A Study on the Impact of COVID-19 Crisis on Three-Four Star Hotels in Myanmar

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Abstract

The study aims to understand how three stars and four stars hotels in Myanmar survive during COVID-19 outbreak and impact of COVID-19 crisis on three stars and four stars hotels in Myanmar. The researcher used qualitative analysis methods, by semi-structured in-depth interviews, collected raw data from sixteen local guests, one long-stay foreigner and five hotel managers in Mandalay and Muse during May to August 2020. To analyses the data, the study used thematic analysis method. The findings of the study are that all three-star and four-star hotels in Myanmar follow safety instruction and internationally-accepted safety standard to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the hotels' guests and employees. Hotels were using hospital-grade disinfectants and disinfected common area inside the hotel three times a day. Hotel staff are requested to wear a face shield, mask, gloves and PPE suit. From the guest' perspective, every hotel at least had to implement WHO protocols because they have high expectations of hygiene, cleanliness and safety before and during their stay. It is believed that by being able to identify a crisis situation and determine a positive management response, the Myanmar hotel industry has indeed learned its lessons on how to cope with similar situations in the future.

Keywords: Covid-19; Hospitality and tourism industry; Hygiene; Safety management measures; Safety standard

Introduction

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, a largely rural, densely-forested country, is the world's largest exporter of teak and a principal source of jade, pearls, rubies and sapphires. The tourism business has played a major role in driving forward Myanmar's economic development since the start of national reforms in 2011. Before the alarming spread of coronavirus, Myanmar saw over 200,000 tourist arrivals in January—25 percent increase from the same period last year, in which Myanmar saw over 160,000 foreign tourists (Myat Pyae, 2020). The number of tour services increased from 2,453 to 3,188 during the period. The population of

registered tour-guides increased from 7,000 to 9,000 during the same period. In addition, Myanmar saw 18 per cent increase in the tourist arrivals in 2017, 1.15% increase in 2018 and 23% increase in 2019.

As the coronavirus has spread across the globe in February and March in 2020, travel agencies, airlines, hotels, restaurants and scenic spots have faced cash flow pressure, and at the same time, the capital chain is under strain across the tourism industry. The hotels suffered suspension of business as the occupancy rate fell sharply in the short term, business revenue was severely hit and many enterprises even in the basic state of suspension. It led to a large number of cancellations and more than

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80% of previously booked travel orders being refunded (Demetriou , 2020). At present, although 86.8% of tourism enterprises are suspended from an operation, according to the overall deployment and requirements of the central government, tourism enterprises and the hotel industry should strictly control the risk of epidemic spread caused by the increase of personnel flow and aggregation, remain vigilant against the epidemic, and continue to take concrete and detailed prevention and control measures. While over 4.3 million foreign travelers visited Myanmar last year, the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism predicts that only around 2 million would visit the country this year.

The impact of this outbreak on the hospitality and tourism industry are the most serious, far exceeding the impact of the SARS outbreak in 2003 (Folinas & Sotiris , 2020). Not only because of the ongoing uncertainty of the epidemic, but also because of the changes in the economic structure of the world over the past decade especially tourism, accounts for a higher proportion and the economic cycle is in a different position. Therefore, the negative impact on hospitality and tourism is not comparable to that during the SARS period (Folinas & Sotiris , 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic worldwide has affected the tourism industry in the world, and Myanmar is also adversely affected. The economy worldwide is badly hit. The Myanmar international flight has been banned since early April 2020 in order for the country to combat the pandemic. The worldwide media coverage of the pandemic also influences and affects the decisions made by government, companies and travelers. The ongoing reviews and changes in travelling protocols, cancellation of travel flights, and hotel booking fees intensifies the growing problems of the tourism industry and drives the Myanmar economy into a potential recession. In addition, in order to shorten the recovery cycle and come over industrial development trough as soon as possible, the hotel and tourism industry should obtain the guarantee of cash flow through the pre-sale of products, orderly resumption of work, and accelerated payment collection (Airui, 2020). Therefore, it is of great significance to make clear that the hotel and tourism industry should draw lessons from the crisis and do a solid job in establishing crisis response mechanism and disaster preparedness, improve the safety quality, loss reduction mechanism and the way to turn the crisis

into an opportunity, effectively reduce the adverse impact of the epidemic on post-covid-19.

During this difficult period, the government began to block streets in some areas, to ban travel to other areas, to control crowds, to restrict these areas to travel, to cancel or postpone all offline activities and to maintain social distance to prevent the spread of the virus. Therefore, enterprises related to the hotel industry lost a large amount of revenue in an instant. In addition, as the government had to suspend business, hotels would need to temporarily adjust the deployment of staff within hotel, which led to the redundancy of the hotel industry and a large number of employees had or soon would be facing retrenchment. Some hotels notably decided to retain and provide training to staff about safety and hygiene measures in dealing with Covid-19 prevention, both online and offline, during the shutdown of the business.

This study analyzes the impact of COVID crisis in hotels of Myanmar, and emphasize hotels need to adopt different measures to innovate to deal with the current situation in order to maintain their sustainability. On the other hand, they have to ensure the health and safety of their employees, guests, and reduce unnecessary expenses in order to maintain an acceptable "bottom line". Due to the decrease in numbers of visitors, some hotels changed their emphasis to focus on business from the local market.

Research Objectives
RO1: To study how hotels should operate their hotel business and what needs to be changed to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the hotels' guests, employees and stakeholders.
RO2: To explore the effects of safe management measures on the experience of hotel guests in Myanmar.
RO3: To find out if the operating costs of hotels in Myanmar might be affected by safe management measures.
RO4: To ascertain the impact of COVID-19 travel restrictions on the business performance of hotels in Myanmar.

Review of the Literature
Safety and Security Measures
The hotel industry is a vulnerable business and very sensitive to the crisis in the region. Hotel safety issues could be broken down into three broad

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categories: safety, security, and privacy. The main duties of hotels are to ensure its safety and security after tourists have become more suspicious about safety issues within the hotel premises (Ahmad, 2014). Safety and security are important factors for tourists to choose their destinations and hotels. The first consideration for tourists is to stay away from risks and hazards. Unfortunately, the hotel and tourism industry are very vulnerable to security and security threats. These threats often take the form of crime, terrorism, natural disasters, health and man-made hazards (Ghazi, 2018). This keeps increase pressure on hoteliers and planners to develop more effective measures to prevent or limit their negative impact in order to protect the hotel business and society as a whole. This emphasizes that hotels should improve their safety and security measures and procedures to make it more difficult for them to be targeted for threats and hazards.

Hygiene

Bharwani (2012) identified that hygiene is a key risk for the hospitality industry and should be seen as important by hoteliers. The hotel industry is often adversely affected by pandemics such as coronavirus, SARS and swine flu. They also emphasized that hotels should apply a HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) food safety management system to minimize and control the hazards of food in the process of production, storage, processing, distribution and human consumption (Bharwani & Mathews, 2012). Staff should be trained and informed to pay more attention to the personal hygiene; they should pay attention to the hygienic condition of food and beverage preparation area, hygienic equipment design. Because customer satisfaction with the hotel's service depends on the quality of food hygiene, clean rooms and bathrooms, kitchens and dining rooms. In general, tourists appreciate the contribution of hotels in providing tourists with the most essential safety measures and hygienic practices.

Effects of Epidemics on the Hotel Industry

The experience of SARS in Hong Kong has had a profound impact on public health reform, in particular on infectious disease surveillance and outbreak response. These include strengthening surveillance, isolation and treatment of patients with the disease according to case definitions, establishing channels of communication between hotels and government systems, and developing guidelines and response plans to implement strict infection control measures if necessary (Bharwani & Mathews, 2012). The epidemic prevention and infection control measures adopted in response to SARS and H1N1 swine flu have shown that the hotel industry needs to play its due role. Moreover, the epidemic preparedness and infection control measures mounted against SARS and H1N1 swine flu demonstrated a role that needed to be filled by the hotel industry.

The key findings of this study verify to a certain extent several key links in the relevant literature of the safety and hygiene perceptions of hotels:

In order to provide high quality services and a safe environment, managers must understand the expectations and perceptions of guests regarding the services and facilities provided (Ghazi, 2018).

Tourists appreciate the contribution of hotels in providing tourists with the most essential safety measures and hygienic practices. They expect high standard of hygienic practices are applied (Alananzeh, 2017).

The hotel should develop its own hygiene standards and train its staff before the outbreak. Further roles and responsibilities include emergency response arrangements, protective equipment procurement plans, disease reporting and surveillance mechanisms during outbreaks (Kevin & Carman, 2018).

The hotels tried to minimize expenses during the SARS-affected period. For example, the number of lifts (elevators) and escalators in use was reduced to save power and operating costs (Samuel, Hejin, & Heesung, 2005).

To convince guests to rebuild their confidence in the hotels, the hotels waged intensive promotional campaigns and aggressive advertising campaigns (Samuel, Hejin, & Heesung, 2005).

In order to reduce the payroll, the hotels cut the numbers of temporary employees but did not lay off or fire any permanent employees because of concerns of coming into conflict with strong labor unions (Samuel, Hejin, & Heesung, 2005).

All hotels required their Housekeeping Departments to increase the frequency of cleaning and used bleach solutions two to three times a day in public areas such as guest lift lobby and public washrooms. Additionally, transparent plastic covers were placed on top of the call buttons in elevator panels for the purpose of easy cleaning and disinfection. Lift cars

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and escalators, particularly the call buttons and handrails, were frequently wiped with a diluted household bleach solution at least four times a day (Ada, Rob, & Catherine, 2006).

To protect the health and safety of guests and staff, all hotels require their staff to check their temperature before starting work. Hotel security staff will also check the temperature of employees at their entrances with infrared thermometers when they arrive at the workplace. Some hotels required guests to complete a health declaration form, and distributed face masks and disposable disinfectant tissues during check-in (Ada, Rob, & Catherine, 2006).

Some hotels also rotate employees to different departments, while others take time off. In a way, this is a great opportunity to cross-train employees in different departments to prepare for a business recovery (Ada, Rob, & Catherine, 2006).

However, due to different survey methods and different focuses, this study failed to have sufficient data to verify the following conclusions obtained by related studies:

Comparing hotel room occupancy rates across the three different hotel categories.

Food and beverage operations were not as badly affected compared to the rooms business.

Hotels are very entrepreneurial and one of the hotels has successfully opened a new market by partnering with secondary schools to organize "life skills courses" for students.

Workers without family responsibilities are reported to be more willing to take unpaid leave than those with financial obligations.

Hotel employees were very understanding and willing to share the financial burden with their employer.

Research Methodology

The interview questions for this study were answered and explored by in-depth interviews. This study is qualitative research, using in-depth interviews. The target population for this research is hotel managers who manage three star and four stars hotels in Myanmar and the guests who staying in those hotels. The sample size is sixteen local guests, one long-stay foreigner and five hotel managers from five hotels. The sampling frame is in Mandalay and Muse.

A qualitative interview is the one in which quality matter is filled. The qualitative research was chosen because of the limited sources, can extract the

qualitative data from the findings. Using more and more data will create issues in analyzing the data. Using the qualitative method will be helpful in getting views, opinions personally from every actor. The researcher interviewed five hotel managers and seventeen hotel guests as the data collection. Data will be collected by hotel managers to know about their changes in business performance due to the COVID-19 situation and how they improved safety management measures during the epidemic in order to enhance guests experience and so on. Additionally, guests who stay in hotel were selected for the interview, in order to ask for their perspectives and experiences while they live in hotels. The data is collected at Mandalay Lodge Hotel, Sunset Palace View Hotel, Hotel Apex, Orient Hotel Mandalay, Hotel New Wave Mandalay, So So Pyay Pyay Hotel and Hotel M2 in Muse within 20th June to 3rd July, 2020. Hotels selected for interviews are based on brand name, popularity as well as the lockdown situation in Myanmar.

Discussion

RO1: To study how hotels should operate their hotel business and what needs to be changed to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the hotels' guests, employees, and stakeholders.

Hotels are following internationally-accepted safety standard while setting up safety procedure to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the hotels' guests, employees. During epidemic, since there is no business in tourism, so hotels are also stop collaborating with the stakeholder like tour agency, car tour companies or restaurants but if the tourism business starts running, they will collaborate with their stakeholder again. Not only hotel guests and employees are needed to follow every safety procedure provided by hotels but also from stakeholder's side need to strictly follow the safety instruction to ensure the safety of themselves. In addition, in order to implement the contact-less rule, hotels changed the attendance recording method of staff from using a fingerprint to record datils in book by signing their signature. Hotel managers also set up social distancing within staff, taking temperature and recording daily health status for staff, request staff to wear mask, face shield, gloves all the time while contacting with guests and set up thermometer and sink separately home or leave without payment, managers will also allow them but for those staff

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who stay working inside hotel, they did not allow to go out and must stay inside hotel.

According to the opinions of some hotel guests, upon their arrivals, using hospital-grade disinfectants and stationing security personnel at the entrance of hotels to take body temperatures using a thermometer is of great importance in the aspect of health safety. Guests will also be asked to wash hand with hand sanitizer and wearing mask while entering hotel lobby. A declaration form was set up to know the guests' personal health status and travel history. The staff will help to sanitize the belongings of guests such as luggage and backpack. At the reception, all the guests had to be in certain spot before check-in in order to keep social distancing norm.
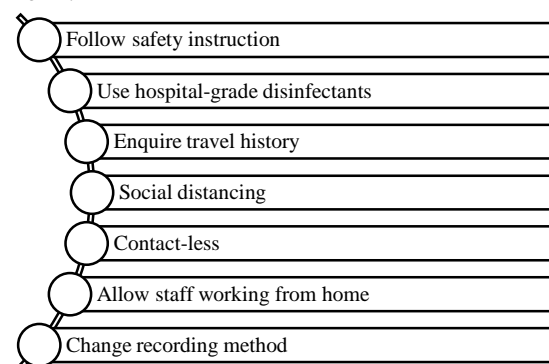

Figure 1: Model of Operating Method of Hotels in Myanmar During Epidemic

RO2: To explore the effects of safe management measures on the experience of hotel guests in Myanmar.

From guest experience, every hotel guest is concerned about the hotel's safety standards and whether they are following or implementing WHO protocols. Cleanliness, hygiene and safety are their top priorities before and during their stay. If the hotel does not provide daily temperature check, does not emphasize the disinfection equipment before and after the guests' check-in, does not pay attention to the safety of the guests, does not strictly between the guests' safety distance, will not be a factor for them to consider the hotel.

Guests' expectation of safety standards during and after the outbreak is that the hotel should pay attention to disinfection and sterilization equipment, provide daily disinfection on public area and room corners, place sinks and hand sanitizers in and out of the hotel lobby, check the temperature before

entering any place and spray sanitizers on incoming and outgoing people. Some guests think that following the hotel's safety rules makes them feel under the control of the hotel, because the hotel staff will keep an eye on the guests and will tell them if they don't follow the rules.
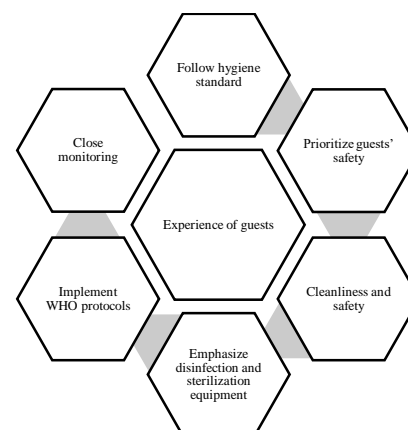

Figure 2: Experience of the Hotel Guests

RO3: To find out if the operating costs of hotels in Myanmar might be affected by safe management measures.

Hotel managers mention that they spent a lot of extra money on setting up new security procedures and buying additional security equipment in preparation for the hotel's reopening. As product prices rise during the peak of the epidemic, and safety measures such as disinfection tools, human operation, food ordering and COVID-19 testing also require significant investment, operating budgets are doubled and labor costs are rising, so the costs are huge. In addition, there were few guests during the outbreak, as everyone was told by the government to stay at home and not to travel. So, while hotels can be said to have almost no revenue, items double or triple at peak times, so room occupancy also seriously affects revenue. Obviously, the operating costs of all hotels have been adversely affected by the epidemic.
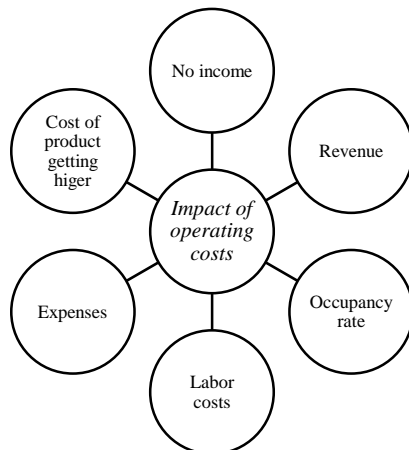
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Figure 3: Impact of Operating Costs of Hotels in Myanmar

Figure 4: Impact of COVID-19 Travel Restrictions on the Hotel Business Performance

RO4: To ascertain the impact of COVID-19 travel restrictions on the business performance of hotels in Myanmar.

Researcher have found that the impact of COVID-19 travel restrictions on business performance is difficult to measure under unstable conditions. During the lockout, hotels will retain only the necessary staff and allow those staff who willing to work from home to do so. When asked what changes would need to be made to current operations, some managers mentioned that they needed to use their current experience to develop realistic budgets, upgrade hotel safety standards and plan for the future financially. In addition, they need to pay more attention to train employees with enough safety knowledge, prepare enough necessary equipment, change the target market, pay more attention to digital marketing, promote booking before paying for activities and attract tourists to stay in hotels with affordable room prices. In this way, they can also get a temporary income. So, when this kind of crisis happens again in the future, the company can gain experience and deal with future crises without layoffs and waiting for recovery time.
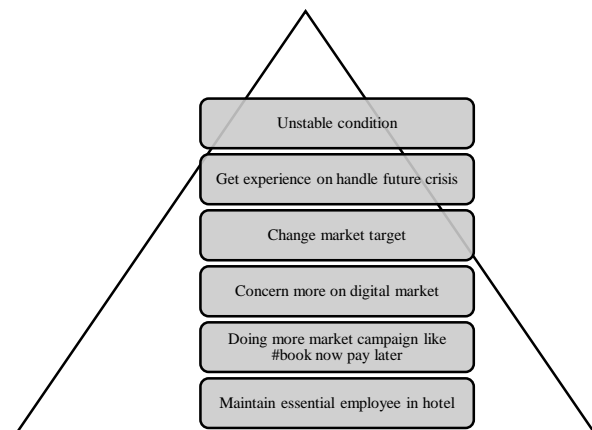
Key Findings

To ensure the health, safety and well-being of the hotels' guests and employees, all three-star and four-star hotels in Myanmar follow safety instruction and internationally-accepted safety standard.

In order to contact-less, the hotels changed the way of staff attendance records from fingerprint records to signature records.

Hotels were used hospital-grade disinfectants and disinfected public area inside hotel three times a day meanwhile staff are requested to wear a face shield, mask, gloves and PPE suit.

Hotels are set up thermometer and sink separately for hotel guests and staff.

During epidemic, since there is no business in tourism, hotels are temporarily stopped collaborating with tour agency, car tour companies or restaurants.

From the guest' perspective, every hotel at least had to implement WHO protocols and have the reach in the standard of cleanliness and safety for the guests chosen to stay in the hotel.

Hotel guests have high expectations of hygiene, cleanliness, and safety before and during their stay. When the hotels emphasize disinfection and sterilization equipment, and complies with hygiene standards, most hotel guests will feel relief and safe inside hotel.

Most guests do not complain about following the security procedures provided by the hotel but a few guests feel uncomfortable while requesting them for washing hand before or after entering the hotel lobby or sanitizing their belongings such as luggage and backpack.

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If safe management by hotel reassure guests that they have checked properly and have prioritised customers' safety or close monitoring on guests, it will make most guests feel that they were under by control of hotels.

Some guests may lie about their travel history when hotels check and record their travel history and health certificates for guests from the worst-affected areas.

The cost of setting up new safety procedures and buying additional safety equipment is huge due to rising product prices and a doubling of operating budgets during the peak of the epidemic.

The expenses are also high because of the need to implement for safety measures such as disinfection, manpower operations, food ordering and COVID-19 testing.

There is a mismatch between income and daily expenses, and it may be difficult to run a hotel if the outbreak lasts too long.

Although room occupancy had a severe impact on revenue during the epidemic, hotels reduced room price in order to attract local guests.

During this outbreak, there were only local guests for business or other tourist purposes, and some foreigners who stayed in the hotel for a long time.

Hotel managers changed the target market from foreigner to local people and focused more on Facebook marketing since local guests used Facebook most.

Hotels are turning to digital marketing and switching to room service to achieve contactless.

During COVID situation, hotels are promoting special package, setting an affordable price and doing more market campaign like #book now pay later, to attract customers.

To reduce labor cost, hotels allow staff working from home and only maintain essential employees in hotel while preparing to reopen hotel.

Hotel managers got experience in handle future crisis.

Conclusion and Implications

The aim of the study is to addresses the COVID-19 impact on the Myanmar Tourism Industry on the basis of its effect on business performance and operating costs of hotels, safe management measures on the experience of hotel guests and the prediction of the hotels in Myanmar in which what will happen to the standard of hotel industry in the future after the outbreak, and how the safe and security standard of hotel industry will change after

pandemic of covid-19. Results of interviews with the management of the five hotels in Myanmar showed that COVID had a strong negative impact on the hotel industry. However, the COVID outbreak may have offered to those who survived the storm reasonably unscathed an opportunity to capture a bigger share of future markets. Specifically, it taught the hotel industry a priceless lesson on the importance of crisis management. (Sönmez, Tarlow, & Apostolopoulos, 1999) noted that a lack of preparation could result in the loss of visitor confidence, a permanently damaged image, loss of revenues, and requiring high advertising costs to regain public confidence and rekindle customers' interests.

Furthermore, it is believed that by being able to identify and assess a crisis situation and determine a positive management response, the Myanmar hotel industry has indeed learned its lessons on how to cope with similar situations in the future. These studies can also provide direction suggestions for the emerging of new markets in the future which are "new products, new technologies, new models, new experiences" and inject new energy into the industry for example, international restaurants, ethnic restaurants, hotels and catering enterprises are actively developing takeout products and opening the service mode of "online ordering + zero contact". At the same time, provides safe accommodation service for those who need to be isolated when they return to work and also healthy and safety environment. Middle and high-end hotels also offer "heart-warming suites" to provide guests with comfortable experience of staying and sleeping at ease. Thus, further accelerating the digital transformation.

Future Research

Due to various reasons and limitations, this research failed to reach a certain depth and breadth, so the future research mainly has the following directions:
(1) Extend the scope of the data survey to five star and international standard hotels because quantitative research is suggested to apply in wider range.
(2) Expand the number of people involved in the study and increase the sampling capacity when Myanmar is not affected by virus infection or other special circumstances.
(3) Specific research on different nationalities and international guests also is advised by the researcher

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due to its different cultural and economic background. For example, the research only got the opinion from local respondents and one long stay foreigner who stays in hotels in Mandalay.

(4) Improving research methods, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, to study in-depth the difference between the views of guests on the safety standard of different hotel stars.

(5) Building on the model and findings of this study, it is recommended for other researchers to investigate the perception of tourists regarding safety, security, and hygiene in other cities in Myanmar and regional destinations to have a clear view of the whole region during instability epidemic.

Acknowledgements

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