

The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Travel Agencies: Evidence from Turkey

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Abstract

The Covid-19 epidemic disease, which emerged in Wuhan, China, brought the tourism movement in the world to a halt. Travel agencies are one of the tourism businesses most affected by this situation in the tourism sector. This research, it is aimed to determine the effects of Covid-19 on travel agencies. For this purpose, a quantitative research method was used and the data were obtained by online questionnaire technique. The data were obtained from travel agency officials (n: 330) using the convenience sampling method. The data obtained were analyzed using the SPSS program and the Maxqda program. As a result of the analysis; It has been revealed that most of the agencies have stopped business and there have been changes in the agency tour programs. It was also found that in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis, the vast majority went to reduce costs, and the majority experienced a decrease of 81% or more compared to last year's turnover. Along with these, the solutions offered by travel agencies for this negative trend; It has emerged as granting and credit support and postponing dues payments.

Keywords: Covid 19, Pandemic, Travel Agencies, Tourism Enterprises

1. Introduction

Although travel agencies are one of the important components of the tourism industry, it is surprising that studies investigating the effects of Covid-19 on travel agencies are very limited. It is surprising because tourism is among the sectors most affected by Covid-19 (Korkut et al., 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020). Until the last months of 2019, extreme tourism was talked about and explored, now we talk about "no tourism" and the world is experiencing a "non-globalization" with restrictions (Naumov et al., 2020). The airline industry, restaurants-cafes, souvenirs, accommodation businesses, tourist guides, and travel agencies are on the brink of bankruptcy. Considering the multiplier effect of tourism, it can be seen how big its economic impact on other sectors.

In addition to the economic impact of Covid-19, its impact on individual psychological, family communication and community interaction should not be forgotten (Verma & Prakash, 2020; Zhang & Ma, 2020). We can see that all these effects are also addressed in academic research. When looking at studies on tourism in particular, the relationship between Covid-19 and travel habits (Shamshiripour et al., 2020), post-covid travel attitudes (Ivanova et al., 2020), risk perception, and travel behavior (Matiza, 2020; Neuburger & Egger, 2020), sharing economy (Hossain, 2021), tourism businesses stock market values (Gümüş & Hacıevliyagil, 2020), travel intention (Terziyska & Dogramadjieva, 2021) and impact on the tourism sector in general (Alaeddinoğlu & Rol,

2020; Jiang & Wen), However, it is seen that there are limited studies that reveal the effect of tourism on travel agencies, one of the important pillars of tourism, which is a shortcoming, because tour operators and travel agencies felt the most impact of Covid-19 in the tourism sector.

Reservation cancellations or delays have left tour operators and travel agencies with a serious economic crisis (Korkut et al., 2020). Scientific investigation of the subject will help us understand the depth of the crisis. Also, how can the Covid-19 crisis process be managed in terms of travel agencies? It is necessary to find an answer to this question. It has been determined in some studies (İbiş, 2020) that the Covid-19 crisis could not be managed well.

This study, it is aimed to determine the situation by revealing the economic effects of Covid-19 on travel agencies and to present a proposal for the future. For this purpose, a quantitative research method was used. It is very important in terms of both literature and industry to determine the situation of research travel agencies in the Covid-19 process and to bring a perspective about the future. It is seen that studies on Covid-19 in terms of travel agencies are limited in the literature. Additionally, what can be done? The answers to the question offer a perspective on what can be done in a future crisis. Although studies are being carried out, conditions are changing considerably because the pandemic process is dynamic. Therefore, conducting such studies is important in terms of offering solutions to situations that will be encountered in the future. The study then processes with the method, findings, result, and discussion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Covid-19 and Tourism

Traveling has a lot of motivation such as getting to know the culture, meeting foreigners, discovering new places, resting, and having fun. The activities carried out provide unforgettable experiences. However, outbreaks are crises that undermine these experiences and scare travelers and the tourism industry (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020). Spanish Flu, Asian Flu, Hong Kong Flu, SARS, MERS, and EBOLA viruses, which have previously affected many countries, have been encountered (Gössling et al., 2021). However, Covid-19, which emerged in 2019 and is still ongoing, was not on a small scale like other epidemics but was effective in around 100 countries (Song et al., 2021). The Covid-19 Crisis has been so wide-ranging, sudden, and unexpected that predicting the future has become very difficult, if anything is certain, the room is "uncertainty" (Romagosa, 2020). The development of air travel (Browne et al., 2016; Gössling et al., 2021), the rapidly growing and moving world population, urbanization and human density, and industrialized food production (Pongsiri et al., 2009). From this point of view, tourism is a sector that both plays a role in the spread of the virus and is most affected by the spread of the virus. The fact that tourism is a sector that is both affected by the environment and affects the environment (Uğur & Akbıyık, 2020) raises this situation.

Due to Covid-19, travel restrictions are observed at national and international levels. These travel bans have resulted in border closures, cancellation of events, quarantine requirements and fear of sprawl, extreme difficulties in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021), and negative consequences (layoffs, business stoppages, bankruptcy, etc.). This situation is even worse in places that are dependent on tourism (Brouder, 2020). It remains unclear when the situation will improve (Bhaskara, 2021). It is seen that there is a decrease in airline and hotel reservations by -209% in airline and hotel reservations, -70% in hotel occupancy rates, -39% in hotel prices, and -47% in local recreational activities in March 2020 worldwide (WTTC, 2021b). In December 2020, it is seen that these rates decreased a little more and some improvements were made; -93% for airline and hotel reservations, -29% for hotel occupancy rates, -21% for hotel prices, -11% for local recreational activities (WTTC,

2021b). According to WTTC (2021a) data, 142.6 million (43%) people lost their jobs in 2020 and it is estimated that this number could reach 174.4 million if there is no improvement. In addition, it is estimated that there is a 65% decrease in international arrivals worldwide, 33% in domestic tourist flow, and if there is no improvement, these rates will be 73% -45%, respectively (WTTC, 2021a). The effects of Covid-19 on tourism are likely to negatively affect dozens of industries with its multiplier effect.

It is seen that the effects of Covid-19 are reflected in academic studies in the field of tourism. Tian et al. (2021) revealed the effect of Covid-19 on city transportation and air quality in their studies. In another study (Qiu et al., 2021), they emphasized that the value of the company can be increased with social responsibility projects in the Covid-19 process. Neuburger & Egger (2020) investigated travel risk perception and travel behaviors in their study. As a result of the research, it was observed that the risk perception increased with time. According to consumer predictions, agencies should develop strategies that can follow government and legal notifications well. And they should focus on reducing the travel risk perception of tourists by using communication methods well. Terziyska & Dogramadjieva (2021), on the other hand, investigated the impact of Covid-19 on travel intentions with the perspective of Bulgarian citizens, as early as Covid-19 (9-16 April 2020), using a survey method.

Romagosa (2020) emphasized in his study that the Covid-19 crisis could be an opportunity for the sustainability and proximity of tourism. Özdemir (2020) aimed to determine the scenarios that may be experienced in the field of tourism after the Covid-19 outbreak. It is aimed to determine what kind of change will occur in the field of tourism in Turkey and what kind of an effect will be experienced. As a result of the study, it has been determined that tourists will have a demand and tendency for nature-themed tours. The study shows that while travel agencies increase the number of products in their tour plans according to accommodation types, demand variables will occur. In the study of Wachyuni & Kusumaningrum, (2020), are the trends that will occur after the pandemic period is over, travel intention, or travel anxiety? researched their experiences. According to the data obtained, it has been determined that tourists think positively about travel and that there is no change in the idea that traveling is enjoyable. In the research, it was determined that they focused on 3 different issues of concern. These; It is psychological, physical, and body health. It has been determined that new travel demands of the tourists will arise, they will prefer nature-themed but short-term tours, which they consider travel plans with close friends and relatives. It has been determined that they are planning to go on a tour with the agencies they are sensitive, and trust in hygiene, but they do not intend to go to countries with a bad past in the pandemic process and think that new diseases will emerge after the pandemic.

When the literature is reviewed, it is seen that studies on the relationship between Covid-19 and travel agencies are limited. İbiş (2020) investigated the effect of Covid-19 on travel agencies with qualitative research. As a result of his research, he stated that the revenues of the agencies have decreased to a great extent, fixed costs continue, and the agencies need more government support. In the research conducted by Tursapnet (2020); It has been determined that agencies have reduced costs (reducing the number of employees, reducing service procurement with technological infrastructure) as a method of overcoming the crisis. Atsız & Eşitti (2021) investigated the effect of Covid-19 on travel agencies in a qualitative study. As a result of the research, the results of the research showed that travel agencies were adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, attaches importance to hygiene rules, applied this on their buses and tours, and the needs and desires of tourists coming to the agency changed.

3. Methodology

Survey Design

While preparing the survey questions, the literature and the opinions of the industry experts were taken into consideration. 15 questions were asked, 8 of which were previously prepared by Tursabnet (Tourism and Travel Agencies Platform) (2020) (permission was obtained), 7 of which were by researchers. Answer options of the questions were determined as 1 open-ended, the others closed-ended, single choice, multiple-choice. In the open-ended question, if you were authorized, what would you do for travel agencies in the Covid-19 process? The question has been asked. After the questions were prepared, they were shown to two experts in their field. Later, the opinions of 13 people were consulted for superficial validity and the final form of the questionnaire was given after the necessary corrections were made.

Population

The research universe consists of A group of travel agencies (n: 9887) active in Turkey. The convenience sampling method was chosen to identify the participants. The questionnaire prepared was sent online to the e-mails of travel agencies and a return was requested. With this method, 330 travel agency officials answered the questionnaires. The data were collected between 24.01.2021-04.04.2021.

Analysis

After the data was obtained, the data file was checked and erroneous data was extracted. Then, the closed-ended questions were put forward with descriptive statistics using the SPSS program. The answers to the open-ended question are presented by creating a word diagram. MAXQODA program was used for this.

4. Results

In this section, the results of the analysis made for the responses of the agencies are presented.

Table 1. Basic information about travel agencies

Q1. Fields of activity of travel agencies (multiple choice) *	Frequency	%
Ticket Sales	165	49,80%
Visa	80	24,20%
Authorized Sales Agent	129	39%
Individual Reservation	175	52,9
Rent a car	44	13,3
Tour operator	217	65,6
Online Hotel Reservation	92	27,8
MICE	83	25,1
Boat management	12	3,6
Q2. Travel agency activity periods		
0-2 year	1	,3
3-5 year	46	14,1
6-8 year	49	15,0
9-11 year	47	14,4
12 years and over	154	47,2
Q3. Number of employees in travel agencies		
1-5	230	70,6
6-10	51	15,6
11-15	16	4,9
16-20	13	4,0
21 and over	14	4,3

*Question

In the first question with multiple selection options, the vast majority of the participants (65.6%) were tour operators, as well as activities such as ticket sales (49.80%), individual booking (52.9%), online hotel reservation (27.8%). it is seen that they are carrying out. In addition to this, it has been found that the number of enterprises operating between 0-2 years, in which approximately half of them (47.2%) operated for more than 12 years, was

only 1. It is observed that the number of employees in agencies is mostly between 1-5 (70.6%), and there are also agencies with 21 or more employees (n: 14).

Table 2. Findings regarding the effects of Covid-19

Q4. The effect of Covid-19 on your business? (multiple choice)	N	%
Works stopped altogether	253	76%
Formation of travel obstacles	200	60,1%
Domestic demand reduction	184	55,3%
Decrease in foreign demand	146	43,8
Cancellations of planned congresses and events	155	46,5
Q5. Covid-19's effect on package tour contents (multiple choice)		
Tour contents have not changed	51	16,5
Boutique tours planned instead of mass tours	168	54,4
Transportation preferences have changed	186	60,2
There have been changes in accommodation preferences	172	55,6
Nature tours planned instead of cultural tours	123	39,8
Selling price went up	116	37,5
The sale price has fallen	66	21,4
Q6. Financing resources of travel agencies in the Covid-19 process	N	%
I'm using credit	204	61,3
I borrow from the market	130	39
I work with my resources	197	59,2
I borrow money from company partners	78	23,4
I sold the firm fixtures	109	32,7
Q7. How Travel Agents deal with the Covid-19 crisis (multiple choice)		
We do not use a method	35	10,6
Cut costs	247	74,8
Changing the business's product portfolio / market	90	27,3
Focus on digitalization	129	39,1
The search for new suppliers	70	21,2
Operating in non-tourism areas	161	48,8
Q8. Turnover reduction rate of travel agencies in the Covid-19 process compared to pre-covid		
0%-20%	9	2,8
21%-40%	8	2,5
41%-60%	26	8,0
61%-80%	84	25,8
81% and above	194	59,5
No, there was no decrease	2	,6
Q9. Increase in tour costs		
0%-20%	67	20,6
21%-40%	100	30,7
41%-60%	71	21,8
61%-80%	17	5,2
81% and above	13	4,0
No, there was no increase	44	13,5
Q10. Employment policies of travel agencies in the Covid-19 process		
We had to reduce staff	251	77,0
No change	53	16,3
We are recruiting new staff	5	1,5
Q11. The future forecast of travel agencies		
We started working and continue.	12	3,7
Second-quarter of 2021	53	16,3
Third-quarter of 2021	69	21,2
Fourth-quarter of 2021	35	10,7
In the year 2022	94	28,8
After 2022	48	14,7
We do not expect a return to normal	14	4,3
Q12. Refund rate for tour cancellations of travel agencies		

0% -20%	24	7,4
21% -40%	28	8,6
41% -60%	21	6,4
61% -80%	26	8,0
81% and above	194	59,5
No refund is made	18	5,5
Q13. The situation of turning to another sector		
I think	184	56,4
I do not think	75	23,0
I am already headed	64	19,6
Q14. Support of institutions		
Enough	14	4,8
Insufficient	316	95,2

The majority of the respondents stated that business was completely halted (76%), travel barriers occurred (60.10%) and domestic demand decreased (55.3%). In addition, almost half of the participants (46.5%) stated that the international demand decreased and planned events were canceled (46.5%).

In another finding, it was revealed that Covid-19 caused changes in package tour contents. It was determined that these changes mostly changed the means of transportation (60.2%) and accommodation preferences (55.6%), boutique tours were preferred over mass tours (54.4%) and the demand for nature tours increased (39.8). In addition, 37.5% of the participants stated that there was an increase in tour sales prices, but 21.4% of them decreased the sales price. In addition, the rate of those who stated that the tour contents did not change is 16.5%.

The majority of the respondents (61.3%) stated that they get credit to continue their activities and 59.2% continue to work with their equity. In addition, it is observed that they try to meet their financing needs through methods such as borrowing from the market (39%), selling firm fixtures (32,7%), and borrowing from company partners (23,4%).

When we look at the methods used by agencies to deal with the Covid-19 crisis; 74.8% preferred to reduce costs, 48.8% started to operate in non-tourism areas, 39.1% focused on digitalization, and 27.3% used methods such as changing the business market and product portfolio. It has been determined that Covid-19 causes a decrease of 81% or more in the turnover of most of the travel agencies (59.5%). They also stated that the majority of them had an increase of 21% -40% in tour costs and they had to remove personnel (77%). It is seen that the rate of non-staffing is 16.3%, and the rate of enterprises recruiting new staff is 1.5%.

Forecasts of the agencies for the future, 48.6% of the participants estimate that 28.8% of the participants will return to normal in 2022. Few of the participants (4.3%) do not expect a return to normal. Also, it has been determined that the majority of participants (59.5%) made 81% and above refunds arising from tour cancellations.

In addition to all these, the majority of the participants (56.4%) stated that they were thinking of moving to another sector, 19.6% of them were turning to another sector and just 23% of them did not think to move to another sector. Additionally, 95.2% of the agencies found inadequate support provided by the relevant institutions and organizations.

What would you do if you were? In the form of an open-ended question was asked. The representation of the answers given to this question with a word diagram as in Figure 1. Looking at the answers given; It has been determined that the suggestions such as grants and bank credit support, not collecting dues, postponing or reducing the SSI and taxes, communication with agencies, and obtaining their opinions are at the forefront.



5. Discussions

This study, which investigates the effect of Covid-19 on travel agencies, is important in terms of both determining the current situation and revealing the situation in other crises that may occur in the future. As a result of the answers given to the questionnaire questions used in the study; It has been determined that Covid-19 has almost completely stopped the business of travel agencies and caused travel barriers to occur. The research results reveal that the impact of Covid-19 also affects the tour contents of travel agencies. It has emerged that boutique tours instead of mass tourism and nature tours are more demanded than cultural tours. The preference of open spaces with the effects of Covid-19, the increase in the demand for nature, and the significant increase in rental villas, nature-friendly hotel businesses, resorts, camping, and caravan preferences (Ciritci, 2020; Şengel et al., 2020) supports our research result. In addition, the finding in the Wachyuni & Kusumaningrum (2020) studies that the tourists' preferences for nature-themed tours will increase in their new travel preferences supports the result of the research. Also, Çelik (2020) has predicted that these results may occur. Another important result of our research is that there are also changes in accommodation and transportation preferences. Shamshiripour et al. (2020: 12) stated in their study that 43% of the society plan to travel but their flight preferences are low, and 48% are worried about using areas such as shared airplanes and hotels while traveling, which supports the change in accommodation and transportation preferences.

In the research, it is seen that some agencies increase their sales prices and some decrease them. One of the most important factors in increasing the prices of the agencies is that the restrictions made increase the costs. The reason for price reductions can be seen as a move to turn more or less business and stay afloat. Financing methods used to reduce the negative impact of Covid-19, respectively; get credit, using equity, borrowing from the market, selling firm fixtures, and borrowing from partners. In addition, when we look at the methods of coping with the Covid-19 crisis, it has been determined that the vast majority of the agencies go to reduce costs and some of them use methods such as market/product diversification and searching for new suppliers. These results were similar to the research conducted by Tursabnet (2020). Another method of dealing with the crisis is to operate in non-tourism areas (other sectors). The rate of those who express this is 48% and this is a serious number. We see this result in the answer given to the question we asked about the agencies' orientation to another sector (56.4% of them think to move to another sector). These results are very sad for the Turkish tourism industry. Because the majority of the participants are businesses that have worked in this sector for 12 years or more and have

experience. Their shifting to other sectors will adversely affect Turkey's tourism. This shows once again how much Covid-19 has an impact. It can be thought that the decrease in turnover of participating enterprises by 81% or more may force the agencies to do so. This result was similar to the Tursabnet (2020) study. It seems that even if Covid-19 ends, its effects will not pass quickly.

When we look at other findings, it was determined that most of the participants had an increase in tour costs and had to remove personnel. In tourism enterprises, we can see that the habit of hiring personnel continues in times of crisis, as in other enterprises. One of the most important reasons for this is the answer to our 14th Question. In this answer, most of the agencies (95.2%) found the support given insufficient. At this point, it can be said that the support of the relevant institutions is insufficient.

In the study of İbiş (2020), it was revealed that the supports were insufficient. One of the important reasons why agencies have been negatively affected and dismissed their employees is that most of the agencies have made refunds arising from tour cancellations. In addition, it should be noted that the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has announced that they will offer credit support with a term of 6 months so that businesses can make payments for cancellations regarding tour and accommodation reservations.

In addition, in another question, it was determined that the majority of the participants wanted to move to another sector, and even 19.6% of them turned to another sector. It is thought that this situation may be due to the continuing effects of Covid-19 and the insufficient support of the state and related organizations. In the research, the participants stated that support should be given in issues such as grants, credit support, insurance support, and tax reduction to get rid of this bad situation. It is seen that no significant support was seen during the time of the research, but some steps were taken after 2021. For example, Halkbank announced that it would provide a credit of 100 thousand Turkish Lira to travel agencies. With this negative picture, the hopes of the agents for the future are not very pleasant, and most of them think that normalization will begin in 2022 after the last quarter of 2021. It is seen that if these predictions come true, they may face much more serious negative consequences.

This study was carried out in Turkey on travel agencies within the scope of the sample and between the specified dates. It is an important limitation that it was not carried out in other countries, and that it was carried out only with travel agencies, and that it was carried out in a single time period. In future studies, researchers can study the impact of COVID-19 both in different countries and within the scope of different tourism businesses. It will also be important in terms of crisis management that these studies are carried out at different time intervals in crises such as the COVID-19 crisis. In this way, comparative studies and more in-depth information can be obtained.

6. Conclusions

In this study investigating the effect of Covid-19 on travel agencies; It has been observed that the majority of travel agencies are negatively affected. It can be said that the insufficiency of the institutions to which they are affiliated and the state support together with this negative impact make the situations worse. One of the most striking results of the study is that travel agencies are shifting to other sectors. The dismissal of the agencies providing quality service in the sector resulted in their withdrawal from the sector. With the departure of these people and agencies from the sector, the sector will be deeply affected.

It is predicted that agencies will not be able to do business during 2021-2022. The expenses of the agencies that cannot do business continue in the same way. For the agencies to survive, it is seen that there is a need for long-

term plans in the support that should be given to the agencies. These plans require grants, long-term non-payment credit, tax deductions, employee premium support, and tax exemptions.

The elastic structure of the tourism sector is known and it is seen that the tourism sector has been seriously injured in every crisis period. However, the fact that there is no action plan for these crisis periods and a budget is not allocated for difficult times aggravates the situation. Therefore, the tourism sector should have a fund that it can support in times of crisis. This can be through either the state or a non-governmental organization. Tourism professionals who contribute to the fund can overcome difficult processes by providing financial support in times of crisis.

In this study, the effect of Covid-19 on travel agencies was made through a questionnaire attended by 330 business executives. It was observed that people who were depressed due to the negative situation during the survey process did not want to fill the questionnaire. Due to this situation, the number of questionnaires could not be increased. Performing similar studies using qualitative research methods in future studies may enable us to see the different effects of Covid-19. In addition, researching the effects on other sectors or other stakeholders in the tourism sector is important in terms of determining the current situation and shedding light on the future.

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