

High street resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: Shopkeepers' strategies of Istiklal Avenue, Istanbul

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Abstract

This study investigates the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on high streets, focusing on Istiklal Avenue, a historical shopping street in Istanbul, Türkiye. It seeks to uncover the relationship between the resilience of the high street and the response strategies of shopkeepers by examining how they coped with the challenges of the pandemic, adapted to changing conditions, and adopted immediate, temporary, or permanent strategies. To this end, 71 businesses' shopkeepers, managers, and employees were interviewed in-depth to gain a subjective and profound understanding of their micro-resilience. The findings reveal that businesses in and around Istiklal Avenue responded to the COVID-19 crisis through preventive measures to contain the spread of the pandemic, operational and financial strategies, space adaptations, and alternative interventions, as well as a widespread preference for inaction. These strategies are closely linked to the policies implemented by central and local governments during the pandemic, government support and incentives, and the ability of businesses to take advantage of these policies. Additionally, the response to the crisis is significantly influenced by business characteristics, including sector, activity, size and crisis experience. Significantly, the study highlights a mutually reinforcing relationship between the resilience of high street businesses and the overall resilience of the high street itself. The historical continuity of the high street, its previous crisis experiences, its ability to adapt quickly to the changing conditions of each period, and therefore the resilience of the high street becomes a guiding factor in the decision-making mechanisms of the shopkeepers and increases their resilience.

Keywords

COVID-19, Crisis response strategies, High street, Istiklal Avenue, Resilience.

1. Introduction

Starting from late 2019 and spreading globally over the next two years, the COVID-19 pandemic, considered more than a health crisis in terms of its scale, causes, and effects, has led to various vulnerabilities and inequalities at different levels (United Nations, 2021). High streets have become one of the most vulnerable places during the COVID-19 crisis, as it has strained their capacities, disrupted daily activities, caused damages, posed threats, and exposed their vulnerabilities, highlighting the visible inequality.

High streets, referred to as commercial urban corridors in cities, are not only economic hubs, but also complex socio-spatial environments where socialization and culture are produced, sometimes even surpassing mere economic significance. Distinguished from other urban components, they serve a high level of public space function and are characterized by inclusivity, diversity, vibrancy, crowds, uniqueness, and place attachment, while also maintaining connections to global geographies, often holding symbolic meanings for cities. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, these unique characteristics of high streets have made them vulnerable to a variety of risks, in addition to the more common risks faced by cities. These risks stem from a multitude of environmental, socio-economic and political factors, including natural disasters, climate change, economic crises, terrorist attacks, social movements, urban policies, sectoral dynamics, technological advancement and epidemics. While other changes, shocks, crises in the past and the COVID-19 pandemic have severely damaged the everyday functioning of some high streets and caused them to lose their vitality and viability in the future, some high streets have either been minimally affected by such crises or have continued to maintain their identity and function by adapting and, if necessary, transforming. In the face of future crises, there is a fundamental need to discuss what ensures the resilience of high streets, especially in historic town centres where traditional retailing still dominates and the shopping function has been maintained

through many crises and changes over many years. The COVID-19 crisis provides a unique opportunity to conduct such a debate.

Correspondingly, this research aims to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on historical high streets, exploring the concept of resilience to uncover how businesses in the area were affected, how shopkeepers, managers and employees coped with the pandemic's impacts, and what strategies they used to survive and adapt in the new normality, taking Istiklal Avenue as a case study. Based on the concept of panarchy (Gunderson & Holling, 2002), which refers to the interconnected levels in social-ecological systems and the multi-level interactions between these levels, the research considers the high streets as a focal system and the businesses located on the high streets as a micro-level system. Therefore, this study is based on the assumption that high street resilience and business micro-resilience are related, and this relationship is examined rather than all the components of high street resilience.

The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, the theoretical background of high street resilience is presented, along with a review of the literature expanded by COVID-19 crisis-related studies. The subsequent section offers an overview of Istiklal Avenue, a historic city center in Istanbul, Türkiye, outlining the COVID-19 pandemic's course. The fourth part encompasses case specifics, involving in-depth interviews with 71 shopkeepers, managers, and employees, along with the analysis of findings related to shopkeepers' crisis response strategies. The final section discusses high street resilience and shopkeepers' crisis response strategies, concluding the study.

2. High street resilience

High streets, encompassing not only an economic system but also social, physical, environmental, political, and administrative systems, are regarded as complex and dynamic urban ecosystems (Griffiths et al., 2008; Zukin et al., 2015), with their resilience acknowledged as a facet necessitating enhancement in the face of ongoing

uncertainties, shifts, and manifold crises. In its broadest sense, based on social-ecological system resilience, the resilience of high streets encompasses the ability to sustain their functioning and maintain their identity in the face of sudden or gradual changes, crises and uncertainties, while at the same time being capable of adapting to new conditions, seizing new opportunities and effectively benefiting from new potential (Fernandes & Chamusca, 2014; Hudson, 2010; Meerow et al., 2016; Salgueiro, 2011). The absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities of good resilience (Béné et al., 2012) recognised in socio-ecological systems also apply to high street resilience, and all components and actors of the high street are considered in building resilience.

The concept of resilience to high streets was initially developed from economic geography literature and utilized with a focus on urban retail (Dolega & Celinska-Janowicz, 2015; Wrigley & Dolega, 2011). Following the financial crisis of 2007-2008, Wrigley and Dolega's (2011) "Resilience, Fragility, and Adaptation: New Evidence on the Performance and Policy Implications of UK High Streets during the Global Economic Crisis" was a pioneering study exploring the resilience of high streets. In the years to come, initial comprehensive research primarily took place under the REPLACIS project, a collaborative effort involving scholars from Portugal, France, Sweden, and Türkiye, focused on urban retail and urban resilience (Balsas, 2014; Barata-Salgueiro & Erkip, 2014; Cachinho, 2014; Erkip et al., 2014; Fernandes & Chamusca, 2014; Kärrholm et al., 2014; Ozuduru et al., 2014; Yalciner Ercoskun & Ozuduru, 2014). These studies reveal that city centers and high streets in countries such as Portugal and Türkiye have distinct issues compared to those in English, American, and certain European cities. The debate on the resilience of the retail sector in emerging markets has centred on the impact of the global economic crisis as well as structural and spatial changes in urban retail. While British and American cities underwent retail decentralisation in the second half of the 20th century due

to the impact of out-of-town shopping centres, and traditional high streets faced death in the face of modern retail, this retail transformation in developing countries has only emerged as a threat to high streets since the 2000s. For instance, the structural transformation of retail, defined as small, capital-weak, independent, family-run businesses (Tokatli & Ozcan, 1998) in large cities such as Ankara and Istanbul in Türkiye, towards modern retail only became visible with the opening of shopping malls in both city centres and peripheries in the 2010s (Erkip et al., 2014; Erkip & Ozuduru, 2015; Ozuduru et al., 2014; Yalciner Ercoskun & Ozuduru, 2014), i.e. while the resilience agenda of developed countries is shaped around the renewal of city centres and high streets and the global crisis. Nevertheless, regardless of the underlying rationale, high streets have been jeopardized by modern retailing, leading to increased vacancy rates, vulnerability to economic conditions, shifting customer preferences due to the rise of online shopping, and the loss of their former vibrancy and viability. Consequently, the phenomenon of death of high streets has been frequently declared, particularly in English and American cities, prompting discussions on the causes of this decline, methods for restoring their vitality and viability, and strategies to enhance their resilience (Hall, 2011; Hubbard, 2017; Hughes & Jackson, 2015; Millington & Ntounis, 2017; Parker et al., 2017; Singleton et al., 2016; Talen & Jeong, 2019; Wrigley & Lambiri, 2015). These research efforts have contributed not only academically, but also through reports published by various institutions or researchers, addressing the specific needs of high street management organizations. Research encompassing the broader context of urban policies supporting high streets has been crucial for both identifying the problems faced by high streets and offering action-oriented strategies in areas such as cloning, digitalization, and walkability etc. (Brett & Alakeson, 2019; Genecon LLP and Partners, 2011; Good Growth by Design, 2019; Grimsey et al., 2020; High Streets Task Force, 2020a, 2020b; New Economics

Foundation, 2010; Portas, 2011).

The COVID-19 pandemic has marked a new turning point in the discourse on high streets and their resilience. The widespread implementation of lockdowns, quarantines, mandatory government measures, near cessation of economic activity and gradual changes in human behavior have highlighted the need to reconsider and discuss the resilience of high streets.

While there were significant concerns about the resilience of high streets at the beginning of the pandemic, the academic literature has since broadened its focus to include the impacts of the pandemic on high streets, the factors influencing their resilience, the crisis response strategies of businesses on high streets, and the high street's future role. Carmona (2022) argues that the rise of online shopping has created an existential crisis for high streets, emphasizing the need for them to offer options beyond retail and to be reimagined as experiential places where social interactions are enhanced. Lashgari and Shahab (2022) support Carmona's perspective through a literature review, showing that the rise of online shopping during COVID-19 has led to changes in customer preferences, resulting in declining footfall in city centers and posing a long-term risk to the vitality of high streets. In contrast, Popławska (2021), using the case of Poland, highlights that high streets experienced a revival during the pandemic compared to shopping malls, representing an opportunity for their future, thus offering a more optimistic outlook for high streets.

Some studies of the pandemic have focused on the characteristics of high streets that contribute to their resilience. For example, in a study of footfall in six UK city centers, Enoch et al. (2022) found that smaller centers are likely to be more resilient than larger centers due to utilitarian shopping and proximity, highlighting that footfall is not only criteria for vibrancy but also for resilience. Hill and Cheshire (2023) found that in the UK, high streets with more basic service retailers, and therefore more shops open during compulsory closures, were more resilient, while streets with pre-pandemic in-

stability, high vacancy rates and high tenant turnover were less resilient.

Studies have also focused on the response strategies of high street businesses during the crisis. For example, Appel and Hardaker (2021) identified the factors influencing the resilience of textile retailers in Würzburg, Germany, including local government management style, financial situation, infection rates, self-assessment, innovation willingness of business owners, pre-crisis business status, and property ownership/leasing. In a related study, they examined e-commerce strategies and analyzed subjective and objective components of businesses' resilience (Hardaker et al., 2022). Additionally, Nanda et al. (2021) focused on e-commerce and digitalization, discussing future retail scenarios on high streets and the strategies physical stores should adopt. It should be emphasized that while there are studies in the business resilience literature that explore businesses' response strategies to the COVID-19 crisis (Bressan et al., 2021; Chang et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2022; Katare et al., 2021; Klöckner et al., 2023; Klyver & Nielsen, 2021; Miklian & Hoelscher, 2022; Morgan et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020), there is a notable lack of research specifically focusing on the response strategies of high streets' businesses.

The effects of the pandemic are beginning to fade away, researches have also addressed the characteristics that future high streets should embody, including policy considerations for their resilience (Sparks, 2021) and the need for a comprehensive framework that evaluates sustainability, livability, vitality, adaptability and resilience approaches for high streets (Ntounis et al., 2023). More broadly, the future of high streets involves their transformation into multifunctional centers supported by cultural and entertainment opportunities, encompassing tourism, sport and residential areas, and serving as social and experiential spaces (Carmona, 2022; Grimsey et al., 2020; Local Government Association, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2021; Ntounis et al., 2023; Sparks,

2021).

Upon reviewing the literature, various studies have assessed the resilience of high streets in terms of the diversity of functions and retail mix, the characteristics of the physical environment, location and accessibility, the presence of supporting institutional structures and their funding, the role of government, the presence, profile and preferences of users. However, what businesses, which play a crucial role in contributing to the vitality and viability of high streets, providing essential shopping and entertainment functions and shaping their distinctive identities, do during and after the crisis and their impact on street resilience has not been adequately addressed. It becomes evident that understanding the effects of a multi-faceted crisis like COVID-19 on a high street with the history, continuity, and super-diverse character already suggested for future high streets is essential to exploring high street resilience. Furthermore, we believe that the resilience of high streets lies in the ability of businesses to survive, adapt, explore new opportunities, take radical decisions if necessary, and ultimately gain experience to prepare for future crises.

This research aims to fill an existing gap in the literature by examining the crisis response strategies of businesses located on high streets during the COVID-19 crisis, thereby enriching the understanding of high street resilience. Conducted within a high street, Istiklal Avenue, characterized by historical continuity, super diverse, and substantial crisis experience, the study's in-depth interviews with shopkeepers, managers, and employees are anticipated to provide valuable insights into the subjective facets of micro level resilience. It is believed that these interviews will offer profound insights into the unique practical experiences of each business, facilitating a deeper comprehension of their distinctive operational strategies.

3. Istiklal Avenue and COVID-19 pandemic

Istiklal Avenue in the historic center of Istanbul, Beyoğlu district, was one of the high streets that faced various

challenges during the COVID-19 crisis due to its long history as an active shopping street for over 150 years. Spanning 1.4 km, this pedestrianized street boasts Türkiye's highest footfall (Cushman & Wakefield, 2022a), stands 30th globally in priciest high streets (Cushman & Wakefield, 2022b) serves as Istanbul's inaugural Western-style shopping destination, harbors diverse commercial and societal roles across sectors beyond retail. Unlike traditional high streets, Istiklal Avenue is not only characterized by its pedestrian section in terms of function and perception. It is intimately connected with the ground and upper floors of the buildings lining the street and all the surrounding streets, as well as the numerous passages, hans and shopping centers. Therefore, the high street is not just limited to the definition of a retail hub, but rather represents a super-diverse high street that includes different urban and public functions, such as shopping, manufacturing, culture, arts, sports, tourism, dining, entertainment, offices, administration, education, healthcare and religious activities, which approximately 4000 commercial units (Türkün et al., 2021).

Due to its own historical background, location, ideological, symbolic and economic value, Istiklal Avenue has experienced multiple economic crises, terrorist incidents, social movements, neoliberal urban policies, and various sectoral decisions and legal processes at different times. A study by Türkün et al. (2021) revealed that the avenue has gone through cycles of decline and revival, experiencing multiple downturns but consistently recovering and adapting to the conditions of each period. Therefore, the shopkeepers, managers and employees, both on the Avenue and in the surroundings streets, have acquired considerable experience in dealing with slow changes and crises. However, they testified that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a uniquely challenging situation.

In the context of Istiklal Avenue, the COVID-19 trajectory in Türkiye commenced with the identification of the first case on March 11, 2020. Swiftly thereafter, the government initiated multifaceted strategies to mitigate the

pandemic's dissemination. Measures encompassed border closures, flight cancellations, compulsory quarantine for travellers, social distancing enforcement, remote work adoption, online education implementation, curfews, and urban transit restrictions. These measures had a substantial initial impact on high street businesses. Notably, on March 15, 2020, coinciding with the first COVID-19-related fatality in Türkiye, businesses started to be gradually shut down depending on their sectors and activities like cinemas, cafes, gyms. Subsequently, barbershops, beauty centres, and dining businesses joined the temporary closure. Then, the dining sector transitioned to takeaway and delivery services, while essential stores adjusted their schedules and patron capacity. This first comprehensive lockdown lasted until 1 June 2020 and included harsh conditions for Istiklal Avenue shopkeepers, unprecedented in their experience on the Avenue. This was followed by a secondary lockdown from 18 November 2020 to 28 February 2021, and then from 29 April to 17 May 2021. From 17 May 2021, the gradual normalisation was completed on 1 June 2022, with the lifting of the still partial mask requirement and the COVID-19 PCR/antigen testing requirement.

From the beginning of the pandemic, mandatory lockdowns, aimed at preventing the spread of the pandemic, have been reinforced by the government through several hygiene practices as well as economic support packages and incentives. For instance, the Ministry of Health released the "COVID-19 Pandemic Management and Workplace Guide" on 25 June 2020, which details vital protocols that need to be implemented across different sectors and activities in order to maintain hygiene practices. To alleviate the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic, the first support announced on 18 March 2020 was the Economic Stability Shield Measure Package, which included support such as suspension of social security premiums and VAT deductions/payments, the postponement of income tax payments, the interest-free postponement of loan payments, and short-time work

allowances for employees. In addition, during the following period, support packages were announced, such as the Tradesmen's Support Package, the Basic Needs Support Package, the Cash Wage Support, the Direct Income Support and the Turnover Loss Support. While some of these instruments were organised for the pandemic, others were created by adapting a number of existing instruments. It is important to note, however, that there is no direct support or incentive for high streets or town centres as part of this process.

Despite the considerable lockdowns and rigorous government-mandated hygiene measures, which presented significant obstacles, Istiklal Avenue was able to sustain an appreciably higher footfall than other high streets in Istanbul, even during periods of severe restrictions and business closures (Cushman & Wakefield, 2022a). Moreover, following the gradual easing of restrictions, the high street regained its former vibrancy with great enthusiasm and witnessed even denser crowds than before. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how businesses on Istiklal Avenue responded during the pandemic crisis, in order to comprehend the reasons, decisions, and time frames for these responses, evaluate the factors that impacted the responses, and debate the ways in which these resilience efforts on a micro level contributed to the overall viability, vitality, and consequently, resilience of the Avenue.

4. Case study

4.1. Methodology

The research adopted a firm-level approach to examine how shopkeepers, managers, and employees navigated the COVID-19 crisis and devised survival and recovery strategies. Utilizing semi-structured in-depth interviews, the study aimed to comprehend contextual nuances and evaluate their experiences. The interviews, comprising 45-60 tailored questions, followed a general structure, beginning with an introduction to gather business and participant information, progressing to a comprehensive analysis of the pandemic's evolution, and concluding with discussions on experiences, the present situation, and expectations for

Istiklal Avenue.

Quota, snowball, and purposive sampling methods were utilised to construct the sample. The study's targeted objectives were enhanced through the use of quota sampling, which ensured comprehensive representation across sectors and localities, snowball sampling, which leveraged pre-existing participant relationships, and purposive sampling, which effectively addressed sample gaps. Sample size was achieved through data and thematic saturation, often used in qualitative studies (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The selection was consistently revised until all crucial matters and perceptions were addressed. Even though a thematic saturation was achieved due to the semi-structured interviews, the complexity of the topic and the diversity of sectors, activities, business characteristics and locations were factors in achieving a meaningful saturation of the data.

Between 1 June 2022, when the gradual normalisation ended in Türkiye, and 6 October 2022, 71 interviews were conducted with shopkeepers, managers or employees in Istiklal Avenue and its neighbouring areas. The interviews were conducted in Turkish, recorded with the participants' consent, and later transcribed for analysis. In addition, it is considered that the involvement of the researchers in a research project covering a wider area over three years, including the onset of the pandemic and the pre-pandemic period, coupled with field observations during all phases of the pandemic, has contributed to the study.

4.2. Prefatory remarks

The data collected from 71 interviewees, comprising 10 females and 61 males, including 29 shopkeepers, 18 managers, and 24 employees, provides a diverse perspective on the sectors, activities, and business characteristics represented by the interviewees in the Istiklal Avenue and surrounding area. The distribution of interviews by sector is as follows: 32% in the food & beverage sector, which includes restaurants, cafes, patisseries, bars, and taverns; 30% in the retail sector,

mainly includes clothing, cosmetics, book, jewellery, and gift shops; 14% in the services sector, such as beauty salons, dry cleaners, tailors, and funeral services; 11% in the culture, arts, entertainment, and sports sector, which involves cinemas, sports halls, and museums; 9% in the office sector, incorporating publishing, real estate, and tourism agencies; and 4% in the tourism sector, mainly hotels.

The businesses interviewed comprised of 51% micro, 21% small, 7% medium, and 21% large-sized businesses. Of these, 7 were foreign franchises, and 8 were domestic franchises. It is important to note that employees interviewed in these chains were often not directly involved in the decision-making process, or it was difficult to find former employees in these businesses with sufficient knowledge of the pandemic process. There were also 10 local chain establishments and 45 independent businesses, making a total of 63 local brands. Regardless of their location on or around Istiklal Avenue, 86% of the businesses were tenant businesses and ownership was very low, regardless of their size, origin, or type.

4.3. Crisis response strategies of shopkeepers in Istiklal Avenue

In the case of the businesses interviewed, different strategies were implemented at different stages of the crisis. While some of these interventions were mandated by the government and ranged from immediate to temporary or permanent measures, others were initiated at the discretion of shopkeepers, managers or employees. The responses of the businesses were broadly categorized into interventions aimed at preventing the spread of the pandemic, operational interventions, financial interventions, space adaptations, and alternative interventions independent of the existing business. In addition to active interventions, it was also noted that many businesses remained passive, and the reasons for and consequences of this passive waiting warrant further discussion.

4.3.1. Measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic

Businesses' initial response to COVID-19 focused on preventing the spread of the pandemic, and a significant portion of these measures were mandated by governments worldwide, leaving limited room for individual preferences. In Istiklal Avenue, the first action taken by all businesses from mid-March 2020 was mandatory closure. For essential businesses that were allowed to remain open without a complete closure, regulations were introduced regarding working hours and the number of customers allowed inside.

During the different phases of the pandemic, the closure decisions and working hours imposed by the government varied according to the sector and the activity, resulting in considerable disparities between the businesses on Istiklal Avenue, which were keenly felt and recognized by shopkeepers. While many shops remained completely closed for 2 months, specific activities such as bars, clubs and internet cafes were forced to remain closed for as long as 16 months. The prolonged closures, restricted working hours and even the continued ban on music after full reopening of entertainment businesses such as tavern or pubs, which are generally dependent on the nighttime economy, were strongly criticized by interviewees. In addition, the local authority's practice of granting licenses for the same function under different names in different years has led to unfair implementation of closure decisions. For example, the manager of a corporate coffee shop chain with two branches on the Avenue, Interviewee 61, mentioned that while the first branch they opened was not affected by the closure decisions, the newer one remained closed for months. The reason for this discrepancy was the different categorization of the licenses, with one being a 'café' and the other a 'cafeteria'. On the other hand, it was observed that some food and beverage businesses, despite being allowed to operate through takeaway or home delivery services during mandatory closures, chose to keep their shops closed for a period of time as they struggled to

adapt to these new service options. The closure measures by the government prevented businesses from actively adopting coping strategies.

Hygiene measures are another set of measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Health published documents with specific guidelines and measures for businesses to follow, making an "Intra-Enterprise Pandemic Measures Plan" mandatory for businesses (2020). These measures covered a number of aspects of workplace operations, including opening and closing hours, use of open and closed areas, surveillance, compliance with social distancing rules, maintenance of cleanliness in common areas, display of informative posters and signage, compliance with air conditioning and ventilation regulations, and waste management protocols. In addition, measures to protect employees and customers included social distancing, wearing masks, face shields, gloves, appropriate clothing, temperature checks and vigilance about space utilization. The interviewees have highly embraced hygiene practices, and even though they are no longer mandatory due to the changing course of the pandemic, they have become integrated as permanent practices.

4.3.2. Operational interventions

The crisis responses of businesses to the COVID-19 crisis are predominantly evident in operational interventions. These interventions encompass various adjustments related to employees, working hours, diversification and modifications in sales/service channels, as well as changes in marketing and management strategies. Businesses have gone beyond mere prevention and have implemented coping strategies, adaptations, and permanent changes to navigate the challenges of the pandemic.

The pandemic has led businesses to reduce their workforce as a cost-cutting measure due to the decreased customer capacity. The government's support tool known as the Short-Term Work Allowance for employees has been extensively utilized, with businesses

applying for the allowance for their employees when their operations came to a complete halt or decreased by at least one-third, providing payment for non-working days. Additionally, some employees chose to take unpaid leave or utilize their annual/paid leave. As an additional strategy, businesses adopted shift work and remote working to reduce the number of employees. Some of the employees interviewed also used short-term individual strategies, such as returning to their hometowns to reduce rent expenses, engaging in trading activities, or working as couriers for the same business. Despite not being explicitly addressed in the interviews, it is worth noting the presence of a considerable number of uninsured workers in the vicinity who could not avail themselves of these supports. Moreover, despite shopkeepers expressing sensitivity towards layoffs, it is noticeable that certain highly skilled workers, who had long been part of their sectors, are no longer employed on the Avenue.

Operational responses to the pandemic included adjustments in working hours, where government regulations-imposed restrictions on businesses' opening and closing times based on risk levels and activities. Businesses generally complied with these restrictions, and some voluntarily modified their working hours to ensure a safer environment. However, some businesses were still not allowed to operate at all during this period.

The third operational intervention involved businesses diversifying their sales and service channels, including online sales, home services, takeaway and home delivery, and developing alternative services/products. Online sales have been the most prominent coping and adaptation strategy in the retail sector. For example, many second-hand book sellers in Sahaflar Pasaji survived by solely relying on online sales, while some closed their shops and continued their operations with only warehouse expenses. The food and beverage sector also witnessed the implementation of delivery services as a reflection of this strategy. However, transitioning to these digital platforms posed challenges for micro and small

businesses due to registration requirements, commission fees, inadequate technological skills, and the nature of their products or services not aligning with online strategies. Some entrepreneurs, like Interviewee 47, faced difficulties in meeting the platform requirements and reverted to in-person services once restrictions were lifted, indicating that the shift to online was a necessity and not a long-term strategy. Other shopkeepers on Istiklal Avenue have similarly asserted that they did not perceive the necessity for an alternative sales channel, attributing it to the bustling pedestrian traffic the avenue typically experiences both before and after the pandemic-induced disruptions. On the other hand, corporate and large businesses, such as an international chain coffee shop managed by Interviewee 61, successfully adapted to online sales by collaborating with major digital platforms, changing packaging, and expanding their product offerings. Similarly, Interviewee 71, a senior employee at a museum with a library, utilized closure periods to digitize resources and organize online events during the pandemic. Therefore, the success of using online sales/service strategies was influenced by the business's characteristics, specialized workforce, availability of financial resources for innovation, and motivation for embracing innovation.

One of the key strategies for diversifying sales and service channels is the implementation of take-away services. Following the relaxation of full closure measures, food and beverage establishments were allowed to offer only take-away and home delivery services to prevent the spread of the pandemic. While this encouraged businesses, the positive impact was not as significant as that of take-away services. The decline in local customers on the Avenue and the ban on tourists entering the country resulted in a considerable reduction in footfall and, consequently, in the use of take-away services. For instance, Interviewee 64, the manager of a frozen yogurt shop, mentioned attempting to compensate for the closure's effects by introducing a product change and offering fruit juice as a take-away option, but due to the limited foot traffic, they

were not successful and temporarily closed the business until full reopening.

Although not directly implemented in interviews, some professionals discussed home-based services. For instance, Interviewee 68, a tattoo artist, mentioned considering providing tattoos at clients' homes if closures prolonged. Another strategy used was to develop alternative products. Interviewee 26, who owns a restaurant serving local cuisine, mentioned the development of alternative products and expressed his intention to start selling organic products, although it should be noted that such examples were limited.

Regarding the fourth operational intervention is making changes in marketing and management strategies. Only the manager of an international chain sports retail store, Interviewee 65, mentioned making changes in their marketing strategy by reopening physical stores with discounts and adapting to the process by implementing open stock management due to more active online sales. This strategy is closely related to the size of the business and its financial capabilities, and micro and small businesses were already struggling to cope with existing challenges and were not in a position to make such moves.

4.3.3. Financial interventions

As consistently reported by interviewees, the pandemic's toughest challenge for businesses was the ongoing operating costs, including significant fixed expenses like rent, utilities, and taxes during closures. As a result, businesses frequently resorted to financial interventions, including cost-cutting measures, using personal savings, using family resources, borrowing funds, taking out loans, benefiting from government support and incentives, and transferring business ownership.

Businesses utilized cost reduction strategies by optimizing their expenses, particularly at the household level, due to the complete closure of businesses. At the business level, cost reduction measures were perceived as workforce reduction, though not explicitly men-

tioned by interviewees, and limiting the use of mechanical equipment to reduce bill payments. Emphasizing the financial lesson from the pandemic, businesses stressed saving and cost reduction as a coping strategy, with a common preparation for future crises being an emphasis on individual savings. This is because it was observed that individual savings were the most effective financial strategy, especially for micro and small businesses that could not benefit from government support and incentives. During the interviews, the participants repeatedly emphasized feeling alone and believed that they could only overcome crises through individual savings. In addition to savings, some businesses tried to mitigate the impact of the crisis by selling personal assets, albeit on an individual basis. In some cases, the capacity of individual savings was slightly exceeded, and in family businesses, it was a common strategy to utilize family resources, with businesses benefiting from profits generated by other family ventures.

It was observed that businesses without sufficient individual savings resorted to taking loans or borrowing as alternative financial strategies. In Türkiye, the government's major incentive was aimed at facilitating businesses' access to credit. As part of the Economic Stability Shield Package, agreements were made with banks to prevent legal actions against companies facing payment difficulties, providing flexibility and deferment options for loan payments to maintain financial stability and credit credibility. Additionally, credit support was offered to businesses with the condition of not reducing their workforce. However, the positive impact of these measures on Istiklal Avenue was rarely seen. Some businesses reported relying on credit to cover their expenses, and even though they had taken loans, they still faced ongoing financial challenges. Some interviewees mentioned borrowing personally to pay employee salaries rather than for the business itself. On the other hand, micro and small businesses were found to initially utilize individual savings before considering

borrowing when they preferred not to take loans.

As highlighted earlier, various government agencies and chambers of commerce in Türkiye offered support and incentive packages to businesses, ranging from tax and premium payment deferrals to grants, rental assistance and loss of turnover support. These initiatives were aimed at facilitating businesses' access to finance and easing their financial burden. Despite these efforts, feedback from interviewees revealed several concerns and criticisms regarding the effectiveness and adequacy of these supports. Criticisms were raised about the insufficiency of tax and withholding deferrals, the lack of systematic criteria for determining eligible businesses, inconsistent practices between businesses operating and not operating, inadequate funding allocations, the absence of regulations concerning tenants, and the difficulties faced by employees who received short-term work allowances when claiming unemployment benefits and insurances later on. Particularly, the regulation related to tenancy received the most criticism as rent payments were the most burdensome expense for tenant businesses during the pandemic. The provided rent support from the government was a maximum of 79 € per month, which was insufficient considering the average rent level of €1,175 m²/year (Cushman & Wakefield, 2022b) on Istiklal Avenue. Moreover, most businesses on the field could not meet the criteria to receive rent aid. Apart from this inadequate rent support, there were no specific regulations made by the government regarding tenant businesses, and only individual cases were found where landlords showed solidarity by postponing or not collecting rent for a certain period. Unfortunately, the government's support fell short for businesses on Istiklal Avenue.

The final financial intervention is the transfer of ownership, and three transferred businesses were interviewed in this study. A clothes shop was transferred to survive the pandemic, a café due to insufficient individual savings at the time of closure and a dry-cleaning service due to demands for rent in-

creases. In the last case, the shopkeeper's consideration of retirement made the transfer a successful and timely financial decision, highlighting the importance of the shopkeeper's experience and foresight.

4.3.4. Space adaptations

Businesses on Istiklal Avenue made space reconfigurations during the pandemic, such as changing the functionality of their spaces, rearranging and enlarging interiors, carrying out renovations, maintenance and decoration changes. Some of these interventions were mandatory measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic and included rules on the use of indoor and outdoor spaces. Food and beverage outlets, for example, had to reduce their seating capacity by half, resulting in inadequate service to an already dwindling customer base. In addition to these mandatory adjustments, some businesses have voluntarily changed their internal layouts, reducing customer areas to create more workspace for office staff, or using temporary solutions to convert one of the floors normally used by customers into a storage area or staff lounge. In addition, food and beverage businesses forced to offer a takeaway service developed strategies to remain visible and facilitate sales on the avenue. They relocated their food stalls to the street front and reorganized their interiors to adapt to the new circumstances.

During the period of closure, businesses also undertook more lasting and simple renovations, such as repainting, renewing furniture, comprehensive cleaning, and equipment maintenance. However, it is worth noting that despite expressing the need for such renovations, a surprisingly large number of interviewees stated that they could not afford even the smallest changes under economic conditions. Rather, two financially stronger businesses implemented more radical changes. In a multi-functional passage, a cinema hall was permanently closed and transformed into a multi-purpose venue to host concerts and events. Another shisha cafe expanded its premises by purchasing the neighboring space af-

ter its closure due to high rent. These examples demonstrate how financial strength enables businesses to seize opportunities and innovate to thrive amidst challenges.

4.3.5. Interventions apart from businesses

During the interviews, it was found that some shopkeepers diversified their investments by exploring alternative business areas, alongside their existing ventures, to capitalize on opportunities. Despite the widespread impact of the crisis on businesses across sectors, certain interviewees highlighted the importance of sectoral diversification, drawing from their past crisis experiences and observations during the pandemic. For example, Interviewee 34, who operated in the cinema industry, sustained their business during the pandemic by having cafeteria permits within the cinema premises, which facilitated continuous operations, leading them to invest in the accommodation sector based on this experience. On the contrary, Interviewee 54, a restaurant owner who had recently invested in opening a beauty salon on Istiklal Avenue before the pandemic, shared that despite completing renovations and continuing to pay rent, they were unable to actively open the new business during the crisis, leading them to abandon this investment.

4.3.6. Nonaction

During the pandemic, a prevalent coping response among businesses was passive waiting, with a significant number of them adopting a “wait and see” approach. There are several reasons for this reluctance to take proactive measures. In the first place, the pandemic was unlike any previous crisis, and its unprecedented nature brought about uncertainties regarding its duration and the most effective strategies to navigate through it. Some shopkeepers did not fully understand the gravity of the situation and adopted a nonchalant attitude, while others adopted a fatalistic approach, feeling overwhelmed and helpless in the face of a global health crisis that seemed beyond their control.

Although some interviewees recognized the importance of being nimble and agile to identify opportunities and create value in the midst of a crisis, the lack of cash flow during the pandemic led them to prioritize preserving their existing resources. For the micro-enterprises on Istiklal Avenue in particular, the risks associated with taking bold and innovative steps felt overwhelming, leaving them with a sense of vulnerability and isolation in the face of uncertainty. Feeling financially constrained and unsure of the future, they were hesitant to take any action that might further jeopardize their already fragile financial situation.

Furthermore, and most profoundly, a key factor contributing to the inaction of Istiklal Avenue businesses was their unwavering confidence in the avenue’s resilience. Having weathered numerous crises in the past, these businesses had developed the belief that “nothing can happen to Istiklal Avenue”. They considered crises as routine occurrences and were confident that despite any temporary setbacks, the avenue would inevitably return to its vibrant state or another new state. This deep-rooted faith in the avenue’s enduring appeal and commercial viability led some businesses to choose a passive approach, hoping for a natural recovery without taking additional risks or making drastic changes to their operations.

4.4. Results

This study reveals that the businesses in and around Istiklal Avenue responded to the COVID-19 crisis through pandemic prevention measures, operational and financial strategies, adaptations of their physical spaces, and alternative interventions independent of the existing business. The findings demonstrate that these businesses developed various immediate, temporary, or permanent responses, whether mandated by the government or voluntarily adopted, to cope with the crisis, adapt to new conditions, and seize opportunities for further development (Table 1). Furthermore, unexpectedly, many businesses have adopted a “wait and see” approach, hesitating to take proactive measures

Table 1. *Istiklal Avenue shopkeepers' strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

	STRATEGIES	DURATION			PREFERENCE		PURPOSE		
		Immediate	Temporary	Permanent	Obligatory	Voluntarily	Cope	Adapt	Innovation
Measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic	Full closure	+	+		+	+	+		
	Restriction on working hours		+				+		
	Hygiene measures	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Operational interventions	Employee related adjustments								
	Reducing the number of employees		+			+	+		
	Use of Short-Term Work Allowance		+		+		+		
	Annual leave - Unpaid leave		+			+	+		
	Switching to shift work		+			+	+		
	Remote working		+	+	+	+	+	+	
	Working in different role		+			+	+		
	Adjustment in working hours		+			+	+	+	
	Diversification in sales/service channels								
	Online sales		+	+		+	+	+	+
	Home delivery		+			+	+	+	
	Take-away		+			+	+	+	
	Online services		+	+		+	+	+	
	Home-based services		+			+	+	+	
	Alternative service/product development								
Changes in marketing and management									
Discounts	+	+				+	+		
Open stock management			+			+		+	
Financial interventions	Cost reduction	+	+	+		+	+		
	Using personal savings	+	+			+	+		
	Using family resources		+			+	+		
	Borrowing		+			+	+		
	Taking out loans		+			+	+		
	Government support and incentives				+	+			
	Transferring business ownership					+	+		
Space adaptations	Changing the functionality of spaces		+			+	+	+	
	Permanent function changes			+		+		+	+
	Renovations and decoration changes			+		+		+	+
Interventions apart from businesses	Investing in alternative businesses			+		+			+
Nonaction	Passive waiting	+	+			+	+		

due to uncertainties and their strong belief in Istiklal Avenue's resilience.

In light of businesses' experiences and their responses, it is evident that one of the most significant factors affecting businesses is the policies implemented by central and local governments during the crisis. Particularly, the duration of closures and the regulation of working hours, varying based on sectors, activities, and even the years of obtaining local permits, have emerged as practices that inflict more harm than the crisis itself, leading to profound inequality among businesses. The restrictive decisions of the government, which either completely halted or severely limited economic activity, have incentivized the deferral of existing debts and the use of credit as a means to compensate for the effects. Unfortunately, this mechanism has not proven sufficient for Istiklal Avenue's businesses. Moreover, the absence of any regulations or guidance, specifically concerning high expenses like rent, in the context of the Avenue where businesses largely function as tenants, and the unquestioning adherence to specific rules for the Avenue without any support from local authorities,

have exacerbated the impact of the crisis even further.

Taking all the interviews into account, although the characteristics of the businesses were not determinant in all cases, the sectors and activities, size, number of branches, type, age of business, institutional structure, tenancy status of the businesses and experience of business contributed to their responses to the crises. The sector and activity of the business were the most important distinguishing characteristics due to government-mandated closures, with entertainment and service businesses on Istiklal Avenue facing greater challenges than others. The size of the business has been influential both in terms of benefiting from government support and incentives, and in determining the capacity to take risks. Micro and small businesses have opted for temporary strategies, trying to cope without taking significant risks or simply waiting for a return to pre-crisis conditions. On the other hand, medium-sized businesses with stronger financial capabilities have been more successful in implementing long-term strategies and seizing crisis opportunities. Although detailed re-

search into the strategies of the branches of large-scale businesses remains limited, it has been found that their adherence to workers' rights, fostered by institutionalization, has contributed to their success. In addition, these types of businesses and their employees do not show a strong place attachment to the Avenue, which allows them to make quick exit decisions based on the course of the crisis.

In addition, the years of establishment of the businesses, the working years of the shopkeepers and managers, and their crisis experiences on Istiklal Avenue have emerged as highly influential factors in making critical decisions. Although these experiences enabled them to observe the opportunities arising from the crisis, they were unable to take action due to insufficient subsidies. Furthermore, the prevalence of high rents and limited property ownership in the Avenue was identified as a critical factor in overcoming financial difficulties. Finally, although not explored in detail in this study, as well as business characteristics, the resilience of shopkeepers and managers and the individual strategies adopted by employees are other factors that enrich the crisis response strategies of businesses in high streets.

Most importantly, the research findings indicate that the resilience of Istiklal Avenue directly influences the resilience of businesses and their responses to the crisis. It is concluded that the action or inaction of businesses is closely linked to the high level of confidence shopkeepers have in the resilience of the Avenue. The avenue's long history and its past experience with crises, in which it experienced setbacks on several occasions but eventually adapted to new customer profiles and conditions, was achieved through the ability of businesses to adapt. The avenue's ability to withstand this transformation has become a guiding factor in the decision-making mechanisms of the businesses, leading to the development of a strong sense of attachment to the avenue and raising the threshold for abandonment.

5. Conclusion

This research aims to examine the response strategies of businesses

located in historic high streets that have continued their shopping function, focusing on the example of Istiklal Avenue, and discuss their relationship with the resilience of high streets during the COVID-19 crisis. The study has shown that the ways in which businesses on Istiklal Avenue responded to the crisis varied according to their characteristics, the quarantine measures implemented by central and local government, the support and incentives provided, and their ability to take advantage of these measures. Furthermore, the belief of these businesses in the resilience of the high street they operate on has strengthened their ability to withstand the crisis.

The key finding of this research highlights the interrelationship between the micro-resilience of businesses located on a resilient historic high street and the way they respond to crisis. Business resilience and high street resilience suggest two mutually reinforcing, not always linear, but highly correlated scales of resilience. The higher the resilience of the high street, the higher the resilience of the businesses, and often vice versa. In some cases, businesses may fail and be forced to close for internal reasons, but this may not be reflective of the resilience of the high street as the business will be replaced very quickly by another business.

The study findings affirm the prevailing notion that Türkiye's high streets are resilient compared to similar counterparts (Erkip & Kızılgün, 2011; Ozuduru, 2019), showcasing their capacity to survive and adapt to arduous circumstances without significant consequences. Nonetheless, it cannot be asserted that either Türkiye or universally, COVID-19 yields similar outcomes for high streets or that they will respond to future crises with the same resilience. The research further underscores that resilience is context-specific, dynamic, and multifaceted in nature (Meerow & Newell, 2016). Like the resilience of the high street itself, the strategies adopted by businesses on the high street might vary and be constrained in context-specific ways, sometimes fostering resilience

and at other times leading to vulnerability. A fundamental indication of this is the adoption of inaction as a strategy by businesses on such historically multifunctional high streets, even though inaction is inherently inconsistent with the principles of resilience. It is the adoption of this passivity and, of course, the resilience of the high street that has allowed businesses to survive. However, it should be remembered that resilience is achieved through the complementarity of coping, adaptive and transformative capacities, rather than through the use of coping capacities alone, and that it aims at creating new opportunities and moving forward, rather than simply returning to the old status quo. In the case of Istiklal Avenue, it can be seen that traditional, micro and small local businesses in particular have been unable to do this due to a lack of context-specific policies and support, and have instead sought to return to their previous state.

The future of high streets necessitates the widespread adoption of resilience thinking by all relevant stakeholders. Effectively addressing this imperative will require a multifaceted approach that includes reimagining the central role of high streets, preserving the historic elements that underpin their significance, carefully identifying the unique characteristics and needs of each high street, and actively engaging the different actors within the street ecosystem - commercial and non-commercial businesses, institutions, shopkeepers, employees, residents and tourists - in the formulation of responsive policies. Concurrently, it is crucial to safeguard local identity and heritage, conscientiously account for the ecological footprint, and adeptly embrace contemporary innovations such as digitalization, thus fostering a dynamic and adaptive high street milieu capable of withstanding the challenges of the future. Above all, it is essential to recognize that resilience is a place-specific phenomenon and to establish it as a long-term guiding principle. Once this principle is embraced, resilience-specific characteristics such as diversity, heterogeneity, redundancy, robustness, resourcefulness, speed, negotiation, adaptability and recovery

capacity will ensure the resilience of high streets.

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