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Christin Khardani, Jürgen Schmude, Philipp Namberger

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## Crisis planning among tour operators: an evaluation of small, medium-sized and large enterprises

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Christin Khardani\*, Jürgen Schmude and  
Philipp Namberger

Department of Economic Geography,  
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München,  
Luisenstreet 37, 80333 Munich, Germany

Email: christin.khardani@lmu.de

Email: j.schmude@lmu.de

Email: philipp.namberger@lmu.de

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** The worldwide shutdown of borders during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 has shown that crisis management in tourism is essential for all stakeholders and has put crisis management of tour operators in a public spotlight. Currently, there is little research on crisis management strategies of tour operators. An exploratory analysis of empirically collected data aimed at determining the current level of crisis planning among German tour operators reveals that although tour operators feel prepared for a crisis, the level of crisis planning is low. This is particularly the case for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which dominate the market. This paper therefore suggests a code of conduct to establish a minimum standard in crisis management for the industry. The findings show that the managers' attitude towards such a code of conduct is neutral. A higher level of involvement from official institutions to support SMEs in their crisis management is recommended.

**Keywords:** crisis and disaster management; crisis preparedness; crisis planning; code of conduct; evaluation of tour operators; SMEs; small and medium-sized companies; package travel; safety; certification in tourism.

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**Biographical notes:** Christin Khardani is a PhD student and Lecturer at the department of Economic Geography at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany. Her research focus is on crisis and disaster management as well as safety and security in tourism, specifically in the industry of tour operators.

Jürgen Schmude is retired Professor of Economic Geography at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany. His research interests focus on climate change and tourism, tourists' behaviour as well as on safety and security in tourism. His regionally oriented work focuses on Germany and France. He is the author of numerous papers in journals and the author of several monographs as well as the editor of various anthologies. Moreover, he is president of the German Society of Tourism Research (DGT) since November 2015 and scientific director of the Bavarian Center for Tourism (BZT) since September 2019.

Philipp Namberger is a Senior Researcher and Lecturer of Economic Geography at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany. His research focuses on questions of tourism geography and mobility in general. Specifically, he deals e.g., with questions of overtourism, carrying capacity, and the limits of acceptable change, often providing the perspective of those being affected in their everyday life.

## 1 Introduction

Tour operators play a vital role in tourism crisis management, providing the vast majority of tourists in mass destination markets (Aguiló et al., 2003). However, studies examining tour operators as protagonists in crisis management are scarce (de Sausmarez, 2013) and no research has yet been conducted on their level of crisis preparedness. Over 15 years ago, Glaesser (2006) predicted that crisis management would be an integral instrument of the quality strategy of tour operators, highlighting the idea of the package tour as allowing tourists to travel carefree and safely, which is denied to them when booking individual services. According to a Forsa survey by the German Travel Association (DRV, 2019), reliable crisis management is the second most important reason for booking a package tour. That was the case for 96% of the 1005 surveyed Germans who undertook at least one journey during the last three years. This aligns with researchers' findings that safety is essential for tourists and also crucial for their destination decision (e.g., Karl et al., 2017).

This paper follows Wang's and Ritchie's (2011, p.781) crisis definition: "*Crisis* refers to any unplanned event or situation emerging from the internal or external environment of an organisation which can disrupt operations, threaten customers and employees physically and mentally, and endanger an organisation's financial status and future viability." Examples range from natural disasters to transport and technological crises, political disturbances, terrorist attacks and epidemics/pandemics.

As transnational tour operators are usually at a spatial distance from the location of the crisis, their offices remain unaffected (Derham et al., 2022). Consequently, crisis management of tour operators primarily deals with the professional handling of customers during a crisis in the destination, which includes (Glaesser, 2006):

- 1 rebooking accommodation
- 2 changing the travel itinerary
- 3 organising alternative return flights (evacuation)
- 4 initial psychological support of affected customers
- 5 handling of deceased customers and support of their relatives.

The specific duty of care of tour operators towards their customers is important for two reasons: Firstly, tourists are vulnerable in unfamiliar locations (e.g., Faulkner, 2001), which indicates an ethical obligation. Secondly, the EU package travel directive 2015/2302 on package travel and linked travel arrangements assigns tour operators a

legal obligation to provide the customer with immediate and appropriate assistance. This includes organising accommodation and alternative travel arrangements at the cost of the tour operator as well as providing necessary information.

A code of conduct might be a feasible approach to ensure minimum standards within the industry, serving as a nexus between the broadly formulated legal and the ethical obligations a tour operator is faced with. Codes of conduct are self-imposed sets of rules which aim to influence attitudes and behaviour (Mason and Mowforth, 1996). They are self-regulating, rely on ethical obligation and peer pressure and can be developed and introduced comparatively quickly and easily, which is why they are also used to fill a legislative gap (Garrod and Fennell, 2004). In tourism, they can be found mainly in visitor and environmental management.

This explorative and inductive study aims to pave the way for comprehensive crisis planning in the tour operator business. First, it examines the self-perception and the actual level of crisis planning of tour operators in Germany according to company size to obtain a status quo snapshot of crisis management structures in the industry. Secondly, the study reveals the managers' attitude towards a code of conduct in crisis management, to find out to what extent a code of conduct would influence the level of crisis planning of a company.

To achieve these aims, the paper is structured as follows: The next section puts crisis management in context with tour operators, certifications and SMEs. After describing the methodology, the results are presented and subsequently discussed in line with the research objectives. Finally, the contribution of the study to the current academic research is summarised and its practical and theoretical implications as well as limitations of the study are explained.

## **2 Literature review**

Crisis management in tourism has played a role in academic research since the late 20th century (e.g., Wut et al., 2021) with an increase in the number of publications following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 (e.g., Jiang et al., 2019). To date, the focus in academic literature has remained mainly on crisis management in tourist destinations (Jiang et al., 2019) and in the hospitality industry (Wut et al., 2021). Research about transnational tour operators is represented in only few papers (e.g., Cavlek, 2002; Evans and Elphick, 2005; Derham et al., 2022). Their omission in academic literature can also be observed in recent papers on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on several tourism sectors, where tour operators do not appear (e.g., Gössling et al., 2021).

Researchers tried to conceptualise a crisis by segmenting it according to its lifecycle. In 1986, Fink (2002) was the first to create a crisis management model. Different models with different numbers of stages followed, e.g., a five-stage model by Mitroff (1988) and one by Roberts (1994) as well as a four-stage model referred to as the PPRR or RRRR model (pre-disaster planning/reduction, preparedness/readiness, response, recovery) by Smith in 1995 (Smith, 2013). All frameworks cover the stages of planning, intervention and adaption. The most frequently discussed crisis management frameworks in tourism have been the tourism disaster management framework by Faulkner (2001) and the holistic crisis and disaster management framework by Ritchie (2004).

Several researchers (e.g., Mair et al., 2016) noted that crisis planning is not a topic of in-depth research. They tried to determine why the industry lacks commitment to crisis

preparedness (Pennington-Gray, 2018) and recommended further studies in this field because “preventing the crisis from happening is the best crisis management strategy” (Wut et al., 2021, p.13). The latest overview conducted by Wut et al. (2021) identified 16 papers related to crisis preparedness and crisis prevention between 1985 and 2020. Among these, four studies dealt with the level of crisis preparedness in the hospitality (Ritchie et al., 2011; Rousaki and Alcott, 2006; Gruman et al., 2011) and MICE industry (Smith and Kline, 2010). Most of these studies focused on the managers’ perception, but not on the actual level of crisis planning, although Wang and Ritchie (2011) stated that self-assessment of crisis planning may differ from reality.

Researchers detected a huge knowledge gap between large enterprises and SMEs as well as a lack of strategic management in terms of crisis management (e.g., Bollrich and Warren, 2016). Okumus and Karamustafa (2005) argued that the ad-hoc management practices of SMEs might reflect general managerial practices in the tourism industry. Liu et al. (2021) demanded a scientific discussion of the crisis response of SMEs in the tourism industry, as they contribute significantly to economic growth.

The purpose of certifications and codes of conduct in tourism is to achieve environmental, social and behavioural standards in order to reduce the industry’s negative impact on a destination (Cole, 2007). While both instruments are voluntary, certifications are based on a set of standards that need to be met, and ideally, this is monitored by an independent agency (Pennington-Gray et al., 2014). Codes of conduct have been established in tourism since the 1980s (Mason and Mowforth, 1996) and are introduced either by government, the industry or non-governmental organisations (Mason, 2007). Research contributions to certifications in tourism mainly concerned sustainability (e.g., Dziuba, 2016; Karlsson and Dolnicar, 2016). Only a few scientists covered the field of certification in safety (e.g., Beeton, 2001; Morgan, 2021) and crises (e.g., Pennington-Gray et al., 2014). In the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, some researchers foresaw an increased need for security among consumers, which is why quality commitments such as a code of conduct might gain more importance in the travel decision process (e.g., Yu et al., 2021).

### 3 Materials and methods

#### 3.1 Conceptual framework

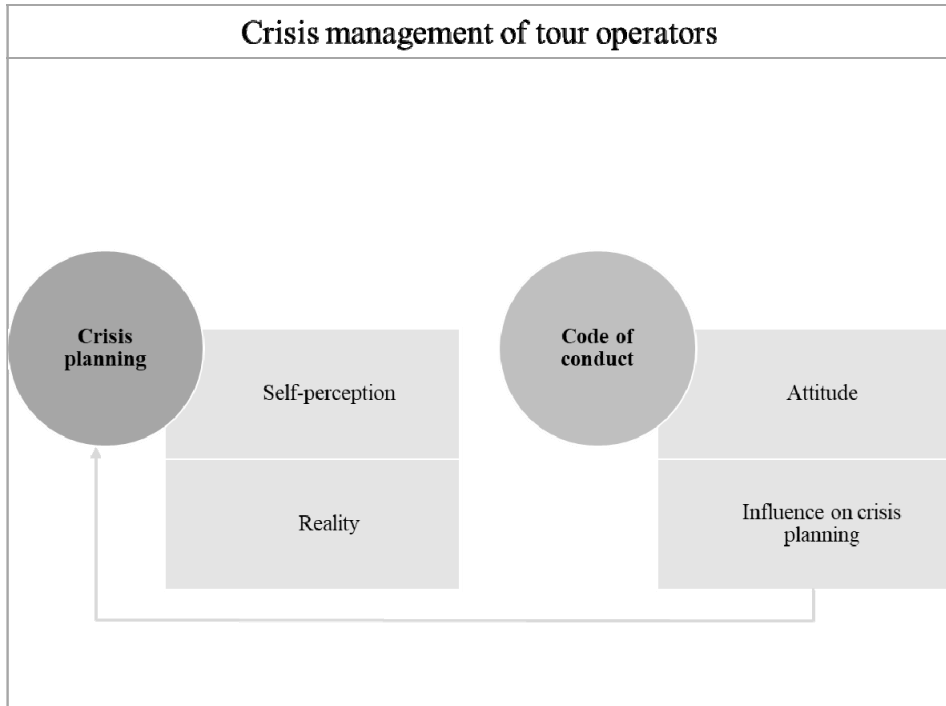
The research design (see Figure 1) outlines the conceptualisation of the two research topics. To analyse the level of crisis planning of tour operators in Germany (first research objective), crisis planning was divided into the managers’ self-perception and the actual level of crisis planning. The latter was operationalised into aspects based on the components in the pre-event and prodromal phases of Faulkner’s (2001) and Ritchie’s (2004) crisis management frameworks, as they offer the most detailed assignment of tasks in each phase. These aspects were supplemented by reoccurring elements assigned to crisis planning taken from the current academic literature as follows:

- 1 crisis department (Coombs, 2019; Mitroff, 1988; Wang and Ritchie, 2011)
- 2 crisis processes (Pennington-Gray et al., 2011; Pforr and Hosie, 2008)
- 3 crisis manual or guideline(s) (Coombs, 2019; Fink, 2002; Pennington-Gray et al., 2011; Pforr and Hosie, 2008)

- 4 crisis unit (Coombs, 2019; Wang and Ritchie, 2011)
- 5 crisis simulation (Coombs, 2019; Mitroff, 1988; Pennington-Gray et al., 2011; Pforr and Hosie, 2008; Wang and Ritchie, 2011)
- 6 crisis stage 'intervention' (Pforr and Hosie, 2008).
- 7 crisis stage 'analysis and adaption' (Pforr and Hosie, 2008).

Quantitative, descriptive research was used for this part of the explorative study.

**Figure 1** Research design



For the second research objective, the influence of a code of conduct in crisis management on the level of crisis planning of tour operators was examined by inquiring into the following aspects based on a 4-point Likert scale. Managers were asked about their attitude towards a code of conduct (need, participation, sales argument) and towards a seal as certification (need, participation, investment). Another question concerned the extent to which a code of conduct would directly influence the company's own crisis planning (supporting and stimulating own crisis planning, adapting processes in own crisis planning, feeling better prepared). Quantitative and qualitative methods were used for the second part of this inductive study.

### 3.2 Data collection and sampling

According to the German Federal Office of Statistics, there were 2091 tour operators liable for taxation in 2020 (latest available data) (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022).

However, there are neither official nor unofficial listings of those tour operators. In order to guarantee accurate acquisition of information and clearly define the population of the research (e.g., Creswell, 2014), the enterprises listed in the industry's leading media *fvw | TravelTalk* book 'Branchenkontakte 2022' (FVW Medien GmbH, 2022) in the sections 'tour operator' and 'cruises' were selected as a sample frame and adjusted: All companies not based in Germany were removed as well as club hotels and brokers. Tour operators belonging to a parent company were also deleted because their crisis management is handled by the parent company directly. The cleared list contained 621 companies and represented the population of the research. A standardised online questionnaire with 55 questions was created using the software Unipark. The questions were arranged in six groups covering the topics crises, crisis management, crisis planning, attitude towards a code of conduct, crisis management in the destination and corporate data. Between 8 and 12 June 2022, the cover letter with a personalised link was sent to the companies as a complete survey. Of the 621 companies invited, 15 emails could not be delivered due to company liquidation and two emails for reasons unknown. Five companies stated that they act as brokers. Finally, of  $n = 599$  companies participating in the study, 77 returned correctly completed questionnaires (13%) for data analysis in SPSS.

### 3.3 Structure of the sample

The research was conducted to detect the differences in crisis planning of micro, small, medium-sized and large tour operators. To define the companies' size, the EU Commission's recommendation 2003/361/EC concerning the definition of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) was used as per Table 1. The parameter 'number of employees' was chosen as a reference because it was unanimously given by all participants. Due to the lack of information about the industry structure, there was no distribution by size of the final research population of 599 companies, which emphasises the inductive character of this study. However, a university study of 2018 estimated that around 94% of tour operators in Germany are micro and small enterprises, as the tour operator market in Germany is very small-scale (Kirstges, 2018). Table 1 also indicates this finding with micro (almost two-thirds) and small (almost one-fifth) enterprises dominating the sample. Large companies were represented completely in this study.

**Table 1** Types of enterprise (based on EU Commission's recommendation 2003/361/EC), research sample and random sample of questionnaire

Type of enterprise	Number of employees	N = 599		Annual turnover total in €	← or →	Annual balance sheet total in €
		n = 77 in total	n in percent			
Large	≥250	6	8%	>50 million		>43 million
Medium	50–249	11	14%	≤50 million		≤43 million
Small	10–49	14	18%	≤10 million		≤10 million
Micro	1–9	46	60%	≤2 million		≤2 million

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Level of crisis planning

#### 4.1.1 Self-perception

The respondents were asked if they consider their company to be well-prepared for a crisis by choosing from a 4-point-Likert scale between 1 = definitely and 4 = not at all. Table 2 shows that there is a tendency towards 'partly prepared' among medium-sized, small and micro enterprises, whereas large tour operators tend to feel 'definitely' prepared. Interestingly, none of the companies chose the last option 'not at all prepared'.

**Table 2** Self-perception of crisis preparedness of tour operators according to company size (mean)

<i>Type of enterprise</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Large	1.17
Medium	1.73
Small	1.71
Micro	1.76

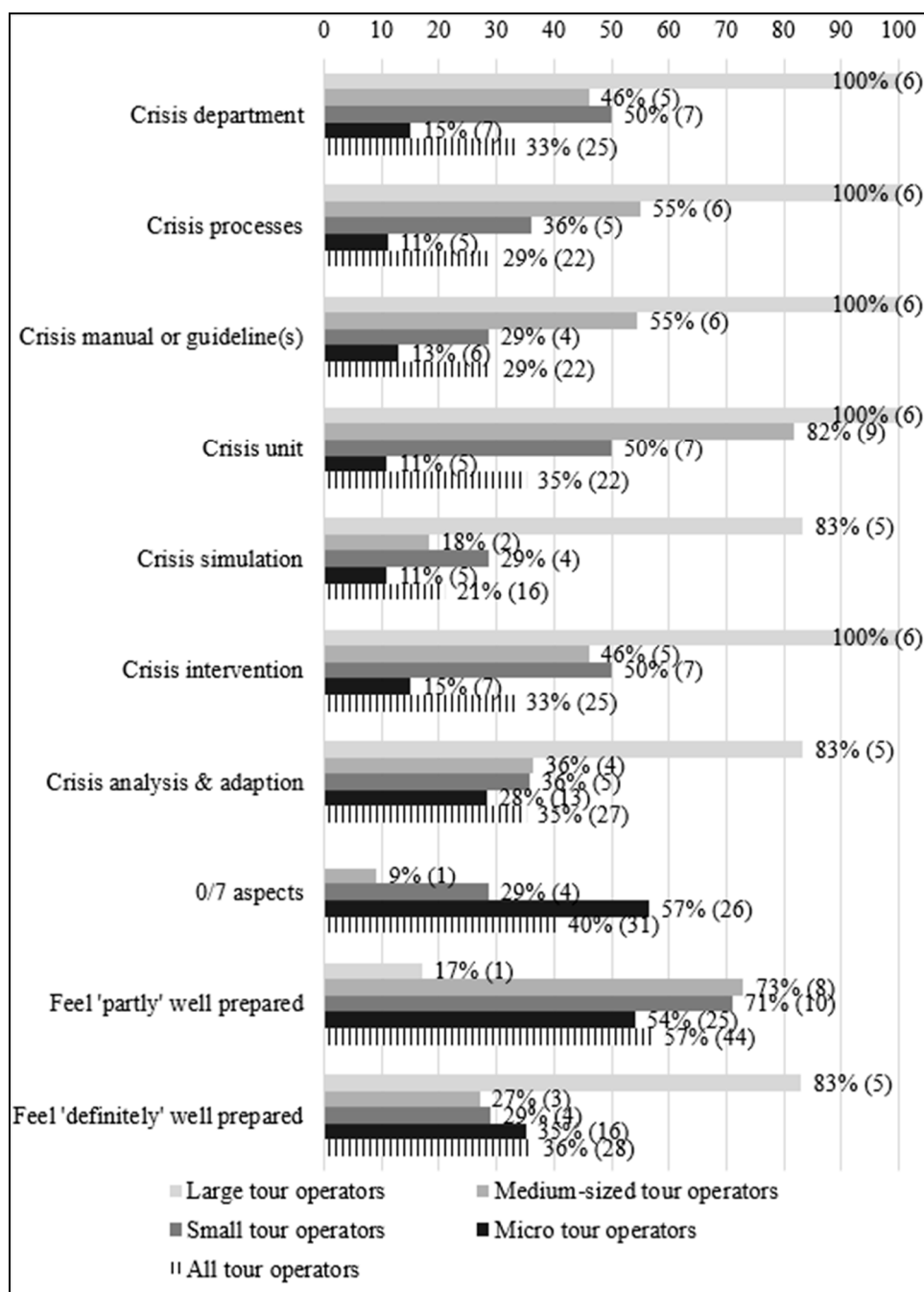
#### 4.1.2 Actual level of crisis planning

The overall level of crisis planning among German tour operators can be considered low, as 40% apply no aspects of crisis planning in their company (see Figure 2). Large tour operators stand out, covering five of seven parameters with 100% and the remaining two parameters with 83% (see Figure 2). Micro enterprises also occupy a unique position, showing the lowest level of crisis planning throughout all aspects (see Figure 2). A comparison between companies' self-perception and the actual level of crisis planning reveals a significant discrepancy (see Figure 2). Among micro tour operators, 89% of the companies feel 'definitely' or 'partly' well-prepared, although 57% do not cover any aspect of crisis planning (see Figure 2). All small and medium-sized companies feel 'definitely' or 'partly' well-prepared, while 29% respectively 9% do not cover any of the aspects (see Figure 2). There is no discrepancy between self-perception and the actual state of crisis preparedness in large companies.

### 4.2 Managers' attitude towards a code of conduct

The participants were asked to state their attitude towards a code of conduct in crisis management for tour operators by choosing from a 4-point-Likert scale between 1 = definitely and 4 = not at all. Across all company sizes, the mean of the managers' agreement lies between 'partly agree' and 'rather not agree' (see Tables 3–5). The level of agreement decreases with the size of the company (see Tables 3 and 4).



**Figure 2** Self-perception and aspects of crisis planning of tour operators according to company size, in percent and in absolute numbers

#### 4.2.1 Code of conduct

Outliers to the aforementioned trend were found when managers were asked if they see a need for a code of conduct, whereby medium-sized companies exhibited the greatest level of agreement, followed by small, large and micro companies (see Table 3). Interestingly, large tour operators ‘rather not’ see a need for a code of conduct but show the highest willingness to participate (see Table 3). The comments in the qualitative data section outline the low level of approval:

- “A ‘Code of Conduct’ often contains recommendations and specifications for large tour operators with corresponding departments and trained staff, which small tour operators cannot implement” (case 69, micro company).
- “Small ones [tour operators], like ours, do not need a code of conduct because we react extremely quickly and personally to crises. In case of problems, the clients are informed immediately, and a solution is found very quickly, without scaremongering. We work with Africa; unfortunately, there is no shortage of crises there, and therefore we also have a lot of experience. In my opinion, a guideline or something similar would not help because every situation is different. And for basic things like communicating immediately and openly and honestly, you don’t need a manual, that’s clear to everyone anyway.” (case 40, micro company)
- “A code of conduct prevents the ability to improvise” (case 58, micro company).
- “The question of setting up a crisis management system or a crisis team only arises for large companies (from 100 employees) or for hierarchically managed companies in which the employees do not feel empowered to react or take part in decisions in crisis situations. At [company name], all employees who can contribute to minimising the damage or to finding a solution (and who can be reached) are the crisis team. A healthy (cooperative) medium-sized working culture is the Code of Conduct.” (case 43, medium-sized company).

One statement favours a code of conduct:

- “A code of conduct can only be the beginning of a professional crisis management” (case 57, small company).

**Table 3** Tour operators’ views on code of conduct according to company size (mean)

<i>Type of enterprise</i>	<i>Need</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Sales argument</i>
Large	2.50	2.17	1.83
Medium	2.09	2.18	2.34
Small	2.29	2.21	2.52
Micro	2.67	2.63	2.59

#### 4.2.2 Quality seal

In line with the trend described initially, large tour operators have the highest and micro companies the lowest opinion of a quality seal as certification (see Table 4). The following comments by micro tour operators in the qualitative data section support their low level of agreement again:

- “Certifications are mostly money machines, and the main thing is to have the allegedly important seals. People rarely work according to them. What is important is common sense and a trusting relationship with the local service providers” (case 34).
- “In particular, ‘big players’ with various quality certificates and ‘stamps’ often demonstrated miserable crisis management during the Coronavirus pandemic [...]. In my opinion, small companies without rigid procedures and WITHOUT a quality certificate usually reacted better. External consultants and rigid criteria for awarding certificates based on purely formal aspects often lead to expensive ‘posturing’ with miserable results [...]” (case 50).
- “Please, not another ‘bureaucratic monster’, not another certification. That doesn’t help us small tour operators at all. We know our partners. In a crisis, the best thing we can do is to communicate openly, honestly, quickly and find solutions together. [...]” (case 37).

**Table 4** Tour operators’ views on a quality seal as certification according to company size (mean)

<i>Type of enterprise</i>	<i>Need</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Investment</i>
Large	1.83	2.67	2.50
Medium	2.27	2.73	3.00
Small	2.5	2.93	2.93
Micro	2.93	2.96	3.20

#### 4.2.3 Direct influence on own crisis planning

The trend that the larger the company, the higher the level of approval, was not continued in this section. Here, large tour operators show the lowest agreement in their statements, saying that a code of conduct would ‘more likely not’ have an influence on the company’s own crisis planning (see Table 5). Large companies show the most homogenous results within the group, while small companies, as well as in two cases medium-sized companies, exhibit the most homogenous distribution within their group (see Table 5).

**Table 5** Influence on tour operators’ crisis planning according to company size (mean)

<i>Type of enterprise</i>	<i>Supports own planning</i>	<i>Stimulates crisis planning</i>	<i>Adapt processes accordingly</i>	<i>Feel better prepared</i>
Large	2.83	2.83	2.67	2.83
Medium	2.09	2.36	2.09	2.18
Small	2.14	2.43	1.93	2.29
Micro	2.67	2.76	2.50	2.67

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Crisis planning

The present study reveals a perceived crisis preparedness among German tour operators of 60.3%, which is considerably lower than the 72.7% in the Australian (Wang and Ritchie, 2011) and 80.4% in the UK (Rousaki and Alcott, 2006) hospitality industry. However, the figure serves as an indicator.

29% of the study's respondents have a crisis plan. The low result matches that in the literature: Only a few of the businesses in Kelowna, Canada interviewed by Hystad and Keller (2006) had a crisis plan, despite the fact that the respondents regularly deal with forest fires. Gruman et al. (2011) revealed that over 80% of respondents of the Canadian hospitality industry had either no or only a minimal plan. Pennington-Gray et al. (2011) indicated in a study with tourism stakeholders (lodging, attractions, promotions) in Florida that 45% had a crisis plan for visitors.

The present study does not reveal the reasons why particularly small enterprises face difficulties in setting up crisis management. However, researchers identified a lack of, for example:

- 1 staff and financial resources (Cioccio and Michael, 2007; Runyan, 2006; Wang and Ritchie, 2011),
- 2 knowledge and time due to high involvement in daily business (Cioccio and Michael, 2007),
- 3 perception of a threat of crisis (Gruman et al., 2011).

Coombs (2019) argued that it might be the complexity of the task that discourages small businesses from establishing a crisis management. Evans and Elphick (2005, p.143) called this phenomenon "the myth of planning". This attitude can also be deduced from the managers' comments (case 34, 40, 50, 58 micro company, case 60 small company) in this study.

In cases 40 and 60 of the same commentary section as well as in the literature (e.g., Evans and Elphick, 2005) it has often been argued that crisis plans are redundant because every crisis is different, and therefore it is not possible to prepare for every crisis. In contrast, Fink (2002) and Mitroff (1988) argued that crisis management is universal and should be applied independent of the content of the crisis.

Large tour operators have the highest level of self-perception and at the same time the highest level of crisis preparedness – self-perception and reality align (see Figure 2). This is not the case for the other company sizes where there is a significant gap between self-perception and reality exists (see Figure 2). To explain this discrepancy, a first approach was made with the model of behaviour-attitude gap which marks the difference between an individual's attitude and action and is mainly employed in environmental research and social psychology (e.g., Chatzidakis et al., 2016). However, the managers' comment, e.g., "Everything and every decision in the event of a crisis depends on the situation – very few can be handled by the book, know-how and flexibility are the best solutions!" (case 60, small tour operator) suggests that the model cannot be applied. In fact, all comments but that in case 57 published in this paper give the impression that the managers are not aware of the need for and importance of a functioning crisis management. Bollrich and Warren (2016) explained this behaviour, specifically in small and medium-sized

businesses, with psychological and contextual barriers incorporating the managers' personal beliefs, emotions and knowledge as well as personal experience and opinions of friends and family.

## 5.2 *Code of conduct in crisis management*

In this study, tour operators tended towards a neutral to pessimistic view of a code of conduct in crisis management. In a study examining U.S. travellers' perception of a certification of crisis preparedness for destinations, the participants were also neutral (Pennington-Gray et al., 2014). These researchers assumed that this was partly due to a lack of understanding of the concept, which might also be the case for the present study.

The larger the organisation, the higher the agreement for a code of conduct. Interestingly, micro tour operators are least convinced of the concept, although they show the lowest level of crisis planning. Large tour operators see the lowest influence, probably because they already have a high degree of crisis planning.

The results as well as the literature suggest that a lack of crisis planning needs to be faced. The initially mentioned EU package travel directive 2015/2302 provides a legal framework for this, but needs to be addressed in detail by the institutions. Researchers agree that superordinate institutions might serve as catalysts or mentors for the implementation of crisis management structures, specifically among micro, small and medium-sized companies, to enhance awareness (e.g., Hystad and Keller, 2006). Wang and Ritchie (2012) argued that tourism associations have a specific stake, serving as they do as a platform for education and a network between tourism companies. This paper follows this approach. 84% of the respondents (100% of large, small and medium-sized companies) are members of a travel association. Consequently, travel associations in Germany could indeed serve as a booster to introducing a code of conduct. Several tourism organisations such as the German Travel Association DRV, the Council of Australian Tour Operators CATO and the Pacific Asia Travel Association PATA offer guidelines for the industry with specific instructions on how to implement crisis management in a destination as well as in a tourism company, which demonstrates that they are aware of the necessity of the topic. However, more dedication and above all persuasion and training specifically for SMEs are needed.

## 6 Conclusion

The results of the study reveal that the self-perception among tour operators in Germany is high, while the actual low level of crisis planning among SMEs shows a completely opposite picture. Researchers already identified the main barriers for SMEs implementing crisis planning, but not how to remove those barriers. An approach was made with the present research by suggesting a code of conduct in crisis management to support crisis management structures among tour operators. The findings show that this does not seem to fall on fertile ground within the industry because the majority see no need for it, although approval increases with the size of the company.

Researchers refer to superordinate institutions providing guidance for SMEs. Considering that the majority of the tour operators involved in the study belong to a travel association and that the German travel association DRV already has a crisis guide for tour operators, the researchers see a great potential for disseminating the crisis guide

to other travel associations and intensifying training and concrete support. A study analysing the consumers' attitude towards a code of conduct in crisis management might be a further booster for tour operators, should the findings indicate that a code of conduct is a purchasing argument.

As this study is exploratory and certain market data such as a complete list of all tour operators based in Germany and their distribution by size are not available, some limitations must be accepted. Reasons why companies did not participate in the questionnaire might be that companies without a crisis management may not feel confident, that managers do not see a course or that they lack resources in the form of time and skilled labour. The latter was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to a dramatic increase in unemployment within the tourism industry and the current shortage of skilled workers.

### Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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