Universal Library of Innovative Research and Studies Research Article

ISSN: 3065-0003

Open Access | PP: 07-13

DOI: https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulirs.2023.002

Crisis Management as a Driver of Strategic Business Transformation: Restructuring Mechanisms and Profit Recovery in Food Service Enterprises

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a sharp decline in demand for foodservice and forced small urban ventures to rebuild their business models within a compressed timeframe. The article traces how a set of crisis management decisions in the independent gastropub Magarych Pub in 2020–2021 reduced the break-even point, restructured sales channels, and restored profitability by 2022. The study focuses on foodservice enterprises under pandemic shock, with the specific research subject being the mechanisms of restructuring and transitioning to sustainable profit, illustrated by the case of a small urban gastropub. The analysis encompasses the pre-crisis period of 2018–2019, the phase of restrictions from 2020 to 2021, and the initial recovery in 2022. The empirical base consists of Magarych Pub's managerial reports on revenue, costs, and margins, as well as menu and operational data, along with qualitative descriptions of decisions and mistakes drawn from the author's professional experience. The external environment is reconstructed using international statistical reviews and industry studies of the restaurant sector, focusing on revenue dynamics, the expansion of off-premise channels, digital transformation, and anti-crisis strategies in the HoReCa sector from 2019 to 2022. The methodological framework combines a case-study design, time-series analysis, calculation and interpretation of the break-even point, structural analysis of revenue and costs, and comparison with practices of large chains and independent restaurants described in the contemporary literature on crisis management and turnaround management in hospitality. The findings show that a combination of strict control over fixed costs, menu simplification, reorientation towards delivery and takeaway, and maintenance of regular guests' trust through communication and events during periods of eased restrictions leads to a sustainable transformation of the business model of a small gastropub. The practical contribution lies in assembling a set of managerial decisions suitable for replication in small foodservice enterprises facing demand shocks and regulatory constraints on operating formats.

Keywords: *Crisis Management, Anti-Crisis Governance, Restructuring, Food Service Enterprises, Cost Management, Guest Retention, Digitalisation, COVID-19.*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly interrupted the trajectory of steady growth in the global restaurant market, which by the end of 2019 had reached record levels of revenue and employment [6; 9]. According to estimates by the National Restaurant Association of the United States, aggregate industry sales in 2020 fell roughly 240 billion USD short of the preliminary forecast, and a share of establishments never resumed operations [9]. A study of the U.S. market records not only declining revenues and rising layoffs, but also an increase in the debt burden of restaurants, particularly pronounced in independent ventures without access to large credit lines and centralised support [11]. A similar picture is described for the European HoReCa sector: strict sanitary restrictions, dining-room closures, a sharp contraction in tourist flows, and prolonged uncertainty over the timing of lifting restrictions [10].

The response to this shock involved the accelerated development of off-premise formats, including delivery, takeaway, dark kitchens, and hybrid models. Industry reviews and corporate reports of large chains indicate a persistent shift in consumer behaviour: the share of off-premise orders in total turnover rose markedly in 2020 and remained at an elevated level in 2021–2022, even after guests partially returned to on-premise venues [2; 6; 9]. For instance, Cheesecake Factory's 2021 report shows that off-premise sales stabilised at around one-third of the chain's turnover, whereas in 2019, this channel played a secondary role [2].

Recent academic publications concentrate on several strands. The first concerns the financial condition and resilience of restaurants from 2019 to 2021, during which declining profitability, growing debt burdens, and reduced efficiency under pandemic conditions were documented [5; 6; 11]. The second addresses organisational and managerial responses to the crisis, including cost restructuring, staff reductions, rent negotiations, changes in service formats, and rethinking of operating processes; this body of work typically emphasises small and medium-sized companies facing pronounced resource constraints [4; 7]. The third strand relates to the digital transformation of restaurant business models, including the expansion of online ordering, integration with delivery aggregators, contactless payments, and the implementation of digital tools that lower perceived sanitary risks [1; 3]. A separate line of discussion focuses on menu engineering and menu revenue management as instruments for restoring margins after demand shocks [8; 13].

At the same time, the field of case studies on small independent establishments is far less developed than on large chains. Chain operators have access to a larger volume of analytical data, their decisions are frequently documented in public reports, and they regularly become subjects of empirical research. Small urban projects, especially gastropubs and chef-driven venues, are more often presented in advisory and practitioner-oriented literature for industry professionals, while academic work devotes less attention to them. The 2018–2022 time horizon includes not only the shock phase but also a period of partial recovery, allowing the crisis to be viewed not merely as an episode of survival but as a turning point in the business model.

The purpose of the present study is to provide an analytical description and assessment of the set of managerial decisions implemented at Magarych Pub in 2020–2021 and their impact on the restoration of profitability in 2022. The analysis concentrates on reconstructing the pub's initial operating model before the pandemic, describing the dynamics of financial and operating indicators in 2020–2021, identifying and grouping managerial decisions into blocks, evaluating their influence on the structure of revenue, costs, and the break-even point in 2022, and comparing the case with international industry data. The research questions focus on which business-model changes were implemented, to what extent they correspond to typical turnaround steps in the restaurant industry, and which elements of this programme are technologically and organizationally suitable for replication in other small establishments.

Magarych Pub fits into the broader picture of foodservice enterprises operating in an urban environment, where intense competition exists for guests' attention. The project was a small, independent gastropub targeting both residents and tourists, with an emphasis on local craft beer and seasonal cuisine featuring produce from the nearby market. The venue fulfilled a cultural function as an urban "third place", hosting regular musical and literary events, which increased its reliance on in-person attendance and made the impact of lockdowns particularly acute. The 2018–2022 timeframe makes it possible to trace the trajectory from launch and stabilisation through the crisis-induced collapse in demand to the subsequent transformation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The empirical base for Magarych Pub consists of three data blocks. The first block covers managerial financial reporting, detailing revenue distribution by channel (dining room, delivery, takeaway), the cost structure (food, labour, rent, marketing, other fixed expenses), and calculations of gross margin and break-even point over the 2018–2022 horizon. The second block comprises product-related information: menu dynamics, the share of high-margin items, shifts in price levels, and their alignment with the purchasing power of the target audience. The third block brings together operational and qualitative data: load factors by day of the week and by segment (local patrons, tourists, event participants), staffing patterns and wage bill, guest feedback, as well as narrative descriptions of decisions taken, mistakes made, and lessons drawn from the author's professional experience.

The external comparative base draws on industry statistics and academic research. To assess the macro-dynamics of the restaurant market, the study utilises National Restaurant Association reports for 2019–2021, which contain data on total sales, the scale of the decline in 2020 and subsequent recovery, as well as information on the share of off-premise channels [6; 9]. Studies on Europe and individual EU countries extend the picture for a region comparable in demand structure and regulatory regime [5; 10]. Research on crisis management in hospitality and restaurant business provides a theoretical lens for interpreting managerial responses: a review of crisis management in tourism and hospitality [12], studies of organisational behaviour under turbulence [4], and specialised articles on restaurant survival strategies during COVID-19 [3; 5; 7; 11]. For the menu-engineering block related to profit recovery, empirical work on chefs' approaches to menu management is used [8; 13].

Methodologically, the study takes the form of an in-depth case study. Time series for Magarych Pub's core indicators are examined by subperiods: pre-crisis (2018–2019), crisis (2020–2021), and recovery (2022). For each period, the structure of revenue by channel and menu category, the cost structure, and the break-even position are reconstructed. Within the crisis phase, a further distinction is made between the initial wave of reactive measures (spring–summer 2020) and the phase of a coherent restructuring programme (autumn 2020–2021). Break-even calculations follow the classical approach of separating fixed and variable costs, identifying the point at which revenue equals total costs, and taking into account the contribution margin of key menu categories. Structural analysis of revenue by channel compares the shares of dining room, delivery, and takeaway with industry benchmarks for analogous periods [2; 6; 9; 11].

Comparative analysis (benchmarking) proceeds in two directions. On the one hand, Magarych Pub is compared with large chains, whose reports document similar managerial moves, including menu simplification, development of digital channels, intensive use of delivery and takeaway, and redesign of pricing [1–3; 7]. On the other hand, the case is related to studies of small and medium-sized restaurants, which describe decisions on cost reductions, negotiations with landlords, and modifications to service formats [4; 6; 7]. The qualitative component involves reconstructing the author's managerial decisions, which are categorised into four blocks—financial, product, operational, and marketing—and are then compared with theoretical models of turnaround management.

RESULTS

The global dynamics of the restaurant market from 2019 to 2022 follow a typical U-shaped trajectory. Studies for Spain and Portugal indicate declining profitability and rising debt burdens for restaurants in 2020, with a partial recovery by 2021–2022, although indicators remain below pre-crisis levels [5]. For the United States, researchers highlight the simultaneous decline in sales and increase in productivity driven by the rapid expansion of delivery and takeaway services; some establishments managed to turn this shift to their advantage, whereas small, independent restaurants more often faced closure [6; 11]. The National Restaurant Association reports that in 2020, roughly one in six restaurants in the United States suspended operations temporarily or permanently. By 2022, the industry had not returned to its projected trajectory, despite experiencing double-digit revenue growth [9]. For Europe, work on HoReCa underscores the particular vulnerability of small enterprises and their dependence on the stringency of local restrictions [10].

Before the pandemic, Magarych Pub operated as a gastropub strongly oriented towards on-premise consumption. The concept rested on a combination of craft beer, seasonal cuisine based on local products, and a cultural programme of music evenings, poetry readings, and meetings with local communities. The target audience consisted of residents of nearby neighbourhoods with a stable demand for informal social interaction and tourists seeking an authentic local experience. The basic revenue model relied on in-house sales; in 2018–2019, delivery played a secondary role and accounted for only a negligible share of turnover. The cost structure contained a substantial fixed component: rent, the minimally acceptable wage fund for qualified staff, baseline marketing efforts, and expenditure on maintaining the cultural programme. Variable costs were linked to purchasing fresh food and beverages, with a significant portion of ingredients sourced from the local market, which allowed for flexible volumes and adjustments to food costs but increased exposure to price fluctuations.

In spring 2020, restrictions on dine-in service and a decline in tourist flows resulted in a sharp drop in traffic. Managerial reports recorded a collapse in revenue against an almost unchanged level of fixed costs, which shifted the break-even point into an unattainable zone. Initial reactive measures included cutting purchases, temporarily reducing staff, trimming marketing expenses, and attempting to weather the period in anticipation of a rapid lifting of restrictions. This pattern aligns with descriptions of small restaurants in Canadian and European studies, where stress, liquidity shortages, and attempts to offset revenue loss through straightforward cost-cutting measures are emphasised [4; 7]. In practice, such steps generated risks of service degradation, weakening ties with regular guests, and did not address the need for systematic adaptation of the business model.

A turning point came when the author moved from passive cost compression to an active restructuring programme. In the financial block, negotiations with landlords and suppliers were initiated, which enabled the rescheduling of part of the fixed payments over time and reduced pressure on the cash flow. Some debt obligations were restructured, and purchasing and inventory control were tightened. Order quantities were linked to actual turnover in aggregated categories, and stricter limits on write-offs and losses were introduced. On the product side, the menu was reduced to a set of the most profitable and operationally robust items, which cut inventory variety and simplified production. Priority was given to dishes suitable for delivery and takeaway without compromising quality: fish and meat items that reliably retain their sensory properties in packaging, burgers, and selected hot appetisers. Prices were revised in light of reduced purchasing power for part of the guest base and rising input costs: anchor items with moderate mark-ups were defined to sustain a perception of affordability, alongside premium items with higher margins aimed at the loyal audience.

The operational block involved redesigning shifts, combining tasks, and tighter management of the wage fund. The number of shifts was reduced, schedules were aligned with peak delivery demand and periods when limited on-premise service was permitted, and staff were trained for multifunctional work. Control over production processes was intensified through the standardisation of recipes, preparation times, and packaging procedures, which reduced variance in both cost and quality. Marketing and communication efforts focused on maintaining contact with regular guests through social networks, direct messages, club offers, and events during periods when the dining room was operational. Communications emphasised sanitary safety and transparency of procedures: guests received information on cleaning protocols, spacing between tables, and staff use of protective equipment, which lowered the perceived risk of visiting the venue, consistent with research on digital technologies and the reduction of clients' risk perception [3].

The dynamics of Magarych Pub's indicators from 2020 to 2022 indicate a shift in revenue structure and a gradual recovery of margins. In 2020, the share of dine-in revenue dropped sharply, while delivery and takeaway shifted from an auxiliary channel to a vital source of revenue. In 2021, with some restrictions still in place, the share of off-premise formats continued to grow, while the dining room partially recovered during periods of relaxation. By 2022, the channel mix stabilised at a level where a significant proportion of revenue still originated from delivery and takeaway, and the dining room no longer served as the sole centre of the model. This trajectory is summarised in Figure 1.

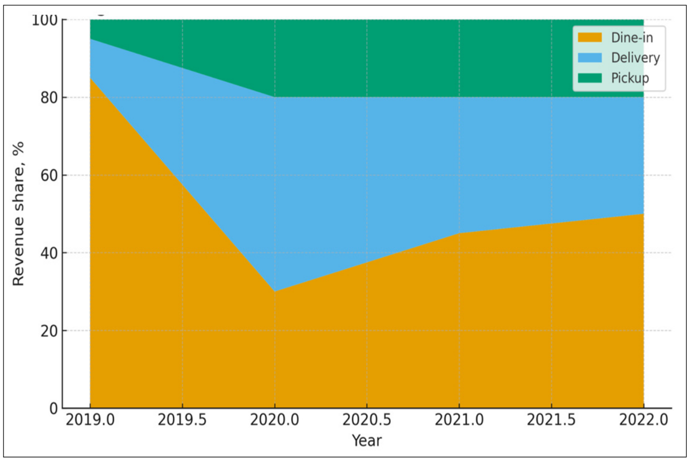

Figure 1. Change in the structure of sales channels at Magarych Pub in 2019–2022 (notional revenue shares, %) (compiled by the author based on original research)

In 2019, the dining room generated the largest share of turnover, with delivery and takeaway accounting for a minimal portion. In 2020, the share of the dining room dropped sharply, delivery's share increased, and takeaway strengthened as a compromise between expectations of speed and guests' desire to minimise contact. In 2021, the dining room partially recovered, while off-premise remained at a level far above its pre-crisis state. In 2022, a combined model took shape, where the dining room, together with delivery and takeaway, formed a balanced structure, and off-premise did not revert to their former status as a secondary channel.

The shift in revenue structure coincided with a change in the break-even point. Through rent negotiations, optimisation of the wage fund, and reductions in unproductive expenses, the fixed-cost component decreased, pushing the break-even point down in both volume and value terms. At the same time, menu revisions and a higher share of high-margin items increased the average margin, thereby expanding the safety cushion. Such a combination—lower fixed costs alongside higher contribution margin derived from menu engineering—aligns with recommendations in studies on menu management and profitability restoration in the restaurant sector [8; 13].

A comparison of the Magarych Pub case with international practice reveals that the chosen measures align closely with the behaviour of successful restaurants during the pandemic, as described in crisis management literature. These establishments typically combine flexible cost management, accelerated digitalisation, focus on regular guests and active communication, and a rethought menu emphasising operationally resilient items [3; 4; 5; 7]. Magarych Pub differs in that the resources of a small independent team are limited, decisions are taken faster and with a higher degree of personal responsibility on the part of the owner, and reliance on a cultural programme strengthens the need to preserve emotional ties with guests under conditions of physical separation.

DISCUSSION

The interpretation of the results indicates that the resilience of Magarych Pub during COVID-19 did not arise from a single, isolated decision, but from a coherent set of steps encompassing financial management, product strategy, operational processes, and guest relations. In terms of economic stability, rent negotiations and debt restructuring played a central part: without rescheduling fixed payments over time, even the most effective menu-engineering programme would be unable to offset the collapse in revenue [5; 9]. In parallel, emphasis on high-margin dishes and the removal of low-margin and operationally complex items created room to absorb the inevitably higher costs of sanitary safety and delivery logistics [8; 13].

A comparison with concepts of crisis and turnaround management in hospitality reveals that Magarych Pub aligns with several principles described in the literature. The review by Wut and co-authors identifies a sequence of steps: crisis recognition, rapid measures to preserve liquidity, adaptation of the operating model, and strategic rethinking [12]. In the Magarych Pub case, one observes a transition from initial, largely instinctive cuts to a more structured programme directed at changing the business model itself. The study by Giousmpasoglou and colleagues highlights that, in pandemic conditions, managers require not only technical skills but also personal resilience, the capacity to make unpopular decisions, and the ability to maintain team motivation [4]. At Magarych Pub, this line emerges in the author's willingness to suspend an emotionally attractive but financially burdensome cultural programme during periods of strict restrictions, redirecting resources toward basic operational stability, and then gradually rebuilding the event component once the financial base had strengthened.

Comparison with international practices of large chains reveals structural similarities, despite significant differences in scale. McKinsey articles and industry reports indicate that successful chains during the pandemic simplified their menus, shifted ordering to digital channels, introduced contactless payment, expanded delivery and drive-thru services, and built loyalty programmes around mobile applications [1; 2; 7]. Magarych Pub, lacking corporate-level resources, relied on tools commonly available to local projects: cooperation with delivery aggregators and its own couriers, active use of social media, direct communication with regular guests, and manual management of the contact database. In essence, the same logic was implemented: shifting the centre of gravity toward off-premise and reinforcing relationships with guests, but without a large-scale digital platform.

To systematise the comparison, it is helpful to consider summary Table 1, where large chains and the independent Magarych Pub are contrasted along four dimensions—revenue and sales channels, cost management, operational decisions, and digital/service changes—based on the literature and the case study.

Table 1. Comparison of crisis strategies of large chains and Magarych Pub during COVID-19 (compiled by the author based on [1–3; 5; 7; 9])

Dimension	**Large chains (according to studies and reports)**	**Magarych Pub**
Revenue and sales channels	Large-scale expansion of delivery and drive-thru, strong focus on mobile applications, testing of virtual brands, and growth of off-premise share to 30–60% of turnover in 2020–2021.	Shift from near-total dominance of dine-in to a mixed model: delivery and takeaway account for a substantial share of turnover, the dining room recovers during periods of eased restrictions; virtual brands are not used, reliance falls on the pub's own name and local reputation.
Cost management	Standardised cost-cutting programmes, temporary closure of some outlets, redeployment of staff, use of centralised purchasing and hybrid work formats.	Rent negotiations, local debt restructuring, reduction and rescheduling of shifts, tighter control over purchasing and inventory, and elimination of cost items that provide little return when operating without a fully open dining room.
Operational decisions	Transition to shorter shifts, automation of selected operations, and introduction of new sanitary protocols supported by corporate services.	Multifunctional roles for staff, simplification of production processes, standardisation of recipes and packaging, and manual schedule management tailored to delivery peaks.
Digital and service changes	Development of proprietary digital platforms, data-driven loyalty programmes, and marketing campaigns highlighting safety and ordering convenience.	Active presence in social media, personalised offers for regular guests, focus on transparency of sanitary protocols, use of aggregators and simple digital tools instead of a proprietary platform.

The comparison indicates that a small gastropub, acting intuitively and drawing on practical experience, arrived at decisions consistent with the recommendations of consulting and academic work. The difference lies in the toolkit: where chains rely on complex IT systems and loyalty programmes, Magarych Pub relies on personal relationships and manual management of guest databases.

Table 2 provides a more detailed view of Magarych Pub's managerial decisions by block, linking them to the expected effects on performance indicators.

Table 2. Managerial decisions at Magarych Pub by block and their links to performance indicators

Block	**Decisions taken**	**Expected effects on indicators**
Financial	Rent negotiations, phased debt restructuring, revision of budgets for marketing and events, and tighter control over working capital.	Reduction of fixed costs, improved liquidity, lower financial leverage, reduced risk of insolvency during periods of revenue decline [5; 6; 9; 11].
Product	Menu reduction to the most profitable and delivery-resilient items, introduction of anchor dishes with moderate prices, revision of the purchasing policy for raw materials, and a higher share of local suppliers.	Increase in average dish margin, lower write-offs, better alignment with guest expectations under crisis conditions, and higher economic efficiency of the menu [8; 13].
Operational	Shift rescheduling, task combination, standardisation of preparation and packaging processes, and retraining part of the staff for an off-premise model.	Lower wage costs per unit of revenue, reduced variance in food cost, higher productivity, better alignment of the operating model with demand structure [3; 4; 7].
Marketing and service	A stronger presence on social media, personalised offers for regular guests, an emphasis on safety and transparency of sanitary protocols, and event-based activities during periods of eased restrictions.	Preservation of the loyal customer base, maintenance of demand under limited dining-room operations, reduction of perceived risk of visiting and ordering, and a higher repeat-visit rate [1; 3].

This classification aligns with conclusions from research on service innovation in the restaurant sector: digital and organisational changes, when combined, reduce customers' risk perception and sustain their willingness to return, despite sanitary restrictions [3]. For Magarych Pub, the interplay between product and service decisions had critical significance: guests received consistent dish quality in delivery while simultaneously observing care for safety and the continuation of the project's cultural life, albeit in a reduced format.

The author's prior experience has a significant influence on the configuration of decisions at Magarych Pub, which warrants separate attention. At Magarych Pub, these lessons took on a concentrated, practical form. Experience with crisis turnaround in a pan-Asian chain built around teppan and show-kitchen formats prepared the ground for bold changes in the menu. Experience in waterparks demonstrated how crucial control of food costs and service speed becomes when working with high guest volumes. Transferring these insights into a small gastropub accelerated the decision-making cycle. Some mistakes had already been encountered in previous projects, so restructuring during the pandemic rested on accumulated knowledge of guest behaviour and the economics of different formats.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Magarych Pub case reveals that consistent crisis management under COVID-19 conditions not only restores pre-crisis performance indicators but also fosters the development of a new, more resilient business model. Lowering the break-even point through rent negotiations and strict control of fixed costs, simplifying the menu and increasing the share of high-margin items, shifting the centre of gravity towards delivery and takeaway, strengthening managerial control, and intensifying individual work with regular guests together produce an effect comparable to the recommendations of the international literature on crisis and turnaround management in the restaurant sector.

For small foodservice enterprises, several practical steps can be distilled from the Magarych Pub experience. First, early and persistent dialogue with landlords and creditors creates room for manoeuvre and eases the pressure of fixed expenses. Second, a systematic review of the menu with a focus on margin and technological suitability for delivery not only improves financial indicators but also makes the model more compatible with limited kitchen resources. Third, the reinforcement of off-premise channels, combined with the preservation of the emotional bond with guests through events, personalised offers, and transparent communication, builds a stable demand base that is less sensitive to local restrictions. Fourth, team management that considers staff motivation and readiness for multifunctional work reduces the risk of burnout and supports productivity under heightened stress.

The transferability of these findings to other small establishments requires careful attention to local conditions, including demand structure, regulatory regime, location characteristics, and resource base. Nevertheless, the underlying logic—lowering the break-even point, strengthening margins, and diversifying sales channels while maintaining the trust of regular guests—provides a practical benchmark for independent industry professionals seeking to use crisis not only as a period of survival but as an opportunity for strategic transformation.

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Citation: Volodymyr Tolstov, "Crisis Management as a Driver of Strategic Business Transformation: Restructuring Mechanisms and Profit Recovery in Food Service Enterprises", Universal Library of Innovative Research and Studies, 2023; 07-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70315/uloap.ulirs.2023.002.