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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Hospitality Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijhm

Managing relationships in the Tourism Supply Chain to overcome epidemic outbreaks: The case of COVID-19 and the hospitality industry in Spain

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

COVID-19
Economic disruption
Hospitality industry
Hotel chains
Tourism supply Chain (TSC)

ABSTRACT

The rapid spatial diffusion of the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak has resulted in the total economic disruption of the Tourism Supply Chain (TSC) causing a significant reduction in revenue and creating liquidity issues for all operators. Firms in TSC are linked to each other in complex patterns, leading one risk to another. The purpose of this article is to understand the role of relationship management between hotel chains and their key TSC agents in order to overcome economic disruptions caused by epidemic outbreaks. Among the main contributions of this article are the identification of governments, tour operators, and competitors as the key relationships to be managed by hospitality firms. In addition, key areas for coordination with these actors are explored. Finally, the objectives of relationship management according to the partner are also addressed.

1. Introduction

The cross-cutting, interdependent, and fragmented nature of tourism products forces firms to establish relationships with numerous stakeholders in the industry –suppliers, distributors, competitors, governments and other firms–, resulting in Tourism Supply Chains (TSCs). Cooperation is therefore seen as a driver of agility, flexibility and organizational performance. However, being a coordination-intensive industry represents a risk due to the high dependency on the supply chain. Any shock from one agent quickly spreads to others, producing cascading effects on the TSC (Sigala, 2004; Zhang et al., 2009; OECD, 2020). Consequently, it could be said tourism is a very sensitive and vulnerable sector to any risk situation caused by external factors, whether it is a natural disaster, an economic crisis, an international conflict, terrorism or an epidemic outbreak (Pizam and Fleischer, 2002; Kuo et al., 2008; Jiang et al., 2019).

The rapid spatial diffusion of the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak led the World Health Organization (WHO) to announce the pandemic (March, 11, 2020), resulting in border closures and mandatory mass quarantine, with the consequent total economic disruption of TSCs' activities. The impacts of this pandemic on the travel and tourism sector are unprecedented and fast-changing. Airlines have had to drastically reduce their activities, and in some cases even suspend them. It is

estimated that the fall in international traffic during 2020 would be equivalent to a reduction of passengers between 44 and 80 % (ICAO, 2020). Tour operators have also decreased or stopped their operations from mid-March to at least mid-May 2020 (OECD, 2020).

For the hospitality industry this has meant extremely low occupancy rates and even mass closures. In Europe it was estimated that 76 % of hotels were closed (OECD, 2020). In Spain, one of the countries most dependent on tourism, as a result of restrictions during the first three weeks of June 2020, only 35.4 % of hotels were open and 17.6 % of bed-places were offered, compared to 2019. In the same line, overnight stays in hotel establishments fell by 95.1 % in June (INE, 2020).

In this context, revenue is expected to drop 50 % for hotels, 70 % for tour operators and 90 % for airlines (European Parliament, 2020). All this has put the tourism industry under unprecedented pressure, causing a significant reduction in revenue and creating liquidity issues for all operators (De Rosa et al., 2020).

General literature on supply chains has addressed two types of risks to be faced by supply chains. On the one hand, operational risks can cause disturbances like demand fluctuations, as happened with the S.A. R.S. epidemic (Kinra et al., 2019; Ivanov, 2020). The work of Fung and Fung (2014) identified interruptions on the TSC causing safety issues or inconvenience to tourists making them dissatisfied –shortage of quality food supply; electricity outage; computer systems outage; natural

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102733>

Received 29 June 2020; Received in revised form 4 October 2020; Accepted 15 October 2020

Available online 21 October 2020

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disasters etc. –. The authors propose managing the issue, risks and reputation in order to provide the tourist service under that circumstances. On the other hand, disruption risks in supply chains are low-frequency-high-impact events characterized by a long-term business interruption with an unpredictable scaling, as the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruption risks in supply chains are also characterized by the simultaneous disruption propagation in the supply chain and demand (ripple effect) (Kinra et al., 2019; Ivanov, 2020).

TSC research has gained recent attention among scholars (e.g., Mandal and Saravanan, 2019; Richards and Font, 2019). Although not directly related to crisis management, Zhang et al. (2009) identify a diversity of areas to address in order to obtain all the benefits from the TSC. Considering the nature and characteristics of TSCs, they propose coordination between two-party relationships as key management aspects, among others.

Besides this work, little is known about how to manage relationships with key stakeholders within the TSC in order to overcome disruption risks caused by epidemic outbreaks. However, according to recent research on crisis management in the tourism industry, the existing interconnectivity and relationships could be a key aspect in the recovery of the industry by mitigating the negative effects of the economic impact of COVID-19 (Racherla and Hu, 2009; Orchiston and Higham, 2016; Jiang and Ritchie, 2017).

In light of this unprecedented situation that affects all members of the TSC in different ways, the purpose of this article is to understand the role of relationship management between hotel chains and their key TSC agents in order to overcome economic disruptions caused by epidemic outbreaks. More specifically, this article focuses on understanding coordination as a decision-making strategy of TSC participants through diverse arrangements.

According to Manuj and Mentzer (2008), taking into account the novelty of the phenomenon, a qualitative research design was chosen. Given the descriptive nature of the phenomenon, the extent of the literature, and the first-hand information available, the case study approach has been used in this article. Based on the analysis of in-depth qualitative interviews with the CEOs and senior managers of three international hotel chains, several contributions to the literature are made.

First, given the nature of the COVID-19 outbreak, we can conclude that there is a need for theory building in TSCs management during economic disruptions. The research also provides insight into how business objectives evolve from cost reduction and operational efficiency—under favorable conditions—to a focus on liquidity, labor relations, international arrivals, customer attraction, dependence on tour operators, and the regulatory framework when economic disruptions arise.

While TSCs are often addressed from a global perspective and research on two-party relationships is mainly based on the service provision, another contribution is the identification of the crucial two-party relationships to be managed by hospitality firms—governments, tour operators, and competitors—focusing not on the provision of the tourism product but on overcoming economic disruptions. In the same line of thought, we also contribute to the understanding of relationships within the supply chain. Given the need of coordination to provide a tourism product, this study also explores the key coordination areas between the TSC agents to overcome circumstances of economic disruptions: finance, labor, demand, supply and regulation.

2. Literature review: two-party relationship management within the Tourism Supply Chain (TSC) and economic disruptions

The economic disruption resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak is causing uncertainty in tourism markets. This is not new, since uncertainty about future demand is a significant feature of the tourism sector (Williams and Baláz, 2015). However, border closures and mandatory mass quarantine have led to an exceptional situation never experienced before.

Companies have to cope with costs related to closing down premises, maintaining the disinfection of working environments, employees' leaves to prevent any possible spread of the virus or the cancellation of reservations, among others. In addition, some companies have provided infrastructure and even funds to assist the government in addressing the pandemic (Ataguba, 2020).

Tourism products are viewed as value added chains of different service components resulting from complex interactions among numerous stakeholders (Guo and He, 2012). Zhang et al. (2009: 347) refer to this network as a Tourism Supply Chain (TSC): “a network of tourism organizations engaged in different activities ranging from the supply of different components of tourism products/services such as flights and accommodation to the distribution and marketing of the final tourism product at a specific tourism destination, and involves a wide range of participants in both the private and public sectors”.

Considering the objectives of the different organizations, effective upstream and downstream relationship management and coordination within the supply chain is a key issue in achieving and maintaining competitiveness for the entire supply chain and its individual agents (Monczka et al., 1998; Chen et al., 2001; Tapper and Font, 2004; Christopher, 2011). This implies two-party relationships among heterogeneous and homogeneous tourism agents. Heterogeneous players whose capabilities do not overlap represent vertical relationships—hotels and tour operators—. Horizontal cooperation—also called co-competition—implies the establishment of collaboration relations among firms at the same level of production, such as hotels cooperating with one another (Chathoth and Olsen, 2003).

Relationships within the supply chain can take multiple forms: arm's length, strategic alliance, vertical integration, cooperation, and competition, among others. Early research has emphasized arm's-length as the traditional way of relating. Under this approach, both parties act in their own self-interest and make their own decisions without any consideration of the impacts of the decisions on the other party (Hoyt and Huq, 2000; Zhang et al., 2009). However, efficiently managing the operations of the TSC and achieving individual business goals requires a move away from arms-length relationships towards coordination and cooperation between organizations through a TSC (Zhang et al., 2009).

Relationships based on coordination and a win-win philosophy can improve firm performance (Handfield and Nichols, 1999). In addition, when the environment is uncertain, agreements based on trust are positively related with firm performance, as these arrangements are more flexible and can be modified easily (Goldhar and Lei, 1991; Hoyt and Huq, 2000).

Coordination requires that each agent in a supply chain operates considering the impact of its actions on the other players. Full vertical integration is recognized as the most effective way to achieve coordination. However, this strategy is often related to increasing fixed costs and reducing flexibility to cope with market changes. Moreover, TSC actors are often independent firms having conflicting objectives (Gomez and Sinclair, 1991; Lafferty and van Fossen, 2001). This article focuses on understanding coordination as a decision-making strategy of TSC participants through diverse arrangements. Supply chain coordination strategies are already adopted by many large tourism firms especially between service providers such as hotels and airlines, and tour operators and travel agencies (Buhalis and Laws, 2001; Guo and He, 2012).

Among the main benefits to be obtained by business are improved brand value, reputation, image and status. In the current circumstances, emphasis must be given to benefits like reduced costs and operational efficiency, which makes firms more competitive to assess and respond to risks and opportunities in the market, as well as staying ahead of legislative requirements (Tapper and Font, 2004).

A typical tourism value chain is comprised of suppliers, tour operators, competitors, partners, governments, and other firms carrying out complementary activities (Kaukal et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2009). According to our in-depth interviews, the crucial two-party relationships to be managed by hospitality firms in contexts of economic disruptions

are: the government, tour operators, and competitors. In addition, following the work of Zhang et al. (2009), besides coordination between two-party relationships, we propose key issues to be managed in a TSC in order to overcome disruption risks caused by disasters: finance, labor demand, supply and regulation.

2.1. Government relationship management

Recent research recognizes that public support from governments is crucial to the growth of the tourism industry due to intervention in political and economic affairs (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2011; Rivera Mateos and Félix Mendoza, 2019). During the early post-pandemic periods, it is essential to provide the liquidity necessary for the system to recover and to avoid the disappearance of companies and economic collapse (Onrubia Fernández, 2020).

Since mid-March 2020, most European governments have mobilized their development banks to ease the financing and liquidity constraints experienced by companies. The Spanish government, through its national development bank (Instituto de Crédito Oficial, ICO), adopted a package of economic measures, the most important of which is the 100 billion € loan guarantee scheme to support companies affected by the COVID-19 crisis (Mertens et al., 2020).

Public development banks should play a countercyclical role helping firms to mitigate the impact of economic shocks. Their goal is to provide funds on preferential terms to meet costs related to the production cycle, especially working capital: payroll, supplier payments, purchases of goods etc. (Del Campo and Ferreiro, 2012; Mertens et al., 2020). To comply with the objectives of the public development banks, commercial banks are supposed to transfer the benefits of the public guarantee to their customers, in the form of preferential conditions in terms of interest, commissions, guarantees etc. (Del Campo and Ferreiro, 2012; Mertens et al., 2020).

Providing liquidity effectively and efficiently requires a combination of financial and tax policies. When depressed demand due to unemployment, uncertainty and depleted savings are restricting economic activity, it is crucial to delay or forgive taxes that can be easily adjusted (Kopczuk, 2020; Serrano Antón, 2020). However, there are no tax policies to support the Spanish hotel industry in this crisis (Ranera, 2020).

Tourism is a labor-intensive industry, consequently, labor agreements with governments are crucial to survive in the current context. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the Spanish government has allowed many businesses to temporarily lay off their employees (Onrubia Fernández, 2020). A temporary layoff is a “temporary suspension of the employment relationship which unites employees and employers. The employee ceases to provide labor to the employer, and the employer ceases to pay the employee” (Lord and Saad, 2020: 15). Due to force majeure during the alarm state, the subsidy has covered up to 70 % of payroll costs, up to a maximum of 1.098 € per employee. In addition, companies with more than 50 employees can obtain a 75 % reduction in their social security contribution and 100 % if the workforce does not exceed this threshold (Real Decreto-ley 8/2020; López Ahumada, 2020).

The activities of TSC members are directly driven by tourism demand (Zhang et al., 2009). Economic conditions are traditional determinants of international tourism demand (Kim and Lee, 2017). However, epidemic outbreaks can cause tourists to avoid an area since these events are linked to health risk and malfunction of the medical system (Lee et al., 2012). Thus, the decrease in tourism associated with the COVID-19 crisis would be related not only to the customer economic conditions, but also to health issues.

Demand management includes forecasting, marketing, and sales planning (Zhang et al., 2009). Studies highlighting the role of governments stimulating international tourism demand are mainly focused on marketing activities such as destination promotion (e.g. Tosun, 2002; Law et al., 2004) and government-supported tourism (e.g. Kim et al., 2018).

Kim et al. (2018) highlight the usefulness of establishing ties

between countries to stimulate tourism flows after a crisis—government-supported tourism—. Considering the current health context and the opening of EU borders, a possible avenue for the recovery of international tourism is through collaboration with governments.

Countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania or the Nordic region, are looking to permit travel with neighboring countries through what is called ‘travel bubbles’ or ‘airbridges’ between countries where the virus is contained. (OECD, 2020). The East–West Economic Corridor (EWEC) between the Andaman Sea and South China Sea is another example of an economic corridor, including cooperative tourism policies between countries such as simplification of entry and exit procedures, road improvements and destination promotion campaigns (Lebel and Lebel, 2019). This type of economic corridors are global and regional value chains providing connection between economic agents along a defined geography. They link the supply and demand sides of markets, stimulate economic growth, alleviate poverty and benefit from globalization. Accordingly, they prosper as part of an economic network of interactions (Brunner, 2013; Lebel and Lebel, 2019).

2.2. Tour operator relationship management

Supply management represents the buyer-supplier relationship in the supply chain (Leenders et al., 2002). Many hotel chains depend almost entirely on tour operators for the distribution of their services and visibility in their main markets (Karamustafa, 2000; Bastakis et al., 2004; Calveras and Orfila-Sintes, 2019).

Conflicts between tour operators and hotels often arise because of different commercial and strategic interests. Hotel companies seek to maximize their revenues and achieve a reasonable return on investment by balancing customer volume with average room rates. Thanks to ‘guaranteed’ accommodation contracts with tour operators, hotel operators guarantee payment regardless of occupation. On the other hand, the competitiveness of tour operators is based on reducing prices and profit margins paid to hotel companies (Buhalis, 2000; Medina-Muñoz & García-Falcón, 2000; Medina-Muñoz et al., 2003; Tapper and Font, 2004).

In addition, tour operators are often vertically integrated, controlling carriers (charter airlines) and retailers (travel agency chains). This, combined with slower growth in demand for mature destinations and low asset specificity, allows them to increase their bargaining power and interorganizational control over the hospitality firm suppliers (Buhalis, 2000; Bastakis et al., 2004). Consequently, tour operators are able to exert influence on the hospitality companies to achieve their own individual goals and interests.

The most controlled aspects by tour operators are those related to contracts, especially economic and financial issues such as payments, guarantees and release conditions to which the tour operator is subject: guarantees and compensation offered to the tour operator; prices, discounts and special promotions offered to the tour operator (Medina-Muñoz et al., 2003).

Research on the relationship between tour operators and hotels shows that having good relationships with the tour operator is crucial to success. Medina-Muñoz and García-Falcón (2000) reveal that trust, commitment, coordination, quality of communication, exchange of information, participation, use of constructive resolution techniques and similar relative dependence are the key factors in the relationship between hotels and tour operators.

In general, interorganizational relationships are successful when the conditions and the environment are favorable (Mohr and Spekman, 1994). However, changes in the market are a potential source of failure in supply chain partnerships (Forrest and Martin, 1990). According to the study by Tse (2003), after the impact of events such as terrorist attacks and epidemic outbreaks, many hospitality companies have built their own websites to sell their accommodation services directly. This strategy will reduce the dependence on tour operators and therefore the

possible uncertainty if they do not fulfil their obligations. In these cases, the possible reactions of tour operators must be estimated, and possible losses must be justified or compensated for by communicating the message honestly to them as soon as possible. In contrast, the recent study by Calveras and Orfila-Sintes (2019) confirms that, despite the impact of information technology over the organization of the hotel value chain, there has been no significant decrease in the presence of intermediaries in hotel distribution.

2.3. Competitors relationship management

The establishment of alliances is increasingly considered a critical aspect in achieving competitive advantage for hospitality firms (Pechlaner and Volgger, 2012). Horizontal collaboration between competitors —also called *coopetition* (Gnyawali and Madhavan, 2001). — exist among homogeneous agents in the same level of the supply chain (Pomponi et al., 2015).

Value and mutual benefits between different hospitality companies are created when the joint exploitation of resources neutralize individual firm's weaknesses. Efficient *coopetition* should be limited to those areas where there is no rivalry, where there are common interests, (Wang and Krakover, 2008), or to influence an industry- favorable regulatory framework (Tether, 2002).

In order to do so, competitors should consider the impact of their actions on the other agents (Szpilko, 2017). Thus, a win-win premise based on trust among agents can lead to a stronger sustainable competitive advantage. Trust implies that actors do not act opportunistically even if there are short-term incentives to do so (Chiles and McMackin, 1996; Yu, 2019).

As mentioned above, the existence of touristic demand is a common interest for all members of the TSC within a destination. According to OECD (2020), a key issue for the recovery of destinations during this type of crisis is to keep the critical mass of services in place to serve visitors when they arrive. *Coopetition* in touristic destinations is a powerful determinant to gain competitive advantage for both the destination and the individual firms (von Friedrichs Grängsjö and Gummesson, 2006; Martínez-Pérez et al., 2016). Generally, large hospitality companies collaborate with competitors to address environmental threats related to the maturity phase of the industry. With an established market, the main focus is therefore on destination marketing and development activities to improve the competitive position by increasing trial and repurchase, hence improving the market share of both firms (Chathoth and Olsen, 2003; von Friedrichs Grängsjö and Gummesson, 2006).

From a sectoral perspective, *coopetition* is particularly useful in increasing bargaining power at the industry level and therefore in addressing issues such as the creation of sector-specific regulation (Tether, 2002; Chathoth and Olsen, 2003). In order to do so, the relative relevance of individual sectors within an industry is crucial (Hall, 1994; Zhang et al., 2009).

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Sampling procedure and data collection

In order to achieve the main purpose of this study, hotel chains in Spain were selected. Three key factors suggested the sample. First, because of their relevance in the Spanish tourism industry. In Spain there are almost 15,000 hotels and more than 200 hotel chains —managing 3800 hotels— (Ortega-Pestana, 2019). Second, because Spain is a country that has suffered drastically from the health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak (ECDC, 2020). Finally, because of the proactive attitude both to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and to plan the return to activity in a competitive manner.

The sample for this study consists of three international hotel chains

located among the 60 hotel chains with more presence in Spain. The first hotel chain (A) currently has 72 establishments and more than 3000 rooms in more than 20 different destinations —55 in Spain—. The second one (B) has 35 hotels —30 in Spain— with more than 1300 rooms. The third hotel chain (C) has 36 establishments in Spain and more than 1000 rooms (see Table 1). All these companies have hotels dedicated to both vacation for leisure tourists, and urban offerings for business travelers. Accordingly, the establishments are mainly located in urban and beach destinations.

Considering the descriptive nature of the phenomenon, the extent of the literature and the first-hand information available, the case study approach has been used in this article. According to Merriam (1998), the case study approach, within the qualitative research, enables a deeper understanding of a specific social phenomenon. In contrast to the quantitative theory-testing empirical approach, the methodology of inductive qualitative research to analyze the content of interview documents is widely accepted in order to construct better theories for practice (Pieterse, 2020). Following Ahmad and Ali (2003: 2), the in-depth interview method is particularly useful when “there is a concern for understanding how things happen and how they are related, rather than only measuring the relationship between variables”. Moreover, it is also relevant when the goal is to understand, resolve, or improve a procedure carried out in the professional world (Larrinaga and Rodríguez, 2010).

The respondents were chosen for their expertise, that is, as key informants, to explore their views on their relationships with their key TSC agents in order to overcome the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak. Following the purposive sampling method (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009), only top-level hotel executives and managers were sampled, given their high position in the information hierarchy, as they are all responsible for high-level corporate decision-making (Kruesi et al., 2017).

In order to have access to such high-level executives, the research team considered it appropriate to make contact through LinkedIn, since it is the largest professional network in the world on the Internet. A total of 30 potential interviewees were identified and contacted. However, the number of interviews and informants was not specified at the

Table 1
Stages of the case study approach.

Profile
Review of Literature (Web of Science and Scopus)
Sample selection
Hotel Chain A (72 hotels)
Hotel Chain B (35 hotels)
Hotel Chain C (36 hotels) (Spain strategic business units from three international hotel groups)
Units of analysis
Hotel Chain A CEO
Hotel Chain B CEO
Hotel Chain C CEO
Total CEOs: 3 respondents
Hotel Chain A area managers (operations, financial and human resources)
Hotel Chain B area managers (operations, financial and human resources)
Hotel Chain C area managers (operations, financial and human resources)
Total senior managers: 9 respondents
Information gathering
9 semi-structured interviews: 2020 senior managers (operations, financial and human resources)
3 open interviews: 2020 (CEO)
Internal and external documents: 2020 (Principle of triangulation)
Information transcription
ATLAS.ti (qualitative data analysis)
Data records and classification:
(1) internal documents, (2) external documents,
(3) interviews, and (4) field notes
Results and conclusions
Conformity with the analysis results
Conclusions, along with literature and professional implications

Source: adapted from Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. (2020).

beginning of the research, and it was decided that a strategy of “theoretical saturation” would be followed to determine this. In order to promote an open dialogue, evidence was collected through open and semi-structured interviews that began with broad open-ended questions, followed by focused and directed questions as the interviews progressed within and between interviews (Morrison et al., 2002; Manuj and Mentzer, 2008). Interviews continued until “theoretical saturation” was reached, in other words, until it was perceived that informants did not reveal any new information and reported similar and consistent information to support the validity and quality of the theoretical model (Yin, 1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), twelve interviews meet the qualitative research guidelines that eight or fewer informants usually provide theoretical saturation.

The respondents were all in high-level management positions and had extensive experience in the hotel industry, they were all male and their ages ranged between 40 and 60 years. The interviews were conducted with three (operations, financial and human resources) area managers from the three hotels groups. On the other hand, we also conducted three in-depth open interviews with CEOs from the different firms. The diversity in the backgrounds of the informants, both in terms of their position in the organizational structure and the department, has led to different perspectives, enriching the analysis and the implications of the research. The interviews, which lasted on average between one and one and a half hours, were conducted by webinar using the Microsoft Teams tool.

As a complement to the interviews, we participated in webinars, interviews or events organized by the different hotel groups. Finally, to complete the principle of triangulation in the collection of information, we accessed internal documents. Consequently, we triangulated the study to ensure internal validity and minimize possible bias in drawing conclusions (Breitmayer et al., 1993).

3.2. Data analysis

All interviews were conducted in Spanish and were recorded and fully transcribed. Once the research team became familiar with the text and its interpretations, all interviews were translated into English. The qualitative data collected was analyzed through a content analysis assisted by the software programme ATLAS.ti. This software enables the systematization of the findings according to categories and sub-categories illustrated through conceptual networks (Friese, 2018).

According to Varguillas (2006), the process involves four stages: information (data) coding; categorization; structuring or creating one or more networks of relationships or flowcharts, mind maps or concept maps between categories; and structuring findings or theorizing if applicable. Consequently, we generated an initial set of categories based on the theoretical framework and the interview guidelines. Then, the transcribed interviews were entered in the software to arrange data into value codes. To do this, we grouped the quotes that are repeated in a patterned manner, to generate codes. The next step involved grouping the interrelated codes under the pre-established categories before determining the definitive categories and codes. Finally, in order to contrast the independent interpretations of the research team and to confirm relationships among codes and categories, we conducted diverse team meetings.

After this process, three main categories themes emerged regarding the management of relationships: governments, tour operators and competitors. These codes or categories were at the same time linked with the codes related with the diverse coordination areas: finance, labor, demand, supply and regulation.

4. Results

The two-party relationships within the hospitality firm and its key TSC members were all discussed with the respondents. Management and coordination aspects were also explored in order to overcome disruption

risks caused by epidemic outbreaks.

4.1. Government relationship management: coordination areas

Initially, the importance of public support from governments was proved. All respondents stressed that government intervention is crucial for the industry. The following quote shows how a Hotel Chain A operations area manager value the role of governments:

“To face this crisis, government action is the most important thing for our industry. The regulatory framework that will help businesses to prosper will depend on the success of their decisions.”

The feedback from respondents has provided insight into the main areas of relations with governments to overcome economic disruptions. On the one hand areas such as finance, taxation and labor —aimed at providing liquidity—, and on the other hand, demand-stimulating issues —aimed at reactivating international arrivals—.

Hotel Chain B financial area manager highlights the critical role of liquidity in surviving uncertain environments for the hospitality industry:

“The industry is facing high levels of uncertainty. We do not know if there will be new epidemic outbreaks, when a vaccine will be available, or how this will affect tourism demand. We still have to deal with a lot of costs related to rent, taxes, maintenance of the facilities, employees, losses related to the hotel opening with less occupation etc. In order to be able to cope with this situation and guarantee survival, liquidity is essential”

4.1.1. Coordination in the financial and fiscal areas

Since mid-March 2020, most European governments have mobilized their development banks to ease the financing and liquidity constraints experienced by companies. A Hotel Chain C CEO discusses the scope of the funds in Spain:

“ICO credit lines are especially useful for companies with low financial solvency that may have difficulties in obtaining a commercial bank loan. Compared to other European countries, the Spanish funds are not sufficient given that it covers up to 70 % of new loans and 60 % of renewal operations.”

The quote below —where the Hotel Chain A CEO compares European and Spanish interest rates— illustrates the conflicting interests between the ICO and the commercial banks, and the consequences for companies:

“Compared to the European Central Bank —interest rates at 0% during the critical situation—, in Spain, the interest rates on ICO loans could have been more advantageous. It is obvious that the banks have to do their business, but it was not about that, it was about helping.”

Hotel Chain B financial area manager also discusses how the bank’s objectives often override the ICO’s primary function of providing liquidity:

“The ICO credit lines are limited and insufficient, so the banks firstly cover their own needs, prioritizing the protection of their debts. Thus, they are granting ICO loans with government guarantees to companies that have loans with them, to cover their own repayments. Therefore, the system is not being injected effectively.”

Furthermore, the observation made by the following senior manager is in line with research by Kopczuk (2020), who points out the relevance of preventing the damage from lost cash flow for larger businesses in particular industries. However, the real problem is for businesses that do not have the same access to credit market and that cannot realistically raise outside equity. Accordingly, the Hotel Chain B CEO affirms:

“Companies that are less solvent do not have access to commercial bank loans will have great difficulty obtaining liquidity in times of economic

disruption. It would be desirable for governments to establish genuinely favorable conditions and rules for access to ICO loans that cannot be changed by commercial banks.”

Providing liquidity effectively and efficiently requires a combination of financial and tax policies (Kopczuk, 2020; Serrano Antón, 2020). The quotes below confirm that there are no tax policies to support the Spanish hotel industry in this crisis as well as illustrates the most appropriate fiscal measures according to the Hotel Chain A CEO and operations area manager—corporate tax rate, property tax and VAT—:

“Approval of tax deferral for an industry particularly affected by the crisis, such as hospitality, would be key to maintaining liquidity and avoiding future bankruptcies. After some years of economic prosperity, the most useful measure would be the reduction or deferral of the corporate tax rate, in order to offset current losses and maintain liquidity.”

Hotel Chain B financial area manager remarks:

“For hospitality companies with a large number of establishments in ownership, it will be very useful the property tax deduction equivalent to a percentage of the amount paid for renting buildings where economic activity takes place during the pandemic.”

Finally, Hotel Chain C CEO concludes:

“Another much more direct element would be to temporarily reduce VAT on hotel stays. This would allow us to be much more competitive in reducing the rate without this going directly against the hotel’s margin.”

4.1.2. Coordination in the labor area

By adopting temporary layoffs, governments provide business with payroll flexibility, helping to preserve the liquidity of the company (Kopczuk, 2020; Lord and Saad, 2020). Hotel Chain C human resources area manager highlights the critical role of this measure:

“In labor-intensive industries like hospitality, flexibility on a major cost such as payrolls can ensure the survival. Temporary layoff—due to force majeure—has been the only useful and appropriate measure to preserve liquidity, otherwise our firm would have gone bankrupt in 6 weeks.”

Consistent with the work of López Ahumada (2020), a Hotel Chain A CEO confirms that by adopting this measure, governments help preserve the employment relationship:

“For hospitality companies, employees are the most important resource. The company has allocated resources to recruit and train. Therefore, we cannot afford to lose this talent or the investment.”

Hotel Chain B CEO suggested that, considering that this measure is not newly created, it should be addressed in a comprehensive and long term manner:

“This measure is useless unless it is aligned with the demand recovery. Great part of the hospitality industry largely depends on international tourism demand, which we expect to recover gradually.”

The feedback from respondents has provided insights into whether this measure can be improved for the hospitality industry. Hotel Chain C operations area manager speculates on the possibility of keeping employees on payroll:

“We always complain about the lack of professionalism in the tourism industry. Governments could subsidize companies that keep employees on payroll or at least provide them with the temporary liquidity to do so. Even if hotels are closed, the employees could be receiving online training in the new health protocols or in new strategies and operations for the new context.”

4.1.3. Coordination in the demand area

Tourism Supply Chain activities are directly driven by tourism demand. Spain received in 2018 the visit of 82.8 million international tourists. The United Kingdom was the main issuing country, accounting for 22.4 % of the total. Germany and France were next, accounting for 13.8 % and 13.7 % respectively (INE, 2019). The quote below illustrates the relevance of international versus domestic tourism in order to overcome this crisis. This action was highlighted by the Hotel Chain B CEO:

“The hospitality industry in Spain cannot be kept alive through domestic demand given the lower travel rate and purchasing power as well as high levels of seasonality—from 15 July to 15 August—. The Spanish hospitality industry is dimensioned for a global and international demand, mostly localized in coast and beach destinations—90 % of the activity—. Accordingly, international demand reactivation is crucial to survive this crisis.”

The interviews revealed diverse points of view regarding the responsibility and capacity of the government in stimulating international demand after the economic interruption. Hotel Chain A human resources area manager said:

“It is necessary to generate trust so that people want to travel and stay in our hotels. However, if demand is not reactivated through institutional mechanisms—health measures at airports, ease of travel, availability of tourism resources, etc.—there is no point in what individual firms can do.”

On the other hand, regarding the capacity of the state to promote international demand, Hotel Chain B CEO remarked:

“I do not believe in the capacity of the state to generate or stimulate any kind of demand. The budget available to the institution in charge of promoting Spain is very limited. In view of the expected economic disruption and consequent uncertainty for potential tourists, effective demand-stimulating measures need to be implemented when the pandemic begins to be brought under control. This means that tourism institutions must start planning measures at the onset of a health crisis.”

Hotel Chain B operations area manager illustrates the importance of aligning interests with major issuing countries:

“We must develop a plan enabling gradual demand reactivation through agreements with issuing countries such as United Kingdom, Germany and France. Once the pandemic is under control, all countries must have the same restrictions at the borders so as not to divert demand to other destinations. The key will be to homogenize health measures among countries with the pandemic under control.”

Hotel Chain A CEO also discussed the relevance of time and coordination in planning these institutional partnerships to facilitate the arrival of traditional international tourists:

“Tourism ministries from different countries should work to coordinate safe tourism corridors. Diligent decisions taken by governments are crucial to avoid any delays, as a one-week delay in decisions on the European corridor can have multiplier proportions in the sector.”

Consistent with Albert et al. (2004), a Hotel Chain B CEO suggests that cooperation between tourism ministries is needed to achieve a corridor-wide vision. In order to do so, it is crucial to provide an organizational structure for addressing institutional issues, to develop a branding plan, to manage data for seamless information and to address international visitor needs:

“The hospitality industry does not need destination marketing campaigns promoted by the government in isolation. Spain is a mature destination with sufficiently well-known touristic resources. There is a need of touristic corridors between territories and regions in the form of common rules

and health protocols to make travel secure. Governments must design coordinated measures to help protect tourists, while throwing a lifeline to a key industry in countries such as Spain. Those corridors should include clear new protocols on flight, accommodation, interaction, meals and visits”.

4.2. Tour operator relationship management: coordination in the supply area

Many hotel chains depend almost entirely on tour operators for the distribution of their services (Karamustafa, 2000; Bastakis et al., 2004). Hotel Chain C CEO illustrates the previous theory regarding the power distribution between hotels and tour operators:

“In holiday and island destinations there is a high dependency on the tour operator. In our case, this is the main source of sales since tourists from the major international issuing markets usually purchase our services through vacation packages. We have no bargaining power over them.”

In addition, contracts and agreements are often unilateral, leaving hotel companies exposed if tour operators fail to meet their obligations (Buhalis, 2000; Medina-Muñoz and García-Falcón, 2000). Hotel Chain A financial area manager suggested that in the current demand disruption, each actor tries to protect its own interests, often at the expense of their partners’ performance:

“Tour operators have the capacity to unilaterally suspend their guarantee contracts with the hospitality firms. Some of them even demanded the return of customer deposits that had already been processed. For hospitality companies this implies a great business risk and affects the liquidity and therefore the survival of the company in a very dangerous way.”

Hotel Chain C operations area manager discussed that this is the most appropriate strategy to follow in the current conditions:

“We are aware that there are tour operators who cannot fulfil their commitments, even if a guarantee contract exists. We have to adapt to this new situation, we will be flexible, helping them to sell as much as possible. Collaboration and understanding are the key.”

Hotel Chain B CEO suggest the need to evolve towards a direct sales model to maintain competitiveness in unfavorable contexts in order to increase their power in the tourism distribution channel and collaborating with tour operators in a more equitable way (Karamustafa, 2000).

“The high dependence of the sector on tour operators seriously endangers our survival. Through direct sales we would gain more control over the end customer, and make relations with tour operators fairer. We cannot forget that to carry out this strategy, it will be necessary to assign technological and human resources”.

4.3. Competitor relationship management: coordination in the demand and regulation areas

The observation of the Hotel Chain C human resources area manager is in line with research by von Friedrichs Grängsjö and Gummesson (2006), who argue that the feeling of having common problems to face, inspires cooperation:

“Although the government is responsible for activating the demand, companies must be able to attract tourists. In the context of an economic disruption with limited and uncertain demand, collaboration with other hotels to promote the attractiveness and health security of a destination is even more important.”

In the same vein, although hotels work together to market the destination, they must balance cooperation and competition, as well as collective and individual action. Thus, the need for a code of conduct to

achieve this balance arises (von Friedrichs Grängsjö and Gummesson, 2006). This idea is illustrated by the following quote of a Hotel Chain A CEO:

“Historically, competing hotels could run the risk of entering a price war in case of liquidity needs. Even more solvent companies (operating hotels on their own property) can afford to lower rates to drive competitors out of the market. A price war will delay the recovery of the sector by at least two or three years. Therefore, companies should be aware of their cost structure, not sell below the cost of production and focus on service differentiation.”

In order to achieve differentiation at the sector level, the Hotel Chain B operations area manager suggested collaborating by focusing on safety and quality as main sources of reputation, efficiency and profitability (Tapper and Font, 2004; Benavides-Chicón and Ortega, 2014).

“Collaboration at sector level to create health standards and/or Covid-free certifications would be a very useful way not to lose competitiveness. The individual development of these standards is very demanding in terms of resources. Cooperating and sharing resources is a more efficient way. In addition, this common effort will allow for greater visibility to project a positive and homogeneous image of the sector.”

Finally, Hotel Chain A CEO illustrates the difficulties to achieve favorable conditions despite de importance of the industry:

“Through the employers’ associations or lobbies —Alianza para la Excelencia Turística (Exceltur), Confederación Española de Hoteles y Alojamientos Turísticos (CEHAT) and Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales (CEOE)—, attempts have been made to negotiate with the government special regulations for the industry. However, this sector is highly fragmented—in Spain only 20 % of hotels belong to a brand or a chain with more than 1000 rooms—. This situation greatly weakens the sector, especially in horizontal decision-making.”

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Operational risks can cause demand fluctuations or even interruptions on the TSC causing safety issues or inconvenience to tourists making them dissatisfied (Fung & Fung, 2014; Kinra et al., 2019). However, compared to an operational risk, the rapid spatial spread of the COVID-19 outbreak, together with the unpredictable scaling and ripple effect, has resulted in one of the greatest economic disruptions in recent decades. Literature on TSCs has hardly discussed these issues, so this work contributes to addressing the need for theory building in TSCs management during economic disruptions.

The main goal of this article is to understand the role of relationship management between hotel chains and their key TSC agents in order to overcome economic disruptions caused by epidemic outbreaks such as COVID-19. Managing the TSC implies efficiently developing all chain operations in order to meet the needs of tourists and to fulfill the business objectives of the different TSC members (Zhang et al., 2009). This study contributes to a better understanding of the goals of the agents of a TSC based on the socioeconomic situation. While Tourism supply chains (TSC) are particularly vulnerable to the risks of economic disruptions caused by pandemics and other disasters, results reveal that the business objectives of hotel chains should evolve from cost reduction and operational efficiency to obtaining—or not losing—liquidity, preserving labor relationships, reactivating international arrivals, attracting customers, reducing dependence on tour operators and achieving fair relations and greater control over the end customer and, finally, ensuring a favorable regulatory framework for the industry.

In order to achieve these goals, effective inter-organizational relationship management in the TSC is a key aspect. This implies

coordination between the activities of the agents, as well as consideration of the impact of their actions on other members. TSCs are often addressed in the literature from a global perspective, both in terms of the overall network performance and the provision of the tourism product, usually in package form. There are also studies describing the wide range of participants in the private and public sectors (e.g. Kaukal et al., 2000; Tapper and Font, 2004). Therefore, significant efforts have been made to understand two-party relationships in the industry, primarily with respect to service delivery issues. The most discussed relationships are those between tour operators and destinations (e.g. Carey et al., 1997; Baloglu and Mangalolu, 2001), tour operators and travel agencies (e.g. Tsaour et al., 2006), hotels and travel agencies (e.g. Medina-Muñoz and García-Falcón, 2000; Bastakis et al., 2004); hotels and airlines (e.g. Lafferty and van Fossen, 2001), and competitor hotels (e.g. Chung (2000).

On this basis, another contribution of this study is the identification of the crucial two-party relationships to be managed by hospitality firms focusing not on the provision of the tourism product but on overcoming economic disruptions —governments, tour operators, and competitors—. Effective upstream and downstream relationship management within the supply chain is a key issue in achieving and maintaining competitiveness for the entire supply chain and its individual agents (Chen et al., 2001; Tapper and Font, 2004; Zhang et al., 2009; Christopher, 2011).

Finally, this research delves into coordination as a decision-making strategy. Coordination between TSC agents is an emerging topic in the literature (Szpilko, 2017). Although this strategy is already adopted by tourism companies, its aim is mainly related to service provision issues such as pricing strategy, service quality and/or planning decisions (e.g. Buhalis and Laws, 2001; Guo and He, 2012). Thus, another contribution is the exploration of the key coordination areas with these actors in the circumstances of an economic disruption—finance, labor, demand, supply and regulation—. Trust and commitment between agents is also highlighted as a basis for success coordination.

5.2. Practical contributions

In a context of economic disruption, governments are major players in the development of the hospitality industry due to their intervention in political and economic issues. The key areas in the relationships are, on the one hand finance and taxation, as well as labor—aimed at providing liquidity—, and on the other hand, demand-stimulating issues —aimed at reactivating international arrivals— (see Table 2).

Economic disruptions and the uncertainty of the first post-pandemic

periods have caused reductions in revenue and liquidity problems for the hospitality industry. These firms have to deal with great part of the costs —rent, taxes, maintenance of the facilities, employees, losses related to the hotel opening with less occupation etc.—. Thus, liquidity is essential to avoid bankruptcies and to recover the economy. Providing liquidity effectively and efficiently requires coordination with governments in areas such as finance, taxes and labor. However, according to the results of the study, in the current situation of economic disruption, relations between governments and hotel chains seem to take arm’s length form.

On the financial side, governments should play a counter-cyclical role in helping businesses to mitigate the impact of economic disruptions (Mertens et al., 2020). This involves providing public funds on preferential terms, particularly to companies with low financial solvency that may have difficulties in obtaining a loan from a commercial bank. To this end, the loan guarantee scheme to support firms affected by epidemic crisis should be sufficient and should cover up to 100 % of new loans and renewal operations. Thus, coordination must involve the harmonization of the interests and objectives of the government and the commercial banks for the measures to be effective. These entities must completely and realistically transfer the benefits of the public guarantee to the companies, over and above their private interests.

On the other hand, the results reveal the need of fiscal arrangements between the hospitality industry and the government in order to achieve liquidity and overcome disruption risks caused by pandemics. Coordination and information-sharing about previous years of prosperity, should lead to agreements on the most appropriate fiscal measures —mostly based on tax deferral—, for example, those related to the corporate tax rate, property tax and VAT on hotel stays.

With respect to labor, by negotiating temporary layoffs, governments provide companies with payroll flexibility, helping to preserve liquidity (Kopcuk, 2020; Lord and Saad, 2020). In addition, this measure helps to preserve employment relationships (López-Ahumada, 2020). This is particularly relevant in labor-intensive industries such as hospitality, where human resources are a crucial asset as well as a major cost.

In situations of economic disruption, negotiation and coordination are crucial to implement measures more efficiently. Moving from a relationship of arm’s length to a relationship of coordination would mean greater consideration of the characteristics, needs and real impact of the hospitality industry by governments. Thus, coordination would imply information sharing and flexibility to address labor issues in a comprehensive and long-term manner through its alignment with the recovery of international demand. Another efficient measure resulting from coordination among both agents would providing liquidity to

Table 2
Model of two- party relationship and coordination management aspects between hotel chains and their key TSC agents.

Type of relationship	Key agents	Coordination areas				
		Finance	Labor	Demand	Supply	Regulation
Vertical	Governments	Public funds on real preferential terms Aligned objectives between government and commercial banks (intermediaries) Tax deferral: corporate tax rate, property tax and VAT on hotel stays	Negotiation of temporary layoffs Alignment with recovery of international demand Keeping employees on the payroll by training	Marketing activities: government-supported tourism Safe tourism corridors: time and coordination	-	-
	Tour operators	-	-	-	Trust, commitment and coordination Evolution towards a direct sales model	-
Horizontal	Com-petitors	-	-	Marketing activities: destination promotion International arrivals reactivation	-	Concentration on lobbying
Objectives		Liquidity	Liquidity Employment relationship preservation	Attraction of customers	Reducing dependency Fair relations Greater control end customer	Industry- favorable regulatory framework

companies that keep their employees on the payroll by training them to meet the challenges of the post-pandemic environment.

Once tourism activity is reactivated during or after a pandemic period, the results of the study reveal that the recovery of hotel chains will depend on coordination agreements with the government to stimulate demand. While demand management includes forecasting, marketing and sales planning (Zhang et al., 2009), interviews indicate that arrangements must be made in the area of marketing, more specifically in the development of government-supported tourism (Tosun, 2002; Kim et al., 2018).

While many countries are moving to promote domestic travel (OECD, 2020), Spanish coordination measures should focus on international demand. The main reason is that the Spanish hotel industry is sized for international arrivals. In addition to the traditional unilateral actions of governments, it should be useful to cooperate with the main issuing countries to stimulate tourist flows after a crisis —United Kingdom, France and Germany—.

However, the EU currently lacks a consistent international approach to opening or closing borders, to quarantine regulations, or to the establishment of 'bubbles' and 'air bridges'. Instead, through the Re-open EU initiative, they merely provide essential information about the safe relaunch of free movement and tourism across Europe: borders, available means of transport, travel restrictions, public health and safety measures (European Commission, 2020).

Safe tourism corridors in the form of common standards and health protocols would make travel safe and ensure the proper functioning of TSCs and therefore the survival of the industry. Another insight is the importance of time and coordination in the planning of these institutional partnerships to avoid delays that can have multiplier proportions in the sector.

Operating with tour operators is the most cost-effective way for the hospitality industry to distribute accommodation services. According to key researchs, for this reason many hotel chains depend almost entirely on these agents to extend its sales and marketing efforts (Medina-Muñoz and García-Falcón, 2000; Calveras and Orfila-Sintes, 2019). Having good relationships based on trust, commitment and coordination with the tour operator is crucial to success.

It is also confirmed that changes in the market can lead to the failure of supply chain partnerships (Forrest and Martin, 1990). In times of economic disruption, financial security stands out as a major source of conflict between tourism distribution partners. In addition, results show that the heavy dependence on these players and the unilateral nature of the agreements leave hotel chains exposed if tour operators do not meet their obligations (Buhalis, 2000; Medina-Muñoz & García-Falcón, 2000).

According to the results, a potential way to evolve to a coordination relationships can be moving towards a direct sales model —combined with the tour operator— would be useful to increase the negotiating power of hotel chains in the tourism distribution channel, to obtain greater control over the end customer and to make relations with tour operators fairer.

Finally, in order to overcome the effects of economic disruption caused by epidemic outbreaks, competitors should collaborate in those areas where there is no rivalry —destination promotion—, or to influence an industry- favorable regulatory framework from a sector level.

Once the demand is reactivated, companies must be able to attract these tourists by cooperating with other hotels through marketing activities such as destination promotion. In order to do so, trust between agents is needed. According to Liedtka (1996), trust is often generated over time as a result of a history of successful performance among agents. However, this study reveals that in case of liquidity needs, firms usually compete in terms of price instead of cooperate.

Thus, coordination between hotels should imply following certain code of conduct to achieve balance between cooperation and competition and early sector recovery, avoiding war prices by focusing on sectoral differentiation based on safety and quality. Consequently, in order

to achieve sectoral differentiation to attract demand cooperation firms should focus on creating health standards or Covid-free certifications. This type of initiatives allow companies to create more value than than they would achieve acting individually (Pomponi et al., 2015; Ann Peng et al., 2018).

From a sectoral perspective, for highly fragmented sectors such as hospitality, it is difficult to achieve favorable conditions despite the industry's contribution to the country's wealth. Therefore, concentration on lobbying would be particularly useful to increase the bargaining power to influence regulatory frameworks in the context of an economic disruption.

5.3. Limitations and future research agenda

The results obtained in this research must be interpreted with caution due to the limitations inherent to its methodological design. The qualitative methodology does not allow us to understand the phenomenon studied in other contexts or to draw conclusions that can be extrapolated to other sectors. In addition, another limitation stems from only interviewing three Spanish hotel chains. Moreover, like any other research work, it raises new questions allowing us to further deepen the study of study of interorganizational relations in similar crisis contexts.

Studies analyzing the financial or performance effects of the COVID-19, both in the hospitality sector and others, will help governments and managers to reduce the negative effects that may arise in future crises, by identifying the measures that have proven to be most appropriate. Surveys and the use of statistical techniques for analysis can improve the understanding of this phenomenon and make recommendations to the industry. It would also be interesting to distinguish between how large international hotel chains and independent hotels have responded to the crisis.

In line with the decision-making process, the creation of relationships between different agents —government, tour operators or competitors— are key to overcoming crises in the hospitality industry. Therefore, another line of concern is the analysis of these network of relationships in terms of number, objectives, whether they have been occasional or long-lasting relationships or the results achieved. In this regard, the study of the cultural integration and the diversity management in the Managing relationships with key agents in the Tourism Supply Chain and their role in the process' success can help in new crisis.

Human resources are the main resource in the hotel industry so the way hotels have managed the crisis can be a motivating element for staff or, on the other hand, it can encourage the loss of workers and talent. Therefore, the analysis of the effect of the measures implemented by the government, with the temporary suspension of employment, and the measures adopted by companies in aspects of health and safety, salaries, adaptation of jobs, etc. are an interesting line of study.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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