

The survival strategies of inbound tour operator in Thailand

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Abstract

Tourism industry is one of the most important sectors in Thailand. However, it is the most sensitive industry to any crisis, whether natural disaster, terrorism, political instability, economic, or disease. The spread of COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the tourism industry worldwide, Thailand is no exception. This research attempts to study the impact and provide the survival strategies for inbound tour operators in Thailand. This qualitative research uses in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions as a research tool. The researcher interviewed six tour operators in major cities across Thailand namely, Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. It was found that tour operators in Thailand suffered notably bad effects from the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the businesses had to downsize their organisations, require staff to leave without pay or even lay-off staff since there are no international tourist arrivals due to the closed borders during country-wide lockdowns. It also found that government policies toward financial and other assistance were not flexible nor effective enough. For example, regards short-term loans, tourism businesses did not have sufficient collateral, so they couldn't borrow money. This is the reason why the tourism businesses lacked adequate financial liquidity. As a result, tourism businesses need learn the lessons from this pandemic and prepare for future challenges to survive in the tourism industry.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Crisis Management; Inbound Tour Operator; Thailand.

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1. Introduction

The crisis has had a profound effect on tourism from the past to the present. Crises have become apparent over the past two decades, such as the 2002 SARS epidemic crisis, the natural crisis of the tsunami in 2004, the influenza A (H1N1) epidemic in 2009, the domestic political crisis in Thailand 2009-2010, including the great flood in Thailand in 2011, and the coup d'état in 2011 and 2014. Those situations were both risky and dangerous crises that impacted tourism dramatically [1]. Due to those phenomena, travelers are more likely to avoid destinations with increased safety risks, such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, or epidemic outbreaks [2-3].

Tourism is a sector that is highly sensitive to external factors and pressures in the operating environment. However, tourism remains an important economic sector for many countries. And many destinations rely on tourism for growth and survival. This puts an increased pressure on tourism-related managers and planners to consider the impact of crises and disasters on the business and develop strategies to manage impacts to protect the tourism industry [4]. In response to the crisis subjected the entire hotel sector and travel business the government must take steps to adjust and mitigate the harmful impacts as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Crisis and adjustments of public and private sectors in times of crisis

Crisis	Crisis Adaptation		
	Hotel Sector	Tourism Sector	Government Sector
Catastrophic Crisis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compliance Regulations to make hotels more flexible. 2. Establishing internal procedures to enhance the safety of tourists and staff. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The willingness and readiness of tourism stakeholders to work together as an integrated team. 2. Conservation/ resistance to change in the business sector 3. Prioritization availability of company resources political tensions and border crossing 	The refugee crisis and the country's image have been affected by the crisis.
Political Crisis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lower the room rate. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have a crisis management plan 	The refugee crisis and the country's

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Shifting employees from foreigners to locals. 3. Diversification of payment currency for rooms 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Use a marketing strategy, Human Resources, Communication and Lessons Learned 	<p>image have been affected by the crisis.</p>
Economic Crisis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lower the room rate. 2. Shifting employees. from foreigners to locals 3. Diversification of payment currency for rooms. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is an increase in dependence on. 2. Reduce trade barriers. 3. Move the factors of work in the financial and labor markets from worse areas to better places. 	<p>Rebuild society and connect countries or cultures that have been separated from conflict.</p>
Epidemic Crisis	<p>To quarantine and not accept tourists from countries with epidemic outbreaks.</p>	<p>Travel companies advise travelers to divert to destinations where the disease has not spread.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The government issues travel restrictions. Advise their citizens to avoid travel to the affected states. 2. Intensify the public health system. 3. Increase security measures.

Source: [5-10].

At the beginning of 2020, the world witnessed the unprecedented situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [11]. The tourism situation during the COVID-19 crisis has been disrupted. Tourists around the world stop traveling including Thailand. As a result, accommodations, restaurants, and all forms of tourism activities in Thailand have been cancelled. Due to the closure of international borders and restrictions on entry and exit of individual countries, these procedures have affected international travel tremendously [12-13]. Preparing for the tourism industry renewal requires big changes. It

required a few reorganizations and included setting up new agreements and standards [14]. At the same time, consumer behavior has changed due to the pandemic, such as perceptions, preferences, and attitudes to travel [15]. Therefore, after this epidemic, businesses and sectors in the tourism industry should consider strategies. The inevitable change in tourist behavior and demand [16].

Tour operators, which are the first step to attract tourists to visit Thailand and take care of creating an impression on tourists after the COVID-19 situation are now facing the new normal tourism like other sectors within the tourism industry. The new normal for travel agencies is divided into 4 main areas: 1) Prepared teams and quality operations; 2) Providing a safe experience for staff and customers; 3) Building trust and confidence. 4) demands from the government to bring realistic policies into practice [17].

From the study of literature and past research, the researchers found that there are many studies on travelers' perceived risks because of health crises [18-23]. However, the researcher found that there is still a lack of studies on the impact of COVID-19, which is an epidemic beyond the tourism crisis, on tourists' perceptions of risks and influencing travel behavior. Including adapting to business travel during the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, the researcher is interested in studying strategies for adapting European tourist tourism businesses during the COVID-19 crisis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Crisis Management

Crisis refers to a situation in which it is necessary to act to avoid or correct the damage that has occurred [24]. Moreover, a crisis in safety, environment, or health, which is an unplanned event can cause a threatening situation whether it is true or perceived. There is insecurity in various areas, affecting the image or trust in the organization or causing legal action. causing damage to the environment, economy, and image [25]. As for the "Tourism Crisis" is any event that occurs that will affect the reputation, credibility, and faith in the tourism or tourism business. This will have a direct or indirect effect on operations or ability to perform both in the short and long term. And it is characterized as a sudden event with high impact and short time for management [26].

Carter McNamara [27] states that crisis management is a new branch of management. and planning for crisis management, such as dealing with computer systems when a crisis occurs. How does the organization have sufficient time and equipment to manage the plan

to manage the crisis, etc. Crisis management is about confronting situations. The precise nature of the crisis must be defined. trying to mitigate the damage caused by the crisis. Crisis management often involves a lot of public relations communication to help mitigate damage to the reputation of the organization. and reassuring stakeholders in times of the crisis. While Karn Lord states that managing a crisis is not a simple matter of management. Crisis management cannot be separated from policy planning and strategic management.

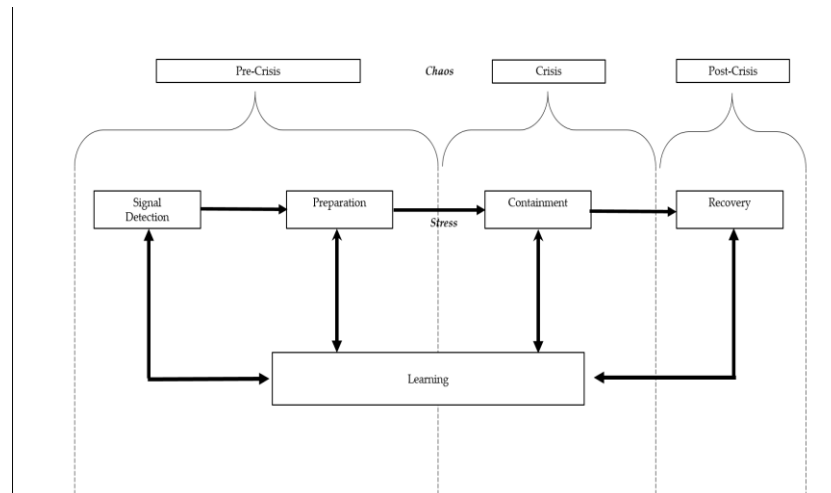
Pauchant and Mitroff [28] presented the concept of crisis management, which has 3 steps and consists of 5 phases of the crisis management process (as shown in Figure 1) as follows:

Step 1: Proactive crisis management is the process before the event becomes a crisis, consisting of 2 phases. 1) Signal detection phase is before a crisis occurs, there will be a warning signal in advance. Only the organization or business will be able to catch that early warning signal or not. 2) The phase of crisis preparedness or the creation of mechanisms to avoid crises. Preparation/Prevention is after the organization or business can catch the alarm, the organization will prepare to create a strategy to avoid the crisis or let the crisis happen.

Step 2: Passive crisis management is a crisis management that is implemented after the crisis has occurred, consisting of 2 phases of the crisis management process. 1) The damage limitation phase. (Containment) is to control the damage that occurs to a minimum and try to control the situation. 2) Phase of recovery to normal (Recovery) is a process to restore the business back to normal as soon as possible.

Step 3: Interactive crisis management is the application of the knowledge and experience of step 1 and step 2 to respond to crises. It consists of 1 phase of crisis management process, namely the decoding phase, which is an important phase. It is a lesson learned from preparing for a crisis. This makes flaws visible in the coping process. Thus, it is necessary to develop a coping process to avoid crises or, if a crisis occurs, to respond more effectively. Reduce the losses that will occur and bring the organization back to normal as soon as possible.

Figure 1. Crisis Management Stages.



Source: [29]

When a crisis occurs, the tourism business, entrepreneurs, organization executives, the government sector, and related parties must fully deal with the various problems that will arise with the crisis. But another important thing that entrepreneurs must keep in mind is management so that the organization can continue to operate continuously as usual. What needs to be considered is the determination of management strategies along with the emotional status of those involved such as customers, tourists, media, and employees, etc. [30].

In the case of Thailand's crisis management, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has laid out guidelines to promote the TAT market in 2020, focusing on penetrating quality groups by segment, building on from the previous year. It consists of 5 guidelines. Go high is to penetrate upmarket segments that are more interested in value than price. Go new is to expand market segments namely, first visit, new customers in the same area, and customers in new areas. Go local involves local way of life tourism to spread travel to communities both in primary and secondary cities. Go low season is the marketing technic that is in line with the country's fundamentals, emphasizing Thailand as a country of agriculture and rainwater that is important to life. These will be perfectly linked with the main product of gastronomy. Go Digital applies information technology as a key tool to reach customers in depth and breadth. But when there is an epidemic of a new strain of corona virus or COVID-19, TAT needs to adjust its strategy and marketing plan. Especially when the world begins to relax the travel regulations to be able to resume various activities again, Thailand Safety & Health Administration (SHA) can be considered one

of the strategies issued to raise service standards in a new way or New Normal in tourism. This hopes to revive the heavily deteriorated tourism business [31].

2.2. New Normal Tourism

Globalization and the new political and economic world bring changes to the new way of traveling for tourists. The preference for new goods and services, in the 18th-19th centuries, scientific and technological progress led to mass production and the development of a mass market with similar attitudes and tastes. Tourists demand a wide range of tourist goods and services at low prices. This forces service providers to produce many products and services that attract international attention, such as vacation packages where companies offer travelers value-for-money products even if the quality is unbeatable. This process is often described as [32].

The new tourists exhibit a completely different pattern of behavior with a more global focus because of the development of communication and information technology and the increasing social and economic exchange. It has encounter different cultures and has developed new ideas and perspectives. Tourists have various needs and wants that are often borrowed from other cultures. These needs and wants to rely on information technology, more self-service, and personalized booking tools. The new self-sufficient traveler has become more individualized and demands highly customized and developed products, quality choice, more variety, and value for money. Tourists are starting to want easier access to information technology, low-cost transportation, and greater travel flexibility [33].

The change in the preferences of new tourists creates demand for new products and drives the development of new forms of tourism. The traditional mass tourism although still widespread but is developing into a “New Tourism” that is often referred to as responsible tourism, alternative tourism, green tourism, or sustainable tourism, which is a new form of tourism. It will be caused by things that have great potential for the tourism market in the future Reisinger [34].

Niche Tourism is a tourism concept that emerged after the emergence of the similar concept of special interest tourism. But it focuses on supporting the needs of the specific market share, which is the targets segment with different characteristics and interests. The term “Niche Tourism” is borrowed from the term “Niche Marketing”, a marketing term. In marketing, the term “Niche” refers to two related concepts. And the second concept refers to the customer of the product. Both the place and the customer of the product are unique. Hence, it means a product that is tailored to meet the needs of specific markets or individual customers with different specific needs [35].

2.3. Public policies in Thailand toward Covid-19 Pandemic

1. Special Tourist VISA (STV)

According to the announcement that Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a dangerous communicable disease according to the Communicable Diseases Act 2015. It requires that all travelers from abroad must undergo screening, isolation, quarantine or quarantine for surveillance, prevention and control of diseases arriving from other localities or ports outside the kingdom [36].

Subsequently, on September 15, 2020, the Cabinet approved the guidelines for accepting additional foreign tourists into Thailand, namely foreigners who wish to travel for a special type of long-term stay or Special Tourist Visa (STV) can stay in Thailand for 90 days and can apply for a visa extension twice, 90 days each time, for a total of 270 days. Initially, it will open to foreign tourists in October 2020 [37]. The measures for the special tourist visa (STV) program should stimulate tourism to some extent. Because in the supply chain (Supply Chain) or value chain (Value Chain) of this project will benefit from it [38].

2. Measures to mitigate impacts on tourism in Thailand and abroad

The royal Thai government by the Ministry of Finance had launched the measures to take care and remedy the impact of the corona virus (COVID-19) in 3 phases [39] 40 consisting of: (1) phase 1 consists of financial measures, tax measures and, other support measures ; phase 2 consists of measures to take care and remedy of employees, labors, and temporary workers with independent occupations that are not in the social security system which have been affected by COVID-19, and care and remedial measures to entrepreneurs [40]; and phase 3 consists of a draft royal granting the Ministry of Finance to borrow money to solve problems, heal, and revitalize the economy and society affected by COVID-19 (Draft Loan Decree), measures to maintain economic stability and the financial system, and other assistance measures [41].

Additional measures are also issued on a case-by-case basis of "Tourism Business". Groups of tourism business operators and related services received the same assistance measures as those for general entrepreneurs and received additional assistance [42] as follows.

1. Measures to restore liquidity/increase income/create demand/tax, measures to support training and seminars in the country for companies/juristic partnerships to deduct expenses pay for the seminar room, transport, or other expenses related to domestic seminars organized for employees, expenses paid to tour operators for training and seminars in the country, those measures are tax

deductible of 2 times of the expenses actually paid. It allows various agencies to adjust travel plans for government officials abroad set for study visits, meetings, seminars, and training abroad to operate within the country or change the budget according to the above guidelines.

2. Measures to reduce/decelerate the expense burden/postpone the payment of state property rentals for tenants in the category of entrepreneurs located in tourism businesses. and relevant until September 2020, extending the time to pay electricity and water bills for electricity / water users' specific type of business (hotel business and rental business). As well as the government does not charge a penalty (interest) throughout the grace period and a grace period of not more than 6 months of each billing cycle. Tax measures is deducted to support the improvement of hotel operations. A juristic company/partnership operating a hotel business shall deduct income expenses equal to the expenses paid for the addition, change, expansion, or enhancement of the property related to the business. But it is not a repair to maintain the original condition in the amount of 1.5 times the expenses according to the amount actually paid. Refund of collateral for all types of tourism businesses, 70% of the guaranteed money, for example, local tourism businesses can be refunded at 7,000 baht, for domestic tours at 35,000 baht, for foreign tours at 70,000 baht, and for general tours at 140,000 baht.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

The study on strategies for adaptation of European tourist tour operators amid the COVID-19 pandemic is qualitative research that is rooted in a phenomenological philosophy. (Phenomenalism), which focuses on the description approach. It is a study of a small target group that focuses on explaining the tour operators which serve European tourists as target market. This research is comprehensive and consistent with the research objectives as follows: 1) to study the impact of tourism businesses in Thailand arising during the COVID-19, 2) to study how to adapt tourism businesses in Thailand during the COVID-19, and 3) to present strategies for adapting tourism businesses in Thailand during the COVID-19.

3.2. Informants and Data Collection

The key informants were divided into 2 groups:

1. Tour operators in Thailand (Inbound Travel Agency) serving European

2. Government agencies, including the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Tourism Authority of Thailand, and government agencies responsible for tourism marketing in the European market

Inclusion criteria of the key informants is a person with high experience (Intensity), be the highest executive (Chief Executive Officer: CEO) or at the manager level or higher or a business owner. The first group is an individual or a group of persons who operate business related to domestic tours (Travel Operator) conducting some or all the trips for tourists. Travel Agents who sell tour packages or programmes directly to customers. And this may also include a destination management company (DMC), which is a large company that serves many destinations. The second group is the government agencies such as the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Tourism Authority of Thailand, and government agencies responsible for tourism marketing in the European market.

The researcher used a qualitative research technique using a semi-structured interview. (Semi-structured Interview) to study the impact of tourism business in Thailand arising during the COVID-19. Then a data triangulation method was used to verify the quality of the tool by changing the person who gave the information (Investigator Triangulation) and then to check whether when the main informant is changed from one person to another person under the same question, whether will there be opinions in the same direction. Then a triangular examination of data collection methods was performed. (Methodological Triangulation) by examining the theoretical triangulation (Theory Triangulation) to check whether the researcher uses different concepts and theories that will cause the misinterpretation of the data [43].

3.3. Data Analysis

Content analysis was used to classify content groups from the interview questionnaire on the impact of tourism business in Thailand during COVID-19. This includes analyzing, classifying, and summarizing the key points.

4. Results

The study on adaptation strategies of European tourist tourism businesses during the COVID-19 employs a qualitative research method. The data were collected with 6 establishments in Thailand to achieve the following objectives: 1) study the impact of tourism business in Thailand arising during the COVID-, 2) study the adaptation of the tour operators during the COVID-19, and 3) propose strategies for adaptation of tourism businesses in Thailand during the COVID-19.

From the interviews, the researcher can summarize the characteristics of the tour operators as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The characteristics of the tour operators

Characteristics of the tour operator	TO 1	TO 2	TO 3	TO 4	TO 5	TO 6
1. Types of registration of tourism business	General type					
2. Types of commercial registration	Partnership Limited		Company Limited			
3. Business owner	Foreigner	Thai				
4. Number of full-time employees before COVID-19	150	70	70	30	20	10
5. Number of full-time employees during COVID-19	40	20	35	4	2	5

There are 4 types of tourism business registration, which must register with the Ministry of Tourism and Sports namely general, inbound, outbound, and specific areas. From the interviews, all tour operators were registered as general type that covers all aspects of tourism businesses. When asked about the commercial registration with the Ministry of Commerce, it was found that 2 tour operators were registered as partnership limited; whereas 4 operators were registered as company limited. Considering the ownership most of the tour operators own by Thai. There is only one operator invests by foreigner. Finally, the number of employees of each business has been decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From the comparison of the characteristics of the tour operator among the sample groups, the type of tourism business registration and the type of commercial registration do not show differences in adaptation. Therefore, the nature of operation (Business owner) has the effect of longer business operations due to receiving budget from the major company during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism businesses with 70-150 employees (large businesses) have adapted during the crisis by reducing the number of employees but retaining supervisory positions. Because there is still cash flow or budget from the major company. On the other hands, the tourism businesses with 10-30 employees (small and medium enterprises) have adapted during the crisis by retaining the employment of specialists such as technology (IT), accounting, design, or managers in foreign branches.

The impacts, adaptation methods, and strategies of the tour operators during COVID-19 pandemic are varies from one operator to another. It can be summarized as illustrated in table 3.

Table 3. Adaptation strategies of tour operators

Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ambiguity of government policy - The rules change all the time. - Strict enforcement of regulations - Emphasis on the public health system rather than the economic system. 	<p>Operations and organizational structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Run and manage the company by CEO - Review efficiency and concise operating procedures - Meet more often online - Received budget support from the main company - Improve the internal system <p>Personnel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allow employees to attend internal and external training (Retain) - Provide employees with customer-oriented education (Upskill and Reskill) - Reduce personnel by 10-20% - Still hiring at the supervisor level - Employees have many skills. (multi-tasking) 	<p>Proactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Run and manage the company by CEO (2) - Review efficiency and concise operating procedures (2) - Meeting more often via online system (2) <p>Passive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Received budget support from the main company (4) - Improve the internal system (Internal system) (4) - Allow employees to attend internal and external training (Retain) (4) - Provide employees with customer-focused education (Upskill and Reskill) (4) - reduce personnel by 10-20% (3) - Still hiring at the supervisor level (3)
Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy
	<p>Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build an eConnect system to serve B2B customers - Create an online service platform for FIT travelers who can instantly confirm their bookings. And can book a combination of many countries. Different destinations that the 	<p>Interactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build an eConnect system to serve B2B customers (5) - Create an online service platform for FIT tourists (5) - Establish an online payment system by credit card (5).

	<p>company provides services as follows</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hotel booking service - Pick-up service - travel programs and excursions - Create an online payment system by credit card. - “Book now, pay later” service for tourists online <p>Tourism products/New products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company cooperates with experts who provide services. <p>Necessary for tourism, such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Touring bicycle routes - Providing services to long-stay travelers - Organizing mixed activities - Facilitation of online meetings - Creation of new tourism products - Launch of villas in Thailand and Bali 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Book now, pay later” service for tourists online (5) - The company cooperates with professionals who provide necessary services for tourism (5)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closing the country and shutting down transportation routes. including closing airspace International and domestic travel interruption - The tourism business has not much cash flow (cash flow) not enough. 	<p>Operations and organizational structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiating with trading partners (supplier) on debt management through negotiations to reduce debt obligations (Hair cut) - Participate in financial measures to help rehabilitate 	<p>Proactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company is flexible in operations and management (2) <p>Passive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negotiations with trading partners (supplier) on debt management through negotiations to reduce debt obligations (Hair cut) (4)
Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extending the repayment period (delay payment) for a long time - Inbound and outbound markets have been severely affected by the country's lockdown. - Reserve advance payments to business partners (supplier) - Refund to customers 	<p>business operators. (Rehabilitation Loan) (Soft Loan)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Plan to adjust the organization to a compact size (Lean organization) - Focus on giving the company more cash flow - Reduce price cut competition by focusing on the perspective of increasing profit margins (Profit margin) - Product line expansion to related businesses - The company is flexible in operations and management <p>Personnel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leave without pay - Pay 50% of salary to employees by allowing them to come to work 15 days at a time. - Reduce personnel expenses and operating costs - Implement a policy for retaining personnel (Employee retention) - Take care of employees as relatives - Allow employees to borrow the Company's money without interest <p>Customer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seeking new customers - Focusing on small groups of customers, FIT and families. - Focus on customers with specific interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce personnel expenses and operating costs (3) - Leave without pay (3) - Pay 50% of salary to employees by coming to work 15 days at a time (3) - Participate in financial measures to help rehabilitate business operators. (Rehabilitation Loan) (Soft Loan) (4) - Plan to adjust the organization to a compact size (Lean organization) (4) - Let employees borrow the company's money without interest (4) - Seek new customers (5) <p>Interactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduce price cut competition By focusing on the view of increasing profit margins (Profit margin) (5) - Product line expansion to related businesses (5) - Focus on giving the company more cash flow (5) - Implement the employee retention policy (4) - Take care of employees as relatives (4) - Focusing on small, FIT and family customers (5)
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		- Focus on customers with specific interests (5).
- Closing airspace international travel interruption - Foreign tourists Nation cannot come to travel.	Operations and organizational structure - The owner of the company has sold personal assets to support the business.	Proactive strategy - Company owner sells personal assets to support business (2) - Tourism business operators have switched to other occupations (2)
Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy
- Participated in the project "Charming Chiang Mai" (Charming Chiang Mai) but was unsuccessful. - Personnel in the tourism business return to their original hometowns. - Tourism personnel do not have specific expertise. - Bank's low-interest credit policy Thailand is complicated. difficult to access. - Assets that travel agencies have cannot be used as collateral for loans. - The tourism business faces a lack of financial liquidity during the crisis. - Tourism businesses must have entrepreneur registration. Requires a deposit. There are many conditions and regulations.	- Tourism business operators have switched to other occupations. - The company has adjusted the acceptance of domestic tourists as a private group (Private Group). Personnel - Employees of the company return to their original domicile. - The number of employees in the company has decreased. - The company pays half the salary for employees who are still working. - The guide must have knowledge. more specialized abilities - Apply experience from attending MICE Business training courses and CISI courses to apply in writing project proposals to present jobs to the government sector and other customer groups. Customer /New target groups	- Employees of the company return to their original domicile (3) Passive strategy - The number of employees in the company has decreased (3). - The company pays half of the salary for employees who are still working (3). Interactive strategy - The company has adjusted the acceptance of domestic tourists as private groups (Private Group) (5) - The guide must have knowledge. more specialized skills (5) - Apply experience from attending MICE Business training courses and CISI courses to apply in writing project proposals to present jobs to the government sector and other customer groups. (5)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government assistance is not flexible. - Guides leading foreign tourists have problems when providing information in Thai. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company offers novelties to generate income from specific groups of customers such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food tourism (Gastronomy Tourism) for a specific meal (Chief Table) - Experienced Tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company offers novelty to generate revenue from specific customers (5)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closure of international airspace and Thailand announced the country's closure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operations and organizational structure - The company joins the government insurance refund policy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive strategy - Operations decisions are made by the owner of the company (CEO) (2).
Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company must return the money to the customers of the company. - Closing the Freixin Company who is a support company. - The company's revenue in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic was zero. - The company does not benefit from government assistance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operations decisions are made by the company owner (CEO). - The company has reduced the size of the company. - The company has companies that are partners (Partner) to help support other operations. Personnel - The company has a total of 4 employees including the owner of the company. - The company pays a full month's salary to employees who cancel bookings (Cancel Booking). - The company pays half a month's salary to all employees in the company for 2 months. - The company proceeds to allow employees to receive benefits from 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Passive strategy - Company joins government insurance refund policy (4) - The company has reduced the size of the company (4) - The company has affiliated companies (Partner) to help support other operations (4) - The company has a total of 4 employees including company owners (3) - The company pays a full month's salary. To the staff responsible for canceling bookings (Cancel Booking) (3) - The company pays half a month's salary to all employees in the company for 2 months (3). - The company proceeds to allow employees to receive

	<p>the Social Security Office.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company still does not employ new employees. - Employees will receive commissions from sales but will not receive salary. - All employees must have a variety of skills (Multiple Skill) - The company hires an independent employee (Freelance) who can speak English on a monthly basis. come to work in the field. <p>Customer/ New target groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company has income from picking up and sending tourists from the airport. - The company will start setting up stores in foreign countries (Exhibition) 	<p>benefits from the Social Security Office (3)</p> <p>Interactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company still does not employ new employees (4) - Employees will receive commission from sales but will not receive salary (5) - All employees must have multiple skills (Multiple Skill) (3) - The company hires an independent employee (Freelance) who can speak English monthly. come to work in the field (5) - The company has income from picking up and sending tourists from the airport (5)
Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There was a referral from former customers who used to use the service to new customers. - Increase online sales channels for general tourists (B to C) - The company adapts to be an upstream manufacturer (Supplier). <p>in the production of tourism products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase the target market to have a variety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company will start setting up stores in foreign countries (Exhibition) (5) - The word of mouth from former customers who used to use the service to new customers (5) - Increase online sales channels for general tourists (B to C) (5) - The company adapts to be an upstream manufacturer (Supplier) in producing tourism products (5)

	<p>of groups to diversify the risk.</p> <p>Investment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company has invested in the food business. - The company earns income from real estate business. Doing long-term hire-purchase business or selling pool villas to foreigners who come to stay for a long time. - The company invests in diving business to support the needs of European tourists. - The company increases investment in transportation (Logistic) with people of all nationalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase the target market to have a variety of groups to diversify the risk (5) - The company has invested in the food business (5) - The company earns income from real estate business. Doing long-term hire-purchase business or selling pool villas to foreigners who come to stay for a long time (5) - The company invests in diving business to serve the needs of European tourists (5) - The company increases investment in transportation (Logistic) with people of all nationalities (5)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International travel is closed. causing the main customers to be unable to travel to travel in Thailand. - The company lacks main income. - The company has a normal monthly expense burden. 	<p>Operations and organizational structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company has ceased operations. - Companies attend training courses organized by the public and private sectors to increase their knowledge of doing business in new ways. - The company has changed its business model from the 	<p>Proactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <p>Passive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company has ceased operations (3) - Companies attend training courses organized by the public and private sectors to increase their knowledge of doing business in a new way (5).
Impact	Adaptation method	Adaptation strategy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company lost 20 company employees and 8 company cars. - The company was unsuccessful in expressing its 	<p>original Mass to the following guidelines.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emphasis on sustainability (Sustainable) 	<p>Interactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company has changed the business model (Business Model) (5) - Companies looking for partners in Phuket to

<p>opinions through various meetings organized by the province.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thailand uses the public health system to lead the economy. - Tourism business operators in Phuket focus on the main income from the European market. - There was a problem with Sand Box management. - The issuance of government rehabilitation credit policies cannot help alleviate suffering at the point. - Travel agencies stick to doing business in the form of Mass. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus on social responsibility (Responsible) - emphasis on rehabilitation (Regenerative) - Companies looking for partners in Phuket to aggregate and share information <p>Technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company makes a travel platform together with its IT (IT) partners. - The company developed an online platform to increase sales channels to reach more customers. 	<p>aggregate and share information (4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A travel platform company with IT (IT) partners (5) - The company develops an online platform to increase sales channels to reach more customers (5)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closing airspace, The travel of foreign tourists traveling to Thailand has been disrupted. 	<p>Operations and organizational structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operations decisions are made by the company owner (CEO). - The company operates as a One-Stop Service, removes the memory of "Expensive is worth it". - The company participates in various campaigns organized by the government such as 	<p>Proactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Operations decisions are made by the owner of the company (CEO) (2). - The company operates as a One Stop Service, removes memorable images "expensive is worth it" (2) - The company has legally registered boats. with life jacket Have insurance of the serviced vessel (2)
<p>Impact</p>	<p>Adaptation method</p>	<p>Adaptation strategy</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Travel with joy, volunteers, medical agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - not relying on loans do business adequately If there is income after deducting expenses

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Travel to Phuket, sleep in luxury and lay - There is a contact with the hotel to set the price. and prepare packages for sale - The company has legally registered boats. with life jacket There is insurance of the serviced boat. - not relying on loans do business adequately If there is income after deducting expenses Will use that income to continue investing <p>Tourism products/New products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bringing a long-tailed boat to be adjusted to Luxury, adding sofas, tour guides, food service - Make Food Delivery by ordering through online channels <p>The increase in income</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Launch discount early booking campaigns to encourage traveler purchases and explore the market in advance. - Adjust the service period by setting the time according to breakfast, lunch, and dinner to allow tourists to experience different atmospheres. - More tourists use the LUXURY long-tailed boat service, and the employees who provide the service earn more income. - Higher wages per round causing an 	<p>Will use that income to continue investing (2)</p> <p>Passive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The company participates in various campaigns organized by the government (4). - Make Food Delivery by ordering through online channels (5) <p>Interactive strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a contact with the hotel to set the price. and make packages for sale (5) - Bring a long-tailed boat to be upgraded to Luxury, adding sofas, tour guides, food service (5) - Launch discount early booking campaigns to encourage tourist purchases and explore the market in advance (5). - Adjust the service period by setting the time according to breakfast, lunch, and dinner so that tourists can experience different atmospheres (5). - More tourists use the LUXURY long-tailed boat service, and the service staff earn more income (5) - Higher wages per round Causing an increase in employee income (5)
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	increase in the income of employees.	
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Remarks:

(1): Proactive crisis management by catching early warning signs or signal detection

(2): Proactive crisis management by preparedness/avoidance or preparation

(3): Passive crisis management through damage control or containment

(4): Passive crisis management by restoring to prepare for a normal situation or recovery

(5): Interactive crisis management by extracting lessons from knowledge and experience from items (1)-(4) or learning

From table 3, the effects of COVID-19 to tour operators can be concluded to 1) the strict enforcement of regulations by the government because of the shutdown/lockdown of the country 2) the inflexibility of financial assistant policy by the government sector and 3) the closure of suppliers or supporting businesses. These impacts lead to the loss of revenues, termination of employment, and business downsizing. Regarding the adaptation methods, there are seven methods being used to solve the problems those businesses facing during the COVID-19 pandemic namely, 1) operation and organizational structure, 2) personnel, 3) technology, 4) tourism products/new products, 5) customers/new target groups, 6) investment, and 7) the increase in income. Lastly the adaptation strategies, according to Pauchant and Mitroff [44] and Hasan Yousef Aljuhmani, Okechukwu Lawrence Emeagwali [45] of the concept of crisis management, which has 3 steps and consists of 5 phases, which are step 1 proactive crisis management consists of signal detection and preparation, step 2 passive crisis management comprises of containment and recovery, and step 3 interactive crisis management entails learning. Therefore, within this research it was found that there are 3 steps of 4 phases namely, step 1 proactive crisis management consists of preparation, step 2 passive crisis management comprises of containment and recovery, and step 3 interactive crisis management entails learning.

From the above data, the researcher has summarized to compare the adaptation strategies of the tour operators in Thailand as shown in table 4 below.

Table 4. The comparison of adaptation strategies of inbound tour operators in Thailand during COVID-19

Adaptation strategy	TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6	
1.	Proactive crisis management: preparedness/avoidance						
1.1	The company is run and managed by the CEO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
1.2	There is a review and adjustment of work procedures to be more concise.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
1.3	Flexibility in management and business operations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
1.4	Meeting and working online	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
1.5	One stop service operations					✓	
1.6	Operate business legally	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
1.7	Avoid relying on loans for business to operate adequately	✓				✓	
1.8	Sell personal assets or company assets to support the business.		✓	✓	✓	✓	
1.9	Entrepreneurs and employees switch to other occupations.		✓		✓		
2.	Passive crisis management: damage control						
2.1	Reduce the number of employees or employees returning to their original domiciles.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2.2	Still hiring at the supervisor level	✓	✓	✓			
	Adaptation strategy	TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6
2.3	Let employees take time off work without pay. (Leave without pay)			✓			
2.4	Pay half monthly salary to employees.		✓	✓	✓		

	by reducing the number of working days						
2.5	Pay full salary to employees who still have workload.			✓	✓		
2.6	Procedures for employees to receive benefits from the Social Security Office				✓		
2.7	Employees must have a wide range of skills. (Multiple Skill)	✓			✓		
2.8	The company has temporarily or permanently ceased operations.				✓	✓	
3.	Passive crisis management: restoring to prepare for a normal situation						
3.1	Adjust the organization to a compact size. (Lean organization) or improve the system within the organization (Internal System)	✓		✓	✓		
3.2	Received budget support from the main company	✓					
3.3	Negotiate with partners (supplier) to request a reduction in debt/debt management		✓	✓			
3.4	Foster partner companies to help support other operations.	✓			✓	✓	
3.5	Provide employees with customer-focused education. (Upskill and Reskill)	✓					
3.6	Provide employees with both external	✓					

	and internal training (Retain)						
3.7	Implement a policy for personnel retention. (Employee Retention)			✓			
3.8	Take care of employees like relatives			✓			
3.9	Let employees borrow company money without interest.			✓			
3.10	Remove the memory of tourists from "expensive" to "worth" in order to create a program to offer to existing customers.						✓
3.11	Send information about various travel products or discount travel programs to existing customers of the company. To create incentives to return to use the service and to maintain relationships with existing customers.	✓					
3.12	Look for partners or experts in the same province or nearby. to aggregate and share information		✓			✓	
3.13	Avoid hiring of new employees	✓		✓	✓		
3.14	Participate in various campaigns organized by the government to boost tourism.						✓
3.15	Participate in financial measures to help restore business operators			✓			

	(Rehabilitation Loan: Soft Loans)						
Adaptation strategy		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6
3.16	Participate in the government's tour business registration insurance refund policy				✓		
4.	Interactive crisis management by extracting lessons from knowledge and experience						
4.1	Focusing on the company's cash flow to increase.			✓			
4.2	Adjust to be a primary manufacturer (Supplier) in producing tourism products.				✓		
4.3	Search for new customers or increase the target market to have a variety of groups to diversify risks.			✓	✓		
4.4	Focus on small groups of customers, Free Independent Travelers (FIT), private groups and families.		✓	✓			
4.5	Increase sales channels/and build online travel platforms to reach more customers.	✓			✓	✓	
4.6	Online payment services such as credit cards, transfer payments, scan payments, or "Book Now, Pay Later" installments for tourists, etc.	✓				✓	
4.7	Reduce price competition By			✓			✓

	increasing profit margins (Profit margin)						
4.8	Present novelties to earn money from tourists with more specific needs, such as gastronomy tourism or experiential tourism, etc.		✓	✓			
4.9	Upgrade tour vehicles to be more Luxury and increase tour revenue, such as adding audio equipment, changing sofas, seats, food services and tour guides.						✓
4.10	Divide the guided tour into rounds such as morning-evening. or by meal Add food services and tour guides. for tourists to experience different atmospheres						✓
4.11	Launch campaigns to encourage purchases by tourists to explore market needs in advance, such as pre-booking campaigns with discounts						✓
4.12	Create contact with the hotel to set the price. and prepare packages for sale						✓
4.13	Employees earn commissions on sales but are not paid a salary.				✓		
4.14	Hire an independent employee (Freelance) who can speak English as a field worker.				✓		

4.15	Employees earn more from adjusting the company's tourism business operations.						✓
4.16	Change the business model					✓	
4.17	There are exhibitions in foreign countries				✓		
Adaptation strategy		TO1	TO2	TO3	TO4	TO5	TO6
4.18	Expand the product line to related businesses.			✓			
4.19	Have more income from investing in other businesses such as real estate Long-term hire purchase business food and beverage business and online ordering, logistics business, etc.	✓			✓		✓
4.20	Reinvest profits from business operations to increase income.						✓
4.21	Guides have more specific knowledge and abilities.		✓				
4.22	Entrepreneurs or employees bring knowledge and experience from training organized by the government or private sector to apply in running a business or running a new business model.		✓			✓	
4.23	There was a referral from existing customers to new groups of customers.				✓		

From the above table, it was found that in step 1 proactive crisis management of preparedness or avoidance phase, the tour operators adopted 9 strategies; however, they all agreed on 6 strategies as

follows: the involvement of CEO in operating and managing, the adjustment and concise work procedures, the flexibility in management and business operation, online work, one stop service operations, and legal business operations. Step 2, passive crisis management, the damage control or containment phase, there are 8 strategies that were mentioned. All tour operators are agreed on reductions in the number of employees or employees returning to their original domiciles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas 4 out of 6 operators adopted the strategy of hiring a supervisor position to run the business. In step 2 passive crisis management, restoring to prepare for a normal situation or recovery phase, there are 16 strategies from the interviews with those 6 tour operators. There are 3 strategies that 3 out of 6 businesses have the same opinions namely: adjust the organization to a compact size. (as a Lean Organization) or improve the system within the organization (Internal System), increase sales channels/build online travel platforms to reach more customers, and no new employees have been hired during the crisis. Finally step 3, the interactive crisis management, there is 1 phase of extracting lessons from knowledge and experience or learning. From the interview, there are 23 strategies within this phase, though, there are 2 strategies that 3 out of 6 operators in adopting them to their companies like, increased sales channels/building online travel platforms to reach more customers and investing in other businesses such as real estate, long-term hire, purchase business, food and beverage business, and online ordering, logistics business, etc for more income.

5. Conclusions and discussion

COVID-19 has had a serious impact on the tourism industry, which is classified as a sensitive business. However, according to the researcher's study, there have been various studies on the impact of COVID-19 on tourist behavior and impacts for the tourism sector especially hotel businesses. Yet, there is still a lack of education on the issue of the tour operator, that, as a business, is directly affected by the country's lockdown policy, which prevents the arrival of tourists, for most part, nearly altogether. Therefore, this research aims to study the impact, problem solving, and strategies for the survival of tour operators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research found that tour operators are diverse in terms of registration of tourism businesses, commercial registration, and nature of ownership. Most of the tourism businesses in Thailand are registered as general travel businesses, for they can do a variety of tour operating programmes. It is also found that a small minority of tourism businesses in Thailand are large businesses owned by foreigners and operated as destination

management companies (DMC). However, most travel businesses in Thailand are classified as small travel agencies.

When looking at the issue of the impact of COVID-19 to the tourism business. The research found that lockdown policies have a domino effect on the tourism sector. Since the tourism business must rely on the revenue from the tourist arrivals as the main source of income. When there is no travel, the tour operator lacks financial liquidity. Then, the lack of business income causes the tourism business to adjust the organization's losses through various strategies: reducing expenses, reduction of work time, reducing the number of employees, debt restructuring, temporarily closing the company to permanent closures for small, underfunded tour operators. This aligns with the crisis management theories put forth by Long (2001) [46], Macnamara [47], and Covello [48], which identify that crisis management is how organizations deal with unplanned and unpredictable situations for the survival of the business.

Looking at the crisis management theory of Pauchant and Mitroff [49] and Hasan Yousef Aljuhmani, Okechukwu Lawrence Emeagwali [50], which is divided into 3 phases and 5 phases respectively, this research found that the crisis management of tour operators in the COVID-19 period is divided into 3 phases, 4 phases. From the theory, there are: step 1 proactive crisis management with 2 phases of catching early warning signs or signal detection and preparedness/avoidance or preparation; step 2 passive crisis management with 2 phases of damage control or containment and restoring to prepare for a normal situation or recovery; and step 3 interactive crisis management with 1 phase of extracting lessons from knowledge and experience. In contrary, this research found that the tourism businesses cannot catch the early warning sign or detect any signal of the spread of such deadly disease like COVID-19. As a result, 1 phase has been reduce from step 1 of proactive crisis management.

6. Recommendations

COVID-19 has had a serious impact on tourism across the world and Thailand, where 1/3 of its gross domestic product comes from the industry. The government has issued various policies. to help the tourism business sector, providing financial assistance through a policy of easing and reducing the burden of borrowing from state financial institutions. corporate income tax reduction and encourage domestic travel of Thai people, etc. [51]. However, the study found that these government policies, particularly the lending policies from government banks, have difficulty in proof of credit guarantees. Because most tourism businesses tend to lack assets that can be used

as collateral for loans. The tour operators have suggested that the government, led by the Bank of Thailand, should have more flexible policies than it currently has when it comes to tourism-related business assets, which tend to be movable rather than immovable, such as tour vans, boats, buses, and the like. This research also provides the guideline for tourism businesses to be prepared and get ready for any sudden circumstance that may occur in the future by following the past and proposed strategies of operation and organizational structure, personnel, technology, tourism/new products, customers/new target groups, investment, and the increase in income.

This research has limited data collection due to COVID-19, many travel businesses have ceased operations or closed down, so, making it more difficult to collect data. In addition, the researcher also found a problem in the face-to-face interview process in that the interviewee had quite limited time. As a result, data could not be collected according to the question outlines as some questions had to be adapted to accommodate the amount of time received. As for the information the interviewer received, some issues are susceptible to potential inaccuracy or non-disclosure in terms of financial, investment, and other market information. As a result, researchers cannot access this data with certainty.

For further research, the researchers hope to capture a broader picture of the tourism industry, including hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, and other tourist attractions, so that the government can use the information received to plan for dealing with future crises. This includes the business sector which can apply the information received to manage more effectively. Moreover, there should be further study of the policies and strategies of the tourism industry in different countries in comparison with this study in order to develop best practices in crisis management. Finally, the researcher hopes that this COVID-19 crisis will be a good lesson for tourism businesses to conduct their strategy carefully for sustainability in the future.

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