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A Social Entrepreneur Explores Alternative Business Models During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Rawan Hudaifa

It was late April 2020 and Rawan Hudaifa was sitting in her home office in Ankara, Turkey, contemplating the future of her social enterprise, Tina Zita (TZ).ⁱ Hudaifa, a migrant from Syria—along with a Turkish friend and mentor—had started a catering business in May 2019 with a mission to empower women migrants economically by hiring them as chefs and offering them fair wages. The business also utilized cooking as a way to build community among women migrants, as well as connect them to Turkish customers and strengthen customers’ awareness of migrant cultures. Hudaifa often said that, “Cooking can be our common language.”

Hudaifa had just spoken with one of her best customers who had called to cancel a 50-person catering order due to the public health risk associated with gathering in-person during the COVID-19 pandemic. The call did not come as a surprise to Hudaifa, as her five other regular customers had recently cancelled their orders, as well. Hudaifa began to accept that the COVID-19 pandemic would not end soon and that TZ needed to pivot its business model. She asked herself, “What changes can I make to Tina Zita to ensure it survives the pandemic?”

Background

Hudaifa was currently completing her degree in nutrition and dietetics at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University and earned income as an Arabic-English interpreter for various development projects. She hoped to one day draw a salary from TZ so she could focus on it full-time after she graduated.

The idea for TZ grew out of Hudaifa’s experience volunteering with a community organization in Ankara that served mothers who were Syrian refugees. These women, who used their special family recipes to cook meals together, wanted to sell their homemade food to the Turkish community. While the women were talented cooks, Hudaifa observed that they had limited business experience and were unfamiliar with

ⁱ “Tina Zita” has a similar sound in Arabic to “fig” (tayn) and “olive” (zaytun). See **Exhibit 1** for an explanation of “Tina Zita” and its logo.

Turkey's business regulations. Also, tensions between Syrian refugees and the host community fueled by high competition for jobs made it difficult to reach Turkish customers.

Inspired by these women, Hudaifa used her personal funds to create TZ. It was established as a social enterprise—a business that is driven by a social mission while also seeking to generate a profit. Hudaifa wanted to support migrant women seeking to earn an income for their families and connect with the Turkish community. Social enterprises were new in Turkey but were gaining popularity in line with global trends. Still, the ecosystem supporting social entrepreneurship in Turkey was nascent and limited.¹

The Product

TZ was a full-service catering business that specialized in Levantine cuisine, which aligned with the background of its five chefs. Some examples of TZ's dishes included ma'amoul (cookies stuffed with dates), falafel (fried chickpea balls), hummus (seasoned chickpea puree), and sambousek (pastries filled with meat). Customers raved about TZ's food, noting the bold flavors, fresh ingredients, beautiful presentation, and generous portions.

TZ also provided setup at the start of events and cleanup afterward. Much care was put into presentation, resulting in beautiful spreads, complete with handmade tablecloths and platters of food expertly garnished. Each dish had a sign placed next to it with its name and a brief description. Customers were provided with literature on TZ's background, the chefs' personal stories, and their favorite dishes (see **Exhibits 2-4**).

Target Market

Ankara, Turkey's capital and second-largest city, was home to many government officials and diplomats. But unlike Istanbul, Turkey's iconic tourist destination and largest city with countless food options, Ankara offered limited cuisines from other countries.

TZ targeted non-governmental organizations, foundations, universities, and other mission-oriented organizations that would value not only TZ's product but also its mission. TZ's Turkish co-founder leveraged her existing connections among Ankara's nonprofit community to reach new customers because these organizations often employed Turks. TZ now had six regular customers, each hiring TZ about twice a month.

TZ marketed its services online, through Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and its own website.

In addition, TZ occasionally offered ticketed events featuring live cooking demonstrations, which generated interest in the business, as well as revenue.

Team

Hudaifa oversaw TZ and made key administrative and management decisions, often in consultation with her co-founder. TZ also had a customer relations manager, an event coordinator, and a social media manager. These five people were TZ's core volunteers. The goal was to start paying them a salary once TZ began generating enough revenue to do so.

All five of TZ's chefs were women who had been forced to leave Syria due to the civil war. Each helped shape TZ's brand with their personal stories and recipes. Some had professional careers—including nursing

and engineering—before coming to Turkey. The chefs often delivered food orders and attended events to set up the buffets, serve food, and clean up. When TZ started, core volunteers would lead setup and serving of dishes at events, enabling them to gain experience in catering, which they all needed. The core volunteers then trained the chefs. As chefs became more involved with on-site catering and serving Turkish customers, they developed food service and Turkish language skills, and required less assistance from the core volunteers.

Costs

Labor was one of TZ's major costs. With a mission to empower women migrants economically, TZ paid its chefs above the minimum wage in Turkey. Paying fair wages was made possible by Hudaifa and her friends serving as volunteers.

Food ingredients were another key cost. TZ reimbursed chefs for fresh ingredient purchases, plus the stock of staple ingredients used in the chefs' home kitchens.

Other costs included:

- Monthly business permit fee, a requirement of the Turkish government for formally registered businesses.
- Transportation, including any van rental, gas, and public transportation expenses.
- Serving items, such as platters, utensils, and tablecloths.
- Coffee and tea machines.
- Basic cooking equipment for live demonstrations.
- Marketing and promotional materials.
- Miscellaneous items such as basic supplies, web hosting, and banking.

TZ did not cover the fixed costs associated with running chefs' home kitchens.

Impacts of COVID-19 in Turkey

At the time TZ's customer cancelled its event, Turkey had 117,589 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and 3,031 deaths due to the virus.² Globally, the pandemic was surging. Like many countries, the Turkish government took steps to curb the spread of COVID-19 by shutting down segments of the economy. On March 16, 2020, a nationwide shutdown was announced that included closing many public gathering places. With little scientific knowledge about this new disease and its ability to spread, and regardless of the government-ordered shutdown, people were hesitant to gather in groups. The combination of public fear, the ban on public gatherings, decreased job security, and concerns around food hygiene and safety hit the food service industry particularly hard.

Demand for catering in Ankara plunged. While confirmed cases had dropped in Turkey by late April 2020, most public spaces were still closed and there was no certainty around when they would reopen. TZ was left without a customer base.

Exploring a Business Model Pivot

Hudaifa cared deeply about the well-being of her chefs. Most were now the primary income earners in their households because their husbands and other family members had lost their jobs for reasons linked to the pandemic. The chefs were counting on Hudaifa to find a way to keep TZ running and provide them with income. Additionally, Hudaifa needed to continue paying the monthly business permit fee. The call from her customer cancelling an event confirmed to Hudaifa that TZ would need to develop a new strategy to survive the pandemic.

Prior to this call, Hudaifa had asked some of her regular customers about their needs now that in-person operations had ceased. Most were not interested in purchasing anything from TZ at the time. Based on this information, and driven by the fact that many employees in her customer organizations were now working remotely and separately, Hudaifa considered shifting TZ's target market from organizations to individuals.

During the pause in TZ's catering operations due to COVID-19, Hudaifa had done some market research to help generate ideas for new products. Her list included:

- Gift sets with sweet pastries, coffee, dried figs, extra virgin olive oil, and a teacup.
- Frozen prepared meals.
- Live virtual cooking workshops, for which TZ had already started to pilot and charged a small fee (see **Exhibit 5**).
- Handmade textiles. Some of the chefs knew how to make handicrafts.
- Pickles, jams, and other non-perishable products that could be prepared in a home kitchen.
- Meal kits with ingredients and recipes for at-home preparation.
- TZ merchandise, including clothing and coffee mugs promoting TZ's mission.

Hudaifa was also open to exploring other ideas that leveraged TZ's existing assets and kept her chefs employed.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1
Tina Zita Logo

TZ's logo is featured on its signage, literature, and website. The words Tina Zita have a similar sound in Arabic to fig (*tayn*) and olive (*zaytun*). Figs and olives are symbolic of the women migrants TZ employs because, as shown on TZ's website, figs and olives "left the lands they were born and migrated to new places."

Source: Tina Zita.

Exhibits (cont.)

**Exhibit 2
Catered Event**



Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, TZ provided catering at an event with 20 attendees at Istasyon TEDÜ, a university in Ankara that houses a nonprofit social enterprise incubator and coworking space.

Source: Tina Zita.

Exhibits (cont.)**Exhibit 3
Small Event Setup and Display**

TZ's setup at a smaller event included signs that identified each dish, Hudaifa's business cards, and a promotional brochure entitled "Life-changing Food!" in Turkish. Dishes, from left, include hummus (seasoned chickpea puree), musakhan wraps (roasted chicken with sumac and caramelized onion), tabouli (parsley salad), ma'amoul (cookies stuffed with dates), and kaak (bread rings).

Source: Tina Zita.

Exhibits (cont.)**Exhibit 4
Aesthetics and Presentation**

Customers look on as Hudaifa tops a platter of carrot cake with sweetened condensed milk. The 40-person event, held prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, was for a social enterprise at a coworking space in Ankara. In addition to these Western dishes, Levantine appetizers (not shown) were also offered. TZ's focus on aesthetics and presentation is represented in this photo.

Source: Tina Zita.

Exhibits (cont.)**Exhibit 5
Virtual Cooking Workshop**

In April 2020, Hudaifa (wearing a facemask) introduces online participants to a TZ virtual cooking workshop, which was led by TZ's main chef (right) and event coordinator (left). Ingredients for making falafel are shown on the table. The virtual event was hosted on Zoom and marketed on Instagram and Facebook. Fifteen attendees paid a small fee to attend. Hudaifa piloted the virtual cooking workshop to help determine whether TZ should focus on offering this type of event in the future.

Source: Tina Zita.

Endnotes

- ¹ "The State of Social Entrepreneurship in Turkey." *IstasyonTEDU*, 3 July 2019. <https://istasyon.tedu.edu.tr/en/turkiyede-sosyal-girisimlerin-durumu-raporu/>. Accessed 26 Dec. 2020.
- ² "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report — 101." *World Health Organization*, 30 Apr. 2020. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200430-sitrep-101-covid-19.pdf>. Accessed 26 Dec. 2020.

Notes



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