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How Well Do Turkey-Based Travel Agencies Manage the Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis?

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Abstract

This research used an adapted crisis management framework from the relevant literature and applied it to the context of Turkey-based travel agencies during a devastating health crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic. The adapted framework consists of six stages and it has been applied in many fields so far, but it has not been tested in any health crisis with global effects in the tourism industry yet. Therefore, this study focused on some Turkey-based travel agencies to evaluate their crisis management performances in a health crisis. An interview schedule was developed based on the adapted framework and then used in the qualitative data collection. Through in-depth interviews with the senior managers of 16 travel agencies, the crisis management performances of those businesses were examined in detail. It was found with this study that the examined travel agencies failed to manage the Covid-19 crisis appropriately. With this study, various recommendations have been offered about what kind of strategies could be effective in such tourism crises in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Crisis Management, Tourism, Travel Agency.

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INTRODUCTION

“Crisis”, as a word, is rooted from the word “krisis”, which is a Greek word and means “decision”. It was first used in the field of medicine and then started to be used in the field of psychology, politics and economics (Lachtar & Garbolino, 2012). Tourism has become one of those fields in which “crisis” is often used. The industry has often suffered from many crises by its nature, which is the most basic reason why there is a need for crisis management strategies for stakeholders of the tourism industry to adopt. Cavlek (2002) points out that there is not any other industry more susceptible to a crisis than tourism as it is dependent on voluntary activities and particularly sensitive to the changes in the environment (political, social, climatic, etc.), and such changes could have a great effect on the travel experience of tourists (Santana, 2003)

Faulkner (2001) points out that how the tourism industry manages crises and disasters has not caught enough attention in the relevant literature claiming that almost all destinations are prone to disasters and crises. On the other hand, Ritchie (2009) has contributed to the crisis management literature claiming that the researches having been conducted on this issue have failed to provide enough theoretical and conceptual focus. Therefore, it is claimed that more models regarding crisis and disaster management should be developed and tested in the context of tourism. Ritchie (2009) also notes that the Tourism Disaster Management Framework (TDMF), developed by Faulkner & Vikulov (2001) needs to be tested more in the tourism industry.

In the relevant literature, many researchers have examined disasters and crises from tourism perspectives (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Faulkner, 2001; Henderson, 2003; Prideaux et al, 2003; Ritchie, 2004). Among these models, the one developed by Faulkner & Vikulov (2001) has caught more attention in the literature, and it has been tested in some disasters and crises such as the 1998 Katherine Floods and the 2003 SARS epidemic.

The TDMF model that Faulkner & Vikulov (2001) developed could be applied to many types of disasters and crises, which is why TDMF could be applied in different crises and disasters (Prideaux, 2003). This makes this model stronger than the other models developed in the relevant field (e.g. Murphy & Bayley (1989); Smith (1990); Santana (1999); Paraskevas & Arendell (2007); Hystad & Keller (2008); Armstong 2008; and Murphy (2008). This research has used a model adapted from TDMF and Crisis and Disaster Management Framework (CDMF) developed by Ritchie (2004), which is another framework most often

used to test the applicability of the adapted models in the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis in the Turkish travel agencies, considering that COVID-19 is a health disaster in which such frameworks have not been tested yet.

The novel coronavirus is a health crisis which has had global effects in the tourism sector (Eryılmaz, 2020). By 2020 August, 21.294.845 cases of Covid-19 were confirmed globally, and 761.779 deaths were confirmed (WHO, 2020). All countries worldwide have been attempting to stop the spread of the pandemic and diminish its effects, and they enacted “shelter-in-place” “wear your mask” and “keep your social distance” initiatives to control the spread of the virus. Some businesses which were viewed nonessential were closed to decrease human interaction (VOX, 2020).

According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2020), the figures regarding the arrivals of international tourist are expected to go down by 20% to 30% in 2020 when compared with the figures of 2019, which means a loss between 300 and 450 US\$ billion. Some countries are predicted to suffer from more serious effects than the others as they have a higher economic reliance on the tourism sector. Out of the top 10 tourist attractions in terms of tourist arrivals, which are France, Spain, United States, China, Italy, Turkey, Mexico, Germany, UK and Thailand, 8 countries are expected to suffer the hardest from the COVID-19 pandemic, which means that the economic effect of the pandemic will be more on the tourism sector of these countries. According to the forecasts, Asia is expected to suffer from the highest decrease in the revenue earned from travel and tourism in 2020 (Statistica, 2020). In Europe, where around 13 million people are employed in the tourism sector, around €1 billion monthly income is predicted to be lost because of the novel coronavirus. For example, Italy is expected to close the 2020 tourism season with 60% less presences than 2019, which is a figure equivalent to those in the 1960s (Assoturismo, 2020). The tourism sector in Spain is expected to experience losses of about €55 billion by 2020 (El pais, 2020). Another group of countries which are expected to be heavily affected by the novel coronavirus pandemic are the Small Island Developing States because their tourism sector accounts for almost 30% of their economy, and as they cannot manage this crisis for long without having alternative sources (United Nations, 2020).

This research aims to examine how Turkey-based travel agencies prepared and responded to the novel coronavirus pandemic and to explore what crisis management strategies were used by the examined travel agencies. The major reason for the choice of

travel agencies as the context of the research to gather data is that travel agencies are the main channels of tourism flows. They are more likely to be affected by the Covid 19 crisis and its consequences in the field of tourism. For this purpose, the questionnaire adapted by Uysal et. al. (2018) from TDMF and CDMF was used as the conceptual frameworks to guide the research, by adapting into an interview schedule in qualitative data collection stage. The reason why this research adopted the framework into qualitative research is that qualitative research is an investigative one. They are often used for deeper understating of views and perceptions. Qualitative research also helps researchers discover new thoughts and views as well as offering researchers the opportunity to observe gestures, postures and body languages. Thus researchers could identify problems and provide the best fitting solutions.

For the research purpose, the following research question was developed and asked in this research:

- What strategies did Turkey-based travel agencies employ to prepare and respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic?

The research aims to adapt and test the TDMF and CDMF in the context of Turkey-based travel agencies in a worldwide pandemic crisis. The outcomes of this research are expected to provide a significant contribution to the relevant literature on disaster and crisis management, as it has tested two most commonly used and known conceptual frameworks on crisis management in the relevant literature. This research is also expected to provide some recommendations to travel agencies for similar crisis management practices which may occur in the future as well as shedding light on all other stakeholders of the tourism sector.

Contribution of This Research

This research is considered to contribute to the crisis and disaster management literature and crisis management in the tourism sector as it was designed to provide an insight into travel agencies' preparation for and responses to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. This was found to be a gap in the relevant literature as suggested by many researchers (e.g. Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001, Ritchie, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to test crisis and disaster management models within the context of tourism during such a large scale pandemic crisis. Armstrong (2008) pointed out that there has been a very limited amount case studies focusing on individual business and the way they managed a certain crisis and disaster within the context of tourism. Therefore, Armstrong (2008) recommends further case studies whose findings could inspire other businesses to make them better prepared

for a crisis by providing guidelines to use in responding to and recovery following the crisis. This research is considered to contribute to the relevant literature with this regard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Crisis and Disaster Management?

A crisis is defined as a loss of control over a situation. Crises often occur in the kind of environments which are composed of many different actors interacting within a certain context (Lachtar & Garbolino, 2012). The UNWTO (2003) defines crisis as an unexpected situation affecting travellers' confidence in a destination and interfere with the destination's ability to operate normally. Ritchie (2009) points out that the relationship between a crisis and disaster is very confusing because a crisis may also cause a serious disaster. Faulkner (2001) also agrees with that suggesting that the difference between crises and disasters is not something clear.

Pauchant & Douville (1993) define a crisis as disruptive situations which affect an organization or a certain system challenging previously held basic assumptions. Crises also generally demand urgent and novel decisions and actions. Scott & Laws (2005) define a disaster as a catastrophic event, which causes negative influences on the system. On the other hand, Anderson (2006) defines a disaster as a negative event having the potential to influence the tourism industry resulting in a decrease in the number of arrivals. Faulkner (2001) highlights the differences between a crisis and a disaster, and he suggests that a crisis could be caused in organisations if it is not managed effectively. Therefore, it should always be remembered that both a crisis and disaster need to be planned effectively and relevant management strategies should be employed to manage the possible consequences of crises and disasters (Evans & Elphick, 2005).

Classification of Crises and Disasters

When the relevant crisis and disaster management literature is reviewed, it is seen that many different crises and disasters have hit and caused problems in the tourism sector. These disasters and crises have been put into many categories by the researchers in the literature: a) internal organisational issues, (b) natural disasters (c) terrorist attacks, (d) environmental changes, (e) health outbreaks, and (f) market changes, including economic disasters and system failures (Ritchie 2009; Santana, 2003).

McKercher & Hui (2004) classify disasters as natural events or human-involved events. As disasters and crises are unpredictable in terms of the consequences

that they trigger, losing control over the crises and disasters is considered to be the key issue (Faulkner, 2001). To be able to have control over disasters and crises, resources that organisations have, and which are necessary to control crises and disasters should be managed very well. This is specifically true for small scale organisations operating in the tourism sector (Cioccio & Michael, 2007)

The UNWTO (2011) puts tourism crises into five categories. The first is of them is environmental such as geological and extreme weather events and human-induced situations. The second is societal and political like terrorist acts, human rights abuses. The third is health-related crises like epidemics. The fourth is technological, like transportation accidents and system failures. The last of them is economic, like major currency fluctuations.

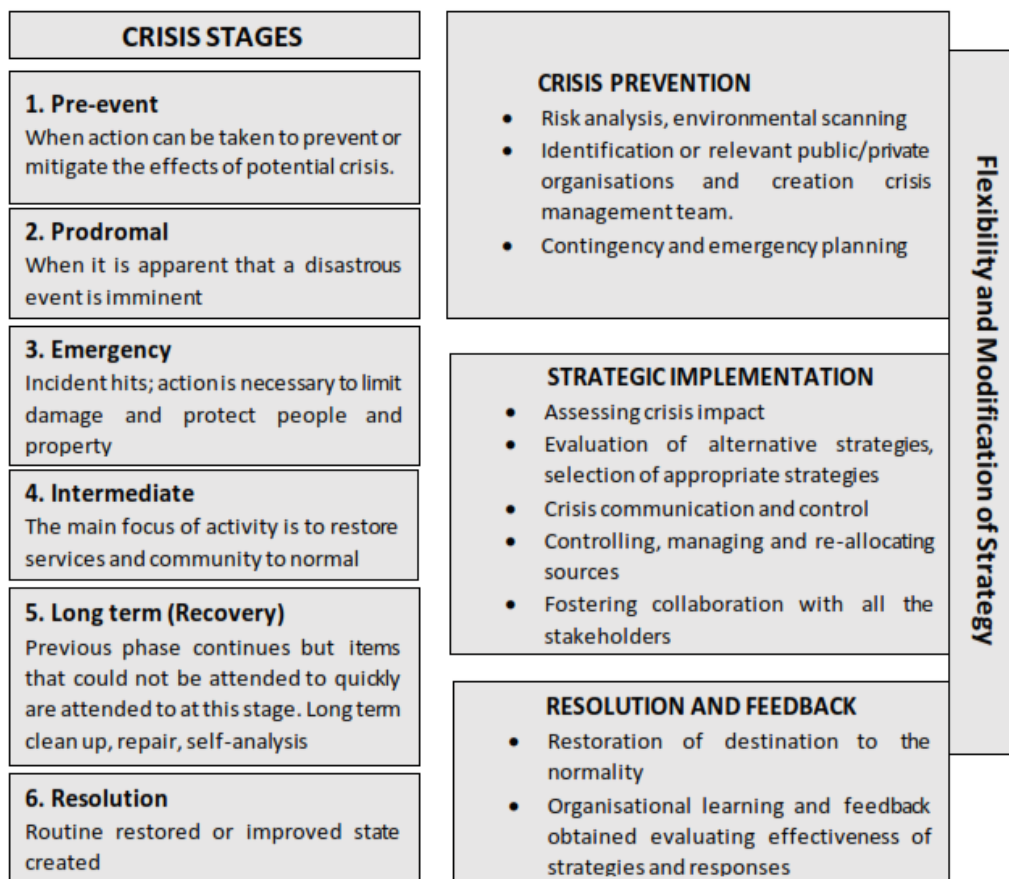
Crisis and Natural Disaster Management Frameworks and Consequences of Crises

Heath (1998) claims that there have been two major approaches often used in managing any crisis. The first

one focuses on the time when the crisis hits and does not consider making any plan before a crisis occurs. The second is about the risk management approach which focuses on the assessment and management of any risk before it occurs. As the tourism industry is often prone to losing visitors and thus lower employment, which also results in lower profit (Laws & Prideaux 2005), research in the relevant field highlights the importance of pre-planning and effective management of any crisis at all stages. Therefore, many theoretical frameworks and models have been developed and tested in the relevant literature to examine the stages of a crisis, and they aimed to manage each stage of crisis effectively. The most popular two frameworks are TDMF developed by Faulkner and Vikulov (20019) and CDMF developed by Ritchie (2004), these two models could be summarized as in Figure 1.

If crises are managed effectively, they could be prevented from becoming. Otherwise, they could lead organisations to crises situations. Risk management is closely related to assessing the possibility of unexpected events which may cause the tourism sector to fail in operating normally (Comcec, 2017). With

Figure 1: Comparison of the Stages of the Adapted Frameworks
Developed by Faulkner and Vikulov and Richie



Source: (Rossi, 2012)

this regard, Pata (2011) suggested six functions for risk management; identifying the risks or hazards before they happen, analysing the probabilities, timeframes and potential impacts of each and then classifying and prioritising them, planning contingency action to diminish the possible effect, tracking the likely effectiveness of these plans, monitoring and evolving risks, controlling the plans prepared based on the data obtained from the monitoring stage and communicating with stakeholders and ensuring them by monitoring the changes in the risk.

Any significant crisis may negatively affect the tourism sector, and the sector may fail to operate in a normal way. This may be because the infrastructure and facilities are given damage, or the destination could be perceived as unsafe by tourists planning a visit to such destinations. The most common consequences of crises are a sudden decrease in the figures regarding arrivals and hotels' occupancy levels, airlines and tour operators because physical damage is given to the tourism infrastructure, perception of risk is higher, and the level of consumer confidence is lower, trips are cancelled or postponed, tour operators are removed from holidays, flights to affected destinations are reduced (Comcec, 2017)

METHOD

In qualitative research, the focus is usually on a small sample of people in the target context, and they are examined in-depth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This qualitative research focused on a small sample, 16 Turkey-based travel agencies which were experiencing a crisis that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic from 4 different geographical regions of Turkey. All travel agencies who were taken as the focus of the study were the ones who were still operating in the travel business at the time when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the sector.

Research Design

This research was based on TDMF and CDMF. Travel agencies were chosen within Turkey context through a purposive sampling method. COVID-19 pandemic was chosen as the case to be examined in the study. Veal (2006) claims that a case from the field can be used to test the applicability of existing theory and thus it could be used to validate the application of the TDMF and CDMF. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted with the managers of 16 travel agencies in the Turkish context. An interview guide was first adapted from the framework. The adapted interview guide consisted of six crisis management stages and 24 questions in total. The collected data was then submitted for content analysis

using the process suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), which consists of Data Reduction, Data Display and Conclusions Drawing and Verification.

Sampling

To apply the adapted framework to Turkey-based travel agencies, a purposive sampling method was employed to find out the units that could be the most appropriate to include in the study (Jennings, 2010). The focus of this study was to find out the crisis management strategies of Turkish travel agencies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. 16 travel agencies were randomly chosen from 4 different geographical regions of Turkey; Aegean Region, Mediterranean Region, Central Anatolia Region and Marmara Region. The senior managers of the target travel agencies were specifically chosen as their knowledge of the organisations' operational strategies were considered to be the highest, and as they were the ones who prepared and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. All travel agencies who were interviewed within the scope of the study acknowledged that they had been operating in the sector during the Covid-19 crisis.

Data Collection Method: Semi-structured in-depth Interviews

The qualitative interviewing technique was used in this study as the method of data collection. Qualitative interviewing could be either "in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing (Mason, 2002, p.62). Similarly, Berg (2004) describes them as standardised, semi-standardized or unstandardized. Berg (2004) also defines interviewing as a conversation with a purpose. This study used semi-structured or semi-standardized in-depth interviews with 16 travel agencies' senior managers in Turkey to test the applicability of the adapted framework and evaluate their crisis management performances according to the criteria set by the adapted framework. The interviews were conducted with the respondents between October and November 2020. Each interview took between 30 and 60 minutes and the length of the interview changed depending on the responses received from the participants. Each interview was conducted face to face and the interviews were tape-recorded for further analysis upon receiving permission from the respondents.

First, Faulkner & Vikulov's (2001) and Ritchie's (2004) frameworks were adapted to generate an interview schedule, and the schedule included questions for each stage of the adapted framework. Mason (2002) points out that qualitative interviews need to be flexible and well-planned to be effective and consistent with the developed research questions. According to Mason,

qualitative interviews also need to be ready to make on-the-spot decisions regarding the content and sequence. As the interview schedule provided flexibility due to its open-ended nature in the addressed questions, it allowed the researcher to make quick decisions on the follow-up questions (Mason 2002). The use of open-ended questions is also important in interviews as it provides the researcher with the opportunity to listen and to encourage respondents to talk (Veal, 2006).

The adopted interview schedule and the questions asked at each stage in the interviews are given below.

Pre-event Stage (Action/s Taken to Prevent Disasters)

Q1. Before the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, did your organisation consider about crisis management strategies?

Q2. Could you explain the pro-active measures your organisation took to manage the Covid-19 pandemic crisis? (If no, go to Q3)

Q3. Did your organisation conduct any environmental scanning, forecasting or risk analysis of your business in case of a crisis? (If no, go to Q5)

Q4. Did you develop any strategic plan/manual based on your scanning and risk analysis?

Prodromal Stage (Apparent Crisis/disaster is About to Hit)

Q5. Were you provided with any warning by any party about the crisis before the Covid-19 pandemic crisis hit? (If yes, go to Q6, if no, go to Q9)

Q6. How did you learn about the Covid-19 pandemic crisis?

Q7. What strategies did your organisation implement after the warning that you received about the pandemic crisis?

Q8. Were your strategies based on any plan that was already developed? If yes, please explain in detail.

Emergency Stage (Incident Hits; Damage is Clear, Limitation and Action Needed)

Q9. From which countries do your organisation mostly welcome visitors?

Q10. What crisis communication strategies did you use?

Q11. Did you appoint any person/team/external source to manage the pandemic crisis on behalf of your organisation?

Q12. What other actions did you take in your organisation when the immediate impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis were felt?

Intermediate Stage (Short Term Needs Dealing with)

Q13. What are the main difficulties in the short term in improving your operations to the normal condition?

Q14. How did you manage your resources (human, financial etc.) to improve your services back to normal?

Q15. Did you make any change in your organisational structure and leadership styles in your organisation? If so, what changes did you make?

Q16. Was there any form of collaboration with any of your stakeholders to help the restoration of your operations?

Long-term Recovery Stage (Longer-Term Clean-Up; Repair; Reinvestment; Post Mortem)

Q17. What type of consultation did you receive from external stakeholders to improve the state of your organisation in the long-term? (Media, tourists and other businesses)

Q18. What type of consultation and collaboration did you receive from your internal stakeholders for recovery in the long-term? (e.g. employees, managers, shareholders)

Q19. What are the main difficulties in your operations for the recovery in the long-term?

Q20. What action/s did your organisation take to ensure this recovery?

Resolution (Normal or Improved State)

Q21. Did the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis bring about any permanent changes to the operating environment of your organisation?

Q22. How has your organisation responded to the changes?

Q23. How did you evaluate the effectiveness of your strategies and responses to the crisis?

Q24. After the evaluations, were any changes made to your Crisis Management prevention and planning tools?

Data Analysis

Miles & Huberman (1994) suggests three stages to follow in qualitative data analysis, which are data reduction, data display and conclusion and verification.

This study used the method that Miles & Huberman (1994) suggested. Miles & Huberman (1994) also suggest that phenomenologists should be careful about not condensing the material obtained from the interview transcripts, rather they should try to obtain a deep understanding and an interpretation of the collected data. Therefore, the interview transcripts were carefully analysed to ensure that the material could be understood adequately. The data reduction stage allows researchers to draw conclusions based on research findings.

With the use of the six stages of the adapted framework and the interview schedule, the collected data was labelled and put into categories for each stage. Veal (2006) mentions some manual methods of analysis, in some of which the analysis is conducted manually on hard-copy transcripts, which was considered to be the most appropriate method in this research as the sample size of the study was very small. The themes and categories obtained as a consequence of the data analysis were put into groups and addressed under the six stages highlighted in the adapted framework. The participants were tagged with figures (from 1 to 16) and each script was coded with numbers. These codes were used throughout the results and discussion parts to refer to. Due to confidential reasons, a copy of the coding tables will not be presented as an appendix in the study. In the analysis of the data, the main purpose was to search for meaning and to obtain new insights using the obtained themes and categories (Saunders et al., 2003). This was then used to conclude the validity of the adapted framework, which is the final stage of the analysis as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994).

Validity and Reliability

Mason (2002) claims that semi-structured interviews help validity, as such interviews require flexibility. This was true in this study because a semi-structured survey tool was used to have deeper and more meaningful responses from participants, and the questions in the survey form were designed as open-ended questions to expand participants' responses. Sarantakos (2005) claims that qualitative researchers consider reliability, using terms such as credibility, applicability and suitability, and they should avoid the generalisability of the data. Generalisability is the probability of the obtained findings to apply to other subjects, other groups, and other conditions. Veal (2006) also points out that the obtained research findings should be used only to the subjects involved in a study at the time when the research was completed. The aim of this was not to generalise the findings of the study to wider populations, rather provide a deep interpretation about how travel agencies in Turkey

address crisis management when they are operating in a crisis environment. As each crisis needs a different management approach by their nature, it would not be a good idea to expect similar results when these research findings were applied to different subjects. The researchers conducting qualitative research must document the procedures followed in the research methods, and these details should include knowledge about how the data was collected and analysed. Such details should be able to understand by each reader very easily (Minichiello et al., 2008). In this study, before the analysis of the data, interview contents were converted into text and the converted texts were sent to the relevant respondents so that they could check and approve the content. Thus their final approval was received and they the research continued with the further analysis. Ethical committee approval was received from Yozgat Bozok University, Ethical Approval Committee on 21-10-2020.

RESULTS

Pre-event Stage (Action/s Taken to Prevent Disasters)

The first stage of the framework aims to find out the measures that travel agencies took to suffer less from the damage during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. This is the stage when organisations still could take measures to prevent or mitigate the potential effects of the crisis. At this stage, four questions were asked the senior managers of the interviewed travel agencies. The responses received for these questions were submitted for content analysis by the researchers, and they were put under the following three themes; 1- Probability of the crisis, 2- Pro-active measures, 3-Contingency plans, risk analysis and environmental scanning.

To categorise the content of the interviews into the relevant themes, the interviewed senior respondents were asked if they had expected any crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic crisis for the travel sector in which they had been operating. Except for one agency, all agreed that the travel sector had not expected such a big crisis and even considered it. All of them also agreed that to be prepared for a crisis in their sector, as in all other sectors, is very important. All of them agreed that they were used to a crisis in the tourism sector, but the Covid-19 crisis was more than they could imagine. In other words, this crisis was too devastating for them to survive. The following extracts are worth noting here (Theme 1);

“As a player in the tourism sector, we have always considered a crisis and some of us have experienced it for one or more times, but

the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences were more devastating than we could imagine or consider. It was the kind of crisis we have not read even in books or reports. Perhaps it will take another lifetime to experience such a crisis in the future (R1)”

“No one can claim that they had considered or predicted such a big crisis. I would not believe it. This is something new for everyone (R7).”

The respondents were then asked if they attempted to take any proactive measures once they saw the crisis coming. 9 of them agreed that they had some minor proactive measures to protect their financial state and employment within the bounds of possibility. The following extracts are worth noting here (Theme 2);

“We decided to improve our service standards to have a competitive advantage over others. But I have to confess, it was not enough, it could not have been enough actually when we consider how the crisis is (R5).”

“We tried to cooperate with the Ministry of Tourism and TURSAB to be prepared for the coming crisis, or to be well-informed about it, but our attempts failed at this point (R6).”

“We stopped hiring new employees as we could not predict what kind of crisis was waiting for us, this was the first and the simplest measure we could take (R9).”

The respondents were asked if they conducted any environmental scanning, forecasting or risk analysis. 10 of them replied that they have always conducted such analyses as the tourism sector is considered a risky sector. They followed the news on the media and tried to read the reports presenting predictions for the coming tourism season. The extracts below are worth noting here (Theme 3);

“We conducted some environmental scanning to see what our competitors are doing to be prepared for the coming crisis. But I understand now that all our attempts for environmental scanning were in vain because we faced more than we could predict as all of our competitors did (R2). “

“We felt helpless at the very beginning, so I have to confess that it was not something I could not consider about at that time (R12). “

When the participants were asked if they had any manual or plan to respond to such a crisis at their organisation, it was found that none of them had a ready-to-use manual or plan in responding to the pandemic crisis and its consequences in the travel sector. When they were asked for the reason for lacking such a manual or plan, none of them could come up with a noteworthy reason to mention here. However, the extract below is worth noting here (Theme 3);

“I have never heard about such a plan, nobody mentioned about such a plan or guide (R7).”

Prodromal Stage (Apparent Crisis/disaster is about to Hit)

The second stage is about the immediate responses given to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. At this stage, it is apparent that a crisis is coming. In total, four questions were asked the senior managers about whether the examined travel agencies received any warning about the crisis which is about to hit somehow.

To categorise the content of the interviews into the relevant themes, the respondents were asked if they had been provided any warning for the crisis coming. All of the respondents agreed that they were not provided with any warnings direct or indirect from their stakeholders, both internal and external. Therefore, the questions Q6, Q7 and Q8 had to be skipped in all interviews. Therefore, one theme, which is “pre-warning received” could be established as the questions 6, 7 and 8 were skipped following the question 5 at the prodromal stage.

Emergency Stage (Incident Hits; Damage is Clear, Limitation and Action Needed)

The third stage is about the action/s taken when the crisis fully hit the travel sector and the emergency actions that need to be implemented. At this stage, the crisis hits, the sector or business needs action to limit any damage and protect the business and organisation. This stage is about the used strategies for communication purpose and the methods used to control public relations. The responses received for the questions asked at the emergency stage were submitted for content analysis by the researchers, and they were put under the following four themes; 1- Customer profile, 2- Crisis management strategy use, 3- Control mechanisms and 4. Specific actions taken

To categorise the content of the interviews into the relevant themes, the respondents were asked which countries their visitors came from mostly, and 15 out of 16 respondents said that their customers were domestic tourists. The following extract is noteworthy here (Theme 1);

“It is hard to answer this question because we sell tours to both domestic tourists and Turks from Germany, and we still name them as domestic tourists (R15).”

The senior managers were then asked what crisis management strategies they employed when the crisis seriously hit their sector, all of them said that they started to sell their products and services through online platforms. All of the respondents said that they worked hard to make their services and products virus free and safe, and they also informed their clients or potential clients about how safe their services and products through online announcements on various platforms. 10 of the respondents said that they tried to keep all their offices open for face to face communication hoping that authorities will find a solution for the problems in the travel sector, but the other respondents said they closed some of their offices and tried to communicate with their clients or authorities through technological tools. 10 of the respondents had phone calls with their clients and encouraged them not to cancel their bookings or to book new tours. The following extracts are noteworthy here (Theme 2);

“Selling our products and services through online platforms was the very first thing that we thought, and it was cheap and secure. It helped us sell to some extend (R16).”

“Thanks to the online platforms, we were away from our customers, but we were so close as well. So I think the future of travel agencies is dependent on their presence on online platforms (R15)”

“At the very beginning of the crisis, we were hopeful that authorities would find a solution to relieve the sector in a few months, so we insisted on keeping physical offices open hoping face to face interaction with clients soon, but we were wrong (R12).”

“We have a database for our clients who had new bookings or past bookings, so we made phone calls and tried to keep them informed (R13).”

The respondents were asked if they had appointed any special team/person/external source to effectively manage the pandemic crisis, it was found that only two of them appointed one of the employees in the client services department. In the other 14 travel agencies. Senior managers were responsible for the management of the pandemic crisis (Theme 3).

“As I had the full control over our operations, we thought I would be the right person to manage the crisis. Appointing someone else for managing the crisis seems to be very professional but not realistic because it will take time for him/her to take the control of the agency and operations (R14).”

The respondents were then asked what other actions they had taken in their organisation specifically when the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis were seriously felt. 11 respondents said that they slowed down their operations with fewer employees and offices to save in costs. 1 respondent said that they continued their operation as if everything were normal. 4 of the respondents said that they froze their operations till the end of May hoping that things could go for better. 12 of them said they reached their clients or potential customers to encourage them to book or not to cancel any reservation just because refunding for the cancellations could put more financial burden on the shoulders of the organisation. The following extracts are noteworthy here (Theme 4);

“Cost was the very first thing I remembered because our organisation runs with a very limited budget. It had to be so (R10).”

“We were so sure that beginning from May 2020, things would start to go for better, and it did actually, but the income that we had was not enough to keep the agency alive (R12).”

“Cancellation of the past bookings was something that we were afraid more than not selling new tours because cancellation means refunding, refunding means more cash to return (16).”

Intermediate Stage (Short Term Needs Dealing with)

The fourth stage is about the strategies employed for marketing recovery in the future. The most basic purpose of this stage is to restore delivered services and the served target community to the normal. The responses received for the questions asked at the intermediate stage were submitted for content analysis by the researchers and they were put under the following four themes; 1- Challenges to the organisation, 2- Management of resources, 3- Organisational changes and 4. Collaboration with stakeholders.

To categorise the content of the interviews into the relevant themes, the respondents were asked about the main difficulties that they could encounter in the short term in improving their operations to their normal, and all of the respondents agreed that improving to

the normal in the short term, and regaining the trust of their clients or potential clients by persuading them about how safe their tours are is not possible. 14 of them said that funding their operations in the short is difficult, and refunding the cancellations of the services and products due to the Covid-19 pandemic. 4 of the respondents stated that it is difficult for them to employ qualified staff in the sector as they also could not ensure their positions in the sector. The following extracts are noteworthy (Theme 1):

“It will be very difficult to go back the days before the pandemic crisis. We can talk about some improvements only in the long term. This is not only true for Turkey but also true for world tourism (R12).”

“People had to change themselves and adopt new habits all of a sudden because of the pandemic, so it is difficult to change them and their habits in the short term (R11).”

“We had a very limited budget to fund our operations. Now, due to the pandemic crisis, our budget has become more limited. I have no predictions for the short term (R9).”

“We all know that it has always been difficult to employ qualified staff in the tourism sector. After now on, this will be something beyond difficult (R3).”

The respondents were then asked how they managed their available resources to improve their services back to normal. 9 of them said that they used their financial resources sparingly and 10 of them said they continued working with the employees with moderate qualification as it was easier to keep them in the organisation. 2 of the respondents said they loaned from external resources and 13 of them said they got a short-term working allowance from the state. Despite all these, all respondents said that they had to make some of their employees redundant, and 6 of them said that they had to stop serving some products which seemed to have been most affected by the consequences of the pandemic (Theme 2):

“It has always been difficult to employ and keep qualified staff in this sector. What is worse now is that we will have to pay them less for their contribution. Therefore, I do not know how we will find new employees (R4).”

“The state provided the opportunity of short-term working allowance, but we could not get it for every employee, or every travel agency could not get it. It is a solution for the very short term, what about the long term.

I cannot make any plan for 2021 tourism season (R14).”

“Our products and services are not plentiful anymore, we have decided to focus on key ones to survive due to the pandemic (R2).”

The respondents were asked if they have made any changes in their organisational structure and leadership styles. 10 of them said they paid more attention to the use of communication and communication channels among their employees. 6 of them decided to manage the organisation with the participation of all employees as much as possible. (Theme 3)

“During the crisis period, we felt that we needed to communicate with each other more and tell us about the latest developments through various platforms. We realized that this has made employees relaxed and motivated (R16).”

“As the senior manager of the agency, I started to feel helpless and I started to think that my employees might have a word to say about what we could do to improve our state (R15).”

The last question at this stage was if there was any collaboration with any stakeholder of the organisation to improve the operations of the agency. 7 of them said that they communicated with the hotels that they had worked with and restructured their payment methods and due dates for payment for the benefits of both sides. 9 of them said they looked for new ways to communicate with the state authorities (Theme 4).

“Payments and whoever we have to make payment were the two things we felt we needed to manage, so we communicated with our stakeholders we are in payment interaction. We tried to extend due dates for payments (R6).”

“I did not believe that we, as travel agencies, had much that we could do, so we waited for the state authorities to take the first actions. However, the state authorities were not quick enough to show response to the crisis (R13).”

Long-term Recovery Stage (Longer-Term Clean-Up; Repair; Reinvestment; Post Mortem)

The fifth stage is about the recovery of the operations in the long-term. At this stage, the previous stage is still in progress; however, the items that could not be dealt with quickly could be dealt with at this stage. Long term clean-up, repair and self-analysis should be the focus of the organisation. The responses

received for the questions asked at the intermediate stage were submitted for content analysis by the researchers and they were put under the following four themes; 1- Consultation with external stakeholders, 2- Consultation with internal stakeholders, 3- Long-term challenges for recovery and 4-Action/s taken to address recovery.

To categorise the content of the interviews into the relevant themes, the respondents were asked whether or not they took any consultation from any external stakeholder to improve the state of the organisation for better in the long term. 4 of them said that they had paid more attention to cooperation with the stakeholders to relieve the negative consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. 3 of them stated that they started to follow the reports, evaluations and recommendations released by the World Health organisation, Ministry of Tourism and TURSAB (Association of Turkish Travel Agencies) (Theme 1).

“I was not the kind of person who reads newspapers or listens to news programs much before the crisis. After the crisis hit, I do not know why, I started to follow any news or reports, anything which tells about tourism and crisis very carefully. This may be because I was so helpless and in need of any help (R15).”

“Reports and news on media were not so pessimist actually. It took a few months to understand that they were all wrong and they were all misguiding us (R5”).

The next question asked the respondents at this stage was what consultation they took from their internal stakeholders. 7 of them said that they started to gather feedback from their staff regarding what they could do to improve the state of the organisation in the long term. 9 of them said they received no consultation from their internal stakeholders (Theme 2).

The respondents were asked what the major difficulties that they encountered for the recovery of the organisation were in the long term. 4 of them said that it has become difficult to encourage the capital owners to invest in travel business due to the loss of trust and fragility of tourism business. 7 of them said that people’s habits of travelling have changed and meeting the needs of new travellers will be costlier in the long run. The other respondents delivered no significant response to this question (Theme 3).

“It has become clearer for people after this crisis that, the tourism sector is riskier to invest money than though (R11).”

“The speed of new investment in the tourism sector will slow down after this crisis. Capital owners will look for safer areas to invest. This is not something good for the future of tourism (R10).”

“Potential travellers have adopted a new habit, which is travelling safely. After now on, safety and hygiene will be more important, which will increase the cost of travel organizers (R14).”

The last question of this stage was the actions that travel agencies took to ensure the recovery of their organisation in the long term. 5 of them said that they paid more attention to telling clients/potential clients about what makes a tour safe. 6 of them said that they will find ways to persuade potential clients that safe travel and related services will be costly. 12 of them said that they will give more emphasis on the sales and marketing in virtual environments considering that it is less costly and considered safe by clients (Theme 4).

“Communication with clients will be very important in the future. Clients will demand more information and guarantee about their experience. Therefore, we will have to work harder (R12).”

“Marketing and marketing techniques will have more importance in the sales of the services and products (R4).”

“Travel insurance should be the point that we, as travel organisers, should focus on (R9).”

Resolution (Normal or Improved State)

The fifth stage is about the recovery of the operations in the hotels in the long-term. At this stage, the routine is restored or the new state of the organisation is created and improved. The responses received for the questions asked at the resolution stage were submitted for content analysis by the researchers and they were put under the following three themes; 1- Permanent changes to the operating environment, 2- Employees’ response 3- Evaluation of the effectiveness of strategies and 4- Changes to crisis prevention and planning tools.

To categorise the content of the interviews into the relevant themes, the respondents were asked if the Covid-19 pandemic crisis has brought about any permanent change to their organisations’ operating environment. 12 of them said that they had designed their operating environment in a way which causes least physical contact with their clients and stakeholders considering that the consequences of the pandemic will last for long years even if the covid-19 pandemic could be stopped soon. 11 of them responded that they have focused their concentration on certification such as certification of “secure travel agency” (Theme 1).

“We do not need spacious offices to sell our products anymore. The future of this job is in the use of online platforms (R12).”

“We will need less physical space but more qualified employee to continue our operation online in the future (R7).”

“Physical distance is the main concern in all services in tourism in the future (R8).”

“Tourism organisations are certified with “Hygienic Certification” now. Even the pandemic could be stopped shortly, clients will continue to demand such certification, which I think put more burden on our shoulders (R13).”

The next question which was asked the respondents was how their employees responded to such changes. 2 of the respondents said that it was difficult for the organisation and employees to adapt to service and product marketing in virtual environments. 5 of them said that their employees were not prepared and trained enough for the use of novel marketing strategies and they need in-service training. 1 of the respondents said that his employees were surprisingly well prepared for the novel marketing strategies (Theme 2).

The next question which was asked the respondents was how they evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies and responses to the pandemic crisis. All of the 16 respondents said that they did not find the strategy use of their organisation enough to effectively manage the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In brief, all of them feel the need to improve their strategies for the management of such crisis in the future (Theme 3).

The last question asked at this stage was if they have made any changes to their crisis prevention and planning tools. All of the 16 respondents said “yes” to this question accepting that they did not have one, but will have one in the future, but 8 of them added that they needed time and guidance to start this. 5 of them said they did not know how they would do this (Theme 4).

DISCUSSION

Probability of the Crisis and Risk Management

In this research, Faulkner & Vikulov’s (2001) TDMF and Ritchie’s (2004) CDMF were adapted into one framework and applied in the context of some Turkey-based travel agencies during the Covid-19 health crisis. The findings in this study suggest that the implementations of the considerations detailed in the adapted framework were limited. Assessing a potential

crisis well advance before it hits is suggested to be very important by Faulkner & Vikulov (2001), and this is highlighted as an important element at the pre-event stage. Based on the findings, it could be concluded that what Turkey-based travel agencies have been doing to manage the Covid-19 crisis does not match with what the adapted framework recommends. It is noteworthy here that almost all of them agree that they have always expected a crisis in the sector by the nature of tourism. The findings regarding the probability of the crisis support those claimed by Glaesser (2006) who concluded that large scale crises tend to hit most seriously when unprepared.

Pro-active Measures

It was found in this study that all travel agencies are used to crisis due to the nature of the tourism sector, but surprisingly they are not prepared for the crisis. It is also noteworthy that the impacts of Covid-19 crisis are beyond the predictions of the travel agencies. When we consider the so-claimed few proactive measures taken by the travel agencies, we can conclude that the Covid-19 pandemic crisis was too unpredictable, so it would not be wise to expect travel agencies to be well prepared for such a crisis. The findings of this research regarding proactive measures are partly similar to those claimed by Anderson (2006); Cavlek (2002); Cioccio & Michael (2007); De Sausmarez (2003); Prideaux (2003) and Runyan (2006). Henderson (2007) also supports this suggesting that some tourism crises may have nature which makes it hard to be forecasted well in advance before it hits.

Contingency Plans, Risk Analysis and Environmental Scanning

Developing a crisis management plan has been recommended for tourism organisations by many researchers (Faulkner & Vikulov 2001; Henderson 2007; Murphy, 2008; Ritchie, 2004; Ritchie, 2009). However, the findings of this research suggest that none of the travel agencies reported having a crisis management plan. This may be because developing a crisis management plan requires to implement various strategies and to continuously gather feedback from the field. In other words, it is time-consuming and costly for organisations. As Gurtner (2006) suggested, risk management in the tourism sector demands the investment of significant time and money. This may be the basic reason for lacking such a plan for the management of a potential crisis.

Pre-warning Received

It was also found with this study that travel agencies did not receive any warning before the crisis, directly

or indirectly. Therefore, there is a need to establish crisis forecast systems in coordination with the relevant organs of the state. Media was found to be the primary source of learning the crisis coming. This finding is in line with the finding of Hall (2002), who claimed that the tour operators are more likely to learn about a crisis through the media. However, the media could provide some misleading information or exaggerate the events coming, so media cannot be claimed to be a very reliable source of information (Murphy & Bayley, 1989). Therefore, new reliable and consistent sources should be established to provide the sector with more reliable information so that they can take necessary and effective measures before a crisis. In other words, there should be some working communication channels between the sector and the relevant departments of the state. From the findings of this research, it could be claimed that travel agencies failed to communicate with the relevant authorities during the stages of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Establishing appropriate communication channels and keeping them open could provide travel agencies with opportunities to better manage crises.

Long-term Challenges for Recovery

The models developed by Faulkner & Vikulov (2001) and Ritchie (2004) suggest a recovery stage following a crisis. However, at the time when this study was administered, the Covid-19 crisis was still in progress although the sector expected a significant relief following May 2020. This research could hardly test this stage of the framework and had to focus on the expected or predicted recovery following the crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has been the worst crisis that the tourism sector experienced recently. Therefore, this crisis must have been their first experience. It was found in the study that almost all of the travel agencies cut into their employees and their wages. It was also found that they had to spare a significant amount of their resources to hygiene-related expenditures. It was also another finding in the study that travel agencies think it would be difficult to regain the trust of potential travellers and to employ qualified employees in the sector in the long run, and this needs to be dealt with immediately following the end of the Covid-29 pandemic.

Organisational Change

The findings regarding the changes to the leadership styles of the senior managers were also attention-grabbing because they seemed to have evolved into the leaders adopting participative management. The senior managers started to give more value to the views of the employees regarding the problems resulted from the crisis. This is something which needs handling very

carefully by the authorities, and such gains should be kept alive in the future.

Regarding organisational change, it was found in this study that travel agencies tended to make some organisational changes. Organisations operating under crisis conditions need to be flexible to meet the needs of their stakeholders (Evans & Elphick, 2005; Ritchie, 2004 and Tse et. al., 2006). Therefore, it could be concluded that travel agencies are ready to be flexible in the future, but it is evident that they need external help and guidance. The adapted framework requires collaboration with the stakeholders to effectively manage the crisis because tourism consists of many elements which are interdependent to one another. It was found with this study that travel agencies are prepared for such a collaboration but they all seem to be not prepared for this. They also need guidance and help with this regard. For example, collaboration with the media was significantly pointed out in this study.

CONCLUSION

The TDMF and CDMF were partly applicable to travel agencies in the context of Turkey, and this may be because TDMF and CDMF were designed to be used in destinations rather than travel organisations. It should be noted here that the TDMF and CDMF were adapted into travel agency context in Turkey. As often pointed out, the tourism sector has been prone to changes in the environment. Therefore, much research has been conducted in the relevant literature such as accommodation, airlines and tour operators. This study extended this and examined travel agencies in Turkey in a large- scale health crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the worst crises in human history and examination of the consequences of such a large scale crisis and its effects on tourism and how it has been managed is very significant for the benefit of the sector in the future.

Recommendations

- Travel agencies should develop a crisis management plan, and practice it in different crises and then improve their plan in line with the feedback collected from their stakeholders.
- Regular risk assessments should be conducted in the tourism sector
- New communication channels should be established among the stakeholders of tourism and the relevant departments of the Ministry of Tourism.
- Travel agencies should be encouraged to transfer

their operations to online platforms and they could be provided with funding by the authorities to do this.

- Safety and health insurance in the travel sector should be encouraged or be compulsory.
- Certification should be the primary focus of tourism organisations such as travel agencies.

Limitations

This research was applied as qualitative research, so the limitations of the research should be outlined here. It is important to highlight here that this research does not intend to make any generalization of the data to the whole population. It cannot be claimed here that the examined travel agencies are not representatives of all the agencies operating in the Turkish tourism context, so this study cannot claim its findings as to the attitudes and management decisions of all travel agencies in responding the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. In other words, the size of the sample could be claimed to be a limitation of the research.

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