

INNOVATIVE USE OF RESOURCES OF SPA TOURISM ENTERPRISES DURING THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Purpose: Study addresses the issue of an implementation, in a crisis situation, of an organisational innovation in the form of transformation of tourism and medical activities of Polish health tourism companies into crisis support centres for the health care system.

Design/methodology/approach: The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult period for the tourism market, but by adopting the form of a natural experiment (Messer 2016) it allowed tourism enterprises to develop and implement new organisational solutions.

Findings: The research note shows the key conclusions from the research conducted in Polish health resorts in the period 2018-2021.

Originality/value: The article has practical value by showing solutions developed during the pandemic.

Keywords: health tourism, management, business model, Poland.

Category of the paper: Viewpoint (research note).

1. Introduction

Spa tourism enterprises are established to provide tourism and medical services in spa areas, i.e. locations with healthy climates. They pursue both tourism and medical objectives within the framework of the state's health care policy. During the pandemic period, the activities of spa companies took on a completely different role to the one they had previously fulfilled. While it was not possible for them to provide tourism and health services, their activities and infrastructure could be integrated with the state's system of emergency and preventive measures.

The purpose of this research note is to identify the innovative role of spa infrastructure in the health care system during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research note presents the most important results of empirical research conducted in Polish health resorts, and thus shows a new perspective on the use of health resorts in the public health system.

2. Short literature review

The nature of this scientific work takes a limited form in the form of a research note, so only the most important points of reference are focused.

Previous research on the activities of spa businesses has focused on their economic, marketing, social policy, medical and historical problems (Ridderstaat et al., 2019, Gmyrek-Gołąb et al., 2022). The issues of sustainability (Hung Leea, Jan, 2019), business models responding to the challenges of climate change (Sigüenza et al., 2021) and applications of business models in the area of sustainability (Hossain, 2021) have been addressed only incidentally. An important piece of literature regarding the topic discussed is the study by K. Gmyrek-Gołąb et al. (2022) related to the operation of Polish health resorts during the Covid-19 pandemic. They present the offer of Polish spa companies in the field of rehabilitation of people after Covid-19.

The literature on the subject also formulates numerous recommendations and guidelines related to crisis management (Yu, 2006) and the implementation of critical changes in the functioning of organisations (Zenker, Kock, 2020). Some international organisations, such as the OECD, propose that tourism organisations take advantage of crisis situations and reorientate their policies towards more sustainable development (OECD, 2021).

However, a review of the literature revealed a lack of research relating to the business models adopted by spa tourism businesses during periods of global health crises, i.e. the transformation of their operations as a process of organisational innovation, triggered by humanitarian crises. This issue appears to be fundamental, given that, in periods of crisis, organisations need to adapt quickly to new conditions, and in such circumstances it is necessary to know how a company should change its business model while fulfilling its obligations in the area of corporate social responsibility. The identified research gap needed to be bridged by a separate study.

3. Conducting research and results

The basic research problem was an attempt to identify the key transformational activities carried out by spa tourism enterprises and their positioning in crisis management models.

The research was conducted in Poland in two stages, in 2018 and 2021, following the methodology of the Generic Contingency Principle (GCP), referring to the assumptions of grounded theory. The research methodology included a triangulation of methods, i.e. in-depth qualitative interviews conducted among managers of the largest spa companies as well as among their current and potential customers. The research conducted in 2018 identified business models used in Polish health resorts, and the research conducted in 2021 aimed to identify the versions of these models to be used in crisis situations, taking into account elements of sustainable health tourism development (Figure 1). The opportunity for this was provided by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the analysis of business model components, the CANVAS diagram proposed by A. Osterwalder and Y. Pigneur (Osterwalder, Pigneur, 2010) was used. The quantitative research was carried out on a random sample of 753 respondents, of whom 63.5% (478 persons) were actual clients of Polish spas and 36.5% (275 persons) were qualified as potential clients.

Taking into account the current state of knowledge and the identified research gap, the following three research questions were formulated:

1. The application of what sustainability measures can be observed in spa businesses nowadays?
2. How is it possible to adapt the components of existing business models to use them subsequently in the development of sustainable business models?
3. What is the role of spa businesses in health crises caused by the risk of an epidemic?

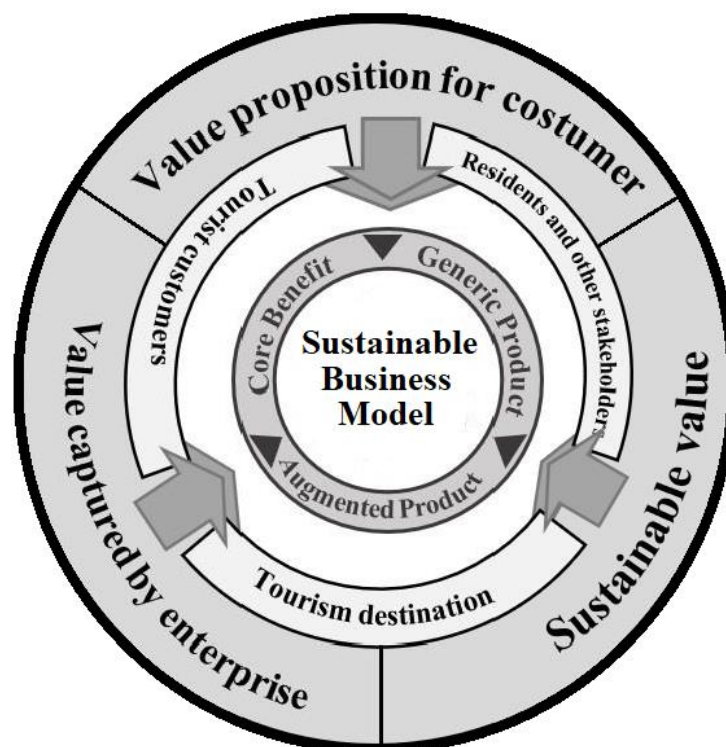


Figure 1. The structure of a sustainable business model of a spa company.
Source: own study.

4. Conducting research and results

The research shows that the role of spa enterprises in situations of health crises caused by the threat of an epidemic is extremely important and takes diverse forms. It is noteworthy that in the first year of the pandemic, general spa therapies, i.e. standard tourism and medical services, were provided by 56% of the establishments, while post-COVID therapies, i.e. the treatment of patients who had suffered from COVID-19 and had a negative COVID test, were offered in 50% of them. 44% of the surveyed spa enterprises operated vaccination centres and 28% ran isolation facilities for COVID-19 patients. Only 11% of the spa companies and only during certain periods of 2020 provided exclusively tourism services.

28% of them purchased organic products as part of their tourism and medical services, and 72% reduced purchases, for example to avoid excessive stocks of food. Measures aimed at reducing the consumption of electricity and water were introduced by 56% of the businesses and 39% of them used renewable energy sources. All establishments had implemented at least one of the programmes aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions (6%), reducing demand for transport services (6%), reducing generation of pollutants, waste and harmful substances (89%) and segregating waste (94%). One in two spa businesses had implemented a sustainable development management system, but the vast majority of them did not communicate this to their clients.

The research showed that there were no barriers to the newly implemented management tool adopting the form of a sustainable business model, including an extended value proposition. Taking into account that it is more efficient to introduce successive versions of a particular model in an evolutionary way, it was proposed to introduce a standard model that could be gradually developed into a sustainable model containing not only business objectives and strategic directions, but also various ways of achieving the sustainable development goals proposed by the UN, as well as ways of generating value propositions based on juxtaposing a value map with the needs of the environment and stakeholders.

Subsequently, the research proposed a transformation of a sustainable business model into a model taking into account not only a sustainable value proposition, but also an important extension of the scope of activities in circumstances of humanitarian crises. A so-called critical business profile was proposed as a component of a model to be triggered in situations of threats to ordinary business operations, as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This component should include basic plans to change the business profile from tourism and medical services to broadly understood rescue activities. As proposed, these should include: contingency plans aimed at reducing the local impact of health, environmental and military disasters, scenarios for rapid business turnaround in a coordinated emergency response, as well as infrastructural (evacuation and medical) and material reserves. Figures 2 show a change in a business profile and a business model transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

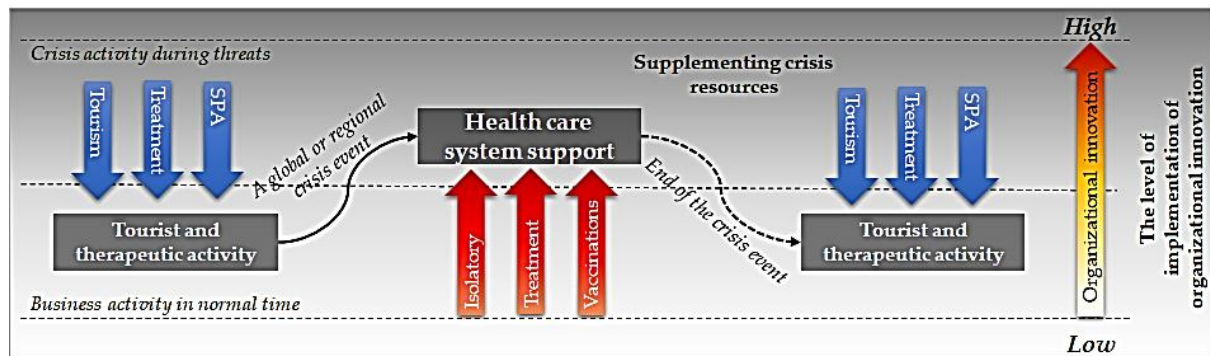


Figure 2. Changes in the profile of the business model.

Source: own study.

In turn, Figure 3 shows the transformation of business models in individual phases of a humanitarian emergency. It takes into account the components of business models and their mutual relationship, as well as a direct reference to sustainable business models.

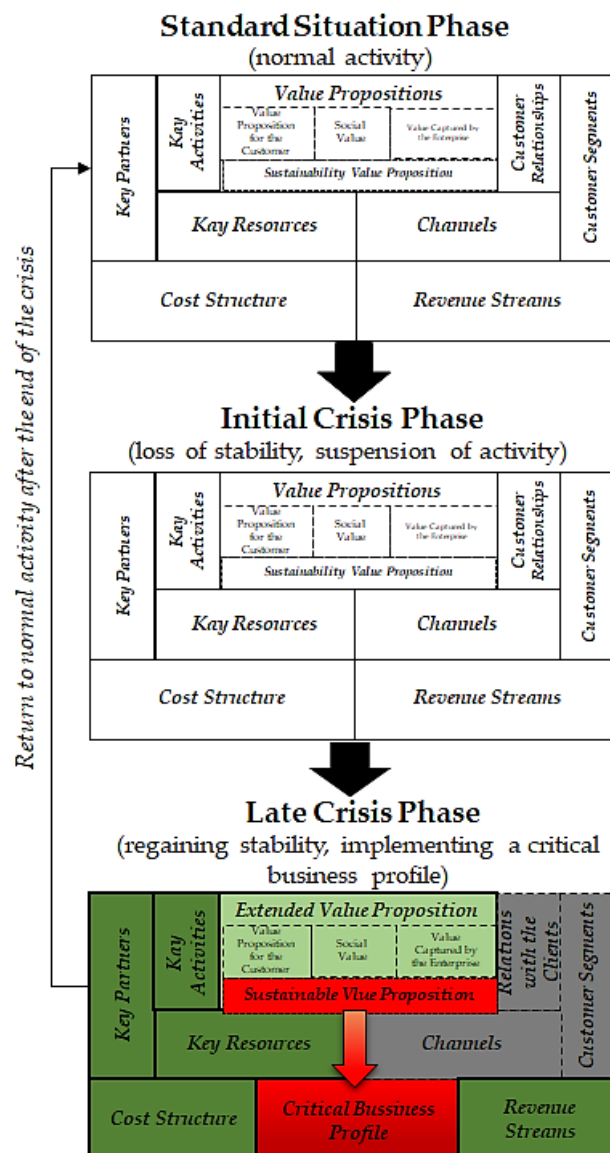


Figure 3. Three phases of changes in the form of business models.

Source: own study.

5. Conclusion

Crisis situations are an opportunity for learning and rapid changes of business models that must take into consideration not only sustainability development objectives, but also ways of managing crisis situations, including a quick change of a business profile and scope. The prospect of further research indicates the need to take into account the individual conditions of spa enterprises in business models.

The research results presented in this research note show that modern health resorts and their infrastructure can be used much more widely than before. It is extremely valuable to develop new practices of involving medical and tourist personnel employed in sanatoriums and rehabilitation centers in health resorts, to achieve the goals of saving the lives and health of the local population in situations of humanitarian threats. The research note presents an example of such rescue activities undertaken by health resort companies in Poland during the COVID-19 pandemic. The hope of the authors is to promote such activities and to consolidate them in the business models of spa enterprises.

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