
The Hotel Strategy During the Pandemic of COVID-19: the Case of Secondary Cities

Situmorang, Ringkar¹, Choirisa, Septi. Fahmi², Mehrotra, Amit³

ringkar.situmorang@umn.ac.id¹, septi.choirisa@umn.ac.id²,
amehrotra@citytech.cuny.edu³

Universitas Multimedia Nusantara^{1,2}
City University of New York³

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Abstract

The pandemic of COVID-19 has given a disaster to the business industry. Many businesses have to concede that they have to suffer financially because of this situation. One of those businesses that suffered is the hotel business. Many hotel companies have to find a strategy to ensure their relationship between the main city (head office) and secondary cities (branch office) working seamlessly to mitigate this crisis. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how the hotel industry is handling the challenges during pandemic COVID-19 in the secondary cities. This study adopted qualitative research with 12 semi-structured interviews from various hotel managers in multiple cities. The result showed some discrepancies in the interrelationship between the head office and the branch office in secondary cities, creating uncertainties among them. This study contributed to the crisis management literature in hospitality and tourism industry by exploring the challenges from the pandemic of COVID-19 among cities in Indonesia.

Keyword: COVID-19, Tourism; Hospitality, Hotels; Secondary cities.

I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has brought the business industry into a new lowdown with uncertainties and suffered (e.g. [1], [2], [3]). The tourism business is one of the industries that hit hard because of the situation. It brings the global hospitality and tourism industry collapsing without knowing what the future will hold (e.g. [4], [5]). This global pandemic has caused multiple problems to the industry, such as low business income, quarantine periods, closing borders, and travel limitations. Some hotels and resorts worldwide have to close their operation or limit their business operation to the minimum. As a result, the hospitality and tourism businesses have lost millions of income due to unprecedented conditions within the industry. For example, the number

of people who work in hospitality and tourism, around 272 million jobs, lost their welfare. Furthermore, the industry itself has lost more than 4.7 trillion US\$ [6]. Many scholars (e.g. [7], [8], [9]) considered this pandemic as the crisis management that gives tremendous effect from different dimensions to the industry such as political, economics, and social justice.

Various studies have been conducted about the impact of the pandemic COVID-19 on the hospitality and tourism industry. For example, the tourism recovery strategy of COVID-19 in Taiwan [10], the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic towards rural destinations in Chezia [11], the impact of COVID-19 on tourism from a human rights point of view [12], and the repercussion and challenges of COVID-19 in the Indonesian's hotel industry [9]. Some other studies offered how the pandemic COVID-19 could change tourism and societies in the future (e.g. [5], [13]). Different studies discussed how the COVID-19 changed the management planning in urban and rural areas, such as environments [14], socio-economics (e.g. [15], [16]), municipal finances [17], and rural tourism development [18]. However, there are still limited studies regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the management strategy for secondary cities in the hotel industry (e.g. [19], [20]). Recently, Reference [36] proposed a theoretical framework for building resilience in managing the pandemic of COVID-19 crisis drawing on the theory of resilience and exploring various hospitality businesses. Nevertheless, more research into the dynamics of strategic management of the hotel industry in developing countries is required to contribute to multiple stakeholders in facing the pandemic of COVID-19. Therefore, the present study aims to provide the management strategies in mitigating the challenges in secondary cities for handling the pandemic COVID-19.

Various scholars studied urban and rural tourism challenges in developing their tourism area (e.g. [21], [18]). Reference [21] explores the effect of COVID-19 on airlines, airports, and the destination Andalusia in Spain. He stated that the result of the pandemic make the destination area become devastated and significantly had affected the economy. Similarly, Reference [18] posited that the pandemic COVID-19 had suggested that multiple stakeholders (e.g., government, managers, tourists) focus on the tourism economic recovery in rural and urban tourism. They believed that various stakeholders could share their views in understanding urban and rural tourism development and trends during this pandemic crisis. Therefore, this research about the hotel management strategy in secondary cities could offer more insights to the industry and its stakeholders.

This research focuses on the developing country of Indonesia. Multiple cities are taken into consideration, including Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. Jakarta is considered because the city is the central hub of the other cities in terms of the company head offices or the central government of the regional government in the area. This study uses the secondary cities in the context of responding to the crisis of COVID-19. Many scholars have explored the impact of the

pandemic on the larger cities [14]. However, exploring urban secondary towns is still much desired [20].

This study's primary purpose is to investigate how the hotel industry handles the challenges during pandemic COVID-19, especially with the relationship between the central hotel hub and the hotel in outer cities. Notably, the objectives of this study seek to answer the following question,

- (i) How does the COVID-19 pandemic impact the hotel businesses in secondary cities?
- (ii) What are the responses or strategies being made to deal with this situation?

The present study is essential since a crisis could occur at any given time. It is imperative to prepare for the future to ensure the sustainability of the business. Moreover, the focus of this study is the hotel businesses in Indonesia. A developing country would respond to a crisis (e.g., pandemic) differently than a developed country. There are substantial differences between the two (e.g., infrastructure, income level, readiness to face a crisis, etc.). Thus, it is vital to study the impact of COVID-19 from the perspectives of a developing country.

The paper starts with reviewing the literature on the pandemic COVID-19 in the hotel industry, then continues with the effect of the pandemic in the secondary cities. Following that, it continues with the importance of secondary cities for tourism. Next, the method, the findings, and the discussion are presented. The paper concluded with implications for MNC hotel companies and this study's limitations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The effect of pandemic COVID-19 on the hotel industry

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 is an infectious disease and a respiratory illness caused by a new form of coronavirus - a large family of viruses that induce respiratory infections. The first case of COVID-19 was initially found as pneumonia with an unknown cause in Wuhan, China. The Chinese government reported this pneumonia case to the WHO in December 2019. In March 2020, WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 is immense due to the human-to-human transmission through droplets of saliva during coughing or sneezing. According to WHO, most individuals who contracted COVID-19 will recover without any special treatment. However, older individuals with medical problems (e.g., cardiovascular, diabetes, cancer, etc.) are more likely to develop severe illnesses. Without a doubt, COVID-19 has changed the world. Many countries put restrictions in place (e.g., social distancing rules), even closing their borders to a state of lockdown. As a result, the world economy suffers, particularly in the hospitality and tourism industry. Hotels also suffered

from this COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Marriot International reported losing an income of approximately US\$234 million in China [22]. Not only in China but hotel operators across the globe are experiencing homogeneous situations. Hospitality and tourism in Singapore also had hit turbulence during pandemic COVID-19, and recently they are focusing on encouraging local tourists to restart their tourism business [23].

As of 4 August 2021, Indonesia is still fighting with the pandemic of COVID-19 and surpassed its death toll of 100.000 fatalities this date. This report showed total cases and deaths to 3.5 million and 100.636 deaths [24]. This report showed how significant the number of pandemic outbreaks in the country is. Due to this situation, the Indonesian government set multi-tiered public activity restrictions or *Pemberlakuan Pengetatan Kegiatan Masyarakat (PPKM)* for several weeks. These restrictions were created to decline the high curbs of case numbers and helped ease pressure on hospitals. So far, the number had been going down, and the bed occupancy rate (BOR) in hospitals declining in several cities. Subsequently, the hotel business also experienced its worst condition in this pandemic because thousands of hotels and restaurants closed permanently [25]. In October 2020, there are 125-150 business closes monthly. This situation occurred due to 'public restrictions' in hotels and restaurants to limit visitors coming to the premises. Many hotel business people were hopeful that the government provides some incentive (e.g., tax relaxation) to survive in this unprecedented situation.

2.2. The impact of the pandemic of COVID-19 on the secondary cities

Various studies have investigated the effect of pandemic COVID-19 in the rural-urban area (e.g. [15], [16]). For example, Reference [16] investigated the consumption impact due to the epidemics and pandemics of COVID-19 in rural-urban India. Their studies explore consumer behavior on consumption and income by using questionnaires and analyzing them using SPSS software. There were 500 questionnaires sent, and 172 were returned. Their study believed that there were some changes in consumers' consumption in urban and rural tourism areas. Many consumers had less spending on their everyday needs and focus on their essential product only. They also added that digital payment such as education, entertainment, or social networking had increased online. Thus, this study showed how the pandemics had changed consumer habits during the pandemic of COVID-19 in rural-urban areas. Therefore, stakeholders (e.g., employees, managers, investors) need to focus on creating the mitigation for such a crisis so the industry can minimize the impact if this kind of pandemic occurs again in the future, particularly in urban areas.

Likewise, multiple studies also have explored the challenges from the pandemic of COVID-19 in rural-urban tourism destinations (e.g. [18], [21], [26]). For example, Reference [26] investigated the dynamic relationship between tourists and tourism companies during the pandemic of COVID-19 regarding its services. They gathered 647 online complaints from multiple

tourism businesses such as OTAs (online travel agencies), hotels, airlines, and short-term rental platforms. They analyzed them using content analysis to see how those companies are responding to such inquiries. They concluded their research that the complaints during the pandemic of COVID-19 were substantial, and they also found deficiencies in tourism enterprises in measuring their response during the crisis. Therefore, the tourism businesses in the rural-urban area are hopeful of preparing the mitigation in handling this crisis related to setting up policies and procedures involving the employee, managers, tourism business association, and government [26].

2.3. Why the secondary cities are pivotal in developing the tourism region?

The term of secondary cities is defined as the group of cities considered the smaller towns below a country's metropolitan areas [19]. Secondary cities often become the key element for their urban and regional development, which are the primary sources of economic development for larger cities [27]. Subsequently, many researchers pointed the significant relationship between secondary cities and urban tourism in bringing better sustainable tourism (e.g. [19], [28]). [28] investigated the involvement of secondary cities in developing the more immense landscapes for well-established urban tourism. They believed that the interconnectedness among cities could bring a unique global competition in tourism development. This relation could be explored more during the crisis of pandemic COVID-19 of how they communicate with each other. Similarly, Reference [19] examined how secondary cities offered substantial national economic development to their urban tourism. Using secondary data from 22 local municipalities, he interpreted the tourism economies performance of its secondary cities from how the domestic and international tourists contributed to the national gross domestic product in South Africa. His research showed the significant contribution of secondary cities to the tourism economics for larger cities.

Various studies discussed the challenges that the secondary cities could be vulnerable to due to limited sources compared to larger cities (e.g. [29], [30]), especially during the pandemic COVID-19 [20]. Reference [29] explored the role of secondary cities and the metropolitan area in contributing their rubber industries to Ghana. They deployed 108 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as the primary data sources to gather insights about the study. They believed that the spatial and social transformation of the emerging rubber industries in the second city of Sekondi-Takoradi had shown economic contribution by substantial housing development for future employees for the sectors. However, this also challenges the local town because it created an overcrowded living environment with limited infrastructures. Therefore, their research presented the pivotal of secondary cities development planning, especially when the area expects visitors from outside, which could create potential challenges and social problems [31].

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Design and participants

To understand the repercussions of the pandemic COVID-19 in secondary cities, the researchers adopted a case study approach to obtain unique insights from the specific context from the in-depth interviews with the participants [32]. The hotel managers are chosen to share their insights for this study. They are selected due to their prominent role in developing strategies in facing the challenges from the COVID-19 in Indonesia. Purposive sampling was selected to ensure the participant can provide valid responses to the intended questions [33]. We contacted the participants through our networks and the hotel association where the researchers become a member. 12 (twelve) participants responded to our invites from different cities across Indonesia (see Table 3.1). The 12 participants come from six cities from six other provinces. They are Jakarta (DKI Jakarta), Palembang, (South Sumatera), Lombok (West Nusa Tenggara), Solo (Central Java), Bandung (West Java) and Ketapang (West Kalimantan). As the capital city of Indonesia, Jakarta is considered the central hub for business and leisure activities and the center hub of many out-posted hotel companies throughout other cities in Indonesia. Other cities are intended to represent the outpost hotel companies. Here is the list of the participants,

Table 3.1. Participant list

No	Name	Gender	Positions	Property	Location
1	IKN	Male	Senior Manager	Local	Jakarta
2	PPN	Male	Senior Manager	Local	Jakarta
3	RYN	Male	Senior Manager	Local	Palembang
4	JMD	Male	Senior Manager	International	Jakarta
5	RYZ	Male	Senior Manager	Local	Jakarta
6	WPI	Male	Junior Manager	Local	Jakarta
7	LYI	Female	Middle Manager	International	Lombok
8	AYM	Female	Middle Manager	International	Jakarta
9	GSI	Male	Senior Manager	Local	Jakarta
10	RTM	Female	Middle Manager	Local	Solo
11	MTI	Male	Middle Manager	Local	Bandung
12	DNZ	Male	Senior Manager	Local	Ketapang

Source: Interview data

3.2. Data Collection

During the pandemic COVID-19, data collection was conducted using video conference online (zoom) for three months, from August to October 2020. Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. The interview took 45 minutes to 1 hour of conversation regarding the challenges and effect of the manager's experience in handling the COVID-19 at their hotels. This interview method was selected to obtain a deeper understanding of the personal views and their insights [34]. The questions were prepared based on the literature review, including the probe questions that depended on what topics were raised during the interviews. The researchers prepared queries to answer the research questions about the impact of the pandemic COVID-19 in secondary cities of the hotel industry [32]. The questions began with the discussion of the effect of COVID-19 on hotel performance. Next, it continued with the type of implementations used during the crisis and what strategies the hotel adopted to overcome the problems.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis began with recognizing the relevant extensive classifications and themes [35]. We started analyzing data by establishing patterns, familiarization, (re)ordering, and recognizing thematic matrices from the conversation with the managers. From here, initial coding was created through grouping and classifications, which can bring different meanings from the researcher's point of view. Subsequently, the data was encoded into categories and themes based on a few words or sentences. Data then was input digitally and coded using Nvivo. Several types and classifications emerged, such as impact, cities, financial, food and beverage, and strategy.

IV. FINDINGS

4.1. The impact of the pandemic COVID-19 on the hotel industry in secondary cities.

Findings suggested that the pandemic COVID-19 had devastated and disrupted the hotel business in Indonesia. Many hotels suffered financial loss and forced them to create a strategy to help the companies continue operating. These hotels have experienced the lowest hotel occupancy for some time. One hotel manager stated the poor condition of its hotel occupancy,

“From December 2019 to March 2020, we still have an average of 78% room occupancy. Suddenly, into March, hotel reservations were canceled one by one. Then, the (room) occupancy gradually declined. By April, we have no guests in our hotel. By the end of April, we closed our hotel for an operation to save our expenses, saving cost”.
(Participant#7, middle manager, international hotel, Lombok)

Another hotel manager expressed his opinion,

“Before March 2020, we still had 85%-90% room occupancy. In March 2020, we declined to 55%. Then in early April 2020, we started to feel the impact because the room occupancy reached in single digit. Then, in the middle of April, we decided to close our property.” (Participant#3, senior manager, local hotel, Palembang).

Most managers show their concerns regarding this matter, especially in regards to financial loss. One of them, who worked in one prominent hotel in Bandung, mentioned that their properties lost around \$US300.000 for just in March 2020. He pointed out how the management needs to plan their strategy to handle this crisis because the city has many visitors, domestic and international travelers. The city of Bandung is considered a leisure destination that only takes a two-hour drive from the capital city of Jakarta. Even though Bandung is still a secondary city, this city considers as a larger city for tourists. It is well known to have unique attractions with its culinary, local garments, and mountain views.

Many hotels have to come with solutions to slow down the shortage of cash flow. Most hotels tried not to lay off their employees, but they eventually had to cut off the employment to balance their book since the business fell to drain. One manager showed his concern,

“The lay-off started with a daily worker and apprentices, then the hotel employee who is still under a short-term contract. Full-time employees were pushed to take their unpaid leave for working lesser days in a week.” (Participant#11, middle manager, local hotel, Bandung)

Another manager may have different strategies in saving their labor cost,

“In our hotel, all full-time employees will have their salary cut, but they still on schedule with fewer working days” (Participant#9, senior manager, local hotel, Jakarta).

This situation created uncertainties for hotel employees. They were in a dire situation in which they lose their income either individually or as a family. Many of these employees work on the government's incentive to ease their burden using the government mobile app.

4.2. The lack of communication between head office and branch office during the pandemic COVID-19

The participants have many insights regarding the scarcity of communication among the hotel headquarters with their secondary posts. In Indonesia, international hotels or local hotels have their head office situated in Jakarta. Jakarta becomes the central hub of these secondary cities due to superior infrastructure such as international airports, extensive train stations, close to policymakers, etc. One manager mentioned how confusing the communication from the hotel head office in Jakarta, which could create lateness in the decision on his property,

“I am a part of local chains which depend to the instructions from Jakarta (head office), anything that we would like to do; we need to follow direction from our main office. For example, we still consider a green zone in our city but still watch our social distancing. On the other hand, Jakarta is considered a red zone. Jakarta told us to keep our manning as minimum as one employee working in a banquet guest meeting. It is impossible to compare us, sir. We are not apple to apple. Because Jakarta has enough manning in general, so they can find employees who can cross-department easily. However, it is difficult for us in the smaller cities. We are already basically short of employees because it is not easy to find qualified employees to work in a hotel. What we have is already minimum. But in the end, we have to follow the directions from the main office.”
(Participant#12, senior manager, local hotel, Ketapang)

The hotel manager understood that this decision might be one of the strategies to ease the pressure, especially in saving labor costs. However, he might think that there must be some considerations to apply those strategies due to the different situations of the two nature of the cities.

Another hotel manager who worked in the head office in Jakarta sharing his stories about the communication that could drawback the business in the secondary cities.

“We (head office) have to think about the sustainable business growth of our properties both in Jakarta and secondary cities. There might be few hesitations from our sister hotels to follow some instructions. They may consider that they could operate as usual. Our sister hotels dare to reduce the hotel price as minimum as possible to increase the room occupancy. But for us in the head office, we should be careful to decrease the price because once we decrease, it might be difficult to bring the price up again.”
(Participant#1, senior manager, local hotel, Jakarta)

Different managers (Participant#10, middle manager, local hotel, Solo) also mentioned that her city is the last place affected by the pandemic COVID-19. Other cities in the region of Central Java, such as Semarang and Yogyakarta, have decreased their room occupancy. At the end of March 2020, they still have several events held in their hotels. Her hotel has already been told to close in March, but because the number of infected is still zero; then the management decided to continue their operation until early April when they had the first infected case. This particular situation could give a complex problem for the head office and its properties in secondary cities. On one side, the company would like to survive this pandemic by deploying several strategies. However, the secondary city situation might not compare with the case in the head office.

4.3. Management strategies to respond to the pandemic COVID-19 in secondary cities

According to several participants, many strategies have been conducted to survive the hotel business during the pandemic COVID-19, such as modified room package price, saving overhead costs (labor and maintenance), and increasing food and beverage (F&B) income. This food and beverage theme was discussed widely in the interviews because F&B is the second biggest department that produces income in the hotel business. Since the room occupancy situation was down, hotel managers shifted their attention to making food and beverage (e.g., restaurant, room service banquet/event) keep alive. One manager shared her opinion,

“Once our room sales have gone down, we turned our attention to bring our F&B and banquet events, bringing some income for our hotels. We knew that many people are working from home (WFH), so we want to bring our cuisine to their homes by offering them food delivery. We still have wedding events in our hotel with only a few people and follow tight health protocols. At the moment, we are preparing to have a virtual wedding package. We required only the immediate family to come to the hotel; then they will proceed the ceremony using zoom application” (Participant#10, middle manager, local hotels, Solo).

Another manager had to offer a different solution, so they do not need to cancel the wedding bookings. Because they do not want to lose income, one manager (Participant#11, middle manager, local hotels, Bandung) shared the strategy she implemented at her property. Instead of canceling the wedding, they still allow the wedding to be held in a small number of 30-40 guests, then place them in several different small rooms. By doing so, they still maintain the social distancing among the attendees.

Several other managers also shared similar strategies for their F&B department. One manager mentioned that they did something similar to their room service. He (Participant#9, senior manager, local hotel, Jakarta) said that all hotels under the same brand, including in the secondary cities, delivered their room service to the guest rooms without contacting the guests. This service also includes a buffet breakfast daily. The hotel guests are not allowed to gather in their restaurant, so they bring their room service order to their rooms.

V. DISCUSSION

This study examines how the hotel industry handles the challenges during the pandemic COVID-19 in secondary cities. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit hard in any nation worldwide [36]. The pandemic crisis had brought the hotel business to a catastrophic situation. Hotel is suffered

because of financial loss and wondering how they would bounce back in the future. This crisis has also happened with the tourism destination elsewhere, where this kind of crisis might not happen before. Tourist activities had to stop indefinitely. This situation had affected the socio-economy within the area. Some areas (e.g., Lombok, Solo, Palembang) have their community depend on the incoming and outgoing tourists to survive daily. One thing from the hotel that had an enormous effect is labor conditions. Hotels do not have any choice to sustain, either laying off their employees or reducing their employee salary to 50-75%. This condition makes the employees into uncertainties and wonders what they need to do to survive daily. Multiple hotels have used various strategies to sustain their hotels (e.g. [9], [18], [26]) which must involve multiple stakeholders handling this crisis management thoroughly. Government still has a prominent role in managing all stakeholders together so the situation nationwide could handle better. There is still much confusion among head office and branch office when it comes to making a decision. Too many cases cannot be decided by companies only but need to involve assistance from the government as well. The application of multi-tiered public activity restrictions (*PPKM*) is still being conducted. Many districts (*kabupaten*) in Java, Sumatera, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi still have a high number of cases of COVID-19 [37]. So, the government put higher restrictions on those districts and relaxed some communities with fewer cases. Government cannot work alone in this *PPKM*. Public or society also need to work together to ensure the chain of the coronavirus slowed down by obeying the rules and restrictions set by the local and central government [13].

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that the relationship between the head office in a larger city and the branch office in the secondary city is crucial. They cannot work solely, but they need to ensure their policies are similar and the decision fit for both sides. This research attempt to investigate the relationship between the head and branch office in the hotel industry.

This study contributes to the literature of crisis management in the hospitality and tourism industry, highlighting the relationship of the head office and branch office in handling the pandemic COVID-19 at the secondary cities. Most of the existing crisis management in pandemic COVID-19 is focused on urban tourism (e.g. [14], [38]), rural tourism (e.g. [18], [21]), destination tourism [39]. However, there is still limited studies about secondary cities in hospitality and tourism [20]. This study extended the importance of the relationship between head and branch office in handling the pandemic of COVID-19 in the developing country. Thus, this research extends the body of knowledge of crisis management in the hospitality and tourism industry. This study showed that the management strategy at the hotel needs cooperation from multiple stakeholders (e.g., government, hotel managers, consumers, and investors) to overcome these pandemic issues.

In managerial implications, many strategies have been deployed by hotels worldwide. Health certification for hotels has been a new standard in this new normal. Hotel industries consider their hotels to be prepared to change hotel consumers' behavior because of the pandemic COVID-19. Hotel consumers would prefer a hotel that fits the “new normal” standard, which provides convenience and safety to their customers. It means there would be a possibility that the virus would not go away completely. Many hospitality and tourism businesses should be at peace with the pandemic of COVID-19. The idea is that the hospitality and tourism sector should adapt, adjust and practice to walk together with the COVID-19. Nevertheless, all stakeholders need to work together to prepare better in handling this kind of crisis in the future.

This study has few limitations like other research. First, this study is based on the hospitality and tourism industry. This type of research may give a different kind of result is based on other sectors. Second, this research has been conducted on one country, which is Indonesia. Other different countries may give additional insights which might not generate the same outcome. In addition, different industries (e.g., construction building, health and welfare, telecommunication, automobile industry) can use various data collection methods to enrich the pandemic of COVID-19 study.

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