Chapter 11
Consumer Behavior During the COVID–19 Pandemic Period:
Investigation of Passenger Air Travel Behavior

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the ongoing and changing situations in the air travel behavior of passengers during the COVID-19 period, within the framework of the passengers' perceived risk situations. Since air travel is the means of transportation that has the highest national and international mobility and accelerates the spread of the virus; focusing on changing passenger behaviors, this study examined consumer behaviors before and after the discovery of vaccines in air travel. The adequacy of the precautions and precautions taken during air travel in Turkey, whether the passengers use these precautions, and the risks and travel behaviors perceived by the passengers were examined using air travel and pre-pandemic comparative data. In addition to the literature contribution of the study, it is expected that airline companies will help them understand their passengers emotionally, provide them with better service, and realize more flights and passengers.

INTRODUCTION

In 2019-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, China, has affected all aspects of human life. The first reported case of the novel coronavirus (i.e., SARS-CoV-2) was confirmed in November 2019. Shortly after, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized this viral outbreak as a COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, there have been 235,972,839 confirmed cases of COVID-19 worldwide (as of October 2021), including 4,820,181 reported deaths by WHO. In Turkey, between January 2020 and October 2021, there

were 7,296,879 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 65,117 deaths reported by WHO (https://covid19.tubitak.gov.tr/dunyada-durum).

After this pandemic became known, which started in China and spread very quickly by continuing reciprocal flights; the entire world order, humanity, and the way businesses operate changed in an unprecedented way. The economy was significantly affected in the fight against the pandemic. To limit the pandemic, reduce the number of cases, and slow down the spread of the pandemic, measures were taken at national and international levels and put into practice with the outbreak of the pandemic. Among other countries, Turkey is one of the countries that have taken strict measures to fight the pandemic. Before the vaccines are available, people had to close their homes, restrict going out, stop personal education and training activities, close all or part of the catering, personal care, and transportation sectors for specific periods, etc.

Air transport, one of the sectors with the highest mobility, is one of the areas where the strictest measures are applied. Airlines have been on the agenda since the pandemic because they are critical sectors that ensure the spread and prevention of the pandemic. Although there have been periods of decline in air travel, there has never been such a negative impact as COVID-19. The airline industry is one of the driving forces of the global economy. As a result, many countries have imposed travel restrictions, particularly on air travel, to contain the spread of the coronavirus and limit travel. Turkey restricted air travel by imposing a self-quarantine on people who change cities or countries by plane after suspending domestic and international flights for a while. In this case, people did not realize the behaviour of travelling unless it was necessary. Most officials and employees of government institutions and private companies switched to a new way of working, such as working from home and holding meetings remotely. Educational institutions stopped face-to-face teaching and switched to distance learning. The tourism sector was closed and restricted. The state restricted travel between cities. Long-term curfews were imposed in many countries and Turkey. This reduced people's mobility to a minimum. In this context, travel by air also declined sharply. Initially, the SINOVAC vaccine was developed in China and BioNTech in Germany, followed by the gradual normalization process with many vaccines. By October 2021, 6.39 billion vaccine doses were administered worldwide, and 111 million were administered in Turkey. However, even if the discovery and application of vaccines has eased restrictions; social distance, the use of masks and hygiene recommended for individuals continues. In addition to applying the HES code at entrances to restricted areas and purchasing airline tickets, the PCR test and the requirement to present a vaccination card have also begun. Those who are not vaccinated must have a PCR test. Passengers are forbidden to travel by plane or even public transport if they have not done both.

Although new measures were taken with the discovery of the vaccines, the pandemic made airlines realize that they are inadequate in emergency and crisis management. This crisis, which once again showed that air transport is one of the vital sectors that keeps the wheels of the world economy turning, has confronted the airline industry with two critical realities: Emergency response time and crisis management. From the outset, national and international aviation and health authorities have acted in concert to take all necessary precautions for the health and safety of passengers. The COVID-19 era, in which capacity, resource, and risk management in the aviation industry are more challenging than ever before, can be described as the most extensive global crisis since World War II. According to the Air Transport Action Group's (ATAG) September 2020 data, the IMF estimates that between 2020 and 2025, the Covid-19 pandemic will cause 22 trillion USD loss in the aviation sector and 4.8 million people will lose their job with a rate of 43% compared to pre-pandemic period in the early 2021. Combined with other sectors related to aviation, such as tourism, this number is expected to increase to 46 million.

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