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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL SERVICES AND RETAIL MANAGEMENT

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Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu

Dr. Valentina Della Corte



Co-Editors

Dr. Cihan Cobanoglu, University of South Florida, USA

Dr. Valentina Della Corte, University of Naples Federico II, Italy

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The Effects of COVID-19 Epidemic on Guided Tours and Alternative Tour Samples from Turkey

Bayram Akay

School of Tourism and Hotel Management
Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Turkey

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effect of covid-19 on guided tours and examine the alternative tour examples that have emerged in Turkey during the pandemic. In this study, qualitative research method was used and data analyses were conducted using content analysis. The content analysis have been made through the statistics, reports and qualitative research methods by tourism portals (Tourism current, tourism news), UNWTO, Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI), Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TÜRSAB and Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism (ATTA). In Turkey during the pandemic, the number of tourists decreased by 70% and tourism revenue decreased by 65%. Travel agencies in Turkey have produced alternative tour solutions such as online tours, live tours and virtual trips to guided tours, which come to a standstill. Travel agencies have welcomed thousands of tourists on these tours and will continue to do so in the future by establishing a digital tour department. Technological developments can be combined with innovative approaches to offer alternative solutions to tourists. The paper examine the effect of covid-19 on tourism, travel agency as well as guided tours and contributes towards innovative strategies for integrated and regional online, onlive and virtual tours of destinations such as naturel, cultural, historical reserves and other tourist attractions.

Keywords: COVID-19, tourism, crisis, guided tours, Turkey

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Introduction

International tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) worldwide grew 4% in 2019 to reach 1.5 billion and UNWTO forecasts growth of 3% to 4% in international tourist arrivals worldwide in 2020 (<https://www.unwto.org/world-tourism-barometer-n18-january-2020>). The coronavirus variant that appeared in Wuhan, China in December 2019 turned all predictions upside down and quickly turned into an epidemic. It was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020 (TURSAB, 2020).

In recent years, global crises such as natural disasters, internal conflicts, epidemics, technological failures, terrorist attacks, bio-security threats, economic, political and political instability, attacks on September 11 and the Gulf War have affected the tourism negatively (Köşker, 2017). Even the rumors of the crisis in the tourism sector, which is very sensitive to any crisis, cause the cancellation of reservations (Albeni & Ongun, 2005: 97217). Almost all bookings in Turkey, which reached 85% by March 2020, were canceled in the same month. Some hotels opened in June

2020 with a safe tourism certificate and extraordinary measures. Covid-19 Protocols covering prior to the tour, meet and greet, during the tour and at the end of the tour have been prepared for tourist guides.

As in all areas of life, safety is important in tourism. People want to travel to destinations where they feel safe. Epidemics, a form of crisis, seriously affect and even stop tourism, just like terrorist incidents, disasters and wars (Loannides & Gyimóthy, 2020: 2-3). Such crises can be overcome by demand and supply if necessary institutional innovations occur (Brauder, 2020: 4). In addition, crises accelerate technological innovation (QR health code system, quarantine tracking bracelet etc) and change (Sigala, 2020). Travel agencies, one of the important stakeholders of tourism, have developed alternative tours based on technology in order to survive and have produced solutions to the problem. In this way, the guides have shown tourists around various places and destinations, albeit from a distance. With the pandemic, all tourism activities have come to a standstill and the guided tours, which is one of the important services of the sector, have almost stopped in this process (Düzgün and Kurt, 2020: 20). The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of covid-19 on guided tours in the context of the covid-19 pandemic that occurred on December 1, 2019 in Wuhan, China. In addition, it is to examine examples of alternative tours to guided tours implemented in Turkey during the pandemic process.

Literature Review

COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact Tourism and Guided Tours

COVID19, is defined as illness caused by a novel coronavirus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. Since being first reported by the Chinese government on December 31, 2019 and later declared as a pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020 (WHO 2020), the COVID-19 virus, within a short period of only several months, has caused an unprecedented global crisis with enormous impacts on our political, social, and economic systems (Gretzel, 2020: 137).

Coronavirus disease became an unparalleled disaster (pandemic) so that the world was not prepared. To date, CO-SARS-v2 (known as COVID-19) infected almost 112.553.181 persons causing 2.497.406 fatal victims (last updated on 26-02-2021). The most affected countries include the US (508.107 victims) followed by Brazil (251.498), Mexico (183.692), India (156.825), the UK (122.070), Italy (96.974), France (85.141), and Spain (68.813). (<https://news.google.com/covid19/map?01.03.2021>). Even if the virus originally wreaked havoc the public health system in Spain, Italy and France, a similar state of the crisis involved other countries such as the US, Germany and the Netherlands. At first glance, the WHO (World Health Organization) failed to adopt and impose a standardized plan of contingency while each nation followed their methods of prevention (Jiang and Wen, 2020). As a result of this, nations –no matter their economic maturation- opted for two clear-cut decisions. Some countries like the US, Mexico, Ecuador, Brazil and the UK engaged to protect the domestic market adopting soft measures while others imposed a strict lockdown, lasting for weeks or months (China, Japan, Argentina, South Korea, Australia). Quite aside from the discrepancies revolving around the correct –if not most efficient- course of action to prevent the pandemic, the global economic downturn teetered the entire world on the brink of a financial collapse (Çobanoğlu, 2020).

The tourism industry is vulnerable to threats posed by unexpected crises such as wars, natural disasters, epidemics, pandemics, economics and terrorist attacks (Jiang and Wen, 2020; Dayour et al., 2020). The pandemic (COVID-19), in view of the lack of an effective vaccine, had a significant impact on the tourism and travel as well as guided tours, resulting from travel-ban and the closure of borders (Gossling, Scott & Hall, 2020; Sigala 2020; Carr 2020; Gretzel et al.,2020; Wen et al., 2020). The number of tourists coming to Turkey through international tourism movements during COVID-19 supports this (See Table 1).

Guided tours can be found at more or less all places where tourism exists (Zillinger et al., 2012). Schmidt (1979), stated that there are four functions of guided tours. Firstly, tourists do not have to choose themselves which sites to visit on occasions when time is limited. Secondly, travelling in a group with accordingly different positions, guided tours can act as a compromise for the individual group members. Thirdly, tourism can be legitimized by the educational contribution that a guided tour would bring and last, it is a safe way to get to know a new place. No matter if tourists are visiting urban or rural areas, if they are travelling alone or in company, if they visit the nearest museum or a low-accessible place in another continent, guided tours are offered in most places, in different shapes and to different visitors.

Tourists have engaged the services of guides since at least the time of the Grand Tour in the 17th century. Tour guides lead groups of tourists around cultural and historic sites, cities and villages. They also take visitors to visit natural environments and view wildlife, sometimes navigating through jungles, over mountain ranges, along rivers and coastlines, and across open water (Chen et al., 2018). Tourist guides meet visitors in various locations and take them on moving vehicle, site and walking tours. Covid-19 Protocols covering prior to the tour, meet and greet, during the tour and at the end of the tour have been prepared for tourist guides (<https://covid19.tourismni.com>).

Travel agencies offer to tourist sejour and circuit package tours. The package tour (PT) is a major form of outbound travels. With PT, tourists pay a one-time fee to a travel agent before a designated tour, the travel agent then provides all of the travel services, including food, lodging, sightseeing, transportation, and all sorts of tickets. The package tour is an organization formed by a tour leader and tour members (Tsaur et al., 2019). Package tour expenditures of tourists in Turkey decreased by 39.4% (TURKSTAT, 2021). By its very nature, guided tours nationally and internationally have been one of the most affected services.

Methods

In this study, qualitative research method was used and data analyses were conducted using content analysis. Content analysis helps researchers make replicable and valid inferences from texts, increase researchers' understanding of a particular phenomenon including the origins and progression of a sub-field, and guide and inform the directions of future research (Bryman et al, 2009).

Data Collection

Data collection have been made from tourism portals (Tourism current, tourism news), UNWTO, Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI), Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TÜRSAB and Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism (ATTA).

Purpose of the Research and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effect of covid-19 on guided tours and examine the alternative tour examples that have emerged in Turkey during the pandemic. In line with this general purpose, the research questions to which answers are sought for as follows;

- Did the covid-19 affect the guided tours?
- How did the guided tours progress in the crisis period?
- Which are new alternative guided tours?

Findings

In this research, a detailed literature review through books, journals, articles, websites and newspaper in Turkish and English languages about the concepts of covid-19, guided tours, tourism and travel agency. The research findings compare international tourism movements with 2020 and include guided tours carried out by travel agencies during the pandemic.

Table 1. World and Turkey Tourism Receipt and Arrivals (2014-2020)

Years	World*		Turkey**	
	Number of tourist (Billion)	Tourism income (Trillion \$)	Number of tourist	Tourism income (\$)
2014	1.134	1.252	41.627.246	34.305.904.000
2015	1.186	1.195	41.114.069	31.460.000.000
2016	1.235	1.239	30.906.680	22.107.440.000
2017	1.326	1.340	37.969.824	26.283.656.000
2018	1.406	1.407	46.112.592	29.512.926.000
2019	1.500	1.600	51.747.198	34.520.332.000
2020	400	300	15.964.000	12.100.000.000

Source. UNWTO, 2018*; UNWTO, 2021*; Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2021**

Between 2014 and 2019, the average annual growth rate of international tourism was 5.7% in the world. There were 1.134 billion tourists with \$1.252 trillion in revenue in 2014 and 1.186 billion tourists with \$1.195 trillion in revenue. In 2017, there were 1.235 billion tourists with \$1.239 trillion in revenue in 2016 and 1.326 billion tourists with \$1.340 trillion in revenue.

Table 2. Tour Examples and Applications

Tour Examples	Method of Application
Online Tours	In this tour, the tourist guide shows tourists through the screen with rich-content photos, images that he could not show on the normal trip in different places and countries. Since May 2020, the professional tourist guides have walked this path, which is initially feared to be entered and performed. In this way, they welcomed approximately 3,000 tourists in this virtual world.
Online Tours or Phys-digital tour	This tour is called "Online tour" or "Phys-digital tour". This is considered a first in tourism. A guide walks live through a place, a neighborhood, and tourists at their screens take part in the trip while sipping their coffee. These tours were carried out in the form of Istanbul Kuzuncuk and Galata tours. This trip, which was designed with both physical and digital openings, received a lot of attention from outside Istanbul and from abroad. In this way, tourists are offered the opportunity to experience hybrid excursions such as online in the morning and online excursions in the afternoon.
Virtual Tours	These tours include classic photos, maps, and plans through rooms in specially designed online lounges; specially shot 360-degree videos, animated gifs, drone footage, and tours enriched with 3D simulations. Technical team and professional guides work hard for this. The project, which is an intensive and collective labor product, is offered both to Turkey and to the whole world.

Source. <https://www.turizmguncel.com>, 2020.

In 2019, there were 1.406 billion tourists with \$1.407 trillion in revenue in 2018 and 1.500 billion tourists with \$1.600 trillion in revenue. In 2020, however, 400 million tourists participated in international tourism and \$300 billion in tourism revenue was generated and world tourism decreased by -%74. Turkey generated \$34.3 billion in tourism revenue from 41.6 million tourists in 2014 and \$31.4 billion from 41.1 million tourists in 2015. In 2016, during the plane crisis between Russia and Turkey, Turkey generated \$22.1 billion in revenue from 30.9 million tourists and \$26.2 billion from 37.9 million tourists in 2017. In 2018, it generated \$29.5 billion in tourism revenue from 46.1 million tourists. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, it reached \$34.5 billion in tourism revenue from 51.7 million tourists in 2019 and \$12.1 billion came from 15.9 million tourists in 2020, which was the crisis period. During the pandemic, the number of tourists decreased by 70% and tourism revenue decreased by 65%.

Figure 1. Below Shows the Online and Onlive Tours Performed by Fest Travel in One of the Tourist Attractions of Istanbul: Professional Tourist Guides Take Part in These Tours



Source. <https://www.turizmguncel.com>, 2020.

Conclusions

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a destructive economic impact all over the world. The impact on hospitality and travel in particular has been strongly negative (Salem et al., 2021). The countries tried to stop the spread of the virus by closing their borders and severely limiting air transportation, and as a consequence international (and to a certain extent also domestic) travel came to a virtual standstill. Tourist guides – typically working as freelancers were among the most severely impacted professions (Grancay, 2020) as well as guided tours.

New virus mutations, difficulties in procuring vaccines, debates about vaccination passport, and existing travel warnings make accurate forecasts impossible. UNWTO foresee growing demand for open-air and nature-based tourism activities, with domestic tourism and ‘slow travel’ experiences gaining increasing interest. Wherever the destination — sustainable travel, whether hiking, biking or camping vacations is now a popular trend. Travelers also increasingly relied on vacation homes and campsites for accommodation instead of big hotels. The demand will increase health and wellness travel, wilderness trips, private accommodation and visiting natural parks. The

demand for more personalized and customized trips will also increase (Hudson, 2021). This will reflect positively on guided tours and tourist guides.

Virtual tours of cities, destinations, landscapes and museums with video, photo-based media or panorama techniques are not new to the tourism industry (Pan, 2016; Aksoy and Baş, 2020). The potential of VR technology in tourism was recognized in the 1990s. VR is a highly novel technology and is widely defined as a communication medium that provides users with a computer-simulated 3D (360-degree) virtual context which enables users to become immersed, navigate, and interact in a fully digital environment (Yang et al., 2021). What is new in this research is that the virtual tour is carried out with a tourist guide alongside virtual reality technology and network technology. The virtual tours may save the travel agency and tour guide from massive revenue decline. Virtual tours can market and sell online. In online tours, tourists who cannot travel due to the pandemic through the travel agency are offered by the tourist guide in different places and countries with rich photos, images that they cannot show on the normal trip. Onlive tours are also a substitute for the guided tour offered to tourists who cannot travel due to the restriction. It is considered as a type of tour that can be applied after the pandemic.

Düzgün and Kurt (2020) stated that the tourist guides had serious economic difficulties during COVID-19 period and from the financial support offered to them in very low amounts. Tourist guides still feel unsafe despite taking all necessary precautions in the working environment. This research result also stated the impact of covid-19 on guided tours, it is revealed that the pandemic, had a significant impact on the tourism, travel agency as well as guided tours and emerged online tours, onlive tours and virtual tour by travel agency. As a result of the fact that other tour operator and travel agency can perform new tour method in the covid-19 period and post covid-19.

Tourism has become one of the world's most vital, vibrant, volatile and value-oriented service industry. However, sometimes this mobility may be great cause of unprecedented crises (Kushreshtha, 2021). As so far, in the future, pandemics, natural disasters, economic crises, etc. crises are likely to negatively affect tourism. Safe Tourism Certification, COVID-19 vaccine studies, and vaccination are important steps that will change the course of the pandemic. Important tasks are assigned to the World Health Organization, government officials, tourism enterprises and tourists in the fight against the pandemic.

This study will contribute to the literature in terms of the linkages between the findings and prescriptions of existing frameworks. In subsequent studies, the satisfaction of the tourists participating in the guided tour, who have been subjected to many measures and restrictions can be investigated. The impact on other tourism enterprises (such as food and beverage, travel, transport, entertainment, and recreation enterprises) other than guided tours can examine.

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