

# Research Paper

# Pandemic's Unprecedented Impact and Business Continuity Plan: A Pandemic Management Framework Proposal for the Malaysian Hotel Industry

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Abstract: According to Malaysia's Shared Prosperity Vision 2030 Strategic Thrust 1: The Business and Industry Ecosystem, SMEs and microbusinesses are expected to contribute 50% of the country's GDP. Service sector contributions are expected to increase by 30% within Strategic Thrust 2 Key Economic growth activities (Darmalinggam, Kaliannan, & Dorasamy, 2021). The 10th Malaysian Science, Technology, Innovation & Economic Framework (My SITE) socio-economic drivers of Culture, Arts & Tourism were identified for their potential to boost the economy through innovation in its business and financial service sectors. The plan is in line with the 11th. UN-SDG, specifically the 11.b, also aims to develop holistic disaster risk management at all levels by 2020. As a result of this global pandemic, the hospitality and tourism industry was the first to be affected, and it will be the last to recover (Fotiadis, Olyzos, & Huan, 2021). The Malaysian hotel industry suffered a significant decline in revenue due to halting of operations, travel bans and lockdowns. As a result, massive layoffs and reduction of workforce took place. Some establishments even closed down. Even though researchers and industry experts acknowledge the industry's volatility, the importance of crisis management in the business community has not received adequate attention. There is a definite need to develop a crisis management framework, to help the Malaysian hotel industry become more resilient against crises such as pandemics. A qualitative approach will be used to develop and validate the model in this study, and quantitative analysis will be carried out to test it. The proposed crisis management model aims to support this highly vulnerable industry so that it can continue to be an important economic contributor, in line with SDG's 11th goal.

Keywords: Hospitality industry, post pandemic, Malaysian hotel industry

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#### **Problem Statement**

Like many other countries globally, the Malaysian economy underwent a significant contraction as a result of the pandemic, with the hospitality sector being the hardest hit. In post-COVID recovery, the hospitality industry has adopted "new-normal" Standard Operating Procedures and recouping its losses. However, a crisis management framework is deemed vital and necessary to support business continuity in the event of another crisis in the future. As the pandemic was unprecedented, there is hardly anything on this topic in tourism literature. Thus, this paper aims to fill the gap by applying Sharma, Thomas, and Paul's (2021) resilience-based theoretical model to develop a pandemic management framework, in the context of the hospitality industry. The framework will be incorporated with risk assessment, prioritization, protocol development, community capability audits, warning systems, and flexibility as outlined by Faulkner (2003).

# Research Objectives

- 1. To identify the various components of pandemic management in the hospitality industry.
- 2. To assess the complexity and interrelatedness of these components in affecting hospitality management.
- To develop an integrated model for pandemic management in the hospitality industry.

#### **Research Questions**

- RQ1. What are key areas of the hotel industry that need to be considered for the development and validation of a pandemic management framework?
- RQ2. What are the critical factors involved in the business continuity of the Malaysian hospitality industry?
- RQ3. What are the benefits of the pandemic management framework for the hotel industry in Malaysia?

#### Literature Review

The World Health Organization (WHO) classified the SARS outbreak as an epidemic in 2003 (Yam, Chen, & Zhong, 2003). Amongst the sectors affected by this epidemic were the tourism, hospitality, and retail sectors. Due to the outbreak of SARS, the tourism and hospitality industry witnessed massive cancellations or postponements of tourist arrivals, events, and conventions, which led to a dramatic drop in hotel occupancy as never seen before (Hung, Mark, Yeung, Chan, & Graham, 2018). However, the outbreak of the coronavirus was on a much a bigger scale and was classified as a pandemic, as it spread to almost all countries globally (WHO, 2020). The rapid spread and the fast transmission rate of COVID-19 has had an unprecedented impact on the entire global economy, including the hospitality industry (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2020). In reporting on the severity of the situation, The Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) confirmed that the average occupancy rate (AOR) for hotels and resorts in the first quarter of 2020 was 21%, down from 74.5% for the same period last year, and average room rates decreased by 18.8%. Industry-wide data were consistent with those surveyed hotels, with an average AOR of 35.8% in April. This figure dropped to 27.7% in May before gradually increasing to 42.3% in June. Hoteliers started to see their revenue shrink more and more as the pandemic dragged on into the second year in 2021. Over 23,000 rooms listed were not fully occupied in 2020.

Even before the pandemic, in the fourth quarter of 2019, the Malaysian Budget Hotel Association (MyBHA) of Kuala Lumpur reported that 3-star hotels and below experienced a drop of 15% to 20% in revenue due to the stiff competition posed by Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) and the various online travel platforms (Mordor Intelligence, 2021). Nevertheless, Malaysia recorded a 74.6% occupancy rate by the end of 2019, with revenue per available room at RM247.75 and average daily revenue of RM331.98. However, in March 2020, the domestic tourism market took a nosedive with the global outbreak of COVID-19, recording a colossal loss of RM75,692,028 due to the cancellation of room bookings from across Malaysia (Dewan, 2020).

This pandemic has drastically affected the health and economy of the world ("Retrenchments", 2020), specifically for countries that are heavily dependent on tourism (Jamal & Budke, 2020), when travel bans and border closures were enforced to contain the outbreak. Subsequent pandemic waves (Bashir, 2020) continued to challenge the hospitality industry and undermine Malaysia's reputation as a safe and secure travel destination (Asean Travel News, 2020). Many countries, including Malaysia, put in place movement control and social distancing measures, including ban of social gatherings, closure of state borders and lockdowns (stay-at-home orders). The measures also included travel bans, and closing of borders to foreign nationals, especially those from countries with high numbers of COVID cases.

Consequently, visitor numbers decreased significantly in most countries (Pine & McKercher, 2004). Malaysia enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO) during the peak of pandemic to contain the spread of the virus. The country underwent a number of different MCO phases and in 2021, the Malaysian government introduced MCO 2.0 with a different set of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). MCO 2.0 witnessed some Malaysian hotels on the verge of being 'left to collapse' (Chin, 2021). According to Sneader and Singhal (2020), jobs in the accommodation and food services sector accounted for over 20% of all jobs made vulnerable to COVID-19. These positions were either subjected to furloughs or layoffs or were not possible due to social distancing measures in place. After facing widespread cancellations and very few new bookings, hotels were struggling to maintain their day-to-day operations and ensure minimal cash flow (Palabiyik et al., 2020). These factors resulted in employee wage being cut or workers let go or workers asked to take unpaid leave ("Retrenchment", 2020). Furthermore, the industry has been hindered by the closure of international borders and restrictions on movement. As part of the government's containment measures, all hotels, restaurants, pubs, and bars had to temporarily cease operations (Kaur, 2020). Overall, all sectors of the hospitality industry were badly affected by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, when certain sectors of the hospitality were allowed to reopen slowly, "new norm" SOPs were widely adopted by all hotels to earn back customer trust (Nathan, 2020). Moreover, hotels also put in place stringent hygiene and safety processes and standards to keep guest rooms and hotel surroundings free from the virus (Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020). They also updated their health and safety procedures (Hamid, Hashim, Shukur, & Marmaya, 2021). The introduction of technology-driven hotel operations as part of the "new-normal" SOP were aimed to secure customers' trust in the hotel's capabilities in health and safety issues (Hamid et al., 2021). However, many hotel brands perceived this change could cause disruption in their customer experience.

To support hospitality businesses in this challenging time, the Malaysian government lowered wage taxes and allocated funds to hotels, travel agencies etc as part of the stimulus package announced in 2020 (Chin, 202s). Additionally, the government's fixed interest rate financing scheme to provide short-term loans to SMEs was adequate to support small hotel operators. Further, a number of hotels were converted into quarantine facilities to generate a nominal revenue (Mat Ruzki, 2020) as the government compensated approximately RM140 per room per night. In the post-COVID recovery, the travel business is steadily rising again, although not yet to the pre-pandemic levels. MAH's CEO also pointed out that "Steady demand can be seen for 2021, indicating confidence in the recovery and acceptance of the new norm as part of travel" (MAH, 2020).

#### **Continuity and Commitment**

The reopening of hotels in most countries is expected to be gradual, with many restrictions still in place (Bashir, 2020). In Malaysia, the industry was allowed to reopen gradually in the third quarter of 2020 (Zainul, 2020). Hotels still maintained some of the procedures they had implemented at the peak of the pandemic but eased up on some other stringent precautions, such as regular screening of guests for fever (Karim, Haque, Anis, & Ulfy, 2020). However, removing all lockdown restrictions will not guarantee an immediate return to normalcy (Nicola et al., 2020). The hospitality industry is still undergoing a period of massive change and readjustment as travel and tourism picks up. Furthermore, most hotels are offering incredible rates to attract customers (Nicola et al., 2020). As such, hoteliers must negotiate, adapt, and manage the reopening process. Some hotels try to reduce their operating costs by either multitasking operations or shutting down for a significant renovation and revamp during the middle of the year. It is crucial that employees in the hotel industry are knowledgeable and prepared in order to convince guests who may still have reservations for their safety with regard to COVID-19 (MAH, 2020).

As a safety measure, the hotel industry should only reopen them as soon as they have ensured their safety by implementing the stipulated "new-normal" practices. First, hotel employees need to play an active role by understanding and implementing the "new-normal" SOPs to assure guests that safety is paramount. Hotel employees' should be constant motivated to ensure they incorporate the "new-normal" procedures in their everyday routines, as well as enhance and maintain their skills as the industry gradually recovers from the pandemic (Jamal & Budke, 2020). Considering the global responsibility and commitment for mitigation plans to revive the industry (O'Brien, 2020), boosting the employees' morale is deemed paramount (Bryson & White, 2019).

Past studies have shown that the hospitality and tourism industry has a significant role in developing a comprehensive health communication strategy (Yuda & Tani, 2020). This communication strategy will include medical facts about virus transmission and the steps to prevent transmission of infection. However, there is no or limited evidence from the existing review to suggest that Malaysian hotels have a business continuity plan in terms of a disaster management framework. Indeed, much of this review has revealed a lack of existing crisis management plans, lack of communication, and reactive responses.

Adopting a new plan to meet the latest hygiene standards and to ensure that hotels can make a strong comeback will involve the consideration of many factors (Gössling et al., 2020). Nonetheless, adopting these strategies will stimulate the economy and tourism industry (Bremser, Alonso-Almeida, del M., & Llach, 2018). The strategies can be categorized into four broad categories: (1) disease and hygiene control, (2) cost savings, (3) marketing, and (4) lobbying for official aid (MAH,

2020). One of the strategies includes a sustained reduction of new cases for at least 14 days (about two weeks) (Karim et al., 2020). According to MAH's CEO, hotels in Malaysia provide "more hope" for the industry since a recent survey of 402 tourism stakeholders revealed that 96% had adopted SOPs for safety, health, and hygiene. The hotel industry also needs to invest more in advertising to increase customer awareness and stimulate demand (Karim et al., 2020). Thus, hoteliers need to demonstrate their commitment by setting high standards for cleanliness and hygiene and putting in place guidelines and regulations to reassure their guests and establish confidence. Further, MAH assured that the hotels' hygiene standards meet the standards stipulated by global healthcare authorities (MAH, 2020). The opening of hotels and SMEs in the "new normal" environment may be well-supported, but revenue generation will be a long and slow process (Jamal & Budke, 2020).

#### The Theoretical Resilience-Based Model

The resilience-based model refers to an organisation's ability to withstand disruptions and bounce back to its previous levels of performance quickly (Hosseini & Barker, 2016). Business resilience is a tool for managing business strength and adaptability for any risks in the event of a natural disaster or crisis (Sharma et al., 2021). It is directly related to the establishment's ability to adapt to new circumstances or conditions caused by an unforeseeable event (Sharma et al., 2021). In the resilience model, strategies outlined include coordinated team approach, consultation, capability commitment audits, risk assessment recognition, warning systems, flexibility, prioritization, disaster management media center, and protocols, as laid out by Faulkner (2003). The theoretical resilience-based model proposed provides a foundation, but it was developed for a different business scenario and a different geographical setting; thus, not suited for the Malaysian hotel industry.

In terms of the crisis management framework for the hospitality industry, previous researchers (Lai & Tan, 2015; Laws & Prideaux, 2017; Pennington-Gray Thapa, Kaplanidou, Cahyanto, & McLaughlin, 2011) identified four phases that provide the basis for managing the crisis in terms of (1) reduction, (2) readiness, (3) reaction, and (4) recovery.

### Methodology

### Research Paradigm

Developing a crisis management framework would be a novel concept in this field, as there has been limited research on this topic. In order to address this issue, the research will utilise a sequential mixed-methods approach (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) based on a post-positivist paradigm. The scope of post-positivism is broad,

connecting theory and practice, acknowledging and encouraging the researcher's commitment to the topic, and allowing a wide range of correct methodologies for collecting and analysing data (Ryan, 2006). According to Ryan (2006), diversity and difficulty are the reality of all human experiences, which will serve as the paradigm for this study.

# **Qualitative Approach**

The research will adopt a qualitative approach to identify the key factors and components of the crisis management model and quantitative analysis to test and validate the model. This approach was selected given the lack of theories in the study context and the need to obtain respondents' perspectives regarding the study topic (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). As this study aims to investigate and understand the current crisis in the hospitality sector, a qualitative approach is appropriate (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). Further, scholars admit that a qualitative approach can answer the how and why part of the research questions (Wankmüller, 2021).

Purposive sampling will be used since this study requires hotel managers to give their perspectives in developing a crisis management framework for the Malaysian hotel industry (Fraenkel et al., 2015). The instrument used will be semi-structured interview since this method is flexible and provides two-way communication, allowing the researchers to identify the essential factors for business continuity. As this study aims to develop a framework, it is essential to analyse and understand the needs of the hotel industry. Thus, an inductive approach will be appropriate when exploring deterrent factors. In-depth interviews will investigate why and how the factors affect business continuity, especially during challenging times.

### Quantitative Approach

Quantitative analysis will also be performed in the second part of the research. The study will also utilise simple random sampling since all the elements in the sample frame, which will be the listed hotels in Malaysia, will be considered, and each element will given an equal chance of being chosen as a subject, and the results will be highly generalizable (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013). The sample frame for the study will be hotels in Malaysia, which total 4,806 (Mordor Intelligence, 2021). A sufficient number of respondents will have to be identified with an acceptable 5% margin of error and a 90% confidence level (Raosoft, 2021).

# **Data Analysis**

Data will be analysed with EFA, CFA, and path analysis using AMOS 24 to develop the pandemic management model.

# **Conclusion and Implications**

#### Conclusion

Developing a pandemic management framework for the Malaysian hotel industry will add new knowledge and insights to the existing literature on hospitality and tourism. Employees, managers, and investors will be better prepared for future crises guided by this framework. It is a dynamic framework that requires clear communication, collaboration, updates, and practical experiences.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study will complement and add to the body of literature in the crisis management specific to the hospitality industry.

# **Practical Implications**

The critical factors identified in this study for building business continuity will ultimately guide the Malaysian hotel industry players to cope with the challenges posed by crises, for example, pandemic. The study's findings can be an essential tool for the hotel industry and support the hotel industry's social & economic well-being.

In order to achieve consistent business continuity, tourism stakeholders, service providers, and tourists should be well informed on the immediate course of action and the next course of action when faced with a crisis (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). As part of a proactive strategic response plan, communication channels must remain open between hospitality, tourism, and public health stakeholders (Gössling et al., 2020).

### Limitations and Future Research

The crisis management framework to be developed is exclusive to the Malaysian hotel industry. It will directly impact socio-economic drivers, namely Culture, Arts & Heritage, as well as Social Economic Well-being. The study will be conducted during one of the world's worst economic crises with extreme uncertainties. As such, the findings can be expanded further by similar studies that can be conducted once business levels reach pre-COVID-19 levels. Similar studies could also be conducted in different locations, considering destination crisis expectations.

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