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To cite this article: Murat Nazli (2021): Tourist guides facing the impacts of the pandemic COVID-19, Current Issues in Tourism, DOI: [10.1080/13683500.2021.1997943](https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1997943)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2021.1997943>



Published online: 06 Nov 2021.



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RESEARCH LETTER



Tourist guides facing the impacts of the pandemic COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on the profession of tourist guides and offers possible solutions to the industry. The study draws from the recently published studies and guides' perspectives from 36 countries. E-mail interview is used to collect data between 25 February and 30 May 2020 when the epidemic is spreading rapidly worldwide. The analysis is performed by using MAXQDA Analytics. The study captures events on COVID-19, as guides experience unemployment and trauma, and provides social and practical implications concerning cooperation and collaboration of stakeholders, the occurrence of inequality, and unfairness in the pandemic.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 June 2021
Accepted 19 October 2021

KEYWORDS

Tourist guides; COVID-19; tour guidance; employment; tour guides and operators; sustainable tourism

1. Tourist guides and COVID-19

The global spread of COVID-19 within a short period threatens millions of service jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry (Chang et al., 2020). The travel restrictions/bans and social distancing (Chinazzi et al., 2020), the quarantine period (UNWTO, 2020), and the obedience to the international health regulations (Habibi et al., 2020) changed the travel behaviour of people all over the world. The professional tourist guides who serve tourist groups without taking into account the social distancing or the risk factors of diseases take their share from this epidemic disease. Since the guides are one of the backbones of the tourism industry representing the destinations (Isaac & Abuaita, 2021), it will be valuable to learn their insights into what is happening to their jobs and employment status and the field of tourist guidance due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There are only a few regional studies concerning the effects of COVID-19 on professional guides (Carvalho, 2021; Grancay, 2020; Nyawo, 2020; Turker & Karaca, 2020) but no other study exists with the current study's international scope and perspective, which will contribute to the literature and practice. Therefore, the study aims to examine the impacts of COVID-19 on the jobs of guides, understand their current situation concerning their needs, and offer possible solutions to the industry leaders.

2. Methodology

Among the purposeful sampling methods is criterion sampling, and the key criteria are to be a professional and certified guide in the home country. To reach these tourist guides, an online search of their tour guidance associations in their databases is carried out. The sample is 83 respondents among 844 guides from 36 countries. We believe that the non-respondents from other countries did not respond to the online questionnaire due to the pandemic crisis, their changing employment status, and lack of morale from not having international or domestic tourists in their tourist destinations. Therefore, the response rate is 9.8%. An e-mail interview is used to collect data between 25 February 2020 and 30 May 2020, when the disease is spreading fast across the world. Questions

are sent to the guides in an e-mail attachment whose e-mail addresses are in the guidance associations' databases through Survey Monkey. The same e-mail was sent twice a month starting from late February until May to collect sufficient data. The process has been continued until there is no response from the guides. The inspirational studies concern the occupational risks for COVID-19 (Koh, 2020), responses to the disease in protecting occupations such as tour guidance (Pung et al., 2020), hospitality communication, and funds for tourism due to COVID-19 (Lanz et al., 2020), which led to the following open-ended questions.

- (1) How did the cancellations/postponements of reservations/tours affect the jobs of tourist guides?
- (2) How will the guides overcome this difficulty to stay in business while the tourists cancel/postpone their travel plans?
- (3) How will this disease affect their psychology due to preventing travel, governments' restrictions/bans, and social distances?
- (4) What kind of solutions/strategies would you recommend to keep their jobs safe?

The analysis is performed by using the qualitative software program MAXQDA-Pro 2020. Thematic analysis with an inductive approach is used, which involves letting the data determine themes. Five stages take place as being familiar with the text, coding, and generating themes by identifying their patterns, going through themes whether they represent the data, defining and naming themes. Then, the relational analyses are evaluated.

3. Results and discussion

The demographic profile is: female 50.6%, male 49.4%; the average age is higher than 50; work experience as a guide for female is more than 21 years, for males more than 15 years; country/region representation: USA 14.4%, Turkey 10.8%, Italy 7.2%, Ireland 7.2%, Greece 6%, Germany 4.8%, The UK 4.8%, Spain 3.6%, Slovenia 3.6%, Israel 2.4%, Japan 2.4%, 1.3% each for Austria, Portugal, Russia, Australia, Canada, Romania, Jamaica, Norway, Georgia, Sudan, Lebanon, Tonga, South Africa, Colombia, Nigeria, Cameroon, Bhutan, India, Egypt, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Estonia, Malaysia, and Myanmar.

3.1. Cancellations affecting guides and their survival

Table 1 presents how the cancellations/postponements affect guides and how they will survive in their businesses. Cancellations, no future bookings, and the debts push them to look for other jobs. They are in need of government support and intend to improve their online skills to attract the industry.

3.2. COVID-19 affecting the psychology of guides and their solutions to keep jobs safe

Table 1 also indicates the responses concerning the effects of COVID-19 on the psychology of guides and states their recommendations. Many guides show the signs of depression and anxiety, mainly the independent contractors. Although the solutions are country-specific due to different laws, the stimulus packages and insurances will help them survive according to them. However, government support took place in the pandemic in terms of industry-specific loans to hard-hit sectors in the US (Cochrane & Fandos, 2020), state aid to tour operators in Germany (TUI Group, 2020), credit agreements with public banks for guides in Turkey (Dogancili, 2020), salary support by state in Italy (Nhamo et al., 2020), temporary refund for travel agencies' service and promotion of smart tourism in China (UNWTO, 2020), communication lines between tourism operators and the Ministry of Tourism in Greece and digital support to raise concerns with the UK government (OECD, 2020), suspension of withholding tax payments, social security and welfare contributions, and obligatory

Table 1. COVID-19 and guides.

Comments	Percentage
<i>1. Cancellations affecting guides</i>	
Canceled tours, no request/rescheduling	25.8
Job loss	18.8
No additional income, won't pay for taxes, social security	16.4
Destruction of business	8.23
Loss of season	7.05
Guides who are independent contractors/freelance workers have no help	7.05
Travel restrictions, flight cancellations hitting industry	5.88
Fear, insecurity	4.70
<i>2. How guides plan to stay in business</i>	
Government support	17.2
Seeking other jobs	14.8
Online work	13.5
Many won't recover	12.3
Selling assets/spending savings	8.64
The tourism market is broken down, no survival	6.17
Family support	4.93
<i>3. Effect of COVID-19 on guides' psychology</i>	
Affected terribly	12.0
Income insecurity bringing disappointment	9.63
Social distancing, travel restrictions destroyed our business	8.43
No big effect psychologically	7.22
Guides are proactive, brushing up on studies, WhatsApp groups, skype/zoom	6.02
Reach colleagues, be part of professional community	6.02
Reestablish their businesses, motive for no-booking guides	6.02
Disheartened, fear, panic	6.02
Depression, anxiety	4.81
<i>4. Guides' solutions to keep their jobs safe</i>	
Government support	19.2
Online work	9.63
Support of guides' chambers, tourism guidance organizations	8.43
Keep them educated	7.22
No solutions, wait-see policy	7.22
Using digital platform	7.22
Hoping tour companies recover, rehire guides	6.02
Disinfection in buses, daily safety measures (mask, distance)	4.81
Training	4.81
Restoring the confidence of travel to clients	4.81

Table 2. Thematic analysis.

Themes	Items	Sample quotes
Government support	Monthly allowances, state/wage support, incentives, financial aid, recovery funding, loans without interest, cover expenses	'Government support through monthly allowance or recovery package funding is necessary for their survival'
Online work	Lecturing, tour writing, route development, virtual tours, YouTube channels, digital content, co-edited books, documentaries	'... solution, creating online experiences, using social media to remind the beauties of the country to potential visitors'
Organizational support	Guides' chambers, tourism organizations, tourism guidance organizations, associations	'... support from tourism guidance organizations who hire professional tourist guides'
Education	Studying, following seminars, increasing knowledge, and permanent education, training opportunities	'... guides should continuously educate themselves by following online seminars, learning new topics'
Safety	Disinfection in buses, distance, hand sanitizers, protective masks, wash hands, check guests' health, find vaccine	'... need to adapt themselves to safety rules such as using hand sanitizers or wearing masks in service'
Strengthening confidence	Restore confidence of travel, communicate with target clients, increase the brand value	'Online communication with potential visitors to build trust and attract them'
Protecting certified guides	Standardization, protecting certified guides by the regulation, service level agreements, or contracts with operators	'... need for guides to have service level agreements, or contracts with operators'
Other jobs	Loss of jobs, no income, no survival, travel restrictions	'Guides won't survive for a long time, will look for other opportunities'
No solutions are offered	No answer	'No solution, we will wait and see'

Managing the effects on vulnerable destinations dependent on domestic and international tourists, rising unemployment, struggling to stay alive, and uncertainties in this profession, and handling the outbreak of the disease with emotional challenges, extreme anxiety, fear, and psychological trauma influence the destinations.

Rather than the general problems situated more broadly in the literature, this study emphasizes compact perspectives of guides who face unemployment due to COVID-19. Future studies will need to extend the sample after the post-coronavirus outbreak and analyze their employment status, psychological behaviour, and tendencies to stay in the industry. It is necessary to analyze the crisis management strategies of tourism organizations and governments in terms of their preparation, prevention, and recovery efforts, and how these strategies impact the survival of guides.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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