

## Article

# Residents' Perceptions of Sustainable Tourism Destination Recovery: The Case of Northern Cyprus

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**Abstract:** As nations and tourism destinations are beginning to relax nonpharmaceutical measures for the prevention of the COVID-19 virus, a major quest of tourism stakeholders is to restart and restore the once viable and productive industry to its prior state. While the urge to restart and restore may necessitate a strategic plan and drastic measures, care must be taken not to undermine the sustainability of the destination. The current study seeks to understand the perceptions of residents of Northern Cyprus as key tourism stakeholders concerning the impacts of COVID-19 to the island's tourism activities and recommendations for recovery post pandemic. To this end, the study used grounded theory and semistructured interviews to explore how residents perceive the contribution of focused advertisements and stakeholder engagement in the sustainable restoration of tourism activities post COVID-19 on the island. While divergent opinions were gathered, it can be inferred that stakeholders expect the implementation of strategic plans aided by focused advertisements to ensure the sustainability of their tourist destinations. Policy directions and academic contributions are also stated as requirements.

**Keywords:** sustainable tourism development; residents' perceptions; stakeholder engagement; tourism recovery; qualitative interviews; Northern Cyprus



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## 1. Introduction

Now more than ever, the sustainability of tourism destinations is a concern for tourism stakeholders as many destinations are gearing to restart tourism. Just before the outbreak of the coronavirus in late 2019, the concerns of over-tourism impacts on the sustainable development of tourism were at the forefront of deliberations and policy formulation of many destinations [1]. As destinations are gradually planning to restart and reopen to tourism activities, a major focus is on balancing the exposure of destination resources to tourism consumption vis-à-vis the benefits that accrue to the destinations. Expectedly, owing to the colossal adverse impact of the pandemic on the tourism industry [2], stakeholder's eagerness to restart, rejuvenate and restore tourism activities to their initial state is a fundamental quest. However, guest and tourist attractions without adequate sustainable plans to ensure the sustainability of destination development will only compound the challenges of the industry rather than alleviate them.

As tourism scholars have noted, stakeholder support and engagement are critical factors in the development of sustainable tourism [3,4]. To achieve optimal tourism benefits with minimal risks to the sustainability of the destination, stakeholder engagement, which

refers to the acceptance and involvement of stakeholders' perception in the evaluatory and participatory processes involved in the development and implementation of strategic plans for sustainable destination development [4], must be operational.

On the other hand, focus advertisement refers to a systematic approaches of introducing specific processes into marketing campaigns in order to attain a desired outcome [5]. In other words, focus advertisement takes into consideration consumers' responses to advertisement framing in the pursuit of goals and the marketers' orientation to goal actualization to frame a perfect marketing campaign that not only attracts consumers but also preserves the objective of the marketing organizations. Within the framework of destination marketing, focus advertisements can be considered as specific efforts made by destination marketers to include marketing or advertisement framing that will be integrated into the process of destination development in such a way that will attract guests and enhance the sustainability of the destination.

Given the extent of the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry [6–8], especially on small island destinations such as Northern Cyprus whose economies are tourism-dependent [9,10], it is imperative for policy makers, and all stakeholders in general to adopt and implement strategic and methodical plans towards destination recovery. To this end, the current study used grounded theory and semi-structured interviews to explore the perceptions of residents Northern Cyprus concerning the impacts of COVID-19 to tourism development and the role of focus advertisement and stakeholder engagement in the sustainable restoration of tourism activities post-COVID-19. The study contributes to sustainable tourism development (STD) literature, disaster recovery literature, destination marketing and management literature and, above all, offers an insightful practical guide to destination managers and other relevant stakeholders on the strategic procedures to be taken to achieve tourism recovery and sustainability of the destination.

## 2. Review of Existing Literature

### 2.1. Sustainable Tourism Development and Recovery

The contribution of tourism to the economic viability of nations has been well-documented in the academic literature [1,2,7,10,11]. Based on the World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) 2020 edition of international tourism highlights, tourism represents the world's largest and fastest growing economic sector, with significant contributions to the GDP of the major economies of the world [11]. More specifically, Macao has the largest tourism contribution to GDP at about 48%. Furthermore, tourism contributes to employment opportunities, poverty alleviation, infrastructural development and many other factors. Despite its positive contributions, tourism also has its associated risks, the chief of which include resource depletion and increased environmental affects [12–14]. These negative impacts of tourism, and associated risks, have led many scholars to seek methods of achieving sustainability of tourism development so that actionable plans are developed to educate all stakeholders in ways to identify problem areas and also offer solutions to enhance the development of tourism without negative impacts [15].

According to Hunter [16], STD is the dominant paradigm among tourism practitioners, which seeks to chart a responsible course of balancing the demands of tourism development with the protection of the environment [17]. Other scholars have provided insights into concepts of sustainable tourism and sustainable development. For instance, in his article "Tourism, sustainable development and the theoretical divide: 20 years on", Sharpley [18] argued that while sustainable tourism development is a contemporary phenomenon, its origin can be traced to interactions between the field of tourism and sustainable development. Specifically, STD can be seen as amalgamation of the concepts of tourism development and sustainable development that allows both academicians and industry practitioners to harness the benefits of both concepts, thereby mitigating the negative impacts of tourism developments [18–20].

In sum, STD can be seen as the stakeholders' efforts at maintaining a "natural" equilibrium between the trade-offs of the economic contributions of tourism development for

the preservation of tourism resources in ways that present utilization will not limit the future availability of such resources [19,21]. Particularly, in small island destinations where over-reliance on tourism-led growth is the norm, tourism activities must be checked to ensure they meet the demands of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which states:

The new goals are unique in that they call for action by all countries (poor, rich and middle-income) to promote prosperity while protecting the planet. They recognize that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address a range of social needs, including education, health, social protection and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and supporting environmental protection. While the SDGs are not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for the achievement of the 17 Goals [22].

Although efforts towards the sustainable development of tourism are being implemented across the industry, the very nature of the industry implies that it is highly sensitive to factors such as terrorism, climate change, natural disasters and pandemics [6,23,24]. As with other changes in the environment, the outbreak of the pandemic threatens the sustainability of tourism development. The impact of the pandemic has not only resulted in loss of economic contributions but also a total collapse of the industry. However, with every failure comes the opportunity for recovery. In fact, a growing number of scholars believe that major incidents such as the pandemic offer a great deal of opportunity for us to evaluate and transform our ways of doing things [25].

In Higgins-Desbiolles's [25] view, irrespective of its devastating impacts, COVID-19 can be considered as a catalyst for essential transformations. Bhaskara and Filimonau [23], and Filimonau and De Coteau [26] argued that disaster events provide opportunities for learning and for building resilience against future reoccurrences. In other words, as important as STD is, sustainable destination recovery involving concerted efforts by tourism stakeholders in affected tourism destinations to regain business as usual [27], is paramount when restarting, revitalizing and restoring is the goal of the tourism destination.

## 2.2. *Tourism Destination Stakeholders' Engagement and Collaboration*

Tourism is a multistakeholder industry [28]. Tourism business practices requires interactions among complex sets of entities and individual who sometimes have conflicting or complementing interests [29]. The associated problems of tourism development pertaining to global warming and natural resource management have great effects on a number of groups and individuals [30]. Given this reality, fostering participation or engagement among all affected interests has been proven as the way to attain better destination outcomes [30]. In other words, stakeholder engagement, which is a way of encouraging high level of involvement and participation of all actors in the tourism industry in the process of tourism development, is also essential in the effort towards tourism recovery.

In destination stakeholder engagement, active players in the tourism development of the destination convene to deliberate on the issues pertaining to their shared interests and how to reach compromises that will result in gains for the destination [31]. Given the diversity of interests and the complexity of tourism destination stakeholders, factors such as level of awareness, trust between stakeholders, objectivity, interdependency, power issues and so on, play a major role in the level of progress made towards the inception, progress, development and outcomes of stakeholder engagement and collaborations [31,32].

For tourism-dependent economies such as small island destinations, stakeholder participation is even more necessary due to their vulnerability to economic shocks [33]. As such, a greater level of collaboration and participation is demanded of the stakeholders. The sustainability of tourism development in small island destination strongly depends on the synergetic interrelationship of all stakeholders. For instance, tourism governance in such destinations must involve the directions of policy makers, the market orientation of industry players and the consumption habits of tourists. As in any system, every component of the tourism industry must assemble and align for the output of the system

to be realizable. In disaster events, stakeholder contributions cannot be overemphasized as the nature of the industry implies that past performances do not translate to future success.

### *2.3. Marketing and Advertisement of Sustainable Tourism Development*

Sustainable tourism development, or tourism development as a whole, requires that tourists are attracted to a destination for it to be successful and sustainable. Successful tourism destinations know the “how” of tourist attractions. Watts and Giddens [34] argued that sustainable consumption can only be attained when the sustainability of the product is communicated in a trustworthy and convincing manner via appropriate advertisement. Font and McCabe [35], and Hardeman, Font, & Nawijn [36], further stressed that the importance of sustainable tourism advertisement is mostly in its ability to showcase the altruistic aspects of the linkages between social and environmental welfare and sustainable consumption.

Considering that marketing and advertisement efforts are often geared towards attraction of consumers who, in turn, use the product and judge the authenticity of the marketing efforts based on actual experience, the marketing of sustainable tourism requires that the sustainability depicted in the advertisements should be evident at the destination [37]. It is also important to highlight the constituent elements of advertising strategies in sustainable tourism as important items of destination development. As such, destination marketing or advertisement efforts must be designed in ways that result in the improvement of destination attractiveness, improvement of regional competitiveness, increased marketing effectiveness and an enhanced destination performance [38].

### *2.4. The Northern Cyprus Context*

As a tourism-dependent small Mediterranean island, the warm-water destination of North Cyprus has been overly reliant on its sand, sea and sun (3S) for the attraction of mass tourism [39]. Considering the political and communal uniqueness of the destination, tourism, education and governmental support are the main pillars of the economic viability of the destination. With its over eight-hundred and fifty tourism and hospitality businesses and services, Northern Cyprus’s reliance on tourism development cannot be overemphasized [40].

Investments in tourism development have resulted in the development of thematic hotels, such as casino hotels, with an uneven distribution of infrastructural development across the island’s regions [39,40]. However, with the benefits also come some concerns in regions such as Bafra that have experienced rapid development of thematic hotels and are now dealing with social concerns such as overpopulation, loss of authenticity and saturation, while other less impacted areas such as Yeniboğaziçi and Karaoğlanoğlu are either completely neglected or have lost their authenticity due to proximity to benefiting regions.

Despite the imbalances in the distribution and allocation of tourism proceeds, Northern Cyprus, as with other small destination islands, cannot afford the luxury of completely alienating tourism development. Indeed, various stakeholders are calling for the implementation of a Tourism Master Plan of the destination as a strategic way of dealing with the challenges of tourism development. That notwithstanding, the impact of COVID-19 on the economy of Northern Cyprus is grievous, and efforts must be made to restart and restore the industry. International tourism experienced a massive drop of about 75.1% between October 2019 and 2020 [41].

## **3. Method and Materials**

### *3.1. Research Design*

The current project adopted the use of a qualitative research method for soliciting data and for analysis of the same. This method was deemed preferable due to its potential to offer rich (er) and in-depth explanations of the “whys” and “hows” of the phenomenon under investigation [23]. Further, eliciting deep intuitive information from stakeholders with broad, divergent and sometimes conflicting interest is best suited to the qualitative

method of interviews and content analysis. This is because interviews (structured or semi-structured) allow great analytical power and design flexibility that can offer novel insights [42].

### 3.2. Application of Grounded Theory

As with other studies that seek to uncover human perceptions of social concepts that are not easily quantifiable, our study adopted the use of grounded theory [40]. The rationale for the adoption of grounded theory is rooted in the fact that in-depth elicitation of opinions and views can be best captured in an environment where participants have the freedom to express their perceptions without judgement or prejudices. Kensbock, and Jennings [43] shared a similar view when investigating tourism entrepreneurs and their contributions to STD.

The application of grounded theory in the generation of new insights, novel perspectives and theme generations have been documented in the literature. In tourism and sustainable tourism studies, the application of grounded theory is widely accepted. For instance, in their effort to bridge the gap between the development of theory and the practical applications, Stumpf, Sandstrom, and Swanger [44] performed a comprehensive literature review of studies in sustainable tourism with the application of grounded theory. More than 30 articles using grounded theory were cited in the methods section of their study.

Beyond its wide acceptance in sustainable the tourism domain, grounded theory offers a host of other advantages. Its application guarantees that an inductive process can be efficiently followed leading to new discoveries and, importantly, in the context of the current study in which COVID-19 is still on-going, a degree of uncertainty still exists and grounded theory offers mitigation of information loss due to uncertainty. With the help of grounded theory as an analytic framework, it is possible to identify and classify differing topics of interest, theoretical perspectives, and methodologies [44].

### 3.3. Interview Design and Informant Selection

To better capture the full extent of informants' knowledge and the information relevant to the realization of the study objectives, purposive sampling techniques were used to select the participants. With purposive sampling, researchers are able to use the purpose of the study as a qualifying criterion for informant selection [23]. Hence, all participants were active stakeholders in the Northern Cyprus tourism network. Thirteen informants were selected for the study based on their involvement in the Northern Cyprus tourism industry. The informants included policy makers, employees of nonprofit organizations, hoteliers, restaurateurs, employees, education tourists and tour operators [40]. The full spectrum of the informants covered suppliers, consumers and governors of the tourism industry. The informants' details are available in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Informants Details (n = 13).

Informants ID	Sector	Informants' Profile	Years of First Involvement	Experience of COVID-19	Interview Duration
I1	Accommodation	Owner of a 5-star hotel located in Bafra region of Northern Cyprus	2009	Yes	40:11
I2	Tour Operator	Owner of a viable tour operation in Famagusta; also a member of Tourism stakeholder committee	2007	Yes	35:05
I3	Accommodation	Employee of a casino hotel	2015	Yes	30:01
I4	Accommodation	Manager of a 5-star hotel in Kyrenia region of North Cyprus	1991	Yes	1:10:08
I5	Education	Education tourist, studying tourism management in Northern Cyprus	2010	Yes	50:23
I6	Policy Making	Member of the ministry of tourism	2003	Yes	41:47

Table 1. Cont.

Informants ID	Sector	Informants' Profile	Years of First Involvement	Experience of COVID-19	Interview Duration
I7	Policy Making	Member of Tourism Information office of North Cyprus	2014	Yes	46:13
I8	Transport	Employee of full-service airline operating local and international flights	2017	Yes	41:50
I9	Transport	Airport taxi driver	2019	Yes	41:21
I10	Tour Operator	Representative of a large tour operation in North Cyprus	2013	Yes	38:14
I11	Restaurant	Owner of a themed restaurants situated in the tourist attraction zone in Bafra	2012	Yes	50:10
I12	Accommodation	Manager of a casino hotel	2016	Yes	32:12
I13	Education	Professor of Tourism Management	1993	Yes	30:02

The selection and determination of the appropriateness and representativeness of the study sample followed the recommendations of Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora, (2016) [45]. According to Malterud et al., the adequacy and representativeness of the sample size in qualitative interview studies should be dependent on the “information power” of the responses gathered from the sample rather than the saturation of the information. Furthermore, information power, which refers to the quality of information resident in the sample, the relevance of such information, and the number of responses needed to attain such quality depends on (a) the aim of the study, (b) sample specificity, (c) use of established theory, (d) quality of dialogue, and (e) analysis strategy [45]. Given the context of the current study and the uniqueness of the problem in relation to the research approach and analysis strategy, the current sample size was deemed appropriate and representative. Similar sample sizes have been used in other studies such as [46,47].

Given that the interviews were conducted between February 2021 and April 2021 while COVID-related restrictions were still actively implemented in North Cyprus, digital platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and telephones were used for the administration of the interviews. This approach not only allows for compliance to the governmental rules but also offers a relaxing environment for informants, as the times and locations of the interviews were totally dependent on the informants' preference, leading to maximal outputs [48,49].

To ease the informants into interview mode, general questions such as introduction and position held were asked. Then, specific questions about the extent of damage of COVID-19 to the industry, and why such damage is so impactful, were used as follow ups. The interview duration ranged from 30 min to 75 min with an average of 45 min. Interviews were conducted in the English language and no incentives were offered for participation.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. All the researchers read and re-read the interview transcripts carefully for concept familiarization and building of the core themes of meanings. Coding and theme generation followed later using the recommendations of Braun and Clarke [50,51]. The themes and coding structures generated in the current study are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Themes and coding structures indicating the significance of each code.

Theme	Code	Sub-Code	No. of People Talking about It	No. of Quotes	
Impacts	Challenges of tourism employees	Job loss	4	15	
		Reduced demands	8	29	
		Stagnation	10	30	
		Unpaid leave	5	10	
		Business closure	11	19	
	Disruption	Challenges of tourism business owners	Uncertainties with regulations	13	36
			Haphazard patronage	6	18
			Loss of revenue	8	22
	Business preparedness		Complete business collapse	7	10
			Difficulty in sudden switch to digital platforms	3	5
			Lack of anticipation for such outbreak	8	17
			Questionable resilience and safety plans	2	5
	Recovery	Products	Mass Tourism	8	30
			Ecotourism	9	18
Slow Tourism			2	6	
Dark Tourism			7	11	
Nature Tourism			10	15	
Agro Tourism			4	4	
Casino Tourism			5	8	
Focused Adverts		Strategic positioning of marketing campaigns	Governmental websites	8	22
			Safety	4	10
			Movies/Screen tourism	9	12
			Brochures	3	7
			Celebrity/Brands	6	14
			International TVs	5	8
			Digital information centers	4	4
Political/Governance	Governmental support	Tourism agencies	3	4	
		Transportation	11	36	
		Conflict/dispute	5	10	
		Infrastructures	6	15	

#### 4. Result and Discussion

The central focus of the current study was to understand the extent of damage that the outbreak of the COVID-19 has had on the Northern Cyprus tourism industry, and how focus advertisement and stakeholder collaboration can aid the restart of the industry in a sustainable way to preserve the resources of the destination. Our findings are in tandem with those of Baum et. al. [52] who reported that border closures, curtailment of travels, closures of attraction and tourism facilities all culminated in depriving tourist of their right to tourism and hospitality. On the other hand, such measures equally deprived the tourism business owners from their business-as-usual operations. Further, our study noted that the disruption brought about by the pandemic manifested in challenges relating to tourism employees, tourism business owners and business preparedness to disaster events. These findings are aligned with those of Yeh [53] who reported economic upheaval as a major impact of the pandemic. Although Yeh's investigation reported economic upheaval in the form of company closures and job losses, our results highlighted job losses, reduced revenue, reduced wages, and business closures, and supported the same notions.

#### 4.1. Disruption and Uncertainty

Disruption and uncertainty are the major impacts of COVID-19 on Northern Cyprus tourism and can be subdivided into three subcodes of “challenges to tourism employees”, “challenges to tourism business owners” and “business preparedness”. The tourism marketplace during the pandemic is characterized by varying degrees of uncertainty, largely due to the evolving nature of governmental policies aimed at managing spread of the virus. The most discussed impact of COVID-19 as shown in Table 2 is uncertainties with regulations. Given that most nonpharmaceutical measures against the spread of the virus are announced as per changes of events, there are many uncertainties and business plans and activities that are not attainable. When probed on how the virus impacted their businesses, most informants pointed out the difficulties surrounding business decision making when there is no element of certainty about the next line of action from the government concerning the pandemic.

The disruption to business has also led to a rising number of challenges facing employees in the industry. As businesses began to comply with lockdown and other measures, revenues began to dwindle as did the capacity of organizations to keep hold of their employees. It became inevitable to lay-off employees, and those retained were offered reduced wages, while some small businesses had to completely with shutdown operations. Various government palliatives were available for affected individuals; however, the damage was deleterious. Business owners, like employees, also felt the brunt of the pandemic. Severe losses of revenue and, in some cases, total collapse of businesses were highly discussed impacts.

With disaster management, it is often said that the degree of preparedness plays an important role in determining the extent of the impact of disaster events. Many informants believed that most of the disruptions experienced in the industry could be associated with lack of adequate preparation for such incidents. As noted in Table 2, lack of anticipation for such an outbreak, and questionable resilience and safety plans, are the most discussed subtheme under the business preparedness theme. This finding reflects the opinion of Gössling et. al. [6] who concludes that pandemics should be evaluated in the light of the potential for reconsideration of the notion that increased tourist arrival equals increased benefit for the destination, but that transformative innovations often follow periods of hardships and strains that pandemics can offer. The following are some extracts from the interviewees demonstrating the above findings:

*“COVID has caused so many problems for us both as managers of hotels and even for our employees. Because of the lockdown and restrictions, we have no market, thanks to the government subsidies, people would have gone hungry. But you know as business owners, you are only happy when you are doing well.” (I12)*

*“To be sincere, COVID caused so many problems. Like in my workplaces, many of my colleagues were asked to leave the job. I am among the lucky ones who escaped this axing but still the people have family to feed and people depending on them for survival. Still, we understand that the business on thrive on sustained patronage and with the necessary and mandatory lockdowns, it is a matter of time for everyone.” (I3)*

#### 4.2. Tourism Product Development

While the impact of the pandemic is important in the broad context of the destination management, the key to sustainable destination development lies not in focusing on the impact but on the recovery efforts to restart and revitalize the destination. Given that part of the objective of the current project is to determine the role of focus advertisement and stakeholder engagement in the recovery plans for the destination, informants were asked about their perspectives with respect to recovery efforts in the destination. Table 2 presents three themes and 17 sub-codes that informants deemed necessary toward the recovery efforts of the destination. The first movement towards recovery concerns tourism products. Informants believed that while mass tourism has been instrumental in the development of

tourism in Northern Cyprus in the pre-pandemic era, specialized tourism products such as agrotourism, ecotourism, dark tourism, nature tourism, and so on, will be the way to go in the rebuilding process of the industry. Many stated that threats to the industry during the current pandemic showed the danger of focusing on a single-source of tourism earnings and the need to accentuate other environmentally friendly tourism products that will not only bring about economic gains but will also ensure the sustainability of the destination's resources. The following are some extracts from the respondents stating this viewpoint:

*"Eco tourism is a big advantage especially for small island countries. Cyprus has an unspoiled geographical position. In this sense, large hotel businesses related to sustainable tourism management can unfortunately be a pressure factor. Regions such as Buyukkonuk, Dipkarpaz, Lefke and Güzelyurt in the north of Cyprus have the features that allow tourists to taste the country's production activities in the name of cultural tastes. but TRNC tourism ministry could not determine a strategic plan in this direction, so there are big companies that can crush small businesses especially because planning can't be done. however, if those big companies take steps with ecotourism, their customers will increase. In the promotion of the country in the new world, not luxury hotel management, but small eco-tourism, bungalows or boutique hotels far from the city, the customers are more satisfied in the name of getting to know the people and the culture." (I4).*

*"Our island can be considered as one of the most important tourism destinations. The landscape of the island makes it suitable for holidaying and recreational activities. However, as it is with most tourism destinations, human activities often attract environmental issues such as air pollution and depletion of the resources. Even more, the topography of our island is such that it is limited in resources, highly dependent on imports and also remotely located. Sustainable tourism such as agrotourism and ecotourism can minimize these challenges and also our island is a good place to promote sustainability. Sustainable tourism can serve an important role in attracting ecotourist and agrotourist to our island and I believed that we have the potential to develop this kind of tourism." (I10).*

#### 4.3. Focused Advertisements

Traditionally, tourism marketing and advertisement in Northern Cyprus were designed for mass tourism in the form of packaged tours. However, a number of the informants were of the opinion that advertisement campaigns should be targeted in the post-pandemic era. Many believed that through the implementation of focused advertisements, niche tourism markets can emerge and various eco-friendly tourism products that have not been well projected in the past will gain more market exposures. The need to develop and update governmental agency websites for easy information access and use was the most discussed subcode under the strategic positioning of the marketing campaign theme. Government websites are deemed authentic and should be the best and most reliable source of marketing information that should not only attract tourists but aid their experiential journey at the destination.

Some informants also believed that the historic and cultural topography of north Cyprus offers a unique selling point to tourists. Out of the 13 informants, nine believed that sustainable tourism development can be enhanced to a great degree when all the tourism products of the destination are showcased in blockbuster cinemas and movies. Others opined that the current use of brochures can be digitized and greater application of information technologies could be used in the advertisement campaigns. Another subtheme that informants agreed upon was that there is the need for greater utilization of tourism agencies. Many informants stated that tourism agencies should do more in terms of advertising and marketing campaigns for their special sectorial products. Agency websites should be updated and be more interactive for tourist information access. Some statements to support this view are given below:

*“During my interaction with tourist as tour guide before the pandemic, my main observation was that tourist got to know about North Cyprus through television advertisement and brochures and catalogs from travel agencies. What they love about North Cyprus is its local festivals like eco-tourism festival in Buyukkonuk, like grape festival, wine festival and their ability to participate in the creation of special events such as festival. In my opinion, if we are to recover from the current impacts of the pandemic, we must focus our advertisement effort in these areas where tourist consider as unique and important selling points for our island.” (I2)*

*“I have a lot Israelis come now, before the pandemic, the Israelis population was very big, they want a lot of things for family and kids, so, we make things like bread making and made lots of aprons for kids, the kids have aprons on, if they have long hair, they put some cover on, and people are fascinated about it, they think its Islamic thing, I said No, it's not Islamic, its cultural, its village life and many visitors want to be part of this experience but we don't have information accessible to them in their languages. The websites are in English, the Europeans can cope with that, but we need to focus on making the information available in the language of our expected visitors.” (I5)*

#### 4.4. Political Governance

Although many informants believed that the political situation of north Cyprus is among the limiting factors against the restart and recovery of the tourism industry, they also believed that governmental interference may be helpful in augmenting international recognition of the destination. Informants also expressed the challenges that tourists face with lack of transportation and overall lack of infrastructures. A viable path to recovery would include opening up of the destination through diplomatic resolutions, embargo minimization and other infrastructural developments. Some extracts from the interviews supporting this view are presented below:

*“Cyprus, the name, the geography, the country in the history, 10,000 years ago, all the world knows it. The main problem is political. The main problem. Why? Because, your transportation, we have no direct flight here. No direct ships here. You have to touch down in Istanbul, Turkey or land in Larnaca, that means guest have to use their passports. The problem is political because our ecology, our cuisines, cultural places, heritage places, we have a lot of these. We have even intangible heritages but the problem is politics. The tourism industry here in North Cyprus, we have nearly three different models of tourism. The entertainment industry—the casino tourism, the mass tourism, the special interest tourism. Now! There is tourism ministry that make all the advertisement and associations that make their own For casino, only we have guest from Turkey and some of Greek-Cypriots from South. They use special advertising systems. They are so professional. They are trying to find, to catch, the rich men. And they are trying to send them some invitations and they are using popular artist, singers from turkey, making concerts and invite the special guest to the concerts. But the target is for them to play games. They pay their flight; they have to stay here free of charge but they must have to play for instance minimum of 10,000 dollars in casinos. This is the first principle for them and they are making the advertising only by letters and they are trying to find people who are rich. They are not trying to use newspaper or TV. They are not using it. Only face-to-face, word-of-mouth communication; because the people doesn't like it mostly. For Cyprus, we do want to hear it to say come here to Cyprus for casinos; why? Why? Is not a good model for tourism industry; casino; always we lost; casino because when the people come here, they never use taxi, never use restaurants, never visit cultural heritage places, castles, museum, rent a car, they spend nothing for us, the industry, only hotels, casino hotels. Tourism ministry are not doing it too but they supporting the casinos underground for the taxes, for the charter, the prices.” (I4)*

## 5. Conclusions

The current study explores the role of focus advertisement and stakeholder engagement in the sustainable restoration of tourism activities, post-COVID-19, in Northern Cyprus. Findings revealed that, irrespective of the negative impact of COVID-19 on the destinations' tourism contributions to economic growth, and the eagerness to restart tourism activities, stakeholders are still concerned about the sustainability with respect to such things as carrying capacity, preventive focus attraction, and focus advertisement. Stakeholders stated the need for resource preservation and sustainable tourism development.

The findings of the study support those of current literature pertaining to the detrimental impacts of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. Specifically, the disruption of hospitality and tourism businesses due to government regulations and measures against the spread of the virus is a well-reported impact in the hospitality literature.

Beyond the impacts of the pandemic, informants showed great enthusiasm concerning recovery. Our findings suggest that the pandemic should not only be measured in terms of its deleterious effects but should be seen in the light of the opportunities it presents. Specifically, our study participants indicated that the pause in business-as-usual in Northern Cyprus tourism represents an opportunity for the re-evaluation of the tourism agenda and its marketing efforts. The notion here is that mass tourism, which is the main tourism product of the destination, has had more harmful impacts on the destination than the economic gains it has brought. Without the pandemic, clear insight into this effect of mass tourism on the nations' tourism industry may have been elusive. As such, promotion of alternative tourism development in the form of nature tourism, ecotourism, and agrotourism is beginning to take a central point in the stakeholder agenda for a restart.

Tourism management and governance structure in Northern Cyprus have been successful thus far. However, the measure of success in the form of economic benefit alone may jeopardize the sustainability goals of the destination. For a small Mediterranean island destination that prides itself on natural resources such as beaches, good weather and heritage values, the critical nature of sustainability cannot be underestimated. As such, key stakeholders in the industry may take into account the findings of the current study when revisiting the policy directions of the destination. Notably, the implementation of a tourism master plan for the destination may be more critical for recovery.

Furthermore, it is imperative that policy makers realize that their actions in the fight against the pandemic should not stop with curbing its spread but, more importantly, they should commit to the recovery plans that will ensure the sustainable development of the destination. Collaboration among all stakeholders at all levels of governance is also a major vehicle that will drive the recovery of island. Beyond all stakeholder engagement and collaborations, focused advertisements offer another substantial outlet for destination marketing organizations to explore and showcase the uniqueness of the destination. When policy directions encourage the development of eco-friendly tourism products such as nature tourism, agrotourism, ecotourism, slow tourism, and so on, and such products are included in targeted marketing campaigns such as in governmental websites, screen tourism and digitalized brochures, the authentic nature of the destination can be communicated effectively to the right market segment, whose members will not only pay appropriately for the tourism experience but promulgate the sustainability agenda of the destination.

Although the informants of the current project were major stakeholders in the Northern Cyprus tourism industry, the small size of the sample can only offer a correspondingly small amount of information. Drawing from the insights generated in this study, future researchers may develop a quantitative and standardized scale for the measurement of the destinations' sustainability index and relevant stakeholder's requirements for destination recovery. Furthermore, we must add that the findings of our study help to explain the experiences and perspectives of the residents with respect to the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism sector of the island. This study presents preliminary findings in this research domain which can serve as anchors for further research delineating the roadmap for tourism recovery studies.

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