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## Communication during COVID-19 crisis: A case of hotels in Turkey

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# Communication During COVID-19 Crisis: A Case of Hotels in Turkey

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## Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which has spread all over the world, the importance of communication in terms of knowledge sharing has increased even more in the tourism sector, as in all sectors. Each hotel business has benefited from various communication tools in the pandemic crisis. The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of the crisis communication strategy tackled by the hotels in Turkey during this unprecedented period, via both conventional and internet based public relations and communication platforms within the framework of crisis communication management. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 hotel managers in Turkey who are members of SKÅL International. After the recordings of the interviews were transcribed, the collected data were coded and analyzed by MAXQDA. Some of the striking answers from the participants that were given in the findings section by making descriptive analysis. 9 themes and 43 codes emerged in the findings of the study. Social media usage and informing are the most emphasized topics for crisis management by the participants.

**Keywords:** public relations, crisis management, communication, COVID-19

## Introduction

The burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic crisis is unprecedented in its size and scope, and it represents the single largest decline in travel and tourism industry in modern times. Most governments around the world imposed strict restrictions on travel while closing their borders, which brought international travel to almost a complete halt. Airline companies decided to ground their fleet and suspend operations (Sahin, 2020). Despite being a hot topic nowadays for both

academic and industrial circles of the industry, the scope of COVID-19 pandemic crisis and its long-term impact on global tourism industry is still unknown. Historically, tourism and travel industries have been shattered by various global crises, but COVID-19 is considered to be the worst thus far. According to American Hotel and Lodging Association President and CEO Chip Rogers, the impact of COVID-19 to hotel and lodging industry is already more severe than anything seen before, including September 11 and the Great Recession of 2008 combined (American Hospitality and Lodging Association, 2020).

Turkey, as a significant travel destination which has experienced an exponential growth in the past thirty-five years and become a promising major player of global tourism industry, is now amongst the highly impacted countries. Thus, it is of strategic importance for the Turkish tourism industry to get prepared for the post-COVID-19 period with an understanding that crises and the tourism industry are essentially intertwined, and a proactive public relations strategy built upon an effective crisis communication management is indispensable. Numerous research on crisis communication in the hotel business have been conducted (Bilić et al., 2017; Liu-Lastres et al., 2020; Atasoy et al., 2022; Zavisic et al., 2022). To the authors' best knowledge, only one study (Susilo & Prayudi, 2022) has looked at crisis communication strategies used in the hotel sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, studies that concentrate on communication strategies in hotels during crisis situations are urgently needed. Turkey is one of the developing countries where tourism and hospitality sectors have been trying to navigate through various challenges COVID-19 posed on their public relations and communication management. In order to improve our understanding of the how tourism and hospitality sectors manage their communications during pandemic times, his paper focused specifically on the communication strategies employed by Turkish hotels during the early months of COVID-19. This study aims to address this need by investigating conventional and internet-based public relations and communication platforms in Turkish hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following were the specific research questions explored in this study:

1. What are the practices/endeavors engaged in hotels for the wellbeing of internal and external stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?
2. How do the PR methods during the pandemic differ among hotels?
3. What are the best practices in community service and PR carried out during the pandemic?
4. What are the implications of the pandemic PR activities in terms of increasing hotel guest demand in the future?

## **Literature Review**

### ***The recent Importance of public relations***

Public relations serves as a management function that helps organizations and their target audiences understand, accept, and communicate with one another while offering a platform for ongoing communication (Arslan, 2007, p.19). To ensure the continuity of communication with the organizations' target audiences and various stakeholders, since the late 1990s, the internet has been widely used as a tool for engaging the public. (Saffer, Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2013). The use of

the Internet for public relations purposes provided the businesses with a continuous platform that they have always been longing for; starting with the corporate web sites, businesses gradually turned to other communication platforms such as search engines, blogs, and social media. Yeniçıktı (2016, p. 93-94) posits that social media became widely used to reach the target audience without being limited to time and space and allowing for interactive public relations through two-way communication.

The mission of public relations is to relay information to the public correctly through the media (Al-Tai, 2006). Public relations activities are also very important in tourism, which is an amalgam of industries vulnerable to externalities (Novelli et al., 2018). The scope of the crises that the tourism and hotel industry may encounter due to its unique aspects is also quite wide (Bilić et al., 2017). Hotels, an important sector of the tourism and hospitality industry, are equally susceptible to similar unanticipated negative events (Liu-Lastres, 2020). There are various studies emphasizing the importance of public relations activities in the tourism sector. (Huestras, 2008; Perez-Garcia, 2018). These studies commonly indicate that management of crisis processes is especially important for successful public relations.

### ***Crisis Management and Communication during COVID-19 Era***

A crisis is defined as “an event or a perception of an event that threatens or violates important value expectancies of stakeholders and stakeholder reactions can seriously impact the organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Fediuk et al., 2010). The necessity for organizations to repair their reputation and image leads to the requirement for crisis communication, which is more commonly connected with public relations (Benoit, 1997; Seeger, 2007). In terms of public relations, the crisis is not always perceived as a threat (Susilo & Prayudi, 2022, p. 74). The usage of social media in crisis communication is becoming increasingly common, especially in public relations research (Su et al., 2019, p. 2). In the tourism and hospitality field, the role of social media in crisis management, corporate communications, and public relations have quickly developed into a thriving research field (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Zavisic et al. (2022) examined the use of social media as a crisis communication platform in the hotel industry, especially in small hotel businesses. Due to the negative effect of the pandemics on both tourist demand and destination perceptions (Novelli et al., 2018), the industry has been incurring significant economic costs (Kuo et al., 2008). Due to its fragility, hospitality sector is one in particular that is thought to be severely damaged by pandemics.

### ***Communication Strategies of Hotels during the COVID-19***

The hotel industry has faced a wide range of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling et al. 2020) and guests have increasingly been demanding higher standards of health and sanitation when making their hotel choices (Hoang, Truong & Nguyen, 2021, p. 226). Hoang et al.’s (2021) study investigated strategies for issues such as "health and sanitation capabilities, collaborative network growth during crisis, cost control, resources management, relocated management awareness and employee training for paid quarantine service, employee’s morale". A similar study by Uysal (2020) examined the relationship between internal communication strategies of Turkish hotels during the pandemic and employees' engagement levels. Atasoy et al. (2022) emphasized that hoteliers provide all kinds of information through online resources so that guests in hotels do not experience victimization due to COVID-19. Responses to COVID-19 crisis in each sector,

including hospitality, rely on the state of development of the nation in which they are situated. Typically, developed countries were able to become organized earlier than developing countries due to their financial and human power on crisis management. On the other hand, it took longer for developing countries to realize the importance of the crisis and take action accordingly (OECD, 2020). Therefore, earliest publications on impact of COVID-19 on hospitality sector came from the developed countries (Lew et al. 2020; Sönmez et al. 2020).

## **Methods**

### ***Crisis Communication Study Context***

Crisis communications and PR activities during the pandemic varied amongst different tourist destinations around the world. The context for this study was selected to be Turkey, one of the top ten most visited countries worldwide. According to the UN World Tourism Organization's 2020 Tourism Highlights report, the total number of international visitors to Turkey during the pre-pandemic period of 2019 was 51.192 million people, making Turkey the sixth most visited country in the world (UNWTO, 2020). The pandemic, however, caused a 69,5% decrease in this figure, rendering the international arrivals to Turkey in 2020 a total of 15.826 million (TUIK, 2022). As travel restrictions were gradually removed during the normalization process, tourist arrivals and tourism revenues increased in 2021, reaching 29.357 million international visitors (TUIK, 2022). Since the first officially confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 11, 2020, serious measures have been taken across Turkey. Mask mandates in all locations, hygiene requirements, curfews, domestic and international travel prohibitions, as well as transitioning to online education, were among these measures. Turkey was the first and maybe the only country to mandate curfews specifically for citizens over 65 or under 20 years of age (World Health Organisation, 2020a). During this period, hotel businesses also halted most of their activities. The hotel businesses, which resumed operations for normalization during these early months are currently continuing to take various health measures such as vaccination, PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) codes and required quarantine period to protect both guests and staff from the pandemic (UNHCR, 2021).

The Safe Tourism Certification Program, which was developed under these measures and is one of the world's first examples of such programs, is mandatory for all lodging facilities with thirty or more rooms. Enacted on January 1, 2021, the program is optional for accommodation facilities with fewer than 30 rooms. Businesses seeking this certification apply to authorized international accreditation agencies. Businesses that meet the criteria are then granted a Certificate of Safe Tourism and regularly audited for their compliance (Turkish Tourism Promotion and Development Agency, 2021). Following the launch of the normalization process in June 2020, hotel businesses resumed operations at half capacity in the beginning. In 2021, tourism workers were among the priority groups for the national vaccination program, and hotels were once again able to operate at full capacity for the summer season. During this time, hotels started to pursue a wide range of communication strategies with both internal and external stakeholders in order for effective crisis management. Hence, this research is focused on identifying these communication strategies. Within the conceptual framework of crisis communication management, this study utilizes a qualitative method to explore communication strategies during the pandemic in selected hotels in Turkey.

### ***Study Design***

This study employed qualitative methodology. Unlike quantitative research approach, which aims to determine how certain variables affect others by quantifying the relationships with an effort to generalize concepts, qualitative research approach focuses on an in-depth description and detailed analysis of meaning patterns related with one or multiple cases or phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research design is particularly helpful in cases where there is a lack of knowledge and theoretical background. Hence, the unprecedented nature and large scope of COVID-19 health crisis, which differentiates it from any other form of crises the industry faced so far, prioritizes a qualitative approach. In order to operationalize our research questions, first, industrial articles published in Turkish digital tourism (Turkish Tourism Promotion and Development Agency etc., 2021) platforms and hotels' social media accounts were analyzed through content analysis. Second, the codes and categories derived from content analysis data along with the projections formed in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic crisis provided the basis of the questions for online in-depth interviews. Lastly, the authors' background in tourism and hospitality industry informed the final format of the interview questions used in this study (see Appendix A).

### ***Data Collection***

Within a designated timeframe between December 2020 and January 2021, 25 in-depth interviews were conducted with hotel executives and departmental managers, who were all members of SKÅL International, via online meeting platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom. First, selected members were sent an email informing them about the nature and content of the study. In this email, they were also requested to select a suitable date for the in-depth online interview. In this email, they were also requested to select a suitable representative with managerial responsibilities as well as a date for the in-depth online interviews. In-depth interviews are the most employed tools in qualitative research methodology (Daymon & Holloway, 2002). Open-ended questions used in a semi-structured interview format for this study allowed the researchers to reach a more in-depth understanding of the crisis communication strategy employed by the hotels during COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The duration of the interviews varied between 30 minutes and 1 hour. During the interviews, the participants were asked questions from previously designed semi-structured interview form. Qualitative interviews, comprising of semi-structured or unstructured interview questions are asked to elicit information from the participants related to their specific experiences. (Elliot & Timulak, 2005, p.150).

### ***Data Analysis***

Contrary to quantitative research, the examination of data in qualitative research does not require measurement, demonstration, or population generalization and the key lies in comprehending the situation, analyzing the material, and developing an analytical generalization (Urhan et al., 2021, p. 44). Therefore, qualitative data in this study were analyzed in four stages described by Gunbayi (2019); i) theme analysis, ii) descriptive analysis, iii) content analysis and iv) analytical generalization. Before the interview process took place, the questions were revised to have their final form by taking professional opinions from academics and industry experts. After the interviews were conducted, first, the audio recordings of the interviews with 25 participants were transcribed. Transcription consists of comprehending what is said and how it is said (Bailey, 2008). Following transcription, coding was done for each participant and their response. MAXQDA, a

qualitative analysis software, was used for “theme analysis”. Theme analysis is a method for identifying data, as well as interpreting the codes in the selection and theme creation processes. Thematic analysis is a powerful and flexible method used to analyze qualitative data. (Kiger & Varpio, 2020, p. 1). MAXQDA provides various useful code tools, which enable researchers to do an easy coding work (Kuckartz & Kuckartz, 2002, p. 20).

In content analysis and thematic analysis, themes or codes are determined in two different ways, inductive or deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deductive and inductive approaches provide a comprehensive approach in the analysis of qualitative data (Azungah, 2018). In this study, codes and themes were determined with an inductive approach, where categories and themes are revealed according to the data obtained from the participants (Bümen & Yazıcılar, 2020). In inductive approach, the themes or codes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes consist of patterns that answer the research question, not just the classification of codes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The thematic analysis method consists of very specific and clear instructions for its execution, and these procedural instructions undoubtedly give the method a scientific power (Majumdar, 2022). In this study, themes obtained from the responses were clearly identified, and the emerging codes within each theme were explained in detail. Themes with more than two codes were also graphically illustrated.

In the next step of the data analysis, the striking answers of the participants under each code were highlighted with quotation marks, which is defined as descriptive analysis (Gunbayi, 2019). The goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics (Nassaji, 2015, p.129). Descriptive analysis makes the themes revealed in the theme analysis to have a more descriptive nature. The following step comprised of examining the already descriptively analyzed themes and the participant responses in more detail via content analysis (Gunbayi, 2019). A research method called qualitative content analysis was utilized in this study to detect themes and code data for subjective interpretation (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1278).

In the last stage of the research, the data that emerged as a result of the theme, description and content analysis were interpreted and generalized, which is called “analytical generalization” (Gunbayi, 2019). Analytical generalization "...is used as a template for comparing the empirical results of the case study” (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014, p. 2). As for the reliability of the study, first, all the tools and procedures utilized in the study (e.g., study protocols, interview schedules, interview recordings and transcripts) were stored in digital and paper formats for error detection (Gibbs, 2007). Second, all the authors were fully involved in every stage of the study, cross-checking each other’s work, and ensuring reliability (Miles et al., 2014). In terms of validity, datasets were shared with participants anonymously, checking their understanding and interpretations with our findings. Lastly, data were triangulated by using primary and secondary sources (e.g., international, and national press releases, government reports).

## **Findings**

Our findings are presented under five subtitles: participants' demographics and four research questions.



### ***Participants' Demographics***

In the study, a total of 25 hotel managers who are also SKÅL International members, were interviewed. Demographic characteristics explored in this study were gender, age, position, years of experience in the tourism sector and years of managerial experience at their current workplace. Out of 25 participants, 22 (88%) were male and three (12.0 %) were female. As for the age distribution, there were three groups according to the average age. 36% of the participants, (n= 9) were 50 years or older. Both the group comprising of participants between 46-59 years of age and the group under 45 years of age were 32% of study sample. Out of 25 participants interviewed, 80% (n=20) are general managers. Remaining four participants had other managerial positions which were general, sales and marketing director, business development director, operations director and room's department manager, respectively. Years of tourism industry experience among the participants varied such that that 36 % (n=9) had more than 30 years of experience, 32 % (n=8) had an experience between 26 to 29 years, and the remaining 32 % (n=8) had 25 years or less experience. Lastly, in terms of years of experience in the their current workplace 36 % (n=9) of participants had 4-5 years of experience, 32 % (n=8) had 6 or more years of experience and the remaining 32 % (n=8) had 3 or fewer years of experience.

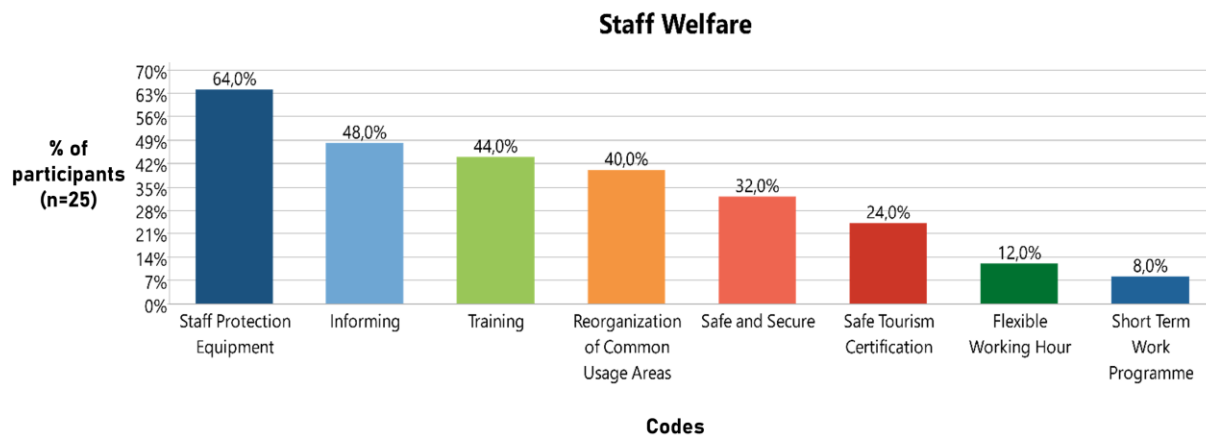
### ***What are the practices/endeavors engaged in hotels for the wellbeing of internal and external stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis?***

Participants were asked about the activities/endeavors that they engaged in for the wellbeing of the internal and external stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Nine themes (staff welfare, staff adaptation, staff motivation, staff financial situation, communication with other stakeholders, public service activities, the best practices, public relations method, and the impact on future guest demand) and 43 codes emerged from the analysis (see Table 1 for the summary of themes and codes).

**Table 1:** Summary of themes (n=9) and codes (n=43) emerged from the analysis

Themes (n=9)	Codes (n=9)
Staff Welfare	Staff protection equipment (64%), Informing (48%), Training (44%), Reorganization of Common Usage Areas (40%), Safe & Secure (32%), Safe Tourism Certification (24%), Flexible Working Hour (12%), Short Term Work Programme (8%)
Staff Adaptation	Informing (59,1%), Training (50%), Regular Meetings and Communication (27,3%)
Staff Motivation	Communication (66,7%), Safe and Secure (38,1%), Informing (38,1%), Additional Monetary Benefits (14,3%)
Staff Financial Situation,	Short-term Working Allowance (90,9%), Advance Payment/Additional Monetary Benefits (22,7%), Leave without Payment (13,6%), Payment from the Association Fund (9,1%), Relief Supply Kit (4,5%)
Communication with Other Stakeholders	No salient codes.
Public Service Activities	No activity (37,5%), Support for Health Care Workers (25,0%), Animal Welfare (16,7%), Environmental Protection (16,7%), Emergency/Natural Disaster Support (12,5%), Financial Support for People in Need (8,3%), Child Welfare (4,2%), Support for Tourism Workers (4,2%), Support for Disabled People (4,2%), Student Welfare (4,2%)
The Best Practices	Communication (47,6%), Social Media (38,1%), Sincerity (14,3%), Up to Date Applications (9,5%), Employing Women (4,8%), Emergency/ Natural Disaster Support (4,8%), Loyalty Programs (4,8%), Environmental Awareness (4,8%), Support for Health Care Workers (4,8%)
Public Relations Method	Differences in methods (60,9%), Similarity of methods (39,1%)
The Impact on Future Guest Demand	Positive Impact (80,0%), Lack of significant impact (12,0%)

The first themes identified from the responses to the first question pertained to improving the *staff welfare*, enabling *staff adaptation*, enhancing *staff motivation*, and maintaining the *financial situation* of staff at an optimal level. The first of these themes -Staff Welfare- consisted of activities aimed at the wellbeing, security and occupational safety of the employees. There are various codes in total under the practices/endeavors tackled for the wellbeing of internal stakeholders.



**Figure 1.** Staff Welfare

64% of the participants emphasized that *protective equipment* was the most important factor to protect and maintain staff welfare. One respondent explained the importance of using staff protection equipment as follows:

*“In order to protect the health of the personnel, adequate protective equipment such as masks and overalls were used. Training was given to teach the staff how to use them. Sanitation stations were set up at the workspace, breakrooms, and lounge areas. Sanitation protocols and social distancing measures were implemented in changing rooms, cafeteria, etc. including a limitation on the total number of people who can be in an area for a certain time frame. The areas were periodically disinfected against the virus with disinfectant solutions and ULV devices (P22).”*

48% of the participants emphasized the importance of *informing* the employees about the whole process. Also, one respondent said the following:

*“Once a month, we provided information to our personnel through the meetings held either via zoom or in-person at our largest meeting hall” (P3).*

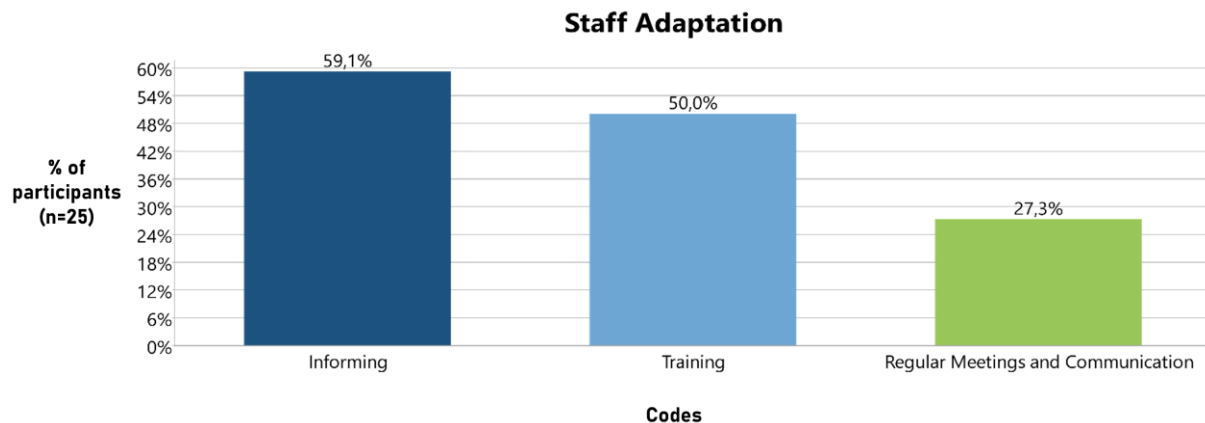
44% of the participants thought that an effective method to protect the health of the personnel was organizing *training sessions*. One respondent said:

*“In this process, it was our aim to train all our employees, starting from the top executive. We opened our facility as soon as we felt that we were ready after our training sessions were complete” (P1).*

Another respondent emphasized that the training sessions were implemented in cooperation with all departments to:

*“... to acknowledge the situation, we are in and what conditions we need to provide in order to open up again as a hotel business, both through the certification processes and following the guidelines, together with occupational safety specialists and trainers...” (P4)*

In addition to these codes, five more codes were observed under the theme of staff welfare (Figure 1).



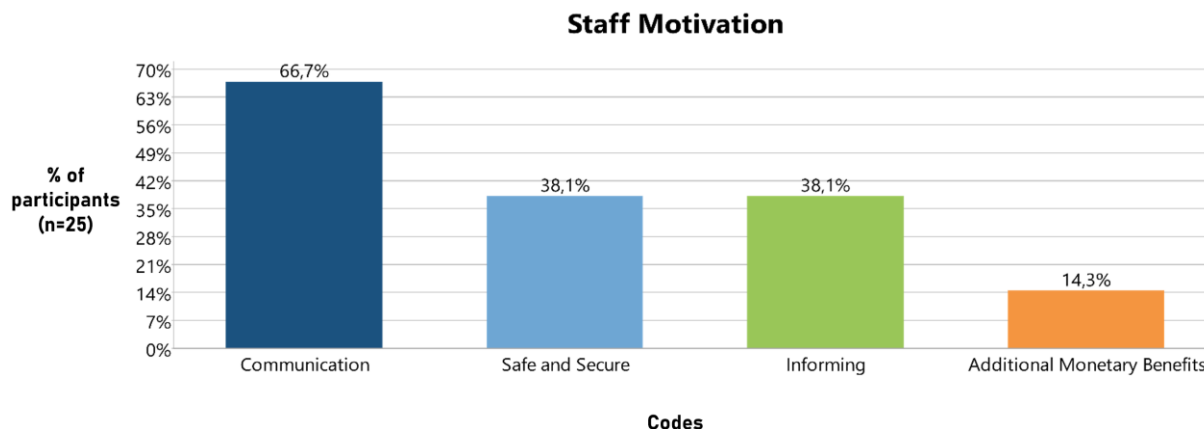
**Figure 2.** Staff Adaptation

“Staff Adaptation” was the second theme that emerged from the responses. This theme referred to the promotional and supportive activities and policies pursued by the hotels in order to help their employees adapt to the pandemic-related circumstances. 59.1% of the participants emphasized that the most important thing for staff adaptation in the wake of the pandemic was *“the provision of information”*. One respondent explained this as follows:

*“We continue to carry out reminders and informative activities with signage and posters in accordance with the newly implemented guidelines” (P6).*

Additionally, 50% of the participants indicated that *“training sessions”* were important for the adaptation of staff while 27.3% emphasized *“regular meetings and communication”*. One participant elaborated:

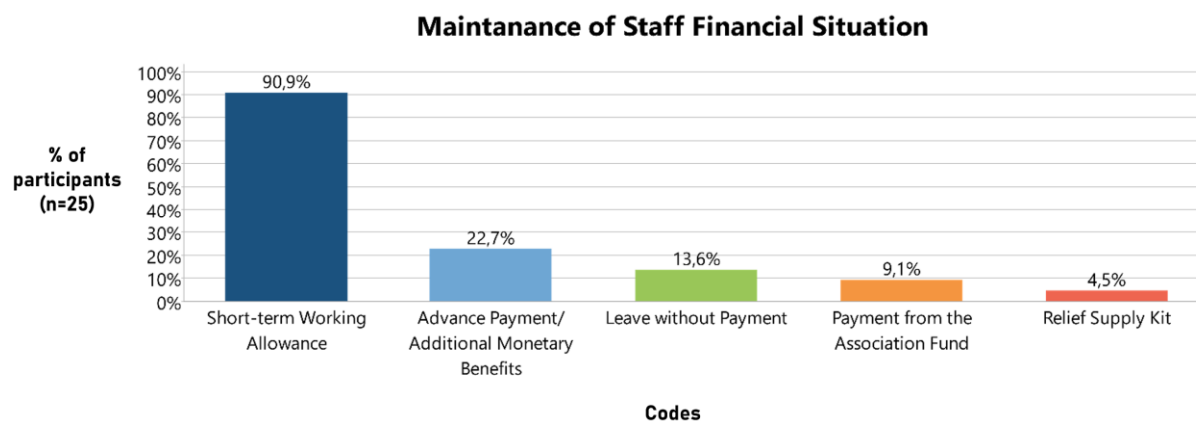
*“...Since the beginning of the pandemic, the importance of the new applications and COVID-19 measures taught in training sessions either via internet or in-person, participation and follow-up of the employees via both the internet and printed documents as well as the adoption of these new applications by the top management and their implementation in daily work life has been of great importance. These measures would also be highly beneficial in their personal lives and for their loved ones as well as at the workplace...Participation in the training sessions was much higher in comparison to any other type of training sessions; active listening and desire to learn were also observed to be at relatively high levels” (P9).*



**Figure 3.** Staff Motivation

Another theme identified from the responses was “Staff Motivation”. This theme encompassed the assistive activities as well as incentives utilized by the hotels in order to manage employee motivation during the uncertain times caused by the pandemic. 59.1% of the participants emphasized that the most important factor for staff motivation in the wake of the pandemic was “*communication*”. 3.1% of the participants emphasized “being *safe and secure*”, 38.1% emphasized “*information provision*” while the remaining 14.3% indicated that “*additional monetary benefits*” were important components of staff motivation. One respondent said the following:

*“In order to ensure the motivation of the staff within the team, especially during the temporary closure of the hotel, each team member was called by the hotel manager once every two weeks for a one-on-one meeting sessions. Enhancing what has already been communicated also through such one-on-one sessions created a sense of trust among our colleagues and had a positive impact on their morale...”(P10).*



**Figure 4.** Measures Taken to Maintain the Financial Stability of the Staff

“Maintenance of Staff Financial Situation” was another theme identified. Out of 25 participants interviewed, 90.9 % of them emphasized “*short-term working allowance*” to be the most important thing that had been done so far in terms of maintaining the staff’s financial stability. Other measures in that regard comprised of “*advance payment/ financial stimulus*” (22.7 %),

**“leave without payment”** (13.6 %), **“payment from the association fund”** (9.1 %) and **“relief package”** (4.5 %). One respondent explained:

*“... In order to support all staff, first of all, short-term working allowance application was implemented, and financial stimulus was provided to the staff. In addition to relief packages, food support was also provided to the staff on a monthly basis” (P22).*

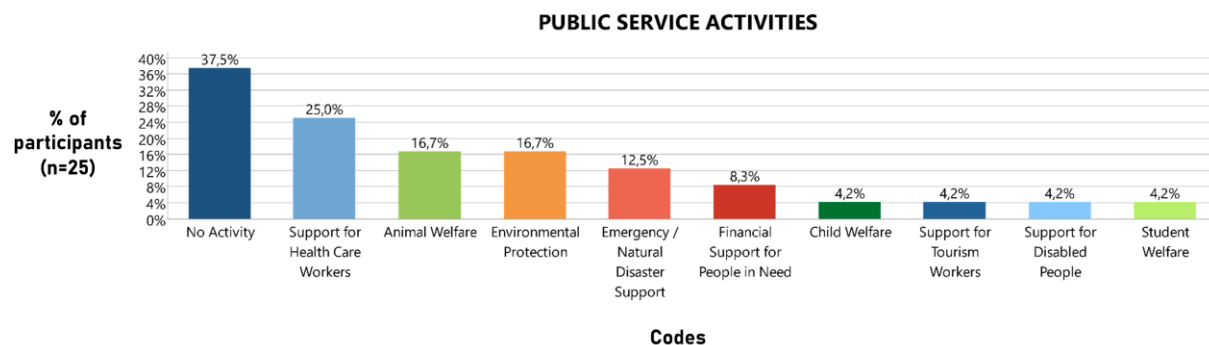
Lastly, “Communication with Other Stakeholders” was another emerging theme under the first research question. In this section, the participants` views with respect to the communication with external stakeholders revealed four major external stakeholder groups: i) travel agents /tour operators, ii) suppliers, iii) loyal guests, and iv) other stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations. Even though all participants responded to the questions related to communication with other stakeholders, no salient codes were identified. The common point of all the responses was that they were constantly in communication with external stakeholders via phone calls to exchange information during the pandemic. Below are two examples in this regard:

*“...each of us constantly called suppliers, agents, companies, and loyal customers. Sometimes we made phone calls on special days, sometimes for no reason other than checking up on them. Each department has done its part in this sense, and by doing so, we also gained appreciation” (P2).*

*“In order to follow the immediate decisions and measures taken by the government, close contact was secured, and regular information exchange was ensured on a regular basis with all the institutions and organizations listed above” (P13).*

### **How do the PR methods during the pandemic differ among hotels?**

Participants were asked about their engagement in community service and PR activities, and which of these activities can be described as best practices. Hence “Public Service Activities” emerged as one of the themes. A total of 10 codes (no activity, support for health care workers, animal welfare, environmental protection, emergency/natural disaster support, financial support for people in need, child welfare, support for tourism workers, support for disabled people, student welfare) were identified under this theme.

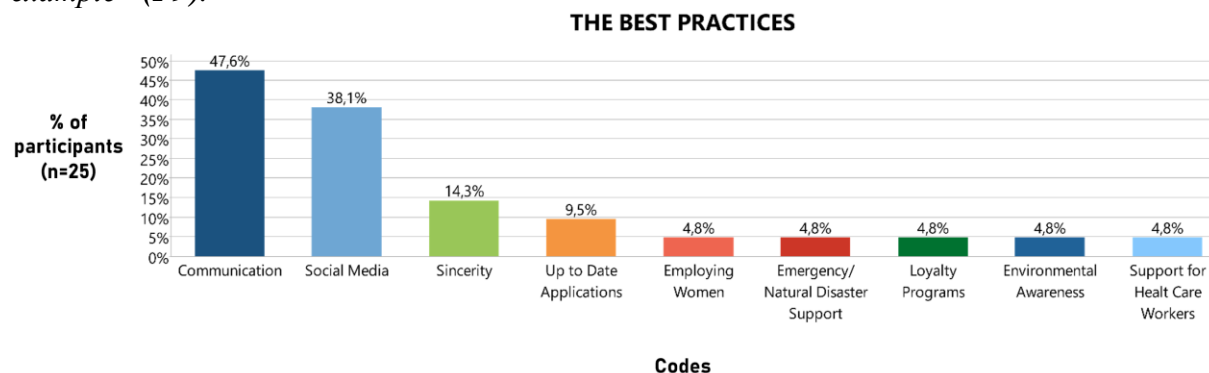


**Figure 5.** Public Service Activities

The 37.5% of the participants stated that their hotel companies did not engage in any specific public service activity during the pandemic. However, responses from the remaining participants

revealed hotel companies focused nine distinct areas with respect to public and community service activities (Figure 5). One participant emphasized that the hotels were not engaged in community service activities, especially during the pandemic and said: *“I guess hotels are just trying to stay afloat these days” (P14)*.

Another participant said *“In terms of the public/community service, I think arranging three of our facilities in Istanbul to specifically accommodate healthcare workers stands out as a best practice example” (P9)*.



**Figure 6.** The Best Practices

Recurring accounts of practices that were regarded beneficial in terms of public relations formed the theme of “The Best Practices”. Also, 9 codes were identified under this theme.

When the answers of 25 participants were analyzed, 47.6% of the participants emphasized communication while 38.1% of the participants considered social media efforts to be recognized as best practices within the context of PR efforts (Figure 6). One of the participants (P9) summarized their best practices as the support they provided for healthcare workers and the environmental awareness as follows:

*“First, during the primary stage of the pandemic, three hotels within our group provided free of charge service to Healthcare Workers. Second, we have been working together with the European Union embassies in global warming projects. Lastly, we have been involved in the Zero-Waste Project implemented by the Turkish Presidency and it is supported by our entire hotel group”*

***What are the best practices in community service and PR carried out during the pandemic?***

Participants were asked whether they think the public relations methods would differ according to the type of the hotel. Under the theme “Public Relations Methods”, most of the 25 participants (60.9%) agreed that public relations methods differ based on the type of hotel, while other participants (39.1%) stated that Public relations methods do not have such variations:

*“Since the most important features of public relations activities in every global or local business are transparency and creating sound communication, these do not change” (P12)*.

*“There will definitely be differences between being affiliated with a global brand and being an independent, self-standing hotel. Global brands continue their public relations activities on a global scale, adapting them to regional needs. Hotels affiliated with global brands*

*can communicate with agencies and tour operators from their headquarters and are offered different forms of support” (P22).*

***What are the implications of the pandemic PR activities in terms of increasing hotel guest demand in the future?***

Participants were asked about how the public relations activities performed by hotel management during the crisis would be effective in increasing the future guest demand. The single theme that emerged from the answers to the fourth research question was identified as “The Impact on Future Guest Demand”. 80% of the participants thought that the public relations activities during the pandemic would positively impact the guest demand in the future. One respondent said the following:

*“When the pandemic is over, there is a high probability that there will be a great tourism boom throughout the world, including our country ... In the coming years, public health and hygiene will be one of the most important selection criteria and businesses will build their investment plans and work procedures on this reality” (P13).*

On the other hand, 12% of the participants stated that the public relations activities would not have any significant impact on the demand, while 8% of the participants did not comment on the question. Another respondent said:

*“I don't think it will have a huge impact. When everything returns to normal, the preferences of the guests will vary based on their financial situation” (P8).*

**Discussion**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started in China in December 2019, has had significant economic, psychological, and sociological impacts all over the world. One of the sectors most affected by the negative effects of the pandemic is the tourism sector. The tourism sector, which has considerable economic and socio-cultural impact on the communities comprising the society at large is known to have a fragile nature and has been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study explored the crisis communication strategies pursued by the hotels in Turkey during the unprecedented period of COVID-19 pandemic crisis, via both conventional and internet-based public relations and communication platforms based on a crisis communication management framework.

Within the pandemic, many hotels in Turkey were closed temporarily and those that remained open were required to take various measures. During this period, hotels started to use technology in order to provide information to their various stakeholders with the purposes of protecting their employees and maintaining their customer base. In other words, hotels tried to establish a sustainable communication framework with their stakeholders to be able to continue with their public relations activities. Despite the significance of crisis communication in hospitality industry, the topic remains relatively under-researched (Bilić et al., 2017, p. 104). Hence, this study was conducted to examine the crisis communication strategies and tools employed by hotel companies during the pandemic. Interviews were conducted with hotel managers regarding their



communication with both internal and external stakeholders as well as their general PR activities. Analyses and interpretations were made based on the participants' responses.

One of the most emphasized issues during the pandemic was social distancing measures implemented. For this reason, many businesses either temporarily stopped their activities or had some of their employees work from home. Social distancing measures have eliminated many forms of communication and social interaction, but the use of technology in communication has increased (Lee, Malcein & Kim, 2021, p. 9). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, smartphone apps were used to combat infectious diseases, but with COVID-19 there has been a massive increase in app usage to counter the COVID-19 crisis (Kobayashi, 2021, p. 42). The findings obtained in this study with respect to the use of technology in general and social media in particular by hotel companies for communication purposes support the existing literature.

Analysis of the data brought out 9 themes which are the major points during COVID-19 for the communication strategies. These themes were: staff welfare, staff adaptation, staff motivation, staff financial situation, communication with other stakeholders, public service activities, the best practices, public relations method and the impact on future guest demand. As for the staff welfare, wellbeing, and job security of the employees during the pandemic were salient in employers' implementation of protective measures, physical and organizational restructuring of the workspaces, as well as rescheduling of employee work hours.

The findings revealed that hotel managers informed regularly both their internal and external stakeholders during the pandemic crisis. Informing people is one of the most repeated codes under the themes of staff welfare, staff adaptation and staff motivation. This result supports the earlier study by Reddy & Gupta (2020). To lessen the harm that crises can do to the company and its stakeholders, planned management techniques are referred to as crisis management (Reddy & Gupta, 2020). Social media emerged as the most common tool used by hotel companies in terms of information distribution and communication with both their existing clientele and potential guests. It is common practice for today's hotel guests to follow their favorite hotel brands and/or companies on social media. Thus, consumers tend to have high expectations for the various media channels they use (Mason et al., 2021). In this respect, it is very important for hotel businesses to use social media actively for both information sharing and marketing communication purposes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses continued their marketing activities through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Blogs and WhatsApp to raise awareness and increase sales (Sulthana, Evangelin & Vasantha, 2021, p. 6370). Especially in the last 15 years, social media platforms have radically changed communication and have become an effective way for companies to directly communicate and interact with their stakeholders (Patuelli et al., 2021, p. 2). In this context, Zavisic et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of social media tools as a crisis communication tool in the hotel industry. The importance of informing both the employees and guests of the hotel companies was also emphasized in the COVID-19 report prepared by the World Health Organization (WHO) for the accommodation sectors (World Health Organization, 2020b). Adaptation of the staff to the "new normal" of the pandemic times was largely achieved through regular communication, meetings and training.

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, different measures have been taken by governments from the health, public and economic spheres, and these measures aim to control the spread of the virus

in order to minimize the negative effects of the COVID-19 outbreak from both health and economic perspectives. (Aharon et al., 2021, p. 2). The answers obtained from the participants in this study were the implementation of the hygiene and self-distancing measures specified by the government, emphasizing the implementation of methods such as short-term allowances, and obtaining safe tourism certification in order to support staff financially. These findings also support the existing literature. Regular communication, updates on safety and security, and monetary benefits were the main tools for sustaining employee motivation.

Finally, it was found out that various beneficial activities were carried out by the hotels in terms of community service, which could be categorized as part of public services or as examples of best practices. Both of these themes spanned across various social and environmental domains, such as gender equity in employment, nature and animal welfare, financial equity, and care for the disabled people. However, these activities have changed direction during the pandemic. According to the data obtained during the research, it was observed that the hotels provided accommodation free of charge for the healthcare professionals during the pandemic or some hotels came to be used as quarantine hotels. The quarantine hotel concept emerged as a very important contribution to the community during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and may well be considered as a significant "corporate social responsibility" effort (Teng et al., 2021, p. 2). Lastly, a significant number of hotels did not report any specific public service activity carried out during the pandemic. When further questioned, some participants revealed that the day-to-day difficulties faced because of the pandemic adjustments prevented them from meaningfully concentrating on public services. However, it should be noted that such responses were generally stated in vague terms and did not necessarily elaborate on the nature of these difficulties. Therefore, the reasons for the absence of public service activities during the pandemic can be the focus of future investigations.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

This paper was a unique exploratory attempt in terms of looking into the crisis communication strategy employed by hotels in Turkey during Covid-19 pandemic crisis and can enable both scholarly researchers and practitioners of the industry to have a deeper understanding of the significance of an effective crisis communication management. The results of the study set the basis for future studies which can be conducted in the wake of post-pandemic transition period, especially by providing the hypothetical bases for quantitative research.

## **Theoretical Implications**

In today`s world, based on the developing technology, the communication landscape is marked by a widespread switch from conventional communication tools to digital communication platforms, which are ubiquitous in nature and can be accessed with ease regardless of time and space constraints. Accordingly, several new communication tools, especially various social media platforms, emerged and started to be widely used. For businesses, these communication tools are used for various purposes, such as information dissemination, marketing and public relations. During the ongoing pandemic period throughout the world, it has proved to be especially beneficial for businesses to communicate interactively with both their internal and external stakeholders in order to successfully overcome the crisis. In this context, the research provides a conceptual contribution in terms of revealing the crisis communication strategies used by lodging companies

in the tourism industry. The nine themes and 43 codes that emerged from the interviews were examined in the findings section. This research is important in terms of examining the communication of hotel managers with both internal and external stakeholders during the pandemic crisis and determining relevant crisis communication strategies.

### **Practical Implications**

The most important practical contribution of the research is the re-evaluation of the crisis communication strategies of hotel companies by taking into account the effects of the pandemic. In this context, it is concluded that the issue of information sharing is especially important during any sort of crises. It was also determined that the most important communication tool for informing both internal and external stakeholders is social media. Social media platforms are used to disseminate instant information and as effective communication tools for marketing activities. A noteworthy observation was that all the measures taken by the government were implemented strictly at all levels of hotel operations. Specifically, education and training sessions were organized for the internal stakeholders to make sure that to ease anxiety about the outcomes of the pandemic crisis and maintain a sense of safety in terms of health. It was also found short-term working allowance, which was also recommended by the Turkish government, was a common practice, among hotels to reinforce the financial security of employees. Thus, it is important for the management team in charge during the crisis to regularly share information with external stakeholders and remain in contact with them. In order not to lose loyal customers, one of the most important set of external stakeholders, keeping in touch with them on a regular basis during the pandemic crisis through phone calls, creating rapport with them, showing them that the hotel company genuinely cares for them by creating meaningful dialogues and also by celebrating their special days, etc. were all observed to be important relationship marketing efforts to successfully overcome the pandemic crisis and to retain the existing clientele. Finally, this study provided a practical contribution as to whether the public relations activities of hotel companies are effective in terms of determining future guest demand in addition to customer retention.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

In terms of the limitations of this study, it should be noted that, initial, interviews were conducted online or by phone, not face-to-face, due to the pandemic restrictions. This may have lessened the depth of information obtained compared to face-to-face situations as it prevented the researcher from being able to probe with subsequent questions. Interviews were conducted only with hotel managers who are members of SKÅL International, Turkey. While the fact that the research was conducted with only the hotel managers gives this study a managerial overlook, it also denotes a limited sample set by not including other team members who are in constant communication with guests and managers. Although the study has achieved data saturation, the sample size of the study has been limited to 25 because of time and cost constraints. Thus, suggestions and findings may not have a high degree of generalizability. However, the findings of this research can still provide some general guidelines and clues as to how similar research endeavors can benefit from this study. Quantitative or qualitative follow-up studies could be conducted to examine the crisis communication strategies during the post-pandemic period. In this context, it is advisable to ask the opinions of employees in terms of crisis communication strategies. For instance, the adequacy and effectiveness of the training given on communication and the information provided by the

management can be further researched. In addition, hotel employees can be asked whether they really feel safe in terms of both their health and finance concerns during the crisis periods. Interviews can be conducted with different types of tourism companies such as travel agents, tour operators etc., so that, the crisis communication strategies can be evaluated not only from the hotel companies' point of view but also through the perspectives of other stakeholders within the tourism industry.

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## **Appendix A**

### **INTERVIEW FORM**

#### **Demographic features**

**Age:**

**Gender:**

**Position:**

**Department:**

**Years of experience in the Tourism Sector:**

**Years of experience in the Current Hotel:**

#### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. As hotel management, during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis,
  - a. What kind of measures have you taken to protect the health of the personnel and to make the working capacity sustainable?
  - b. What kind of training and information did you provide to facilitate the adaptation of personnel to new measures and practices?
  - c. What kind of work did you do to keep the morale and motivation of the staff high during this process?
  - d. What kind of financial incentives and assistance packages did you apply to protect the financial situation of the personnel?
2. As hotel management, during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis,
  - a. What are the crisis communication strategies you use to maintain your relations with the suppliers you work with?
  - b. What are the crisis communication strategies you use to maintain your interaction and communication with the travel agencies and tour operators you work with?
  - c. What crisis communication techniques have you used to protect your loyal customers?
  - d. How is your communication and interaction with other stakeholders (NGOs, industry associations and government institutions, etc.) that make up the society?
3. Do hotels engage in public service activities in line with the needs of the community? If so, what public service activities/projects have they planned or are currently planning?
4. Do the public relations and communication methods and tools mentioned in the answers to the questions above differ according to the type of hotels (based on whether the hotel in question is affiliated with a global brand and/or is an independent brand)?
5. Which of the mentioned public relations activities can be qualified as best practice examples?
6. Do hotel managements think that the public relations activities they implement during similar crisis processes will be effective in increasing guest demand in the future (when everything returns to normal)?