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Impact of COVID-19 on Travel Intention: The Case of Şırnak, Turkey

COVID-19'un Seyahat Etme Niyetine Etkisi: Şırnak Örneği

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ABSTRACT

Outbreaks such as COVID-19 cause great losses to the tourism industry. In particular, the decrease in people's travel mobility is effective in these losses. Perceived risk to people's safety also affects their intention to travel. Considering the behavior of individuals under conditions of social instability is necessary both economically and sociologically. For this reason, in case of major epidemics such as COVID-19, it is an urgent necessity for scientists to examine behavior in society. With this understanding, this research empirically examined whether individuals' COVID-19 attitudes affect their travel behavior. The research was carried out in Şırnak, Turkey. Research data was collected through online questionnaire and purposeful sampling method. The database of the research consisted of 480 participants. The result of the research indicated that COVID-19 attitudes did not affect travel intentions. This finding does not support the results of similar studies in the literature. In the conclusion, this remarkable finding of the research and its possible reasons were discussed.
Keywords: Travel Intention, Tourism Mobility, Pandemic, COVID-19

ÖZET

COVID-19 gibi salgın hastalıklar, turizm sektöründe ciddi kayıplara yol açmaktadır. İnsanların seyahat hareketliliğindeki düşüş, bu kayıplarda etkili olmaktadır. İnsanların güvenlikle ilgili algıladıkları risk, seyahat etme niyetlerini de etkilemektedir. Bireylerin bu tür sosyal istikrarsızlık koşulları altındaki davranışlarını değerlendirmek hem ekonomik hem de sosyolojik açıdan gereklidir. Bu nedenle, bilim insanlarının COVID-19 gibi büyük salgın hastalıklarda toplumdaki davranışı incelemesi acil bir gerekliliktir. Bu anlayışla, bu araştırmada bireylerin COVID-19'a yönelik tutumlarının seyahat davranışlarını etkileyip etkilemediği ampirik olarak incelendi. Şırnak'ta yürütülen araştırma verileri, çevrimiçi anket ve amaçlı örnekleme yöntemi ile toplandı. Araştırmanın veri tabanı 480 katılımcıdan oluştu. Araştırma sonucunda, bireylerin COVID-19'a yönelik tutumlarının seyahat etme niyetlerini etkilemediği tespit edildi. Bu bulgu, literatürdeki benzer çalışmaların sonuçlarını desteklememektedir. Sonuç olarak, araştırmanın bu dikkat çekici bulgusu ve olası nedenleri tartışıldı.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Seyahat Etme Niyeti, Turizm Hareketliliği, Pandemi, COVID-19

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, a COVID-19 case in Wuhan, China's Hubei Provincecase was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). Later, cases were detected in 12 countries on January 27, 2020. WHO determined that the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) could be similar to the previous coronavirus outbreaks of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and recommended avoiding contact with people suffering from the virus and promoting social distancing (WHO, 2020a). As a result of the spread of the cases worldwide, WHO declared COVID-19 as an epidemic on March 11, 2020 (WHO, 2020b).

COVID-19 can be thought of as a sudden storm or tsunami shaking the world (Jain, 2020). Because the closure of the border gates all over the world, the suspension of flights, brought import

and export to a halt (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). COVID-19, which started to be seen in approximately 190 countries in the world with the progress of the process, was declared as a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. In the following period, Europe began to become the center of this pandemic. Most countries subsequently imposed restrictions on human mobility. Human mobility is indispensable for the tourism industry. The decrease in human mobility, which tourism depends on, caused an extraordinary decline in the tourism industry of many countries in the world (Yang, Zhang & Chen, 2020).

When scientific research on the COVID-19 pandemic is examined, it is understood that the travels of individuals carrying the virus are effective in the spread of the virus worldwide (Wilson & Chen, 2020). As COVID-19 spread around the world, the tourism industry in all countries has started to decline. All countries have told their citizens to stay at home. Curfews have been imposed in many countries. As a normal result, tourism mobilities have started to decline (Hoque et al., 2020). Visitors' sense of safety influences their travel behaviour (Zou & Meng, 2019). Because safety is an important determinant in the preference of destinations, in other words, in the intention to travel to destinations (Avraham, 2016). The crises affect tourists' behaviour towards travel (Wen, Huimin & Kavanaugh, 2005). Considering the behavior of individuals under conditions of social instability is necessary both economically and sociologically (Cooper, 2006; Deng, Wang & Yousefpour, 2017). For this reason, in case of major epidemics such as COVID-19, it is an urgent necessity for scientists to examine behavior in society (Long & Khoi, 2020). Although the impact of epidemics such as COVID-19 on individuals' travel intention has begun to be investigated, knowledge on this is very limited (Neuburger & Egger, 2020). With this understanding, this research empirically examined whether individuals' attitudes towards COVID-19 affect their travel behavior.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Tourism is one of the industries most rapidly affected by natural disasters, epidemics, economic turmoil and terrorist incidents (Maphanga & Henama, 2019). The tourism industry has been exposed to many crises around the world in the past. The September 11 attacks in 2001, the sars virus in 2003, the economic crisis in 2008-2009 and the mers virus seen in the Middle East in 2015 are some of these crises. Apart from these, diseases such as swine flu and ebola virus are seen in some parts of the world, but they have also affected tourism in unseen regions (Çeti & Ünlüönen, 2019). But none of these pandemic events or other crises have caused a significant decline in the global development of tourism as COVID-19. In particular, the inability to make clear plans for the future regarding COVID-19 significantly affected the tourism of countries (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020).

When the literature is examined, there are studies to determine the impact of epidemics such as swine flu (Page, Song & Wu, 2012), ebola (Novelli et al., 2018) sars (Cooper, 2006) foot and mouth disease (Irvine & Anderson, 2006) on the tourism industry. Tourism is so fragile that individuals give up their travels at any time (Promsivapallop & Kannaovakun, 2017). Indeed, demand for tourism depends on safety and health conditions (Blake & Sinclair, 2003). Scientific research results also support this view. Blake, Sinclair and Sugiyarto (2003) found that the industry most affected by the Foot and Mouth epidemic is tourism. Maphanga and Henama (2019) stated that the Ebola epidemic negatively affected the tourism industry in Western Europe. Pine and McKercher (2004), Kim, Chun and Lee (2005), Kuo et al. (2008) found that the SARS epidemic had a strong negative impact on the tourism industry. Of course, there are studies in the literature that have found different findings. For example, Lee and Chen (2011) investigated the tourism mobility of elderly Asian Tourists as a result of Bird Flu and SARS. As a result of the research, it was determined that there had no significant change in the number of elderly tourists visiting Asia. Researchers attributed this result to the low mortality rates in the outbreak. Therefore, it can be said that the death rate in an epidemic has a significant impact on the tourism mobility of individuals.

Reflections of COVID-19 in the tourism industry have also started to take place in the literature. Şengel et al. (2020) found that people's fear of death from pandemic significantly affects their intention to travel. Acar (2020), Bahar and Çelik İlal (2020) stated that COVID-19 will significantly affect the tourism industry negatively. According to another view supporting this (see Akca, 2020) COVID-19 will cause 3.8 billion passenger loss worldwide. These predictions are attributed to the decrease in travel mobility of individuals due to the epidemic (Çeti & Ünlüönen, 2019). As a matter of fact, the determination of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) that international tourism has been completely stopped in 156 of 217 destinations worldwide as of 27 April 2020 and the sudden and rapid decline in tourist mobility due to COVID-19 cost an estimate of $ 320 billion (UNWTO, 2020) supports these predictions. Das and Tiwari (2020), Kourgiantakis, Apostolakis and Dimou (2020), Luo and Lam (2020), Nazneen, Hong and Ud Din (2020), Neuberger and Egger (2020), Sánchez-Cañizares et al. (2020), Wen et al. (2020) found in their research in different countries that COVID-19 negatively affects the travel behavior of tourists.

Individuals' attitudes affect behavior significantly (Hsu, Cai & Li, 2010; Hamdah, Rahmadya & Nurlaela, 2020). According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, people do not travel to a destination where they feel unsafe (Güzel & Barakazı, 2018). Therefore, safety is an important determinant in the preference of destinations, in other words, in the travel intention to destinations (Avraham, 2016). The safety factor should not be considered only as terrorist incidents or natural disasters. A disease that occurs in a destination is also an important safety factor that can affect the travel intention to that destination. Even a slight risk to human health is enough to avoid a tourist destination (Lee & Chen, 2011). As the perception of threat caused by infectious diseases increases, people who experience panic and stress may exhibit different behaviors than normal (Beck, 1992). Therefore, it can be said that as individuals' attitudes increase negatively, their behaviors will also be affected negatively. Based on these explanations, the following hypothesis has been developed to be tested in this research:

H_1: The more negative the attitude towards COVID-19 pandemic, the less the travel intention.

3. METHOD

This research was conducted in Şırnak. Şırnak is a city in Southeast Anatolia Region, Turkey. As well as the main livelihoods of Şırnak are mines, agriculture and livestock (Çelik, Coşkun & Öztürk, 2013), it has an important tourism potential with its natural, historical and cultural attractions. For example, Cudi Mountain, Tigris River, Feraşin Plateau, Red Madrasa, Mem and Zin Tomb, Noah Tomb can be shown among the important tourism attractions of Şırnak (Ertaş, 2018). The fact that the Noah's Flood took place on Mount Cudi (Crouse & Franz, 2006) is a tourism attraction in itself for Şırnak. There are 17 historical churches in Şırnak's İdil district, from past to present, as a result of people with Yezidi and Syriac beliefs. With this feature, İdil is an important center of attraction for Christians (Soydan & Şarman, 2013). Despite these important features, it can be said that Şırnak is still in the exploration stage which is the first stage of tourism development. According to current official records, the total population of Şırnak is 529,615 (TUIK, 2020). A total of 19travel agencies (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2020) 5 accommodation establishments andoperate in Şırnak. Also there are 3 accommodation business projects in Şırnak (TURSAB, 2020). In the accommodation establishments in Şırnak, a total of 78116 overnight stays, 1092 of which were foreigners and 78116 locals, took place. Occupancy rate of accommodation establishments is 37.04% (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2019).

Due to the necessity of paying attention to the social distance rules during the data collection period of the research, it was thought that it was more appropriate to reach the participants through an online questionnaire. Therefore, the population of the research is limited to the internet domain

of the researchers. The sample of the study, on the other hand, consisted of participants who live in Şırnak (Central district and other districts), traveled for tourism purposes at least once in 2019, aged 18 or over, use the internet and voluntarily agree to support the research. Based on the assumption that COVID-19 negatively affected or will affect the tourism industry in 2020, the year 2019 was based on. Research data were collected between April 13-20 2020 with purposeful sampling method. Participants were asked whether they made any vacation plans for 2020 and whether they canceled these plans, except for their gender, marital status, education level, income and age. Participants were also asked whether they or their relatives had a COVID-19 case. To measure the participants' attitudes towards COVID-19, the scale of "Negative Problem Orientation" developed by Gosselin, Ladouceur and Pelletier (cited by Akyay, 2016) was used by adapting to this research. To measure the travel intention of the participants, the scale of "Travel Intention" developed by Chin et al. (2015) was used. To measure the travel intention of the participants, scale of "Travel Intention" developed by Chin et al. (2015) was used. The attitude scale consists of 12 items and the travel intention scale consists of 5 items. Both scales are one-dimensional and graded in Likert type (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Undecided, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree).

At the end of the data collection process, a total of 480 people were reached, including 150 from the Central district, 100 from Cizre district, 70 from Silopi district, 50 from İdil district, 35 from Uludere district, 35 from Beytüşşebap district, and 30 from Güçlükonak district. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) and Child (2006), if the sample reached is 5 times the number of items, it is sufficient. But Field (2005) suggests that the sample size should be at least 10 times the number of items. Due to the lack of consensus on this issue, Comrey and Lee's (2013) views were also taken into consideration. According to the researchers (Comrey & Lee, 2013), 500 participants is an adequate sample. Considering all these opinions, it can be said that the sample reached in this research is sufficient.

Research data were analyzed through SPSS 23.0 statistical package program. Percentage distributions were used to determine the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were taken into account to test the reliability of the scales used in the research. Explanatory factor analysis was used to test the construct validity of the scales, and simple linear regression analysis was used to test the research hypothesis.

4. FINDINGS

Majority of the participants were male (55.0%) and single (60.2%). On the whole, majority of participants were educated: 4.4% primary school, 4.6% secondary school, 26.5% high school, 26.3% two year vocational school, 27.1% undergraduate level and 6.3% graduate level. On the other hand, 5.0% of the participants do not have any education. Although 16.3% of the participants stated that they do not have any monthly income, on the whole participants had a certain monthly income: 12.1% below the minimum wage, 19.4% between minimum wage-3000 Turkish lira (TL), 14.6% between 3001-4000 TL, 23.1% between 4001-5000 TL, and 14.6% between 5001 TL or above. The participants comprised of 40.6% between 18-24 years old, 34.0% between 25-34 years old, 14.2% between 35-44 years old, 3.8% between 45-54 years old, 3.5% between 55-64 years old, 4.0% 65 old or over. 69.3% of the participants stated that they made a vacation plan for the 2020 summer before the pandemic, 13.4% of these participants stated that they made an early reservation. 22.5% of these participants stated that they canceled their vacation plans for the summer of 2020, 51% were undecided to cancel the holiday plan, and 26.5% stated that they would continue their summer vacation plans. In addition, the participants stated that neither they nor their relatives have caught COVID-19.

Cronbach's Alpha general reliability coefficient is .893 for the attitudes towards COVID-19 scale, and .949 for the travel intention scale. In the social sciences literature, an alpha reliability coefficient greater than .70 is considered sufficient for the reliability of scales (Baum & Wally,

2003). On the other hand, items with all item correlation values below .250 should be removed from the scale because it disrupts the collectibility of the scale. In this context, item-total correlations of two scales were examined. Item-total correlation values were between .346-.683 for the attitudes towards COVID-19 scale, and .817-.902 for the travel intention scale. As a result, two scales were found to be highly reliable (Hair et al., 2010).

As a result of the factor analysis (Table 1), the value of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) being at least .60 and Bartlett's sphericity test being significant indicates that the data set is sufficient for factor analysis (Patyal & Koilakuntla, 2015). As a result of the factor analysisapplied to both scales, one factor emerged. However, in the scale of attitude towards COVID-19, three items (*I perceive the epidemic as a threat to my comfort*; *My first reaction to the problems caused by the epidemic is to question myself*; *I perceive the problems caused by the epidemic as obstacles that disrupt my functioning*) reduced the total variance explained below 50% due to the communality values. Relevant items were removed from the analysis. When the factor averages are considered, it can be said that the participants are undecided about both their attitude towards COVID-19 and their intention to travel.

Table 1. Factor Analysis

Attitudes towards COVID-19*	**Factor loadings**
Even if I find solutions to the problems caused by the epidemic, I doubt that they will be solved easily.	,786
I often think that the problems caused by the epidemic are unsolvable.	,777
I think it is difficult for me to find solutions to the problems related to the epidemic.	,765
Problems caused by the epidemic often seem insurmountable to me.	,742
I often perceive the problems caused by the epidemic as bigger than they actually are.	,736
I often doubt my abilities to solve pandemic issues.	,711
While trying to solve the problems caused by the epidemic, I often question my own abilities.	,689
I tend to see the problems caused by the epidemic as a threat.	,671
Even if I look at the problems caused by the epidemic from all possible angles, I question whether the solution I chose will still be effective.	,665
*Total Variance: %53.013; KMO: ,906; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 1905,327 (Sig. ,000); Eigenvalue: 4,771;Mean: 3,166; Reliability: ,889	
Travel Intention**	**Factor loadings**
I am determined to travel in 2020.	,940
As my age is young, my motivation to travel in 2020 is high.	,917
I have a high probability of traveling in 2020.	,912
I am ready to travel in 2020.	,911
I am interested in traveling in 2020.	,881
**Total Variance: %83,269; KMO: ,905; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity: 2384,701 (Sig. ,000); Eigenvalue: 4,163;Mean: 3,185; Reliability: ,949	

According to similar studies in the literature or the prediction of many researchers, COVID-19 negatively affects individuals' travel intention. But according to regression analysis (Table 2) carried out in this research, individuals' negative attitudes towards COVID-19 has not a significant effect on their travel intentions. Therefore, research hypothesis (H_1) was not accepted.This remarkable finding is discussed in the conclusion.

Table 2. Regression Analysis

	Beta	Sig.
(Constant)		,000
Attitude	,028	,540
DependentVariable: Travel Intention; R^2: ,001; Adjusted R^2: -,001; F: ,376; Sig.: ,540; Durbin-Watson: 1,707		

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 outbreak affected the whole world in a short time and brought human mobility to a halt. The fact that travel is the most important element of tourism explains how much the tourism industry will be affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Attitudes are the main determinants of behavior (Cheng, Lam & Hsu, 2006). This study was carried out on the Şırnak (Turkey) case to determine how individuals' attitudes towards COVID-19 will affect their travel behavior. Studies (Das & Tiwari, 2020; Kourgiantakis, Apostolakis & Dimou, 2020; Luo & Lam, 2020; Nazneen, Hong & Ud Din, 2020; Neuberger & Egger, 2020; Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2020) stated that COVID-19 adversely affected travel intention of individuals. However, in this study, it was concluded that COVID-19 did not affect individuals' travel intention. In this respect, this research does not support the findings of similar studies in the literature.

Individuals worry about any negativity. Because they fear the reflection of this negativity on themself (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). This anxiety situation may be more valid for the tourism industry. Because when people have a perception of risk in traveling or participating in tourism activities, they postpone or cancel these activities (Qi, Gibson & Zhang, 2009). Perhaps the most important of these risks/concerns is death anxiety. When considered in terms of tourism and travel activities, death anxiety affects the behavior of people to travel and participate in tourism activities (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). In situations of risk of death, people do not travel and do not participate in tourism activities (Ainsworth, 1989). In the light of this information, it can be said that death anxiety related to COVID-19 plays a determining role in individuals' travel behavior (Şengel et al., 2020). This research data was collected in April 2020. When considering the number of COVID-19-induced deaths in Turkey in April 2020 (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Health, 2020), it can be said that Turkey has not yet come to the peak level. In addition, the number of patients healed (Covid-19-induced) began to exceed the number of cases on April, in Turkey. Therefore, there is a high probability that a state of relaxation occurred in humans. On the other hand, the fact that both these research participants and their relatives have not catch COVID-19 may have relieved them psychologically. In this case, people's risk perception levels may have decreased. The fact that COVID-19 had no effect on travel intention in this study can be interpreted as that both perceived risk level and fear of death were not high in the participants. Indeed, the fact that the participants are indecisive about COVID-19 attitudes (Mean: 3,166) can be considered as an indicator that their anxiety levels are not yet fully established as the psychological limit.

Taylor (2019) states that one of the important psychosocial situations caused by global epidemics is the inability of people to tolerate situations such as compulsory isolation, maintaining social distance, staying at home. This situation is perhaps related to uncertainty. People do not want to disrupt their current order in situations where risk and uncertainty prevail (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). Because people need to pull themselves together in certain risk situations (Karataş, 2020). Not being able to predict the future creates such a need. Tourism is one of the sectors that best meets this need (Aydın & Doğan, 2020). This research participants may have preferred to travel to both remove the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 and to feel better psychologically.

Although tourism is flexible enough that people can easily give up their travels, it is seen as a way of escape from the stress of people's routine lives (Qi, Gibson & Zhang, 2009). For this reason, in some cases, people can change their holiday preferences instead of postponing their travel

plans. In such cases, individuals may prefer places with less crowd (Ranasinghe et al., 2020). So much so that Yenişehirlioğlu and Salha (2020) also found that during this period, tourists preferred accommodation places such as hobbit houses, bungalows, glamping, whose social distance was created by themselves. Therefore, the possibility that these research participants were able to change their holiday preference rather than the travel plan may have led to the conclusion that the COVID-19 attitude did not have an impact on travel behavior.

Within the scope of the findings of this study, it can be said that there are some opportunities for the tourism industry. Travel has always been an important tool for people's psychological satisfaction. The fact that the participants' travel intention is not affected despite COVID-19 can be considered as an opportunity. In this context, it can be said that one of the most important issues that tourism destinations should consider is related to hygiene. Destinations should take the necessary hygiene measures to the maximum. In addition, it is likely that the holiday preferences of tourists have changed. Thus, possible concerns of tourists arising from COVID-19 may be minimized. On the other hand, it is known that many countries have turned to domestic tourism during the COVID-19 process. Considering these research findings, it is important that destinations take measures to encourage domestic tourism (Neuburger & Egger, 2020). Thus, it may be possible for the tourism industry to exit the COVID-19 process with minimal damage.

Some important limitations can be mentioned in this study. It is thought that conducting similar studies in the future by taking these limitations into account will contribute to the tourism literature. First, this study was conducted at the beginning of the period in which COVID-19 began to spread in Turkey. If the same research is repeated in the Şırnak case, different results are likely. Because the effect of death anxiety on individuals' intention to travel is obvious. Therefore, it is important to interpret the travel behaviors of individuals by considering their death anxiety levels. However, since this research data was collected in a period that could be counted at the beginning of the pandemic process, it was deemed appropriate not to ask questions about death anxiety considering the psychology of the participants. In similar studies to be carried out in this context, it is also important to learn about the death anxiety caused by COVID-19. On the other hand, possible holiday preferences of the participants were excluded from this study. It is important that similar researches to be done in the future are carried out by considering the holiday preferences of the participants. Finally, conducting research on a major crisis such as COVID-19 in a larger geographic sample will make significant contributions to the generalizability of the results.

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