

1 **Managing relationships in the Tourism Supply Chain to overcome epidemic**
2 **outbreaks: the case of COVID-19 and the hospitality industry in Spain**

3 **Abstract:** The rapid spatial diffusion of the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak has resulted
4 in the total economic disruption of the Tourism Supply Chain (TSC) causing a significant
5 reduction in revenue and creating liquidity issues for all operators. Firms in TSC are
6 linked to each other in complex patterns, leading one risk to another. The purpose of this
7 article is to understand the role of relationship management between hotel chains and
8 their key TSC agents in order to overcome economic disruptions caused by epidemic
9 outbreaks. Among the main contributions is the identification of governments, tour
10 operators, and competitors as the key relationships to be managed by hospitality firms. In
11 addition, key areas for coordination with these actors are explored. Finally, the objectives
12 of relationship management according to the partner are also addressed.

13 **Keywords:** COVID-19; economic disruption; hospitality industry; hotel chains;
14 Tourism Supply Chain (TSC)

15 **Declarations of interest:** none

16 **1. Introduction**

17 The cross-cutting, interdependent, and fragmented nature of tourism products forces firms
18 to establish relationships with numerous stakeholders in the industry –suppliers,
19 distributors, competitors, governments and other firms–, resulting in Tourism Supply
20 Chains (TSC). Cooperation is therefore seen as a driver of agility, flexibility and
21 organizational performance. However, being a coordination-intensive industry represents
22 a risk due to the high dependency on the supply chain. Any shock from one agent quickly
23 spreads to others, producing cascading effects on the TSC (Sigala, 2004; Zhang, Song &
24 Huang, 2009; OECD, 2020). Consequently, it could be said tourism is a very sensitive
25 and vulnerable sector to any risk situation caused by external factors, whether it is a
26 natural disaster, an economic crisis, an international conflict, terrorism or an epidemic
27 outbreak (Pizam & Fleischer, 2002; Kuo, Chen, Tseng, Ju & Huang, 2008; Jiang, Ritchie
28 & Benckendorff, 2019).

29 The rapid spatial diffusion of the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak led the World Health
30 Organization (WHO) to announce the pandemic (March, 11, 2020), resulting in border
31 closures and mandatory mass quarantine, with the consequent total economic disruption

32 of the activities of TSCs. The impacts of this pandemic on the travel and tourism sector
33 is unprecedented and fast-changing. Airlines have had to drastically reduce their
34 activities, and in some cases even suspend them. It is estimated that the fall in
35 international passenger traffic during 2020 will be equivalent to a reduction of between
36 44 and 80% (ICAO, 2020). Tour operators have also decreased or stopped their operations
37 from mid-March to at least mid-May 2020 (OECD, 2020).

38 For the hospitality industry this has meant extremely low occupancy rates and even mass
39 closures. In Europe it was estimated that 76% of hotels were closed (OECD, 2020). In
40 Spain, one of the countries most dependent on tourism, as a result of the restrictions in
41 the first three weeks of June 2020, only 35.4% of hotels were open and 17.6% of bed-
42 places were offered, compared to 2019. In the same line, overnight stays in hotel
43 establishments fell by 95.1% in June (INE, 2020).

44 In this context, revenue is expected to drop 50% for hotels, 70% for tour operators and
45 90% for airlines (European Parliament, 2020). All this has putted the tourism industry
46 under unprecedented pressure, causing a significant reduction in revenue and creating
47 liquidity issues for all operators (De Rosa, Lanzilotta, Perazzo & Vigorito, 2020).

48 General literature on supply chains has addressed two types of risks to be faced by supply
49 chains. On the one hand, operational risks can cause disturbances like demand
50 fluctuations, as happened with the S.A.R.S. epidemic (Kinra, Ivanov, Das & Dolgui,
51 2019; Ivanov, 2020). The work of Fung & Fung (2014) identify interruptions on the TSC
52 causing safety issues or inconvenient to tourists making them dissatisfied –shortage of
53 quality food supply; electricity outage; computer systems outage; natural disasters etc. –
54 . The authors propose managing the issue, the risk and the reputation in order to provide
55 the tourist service under that circumstances. On the other hand, disruption risks in supply
56 chains are low-frequency-high-impact events characterized by a long term business
57 interruption with an unpredictable scaling, as the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruption risks
58 in supply chains are also characterized by the simultaneous disruption propagation in the
59 supply chain and demand (ripple effect) (Kinra et al., 2019; Ivanov, 2020).

60 TSC research has gained recent attention among scholars, (e.g., Mandal & Saravanan,
61 2019; Richards & Font, 2019). Although not directly related to crisis management, Zhang
62 et al. (2009) identify a diversity of areas to address in order to obtain all the benefits from

63 the TSC. Considering the nature and characteristics of TSCs, they propose coordination
64 between two-party relationships as key management aspects, among others.

65 Besides this work, little is known about how to manage relationships with key
66 stakeholders within the TSC in order to overcome disruption risks caused by epidemic
67 outbreaks. However, according to recent research on crisis management in the tourism
68 industry, the existing interconnectivity and relationships can be a key aspect in the
69 recovery of the industry by mitigating the negative effects of the economic impact of
70 COVID-19 (Racherla & Hu, 2009; Orchiston & Higham, 2016; Jiang & Ritchie, 2017).

71 In light of this unprecedented situation that affects all members of the TSC in different
72 ways, the purpose of this article is to understand the role of relationship management
73 between hotel chains and their key TSC agents in order to overcome economic disruptions
74 caused by epidemic outbreaks. More specifically, this article focuses on understanding
75 coordination as a decision-making strategy of TSC participants through diverse
76 arrangements.

77 According to Manuj & Mentzer (2008), taking into account the novelty of the
78 phenomenon, a qualitative research design was chosen. Given the descriptive nature of
79 the phenomenon, the extent of the literature, and the first-hand information available, the
80 case study approach has been used in this article. Based on the analysis of in-depth
81 qualitative interviews with the CEOs and senior managers of three international hotel
82 chains, three major contributions are made.

83 First, the results reveal that in circumstances of economic disruptions caused by
84 pandemics and other disasters, the business objectives of hotel chains move from cost
85 reduction and operational efficiency to obtaining —or not losing— liquidity, preserving
86 labor relationships, reactivating international arrivals, attracting customers, reducing
87 dependence on tour operators and achieving fair relations and greater control over the end
88 customer and, finally, ensuring a favorable regulatory framework for the industry.

89 Another contribution of the study is the identification of the crucial two-party
90 relationships to be managed by hospitality firms in order to achieve the previous goals —
91 governments, tour operators, and competitors—. Finally, it is demonstrated the need of
92 coordination between hotel chains and their key TSC agents in the areas of finance, labor,
93 demand, supply and regulation—.

94 **2. Literature review: Two-party relationship management within the Tourism**
95 **Supply Chain (TSC) and economic disruptions**

96 The economic disruption resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak is causing
97 uncertainty in tourism markets. This is not new, since uncertainty about future demand is
98 a significant feature of the tourism sector (Williams & Baláž, 2015). However, the border
99 closures and mandatory mass quarantine have led to an exceptional situation never
100 experienced before.

101 Companies have to cope with costs related to closing down premises, maintaining the
102 disinfection of working environments, employees' leaves to prevent any possible spread
103 of the virus or the cancellation of reservations, among others. In addition, some
104 companies have provided infrastructure and even funds to assist the government in
105 addressing the pandemic (Ataguba, 2020).

106 Tourism products are viewed as value added chains of different service components
107 resulting from complex interactions among numerous stakeholders (Guo & He, 2012).
108 Zhang, Song & Huang (2009: 347) refer to this network as a Tourism Supply Chain
109 (TSC): “a network of tourism organizations engaged in different activities ranging from
110 the supply of different components of tourism products/services such as flights and
111 accommodation to the distribution and marketing of the final tourism product at a specific
112 tourism destination, and involves a wide range of participants in both the private and
113 public sectors”.

114 Considering the objectives of the different organizations, effective upstream and
115 downstream relationship management and coordination within the supply chain is a key
116 issue in achieving and maintaining competitiveness for the entire supply chain and its
117 individual agents (Monczka, Petersen, Handifield & Ragatz, 1998; Chen, Federgruen, &
118 Zheng, 2001; Tapper & Font, 2004; Christopher, 2011). This implies two-party
119 relationships among heterogeneous and homogeneous tourism agents. Heterogeneous
120 players whose capabilities do not overlap represent vertical relationships –hotels and tour
121 operators–. Horizontal cooperation –also called coopetition– implies the establishment of
122 collaboration relations among firms at the same level of production, such as hotels
123 cooperating with one another (Chathoth and Olsen, 2003).

124 Relationships within the supply chain can take multiple forms: arm’s length, strategic
125 alliance, vertical integration, cooperation, and competition, among others. Early research

126 has emphasized arm's-length as the traditional way of relating. With this method, both
127 parties act in their own self interest and make their own decisions without any
128 consideration of the impacts of the decisions on the other party (Hoyt & Huq, 2000; Zhang
129 et al., 2009). However, efficiently managing the operations of the TSC and achieving
130 individual business goals requires a move away from arms-length relationships towards
131 coordination and cooperation between organizations through a TSC (Zhang et al., 2009).

132 Relationships based on coordination and a win-win philosophy can improve firm
133 performance (Handfield and Nichols, 1999). In addition, when the environment is
134 uncertain, agreements based on trust are positively related with firm performance, give
135 that these arrangements are more flexible and can be modified easily (Goldhar & Lei,
136 1991; Hoyt & Huq, 2000).

137 Coordination requires that each agent in a supply chain operates considering the impact
138 of its actions on the other players. Full vertical integration is recognized as the most
139 effective way to achieve coordination. However, this strategy is often related to increasing
140 fixed costs and reducing flexibility to cope with market changes. Moreover, TSC actors
141 are often independent firms having conflicting objectives (Gomez and Sinclair, 1991;
142 Lafferty & van Fossen, 2001). This article focuses on understanding coordination as a
143 decision-making strategy of TSC participants through diverse arrangements. Supply
144 chain coordination strategies are already adopted by many large tourism firms especially
145 between service providers such as hotels and airlines, and tour operators and travel
146 agencies (Buhalis & Laws, 2001; Guo & He, 2012).

147 Among the main business benefits are improved brand value, reputation, image and
148 status. In the current circumstances, emphasis must be given to benefits like reduced costs
149 and operational efficiency, which makes firms more competitive to assess and respond to
150 risks and opportunities in the market, as well as staying ahead of legislative requirements
151 (Tapper & Font, 2004).

152 A typical tourism value chain is comprised by suppliers, tour operators, competitors,
153 partners, governments, and other firms carrying out complementary activities (Kaukal,
154 Werthner & Hoepken, 2000; Zhang et al., 2009). According to our in-depth interviews,
155 the crucial two- party relationships to be managed by hospitality firms in contexts of
156 economic disruptions are: the government, tour operators, and competitors. In addition,
157 following the work of Zhang et al. (2009), besides coordination between two-party

158 relationships, we propose key issues to be managed in a TSC in order to overcome
159 disruption risks caused by disasters: finance, labor demand, supply and regulation.

160 **2.1. Government relationship management**

161 Recent research recognizes that public support from governments is crucial to the growth
162 of the tourism industry due to intervention in political and economic affairs (Nunkoo &
163 Ramkissoon, 2011; Rivera-Mateos & Félix-Mendoza, 2019). During the early post-
164 pandemic periods, it is essential to provide the liquidity necessary for the system to
165 recover and to avoid the disappearance of companies and economic collapse (Onrubia-
166 Fernández, 2020).

167 Since mid-March 2020, most European governments have mobilized their development
168 banks to ease the financing and liquidity constraints experienced by companies. The
169 Spanish government, through its national development bank (Instituto de Crédito Oficial,
170 ICO), adopted a package of economic measures, the most important of which is the 100
171 billion € loan guarantee scheme to support companies affected by the COVID-19 crisis
172 (Mertens, Rubio & Thiemann, 2020).

173 Public development banks should play a countercyclical role helping firms to mitigate the
174 impact of economic shocks. Their goal is to provide funds on preferential terms to meet
175 costs related to the production cycle, especially working capital: payroll, supplier
176 payments, purchases of goods etc. (Del Campo & Ferreiro, 2012; Mertens et al., 2020).
177 In compliance with the objectives of the public development banks, commercial banks
178 are supposed to transfer the benefits of the public guarantee to their customers, in the
179 form of preferential conditions in terms of interest, commissions, guarantees etc. (Del
180 Campo & Ferreiro, 2012; Mertens et al., 2020).

181 Providing liquidity effectively and efficiently requires a combination of financial and tax
182 policies. When depressed demand due to unemployment, uncertainty and depleted
183 savings is restricting economic activity, it is crucial to delay or forgive taxes that can be
184 easily adjusted (Kopczuk, 2020; Serrano-Antón, 2020). However, there are no tax
185 policies to support the Spanish hotel industry in this crisis (Ranera, 2020).

186 Tourism is a labor intensive industry, consequently, labor agreements with governments
187 are crucial to survive in the current context. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the Spanish
188 government has allowed many businesses to temporarily lay off their employees

189 (Onrubia-Fernández, 2020). A temporary layoff is a “temporary suspension of the
190 employment relationship which unites employees and employers. The employee ceases
191 to provide labor to the employer, and the employer ceases to pay the employee” (Lord &
192 Saad, 2020: 15). Due to force majeure during the alarm state, the subsidy has covered up
193 to 70% of payroll costs, up to a maximum of 1.098 € per employee. In addition,
194 companies with more than 50 employees can obtain a 75% reduction in their social
195 security contribution and 100% if the workforce does not exceed this threshold (Real
196 Decreto-Ley 8/2020; López-Ahumada, 2020).

197 The activities of TSC members are directly driven by tourism demand (Zhang et al.,
198 2009). Economic conditions are traditional determinants of international tourism demand
199 (Kim & Lee, 2017). However, epidemic outbreaks can cause tourists to avoid an area
200 since these events are linked to health risk and malfunction of the medical system (Lee,
201 Song, Bendle, Kim & Han, 2012). Thus, the decrease in tourism associated with the
202 COVID-19 crisis will be related not only to the customer economic conditions, but also
203 to health issues.

204 Demand management includes forecasting, marketing, and sales planning (Zhang et al.,
205 2009). Studies highlighting the role of governments stimulating international tourism
206 demand are mainly focused on marketing activities such as destination promotion (e.g.
207 Tosun, 2002; Law, Goh & Pine, 2004) and government-supported tourism (e.g. Kim, Lee
208 & Mjelde, 2018).

209 Kim et al. (2018) highlight the usefulness of establishing ties between countries to
210 stimulate tourism flows after a crisis —government-supported tourism—. Considering
211 the current health context and the opening of EU borders, a possible avenue for the
212 recovery of international tourism is through collaboration with governments.

213 Countries like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania or the Nordic region, are looking to permit
214 travel with neighboring countries through what is called ‘travel bubbles’ or ‘airbridges’
215 between countries where the virus is contained. (OECD, 2020). The East–West Economic
216 Corridor (EWEC) between the Andaman Sea and South China Sea is another example of
217 an economic corridor, including cooperative tourism policies between countries such as
218 simplification of entry and exit procedures, road improvements and destination promotion
219 campaigns (Lebel & Lebel, 2019). This type of economic corridors are global and
220 regional value chains providing connection between economic agents along a defined

221 geography. They link the supply and demand sides of markets, stimulate economic
222 growth, alleviate poverty and benefit from globalization. Accordingly, they prosper as
223 part of an economic network of interactions (Brunner, 2013; Lebel & Lebel, 2019).

224 **2.2. Tour operator relationship management**

225 Supply management represents the buyer-supplier relationship in the supply chain
226 (Leenders, Fearson, Flynn & Johnson, 2002). Many hotel chains depend almost entirely
227 on tour operators for the distribution of their services and visibility in their main markets
228 (Karamustafa, 2000; Bastakis, Buhalis & Butler, 2004; Calveras & Orfila-Sintes, 2019).

229 Conflicts between tour operators and hotels often arise because of different commercial
230 and strategic interests. Hotel companies seek to maximize their revenues and achieve a
231 reasonable return on investment by balancing customer volume with average room rates,
232 Thanks to 'guaranteed' accommodation contracts with tour operators, hotel operators
233 guarantee payment regardless of occupation. On the other hand, the competitiveness of
234 tour operators is based on reducing prices and profit margins paid to hotel companies
235 (Buhalis, 2000; Medina-Muñoz & García-Falcón, 2000; Medina-Muñoz, Medina-Muñoz
236 & García-Falcón, 2003; Tapper & Font, 2004).

237 In addition, tour operators are often vertically integrated, controlling carriers (charter
238 airlines) and retailers (travel agency chains). This, combined with slower growth in
239 demand for mature destinations and low asset specificity, allows them to increase their
240 bargaining power and interorganizational control over the hospitality firm suppliers
241 (Buhalis, 2000; Bastakis et al., 2004). Consequently, tour operators are able to exert
242 influence on the hospitality companies to achieve their own individual goals and interests.

243 The most controlled aspects by tour operators are those related to contracts, especially
244 economic and financial issues such as payments, guarantees and release conditions to
245 which the tour operator is subject: guarantees and compensation offered to the tour
246 operator; prices, discounts and special promotions offered to the tour operator (Medina-
247 Muñoz et al., 2003).

248 Research on the relationship between tour operators and hotels shows that having good
249 relationships with the tour operator is crucial to success. Medina-Muñoz and García-
250 Falcón (2000) reveal that trust, commitment, coordination, quality of communication,
251 exchange of information, participation, use of constructive resolution techniques and

252 similar relative dependence are the key factors in the relationship between hotels and tour
253 operators.

254 In general, interorganizational relationships are successful when the conditions and the
255 environment are favorable (Mohr & Spekman, 1994). However, changes in the market
256 are a potential source of fail in supply chain partnerships (Forrest & Martin, 1990).
257 According to the study by Tse (2003), after the impact of events such as terrorist attacks
258 and epidemic outbreaks, many hospitality companies have built their own websites to sell
259 their accommodation services directly. This strategy will reduce the dependence on tour
260 operators and therefore the possible uncertainty if they do not fulfil their obligations. In
261 these cases, the possible reactions of tour operators must be estimated, and possible losses
262 must be justified or compensated for by communicating the message honestly to them as
263 soon as possible. In contrast, the recent study by Calveras and Orfila-Sintes (2019)
264 confirms that, despite the impact of information technology on the organization of the
265 hotel value chain, there has been no significant decrease in the presence of intermediaries
266 in hotel distribution.

267 **2.3. Competitors relationship management**

268 The establishment of alliances is increasingly considered a critical aspect in achieving
269 competitive advantage for hospitality firms (Pechlaner and Volgger, 2012). Horizontal
270 collaboration between competitors —also called *coopetition* (Gnyawali and Madhavan,
271 2001). — exist among homogeneous agents in the same level of the supply chain
272 (Pomponi, Fratocchi & Tafuri, 2015).

273 Value and mutual benefits between different hospitality companies are created when the
274 joint exploitation of resources neutralize individual firm's weaknesses. Efficient
275 *coopetition* should be limited to those areas where there is no rivalry, where there are
276 common interests, (Wang and Krakover, 2008), or to influence an industry- favorable
277 regulatory framework (Tether, 2002).

278 In order to do so, competitors should consider the impact of their actions on the other
279 agents (Szpilko, 2017). Thus, a win-win premise based on trust among agents can lead to
280 a stronger sustainable competitive advantage. Trust implies that actors do not act
281 opportunistically even if there are short-term incentives to do so (Chiles and McMackin,
282 1996; Yu, 2019).

283 As mentioned above, the existence of tourist demand is a common interest for all
284 members of the TSC within a destination. According to OECD (2020), a key issue for the
285 recovery of destinations during this type of crisis is to keep the critical mass of services
286 in place to serve visitors when they arrive. *Coopetition* in tourist destinations is a powerful
287 determinant to gain competitive advantage for both the destination and the individual
288 firms (von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006; Martínez-Pérez, García-Villaverde
289 & Elche, 2016). Generally, large hospitality companies collaborate with competitors to
290 address environmental threats related to the maturity phase of the industry. With an
291 established market, the main focus is therefore on destination marketing and development
292 activities to improve the competitive position by increasing trial and repurchase, hence
293 improving the market base of both firms (Chathoth & Olsen, 2003; von Friedrichs
294 Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006).

295 From a sectoral perspective, *coopetition* is particularly useful in increasing bargaining
296 power at the industry level and therefore in addressing issues such as the creation of
297 sector-specific regulation (Tether, 2002; Chathoth and Olsen, 2003). In order to do so,
298 the relative relevance of individual sectors within an industry is crucial (Hall, 1994;
299 Zhang, Song & Huang, 2009).

300 **3. Materials and methods**

301 **3.1. Sampling procedure and data collection**

302 In order to achieve the main purpose of this study, hotel chains in Spain were selected.
303 Three key factors suggested the sample. First, because of their relevance in the Spanish
304 tourism industry. In Spain there are almost 15,000 hotels and more than 200 hotel chains
305 —managing 3,800 hotels— (Ortega-Pestana, 2019). Second, because Spain is a country
306 that has suffered drastically from the health and economic consequences of the COVID-
307 19 epidemic outbreak (ECDC, 2020). Finally, because of the proactive attitude both to
308 mitigate the effects of the pandemic and to plan the return to activity in a competitive
309 manner.

310 The sample for this study consists of three international hotel chains located among the
311 60 hotel chains with more presence in Spain. The first hotel chain (A) currently has 72
312 establishments and more than 3,000 rooms in more than 20 different destinations —55 in
313 Spain—. The second one (B) has 35 hotels —30 in Spain— with more than 1,300 rooms.

314 The third hotel chain (C) has 36 establishments in Spain and more than 1,000 rooms (see
 315 Table 1). All these companies have hotels dedicated to both vacation for leisure tourists,
 316 and urban offerings for business travelers. Accordingly, the establishments are mainly
 317 located in urban and beach destinations.

318 Table 1. Stages of the case study approach.

Profile Review of Literature (Web of Science and Scopus)
Sample selection Hotel Chain A (72 hotels) Hotel Chain B (35 hotels) Hotel Chain C (36 hotels) (Spain strategic business units from three international hotel groups)
Units of analysis Hotel Chain A CEO Hotel Chain B CEO Hotel Chain C CEO Total CEOs: 3 respondents Hotel Chain A area managers (operations, financial and human resources) Hotel Chain B area managers (operations, financial and human resources) Hotel Chain C area managers (operations, financial and human resources) Total senior managers: 9 respondents
Information gathering 9 semi-structured interviews: 2020 senior managers (operations, financial and human resources) 3 open interviews: 2020 (CEO) Internal and external documents: 2020 (Principle of triangulation)
Information transcription ATLAS.ti (qualitative data analysis) Data records and classification: (1) internal documents, (2) external documents, (3) interviews, and (4) field notes
Results and conclusions Conformity with the analysis results Conclusions, along with literature and professional implications

319 Source: adapted from Rodríguez-Sánchez, Ortiz-de-Urbina-Criado & Mora-Valentín,
 320 (2019).

321 Considering the descriptive nature of the phenomenon, the extent of the literature and the
 322 first-hand information available, the case study approach has been used in this article.
 323 According to Merriam (1998), the case study approach, within the qualitative research,
 324 enables a deeper understanding of a specific social phenomenon. In contrast to the

325 quantitative theory-testing empirical approach, the methodology of inductive qualitative
326 research to analyze the content of interview documents is widely accepted in order to
327 construct better theories for practice (Pieterse, 2020). Following Ahmad & Ali (2003: 2),
328 the in-depth interview method is particularly useful when “there is a concern for
329 understanding how things happen and how they are related, rather than only measuring
330 the relation-ship between variables”. Moreover, it is also relevant when the goal is to
331 understand, resolve, or improve a procedure carried out in the professional world
332 (Larrinaga & Rodríguez, 2010).

333 The respondents were chosen for their expertise, that is, as key informants, to explore
334 their views on their relationships with their key TSC agents in order to overcome the
335 economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak. Following the
336 purposive sampling method (Sangpikul and Kim, 2009), only top-level hotel executives
337 and managers were sampled, given their high position in the information hierarchy, as
338 they are all responsible for high-level corporate decision-making (Kruesi, Kim and
339 Hemmington, 2017).

340 In order to have access to such high-level executives, the research team considered it
341 appropriate to make contact through LinkedIn, since it is the largest professional network
342 in the world on the Internet. A total of 30 potential interviewees were identified and
343 contacted. However, the number of interviews and informants was not specified at the
344 beginning of the research, and it was decided that a strategy of “theoretical saturation”
345 would be followed to determine this. In order to promote an open dialogue, evidence was
346 collected through open and semi-structured interviews that began with broad open-ended
347 questions, followed by focused and directed questions as the interviews progressed within
348 and between interviews (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan & Taylor, 2002; Manuj & Mentzer,
349 2008). Interviews continued until “theoretical saturation” was reached, in other words,
350 until it was perceived that informants did not reveal any new information and reported
351 similar and consistent information to support the validity and quality of the theoretical
352 model (Yin, 1998). According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), twelve interviews meet the
353 qualitative research guidelines that eight or fewer informants usually provide theoretical
354 saturation.

355 The respondents were all in high-level management positions and had extensive
356 experience in the hotel industry, they were all male and their ages ranged between 40 and

357 60 years of age. The interviews were conducted with three (operations, financial and
358 human resources) area managers from the three hotels groups. On the other hand, we also
359 conducted three in-depth open interviews with CEOs from the different firms. The
360 diversity in the backgrounds of the informants, both in terms of their position in the
361 organizational structure and the department, has led to different perspectives, enriching
362 the analysis and the implications of the research. The interviews, which lasted on average
363 between one and one and a half hours, were conducted by webinar using the Microsoft
364 Teams tool.

365 As a complement to the interviews, we participated in webinars, interviews or events
366 organized by the different hotel groups. Finally, to complete the principle of triangulation
367 in the collection of information, we accessed internal documents. Consequently, we
368 triangulated the study to ensure internal validity and minimize possible bias in drawing
369 conclusions (Breitmayer, Ayres & Knafl, 1993).

370 **3.2. Data analysis**

371 All interviews were conducted in Spanish and were recorded and fully transcribed. Once
372 the research team became familiar with the text and its interpretations, all interviews were
373 translated into English. The qualitative data collected were analyzed through a content
374 analysis assisted by the software programme ATLAS.ti. This software enables the
375 systematization of the findings according to categories and subcategories illustrated
376 through conceptual networks (Frieze, 2018).

377 According to Varguillas (2006), the process involves four stages: information (data)
378 coding; categorization; structuring or creating one or more networks of relationships or
379 flowcharts, mind maps or concept maps between categories; and structuring findings or
380 theorizing if applicable. Consequently, we generated an initial set of categories based on
381 the theoretical framework and the interview guidelines. Then, the transcribed interviews
382 were entered in the software to arrange data into value codes. To do this, we group the
383 quotes that are repeated in a patterned manner, to generate codes. The next step involved
384 grouping the interrelated codes under the pre-established categories before determining
385 the definitive categories and codes. Finally, in order to contrast the independent
386 interpretations of the research team and to confirm relationships among codes and
387 categories, we conducted diverse team meetings.

388 After this process, three main categories themes emerged regarding the management of
389 relationships: governments, tour operators and competitors. These codes or categories
390 were at the same time linked with the codes related with the diverse coordination areas:
391 finance, labor, demand, supply and regulation.

392 **4. Results**

393 The two-party relationships within the hospitality firm and its key TSC members were all
394 discussed with the respondents. Management and coordination aspects in order to
395 overcome disruption risks caused by epidemic outbreaks were also explored.

396 **4.1. Governments relationship management: coordination areas**

397 Initially, the importance of public support from governments was probed. All respondents
398 stressed that government intervention is crucial for the industry. The following quote
399 shows how a Hotel Chain A operations area manager value the role of governments:

400 *"Faced with this crisis, government action is the most important thing for our*
401 *industry. The regulatory framework that will help businesses to prosper will*
402 *depend on the success of their decisions."*

403 The feedback from respondents has provided insight into the main areas of relations with
404 governments to overcome economic disruptions. On the one hand areas such as finance,
405 taxation and labor —aimed at providing liquidity—, and on the other hand, demand-
406 stimulating issues —aimed at reactivating international arrivals—.

407 Hotel Chain B financial area manager highlights the critical role of liquidity in surviving
408 uncertain environments for the hospitality industry:

409 *"The industry is facing high levels of uncertainty. We do not know if there will be*
410 *new epidemic outbreaks, when a vaccine will be available, or how this will affect*
411 *tourism demand. We still have to deal with a lot of costs related to rent, taxes,*
412 *maintenance of the facilities, employees, losses related to the hotel opening with*
413 *less occupation etc. In order to be able to cope with this situation and guarantee*
414 *survival, liquidity is essential"*

415 **4.1.1. Coordination in the financial and fiscal areas**

416 Since mid-March 2020, most European governments have mobilized their development
417 banks to ease the financing and liquidity constraints experienced by companies. A Hotel
418 Chain C CEO discusses the scope of the funds in Spain:

419 *“ICO credit lines are especially useful for companies with low financial solvency*
420 *that may have difficulties in obtaining a commercial bank loan. Compared to*
421 *other European countries, the Spanish funds are not sufficient given that it cover*
422 *up to 70% of new loans and 60% of renewal operations.”*

423 The quote below –where the Hotel Chain A CEO compares European and Spanish interest
424 rates– illustrates the conflicting interests between the ICO and the commercial banks, and
425 the consequences for companies:

426 *“Compared to the European Central Bank —interest rates at 0% during the*
427 *critical situation—, in Spain, the interest rates on ICO loans could have been more*
428 *advantageous. It is obvious that the banks have to do their business, but it was not*
429 *about that, it was about helping.”*

430 Hotel Chain B financial area manager also discusses how the bank's objectives often
431 override the ICO's primary function of providing liquidity:

432 *“The ICO credit lines are limited and insufficient, so the banks firstly cover their*
433 *own needs, prioritizing the protection of their debts. Thus, they are granting ICO*
434 *loans with government guarantees to companies that have loans with themselves,*
435 *to cover their own repayments. Therefore, the system is not being injected*
436 *effectively.”*

437 Furthermore the observation of the following senior manager is in line with research by
438 Kopczyk (2020), who points out the relevance of preventing the damage from lost cash
439 flow for larger businesses in particular industries. However, the real problem is for
440 businesses that do not have the same access to credit market and that cannot realistically
441 raise outside equity. Accordingly, the Hotel Chain B CEO affirms:

442 *“Companies that are less solvent do not have access to commercial bank loans will*
443 *have great difficulty obtaining liquidity in times of economic disruption. It would be*
444 *desirable for governments to establish genuinely favorable conditions and rules for*
445 *access to ICO loans that cannot be changed by commercial banks.”*

446 Providing liquidity effectively and efficiently requires a combination of financial and tax
447 policies (Kopczuk, 2020; Serrano-Antón, 2020). The quotes below confirms that there
448 are no tax policies to support the Spanish hotel industry in this crisis as well as illustrates
449 the most appropriate fiscal measures according to the Hotel Chain A CEO and operations
450 area manager —corporate tax rate, property tax and VAT—:

451 *“Approval of tax deferral for an industry particularly affected by the crisis, such*
452 *as hospitality, would be key to maintaining liquidity and avoiding future*
453 *bankruptcies. After some years of economic prosperity, the most useful measure*
454 *would be the reduction or deferral of the corporate tax rate, in order to offset*
455 *current losses and maintain liquidity.”*

456 Hotel Chain B financial area manager remarks:

457 *“For hospitality companies with a large number of establishments in ownership,*
458 *it will be very useful the property tax deduction equivalent to a percentage of the*
459 *amount paid for renting buildings where economic activity takes place during the*
460 *pandemic.”*

461 Finally, Hotel Chain C CEO concludes:

462 *“Another much more direct element would be to temporarily reduce VAT on hotel*
463 *stays. This would allow us to be much more competitive in reducing the rate*
464 *without this going directly against the hotel's margin.”*

465 **4.1.2. Coordination in the labor area**

466 By adopting temporary layoffs, governments provide business with payroll flexibility,
467 helping to preserve the liquidity of the company (Kopczuk, 2020; Lord & Saad, 2020).

468 Hotel Chain C human resources area manager highlights the critical role of this measure:

469 *“In labor-intensive industries like hospitality, flexibility on a major cost such as*
470 *payrolls can ensure the survival. Temporary layoff—due to force majeure— has*
471 *been the only useful and appropriate measure to preserve liquidity, otherwise our*
472 *firm would have gone bankrupt in 6 weeks.”*

473 Consistent with the work of López-Ahumada (2020), a Hotel Chain A CEO confirms that
474 by adopting this measure, governments help preserve the employment relationship:

475 *“For hospitality companies, employees are the most important resource. The*
476 *company has allocated resources to recruit and train. Therefore, we cannot afford*
477 *to lose this talent or the investment.”*

478 Hotel Chain B CEO suggested that, considering that this measure is not newly created, it
479 should be addressed in a comprehensive and long term manner:

480 *“This measure is useless unless it is aligned with the demand recovery. Great part*
481 *of the hospitality industry largely depends on international tourism demand,*
482 *which we expect to recover gradually.”*

483 The feedback from respondents has provided insights into whether this measure can be
484 improved for the hospitality industry. Hotel Chain C operations area manager speculates
485 on the possibility of keeping employees on payroll:

486 *“We always complain about the lack of professionalism in the tourism industry.*
487 *Governments could subsidize companies that keep employees on payroll or at*
488 *least provide them with the temporary liquidity to do so. Even if hotels are closed,*
489 *the employees could be receiving online training in the new health protocols or in*
490 *new strategies and operations for the new context.”*

491 **4.1.3 Coordination in the demand area**

492 Tourism Supply Chain activities are directly driven by tourism demand. Spain received
493 in 2018 the visit of 82.8 million international tourists. The United Kingdom was the main
494 issuing country, accounting for 22.4% of the total. Germany and France were the
495 following most important countries of residence of tourists visiting Spain in 2018,
496 accounting for 13.8% and 13.7% respectively (INE, 2019). The quote below illustrates
497 the relevance of international versus domestic tourism in order to overcome this crisis.
498 This action was highlighted by the Hotel Chain B CEO:

499 *“The hospitality industry in Spain cannot be kept alive through domestic demand*
500 *given the lower travel rate and purchasing power as well as high levels of*
501 *seasonality —from 15 July to 15 August—. The Spanish hospitality industry is*
502 *dimensioned for a global and international demand, mostly localized in coast and*
503 *beach destinations —90% of the activity—. Accordingly, international demand*
504 *reactivation is crucial to survive in this crisis.”*

505 The interviews revealed diverse points of view regarding the responsibility and capacity
506 of the government in stimulating international demand after the economic interruption.
507 Hotel Chain A human resources area manager said:

508 *“It is necessary to generate trust so that people will want to travel and stay in our*
509 *hotels. However, if demand is not reactivated through institutional mechanisms*
510 *—health measures at airports, ease of travel, availability of tourism resources,*
511 *etc. —there is no point in what individual firms can do.”*

512 On the other hand, regarding the capacity of the state to promote international demand,
513 Hotel Chain B CEO remarked:

514 *“I do not believe in the capacity of the state to generate or stimulate any kind of*
515 *demand. The budget available to the institution in charge of promoting Spain is*
516 *very limited. In view of the expected economic disruption and consequent*
517 *uncertainty for potential tourists, effective demand-stimulating measures need to*
518 *be implemented when the pandemic begins to be brought under control. This*
519 *means that tourism institutions must start planning measures at the onset of a*
520 *health crisis.”*

521 Hotel Chain B operations area manager illustrates the importance of aligning interests
522 with major issuing countries:

523 *“We must develop a plan enabling gradual demand reactivation through*
524 *agreements with issuing countries such as United Kingdom, Germany and France.*
525 *Once the pandemic is under control, all countries must have the same restrictions*
526 *at the borders so as not to divert demand to other destinations. The key will be to*
527 *homogenize health measures among countries with the pandemic under control.”*

528 Hotel Chain A CEO also discussed the relevance of time and coordination in planning
529 these institutional partnerships to facilitate the arrival of traditional international tourists:

530 *“Tourism ministries from different countries should work to coordinate safe*
531 *tourism corridors. Diligent decisions taken by governments are crucial to avoid*
532 *any delays, as a one-week delay in decisions on the European corridor can have*
533 *multiplier proportions in the sector.”*

534 Consistent with Albert et al. (2004), a Hotel Chain B CEO suggests that cooperation
535 between tourism ministries is needed to achieve a corridor-wide vision. In order to do so,

536 it is crucial to provide an organizational structure for addressing institutional issues, to
537 develop a branding plan, to manage data for seamless information and to address
538 international visitor needs:

539 *“The hospitality industry do not need destination marketing campaigns promoted*
540 *by the government in isolation. Spain is a mature destination with sufficiently*
541 *well-known tourist resources. There is a need of tourist corridors between*
542 *territories and regions in the form of common rules and health protocols to make*
543 *travel secure. Governments must design coordinated measures to help protect*
544 *tourists, while throwing a lifeline to a key industry in countries such as Spain. This*
545 *corridors should include clear new protocols on flight, accommodation,*
546 *interaction, meals and visits”.*

547 **4.2. Tour operators relationship management: coordination in the supply area**

548 Many hotel chains depend almost entirely on tour operators for the distribution of their
549 services (Karamustafa, 2000; Bastakis, Buhalis & Butler, 2004). Hotel Chain C CEO
550 illustrates the previous theory regarding the power distribution between hotels and tour
551 operators:

552 *“In holiday and island destinations there is a high dependency on the tour*
553 *operator. In our case, this is the main source of sales since tourists from the major*
554 *international issuing markets usually purchase our services through vacation*
555 *packages. We have no bargaining power over them”.*

556 In addition, contracts and agreements are often unilateral, leaving hotel companies
557 exposed if tour operators fail to meet their obligations (Buhalis, 2000; Medina-Muñoz &
558 García-Falcón, 2000). Hotel Chain A financial area manager suggested that in the current
559 demand disruption, each actor tries to protect its own interests, often at the expense of
560 their partners' performance:

561 *“Tour operators have the capacity to unilaterally suspend their guarantee*
562 *contracts with the hospitality firms. Some of them even demanded the return of*
563 *customer deposits that had already been processed. For hospitality companies*
564 *this implies a great business risk and affects the liquidity and therefore the*
565 *survival of the company in a very dangerous way.”*

566 Hotel Chain C operations area manager discussed that this is the most appropriate strategy
567 to follow in the current conditions:

568 *“We are aware that there are tour operators who cannot fulfil their commitments,*
569 *even if a guarantee contract exists. We have to adapt to this new situation, we will*
570 *be flexible, helping them to sell as much as possible. Collaboration and*
571 *understanding is the key.”*

572 Hotel Chain B CEO suggest the need to evolve towards a direct sales model to maintain
573 competitiveness in unfavorable contexts in order to increasing their power in the tourism
574 distribution channel and collaborating with tour operators in a more equitable way
575 (Karamustafa, 2000).

576 *“The high dependence of the sector on tour operators seriously endangers our*
577 *survival. Through direct sales we would gain more control over the end customer,*
578 *and make relations with tour operators fairer. We cannot forget that to carry out*
579 *this strategy, it will be necessary to assign technological and human resources”.*

580 **4.3. Competitors relationship management: coordination in the demand and** 581 **regulation areas**

582 The observation of the Hotel Chain C human resources area manager is in line with
583 research by von Friedrichs Grängsjö & Gummesson (2006), who argue that feeling that
584 many of the problems faced are common to all of them inspires cooperation:

585 *"Although the government is responsible for activating the demand, companies*
586 *must be able to attract these tourists. In the context of an economic disruption*
587 *with limited and uncertain demand, collaboration with other hotels to promote the*
588 *attractiveness and health security of a destination is even more important.”*

589 In the same vein, although hotels work together to market the destination, they must
590 balance cooperation and competition, as well as collective and individual action. Thus,
591 the need for a code of conduct to achieve this balance arises (von Friedrichs Grängsjö &
592 Gummesson, 2006). This idea is illustrated by the following quote of a Hotel Chain A
593 CEO:

594 *“Historically, competing hotels could run the risk of entering a price war in case*
595 *of liquidity needs. Even more solvent companies (operating hotels on their own*
596 *property) can afford to lower rates to drive competitors out of the market. A price*

597 *war will delay the recovery of the sector by at least two or three years. Therefore,*
598 *companies should be aware of their cost structure, not sell below the cost of*
599 *production and focus on service differentiation.”*

600 In order to achieve differentiation at the sector level, the Hotel Chain B operations area
601 manager suggested collaborating by focusing on safety and quality as main sources of
602 reputation, efficiency and profitability (Tapper & Font, 2004; Benavides and Ortega,
603 2014).

604 *“Collaboration at sector level to create health standards and/or Covid-free*
605 *certifications would be a very useful way not to lose competitiveness. The*
606 *individual development of these standards is very demanding in terms of*
607 *resources. Cooperating and sharing resources is a more efficient way. In addition,*
608 *this common effort will allow for greater visibility to project a positive and*
609 *homogeneous image of the sector.”*

610 Finally, Hotel Chain A CEO illustrates the difficulties to achieve favorable conditions
611 despite de importance of the industry:

612 *“Through the employers' associations or lobbies —Alianza para la Excelencia*
613 *Turística (Exceltur), Confederación Española de Hoteles y Alojamientos*
614 *Turísticos (CEHAT) and Confederación Española de Organizaciones*
615 *Empresariales (CEOE)—, attempts have been made to negotiate with the*
616 *government special regulations for the industry. However, this sector is highly*
617 *fragmented—in Spain only 20% of hotels belong to a brand or a chain with more*
618 *than 1000 rooms—.This situation greatly weakens the sector, especially in*
619 *horizontal decision-making.”*

620 **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

621 **5.1. Theoretical contributions**

622 Operational risks can cause demand fluctuations or even interruptions on the TSC causing
623 safety issues or inconvenient to tourists making them dissatisfied (Fung & Fung, 2014;
624 Kinra et al., 2019). However, compared to an operational risk, the rapid spatial spread of
625 the COVID-19 outbreak, together with the unpredictable scaling and ripple effect, has
626 resulted in one of the greatest economic disruptions in recent decades. Thus, as a first
627 contribution, we can conclude that the low-frequency and the high-impact nature of the

628 COVID-19 outbreak makes it a disruption risk for the TSC (Kinra et al., 2019; Araz et
629 al., 2020; Ivanov, 2020).

630 The main goal of this article is to understand the role of relationship management between
631 hotel chains and their key TSC agents in order to overcome economic disruptions caused
632 by epidemic outbreaks such as COVID-19. Managing the TSC implies efficiently
633 developing all chain operations in order to meet the needs of tourists and to fulfill the
634 business objectives of the different TSC members: mainly cost reduction and operational
635 efficiency (Zhang et al., 2009). Tourism supply chains (TSC) are particularly vulnerable
636 to the risks of economic disruptions caused by pandemics and other disasters. In these
637 situations, the results of the study reveal that the business objectives of hotel chains should
638 be particularly focused on obtaining —or not losing— liquidity, preserving labor
639 relationships, reactivating international arrivals, attracting customers, reducing
640 dependence on tour operators and achieving fair relations and greater control over the end
641 customer and, finally, ensuring a favorable regulatory framework for the industry.

642 In order to achieve these goals, effective inter-organizational relationship management in
643 the TSC is a key aspect in mitigating the economic effects and for the recovery of the
644 industry. This implies coordination between the activities of the agents, as well as
645 consideration of the impact of their actions on other members. Effective upstream and
646 downstream relationship management within the supply chain is a key issue in achieving
647 and maintaining competitiveness for the entire supply chain and its individual agents
648 (Chen, Federgruen, & Zheng, 2001; Tapper & Font, 2004; Christopher, 2011). Zhang et
649 al., 2009).

650 While TSCs usually involve a wide range of participants in both the private and public
651 sectors, another contribution of the study is the identification of the crucial two-party
652 relationships to be managed by hospitality firms in order to obtain both individual and
653 collective results in contexts of economic disruptions —governments, tour operators, and
654 competitors—. A second contribution is the exploration of key areas for coordination with
655 these actors —finance, labor, demand, supply and regulation—.

656 **5.2. Practical contributions**

657 In a context of economic disruption, governments are major players in the development
658 of the hospitality industry due to their intervention in political and economic issues. They
659 key areas in the relationships are, on the one hand finance and taxation, as well as labor—

660 aimed at providing liquidity—, and on the other hand, demand-stimulating issues —
661 aimed at reactivating international arrivals— (see Table 2.).

662 Economic disruptions and the uncertainty of the first post-pandemic periods causes a
663 reductions in revenue and liquidity problems for the hospitality industry. These firms
664 have to deal with great part of costs —rent, taxes, maintenance of the facilities,
665 employees, and losses related to the hotel opening with less occupation etc.—. Thus,
666 liquidity is essential to avoid bankruptcies and to recover the economy. Providing
667 liquidity effectively and efficiently requires coordination with governments in areas such
668 as finance, taxes and labor. However, according to the results of the study, in the current
669 situation of economic disruption, relations between governments and hotel chains seem
670 to take arm’s length form.

671 On the financial side, governments should play a counter-cyclical role in helping
672 businesses to mitigate the impact of economic disruptions (Mertens et al., 2020). This
673 involves providing public funds on preferential terms, particularly to companies with low
674 financial solvency that may have difficulties in obtaining a loan from a commercial bank.
675 To this end, the loan guarantee scheme to support firms affected by epidemic crisis should
676 be sufficient and should cover up to 100% of new loans and renewal operations. . Thus,
677 coordination must involve the harmonization of the interests and objectives of the
678 government and the commercial banks for the measures to be effective. These entities
679 must completely and realistically transfer the benefits of the public guarantee to the
680 companies, over and above their private interests.

681 On the other hand, the results reveal the need of fiscal arrangements between the
682 hospitality industry and the government in order to achieve liquidity and overcome
683 disruption risks caused by pandemics. Coordination and information sharing about
684 previous years of prosperity, should lead to agreements on the most appropriate fiscal
685 measures —mostly based on tax deferral—, for example, those related to the corporate
686 tax rate, property tax and VAT on hotel stays.

687 With respect to labor, by negotiating temporary layoffs, governments provide companies
688 with payroll flexibility, helping to preserve the liquidity (Kopczuk, 2020; Lord & Saad,
689 2020). In addition, this measure helps to preserve the employment relationship (López-
690 Ahumada, 2020). This is particularly relevant in labor-intensive industries such as
691 hospitality, where human resources are a crucial asset as well as a major cost.

692 In situations of economic disruption, negotiation and coordination are crucial to
693 implement measures more efficiently. Moving from a relationship of arm's length to a
694 relationship of coordination will mean greater consideration of the characteristics, needs
695 and real impact of the hospitality industry by governments. Thus, coordination would
696 imply information sharing and flexibility to address labor issues in a comprehensive and
697 long-term manner through its alignment with the recovery of international demand.
698 Another efficient measure resulting from coordination among both agents would
699 providing liquidity to companies that keep their employees on the payroll by training
700 them to meet the challenges of the post-pandemic environment.

701 Once tourism activity is reactivated during or after a pandemic period, the results of the
702 study reveal that the recovery of hotel chains will depend on coordination agreements
703 with the government to stimulate demand. While demand management includes
704 forecasting, marketing and sales planning (Zhang et al., 2009), interviews indicate that
705 arrangements must be made in the area of marketing, more specifically in the
706 development of government-supported tourism (Tosun, 2002; Kim, Lee & Mjelde, 2018).

707 While many countries are moving to promote domestic travel (OECD, 2020), Spanish
708 coordination measures should focus on international demand. The main reason is that the
709 Spanish hotel industry is sized for international arrivals. In addition to the traditional
710 unilateral actions of governments, it should be useful to cooperate with the main issuing
711 countries to stimulate tourist flows after a crisis —United Kingdom, France and
712 Germany—. A possible avenue is through safe tourism corridors in the form of common
713 standards and health protocols to make travel safe and ensure the survival of the industry.
714 Another insight is the importance of time and coordination in the planning of these
715 institutional partnerships to avoid delays that can have multiplier proportions in the
716 sector.

717 Operating with tour operators is the most cost-effective way for the hospitality industry
718 to distribute accommodation services. According to key research, the study results
719 confirm that for this reason many hotel chains depend almost entirely on these agents to
720 extend its sales and marketing efforts (Medina-Muñoz & García-Falcón, 2000; Calveras
721 & Orfila-Sintes, 2019). Having good relationships based on trust, commitment and
722 coordination with the tour operator is crucial to success.

723 It is also confirmed that changes in the market can lead to the failure of supply chain
724 partnerships (Forrest & Martin, 1990). In times of economic disruption, financial security
725 stands out as a major source of conflict between tourism distribution partners. In addition,
726 results show that the heavy dependence on these players and the unilateral nature of the
727 agreements leave hotel chains exposed if tour operators do not meet their obligations
728 (Buhalis, 2000; Medina-Muñoz & García-Falcón, 2000).

729 According to the results, a potential way to evolve to a coordination relationships can be
730 moving towards a direct sales model —combined with the tour operator— would be
731 useful to increase the negotiating power of hotel chains in the tourism distribution
732 channel, to obtain greater control over the end customer and to make relations with tour
733 operators fairer.

734 Finally, in order to overcome the effects of economic disruption caused by epidemic
735 outbreaks, competitors should collaborate in those areas where there is no rivalry —
736 destination promotion—, or to influence an industry- favorable regulatory framework
737 from a sector level.

738 Once the demand is reactivated, companies must be able to attract these tourists by
739 cooperating with other hotels through marketing activities such as destination promotion.
740 In order to do so, trust between agents is needed. According to Liedtka (1996), trust is
741 often generated over time as a result of a history of successful performance among agents.
742 However, this study reveals that in case of liquidity needs, firms usually compete in terms
743 of price instead of cooperate.

744 Thus, coordination between hotels should imply following certain code of conduct to
745 achieve balance between cooperation and competition and early sector recovery, avoiding
746 war prices by focusing on sectoral differentiation based on safety and quality.
747 Consequently, in order to achieve sectoral differentiation to attract demand cooperation
748 should focus on creating health standards or Covid-free certifications. This type of
749 initiatives allow companies to create more value than if they achieve in an individual
750 way (Pomponi et al., 2015; Ann Peng, Yen & Bourne, 2018).

751 From a sectoral perspective, for highly fragmented sectors such hospitality, it is difficult
752 to achieve favorable conditions despite the industry's contribution to the country's wealth.
753 Therefore, concentration on lobbying would be particularly useful to increase the

754 bargaining power to influence regulatory frameworks in the context of an economic
755 disruption.

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Table 2. Model of two- party relationship and coordination management aspects between hotel chains and their key TSC agents

Type of relationship	Key agents	Coordination areas				
		Finance	Labor	Demand	Supply	Regulation
<i>Vertical</i>	<i>Governments</i>	Public funds on real preferential terms Aligned objectives between government and commercial banks (intermediaries) Tax deferral: corporate tax rate, property tax and VAT on hotel stays	Negotiation of temporary layoffs Alignment with recovery of international demand Keeping employees on the payroll by training	Marketing activities: government-supported tourism Safe tourism corridors: time and coordination	-	-
	<i>Tour operators</i>	-	-	-	Trust, commitment and coordination Evolution towards a direct sales model	-
<i>Horizontal</i>	<i>Com-petitors</i>	-	-	Marketing activities: destination promotion	-	Concentration on lobbying
Objectives		Liquidity	Liquidity Employment relationship preservation	International arrivals reactivation Attraction of customers	Reducing dependency Fair relations Greater control end customer	Industry- favorable regulatory framework

766 **5.3. Limitations and future research agenda**

767 The results obtained in this research must be interpreted with caution due to the
768 limitations inherent to its methodological design. The qualitative methodology does not
769 allow us to understand the phenomenon studied in other contexts or to draw conclusions
770 that can be extrapolated to other sectors. In addition, another limitation stems from only
771 interviewing three Spanish hotel chains. Moreover, like any other research work, it raises
772 new questions allowing us to further deepen the study of study of interorganizational
773 relations in similar crisis contexts.

774 Studies analyzing the financial or performance effects of the COVID-19, both in the
775 hospitality sector and others, will help governments and managers to reduce the negative
776 effects that may arise in future crises, by identifying the measures that have proven to be
777 most appropriate. Surveys and the use of statistical techniques for analysis can improve
778 the understanding of this phenomenon and make recommendations to the industry. It
779 would also be interesting to distinguish between how large international hotel chains and
780 independent hotels have responded to the crisis.

781 In line with the decision-making process, the creation of relationships between different
782 agents —government, tour operators or competitors— are key to overcoming crises in
783 the hospitality industry. Therefore, another line of concern is the analysis of these network
784 of relationships in terms of number, objectives, whether they have been occasional or
785 long-lasting relationships or the results achieved. In this regard, the study of the cultural
786 integration and the diversity management in the Managing relationships with key agents
787 in the Tourism Supply Chain and their role in the process' success can help in new crisis.

788 Human resources are the main resource in the hotel industry so the way hotels have
789 managed the crisis can be a motivating element for staff or, on the other hand, it can
790 encourage the loss of workers and talent. Therefore, the analysis of the effect of the
791 measures implemented by the government, with the temporary suspension of
792 employment, and the measures adopted by companies in aspects of health and safety,
793 salaries, adaptation of jobs, etc. are an interesting line of study.

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