



MANAGING THE DIFFERENT STAGES OF UNEXPECTED EVENTS: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF TOURISM FAMILY BUSINESSES

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to explore how family businesses (FBs) redesign their business strategies throughout the different stages of unexpected events.

Design/methodology/approach: This article performs an exploratory multiple-case in the context of 10 Italian firms operating in the tourism sector.

Findings: The study develops a circular event framework illustrating the key business strategies implemented by FBs in the different moments of unpredicted circumstances: (1) leverage digital tools to facilitate relationships with customers and ensure business operations, during the crisis prevention phase; (2) identify and meet customer protection and safety needs, and take care of customers human-ly, during the crisis response phase; (3) renew customer value creation, in the crisis recovery phase.

Originality of the study: This study contributes to the extant literature on crisis management by identifying the main strategies developed by FBs to address customer relationships across the crisis prevention, response, and recovery phases. This work represents a robust benchmark for managers and practitioners to make more informed strategic and operational decisions, increasing their capacity to act when addressing the different moments of a crisis event.

1. Introduction

Crisis management is a systematic approach, supported by internal and external stakeholders, to identify crisis signals, avoid and plan for potentially harmful situations, and recover and learn from a crisis (Mitroff, 1988; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). Literature acknowledges that the implications of crisis management are particularly challenging for family businesses (FBs) (Laffranchini *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, unlike non-FBs, FBs are characterized by a strict connection between family, business, and ownership components (D'allura *et al.*, 2019; Tagiuri & Davis, 1982). Consequently, since different types of interests (e.g., economic, socioemotional) may overlap (Baron & Francois, 2020; Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2007, 2011; Kraus *et al.*, 2020), the attitude to hazardous and risky choices can be even more relevant when FBs have to cope with a situation of crisis (Boers *et al.*, 2017). Dealing with unforeseen circumstances can insidiously raise tensions at physical and emotional levels across family and non-family members, considerably jeopardizing the clarity of thought of FBs' key decision-makers (De Massis & Rondi, 2020). Due to the aforementioned factors, FBs may find it tricky to deal with crises and choose what steps or strategies to take when they arise. Remarkably, the business family owning and/or governing the firm is heavily involved (Calabró *et al.*, 2021; Chirico & Nordqvist, 2010; Minichilli *et al.*, 2016; Salvato *et al.*, 2020; Siakas *et al.*, 2014). Hence, when this proactiveness fails, families can inflict severe damage on their companies (Calabró *et al.*, 2021; Habbershon *et al.*, 2003).

Although the growing academic interest in crisis management in the context of FBs (e.g., Cater & Beal, 2014; Cater & Schwab, 2008; Faghfour *et al.*, 2015; Herbane, 2013; Kraus *et al.*, 2013, 2020; Rovelli *et al.*, 2021; Van Essen, 2015), research about how these specific types of firms deal with unexpected events is still in its infancy. Some studies have analyzed the implications of the last financial crisis on FBs (Van Essen, 2015) and stressed how FBs outperformed non-FBs thanks to a greater motivation of FBs' founders to overinvest to enhance short-term revenues during the crisis (Zhou *et al.*, 2017). More recent studies have analyzed the effects of the pandemic Coronavirus (Boers & Henschel, 2021; Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Żukowska *et al.*, 2021) and outlined a long array of internal and external changes in the management of FBs operating in the tourist and hospitality sector (Schwaiger *et al.*, 2021), including, for instance, unplanned generational transitions, more "dehumanized" relationships due to social distancing and virtual interactions, and profound financial upheavals (De Massis & Rondi, 2020).

Moreover, previous literature has mainly investigated how, during a crisis, FBs may modify and adapt their business strategies from an internal perspective (e.g., changes in the internal business or family challenges) (Soluk *et al.*, 2021). Less attention has been paid to explaining how FBs

manage and fight adversities in their external relationship with customers, and examining how the pandemic affected their relationship with them.

Most studies on crisis management in the context of FBs did not also consider how a crisis event may evolve over time. Scholars identify different stages that might characterize a crisis (e.g., crisis prevention, crisis response, and crisis recovery) (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Hills, 1998; Pusceddu *et al.*, 2021; Smith, 1990). However, existing literature does not explain how FBs' strategies change over time across the entirety of the crisis in its three distinctive stages. Hence, it becomes critical in the context of FBs to adopt an integrative approach to contemplate and explicate the different business strategies implemented across the various, specific phases of crisis management to allow the business to navigate the crisis. Each stage should be considered interdependent, such as one strategy appearing in the prevention phase will affect another strategy in the response or recovery phase and vice-versa.

To fill these gaps, this study performs an exploratory multiple-case study in the context of 10 Italian tourism-based FBs (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994) to investigate how FBs adjust and redefine their business strategies to address customer relationships during the different stages of unexpected events. The research question is as follows: *"How do family businesses redefine their strategies during the different stages of unexpected events?"*.

The present work extends prior research and practice in significant ways. It improves prior literature on crisis management by investigating how FBs effectively adjust and redefine their business strategies to address customer relationships during crises (i.e., addressing in detail the crisis prevention, response, and recovery phases). Therefore, we propose a circular event framework that identifies the main strategies developed by FBs to cope with crises across the phases of crisis prevention, response, and recovery. Finally, the study advances three theoretical propositions that categorize the main strategies intersecting with the different moments of unpredicted circumstances, providing a foundation for further theoretical and empirical research on this topic. From a managerial perspective, this study offers significant guidance to the managers of FBs in orienting their behaviours when interacting with customers during a crisis event's different crucial moments.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Crisis management in the context of FBs

In the management and entrepreneurship fields of research, a crisis is generally defined as "a low-probability, high-impact situation perceived

by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization” (Pearson & Clair, 1998: 66). Literature acknowledges that crisis management is particularly relevant in the context of FBs as it involves both business and family issues (Baron & Francois, 2020; De Massis & Rondi, 2020; Kraus *et al.*, 2020). Notably, when dealing with FBs, failure can have much more severe implications than non-FBs owners and managers (Cater & Beal, 2014). Indeed, the danger of losing family property and compromising the family heritage (Calabró *et al.*, 2021) exposes FBs to extreme duress conditions when unforeseen external situations suddenly arise.

Remarkably, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has triggered profound financial upheavals and issues related to sudden generational transitions, less closed relationships because of virtual interactions, and more pressure at the psychological level (De Massis & Rondi, 2020). In addition, studies have shown that FBs adopt behaviors and measures during crises that do not follow formal crisis procedures (Faghfour *et al.*, 2015) and that the family’s emotional attachment affects the performance of FBs during a crisis (Gomez-Mejia *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, FBs usually rely on their employees and suppliers to overcome the crisis, emphasizing the value of personal and regular connection and the operational usage of digital technologies (Kraus *et al.*, 2020). For these reasons, FBs need to redesign the underlying mechanisms of business activities, improving their capacity to respond quickly and act effectively to outward environmental changes (Chrisman *et al.*, 2011; Siakas *et al.*, 2014).

Research on how FBs handle unexpected events is still in its infancy, despite the rising academic interest in crisis management within the setting of FBs (e.g., Cater & Beal, 2014; Cater & Schwab, 2008; Faghfour *et al.*, 2015; Herbane, 2013; Kraus *et al.*, 2013, 2020; Rovelli *et al.*, 2021; Van Essen, 2015). Prior research has focused chiefly on how FBs may adjust and adapt their strategies from an internal viewpoint (e.g., investigating changes to internal business processes or family concerns) during a crisis (Soluk *et al.*, 2021). Less focus has been placed on describing how FBs deal with challenges in their external relationships with customers and how the pandemic altered those relationships.

2.2 Crisis prevention, response, and recovery

Given the ever-changing nature of crises (Bazerman & Watkins, 2004; Hermann, 1963; Quarantelli, 1988; Weick *et al.*, 1999), researchers have stressed the need to focus on analyzing the entirety of the unexpected event itself to explore better how a crisis may progress, and how businesses thrive under such circumstances (Buchanan & Denyer, 2013; Moi & Cabiddu, 2022).

Literature acknowledges that the prevention, response, and recovery phases represent crucial moments of crisis events (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Hills, 1998; Pusceddu *et al.*, 2021; Runyan, 2006; Smith, 1990).

Regarding the prevention stage, scholars investigated how business leaders – entrepreneurs, owners, CEOs, and managers – and employees plan to address future unforeseen situations to mitigate potential risks (Fink, 1986). Thus, they stress comprehensively preparing the organizations for unanticipated events (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Fink, 1986; Hale *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 1990; Quarantelli, 1988). For instance, firms could foster flexible organizational structures that adapt quickly to changing environments (Herbane, 2019; Moneva-Abadía *et al.*, 2019) and proactive solutions to anticipate changes in customer demand (Cassia *et al.*, 2012; Herbane, 2010). Also, it is necessary to adopt financial resource management methods that mitigate unexpected risks, ensuring the quantification of financial needs and the sources of coverage necessary to safeguard business management and the supply chain (Kraus *et al.*, 2012; Tognazzo *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, prior literature outlines the need to collaborate through business networks and partnerships, creating an open environment where sharing knowledge and skills supports firms in addressing unforeseen situations (Branicki *et al.*, 2018).

The crisis response phase focuses on how organizations shift or reconfigure their resources to minimize business damage (Hale *et al.*, 2005). Notably, the response phase is crucial to researchers because decisions made during this period will help reduce the crises' disruptive effects (Elliott *et al.*, 2005). Organizations increase their ability to navigate unpredicted challenges through cost minimization and cash flow protection strategies, defining expenses to suspend or reduce to cover potential liquidity shortages (Eggers & Kraus, 2011; Smallbone *et al.*, 2012). When firms commit to making the most of their financial resources, they reevaluate or modify their existing business model and value proposition by pursuing revenue generation strategies (Macpherson *et al.*, 2015; Morrish & Jones, 2020). Furthermore, businesses accept the need for collaboration, strengthening or building the relationship with the stakeholders (Doern, 2016; Mayr *et al.*, 2017). Finally, combining existing skills with new knowledge deriving from investments in research and development is seen as a successful element in reacting effectively during unpredictable circumstances (Battisti *et al.*, 2019; Osiyevskyy *et al.*, 2020).

In the crisis recovery phase (Smith, 1990), organizations implement innovative actions to return to business as usual based on what they have learned from the crisis (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Hale *et al.*, 2005; Smith & Sipika, 1993). Hence, organizations mainly reflect on the measures that would have been necessary to modify the organizational structure and better prepare for the future (Doern, 2016; Le Nguyen & Kock, 2011). Unlike the prevention and response phases, which suggest the importance of minimizing risky projects (Kraus *et al.*, 2012), scholars highlight a common trend of firms diversifying risk during the recovery phase (Morrish & Jones, 2020).

Furthermore, re-employment plans, the establishment of funds for personnel, and re-establishing stakeholder relationships confirm the importance of investments in human resources, which, impacted during the early stages of the crisis, take on a pivotal role in the restart (Doern, 2016; Hong *et al.*, 2012).

Despite the growing knowledge regarding crisis management for FBs (e.g., Kraus *et al.*, 2020; Santiago *et al.*, 2021), little research has examined how FBs have reshaped their business strategies to manage and overcome adversities in the relationship with customers in the different moments of the crisis. Notably, a crisis occurrence may develop over time, and although different phases that might define a crisis have been identified by academics (i.e., crisis prevention, crisis response, and crisis recovery) (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990), this was not considered in most research on crisis management in the context of FBs. To traverse the crisis, it is crucial for FBs to take an integrated outlook in order to consider and explain the numerous business strategies used across the various phases of crisis management. Additionally, it is essential to consider each stage as interrelated, where the impact on a strategy in one particular phase reverberates to the following ones.

3. Methodology

This empirical study adopts a theory-building process based on an in-depth exploratory multiple-case study (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Yin, 1994). On the one hand, if a qualitative approach is particularly relevant due to the emphasis on the “how” issue (Yin, 2003), especially for studies addressing how FBs deal with crises (Boers & Henschel, 2021), on the other hand, the multiple-case is an excellent method for exploratory inquiries, facilitating the cross-case comparison and generalization of emergent findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As a result, the chosen method was considered appropriate and aligned with the aim of this research, which was to investigate how FBs reshape their business strategies during the different stages of unexpected events.

3.1 Research setting and case selection

For this study, we adopted a theoretical sampling approach and sought cases likely to provide an initial extension of theory on the investigated topic (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We selected cases corresponding to specific dimensions developed in advance, including the type of firm (family firm), industry, and country of origin.

As concerns the type of firm, we ensured that the firms involved in this

study were coherent with the definition of FB as “a business governed and/or managed to shape and pursue the vision of the business held by a dominant coalition controlled by members of the same family or a small number of families in a manner that is potentially sustainable across generations of the family or families” (Chua et al., 1999, p. 25).

Furthermore, we chose to focus on the tourism industry, which represents one of the sectors most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gössling *et al.*, 2021; World Tourism Organization, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020). Scholars claim that the implications of the recent pandemic have been particularly challenging for FBs operating in the tourism and hospitality sector (Davahli *et al.*, 2020; Schwaiger *et al.*, 2021) due to the lockdowns and travel restrictions imposed by Governments worldwide to prevent the virus’ spread (Baum & Hai, 2020; Gössling *et al.*, 2021; Hall *et al.*, 2020). Also, as the strict norms and regulations regarding hygiene and social isolation have made consumers more cautious and anxious, the pandemic has powerfully impacted the long-term tourism FBs *modus operandi* (Kraus *et al.*, 2020), sawing a significant, persistent drop in revenue (Baum & Hai, 2020).

Finally, concerning the country, we focused on the Italian context, where about 784,000 family firms account for more than 85 percent of total business and over 70 percent of employment (AIDAF, 2022). As a result, it embodies a valuable and compelling research setting to investigate the underlying strategies that FBs enact in managing the different stages of unexpected events. To collect data from a homogeneous sample, we considered additional critical elements, such as industrial settings in the tourism sector (hotel accommodation facilities), average turnover ranging from 200.001€ to 500.000€ in the years preceding the pandemic outbreak, Italian Regions with 2020 GDP supply-side higher than 45.000€.

The case selection procedure included purposive sampling by choosing exemplary cases to extend the theory (Patton, 2002) and snowball sampling by combining cases relating to tourism businesses purely causal (Goodman, 1961).

Theoretical saturation was reached at ten cases, which are generally considered adequate to provide a suitable empirical foundation to develop the theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The majority of tourism FBs included in the sample were hotel accommodation facilities with less than 250 employees and yearly sales exceeding 2.000.000€ in 2019. The data revealed that more than half of consumers during the COVID-19 emergency came from Italy (excluding the Region where the company is based). However, in 2019, the most significant percentage was of international clients, followed immediately after by Italian customers (not including the Region where the enterprise is located). Finally, almost all the tourism FBs examined (8 out of 10) exhibited a decreasing trend in their activity during the Covid-19 emergency concerning the 2019 turnover (see Table 1).

Tab. 1: Summary of the cases

General information			Impact of the COVID-19 emergency				
Case	Region	Tourist sector in which it operates	Firm size	Customer origin ¹ (Before Covid)	Turnover in 2019	Origin of tourists during the Covid-19 emergency	Trend of the activity during the Covid-19 emergency concerning the turnover of 2019
Case-1	Latium	Hotel accommodation facility	<10	D	up to 200.000€	D	Increasing
Case-2	Trentino Alto Adige	Hotel accommodation facility	<50	C	from 200.001€ to 500.000€	C	Increasing
Case-3	Apulia	Resort	<50	B	up to 200.000€	B	↓ 1- 25%
Case-4	Emilia Romagna	Hotel accommodation facility	250 +	B	over 2.000.000€	B	↓ 26-50%
Case-5	Sicily	Hotel accommodation facility	<50	C	over 2.000.000€	B	↓ 51- 75%
Case-6	Lombardy	Hotel accommodation facility	<250	C	over 2.000.000€	D	↓ 76- 100%
Case-7	Campania	Hotel accommodation facility	<50	A	over 2.000.000€	A	↓ 76- 100%
Case-8	Campania	Extra-hotel accommodation facility	<10	C	up to 200.000€	A	↓ 1- 25%
Case-9	Lombardy	Hotel accommodation facility	<250	C	over 2.000.000€	C	↓ 51- 75%
Case-10	Veneto	Other: Hotel accommodation facility, congress center, spa and restaurant	<250	B	over 2.000.000€	B	↓ 51- 75%

3.2 Data collection

To ensure data triangulation (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and robustness (Dubé & Paré, 2003; Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994), data were collected from various sources, including online questionnaires, social networking sites, and official websites.

Primary data were collected through an online questionnaire (Shafi *et al.*, 2020) due to the government's social distancing measures during data collection (September-October 2020). The questionnaire included 14 open-ended questions, developed based on the literature on crisis management in the context of FBs. Examples of guiding questions were as follows: *What have been the main changes in the relationship with tourists during the first phase of the pandemic crisis? How are you trying to meet tourists' needs and expectations? How are you using technology to reorganize your work? Tell me about the initiatives you consider helpful to promote and support a faster recovery. What do*

you feel you can recommend to other firms in the sector? Participation was voluntary, assuring the anonymity of participants (Shafi *et al.*, 2020). The questionnaire involved key respondents of the FBs included in this study (primarily CEOs and managers) chosen because they were highly knowledgeable in the field (Kumar *et al.*, 1993). Each interviewee was representative of his/her respective firm (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003).

Secondary data were collected via social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and Instagram) and the official website (Miles & Huberman, 1984), covering the period between January 2020-October 2021 (see Table 2).

Tab. 2: Summary of secondary data sources

Case	Source	Type	Number of items
Case-1	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (25 posts) Instagram (11 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)
Case-2	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (99 posts) Instagram (283 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (5)
Case-3	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (55 posts) Instagram (18 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)
Case-4	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (147 posts) Instagram (137 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Captures (22)
Case-5	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (105 posts) Instagram (89 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)
Case-6	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (21 posts) Instagram (10 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)
Case-7	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (128 posts) Instagram (62 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)

Case-8	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (50 posts) Instagram (30 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)
Case-9	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (131 posts) Instagram (255 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (1)
Case-10	Social networks	Posts on Facebook and Instagram	Facebook (200 posts) Instagram (63 posts)
	Official website	Web page	Capture (4)

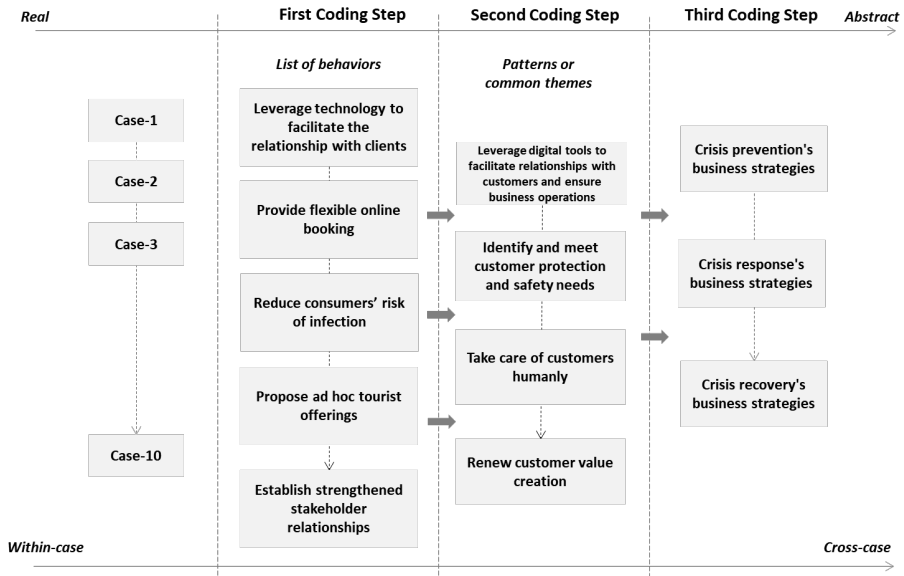
3.3 Data analysis

Using Nvivo software, this study performed both within- and between-case analyses (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007). In the data analysis, an abductive technique was used, which combined a deductive and an inductive procedure. If, on the one hand, a deductive method directed the work in the first phase, i.e., in the experiences and their classification, the inductive approach added uniqueness to the contents by addressing new insights not covered in the prior literature (i.e., the circular event framework of tourism FBs' business strategies in a time of crisis) (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018).

The research was carried out by running three coding stages (Saldaña, 2015). During the first coding step, we analyzed in-depth the primary data and identified descriptive and interpretative codes about how FBs responded to and handled the pandemic (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Following a concept-driven coding process, data were abstracted (Gibbs, 2007) to develop a list of critical actions implemented by each FB when dealing with the pandemic (i.e., first-order codes). Therefore, we looked for similarities and differences between the cases (cross-case analysis). We grouped data and identified common themes. This step identified common strategies across data: *leverage digital tools to facilitate relationships with customers and ensure business operations; identify and meet customer protection and safety needs; take care of customers humanly; renew customer value creation*. Finally, the identified business strategies were classified according to each phase of the pandemic crisis: "crisis prevention", "crisis response", and "crisis recovery" (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990) (see Figure 1).

Two of the co-authors carried out the coding procedure independently and simultaneously. At each step, a Coding Comparison Query was run to address any discrepancies until achieving a Kappa coefficient¹ above 0.75. (Bazeley and Jackson 2013).

Fig. 1: Overview of the data analysis process



Source: adapted from (Saldaña, 2015).

4. Findings

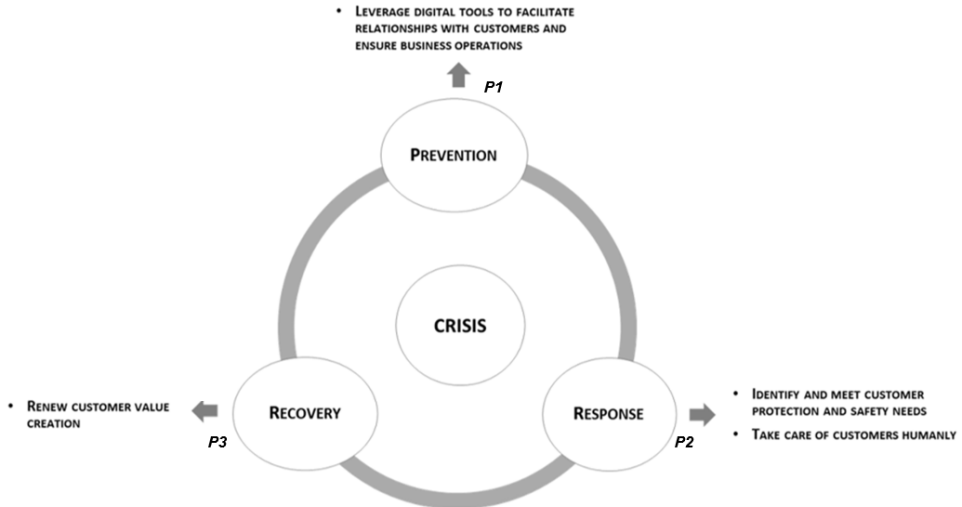
This study showed that FBs have adopted different strategies to respond to each phase of the pandemic crisis, summarized in the circular event framework (see Figure 2).

The framework organizes the business strategies into intersecting categories to provide accurate insights into how FBs redefined their business strategies across the different stages of unexpected events: crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990). The framework goes beyond a mostly adopted sequential and linear analysis of crisis management strategies found in previous literature—focusing on the event occurrence rather than the intersection and effect of each phase on subsequent ones. The circular characteristic of the crisis prevention, response, and recovery phases depicted in the framework demonstrates how the strategic responses during the various phases of the crisis—prevention, response, and recovery—have distinct effects and interact with one another. For example, during the crisis prevention phase, the business strategies adopted influence how the management acts through the crisis response

¹ The coefficient quantifies the degree of agreement among coders. A K-coefficient close to 1 suggests “high agreement,” whereas a value of 0 (or below) shows coder disagreement.

phase and their understanding and preparedness to navigate the challenging time ahead successfully.

Fig. 2: The circular event framework of tourism FBs' business strategies in a time of crisis



Source: own elaboration

4.1 Crisis prevention: Digitalize business processes to better fit unexpected changes in the marketplace

The first phase looks at the crisis preventive strategies adopted by FBs to mitigate unfavorable crisis outcomes in the tourism context. Crisis prevention is characterized by moderation and planning (Fink, 1986). During this phase, FBs' owners—CEOs and managers—strive to learn how to be best prepared, whether they have faced hardship due to an unanticipated circumstance.

The analysis has revealed that, during crisis prevention, FBs are committed to leveraging digital tools to facilitate relationships with customers and ensure business operations [Case-4]. They have shown to be deeply aware of the importance of implementing more digitalized processes (“*We were already at the forefront with Booking Engine, Channel Manager etc.*” [Case-6, CEO/Manager]; “*(...) less paper and more things online*” [Case-4, CEO/Manager]), to adapt business operations in changing conditions.

In the tourism context, adopting web-based reservation systems helps convert the FBs' websites into a 24/7 direct sales channel. Having a robust, intuitive booking engine that is easy to understand and administer lowers management time and allows the small FBs' team to work efficiently. This could help increase client loyalty throughout the purchasing process, boosting firms' productivity.

4.2 Crisis response: Boost the attention of customers

The response phase looks at firms' actions pursued and implemented to reduce the crisis' harmful consequences (Elliott *et al.*, 2005).

In this heightened state of the COVID-19 crisis, the central dilemma of the enquired tourism FBs was deciding whether to open tourism accommodation facilities or skip the current season. Tourism FBs deciding to reopen bravely re-invented their business approach to cope with the pandemic's challenges. Hence, they rapidly pivoted the unexpected event into a "game-changing" opportunity, embracing advanced business strategies in their ways of performing to meet the shifted guest demands and expectations.

In this phase, a strong focus was given to enhancing customer attention. Namely, from the data analysis, it could be observed that, in the crisis response phase, FBs employed two main response strategies: (1) identify and meet customer protection and safety needs, and (2) take care of customers humanly.

As tourism FBs slowly reopened, fulfilling the latest COVID-19 World Health Organization and government regulations and recommendations on social distancing, cleanliness, and safety for travelers and staff was crucial to satisfy guest expectations during their stay [Case-1, -2, -3, -4, -5, -6, -7, -8, -9, -10]. For example, to optimize the guest experience and hotel operations, firms establish staggered timings to access shared amenities like breakfast rooms; they also ensure that guests and employees dispose of hand sanitizing gel in common areas, such as lobbies, restaurants, and pools. Customers had higher service expectations than ever before. Notably, the enquired tourism FBs stressed the importance of maintaining travelers' confidence, letting guests know about tourism FBs' efforts in maintaining a healthy "COVID-secure" environment within tourism facilities, minimizing the exposure to the virus. As the business leader of one hotel accommodation facility stated: *"The tourist expects the structure to comply with all the rules in order to counter the spread of Covid (sanitized environments, respect for distances, use of masks)"* [Case-10, CEO/Manager]. In this regard, FBs sent out messages informing consumers about how they were actively striving to prioritize customer safety: *"Sanitation work continues to ensure the health of our staff and customers and to allow us to restart"* [Case-10, Facebook].

Tourists' demands for safety, hygiene, social distancing requirements, and consistent service standards forced tourism FBs owners to constantly rethink customer interactions, stimulating the implementation of new, digital technologies to make procedures more straightforward and faster. Hence, guests were prompted, for example, to download specific applications from their devices – mobile, tablet, or laptop – to check-in and check-out [Case-1, -2]. As a result, moving interactions to digital channels helped avoid non-essential physical interactions and reduce touch points.

Coughing up in reimagining and delivering outstanding services for the limited number of guests allowed to stay in tourist facilities, business leaders provided their workers with regular ongoing training to help keep them and visitors safe [Case-2, -10]. Specific training included, for example, proper use of safe work practices on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), COVID-19 testing, daily fever measurement, the entrance of one person at a time in staff rooms, and effective behaviors to sensitively serve guests in challenging circumstances. Moreover, employees had to adjust their regular roster and duties to help manage the impacts of Coronavirus: *"The housekeeping staff has implemented completely new procedures, postponing their arrival at work to allow the machines to sanitize the room before any intervention by the staff"* [Case-2, CEO/Manager]; *"(...) Our staff will continue, as always, to follow precise practices for the safety, health, and well-being of our guests. Our large and well-kept spaces, both inside and outside, have all the right characteristics to guarantee a natural distance (...)"* [Case-4, Official website].

During periods of uncertainty and turbulence in the FBs context, another aspect involved providing customers with constant assistance, thereby developing authentic engagement. Because they faced the same struggles arising from the COVID-19 pandemic landscape, tourism FBs and consumers showed exceptional mutual empathy for one another. Creating a human, Empathetic engagement with customers, making them feel valued and safe again, was a vital issue that the tourism firms raised. The psychological impacts of the social isolation guests encountered during lockdowns and the unclear information on travel restrictions sparked concerns: *"Much more demanding and nervous ... need reassurance"* [Case-4, CEO/Manager]. Guests were unsure about booking and planning ahead of time due to the unprecedented uncertainty brought by the pandemic, including border closures and travel restrictions. Travelers showed to be eager to stay in the tourism accommodation facilities only in the presence of certain conditions [Case-1, -8]. Hence, offering adjustments to cancellation policies and change fees (e.g., full or partial refund, credit for future dates) was widely adopted by the interviewees: *"[...] Commercially it is necessary to activate a sale without cancellation penalties, avoid the prepaid, possibility of changing dates without costs [...]"* [Case-8].

Customers expected companies to look after them. Remarkably, tourism firms had to step forward to understand what services might be given to visitors, thinking from their consumers' perspectives. Thus, customers were actively supported by tourism FBs owners who actively listened to and responded to their needs. This proactive attitude entailed paying close attention to details and providing individualized services, as well as maintaining outstanding and focused solutions to meet clients' demands as quickly as possible: *"[...] personalized services and attention to special requests that are sometimes new to our work experience"* [Case-1]; *"[...] much distrust, a request for more attentive service"* [Case-5, CEO/Manager].

Ensuring constant communication with customers was indispensable to satisfy their needs and requests promptly. Tourism FBs strengthened communication through clear, timely, and relevant messaging to thrive, keeping communication channels open. Truthfully informing visitors on how tourism FBs handled the crisis was the key to gaining and re-establishing trust among the guests: *“Vacation is the time we all look forward to. We know the value it has for each of you. For this reason, we have always dedicated all our energy and passion to our guests and to the time we spend together (...). Today, more than ever, this touch does not disappear. However, it is transformed into even greater attention (...)”* [Case-4, Official website]. Since travelers were suffering anxiety spikes due to COVID-19 uncertainty, this strategy was necessary to reassure them before and throughout their stay: *“[...] Strengthened pre-arrival communication”* [Case-2]. Notably, the research shows that with the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, tourism FBs shifted their online communications to include more engaging interactions with clients, for example, attempting to express how they were psychologically closed to clients during the difficult period: *“You will travel again, and we will be here to welcome you”* [Case-7, Facebook]; *“(...) We care about the health and protection of our employees, their families and our guests (...)”* [Case-4, Instagram].

4.3 Crisis recovery: Reshape business models to address the next normal

The final phase is dedicated to understanding the recovery techniques used by tourism FBs in the aftermath of unpredictable circumstances.

During the crisis recovery stage (Smith, 1990), tourism FBs change the organization structure and implement preventive action plans for the future (Doern, 2016; Le Nguyen and Kock, 2011).

From the investigated sample, it becomes evident that some of the measures implemented during the lockdown will persist long after the pandemic is over (e.g., adjusted client interactions, safety upgrades, strengthened communication) since consumers have changed and have developed higher expectations than before.

As a result, the area on which tourism FBs should stay focused during this crisis containment process can be identified as renewing customer value creation.

One aspect that emerged from the questionnaire results is how the promotion of the tourist destination will change [Case-2]. Notably, respondents often mentioned the necessity to be flexible and adaptive in turning positive and inspirational business models, inextricably linked with quality improvement as a structural need and value-added. The analysis showed that even after unforeseen occurrences, FBs must continue to seek gaps and pain spots in the customer journey – increasing and focusing on service quality and innovation, thereby containing costs [Case-5, -9]. As

a result, tourism companies' prioritized innovations and improvements are shaped by current consumer preferences and habits. Remarkably, the respondents repeatedly stressed the need to change the marketing of the tourist destination toward safety concepts [Case-10], both as a necessity and as a value-added of the structure: "*Working on communicating that Italy is a safe destination*" [Case-10, CEO/Manager]; "*Marketing aimed at reassuring individuals and companies to organize meetings*" [Case-4, CEO/Manager].

Hence, FBs owners courageously strengthen and elevate the tourism offer while remaining focused on the most outstanding customer results.

Finally, company success will be facilitated by the relationships with the stakeholders. Finding partners enables the creation of unique tourist offerings, thereby increasing consumer value and trust. Using leadership teams creates a feeling of community that everyone can benefit from, allowing tourism FBs to mobilize the extra support they need to expand and to shape new, more diverse tourist offerings: "[...] *mainly reactivate sales through travel agencies in Italy*" [Case-8, CEO/Manager].

Therefore, in the "new normal", offering superior experiences thus, experimenting, and promoting the destination through attentive and differentiated services will be built up by the relationship between FBs leaders and stakeholders.

5. Discussion

Despite increasing academic research on crisis management in the context of FBs (e.g., Cater & Schwab, 2008; Cater & Beal, 2014; Faghfour *et al.*, 2015; Herbane, 2013; Kraus *et al.*, 2013, 2020; Rovelli *et al.*, 2021), research on how FBs deal with unforeseen events like the recent pandemic crisis is still in its infancy. By elaborating upon prior crisis management literature involving FBs, this study extends current research in meaningful ways.

Previous research has focused chiefly on how FBs modify and adapt their organizations from an internal perspective (e.g., changes in internal business or family hurdles) during a crisis (Soluk *et al.*, 2021). More specifically, previous research has primarily analyzed the specific actions or interventions implemented internally by FBs after unexpected events. Scholars, for instance, argued about short-term adaption and long-term firm positioning crises models (Kraus *et al.*, 2020), the relationship between family ownership and formalized crisis procedures (Faghfour *et al.*, 2015), and FBs' characteristics that affect their ability to initiate turnaround strategies during an organizational crisis (Cater & Schwab, 2008). This research contributes to extending prior knowledge by examining how FBs manage and overcome hardship in their external relationships with customers or how the pandemic affected their relationships with clients. For instance, tour-

ism FBs stressed the need to be adaptable and agile in shifting the tourist destination's marketing toward safety principles, thus focusing on positive and inspiring business models as a structural need and value-added. The research also revealed that creating personal, Empathetic contact with clients was a critical concern identified by the tourism companies.

Secondly, most studies concentrating on crisis management in the context of FBs did not consider how a crisis may develop over time. By extending prior literature, this study explains how FBs' strategies in addressing crisis events change and evolve across the stages of crisis prevention, response, and recovery (Bazerman and Watkins, 2004; Fink, 1986; Hermann, 1963; Quarantelli, 1988; Weick *et al.*, 1999). Thanks to a circular event framework, this analysis shows how the strategies implemented by the FBs intersect with each other; hence, implementing a strategy during a specific moment of a crisis also affects the following phases, determining FBs' success. By identifying the strategies implemented by FBs, this study also enhances prior literature on crisis management in meaningful ways.

Prior studies on the crisis prevention phase have highlighted the importance of being fully prepared for unanticipated events (Elliott *et al.*, 2005; Fink, 1986; Hale *et al.*, 2005; Smith, 1990; Quarantelli, 1988). Scholars show how organizations encourage flexible organizational structures to adapt quickly to changing environments (Herbane, 2019; Moneva-Abadía *et al.*, 2019), for instance, through proactive strategies to anticipate client demand fluctuations (Cassia *et al.*, 2012; Herbane, 2010), financial resource management procedures (Kraus *et al.*, 2012; Tognazzo *et al.*, 2016), and collaborations through business networks and partnerships (Branicki *et al.*, 2018). This study extends previous literature by explaining how leveraging technology into business operations during the crisis prevention phase not only helps firms ensure their flexibility in managing activities when unforeseen issues arise but, more importantly, facilitates relationships with customers, building up consumer loyalty throughout the purchasing process. Therefore, this research proposes that:

Proposition 1 (P1): Leveraging digital tools to facilitate relationships with customers and ensure business operations increases firms' ability to prevent unwanted outcomes of unforeseen events.

Moreover, scholars have shown multiple ways to restructure themselves during the crisis response phase to mitigate the crisis' disruptive effects (Elliott *et al.*, 2005). For instance, organizations may respond to a crisis by cutting costs (Eggers and Kraus, 2011; Smallbone *et al.*, 2012), modifying their existing business model (Macpherson *et al.*, 2015; Morrish & Jones, 2020), strengthening or building relationships with stakeholders (Doern, 2016; Mayr *et al.*, 2017), or investing in new skills (Battisti *et al.*, 2019; Osiyevskyy *et al.*, 2020). The empirical qualitative evidence presented in this study

suggests that, in the case of FBs, the key priority in the crisis response stage is searching for more empathetic, customer-centric approaches based on identifying and meeting customer protection and safety needs and taking care of customers humanly. Remarkably, our findings demonstrate how safety for travelers and personnel and continuing human support toward consumers will be crucial in creating value during periods of uncertainty. Accordingly, this study proposes that:

Proposition 2a (P2a): Identifying and meeting customer protection and safety needs increase firms' ability to respond to unforeseen events.

Proposition 2b (P2b): Taking care of customers humanly increases firms' ability to cope with unforeseen events.

Finally, scholars have underlined how, in the crisis recovery phase, organizations reflect on the measures that would be necessary to implement to adapt the organizational structure and prepare for the road ahead (Doern, 2016; Le Nguyen & Kock, 2011). Hence, the literature highlights a risk diversification attitude from the business side (Morrish & Jones, 2020), with re-employment plans and stakeholder relationships re-establishment while recovering from adverse events (Doern, 2016; Hong *et al.*, 2012). By extending previous studies, this analysis advances that FBs focus on renewing customer value creation to bounce back from unexpected circumstances in the crisis recovery phase. Specifically, it was possible to observe how firms might find outside new partnerships to improve the offer proposal, thus, meeting the needs of customers who are increasingly inclined to a service that is attentive to outstanding customer experiences and personal needs. Therefore:

Proposition 3 (P3): Renewing customer value creation increases the capacity of firms to bounce back from unforeseen events.

5.1 Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, this study offers critical insights into efficient business strategies when interacting with customers in the crucial moments of a crisis, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Given the intense emotional and economic failure implications for FBs owners and managers, it is necessary to undertake the proper initiatives that prevent FBs from losing family property and compromising the family heritage. In this regard, the framework conceptualized in the study offers practical guidelines on business strategies redefinition about external relationships with customers in the FB context throughout the different stages of unexpected events. Hence, it could provide remarkable insights for managers

and practitioners to understand the main priorities (e.g., leverage digital tools to facilitate relationships with customers and ensure business operations, identify and meet customer protection and safety needs) to be addressed to handle and overcome difficulty in their external relationships with customers, in the specific phases of distress (i.e., crisis prevention, response, and recovery) (Hills, 1998; Smith, 1990; Elliott, Harris, and Baron, 2000), thus ensuring the continuity of business operations successfully.

5.2 Limitations and future research

Despite its important insights, this paper owns several limitations that could be addressed by future research.

First and foremost, this study examined how FBs manage and fight adversities in the external relationship with customers and explored how the pandemic affected their relationship with customers. Future research could examine how FBs modify and adapt their business internally during crisis prevention, response, and recovery stages.

Then, since this study analyzed how FBs operating in the tourism context reshaped their business strategies during the different stages of unexpected events, it would be interesting for future studies to investigate whether the identified strategies effectively allow FBs and/or companies, in general, to be more resilient considering the definition of resilience referred as “the process by which an actor (i.e., individual, organization, or community) builds and uses its capability endowments to interact with the environment in a way that positively adjusts and maintains functioning prior to, during, and following adversity” (Williams et al., 2017, 742).

Furthermore, future works could also focus on other research contexts. For instance, it would be interesting to involve FBs which operate in other sectors, like Industrial and Consumer Goods. Also, this work could be extended to other types of companies to see if this study’s results and our propositions can be applied in different business contexts.

Moreover, this study looked at tourism FBs operating in Italy. It would be interesting to extend the research to other countries. Additionally, future studies could investigate how socioemotional factors influence the risk perception of FBs owners, affecting how FBs may respond to fight adversities.

Also, the selected firms exhibited differences in the increase in activities during the pandemic. Hence, future research could deepen the underlying reasons that could motivate this evidence (e.g., differences in size, strategic positioning, and the efficacy of the strategy implemented).

Finally, this study was based on a qualitative approach. Future research paths could therefore test and validate the proposed framework.

6. Conclusion

Our study illuminates the significance for tourism FBs to rethink their business strategies when addressing the different stages of unexpected events as a crisis. Thus, this study argues that ignoring how crises may evolve can be problematic for such organizations. Implementing digital technologies to improve customer relationships and guarantee company operations will improve FBs capacity to avoid unfavorable results from unanticipated situations in the crisis prevention phase. FBs' capacity to respond to unanticipated issues strengthens when FBs identify and address consumer protection and safety demands and take care of consumers on a human level in the crisis response phase. Finally, increasing the potential of FBs to bounce back from unanticipated obstacles by renewing customer value generation is paramount in the crisis recovery phase. Scholars are invited to advance knowledge on this critical line of inquiry since gaining a deeper understanding of crisis management in tourism FBs can provide further theoretical and practical insights into the existing literature.

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