



## Article

# VFR Travel in Turkey during and Post-COVID-19

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**Abstract:** Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel is a significant component of travel across the globe. Whilst COVID-19 impacted all travel in all countries, its impact on VFR in certain cultures was particularly pronounced. Aside from reconnecting socially with friends and relatives, in some cultures, certain ceremonies and rituals were compromised, meaning a complex choice for residents between focusing on global health information (e.g., avoiding contact, especially with elderly who are at risk) and disobeying significant cultural rituals that signify respect and importance. Whilst most VFR travel research has focused on western countries, this research examined the impact of COVID-19 travel restrictions and health warnings on VFR travel in the country of Turkey. The significance of COVID-19 to VFR travel in Turkey is explained, and implications for the future are put forward.

**Keywords:** VFR travel; visiting relatives; Turkey; VFR hosts; visiting friends and relatives; COVID-19



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## 1. Introduction

Tourism is an important component of many economies in the world. As people travel, for various reasons, they generally inject funds into local economies that they travel to and into the industries that are part of tourism. One of the most significant forms of travel movement is Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel, which is a major component of tourism around the world [1].

Until 2019, known as the pre-pandemic era, approximately 1.4 billion individuals worldwide participated in international tourism mobility [2]. In comparison to 2019, 2020 was reported as the 'worst year in tourism history' due to the influence of COVID-19, resulting in a 74% drop in the number of individuals travelling worldwide [3]. Similarly, there was a 72% decline in 2021 compared to 2019 [2]. The COVID-19 restrictions reduced global travel by 97% in the first three months of 2020 [4], which brought travel movement to a virtual halt. Even when compared to other crises impacting tourism mobility, such as the SARS, the September 11 attacks, and the 2019 global economic crisis, the impact of COVID-19 was overwhelming and momentous. International tourism and travel activity started to grow five months after SARS, six months after the September 11 attacks, and ten months after the global economic crisis of 2019. As of early 2022, recovery was observed only compared to those levels in 2020 [4], still far from its pre-COVID-19 level.

Whilst travel restrictions caused by COVID-19 affected all countries, some countries faced particular complexities due to cultural aspects. One such example is Turkey, where VFR travel can be additionally assessed in terms of unique social and moral obligations. Relatives, especially close family members, have responsibilities toward members of the family and key events such as funerals, marriages, births, circumcision ceremonies, and engagement rituals were impacted. VFR travel is considered a key part of Turkish culture but being a VFR host created a risk to health due to COVID-19. The risk to the elderly in VFR visits is also critical.

The complexities of various cultures alongside health risks from COVID-19 created a combination of competing events. How these competing events were viewed was unknown, and the impacts on future social connections may result in altered cultural aspects well beyond the initial post-COVID years. This paper set out to investigate three main research questions. Firstly, what was the attitude towards travel during COVID-19 times in Turkey? Secondly, how did COVID-19 impact unique social and cultural connections in Turkey? Thirdly, how might VFR travel behaviours be altered in Turkey and other countries as a result of forced changes due to COVID-19?

In this study, the impact of COVID-19 on travel behaviour and VFR travel is explored from both the viewpoints of VFR travellers and VFR hosts in one destination, that being Turkey. This study determines the degree to which VFR travel was impacted by COVID-19, given the unique culture of Turkey, and how COVID-19 conditions may impact VFR experiences in the future.

## 2. Literature Review

It is important to set out from the outset that this paper discusses VFR travel and not VFR tourism. Whilst many VFR papers have used these terms interchangeably, the authors of this research article wish to highlight that the term 'VFR travel' is deliberately selected as the appropriate term for this study. It is recognised in the VFR travel literature that data capturing VFRs by either purpose of visit and/or type of accommodation will include people who are travelling, but who may not necessarily be engaging in leisure and touristic activities. As was highlighted by Backer [5], 'tourism and travel are not the same' (p. 74) and, accordingly, 'a VFR traveller may not qualify as a VFR tourist' (p. 74).

VFR is an important component for global economies as it has been shown to be consistent in times of economic downturns [6] and less risky than international travel for crisis recovery [7]. The article from Backer and Ritchie [7] is especially relevant at this time, as it undertook a market segmentation analysis and concluded that VFR travel (domestic) was an appropriate first-mover market for destinations to target after crises. Accordingly, it seems important to consider in what way VFR travel might be relevant to destinations across the globe in a post-pandemic period.

Noting that COVID-19 travel restrictions brought international tourism mobility to a halt, the relieving potential of domestic tourism in some countries is noteworthy. Sometimes destinations might focus on international travel markets; however, in 2018 (prior to COVID-19), domestic travel worldwide had a market share of almost six times that of international travel [8]. Such data reinforce that VFR travel may hold an important link for destination recovery.

Of course, VFR travel is also influenced by other elements such as friendship, blood ties, longing, social connections, family events, obligatory hosting, and support. Social and economic recovery may be enhanced by VFR travel which, as mentioned, has been identified as a suitable first-mover market after crises [7]. Although, possible health risks during post-crisis VFR trips have been noted in the literature as a concern to be aware of and consider [7,9].

### 2.1. Impacts of COVID-19 on Travel

Tourism is an open system in which externalities impact travel movement [10]. Economic downturns, natural disasters, political instability, wage conditions, industrial matters (e.g., airline strikes), legal matters, visa controls, health issues, and energy resources are just some of the types of externalities that can impact tourism industries. Externalities can have a particularly detrimental influence on international tourist mobility, whilst domestic levels tend to be less impacted by externalities [11]. As a result, tourism industries can have a fragile structure that is impacted by crises, which tend to be sudden and unpredictable. Additionally, it is critical to manage the consequences of tourism crises on destinations and businesses [12]. Thus, planning for potential crises is critical to reducing damage to sectors with fragile structures such as tourism [13].

Whilst COVID-19 started in China, it rapidly developed into a pandemic crisis that spread worldwide. Tourism industries suffered significantly due to severe restrictions, including individuals unable to leave their homes except for a small number of essential reasons. Such restrictions had significant negative impacts on travel, primarily based on tourism mobility. Such dramatic impacts may result in individuals choosing domestic travel over international travel for many years [14]. Before 2019, there were cases where local residents in some communities complained about over-tourism caused by an excess of tourists. During COVID-19, the discussion shifted to under-tourism.

It seems likely that impacts on travel behaviour from COVID-19 will have lasting effects on tourism. Changes may be trends towards short-term travel, more self-drive tourism, and an increasing interest in accommodation where sanitization is more within the individual's control. Accordingly, COVID-19 could generate new opportunities via touristic degrowth [15].

Early studies on the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, focused on uncertainty, reduced tourism activity, the negative impact on tourism, tourists' avoidance of risks, fear of viruses in travel, tourist behaviour during COVID-19, and consideration of the future of tourism post-COVID-19 [16–18]. Given that tourism is partially industrialised [19–21], impacts on tourism industries from COVID-19 would have a broad impact on a variety of sectors, such as transportation, commercial accommodation, hospitality, and events. Such impacts would result in novel behaviours and situations influenced by various elements such as social distancing, health risks, and restrictions [22].

The COVID-19 vaccines have created travel opportunities again, although some people who have been fully vaccinated, including booster shots, do fall ill, which continues the health fears for some people. Some countries made vaccination mandatory for visitors at border crossings and exits, which became a requirement for international travel in certain countries. Although vaccination became mandatory in certain countries, individuals could travel to other countries to get vaccinations [23]. The urge to travel prompted some people to receive the COVID-19 vaccination [24].

## 2.2. *Influencing Travel Preferences during COVID-19*

COVID-19 impacted many people's holiday plans. Some plans were cancelled, whilst other plans were not created due to uncertainty. In other cases, plans for some were altered so that different choices were made concerning the destination, accommodation type, mode of transportation, and duration of stay. A study undertaken in Australia during COVID-19 times highlighted that there was a desire to travel when restrictions allowed it, but that preferences were shifted toward VFR, and drive holidays [25], where people had more control over hygiene concerns, travel companions, and dining choices.

Many people wanted to escape crowds, chose less popular areas during this time, and favoured more remote accommodation facilities and locations. In fact, a study in the United States revealed 'that travelers—regardless of COVID-19 scale of accommodation type (i.e., tent or glamping)—prefer locations that provide social distance' (p. 4) [26]. Second-home and mountain tourism were also seen as excellent quarantine destinations [27]. According to Craig [26] tourist choices shifted from hotel/resort vacations toward glamping trips as a result of COVID-19. Glamping, camping, and other outdoor accommodations became an attractive alternative to hotels and motels for those travelling during the COVID-19 years. Such forms of vacations could readily remain popular in the immediate years after the pandemic.

Although the pandemic had a more significant impact on particular types of accommodation, the measures undertaken by these facilities have still been notable. The importance of hygiene, sanitation, and physical distancing was heavily highlighted in the media in many countries to reduce virus transfer risks. Giacomo et al. [28] claimed that COVID-19 affected the way prospective tourists plan for vacations because tourists value a safe accommodation facility, offering extra services and complying with precautions. Their study also draws attention to the fact that accommodation facilities' hygiene, sanitation, and

physical distance regulations could significantly shape tourist demand during and after COVID-19 [28].

### 2.3. VFR and COVID-19

VFR travel is regarded as socially significant [29], and in this manner, VFR travel is unique compared to other forms of travel. Since VFR can involve a deep connection between friends and family, it also delivers psychological and social benefits and adds to the quality of life [30]. This effect is crucial, especially in response to the adverse impact and strain of COVID-19 on individuals. VFR journeys enable guests as well as hosts to engage in a variety of tourist activities, resulting in locals undertaking touristic activities in their neighbourhoods [1]. As a result, there is a two-way interaction (VFR hosts and VFR travellers), which may benefit the well-being of the VFR host as well as the VFR traveller.

Travel restrictions and social distancing quarantine measures imposed due to COVID-19 had a significant impact on VFR travel and prevented the well-being benefits that VFR can provide. The restrictions on intra-provincial and inter-provincial travel, including funeral ceremonies, family social gatherings, and meetings, were primarily responsible for the severe impact. COVID-19 is estimated to continue to substantially influence all forms of travel, particularly VFR [31]. The fact that elderly and chronic patients are more affected by the virus has created a significant barrier to visiting relatives and friends who are elderly and chronically ill. Therefore, frequent visits to relatives and family members have been disrupted since 2019. Although, the development of the vaccine and increased familiarity with the disease have encouraged the resumption of visits since late 2021.

COVID-19 may also result in changes to VFR typologies. There are three different VFR types [5]:

- (1) Those who stay with friends/relatives and state that VFR is their main purpose of visit (Pure VFRs; PVFRs);
- (2) Those who stay in commercial accommodation but whose main purpose of the visit is to visit friends/relatives (Commercial VFRs; CVFRs); and
- (3) Those who stay with friends/relatives but do not state that VFR is their main purpose of visit (Exploiting VFRs; EVFRs).

While the significance of market share in tourism mobility has been recognised throughout time, VFR travel has rather distinct dynamics. The propensity for VFRs to select commercial accommodation or state a non-VFR purpose of visit may shift in the post-COVID-19 years as people yearn to connect with important people in their lives and be closer to them. VFR trips may be seen as regular tourism activities, but these trips have unique features. The VFR traveller forms a bond with the place while spending time with family and friends and can be regarded as an extension of the local community because they are connected to it through knowing the local resident/s. Personal financial difficulties from lost wages due to COVID-19 may reduce the propensity for holiday travel, but are less likely to prevent necessary visits to family and friends (e.g., funerals, weddings, graduations, and milestone birthdays). Thus, when these characteristics are considered, VFR may be a panacea for tourism industries, bringing stronger economic recovery in a post-COVID-19 world.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak introduced social distance, lockdowns, and restrictions, some people who lived alone or were no longer in the workforce may have experienced a greater sense of loneliness. During the height of the pandemic, some individuals developed a greater fear of death and loneliness due to limits on visiting friends and family members who were ill or in need of care [32]. Additionally, the isolation period during COVID-19 resulted in mental health issues such as depression. Isolation resulted in individuals reducing their physical distance from family and friends, increasing their sense of loneliness. Although individuals may connect digitally with friends and family, being physically together is crucial not just for socialisation but also for mental health [33].

Whilst VFR travel may be undertaken for social reasons, it may also be undertaken to visit senior relatives or friends in need of care. In other words, VFR travel may be

considered to be obligatory at times. In a post-COVID-19 destination recovery mode, VFR travel often entails expenditures such as commercial accommodation, transportation, food and beverage, entertainment, fuel, and other expenses [34]. Thus, the economic impact of VFR travel on destinations can be a supporting factor in offsetting the financial losses connected with COVID-19. For many individuals, seeing relatives and friends can be a priority. Thus, it is plausible that those who were unable to visit relatives and friends for an extended period owing to the epidemic may reasonably focus on VFR travel in a post-COVID-19 world [31]. Accordingly, this research set out to gain an understanding of in what ways COVID-19 may have impacted VFR travel, using one country, Turkey, as the destination for examination.

### 3. Method

The outbreak date of COVID-19 was January 2020, and accordingly, participants who were interviewed had travelled after January 2020. The interviewing period occurred across two months (December 2021 and January 2022). Data were collected using a structured interview form, where interviews were recorded. Potential respondents were provided with the option of selecting face-to-face or phone and were asked a series of questions relating to the variables encountered on their trip since the COVID-19 outbreak (i.e., travel after January 2020). Questions included the impact of COVID-19 on vacation participation, vacation experiences during the COVID-19 period, and the impact of COVID-19 on length of stay, the distance of the destination, means of transportation, and type of accommodation. Questions concerning VFR travel during the COVID-19 period were also included in the research. As a result, perceptions and other characteristics related to VFR travel were investigated to assess the influence of COVID-19 on VFR travel. The research included a total of 22 participants. Data saturation was achieved after 20 participants, and this was subsequently verified with 2 more participants. Thus, the number of participants was determined to be 22 when the data were replicated in the same manner.

The average interview duration was approximately 35 minutes (minimum 22, maximum 45). The participants included 9 men and 13 women, with an average age of 41 (minimum 21, maximum 68). Furthermore, just one participant was not vaccinated against COVID-19, and most participants reported that they had received three doses of vaccination (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Information about participants.

Participant	Gender	Age (Years)	COVID-19 Vaccine
P1	Female	32	2 doses
P2	Male	35	2 doses
P3	Female	29	2 doses
P4	Male	45	3 doses
P5	Male	57	3 doses
P6	Male	27	2 doses
P7	Female	40	3 doses
P8	Male	37	Unvaccinated
P9	Female	57	3 doses
P10	Male	68	3 doses
P11	Female	62	3 doses
P12	Female	21	2 doses
P13	Female	38	3 doses

Table 1. Cont.

Participant	Gender	Age (Years)	COVID-19 Vaccine
P14	Male	43	3 doses
P15	Female	40	2 doses
P16	Female	47	2 doses
P17	Male	57	4 doses
P18	Female	37	4 doses
P19	Female	30	3 doses
P20	Female	36	3 doses
P21	Male	40	3 doses
P22	Female	29	3 doses

#### 4. Results

In total, 22 in-depth interviews were collected for this study. Thematic analysis was selected as the means to analyse the data. Thematic analysis can be effective as a method for qualitative data analysis where the transcripts from in-depth interviews are read through in order to identify patterns in meaning across the different responses to obtain 'themes'. A number of key themes emerged from the results of this study. Using thematic analysis, the key themes that were clearly evident were: mobility, distance, and duration. Key themes relating to being a VFR traveller and VFR host were also captured during the analysis of this research.

##### 4.1. Travel Mobility during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 period, tourism mobility was impacted due to restrictions and health risks. The consequences were most notable in the decline in international tourism mobility [2]. Because of these international restrictions during the height of COVID-19, some people in Turkey looked to domestic travel as a substitute. Thus, domestic travel as a substitute for other travel that would otherwise have occurred in the absence of COVID-19 was a key theme among the respondents.

As an example of this situation, participant P19 said, "We made a domestic trip because there was a ban on going abroad due to COVID. We went because it was a domestic holiday for honeymoon in the country." Similarly, P1 commented, "I was planning a vacation abroad and was going to go on vacation. However, I did not make this trip due to COVID-19", and expressed how their preferences in vacation types were affected by COVID-19:

*"I wanted to stay in all-inclusive hotels. But due to COVID-19, I had to move away from holiday types where crowded people are together and turn to isolated holiday options. In the following periods, I turned to options such as renting a house from Airbnb or vacationing in the summer houses of our acquaintances".*

As was evident from respondents such as P19, regular travel plans could be considered to be risky and uncertain. Isolation was considered to be safer, and VFR was one of the options considered because of COVID conditions. That is, for some participants, such as P19, renting a house was an option in COVID conditions, as was vacationing in the homes of their friends and relatives. This was put more explicitly by participant P2 who admitted to only staying with friends and relatives until they were vaccinated because of risk. Participant P2 remarked,

*"If there weren't COVID-19, I would have stayed at the all-inclusive hotel. And I couldn't go on my holiday abroad. Instead of having a holiday in an all-inclusive and crowded environment, I turned to accommodation where we could stay independently. In fact, I did not stay in any commercial hotel except visiting friends and relatives until I was vaccinated."*

Similarly, Participant P4 reflected that VFR travel presented as the best safe option for them in COVID conditions, revealing that: “We gave up because of the crowd and the risk of transmission . . . we had to spend a more isolated holiday in my family’s summer house in Mersin.” Indeed, a key theme from the responses was that some participants preferred individual travel options and abandoned their original travel plans and instead chose to visit family and friends or take a vacation with their family. Thus, even if they could not go on a regular trip, for reasons such as the risk of transmission, they avoided staying in a room where others had been staying before them and using the items that had been used by others by selecting different travel options.

#### *4.2. Travel during COVID-19’s Early Stages and After*

As of January 2020, the influence of COVID-19 was strongly felt. There were circumstances all over the world that impeded travel or vacation, such as lockdowns, travel bans or restrictions, and entrance and departure bans to specific cities and countries. The remarks regarding participants’ first trip during COVID-19’s early stages and subsequent process highlighted how the VFR trip aimed to achieve a particular well-being benefit, as was highlighted by participant P3: “My first trip was a family visit. I went both to see our family and to have a vacation. I also think that visiting family is safer.” This was similarly captured by Participant P8, who mentioned: “In my holidays during COVID-19, we first went to our family living in another city with my spouse and child . . . Actually, I went to my family because I missed them and not to be alone in the city we live in”.

The substituting of VFR travel to replace other forms of travel that might otherwise have occurred was also captured, such as by Participant P9, who said: “We made our first trip to our son. I can say that this trip was due to longing rather than aiming for a vacation . . . I also travelled to attend my relative’s funeral. I was compelled to attend.” This was similarly highlighted by Participant P11: “I attended two weddings and stayed at the house of my acquaintances, who were the hosts of the wedding. One was my grandson’s circumcision, and the other was an acquaintance’s wedding . . . other than that, I didn’t take a vacation”. Such sentiments were echoed by Participant P13, “I first made a family visit. It was a necessity for me as a result of my yearning. Although the distance was so far away, I missed them so much that I risked everything and went to my family”.

According to the participants’ comments, family visits were regarded as significant, particularly shortly after the restrictions were eased. The vacations varied, and among the initial trips, there were variations, such as mandatory attendance at funerals (P5), visits owing to health concerns (P7), and camping (P6).

#### *4.3. Transport and Accommodation during COVID-19*

COVID-19 is a virus transmitted from one person to another, primarily through breathing. This fact implies that collecting a large group of individuals raises the likelihood of transmission. Thus, for some people, being around other people may add health concerns. Individuals may feel fear and anxiety associated with COVID-19 when travelling in commercial transportation and staying close to other people in their places of stay [35–37]. This theme was evident from participants’ statements about transportation during COVID-19, such as Participant P9: “. . . Travelling by bus . . . can take a long time, long-term contact and closed environment . . . I didn’t go to the hotel, but if I go, I can’t eat in public, I still look at cleaning and hygiene in hotels . . .”.

The way in which transit routes were altered due to COVID-19 was also echoed by Participant P4, who said, “I preferred the plane for long-distance travel. But due to COVID-19, we prefer to go in our private car wherever we go . . . we had to head to our family’s summer house”. The use of a private vehicle was also mentioned by Participant P2, who stated that: “I made every trip by my private vehicle during COVID-19 . . . I prefer clean and not too crowded hotels now. I take off my mask only after I ventilate the room for a long time”. Participant P11 also mentioned the preference for self-driving due to COVID-19 conditions saying: “I only prefer my vehicle; I do not get into other vehicles to avoid

getting sick. I stopped staying in other places during this process. I only go to my own summer house”.

Participant P8 also mentioned the use of their private vehicle, saying that: “I did not use the plane, bus or other public transport. I only travelled with my vehicle”. Similarly, Participant P14 mentioned: “. . . my spouse and I travelled by a private vehicle. We took an extended vacation, but the vaccine had a significant relief effect . . .”. Participant P12 highlighted how COVID-19 impacted accommodation choices: “We cannot always be sure about hygiene. I chose to stay at my friend’s house on my trip following [the one at the hotel], and I am planning camping for my next vacation”.

Thus, this research revealed a key theme of a movement away from public transport towards self-driving during COVID-19. Many of those who reported utilising public transportation before COVID-19 claimed that they then favoured private cars, despite the distance, and their preference for public transportation decreased. In terms of accommodation preferences, this research revealed a more individualistic approach, which revealed a more isolated approach in combination with hygiene concerns.

#### 4.4. Distance and Duration of the Trip

Trip distance and trip duration were key themes that emerged from this research, with many of the respondents highlighting that COVID-19 conditions affected either the distance they travelled or the duration of their trip. It is important to provide some broader context for the reader on issues in Turkey before outlining the responses that emerged in this research.

During the height of COVID-19, there were various prohibitions and limits in countries across the globe, and restrictions on travel included the entrance and departure from cities and countries. In Turkey, risky provinces with a high number of instances of COVID-19 were identified, and entry and exit to these cities were limited during certain periods [38]. Similar actions were undertaken in other countries; for example, in Australia, restrictions varied with each State/Territory in the country. In Turkey, bus and airline services were halted at peak early COVID-19 times where lockdowns were also established except for particular circumstances. Further, those under the age of 18 and over the age of 65 were forbidden from using public transportation.

The particular bans in place in Turkey outlined above translated in responses received from participants where trip distance/trip duration was a key theme that emerged. In particular, respondents highlighted a fear of COVID-19 transmission that was related to trip distance and duration. That is, there was a sense that risk increased when travel and accommodation durations increased. For example, Participant P3 revealed that “We preferred close places due to the ban on public transport and travel restrictions . . . we turned to short-term holidays”.

Participant P4 highlighted avoiding public transport and using a private vehicle instead: “We do not use public transport due to the risk of COVID-19. In this case, we always go on our holidays in our car”. Similarly, participant P11 commented: “I always went with my vehicle to the places I went”. This was reinforced by Participant P8, who said: “I went everywhere by my car, but if I had used public transport, I wouldn’t have been able to go long distances”. They further added that their trip duration was not impacted because “I’m going to my family and I’m on an individual vacation”.

The fear of transmission and the need for a private vehicle when visiting a VFR was highlighted by Participant P10, who said:

*Because I am over 65, I could not travel for a long time due to my age restriction. I also went to my child on my trip. In any case, my son came and took me in a private vehicle so that there was no risk to him; otherwise, I could not go, I could not go to distant places at all. Even if I visit my child, I cannot feel comfortable. We can’t even hug each other for fear of getting infected or infecting [the other party]. That’s why I stay very short when I go. (P.10)*



#### 4.5. COVID-19 and Being a VFR Traveller

The importance of VFR during COVID-19 times also emerged as a key theme in this research. As previously stated, VFR trips could be undertaken in three ways during the height of the pandemic (i.e., there are three VFR typologies). VFR visits in this research were those where the VFR traveller stayed with friends and relatives (i.e., PVFRs and EVFRs). Based on the results of this research, VFR visits during COVID-19 showed a variety of factors about the participants. A key theme was focusing on familial and friendship relationships, which is also related to a strong cultural framework, particularly in Turkey. Visiting and even fulfilling the needs of relatives such as uncles, aunts, and close family members such as mother, father, and grandparents are considered an obligation to Turks.

Furthermore, whether necessary or not, visits to friends are made consistently and regularly in Turkey as part of the culture. During family visits, it is customary to kiss the elders' hands. Furthermore, funerals, births, circumcisions, and weddings are significant occasions that Turks prioritise, and intercity travel is conducted for such purposes. These issues arose as themes in this research.

Being unsettled and only wanting to visit VFRs was mentioned by Participant P2, who said: "Before we got vaccinated, we didn't plan a vacation other than visiting our distant or close family", and further highlighted that being around unfamiliar people was: "unsettling I want to hurry and put on my mask as soon as possible, even when I'm eating at the restaurant".

Such nervousness was also expressed by participant P11, who did not leave her summer house and reported that trips focused on VFR such as attending weddings of relatives and friends. Participant P11 further said that she did not want to go any other places since her spouse was sick and elderly. For participant P5, they mentioned that COVID-19 conditions also meant that they were unable to share important VFR events such as weddings and funerals. They said: "I couldn't see my family too often, and there were instances when I couldn't even attend a funeral or a wedding. When I went, I was happy. Because we are old, we are afraid".

VFR events were captured by other respondents, such as participant P16, who said, "We had to go to my nephew for the circumcision ceremony. We entered a crowded environment, but it was a necessity." One of the most critical risks during the COVID-19 period was the fear of catching the disease or transmitting the disease to someone else during the visits. Accordingly, participants experienced this risk perception in VFR event-based trips such as weddings, funerals, and circumcision ceremonies.

Participant P8 highlighted that their VFR trips had reduced: "My visits to family and friends have decreased, I could not go comfortably . . . I have a fear that especially I can infect my own family, they may infect [me]." This theme was also captured by Participant P7: ". . . my friend had a new baby, I wanted to go, but I couldn't because I could infect them." Similarly, Participant P3 mentioned: ". . . this process has placed more responsibilities on visiting friends and relatives . . . we did not go to visits most of the time in order not to cause consequences that would have a heavy moral burden."

The early stages of restrictions affected VFR for Participant P6, who mentioned, "It is always good to spend time with friends, but I did not want to go in the first period because I did not want to stay indoors for 4-5 days with the [lockdown] restrictions".

The particular cultural impacts were also captured. Whilst disease transmission was a global concern, there were impacts on traditions that added another layer of complexity and difficulty. Regardless of gender, kissing the hands of older people is a symbol of respect for Turks. Participant P15 said, "We went to my mother's village, but we paid attention to the distance. You know, we need to kiss hands when we go, but I couldn't even kiss my mother's hand in this process". This dilemma was mentioned by Participant P12:

*Due to COVID-19, I couldn't see my friends for a long time. I put off visiting my friends not to bring the disease to my family. Likewise, I avoided visiting my relatives. I go to my grandmother from time to time, but I never take off my mask, and I disinfect my hands all*

*the time. My grandmother held out her hand because she was not very aware of COVID. I explained, "I can't kiss, grandma, there is a disease". (P12)*

#### 4.6. COVID-19 and Being a VFR Host

Those who host VFR visitors also have some fears about visits from friends and relatives. In particular, those people who are in the high-risk group, such as the elderly or those with chronic diseases, as well as those people who are especially cautious about COVID-19, can experience anxiety when accepting VFR visitors. However, the cultural values and the importance given to the guests come to the fore in Turkey, creating a complex choice for residents. These difficulties were revealed in this research with comments such as, "you can't say don't come" (P4), "... I feel uneasy, I feel a little relieved owing to the vaccine, but if anyone wants to come, we will accept" (P2), "... I didn't say 'do not come' those who say I will come ... " (P8). The particular aspects within Turkey due to culture were also explained by Participant P7, who said:

*I accepted less than before. I'll see if they have to stay with me. People don't get tested to avoid quarantine, they can walk around sick, so I wouldn't want to accept guests. Still, I can't say this is because of customs". (P7)*

Such conflict was also captured by Participant P7, who said: "... there is no guest like before, I get nervous, sometimes they come, I isolate myself, but it's a shame." The cultural significance of VFR trips, especially VFR events, was discussed by Participant P4, who said:

*We like our overnight guests very much because of our culture and family structure. We accepted guests in situations that would not be repeated, such as weddings and funerals. We accepted our relatives and friends, and everyone who made offers, at the expense of taking risks as part of social grace. (P4)*

These statements demonstrate the significance of culture, tradition, and the respect shown to the visitor, even with the risks of COVID-19. A theme from four of the respondents was that although most felt that they were unable to refuse VFR guests due to cultural expectations, some participants reported that they did refuse VFR visitors due to COVID-19. Comments included: "They did not come, we did not accept them, and they accepted it with understanding" (P11), as well as Participant P6, "I did not accept the offers to come or go during the lockdown." For Participant P5, they explained that their VFRs were asked to use alternative accommodations to reduce their risk: "Because my spouse has a chronic illness, I make sure that they [people who want to come] stay elsewhere." (P5). The fear of COVID-19 was also mentioned by Participant P21, who said, "I did not want to accept anyone because it is a contagious disease. I said it politely, and everyone agreed" (P21).

#### 4.7. Perceptions of VFR Visits during COVID-19: Visitors' and Hosts' Perspectives

The impressions of both visitors and hosts about VFR visits during COVID-19 were included in the scope of the research. Two themes arose from the research. The first is how VFR travellers see their VFR hosts, whilst the second theme is how VFR hosts perceive their VFR guests. VFR visitors may believe that their friends or relatives who they stay with have a positive or negative attitude about them staying overnight with them. Furthermore, it was evident that some of the study participants were afraid of being stigmatised when they refused VFR guests. Occasionally, this fear led them to admit VFR guests despite the risk of COVID-19. As Participant P8 said: "There is not much "don't come" in our culture". Similarly, Participant P7 said:

*I would be greeted with trepidation, but many would host. I wouldn't offer it to sick older people anyway. Even if they were nervous, they would have to host since it would be a shame. When I refused the people who wanted to come, they would say to me, 'S/he does not want to host and to use COVID-19 as an excuse'. (P7)*

Similarly, Participant P4 stated: "We also went there for fear of losing our friendship". Participant P12 also revealed, "I asked a friend who wanted to stay with us not to come

so that my mother and father would not be affected. I explained it well. Of course, he was offended because he thought I didn't want him." This cultural clash issue was also highlighted by participant P2:

*I am very cautious against COVID-19, and my relatives know this, so I don't think I will have any problems with being hosted. Some of our relatives and friends even criticised us for not going. If we do not accept, they may show resentment, although it varies from person to person. In the following processes, we may be seen as 'people who will not be offered by the people around us. We can be seen as cowards of COVID. (P2)*

The difficulties were also shared by Participant P18, who said: "I am reluctant to host guests anymore. I don't want to go. I don't want anyone to come. And I think this has become our new way of life." Similarly, Participant P22 mentioned, "I was not accepting anyone at the beginning of the pandemic. But especially after getting vaccinated, I'm not saying not to come to the person who wants to come, and I don't think it would be right either."

Resentment from friends and relatives due to avoidance was mentioned by Participant P9, who said:

*I had relatives who resented me for not going. We were offended at each other. We couldn't even go to the funeral. Sometimes they don't welcome me very well; they get nervous just as I don't host anyone. I can't say 'I'm coming' to anyone. They may reject me. It can also be a troublesome situation; I may get offended. When my mother passed away, I did not accept the people who would come. We said things like 'I can infect you'. Thus, some of our kinship ties were severed, and we moved away from people. The other party thinks that I am using the pandemic as an excuse. And they say, 'No one was paying visits to each other anyway, now the pandemic became an excuse'. Some of my relatives say, 'corona gave you an excuse'.*

The complex situation for people faced with the choice between health versus risks of offending friends and relatives if they did not visit or host them was a very clear issue captured in the responses in this research study. As Participant P17 shared:

*During this process, my father passed away, but we did not host anyone, so we said 'we are COVID positive'. We accepted our condolences outside. We could infect someone too. This plague is hard to bear. If a disease caused by me ends in death, it would be difficult to bear it. But now we are accepting guests. If someone says I want to come to you, I can't say 'don't come'. That's how we were brought up. According to our upbringing, we don't say don't come to the guest; I say come'. (P17)*

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

COVID-19 set global travel to a halt and significantly harmed tourism industries. Impacts were global, and impacts were broader than economic. The separation from friends and family caused a sense of loss for many, and the importance of VFR connections was highlighted [39]. The connection between social connections and health risks spread fear for some people in some countries and divided people even within the same country. For example, in Australia, COVID-19 cases were high in two of its states—Victoria and New South Wales—and state borders were closed. Certain allowance for interstate travel was permitted by the Government but created negative behaviours for some. As an anecdotal example, a person towing a caravan through Queensland with Victorian number plates had a sign on the back of their caravan stating, 'I reside in Queensland but just bought this caravan from Victoria'. It would seem that the driver had attracted enough negative behaviour to believe this explanation was needed. Other anecdotal examples include a person being in their Victorian vehicle on permitted travel in Queensland and engaging in friendly conversations with other people until the Victorian plates were spotted, and then the smiles disappeared, and they were shunned. Some people reported being spat at. Thus, in some cases, not only did COVID-19 limit travel movement, it created division among its own people.

Such division was captured in the responses in this research study. The importance of culture in Turkey created a particular complexity that would not have been experienced across the globe. For example, as was revealed in the research responses, some people lost connections with their friends and relatives because they either did not visit them or did not host them. In other cases, they accepted the health risk to avoid offending friends/relatives.

Whilst COVID-19 is not the first crisis that has impacted tourism, in comparison to previous significant crises, the intensity of COVID-19 as well as its duration compounded the impacts. At the time of writing, tourism mobility is still at a low level compared to the pre-COVID-19 era [4]. One of the most noteworthy projections is that touristic mobility will demonstrate a stronger inclination for domestic travel [40]. People have already started to take different types of vacations, and individualistic holidays have become more common.

While VFR travel positively impacts destinations, it also plays an essential role in tourist mobility after crises [7]. VFR travel is expected to acquire increasing importance in the post-COVID-19 era, as it fills an important social connection between people who were disabled from their usual connection opportunities [39].

This research aimed to explore the effect of COVID-19 on various components of tourist mobility and its link to the structural characteristics of VFR travel. This research revealed that aside from having travel plans impacted, COVID-19 created a conflict between travel restrictions and important and age-old cultural traditions in Turkey.

This research also revealed that some people changed their travel plans by avoiding pre-planned travel and opting for more individualistic vacations such as rental homes, bungalows, camping, caravanning, and glamping. It was further revealed that many of the individuals often made VFR trips, mainly to see relatives. Additionally, initial travel plans were often comprised of family visits (i.e., VR trips) rather than vacations (i.e., leisure trips). Travelling for vacation was substituted with VFR visits during the first phase of the epidemic, and for some individuals, VFR trips became the sole vacation plan.

This study revealed that people preferred private vehicles over public transportation. Those respondents who had the opportunity to travel almost always travelled in their vehicles, whilst those respondents who used to travel by public transport only travelled if it was deemed essential.

Even though COVID-19 vaccinations made it possible to revert to former routines, all-inclusive hotel-focused holiday habits have been altered in the initial post-COVID-19 era as some people remain nervous about crowded settings. Instead of attending large events and dining in crowded restaurants, individuals have switched to accommodation establishments with less contact. This has also impacted VFR as people reported wanting to avoid crowded environments such as at VFR events (e.g., weddings, funerals, circumcision ceremonies).

Similarly, accommodation businesses with limited rooms have become more popular than hotels with overcrowded and shared spaces. This condition has increased the demand for individualistic holidays, which has resulted in an upsurge in pricing in isolated vacation alternatives. So much so that residents seeking to leave Turkey's crowded cities have triggered a surge in house prices in holiday locations, almost doubling [41]. It was discovered that several participants vacationed in their own summer house or their parent's summer house during COVID-19. As a result, several participants decided to prolong their holiday durations. Due to COVID-19, some firms shut down, and others laid off their employees. When combined with price rises, this circumstance has resulted in economic issues. Thus, it can be said that the economic environment has also been influential on holiday accommodation types. Avoiding long-term vacation expenditures at hotels by staying in family's vacation houses is one example of a shift that has occurred as a result of COVID-19.

In the early phases of COVID-19, Turkey imposed a restriction on public transportation and various lockdowns on those under 18 and above 65. This issue had a significant impact on how people used vehicles during their vacations, the length of their vacation, and the distance travelled to enjoy a vacation. People started to travel shorter distances,

and vacation lengths were shortened. Additionally, price rises in accommodation that provide options for individualistic vacations, which have been raised as a result of COVID-19's indirect effects, might separately result in reducing the length of stay for travellers. Although, staying at a family summer house may extend the vacation length.

Since COVID-19 affects all tourism mobility, it also affects VFR travel. This research focused on a few key factors to assess VFR travel status during COVID-19. This issue is also linked to the cultural point of view because it should be considered that VFR travel entails various cultural elements, cultural values and beliefs that may influence how VFR travellers behave [42]. Visiting relatives and friends in Turkey may be assessed in terms of moral and social obligations. The view that all relatives, particularly close family members, have responsibilities toward one another is important.

According to the findings of this research, the fear of getting or spreading COVID-19 dominated visits to family and friends. This concern limited VFR trips and altered their length, frequency, and nature. This condition is also evident in visits to friends and relatives in the high-risk category and with chronic illnesses. VFR trips are often undertaken with a yearning, affection, and desire to see, whether for adults or children. Even under these circumstances, the participants noticed and acknowledged a shift in behaviour throughout the visits.

As mentioned in this paper, under normal conditions, as a prerequisite of showing respect for the older people in Turkish culture, younger people kiss the elders' hands. For children and young people to not kiss the hands of adults is often seen as a disrespectful and impolite action [43]. It was asserted that even this rule is not made to protect the elderly in the visits. Thus, centuries-old customs were impacted by the pandemic and may be compromised in the future as an ongoing by-product of COVID-19.

Further, according to Turkish culture, VFR travel is deemed compulsory-voluntary. Being a VFR host exposed one to the threat of COVID-19. It can be argued that because of the significance placed on the visitor in Turkish society, the attitude that the guest who comes to the home is not rejected is prevalent. It is nonetheless seen that guests are not accepted in certain circumstances owing to the pandemic conditions.

Additionally, there are various views about VFR travel that took place during COVID-19. For instance, the host may welcome the visitor if the VFR guest lives alone and adheres to the COVID-19 health precautions. However, in typical VFR travel, the worry of VFR hosts was acknowledged. This was especially prevalent for VFR events, which involve crowded environments. Mutual understanding also impacts the VFR traveller and the VFR host's acceptance or rejection. For instance, if the host is concerned about the person staying at home due to COVID-19 or lives with potentially high-risk people, the scenario was seen as more acceptable when the host refuses the guest. Regardless, individuals who do not accept VFR guests might carry the fear of being labelled even if they are a minority. Fear of being mistreated by friends or family, jeopardising their connection and evoking resentment might also impact their choice to receive VFR guests marginally. Again, this might be due to cultural differences unique to Turkey. However, some people refused to accept VFR visitors during COVID-19, and this may impact those connections and the appetite for those VFR trips in a post-COVID-19 environment.

Even with borders open and vaccination rates improved, the future for travel in the short to medium term remains uncertain. How COVID-19 experiences will impact travel motivation is also unclear. VFR trips were impacted in various complex ways during the height of COVID-19, creating conflict between health concerns and cultural concerns in Turkey. In what ways, if any, those impacts are felt in the future remains unknown but an important matter to follow. Cultures sometimes fade over time, and some historic cultures in Turkey may fade because of how COVID-19 forced change upon a society that valued centuries-old customs. This paper is limited in several ways, including the sample size and that the focus is on one country. The findings from this study may not be generalisable in other settings, and indeed, because of the unique culture in Turkey, these authors expect that these results will not be generalisable across the globe. However, it is felt that this

uniqueness adds to its significance. Many VFR travel studies are based in western countries. A study such as this one undertaken in a western country would be unlikely to yield these results. However, the unique cultural issues that complicated VFR choices for people in Turkey are significant to understand, as the impacts of COVID-19 may change Turkish culture to some extent forever. Following this impact in Turkey as well as other different countries to see how COVID-19 impacts cultural behaviour amongst VFRs would be a valuable study for scholars to pursue.

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