

## STRATEGY IN CRISIS AND INNOVATION DURING PANDEMIC (CASE STUDY OF ABC HOTEL IN JAKARTA)

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### Abstract

Impacts of COVID-19 on the global economy and international tourism are disastrous. This pandemic has lasted longer than other previous epidemics, and no single one-time solution could be adopted in the whole period. This research examines those financial impacts during pandemic and how a budget hotel has innovated continuously to sustain economically within a crisis management framework. The data was collected from hotel internal documents and were then discussed in form of interview with the hotel manager. The outcome shows that the pandemic affected differently throughout the period depending on government regulation. During this uncertainty, strategy need to synergize with innovation for flexibility and decision making. Facing exponential decrease in occupancies, process innovation as the driver for cost efficiencies is a must. However, organizational innovations as being able to respond to government actions and applying the right marketing innovations to grab extended stay in accordance with the new operation health and safety protocols are more crucial to achieve economic sustainability in the long run. This critical case study can then help to exemplify even other larger, better equipped, and stronger brand hotels on how to strategize effectively in this pandemic.

**Keywords:** innovation; economic sustainability; crisis management framework

### Introduction

Impacts of COVID-19 on the global economy and international tourism are disastrous. This corona virus pandemic caused by acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was first identified in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019. This disease has spread to more than 200 countries by the end of first quarter in 2020 and has caused 4.9 million deaths worldwide as on 16 October 2021 ([Worldometers, 2021](#)). [Loungani et al. \(2021\)](#) predicted that based on the historical effect of five previous major epidemics in the century, COVID-19 pandemic is likely to disrupt economic performance and income distribution through 2025. The regulations on mobility restrictions imposed by various governments have specially caused the tourism industry to crumble. Consequently, tourism industry which has contributed to about 5.5% of 2019 National GDP and where its continuous growth rate from year to year was directly influenced by the arrival of foreign tourists ([Haryana, 2020](#)) declines substantially since the first quarter and drops further in the next quarter of 2020 . Bali Province which has

accepted 36% of overseas visitors in 2015 faced the worst situation where many accommodations had to close, and the remaining opened ones had only about one to five percent occupancy level between April and August in 2020. In contrast, the city of Jakarta despite being one of the five pandemic hotspot provinces and being many times accounted for the most increase of daily new cases during the pandemic (Aliya, 2021), has relatively better hotel occupancies at a yearly average of 38.73% in 2020.

Hospitality industry which features human centric characteristics is currently facing fundamental challenges where social distancing arrived as must-do to protect themselves causing human interaction to take a major hit. Considering the uncertainties of government regulations on handling the second wave of pandemic in July 2021, this pandemic has caused another decrease in occupancy by about 20 points. The top management must make another crucial decision to minimize the immediate impact on the company cash flow and to survive in the long run. The purpose of this research is therefore to examine this crisis management framework (Le & Phi, 2021), i.e., the pandemic impact to the hotel financial performance and how continuous innovation in each pandemic phase has helped to promote economic sustainability. Such identification of these strategic responses to each phase could serve as post-crisis knowledge for another COVID-19 wave or even could fit the evolution of the crisis (Lai & Wong, 2020).

### **1) Risk, Crisis, Disaster and COVID-19**

Bong, et al (2019) explains that risk happens when reality is not as expected and it indicates a deviation from the target that has potency for loss. Crisis is also type of risk depending on its severity of impact. When risk is not managed properly, it can transform into crisis and even directly turn into a disaster. Faulkner (2001) separated the definition by which crisis describes a situation where the root of cause is self-inflicted while disaster refers to situations where tourism is confronted with sudden unpredictable catastrophic change and little control.

Unlike some other countries that previously experienced five major pandemic events such as SARS in 2003, H1N1 in 2009, MERS in 2012, Ebola in 2014 and Zika in 2016 with a combined of almost 7 million confirmed positive cases, Indonesia currently with a total of 4.2 million COVID-19 confirmed cases per October 2021 might initially have not been aware of the possibility of pandemic entering the country and thus, it has not mentioned pandemic as a disaster in their the SOP Managing Tourism Crisis 2018 (Kemenparekraf, 2018). Nevertheless, COVID-19 is already a crisis costing more in 2020 than the world's combined natural disasters in any of the past 20 years (Noy, I. & Doan, 2021) and the current solutions were considered inadequate and unprepared for this significant external event, hereby naming it a 'disaster' rather than a 'crisis' (Kenny & Dutt, 2021).

## 2) Crisis Management & Innovation in the Hospitality Context

Faulkner (Faulkner, 2001) emphasized that good management has potency to avoid crisis to some degree but it needs to be equally incorporated with strategies to cope with unexpected event over which it has little control. In the hospitality context, crisis management can be in form of activities such as protecting or rebuilding tourism destination image (for the marketing side), reassuring potential visitors of area's safety (in the human resource side) and directly aiding local hospitality companies (in the tourism destination area) to facilitate tourism's recovery (Kim, Chun, & Lee, 2005). Crises and disaster can be then referred as a turning point in which it has transformational effect, either positive (stimulus to innovation, to new markets, or to negative outcomes).

Responding to such challenges, the new way in running the business is what characterize an innovation. Fagerberg (2009) highlighted that innovation features novel combinations of knowledge, resource, etc. subject to attempts at commercialization. To navigate the uncharted terrain that has resulted from this pandemic, hotel industry is required to re-assess their business practices and quickly device strategies that safeguard the health and safety of guests as well as employees. Innovation necessities to do everything they can either by adjusting their approaches, refocusing or doubling their efforts to maintain existing cash flow, minimizing cost while at the same time being able to keep maximizing their revenue with the knowledge that the end of the pandemic could potentially be in sight (Hospitality Technology, 2021).

The adoption of innovations discussed in the OSLO Manual (OECD, 2005) can be seen to be applicable in view of five crisis management categories practiced in COVID-19 as proposed by Pavlatatos, et al. (2021) i.e.,: Operation category as in product innovation. It is what the hotel can do to ensure the safety and health of its customers against the risk of COVID-19 case; Marketing category as in market innovations that includes techniques associated to increase hotel occupancy, increasing brand awareness on COVID-19 handling and informing on special prices and packages during the pandemic; Human resource and Maintenance category that are related to efficiencies either through reduction of labor expenses, postponing of building maintenance (cosmetics) or renegotiation of vendor payments can be linked to process innovations with its cost-cutting nature (Fagerberg et al., 2004); Government category where hotels receive incentives, tax cuts and other supportive regulations such as collaboration for tourist arrival quarantine can be counted as organizational innovations.

## 3) Strategy and Innovation in Uncertainty

Firms with planning system and strategy are more likely to exhibit superior financial performance in their industry. The term 'strategy' itself, prescribes a long term perspective (Rhyne, 1986). The most common basis for measuring it is profitability by comparing the actual with the budgeted figures (Harris & Mongiello, 2006). However, during uncertain situation, budget may no longer be achievable, and

CFO is required to redesign plans by setting multiple scenarios, deploying flexibility and discussing progress monthly performance to create value and impact (Agraval, Birshan, Grube, Maloney, & Seth, 2020). Traditional approaches to strategic planning may lead people to suffer decision paralysis because it usually views the world as either predictable that promotes incrementalism or views it as unpredictable that abandons any kind of strategy at all (Viguerie, 1997). As opposed, innovation perspective considers present opportunities in building desirable future. History suggests that organizations that maintain innovation through a crisis emerge stronger than their peers (Am, Jorge, Furstenthal, & Roth, 2020). For innovation to work, it needs to align with the strategy and this strategic innovation also focusses on how to run the business and not only on positioning or on being cheaper or different than their competitors (Sniukas, Lee, & Morasky, 2016).

Le & Phi's (2021) integrated crisis management framework as a model for this research summarizes five different strategies throughout a pandemic cycle and on each of this strategy, hotel may implement various actions, a.k.a. innovations accordingly. In the pre-event and early symptom phase, saving strategy is proactively employed to boost short-term returns and to ensure enough cash flow for operations. However, when rapid increase in cases and booking cancellations indicates an emergency phase, companies immediately implement reactive strategies through cost-cutting measures while keeping close on any updates of government regulations such as health and safety protocols, border closing and any likelihood of government subsidies to assist the affected industry. In the crisis phase, hotel managers had very limited options, i.e., hibernation or service transformation. As hotels are limited in serving food and beverages, instead of offering buffet, they provide room services. Sales promotions through pay now, stay later have also become a trend to maintain the level of cash flow. In this situation governments may collaborate with hotels offering quarantine for international tourist arrivals. In the recovery phase where the number of infected cases has declined, hotels are developing new strategies to grab any existing domestic markets with new health and safety measures along with automation and digitalization. Finally in the last phase to anticipate another pandemic wave, management has gained a post crisis knowledge for counter measure, i.e., by continuing with saving strategy while also pro-actively exploring for new opportunities.

#### **4) Business Sustainability**

Sustainability has been one of the main concerns for business growth. By applying this concept, sustainability allows business to be more profitable in the future than in the past. In other words, business has the ability to meet their short-term financial needs without compromising the ability to meet its future needs (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014). Brundtland World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) defines sustainable development as 'a process that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet

their own needs.' It linked the concept of economic development with notion of environmental and social sustainability.

Sustainability can be created through the adoption of a more sustainable processes, promoted through business practice or introduced through new (green) technologies (Elmo, Arcese, Valeri, Poponi, & Pacchera, 2020). While economic success might be the foremost goal of businesses, (economic) sustainability in hotel industry implies pursuing economic means, providing benefits of hospitality services and tourism experiences to current and future guests and other stakeholders. A study by Kasim et al. (2014) revealed that hotel may voluntarily undertake innovative measures for the sake of sustainability such as conservation of environmental resources in order to ultimately obtain commercial benefit. In this case, sustainability and innovation are closely tied by cost-saving attitude but in other areas, such practices may sacrifice the level of quality services. Nonetheless, the right innovation strategies should promote sustainable growth, long term profitability, customer satisfaction and value chain management (Njoroge, Anderson, & Mbura, 2019).

### **Methodology**

A qualitative method is selected for this research as this empirical method has been encouraged by many in the range of strategic management that focusses on process (Bettis, Gambardella, Helfat, & Mitchell, 2015). Case study seems to be preferred as research strategy in answering how or why questions to retain holistic and meaningful characteristic of real-life events. While there are already many case-based researches that explored how hotels have responded to the crisis (Hoang, Truong, & Nguyen, 2021; Kristiana, Yohanes, & Gunawan, 2021; Nuruddin, Wirawan, Pujiastuti, & Sri Astuti, 2020), this study aims to investigate the development of a pandemic crisis management framework that may encourage varieties of innovations as integral part of business strategies in each crisis phase to strive for economic sustainability.

In qualitative research, the role of researcher is the key instrument to gather and interpret the data. Researcher past and present experiences in the hospitality, data analysis and management shape the interpretation of the data. As a practitioner action research, this position enhances the validity and to minimize the impact of biases, this research was helped by an academic supervisor (Rooney, 2005). Researcher chose purpose sampling in which he has access on the data and to maintain its anonymity, we labelled it as ABC Hotel. The choice of this hotel is similar to Hoang's (Hoang et al., 2021) in which one critical case should have strategic significance that permit analytic generalisation. In this case, if innovations within crisis management framework as proposed by Le & Phi (Le & Phi, 2021) could work in a small hotel, it should work out in larger hotel chain with better communication technologies, proven record of management experience and so on. ABC Hotel has survived this pandemic with average monthly hotel occupancies of 67%, 25 points above the average of Jakarta hotel occupancies. Moreover, the justification to choose one sample case study is supported by several research where this one firm has a unique features or attributes to meet the

research objective. An instance of such powerful example is a firm with constantly high performing financial performance (Gaya & Smith, 2016; Siggelkow, 2007).

The data was collected both from primary and secondary sources. For primary data, hotel manager was interviewed with questions relating to practices in five areas of crisis management (Pavlatos et al., 2021) and categorized into four innovation types. The interview was audio-recorded on the agreement with the interviewees and then they were turned into transcript. Access to participating hotels could be granted on the understanding that the result would be published anonymously. Although the name of the hotel and participant cannot be presented, the job title was still allowed to be mentioned. For secondary data, it observed hotel financial documents especially, hotel monthly income statement which could show how the hotel has been performing financially before, during and after the pandemic. Other public related documents also support the clarification and the timeline for strategic response to government actions in handling pandemic COVID-19.

Financial performance was then analyzed using monthly average from the year 2019, a period before pandemic as the benchmark until the month of September 2021 in form of income statement consisting of hotel occupancy and its average room rate as revenue metrics indicator; room with food and beverage revenue as hotel revenue streams indicator; payroll expense and other related expenses as cost structures indicator; and their bottom-line indicator, i.e., gross operating profit. Those months with relative similar occupancies were then grouped together to show their relevance with the pandemic phase as explained in the Le & Phi (Le & Phi, 2021) journal. The results from the interview helped to explain how various changes happened in the income statement and what innovations the hotel has applied as strategic responses to those dynamics.

## Results And Discussions

ABC Hotel is a budget local chain hotel located in South Jakarta, in a district famous for its entertainment and expat friendly features. In 2019 during a normal phase, the hotel has about 76% occupancy, an average room rate of \$30 and a 40% gross operating profit with food and beverage contributed only about 12% of total revenue as expected of a limited-service hotel. For comparison, a typical hotel with average daily room rate of below USD 40 usually has occupancies of below 70% and GOP of about 30% (Horwarth HTL, 2019).

The first phase, i.e., pre-event and early symptom phase began in January until February 2020 where the first reported case appeared at the end of 2019 in Wuhan (WHO, 2020). Although ABC Hotel mostly accommodated domestic market, the hotel area location was usually crowded with foreign tourists that contributed a bit to the hotel market segment. The restriction on international travel ban from the origin countries has somewhat caused a 20% decrease in the hotel occupancy. Unlike the evidence provided by Le & Phi (Le & Phi, 2021) where saving should have started on this period, the hotel was only driven to save cost gradually in the next phase.

The second phase, i.e., emergency case was in March 2020 when the government reported the first two confirmed positive COVID-19 cases (Gorbiano, 2020). Facing another revenue decrease of 20%, hotel began to minimize expense. Beside variable expenses that decreased along with the hotel occupancy, the largest expense comes from the fixed expenses, i.e., payroll expenses. During this time, daily worker staff was stopped, and the current employee was expected to work longer to replace them when needed. Some staffs could not even extend their contract periods when they expired. However, the immediate impact to payroll expenses was delayed because of the calculation of payroll period which started from the middle of the last month to the middle of the current month. Although ABC hotel was still able to maintain a positive profit, the percentage of its gross profit fell to a quarter of its original value.

The crisis phase lasted longer than the first two phases. It was directly after Jakarta local government marked the first day of large-scale social restriction on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April (Pinandita, 2020). During these three months, people were encouraged to stay at home and the hotel was only able to fill in the occupancies of less than 15%. Restaurant and other similar food service businesses suffered the most because local government only allowed food delivery services (Garjito, D. & Rahmayunita, 2020). This regulation hit ABC Hotel food and beverage revenue coming from the Meeting, Incentive, Conference and Exhibition (MICE) service. While more than 2000 hotels decided to close during this time (Wardoyo, 2020), ABC hotel management decided to keep the hotel open because the costs to open or close the hotel was relatively the same. Unlike medium and large hotel, a budget hotel has relatively much lower fixed cost (Harris & Mongiello, 2006). During this time, fixed related cost such as payroll expenses, internet and TV media service expenses were cut to less than 50%. Employees were also granted to take unpaid leaves. On the other hand, the variable cost such property maintenance expenses, utility and other operational expenses decreased by more than 60%. Property maintenance such as lift service and pest control were reduced from twice a week to once a week, while the usage of lift and boiler for hot water were also adjusted to run only on certain period of times.

On the next phase where the government has loosened its regulations and the number of daily COVID-19 patient undergoing treatment starting to decrease (Diskominfotik DKI, 2020; Windarty, 2020), hotel began to recover to about 30% of its original revenue. The only existing market available was retail online travel or full independent traveler market. On the marketing side, many offices still demanded work from home and since hotel sales could not visit their locations, hotel worked closely more with online travel agents by joining with their promotion programs and offering pay now stay later. Price wars happened and hotel average daily rate experienced a drop of almost 30%. The sum of all other expenses began to rise, except payroll related expenses that reached minimum amount to about 34% compared to pre-covid situation. In this second semester of 2020, hotel was also able to raise its food and beverage revenue giving a positive profit.

In the next period, i.e., beginning of 2021, tourism situation was improving due to two major factors: national vaccination program with President as its first candidate (Suparto, 2021); and Cleanliness, Health, Safety and Environment Sustainability (CHSE) program to boost guest confidence on the hotel service (Liputan6dotcom, 2021). ABC Hotel participated and supported this government initiatives, passing CHSE Audit and being able to accommodate the medical workers who were engaged in vaccination and COVID-19 patient treatments. Even in the midst of second pandemic wave (Nurita & Persada, 2021), the hotel did not waver because in this nine months of resolution phase, hotel accommodated double occupancies for medical workers and provided full board services. Although the average hotel occupancies were still below normal condition, it amplified the average room rate, magnified both room and F&B revenue while being able to save utility and maintenance cost. Surely, every department expense raised but with continuous saving strategy, the hotel was able to decrease 5 points of total expenses and generated higher gross operating profit than before the pandemic phase.

### **Conclusion**

A crisis like pandemic COVID-19 has notably brought enormous impact to the hotel and tourism industry. Some were pushed to close, while survivor ones must adapt to the new normal conditions. This research investigates a budget hotel who hold on by transforming the way it conducted its business and by applying various strategy throughout the pandemic phase. This hotel realized that keeping pace with government regulation and grabbing an opportunity to obtain captive market as base occupancies is of the utmost importance. This captive market in form of extended stay could drive hotel resiliency and led hotel to less vulnerability during economic shock (Kalibri Labs, 2020). The same principles should perform better in a larger hotel with example, the minimum requirement to participate as a quarantine facility at the end of 2020 (Zhacky, 2020) is a three star hotel (Sandi, 2021).

At last, this research concluded that although a budget hotel surviving the crisis and exceeding 2019 financial performance in 2021 applied a crisis management, there were some differences with the one proposed by Le & Phi (Le & Phi, 2021) in which saving and cost cutting strategy shifted one phase later. This overall strategy, however, might not work in other research locust because of the strategic role imposed by the government both nationally and locally could vary and further research is thus, recommended to better understand hotel strategies on national level. For those larger hotels in the same area, the timeline for each phase and the effect to financial performance could end up differently. Another limitation is that the time frame for the research in which if the government vaccination programs has finished and the number of COVID-19 patients undergoing medical treatments has declined significantly, ABC hotel might lose its current captive market and should look for other type of extended stay to sustain in the long run.



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