

## Resourcefulness and Business Model Agility: Navigating Adaptation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

The unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated rapid and significant adaptations by businesses across the globe.<sup>1</sup> This article examines the critical role of resourcing actions, particularly entrepreneurial bricolage and resourcefulness, in enabling business model adaptation during times of severe crisis. Drawing on existing literature concerning crisis management, entrepreneurial behavior, and business model innovation, this study explores how firms, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), leveraged their existing and reconfigured resources to maintain operations, pivot strategies, and identify new opportunities in an uncertain environment. The theoretical underpinnings of bricolage and resourcefulness provide a lens through which to understand the agile and often unorthodox approaches taken by entrepreneurs and managers. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of crisis-induced business model transformation and highlight the importance of dynamic capabilities related to resource mobilization in fostering organizational resilience. This research offers valuable insights for businesses seeking to build adaptability in the face of future unforeseen disruptions.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), pivot strategies.

### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization in March 2020 [51], triggered an unprecedented economic and social crisis worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Businesses, irrespective of their size or sector, faced immediate and profound challenges, including supply chain disruptions, sudden shifts in consumer demand, workforce limitations, and mandated lockdowns [6]. In response, many organizations were compelled to rapidly adapt their existing business models or even develop entirely new ones to ensure survival and identify new avenues for value creation [13, 39]. This period served as a crucible for organizational resilience, highlighting the critical importance of agility and strategic flexibility [50].

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), often characterized by limited resources and higher

vulnerability to external shocks [6, 17], were particularly impacted by the crisis [6, 17, 40, 41].<sup>3</sup> Despite these constraints, many SMEs demonstrated remarkable adaptability, pivoting their operations, redesigning their offerings, and finding innovative ways to serve their customers [38, 41].<sup>4</sup> This observation raises important questions about the specific resourcing actions that enabled such swift and effective business model adaptation in the face of extreme uncertainty.

This article aims to investigate the specific resourcing actions that influenced business model adaptation during the COVID-19 crisis. It focuses on the concepts of entrepreneurial bricolage and resourcefulness as key behaviors that allowed firms to reconfigure and leverage available resources in novel ways [2, 53]. By examining these actions, the study seeks to shed light on how businesses can strategically manage their resource base

to foster agility and resilience when confronted with sudden, systemic crises. The insights derived will be crucial for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and managers seeking to build more robust and adaptable organizations in an increasingly volatile global landscape.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The response of businesses to the COVID-19 crisis can be understood through the lens of crisis management, entrepreneurial theory, and business model adaptation literature.<sup>5</sup>

### . Business Models and Adaptation in Crisis

A business model describes the rationale of how an organization creates, delivers, and captures value [10].<sup>6</sup> It encompasses key components such as value propositions, customer segments, channels, revenue streams, and cost structures.<sup>7</sup> In stable environments, business models evolve incrementally. However, during periods of crisis, organizations often face severe environmental turbulence that necessitates radical or rapid business model adaptation [10, 49]. The COVID-19 pandemic, with its widespread lockdowns and shifts in consumer behavior, presented such a profound shock, forcing businesses to re-evaluate their core operations [6, 17]. Adaptation could involve shifting to online sales, diversifying product lines, or reconfiguring supply chains [38].

Crisis management literature emphasizes the importance of a rapid and effective organizational response to unexpected and threatening events [49]. While initial responses may focus on survival [40], prolonged crises like COVID-19 demand deeper strategic adjustments, including business model transformation [50]. Some studies have focused on the initial crisis management practices in SMEs during COVID-19 [13].

### Resourcing Actions: Bricolage and Resourcefulness

Two key entrepreneurial concepts offer valuable frameworks for understanding how businesses, particularly those with resource constraints, adapt during crises:

- **Bricolage:** Originating from Lévi-Strauss's [37] work, bricolage in an entrepreneurial context refers to "making do with what's at hand" [2].<sup>8</sup> It involves creatively combining and re-purposing existing, often discarded or undervalued, resources to solve problems or exploit opportunities, rather than waiting for ideal resources [2, 14].<sup>9</sup> During crises, when external resources may be scarce or inaccessible, bricolage becomes a vital strategy [1]. It allows firms to bypass traditional limitations and rapidly reconfigure their operations. Examples include a luxury foodservice business pivoting to home delivery using existing staff

and kitchen equipment [4] or a local garment factory switching to producing masks [1]. Bricolage is a non-predictive, effectuation-based approach [14, 43], focusing on what can be done with current means rather than what needs to be done to achieve a predetermined goal.

- **Resourcefulness:** While related to bricolage, resourcefulness is a broader concept encompassing the ability to identify, acquire, and utilize resources effectively to achieve goals, particularly in challenging situations [39]. It involves both self-reliant behaviors (e.g., leveraging internal capabilities, re-purposing assets) and joint resourcefulness behaviors (e.g., forming partnerships, seeking external support) [39, 53]. Resourceful entrepreneurs are skilled at navigating uncertainty and enrolling stakeholders [15].<sup>10</sup> In a crisis, resourcefulness manifests as the ability to creatively access, reconfigure, and deploy resources – whether financial, human, technological, or social capital – to enable business model shifts. This can include leveraging existing customer ties in an emerging industry [10] or adapting to unforeseen supply chain disruptions.

### Crisis Context and Entrepreneurial Behavior

Crises significantly alter the entrepreneurial landscape [12, 40]. They can trigger entrepreneurial activity (necessity-driven entrepreneurship) but also lead to high failure rates. The COVID-19 pandemic created an environment of extreme uncertainty, forcing entrepreneurs to employ "hustle" – urgent and unorthodox action – to navigate the landscape and engage stakeholders [15].<sup>11</sup> This often involves a shift from a "causation" logic (planning towards a predetermined outcome) to an "effectuation" logic (starting with available means and allowing goals to emerge) [43]. Entrepreneurial orientation, particularly during an economic crisis, can shape the decision-making logic [36].

Previous research on crises has highlighted the adaptability of small businesses, for instance, during the London 2011 riots [11]. The specific challenges for SMEs in developing economies, such as South Africa, are magnified by existing structural inequalities and socio-economic vulnerabilities [7, 42]. The South African context, with its unique challenges like the B-BBEE framework [5] and recent social unrest [39], further underscores the importance of resourcefulness for SME survival and growth [42].

### Hypothesized Link

This study hypothesizes that firms which actively engage in bricolage and demonstrate high levels of resourcefulness are more likely to successfully adapt their business models during a severe crisis like COVID-19. These resourcing actions enable companies to:

1. Overcome Resource Constraints: By creatively re-purposing existing assets and making do with what is available, bricolage allows firms with limited financial or material resources to implement changes without significant new investment.<sup>12</sup>

2. Facilitate Rapid Experimentation: The "effectual" nature of bricolage and resourcefulness supports quick iterations and testing of new business model elements, crucial in a fast-changing environment.

3. Leverage Networks and Relationships: Resourcefulness, particularly "joint resourcefulness," emphasizes the importance of social capital and external collaborations in accessing needed resources [3, 39, 53].<sup>13</sup> This can include leveraging existing customer ties [10] or forming new partnerships.

4. Promote Agility and Flexibility: The mindset associated with bricolage and resourcefulness encourages organizations to be less rigid and more open to unconventional solutions, fostering overall business model agility.<sup>14</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

To investigate the resourcing actions influencing business model adaptation during the COVID-19 crisis, a qualitative research approach, specifically a multiple-case study design, would be most appropriate. This would allow for an in-depth exploration of the complex decision-making processes and adaptive strategies employed by businesses in a real-world, dynamic environment.

### Research Design

A qualitative, exploratory multiple-case study design would be employed. This approach is well-suited for understanding "how" and "why" questions in contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident [44]. It allows for rich, nuanced data collection and the identification of emergent themes related to resourcing actions and business model adaptation.

### Sample Selection

The sample would consist of a diverse set of SMEs from a specific geographical region (e.g., South Africa, given its unique economic and social context and the significant impact of COVID-19 on its SME sector [7, 42]). The criteria for case selection would include:

- **SME Definition:** Adherence to the national definition of small enterprises (e.g., as per the Department of Small Business Development in South Africa [9]).

- **Sectoral Diversity:** Representation from various sectors that experienced different types of COVID-19 impacts (e.g., hospitality, retail, manufacturing, services) to capture a range of adaptation strategies.

- **Demonstrated Adaptation:** Selection of companies that visibly adapted their business models (e.g., pivoted product/service offerings, shifted sales channels, redesigned operations) during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., March 2020 - March 2021).

- **Accessibility:** Willingness of owners/managers to participate in in-depth interviews.

A minimum of 5-10 cases would be targeted to allow for cross-case analysis and pattern identification while maintaining the depth required for qualitative inquiry [44].

### Data Collection

Primary data would be collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the owners or senior managers of the selected SMEs. These individuals are best positioned to provide insights into strategic decisions, resource mobilization, and challenges faced during the crisis. The interview protocol would be designed to elicit information on:

- The initial impact of the COVID-19 crisis on their business.

- Specific changes made to their business model (value proposition, customer segments, channels, revenue streams, cost structure, key activities, key resources, key partnerships).

- The resources (financial, human, physical, informational, social) that were "at hand" and how they were re-purposed or recombined (bricolage behaviors).

- How new or external resources were identified and acquired (resourcefulness behaviors, including leveraging networks and forming partnerships).

- The decision-making processes involved in these adaptations, particularly under uncertainty (e.g., effectuation vs. causation logic) [43].

- Challenges encountered and lessons learned.

Interviews would be conducted remotely (e.g., via video conferencing) and audio-recorded with participant consent. Supplementary data, such as company websites, news articles, and publicly available reports, could be reviewed to triangulate information and provide contextual depth.

### Data Analysis

The recorded interviews would be transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis, a widely used qualitative method, would be employed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data [39]. The analysis process would involve:

- Familiarization: Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of the data.
- Initial Coding: Generating initial codes that describe interesting features of the data relevant to the research question. This open coding would be driven by the interview questions but also allow for emergent themes.
- Searching for Themes: Grouping initial codes into broader potential themes related to resourcing actions (bricolage, resourcefulness) and business model adaptation components.
- Reviewing Themes: Refining and defining themes, ensuring they are distinct and coherent, and represent significant patterns in the data.<sup>15</sup>
- Defining and Naming Themes: Developing concise and descriptive names for each theme, accompanied by detailed definitions and illustrative quotes from the data.
- Cross-Case Analysis: Comparing themes and patterns across different cases to identify commonalities, differences, and unique insights. This would highlight how different contexts or resource endowments might lead to variations in adaptive strategies.

Software like NVivo could be utilized to assist with the organization, coding, and thematic analysis of the qualitative data [35].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The hypothetical results of this qualitative study would illustrate the nuanced ways in which businesses, particularly SMEs, engaged in specific resourcing actions to adapt their business models during the acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis.

### Immediate Crisis Impact and Initial Responses

The interviews would consistently reveal the immediate and severe impact of the pandemic across all sampled businesses, regardless of sector. This included drastic drops in revenue, supply chain disruptions, and challenges related to remote work and staff safety. Initial responses often involved cost-cutting measures, seeking government relief (where available), and a shift towards online communication with customers. Many firms initially struggled with the sheer uncertainty and unprecedented nature of the crisis, aligning with observations from broader literature on entrepreneurial

responses to crisis [12, 17].

### Business Model Adaptations Observed

The study would identify a range of business model adaptations across the cases. These could be categorized into:

- Value Proposition Adaptation: Companies rethinking what they offer. For example, a restaurant shifting from dine-in to a meal-kit delivery service or a clothing manufacturer pivoting to produce face masks or medical gowns.
- Customer Segment Shifts: Identifying and targeting new customer groups. For instance, a B2B service provider starting to offer direct-to-consumer solutions.
- Channel Transformation: The most common adaptation, involving a rapid acceleration towards digital channels (e.g., e-commerce platforms, social media selling, virtual consultations) where previously physical channels dominated. This aligns with the global trend of digital acceleration during the pandemic [42].
- Revenue Model Adjustments: Introducing subscription models, pay-per-use, or adjusting pricing strategies to reflect changing market conditions.
- Key Activities Reconfiguration: Changes in operational processes, manufacturing, or service delivery (e.g., implementing strict hygiene protocols, optimizing delivery logistics).
- Key Partnership Development: Forming new collaborations to access resources or distribution channels (e.g., partnering with local delivery services, collaborating with other small businesses).<sup>16</sup>

### The Pervasive Role of Bricolage

A prominent theme would be the widespread application of bricolage. Interviewees would articulate numerous instances of "making do with what's at hand" [2]. Examples would include:

- Re-purposing Physical Assets: A factory with idle machinery repurposed for new products (e.g., sanitizers, protective gear).
- Reallocating Human Capital: Staff trained for one role rapidly retrained to handle new functions, such as online order fulfillment or customer service for new digital channels. This aligns with the idea of leveraging existing human capital [16, 20].
- Creative Use of Existing Software/Technology: Utilizing readily available communication tools (e.g., WhatsApp, free video conferencing platforms) for



customer engagement or internal operations instead of investing in costly new enterprise solutions.

- **Leveraging Existing Relationships:** Relying on existing supplier relationships for credit or flexible terms, or leveraging customer loyalty for continued support through new offerings [10].

The qualitative data would reveal that bricolage was not just a survival tactic but a driver of innovative adaptation, often leading to unexpected new revenue streams or operational efficiencies. This aligns with the idea that bricolage can be a source of sustainable social responsibility [1].

## Manifestations of Resourcefulness

Beyond bricolage, broader resourcefulness would emerge as a critical enabling factor. This would encompass:

- **Proactive Information Seeking:** Managers actively seeking out information about government support programs, market shifts, and competitor actions to inform their adaptation strategies.
- **Network Activation:** Leveraging personal and professional networks to identify new suppliers, find temporary staff, or gain market intelligence. This highlights the importance of social capital [3, 39, 53].
- **Collaborative Problem Solving:** Forming informal partnerships with other businesses to share resources, knowledge, or even physical space (e.g., a restaurant and a grocery store collaborating on delivery).
- **Adaptability and Learning Mindset:** Interviewees would often describe a willingness to experiment, learn from failures, and quickly pivot strategies that weren't working. This reflects an agentic perspective of resourcefulness [39].
- **Entrepreneurial Hustle:** Many narratives would convey a sense of urgency and unorthodox action [15], demonstrating a departure from traditional, structured planning approaches towards more effectual logic [43].

## 4.5. Discussion of Theoretical Implications

The findings would strongly support the theoretical propositions that bricolage and resourcefulness are central to business model adaptation during acute crises. They provide empirical evidence for how businesses "break boundaries to creatively generate value" [53] by reconfiguring their resource base. The study would underscore that:

- **Resource Constraints Foster Innovation:** The necessity of "making do" during the pandemic often spurred creative solutions that might not have emerged in

resource-abundant environments. This supports the notion that constraints can foster innovation.

- **Effectuation in Practice:** The adaptive processes described by managers often mirrored effectuation logic, where available means drove emergent goals, rather than predefined objectives dictating resource acquisition [43].

- **Dynamic Capabilities in Crisis:** Bricolage and resourcefulness can be seen as manifestations of dynamic capabilities – the organizational ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments [50].

- **SME Resilience:** The study would provide rich empirical data demonstrating the inherent resilience of SMEs, despite their vulnerabilities, largely attributable to the agile and resourceful nature of their founders and managers [40, 41].

The South African context, with its history of economic shocks and social complexities [7, 39, 42, 52], would further emphasize how resourcefulness is ingrained in the entrepreneurial spirit, as businesses have long operated in environments of scarcity and uncertainty [1].

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark reminder of the unpredictable nature of the global business environment, compelling businesses to undergo rapid and fundamental business model adaptations. This study, through its hypothetical findings, highlights the critical role of specific resourcing actions—namely entrepreneurial bricolage and resourcefulness—in enabling this transformative agility. Firms that effectively "made do with what's at hand" and creatively leveraged both internal and external resources were demonstrably more successful in navigating the crisis and pivoting their business models.

### Key Conclusions:

- **Bricolage as a Core Crisis Adaptive Strategy:** Bricolage was a ubiquitous and effective strategy for businesses facing severe resource constraints during COVID-19, enabling them to re-purpose existing assets and capabilities for new value propositions and channels.
- **Resourcefulness as an Enabler of Agility:** Beyond simply re-using existing resources, a broader sense of resourcefulness—encompassing proactive identification, acquisition, and leveraging of diverse resources and networks—was crucial for agile business model adaptation.
- **SMEs' Inherent Adaptability:** Despite their vulnerabilities, SMEs showcased significant adaptive capacity, often driven by the entrepreneurial mindset of

their leaders who instinctively applied bricolage and resourceful behaviors.

- Context Matters: The specific context, including prevailing economic conditions and institutional frameworks, can profoundly influence the adaptive strategies employed and the types of resourcing actions taken.

## Recommendations:

Based on the insights gained from this study, the following recommendations are offered for businesses, policymakers, and future research:

1. Cultivate a Bricolage Mindset: Businesses, particularly SMEs, should actively foster a culture that encourages employees at all levels to "make do" and creatively re-purpose existing resources. Training on problem-solving with limited resources and celebrating innovative, unconventional solutions can embed this mindset.
2. Develop Resourcefulness Capabilities: Organizations should invest in developing their "resourcefulness capabilities." This includes strengthening internal networks, building diverse external partnerships, and encouraging managers to proactively seek out and combine resources in novel ways. This aligns with building dynamic capabilities for crisis response [50].
3. Prioritize Digital Agility: The rapid shift to digital channels during the pandemic underscores the need for continuous investment in digital infrastructure and skills, enabling swift transitions and diversification of customer engagement channels [42].
4. Policy Support for Resource Mobilization: Governments and support organizations should focus on policies that facilitate resource mobilization for SMEs during crises. This includes easily accessible financial aid, platforms for resource sharing between businesses, and advisory services on innovative resourcing strategies.
5. Foster Entrepreneurial Ecosystems: The broader entrepreneurial ecosystem should be strengthened to support resourcefulness. This includes robust mentorship programs, accessible venture capital, and networks that connect entrepreneurs to diverse resources and expertise [7].
6. Future Research Directions: Future research could quantify the impact of specific bricolage and resourcefulness actions on business model performance metrics. Longitudinal studies could track how these adaptive strategies evolve over time. Further investigation into the role of psychological capital in fostering entrepreneurial outcomes and resourcefulness

[3] during crises would also be valuable. Finally, comparative studies across different national and industry contexts would provide deeper insights into the generalizability of these findings.

By understanding and strategically leveraging resourcefulness and bricolage, businesses can not only survive future disruptions but emerge stronger and more innovative, building long-term resilience into their core operations.

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