

Bridging tourist services and clients: A personal networks-based description of the roles of travel agents

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we analyse the professional role of a group of 28 travel agents in the Russian tourism market. By breaking down the role into basic activities and evaluating the exchanges with personal contacts regarding the performance of each of these activities, we show the centrality of these agents in the tourism supply chain, as well as their mediating role between suppliers and customers. Agents perform tasks in the management of the trip and assistance to the tourist, by participating in contexts of interaction in which processes of interdependence and coordination of activities are generated. The results also serve to illustrate the combination of qualitative analysis and personal network analysis in a context of formal and informal relationships that reveal the exchange that occurs among tourism service provision professionals.

1. Introduction

The travel and tourism market differs from other professional and organisational contexts in that it has a complex and dynamic structure (Alieva, 2018; Stockdale, 2006). It is a sphere with a high volume of business, in which the ability to attract customers is combined with collaboration to fulfil the service (Zach & Racherla, 2011). The travel and tourism market hinges on two basic levels of activity: the providers of services, which belong to a wide diversity of areas of activity; and the intermediary companies that specialise in facilitating the match between these services and users (Čavlek, 2018; Goeldner & Ritchie, 2003).

Tourism intermediaries are a key part of the tourism management system (Čavlek, 2013, 2018), since they establish a dual communication channel connecting supply and demand organisations in tourism market (Melkić & Čavlek, 2020). This leads to the need to establish collaborative frameworks between organisations in a context with a high level of competitiveness, where the demands for innovation and change are constant. In this sense, a form of exchange between the organisations involved in the sector emerges, which can be called “competitive interdependence” (Pfeffer & Nowak, 1976). For the case of tourism see for instance: Augustyn and Knowles (2000) and Tsisis (2009), as well as Čavlek (2018), which reformulates it as “competitive cooperation”. Social and technological changes and the increasingly active role of

customers in the design of their own trip thus affect the way in which tourism organisations manage their services. This demands constant collaboration among the various actors involved (Ku, Yang, & Huang, 2013; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2007). In this regard, travel agencies play an important role, as the final link in the chain between service providers and customers. Through this process of mediation, agencies have begun to create added value by facilitating the identification of the best product and by designing and matching the service to the characteristics of the user (Buhalis & Ujma, 2005; Čavlek, 2018; Chen, 2009). Travel agencies therefore perform a dual role. On the one hand, they act as a connection between the customer and the travel and tourism service providers, and on the other hand they ensure the flow of information among services, travellers, and destinations (Dolnicar & Laesser, 2007).

In this study we will explore the brokering role of travel agents in the tourism supply chain in the Russian market by analysing their personal networks. To this end, in the following section we will then review some of the literature on work roles and the influence of interaction processes on the definition of the objectives and tasks associated with these roles. Finally, we will describe structural analysis approaches applied to the analysis of professional roles and their application to tourism research.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Organisations and roles

Organisations are structured around the definition of roles and positions to create a specific configuration of functions, responsibilities and tasks (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The structure of work therefore consists of the activities, the capacities and the relations among those who occupy those positions (Sanchez & Levine, 2000). Thus, we can differentiate two complementary perspectives on the way in which organisations are structured as socio-technical systems (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). On the one hand, the definition of the system of tasks and functions has been based on the design of the position and on the distribution of the tasks necessary to maximise their effectiveness. In this case, the focus has been on the development of the individual's capacities to maintain an appropriate performance, and on the motivational factors associated with this performance (Grant, Fried, & Juillerat, 2011; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

On the other hand, the social structure of organisations is configured through the roles and relationships between the individuals who occupy these roles (Biddle, 1986, 2013). In this case, expectations about the behaviours associated with job performance that sustain the system in the organisation and induce its members to carry out the appropriate behaviour for the role they occupy, are crucial (Katz & Kahn, 1978). These expectations stem both from the post-holders and from other individuals inside and outside the organisation. They arise from the social interaction between its members and influence the fit and consensus about the activities carried out through the creation of normative spaces that regulate the behaviour of individuals. From this perspective, the organisational context can be conceived as a set of personal and professional relationships in which the expectations are defined by means of mutual perceptions and valuations (Turner, 2001).

2.2. Interdependence and coordination in the performance of roles

The diverse contexts that make up the organisational space influence the interaction among the roles that exist in an organisation. In this regard, Johns (2006) summarises the components of this context in three types: task context, social context and physical context. Of these three, Dierdorff and Morgeson (2007) argue that task context and social context are the most prominent and relevant in role consensus, due to their direct relationship with the technological and social processes. For Johns (2006), the task contexts can be described in terms of autonomy, certainty or predictability. On the other hand, social contexts can be described in terms of social interactions and influence (Johns, 2006). In this respect, both contexts give shape not only to the way in which the roles are carried out, but also to the consistency of the expectations that workers have about the various requirements to fulfil them.

Two key aspects of the social context for the performance of roles are the interdependence and the coordination of tasks. Interdependence can be defined as the extent to which the tasks in the organisation require different individuals or groups to work with one another (Cheng, 1983; Mohr, 1971). Interdependence provides opportunities for the negotiation of functions and tasks associated with the role, which in turn affect the expectations of the behaviour. Coordination stems from the consistency and coherence between the activities of the organisation's members (Cheng, 1983).

The level of coordination necessary to perform a role appropriately is related to the level of interdependence existing in the employment activity. As Cheng (1983) states, in contexts of low interdependence, the performance of any work role is relatively independent of the performance of other work roles. In contexts of high interdependence, work roles cannot be performed effectively unless all or most of the individuals combine the development of their tasks. There are therefore contexts in which the performance of the role calls for the combined execution of certain tasks to achieve the organisational objectives.

2.3. Personal networks, professional roles, and organisational context

Personal relationships are important in the management of the work role. It is a key process in which workers must rely on the resources derived from their social capital generated in these personal networks. Access to information and the skills acquisition for the improvement of the effectiveness of the work is produced through the direct and indirect relationships of workers in their personal and professional contexts (Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). For example, the relations maintained with governmental actors, communications media and other social actors have become key links in many contexts, as a strategy to manage the increase in complexity in the social, economic and political context (Child & Rodrigues, 2011; Holgado & Maya Jariego, 2022).

The activities that derive from the performance of professional roles influence the type of interpersonal relationships that are maintained. The work carried out facilitates the creation and maintenance of structures of personal and professional relationships for the performance of the tasks associated with the role. This requires an effort from workers to diagnose the capacities and resources of the individuals they encounter in their personal network (Berrou & Combarnous, 2012). In addition, these same personal and professional relationships influence the way in which the activities associated with the role are carried out. Through continued interaction, a mutual awareness is created of the behaviour of others, which leads to expectations about said behaviour. In this case, the inter-subjective space of the relationship facilitates the exchange of information on the expected behaviours associated with the role and the appearance of processes of social comparison that promote the adjustment to these expectations (Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007).

The maintenance of a relatively stable network of relationships for the performance of the professional role, together with the adjustment of the behaviours to the expectations derived from these relationships, demand both an exhaustive control of the task and an in-depth knowledge of the resources of social capital (Bouchard & Maya-Jariego, 2019). They also require workers to perform actions of construction, maintenance and activation of the network (Nardi, Whittaker, & Schwarz, 2000, 2002). The activity is therefore carried out through the collaboration among individuals that hold roles in different contexts. These individuals create a shared knowledge space that makes it possible to carry out the task, by means of a collective construction depending on the mutual expectations.

2.4. Social network analysis and personal networks analysis in tourism

For this reason, the analysis of the impact of interpersonal relationships on the performance of work roles has been gaining importance in recent years in the organisational management literature (Soda & Zaher, 2012). The analysis of the structuring of work roles by the exploration of the ties between individuals and activities goes beyond the technical definition of the job and the subjective view of the individual who holds the position.

Social Network Analysis is a set of methods and models for analyzing the social interactions among individuals which are interdependent, between which there is a flow and exchange of resources and which are embedded in wider structures that constrain or enhance their opportunities (Wasserman & Faust, 2000). It is based on an inter-subjective perspective, in which the mutual expectations with respect to the activities of the role configure spaces of relationships between actors and activities that define the personal, professional and organisational spheres. Furthermore, research on relationships in organisational and inter-organisational contexts has led to the accumulation of an extensive body of knowledge about the structural aspects of organisational functioning and individual and group performance (Borgatti & Foster, 2003).

Starting from the analysis of personal relations, it is therefore

possible to explore the structure of the relationships of an individual who occupies a specific role and how it is linked to the activities that make up that role. Personal network analysis allows to obtain the set of relationships that an individual or *Ego* has with a set of actors in his or her environment (*alteri*). The focus is on the individuals and their relationships with their immediate social context. Therefore, they differ from whole networks, in which all the actors in a context and their relationships with each other are analysed (McCarty, 2002; McCarty, Lubbers, Vacca, & Molina, 2019; Perry, Pescosolido, & Borgatti, 2018; Van Duijn & Vermunt, 2006). In this regard, it is a tool that can help to assess the type of structures generated in those contexts of high interdependence, where the performance of the role is based on the forging of professional relationships with other individuals who occupy other roles.

Social network analysis has been applied recently in tourism market (Merinero-Rodríguez & Pulido-Fernández, 2016). According to Casanueva, Gallego, and García-Sánchez (2016), most of these studies analyse business clusters in tourism destination, with a special emphasis in the collaboration ties between organisations in the supply chain. In addition, Tran, Jeeva, and Pourabedin (2016) distinguish between the analysis of inter-organisational networks and the applied uses in the governance of tourist destinations and in the formation of public-private partnerships.

There has been less frequent the analysis of the intermediation role of tourism agencies and other key players in the tourism market. In this context, the application of personal network analysis is even more scarce. The few examples found, applied ego-networks to analyse the roles of organisations in tourism destinations, in terms of the presence of key players and leaders (Iannolino & Ruggieri, 2017), the functions provided by alters to tourism microfirms (Yachin, 2020) or the transformation of destination management organisations in context of change and uncertainty (Hristova, Minochaa, & Ramkissoonb, 2018). Therefore, our study is the first to apply personal network analysis to the research on the intermediation role of tourism agents in the broader context of collaboration between key actors in the supply chain in the tourism market.

In our case, we propose the application of personal network analysis to explore the structure of personal relationships around the performance of the professional role of a group of travel agency workers in Moscow. As we will see below, this is an example of a professional role with a clear orientation towards the creation and maintenance of relationships that facilitate the coordination of activities for professional practice.

2.5. Objectives

In this study, our aim is to analyse the role of a group of travel agents in the Russian travel and tourism market, using a structural focus on the description of the activities and the work context. Specifically, we use (a) the self-assessment of the professional role by the agents and (b) the systematic analysis of professional relationships for the performance of the activities of the agent's role, as a basis to show an interactive perspective in the exploration of professional roles in highly interdependent work contexts. We will analyse how the activities carried out by travel agents influence the composition and structure of their personal networks and how the inter-professional relationships maintained shape the interdependence among the activities carried out.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Participants

Twenty-eight professionals from eleven Russian tourist agencies participated in the study. They worked with one of the two largest tour operators in the country. The tour operators organise trips to various countries in the world (Spain, Italy, the Czech Republic, China and

Thailand, among others), as well as cruises on the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. The agencies sell the tourist packages previously prepared by the tour operators and act as intermediaries between consulates, ticket sellers, insurance brokers and the end user (Alieva, 2018).

Participants were contacted by phone prior to the visit to conduct face-to-face interviews in the workplace. The contacts were located through an online document review of travel agencies located in Moscow and its metropolitan area. In the first phase of the study, the participants were interviewed in person, while in the second phase the interviews were conducted entirely online. 68.75% of the participants were women and the mean age of the sample was 31.18 years (SD = 6.80). They generally had between two and four years of experience in the agency in which they currently worked (M = 2.93 years, SD = 3.27) and up to 12 years of experience in the travel and tourism sector (M = 6.93 years, SD = 3.27). The interviews in the first phase of the study were conducted between March and July 2016 and the interviews in the second phase were conducted between December 2018 and February 2019.

3.2. Procedures and instruments

The study consisted of two differentiated phases. In a first phase, in addition to other data related to the inter-organisational networks of Russian travel agencies and the itineraries offered by these agencies (Maya Jariego & Alieva, 2018), not included in this study, information was obtained on the agents' personal networks based on their professional activity. A second phase aimed to collect the feedback from these agents on their professional role, the personal network previously obtained and the structure of contacts with the *alteri* based on the activities performed. The collection of information on the reactions and assessments of individuals facilitates the qualitative exploration of personal networks and the confirmation of expectations and hypotheses about the structure of relationships (Maya Jariego & Holgado, 2005; Molina, Maya-Jariego, & McCarty, 2014).

To obtain data on personal networks, each agent was asked to provide a list of 45 people with whom they maintained a continuous relationship in the course of their work in the agency. Obtaining a fixed number of alters facilitates the comparison and analysis of the structural properties of the personal networks, and helps in data processing (Maya Jariego, 2018). Additionally, as McCarty (2002) points out, including a sufficient number of alters is needed to obtain a greater representativeness of the social and professional spaces of the interviewees.

For each of the people mentioned, they had to indicate their professional role. Finally, they completed a relationship matrix among the 45 mentioned actors, in which for each dyad they indicated the level of relationship they had with each other, from 0 ("they do not know each other") to 3 ("they are friends"). Based on this information, the personal relationship matrices were constructed for each agent. The interview in this phase lasted approximately 2 h and 30 min.

In the second phase of the study, the agents were contacted again to obtain structured feedback on their personal networks, as well as information on the performance of their role and the interdependence and coordination with other professionals in the travel and tourism sector. To do this, a semi-structured interview was conducted on (a) their personal network from the observation of the graph that represented it (general composition, prominent roles, division into subgroups and general comments), (b) their professional role as a travel agent and the main tasks that comprised it, and (c) the specific contacts activated in the personal network based on the tasks specified for the performance of the role (see appendix A). The duration of the interview was approximately 40 min.

To evaluate the personal relationships activated by travel agents in the exercise of their role, we obtained affiliation (or two-mode) networks. While one-mode networks are based on a similar set of nodes that maintain direct relationships with each other, two-mode networks, have two different sets of nodes (usually actors and events), and the ties

indicate presence of the actor in each of these events (Borgatti & Everett, 1997).

The systematic review of the activities mentioned by the agents allowed us to establish eleven categories of activities in four main areas of work: (a) activities related to the *management of tourist services*; (b) actions aimed at *assisting tourists on their trip*; (c) activities related to *establishing contacts* to improve the efficiency and results of their work; and (d) in the *other* category, other activities not related to any of the previous categories were included.

3.3. Measurements and analysis

This study combines the qualitative analysis based on the description of the roles and the work context of the travel agents and the structural analysis of the personal networks of the participants.

In the first case, we obtained information on the tasks as part of their professional role, as well as the perception of their personal and professional relationships. This information was analysed through an iterative review process by the authors of the study and based on data reduction and the identification of content categories about the performance of the professional role. The same process was followed for the information regarding feedback on personal networks.

The analysis of the personal networks and the two-mode networks of the interviewees was then carried out. To do this, first we obtained indicators of centrality and cohesion of these networks that were used both for their description and for the cross-checking with the subgroups of agents according to the type of role performed. The second step consisted of creating a visual representation of the networks. In the case of the personal networks, the visual representation served as an instrument for collecting information in the second phase of the study. In the case of two-mode networks, the visual representation allowed to carry out the qualitative description of the distribution of activities and the links among them based on collaboration with other actors.

Furthermore, some strategies linked to structural analysis were used, such as the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) and the hierarchical cluster analysis of network actors. Hierarchical cluster analysis provides a series of nested partitions of network actors. The particular feature in the case of personal networks is that the clusters are obtained based on the links that relate the network nodes with one another. The QAP procedure is a method for establishing correlations between dyadic relationships. Traditional statistical methods assume independence between observations, something that is not always possible in the case of structural data due to the interdependent nature of social relationships. The QAP procedure gets around this problem by using a data permutation methodology to calculate the expected distribution of correlation measures at the dyadic level between two networks (Cramer, Leifeld, McClurg, & Rolfe, 2017).

Network data were analysed with UCINET 6.719 program (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002). The program Visone 2.18 (Brandes & Wagner, 2004) was used to illustrate the graphics.

4. Results

4.1. The role of agents in the Russian travel and tourism market

First of all, the travel agents were asked about the performance of their professional role in an open-ended manner. We obtained individual descriptions of the activities related to the said role and their job. This enabled us to identify in a general way how the performance of their work is carried out, from the perspective of the agents themselves of these tasks.

The main activity that the agents carry out consists of the sale of tourism products that have already been prepared. These packages are usually designed by the tour operators, who organise the trip by setting out the itinerary, creating the programme of tours and excursions, booking the accommodation, the means of transport, etc. The agent's

role in this case is to sell these packages by means of a sales activity of connecting with the customer.

"I feel more like a sales assistant. A customer comes in, I offer him or her a package holiday, they pay, I start to prepare everything and sort out their documents, another one comes in, I give them the package ... People tend to choose something similar or very close, that's why I don't have to come up with anything very different either. [...] However, I still feel more like a sales assistant than a creative worker or something like that". (Agent O1293847, age: 36).

It is an activity based on managing a standardised product in which the objective is to match the customer's needs to the most appropriate package holiday. The sale of standardised products does not offer much margin for innovation or contributing added value in the service. Furthermore, it is usually associated with those agents with less experience or who have restricted margin to use their initiative in their agency. Nevertheless, they occasionally have the opportunity to adapt the package holiday by managing the logistical assistance during the trip or by including changes in some of the contents of the package. Firstly, they make sure to guarantee assistance to tourists in carrying out trips and excursions. This includes contact with insurers, carriers, hotel chains or political bodies such as ministries or consulates, for booking rooms, preparing visas or taking out insurance.

"I work both with people in the market and with the ministry, because I prepare work-related reports for our agency. In addition, I prepare my tourists for trips and I help them sort out tickets, visas or insurance". (Agent M2044485, age: 24).

Apart from the above agents try to adapt the product to suit the customer's interests by modifying aspects related to itineraries and contents. All of this depends on the position they occupy in the organisation, their experience in the industry and the social capital they have built up with business contacts. In a context that is undergoing constant changes and with a progressive increase in the customer's autonomy in making the arrangements for the trip, the ability to adjust to the destination and the user is fundamental to ensure the best service for the tourist and to justify the agent's role as an actor.

"The travel and tourism industry is very dynamic, so you have to adapt very quickly to the changes that are happening in the market. [This means] meeting the tourist's needs, adapting the itinerary of the trip to what the customer wants: contact with hotels, guides, transport, participating in travel and tourism forums...". (Agent O9032611, age: 27).

Therefore, agents need to build relationships with the different actors in the travel and tourism context. Professional and personal relationships are a fundamental asset that helps them to act as mediators between different professional spheres. Together with this, participation in tourism-related events, such as travel and tourism fairs, contributes to updating them and establishing contacts. In this regard, the intangible aspects of these relationships are invariably a fundamental part of the agent's professional activity.

"Although Moscow is big and the tourism sector is too, professional relationships play a very important role in my work. If you want to succeed in this business, you have to have as extensive a network as possible. What is more, your personal relationships always affect your professional ones, and vice-versa. That's why you have to be careful when you communicate with people". (Agent M9830498, age: 20).

In a way, the agent is ultimately responsible for the tourist's satisfaction with the service provided. Despite the participation of multiple actors (tour operators, carriers, hoteliers, restaurants, museums, government agencies), agents must dovetail the services provided by each of these actors, mediating in a complex network of personal and professional relationships.

4.2. Personal networks of travel agents

The agents' personal relationships display a heterogeneous composition. In addition to other agents, who usually constitute an important part of their contacts, they maintain relationships with guides, hotel

employees, drivers and transporters, sociocultural entertainers, ticket sellers, insurance company staff, consulate or embassy personnel or officials of ministries, among others. Firstly, workers in other agencies are their main contact. These occupy a clear intermediation position, linking up different services and professional contexts for the provision of the travel and tourism service (Maya-Jariego, Alieva, & Holgado, 2021). This structure is one of a highly hierarchical sector with a strong dependence on the public administration for professional activity, reflected in contact with consulates, embassies and ministries.

Moreover, the exploration of their personal network makes the agents even more aware of this mediation role. It is a context with a high interdependence in which professionals in the provision of services, management of government agencies and travel assistance must work together to maintain the quality of tourist care. However, in some cases, this centrality is perceived as a weakness of the market, since it places an important part of the work involved in maintaining the tourist service on their shoulders.

"I'm surprised by the importance of agents. Without us, many connections are lost and that's very sad. The market cannot work like this. We should foster relations among different professions in the travel and tourism market". (Agent M1033215, age: 22).

Personal relationships based on the professional role are dynamic and need to adapt to the circumstances that are likewise changeable of the organisation and the social and geographical contexts. For example, this is reflected in the perception of the changes that have occurred since the first phase of the study, in which information was obtained on this network, until the second phase, in which feedback was requested on it. Contacts come and go, depending on the assuming of new functions in the organisation. Some relationships are consolidated, and greater trust is generated with staff in government agencies and consulates. All of this indicates the need to invest time and resources in strengthening relationships and exploring new contacts to gain spaces that expand their ability to improve the service provided.

"Now my network of contacts is broader than when I filled in the survey questionnaire. They have changed my responsibilities and work more in the line of collaboration with other agencies". (Agent M9191872, age: 36).

Finally, a significant part of these relations is based on the maintenance of an "economy of favours" (Ledeneva, 1998; Maya-Jariego, Alieva, & Holgado, 2021). Contacts based on informal exchanges between professionals make it possible to partially overcome the bureaucratic rigidity of government agencies and the hierarchical structure of organisations.

"Professional relationships help when it comes to fulfilling my obligations. But it is the staff who play the most important role. You have to know who gets on well with whom, if someone's kids are having their birthdays, congratulate someone on their birthday or some public holiday. It's pretty exhausting, because the network of contacts is extensive". (Agent M1119837, age: 35).

In short, the agents' personal networks are heterogeneous and have a high degree of centralisation in terms of the mediating role of other agents among the rest of the actors in travel and tourism sector. Below we illustrate some of these characteristics based on a case study of one agent's personal network.

The personal network of a travel agent. The case of Oksana.

Oksana has been working for four years in a travel agency in Moscow. She has a degree in Tourism Studies and Business Relations. She started working in the industry in the Moscow Tourist Office six years ago. This first job helped her to familiarise herself with the type of activities carried out in the field and to meet other professionals. Oksana acknowledges that this first job helped her create an initial network of contacts and strengthen relationships with representatives of local government agencies and public services.

"I have always wanted to work in tourism. When I entered the Moscow Tourist Office, I started as an intern, but I got to know a lot of people from day 1. Little by little I was learning about how things work in this sector and meeting interesting people".

In 2011 she joined a travel agency in the capital. While working in the office allowed her to create institutional ties, dedicated to promoting tourism in Moscow, her position in the agency helped her to forge professional relationships more closely related to direct service to the user.

Oksana's personal network has a well-defined nucleus made up of other travel agents (nodes in red in Fig. 1), which maintains direct and strong relationships with most of the network's actors. Consulate workers form a large group but are located on the periphery of the network (blue nodes). This is a type of contact generated during her time working at the Tourist Office, which has remained in her personal network during her work at the agency. The same occurs with other professionals such as tour guides, transport professionals and ticket sales professionals. In fact, the connection between the latter and the consulate workers is indirect and mediated by travel agencies.

The type of contacts that Oksana maintains in her personal network is related to the type of tasks she carries out at the agency. The personal relationships that she established with the consulate workers during her time at the Tourist Office have oriented her work in the agency mainly to the processing of visas and the supervision of changes in the regulations and entry requirements to the different destinations to which the company offers trips.

However, as it is a small agency, workers often swap tasks and share problems that arise at work. For example, the agency has contracts with hotel chains, as well as formal collaborations with guides, drivers and translators with whom it works closely when it sells tour packages to workers.

4.3. The structure of activities of the travel agent's role

If we examine the set of personal networks of the participating agents, we can see that, like Oksana's network, they are, in general, heterogeneous networks. Of the total *alteri* of all networks, 10.56% ($n = 133$) are other agents, while 10.23% ($n = 129$) are employed in hotels and 9.68% ($n = 122$), are consulate staff. These three are the most numerous roles in the personal network set. Other prominent roles, albeit less frequent, are those of tour guides (6.1%, $n = 77$), carriers (3.65%, $n = 46$) and workers at train or plane ticketing agencies (3.33%, $n = 42$).

The density of the set of personal networks is medium-low ($M = 0.361$, $SD = 0.078$), with low fragmentation (the mean of components is close to 1). However, the average distance in their networks is also relatively low ($M = 1.68$; $SD = 0.12$), which shows significant connections among the *alteri*.

From these personal networks, we built two-mode networks of activities by *alteri*, in which the relationship was indicated by the contact of the agent with the alter to carry out each of the eleven basic activities described. We then developed the one-mode networks of the activities linked to the role, using these networks of affiliation of activities by *alteri* (Fig. 2).

The aggregate network of activities shows a core consisting of event participation, monitoring and problem solving, and hotel booking management activities. The rest of the activities appear on the periphery. Monitoring and problem-solving activity is linked to logistical support actions such as tourist reception or visa management. Once the package holiday is sold, the agent usually carries out travel supervision activities, keeping in touch with other professionals to manage the purchase of tickets, confirm hotel bookings or manage insurance. Together with this, participation in events is an activity linked to the previous ones, possibly because it is a context of generation and maintenance of personal and professional contacts that can be activated later.

We then calculate the centrality measures for each of the activities included in the network (Table 2).

The activity of monitoring and resolution of issues has the highest centrality among the activities carried out. This is the activity with the highest betweenness with other activities, which means that they are

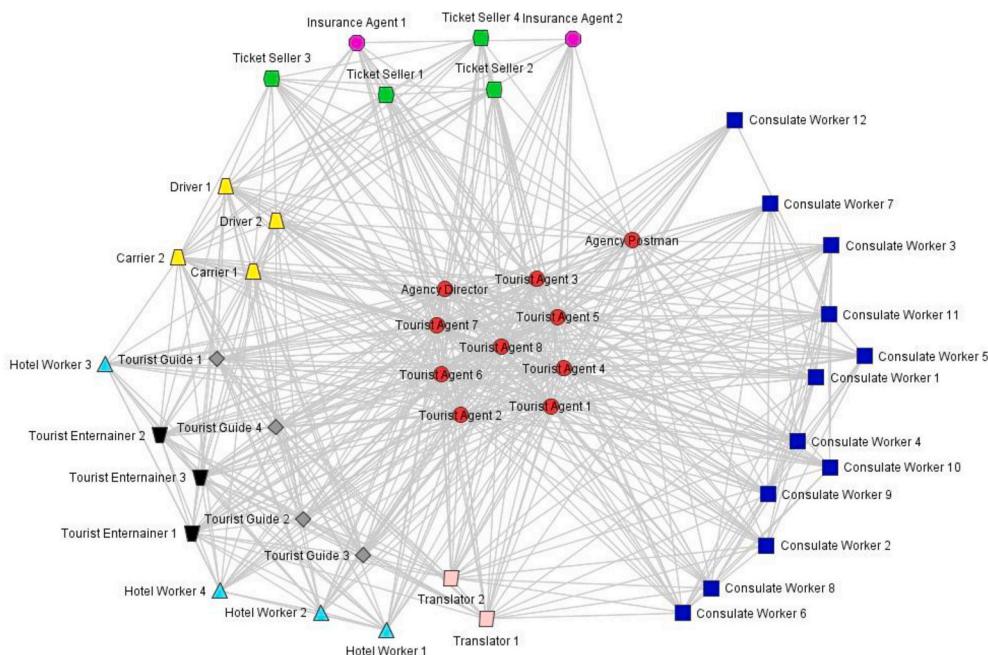


Fig. 1. Oksana’s personal network. The colours and shapes of the nodes indicate the role of the *alteri* in the network. Note: Ego is not included in the visualization.

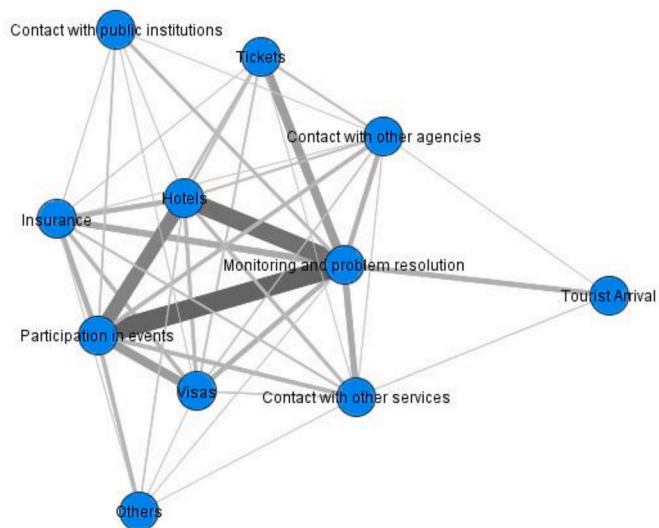


Fig. 2. Aggregate network of the activities performed by the interviewed agents. The edge between the nodes indicates the frequency of coincidence of each dyad of activities in the same *alteri* of the agents’ personal networks. It is shown by the thickness and colour of the edge (a larger width and a darker colour indicates a higher value of the edge).

often associated with other tasks in their execution. In addition, they need these contacts to solve problems or incidents or monitor the tourist’s trip. It is perhaps this network of contacts with which the duties and responsibilities of their role are implemented, the most defining feature of their role in the tourism sector.

4.4. Role typology and professional relationships establishment

Finally, to assess the diversity in the performance of the professional role of all travel agents, we analysed the correlations between the set of twenty-eight matrices of activities of each of the interviewees. As a result, we obtained a square matrix in which the rows and columns indicated the travel agents and the cells indicated the degree of

correlation between each pair of matrices of activities. From this correlation network, we performed a hierarchical cluster analysis to obtain subgroups of actors with a similar profile in their activity structure.

Based on the nature of the data and the results obtained, we chose the level that established the existence of six subgroups of actors, along with two isolated actors. These subgroups are uneven in size and reveal the existence of two broad subgroups, one made up of ten actors and one with six actors. The rest are groups of one, two or three actors.

Fig. 3 shows the representations of the networks of activities of the actors that make up each subgroup.

The distribution of the graphs allows us to observe a certain diversity in the structure of activities carried out by the travel agents. Specifically, agent roles vary depending on the complexity of the relationships between the set of activities they carry out and the contacts they maintain to do so. While some focus on a few activities they carry out through very specific contacts in their network, others diversify their relationships to carry out a larger number of activities.

For example, if we focus on the two largest subgroups, subgroup 1 includes agents with a less complex role, which revolves around a few activities performed through fewer contacts. This group maintains fewer contacts with other agents and public entities and hardly participates in the reception of the tourist. They focus primarily on the management of visas, tickets and hotel bookings, as part of travel monitoring. The agents of subgroup 2 incorporate a wider number of activities between them, which are cross performed with a wide variety of *alteri* of their network. In this case, it is a diversification of contacts and activities, which focuses mainly on the planning and preparation prior to the tourist’s trip.

Finally, we developed the clustered graphs of subgroups 1 and 2 according to the general categories of activities described in Table 1. Using this procedure, we obtained the simplified profile of the set of the agents’ networks, in such a way that a qualitative comparison of these subgroups can be made (Fig. 4).

The two graphs show noticeable differences. In the case of subgroup 1, we see strong relationships between networking and tourist assistance and between the latter and service management. In this case, the clustered graph shows that the management of services and the establishment of contacts are mainly aimed at offering direct service to the tourist during the trip. The clustered graph of subgroup 2 shows a lower density of relationships among the set of activities. In fact, the “Other” category

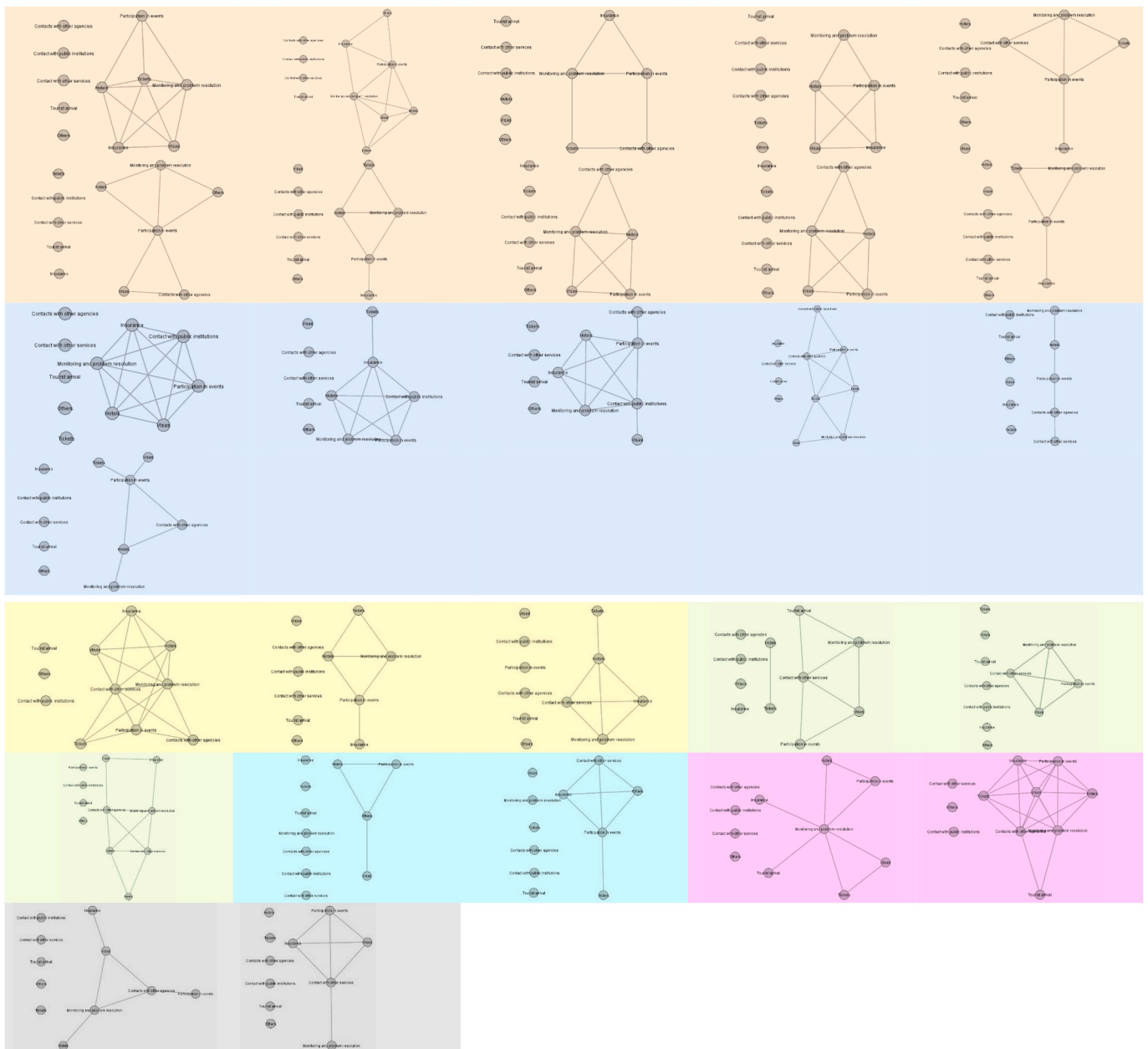


Fig. 3. Subgroups of networks of activities linked to the roles of travel agents. The colours differentiate the conglomerate from membership after the hierarchical cluster analysis.

Table 1

Categories of activities carried out by travel agents.

Tourism services management	1. Visa processing. 2. Insurance processing. 3. Purchase of travel tickets. 4. Hotel reservations.
Tourist assistance	5. Tourist reception at the place of arrival (airport, train, or bus station).
Coordination and Networking	6. Monitoring and resolution of incidents during the trip. 7. Participation in tourism-related events. 8. Contact with other tourist agencies. 9. Contact with other services (tour operators, tour guides, museums, translators).
Others	10. Contact with public institutions (consulates, embassies, and ministries). 11. Other activities not included in the above categories: test trips, advertising.

Table 2

Centrality measures of activities in the network of affiliation of activities by *alteri*.

	Degree	Betweenness	Closeness	Eigenvector
Monitoring and problem-solving	0.344	0.501	0.435	0.874
Hotels	0.245	0.339	0.396	0.359
Visas	0.194	0.296	0.381	0.111
Participation in events	0.161	0.184	0.372	0.271
Tickets	0.097	0.133	0.349	0.083
Insurance	0.089	0.119	0.353	0.079
Contact with other services	0.060	0.065	0.346	0.063
Contact with other agencies	0.037	0.027	0.343	0.047
Tourist arrival	0.032	0.032	0.247	0.032
Contact with public institutions	0.029	0.038	0.318	0.028
Others	0.021	0.013	0.317	0.020

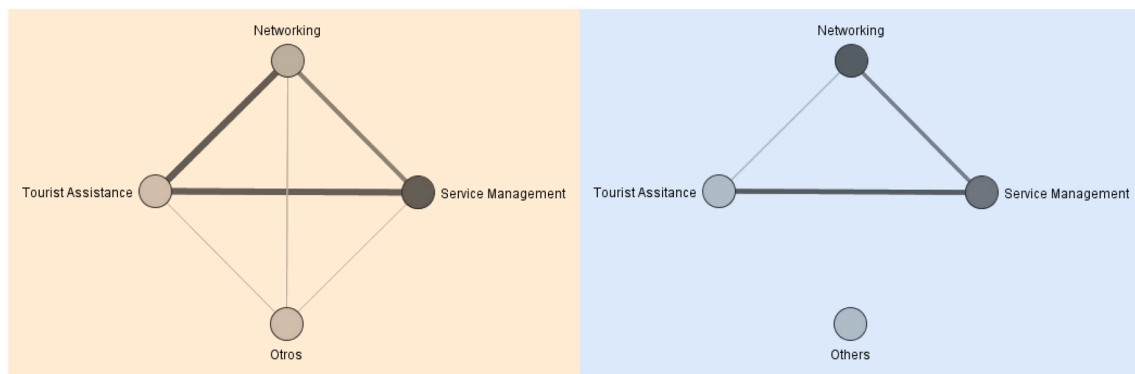


Fig. 4. Clustered graphs of agent activity networks in subgroups 1 (left) and 2 (right). The edge width between the nodes indicates the weight of the links between activities within different areas of work. The edge colour of the also indicates this weight. The colour of the node indicates the weight of the links between activities within the same scope of action.

appears to be disconnected. In this case much of the effort of the agents focuses on generating contexts of relationships, more oriented to the prior management of services associated with the package holiday than to the post-tourist care during the trip.

5. Discussion

In this article we have explored the activities and relationships associated with the role of a set of travel agents in the Russian tourist market. As our starting point, we took a perspective based on interaction and interdependence in the performance of activities related to the preparation of the tourist product and assistance to tourists. To this end, we applied personal network analysis as a strategy to systematically describe the structure and composition of the relationships of the individuals who occupy the above roles.

In the proposed case study, we observed that agents' activity takes place in contexts of interaction with other actors in the sector. Results show that an important part of the performance of their role is the activation of tourist assistance services, which means that their role does not end with the sale of the package holiday. In this regard, agents act as brokers between services and customers, in addition to connecting different professionals and activate relationships with different professionals in the context of providing assistance and support to tourists.

This role stems precisely from their ability to coordinate services in a highly segmented market and in which new technologies tend to reduce links in the chain of intermediaries between the user and the final product (Mamaghani, 2009). All this adds the possibility for agents to occupy a privileged position that allows them to act as mediators in the exchange of information about the sector, reducing its complexity and segmentation and creating social capital resources linked to personal and professional relationships (Michie & Sullivan, 1990; Van der Heijden, 1996).

5.1. Professional roles and contexts of interdependence

The evaluation of the personal networks showed a high interdependence of the travel agents' perception of the functions associated with their role and the expectations of other actors both inside and outside the organisation. Role expectations shape the behaviour and performance of the individuals who occupy said roles. In the case of travel agents, their role is shaped by the way in which other actors in the industry (tour operators, hotel staff and ticket sale companies, consulate or ministry officials, customers, etc.) expect them to act to mediate in the service offered to the tourist. This set of expectations ultimately influences both the position they occupy in the network of relationships in the tourism industry and the travel agent's individual behaviour. The agent works by combining regulatory adjustment to these expectations

along with other behaviours arising from her own experience of the performance of their role, influenced by personal, organisational and geographical factors.

Interdependence therefore refers to the dyadic relationships that an individual maintains with others in the performance of some activity linked to the role. Agents carry out their activities in a context of high interdependence as they need to have other actors in the sector to offer various services to tourists. This is an example that shows how relational aspects related to information-sharing and problem-solving for user care are key to role performance. From the performance of interdependent actions, in which the agent acts as a broker, a context of coordination of services linked to tourist care and assistance is generated (Cheng, 1983).

5.2. Professional roles and personal networks

Personal network analysis allowed us to explore this complex process of coordination of activities and roles in the provision of the service by travel agents. This study illustrates the application of structural analysis to describe how the role of travel agents is organised, through formal and informal relationships among the different stakeholders. On the other hand, by calculating indicators of centrality, position, and composition it offers a way to assess the main activities in the exercise of the role. Finally, the combination with qualitative information offers a description of the complex structure of relationships among different actions, which goes beyond the normative definition of the travel agent's role.

Network analysis also provides information on processes related to role performance in organisational contexts. For example, it is possible to assess their role consensus, based on the assessment of the performance of similar roles in various contexts based on personal and social factors (MacKinnon & Summers, 1976). In our case, the combination of correlation and grouping strategies of activity networks facilitated the establishment of subgroups of individuals that differ in the way they perform the travel agent's role. In this case, results show differences between those agents that concentrate their activities on a few contacts and focus on providing assistance to the tourist on the trip and those that diversify their contacts widely to carry out a larger number of management and planning activities. All this information obtained through personal network analysis can be useful in the design of effective intervention strategies (Maya-Jariego & Holgado, 2015).

The establishment of differences in the performance of the role, and therefore the assessment of the consensus around it, can include structural information on the networks of personal relationships of individuals in organisations. If we start from the premise, as we have mentioned, that the information about the expectations and the results of the role are acquired in the context of the interaction, assessing how these relationships are organised and structured around the activities

carried out can provide valuable information about this process.

5.3. Limitations

The results of our study are based on a small purposive sample of twenty-eight Russian travel agents. Access to this sample was achieved by convenience based on a list of travel agencies in Moscow and its metropolitan area. Accessibility and willingness to participate in the study were the main criteria for inclusion in the study, given the complexity and difficulty to gain access to this population. Therefore, it is not a sample from which representative data can be obtained that could be extrapolated to the population regarding the performance of the role of agent or on the contexts of interdependence in the performance of work roles. However, (a) the combination of qualitative and structural information, and (b) the collection of data in two phases allowing interviewees to provide feedback on their own personal networks, provide a comprehensive view of the performance of the role in the sample referred to.

On the one hand, restricting the sample to the Russian context is another element that may make it difficult to generalise the findings. But, on the other hand, it allows us to consider specific social and cultural factors that may be influencing the structuring of the relationships of travel agents in the performance of their role. In this regard, aspects such as the importance of informal relationships in the structuring of professional contacts and the influence of hierarchy and distance to power can be relevant variables in the interpretation of results (Maya Jariego et al., 2021).

Thirdly, given the nature of the information collected, the study is eminently descriptive and exploratory. In any event, it is an approach that suits the objectives of the study, linked on the one hand to the description of an example of a role played in contexts of high interdependence and, on the other hand, to the exemplification of the application of personal network analysis for the study of relationships arising from the performance of that role. In any case, some results, such as observed changes in the relationships in the interval between the two phases of the study, point to the usefulness of adopting a dynamic and longitudinal perspective in the analysis to offer an explanatory focus to the data.

Finally, and related to the foregoing, the profound impact on the travel and tourism market of the restrictions imposed on domestic and international mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 must be stressed. This has resulted in unprecedented social, economic, political and organisational consequences in the sector (Kusumaningrum & Wachyuni, 2020; Wachyuni & Kusumaningrum, 2020). In this regard it could be of great interest to consider the resumption of this study by evaluating the effects that these changes have had both on the travel and tourism market as a whole and on the relationships between the different actors involved as well as in the processes linked to the performance of the professional roles.

6. Conclusion

Establishing and maintaining professional relationships is fundamental to achieve individual and organisational objectives in the travel and tourism sector. This is because tourism is a business activity and a profession that calls for intensive coordination in which the creation of value in the service entails collaboration among multiple actors. The underlying premise of this idea is that the actors involved directly or indirectly in tourism are not self-sufficient and, therefore, other actors are needed to play their role and complement their resources and their activities.

However, information technologies have led to important changes in the relationship between consumers and providers of tourism services. Both for travel agencies and tour operators, the Internet has become a key tool to attract customers and to remotely manage sales and services in general (Batinić, 2013). It has also led to a process of

disintermediation of travel agencies in the supply chain in the tourism market (Law, Leung, & Wong, 2004). These changes have brought with them a redefinition of the role of the professionals in the industry that have to carry out their work in highly competitive environments in which the supply and service chains have been shortened due to the increasingly active role of the user in the design of their tourism experience. In this case, the improvement in the coordination of services and the increase in the capacity to generate resources and incorporate innovation in the range of tourism products and services are elements that have been integrated in the performance of the travel agent's role, extending their function as intermediaries in the sector.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Daniel Holgado-Ramos: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Deniza Alieva:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Isidro Maya-Jariego:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2022.100947>.

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