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Strategic Crisis Response in Tourism: The Role of Location and Marketing Activities

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing frequency and depth of crisis shocks, the analysis of factors that determine the recovery of tourism industry enterprises across various institutional contexts is becoming particularly relevant. The purpose of the study is to assess the impact of geographical location and marketing activities on anti-crisis adaptation and revenue dynamics of tourism organizations, and to analyze the relationship between operational changes and marketing strategies during the crisis. The research methodology is based on structural equation modeling (hereinafter – SEM), which enables simultaneous assessment of direct, indirect, and moderating effects among key variables. The empirical base of the study includes data from a survey of 342 tourism organizations from 40 countries, including 187 companies registered in Kazakhstan (54.7%) and 155 companies from other countries (45.3%). The data were collected in 2025 using a questionnaire and cover marketing activities, operational changes, crisis challenges, geographical location, and a subjective assessment of the crisis's impact on revenue. The results of the study showed that geographical location is the only statistically significant predictor of revenue changes ($\beta = -0.157$; $p = 0.004$): companies operating in Kazakhstan, on average, demonstrated higher revenue indicators compared with organizations from other countries. Marketing activities proved to be the strongest factor influencing the implementation of operational changes ($\beta = 0.385$; $p < 0.001$). The results indicate the need to develop context-specific anti-crisis strategies and confirm the role of marketing activities as a key driver of organizational adaptability, rather than as a direct source of financial recovery.

KEYWORDS: Economy, Tourism Economy, Marketing, Marketing Activity, Strategic Management, Crisis Management, Moderation Analysis, Structural Modeling

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Стратегическое реагирование на кризис в туризме: влияние географического контекста и маркетинговой активности

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АННОТАЦИЯ

В условиях роста частоты и глубины кризисных потрясений особую актуальность приобретает анализ факторов, определяющих восстановление предприятий туристской отрасли в различных институциональных контекстах. Целью исследования является оценка влияния географического положения и маркетинговых активностей на антикризисную адаптацию и динамику выручки туристских организаций, а также анализ взаимосвязи между операционными изменениями и маркетинговыми стратегиями в период кризиса. Методология исследования основана на применении структурного моделирования (далее – SEM), позволяющего одновременно оценить прямые, косвенные и модерационные эффекты между ключевыми переменными. Эмпирическая база исследования включает данные опроса 342 туристских организаций из 40 стран, в том числе 187 компаний, зарегистрированных в Казахстане (54,7%), и 155 компаний из других стран (45,3%). Данные были собраны в 2025 году с использованием анкетирования и охватывают маркетинговые активности, операционные изменения, кризисные вызовы, географическое положение и субъективную оценку влияния кризиса на выручку. Результаты исследования показали, что географическое положение является единственным статистически значимым предиктором изменения выручки ($\beta = -0{,}157$; $p = 0{,}004$): компании, функционирующие в Казахстане, в среднем демонстрировали более высокие показатели выручки по сравнению с организациями из других стран. Маркетинговые активности оказались наиболее сильным фактором, влияющим на реализацию операционных изменений ($\beta = 0{,}385$; $p < 0{,}001$). Полученные результаты указывают на необходимость разработки контекстно-специфичных антикризисных стратегий и подтверждают роль маркетинговых активностей, как ключевого фактора организационной адаптивности, а не прямого источника финансового восстановления.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: экономика, экономика туризма, маркетинг, маркетинговая деятельность, стратегический менеджмент, антикризисное управление, модерационный анализ, структурное моделирование

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INTRODUCTION

The global business landscape has been marked by increasing uncertainty and crisis events that challenge firms' resilience and adaptability (Wenzel et al., 2020). From financial crises to pandemics, organizations face unprecedented disruptions requiring rapid strategic responses (Herbane, 2010). In the tourism sector specifically, crises have become more frequent and severe, affecting firms of all sizes and across diverse geographic contexts. While existing research emphasizes the importance of operational changes and marketing strategies during crises (Srinivasan et al., 2005), limited attention has been paid to how these factors interact and whether their effectiveness varies across geographic contexts. Moreover, most crisis management research treats geographic location as a mere control variable rather than examining it as a substantive predictor of crisis outcomes.

The economic stakes of understanding crisis recovery in tourism are substantial. Tourism contributes approximately 10% of global GDP and supports approximately one in ten jobs worldwide (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a combined loss of US$2.1 trillion in tourism export revenues between 2020 and 2021, with international tourist arrivals declining by 72% in 2020 and 71% in 2021 compared to 2019 (World Tourism Organization, 2023). For transition economies such as Kazakhstan, where tourism has been identified as a strategic diversification priority to reduce dependence on oil, these losses were particularly consequential—Kazakhstan's tourism sector. Despite the magnitude of these economic impacts, empirical research on the drivers of recovery in tourism firms, particularly in emerging and transition economies, remains limited. Most existing studies focus on developed Western markets, leaving a significant gap in understanding how firms in different institutional contexts respond to and recover from crises.

Kazakhstan presents a particularly valuable research context for several reasons. As Central Asia's largest economy and a key node in China's Belt and Road Initiative, Kazakhstan occupies a strategic position in regional tourism flows. In addition, as a transition economy, Kazakhstan exhibits institutional characteristics, including evolving regulatory frameworks, developing market infrastructure, and varying levels of government support, that differ substantially from those of both developed Western markets and other emerging economies. These institutional differences may fundamentally shape how firms respond to crises and whether standard crisis management prescriptions apply. Kazakhstan's tourism sector comprises a mix of domestic operators and international chains, providing variation in organizational capabilities and strategic orientations. Understanding whether crisis recovery patterns differ between Kazakhstan and other countries can inform both theory development regarding institutional contingencies and practical guidance for managers operating across diverse contexts.

Despite extensive research on crisis management, critical gaps remain that limit both theoretical understanding and practical guidance. The role of geographic location in shaping crisis recovery outcomes remains underexplored. While institutional theory suggests that the effectiveness of organizational strategies depends on contextual factors (Scott, 1995), location is rarely examined as a substantive predictor. This gap is consequential: if location systematically affects recovery outcomes, then crisis management prescriptions developed in one context may be ineffective or even counterproductive in another, potentially leading to misallocated resources and prolonged recovery periods. The interactive effects between operational changes and marketing activities during crises are poorly understood. Firms facing crises must decide how to allocate scarce resources between operational restructuring and marketing initiatives, yet most studies examine these strategies in isolation rather than investigating their potential complementarities or substitution effects. Without understanding how these strategies interact, managers lack evidence-based guidance for resource allocation decisions that could mean the difference between firm survival and failure.

This study makes three contributions to the crisis management literature. By examining location as a focal predictor rather than a control variable, the study provides empirical evidence on whether geographic context, specifically operating in a transition economy like Kazakhstan, systematically affects crisis recovery outcomes. This contributes to institutional theory by testing whether context-specific advantages shape firm performance during environmental discontinuities. Next, by testing the interaction between marketing activities and opera-

tional changes, the study contributes to the strategic complementarities literature by examining whether these crisis responses function as complements (mutually reinforcing) or as independent levers. Further, by examining marketing activities as predictors of operational change implementation, the study contributes to the organizational adaptation literature by identifying antecedents of firm responsiveness during crises.

Using data from 342 tourism organizations across 40 countries, this study employs structural equation modeling to test hypotheses about the relationships between challenges, operational changes, marketing activities, location, and revenue outcomes. The analysis reveals that location is a significant predictor of revenue impact, with Kazakhstan-based firms demonstrating systematically different outcomes compared to firms in other countries. Additionally, marketing activities emerge as strong predictors of organizational adaptation. These findings challenge conventional wisdom about crisis response strategies and highlight the importance of geographic context in shaping crisis management effectiveness.

This study addresses two research questions with direct implications for both theory and practice:

RQ1: Does geographic location (Kazakhstan versus other countries) significantly predict revenue recovery outcomes during crisis periods, controlling for firm strategies and crisis severity?

RQ2: Do marketing activities moderate the relationship between operational changes and revenue impact, that is, are operational changes more effective when accompanied by strong marketing activities?

These questions are important because their answers determine whether crisis management guidance should be context-specific or universal (RQ1) and whether firms should pursue integrated or independent approaches to operational and marketing responses (RQ2).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation of this research draws on three interconnected streams of literature: crisis management and organizational adaptation; marketing capabilities and their role in crisis contexts; and institutional theory regarding geographic context. This review synthesizes existing knowledge on these themes to develop testable hypotheses regarding the relationships among challenges, operational changes, marketing activities, location, and revenue outcomes.

Despite the substantial economic importance of crisis management in tourism, significant gaps remain in empirical research that limit evidence-based decision-making (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). While studies document that firms implement operational changes during crises, particularly in tourism SMEs during the COVID-19 period , evidence on whether these changes actually improve financial outcomes is mixed and often contradictory (Kukanja et al., 2022). Some research reports positive effects of operational adaptation on firm performance, while other studies find null or even negative effects, leaving practitioners without clear guidance on the economic returns to operational restructuring (Wenzel et al., 2020; Reeves et al., 2020). Research on marketing during economic downturns has focused predominantly on large firms in developed markets, with limited evidence on whether findings generalize to small and medium-sized enterprises in emerging economies, despite SMEs comprising the majority of tourism firms globally and facing the most severe resource constraints during crises. Most critically, the economic literature has not systematically examined whether crisis management strategies that prove effective in one geographic context transfer to others. If location-specific factors moderate strategy effectiveness, then the substantial investments firms make in crisis response may yield fundamentally different returns depending on where they operate – a possibility with significant implications for resource allocation but minimal empirical investigation to date.

Research on organizational crisis response provides the first theoretical pillar for this study. During crisis periods, firms typically implement operational changes to adapt to new market conditions (Kovoor-Misra et al., 2001). These changes may include updating crisis management models, revising marketing strategies, and exploring new markets (Herbane, 2010; Lai et al., 2016). Prior research suggests that organizational agility – the ability to reconfigure operations rapidly – is critical for crisis survival (Teece et al., 2016). Dynamic capabilities theory posits that firms' ability to sense, seize, and reconfigure resources determines competitive advantage in turbulent environments (Teece, 2007).

However, the effectiveness of operational chang-

es during crises remains contested. While some studies report positive effects of operational adaptation (Wenzel et al., 2020), others suggest that reactive changes may be poorly planned or executed, resulting in minimal or even negative outcomes (Reeves et al., 2020). Research on organizational change indicates that 70% of change initiatives fail (Burnes, 2004), often due to implementation challenges, resource constraints, or poor strategic fit (Kotter, 1995). The study proposes that the mere implementation of operational changes is insufficient; rather, these changes must be supported by complementary strategic initiatives.

Marketing activities during crises serve multiple functions: maintaining customer relationships, communicating value propositions, and identifying new market opportunities. Marketing literature emphasizes both defensive strategies (retaining existing customers, maintaining brand equity) and offensive strategies (acquiring new customers, expanding into new segments) during downturns (Steenkamp & Fang, 2011). Beyond direct revenue generation, marketing activities may also serve an enabling function by facilitating the effectiveness of other strategic initiatives (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005).

Study draws on marketing capabilities literature to propose that marketing activities moderate the relationship between operational changes and revenue impact. Specifically, marketing capabilities including market sensing, customer relationship management, and brand management (Vorhies et al., 2009) may help firms communicate changes to stakeholders, identify which operational changes will resonate with customers, and create market conditions favorable to new operational approaches. This suggests an interactive, rather than additive, relationship between marketing and operational strategies.

The gap in understanding how marketing and operational strategies interact has direct economic consequences. Firms facing crises must allocate scarce resources between operational restructuring (e.g., exploring new markets, updating business models) and marketing initiatives (e.g., customer retention, digital promotion). If these strategies are complementary, meaning operational changes are more effective when combined with marketing, then firms that cut marketing budgets to fund operations may inadvertently undermine their recovery. Conversely, if strategies operate independently, firms can allocate resources based on expected individual returns. Current research provides insufficient evidence to guide these allocation decisions. Testing the interaction between marketing activities and operational changes addresses this gap directly:

H1: Marketing activities moderate the relationship between operational changes and revenue impact, such that operational changes are more effective when marketing activities are stronger.

Drawing on institutional theory (Scott, 1995) and international business literature (Buckley & Ghauri, 2004; Khanna & Palepu, 2010), the study argues that geographic location may fundamentally shape the effectiveness of crisis response. Geographic location encompasses multiple dimensions, including market maturity, competitive intensity, regulatory environment, and broader economic conditions (Meyer & Peng, 2016). Despite its multidimensional nature, location is often treated as merely a control variable in strategy research.

Kazakhstan, a transition economy with unique institutional and market characteristics, provides an interesting contrast to more developed markets. Research on emerging markets suggests that institutional contexts significantly affect firm strategy and performance (Wright et al., 2005). Differences in competitive intensity, government support, market expectations, and crisis severity may all contribute to divergent outcomes between Kazakhstan and other countries (Urdabaev & Utkelbay, 2011). The failure to examine location as a substantive predictor has practical economic implications. Crisis management prescriptions such as recommendations to invest in marketing, diversify offerings, or restructure operations are often presented as universal best practices. However, evidence from logistics and distribution sectors indicates that the performance effects of managerial practices, particularly those related to knowledge management and innovation are highly contingent on institutional and market contexts (Karácsony et al., 2025). For firms operating across multiple markets, understanding location effects is essential for tailoring crisis responses rather than applying uniform strategies. Moreover, for policymakers in transition economies such as Kazakhstan, evidence on whether local firms exhibit systematically different recovery trajectories can inform the design of support programs. Despite these stakes, location remains underexplored as a focal variable. Testing whether Kazakhstan-based firms exhibit outcomes different from those of firms elsewhere addresses this gap.

H2: Location significantly influences revenue impact, with systematic differences between Kazakhstan-based firms and those in other countries.

Beyond their moderating role, marketing activities may directly influence organizational adaptation. Marketing-oriented firms tend to be more externally focused, customer-centric, and information-rich – characteristics that facilitate adaptive responses to environmental changes (Day, 2011). The market orientation literature establishes that firms with strong, market-sensing capabilities are better positioned to anticipate and respond to market changes (Narver & Slater, 1990).

Marketing capabilities provide organizations with crucial information about customer needs, competitive dynamics, and market opportunities. This information richness enables firms to identify which operational changes are necessary and how to implement them effectively (Sinkula et al., 1997). Additionally, marketing-oriented firms often possess stronger communication capabilities and stakeholder management skills, facilitating change implementation (Varadarajan, 2010). Firms with strong marketing capabilities are better positioned to recognize the need for operational changes and to implement them effectively, particularly in competitive market environments where adaptive conduct shapes performance outcomes (Nurhilalia, Aditya, 2019).

Understanding what drives organizational adaptation during crises has direct implications for crisis preparedness. If marketing orientation predicts whether firms implement operational changes, then investments in marketing capabilities prior to crises may enhance organizational agility when disruptions occur. This has economic implications for both individual firms (suggesting where to invest pre-crisis) and policymakers (suggesting which firm characteristics predict adaptive capacity). However, while the market orientation literature establishes links between marketing capabilities and general firm performance, the specific relationship between marketing activities and crisis-period operational adaptation has not been empirically tested. Establishing this relationship addresses a gap in understanding the antecedents of crisis responsiveness:

H3: Marketing activities positively predict the implementation of operational changes.

In summary, this literature review identifies three key gaps that the current study addresses. While crisis management research acknowledges contextual factors, geographic location remains underexplored as a substantive predictor rather than a control variable. Hypothesis 2 directly addresses this gap by examining whether Kazakhstan-based firms demonstrate systematically different crisis outcomes. Next, the interactive effects between marketing and operational strategies during crises have received insufficient attention; most studies treat these as independent, additive factors. Hypothesis 1 addresses this gap by testing whether marketing activities enable operational changes to be more effective. Finally, while marketing orientation is associated with adaptive capabilities, its role in predicting crisis-period operational changes has not been empirically established. Hypothesis 3 addresses this gap by examining whether marketing activities predict the implementation of operational changes. Together, these hypotheses contribute to a more nuanced understanding of crisis management that accounts for strategic interactions and geographic context.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from tourism organizations through three channels: face-to-face questionnaires administered to Kazakhstani and international exhibitors at the "Tourism and Travel 2025" international exhibition in Almaty, Kazakhstan (April 23–25, 2025); electronic surveys distributed via email to tourism agencies and hotels identified through online industry directories; and direct visits to tourism agencies in Almaty. Survey-based research remains an appropriate approach for examining organizational responses across multiple contexts (Brewer et al., 2016). Survey invitations were distributed to approximately 3150 firms, yielding 342 usable responses (response rate: 10.9%), comparable to other survey-based crisis management research in the tourism sector (Kukanja et al., 2022). The final sample comprised 342 firms distributed as follows: Kazakhstan (n=187, 54.7%) and Other Countries (n=155, 45.3%), spanning 39 additional countries, including CIS countries and various European and Asian nations. All measurement items were drawn from Kukanja et al. (2022) and modified to reflect the COVID-19 context. To ensure accessibility across diverse respondents, the survey was made available in English, Kazakh, and Russian.

Marketing Activities were measured using a

10-item composite scale assessing various marketing initiatives, including targeting new customers, developing new offerings, enlarging campaigns, offering discounts, enhancing customer loyalty programs, adopting digital tools, utilizing social media, increasing marketing budgets, monitoring competitors, and improving quality. Respondents rated each activity on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = to a great extent). The composite was computed as the mean across all items, consistent with reflective measurement models.

Challenges were measured by counting four crisis-related difficulties: cash-flow problems, employee absenteeism, partner/supplier issues, and demand fluctuations. Count measures are appropriate for capturing the cumulative burden or breadth of responses when each additional item represents a distinct, additive contribution (Bollen & Lennox, 1991). Operational Changes were measured using three adaptive responses: increasing crisis-response models, updating marketing strategies, and exploring new markets. Count measures capture the breadth of organizational responses.

(1) Revenue Impact: Respondents rated their firms' revenue impact during the crisis period on a 4-point scale (1 = severe negative impact, 4 = positive impact). The use of a single-item subjective measure for revenue impact represents a methodological limitation that warrants explicit acknowledgment. While single-item measures can demonstrate acceptable validity for concrete, unambiguous constructs (Bergkvist & Rossiter, 2007), the ordinal nature of this measure and its reliance on subjective assessment rather than objective financial data constrain the precision of revenue-related findings. Practical constraints necessitated this measurement approach: collecting objective financial data from 342 firms across 40 countries was not feasible, and many small tourism enterprises lack formal financial reporting systems. However, readers should interpret findings on revenue impact with appropriate caution, recognizing that more precise measurement using objective financial indicators (e.g., actual revenue changes, profit margins) would strengthen confidence in revenue-related conclusions. This limitation is discussed further in the Limitations section.

(2) Location: Location was coded as 1 = Kazakhstan, 2 = Other countries. Location was operationalized as a binary variable, given the study's focus on Kazakhstan-specific crisis dynamics. While this operationalization has limitations in capturing heterogeneity within the "Other countries" category, which encompasses diverse institutional, economic, and competitive contexts, it aligns with the research objective of examining whether Kazakh firms exhibit distinct crisis-response patterns. The binary coding was also pragmatically driven by sample size considerations for more granular geographic analyses.

The study employed structural equation modeling (hereinafter – SEM) using lavaan in R (Rosseel, 2012) to test the hypotheses. SEM offers several advantages over traditional regression approaches for this research. First, SEM enables simultaneous estimation of multiple dependent relationships, which is crucial given that operational changes serve as both outcomes (predicted by challenges and marketing activities) and predictors (of revenue impact). Second, SEM provides a comprehensive assessment of model fit through multiple indices, offering diagnostic information on overall model adequacy. Third, SEM facilitates testing of complex moderation effects while accounting for the full pattern of relationships in the theoretical model.

Model was specified, including:

(1) Main effects of challenges, operational changes, and marketing activities on revenue impact;

(2) Interaction terms (challenges × MA, operational changes × MA) to test moderation;

(3) Location as a predictor of both revenue impact and operational changes;

(4) A path from challenges to operational changes to test for adaptation processes.

Marketing activities were mean-centered before creating interaction terms to facilitate interpretation and reduce multicollinearity. The model included 11 parameters and was estimated using maximum likelihood, which provides efficient and unbiased estimates under normality assumptions.

Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices following recommendations by Hu and Bentler (1999) and Kline (2015): Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.95), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI > 0.95), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < 0.08), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR < 0.08). Both unstandardized and standardized coefficients were reported, as recommended by Hayes (2013).

RESULTS

The structural equation model demonstrated acceptable fit to the data: CFI = 0.966, SRMR = 0.012, RMSEA = 0.086 (90% CI: 0.024–0.159), χ^2 (2) =

7.081, p = 0.029. The CFI and SRMR values exceeded conventional thresholds for good fit, while RMSEA was slightly above the ideal threshold but within an acceptable range. The model explained 33.7% of the variance in operational changes (R^2 = 0.337), indicating substantial predictive power for this outcome. However, the model explained only 3.7% of the variance in revenue impact (R^2 = 0.037). This low R^2 warrants explicit attention.

Methodological guidelines suggest that in social science research, R^2 values below 0.10 (10%) are generally acceptable only when key predictors are statistically significant. For the revenue impact outcome, the current model fails to meet either criterion: R^2 is well below 0.10, and most predictors of revenue impact do not meet conventional significance thresholds (p < 0.05). Accordingly, findings regarding the revenue impact should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive, and the theoretical framework should be understood as identifying potential factors rather than as a predictive model. Table 1 presents the results of hypothesis testing.

Table 1. Structural equation model results

Path	Estimate	SE	z-value	p-value	Std. β
Revenue Impact					
Challenges → Revenue	0.009	0.050	0.177	0.859	0.011
OpChanges → Revenue	-0.014	0.055	-0.260	0.795	-0.017
MA → Revenue	-0.223	0.123	-1.816	0.069†	-0.170
Challenges × MA → Revenue	-0.030	0.080	-0.373	0.709	-0.035
OpChanges × MA → Revenue	0.141	0.085	1.653	0.098†	0.183
Location → Revenue	-0.272	0.094	-2.890	0.004*	-0.157
Operational Changes					
Challenges → OpChanges	0.336	0.044	7.558	<0.001*	0.348
MA → OpChanges	0.594	0.071	8.408	<0.001*	0.385
Location → OpChanges	0.010	0.092	0.109	0.913	0.005
*p < 0.10, *p < 0.05					

Note: compiled by the authors

The summarized results of the verification of the hypotheses put forward in the study are presented below. For each hypothesis, theoretical expectations are compared with the empirical estimates obtained, which makes it possible to assess the degree of their confirmation. Special attention is paid to the direction and statistical significance of the identified effects. This format of presentation of the results ensures the visibility and logical coherence of the analysis. A summary of the hypothesis testing results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Prediction	Result	Verdict
H1	Marketing activities moderate the relationship between operational changes and revenue impact	β = 0.183, p = 0.098	Not supported (p > 0.05)
H2	Location significantly influences revenue impact	β = -0.157, p = 0.004	Supported
H3	Marketing activities positively predict operational changes	β = 0.385, p < 0.001	Supported

Note: compiled by the authors

Hypothesis 2 predicted that location would significantly influence revenue impact. This hypothesis was supported (β = -0.157, p = 0.004). Location was the only statistically significant predictor of revenue impact in the model. Because location was coded as 1 = Kazakhstan and 2 = Other countries, the negative coefficient indicates that Kazakhstan-based firms reported a greater revenue impact than firms in other countries. Specifically, Kazakhstan firms scored 0.272 points higher on the 4-point revenue impact scale, representing approximately 0.16 standard deviations. Location did not significantly predict operational changes (β = 0.005, p = 0.913), indicating that firms in both Kazakhstan and other countries implemented similar levels of operational adaptation.

Hypothesis 1 posited that marketing activities would moderate the relationship between operational changes and the impact on revenue. This hypothesis was not supported at conventional significance levels. The interaction term (Operational Changes × MA) did not reach statistical significance (β = 0.183, p = 0.098). Because the p-value of 0.098 exceeds the conventional threshold of 0.05, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. The evidence for moderation is insufficient to draw firm conclusions. While the direction of the coefficient is consistent with the hypothesized relationship, readers should not interpret this as support for the hypothesis. For a more detailed interpretation of the direction of interaction, simple slopes were analyzed at different levels of marketing activity (average value and ±1 standard deviation). The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Conditional effects of operational changes on revenue at different marketing activity levels

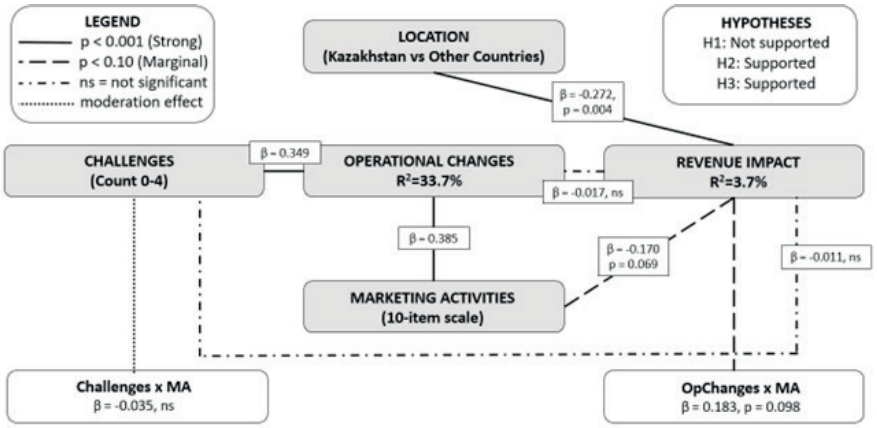
MA Level	Effect	SE	p-value
Low MA (-1 SD)	-0.155	0.101	0.127
Mean MA (0 SD)	-0.014	0.055	0.795
High MA (+1 SD)	0.126	0.101	0.214

Note: compiled by the authors

None of the simple slopes reached statistical significance. The pattern suggests that the relationship between operational changes and revenue may shift from negative at low levels of marketing activity to positive at high levels of marketing activity; however, this pattern requires replication with larger samples before substantive interpretation. The interaction between challenges and marketing activities was not significant (β = −0.035, p = 0.709). Consistent with these findings, the indirect effect of challenges on revenue through operational changes was not significant (β = −0.006, p = 0.795), as operational changes did not significantly predict revenue impact.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that marketing activities would positively predict operational changes, and this hypothesis was strongly supported. Marketing activities emerged as the strongest predictor of operational changes (β = 0.385, p <0.001): for every one-unit increase in marketing activities, firms implemented 0.594 additional operational changes. Challenges also significantly predicted operational changes (β = 0.348, p <0.001), indicating that firms experiencing greater crisis-related difficulties were more likely to undertake adaptive responses. In summary, the results provide strong support for H2 (location effect) and H3 (marketing activities predict operational changes), no support for H1 (moderation) at conventional significance levels, limited explanatory power for revenue impact (R^2 = 0.037), and substantial explanatory power for operational changes (R^2 = 0.337).

Figure 1 presents the path diagram with standardized coefficients.



Notes: N = 342 firms, CFI = 0.966, RMSEA = 0.086, SRMR = 0.012

Figure 1. Crisis recovery conceptual map

The diagram clearly reflects the structure of the verified model and the main identified relationships between the variables. A key role is assigned to marketing activities as a factor contributing to the implementation of operational changes in the context of the crisis. At the same time, the direct impact of operational changes on financial results has not been statistically supported, which highlights the limited explanatory power of the model in relation to revenue indicators. A significant result is the significant impact of geographical location on revenue dynamics, which confirms the importance of the institutional context. Taken together, the visualized relationships demonstrate that the crisis adaptation of firms is more determined by factors of context and adaptive ability than by individual strategic actions.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how location and marketing activities influence firms' crisis recovery in the tourism sector. The results provide strong support for two hypotheses and no support for a third, while also revealing important limitations in explaining revenue outcomes.

The most robust finding concerns the role of geographic location. Kazakhstan-based firms demonstrated a significantly greater revenue impact than firms in other countries ($\beta = -0.157$, $p = 0.004$), even after controlling for strategic responses and the challenges faced. This finding challenges the common practice of treating location as a mere control variable and suggests that geographic context fundamentally shapes crisis recovery trajectories. This aligns with institutional theory's emphasis on context shaping organizational actions and outcomes (Scott, 1995) and contributes to the internationalization literature by demonstrating that location may be a first-order consideration in understanding crisis response effectiveness (Meyer & Peng, 2016).

Several mechanisms may explain the Kazakhstan advantage. As a transition economy, Kazakhstan may offer opportunities unavailable in mature markets: lower competitive intensity, underserved customer segments, and greater potential for market-share gains (Khanna & Palepu, 2010). Government support programs and institutional factors specific to Kazakhstan may have mitigated the severity of the crisis. Different baseline expectations in transition versus developed economies may shape how the impact of revenue is perceived and reported. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the binary operationalization of location (Kazakhstan vs. Other countries) represents a significant limitation. The "Other countries" category collapses highly diverse institutional environments, including developed Western European markets, CIS countries, and Asian economies, into a single comparison group. This heterogeneity makes it difficult to pinpoint precisely which contextual factors drive the observed effect. The Kazakhstan advantage may reflect characteristics of a transition economy, specific government policies, cultural factors, competitive dynamics, or some combination thereof.

The second well-supported finding concerns marketing activities as drivers of organizational adaptation. Firms with stronger marketing activities were substantially more likely to implement operational changes ($\beta = 0.385$, $p < 0.001$), with the model accounting for 33.7% of the variance in operational changes. This finding contributes to the market orientation literature by demonstrating that externally-focused, customer-centric capabilities facilitate adaptive responses to environmental disruptions (Day, 2011; Narver & Slater, 1990). It also extends research on organizational agility (Teece et al., 2016) by identifying marketing orientation as an antecedent of crisis-period adaptation.

Marketing-oriented firms may be more adaptive for several reasons: customer focus provides early warning signals about needed changes; external orientation facilitates environmental scanning and opportunity identification; communication capabilities enable change implementation by building stakeholder support (Kotter, 1995); and market-linking competencies help identify which adaptation paths are viable (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005). The strong relationship between challenges and operational changes ($\beta = 0.348$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that firms respond to crisis pressures by adapting their operations, consistent with threat-rigidity theory (Staw et al., 1981), although responses vary in effectiveness.

The hypothesized moderation effect of marketing activities on the relationship between operational changes and revenue impact was not supported at conventional significance levels ($p = 0.098$). While the pattern of simple slopes was directionally consistent with the hypothesis (operational changes showing negative effects at low marketing levels and positive effects at high marketing levels), the in-

teraction term did not reach statistical significance, and none of the individual simple slopes were significant.

This null finding warrants careful interpretation. It could indicate that: marketing activities do not, in fact, moderate the effectiveness of operational change; the effect exists but the study lacked sufficient statistical power to detect it; measurement imprecision in the count-based operational change measure obscured a true interactive relationship; or the relationship operates through mechanisms not captured in the current model. Given that the moderation hypothesis was theoretically grounded in complementarity theory (Milgrom & Roberts, 1995) and strategic fit research (Venkatraman, 1989), the null finding should prompt further investigation rather than immediate theoretical rejection. However, until replicated with larger samples and more precise measurements, claims about marketing-operations complementarity during crises should be considered speculative rather than empirically established.

The low proportion of explained variance in revenue outcomes ($R^2 = 0.037$) requires explicit discussion. This finding indicates that the theoretical framework captures only a small portion of the factors driving crisis recovery. Model fit indices for social science research suggest that R^2 values below 0.10 are acceptable only when key predictors are statistically significant (Ozili, 2023). The current model meets neither criterion for revenue impact: R^2 falls well below 0.10, and most predictors did not reach significance. This does not necessarily indicate theoretical failure, rather, it reflects the inherent complexity and unpredictability of crisis outcomes, where firm performance results from numerous interacting factors including firm size, industry dynamics, pre-crisis financial health, leadership capabilities, government interventions, and idiosyncratic crisis characteristics (Wenzel et al., 2020). Simple, parsimonious models may be insufficient for predicting crisis outcomes, suggesting that future research should employ more comprehensive frameworks or configurational approaches (for example, fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis) that examine how multiple factors combine.

Given the pattern of supported and unsupported findings, practical implications should be stated with appropriate caution. Two implications rest on well-supported findings. Geographic context matters for crisis outcomes. The significant location effect suggests that managers should explicitly consider their operating context when evaluating crisis response effectiveness and setting recovery expectations. Crisis management prescriptions developed in one context may not transfer to another: what works in developed Western markets may not work in transition economies like Kazakhstan, and vice versa. Rather than applying universal "best practices", firms should assess whether their market context provides conditions favorable to specific strategies (Khanna & Palepu, 2010).

Next, marketing orientation facilitates organizational adaptation. The strong relationship between marketing activities and operational changes suggests that firms seeking to enhance crisis responsiveness should invest in market-sensing capabilities, customer-insight systems, and an external orientation, rather than merely operational flexibility (Day, 2011; Teece, 2007). Marketing capabilities appear to enable firms to recognize and implement needed changes more effectively.

One implication rests on exploratory evidence and should be treated cautiously. The descriptive pattern suggesting that operational changes may be more effective when combined with strong marketing activities is intriguing but not statistically confirmed. Managers may wish to consider integrating operational and marketing responses rather than treating them as independent initiatives, but this recommendation awaits empirical confirmation.

Importantly, the low explained variance for revenue impact ($R^2 = 0.037$) indicates that the variables examined here: operational changes, marketing activities, and location, cannot reliably predict crisis recovery outcomes. Other factors not included in this study likely play substantial roles. Practitioners should not rely solely on these variables when developing crisis response strategies.

Future research could explore several extensions: mechanism studies examining which specific aspects of geographic context explain the Kazakhstan advantage; temporal dynamics examining how relationships evolve over the crisis recovery period; boundary conditions identifying when operational changes succeed without strong marketing; and marketing activity specifics examining which particular activities matter most.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the roles of geographic location and marketing activities in crisis recovery among tourism firms. The analysis provides strong support for two findings and important null results for a third. First, location emerged as the strongest and only statistically significant predictor of revenue impact. Kazakhstan-based firms reported significantly higher revenue than firms in other countries, challenging the common practice of treating location as a control variable. This finding highlights the importance of geographic context as a substantive factor shaping crisis recovery.

Second, marketing activities strongly predicted organizational adaptation. Firms with stronger marketing orientation were substantially more likely to implement operational changes, suggesting that marketing capabilities enable organizational agility during crises.

Third, the hypothesized moderation effect that marketing activities would make operational changes more effective was not supported at conventional significance levels. While the pattern of results was directionally consistent with complementarity theory, the evidence is insufficient to conclude that marketing and operational strategies interact synergistically.

Importantly, this study does not provide a predictive model for revenue outcomes. The low explained variance indicates that crisis recovery depends on numerous factors beyond those examined here. The contribution lies not in prediction, but in identifying location as a significant factor warranting further investigation and marketing orientation as a driver of adaptive capacity.

For practitioners, the findings suggest that crisis response should account for geographic context and that investments in marketing capabilities may enhance organizational adaptability. For researchers, the results highlight the importance of contingency perspectives, the challenges of modeling complex crisis outcomes, and the need for context-sensitive theory development in crisis management.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization and theory: AA; research design: AA; data collection: AA and LS; analysis and interpretation: AA and LS; writing draft preparation: AA and LS; supervision: LS; correction of article: AA; proofread and final approval of article: AA and LS. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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