

Examining the Challenges of Tourism Recession in the Aviation Sector with an Emphasis on Epidemic Diseases: A Thematic Analysis Approach (A Case Study of Kashan)

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Introduction

Tourism is recognized as one of the most significant and promising activities in the contemporary world, with economists describing it as “invisible exports.” This industry can contribute to the development of various regions and bring about notable changes in the economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of tourist destinations. In this context, Iran's role is particularly important due to its unique and unparalleled tourist attractions, which place the country among the top ten tourist destinations globally. To develop the tourism industry and attract tourists, efficient infrastructure in tourism-related sectors is essential. Such infrastructure plays a key role in the relationship between Tourism and the economic growth of countries. One of the crucial sectors related to tourism is air transport. Generally, tourism involves the movement of people from their place of residence to distant locations, and, thus, transportation is considered one of the main pillars of the tourism industry.

Materials and Methods

This applied research is descriptive-exploratory in nature. The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges of the air transport sector arising from the tourism recession during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on Kashan Airport. The study uses a qualitative content analysis approach. This method involves identifying a phenomenon (content analysis) and creating a thematic network (describing the phenomenon) in three different levels: basic themes, organizing themes (concepts derived from combining and summarizing the basic themes), and global themes (overarching themes that represent the general principles of the content). Finally, a thematic network model is designed using the MAXQDA software to create a qualitative framework of the challenges in air transportation due to the pandemic and possible solutions.

Results and Findings

To identify the challenges of air transport caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and to propose solutions, 17 interviews were conducted, and a three-stage content analysis process was applied. In the first stage, the researchers identified the challenges

faced by air transport following the outbreak of COVID-19 and proposed potential solutions. The interviewees were asked to share their experiences and perspectives on the challenges related to air transport caused by the widespread spread of the virus. After carefully reviewing all interviews, 145 key points were initially identified. Upon re-examining these points, basic themes were formed. In this stage, repeated points were consolidated into a single category, and those that were less relevant were discarded. Ultimately, 57 basic themes were extracted. In the next stage, by categorizing the basic themes, organizing themes were formed. Accordingly, related codes or points were grouped together and given a title. In total, 17 themes were identified, which included airport closure and flight cancellations, damage to tourism businesses due to flight cancellations, flight price increases, lack of cooperation from banks and private investors, heavy costs imposed on airports, insurance service issues, decreased revenue for tourism units, lack of government funding, workforce reduction, socio-economic challenges for employees, loss of the tourist market, decreased demand for travel, management problems, loss of growth opportunities, adverse lifestyle changes, formation of xenophobia among locals, and physical and psychological damages. Finally, by grouping and combining organizing themes, global themes emerged. These included operational problems and reduced supply chain activities, financial crises, human resource issues, inability to formulate targeted policies, and the emergence of social and psychological abnormalities as the global challenges of air transport at Kashan Airport following the COVID-19 outbreak. In this section, solutions to address the crisis in the air transport industry at Kashan Airport due to COVID-19 were proposed. These solutions addressed the identified challenges. After analyzing the interview content regarding solutions, 60 key points were identified.

Conclusion

The findings show that the challenges faced by air transport at Kashan Airport following the COVID-19 outbreak include operational problems, reduced supply chain activities, financial crises, human resource issues, inability to formulate targeted policies, and the emergence of social and psychological abnormalities. To address these crises, solutions such as providing large-scale support measures, improving organizational and inter-organizational strategies, and adopting appropriate preventive and treatment approaches are recommended. Furthermore, social and psychological abnormalities, including adverse lifestyle changes and the formation of xenophobia among locals, need to be addressed. Comprehensive solutions to counter air transport crisis involve offering financial support measures (such as financial and credit indicators and government support), adopting appropriate preventive and treatment measures (including enhancing safety and hygiene standards), and implementing organizational and inter-organizational strategies (such as organizing tourism sector stakeholders).

Keywords: content analysis, challenges, air transport, solutions, COVID-19, tourism industry.