

# Niche Tourism for Autistic Children during a Pandemic: The Case in Shakira Travel and Tourism

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## **Abstract**

*The COVID-19 pandemic has become a global disaster. All industrial sectors throughout the country were paralyzed by the virus that originated in the city of Wuhan, China. One of them is the travel and tourism industry. The policy of restricting mobility and crowds of people to reduce the spread of COVID-19 has a direct impact on the tourism sector. The travel and tourism business declined sharply in the MSME business and disrupted the employment opportunities in it. This also happened to Shakira Travel and Tourism which is engaged in the travel and tourism business. This business that was founded in 2016 must be able to rack its brain so that its business can continue to run during the pandemic. One of the strategies used by Shakira travel and tourism is through niche tourism targeting tourists with autism. This paper contains how the impact of this pandemic on the Indonesian tourism sector and the policies and strategies used by Shakira Travel and Tourism to survive. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the implementation of the Niche Tourism strategy for children with autism disorders carried out by Shakira Travel and Tourism in maintaining the continuity of the company. By using qualitative research methods which describe the actual situation that occurred during the research and combined with theoretical references from both journals and articles related to business strategies during the pandemic.*

*Keywords: autism, niche tourism, pandemic, tourism, survival strategy.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world was shaken by the discovery of a new virus, namely the corona. The World Health Organization (WHO) has determined the Covid-19 Pandemic period since March 12, 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic is an event that spreads the 2019 corona virus disease (English: Coronavirus disease 2019, abbreviated as COVID-19) throughout the world for all countries. This virus is a new type of virus that was first detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China on December 1, 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted every aspect in all corners of the world. An unprecedented global health emergency, social and economic conditions because of the pandemic ensued. Travel and tourism are one of the sectors most affected with a massive drop in international demand amid global travel restrictions including many borders being completely closed to contain the virus.

UNWTO (2020) states that "There was a 72 percent decrease in international tourist travel at the world level during January-October 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. This resulted in a loss of 935 million US dollars in tourism receipts from about 935 billion tourists from the international sector. ". The Association of the Indonesian Tours and Travel Agencies (ASITA) stated that due to the pandemic, only 5% of travel companies were able to survive.

Several health communication strategies and measures (e.g., social distancing, travel and mobility restrictions, lockdowns, stay at home campaigns, self-quarantine, restrictions on activities that can lead to crowds and crowds) have hampered global travel, tourism, and recreation. All countries around the world have implemented restrictions and even travel closures to limit the spread of this corona virus. Almost everyone feels insecure about a pandemic, they prefer to stay longer at home to prevent the transmission of this covid-19 virus. This pandemic suddenly came, and all tourist destinations were closed.

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Almost all consumers cancel orders to the organizers or tourism actors. Therefore, the tourism travel sector is said to be the last sector to recover compared to other sectors because all tourism activities have been stopped completely, so that many travel cancellations are carried out. It is not surprising that many businesses in the tourism sector, especially the travel business, have experienced paralysis due to this pandemic which has caused a massive reduction in the workforce. The sectors most affected are transportation, travel, warehouses and the accommodation and food supply sector as well as the tourism sector in Indonesia, based on the 2019 Sakernas, around 11.83% of Indonesian workers are in the tourism industry sector. Meanwhile, the contribution of tourism to GDP is around 4% per year (Tusianti, 2020).

Before the pandemic, the travel service business as a type of business that supports the tourism industry was a very promising business. The increasing number of new tourist attractions that appear and the high interest of tourists to visit tourist attractions make this a very large market potential. Apart from being a service provider, travel companies also play a role in providing interesting tourist references that are fully packaged along with the facilities needed by tourists. But on the other hand, after this pandemic, people who will travel are very rare and even absent at the beginning of the pandemic. No wonder many companies engaged in the tourism industry are unable to finance their operations company. Business threats such as going out of business and layoffs began to haunt employees at travel bureaus or agents (Situmorang, 2020).

As a developing country, Indonesia, like other countries in the world, has experienced paralysis in the tourism industry due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic. This impact has been experienced by large business actors and MSMEs in the tourism service industry, especially tourist travel. Therefore, several companies engaged in the field of travel began to look for opportunities and there were even some travel business actors who turned to other business segments during this pandemic to keep the wheels of the economy turning

One of them was done by Shakira Travel and Tourism as a travel business actor who must have a crisis management plan and find solutions as well as the right strategy to maintain his company. But keep in mind that activating tourism will require measures that ensure safety and security while traveling. In addition to carrying out other businesses in the automotive sector (buying and selling cars), Shakira Travel and Tourism carries out a niche tourism strategy.

As a co-founder of Shakira travel and tourism, also armed with experience as direct parents of children with autism spectrum disorders, the author raised this article with the intention of discussing the implementation of Niche Tourism or special interest tourism for children with autism that has been run by Shakira travel and tourism. This strategy is expected to ensure that the autistic tourist receives all the support and assistance needed during the trip, starting from transportation, accommodation and what tourist destinations are suitable for children with autism.

In general, the purpose of writing this article is to improve the ability to conduct research, especially research related to the Shakira Travel and Tourism Strategy to Survive the Covid-19 Pandemic Period through Niche Tourism for children with autism.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Autism Concept**

Autism is a neurological (brain) disease that results in the loss or reduction of a person's ability to communicate, relate to others, and respond to their environment (Hartono, 2020). Children, especially autistic children, need a positive activity to minimize disturbances or barriers (sensory, communication, interaction, social) in themselves.

### **Travel and Tourism Agency**

Travel agent according to Goeldner (2015) Travel agent or travel agency is an intermediary for a business or a person who sells certain parts of the tourism industry individually or a combination of these parts to consumers. The difference between a travel agency and a travel agent can be seen from their respective duties. The travel agency is in charge of planning and creating trips, earning profits based on the results from the sale of the plans created while the travel agent serves as a travel intermediary and earns profits from commissions, and tips.

### **Travel Agency During a Pandemic**

Gosling et al. (2020), Quiki et al. (2020) and Jamal et al. (2020). Gosling et al. (2020) published an initial study on tourism and pandemics in which they explained the impact of the corona virus which has become the world's opponent, due to the absence of a vaccine and limited medical capacity to treat disease, non-medical efforts have become the main way to overcome the pandemic. Global travel restrictions and stay-at-home

orders have become one of the paths leading to the worst economic growth since World War II, influencing more than 90% of the world's population to refrain from public gatherings and community mobility and tourism activity largely stopped in March 2020.

Jamal et al. (2020) said that "The phenomenon of the Covid-19 outbreak since December 2019 which began in Wuhan China and has not ended until now, should be an important lesson for the world community, this is because disease outbreaks and other pandemics will become something that is getting worse. often occurs".

The increasing number of trips and ease of access to tourist destinations around the world are the cause. Therefore, the impact of health problems due to outbreaks in the world of tourism must be managed properly, such as by paying attention to health facilities and accurate information for visitors and local residents about the direct and indirect impacts of the outbreak. Tourism is a business that is very vulnerable to potential crises that come from various things, including unpredictable external shocks, so that it cannot make preparations for dealing with crises.

Carvalho (2020) argues that "Surviving in a pandemic requires a different strategy from the past, creativity is needed to be different from other destinations". During a pandemic, mass tourism is very difficult to do because the government prohibits crowds of people, so niche tourism is one of the right strategies for the travel industry to survive. Niche tourism is also carried out considering the high standards of safety and comfort, the choice of niche tourism is very important because they will be in small groups with similar hobbies, interests or shared visions. With the development of this new type of tourism, creative travel businesses will emerge to find specific market shares according to the needs of tourists, one of which is Shakira travel and tourism with a target market for children with autism disorders.

## **METHODS**

The methodology used in writing this article is a qualitative descriptive method. The reason for using qualitative methods is so that the authors can know and understand the effectiveness of niche tourism in rebuilding the defenses of Shakira Travel and tourism. Furthermore, the descriptive analysis in this study is intended to understand and dig deeper. Can niche tourism for autistic children help Shakira Travel and Tourism survive this pandemic?

In this study, the primary data obtained by the researcher were: by interviewing the founder and several staff who work at Shakira Travel and Tourism while secondary data (library studies) through journals, books, online media, official websites, and internet sources related to the problems to be researched.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

Shakira Travel and Tourism was founded in 2016 by five people with backgrounds in the tourism industry. All founders of Shakira Travel and Tourism are graduates of tourism colleges with a Bachelor of Tourism degree with more than 10 years of experience in the same field. Shakira Travel and Tourism has working relationships with various hotels, restaurants and tourist destination managers located in various places in Indonesia and abroad. In addition to arranging domestic trips, until now Shakira Travel and Tourism has arranged trips abroad such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Located in Comp. Telkom Jalan Palapa No. 15 Kebon Kopi Cimahi West Java.

### **Shakira Travel and Tourism Conditions at the Beginning of the Pandemic**

In early 2020, many guests used the services of Shakira Travel and Tourism. Tour/trip packages to Pangandaran, Yogyakarta to Bali are carried out almost once a week until mid-March 2020. In addition, tourism bus rental services are quite frequent at these times. On March 31, 2020, the President of Indonesia, Joko Widodo, signed Government Regulation No. 21 of 2020, which regulates large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) in response to COVID-19. During the initial PSBB there was no income at all for the company. All employees are laid off. In October 2020, for the first time, I received a request to arrange a tour from one of the BUMD Banks. Followed by the next two months arranging a 2021 new year tour from Bandar Lampung to Yogyakarta.

### **Niche Tourism Strategies for Autistic Children during a Pandemic**

Travel and tourism businesses, most of their activities are required to meet with many people, from transportation transport drivers, food providers to tourist destination actors. It is undeniable, Shakira Travel and Tourism, which is engaged in the tourism industry, must be able to rack its brain so that its business can continue to run without ignoring health protocols. Then what is the solution for Shakira Travel and Tourism to maintain its business during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Shakira Travel and Tourism is one of the business actors in the field of tourism in Cimahi, West Java. Is a business engaged in the service business, namely the provision of travel services ranging from transportation such as minibuses, buses and trains to airplanes, hotel vouchers throughout the archipelago, ticket sales and domestic tour packages. One of the tour packages sold by Shakira travel and tourism is niche tourism or special interest tourism. The Shakira Travel and Tourism team has more than ten years of experience in the tourism world and is supported by direct experience from one of the co-founders who has a child with autism. Therefore, since 2018 Shakira Travel and Tourism has started to carry out niche tourism, but it has started to be intensively carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic by targeting the market for children with autism in early 2021.

Neo and Flaherty's (2019) suggests that the travel industry facilitates safe and enjoyable travel experiences for children with autism and seeks ways to remove barriers that autistic travelers often face. Children with autism have limitations that can prevent them from carrying out recreational activities so that the benefits obtained cannot / are not optimal. The key to successful travel in general is preparation. Preparation for autistic children's tours is different from other normal children. Jenkins, P. (2008) states that "Autistic children may need more help than others with planning and organizing their tourism trips".

Special interest tourism has another term called Niche Tourism. According to Novelli in Knight (2015) the term Niche Tourism is derived from a marketing system that is specifically made according to needs and marketed in certain segments. Niche Tourism or special interest tourism will form a heterogeneous market because it is related to tourist interests. Knight (2015) also explained "In special interest tourism, tourists will focus on the destination and activities carried out at the destination so that special interest tourist destinations will also be formed". Special interest tourism or Niche Tourism is a tourism model that is different from the usual because the destination will provide special facilities to attract tourists with a specific purpose to come and spend quite a long time. Therefore, niche tourism is called a tourism activity that has a more specific focus on activities. Special interest tourism offers something more than usual, a new and unique experience. The niche tourism activities carried out by Shakira Travel and Tourism include:

### **Autistic Children's Agrotourism**

Exploring and playing in the open is fun for autistic children because they are comfortable without having to face the pressure of interacting or socializing with other people. The concept of nature tourism here is playing while learning is done in the open. Activities include gardening (touching plants, soil, and rocks, harvesting plants) and animal husbandry (seeing and feeding animals such as rabbits and goats). Besides being able to make the mind calm, this activity can train concentration to get to know plants, vegetables, and animals better. Gardening and raising livestock are one way to train children's sensory, especially in their tactile part. This activity is expected to help autistic children become more imaginative and improve their motoric nerves.

### **Hiking**

Hiking programs in the wild by walking along mountains or rivers are also fun for children with autism and families. This fun activity and many benefits for physical and mental health can be done by autistic children. Hiking provides benefits as a sensory motor activity as well as this hiking trains children to adapt to new environments. During this activity, children are trained to focus on walking following instructions. One thing that is important during this activity, don't forget to calm the child first and bring enough food supplies. Before making this hiking program, the team from Shakira Travel and Tourism conducted a previous survey to see and set the distance, and the hiking area must also be prepared and selected with a level of convenience that is suitable for the purpose of therapy.

The chosen hiking locations are plantations, rice fields and hills that are uphill and winding, such as the Sukawana Lembang tea plantation area, the Eldorado Setiabudi plantation in Bandung, the Bojong Koneng and Cihideung area plantations in Lembang. Sometimes while hiking, passing through a small river that triggers adrenaline that requires concentration from hiking participants.

### **Tracking**

Similar to hiking, tracking is very useful for children with autism disorders. The difference, the terrain traversed when trekking is not as difficult as hiking.

### **Camping**

Introducing new situations such as camping in the open can also be done by autistic children who do not like change. Here they learn to get used to being in new places. During the camping, children are invited to play, where the game session is designed to stimulate 3 sensory inputs: tactile input (touch), proprioceptive input (joints & muscles) and vestibular (balance) input for children. In carrying out the activities, we try to pay

attention to aspects that can support the development and interaction of children with autism, such as food provided free of flour, milk, and sugar because these foods can trigger hyperactivity of children with special needs. These games and activities aim to train interaction, courage, self-confidence, focus, independence, and develop the ability to learn and adapt to nature. outdoor activities that can stimulate sensory and motor skills to enrich their experience ([www.idadventure.com](http://www.idadventure.com)).

### **Niche Tourism Promotion from Shakira Travel and Tourism**

In practice, running Niche Tourism, Shakira Travel and Tourism uses several promotional strategies as follows: Direct marketing is direct communication for specific individuals with the intention of seeking a response or commonly called door to door. By providing direct information to parents who have children with autism disorders, one of them is through the What's App group. In addition, Shakira Travel and Tourism also provides direct information to consumers who have used the services of Shakira Travel and Tourism.

### **CONCLUSION**

The COVID-19 pandemic has paralyzed several sectors. The tourism sector is the first industry and is expected to be the last to rise due to the pandemic. The travel and tourism business declined sharply in the MSME business and disrupted the employment opportunities in it. This also happened to Shakira Travel and Tourism which is engaged in the travel and tourism business. Not giving up on the situation, Shakira Travel and Tourism makes innovations and new ideas to maintain the continuity of the company, namely by running Niche Tourism targeting children with autism disorders.

According to the founder of Shakira Travel and Tourism, although this tour for children with autism is niche tourism whose income is not as big as group travel, this strategy is enough to help the company to survive during the pandemic.

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