From SARS Through Zika and up to Covid-19:

Destination Recovery Marketing Campaigns in Response to Pandemics

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered the paradigm of risk and recovery management but it is just one of many pandemics to have impacted destinations during the last two decades. This study examine how destination officials combated the image crises that followed SARS-2003, H1N1 Swine flu 2009-10, Zika 2016-17 and Covid-19 2020. The literature dealing with combating pandemics has focused on the actual management of either a specific pandemic or regional aspects of a pandemic and less on the recovery marketing and image repair aspect. As a result, tourism academic literature has a shortage of image repair theoretical frameworks addressing multi-case health-related crises. In this study, we use qualitative content analysis of news reports, websites and recovery campaigns taken from media outlets, tourism news websites, Google search engine and YouTube, over the past two decades. This paper posits a new theoretical framework: six-phase image repair strategies during pandemics.

Key words. Tourism crisis; pandemics; image repair; recovery marketing; Covid-19; tourism marketing.

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, which visibly emerged in early 2020, has been exceptional in scope, severity and impact on the global tourism industry (Yeh, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Gossling et al., 2020; Jiang & Wen, 2020); nevertheless, Covid-19 is one of a series of pandemics that global destinations have faced over the last two decades (Mansfield, 2020). Pandemics including SARS, Zika, Ebola, Bird flu and Swine flu also caused cancellations of flights and closures of hotels and tourist services, thereby causing severe disruption to tourism industries in various regions all over the world (Chen et al., 2020; Beirman, 2006; Cooper, 2006; Henderson, 2004).

Over the years, several studies which concentrated on the tourism crises caused by pandemics were published but most of them focused either on a specific region or pandemic as well as the management of the pandemic on the ground and less on the recovery marketing and image repair aspects. In addition, tourism academic literature has a shortage of theoretical frameworks addressing health-related crises (Chen et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2015; Novelli et al., 2018, Wilder-Smith, 2006; Gossling et al., 2020; Mason at al., 2005; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009). The purpose of this study is to fill this research gap and to conduct a multi-case study to analyze strategies employed by destinations around the world in order to recover from image crisis and negative perceptions arising from pandemics during the last two decades (2000-2020).

The key methodology employed is qualitative content analysis of news reports, press releases, websites and recovery campaigns taken from nine media outlets, tourism news

websites, the Google search engine and YouTube. Besides the theoretical contribution of a vast, multi-case study that deals with a wide selection of global destinations combating image crisis, this paper will expand practitioners' knowledge of a likely key field in the future. Given the uncertain future regarding diseases and travel, there is a need to develop strategies, frameworks and techniques to effectively contain and recover from infectious diseases and to share these strategies worldwide (Smith, 2006; Yeh, 2020; Gossling et al, 2020).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Tourism Crisis: Definition, Consequences and Role of the Media

The word "crisis" is often misunderstood by tourism scholars and practitioners. A small downturn in tourism activity or spending represents a legitimate concern for destination or tourism enterprises, but it only becomes a crisis when the impact of an event or a set of circumstances is severe. Ritchie (2009) extensively discussed the evolution of theoretical definitions of tourism crises and disasters as well as their multiple causes. In essence, a crisis is a negative event or set of circumstances that severely compromises or damages the reputation, marketability and viability of a destination or enterprise (Beirman, 2003; Yousaf, 2019).

Due to the increased number of tourism crises over the last two decades, especially in areas that are perceived as having strong tourism brands, such as the US and Western European countries, there has been growing interest in dealing with this subject (Avraham, 2021). The effect of crises on tourism arrivals and the market demand for destinations varies according to several factors, such as duration, extent and severity of damage, casualties, causation and extent and nature of media coverage of the crisis (Chen et al., 2020). Generally, similar scenarios occur

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during crises. After the first report in the media, other media outlets also start to cover the crisis and invite "experts" to analyse the events. This information influences reactions by the public in both traditional and social media. Potential and current tourists are asked about the destination's situation and if it is safe to visit. Immediately following initial news reports, tourists cancel flights, tours and hotel reservations. Flight delays and cancellations may occur when the tourism crisis starts, as negative travel advisories published by foreign countries influence tourists to opt for safer destinations (Beirman, 2003; 2019). As the crisis begins, the primary challenge for officials and marketers is to find effective ways to manage the crisis in the field and to repair any damage to the country's image and reputation (Mair et al., 2016; Avraham & Ketter, 2016).

While the division of the world into developed and developing nations has become somewhat blurred over the years, we can still identify areas characterized by "strong" and "weak" countries as regards their political, economic, cultural world status and influence (Golan, 2010). Several studies have dealt with the strategies chosen by officials in developing world countries in order to help their destinations recover from image and tourism crises (see list: Avraham & Ketter, 2016). In general, studies that deal with image and marketing found that during crises, although officials sometimes cooperated with Western media, they also blocked the media, applying physical/economical pressure and threatening journalists (Hachten & Scotton, 2015). Furthermore, in order to bypass international media, these officials also made use of social media to directly reach out to Western audiences (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). Contrary to the emphasis on these source strategies, Avraham (2020a), using quantitative analysis, found that developing countries rarely used audience strategies and did not, for example, seek to emphasize similarity of values with Western audiences. However, there was intensive use by these marketers of message and source strategies (Keter & Avraham, 2016).

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2.2 Pandemics, Health-Related Issues and Crises

Pandemics and other health-related issues, terrorism, natural disasters and wars have frequently posed a serious challenge to the world's tourism industry (Yeh, 2020; Beirman, 2019). According to the World Health Organization (a UN body), "a pandemic is an epidemic occurring worldwide or over a wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people." (WHO, 2020) When discussing pandemics, the 1918-1920 Spanish flu is mentioned frequently, but since then, the world has experienced a chain of pandemics, especially in the last two decades, including SARS-2003, H1N1 Swine flu 2009-10, Ebola 2014-2016, Zika 2016-17 and other pandemics and health issues/hazards, up to the most recent, COVID-19-2020 (Gossling et al., 2020; Yeh, 2020; Chen et al., 2020). Gossling et al. (2020) describe several reasons for the increasing effect of pandemics on the tourism industry, among them: growing mobility, urbanism and industrial food production. As proof of the growing challenge of pandemics, Gossling et al. (2020) mentioned that there were only three major pandemics in all of the 20th century, while during the first two decades of the 21st century, the world has already experienced four major pandemics. The global tourism industry is currently experiencing an unprecedented level of chaos, with millions of people infected and death rates in the hundred thousands, and millions of tourism jobs at risk (BBC, June 10, 2020; Gossling et al., 2020; Yeh, 2020; Chen et al., 2020).

2.3 Image Repair Models, Theories and Strategies

The strategies adopted by decision-makers during a tourism crisis are divided into two. First, are strategies related to crisis management on the ground, such as: treatment of casualties, restoration of infrastructure damage and prevention of a similar crisis. Second, are strategies related to repairing the negative image of the destination that accompanies the crisis as well as recovery marketing activities. When a destination is involved in a crisis, marketers have to address tourist hesitancy about visiting destinations perceived as risky or unsafe (Beirman & Van Walbeek, 2011; Avraham, 2020b). Academia labels efforts to correct the reputation of organizations and brands as "image repair", "recovery marketing" and "reputation management" (Benoit, 1995; Avraham & Ketter, 2016). The approach to these concepts resulted in researchers adopting several theories and models that included strategies to address an image crisis. Benoit (1995) defines strategy as "an abstract or general concept that represents a goal or an effect sought by discourse." (p. 80). During the past twenty years, there has been significant growth in the number of studies focused on the field of image repair theory and more specifically, destination image repair (Avraham, 2020b).

Beirman and Van Walbeek (2011) refer to a ten-step process of recovery marketing. Some strategies included presenting the facts, being open for business, creating collaborative alliances, restoring confidence, publicizing the positive, and rebuilding infrastructure to a higher standard than it was pre-crisis. Avraham and Ketter (2016) offer "the multi-step model for altering place image" which offer three kinds of image repair strategies: 1. Source strategies, which officials utilize in order to influence a destination's media coverage patterns during the crisis, such as hosting media familiarization tours, casting doubts on the media's credibility and blocking media access; 2. Message strategies, which focus on addressing the destination's negative image, such as mitigating the crisis or spinning liabilities into assets; 3. Audience strategies, which deal with a

specific audience and emphasize the similarity of the destination's values, history or culture to those of this audience (Avraham & Ketter, 2016).

Over the years, only a small number of studies directly relate to combating image crisis as a result of pandemics (Chen et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2015; Novelli et al., 2018, Wilder-Smith, 2006; Gossling et al., 2020; Mason at al., 2005; Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009). Yates (2006), for example, discussed the Pacific Asia Travel Associations *Project Phoenix* as a media-orientated strategy to restore the marketability of the Asia-Pacific region in response to the 2003 SARS outbreak. This project, with its recovery based on an alliance between media, DMOs and key tourism enterprises, was a travel industry template for destination recovery for many years thereafter. Other studies offer the use of niche tourism as an image repair strategy during pandemics, as niche tourism has been perceived to be more resilient than any other kind of tourism during a crisis (Novelli et al., 2020; Rittichainuwat, et al., 2020). In this study, we would like to offer a new theoretical framework—the six-phase image repair strategies during pandemics -which relies on previous image repair models but is more concentrated on combating tourism image crisis specifically as a result of pandemics.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

The study employs qualitative content analysis of recovery campaigns, videos/ads, news reports and various marketing initiatives. Media content and initiatives were taken from four types of sources from the years 2000-2020: 1. *International media outlets*. We included news reports about pandemics and image recovery efforts published in various media outlets: *The New York Times (NTY), BBC, CNN, Forbes, The Economic Times, Washington Post, Reuters, and The*

Guardian. These media outlets are a mix of British and American newspapers which are also international, global TV networks and news agencies. All of these outlets have a strong interest in international world events. We searched the web archives of these media outlets using the key words: tourism and pandemic's name (SARS/H1N/Swine flu/ Zika/COVID-19), pandemic's name and tourism campaign, along with similar combinations. We analysed only reports that included any type of image repair strategy used by officials, DMO/NTB or marketers during one of the pandemics during these periods: SARS (2/2003-8/2003), H1N1 (5/2009-8/2010), Zika (1/2015-12/2017), and Covid-19 (1/2020-12/2020). 2. *Global tourism news websites.* We analyzed news articles that appeared in eTurbonews (*eTN*) (http://eturbonews.com/), Travel Weekly (https://www.travelweekly.com/) and Travel Pulse (https://www.travelpulse.com/news/), which are considered among the main websites covering global tourism news. We searched the web archives of these tourism news websites using the key words: tourism and pandemic's name crisis, pandemic's name and tourism campaign, along with similar combinations; 3. *Google Search Engine*. We looked for reports, campaigns and marketing initiatives while entering various combinations similar to those we used in the news outlets and the global tourism news websites (see list of links in appendix 1); 4. *YouTube video-sharing website*. We searched this website using "tourism ad and pandemic's name (list of pandemics)" in the search engine (see list of links in appendix 1). We only included campaigns initiated by ministers, officials, and DMO representatives.

During the media outlets and tourism news websites archives search, we found thousands of reports that dealt with pandemics; nevertheless, in our sample, we included only reports that mentioned any image repair strategies or recovery campaigns. As a result, if we found, for example, reports that dealt only with subjects like medical treatments, infection preventive

measures or measures taken by the authorities to sanitize public spaces, we did not include them in the sample. Overall, we found and analysed 596 news articles, campaigns, and videos/ads that appeared in these four kinds of sources and dealt directly with image repair strategies undertaken by officials and marketers only.

3.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is a reputable research method applied to the two kinds of image studies relevant to this study: 1. *Media image studies* focus on the destination's media coverage patterns during regular times and crisis periods (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). 2. *Image repair studies* emphasize the strategies officials use to market a place through various tools (social media, advertising) and their efforts to improve the destination's public and media image during crisis (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). In essence, qualitative content analysis exposes and highlights the various actors, actions and aims (marketers, officials, journalists) hidden behind the "simple" text whether visual or discursive (in Facebook posts, ads, statements, press releases). The goal is to reveal how various actors interpret the world and attempt to impose their ideologies, perceptions and opinions on an unclear reality (Mair et al., 2016; Avraham & Ketter, 2016).

In the findings section, each official's step or action regarding the destination image or marketing was defined as an "image repair strategy" according to previous studies in the field of image repair (Coombs & Holiday, 2010; Avraham & Ketter, 2016; Beirman & Van Walbeek, 2011). When a strategy was discovered in our content analysis, it was included in the findings section. For example, in the case of the "blaming and attacking the media" strategy, when we found a news report where leaders attacked the media or arrest journalists for reporting the

pandemic, we included this example in the findings section. While we discovered numerous examples for each strategy, we presented only a few cases; these examples are the best illustrations of each strategy. We discovered that the most common strategies used around the world were the "Promised future visit" and "Expanding the destination's image" strategies; both were adopted during the "peak of the infected people" phase of the global quarantine (Spring 2020).

4. Findings

In July 2020, the PATA (Pacific-Asia Travel Association) adopted a strategic approach in response to the Covid-19 crisis that includes five phases: cases on the rise, flattened case spread, cases declining, cases under control, cases minimal (PATA, 2020). As these phases included mainly crisis management strategies, we would like to use these phases as a base to suggest a new model that will concentrate solely on crisis communication management (Beirman, 2003; Coombs & Holiday, 2010; Mair et el, 2016) and destination life cycle models (Rodrigues, Correia & Kozak, 2012). Like PATA's model, in our proposed model, the phases were determined according to the existence of the pandemic in a destination or area, the number of infected people, the size of the threat to the tourism industry and the ability of the authorities to control the number of infected people.

- Figure 1 around here -

As can be seen in the 'Six-phase image repair strategies during pandemics' model (Figure 1) marketers use various kinds of strategies to combat the tourism crisis resulting from pandemics.

Each example of ads, websites or YouTube videos presented in this section was marked in the text with a hashtag sign (#), as details about its link are found in the attachment. In addition, details regarding each example strategy taken from the media reports was marked by the name of the media outlet in which it appeared and the publication date. In cases where we used examples from previous academic studies to illustrate the use of a certain strategy, we cited the authors.

The purpose of the article is not to find out whether or not a certain image repair strategy chosen by officials was effective in combating the pandemic and returning tourists; such a determination depends on various factors (Avraham & Ketter, 2016) related to the destination characteristics (location, budget, popularity), circumstances of the crisis' (type, damages, duration) and the target audience (prior image, risk perception). Thus an image repair strategy that may take one destination out of a crisis might not have the same result in a destination with different characteristics. In other words, there is no strategy that is effective for every destination in the same way (Yeh, 2020; Avraham, 2021). Therefore, our goal here is to identify the image repair strategies and catalog them into a theoretical model that offers practitioners six phases in combating pandemics.

4.1 Phase 1: Pandemic Revealed in the Region

This is the first phase of a pandemic in which the international media start to report about the outbreak in a particular area. Here decision-makers might choose a variety of strategies:

4.1.1 Ignoring or denying the existence of the pandemic

This strategy involves a destination's decision-makers seeking to ignore the reports about the pandemic and deny the tourism crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). For example, when the media started reporting stories about the Zika 2016 outbreak in Miami Beach, the mayor said:

> *We don't expect to have one* (Zika outbreak)… there are 5 cases linked to Miami Beach, 3 tourists , that *I am not sure that they are here anymore… clearly, there are no mosquitoes in Miami Beach.. our hotels are full and people everywhere…* (#1)

The Dominican Republic's local authorities and tourism minister also used this strategy during the crisis of mysterious tourist deaths mentioned previously, saying:

> A cause of death has been determined… *Therefore, mystery deaths do not exist in the Dominican Republic…* (Forbes, June 24, 2019).

The use of these messages intended to calm locals and tourists is positive, provided of course that they are honest and verifiable. These messages probably helped further the flow of tourists to these destinations during the pandemic. On the other hand, if the messages were not factual, as illustrated by US President Trump who kept claiming that the Covid-19 pandemic crisis either did not exist or that "it's being contained" (*CNN*, April 18, 2020) the responses were harshly criticized, with journalists mocking these messages (*NYT*, April 16, 2020; *CNN*, April 18, 2020).

4.1.2 Initiating extra prevention steps

In this strategy, officials claim that the virus is under control and emphasize the adoption of extra preventative measures. For example, Singapore's health ministry mentioned that during the Zika pandemic, "the current measures are *over and above* what is necessary." (#23) Costa Rica likewise declared that "The government has *doubled their efforts* for national protection in order to keep the situation under control and, as far as possible, prevent an increase of Zika cases."

(#18) Another example is the Dominican Republic, which revealed in a press release its new

tourism safety initiatives, stating that:

> The Department of Tourism Services and Companies *will double its inspection capacities and increase standards in tourist destinations* (Travel Weekly, July 18, 2019)

Mexico also used this strategy in the case of the H1N1 pandemic, announcing in their 'Believe

It-Mexico' campaign that:

> *The government took extraordinary measures* to prevent the virus in order to protect the safety of both residents and visitors alike and it worked… (#8)

The goal of this strategy is to calm the target audience and locals by showing that officials did

the maximum to protect visitors from the pandemic.

4.1.3 Having experience in previous pandemic crises

This strategy involves destination-marketers downplaying a current virus crisis by emphasizing

the fact that the destination successfully combated previous pandemics and hinting that they will

overcome the current virus as well. Singapore's authorities said in a reaction to the 2016 Zika

challenge*:*

> *The Republic has been reasonably successful in containing local transmission of other mosquito-borne diseases like chikungunya, and it is possible to do the same for Zika* (#23)

When the first Zika case was discovered in Belize, the president of the Belize Hotel Association

used the same strategy by saying:

> *Belize and the region have dealt with many other emergencies and disasters in the past...* but the industry has always bounced back and kept moving forward….We have to remember that *we have dealt with mosquito-carrying diseases before...* (#19)

Likewise, Costa Rica mentioned its experience with previous viruses while combating Zika

(#21) and a similar message was sent by the Caribbean Hotel and Tourism Association (*Tourism*

Today, August, 2016). All of these messages and declarations are part of the efforts made by marketers to make sure that the target audience believes that the destination's officials have experience in previous pandemic crises, so "they know what they are doing."

4.1.4 Minimizing the effect of the pandemic on tourism

Another strategy to combat rumours regarding a pandemic involves minimizing and downplaying the damage, severity, and negative influence of the crisis on the tourism industry (Coombs & Holiday, 2010). During the Zika pandemic, the Bahamian minister of tourism said: *"We haven't seen any cancellations, we haven't seen a reduction.* In fact we've seen an increase in airlift [to the Bahamas]…" (#2) The Caribbean Tourism Organization sent a similar message in response to Zika *"…there are very few cancellations as a result of Zika."* (#16) In addition, the Brazilian government's communications director said "that there was, as yet, *no evidence of people cancelling their trips* to the Olympics in August.' (BBC, February 3, 2016). Similarly, the tourism minister of the Dominican Republic claimed after many media reports on mysterious tourist deaths: "Americans are not cancelling their vacations." (Forbes, June 24, 2019). Similarly, the president of the Belize Hotel Association said:

> The reports that we have received, unfortunately, have been more of group cancellations…. but we have seen very few individual cancellations and most of them are related to someone who is pregnant (#17).

The use of minimizing the effect of the pandemic on tourism as a message strategy works, as mentioned, if it reflects reality. If not, it undermines the reputation and reliability of the DMO.

4.2 Phase 2: Low Number of Cases were Found

In this phase, news items begin to appear in the international media reporting on a number of people who have been infected in a specific destination. At this point, decision makers are in a hurry to issue relaxing messages to the potential tourists claiming that the situation is under control and business as usual.

4.2.1 "Business as usual"

This popular strategy applies to two situations. The first sends the message that the pandemic has not become a major crisis and no cancellations have been recorded, inferring that the tourism industry is carrying on as usual. The second sends the message that the destination will be open for business and visitors once the crisis is over (Walters & Mair, 2012). A good example of the latter was the president of "Tourism Toronto", who said at the conclusion of that city's SARS pandemic:

> The tourism bureau is planning "an aggressive industry wide marketing and communications effort," he said. Its message: *"Toronto is open for business."*
> (*NYT*, April 27, 2003).

Similarly, the Thai Tourism Authority claimed during the 2003 SARS pandemic that the country was 'SARS-free' (almost true) and that the tourism industry was operating normally (Rittichainuwat & Chakraborty, 2009). Puerto Rico's authorities stated after the Zika crisis: "We are very much open for business." (eTN, June 7, 2016). Another example is Gambia, which during the 2013-2014 Ebola pandemic, promoted the "business as usual" message as the Gambian Tourism Board distributed a video that presented normal day-to-day life in the country (Novelli et al., 2018). As with the former strategy, the "business as usual" message can be effective if it is based on reality. Marketers have also used other strategies to have the same

intended effect. These strategies are organizing events or familiarization trips for journalists,

with the hope that they will promote the message that the destination is back to normal.

4.2.2 Acknowledging the virus crisis and insisting it is "under control"

Here officials acknowledge the virus crisis but assert that the virus "is under control." All

possible measures have been taken to fight and eradicate the virus. For example, during the Zika

virus, Costa Rica claimed:

> The government has *doubled their efforts* for national protection in order to keep
> the situation *under control*…prevent an increase of Zika cases … *Our country has
> highly consolidated protocols for the prevention and control diseases*; hence why
> to date there has been such a low number of Zika cases (#21).

During the 2003 SARS outbreak, Canada's prime minister said: "There is no danger. *All

precautions have been taken.*" (*NYT*, April 27, 2003) A similar message was released by

Toronto's chief medical officer: "The outbreak is not over but it is *definitely under control.*" (*The

Guardian*, April 24, 2003) Florida's governor tried to send a similar message during the Zika

crisis: "*We are very active and making sure we do everything we can to control the spread of

Zika*" (#5) Furthermore, when a crisis is over and the destination has reached the recovery stage,

officials then admit that a crisis had occurred but they concentrate on the fact that the virus has

been handled and no longer exists. For example, in the "Believe it-Mexico" campaign made by

the Mexican tourism board for North American tourists, it was said:

> The first case of H1N1 in Mexico was diagnosed in mid-April and *the
> government took extraordinary measures to prevent the spread of virus…and it
> worked*; the CDC said Mexico's response was a remarkable model and example
> for the world, so now you can discover the magic of Mexico once again (#6)

In this example, the marketers mentioned the challenge the destination faced and highlighted the

successful handling of the pandemic crisis. According to Avraham & Ketter (2016), the officials'

acknowledgment of the virus crisis in the ad increases the target audiences' trust; the target audience does not get the impression that the DMO ignored the pandemic but rather that they understood the challenge and combated it.

4.3 Phase 3: Rising Number of Cases

In the third phase, there is an increase in the number of infected people in the destination. Here, the decision makers use classical image repair strategies such as narrowing the crisis to a specific area or trying to reduce the data published regarding the number of infected people, their medical condition and the source of infection. At the same time, a struggle begins against the media or other sources that publish data which is contrary to the official statistics regarding the pandemic.

4.3.1 Narrowing the geographical area of the virus

In this strategy, marketers try to limit the geographical borders where the virus exists (Hopper, 2003). They claim that the virus is limited to certain locations, while other places in the city or country remain safe to visit. During the SARS pandemic, the Singapore Tourism Board initiated the COOL Singapore Project "aimed to communicate the message that Singapore is not dangerous and *specific venues* were uncontaminated by SARS."(Henderson & Ng, 2004).

Another example can be seen when tourism stakeholders from East Asia were concerned about the effect of the 2002-3 SARS discovered in China and Hong Kong on tourism to East Asia. Trying to restore this tourism, tourism officials and NTBs from the area cooperated in order to attract tourism to all countries in the area except the infected countries. This kind of marketing followed the strategy of "narrowing the geographical area"; instead of claiming that there was no risk of SARS in the whole area, the message acknowledged the crisis while limiting

it to a specific restricted area. Such a strategy allows tourism recovery in the unaffected areas (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). During the Zika virus, Mexico's health ministry emphasized '"he disease was under control and *far from its main tourist centres*." (#22). The "narrowing of the geographical area of the virus" strategy was regarded as efficient, according to the study by Hopper (2003), who demonstrated how London was marketed during the foot and mouth outbreak in the beginning of the 2000s and which only existed in rural areas.

4.3.2 Downplaying the number of infected people, their medical condition, and the source of infection

In this strategy, officials try to downplay the number of infected people, their medical condition, their location and the source of their infection. All of these techniques might indicate the extent and severity of the pandemic in the destination for potential visitors.

a. Downplaying the number of infected people

Some officials seek to downplay the number of infected people. The most radical case was China, accused by the USA of hiding the real number of infected people during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (*The Guardian*, May 18, 2020; *NYT*, May 4, 2020). It should be noted, however, that the technique of publishing low numbers of infected people is actually quite common. The Indian government was accused of publishing misleading statistics that may not have reflected the number of people affected by the 2014 dengue fever outbreak (*The Guardian*, October 7, 2014). During the Zika pandemic, Costa Rica published a press release saying: there have *"only been two native cases reported to date, both acquired the virus in the same*

neighbourhood."(#18) After the US issued a travel warning to Guyana because of the Zika virus, that country's tourism ministry said: *"To date we have only one case."*(#3)

b. Isolated cases

Another technique is to confirm that those who are ill have been isolated or being treated. This was the main strategy used by the Dominican Republic in its various reactions. For example, the minister of tourism said:

> In the last five years, the Dominican Republic has welcomed almost 30 million people, evidencing the large preference of visitors as well as the safety levels of the destination. *This also demonstrates these cases are isolated and regrettable* (#19).

On other occasions the minister sent a similar message: "the deaths and illnesses are seemingly small numbers out of a big number." (*Forbes*, June 24, 2019; *CNN*, June 13, 2019) The UK adopted a similar technique when the government's chief medical officer said: "The six probable cases in the UK had been promptly identified and cared for." (*NYT*, April 27, 2003)

c. Identifying the sources of infection

This technique involves officials suggesting that most of the infected people are not actually infected in the destination, or that they are no longer there. For example, Miami Beach's mayor said:

> '… There are five cases linked to Miami Beach, three tourists, but I am not sure that they are here anymore…' (#4).

The importance of this technique can be understood, by analysing the strategies Toronto chose in its fight with the SARS pandemic in 2003. After evidence revealed that most infected Toronto

residents became infected while visiting Hong Kong, the city changed its messaging strategy to stress this fact (*NYT*, April 27, 2003).

d. Downplaying damage caused to infected people

Here officials try to downplay the damage caused by the virus. For example, as the Thai authorities, worried by the virus's tourism impact, downplayed the Zika risk, the health ministry stressed: "The virus was not deadly or contagious."(*Reuters*, September 12, 2016). Mexico also used this technique in its efforts to reduce the effect of negative perceptions about Mexico arising from Zika:

> It has since been found in many countries around the world – *Thailand stated they have Zika virus since 2006 and tourists flock to their beaches every year with no problem*…(#20)

During the Covid-19 crisis, US President Donald Trump used a similar message: " [Trump] dismissed the severity of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States … downplaying the impact of the disease and saying that while the testing of tens of millions of Americans had identified many cases, "99 percent" of them were "totally harmless." (*NYT*, July 7, 2020) It appears that officials made considerable efforts in mitigating the number of infected people, their medical condition, and the source of the infection. The goal of their messages was to minimize the severity of the pandemic. By July 2020 with over 3.5 million cases and more than 140,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the United States, Trump's approach was widely discredited by the weight of evidence (*NYT*, July 7, 2020).

4.3.3 Blaming and attacking the media and other sources

According to this strategy, leaders' frustration with their destinations' media coverage or negative messages published by other actors, lead them to blame those actors for contributing to the destinations' negative perception (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). For example, after the WHO (World Health Organization) said that the SARS outbreak had continued to grow in Toronto and that people from around the world acquired the infection while visiting Toronto, the city's mayor attacked the WHO at a news conference (*The Guardian*, April 24, 2003). In addition, city health officials said that the WHO advisory "was irresponsible and regrettable." Toronto's officials also complained about the "negative press that we've seen around" regarding the pandemic infection's source (*NYT,* April 27, 2003). Another example is the Dominican Republic which tried to regain traveller trust after several reports in the international media about tourists who died mysteriously or got ill while visiting. As a result, the government "*position [ed] the country as a victim and seemingly blaming the media"* (*Forbes*, June 24, 2019) while promoting the hashtag #BeFairWithDR (*CNN*, June 13, 2019). Also, during the 2003 SARS pandemic, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) improved its website, adding information about the successful combating of the pandemic in the country, as well as media reports that were "misreporting." (Henderson, 2003)

The idea behind the use of this strategy is to make potential tourists question the "defamed" actors or the media's credibility, by hinting that inaccurate coverage and negative messages should either be ignored and can be refuted by verifiable facts; the claim is that the actual situation is much better than the situation reported by the media (Avraham & Ketter, 2016).

4.3.4 Initiating sanctions against the media or other sources

While a destination's image may be enhanced, following the publication of a story or photos of positive news, it can also be negatively affected by negative media coverage. It is for this reason that officials try to prevent it (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). As social media becomes increasingly pervasive, officials start acting against information that might damage their destination. This was the case in Kerala, India where: "*The state police has announced that it would register criminal cases against those caught creating fake messages and spreading panic.*" (#15) Another example of this strategy's use involves Egypt during Covid-19. The government punished sources that published alternative data to the government's statistics on the number of infected people in the country. A Guardian reporter accused of this was expelled from the country and was almost arrested (*Ha'aretz,* March 30, 2020). Turkey, Hungary and China also used sanctions against the media or other sources who criticized or mocked government efforts to combat the pandemic (eTN, May 3, 2020; *Ha'aretz,* May 4, 2020). Sanctions against the media or other sources as a strategy is usually not adopted by democratic governments.

4.4 Phase 4: Peak of Infected People

At this phase, the decision makers understand that there is no point in attracting foreign tourists as the number of local infected people is at its peak and at the same time there is an attempt to reduce or to stop domestic tourism. The goal of the officials in this case is to concentrate less on tourism marketing and more on flattening the curve of the number of infected people. At this point, however, marketers might still be involved in marketing the destination by trying to expand the destination image and to keep it in the minds and awareness of future tourists.

4.4.1 Expanding the destination's image

While countering the negative coverage of any of the destination's negative aspects, like an actual virus itself, DMOs try to enhance the image of their destination (Che, 2008). As the media tends to focus on the virus's victims and the damage caused (Mason et al., 2005), marketers try to emphasize that there is more to their destination than infected people and safety issues. As a result, they want to remind potential tourists how diverse and unique their destinations are - far beyond the current media coverage patterns. For example, as a result of the negative coverage of the mysterious deaths in the Dominican Republic, the tourism minister stressed that:

> The country is continuing to receive visitors as per normal from all over the world. The Dominican Republic 'is a tranquil, peaceful destination and the safest in the region (#19).

After the 2003 SARS outbreak, two countries ran a campaign that used the strategy of expanding the image: Hong Kong and Singapore. Hong Kong used the slogan "Live it. Love it." which presented the city's scenery, activities, islands and heritage (Avraham & Ketter, 2016); Singapore ran the campaign "UNIQUELY SINGAPORE" (Singapore Tourism Board, 2004), "which aimed to offer products and services that showcase the distinctness of Singapore." (#10; #24) As the media tend to cover pandemic crises in sensational and alarmist patterns, it is very important for marketers and DMOs to remind potential visitors what destinations have to offer beyond the current pandemic (Mason et al., 2005).

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, many destinations have used the new media to expand their image. These efforts include information about activities and updates, as the marketers' goal is to connect potential and future visitors with the destinations and to foster a sense of excitement. Virtual trips, which were rarely used in past pandemic-related tourism crises, have become very popular. Japan, for example, offers a "360-degree virtual reality movie

experience featuring scenes throughout the country" (eTN, March 25, 2020), and Jamaica's

marketers initiated the "Escape to Jamaica" campaign that promotes "a taste of the destination."

(eTN, April 1, 2020)

4.4.2 Promising future visit

Because the Covid-19 has caused a prolonged tourism crisis, compared to previous epidemic

crises, destinations have been very apprehensive about disappearing from the minds of potential

tourists. Reflecting this concern, a new image repair strategy has been created that has not been

used in previous pandemics crises. The idea behind this strategy has been to tell visitors that they

can't come yet but will be able to do so in the near future. The essence of this strategy was the

adoption of the UNESCO slogan : "Staying home today means travelling tomorrow". For

example: Kenya has run with the campaign "Staying at home today means traveling tomorrow!"

and Malta has initiated the campaign of "Dream Malta Now…Visit Later" (eTN, April 22,

2020). By adopting this strategy marketers are hoping that if they keep the destination in the

minds of tourists, tourists will prefer to visit their destinations over others when the time comes.

4.5 Phase 5: Cases Decline and are under Control (attracting local tourism)

At this phase, the number of infected people is declining and the decision-makers realize that the

recovery is approaching and they need to start to promote the destination for the return of

tourists. In this phase, marketers begin to promote domestic tourism by convincing local citizens

that business is going back to normal and it safe to travel.

4.5.1 Using patriotism and nationalism

During tourism crises, when foreign visitors are afraid to come, many countries have discovered that local visitors can help in their recovery, as the local market is often faster to react. During these crises, citizens often experience feelings of patriotism which marketers try to use to jumpstart a resumption of tourism (Avraham, 2020b). This strategy has been employed during pandemics. One example is the "Step Out! Singapore" promotion to convince local citizens to travel in and around the islands as well as to shop and consume culture in order to help the country's economy recover (Henderson, 2004).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, extensive border closures have been enacted all over the world and many countries, therefore, have chosen to focus on promoting domestic tourism. Australia, for example, has been globally isolated due to border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Without the imminent prospect of either inbound or outbound international tourism, Tourism Australia has initiated a very effective strategy to leverage a solidarity tourism campaign developed after the 2019-20 bushfires. This transferred to the Tourism Australia's Covid-19 "Love Australia" campaign and "holiday here this year" (#14) which urges Australians to explore their own country. This campaign is supported by an intense media campaign utilizing all media platforms, including the sponsorship of special newspaper features, TV documentaries and social media campaigns (Tourism Australia, 2020).

Similarly, the Israeli tourism ministry and the Tel Aviv municipality has initiated a campaign in June 2020 that "It is time for vacation in Israel." The goal of the campaign is to restore the hospitality industry and includes various price reductions, benefits and special tours (Ha'aretz, June 14, 2020). The patriotism strategy and the concentration on local tourism until the return of foreign tourists was shown to be efficient in two other major tourism crises: 9/11 in

New York and Washington and the terror attacks in Europe since 2014 (Stafford, Yu & Armoo, 2002; Avraham, 2021).

4.5. "We are open for local tourism"

The aim of this strategy is to send an opposite message in order to combat the local tourists' perception that the destination is not safe to visit or close because of the virus. This is a basic strategy, employed by most DMOs albeit with different techniques (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). At the beginning of the recovery period, this strategy is generally aimed first at domestic tourists and then at foreign visitors. For example, Florida officials organized a press conference to mark the end of the Zika virus as the governor declared to the national media outlets: "Our state has no more local transmission of Zika." (*NYT*, December 9, 2016). Similarly, the Sunshine State, during the Covid-19 pandemic has also initiated the "Keep Florida Open" campaign while New York City has run the "All In NYC" campaign (Avraham, 2020b). As the skies were closed to foreign tourists, these destinations are re being re-marketed for domestic tourists.

4.6 Phase 6: Cases Minimal (attracting international tourism)

In the last phase, as the number of infected people declines dramatically and domestic tourism starts to recover, marketers start investing efforts to attract foreign tourists. Here, too, well-known image repair strategies are used, such as attempts to create affinity with foreign audiences, as well as the use of cultural symbols, brands and celebrities that are familiar and popular among various target audiences.

4.6.1 "We are safe for foreign tourists"

This strategy is similar to the one we presented in the previous phase but here it aims at foreign tourists. Once again, the idea is to send an opposite message to the negative image and to claim that the destination is safe to visit. For example, after the H1N1 flu emergency in Mexico was over, Mexico City's tourism secretary said: "The city is safe again" (NYT, May 9, 2009). The Dominican Republic declared that their country "is a very safe destination" while combating Zika (*Travel Pulse*, May 14, 2016). Another example for the use of the "we are safe for foreign tourists" strategy was in Singapore when it fought the 2003 SARS crisis. As the country succeeded in fighting the pandemic, the Singapore Tourism Board informed the travel industry and potential consumers in key markets that the country was ready to welcome visitors again – that it was safe and free of SARS (Beirman, 2006).

4.6.2 Creating affinity with foreign audiences

The target audiences of this strategy are usually foreign audiences that have common values, history, religion, or enemies with the marketed destination (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). The association of the destination to the audience is done while using the audience's cultural and national symbols, heroes, values or history. For example, the Mexico Tourism Board launched an advertising campaign in North America during its recovery from the H1N1 pandemic under the slogan: "The place you think you knew" (#11). This campaign used the familiarity technique as marketers emphasized past affinity between the American audience and their destination, based on past visits and experiences.

Two videos run by Mexico during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 were aimed at the Canadian and Australian audiences and graphically illustrated the affinity factor. In the video for Canadian visitors, the Mexican marketers used various techniques to show the similarity and proximity between Mexico and Canadian citizens, while associating Mexico with several familiar Canadian cultural brands. The video began by presenting the Canadian flag and the soundtrack exclaimed:

> My lovely friends, it's time to prepare a *homemade Poutine* (local Canadian dish) surrounded by our loved ones, sharing games, *maple treats* (well-known Canadian food and memories. *Here at home we are doing the same*. *Remember the last time you visited me*, when you discovered our ancient world… *we are also staying safe*… Love you soon, Mexico (#12).

The advertisement associated Mexico with the Canadian audience's cultural and national symbols, while it emphasized former connections and similar challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Mexico also tailored a similar ad for the Australian market, which started with the Australian flag, using the typical Australian greeting "G'day mate", and mentioning that "these are times for fluffy lamingtons" (Australia's famed dessert) (#13).

The effectiveness of the "emphasis of similarity in values, history and enemies" strategy was proven by several experimental studies (Bekk et al., 2016; Walters & Mair, 2012). These studies revealed that shared values, proximity and similarity increase the affinity between a destination and target audience thereby creating a positive image for the destination, and making the destination more attractive to the target audience.

4.6.3 Recruiting the target audience's trusted, familiar brands

This strategy involves destination marketers seeking to enhance their credibility by aligning their reassuring messages regarding the pandemic to the audience's familiar and trusted brands. These familiar and trusted brands are usually reputable national and international organizations. The audience apparently believes that if these brands are "in the picture", it means that the crisis is being well-handled (Avraham, 2020b). In the context of a pandemic, these could include the WHO (World Health Organization), CDC (Centres for Disease Control), and other governmental bodies as well as respectable leaders in the eyes of the target audience who may be the president or prime minister. For example, during a recovery campaign for Mexico after the H1N1 outbreak, ads targeting the US market mentioned:

> ..the CDC said Mexico's response was a remarkable model and example for the world, so now you can discover the magic of Mexico once again… (#14).

In a similar Mexican ad, US President Obama was quoted, expressing similar compliments regarding Mexico's functioning during the H1N1 pandemic. Mexico also referred to WHO while combating Zika in 2016: "The Mexican government was following all *WHO* guidelines" (#22). Other reputable brands used in marketers' reassuring messages included the FBI and the US State Department. The Dominican Republic mentioned these organizations' involvement in the investigation of the mysterious tourist deaths and emphasized that there were no suspicious findings regarding tourists deaths (Forbes, June 24, 2019; CNN, June 13, 2019). This strategy was also used to encourage local tourism. Much publicity surrounded Canada's prime minister enjoying a well-publicized visit to Toronto during the 2003 SARS pandemic, while saying:

> There is no danger, all precautions have been taken… I wanted to give an example (*NYT*, April 27, 2003).

The use of well-known politicians, familiar brands and cultural symbols is a time-tested strategy in destination marketing (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). According to Walters and Mair (2012), the

use of celebrity testimonials is one the most effective strategies to bring back tourists after a crisis.

5. Summary

In response to suggestions from several scholars (Liu et al., 2015; Novelli et al., 2018, Wilder-Smith, 2006; Chen et al., 2020; Yeh, 2020), regarding the lack of research in the field of tourism and pandemic risk perception and image repair, we conducted an analysis of strategies, used by destinations around the world to combat image related crises, during and following pandemics of the past 20 years. Our analysis shows that officials and marketers used various strategies during six phases of combating the pandemics. Among these strategies are those that can be used only during a specific phase. One example is the use of the "ignoring or denying the existence of the pandemic" in the phase entitled "pandemic revealed in the region", phase 1. Other strategies can be used in multiple phases; an example of this is the use of the "we are safe/open" strategy which appears in both the "cases minimal" and "cases decline and under control" phases.

In our study, we found new image repair strategies in addition to familiar ones which were mentioned in existing image repair models (Beirman & Van Walbeek, 2011; Walters & Mair, 2012). These new strategies included: taking extra prevention steps, claiming that we have experience in previous crises, acknowledging the virus crisis but "it is under control", promising future visits and downplaying the number of infected people, their medical condition and the

source of infection. We would like to suggest adding these four new strategies to these models in future research on image repair strategies used during and after pandemics.

Image repair strategies can be divided, as mentioned into source, audience and message strategies (Avraham & Ketter, 2016). As we can see in our analysis, the most popular strategies in the last phases were audience strategies. As mentioned "audience strategies" are used when marketers desire to reach out to a specific target audience during crisis. For examples, associate the destination to well-known brands to the target audience members such as celebrities and other cultural symbols. In our research we found prominent use of the audience's familiar brands as a strategy to combat the pandemic (Walters & Mair, 2012; Avraham & Ketter, 2016). While adopting this strategy, officials mentioned brands such as the WHO, US presidents, and the CDC to confirm both the "correct management" of the pandemic crisis at the end of the pandemic. Interestingly, we observed that in response to Covid-19, marketers did not employ this strategy, and little reference was made of WHO or any American brands and health organizations. We believe that the main reason is that the WHO's reputation was undermined by accusations of unprofessionalism and data bias, especially during the beginning of the pandemic (*Reuters*, May 31, 2020) and that the American record in combating the Covid-19 pandemic was widely perceived as a failure (*NYT*, July 7, 2020). On the other hand, the only country that used the audience strategy during the Covid-19 pandemic while trying to create affinity with foreign audiences was Mexico. In innovative campaigns, Mexico appealed to a Canadian and Australian audience, emphasizing the commonalities between Mexico and these audiences. While previous studies have found a difference in the kind of strategies used by developing and developed countries to combat crisis (Avraham, 2020a), in our study we found no significant difference in the type of image repair strategies chosen.

Studies dealing with crisis management tend to divide coping with crisis events into three stages: pre-crisis, management and recovery. Most of the studies that dealt with image repair mainly presented adoption strategies and dealt less with their division into the periods of a crisis (Beirman & Van Walbeek, 2011). Due to the complexity of the pandemic-related tourism crises, as our research has shown, it is necessary to divide the coping strategies into more than three phases. Unlike a tourism crisis that occurs due to a terrorist incident or natural disaster, crises related to epidemics tend to be longer, more frightening and create significant damage to the tourism industry. These damages are reflected in the recent Covid-19 crisis. Most previous studies have dealt mainly with short-term crises and hence the innovation in our proposed model offers six phases for this long-term crisis. Therefore, we believe that the results of this study, beside its theoretical contribution, will expand practitioner knowledge regarding the development of strategies to effectively contain and recover from infectious diseases (Smith, 2006; Yeh, 2020; Gossling et al, 2020).

This study has limitations, so it should be kept in mind that the proposed analysis is based mainly on strategies reported in the media and tourism news outlets. There may be additional strategies not yet reported and therefore not analysed. Future research should focus on the ways decision makers decide on the image repair strategies that will be used during the crisis. In addition, we have to remember that the analysis was carried out in English and used international media channels; during crises, many destinations will focus on a domestic audience, use the local language and local communication channels. The local media campaigns in local languages also need to be analysed. Questions for further research abound. Is this decision-making process based on up-to-date information? Is strategic thinking involve in the decision making process? Is there collaboration with the local community and consultation with community leaders? Is there

reliance on theoretical and practical knowledge? Could the image crisis have been avoided if there had been better preparation?

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Figure 1: Six-Phase Image Repair Strategies during Pandemics

	Phase	Strategies used during various phases
1	**Pandemic Revealed in the Region**	● Ignoring or denying the existence of the pandemic ● Initiating extra prevention steps ● Having experience in previous pandemics ● Minimizing the effect of the pandemic on tourism
2	**Low Number of Cases Found**	● "business as usual" ● Acknowledging the virus crisis which is 'under control'
3	**Cases on the Rise**	● Narrowing the geographical area of the virus ● Downplaying the number of infected people, their medical condition, and the source of infection ● Blaming and attacking the media and other sources ● Initiating sanctions against the media or other sources
4	**Peak of Infected People**	● Expanding the destination's image ● Promising future visit
5	**Cases Decline and are under Control (attracting local tourism)**	● "We are open for local tourism" ● Using patriotism and nationalism
6	**Cases Minimal (attracting international tourism)**	● "We are safe for foreign tourists" ● Creating affinity with foreign audiences ● Associating the destination's recovery efforts to the target audience trusted, familiar brands