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Selecting lifestyle entrepreneurship recovery strategies

A response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

The devastating context of the Covid-19 pandemic has created a new reality in which tourism has practically come to a standstill, a situation that must be reversed. This study focuses on the revitalization of businesses run by lifestyle entrepreneurs, a very significant class, of pivotal importance in innovation in the tourism sector. Specifically, this study aims to identify the most relevant indicators to select the recovery strategies of these entrepreneurs. Using the Delphi method combined with the Q-sort technique, a ranking of the indicators was produced on the basis of input from a panel of 26 senior managers and academics. The top five indicators were: creativity and innovation, level of innovation, qualification, startups number, and turnover volume. Findings reveal that the priority is on innovation and the qualification of the entrepreneurs. Only afterward do the traditional indicators of competitiveness of tourist destinations emerge.

Keywords: Disaster recovery; Destination Management Organizations; Innovation; Marketing strategies; Decision-making.

1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus has provoked an unprecedented crisis (Yu et al., 2020). Tourism was one of the most affected sectors, to the point of changing the paradigm of mass tourism to no-tourism (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). In this sector, tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs (TLEs) constitute one of the most representative groups

of small-scale businesses (Thomas, Shaw, & Page, 2011), which in turn also represent the majority of tourism businesses. Surprisingly, despite their relevance, these entrepreneurs remain under-explored in the academic, practice and policy-making fields (Fu et al., 2019; Marchant & Mottiar, 2011).

In a context where countries are concerned with revitalizing their economies and tourism, it is natural that strategies should be defined to support these entrepreneurs. As they are essential in promoting innovation (Yachin, 2019), establishing human and social capital (Jack & Anderson, 2002; Morrison, 2002) and adopting sustainable practices (Wang, Li & Xu, 2019), it is critical to select the strategies best suited to the needs of the tourism destination and to the specific characteristics of the TLEs. Additionally, little attention has been given to recovery strategies (Miles & Shipway, 2020) as most models focus on preparation and contingency planning (c.f. Hall, Scott, & Gössling, 2020; Kuo et al., 2009; Ritchie, 2004). The problem is that there is no previous experience that can bring insights and be applied to the revitalization of these small businesses.

Thus, this study aims to identify the most important indicators in the selection of strategies for the revitalization of TLEs in a post-pandemic context. To achieve this objective, a combination of the Delphi method and the Q-sort technique was used. The 26 participants in the study included leading academics, senior managers of the main Portuguese tourism destinations, and other sector stakeholders.

The contributions are twofold. First, to our best knowledge, this is the first research to present a ranking of indicators to select strategies in a post-pandemic context. Second, unlike traditional models of destination competitiveness, this study reveals that innovation and qualification are at the top of the priorities for the revitalization of small businesses in tourism. These contributions allow us to address the

challenge presented by Shepherd (2020) concerning the contribution to the knowledge of resilience at and across multiple levels of analysis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Disaster recovery strategies

Crisis management models in tourism have a substantial scenario-building component for proposing prevention measures or contingency plans (Hall, 2010; Kuo et al., 2009, Mair Ritchie, & Walters, 2016). These models failed to consider the scale and intensity of the crisis caused by Covid-19 (Hall, et al., 2020). Since these preventive measures are not applicable, it is important to understand what strategic options can be offered for the revitalization of a destination's business network. What is noteworthy is the dispersed nature of the suggested measures, which does not constitute a framework for strategic definition per se.

A first group of measures focuses on marketing and communication, with considerable emphasis on promoting first domestic and then international demand (Pforr & Hosie, 2008). Thus, the dissemination of an image of safe destination is an important path (Henderson, 2005; Mair, et al., 2016), with safe facilities and transports (Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Morrison, 2018) and emphasizing the role of public relations campaigns (Santana, 2004; Scott et al., 2008). Stimulating demand can also be done through vouchers (Henderson, 2005; Henderson & Ng, 2004; Yang, Zhang & Chen, 2020) and travel insurances (Hall et al., 2020). For both the destination and businesses, it is essential to change tourists' perception (Scott Laws, & Prideaux, 2008) by conveying an idea of local community well-being (Hall et al., 2020) and by

reinforcing the sense of compliance with health regulations through seals of conformity (Lee et al., 2012).

A second group of measures focuses on stimulating entrepreneurship and startups. The creation of a more favorable business environment requires de- bureaucratization (Nicola et al, 2020), training (Hall et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Pforr & Hosie, 2008) and rethinking the tourism development model to integrate more sustainable paths (Hall et al., 2020). In this sense, the strategy includes considering segments or niches that appreciate value added tourism products (Gössling et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2008), more aligned with the offer of small tourism businesses, many of which managed by TLEs (Thomas, et al., 2011; Wang, et al.,, 2019).

A third group values the role of cooperation and networking. Thus, in a post- crisis context, it is likely that there will be a reconfiguration of local stakeholders, with the disappearance of some existing players and the emergence of new ones (McKercher & Chon, 2004). In this new scenario, the different local stakeholders may be approached as a way of dealing with the crisis (Lee, et al., 2012), with the possibility of new collaborations (Scott et al., 2008) capable of generating innovation and products with greater added value (Gössling et al., 2020; Hall et al., 2020).

2.2. TLEs as a distinct group of entrepreneurs

This study focuses on TLEs because of their key role in the innovation competitiveness of destinations (Dias et al., 2021). Furthermore, in the total amount of small and medium-sized firms, their representativeness is quite high (Getz & Carlsen, 2000; Thomas et al., 2011), and they present a clear contribution to the community's wealth by hiring local people and acquiring local products and services (Jack & Anderson,

2002). Moreover, they also play a key role in the differentiation and attractiveness of tourism destinations by delivering more creative and genuine experiences linked to the place (Kibler, et al., 2015). Finally, in the context of this study, TLEs "are characterized by the desire to start a business in line with lifestyle values, which is important in the new normal resulting from covid-19" (Ratten, 2020, p. 511).

TLEs have specific characteristics that differentiate them from other entrepreneurs in other sectors. It is essential to understand these specificities to better frame the recovery strategies. The main differentiating characteristic is the approach to performance. While business-oriented entrepreneurs seek financial performance, TLEs aim at other objectives associated with lifestyle, environmental preservation or social and local development (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2000; Wang et al., 2019). For this reason, decision making is not governed by the same criteria as other companies, which may lead to certain limitations. For example, Hjalager, Kwiatkowski and Larsen (2018) argue that these entrepreneurs are driven by opportunities rather than thoughtful decisions. A possible justification derives from the existence of low entry barriers to tourism (Ioannides & Petersen, 2003). As a result, this class of entrepreneurs is characterized by limited experience, lack of specific training and modest resources (Cooper, 2015, Czernek, 2017; Marchant & Mottiar, 2011).

Notwithstanding being vital for innovation and destination competitiveness (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003), TLEs are also associated with passive behaviors and risk aversion arising from quality of life aspirations (Hjalager, 2010; Ioannides & Petersen, 2003; Weidenfeld, Williams, & Butler, 2010); Yachin, 2019). Associated with these characteristics is the reduced willingness to cooperate and network (Czernek, 2017), as well as limitations in capitalizing opportunities in innovation (Hoarau, 2014; Komppula, 2014). From a managerial

perspective, previous research identified lack of skills and business experience as well as limited resources, such as capital, staff, and equipment (Cooper, 2015; Ioannides and Petersen, 2003; Marchant and Mottiar, 2011; Yachin, 2019). Finally, TLEs also evidenced insufficient capabilities for transforming knowledge into innovation (Hoarau, 2014).

3. METHOD

This study addresses the views of key policymakers, academics and practitioners regarding the revitalization of tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs. More specifically, data collection focuses on Portugal, a member state of the European Union (EU), which is the second largest economy in the world in nominal terms. As with other EU countries, entrepreneurial activity plays an important role in the country's economic development. Recent studies (GEM, 2020) have shown that the Portuguese entrepreneurship indicators (entrepreneurial behavior and attitudes) are equal or even superior to the global average. More specifically, in 2019, Portugal revealed a Perceived Opportunities Rate of 53.52% while the global average is 53.65%, and a Perceived Capabilities Rate of 61.43% (global average is 58.27%). As such, the results from this study can be helpful for researchers and policymakers in other countries.

To achieve the objectives of this research, we adopted the Delphi method combined with the Q-sort technique, a methodological approach indicated for forecasting in new contexts where there is no track record (Ashok et al., 2017). We adopted the recommendations of Garrod and Fyall (2000) for the Delphi method and focused on obtaining a convergence of the respondents' views around a central opinion by using a sorting list and informing the participants of the answers obtained in the previous round

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(Von Bergner & Lohmann, 2014). This method uses a group of experts who do not know each other or interact directly to seek a consensus (Powell, 2003). Research also benefits from the anonymity associated with the method, where the specialists do not know the origin of the remaining responses, promoting more candid and personal responses (Green, Hunter & Moore, 1990). Also known as the rounds method, this enables experts to review their responses at each round until the maximum consensus is reached (Mitchell, 1991).

The Q-sort technique uses forced choice, i.e. all items must be classified, and each position can be used only once. Thus, the Q technique allows the identification and classification of perceptions and beliefs, and constitutes a suitable tool for selecting management indicators (Ahangar, et al., 2020). The group of experts is at the center of this methodological approach, and special care must be taken in their selection based in the topics under discussion (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino, 2018).

In this study, all 26 invited Portuguese specialists accepted to participate, which ensures the appropriate size of the panel (Akins, Tolson & Cole, 2005; Worrell, Di Gangi & Bush, 2013). In the selection of experts particular attention was taken to assemble a heterogeneous group, allowing for a broad global perspective, with a diverse experience in tourism. All the participants responded to the three rounds. A possible explanation for this strong adherence to the study lies in the participants' sense of duty to contribute to overcome the crisis resulting from the pandemic. The panel was composed of 6 academics of recognized merit, 10 senior managers from the main Portuguese DMOs, and 10 senior managers from industry stakeholders (industry associations, including the Portuguese Tourism Confederation).

The number of rounds changes according to the level of agreement achieved (Darwish & Burns, 2019). In this case, three rounds were held between May and June

2020. In the first round, a list of six indicators drawn from the literature was presented and participants were asked to suggest new items to be included in the following round. Four more indicators were obtained. Unlike other studies, where the dropout rate between rounds is 18% (Nowack, Endrika & Guenther, 2011), no expert left the study over the three rounds.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To measure the agreement between the participants, the Kendall coefficient (W) was used (Cafiso, Di Graziano & Pappalardo, 2013). The Kendall coefficient (W) presents values between 0 (no consensus) and 1 (total consensus). Values equal to or below 0.3 indicate weak agreement; between 0.3 and 0.5, moderate agreement, between 0.5 and 0.7, good agreement, and above 0.7 strong agreement (Cafiso, et al., 2013). In the first round, the consensus on indicators for evaluating strategies was low (W = 0.07). Despite the inclusion of four more indicators, the degree of agreement increased considerably in the following rounds, reaching strong agreement in the third round (W = 0.73). The final results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators for selecting recovery strategies

Indicators	Ranking
Creativity and innovation	1
Level of innovation	2
Qualification	3
Number of startups	4

Turnover volume	**5**
Level of internationalization	**6**
Number of employees	**7**
Number of partnerships / collaborative projects	**8**
Number of bankruptcies	**9**
Staff turnover	**10**

The results show that innovation is at the top of the priorities in the strategy selection indicators. First, these results reflect the interest of tourism destinations in TLEs and their capacity to generate innovation (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003), and second, they recognize these entrepreneurs' pivotal role in the innovation spillover effect (Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013).

An important contribution of this study is the priority given to innovation in a post-Pandemic situation. The reduction of lockdown measures in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic has led governments to adopt non-pharmaceutical control measures (Maier & Brockmann, 2020), such as social distancing, group dimension reduction, or mask wearing. These measures are easier to achieve in small-scale businesses, which, together with the delivery of creative and genuine experiences associated with the place (Kibler, et al., 2015), constitute a powerful combination for innovation and value creation through co-creation processes (García-Rosell et al., 2019) in this new reality. As such, the TLEs' weaknesses can be overcome by fostering integration in the local community, increasing the assimilation and incorporation of local knowledge, and fostering the development of new experiences and products, as suggested by Dias et al. (2020), more suitable for post pandemic market segments.

Another important finding is the emphasis on the entrepreneurs' training and qualification. The panelists recognize that TLEs need to develop skills in this new context. This competence endowment can be interpreted at two levels. First, as a means to overcome the inherent limitations of this class of entrepreneurs, namely poor management and tourism business experience, reduced cooperation, or risk aversion. As suggested by Bacq and Lumpkin (2020), the crisis offers entrepreneurs the opportunities to capitalize multi-partner efforts to develop innovative solutions. Secondly, because both the entrepreneurs and the destinations themselves are not prepared to deal with the impacts of this pandemic (Fisher & Wilder-Smith, 2020), it is essential to prepare the firms to respond adequately to the new challenges. Probably, the innovation will be fostered by promoting technological transition, where experienced and creative entrepreneurs are willing to take risks and initiate new solutions enabled by new technologies, as suggested by Li-Ying and Nell (2020).

Indicators related to business creation and development follow innovation and training. The following positions in the ranking are occupied by the number of startups, turnover volume, level of internationalization, and number of employees. These 'traditional' indicators of destination development are important for assessing destination competitiveness (Crouch, 2011). Furthermore, this sequence on the indicators' importance aligns with previous research in which is initially expectable a "broad downturn in entrepreneurial activity. Soon after that, however, necessity entrepreneurship is likely to boom" (Liñán & Jaén, 2020: 1).

5. CONCLUSION

Our findings provide new insights that we believe will contribute to bridge the research gap and achieve the objectives of this study. Aiming to identify the indicators for the selection of recovery strategies for TLEs in a post-pandemic context, the results indicate that innovation and entrepreneur qualification have priority. These indicators are linked to the practice-based essence of these entrepreneurs' businesses and the importance they play in innovation, value creation and the competitiveness of tourism destinations.

Although the study was conducted with senior managers of the main Portuguese destination management organizations, stakeholders and academics, in a country where tourism represents a significant percentage of GDP, we believe that the results can be valuable for other countries and destinations. The results can be followed up in future research, to understand what specific strategies can be pursued to achieve these indicators. Other inquiries may also cross these indicators with specific segments of TLEs. For example, Wang et al. (2019) found that there are two classes of these entrepreneurs, depending on their motivations: business-oriented and lifestyle-oriented. Probably the impacts on each class will be different.

The results of this study also point to solutions to be considered in policymaking. The fact that there is a sequence in the results suggests some priorities. The first is related to innovation. The definition of recovery policies should have a clear focus on stimulating entrepreneurs and start-ups, which could be materialized through innovation subsidies or through the existing network of incubators, accelerators and technology transfer.

The second is related to training and the development of skills that stimulate the resilience of companies. There will probably be entrepreneurs with different rhythms, which may lead to a polarization of the economy by the high-potential entrepreneurs, as argued by Liñán and Jaén (2020). To avoid this situation, training provides greater access to knowledge and technology, essential elements to boost business and reach

'new' tourists. Considering the limitations of the TLEs, training should be transversal to several areas: management, marketing, technology and tourism-specific technical areas.

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