

Article

Conference Tourism: Exploring Economic Prospects in the Post-COVID-19 Era—Qualitative Research on Greek Hotel Executives

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Abstract: As is widely known, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected tourism and related activities globally. Due to the restrictive measures implemented for gatherings and movements in order to limit the spread of the virus, conferences and conference tourism received a strong shock since the majority of them were canceled or postponed. At the end of the first quarter year, many countries, like Greece, started organizing digital and hybrid conferences. Therefore, there was a reset in the conference industry as the time when travel was limited allowed the organizers, as well as others involved, to work remotely. The present study aims to investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on conference tourism and, more specifically, how hotels and their conference facilities were affected. In addition, the pursuit of potential opportunities through the ‘New technologies’ adopted, as well as the shaping of the industry in the post-COVID-19 era, are studied. This is achieved through a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews with 27 executives of hotels that offer conference facilities in Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion and Rhodes in order to examine whether this specific sector has adapted to the new reality. The analysis of data in this form of research revealed that the pandemic had benefited conferences to some extent, but only under certain circumstances.

Keywords: conference tourism; COVID-19; Greek hotels; digital and hybrid conferences; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 caused a sense of fear among the global population, disrupting daily life and impacting the global economy. Direct impacts were also observed in the healthcare sector, which were identified as unprecedented and, above all, unforeseen. As expected, the pandemic crisis affected all sectors of the economy, naturally including tourism [1]. However, it also became a catalyst for the introduction of innovative technologies in everyday life in order to meet new needs [2].

Conference tourism falls under business tourism, which is an alternative form of tourism that has seen considerable growth in recent years [3]. Besides its dynamic and growth prospects, it also contributes to the national economy and the mitigation of tourism seasonality [4,5]. The impacts of this pandemic became clear early on due to the ban on assembly. However, the conference planning industry responded relatively promptly and attempted to make use of new technologies in order to adapt to the situation [6]. Therefore, the new circumstances resulting from COVID-19 restrictions led to the digital transformation of global conference tourism, while many researchers began wondering if this situation was transitional or permanent [7].

The present study aims to illustrate the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the conference tourism industry, more specifically in hotels offering event and conference facilities in Greece, with a focus on the areas of Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion and Rhodes. Moreover, it prioritizes the investigation of new technologies and their role in

the present crisis, as well as the possible future demand for them. This study uses a qualitative approach. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted in focus group discussions with selected executives of the hotels with conference facilities located in Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion and Rhodes. This paper's research methodology helped gather a wealth of data from a limited sample of participants—an essential feat for a study examining hotel practices during a period of severe crisis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. COVID-19 and Tourism

As per Blake and Sinclair's research [8], crises are nothing new in tourism. However, the impact of this pandemic, mainly in financial terms, has so far been the most devastating compared to other similar crises in modernity, as traveling has been substantially reduced [9,10]. In the beginning, everyone's attention turned to protection and resilience, while later on questions were raised as to the ways the tourism industry can respond and rebound [11]. Solving this issue is a significant challenge for stakeholders and the scientific community, whereas technology is a factor of particular relevance in this process [12].

According to UNWTO [13], in 2020, when COVID-19 began spreading, international arrivals saw a decline of 65% in the first quarter of 2020 due to extended lockdowns and travel restrictions, which translated to USD 460 billion and a 50% decrease in tourism expenditure throughout the year. Figure 1 indicates the percentage change in international arrivals due to COVID-19 and other external factors from 2000 to 2010. These factors are the terrorist attack of 9/11 (2001), the SARS pandemic outbreak (2003), the impact of the global recession (2009) and the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (2020). Clearly, the COVID-19 outbreak was what led to the most significant decrease in international arrivals for this period. Based on the point of view of Figini and Patuelli [14], in 2020, international tourist destinations (e.g., France, Spain and Italy) suffered more significant GDP losses, unlike countries less dependent on tourism (e.g., Sweden, Germany).

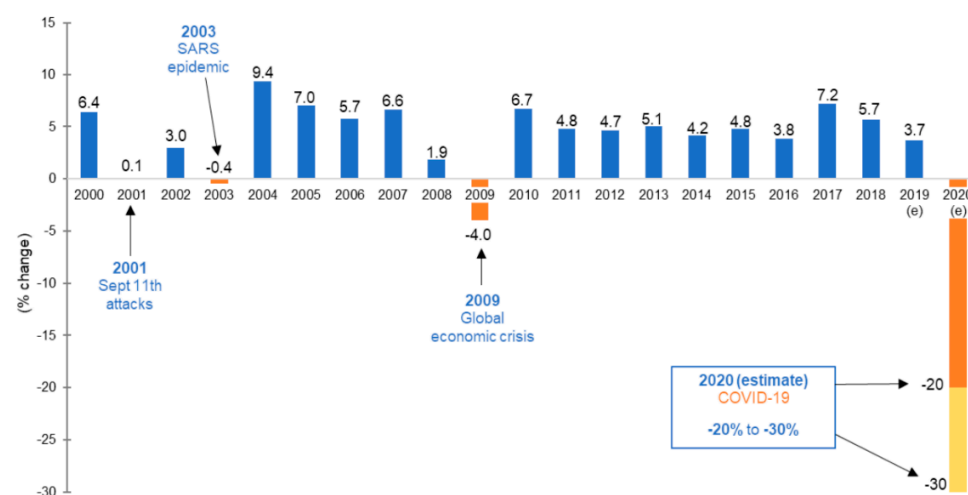


Figure 1. Impact of COVID-19 and other external phenomena on international tourist arrivals. Source: UNWTO [15].

2.2. COVID-19 and Conferences

Through a literature review of COVID-19 and tourism publications, it seems that the existing literature is divided into two categories. The first includes research focusing on the negative impact of the pandemic on local economies, the image of certain destinations and the mental health of tourists. The second category focuses on the pandemic as an opportunity to reconsider and improve the way the tourism industry works [16]. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on conference and business tourism in general has only been studied by a few researchers to date. One of the measures enforced by governments

around the world to restrict the virus spread was the closing of borders to non-residents and non-citizens [10,17,18]. Indeed, 2020 was the year that saw the way conferences are carried out change and signaled their adaptation process in the face of the pandemic, which proved to have a significant impact on the sector on a global scale, resulting in a considerable shift in the previously held perceptions of it. Since March 2020, companies had to restrict employee commutes due to the outbreak of the pandemic [19]. Bans on international travel and the uncertainty revolving around documentation policies were the principal obstacles facing professional travelers globally [6,20].

The COVID-19 pandemic has, regrettably, brought the MICE sector to a complete halt and caused the biggest interruption to the world economy since World War II [21]. However, new ways of carrying out conferences emerged, along with the alternatives implemented by the organizers. Specifically, hybrid and virtual meetings were introduced in order to reduce postponement and cancelation rates. Hybrid and virtual meetings helped organizing bodies as well as unions retain their members' devotion and even expand in new markets [22]. A total of 8409 meetings were carried out or organized for 2020. Compared to the previous year, this number is lagging behind, as in 2019, conferences reached 13,252 [23]. Therefore, conference organizers had to adjust to the new reality in order to meet the challenges since live conferences were banned [24].

The improvement of existing digital platforms and the development of new systems for sharing scientific knowledge have enabled the scientific community to "meet" again via novel virtual environments (e.g., Teams, Zoom, Skype, Cisco WebEx, Google Hangouts, etc.), providing an opportunity to reform methods of organizing academic conferences in all disciplines. On the one hand, virtual events have a much lower environmental and economic impact than regular meetings. Organizers, on the other hand, could expand the number of opportunities for researchers, particularly those in the early phases of their careers, to present their work and to attend high-quality seminars. Online conferences are boosting the diversity of speakers and allowing researchers to participate at much higher levels [25]. Finally, attending virtual conferences spares participants from exhausting long-distance travel and saves a significant amount of money on commuting expenses while lowering the likelihood of contracting the infectious virus [26].

According to Figure 2, since March, when COVID-19 started to spread, a very small percentage of conferences remained unaffected and were carried out normally. In the first few months that the virus spread, most conferences were canceled (44%). This trend picked up speed around the middle of the year and gradually reduced in the second quarter when new ways of carrying them out emerged. The second largest percentage is that of virtual meetings (30%), which started at a relatively small percentage and grew until they surpassed the percentage of postponed conferences in the last couple of months of the same year.

The canceled conferences hold the third place (14%), and while they represented the largest segment during the outbreak of the pandemic, at the end of the year, they ranked next to last, which reveals the extent to which conferences adjusted to the new reality. Hybrid conferences, which the participants can attend online or in person, became more popular by August since they represented an innovative endeavor that gained momentum in 2021. Finally, the conferences that were rescheduled were the less favorable choice throughout the year, reaching just 1%.

In 2019, 13,252 conferences were held, and the estimated expenditure reached \$10,817 million. In 2020, 8409 conferences were planned, of which 3484 were held (763 unconferences, 2505 digital, 143 hybrid and 73 transferred) [23]. As expected, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about changes compared to the previous year, which also affected the economy. Table 1 illustrates how the economic contribution of conferences can be justified for 2020.

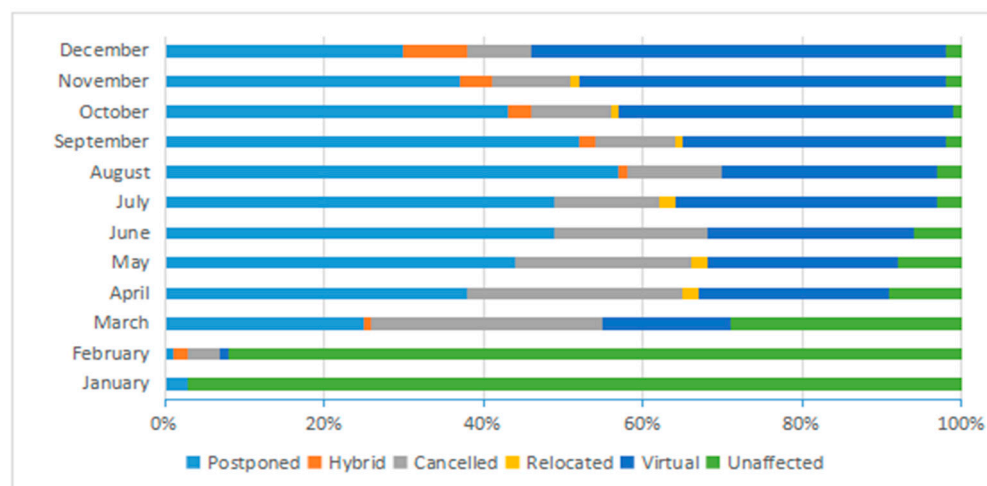


Figure 2. COVID-19 impact on conferences per month rate. Source: UNWTO [14].

Table 1. Potential financial contribution of conferences for 2020.

| | |
|---|---|
| Total Estimated Expenditure 2019 | 13,252 Conferences |
| Loss due to COVID-19 | 4843 fewer conferences compared to the previous year |
| Loss due to canceled conferences | 1211 out of the 8409 planned conferences were canceled |
| Loss due to canceled conferences | 3714 out of 8409 planned conferences postponed until 2021 or later |
| Damage through digital/hybrid conferences | Digital and hybrid conferences have a smaller financial contribution compared to face-to-face conferences. In addition, the registration and participation fee is usually lower |
| Estimated total expenditure 2020 | Unaffected and transferred conferences: 836 |
| | Number of participants in the unaffected and transferred conferences: 418 |
| | Average registration cost for unaffected and transferred conferences: \$571 |
| | Estimated total cost of unaffected and transferred conferences: \$907 M |
| | Digital/hybrid conferences: 2.648 |
| | Average registration cost for digital/hybrid conferences: \$211 |
| | Estimated total cost of digital/hybrid conferences: \$758 |

Source: ICCA [23], the authors' elaboration.

Taking 2019 as a baseline, the table illustrates the decrease in estimated total conference expenditures due to the emergence and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. This decrease was mainly due to the lower number of scheduled conferences, a reduction in spending due to canceled and postponed conferences and the increase in digital and hybrid conferences leading to lower costs for attendees (lower registration fee and not requiring transportation and accommodation). Although the transition to virtual conferences was difficult due to the pandemic, attendees report significant differences between virtual and physical meetings. Some participants claim that they do not experience the same sense of community at virtual conferences; thus, they long for in-person meetings. Virtual conferences, on the other hand, limit the chances for attendees to share personal experiences with one another, which is one of the main advantages of on-site conferences [27].

In restricting on-site conferences, there may be a loss of social connection, personal engagement, networking opportunities and energy. According to Weiniger and Matot [28], the upcoming years will be interesting for conferences. We must learn to appraise future conferences differently than we did the ones that came before since they will not be the same. In conclusion, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the conference sector internationally and domestically. Unfortunately, there is no extensive literature regarding conference tourism exclusively. As can be seen, scholarly articles analyze either

the MICE or the conference market; however, they demonstrate that the current crisis has brought about significant changes in organizing events and conferences, radically changing the way they are conducted as well as the way they are treated by organizers and participants.

2.3. Conference Tourism

According to UNWTO [29], people traveling for business purposes are considered tourists. Business tourism combines leisure with work and includes four subcategories. Conference tourism is one of the subcategories along with exhibition tourism, incentive travel and individual business travel [30]. This has to do with a type of travel that can be defined as people who go to business meetings and events at a common destination [31]. The profile of this category of tourists usually concerns economically strong people with a high level of education [32]. Conferences are meetings that do not require periodicity for their convergence. Although there is no time limit, most of them last 3 days in order to exchange opinions, engage in knowledge transfer and publicize specific issues. The main activities of the participants concern attending parallel educational lectures or events and participating in meetings and discussions [33].

Conference tourism concerns a large percentage of the market while contributing to tourism development and increasing tourist flows. There has been an important increase in the number of meetings, particularly international ones, which were formerly uncommon. Beyond the income from the primary activity, it also produces several benefits in additional fields. In addition, it can prolong the tourism season because of its year-round, season-neutral nature, which allows for year-round planning. Encouraging the growth of the city's or region's infrastructure is another significant consequence. At the same time, MICE tourism-hosting countries and regions receive far quicker and more efficient promotion. Due to these economic activities, international conference tourism is becoming one of the most popular kinds of travel in several countries [34].

Cities and regions can grow their conference tourism industry if the supporting attractions and environmental factors permit. Congress centers and halls, large hotels and other lodging alternatives, infrastructure, conditions, and transportation options, as well as climate and geographic position, are all crucial for the growth of conference tourism [35].

Organizations and associations are actively working to promote conference tourism on a global scale. Their contribution to the industry's growth is especially significant regarding the operational and management part of the conferences and the transmission of know-how. The International Association of Professional Congress Organizers (IAPCO) and the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) meet on an international basis, while the European Federation of the Associations of Professional Congress Organizers (EFAPCO) meets on a European level. The contribution of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is also noteworthy as it has contributed to its development and evolution.

According to Figure 3, Europe has a higher market share of conferences and participants than the rest of the globe. Numerous European capitals and centers have been granted the chance to organize conferences because of their advantageous geographic location. It was the host of 53% of all meetings that were scheduled in 2019. North America and Asia followed, with the latter registering a notable increase [36].

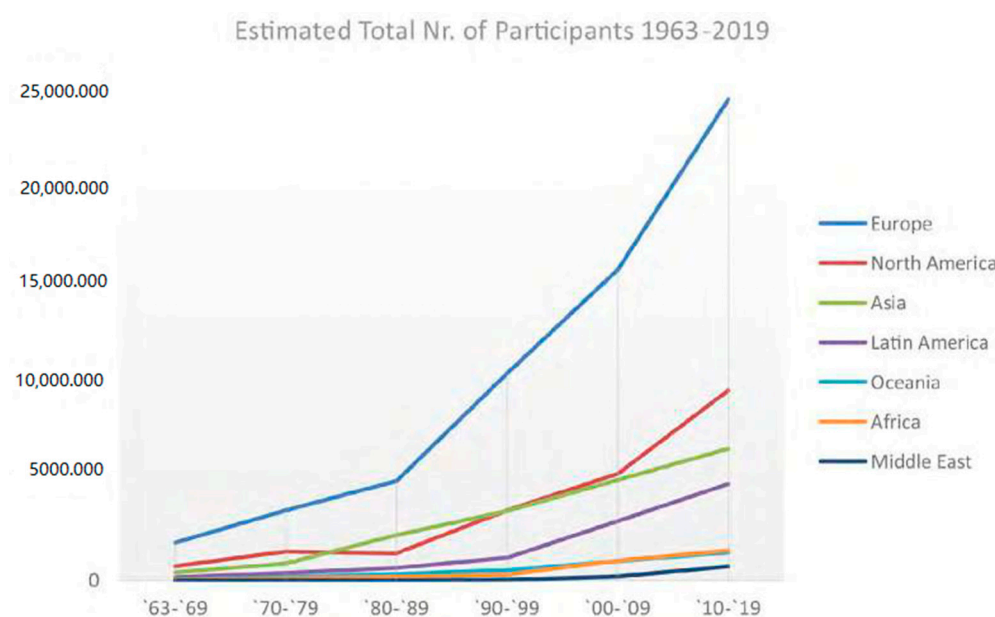


Figure 3. Estimated total number of participants (1963–2019). Source: ICCA [36].

3. Conferences in Greece

3.1. Greece as a Conference Tourism Destination in Brief

Greece has established itself as a 3S destination (Sun Sand and Sea), and as a result, its development is mainly based on mass market models [37]. Conference tourism can be of great benefit to the Greek economy and the brand name of the country [38]. In recent years (apart from the pandemic period), several multinational companies have selected the Greek islands or mainland for their conference and workshops [39]. According to Table 2, income from business travel had been seeing an upward trend until 2019, while since the following year, there has been a sharp decline in all tourism forms due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking into account the data up to 2019, it becomes apparent that the Greek economy is also based on business travel, as the latter provides the second highest income following leisure tourism.

Table 2. Receipts by reason for traveling (in million EUR) between 2015 and 2021.

| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|----------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|--------|----------|
| Personal reasons | 13,343.9 | 12,406.0 | 13,794.5 | 15,216.8 | 17,283.8 | 4004.4 | 10,054.5 |
| Recreation | 11,876.7 | 11,225.9 | 12,558.1 | 13,727.5 | 15,878.9 | 3462.1 | 9201.5 |
| Studies | 170.6 | 175.9 | 226.9 | 194.1 | 264.6 | 51.5 | 100.4 |
| Health reasons | 37.3 | 35.4 | 55.0 | 48.7 | 58.6 | 17.2 | 22.6 |
| Visiting relatives | 553.5 | 696.7 | 719.3 | 991.1 | 806.8 | 394.0 | 611.3 |
| Other reasons | 705.7 | 272.2 | 235.2 | 255.4 | 274.9 | 79.6 | 118.6 |
| Professional reasons | 782.0 | 800.8 | 835.6 | 869.0 | 895.0 | 314.4 | 448.3 |
| TOTAL | 14,125.8 | 13,206.8 | 14,630.1 | 16,085.8 | 18,178.8 | 4318.8 | 10,502.7 |

Source: Bank of Greece [40].

3.2. Ranking at the International and European Levels

The participation of cities in annual exhibitions is particularly important for the establishment and development of conference tourism in cities because conference organizers can identify the potential of destinations [41]. According to the ICCA [42], in the global ranking of countries and cities as conference destinations, Athens was the first city to represent Greece, followed by Thessaloniki. In Table 3, there is a large gap between Athens

and Thessaloniki and the other Greek cities on the list (Rhodes, Heraklion, Chania and Crete) since the difference between the second and the third cities reaches 94 points.

Table 3. Ranking of Greek conference cities at European level for 2019.

| Global/European Level | City | Conferences |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------|
| 17/12 | Athens | 107 |
| 70/39 | Thessaloniki | 39 |
| 267/133 | Rhodes | 10 |
| 332/161 | Heraklion | 7 |
| 377/182 | Chania | 6 |
| 424/204 | Crete | 5 |

Source: ICCA [36], the authors' elaboration.

A brief historical review of the corresponding lists of the past shows that these cities, apart from Rhodes, saw a surge in popularity as conference destinations. More specifically, the number of conferences in Athens in 2013 was 49, with the city occupying the 47th and 24th positions on a global and European level, respectively, while the following year, the number of conferences almost doubled. Similarly, in Thessaloniki, 10 conferences were held in 2013, with the city ranking 219th and 111th, while in 2014, the number of conferences doubled in this case, too. Chania and Crete are at relatively similar levels, while Heraklion first appeared at a global exhibition in 2014, taking the 289th and 143rd position with seven conferences. Finally, 2013 was the best conference year for Rhodes since it placed in the 122nd position on a European level [42,43]. Figure 4 shows the development of the cities mentioned above as conference destinations. The cases of Heraklion and Chania are presented under the wider region name of Crete. As can be seen, the largest gap appears between Athens and the rest of Greek cities, while in 2014, there was a rapid increase in conferences, with a slight decrease in 2017 and a return to the previous levels the following year. Thessaloniki and Rhodes follow a steady course with small fluctuations, while Crete showed an increasing trend until 2016; the following year, there was a drop, and the trend has yet to recover.

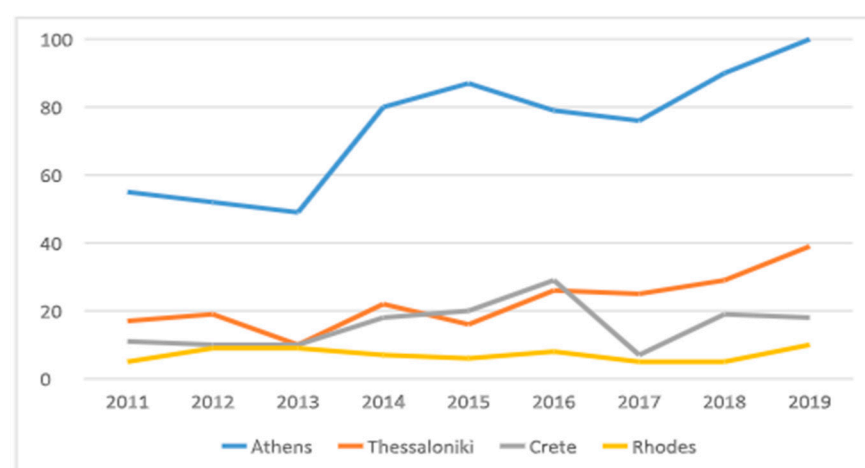


Figure 4. Evolution of four Greek conference cities over time. Source: The authors' elaboration.

Although the country is qualified to establish itself as an international conference destination, this is not reflected in international exhibitions. It is necessary to review the conference tourism policy in order to further develop the institutional and business environment. In addition, improving the infrastructure, especially of conference venues and air transport, is crucial to remove barriers and attract foreign investment [44,45]. The

year 2019 was a successful year for this sector, while the following year saw a sharp decline due to government directives that excluded conferences. Conference and event organizers, hotels, conference centers and business tourism stakeholders found themselves in a period of intense crisis [46].

4. Methodology and Research Questions

4.1. Sampling Hotels

A subset of conference hotels operating in Greece, especially in Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion and Rhodes, were chosen as the sample population for this survey. The selection of these hotels was not random, as it was based on three criteria. The definition of a focus target group was used to determine the number of hotels rather than a sampling procedure to create a “representative” sample. The first was the size of the conference rooms as well as their capacity. The second regarded the frequency of previous experience in conference organization during and after the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. For sample selection, a desk study was conducted about past and future conferences that have taken place or will take place in hotels located in the focus areas [47,48]. Finally, the third one concerned the hotels’ national and international visibility. Regarding the sampling process, the hotels selected belong to a hotel chain or international group (see Table 4). It is argued that hotels managed by a group have established themselves in the hotel industry and have acquired a strong brand name so that consumers feel more secure when staying in one of them, thus gaining greater brand awareness [49,50].

Table 4. Hotels managed by a group.

| Group | Hotel |
|-------------------|--|
| Hilton | Hilton Athens * |
| | Lindian Village Beach Resort Rhodes * |
| Hyatt | Grand Hyatt Athens |
| | Hyatt Regency Thessaloniki |
| | Rodos Park Suites & Spa * |
| Mitsis | Sofitel Athens Airport Hotel |
| | Grand Hotel Beach Hotel |
| Marriott Bonvoy | Athens Marriott Hotel * |
| | King George, A Luxury Collection Hotel * |
| | Sheraton Rhodes Resort |
| Civitel | Civitel Attik |
| | Civitel Olympic |
| Grecotel | Grecotel Cape Sounio, Athens Riviera * |
| | Grecotel Amirandes Crete * |
| Electra | Electra Palace Athens |
| | Electra Metropolis Athens |
| | Electra Hotel Athens |
| | Electra Palace Thessaloniki |
| The Luxury Hotels | Grand Hotel Palace |
| | Makedonia Palace |
| Capsis | Capsis Hotel Thessaloniki |
| | Capsis Astoria Heraklion |

Table 4. *Cont.*

| Group | Hotel |
|----------------|--|
| Cyan Group | Out of the Blue Capsis Elite Resort * |
| | Apollonia Resort & Spa |
| Armony Resorts | Rodos Palladium Leisure & Wellness Hotel |
| | Elysium Resort & Spa |

* The hotels that did not participate in the survey. Source: The authors' elaboration.

This study used an online survey instrument to examine the various hypotheses, and the time period was from February to May 2023. The respondents consisted of event managers and sales executives from a sample of 51 hotels operating in the conference tourism industry in these Greek cities. A total of 27 senior managers overseeing 36 hotels responded to the online survey, which was based on the criteria of work experience and leadership position. This indicates a 70% response rate. To attain a high response rate, hotels that remained unresponsive to the survey were subjected to multiple follow-up sessions.

The aim of this effort was to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on conference hotels and the actions they took to cope with the crisis. For this reason, individuals who are fully aware of the operations of the convention venues before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic were selected. Most of them were working in the hotel before the pandemic occurred, while very few, especially in Heraklion and Rhodes, were newcomers. Table 5 shows the final sample of hotels participating in the survey by study area.

Table 5. Hotels participating in the survey.

| Respondent | Gender | Age | Years in Position | Hotel | Department |
|--------------|--------|-----|-------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Athens | | | | | |
| 1 | Male | 57 | 10 | Athenaeum Intercontinental | Training and Development Executive |
| 2 | Male | 31 | 5 | Grand Hyatt Athens | HR Manager |
| 3 | Female | 39 | 4 | Sofitel Athens Airport Hotel | Event Manager |
| 4 | Male | 54 | 9 | St. George Lycabettus Hotel | Marketing Executive |
| 5 | Female | 51 | 10 | Titania Hotel | Event Manager |
| 6 | Male | 43 | 8 | Civitel Attik | Event Manager |
| 7 | Male | 43 | 8 | Civitel Olympic | Event Manager |
| 8 | Female | 30 | 2 | Electra Palace Athens | Event Manager |
| 9 | Female | 30 | 2 | Electra Metropolis Athens | Event Manager |
| 10 | Female | 30 | 2 | Electra Hotel Athens | Event Manager |
| Thessaloniki | | | | | |
| 11 | Female | 44 | 8 | Grand Hotel Palace | Event Manager |
| 12 | Female | 39 | 7 | Makedonia Palace | Sales Executive |
| 13 | Female | 40 | 2 | Hyatt Regency Thessaloniki | HR Manager |
| 14 | Female | 33 | 5 | Mediterranean Palace | Event Manager |
| 15 | Female | 45 | 17 | Electra Palace Thessaloniki | Sales Executive |
| 16 | Male | 36 | 4 | Capsis Hotel Thessaloniki | Hotel Director Manager |

Table 5. Cont.

| Respondent | Gender | Age | Years in Position | Hotel | Department |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|---|------------------------|
| Heraklion | | | | | |
| 17 | Male | 27 | 2 | Apollonia Resort & Spa | Sales Executive |
| 18 | Male | 54 | 5 | Galaxy Iraklio Hotel | Marketing Executive |
| 19 | Female | 28 | 2 | Aquila Atlantis Hotel | Sales Executive |
| 20 | Female | 44 | 8 | Tui Magic Life Candia Maris | Event Manager |
| 21 | Male | 38 | 6 | Knossos Beach Bungalows & Suites Resort & Spa | Hotel Director Manager |
| 22 | Male | 36 | 4 | Capsis Astoria Heraklion | Hotel Director Manager |
| Rhodes | | | | | |
| 23 | Female | 30 | 1 | Sheraton Rhodes Resort | Event Manager |
| 24 | Male | 51 | 9 | Olympic Palace Resort Hotel & Convention Center | Event Manager |
| 25 | Male | 33 | 3 | Rodos Palladium Leisure & Wellness Hotel | Sales Executive |
| 26 | Female | 28 | 5 | Mitsis Grand Hotel Beach Hotel | Marketing Executive |
| 27 | Male | 33 | 3 | Elysium Resort & Spa | Sales Executive |
| Total | 14 Female-13 Male | Mean: 39 years | Mean: 6 years | | |

Source: The authors' elaboration.

4.2. Research Questions

Questions 1 and 2 are based on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on conferences and conference tourism. According to the literature review, besides the negative impacts, there were also positive ones since instruments were created that facilitated their organization to a large extent. With the development of digital technology, more and more conferences are being held online. The following research questions seek to answer the question of whether digital meetings have replaced or complemented face-to-face meetings.

Q1: To what extent did you organize conferences during the pandemic period, and if so, what form did they take?

Q2: What is the role of new technologies in conferences, and to what extent have they acted as a complementary element or a substitute for face-to-face conferences?

Question 3 focuses on conference venues during the period of restrictions. Unfortunately, no relevant scientific research has been carried out to date regarding their possible utilization, so an attempt is being made to answer it.

Q3: Did you use your conference venues differently?

The following questions (4, 5 and 6) concern the opinion of executives of hotels with conference facilities and focus on the post-COVID-19 period and how the conference industry has been shaped. In addition, they confirm that the pandemic crisis offered several useful conclusions in general and changed the tourism industry to a significant extent.

Q4: Is there now a differentiation in the way you host conferences and the services you offer?

Q5: Is there a demand for hybrid conference infrastructure or practices today?

Q6: What are the lessons from the pandemic that are likely to benefit the conference industry?

4.3. Semi-Structured Interviews

Considering the research questions, the corresponding questionnaire for the semi-structured interviews was formulated. This method of data collection was chosen as it is a widespread way of sharing perceptions, and the semi-structured format is the most common interview technique in qualitative research [51–53]. In addition, the semi-structured method offers flexibility and interaction between the interview participants [54]. To ensure the

clarity of the questions, the research team conducted a pilot study with selected interviews. The two questionnaires used had the same questions based on previous studies' analyses (see Appendix A). Then, individual interviews were held in each hotel. To investigate and exchange data that can be utilized to record the diverse perspectives of informants on the research questions under discussion, remote interviews were employed. The following steps were followed in order to conduct the interviews:

1. Finding contact details of participants through the official websites of the hotels.
2. Sending an email analyzing the purpose of the research and a solemn declaration stating that they have a week to respond if they wish to participate.
3. Telephone call to those who did not respond and a reminder a day before in order to confirm it;
4. Declaration of the data and the responsibilities of the respondents in the hotel;
5. Informing the participants that the conversation is being recorded and will be used in the research exclusively.

The interviews conducted were recorded via the OBS Studio Program and lasted 30–45 min. Most participants were individuals working as event managers in hotels. The reliability of the results is ensured by the fact that the respondents are fully knowledgeable about the operation of conference venues before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them were working in the hotel before the pandemic occurred, while a few of them, mainly in Heraklion and Rhodes, were newcomers. In this study, data collected via a variety of methods were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. Four phases of qualitative data analysis were conducted, with an emphasis on the following:

1. The information gathered was reduced to a more readable form of writing at this point, and the data were transcribed. The information collected was then chosen in accordance with the study's focus and coded to help the researchers classify them;
2. At this step, the authors summarize, sort out the primary elements, focus on the relevant aspects and search for themes and patterns in the field data. At this point, researchers sort the information received from the interviews. Data reduction creates a clear image and makes it easier for researchers to acquire additional data to complete the collection with missing data;
3. To answer the research questions, the summary data are evaluated and clarified;
4. At this stage of the analysis, the researchers make inferences based on the findings of their earlier data analysis process. The findings of qualitative research provide answers to the earlier posed problem questions. In qualitative research, conclusions are supposed to represent new findings that have never been made before.

5. Analysis

RQ1: The largest percentage of respondents explained that during the first lockdown in March 2020, the hotel they were working in remained closed; therefore, no conferences were held, and they focused on the second quarantine period onwards. In particular, R11, working at a big hotel in Thessaloniki, pointed out that, for quite some time, the hotel was closed. "When we started hosting conferences again, we did so in adherence with sanitary protocols announced in government mandates every 2 weeks" (R11).

As is already known, during that period, conference activity suffered a major blow as conference organizers were forced to postpone or even cancel scheduled conferences. As a result, the conference industry was also underperforming during the second lockdown, as no major conferences were held and only a small number of business meetings instead (R1, R6, R7, R25 and R27). In addition, new technologies were adopted by many during this period to maintain this industry and keep in touch with the public. Consequently, in terms of digital and hybrid conferences, there were few hotels that organized exclusively digital ones, while most focused on the second category of conferences with a small number of attendees on the hotel conference premises and the rest of them attending remotely (R2, R12, R13, R14, R18 and R24).

R5, R8, R9, R10, R16 and R22, from smaller hotels in the area, focused on the restrictions in place and pointed out that those conferences that were held at the time were either hybrid or exclusively in-person, considering health protocols. It seems that digital sessions were preferred by larger hotels, while smaller ones wanted to maintain a physical presence (R19).

The number of hotels that did not organize any conferences at all is minimal (R4 and R15), and the number of hotels that organized exclusively digital medical conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic was even smaller (R20). In conclusion, almost all participants argued that even with stringent measures, attempts were made to organize conferences either with little physical presence or exclusively online.

RQ2: The majority of respondents argued that technology and new digital media have greatly enhanced the conference industry as their use was crucial during the period of restrictions. Hybrid participation was a temporary solution to the pandemic crisis, while virtual participation through platforms such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Webx, etc., facilitated conferences (R3, R4, R6, R7, R18 and R19). Therefore, they played a key role given that, at the time, they were the only way to attend certain conferences since physical presence was limited to a minimum. According to the statement of R8 and R9, they were very helpful, especially in terms of international clients or those coming from the periphery, as they could be connected at any time, and this made it easier during the restrictions to host some small events.

Therefore, the role of new technologies has been particularly important because they made reopening this industry possible; otherwise, it would have been quite difficult since no conferences would have been held in recent years (R11 and R12). It was also the belief of many respondents that the new technologies at the conferences acted as a complementary function exclusively in the period when no meetings were allowed, and some digital ones were held in order to keep in touch with the public (R15, R17 and R26). The view of R5 is typical: they pointed out that in the beginning, these tools had a complementary function, but when the market opened again, they became substitutes. Very little was carried out exclusively digitally, and in no way did digital tools replace physical presence.

The above statement is a common assumption of several professionals in the conference industry. The organization of digital events has been the channel of communication between hotels and conferences with the public by offering information through the provision of services (R1 and R13). Moreover, new technologies have upgraded and evolved this tourism product, but they can mainly act as substitutes for face-to-face as they do not have the same economic effect, and people, by nature, seek social contact (R14 and R20).

More specifically, at that time, as is well known, most of the conferences were postponed or canceled, and the idea that some of them could be held even remotely seemed particularly favorable because the sector had already seen significant losses. Specifically, R2, the representative of a hotel in the capital belonging to an international group, wanted to highlight the financial losses that had occurred and, more specifically, stressed that "...although they helped a lot as you save effort and time during the organization phase, from an economic point of view we lost money, because physical presence brought a profit in other categories such as food & beverages".

However, there were also some respondents who claimed that at that time, the hotel they worked in did not use new technologies at all because it was not deemed necessary (R16, R21, R22 and R27). It seems that the highest percentage of hotels that did not offer alternative ways for the public to participate in conferences is found in island regions. In summary, all respondents argued that in a time of crisis such as the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology was a powerful tool for those who wanted to use it and grow, as it provided the opportunity to hold some events and get conference venues up and running again.

RQ3: 66.7% of the respondents answered negatively to this question as they did not use their conference rooms except for internal use and kept them closed to the public either because the hotel was closed or because it was open, but no conferences were organized. Consequently, most of the hotels studied here started to make these spaces available when

conference activity restarted (R3, R4, R5, R8, R9, R10, R11, R12, R14, R15, R16, R17, R21, R22, R25, R26 and R27). In particular, R19 pointed out that even though the financial losses were huge, unfortunately, the conference facilities were not utilized in new ways.

New uses of conference venues were an issue of concern to the scientific community at the time. Some respondents argued that the spaces were used exclusively for the organization of digital and hybrid conferences by the hotel when the necessary equipment was installed, and few participants attended (R8, R9, R10 and R20), while R2, R6, R7 and R24 clearly stated that they used the conference spaces for different events that took place at that time in the hotel, such as weddings and christenings.

Undoubtedly, however, the COVID-19 pandemic became the occasion for further development of the conference product offered by each hotel. A typical example is R18 from a hotel in Heraklion, who pointed out that during the period when the number of conferences organized was quite low as most of them were postponed or canceled, the hotel renovated its conference facilities. More specifically, he said that "...the conference facilities may not have been put to good use at that time, but we managed to upgrade them since they now follow all modern standards and contributed to having a larger clientele".

R23, from the largest convention hotel in Rhodes, also provided a poignant answer, claiming that typically they were operating, but not enough conferences were held as things were so volatile and there was a risk of cancellation of the trips; thus, the clients would not take the chance, even though the hotel offered the facilities, resulting in under-performance of the events section.

In conclusion, according to most participants, conference venues were left unused, which is only justified for the first quarantine period when most hotels were generally closed. Unfortunately, a large percentage of Greek hotels throughout the country failed to otherwise utilize these spaces.

RQ4: The fact is that the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way hotels were run, and, of course, conferences and business meetings were organized. R16 and R22 clearly stated that today's protocols may not be 100% adhered to, but some things have changed a lot compared to the pre-pandemic period, as the priority is now the safety and health of the attendees. Respondent 12 pointed out that today, given that there are no measures, no. But there is certainly a residual effect in terms of the capacity of the rooms, as we now keep a greater distance than normal, which means fewer attendees.

Although it was considered a difficult experience for most people, whether they were involved in the field or were participants, the familiarity with new technologies and the organization of digital and hybrid conferences created new foundations for the conference industry to cope and adapt to the new conditions. Several hotels have invested in technology and made the most of modern digital capabilities (R11, R18 and R24), a fact highlighted by R14 saying, "We now offer the live streaming service that we hadn't have before to people who cannot attend live".

As expected, the new circumstances also brought changes in the demand for conferences, as many saw their clientele change when they adopted digital media and offered remote participation (R23), while some respondents claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic made them change the way they had previously operated and diversified (R2). Due to concerns about distance and protection measures, they focused on a model involving smaller professional meetings that have fewer requirements and audiences (R13).

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that there are hotels that are now operating as they did before the pandemic, and these are found in all four study areas, with a particular concentration in the hotels of the Greek province. More specifically, event managers explained that they have returned to the way of organizing and hosting conferences as they had been doing pre-pandemic (R17, R20, R21, R25 and R27) and some of them provide digital participation only when requested so that the appropriate equipment can be rented (R3, R15 and R26).

In conclusion, the majority of respondents have differentiated the way hotels operate in the conference sector compared to the pre-pandemic period, mainly in terms of distance

and fewer participants, as well as in the adoption of new technologies, especially in the case of hybrid conferences through live streaming services. However, it seems that there are also hotels that either would not organize conferences at that time or would adapt to the new reality but are now operating without restrictions.

RQ5: Due to the new circumstances, there is a trend towards an intermediate form of conference hosting that requires both physical presence and some online participation with the provision of the necessary technology from the hotel's part (R1, R11 and R12). Some event managers who participated in the survey also expressed their opinion on the possible future demand for hybrid conferences (R7 and R19), while R6 mentioned that new technologies are inextricably linked to the future and the sector's development and will certainly complement conferences and events as they are still at an early stage.

However, it seems that today, many clients prefer physical contact and pursue such events, and as a result, the demand for hybrid conferences is on a much smaller scale (R15, R17, R25 and R27). Of course, there are times when hybrid meetings are the only solution, and hotels resort to them in order to meet clients' needs. In island regions, there is often the problem of a lack of direct flights, resulting in some participants attending remotely (R23 and R26). A typical example is R24, a representative of one of the largest hotels with conference facilities in Rhodes, who pointed out that there is a demand, but hybrid arrangements are now being made for countries where the dates are not convenient or there are no direct and frequent flights, for example, from Israel.

Of course, there are also hotels that do not organize hybrid conferences but rent the necessary equipment upon request (R8, R9 and R10) or contact an external partner "...because as a hotel we cannot support it, as the cases are few and far apart" (R5). In addition, in the case of hosting a European or global conference, there is a need for attendees to have face-to-face contact to spread knowledge as opposed to a digital meeting (R2).

On the other hand, in the four study regions, there are cases where no demand for hybrid conferences was observed. Certainly, it seems that some of them, even in the period of severe restrictions, did not offer their clients this possibility as it was not suitable for the resort (R21) or considered it unsuited to their brand identity (R16 and R22). There are also hotels that offered this option during the pandemic but have now reverted to exclusively live conferences (R3, R4, R12 and R20).

In conclusion, it seems that the demand for hybrid conferences is relatively strong in contrast to digital conferences, as people now seek physical contact. In terms of hotels, some are at an early stage, while others have not adopted this category. However, it seems that the hybrid model is something that will be on the minds of managers for some time to come, as sometimes, especially in areas where there are no frequent flights, it is necessary.

RQ6: The COVID-19 pandemic also led to some lessons that were not so obvious in the beginning. According to respondents, these lessons varied but were mainly concerned with digital evolution. The surprise of the pandemic mobilized the existing system to maneuver and immediately respond to new needs by applying new technology methods (R19, R25 and R27 and the use of these methods should also be taken seriously in the case of face-to-face conferences (R6 and R7). For Greek conference tourism, the technology used at that time was adopted by some hotels for the long term (R18). R26 believes that it is a good opportunity to take advantage of the digital era and enter the conference industry like never before. Of course, it was rushed because of the situation, but it could be put into practice and implemented.

In addition, an important lesson was also the flexibility achieved after the use of new technologies as they proved to be useful tools (R14), and there is now greater preparedness in terms of technical coverage, as it is something that was previously absent (R4 and R12). However, some predicted that new technologies would become an integral part of conferences in the future (R20) and that hotels are now better prepared for any future crisis (R5). Of course, the most important lesson was the importance of face-to-face meetings and the need for them as it was something that had been taken for granted until recently (R8,

R9 and R10), while complacency in a particular way of hosting conferences has changed and audiences are more open to any changes that may occur (R15).

All interviewees concluded that the pandemic led to a period of change where some people evolved a little more, but all were asked to follow new rules and adhere to the protective measures required in a health crisis such as this (R1 and R11). Hotel managers may prefer and seek physical presence, but in pandemic situations where conferences and meetings, in general, are allowed under very strict measures, the new technologies adopted were beneficial (R2 and R13).

6. Discussion

Overwhelmingly, representatives of the hotels surveyed claimed that during the first lockdown, they did not organize conferences as the hotel was not operating, and most were scheduled to be held either online or with very few attendees starting from the second lockdown period. Unfortunately, conference facilities during the period of the severe restrictions seem to have been underutilized by hotels in all four study areas except for internal use, and very few of them organized other types of social events (e.g., weddings, christenings), and these were in Athens.

Overall, representatives of hotels with conference facilities recognize the importance of new technologies and how they helped during the pandemic to keep communication going and conference venues up and running again. However, there is a variation in how they are used. More specifically, most of the hotels located in Athens and Thessaloniki, due to both the frequency of organizing conferences (before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic) and their reputation as a large percentage of them belong to a group, adopted the new technologies and offered their audience the possibility to participate hybrid or exclusively remotely.

This does not seem to have been the case in the hotels located in Heraklion and Rhodes, especially in the first case, where the largest percentage of the hotels that participated in the survey organized a few digital or hybrid conferences, and some of them did not organize them at all. In the case of Rhodes, things look a little better as it seems that the hybrid model worked in some hotels, but again, only to a small extent, as there were also those who were waiting for the reopening of the market and the return to normality. Of course, it is worth noting that most hotels in these areas during the lockdown period were closed anyway, as they mainly operate in the summer season. However, when they reopened, they opted for small conferences requiring physical presence.

A common thread among respondents seems to be their opinion on digital technology and whether it has replaced face-to-face meetings. Specifically, digital and hybrid conferences were seen as important tools, especially during the period of severe restrictions, where meetings were greatly reduced but could not replace physical contact beyond that period. Regarding the demand for mainly hybrid conferences by clients, it is considered that there is a tendency to return to the old ways, of course, with the support of technology when necessary.

More specifically, most hotels in Athens and Thessaloniki seem to have returned to the pre-pandemic model and offer live streaming services when requested, either through equipment rental or their own equipment. On the contrary, most of the hotels in Heraklion seem to not offer this service to the public, and many of them never did. Finally, the hotels located in Rhodes argue that clients wish to attend on the hotel premises now, and the demand for hybrid conference infrastructure and practices exists only in cases where it is deemed necessary, such as in the case of a lack of direct flights from certain countries and low frequency of routes. The main lessons learned from this research are the importance of physical contact, because until recently, it was taken for granted, and the benefits associated with the use of new technologies. As it turns out, this is a shared belief of most respondents regardless of the region. A new avenue for the conference industry has been created by several companies that can complement the way they are held and also mobilize alternative ways of communicating.

It is worth noting that the conclusions of the interviews support the findings of the literature review. Based on the findings of the interviews and the previous empirical studies (see Appendix A), it follows that there are no variations in opinion regarding the situation produced by COVID-19. Initially, these Greek cities followed international standards, since in the early days of the pandemic, they canceled/postponed organized conferences and, over time, adopted digital technologies [23]. In Lekgau and Tichaawa's [55] research, it is argued that because of the new daily routine and the changes that were required, the basis for developing and managing the upcoming crises was created. At the same time, the research by Bhargava et al. [56], Woodruff et al. [57] and Grepsiou [58] highlights that the COVID-19 pandemic may have changed the way conferences were organized, but the adoption of new technologies ultimately benefited the scientific community and conference organizers. Moreover, this contribution may be particularly important for the preservation of the industry, but it still serves as a complement to live conferences [59]. Finally, the need to return to the original standards seems to be increasingly intensified [27,28].

7. Conclusions

The emergence of the pandemic affected global health and economy, and strict measures were put in place to limit its spread, as well as support measures to help businesses cope. In addition to the health and economic crisis, society and people's daily lives have been severely affected, particularly regarding meetings. As a result of the pandemic containment and eradication measures, the conference industry was directly affected, as most of it required physical contact with the public. Specifically, this led to the postponement and cancelation of scheduled conferences, suspension of staff and closure of conference facilities.

This survey aimed to collect information regarding this industry and the impact it has suffered due to the unprecedented daily life circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research was conducted directly with the labor market, specifically with the managers of hotels offering conference venues, in order to record the concerns and their transition to the new circumstances through technologies and future crisis management so that proper conclusions can be drawn. It is a fact that the changes occurred in a very short period of time, and the digital era held a key role in this transformation.

Taking into account the findings that emerged through communication with conference hotels in Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion and Rhodes, it was found that the pandemic had several positive and negative impacts. Firstly, the cancelation and postponement of the majority of conferences resulted in significant financial losses. However, it appears that a large percentage of hotels were mobilized during the second lockdown period through alternative forms of conferences in order to rebuild the industry and maintain communication with the public. In addition, few of them waited for the opening of the domestic and international markets to reorganize conferences in the way they had before the pandemic. The conference venues could not be otherwise utilized and remained closed even though the financial losses were already high.

The use of digital technology has contributed to a great extent, as several Greek hotels have taken advantage of it and have been able to grow. However, hybrid and digital participation seems to have been a temporary solution for that time, as the public and organizers prefer face-to-face meetings, while the other forms are preferred in case of an emergency or a crisis like this. Therefore, digital and hybrid conferences are mainly complementary rather than substitutes. As a whole, Greek hotels, since there are no measures in place, have returned to the old way of organizing conferences; however, a large percentage also provides live streaming services and uses them upon request. The lessons that the pandemic has offered, besides the introduction of technology, as it was something that was not used until recently, is the preparedness of the industry and the public, as they are now more prepared for changes that may occur.

However, Greece is a country that suffers from tourist seasonality, as most tourists prefer to visit it during the summer months. In addition, a strong need to extend the tourist

season seems to be faced, especially in Greek islands. It is still worrying that in the cases of Rhodes and Heraklion, no significant efforts have been made to adopt digital technology. These destinations have established themselves in the international and domestic markets as conference destinations. It would be advisable to adopt new technologies in order to organize digital or hybrid events during low season periods in order to increase the consumer base, introduce profits and extend the tourist season. By making the way Greek hotels managed the crisis public, the present research could serve as a background case for other countries, especially in the Mediterranean.

Finally, the largest percentage of hotels in Athens and Thessaloniki claimed that they have the necessary equipment or rent it from partners for organizing digital conferences, though they do not promote them due to lower profits. As already known, during the pandemic period, the economic losses were significant in this sector and in tourism in general. On the other hand, the hotels that claimed to offer live streaming services and to promote them have seen an increase in their consumer base. It would be useful to use the equipment in conjunction with the existing conferences taking place in the hotel rooms.

8. Further Research

However, it would be appropriate for this study to conclude with some suggestions for future research. It would be interesting to analyze the impact of the Greek Convention Bureaus using questionnaires in order to study the way in which the current crisis is being managed and the adoption of new technologies.

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Appendix A. Previous Empirical Studies

| Studies | Purpose | Sample and Country | Data and Methods |
|--------------------------|---|--|---|
| Lekgau and Tichaawa [55] | Examination of MICE tourism policies and strategies implemented in South Africa following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic | 29 representatives in South Africa | Primary research 29 semi-structured interviews in 3 target groups Secondary research Policies and strategies |
| Bhargava et al. [56] | Benefits of digital conferences and webinars in the dermatology sector following the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic | 773 dermatologists from around the world | Primary research Questionnaires and Statistical analysis using Statata 15.1 |
| Woodruff et al. [57] | Negative effects of digital conferences | Survey of doctors participating in conferences | Data derived from Twitter using analytics |

| Studies | Purpose | Sample and Country | Data and Methods |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Grepsiou [58] | Use of technological media in conference tourism in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic | 61 business executives in the conference industry in Greece | Primary research Questionnaires and Statistical analysis using SPSS Secondary research Articles, journals and books |
| Galata [59] | Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Greek conference tourism | 6 leaders of conference tourism in Athens | Primary research 6 semi-structured interviews Secondary research Articles, reports and books |
| Rwigema [60] | The socio-behavioral effects of COVID-19 on the Rwandan MICE market | 34 hotels in Kigali Province | Primary research Questionnaires and statistical analysis using SPSS Secondary research Articles, journals and statistical analysis |
| Ho and Sia [61] | MICE tourism in Malaysia and future trends | 10 hotels in Malaysia | Primary research 10 semi-structured interviews Secondary research Policy, strategic and statistical analyses |
| Disimulacion [62] | Opportunities and challenges of MICE tourism in the Philippines after the COVID-19 pandemic | 8 MICE tourism specialists in the Philippines | Primary research 8 semi-structured interviews Secondary research Articles, reports and online conferences presented in March–April 2020 |
| Palrão et al. [63] | Analysis of the measures implemented by the Government of Portugal in the field of events in response to the pandemic | 165 representatives of Portugal | Primary research Questionnaires to 4 target groups Secondary research Policies and strategies |

Source: The authors' elaboration.

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