describe a sustainable business as one that creates profit and meets the needs of others in services or products. Turner and Endres (2017 pg. 43) argue that a business can achieve differentiation by making sure their product or brand is unique and difficult to replicate by competitors. Box and Miller (2011) agree with this arguing that the most successful business strategy for small companies is focused differentiation. Turner and Endres (2017) explain that customer service and a sense of community are the most critical elements to enable a coffee shop business to survive longer than 5 years. Sheth, J. (2020) explains that Coronavirus highlighted how fragile business in, managing to disrupt the supply chain locally, nationally and internationally, explaining that during the Covid-19 pandemic business and society were interdependent for mutual survival.

Meyer et al (2020) outline some of the positives of pandemics e.g. help advance health care systems and encourage technological innovation. Chandra (2020) describes the pandemic as a catalyst for first time food entrepreneurs. Usman and Sun (2022) describe how adversity created by the pandemic triggered behavioural changes that made some look for alternative ways to make a living. Shepherd and Williams (2014) suggest that the possibility of entrepreneurship alleviates a situation one finds themselves in and is the factor that makes one open a new business following a catastrophic event. Fukushima (2018) reports that age and experience are also factors in establishing a new business following a crisis or a disaster. Hayward et al (2010) explain how resilience helps people through difficult periods suggesting that positive feelings following disaster protects resilience and helps individuals to achieve success in a time of adversity. Usman and Sun (2022) explain how Covid-19 created extreme stresses and restrictions on businesses. Krueger et al (2000) argue that individuals with a tendency to seize opportunities may perceive an event such as a pandemic as an opportunity and launch a new business. Usman and Sun (2022) explain how the increase in

demand for masks and sanitizers and related products was motivation for some to deliver the goods and services. They further explain how entrepreneurship is essential in a crisis such as a pandemic as it can change people's perception of a crisis and turn a negative situation into a positive. They conclude that entrepreneurs are more likely to start a new business during a pandemic if the new business has the potential to improve living conditions. Prince et al (2021) describe the many definitions but closely related definitions of entrepreneurs, referring to business creators, innovators, risk takers with a view to making a profit.

Daft and Marcic (2014) explore the value of developing positive leadership and the important of positive emotions and positive behaviour, in particular when faced with business/leadership challenges. Cucculelli & Peruzzi (2020) advise that business survival following a crisis or recession depends on the entrepreneurial ability of the decision makers to react. Latham & Braun (2010) suggest that business's response strategies and re-positing efforts during an economic crisis will define its post crisis performance. Simon-Moya et al (2016) emphasise when faced with crisis, the importance of a leadership mind-set, maintaining good relationships and networks, identifying threats and opportunities and making decisions promptly.   Doern et al (2019) claim that entrepreneurship activities help to offset the negative impacts of crisis by keeping a flow of goods and services, offering reassurance to the public. Saunders et al (2014) explain that small to medium sized enterprises with strong innovative capabilities who are willing to learn from critical events, survive and recover better than others. Storr et al (2021) point out that "entrepreneurship is a course of action available to anyone". Storr et al (2021) also advise that the expectation is that entrepreneurs will find new and interesting ways to provide goods and services. Chamlee-Wright & Storr (2014) explain that in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, entrepreneurs provided social spaces for people to gather, talk to and support each other.

Enterprise Ireland (2021) reports that they provided €48 million for high potential start-ups during Covid 19, twice the level of funding they normally provide annually. Coffey et al (2020) explain that three key factors impacted consumer behaviour in Ireland during the pandemic (a) economic adjustments to household incomes as a result of labour market adjustments (b) regulatory restrictions on consumer behaviour, and (c) impact of viral infection avoidance strategies on discretionary behaviour (2020, p. 7) Chen et al (2020) explain that early data available from China during the pandemic showed a 64% drop in spending on dining and entertainment. Central Bank Figures in March 2020 showed a 45%

drop in credit and debit card spending on dining and entertainment, this is seen as a direct result of Covid-19 restrictions and business closures. Martinez-Cillero et al (2020) found that one in two small to medium sized enterprises In Ireland faced losses during lockdown, with up to €10 billion in losses by the end of 2020. McQuinn et al (2020) describe the impact of what they describe as the economic shock on the Irish Economy, with unemployment rates rising to above 30% at one stage, with negative impact on low wage and part-time jobs. Petrunoff M. (2020) highlights the negative impact of Covid-19 on small businesses, including shortages of supplies, shortages of staff, owners responsibility to existing staff in face of business closure. Marketbusinessnews.com also reports on the negative impact of the pandemic on small business including the inability to carry on normal business due to restrictions, stress and forced closures. In October 2020 the Irish Independent reported that of 295,860 people in receipt of the PUP payment, 90,051 were from the events/food services industry. Beirne et al (2020) found that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and Temporary Wages Subsidy Scheme (WSS) played a role in lessening the shock of income loss as a result of job losses. The CSO (2023) reports that employees receiving PUP and/or WSS rose from 13.9% in the first quarter of 2020 to 40% in the second quarter, reducing to 30.1% in the third quarter and down to 25.5% in the last quarter.

The Irish Times (2020) reported that the lockdown dealt a severe blow to the foodservice industry, the challenge being for companies to try to think outside the norm and look for potential new business opportunities, services and products. Hannon (2020) reports that those who want to progress in a crisis need to look to innovation. Melia (2021) reported in the Irish Independent that 2020 was an opportunity for Irish entrepreneurs to show resilience and innovation. An entrepreneur put simply by Mouleart et al (2017) describe social innovation as the way businesses develop innovative solutions to meet the needs of communities and individuals. Kothari (2020) claims to start up entrepreneurs need to accept fear, conserve cash, look for opportunity and build adaptability, emphasising that flexibility and the ability to constantly re-evaluate and essential attributes for survival. Lichy et al (2022) explain that food-truck entrepreneurs took advantage of low overheads to provide an alternative for eating out during the pandemic. Lichy et al (2022) discuss the principles of social business in the context of the food truck during the pandemic, mentioning building and maintaining relationships with customers as central to success. Ryan (2020) reported in the Irish Independent on what she described as 6 of the best coffee trucks/kiosks in Dublin. Highlighting their importance to communities since the Covid-19 had forced cafes, pubs and restaurants close their doors either

temporarily or permanently. Ratten & Jones (2020) report that because of people working and living from home they were forced to look to other means of business, entertainment and socialisation.

Research Question

The research question is

How entrepreneurs used Covid-19 as an opportunity to reinvent themselves?

The aim of this study is to discover the challenges faced by small business entrepreneurs during the pandemic, and how faced with Covid-19 restrictions, they set up new businesses and what contributed to their success or failure. My aim involves trying to establish if there is a particular pathway/ formula to follow in a crisis to ensure business success or is it down to individual drive, personality, and outlook.

Chapter2: Method and Methodology

The following is a description of the methodological framework within which this research was conducted and offers a rational for chosen data collection techniques. Possible ethical issues and limitations of the research are also discussed.

Cohen and Mannion (1994) define research methods as the range of approaches, techniques and procedures used to gather data. The chosen methodology depends on several factors for example, the data required, the purpose it will be used for and whether a qualitative or quantitative approach is needed. The research instrument to be used in this research is very important and it must enable the entrepreneur to tell his/story. Cohen et al (2008) explain that there are five main qualitative research types – phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, biography and case study. Cohen et al (2008, p. 254) explains that a case study provides a unique example of real people, in real situations, that enables readers to understand ideas more clearly. A case study approach is deemed appropriate as the focus of the research is the experience of small business entrepreneurs in the hospitality/food service industry in the face of Covid-19 restrictions in Ireland. The data for this research was generated by interviews with at four small business entrepreneurs in the Dublin area. A questionnaire was considered, however, the researcher felt the depth of information required would be better achieved through interviews. Quantitative data available was used to set the scene for the economic landscape and challenges small business entrepreneurs faced. Creswell (2003) describes how qualitative data further enhances to provide depth and analysis to quantitative data. Morrisson (2002) explains that to effectively explore the phenomena under investigation, you need to try to get inside the mind of the person to understand from within. Crotty (1998) describes a theoretical perspective as the philosophical stance lying behind the methodology. The interpretivist approach is adopted as Creswell (2003) explains that is encourages the value of explaining the data to create knowledge and is a way to gain insight though developing understanding and meaning. Ribbons (2007) claims that it is only by listening to peoples' voices that we really find out what it is like to be that person. Creswell (2003) describes the qualitative research interview as a construction site for knowledge. Creswell (2003) also advised that the face-to-face interview can be opportunity to modify your line of enquiry if an interesting point arises that you would like to follow up on. Hague (1993) explains the advantage of an in-depth interview as providing an opportunity to view body language, to gain depth of understanding and for greater accuracy and it gives the respondent time to reflect and consider (1993, p 23)

Hague (1993) explains that interviews are not without their disadvantages and the interviewer must be well prepared and be aware of bias. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. As an inexperienced interviewer structured interviews are used in the main, however some open-ended questions are included to allow the interviewer to follow up on interesting points that may arise. For this research a deliberate non-random participant selection was used, as participants with a particular characteristic or knowledge that is relevant to the phenomenon being researched (Hague, 1993) were needed. Participants were asked to share their story, challenges they faced, attributes, skills and key factors that contributed to their success, key learning and if there is anything they would do differently if faced with a similar situation in the future. The interview questions were piloted with the researcher's current boss to help refine questions and modify gaps. Two of those to be interviewed are known to the researcher and two are known through friends. Doing a pilot interview helps to ensure that the questions are appropriate and allows the interviewer to see reactions to the proposed questions, it also helps to manage timing. Creswell (2003, p 186) points out that interviews have the potential to provide rich information but potentially can be time consuming and take a lot of organising. Gillham (2005) points out the important of the interviewer being prepared, good planning and acknowledging bias to limit possible negative impact. Interviewees are assured of confidentiality. Interview questions was devised from themes uncovered in Chapter One Literature Review. The biggest challenge faced by the interviewer was finding a mutually available time to conduct the interviews, and a couple of the interviews involved a lot of scheduling and rescheduling. The researcher underestimated the amount of time it would take to arrange times that would suit to conduct the interviews. All those interviewed were assured their names and the name of their businesses would not be identified. Their participation was voluntarily and the interviewee was conscious that they were all very busy running their businesses and tried to be as flexible as possible in the conduction of the interviews.

Interview questions were as follows:

You set up a business during the Covid-19 pandemic – up until the pandemic can you give a brief synopsis of your work/employment experience?
Did you set up as a sole trader, partnership or private limited company?
Why?

Did you avail of any government supports?

Had you plans to set up the business before the pandemic struck?

List your three main motivators for setting up your business at that time? (one, being your highest motivator)

What was your biggest fear?

What was the biggest challenge (s) you faced?

What was your biggest reward?

What is the best advice you were given?

If faced with a pandemic again, what advice would you give someone thinking of setting up their own business?

Following the pilot interview, the order of interview questions changed, more general questions are asked first to put the interviewee more at ease. The pilot interview helped to build this inexperienced interviewer's confidence and test recording technology. For the research interviews, interviewees were invited for interview at a time and location convenient to them to help make them feel at ease and as comfortable as possible during the interview. Interviews were conducted during the months of April and May 2023 and lasted approx. 20 minutes. With the agreement of the interviewees the interviews were recorded for ease of transcription and analysis. Each interviewee was assigned a number for data analysis purposes and to protect confidentiality.

A thematic analysis of the data took place to provide a comprehensive profile of the sector, the challenges they faced and the key themes from the participants experiences. Creswell (2009) recommends a step-by-step approach to data analysis that allows for reporting of multiple realities. For this research this involved the reading and re reading of interview transcripts to identify and code themes that can be linked back to themes from the literature review for comparison. Themes were developed into headings for the findings section of the research. Qualitative analysis gives insight into what is being research and can begin with the search for themes. Creswell (2009) explains that qualitative analysis involves converting data into themes that contribute meaning to the phenomenon being researched. Creswell's model of data analysis and his guidance on coding/thematic analysis was adopted.

Creswell (2009) describes a step-by-step system of data analysis that allows for the reporting of multiple realities. He explains that the steps can be modified and interlinked as needed.

Step one involved organising the data, step two involved reading and reading the transcripts from the interviews, using ideas from the literature to help identify themes. Themes were identified in the transcripts, recorded as they arose, and linked back to themes in the literature. Themes were linked to the literature review and linked back to the interviews under the following headings:

Life before Covid-19 Pandemic

You set up a business during the Covid-19 pandemic – up until the pandemic can you give a brief synopsis of your work/employment experience?

Setting up a business during Covid-19

Did you set up as a sole trader, partnership or private limited company?

Why?

Did you avail of any government supports?

Had you plans to set up the business before the pandemic struck?

Motivation

List your three main motivators for setting up your business at that time? (one, being your highest motivator)

Fears

What was your biggest fear?

Challenges

What was the biggest challenge (s) you faced?

Rewards

What was your biggest reward?

Best Advice

What is the best advice you were given?

If faced with a pandemic again, what advice would you give someone thinking of setting up their own business?

Findings are presented in Chapter 3 and are linked back to the main themes identified in the literature review. The final chapter provides conclusions and recommendations because of the research.

Chapter 3: Analysis and Findings

Background

All four entrepreneurs set up coffee/food trucks in their local areas during the pandemic. Storr et al (2021) advised that if entrepreneurs are embedded in local community, it gives them access to local and tacit knowledge that outsiders cannot access. Three of the entrepreneurs offer high quality coffee and treats.   The treats could be described as extra special, and when purchasing it is an item you feel like you are treating yourself. One entrepreneur focused on luxury desserts as the treat andhis main selling point.   One specialised in toasted sandwiches with set preprepared fillings, on toasted and salted bread.   All sourced their food products from local kitchens still able to operate during the pandemic.   All menus were set and limited in choice, however all items on the menus could be considered to be treats. Branding for all the businesses was kept simple, two of the businesses have catchy one-word names branded on coffee cups and trailer names, packaging is recyclable. Two of the trucks are located close to sports grounds, all the trailers were located close to a busy road. Customers form a queue and order, pay by cash or card, stand to the side/waiting area and collect when their name is called. All had some type of basic outdoor seating either on the same grounds as their business or in an area nearby . There is a strong emphasis on customer service for all entrepreneurs and dogs are also catered for with complimentary treats and water available for them at the trailers. Post covid three of the four entrepreneurs are still working in the same food trucks, they have developed and maintained a strong customer base, and all have improved the immediate area surrounding the location of their truck and have enhanced their menus.   One of the entrepreneurs has moved his business to two permanent shop locations.

Interviewee 1 (I1) had recently returned from Australia, before setting up his coffee truck business during the pandemic. The new business venture was a total change in career having worked previously for five years in journalism and as a ministerial writer abroad. While in College I1 worked in Penny's for 4 years and this was their only retail experience. Interviewee 2 (I2) described himself as self-employed since the age of 19, working in the night-time events industry. He described his passion for the night-time events industry describing how he was immersed in *the art of orchestrating unforgettable experiences.* I2 described his enthusiasm for his business before the pandemic as boundless, describing the draw and excitement of organising and promoting of what he described as exceptional nights out. I2 described his

experience of understanding social media management and the art of promotion describing *the ability to reach, influence and captivate audiences*. He also described engagement with stakeholders at the time such as owners, managers and student union representatives. I2 described passionately how the challenges of his night-events business inspired him to *relentlessly innovate and adapt to an ever-evolving landscape*. He also described *the joy of witnessing a venue come alive* as a testament to the hardware work he put in. I2 described the value of connections and his ability to succeed in a high paced, high pressured environment. He described collaborating with passionate others as fuelling his entrepreneurial spirt. I2 also spoke of belief in himself based on the hard work he put into his night-time events business and the skills be developed during this time. Interviewee 3 (I3) worked in on the road sales for five years before the pandemic, during the pandemic his employer tried to offer him commission only payment and he left to set up a dessert trailer. Interviewee 4 (I4) worked in hospitality before the pandemic and managed different bars and restaurants in Dublin. Interestingly I1 and I4 had careers working for other people in different areas before the Pandemic, I2 had plenty of experience of working for himself and I3 worked previously in the food and drinks industry.

Choice of Business formation

I1 confirmed setting up as a limited company for the advantage of corporation tax for retained profits and limited liability. I2 advised that he was a sole trader before the pandemic and it was a harder to separate business and personal expenses, therefore, he went with a limited company to set up a coffee/food trailer business also describing it as a straightforward setup and helped with separating the new business with anything he had done before. I3 Initially he set up as a partnership before then changed to a limited company, commenting that they should have just set up as a limited company from the start. I4 set up his business as a limited company indicating that it was the only option for him as far as he was concerned. All four interviewed formed business as private limited companies, mainly because of the security involved with setting up a private limited company in terms of limited liability and separate legal entity.

Government supports for business during Covid-19

I1 commented that he did not get much support from the Government to set up the business, but admitted that he did not look into too hard also commenting that more could have been done by the Government to offer support. I2 commented on the importance of government supports in the context of the customers of his new business, highlighting that for those who

had temporarily lost jobs they still had some disposable income. I3 suggested the government should give tax relief for the first three months to those setting up a business, mentioning that people setting up their own business have so much money going out. I4 commented on the value of government supports in terms of the wage subsidies available, describing them *as vital for businesses to survive.*   While all four interviewed were aware of government supports, all four did not avail of them. Two answered in terms of the government needing to do more for businesses and two spoke of wage subsidies and their value for enabling those running the business and from the point of view of the customer having money to spend in their business on e.g. coffee, cake, desserts.

Plans to set up a business before Covid

I1 explained that while in New Zealand in 2019 he saw a lot of coffee/food trucks and began to think about his own business. On his return to Ireland in March 2020 the pandemic struck and he sat down with a friend, out of work due to the pandemic, and decided to set up a coffee trailer regardless of the pandemic. The aim was to set up a business that could perform well during and post-pandemic. I2 described a vibrant, exciting and rewarding career as a business owner before the pandemic. I2 also commented that the area he lived in was under served by a good coffee/meeting point but reflects on the fact that he would have just been too busy to set one up before the pandemic. I3 described how he always had it in his mind to set up his own business and with covid and the job he was working in trying to reduce his wages, he decided to do it, first setting up a desert trailer and a few months after that he set up a meat delivering company delivering meant to people stuck at home. I4 advised that he was used to working for others and while he always wanted to set up his own business, the one he ended setting up was not one he would have planned before the pandemic. All four described thinking about setting up their own business but none of the four had specifically thought about setting up a food/coffee truck business. All four were busy with other business ventures or in jobs before the pandemic, three of whom worked in other areas.

Motivation

I1 stated that his main motivation was getting a job and finding something to do. He comments that *Ireland had just completely shut down so there weren't exactly many options for a job.* He was also motivated by wanting to try something new and was interested and excited about owning his own business and being in control. He was also motivated by the confidence that

if he could find the right location for the trailer, he felt the business would be a success. I1 commented that he was at a stage where he wasn't sure what he wanted to do for a career, this was something he was interested in and was motivated by the hope that it would lead into an exciting career with further opportunities. I2 described going from a busy business to two months with no sign of the events industry returning, and the *big fear for personal impact.* This supports Shepherd and Williams (2014) suggestion that the possibility of entrepreneurship alleviates a situation one finds themselves in and is the factor that makes one open a new business following a catastrophic event. As he was previously self-employed he described he felt he needed to come up with a way to make money, he also described the need to work to avoid boredom. I2 described an interest *in a meeting place for the community* and having time to invest his full energy in a new business, and not foreseeing how big coffee would be during a pandemic. I3 described not working for *ass hole business owners* as his biggest motivator followed by the motivation that how hard he worked wasn't making for other people it was making his money for him. I3 also spoke about want to see how far he could grow the business and wanting to see that in five years. I4 quite simply stated that his motivation for setting up his business during the pandemic was n*o job, free time* and he *had experience* in hospitality. All four whether directly or indirectly made references to having time to set up their business, a positive of the pandemic.

Biggest Fear

I1 stated that his biggest fear was that the business would *fail massively* and he would be a *laughing stock.* He felt the business was low risk financially and therefore advised that it helped that he did not have the fear of *losing a fortune.* Lichy et al (2022) explain that food-truck entrepreneurs took advantage of low overheads to provide an alternative for eating out during the pandemic. I2 described his lack of knowledge of the world of coffee as *scary.* He did as much research as he could, spend two weeks in a coffee shop but *feared people seeing through him* and this that *he was chancing his arm.* I3 spoke of the fear of it not working out and not having the money to pay himself or others. I4 advised that at the time he had no huge fear about setting up the business but since then he has always had a fear of failure or something going wrong when expanding. All four of the interviewees shared a very human fear of failure. Kothari (2020) explained that to start up entrepreneurs need to accept fear, conserve cash, look for opportunity and build adaptability, emphasising that flexibility and the ability to constantly re-evaluate and essential attributes for survival.

Biggest Challenge

I1 explained the right location for the coffee trailer was going to be critical for its success, therefore he identified finding the right location as the biggest challenge. I1 explained they put a lot of energy into this, made phone calls, knocked on doors and faced a lot of rejection. The process involved pitching to people without a favourable outcome, before meeting the chairman of the local sports club who agreed to rent him a plot on his grounds close to a public road. I2 also describe finding a suitable location for the coffee trailer as the biggest challenge and describe being turned down 15 – 20 times, preparing zoom presentations, a 10 page proposal for owners of potential locations and getting a responses requesting ridiculously high rent. I3 described having experience in sales for no experience of the food industry and this was challenging, particularly all the small things in the background he had no idea about e.g. industry specific regulations. I4 described the constant changing landscape in which businesses operate as the biggest challenge emphasising that post pandemic and the war in Ukraine we are experiencing huge inflation. An emphasis on lack of experience in the food industry came across as a challenge for three of the interviewees. For two a very practical challenge of locations for their business presented the biggest challenge.

Biggest Reward

I1 started *the biggest reward has just been seeing the place at its best when the sun is out and the place is packed with people*. I2 described *seeing the place as a meeting point for the community, where people bump into each other . . . it is a great feeling*. I3 described his biggest reward currently is being asked by big chain names and brands to partner with him. I4 described *providing a good working environment for his staff* as his biggest reward. The success of the businesses presented the biggest reward but in different contexts, two referred to seeing their customers enjoying their business and one referred to the business for the employees.

Best Advice

I1 advised that a number of people already in the industry and outside it offered great advice e.g. *leave your ego at the door, don't get ahead of yourself, don't sell yourself short*. I1 commented on practical advice regarding pricing products that advised them to put a value on their product that reflected their work. I1 highlighted the need to be seen locally to be value for money. I2 described the advice to concentrate on yourself to help you impress people and

doing your best to hold onto them. I2 also described the importance on focusing on your own business and not wasting energy on things you cannot control specifically giving the example of 5 additional coffee shops opening with a 1.5 km radius . . . *emphasising are we doing everything as well as we possibly can her*e. I3 described the best advice he was given was to work hard, put in hard work you will see the outcome, don't sit and wating for money to come you, you have to go out and push and it will happen. I4 advised that the best advice he was given is always take a step back and think. All four interviewees appear to have gotten very good advice in terms of focus, doing ones best and working hard.

Would you do it again/your advice to others?

I1 advised that when setting up a business in a pandemic it is important that it will operate during and post pandemic. When setting up I1 commented that they had no idea how long the pandemic would last, his main advice is that *if you are confident your business could survive and/or thrive during and after a pandemic then go for it.* Also commenting that *if it feels right it probably is, go with your gut.* Advising that *it is easy to let someone else's opinion or advice overrule what you think is right.* I2's advise is *go for it.* Advising others to give it everything, do settle for grand, take advice from people with experience. I3 said yes but do solid research before you go ahead with in. Referring specifically about a setting a business during a pandemic he recommended think what can operate in a pandemic, what do people need, can you source the product easily and can you pass it on to the client and achieve a good profit margin. I4 put it was simply *there can be the best opportunity in times of turbulence. Don't overthink it.* All four gave positive advice and no one said they would not do it again.

Summary Analysis:

CSO business impact surveys 2020 paint a worrying picture for businesses at the time as do media reports e.g. 23.9% of enterprises who responded at the time (16 March to 19th April 2020) ceased trading temporarily or permanently, 51.4% of responding enterprises (20th April to 3rd May 2020)   Around the same time the four entrepreneurs took the risk of setting up their own businesses in an industry they were not experienced in. In terms of advice received in setting up their businesses all four reflect on the good advice they received in terms of focus, doing ones best and working hard. All in keeping with Surdez-Perez et al (2014) account of personal attributes of successful small business owners including creativity, hard work and self-discipline. Good negotiation skills are also mentioned by Surdez-Perez et al (2014) and this

comes across in I1 and I2's account of the challenge they went through and efforts they went to, to secure a home for their business i.e. a coffee/food trailer.

Chandra (2020) describes the pandemic as a catalyst for first time food entrepreneurs. Usman and Sun (2022) describe how adversity created by the pandemic trigged behavioural changes that made some look for alternative ways to make a living. Both of these points correspond directly with the responses from the interviewees in terms of motivation for setting up their businesses e.g. *wanting to do something new (I1) , need to come up with a way to make money (I2), need to work (I2), invest full energy (I3), free time (I4)*. Shepherd and Williams (2014) suggest that the possibility of entrepreneurship alleviates a situation one finds themselves in and is the factor that makes one open a new business following a catastrophic event. I4 put it was simply *there can be the best opportunity in times of turbulence.*

Chapter 4   Conclusion and Recommendations

The research aimed to answer the question - how entrepreneurs used Covid-19 as an opportunity to reinvent themselves? The aim of this study was to discover the challenges faced by small business entrepreneurs during the pandemic, and how faced with Covid-19 restrictions, they set up new businesses and what contributed to their success or failure. The aim involved trying to establish if there is a particular pathway/ formula to follow in a crisis to ensure business success or is it down to individual drive, personality, and outlook.

The research concludes that the pathway/formula to follow in a crisis to ensure success in setting up your own business during the pandemic is linked to a personal drive to work, the need to be doing something and having a good idea for a business that you know could work. All four business owners who set up their coffee/food truck businesses saw an opportunity arise because of the pandemic. Three of the entrepreneurs had no experience of running their own businesses before the pandemic, this was a surprise for the researcher, however, Storr et al (2021) point out that "entrepreneurship is a course of action available to anyone". Three of the entrepreneurs had no experience in the food and beverage industry prior to the pandemic. This links in with Chandra (2020) who describes the pandemic as a catalyst for first time food entrepreneurs. Krueger et al (2000) argue that individuals with a tendency to seize opportunities may perceive an event such as a pandemic as an opportunity and launch a new business and this appears to have been the case for all four entrepreneurs. The biggest fears and challenges identified were a low lying rather than overwhelming fear of failing, and a fear of not having something to do, fear of not being able to earn a living due to the impact of covid on their existing jobs. Usman and Sun (2022) describe how adversity created by the pandemic trigged behavioural changes that made some look for alternative ways to make a living.

Individual personalities were evident during the interviews conducted in the completion of the research, all were either quietly or loudly confident and all had a strong work ethic. The strongest opportunity arising because of the pandemic, that became evident during the research, was that before the pandemic all four were busy living and working and the pandemic brought this to a stop giving all four something they had very little of and that was time to set up their own businesses. Instead of stopping and waiting for the pandemic to pass they used the time as an opportunity to create their own enterprises. Hayward et al (2010) explain how resilience helps people through difficult periods suggesting that positive feelings following disaster

protects resilience and helps individuals to achieve success in a time of adversity. All four entrepreneurs very cleverly chose a business that was financially low risk. They secured a supply chain that could be sustained throughout the pandemic and the following words came through strongly to describe how they approached the task of setting up their businesses; Opportunity, time, drive, passion, hard-work and confidence that it would work.

Covid-19 has been described many times as an unprecedented crisis, and many governments did not know what they were facing and how best to support those in business. The assumption of this researcher would have been that the entrepreneurs were well supported by Government to set up their business. The reality was that with the exception of one the entrepreneurs interviewed, they did not know about or had not sought out the information. One did acknowledge the value in terms of customers still having money to spend on a coffee thanks to government supports, two advised that the government needs to do more.

Usman and Sun (2022) explain how entrepreneurship is essential in a crisis such as a pandemic as it can change people's perception of a crisis and turn a negative situation into a positive. They conclude that entrepreneurs are more likely to start a new business during a pandemic if the new business has the potential to improve living conditions. This research concludes that the potential to improve living conditions initially comes through in the research in the context of the entrepreneurs improving their own living conditions, however, all four of the entrepreneurs either directly or indirectly spoke of the reward of seeing customers enjoying themselves, the development of a community, happy employees and providing a service that helped others e.g. safe place to meet friends outdoors. Two of the entrepreneurs identify seeing customers happy and meeting up as their biggest reward. The research shows that the food trucks not only provided a means of income for their owners but provide a social place for people to meet up and enjoy a coffee and a treat. Turner and Endres (2017) explain that customer service and a sense of community are the most critical elements to enable a coffee shop business to survive longer than 5 years. Post pandemic four of the entrepreneurs continue to operate their food trucks in the same communities, one has moved to shop premises.

This research provides insight in why entrepreneurs took the risk of setting up businesses during the pandemic while also providing a service to the community that help people stay connected. Insights and comparisons between typical entrepreneurial attributes and the four entrepreneurs who took part in this research are clear when looking at their responses to

questions covering motivation for setting up their businesses . . . Opportunity, need to be doing something, time, drive, passion, hard-work and confidence that it would work.

Recommendations:

The pandemic increased awareness into the importance of off-premises means of conducting business, the importance of I.T. in business whether it is social media to help grow and promote the small business enterprises or for on-line sales – all of which need to be included in training courses, seminars and workshops relating to entrepreneurship and setting up your own business.

The insight into the reward of seeing others benefit from your business venture is recommended as potential motivating factor for others . . . *the biggest reward has just been seeing the place at its best when the sun is out and the place is packed with people.* I2 described *seeing the place as a meeting place for the community, where people bump into each other . . . it is a great feeling.*

Post-pandemic the businesses are still operating, this further supports the recommendations that the product or service introduced is still needed post pandemic.   Food-trucks are just one example of new business start-ups during the pandemic. It is recommended that further research is conducted with small businesses in other industries while they are still operating to learn from their experiences of starting up a business and working throughout the pandemic. The results would produce further valuable information for others and for governments on how best to support small business entrepreneurs.

A recommendation is that the government needs to review the level of supports they provided and how they communicated their availability to be able to provide even better supports in the future if faced with a similar crisis in the future.

The research provides insights and further supports existing writing on attributes of successful entrepreneurs, the recommendation being to think twice before embarking on a business adventure especially if you think you might not have the right opportunity, time, drive, passion, commitment to working and working hard work needed.   The research supports the

recommendation that if you have a good idea for a business and you know based on a particular set of factors it could work, you should go for it and make it work.

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