

Knowledge Matters: Insights from the COVID-19 Experience in the Tourism Industry in Poland

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Abstract: Purpose: Tourism organisations are responsible for destination management and marketing. Given that they operate within a membership structure, serving as sectoral organisations and communication hubs, their role during crisis situations becomes particularly significant. The purpose of this study is to examine the types of knowledge and the sources from which this knowledge was derived during the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of tourism organisations (i.e., Destination Management Organisations). Methodology: This study is based on a qualitative in-depth analysis conducted through semi-structured interviews with 12 representatives of 6 tourism organisations in Poland. The informants were selected to represent a range of organisational levels, including managerial and operational roles. Findings: The empirical evidence indicates that knowledge at three levels was crucial during the pandemic crisis, particularly at the organisational, governmental and industry level. At the organisational level key knowledge areas included safety, both personal and of the institution, from a sanitary-epidemiological perspective. The quantitative data concerning tourist traffic held particular importance for governmental level. For the industry, the following knowledge types were crucial: law-related knowledge, aid-related knowledge, and education-related knowledge. The findings highlighted that the primary knowledge sources during the crisis were central and local authorities, collaborating partners, counterpart tourism organisations, and internal monitoring teams. Research limitations: Due to the qualitative nature of this study and its small sample size, the generalisability of the findings to a wider context or population is limited. Furthermore, this study was conducted on a group of tourism organisations in one country, thus it does not provide a comprehensive industry overview and international applicability. Practical implications: This research provides guidance for managers of tourism organisations regarding the navigation of knowledge during sudden crises. The findings can be used by decision-makers to develop crisis procedures at the KM level to build organisational resilience. Originality/value: This study provides valuable insights concerning the dynamics of knowledge during hazardous events impacting tourism organisations. The findings may trigger researchers investigating the area of crisis knowledge management to engage in further explanatory studies.

Keywords: Knowledge, Knowledge management, Tourism, COVID-19, Destination management organisations

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the global tourism industry, influencing mobility and economic activity on a scale never before witnessed in the modern times (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021). Due to the limitations in travelling and gathering, tourism organisations were forced to deal with a crisis characterised by high uncertainty, rapidly changing regulations, and severe financial limitations. In such a complex and unstable environment, access to relevant, up-to-date and crucial knowledge became a critical element for building resilience and decision-making (Sigala, 2020). While facing this crisis situation, tourism organisations had to rely on a wide spectrum of knowledge sources, such as government authorities, industry partners, internal monitoring units, or digital information channels (Zenker & Kock, 2020). This paper explores different types of knowledge and knowledge sources used by tourism organisations in Poland and how they helped them in organisational responses within the tourism sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such turbulent times, the effectiveness of crisis response was related not only to the availability of knowledge, but also to the organisational capacity to interpret and act upon it. Understanding what type of knowledge was acquired, shared, and applied during the pandemic, as well as from which sources, can offer valuable lessons for creating a crisis-resilient tourism industry in the future.

This paper develops as follows. First, knowledge in the crisis in tourism is described. Second, the methodology of the study is presented and third, the findings and discussion are described. The paper ends with the conclusion section and future research avenues.

2. Knowledge in Tourism During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tourism industry is particularly vulnerable to various crises. Hazardous events can threaten the normal operations of the entire sector as they very often result in temporary stopping of business activity, travelling impediments, and decline in inbound tourism related to safety reasons (Hopkins, 2021). Undoubtedly, the crisis stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic is considered a disruptive event of substantially greater magnitude

compared to any past crisis (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). This crisis engendered numerous challenges within various dimensions of the organisational activity, including aspects of knowledge management (Cegarra-Navarro et al, 2021; Bratianu and Bejinaru, 2021). Acknowledging after Tomé et al. (2021) that the pandemic crisis was a crisis about knowledge (Tomé et al., 2021) and considering the information-intensive character of this event, effective management of knowledge becomes vital in handling such turbulent situations.

The demand for knowledge during disasters is evident across the whole crisis lifecycle, in the preparatory phase, during the crisis and in the recovery stage (Mistilis and Sheldon, 2006). Ng et al. (2022) affirm that knowledge may facilitate the organisations to handle negative consequences of hazardous events when the very first crisis-related challenges appear, but also it may support the new knowledge development and implementation of lessons learnt (Ng et al, 2022). Moreover, while facing the crisis, knowledge may intensify the defence strategies of the organisations (Kir Kuščer et al, 2021) and assist in preserving the safety of employees and their workplaces (Schiuma et al, 2021).

Within the academic literature, an overview of diverse typologies of knowledge is presented. One of the most popular classifications is the one proposed by Nonaka (1994), based on the knowledge division delivered by Polanyi (1962). Nonaka (1994) presents a framework for managing the dimensions of knowledge-creating processes within organisations and divides knowledge into tacit (residing in minds) and explicit (codified). Tacit knowledge, as being personal and derived from experience, cannot be easily transferred, and it reveals itself through the actions (Nonaka, 1994). Whereas, explicit knowledge, which can be easily articulated and shared, can be identified and employed in the organisational context without restraints (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). Another typology is the one provided by Lundvall and Johnson (1994) is built on four types of knowledge: know-what, know-why, know-who, know-how. However, it is important to note that the discussed classifications relate to organisations operating under standard conditions, rather than in a crisis mode.

Crisis situations, including the pandemic, often present new opportunities. According to Sigala (2020), the COVID-19 period can be perceived as a catalyst for significant transformation, wherein knowledge itself played a key role in facilitating the revision of existing strategies and exploration of novel paradigms (Sigala, 2020). Moreover, knowledge contributes to recovery efforts by fostering organisational resilience (Reddy et al., 2020). Knowledge based on the retrospective reflection and after-action review can constitute an important component for strategies so that they mitigate the effects of new potential crisis situations.

All in all, as it can be seen on the basis of the literature analysis presented above, knowledge is a valuable resource also during the crisis. There are some studies indicating knowledge importance during a crisis, however, little is known about the types of knowledge and knowledge sources that are crucial for tourism organisations during a crisis. This paper aims to fill this knowledge gap on the basis of a qualitative study conducted in Poland.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to investigate in-depth the knowledge dynamics in the context of the pandemic crisis from the perspective of tourism organisations operating in Poland. Tourism organisations serve as sectoral institutions and operate within a Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) framework. These institutions are in charge of managing and marketing tourism destinations (incl. attractions, cities, regions, etc.) and play a leading role in coordinating a network of various stakeholders within the tourism industry (UNWTO, 2007). Being “in the middle” of the tourism ecosystem and acting as a communication hub, result in the role of such organisations as particularly significant during crisis situations.

In order to address the purpose of the study, this paper states the following research questions:

RQ 1: What types of knowledge supported tourism organisations during COVID-19 crisis?

RQ 2: Which knowledge sources were crucial for tourism organisations while facing pandemic crisis?

The process of data collection took place between November 2023 and January 2024 via semi-structured interviews. The representatives of local and regional tourism organisations in Poland at two organisational positions, namely decision-makers and operational employees, were chosen to take part in the interviews (the profile of respondents is presented in Table 1). The informants were selected on the basis of the inclusion criteria, including both the organisational role and the professional tenure length (at least since 2020). Altogether, 12 interviews, conducted in 6 tourism organisations, have been analysed within this research. All of the interviews were recorded, subsequently the Polish versions were transcribed *verbatim* (Poland, 1995) and the transcriptions were translated to English. MAXQDA software was used for coding the data. The analytical

approach used within the study followed the procedure of thematic analysis (TA) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012) and was based on the six-step framework for doing TA.

Table 1: Profile of sample

Organisation	Position
Local tourism organisation 1	CEO
	Product Specialist
Local tourism organisation 2	CEO
	Tourist Office Employee
Regional tourism organisation 3	Director
	Tourism Specialist
Regional tourism organisation 4	Vice-Director
	Tourist Office Employee
Local tourism organisation 5	CEO
	Tourism Specialist
Local tourism organisation 6	CEO
	Tourist Office Employee

Source: Own elaboration

4. Findings and Discussion

On the basis of the results, it can be stated that Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) played a vital role during the crisis. They became information brokers in the first months, as they had the possibility of gaining information first-hand from various levels of public administration (namely, from the government level, from the municipal level) and pass it on to the industry. What is important is that this knowledge flow was not only one-directional, it was reciprocated back to those various levels of public administration. The CEO representing tourism organisation 5 highlighted the meaning of information and knowledge at the beginning of the crisis in the following way: “I believe that at the very beginning of the crisis, information management is the most important, because many rumors appeared, many problems that needed to be immediately addressed and then solved.” It was not only the issue of problems or rumours where information management appeared useful, but also the matter of aids that were offered to various organisation, which was mentioned by CEO from tourism organisation 1: “They (i.e. the aids) were indeed very dynamic in this initial phase - several laws were changing, conditions were changing.” Therefore, it was necessary to manage knowledge and information well, to be up-to-date with all the new issues and regulations in order to follow the law and also support organisations with administrative support.

4.1 Types of Knowledge During Crisis

As far as the RQ1 is concerned on the types of knowledge that supported tourism organisations during COVID-19, the empirical evidence indicates that knowledge at three levels was crucial, namely knowledge at the organisational, governmental and industry level, as summarised in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Types of knowledge during crisis

At the organisational level, key knowledge areas included safety, both personal and of the institution, from a sanitary-epidemiological point of view.

“Looking at that perspective, in the first phase, it was information concerning safety, both personal and of the organization - from a strictly sanitary-epidemiological point of view.” (CEO from tourism organisation 1)

“I mean, especially at the level of tourist information, we focused on what it really looks like? How to protect ourselves? What can we do?” (Tourist Office Employee in tourism organisation 6)

The quantitative data concerning tourist traffic, revealing its significant reduction, held particular importance at governmental level.

“On the other hand, for the municipal and governmental level, quantitative data from tourist traffic was very important to know what information we can obtain, how much the traffic has decreased, and to have reliable data.” (CEO from tourism organisation 5)

This was important for the government and municipalities to undertake the right measures and actions to support tourism organisations in those turbulent times. Tourism was one of the most severely affected sectors during a COVID-19 crisis. For example, the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) reported that international tourist arrivals declined by 72% in 2020 and 71% in 2021 compared to 2019, resulting in a loss of 2.1 billion international arrivals over the two years (UNWTO, 2022). For the industry, three main knowledge types were crucial. First of all, law-related knowledge (incl. changing laws, proposed changes, new regulations and restrictions) was mentioned by the respondents:

“Changing regulations regarding, for example, what is allowed, what is not, how quarantine looks, what lockdown rules are, etc... This could change from minute to minute” (Product Specialist from tourism organisation 1)

“key knowledge was about restrictions - what could and couldn't be done, whether museums were open or closed, whether something would be available or not - because that changed a lot. At times, it was literally changing day by day, and those were also very difficult decisions that had to be made about cancelling large events, whether to plan something for a certain date or not, and even if planning was possible, how many people could attend, under what sanitary regime” (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 5)

“Certainly, knowledge about those restrictions, those regulations, was crucial - and we also tried to simply know it because we were often asked about it - someone would contact us because they were organizing something and sometimes we had this knowledge, even somewhat unofficially.” (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 5)

During the COVID-19 crisis, tourism organisations had to constantly monitor rapidly changing laws and public health regulations, for example travel bans, quarantine requirements, and gathering restrictions (e.g. limits for events, groups in one place, etc.), which directly influenced their ability to organise and conduct events, tours, and services. The introduction of new safety protocols, such as vaccine requirements and capacity limits, required tourism businesses to adapt their activities to avoid penalties and provide the health and safety of both staff and guests. Understanding proposed legal changes and policies became crucial for tourism organisations to plan ahead, manage cancellations or refunds, and keep trust with clients in a highly uncertain and legally dynamic environment, changing not only every day, but sometimes also during one day.

The second type of knowledge indicated by the respondents was aid-related knowledge (incl. financial aid measures, support programs for entrepreneurs, compensations). It was mentioned by several respondents, also in the context of legal knowledge that was crucial.

“About funding, about various kinds of shields related to it, online training, but mainly about possibilities of assistance for entrepreneurs who could not operate normally.” (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 3)

“For the industry, for example, information related to legislation, proposed changes, support for entrepreneurs, what we can count on, and where they can submit their issues was crucial.” (CEO from tourism organisation 5)

“information about changing laws, the formal-legal issue, financial, aid-related issues - and somewhat a bit of prediction, seeking, how long this might last and how to really plan this business, right?” (CEO from tourism organisation 1)

“We gathered the freshest information possible regarding restrictions - which changed rapidly - and information about possible aid measures, support programs, various support lines, and places where entrepreneurs from the tourism industry, as well as entities, could receive such support.” (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 5)

During the COVID-19 crisis, tourism organisations relied to a high extent on aid-related knowledge, namely financial aid measures, compensation schemes, and government-backed support programs. They needed this kind of knowledge due to the sudden stop of their operations and problems with cash flow caused by travel restrictions and event cancellations (OECD, 2020). This type of knowledge became crucial for organisational survival, as many tourism businesses, especially from the SMEs sector, lacked the financial reserves to survive prolonged periods of business inactivity (UNWTO, 2020). Research also shows that access to and understanding of support mechanisms significantly influenced the resilience and recovery capacity in the tourism sector during the pandemic (Baum et al., 2020). This is confirmed in the conducted study, where respondents indicated this kind of knowledge as one of the most important.

The last type of knowledge mentioned by respondents was education-related knowledge (including training). This shows that respondents were aware of the existing knowledge gap and the necessity to fill it with new, up-to-date knowledge to handle the crisis in a more resilient and efficient way.

“We had information about training, funding from various sources, and we passed it on to our members” (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 3).

4.2 Sources of Knowledge During Crisis

In regard to RQ2, concerning the knowledge sources which were crucial for tourism organisations while facing pandemic crisis, results highlighted that the primary knowledge sources during the pandemic crisis were: central and local authorities, collaborating partners, counterpart tourism organisations, and internal monitoring teams.

“Plus, of course, at that time we had one or even two people who did nothing but research tools and support for the industry. So it was absolutely key then. That access to reliable information.” (CEO from tourism organisation 2)

“[...] in the Program Council at that stage, we also had representatives of entrepreneurs and city representatives. So by force, at the level of the Program Council and discussion groups, in this group, a lot of information, also how we could locally support entrepreneurs here at the level of the [name] local government. Also due to the fact that a member of this group was [name and surname], who was a member of [name], i.e., this event platform, so a lot of information also came from there and [name] was a very engaged person. Another person was [name], who is the head of [name of organization] here in [city], and at the same time the head of the Consortium [name of organization]. So we managed to create such an information exchange platform within these statutory bodies of the organization. And indeed it worked. We were like a catalyst, a tank, into which many stakeholders from various sources threw information, and we then pushed it further.” (CEO from tourism organisation 2)

“We also used knowledge transfers from other regional tourism organizations, which organized some online event and allowed representatives of the industry from other regions to participate in these meetings, not limiting it to their region only.” (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 3)

"On one hand, from our various partners or entities we collaborate with, e.g., at the governmental level or the Polish Tourism Organisation, and on the other hand, simply, in today's times, it's a matter of reviewing various online sources - services of the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Sport and Tourism, etc. Of course, we also shared information among each other, different organizations also looked because we weren't the only ones doing such things. I remember the [Name] Tourism Organisation also published such information on their site. And a bit on the principle of "one lady told another" - each of us reads the press, watches TV, follows online services, so we also exchanged knowledge within the team." (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 5)

The respondents highlighted that the primary knowledge sources during the pandemic crisis were central and local authorities, collaborating partners, counterpart tourism organisations, and internal monitoring teams. This reliance reflects findings from the OECD (2020), which emphasized the crucial role of government institutions and public health authorities in disseminating up-to-date guidelines and support measures to tourism stakeholders. Additionally, studies such as UNWTO (2020) and Sigala (2020) indicate that inter-organisational collaboration and internal crisis response units played a key role in navigating uncertainties, enabling organisations to quickly adapt their operations and decision-making. Internal knowledge monitoring helped many organisations assess real-time changes and risks and make quick adjustments to services, staffing, and customer communication (Gössling et al., 2021). This was necessary in times of constant changes, new regulations, facts related to the illness and its spreading, etc., and it has been confirmed in the conducted study.

Also, some respondents indicated their role in facilitating and supporting partners.

"That is, the subpage of our tourism portal, where we gathered information, and here we didn't find it appropriate to divide it into categories, etc. - it was about collecting knowledge that, from our perspective, was useful for our partners, for entities that cooperated with us." (Tourism Specialist from tourism organisation 5)

Collaboration across various tourism entities was important as it supported sectoral resilience and knowledge exchange, which proved essential for sector-wide adaptation to this new, crisis situation (Zenker & Kock, 2020). To sum up, the results indicate that tourism organisations during the COVID-19 crisis relied to a high extent on multiple sources of knowledge to deal with the quickly evolving situation.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Avenues

This paper presents the results of a qualitative study related to tourism organisations in Poland and their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on knowledge and its sources that are used during a crisis. The empirical evidence indicates that knowledge at three levels was crucial during the pandemic crisis, particularly at the organisational, governmental and industry level. At the organisational level key knowledge areas included safety, both personal and of the institution, from a sanitary-epidemiological perspective. The quantitative data concerning tourist traffic held particular importance for governmental level. For the industry, the following knowledge types were crucial: law-related knowledge, aid-related knowledge, and education-related knowledge.

Tourism organisations searched for this knowledge among various entities. Central and local authorities provided critical legal, health, and financial guidance, while collaboration with partners and other tourism entities facilitated knowledge exchange and sectoral adaptation. Internal monitoring teams played a crucial role in following current developments, to help organisations in making informed, agile decisions. Following Nonaka (1994), it can be concluded that generation of organisational knowledge during a pandemic crisis was facilitated by an ongoing interplay between implicit (tacit) and articulated (explicit) knowledge. Altogether, access to accurate, timely, and diverse sources of knowledge significantly supported sectoral resilience and crisis response capacity of individual tourism organisations.

This paper is useful both from the theoretical and practical perspectives. First of all, it provides an overview of knowledge types that are important for tourism organisations in times of a crisis like COVID-19. Second, it offers the typology of those knowledge types that could be applied not only by tourism organisations themselves to search for the key information, but also by governmental bodies supporting these organisations in a crisis situation. This typology could be used as a source for classification of news that are addressed at tourism organisations in media or on governmental and municipal websites. Third, it could also be used by researchers to examine this topic in the future, also in cases of other types of crises.

This paper is not free from its limitations. As this study is based on a case study approach, it is subject to the methodology-related limitations. Research output is limited to the analysis of several organisations and therefore, it does not offer a comprehensive overview of the whole sector or other sectors. The analysed case studies are from a single country (Poland) and it also limits the applicability of the results to tourism organisations from other countries.

Future research areas may concentrate on exploring other industries, also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic or another type of a crisis. Furthermore, quantitative studies could be conducted to evaluate the importance of particular types of knowledge in more detail. Additionally, tourism organisations from other countries could be examined, especially the ones facing COVID-19 or other pandemic. By examining tourism organisations from other countries and comparing the results, the cultural aspects of dealing with the crisis with appropriate knowledge and its sources could be detected.

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