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Being creative under the Covid-19 pandemic crisis:

The role of effective inter-organizational relationship management

Abstract

Purpose: Anchored on the Broaden-and-Build Theory and the Circumplex Model, we develop and test a conceptual model in which satisfaction, influenced by an effective handling of communication, cooperation, conflict, and opportunism, is set as the predictor of inter-partner creativity in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents under the Covid-19 pandemic.

Design/methodology/approach: Our model was tested with data collected from 190 randomly selected hotel units located in Greece, using both online and drop-in questionnaire methods. Data were analyzed using SEM analysis.

Findings: Satisfaction with the working relationship was found to be enhanced by improving communication and cooperation, as well as by keeping conflict and opportunism at low levels. This was a strong predictor of inter-partner creativity, although less pronounced under high levels of relational distance and rigidity.

Originality: We unveil the role of effectively managing behavioral factors in inter-firm relationships to develop creative solutions to the Covid-19 crisis challenges, an issue reflected by prior research. We also shed light on the contingent effects of distance and rigidity, two important factors moderating relationships under crisis. We apply for the first time two psychological-based theories, the Broaden-and-Build Theory and the Circumplex Model, to an international marketing crisis situation.

Research limitations/implications: The study should be extended to other country settings, replicated at different levels of crisis severity, and use dyadic data. Additional environmental factors could be used as boundary conditions, while our model could be expanded to include additional drivers and consequences of inter-partner creativity.

Practical implications: To generate inter-partner creativity, there is a need to maintain high levels of satisfaction through proper communication, enhanced cooperation, conflict minimization, and avoidance of opportunistic actions. Also, to better translate satisfaction into inter-partner creativity, interacting parties should keep distance at low levels, while at the same time demonstrate greater flexibility.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; crisis management; inter-partner creativity.

Introduction

As opposed to other previous public crises that have at times plagued the world, caused, for example, by physical (e.g., earthquake disasters), economic (e.g., banking system failures), or political (e.g., war eruptions) conditions, the recent Covid-19 pandemic has indisputably influenced more uniquely and deeply virtually all aspects of human life. This can be attributed to four major factors: (a) *global scope* – the disease is a global phenomenon, affecting almost every country in the world; (b) *time uncertainty* – it is of unpredictable duration, since there are no clear indications of when the disease will be eliminated; (c) *regulatory intensity* – it is characterized by various highly restrictive measures, which are imposed by governments in order to minimize the harmful impact of this disease on public health; and (d) *economic repercussions* – it affects not only social, but also economic life, due to the imposition of various work, mobility, travel, and other restrictions (Ansell *et al.*, 2021; Hitt *et al.*, 2021).

Unavoidably, this unprecedented situation has shaped an unusually challenging business environment on a global scale, which has seriously affected the way business relationships are managed (Hitt *et al.*, 2021). This is because parties in a working relationship are caught in a web of interdependencies, and, therefore, the intensity, quality, and mode of their interactions are influenced by the numerous external constraints associated with the Covid-19 pandemic (Arslan *et al.*, 2021). This situation becomes even more acute when operating in an international context, where relationship members are separated by heightened geographic and psychological

distance, which is responsible for increasing the level of uncertainty and complexity in performing their tasks (Fath *et al.*, 2021).

To accommodate the new challenges imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is vital for interacting parties to come up with creative ideas that would help to preserve or even improve pre-crisis performance levels of their working relationship (Grözinger *et al.*, 2021; Zainal, 2021). Indeed, there are indications that creativity is essential in properly handling a crisis situation, because the unpredictable adversities of the crisis call for more novel responses, rather than tried ones (Pearson and Sommer, 2011). The generation of such fresh, useful, and innovative ideas by interacting parties provides an important value addition to the working relationship, as well as facilitating the effective overcoming of damage caused by the crisis (Sommer and Pearson, 2007; Sung and Choi, 2012). However, although the co-creation of novel and valuable solutions to crisis-related problems requires the substantial integration of resources and capabilities by partners in a working relationship (Bond *et al.*, 2020), it is of equal importance to achieve a harmonious behavioral atmosphere to facilitate creative thinking in their use (Sommer and Pearson, 2007).

Notwithstanding the critical role of behavioral factors in generating the right atmosphere for boosting inter-partner creativity under a crisis situation, only limited attention has been paid to this by extant research (Markovic *et al.*, 2021). This is surprising, especially in light of the fact that the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic: (a) has resulted in the resetting of relational goals that sometimes become

incompatible between interacting parties, thus causing problems in aligning their activities (Bond *et al.*, 2020); (b) has stimulated in certain cases a self-interest seeking attitude at the expense of the other business partner's interests (Gonzalez-Torres *et al.*, 2021); (c) has weakened the intensity and frequency of interactions between members of the relationship due to mobility, trade, and other restrictions imposed by governments (Dubey *et al.*, 2021); and (d) has made it difficult to transfer critical resources between partners and increased uncertainty levels in the working relationship (Paul *et al.*, 2021).

One economic sector where business relationships were particularly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic is that of tourism, which has experienced a tremendous drop in revenues worldwide, from \$1.7 trillion in 2019 to \$800 billion in 2021 (UNWTO, 2021). Although the tourism sector is quite often vulnerable to crises, due to its human interaction-based nature (Carlsen and Liburd, 2008), it has been more severely affected by the current pandemic because of massive lockdowns, border closures, and bans on public gatherings imposed by governments, as well as increasing consumer anxiety about - and even avoidance of - foreign travel, attributed to perceived health-related risks (Aigbedo, 2021; Nazneen *et al.*, 2022; Teeroovengadum *et al.*, 2021). As a response to these adversities and, in some cases, to ensure their mere existence, a number of firms in this sector have embarked on finding creative solutions, such as redesigning processes (e.g., improving sanitization procedures), making service improvements (e.g., providing hygiene kits for guests), and introducing new types of services (e.g., providing drone food delivery) (Chan *et al.*, 2021; Choe *et al.*, 2020; Taylor, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to explain the role of effectively managing the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents under the crisis situation caused by the current Covid-19 pandemic, in order to stimulate inter-partner creativity. Specifically, we focus on addressing three key research questions: (a) How does the proper handling of key behavioral factors in the working relationship under the crisis help to maintain high levels of satisfaction? (b) How can the satisfaction derived from the relationship be conducive to boosting creative solutions between interacting partners to accommodate crisis-related problems? and (c) What is the restrictive role played by relational distance and rigidity (usually exacerbated under crisis conditions) on the positive effect of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity?

Our study is anchored on two theories, namely the Broaden-and-Build Theory and the Circumplex Model, which were originally advanced in the psychology field and subsequently extended to the management area. While the Broaden-and-Build Theory provides a useful platform to explain the mechanism in which satisfaction, an emotional relationship outcome driven by behavioral factors, acts as a predictor of inter-partner creativity under a crisis situation (Frederickson, 2001), the Circumplex Model is used to explain how a crisis could disturb the balance of a relational system by changing the levels of flexibility and cohesion (Olson, 2000). By combining these theories, we aim to provide new theoretical inroads to better understand the business crisis situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study aims to make three key contributions to the international marketing literature. *First*, we shed light on the behavioral dynamics of business relationships taking place between hotels and their foreign travel agents under the idiosyncratic conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although a crisis creates a unique environmental setting in which behavioral interactions between members of a working relationship are affected, the extant literature has remained relatively silent. Nevertheless, the limited knowledge on the subject provides hints that certain behavioral factors (e.g., communication) are vital in generating positive outcomes during the crisis and after its end, such as boosting resilience (Zafari *et al.*, 2020), stimulating innovation (Mandjak *et al.*, 2017), and ensuring survival (Bengtson *et al.*, 2013; Kumar and Sharma, 2021) or even enhancing business performance (Matopoulos *et al.*, 2019; de Oliveira and Handfield, 2017). It also shows that several other negative factors (e.g., opportunism) may possibly be developed within the chaotic situation generated by the crisis, which can severely harm the business relationship (Fath *et al.*, 2021). Our study provides fresh insights into how the effective handling of four key behavioral constructs, namely communication, cooperation, conflict, and opportunism, can help to maintain high levels of satisfaction among interacting parties, even under the unique adversities generated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Second, we place particular emphasis on the link between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity. Although some studies (e.g., Andersen and Kragh, 2014) have stressed the importance of specific behavioral factors (e.g., trust) in successfully implementing the creative processes within organizations, the role of a satisfactory

inter-organizational business relationship in boosting creativity has not yet been explored. However, management research (e.g., Huang *et al.*, 2021; Kim and Shin, 2015; Peñalver *et al.*, 2019; Shin, 2014) indicates that the existence of a positive affect among team members in organizations facilitates the broadening of cognitive and social resources (e.g., information elaboration) that can be helpful in generating novel, valued and useful products and outcomes by team members. Inspired by this research thinking, we posit in our study that satisfaction, defined as the positive emotional state derived from fulfilled expectations in a working relationship, can act as a critical psychological resource (denoting hope, resilience, and optimism) for relational parties to engage in creativity (Lin *et al.*, 2016). In particular, our study stresses the importance of maintaining high levels of satisfaction in a business relationship operating under a crisis situation (as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic) in order for interacting partners to find creative solutions to the numerous thorny problems caused by the crisis.

Third, we underscore the contingent role of both distance between interacting parties and relational rigidity on the link between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity. This is because, as opposed to a smooth development process of a working relationship under normal conditions, an external crisis can cause extreme economic, operational, and other disturbances by unbalancing cohesion and flexibility (Kahn *et al.*, 2013; Olson, 2000), which can be felt more strongly when the relationship is characterized by high levels of distance and rigidity (Kahn *et al.*, 2013). In fact, the imposition of travel, trade, transportation, and other restrictions by governments

during the Covid-19 pandemic has been responsible for many of these disturbances becoming more severe (Arslan *et al.*, 2021; Fath *et al.*, 2021), while the dynamically changing conditions generated by the crisis has exerted continuous pressures on partners in the relationship to find immediate and workable solutions for the problems that emerge (Bond *et al.*, 2020). Our study sheds light on the moderating role of these two important (but neglected) variables characterizing business relationships and shows that their existence can weaken the positive impact of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity during the pandemic.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: In the next section, we refer to research focusing on business relationships under crisis conditions. This is followed by a description of the study's conceptual model and an explanation of its theoretical base. We then proceed to the development of the research hypotheses. The next section highlights the research methodology adopted, with a particular focus on research scope, sampling procedures, measurement scales, research instrument, and data collection. Subsequently, we analyze the data collected and test our hypotheses. This is followed by a discussion of the research findings. The theoretical, managerial, and public policy implications of the study are then presented. In the final section, we discuss the limitations of the study and suggest directions for future research.

Research on business relationships under crisis

A crisis is defined as a "low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organization and is characterized by ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of

resolution, as well as by a belief that decisions must be made swiftly" (Pearson and Clair, 1998, p. 60). The way business relationships are managed under a crisis situation is particularly critical, not only because they are affected by crisis-related disruptions and turbulence, but also because they play a decisive role in overcoming the various problems caused by the crisis (Zafari *et al.*, 2020). The unpredictability and uncertainty of a crisis may result in distrust of the partner trying to cope with the unexpected environmental challenges (Bengtson *et al.*, 2013), while in some cases, environmental pressures may increase opportunistic tendencies (Keränen *et al.*, 2020). Exposure to a crisis can also increase the role of interorganizational justice in maintaining partner commitment, which is vital in mitigating the potential negative effect of the crisis on the business relationship's performance (Matopoulos *et al.*, 2019).

Behavioral factors are particularly critical in accommodating crisis-related challenges faced by parties involved in business relationships. For example, Oliveira and Handfield's (2017) study highlighted the importance of communication as a means to better assess the business partner's financial status and the need for relational adaptations to cope with the crisis situation. Cooperation and closer bonds between partners were also reported to be critical in resolving crisis-related problems (Bengtson *et al.*, 2013), as well as helping them to reconfigure their resource combinations to better fit the dynamically changing conditions caused by the crisis (Keränen *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, Alalwan *et al.* (2021) show that trust, commitment, and information technology-based formal and informal interactions are critical in relationship effectiveness, which ultimately fosters joint planning during the crisis period.

Furthermore, Wagner *et al.* (2021) report that a partner's dependence on a firm which is financially distressed because of the crisis, will motivate the former to provide its assistance, thus increasing the chances of survival under crisis (Wagner *et al.*, 2021).

There are indications in the literature that the status of business relationships is also affected by their pre-crisis tie strength and the favorability of opportunity outlook during the crisis (Fath *et al.*, 2021). For example, if a business relationship is characterized by strong ties before the crisis and the partners have a positive outlook during the crisis, they will increase communication and mutual support, resulting in high levels of trust. However, in the case of a negative outlook, it is very likely to shift their focus toward other possible partners, despite maintaining communication and commitment for future possibilities after recovery (Fath *et al.*, 2021). However, when the pre-crisis relational ties are weak, reduced communication and commitment between partners will make them shift to other partners, especially when joint business expectations during the crisis are negative (Fath *et al.*, 2021).

A crisis situation may also threaten the existence of an established business relationship, because the new and unusual conditions generated may reduce the value of the current partner (Obal and Gao, 2020) or endanger the survival of a partner due to unexpected financial difficulties (Paul *et al.*, 2021). However, losing a current partner can motivate the firm to seek new relationships with other partners who can respond to changing needs and help it to survive in the new business environment generated by the crisis (Butt, 2021; Ivanov, 2021). The fact that these new relationships are quickly

built, based on heuristics, without a thorough evaluation of the new business partner, requires continuous monitoring and reassessment (Zafari *et al.*, 2020).

Creativity is one key resource that business partners could deploy during a crisis situation to accommodate crisis-related issues in a novel, useful, and valuable way (Markovic *et al.*, 2021). In fact, remaining innovative in a crisis environment requires mutual transfers of creative inputs from business partners that provide them with access to complementary capabilities (Andersen *et al.*, 2013; Öberg, 2013). Notably, the available limited research on creativity emphasizes inter-partner relationship management processes that involves fairness, communication, knowledge integration, openness, inter-partner learning, commitment, and supportive monitoring mechanisms as facilitators of inter-partner creativity (Andersen *et al.*, 2013; Andersen and Kragh, 2014; Vafeas and Hughes, 2016).

Three major gaps can be identified from the previous review of the literature on business relationships under crisis: (a) notwithstanding hints in the literature that behavioral factors play a vital role in dealing with crisis-related adversities, these were examined in isolation from each other and only peripherally connected with satisfaction (see **Appendix 1** for the key studies on the subject); (b) although being creative in a business relationship is of paramount importance to effectively and efficiently resolve problems stemming from a crisis situation and ensure continuity, inter-partner creativity was only tangentially tackled; and (c) despite the fact that being close to a business partner and showing a willingness to be flexible are essential prerequisites to

swiftly and effectively respond to the new challenges set by the peculiar conditions of a crisis, their role has been neglected.

Conceptual model and theoretical base

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of our study, where we posit that satisfaction in the working relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents under the Covid-19 pandemic is positively influenced by communication and cooperation, but negatively affected by the existence of conflict and opportunism. We also hypothesize that satisfaction with the relationship acts as a driver to inter-partner creativity. Two additional variables, namely relational distance and relational rigidity, are considered to act as moderators on the association between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity.

...insert Figure 1 about here...

Our model builds on both the Broaden-and-Build Theory and the Circumplex Model. The Broaden-and-Build Theory is based on the idea that experiencing positive emotions broadens individuals' momentary thought-action repertoires, that will in turn contribute to building their lasting personal resources of a physical, intellectual, social, or psychological nature (Frederickson, 2001). This is because positive emotions widen the constellation of thoughts and actions, such as envisaging future success. This can be compared to negative emotions (e.g., fear) that narrow (rather than broaden) the thought-action repertoires (Frederickson, 2001). Hence, in contrast to negative emotions that yield direct and immediate benefits to survival, positive emotions offer

indirect and long-term adaptive advantages that accumulate reserves to be used in cases of future threats (Frederickson, 2001). This is particularly important during challenging times, as in the case of a crisis situation, as the broadened attention and cognition stimulated by previous experiences of positive emotions is also a predictor of coping behavior (Burns *et al.*, 2008). Notably, the potential of positive emotions to help build cognitive resources exists not only at the individual level, but also at the team level (Vacharkulksemsuk and Frederickson, 2013).

According to the Circumplex Model, relational systems consist of three key dimensions: (a) *cohesion*, where relationships range between those which are too separate and those that are too enmeshed; (b) *flexibility*, where relationships can be either rigid or chaotic in their responses to changing conditions; and (c) *communication*, where relationships can balance both cohesion and flexibility through effective communication (Kahn *et al.*, 2013). A crisis can cause a relational disturbance, because it unbalances cohesion (i.e., the relationship leans either toward disengagement or the enmeshment end) and flexibility (i.e., the relationship leans either toward rigidity or the end chaos), thus creating an unhealthy relational system (Kahn *et al.*, 2013; Olson, 2000). Through sound crisis management, firms try to repair relational systems by: (a) increasing the degree of cohesion between disengaged parties and/or decreasing the strength of connection within enmeshed groups; and (b) decreasing the degree of relational systems that are too flexible to reduce chaos and/or increasing the flexibility of rigid relationships suffering from a limited behavioral repertoire (Kahn *et al.*, 2013). Such crisis management involves a transformation

process that helps interacting parties to heal the emotional trauma caused by the unbalancing of their relational system, construct the meaning of the new reality with the aid of proper emotional processing, and form the conception of a desirable post-crisis future. Notably, relationships that were unbalanced before the crisis are more likely to be vulnerable to the adversities of the crisis (due to an inability to cope with unforeseen circumstances), as well as finding it more difficult to recover after the crisis (Kahn *et al.*, 2013).

Research hypotheses

In this section, we develop the research hypotheses as indicated in the conceptual model. These are divided into three groups, corresponding to each of the research questions of the study, namely: (a) the role of behavioral factors (i.e., communication, cooperation, conflict, and opportunism) characterizing the atmosphere of the working relationship during a crisis situation on satisfaction;¹ (b) the impact of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity; and (c) the moderating role of relational distance and rigidity on the association between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity.

Behavioral relationship effects on satisfaction under crisis

Communication refers to the frequent sharing of accurate, relevant, timely and adequate information between business partners and acts as the 'glue' in the relationship (Mohr and Spekman, 1994). In a relationship characterized by proper communication behavior, partners share critical information and participate together in planning and setting goals (Mohr and Spekman, 1994). By its very nature, a crisis

situation, like the Covid-19 pandemic, is characterized by the ambiguity of its cause, effect, and ways of resolution, which creates conditions of high uncertainty, not only at the macro-country level (e.g., public health, economic situation, political stability), but also at the micro-business level (e.g., rising costs, shortage of goods, delivery delays) (Pearson and Clair, 1998). Under these circumstances, it is vital for partners to share, as opposed to hiding information, since there is a need for accurate and timely information to make informed decisions, understand each other's expectations, and feel connected to the relationship (Ecklebe and Löffler, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2021). In fact, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many business partners recognized the need to share information on their plans, forecasts, capacities and other aspects of their working relationship on a real time basis (usually through the use of digital technologies) to be able to swiftly and effectively respond to changes (e.g., Butt, 2021; Gesell *et al.*, 2021; Sharma *et al.*, 2020). A recent study by Qin *et al.* (2021) even revealed that a mere conversation between interacting parties about the pandemic helps to gain insights about relational expectations, ensures adherence to relational norms, and prevents any behavior that could harm the relationship. Obviously, an open, frequent, and rich communication between relational members during a crisis situation would have a positive effect on satisfaction, because: (a) it enables partners to better understand each other and form mutually agreed expectations; (b) it allows the setting of goals together and clarifies each party's role in their accomplishment; (c) it makes it easier for partners to discuss their concerns and alleviates feelings of anxiety and uncertainty; (d) it reduces the risks associated with the partner's ability to keep promises; and (e) it

helps interacting parties to value and appreciate each other's ideas in overcoming crisis-related difficulties (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Cohen *et al.*, 2017; Gesell *et al.*, 2021; Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Robson *et al.*, 2006; Sahadev, 2008). Based on the previous argumentation, we can hypothesize that:

H₁: During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, high levels of communication in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents will increase satisfaction levels among interacting parties.

Cooperation denotes the willingness of one party to work with another in a relationship to jointly achieve both common and individual goals (Cannon and Perreault, 1999; Payan *et al.*, 2016). It is basically a process of collaboration between parties in a working relationship, through which they concede advantages to each other in anticipation of achieving a balanced exchange and beneficial values in future (Das and Teng, 2000). Under conditions of crisis, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, such a cooperative spirit is of paramount importance in: (a) accommodating arising adversities and effectively dealing with the various complexities that occur; (b) developing a better knowledge of each other's crisis-related problems and resolving them in a constructive way; (c) coordinating actions to effectively and efficiently combine resources and capabilities; and (d) encouraging alignment and adjustment of objectives, strategies, and behaviors in light of environmental changes caused by the crisis (Franklin and Marshall, 2019; Sharma *et al.*, 2020; Sharma *et al.*, 2021). In a crisis situation, maintaining a cooperative relationship plays a pivotal role in boosting satisfaction, because interacting parties have to operate in an environment where there

is a mismatch between the speed of external changes and company responses (Olsson, 2015). As such, interacting parties tend to demonstrate greater willingness to help each other, know better how to contribute in order to accomplish their joint goals, and reduce any uncertainties in properly performing their roles and responsibilities (Payan *et al.*, 2016; Payan *et al.*, 2019). Satisfaction is also derived from the fact that cooperation enables access to resources and capabilities of the business partner, which are particularly valuable in times of crisis when firms face the risk of losing their resources and need complementary capabilities (Ashok *et al.*, 2018; Wagner *et al.*, 2021). Hence, we may hypothesize that:

H₂: During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, high levels of cooperation in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents will increase satisfaction levels among interacting parties.

Conflict is a blocking behavior that prevents relational parties from acquiring resources and/or performing activities needed to attain their goals (Anderson and Narus, 1990; Gaski, 1989). Conflicts are likely to occur during times of crisis for various reasons, such as partners having divergent expectations of how to accommodate the arising problems, failing to perform their relational roles as promised before the crisis, and embarking on incompatible methods of operation (Lynch *et al.*, 2014). There is also the potential of a misfit between a partner's capabilities and the requirements of the crisis, because new crisis conditions may demand different kinds of capabilities (Prakash *et al.*, 2022). In addition, during the Covid-19 crisis, there have been cases of business relationships where partners lost sight of their mutual goals and adopted an

“us versus them” approach, thus leading to sub-optimal, and sometimes catastrophic, results (Bond *et al.*, 2020). Conflict in the relationship, due to the crisis situation, is more likely to arise when dealing with foreign business partners because: (a) the psychic distance separating interacting parties may result in different interpretations of the crisis-related problems (Obadia *et al.*, 2017); (b) the possible existence of information asymmetry reduces confidence in the partner to properly carry out its responsibilities (Sachdev and Bello, 2014); and (c) different stereotypes adopted by relationship members may lead to biased, as opposed to objective, interpretations of key relational issues (Hambrick *et al.*, 2001). Obviously, the existence of conflict in a working relationship under a crisis situation is very likely to elicit negative emotions, such as frustration, tension, and displeasure, that will reduce satisfaction levels (Høgevoid *et al.*, 2020). Relational partners may also seek alternative ways and solutions outside the dyad to accomplish their goals, such as taking legal actions, which may jeopardize continuation of the relationship (Franke and Forest, 2021). The following hypothesis can therefore be made:

H₃: During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, high levels of conflict in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents will decrease satisfaction levels among interacting parties.

Opportunism is defined as a self-interest seeking behavior that involves motives of deceit, duplicity, and cunning (Samaha *et al.*, 2011; Seggie *et al.*, 2013). Interacting parties in business relationships can sometimes be tempted to engage in opportunistic actions, which can have a subtle (e.g., taking advantage of others) and/or blatant (e.g.,

shirking obligations) form (John, 1984; Williamson, 1979). These are calculated efforts by a partner aiming to increase short-term unilateral gains at the expense of the other partner, and, once revealed, this can be detrimental to the future continuation of the working relationship (Lewicki *et al.*, 1998; Ring and Van de Ven, 1994). A crisis situation, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, provides fertile ground for cultivating opportunism in business relationships, because: (a) deteriorating market conditions provide possible excuses for violating promises made during the pre-crisis period; (b) the high volatility, unpredictability, and complexity of the new situation can attribute failure to fulfil promises to an inability, rather than renegeing; and (c) business partners deriving power from the crisis may exercise this power to take advantage of the less powerful member (Conway *et al.*, 2014; Ju *et al.*, 2014; Sarbin, 1994). Partners behaving in an opportunistic manner violate relational norms and deliver lower relational value than promised and expected (Bamberger *et al.*, 2021; Um and Kim, 2018). As such, exposure to opportunism is associated with various negative feelings, such as disappointment, exploitation, and devastation, which are expected to reduce satisfaction, because it increases the cost of doing business with the partner, while at the same time reducing the benefits derived due to deteriorating performance (Høgevoid *et al.*, 2020; Glavee-Geo *et al.*, 2021). We can therefore hypothesize that:

H₄: During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, high levels of opportunism between hotels and their foreign travel agents will decrease satisfaction levels among interacting parties.

Relationship satisfaction and inter-partner creativity under crisis

Satisfaction represents a positive affective state associated with the salient aspects of the relationship, which denotes the extent to which relational expectations are met (Schul *et al.*, 1985). This creates positive feelings among interacting parties, such as delight, enthusiasm, and hope, that are conducive to cultivating a creative spirit, which is crucial in generating new, useful, and valued ideas, products, or services (Amabile *et al.*, 2005; Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Shalley and Gilson, 2017; West, 2002). This is particularly true during times of crisis, when there is a need to provide creative solutions to the multiple problems that emerge, although this possibility may not be realized by relationship members, due to the stress, fear, and anxiety associated with unexpected conditions (Fredberg and Pregmark, 2022). Satisfaction has the potential to stimulate inter-partner creativity as this: (a) motivates information elaboration and sharing diverse perspectives (Huang *et al.*, 2021); (b) enables partners to reflect on and exchange information about joint objectives and strategies (Shin, 2014); and (c) provides assurance about their efficacy, resilience, and optimism regarding the continuation of the working relationship (Lin *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, satisfaction aligns partner expectations, prevents them from losing sight of their goals and priorities, and saves time, energy, and resources that are essential to providing creative solutions to crisis-related problems (Peralta *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, satisfaction facilitates a co-creation approach to handle issues relating to the crisis situation, mainly because a business partner can translate and adapt an idea proven to be successful in its own setting to the setting of the other relationship partner (Lu *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we have the following hypothesis:

H5: During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the existence of high satisfaction levels between hotels and their foreign travel agents will increase inter-partner creativity.

The moderating role of relational distance and rigidity under crisis

Relational distance refers to the extent of cultural, social, technological and temporal diversity between business partners in a working relationship (Ford *et al.*, 2011; Ibert and Müller, 2015). Distant relationships are characterized by low levels of coordination, limited transfer of resources, and infrequent contacts between interacting parties (Fleming *et al.*, 2016; Ford *et al.*, 2011). Relational distance is particularly critical when operating in an international context, due to geographic and psychic differences between the countries of the parties involved (Ibert and Müller, 2015). We contend that during a crisis period, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the existence of high levels of relational distance will weaken the positive effect of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity, because: (a) distant partners may not have a shared interpretation of relational issues, which can result in diverging expectations, misunderstandings, and questionable intentions that are detrimental to creative thinking (Johnston *et al.*, 2012) (b) their limited interpersonal connections and interactions will confine access to potential resources (e.g., information) that could serve as important sources of creative ideas (Chen and Tseng, 2021); (c) the higher vulnerability of distant relationships to uncertainties may result in doubts about devoting cognitive resources to the working relationship (Fath *et al.*, 2021); and (d) distance may make it harder to understand and empathize with the problems the partner experiences, leading to an inability to find

creative solutions to crisis-related problems (Leonidou *et al.*, 2006). Based on the previous argumentation, we may posit that:

H₆: Relational distance negatively moderates the effect of satisfaction in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents on inter-partner creativity.

Relational rigidity refers to a relationship partner's tendency toward employing well-learned or dominant responses to address uncertainties and threats stemming from the environment (Fredericks, 2005). This could be ascribed to a restriction of information processing (e.g., sole reliance on existing knowledge) and a constriction in control (e.g., centralization of authority) as a means of reacting to a threatening situation (Staw *et al.*, 1981). In a crisis situation, like the case of the current Covid-19 pandemic, rigidity in the working relationship is unhealthy because the adoption of strictly defined roles and stable rules does not leave much space in which to maneuver in order to effectively accommodate the arising problems (Olson, 2000). Indeed, acting on plans developed based on environmental analysis conducted before the pandemic was found dysfunctional, thus making it necessary to work on short-term plans and contracts (Manwaring *et al.*, 2021). As such, rigidity is expected to weaken the positive effect of satisfaction on creativity in a crisis situation, because: (a) it is maladaptive to the fast-changing (and, sometimes, faster-than-anticipated) market conditions and therefore not compatible with the expectations of business partners (Harris *et al.*, 1998; Staw *et al.*, 1981); (b) it provides a mismatch between interacting parties' responses and environmental demands under a threatening situation, which is responsible for decreasing the attractiveness and value of the relationship (Fredericks, 2005); and (c) it

leads to negative expectations about the future potential of the relationship, which may result in discounting ideas, input, and opinions and generating bitter feelings (Leonard-Barton, 1992). Recent research (e.g., Van Dijk *et al.*, 2021) also shows that inter-partner creativity is hampered by vigilant and cautious strategies, avoidance of risk for making mistakes, and existing routines and rules, which are characteristics of rigid partnerships. Relatedly, the exogenous shock from the Covid-19 crisis has forced many organizations to adopt less rigid mental models and increase their adaptive capacity, which has resulted in the development of new products and services (Soluk *et al.*, 2021). This argumentation leads us to the following hypothesis:

H₇: Relational rigidity negatively moderates the effect of satisfaction in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents on inter-partner creativity.

Research methodology

Scope and sampling procedures

The study took place in Greece, a country that experienced a drastic decrease in international tourism receipts and international tourist arrivals due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (UNWTO, 2020). Tourism, which was an export champion in 2018, with travel exports accounting for 43.3% of total service exports, is one of the most important economic sectors in Greece (OECD, 2020). However, although the Greek government took measures to control the pandemic and avoid the possibility of a health crisis, the national economy, including the tourism industry, was severely hit (Pappas, 2021). In fact, in 2020, there was about a 70% decrease in international tourist

arrivals in the major cities of Athens and Thessaloniki (Dimitropoulos et al., 2021), while many hotels embarked on adjusting their market offerings to incorporate more safety features to protect their guests from the pandemic (Pavlatos et al., 2021).

Sampling procedures

We conducted our study among a sample of Greek hotels identified from the ICAP directory (2020), which contains details of 9,873 hotels located in Greece. Of these, we have randomly selected 1,000 hotels, which were initially contacted by phone to provide information about the purpose of the study, as well as to explore their willingness to participate. Altogether, 385 hotels expressed an interest in participating and provided details of the contact person responsible for the hotel's business relationships with its foreign travel agents. Those hotels that did not respond to our request to participate in the study were either suspending/terminating their business operations (with the financial problems created by the pandemic cited as the main reason) or had a company policy of not divulging information for the purpose of external surveys.

Measurement scales

All measurement scales were extracted from the well-established literature on business-to-business relationships, and adjusted to the context of the current Covid-19 situation with the aid of a panel of academics with expertise in the field (see **Appendix 2**). Specifically, the communication scale comprises four items taken from Mohr *et al.* (1996), the cooperation scale is a five-item scale derived from Sibley and

Michie (1992), the scale for conflict has five items extracted from Etgar's (1979) work, and opportunism is a four-item scale adapted from Yilmaz and Hunt (2001). The scale of satisfaction consists of five items taken from the work of Cannon and Perreault (1999) and Leuthesser and Kohli (1995), while the four items of inter-partner creativity scale were adapted from Oldham and Cummings (1996). With regard to moderators, relational distance has five items derived from Hallén and Sandström's (1991) conceptual article, while the relational rigidity scale has five items extracted from the works of Li (2010) and Fang et al. (2011).

Research instrument

We used a pre-coded, self-administered questionnaire to collect our data. This was designed using the adjusted measurement scales identified earlier from the pertinent literature. All scale items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging between "1= strongly disagree" and "7= strongly agree". The questionnaire began with an introductory section explaining the study objectives, proceeded with a set of questions focusing on the various constructs contained in the conceptual model, and ended with questions seeking information about the hotel's demographic characteristics, such as year of establishment, star rating status, and number of beds. There were also questions assessing key informant quality with regard to familiarity, knowledge, and confidence with the content of the questionnaire, measured on a seven-point scale (where "1= very low" and "7= very high") (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). The questionnaire was first written in English and then translated into Greek, while a back-translation procedure ensured that there were no linguistic problems (Craig and

Douglas, 2005). Before embarking on the full-scale study, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a group of hotel managers requiring minor changes.

Data collection

Data were collected during summer 2020, that is, immediately after the lifting of the first national lockdown in Greece. The questionnaire was electronically sent to all hotels that showed an interest in participating in the study, while in some cases the drop-in method was employed. The questionnaire was accompanied by a covering letter explaining the aim and usefulness of the study and promising that respondents would receive an executive summary of the key findings. We sent e-mail reminders two weeks after the commencement of data collection, and, in some cases, these were followed by telephone calls. To ascertain the absence of non-response bias, we compared the answers of early and late respondents, using a series of Student *t*-tests, which revealed no statistically significant differences (Armstrong and Overton, 1977). In total, we received 215 questionnaires (i.e., 55.8% response rate), of which 14 were not usable due to incomplete and/or inconsistent replies, while another 11 were removed due to insufficient key informant quality. Key informants in our study held the positions of general manager, marketing manager, sales manager, or operations manager.

Data analysis and results

We analyzed the data collected using SEM analysis based on the EQS program and adopting the elliptical reweighted least squares procedure. First, conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we tested the prespecified relationships between

the latent factors and their indicators and assessed the unidimensionality, validity, and reliability of the constructs employed. We then tested the structural model to assess the conceptual model's fit to the data, as well as to estimate direct and moderation effects (Diamantopoulos and Siguaw, 2009).

Measurement model

Table 1 shows the results of the measurement model, where satisfactory fit to the data is observed ($\chi^2=881.41$, $p=.000$, $df = 532$; NFI= .95; NNFI= .98; CFI= .98; RMSEA= .07). We conducted a CFA by restricting each manifest variable to load on its prespecified latent factor and leaving the underlying latent factors to correlate, with the results indicating convergent validity because all standardized factor loadings are high and significant, average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct exceeds the critical threshold of .50, and composite reliability for each construct is above the critical value of .70 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Hair *et al.*, 2018). Construct reliability is also established, since Cronbach's alpha scores for all constructs of the conceptual model are higher than .70. **Table 2** shows the results of the correlation analysis, indicating the existence of discriminant validity since all correlation coefficients between constructs are lower than the square root of AVE, while the confidence interval around the correlation estimate for each construct pair never included 1.00 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

...Insert Table 1 about here...

...Insert Table 2 about here...

Because we gathered data from single key informants on a cross-sectional design, common method bias was assessed through procedural and statistical approaches. Procedurally, we took the following actions: (a) we assured respondents that the anonymity of their responses would be protected, (b) we clarified that there are no right or wrong answers and that it is important to be objective in their responses; (c) we counterbalanced the sequence of predictor and criterion variables in the questionnaire; and (d) we reversed some of the scale items in some of the constructs (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Statistically, we conducted a CFA in which all manifest variables in the measurement model were set as indicators of one latent factor, revealing a very poor fit to the data ($\chi^2=4245.93$, $p=.000$, $df= 560$; NFI= .74; NNFI= .75; CFI= .77; RMSEA= .21) (Venkatraman and Prescott, 1990). We also controlled for the effect of a directly measured latent methods factor, where all items in the questionnaire were loaded on their theoretical constructs and on the latent method factor, with the significance of the structural parameters in models including and excluding the latent method factor remaining stable (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

To check for reverse causality between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity and purify satisfaction from possible endogeneity bias, we applied the two stages least square method (Antonakis *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, we chose 'power' exercised in the relationship as an instrumental variable, which should be strongly correlated with the endogenous independent variable satisfaction, but uncorrelated with the dependent variable inter-partner creativity (Zaefarian *et al.*, 2017). In the first stage, satisfaction was regressed on 'power' and the regression residual was saved. The strength of the

instrumental variable was assessed using F -test, revealing an F -value greater than the threshold of 10 (Stock and Watson, 2011). In the second stage, inter-partner creativity was regressed on the residual which replaced satisfaction. This was followed by the computation of both an efficient and a consistent model, which were subsequently compared using Hausman's (1978) test. No statistically significant differences were observed in this comparison, meaning that satisfaction is exogenous to inter-partner creativity and eliminating the possibility for reverse causality (Antonakis *et al.*, 2014).

Structural model

We ran a latent variable path analysis to test the hypothesized relationships in our conceptual model, which again resulted in a satisfactory fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 1034.04$, $p = .000$, $df = 620$; NFI = .91; NNFI = .94; CFI = .94; RMSEA = .08) (see **Table 3**). Regarding the direct effects, our findings lend support to H_1 , as communication between hotels and their foreign travel agents had a positive impact on satisfaction during the Covid-19 pandemic ($\beta = .13$, $t = 1.76$, $p = .08$). We also confirmed H_2 , which indicates that cooperation between interacting parties is a very strong predictor of satisfaction during crisis times ($\beta = .75$, $t = 9.01$, $p = .00$). On the other hand, we found support for H_3 , because conflict between relationship parties exhibited a negative effect on satisfaction ($\beta = -.15$, $t = -2.03$, $p = .04$). H_4 was also verified as opportunism was shown to decrease satisfaction in the working relationship during the pandemic crisis ($\beta = -.15$, $t = -1.99$, $p = .05$). Finally, our findings revealed that satisfaction is a strong predictor of inter-partner creativity ($\beta = .80$, $t = 9.31$, $p = .00$), thereby providing support for H_5 .

...Insert Table 3 about here...

Moderation hypotheses were tested using the interaction method (Ping, 1995). Our findings revealed that the effect of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity weakens as relational distance increases ($\beta = -.51, t = -3.50, p = .00$), thus supporting H₆. Relational rigidity was also found to significantly negatively moderate the impact of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity, thus confirming H₇ which posits that relational rigidity weakens the effect of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity, ($\beta = -.28, t = -2.05, p = .04$).

Discussion

Inspired by crisis management theory and creativity research, our conceptual model connects behavioral dimensions of the hotel-foreign travel agent relationship with inter-partner creativity within the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic. Our study findings revealed that communication and cooperation between interacting parties under this crisis situation help to boost satisfaction, as opposed to conflict and opportunism which have a detrimental effect. This positive feeling of satisfaction is subsequently instrumental on inter-partner creativity. Our study has also stressed the need to have reduced levels of distance and rigidity between interacting parties in order for this positive association between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity to produce better results. In brief, the study has amply demonstrated the critical role of properly handling the behavioral aspects of relationships between business partners in order to cope with the difficulties associated with a crisis situation.

With regard to *communication*, our results complement recent research on business-to-business relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic, revealing that: (a) the transfer of new and updated knowledge between business partners helps to mitigate the adverse effects of the crisis and improves business performance (Butt, 2021; Gesell *et al.*, 2021); (b) high quality information transfers between business partners facilitates the development of an analytic capability that helps to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the working relationship (Dubey *et al.*, 2021); and (c) formal and informal interactions between business partners (especially when supported by information technologies) contributes to the development of harmonious relational norms and governance (Alalwan *et al.*, 2021).

The strong effect of *cooperation* between hotels and their foreign travel agents on satisfaction found in our study is in harmony with the findings of recent research on the Covid-19 pandemic, underscoring the conducive role of cooperation in: (a) developing innovative ideas, processes, and products/services to accommodate crisis-related challenges (Markovic *et al.*, 2021); (b) helping relationship members to respond in an agile, resilient, and viable way to the difficulties caused by the crisis (Belhadi *et al.*, 2021; Do *et al.*, 2021; Ivanov, 2021); (c) cultivating a hope between interacting parties (especially for the resource-poor one) that the hurdles created by the crisis will be successfully overcome (Sharma *et al.*, 2021; Wagner *et al.*, 2021); and (d) boosting business performance levels of the working relationship (Sharma *et al.*, 2021; Wagner *et al.*, 2021).

The fact that a negative relationship between *conflict* and satisfaction was established in our study indicates that destructive disagreements between members of a relationship under a crisis situation (like the Covid-19 pandemic) can result in unpleasant consequences, such as extra costs, time inefficiencies, and waste of resources (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022). It may also lead to a disparity of business goals and strategies guiding the working relationship, with all the negative consequences that this may entail not only for its success, but also for its mere survival. This is consistent with the results of Mitrega and Choi's (2021) study, which found that the firms' ability to constructively resolve disagreements with their business partners is vital for securing high levels of business performance.

Our results also show that taking *opportunistic* actions during crisis times can harm satisfaction levels in the relationship between hotels and their foreign travel agents. These complement research findings by Gonzalez-Torres *et al.* (2021) who revealed that such a self-interest seeking attitude by business partners during the Covid-19 pandemic was responsible for reducing their financial performance. It also reinforces recent findings by Shareef *et al.* (2022) that the Covid-19 crisis has given rise to unethical practices by some firms in an attempt to gain more benefits than deserved from their partners (and in some cases from end-customers), thus creating bitter feelings.

The strong association between *satisfaction* with the relationship and inter-partner creativity during the Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of a positive

affective state in broadening the thought-action repertoires of business partners and enhancing creative behavior (Amabile *et al.*, 2005). This finding is consistent with those of studies conducted in the wider management field, revealing that: (a) there is a positive association between employee satisfaction with financial and non-financial rewards and individual creativity (Wang *et al.*, 2019); (b) high levels of relationship quality are responsible for enhancing creativity among relationship members (Liu, 2013; Peralta *et al.*, 2021); and (c) a group positive affective tone is conducive to encouraging team creativity (Huang *et al.*, 2021; Shin, 2014).

Finally, the weakening effect of *relational distance* on the satisfaction-inter-partner creativity link emphasizes the criticality of enhancing the level of familiarity between hotels and their foreign travel agents in order to maintain access to important human, technological, and information resources that are instrumental in stimulating creativity in the working relationship (Chen and Tseng, 2021). The similar weakening impact of *relational rigidity* on the association between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity complements prior research findings (e.g., Rappacini *et al.*, 2021), highlighting the role of flexibility in overcoming crisis challenges. It is also consistent with Soluk *et al.*'s (2021) research findings, noting that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced companies to reduce their rigidity and formalization and adopt more adaptive approaches and new business models.

Study implications

Our findings have important implications for theory, practice, and policymaking, which are presented in the following.

Theoretical implications

Inspired by team creativity research in the management and marketing fields, we introduced the concept of inter-partner creativity and its links with behavioral factors characterizing inter-organizational relationships under the crisis situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although communication, cooperation, conflict, opportunism, and satisfaction are constructs that have been widely used in the literature focusing primarily on buyer-seller relationships, in our research they were found to play a crucial role with regard to interactions taking place between hotels and their foreign travel agents during a crisis situation. This means that concepts and ideas developed in other contexts could be used (with some modifications) to better understand crisis-related problems.

We also provide a deeper explanation to the theoretically motivated association between satisfaction and inter-partner creativity by setting distance and rigidity as boundary conditions playing an inhibiting role. This shows that the Circumplex Model, which was developed to explain interpersonal relationships during crises times, can be extended to provide explanations for issues relating to inter-organizational relationships that take place under crisis conditions. The employment of Broaden-and-Build Theory also helped to reveal the potential of the emotional outcome of an inter-

organizational relationship to produce creative solutions to problems connected with the crisis situation. This stresses the fact that a crisis does not only affect the economic side of business relationships, but also its behavioral side. In fact, it is through the proper handling of behavioral interactions between members of a relationship that economic aspects could be better controlled to cope with the chaotic conditions of the crisis.

In general, our study has shown that the unprecedented nature of the Covid-19 phenomenon provides fertile ground for applying and/or extending existing theories that were developed in other disciplines to have a deeper understanding of it. The fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is different from other types of crises (because of its global scope, time uncertainty, regulatory emphasis, and economic repercussions) deserves the development of a specific new theory that will take into consideration the idiosyncrasies of this phenomenon and its impact on business relationships in different stages of their development.

Managerial implications

From a managerial standpoint, there should be an understanding by managers of both hotel and travel agent organizations that crises may require new and unusual solutions to problems in order to survive and succeed. They should engage in creative efforts by being open to new ideas, jointly questioning strategies and processes that do not work under the new conditions, and implementing novel solutions to crisis-related problems. Stimulating inter-partner creativity in times of crisis requires maintaining

high levels of satisfaction in the working relationship and to achieve this there is a need to keep it rewarding, attractive, and valuable during the crisis by increasing relational benefits (e.g., offering reliable responses) and decreasing relational costs (e.g., minimizing anxiety). They should also strive to better understand and meet each other's expectations (which under a crisis may resemble moving targets) and maintain a favorable climate that can inspire novel solutions to crisis-related problems.

Since communication is vital in boosting satisfaction, hotel managers should frequently exchange critical information with their foreign travel agents about new plans, expectations, requirements, and roles required. This information needs to be timely, understandable, and reliable to be able to make sound decisions regarding the well-functioning of the working relationship taking into consideration the high uncertainties of the crisis situation. The fact that the physical movement limitations imposed by governments due to the pandemic gave rise to new means of computer-aided communication (e.g., Zoom) necessitates their more frequent use. It is also important to enhance cooperation with foreign partners since the fast-changing conditions of a crisis situation may call for swift modifications in the nature of activities performed and/or realignment of resources and capabilities to jointly accommodate the difficulties associated with the crisis. This may require making short-term sacrifices (given the possible resource losses of the partner) in order to reap long-term benefits when returning to normality.

Managers should take measures to minimize conflict with their foreign partners by demonstrating transparency on any critical issues concerning the smooth operation of the working relationship, clearly redefining each party's roles and responsibilities to effectively handle the new situation, and emphasizing the potential benefits that could be derived in the long run, once the hurdles of the pandemic are over. This is particularly critical in an international business setting, because this crisis has affected countries in a different way, creating different perceptions with regard to its severity and intensity. In addition, since a crisis situation gives rise to opportunistic actions that can damage harmony in the working relationship and jeopardize its existence, interacting parties need to show greater transparency in their activities, improve adherence to relational norms, and cultivate a spirit of solidarity. This will help to avoid the possibility of having short-term self-interest seeking acts, with all the detrimental effects that this may have on the continuity of the relationship.

The fact that the instrumentality of satisfaction on inter-partner creativity during a crisis situation depends on the degree of distance between interacting parties, implies that managers in the tourism sector should take steps toward being more sensitive to their foreign partner's changing economic, political, and social conditions caused by the pandemic. It also requires more frequent efforts by interacting parties to better understand each other's organizational strategies, policies, and procedures. With regard to relational rigidity, both hotels and foreign travel agents should appreciate the need to be flexible by creatively and jointly accommodating crisis-related problems, as well as being ready to renegotiate terms and conditions in their

contractual agreements to conform with the new realities brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Policymaking implications

From a policymaking perspective, the Covid-19 crisis has been responsible for generating heightened uncertainty for business in many countries, which to a great extent was the result of strict government measures (e.g., border closures, movement restrictions, and new travel rules) that were imposed in a rather abrupt and non-programmatic way. This has widened the distance between firms involved in inter-organizational relationships and increased the risks associated with their operation and even survival. Hence, there is a need for public policymakers, when introducing measures to combat a crisis situation, to take carefully into consideration any detrimental effects that these may have on the smooth operation of business relationships, particularly as regards exchanges between local and foreign companies.

Taking a collective approach is necessary in preparing measures to compact the Covid-19 pandemic and aiming to overcome crisis-related problems, by asking the views not only of scientists and technocrats, but also of business academics and practitioners. This would help to provide sound solutions to crisis-related problems, thus making the business environment more predictable and facilitating the smooth operation of business relationships. In this context, it is important for governments to provide firms with various incentives, aiming to alleviate financial difficulties associated

with the crisis, such as, low interest short-term loans, postponement of tax collection, and facilitation of payments.

Limitations and future research

Our findings should be seen within the context of several limitations that could stimulate further research on the subject. *First*, our research findings refer to a specific country, namely Greece. However, to assess the external validity of our model, it is essential for this to be tested in other country settings, preferably in regions where the hotel sector has been differently affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It would also be useful to extend the analysis to hotel business partners other than foreign travel agents, such as suppliers of food, beverages, and other materials.

Second, the cross-sectional nature of our study did not allow the monitoring of changes in the behavioral dynamics of the working relationship between hotels and travel agents over time, especially during different phases of the development of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. These changes could be captured by designing a longitudinal study that would take into consideration various critical events in the crisis period.

Third, we obtained our data from hotels only, although it would be more appropriate to also have the views of their foreign travel agents. A dyadic approach could help to gain more insights and identify any inconsistencies in the views of the interacting parties. In doing so, it would be better to focus on individual matched-paid

relationships, rather than referring in general to relationships with multiple foreign partners.

Fourth, although our quantitative approach to shed light on the behavioral dynamics of the hotel-travel agent relationship has yielded useful results, input derived from qualitative research (e.g., focus group discussions) could provide additional important insights. It would also be advisable to embark on a series of case studies that would offer in-depth information about how working relationships have been affected during the extraordinary crisis period caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Finally, our conceptual model could be enhanced by incorporating additional variables, having the role of antecedents (e.g., degree of dependence), moderators (e.g., level of environmental uncertainty), or outcomes (e.g., financial performance) of inter-partner creativity. It would also be interesting to control for the effect of various exogenous factors, such as hotel geographic location, national cultural characteristics, and government effectiveness in managing the pandemic.

Notes

1. Although the behavioral constructs of inter-organizational relationship addressed have been extensively used and most of the associations between constructs examined have also been established in the wider relationship marketing literature, in our study these are analyzed under the idiosyncratic conditions prevailing in a crisis situation, as in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, under crisis conditions: (a) communication helps to control the high levels of generated and facilitate informed decision-making (Lee *et al.*, 2021); (b) cooperation is vital to compensate the loss of resources and a disability to activate capabilities necessary to accommodate crisis-related problems (Wagner *et al.*, 2021); (c) conflict is very likely arise and hinder the achievement of relational goals, as well as increase

psychological costs of tension and frustration (Lapierre, 2000); and (d) opportunism finds a fertile ground to develop because the heightened environmental uncertainty gives rise to the promotion of a self-interest approach (Um and Kim, 2018).

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Figure 1: Conceptual model

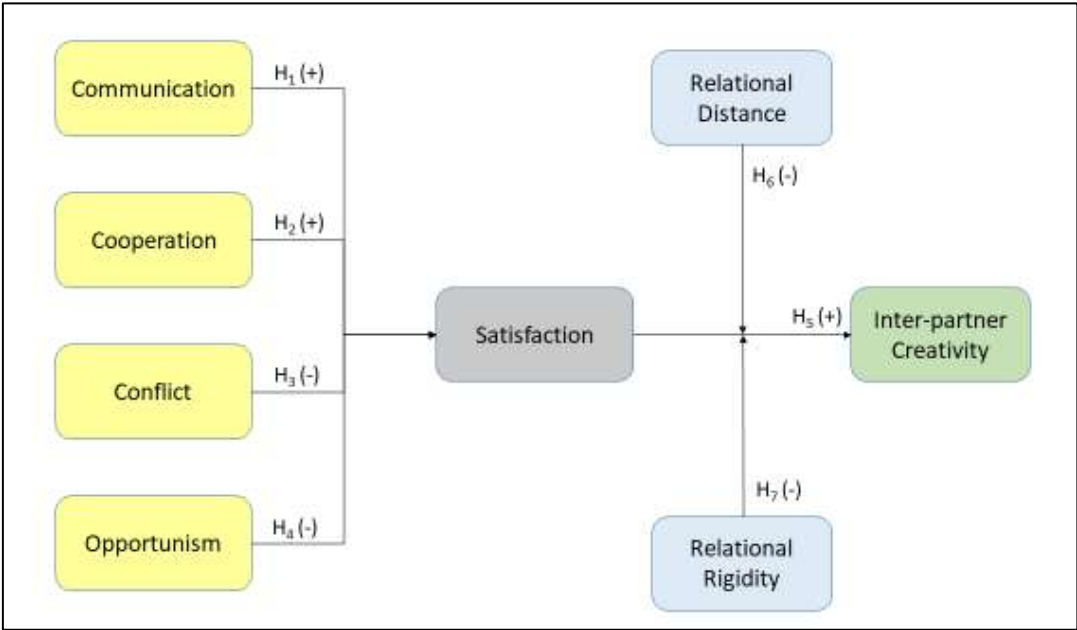


Table 1: Measurement model results and descriptive statistics

| Constructs | Scale items | Standardized loadings | t-value | A | ρ | AVE | Mean score | Standard Deviation | Item Mean | Item S.D. |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------|-----|--------|-----|------------|--------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Communication | CMM1 | .77 | * | .79 | .76 | .53 | 4.60 | 1.43 | 4.28 | 1.74 |
| | CMM2 | .83 | 9.23 | | | | | | 4.46 | 1.88 |
| | CMM3 | .64 | 7.06 | | | | | | 4.47 | 1.86 |
| | CMM4 | .67 | 7.41 | | | | | | 5.16 | 1.67 |
| Cooperation | COP1 | .85 | * | .95 | .90 | .81 | 3.64 | 1.68 | 3.64 | 1.89 |
| | COP2 | .88 | 13.24 | | | | | | 3.81 | 1.81 |
| | COP3 | .92 | 14.32 | | | | | | 3.78 | 1.74 |
| | COP4 | .89 | 13.40 | | | | | | 3.51 | 1.78 |
| | COP5 | .92 | 14.29 | | | | | | 3.38 | 1.85 |
| Conflict | CNF1 | .76 | * | .88 | .84 | .64 | 3.23 | 1.56 | 3.14 | 1.83 |
| | CNF2 | .82 | 9.62 | | | | | | 3.31 | 1.76 |
| | CNF3 | .73 | 8.44 | | | | | | 2.98 | 1.90 |
| | CNF4 | .83 | 9.73 | | | | | | 3.54 | 1.85 |
| | CNF5 | .84 | 9.87 | | | | | | 3.23 | 1.98 |
| Opportunism | OPR1 | .62 | * | .92 | .86 | .74 | 3.37 | 1.73 | 3.38 | 1.96 |
| | OPR2 | .92 | 8.17 | | | | | | 3.43 | 1.90 |
| | OPR3 | .94 | 8.32 | | | | | | 3.27 | 1.92 |
| | OPR4 | .93 | 8.26 | | | | | | 3.33 | 1.94 |
| Satisfaction | SAT1 | .88 | * | .95 | .90 | .79 | 4.20 | 1.63 | 4.14 | 1.74 |
| | SAT2 | .87 | 13.58 | | | | | | 4.34 | 1.81 |
| | SAT3 | .93 | 15.96 | | | | | | 4.16 | 1.85 |
| | SAT4 | .88 | 13.97 | | | | | | 4.15 | 1.73 |
| | SAT5 | .89 | 14.25 | | | | | | 4.61 | 1.76 |
| Inter-partner creativity | CRE1 | .80 | * | .95 | .88 | .80 | 3.88 | 1.69 | 3.92 | 1.78 |
| | CRE2 | .94 | 13.09 | | | | | | 3.83 | 1.88 |
| | CRE3 | .93 | 12.77 | | | | | | 3.83 | 1.81 |
| | CRE4 | .91 | 12.44 | | | | | | 4.01 | 1.84 |
| Relational distance | DIS1 | .61 | * | .78 | .77 | .55 | 3.76 | 1.38 | 4.06 | 1.84 |
| | DIS2 | .80 | 6.53 | | | | | | 3.71 | 1.76 |
| | DIS3 | .78 | 6.45 | | | | | | 3.63 | 1.67 |
| | DIS4 | .76 | 6.39 | | | | | | 3.56 | 1.85 |
| Relational rigidity | RIG2 | .89 | * | .92 | .87 | .77 | 3.46 | 1.48 | 3.60 | 1.69 |
| | RIG3 | .87 | 13.61 | | | | | | 3.26 | 1.60 |
| | RIG4 | .91 | 15.04 | | | | | | 3.41 | 1.58 |
| | RIIG5 | .84 | 12.70 | | | | | | 3.57 | 1.70 |

* Item fixed to set the scale

Fit statistics: $\chi^2=881.41$, $p=.00$, $df = 532$; NFI= .95; NNFI= .98; CFI= .98; RMSEA= .07, 90% C.I.= (.06, .07)

Table 2: Correlation matrix

| Constructs | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1. Communication | .73 | | | | | | | |
| 2. Cooperation | .47** | .90 | | | | | | |
| 3. Conflict | -.40** | -.31** | .80 | | | | | |
| 4. Opportunism | -.44** | -.39** | .49** | .86 | | | | |
| 5. Satisfaction | .40** | .48** | -.28** | -.31** | .89 | | | |
| 6. Inter-partner creativity | .47** | .48** | -.17* | -.28** | .48** | .89 | | |
| 7. Relational distance | -.44** | .47** | .47** | .47** | -.43** | -.42** | .74 | |
| 8. Relational rigidity | -.47** | -.48** | .32** | .33** | -.48** | -.47** | .40** | .88 |

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Note: Values below the diagonal show correlation coefficients among constructs and values on the diagonal represent the square roots of the AVE per construct.

Table 3: Structural model results

| H | Hypothesized path | Standardized Coefficients | t-value | p-value |
|-----------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <i>Main effects:</i> | | | | |
| H ₁ | Communication → Satisfaction | .13 | 1.76 | .08 |
| H ₂ | Cooperation → Satisfaction | .75 | 9.01 | .00 |
| H ₃ | Conflict → Satisfaction | -.15 | -2.03 | .04 |
| H ₄ | Opportunism → Satisfaction | -.15 | -1.99 | .05 |
| H ₅ | Satisfaction → Inter-partner creativity | .80 | 9.31 | .00 |
| <i>Moderation effects:</i> | | | | |
| | Relational distance → Inter-partner creativity | -.14 | -1.91 | .06 |
| H ₆ | Satisfaction x Relational distance → Inter-partner creativity | -.51 | -3.50 | .00 |
| | Relational rigidity → Inter-partner creativity | -.12 | -1.76 | .08 |
| H ₇ | Satisfaction x Relational rigidity → Inter-partner creativity | -.28 | -2.05 | .04 |

Fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 1034.04$, $p = .00$, $df = 620$; $NFI = .91$; $NNFI = .94$; $CFI = .94$; $RMSEA = .08$, 90% C.I. = (.07, .09)

Appendix 1: Behavioral relationship aspects used in crisis management research

| Behavioral relationship aspect Study | Communication | Cooperation | Conflict | Opportunism | Satisfaction |
|---|---------------|-------------|----------|-------------|--------------|
| Arslan et al. (2021), <i>IJOA</i> * | √ | | | | |
| Fath et al. (2021), <i>CPOIB</i> * | √ | | | √ | |
| Grözinger et al. (2021), <i>SBE</i> ** | | √ | | | |
| Markovic et al. (2021), <i>TF & SC</i> * | | √ | | | |
| Gonzalez-Torres et al. (2021), <i>IJHM</i> * | | | | √ | |
| Dubey et al. (2021), <i>IMM</i> ** | √ | | | | |
| Paul et al. (2021), <i>JBR</i> * | | √ | √ | | |
| Kumar and Sharma (2021), <i>IMM</i> * | √ | √ | | | √ |
| De Oliveira and Handfield (2017), <i>SCM</i> ** | √ | | | | |
| Alalwan et al. (2021), <i>IMM</i> ** | √ | | | | |
| Wagner et al. (2021), <i>IJLM</i> ** | | √ | | | |
| Butt (2021), <i>IJPDLM</i> * | √ | | | | |
| Sharma et al. (2020), <i>IJLRA</i> ** | | √ | | | |
| Sharma et al. (2021), <i>JEIM</i> ** | √ | √ | | | |

*Qualitative study **Quantitative study

Appendix 2: Operationalization of constructs

| Scale items | Constructs | Source |
|----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Communication | | |
| CMM1 | Our foreign travel agents have been willing to share with us timely, understandable, and relevant information in order to reduce the level of uncertainty associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. | Mohr et al. (1996) |
| CMM2 | We have designed and implemented strategies to accommodate the new situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic based on sufficient information provided by our foreign travel agents. | |
| CMM3 | Our foreign travel agents have failed to provide us with adequate information to be able to make sound business decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic. (R) | |
| CMM4 | The information exchanged between our hotel and its foreign travel agents has been critical in realistically assessing and responding to the various Covid-19 pandemic challenges. | |
| Cooperation | | |
| COP1 | Our foreign travel agents have shown genuine interest during the Covid-19 pandemic in assisting our hotel to overcome its difficulties. | Sibley and Michie (1982) |
| COP2 | Our foreign travel agents have demonstrated a team spirit in the working relationship with our hotel in order to overcome adversities arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. | |
| COP3 | Our foreign travel agents have cooperated with our hotel to find creative solutions to Covid-19 pandemic-related problems. | |
| COP4 | Our foreign travel agents have on many occasions combined resources and capabilities with our hotel in order to cope with difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. | |
| COP5 | Our foreign travel agents have worked hard with our hotel on a reciprocal basis to effectively accommodate the challenges emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. | |
| Conflict | | |
| CNF1 | The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in our foreign travel agents competing for scarce resources with us, thus creating a conflicting situation. | Etgar (1979) |
| CNF2 | As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, our foreign travel agents have adopted methods incompatible with those used in our hotel. | |
| CNF3 | During the Covid-19 pandemic, our foreign travel agents have taken many impulsive decisions that have seriously jeopardized the interests of our hotel. | |
| CNF4 | Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the roles of our foreign travel agents in the working relationship with our hotel are not performing as required, causing many disagreements. | |
| CNF5 | During the Covid-19 pandemic, our foreign travel agents have often come up with unreasonable demands, causing a great deal of frustration for our hotel. | |
| Opportunism | | |
| OPR1 | Our foreign travel agents have tried to reap short-term unilateral gains at the expense of our hotel during the Covid-19 pandemic. | Yilmaz and Hunt (2001) |
| OPR2 | Our foreign travel agents have exploited the deteriorating business conditions under the Covid-19 pandemic as an excuse to break their promises to us. | |
| OPR3 | Our foreign travel agents have exploited the uncertainty arising due to the Covid-19 pandemic to exploit our hotel. | |
| OPR4 | In many instances during the current Covid-19 pandemic, we have caught our foreign travel agents taking advantage of us. | |

Satisfaction

| | | |
|------|---|-----------------------------|
| SAT1 | Both our company and its foreign travel agents feel pleased with what we have done during the Covid-19 pandemic. | Cannon and |
| SAT2 | Both our company and its foreign travel agents have regretted the decision to do business during the Covid-19 pandemic. (R) | Perreault (1999) and |
| SAT3 | There has always been some problem or other with our foreign travel agents during the Covid-19 pandemic. (R) | Leuthesser and Kohli (1995) |
| SAT4 | Our overall relationships with foreign travel agents during the Covid-19 pandemic has been delightful. | |
| SAT5 | Overall, both our company and its foreign travel agents have been satisfied during the Covid-19 pandemic. | |

Inter-partner creativity

| | | |
|------|---|-----------------|
| CRE1 | In collaboration with our foreign travel agents, we have developed unique products/services to accommodate Covid-19 pandemic-related problems. | Oldham and |
| CRE2 | During the Covid-19 pandemic, in association with our foreign travel agents, we have been innovative about coping with the various problems that have arisen. | Cummings (1996) |
| CRE3 | Together with our foreign travel agents, we have responded in a novel and innovative manner to the various Covid-19 pandemic challenges. | |
| CRE4 | In collaborating with our foreign travel agents, we have developed adaptive and practical methods and processes as a response to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. | |

Relational distance

| | | |
|------|--|-----------------------------|
| DIS1 | We feel that our foreign travel agents have become closer to us during the Covid-19 pandemic. (R) | Hallén and Sandström (1991) |
| DIS2 | The Covid-19 pandemic has broken/weakened the established connections of the various foreign travel agents with our hotel. | |
| DIS3 | Our foreign travel agents have lost their involvement in the working relationship with our hotel during the Covid-19 pandemic. | |
| DIS4 | Our foreign travel agents' working methods have become unfamiliar to us during the Covid-19 pandemic. | |
| DIS5 | Our relationship with individuals working in our foreign travel agents' organizations have become closer during the Covid-19 pandemic. (R) | |

Relational rigidity

| | | |
|------|--|-----------------------------------|
| RIG1 | During the Covid-19 pandemic, our foreign travel agents have made very few adaptations to their objectives/strategies/policies in order to address the new needs of our business relationship. | Li (2010) and Fang et al., (2011) |
| RIG2 | Our foreign travel agents have been unbending in sensing and responding to the Covid-19-related problems | |
| RIG3 | Together with our foreign travel agents, we have been very inflexible in dealing with the new reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. | |
| RIG4 | Our foreign travel agents have altered various procedures in our business relationship in order to accommodate the challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. (R) | |
| RIG5 | Our foreign travel agents, have made very few constructive adaptations to fix the Covid-19 pandemic-affected aspects of the business relationship with our hotel. | |

Note: The sign (R) denotes a reverse scale