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Sylvie Christofle / Andreas Kallmuenzer

International Congress Tourism, Adaptability, and Societal and Technological Transformations in the Pandemic Crisis

Abstract

This study provides a conceptual approach to the congress system, a tourism sector particularly impacted by the pandemic crisis, but so far, only little studied in the literature. It focuses on the measures stakeholders adopt in the context of a significant crisis and structural changes. The main contribution of this work is a theoretical decoding of the metropolitan system of international congress tourism. It analyses the adaptation and shock absorption measures taken during the pandemic crisis by stakeholders of nine world cities in the context of structural transformations. The findings provide a better understanding of the adaptability of metropolitan stakeholders and societal and technological transformations in the event tourism sector.

Keywords: pandemic crisis, international cities, congress/convention tourism system, adaptation strategies, destination management organisations

1. Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism accounted for 10% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and recorded 1.5 billion international arrivals (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2020). At the same time, numerous destinations were relying heavily on congress events to attract tourists (Christofle, 2014; Morrison & Maxim, 2022), and the collapse of the tourism industry resulted in significant challenges on how to recover (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022).

Congress tourism is a specific form of event tourism, different from leisure tourism in terms of how it operates, its clientele, and its key players (Weber & Chon, 2002; Getz & Page, 2016; Getz & Page, 2020; Christofle & Fournier, 2023). Congress tourism is included in MICE (Meeting Incentive Congress/Convention Event) Tourism, which encompasses all travel and stays related to entrepreneurial and associative events, such as commercial, business, training, educational, research, reward, stimulation, or team-building activities (Trišić & Arsenov-Bojović, 2018; Christofle, 2023). Within this classification, congress tourism primarily consists of meetings and congresses, which are non-commercial events with the purpose of education, research, discussion, and relationship-building among participants with shared interests (Weber & Chon, 2002; Christofle, 2014; Getz & Page, 2016; Getz & Page, 2020; Christofle & Fournier, 2023).

Congress tourism, associated with business events, was valued at \$805 billion in 2020 (Allied Market Research [AMR], 2020) and \$215.1 billion in 2021 (AMR, 2021). This decline is attributed to the reactions of political players to the pandemic. Governments at various levels have imposed severe restrictions and bans on travel and assembly to limit or curb the pandemic. Simultaneously, regulatory uncertainties have significantly impacted the tourism market, particularly the MICE sector, for extended periods (Disimulacion, 2021). As a result,

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this market has witnessed a sharp decline in customer numbers (Ceh, 2020; Mohanty & Choudhury, 2020). Currently, the MICE sector is experiencing a slower recovery than leisure tourism (UNWTO, 2023), with a projected timeline for recovery extending beyond 2024 (Global Business Travel Association [GBTA], 2021).

Several authors have examined players' difficulties and broader challenges created by this major crisis, where traditional business practices have become virtually impossible. For instance, Breier et al. (2021) investigated business model innovation in the hospitality industry, while Harms et al. (2021) focused on the gastronomy sector. The market collapse resulting from the pandemic has significantly affected host sites, including major cities (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022). Simultaneously, the international congress system plays a vital role in the functioning and development of metropolitan tourism, economy, politics, communication, and information (Christoffle, 2014; Spencer & Bavuma, 2018; Crouch et al., 2019; Ranjan, 2020). Consequently, the crisis has presented significant challenges for major congress cities, encompassing economic issues, awareness, stakeholder trust, and image maintenance (Maxim & Morrison, 2022; Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2023).

Despite the critical nature of these challenges in the MICE tourism and congress sector, limited literature addresses this topic (Lekgau & Tichaawa, 2022), and its impact on the industry (Disimulacion, 2021). The crisis has not been explored, and its contemporary consequences have been on the congress system, stakeholders, and territories (Lončarić et al., 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the shock absorption measures implemented by international congress tourism stakeholders in response to the pandemic crisis and assess whether they acted with agility (Kalaignanam et al., 2021) or demonstrated innovative approaches in line with the global transformation of the sector (Gössling et al., 2020; Brozović & Saito, 2022), including digitization and an increased emphasis on sustainability principles (Brozović & Saito, 2022; Christoffle, 2023; Morrison & Coca-Stefaniak, 2023).

The main research questions that arise are as follows: What measures have been taken by stakeholders, such as hotels, congress venues, planners, destination management organizations (DMOs) like congress bureaus, etc., to mitigate the impact of the crisis? In addition to immediate adaptability measures, is it possible that the pandemic crisis has accelerated ongoing transformations, particularly in digitization and sustainability?

To address these research questions, we have employed a qualitative methodology. We conducted an international survey involving 50 key public and private stakeholders engaged in organizing congresses in nine prominent tourist destinations across Europe, North America, and Asia. It is worth noting that international congress tourism is primarily concentrated in major global cities (Christoffle, 2014; Morrison & Maxim, 2022; Christoffle & Fournier, 2023) and has been significantly affected by the crisis in event tourism (Maxim & Morrison, 2022).

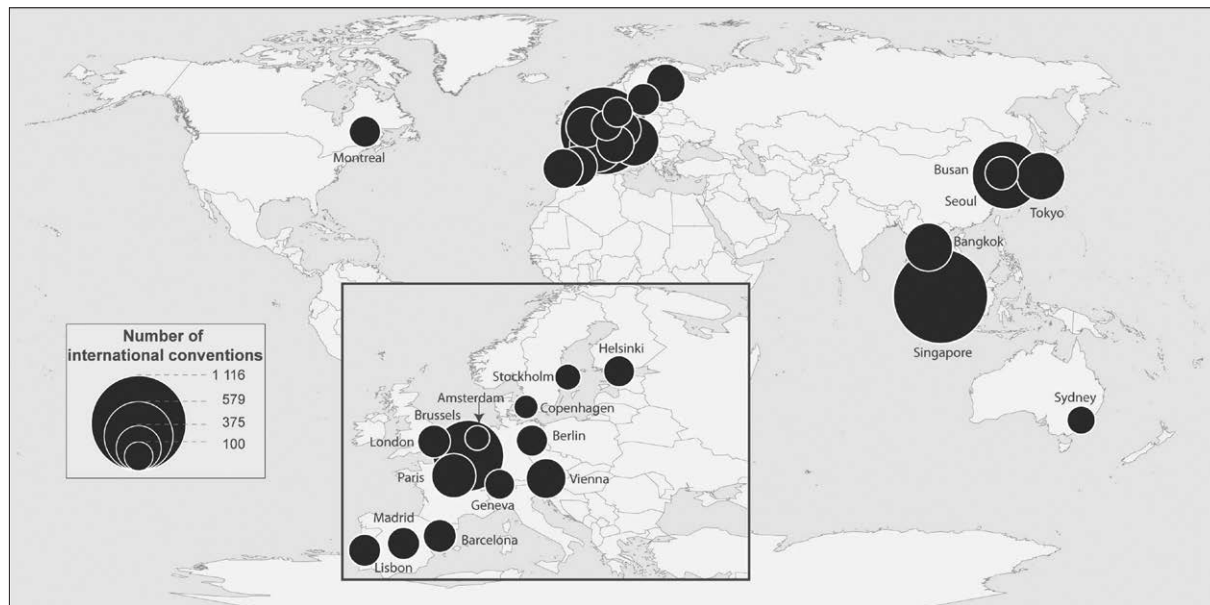
2. Congress tourism and the COVID-19 crisis: Theoretical approach and strategic context

2.1. Systemic approach to the stake-laden relation between congress tourism and international metropolises

In the realm of congress tourism, there exists a significant interaction between the higher tertiary and quaternary functions of metropolitan areas (economy, information, policy, research and development, etc.) and those related to tourism: infrastructure, facilities, entertainment, etc. (Christoffle, 2014; Crouch et al., 2019; Morrison & Maxim, 2022). Flows emerge and are self-sustained due to the need for interaction among various community members, including entrepreneurs, associations, and governmental and non-governmental organizations (Trišić & Arsenov-Bojović, 2018; Christoffle & Fournier, 2023). This activity establishes connections between places, stakeholders, and venues, forming tangible and intangible networks associated with globalization, innovation, information, and tourism (Fighiera, 1992; Christoffle, 2014; Getz & Page,

2020). Consequently, the pre-COVID location of international association meetings is characterized by a pronounced geographic polarization, as illustrated in Figure 1. The map demonstrates the global hierarchy of congress cities, with approximately twenty cities hosting half of all international meetings annually (Union of International Associations[UIA], 2020).

Figure 1
The leading host cities for international congresses in 2019 (representation threshold = 100 international association meetings)



Source: UIA (2020).

The concentration of international congress tourism can explain the absence of American or Chinese cities on the map flows in capital cities in many countries. The towns on the map receive the most international congress flows within their respective countries. In contrast, in the vast countries of China and the United States, numerous cities host meetings (such as New York, San Francisco, Miami, Las Vegas, Orlando in the United States, and Shanghai, Hong Kong, Beijing, Macao, Guangzhou in China), resulting in more dispersed flows (Christoffe, 2014; Liu et al., 2020). No Chinese or US city regularly hosts at least 100 international association meetings annually (UIA, 2022).

As a result, two major geographical centres stand out on this map. The Western centre comprises the traditional European congress hosting areas, predominantly capital cities (such as Brussels, Paris, London, and Vienna) and two metropolises (Barcelona and Geneva). The Asia-Pacific centre is relatively more recent, except for Tokyo. This pole exhibits dynamism, with cities like Singapore, Seoul, and Bangkok being highly active at different scales. This context also recognises two notable tourist metropolises, Sydney (Australia) and Busan (South Korea).

Indeed, international congress tourism encompasses multiple stakeholder functions within a metropolitan context, including urban planning (infrastructure development and transportation connectivity), communication and policy (promotion and attractiveness), strategic networking, leisure-related activities and economic considerations (Getz & Page, 2020; Christoffe & Fournier, 2023).

The economic impact of congress tourism and MICE business tourism is significant (Jones & Li, 2015). Trišić and Arsenov-Bojović (2018, p. 275) reported an average delegate consumption of approximately \$2,000. On a global scale, the direct impact of face-to-face congresses and business events before the COVID-19 pandemic

was estimated to exceed \$1.07 trillion in direct spending, supporting 10.3 million direct jobs globally, and contributing \$621.4 billion to direct GDP (Events Industry Council [EIC] & Oxford Economics, 2018, p. 12). When accounting for indirect and induced impacts, the total global economic impact of business events in 2017 reached \$2.5 trillion in output (business sales), supported 26 million jobs, and contributed \$1.5 trillion to GDP (EIC & Oxford Economics, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, international congress tourism significantly contributes to the global and local economies (Dwyer et al., 2000; Spencer & Bavuma, 2018; Ranjan, 2020). However, the pandemic crisis has disrupted this system.

2.2. Pandemic crisis and major impacts in a context of transformations: An agility-based approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the tourism industry, and international congress tourism has not been spared. In 2020, with a billion fewer international arrivals, the UNWTO declared it the worst year in the history of tourism (UNWTO, 2021). The crisis has disrupted the systemic balance of international congress tourism by impeding or restricting the mobility associated with congress events (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). The measures implemented in response to the pandemic have varied across countries in terms of their form, duration, and severity (UNWTO, 2021). For instance, in France (the 5th leading host country for international congresses globally before COVID-19, according to UIA, 2021), the cancellation of indoor gatherings with over 5,000 participants, followed by the prohibition of gatherings with over 100 people, even outdoors, and the initial lockdown were pivotal moments that led to the collapse of the market in 2020.

The COVID-19 crisis has occurred alongside significant societal and technological transformations, which have further complicated the challenges the tourism sector faces. These transformations include the digitization of the industry, increased competition for hosting meetings, evolving lifestyles, and societal movements such as *Flygskam* (Flight shame) that highlight the importance of sustainability (Christofle, 2021; Brozović & Saito, 2022).

Sustainability concerns extend beyond transportation and encompass the eco-responsibility of stakeholders and destinations (Aburumman, 2020). Simultaneously, the integration of digital technology has the potential to bring about structural and cultural changes in the tourism sector. Digitization can make businesses more flexible, adaptable to modern conditions, and competitive in a dynamic digital world (Barashok et al., 2021, p. 1).

However, before the crisis, many tourism organizations were not fully embracing digitization, despite digital solutions in the congress sector related to organization, logistics, marketing, and more (Liu et al., 2020). Consequently, the impact of the crisis has been severe, and ongoing challenges persist even today (Lee & Eom, 2023). Major cities, which play a central role in international congress tourism, have been particularly affected. Therefore, our research explores the agile measures taken to absorb shocks and resist the ongoing crisis in congress mobility.

According to Kourtit et al. (2013), urban history is a continuous process of adaptation and change. However, tourism crises are often not analysed with this level of complexity (Pappas, 2019; Pennington-Gray, 2018). Congress-related travel is susceptible to crises, including economic downturns and geopolitical events (UIA, 2022). What sets the COVID-19 pandemic apart is its global scale, extensive reach, and prolonged duration. The impacts of the crisis have been manifold (Kraus et al., 2020; Emami et al., 2022; Dejardin et al., 2023), affecting the entire event industry, including transportation, hotels (Breier et al., 2021) and congress venues.

Destinations that heavily rely on congress tourism face significant challenges in maintaining their image, influence, and the trust of stakeholders. In response to the crisis, congress cities have adopted various measures through their stakeholders. The ability to adapt and respond swiftly to the crisis is crucial for mitigating its impact and ensuring the long-term resilience of the congress tourism sector.

Indeed, the concept of tourist agility, as defined by Kalaignanam et al. (2021), emphasizes the importance of rapidly iterating between market understanding and executing adaptive decisions. In the context of the crisis, there are two significant aspects to consider: the impact of the crisis on tourism behaviour and the adaptive measures taken by stakeholders (Hall et al., 2017; Li et al., 2021). The crisis can have profound implications for the behaviour of congress planners and tourists. The negative effects of the crisis can lead to a deterioration in the destination's image, which in turn necessitates efforts to repair and rebuild that image (Abulibdeh & Zaidan, 2017; Avraham & Ketter, 2017). Effective destination image management becomes crucial to regain congress planners' and tourists' trust and confidence. The agility to respond promptly and effectively to the crisis can make a significant difference in rebuilding confidence and attracting visitors back to the destination (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stylos et al., 2021). In a crisis, agility becomes a key priority for achieving marketing excellence (Homburg et al., 2020).

Innovation capacities are crucial in navigating crises (Martinez-Roman et al., 2015). In the tourism industry context, organizations often face challenges related to a lack of innovation (Hjalager, 2002). However, during the pandemic crisis, the agility of destinations and stakeholders has been put to the test. Congress tourism destinations need to embrace innovative approaches that can help them adapt to the changing landscape and address the challenges posed by the crisis. Adaptive measures in terms of strategic planning and operational actions are essential for destinations to navigate the crisis successfully. Overall, tourist agility, driven by innovation and adaptive strategies, can help congress tourism destinations overcome the challenges of the crisis and position themselves for recovery and future success.

3. Research design

The study utilizes a survey research design to gather data from managers of public and private organizations involved in the management and marketing of international congress events. The survey is designed to capture information about the impact of the crisis on the congress system and the measures taken by stakeholders to address the challenges.

3.1. Research setting

The study was conducted in nine international destinations, including five European capitals (Lisbon, Paris, London, Berlin, Prague), Montreal in North America, and Seoul and Bangkok in Asia. These cities were selected based on their geographic distribution, the number of congresses hosted, and trajectory as traditional congress cities or emerging destinations.

3.2. Sampling

The study targets 50 public and private players in the congress sector. The sampling strategy involves purposive sampling, where participants are selected based on their expertise and involvement in the congress tourism industry.

3.3. Research data collection

The research was conducted in 2020/2021, and data was collected through an online survey. The survey targeted managers in general management, commercial, and marketing departments of DMOs, professional associations, conference hotels, congress venues, and planners. The online survey instrument was chosen for its advantages in accessing distant and difficult-to-reach respondents (Wright, 2005; Vehovar & Manfreda, 2008; Mair & Whitford, 2013). However, it also had a potential disadvantage of lower response rates than other methods. A telephone follow-up was conducted two weeks after the initial email to mitigate this.

The survey questionnaire is structured and designed to gather qualitative data. It includes open-ended questions that allow respondents to provide detailed and nuanced responses about their experiences during the crisis and the measures taken. The questionnaire also includes closed-ended questions to gather specific information about stakeholders' actions and strategies. Ten questions were included in the survey, covering topics such as 1. name of the organization, 2. position of the respondent, 3. status of the organization, 4. revenue loss, 5. challenges in attracting MICE events, 6. cancellation and 7. postponement rates of international events, 8. implemented crisis management strategies, 9. perceptions of resilience, and 10 as a future industry outlook.

4. Results and discussion

The survey received responses from stakeholders, including 19 hotels from renowned chains such as Hilton, Marriott, Intercontinental, and Accor in London, Stockholm, Montreal, or Prague. Additionally, 18 congress centres, congress venue managers, and planners participated in the survey. Examples of these venues include the Berlin Congress Centre, Axica Berlin, GL Events, and the Paris Event Centre. Thirteen professional associations and DMOs, such as the Lisbon Convention Bureau and the Seoul Tourism Organization, also responded.

The respondents represented different levels of management within their organizations. Thirteen respondents were from executive management positions, while 37 were from sales and marketing management positions. This diverse range of participants from the congress tourism industry sectors provides valuable insights into the impacts of the crisis and the strategies implemented by different stakeholders.

Table 1
Respondents' profiles

Stakeholders	
Conference hotels	19
Congress venues and planners	18
DMO's and pro. associations	13
Cities	
Bangkok	6
Berlin	6
Lisbon	4
London	5
Montreal	5
Paris	8
Prague	4
Seoul	8
Position	
Sales and marketing management	37
Executive management	13

The impacts of the crisis were severe, with a significant loss in turnover reported by the respondents. More than half of the firms represented in the survey experienced a loss of over 50% of their turnover, and nearly a third reported a loss of over 75%. This highlights the magnitude of the financial impact on the industry.

The crisis led to a series of event cancellations in 2020 and 2021. These cancellations resulted from the successive waves of COVID-19 infections worldwide, which led to regulations restricting or prohibiting mobility and gatherings. Many events scheduled for 2020 were postponed to later years, such as 2021, 2022, 2023, and even beyond. The survey revealed that 32 respondents recorded a cancellation rate of 75% for events, while 31 respondents reported a postponement rate of 75% for the same period.

Respondents implemented various management policies to mitigate the crisis's negative impacts. Four main types of actions emerged: pricing policies, hybridization measures, certification and labelling, promotion and communication policy.

The pricing policies implemented by congress tourism destinations and service providers were aimed at adapting to the crisis and maintaining business activity, whenever possible, within the regulations. One of the strategies employed was making pricing more flexible, including offering price reductions. These pricing policies aimed to attract companies or organizations that organize medium- to small meetings with limited mobility constraints. This shift in focus aimed to cater to events on a national scale, where participants could travel within the country with fewer restrictions. By adjusting pricing policies to attract medium- to small-sized meetings, destinations and service providers aimed to maintain a level of activity when more significant or international events were less feasible. This flexibility in pricing helped cater to the specific needs and limitations of the market during the crisis period.

During the crisis, marketing and communication efforts intensified with the primary goal of informing and reassuring clients. Stakeholders, including DMOs and professional associations, employed various strategies to maintain a connection with their clients and promote the strengths of their destinations. One of the key channels used was social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and the professional networking platform LinkedIn. These platforms allowed stakeholders to engage with their audience, share updates, and highlight the adaptable features of their venues and services. They used visually appealing content, including videos and interviews, to effectively convey the message. In addition, stakeholders also focused on direct communication through websites and email. They emphasized the adjustable spaces in size and layout, tailored services, and flexible pricing to cater to the client's evolving needs and constraints during the crisis. Newsletters and mailings provided regular updates on the measures taken to address the pandemic. DMOs played a crucial role in launching marketing campaigns to promote their destinations. Organizations like the Paris Office du Tourisme et des Congrès, visitBerlin Tourismus & Kongress, Seoul Tourism Organisation, Greater Montreal Convention and Tourism Bureau, and national DMOs such as the Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau utilized digital resources to a great extent for their promotional activities. These campaigns aimed to showcase the destination's preparedness and safety measures, particularly in regions where restrictions were less severe. By effectively utilizing digital resources and implementing targeted communication strategies, stakeholders in the congress tourism sector were able to maintain visibility, reassure clients, and attract bookings during a challenging period.

In response to the crisis, health protocols and the organization of virtual and hybrid events have emerged as key strategies to ensure the resilience and agility of congress tourism destinations. Labels, certifications, and strict health protocols have been developed and implemented by local authorities, DMOs, infrastructure consortiums, and even at the country level, particularly in Europe. Labels and certifications aim to reassure clients and attendees regarding the safety and hygiene measures implemented in the destinations. These certifications demonstrate the destinations' commitment to maintaining high health standards and ensuring the safety of participants.

In addition to health certifications, the crisis has also accelerated the adoption of sustainable certifications. The pandemic has shifted people's thinking and behaviour, prompting them to prioritize sustainability when travelling and participating in events. Destinations and venues have responded to this demand by actively engaging in normative processes and obtaining certifications such as ISO 20121 (UIA, 2022). ISO 20121 is an international standard that evaluates the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of event planners, venues, and marketing organizations involved in MICE activities. It focuses on the wise use of resources, accessibility, inclusion, and the event's overall impact on the local population. By complying with this standard, destinations and organizations demonstrate their commitment to sustainable practices and attract events that align with these values.

The adoption of health protocols and the pursuit of sustainable certifications showcase the adaptability and responsiveness of congress tourism destinations in addressing the challenges posed by the crisis. These measures not only ensure the safety of participants but also contribute to the long-term sustainability and reputation of the destinations.

The shift from face-to-face events to virtual or hybrid events has been the most agile and transformative measure adopted by congress tourism destinations in response to the crisis. Adopting online platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Google Meet has gained immense traction during the crisis (AMR, 2021). Companies and organizations have increasingly utilized these digital platforms for conducting MICE/congress events, resulting in cost savings and accessibility. The widespread use of online platforms is expected to have a long-term impact on the industry, as it offers convenience, flexibility, and the ability to reach a global audience. Event digitization has become a primary concern for stakeholders, with a significant focus on leveraging technological solutions to offer alternatives to traditional face-to-face meetings. The rapid acceleration towards a digital future has been observed globally, with years' worth of transformation occurring within a short period of time. This digital transformation has been described as a significant shift by the Singapore Exhibition and Convention Bureau (Singapore Exhibition Convention Bureau [SECB], 2021). However, it's important to note that not all destinations have adopted digital solutions simultaneously. Implementing hybrid or virtual events requires technological equipment, appropriate software, and trained personnel. The timeframe for setting up these digital technical solutions and offering alternative event formats varies among destinations. Adopting virtual and hybrid events has enabled congress tourism destinations to adapt to the crisis and continue hosting events while ensuring safety and overcoming geographical barriers. The MICE industry's technological advancements and digital transformation are likely to have a lasting impact, even beyond the immediate effects of the crisis.

Among the surveyed destinations, Bangkok, Paris, and Berlin are highlighted as representative examples of different agility levels and strategies adopted in response to the crisis.

Bangkok is described as a destination that primarily applied reactive strategies, addressing problems as they arose. The government's measures in Thailand were comparatively less severe, resulting in a wait-and-see approach. Consequently, there were few virtual and hybrid events in 2020 and the early months of 2021. However, since 2021, meeting venues, particularly congress hotels in Bangkok, have started offering hybrid solutions.

On the other hand, Paris represents destinations that reacted to the crisis as it progressed while also considering the medium and long terms. The strategy in Paris involved diversifying the event offerings by incorporating long-term hybrid and virtual event solutions. Event organizers and congress venues in Paris recognized the need to develop alternative solutions for sharing and meetings during events. This entailed significant infrastructure, equipment, and personnel investments, with innovations such as recording studios for hybrid or virtual events.

Berlin, in contrast, is highlighted as a destination that was already comfortable with hybrid and virtual event management even before the pandemic. This proactive approach allowed Berlin to leverage its technological advancements and skilled personnel to offer appropriate solutions during the crisis. Berlin's preparedness and proactive stance enabled them to adapt quickly and effectively.

The choice between reactive and proactive strategies is an important consideration, as reflected in the opinions of the surveyed stakeholders. Thirty-one respondents estimated overcoming the health crisis and its consequences would take over three years. In contrast, nineteen respondents were more optimistic, calculating a recovery period of one to two years.

Overall, the three highlighted destinations illustrate different approaches to agility and crisis management, ranging from reactive to proactive. These approaches have implications for the recovery timeline and the ability to adapt and innovate in the face of ongoing challenges.

The concept of resilience has been recognized as an essential factor in the ability of tourism, including the congress industry, to rebound from crises (Hall et al., 2020). Resilience refers to the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances, reorganize, and retain its function, structure, identity, and feedback during periods of change (Walker et al. 2004, p. 1).

In the survey, 12 stakeholders did not provide a statement regarding the estimated level of resilience of their congress destinations. However, 38 stakeholders expressed optimism and estimated that their cities had a medium to high level of resilience. They believed that a rebound in event mobility would soon benefit their destinations. Examples of such optimistic goals include Stockholm, London, Montreal, and Bangkok. On the other hand, some destinations expressed a more cautious outlook. Paris, for instance, is considering a longer-term rebound and is emphasizing the 2024 Olympic Games as a potential catalyst for recovery. These destinations acknowledge that the recovery process may take more time.

Overall, the responses indicate a range of perspectives regarding the level of resilience among the surveyed congress destinations. While some stakeholders are optimistic about a relatively swift recovery, others recognize the need for a longer-term outlook, taking into account specific events or factors that may influence the rebound of their destinations.

5. Policy recommendations for DMOs

DMOs play a vital role in the metropolitan congress system as they manage and develop the destination's image and facilitate the hosting of congresses in dedicated infrastructures (Getz & Page, 2020). Their efforts are essential in attracting events and promoting the destination (Latuszek, 2021). However, it is necessary to acknowledge that stakeholders and congress destinations still face fragility. Other potential economic, geopolitical, or health-related crises are also a concern that stakeholders should be prepared for (Christoffe & Fournier, 2023).

The market for corporate meetings has experienced a shrinkage as some companies find virtual events cost-effective and time-saving alternatives. Virtual events also align with their corporate social responsibility goals. On the other hand, the association congress market remains more stable (UIA, 2022).

In light of these challenges and opportunities, recommendations should be focused on the stakeholders representing the destination and align with the identified agility vectors. Based on the findings and considerations mentioned, several practical guidance can be made to enhance the agility and resilience of stakeholders and congress destinations in the post-pandemic era:

1. **Upgrading Digital Marketing and Communication Skills:** DMOs and MICE and congress sector employees should receive training to enhance their digital marketing and communication capabilities. This includes social media utilization, content strategies, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence. Ensuring mastery of these tools is essential for efficient and effective actions in the rapidly changing industry.
2. **Strengthening Destination Marketing:** DMOs should focus on continuously updating websites and databases, incorporating big data analytics (Stylos et al., 2021), and utilizing various sales channels. Strengthening the presence on social media and exploring partnerships with specialized influencers can also improve destination marketing efforts.
3. **Collaboration and Cooperation:** Emphasize the importance of cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders in the congress system. This includes fostering partnerships between DMOs, metropolitan governance, universities, event and tourism stakeholders, and congress tourists. A collaborative approach can facilitate knowledge sharing, skill development, and the introduction of new technologies (Christoffe, 2023).

4. **Support for Smaller Organizations:** Provide assistance and support for smaller organizations, such as small and medium-sized companies (Nguyen et al., 2023), to embrace digital tools and technology. This can be achieved through training programs, knowledge-sharing platforms, and financial support to bridge resource gaps.
5. **Promote Public-Private Partnerships:** Explore the potential of public-private partnerships to support DMOs and mitigate budget shortfalls. This can lead to a more sustainable economic model for DMOs and help them navigate the complex processes of obtaining international labels and certifications (i.e. European capitals of Smart Tourism, Global Destination Sustainability Index, etc.)
6. **Sustainability and Technological Focus:** Incorporate sustainability principles and technological advancements into the agile congress metropolitan system. This includes aligning with the goals of intelligent tourist destinations (Buhalis et al., 2014; Boes et al., 2015; Boes et al., 2016; Bastidas-Manzano et al., 2021) and smart tourism cities (Gretzel, 2021; Christofle 2023), integrating sustainable practices, and leveraging technological solutions to enhance efficiency and adaptability.

By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders and congress destinations can enhance their agility, adapt to changing circumstances, and foster a collaborative environment that supports the recovery and long-term success of the congress industry.

6. Conclusion, limitations and outlook

The Covid-19 pandemic has indeed had a significant impact on tourist mobility. It has forced destinations to reassess their resilience and flexibility to withstand disruptions and recover effectively. As Fabry and Zeghni (2019) suggest, destinations need to adopt an evolutionary perspective and manage themselves as complex adaptive systems.

Based on the survey responses from managers in the congress tourism sector in nine international cities, there is a general sense of confidence among these destinations. Their ability to adapt and embrace new approaches, such as hybrid events, likely drives this confidence. Hybrid events, which combine virtual and in-person components, have emerged as a practical solution to overcome travel restrictions and ensure the continuity of congress activities. By incorporating virtual elements, these events offer flexibility to participants and enable a broader audience to engage, even if they cannot attend in person. This shift towards hybrid events reflects the industry's willingness to embrace new technologies and adapt to the changing landscape.

The confidence expressed by these destinations suggests that they have recognized the importance of resilience and flexibility in navigating crises. By adopting an evolutionary perspective and managing themselves as complex adaptive systems, they are better equipped to recover, redevelop, and reinvent themselves in disruptions. The increasing prevalence of hybrid events highlights the industry's ability to adapt and find innovative solutions to continue congress activities in challenging times. This resilience and willingness to embrace change will likely contribute to these destinations' long-term success and sustainability as congress tourism gradually recovers and evolves.

Recognizing the study's limitations is essential for understanding the scope and applicability of the findings. Indeed, an exploratory survey with a panel of 50 managers provides valuable insights but may not capture the full breadth of perspectives and experiences in the congress tourism sector; it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Expanding the sample size in future quantitative studies would enhance the reliability and generalizability of the results. Additionally, self-reported data from the survey may be subject to biases and limitations associated with respondents' perceptions and experiences.

Moreover, while focusing on major congress cities provides valuable insights into their specific experiences, it is essential to acknowledge that each destination may have unique dynamics and challenges. Including a broader range of cities and destinations in future research would help capture a more diverse set of crisis management strategies and approaches. Furthermore, exploring the national scale and including countries like the United States and China in the analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of their influence on other destinations. Examining the potential transfer effects, mitigating decline or turnover, and influencing policy implementation would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the global congress tourism landscape. In conclusion, while the survey sheds light on the impacts and actions taken by managers in major congress cities, future research should consider larger sample sizes, include a more comprehensive range of destinations, and explore the national scale to provide a more robust analysis of the evolving congress tourism industry.

Findings provide valuable insights for the future of the congress tourism industry. The robustness and agility of destinations, characterized by their variety, network effects, stakeholder interactions, and cooperation, contribute to their resilience in crises. These aspects are crucial for the industry's sustainability and ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

The importance of face-to-face events should not be underestimated. While digital transformation has accelerated during the crisis, the essence of congresses lies in meeting human needs for presence, exchange, social connections, and moments of conviviality. As international congress organizers revive face-to-face events, mobility increases, and destinations regain their prominence.

The crisis has also heightened the consideration of sustainability principles in world congress events. Focusing on digital tools and data management becomes crucial for DMOs and small and medium-sized enterprises in marketing, communication, and management. The ability to harness and transform massive data into value propositions is essential for their success in the post-pandemic era.

Strengthening cooperation strategies is recommended to enhance the agility of destinations and effectively deal with future crises, whether health-related, geopolitical, or otherwise. This entails close and dynamic collaboration among stakeholders within the broader congress-cities system. Metropolitan governance, private players, associations, universities, residents, congress tourists, and DMOs should work together as linchpins and leaders of this community, fostering a collaborative environment to overcome challenges and drive the industry forward.

The opportunities highlighted in the analysis revolve around mobility and congress locations, presenting potential shifts in the industry. Before the pandemic, there was a trend toward larger congresses with an increasing number of delegates, leading to the construction of massive facilities. However, with the exponential growth of hybrid events, there is an opportunity to expand the size of events more efficiently by incorporating virtual participants. This opens the possibility of exploring new destinations without requiring extensive infrastructure development. The increased use of technology and virtual solutions allows destinations to reinvent themselves and adapt to the changing landscape of congress tourism. Personalized and non-generic sales and marketing approaches can help attract participants worldwide to events that were previously of local significance. This can potentially lead to the expansion of events and the attraction of a global audience.

However, it is essential to note that the post-pandemic environment may change the importance and stature of leading events. Despite these changes, large cities are expected to remain at the top of the global hierarchy regarding congress destinations. Overall, the insights emphasize the importance of robustness, agility, face-to-face interactions, digital mastery, sustainability, and cooperation as key factors for the future success of the congress tourism industry.

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