
CHALLENGES AND COPING MECHANISMS OF HOTELS IN THE PHILIPPINES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Ginavee F. Dapula

University of Santo Tomas Alfredo M. Velayo College of Accountancy

Abstract

The economic downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted the global economy. The tourism sector has witnessed a significant dropdown. One of the severely impacted industries is the hospitality industry. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges hotel workers face during the pandemic and to determine the coping mechanisms of hotel owners amidst the health crisis. The study utilized a qualitative exploratory research design and employed purposive sampling among the 16 participants, with financial vulnerability and the safety of families as two emerging themes.

The hotel management helped mitigate the challenges, such as job rotation and financial assistance. The significant contribution of the current study is to extend the limited literature regarding the challenges faced by hotel workers and the coping mechanisms of hotel owners during the outbreak of the virus in the country.

The pandemic opens hotel owners' new opportunities to revive the hospitality industry. The researcher recommends that hotels capitalize on their employees by providing training and seminars to acquire new knowledge and skills to survive and stay afloat with the impacts of the pandemic.

Hotel owners must also capitalize on marketing and advertising their business to attract more local and foreign tourists. Future studies may consider the challenges and coping mechanisms of other service industries.

Keywords: financial vulnerability, family safety, job rotation, and financial assistance.

Introduction

The hotel industry plays a vital role in the economy. This business purely depends on local and foreign travelers visiting a particular destination. Lacap (2014) mentioned that the campaign "It is more fun in the Philippines" led to an increasing number of travelers visiting the country. Some visited provinces include Aurora, Bataan, Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, Pampanga, and Zambales (Lacap, 2014).

In addition, the development of public works and highways, airports, and railways extensively invited travelers to visit the countryside since it is near Metro Manila, the capital of the Philippines. Additionally, in 2019 the Philippines reached a new milestone with 8.26M visitor arrivals. This figure hit the target set in the 2017-2022 Philippine Development Plan.

The lodging or accommodation industry is vital to visitors to the country. Once they arrive, they look for a place to stay. Each hotel client is looking for an accommodation facility that can provide service that meets or exceeds his/her expectations (Enz, 2010). Hotels provide the needed place for entertainment, a needed place for rest, and business meetings. More hotel reservations mean more guests and can generate more employment in the country. Regardless of classification, each hotel dramatically contributes to the economy's overall performance (Galiza, 2020).

However, these hotels are susceptible to environmental forces such as natural calamities, natural disasters, and pandemics. The occurrence of such adversities hurts businesses in the country.

In December 2019, the global economy was shocked by a new virus called COVID-19 that appeared in Wuhan, China. The unexpected spread of COVID-19 worldwide has significantly impacted and is considered a top global economic

risk (WHO, 2020). According to Belle (2020), a coronavirus is a group of viruses that can cause human disease. Nicomedes and Avila (2020) also mentioned that COVID-19 is a person-to-person transmission. In addition, Hidalgo, Marquez, Sarmenta, Alvarez, Ong, and Balaria (2021) explained that COVID-19 is an infectious disease-causing global health crisis. Since the virus spread throughout the globe, the World Health Organization declared that the virus is a pandemic. As the virus hits globally, economic managers in the Philippines have issued more policy initiatives and economic assessments. Due to the virus, business continuity is the most discussed topic of all organizations, regardless of the size and nature of the businesses (DTI, 2021). Global tourism has significantly dropped (Gossing et al., 2020), and the declaration of the enhanced community quarantine due to the virus severely impacted hotels in the country.

Numerous studies have looked into the impact of the pandemic on the hotel industry. The tourism sector in the US reported that during the first quarter of 2020, the room occupancy rates of hotels plummeted to 39.4% (Statista, 2020). Additionally, the leisure and hospitality industry unemployment rates were as high as 39.3% (Lippert et al., 2021). Forty-three percent (43%) of small businesses in the United States were temporarily closed (Bartik et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, the average occupancy rate for resorts and hotels decreased. Hotels laid off its workers with further wage cuts and unpaid leave as the sector buckles the effects of the covid-19 pandemic (Karim, Haque, Anis, & Ulfy, 2020). Workers are concerned about the influence of COVID-19 on their finances and health needs.

This pandemic made many Hongkong hotel staff take annual leaves and led to the termination of contractual employees and probationers. Hotels were struggling to maintain their daily operations and cash flow. The widespread cancellations and few new bookings caused the layoffs of food services and accommodation jobs (Sneader & Singhal, 2020). On the other hand, jobs in the accommodation and food services sector accounted for over 20% of all jobs made vulnerable to COVID-19.

In the Philippines, 33% of tourist and travel industry employees have been laid off (Danay et al., 2021). In other countries, layoffs, financial difficulties, and closures have already occurred (Bartik et al., 2020). Almost all countries have witnessed an enormously lower tourism rate, and the 2020 hotel industry revenue forecast has severely declined (Gössling et al., 2020). With the catastrophic worldwide implications of Covid19, most countries adopted travel restrictions and lockdowns. As a consequence, global tourism has witnessed a significant dropdown.

Given these few significant pieces of research regarding the challenges and coping mechanisms of hotels in the Philippines in the context of the pandemic, the need for this study is evident. Dayor, Adongo, and Adam (2020) mentioned that tourism, hospitality enterprises, and small and medium-sized businesses should address the impact of the pandemic as well as their coping and post-recovery measures. Hence, the main objective of this study is to determine the challenges faced by hotel workers during the Covid-19 outbreak and the coping strategies of hotel owners. This paper can enrich the current understanding of the pandemic disruptions affecting the whole operations of the hotel industry. The research addresses three specific research objectives. 1) first, to determine the demographic profile of the hotel workers. 2) second, to explore the challenges faced by hotel workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. 3) Third, to determine the coping mechanisms of hotel owners during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a descriptive research design which describes a condition that presently exists. It includes descriptive recording, analysis, and interpretation. The study utilized a self-made semi-structured interview questionnaire for hotel workers since this method is flexible and provides two-way communication. In line with the study made by Silverman (2001), the interview was the source of the participants' responses coded without the possibility of uncertainty.

The selected hotels included in this study were those located in northern Luzon (i.e., Baguio, Isabela, Tuguegarao, Vigan Ilocos Sur), Central Luzon (i.e., Cabanatuan, Pampanga, Bataan), and southern Luzon (Lucena). Lacap (2014) posited that these are some of the visited provinces in the Philippines.

The target participants included hotel workers. This study used purposive sampling to gain good qualitative data (Polit & Beck, 2012). Qualitative sampling purposefully selects participants who can help one understand the central phenomenon the researcher needs to explore (Creswell, 2015).

Sixteen key informants participated in the study. There were eight males and eight females. Fifty percent of them were between 31-40 years old. Almost all participants have been working in the said hotels for almost one year and were willing and able to participate by sharing their knowledge and experiences in the hospitality industry.

Listed below are the inclusion criteria for selecting the participants:

1. He/ she must be an employee of the hotel
2. Participants voluntarily participate in the study.

The researcher conducted the distribution of the survey from September to December 2022. The survey consisted of three (3) short questions, which included:

1. What is the demographic profile of hotel workers in terms of:
 - a) gender,
 - b) age,
 - c) civil status and;
 - d) position

These demographic variables can give comfort in the quality of data and credibility of results (Rughisis & Human, 2015).

2. What challenges are faced by hotel workers during the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. What are the coping mechanisms of hotel owners during the Covid-19 pandemic?

The researcher labeled the participants' responses as P1 or Participant One to P16, respectively. Based on the participant's responses, the researcher analyzed the data and coded it to form themes (Creswell, 2014). Thematic saturation was sought when no new themes or information on the topic were obtained.

Results and Discussions

1. What is the demographic profile of hotel workers?

Out of 16 participants, there were eight (8) males and eight (8) females. Their age bracket was between 31-40 years old. Regarding their civil status, most were married, indicating 62.50% (10 out of 16). About their position, most of them were front desk personnel (13 out of 16) while 18.75% (3 out of 16) were kitchen staff (see Table 1).

Furthermore, these participants were willing and able to participate by sharing their insights during the interview.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of hotel workers

Item	Subtotal	%
Gender		
Male	8	50
Female	8	50
Total	16	100
Age		
21-30	6	37.50
31-40	8	50

41-50	1	6.25
51-60	1	6.25
Total		100
Civil Status		
Married	10	62.50
Single	6	37.50
Position	Subtotal	%
Front desk personnel	13	81.25
Kitchen staff	3	18.75

2. What are the challenges faced by hotel workers during the Covid-19 pandemic?

A distinct and interesting set of themes emerged on the challenges of hotel employees. The two themes generated from the challenges faced by hotel employees during the pandemic are as follows:

First - Financial vulnerability

Since hotels were temporarily closed during the implementation of the enhanced community quarantine due to the virus outbreak, most of them generally mentioned that they could not cope financially.

"Financial vulnerability to suffice the needs of the family" P1 – P15.

"We were unable to cope financially during the pandemic" P16.

The pandemic has drastically changed the lives of millions of people (Gignac et al., 2021). The financial vulnerability was the utmost challenge faced by hotel employees. Almost all industries, including hotels, were prohibited from operating in the country. Financial vulnerability is a feeling of being exposed to financial insecurity when individuals cannot cope financially (Mogaji, 2018). The Personal Finance Research Centre (PFRC) at the University of Bristol describes it as the feeling of being financially unstable (PFRC, 2009).

During the first Omicron waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, most people had difficulty paying household expenses due to job loss and company closure. These individuals who have lost their jobs have no more income, yet they still have bills to pay and families to feed. They are being financially challenged during the pandemic (Mogahi, 2020).

Moreover, the health crisis has increased financial hardship in the US (Friedman, 2022). In Canada, a study made by Gignac et al. (2021) regarding the impact of the pandemic on health, financial worries, and organizational support of workers dramatically worsened the situation.

Second - Safety of the Family

The COVID-19 pandemic threatened the health of the family. Infectious disease outbreaks make proximity dangerous. Physical or social distancing is the principal mitigation strategy used to reduce transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a profound impact on the family (Hart et al. (2020).

Almost all participants mentioned that:

"We are concerned with the safety and security of our family during the pandemic."(P1 – P16).

After the lockdown, some hotels were used as quarantine facilities. Since the staff in the hotel are exposed outside their home, they find ways to protect themselves from the virus. They see that intense hygienic practices will be conducted before they get home. Checking body temperature, wearing face masks and face shields, changing clothes,

and taking a shower to mitigate the spread of the virus inside their home is of utmost priority for the family. Thus, a family's health and safety are more critical during a crisis.

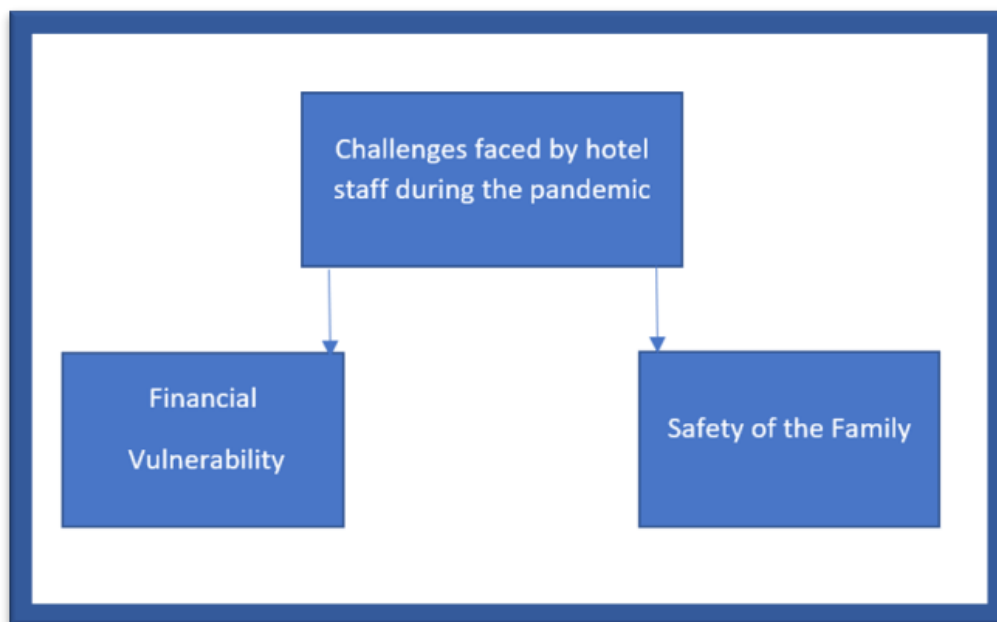


Figure 1. Emerging themes coming from the challenges of hotel workers during the covid 19 pandemic

3. What are the coping mechanisms of hotel owners during the covid 19 pandemic?

Based on the interview, the coping mechanisms of hotel owners are the following:

Job rotation

Due to the health crisis, the deterioration of hotels' financial situations has wreaked havoc on employment and job security. Hotels have forced their workers to be laid off, take early retirement, take unpaid leave, undergo a reduction in welfare benefits, and change their working shifts or positions (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2020). These oppressive circumstances have fostered anxiety in employees about their work and have made them fearful for their employment as their bread and butter.

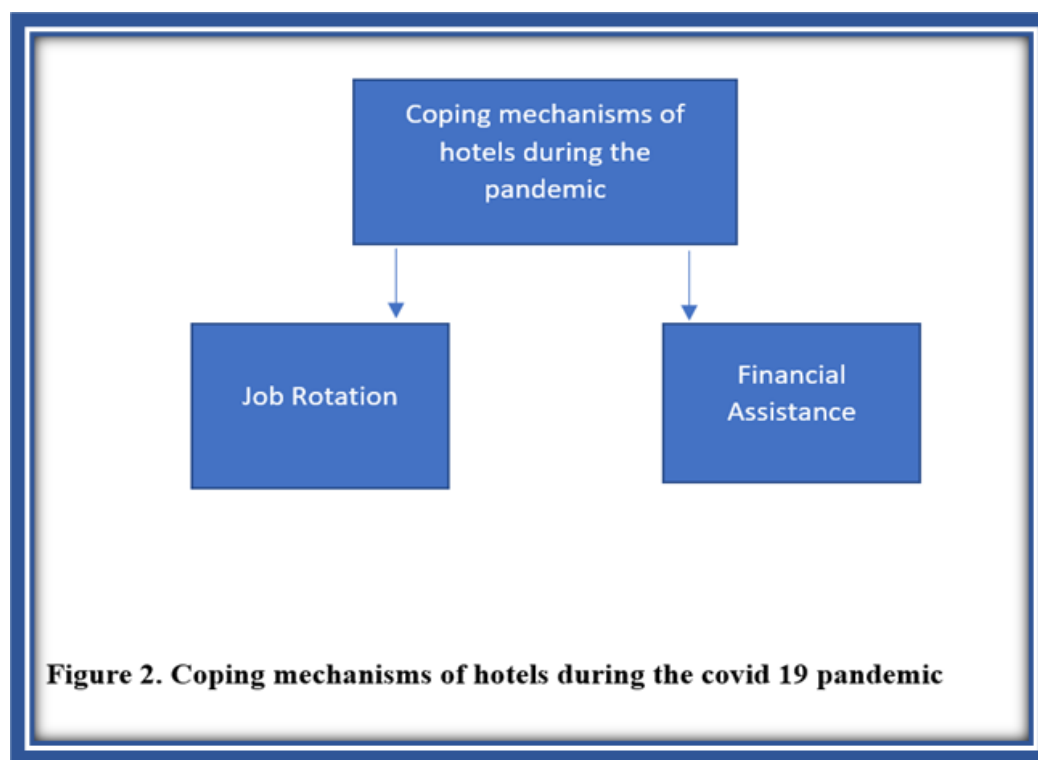
After the lockdown, the Philippine economy started to bounce back. Hotel owners helped their employees in dealing with it. Since some of the hotel workers resigned, the management conducted a job rotation opportunity that would help those who stayed in the industry. According to Ortega (2001), job rotation allows learning different skills instead of doing one job. Experts believe that job rotation provides opportunities for employees that yields high motivation and helps them develop and prepare for promotion in the future (Norbu & Wetprasit, 2020). Some hotel employees perform additional responsibilities and rotate them between various jobs which helps increase employee performance, organizational commitment, and job involvement.

Ogaji (2019) mentioned that with essential competence to perform in whichever unit they find themselves in, the job rotation technique helps equip employees. Through job rotation, the learning process continues even in the practical field. More specifically, the application of job rotation is decidedly appreciated by tourism and hospitality organizations (Emam et al., 2019).

Job rotation is training in an organization involving non-managers and managers. It occurs when employees are moved from one job, department, or task to another after spending some time in a particular job, task, assignment, or department with a view of enabling the employees to acquire more skills, talents, and knowledge (Oparanma & Nwaeke, 2015).

Oparanma and Nwaeke (2015) posited that job rotation is seen in industrial sectors and service-oriented industries such as schools, hospitals, banks, offices, and the like. It shows that job rotation is the most effective way of providing growth and development for people in organizations.

In Pakistan, Jamil, Ahmad, and Nazir (2016) conducted an empirical study (2016) on the effects of job rotation of 266 participants in the health sector. This study used descriptive and correlational analysis. The results show that job rotation contributes to employee specialization and socialization. Thus, job rotation is one of the best training devices for an organization (Oparanma & Nwaeke, 2014). This strategy, indeed, enhance a worker's performance and productivity in companies.



Another mitigating strategy of the hotel owners is providing:

Financial assistance to hotel workers

During the health crisis, hotel owners provide financial assistance to their workers to meet their basic needs. Although the workers did not disclose how much they received, it helped augment their family's basic needs immensely.

Financial assistance is a safety measure for affected families through money during natural calamities, disasters, and pandemics. As such, there has been significant research on financial assistance in other countries. Canada has provided financial support to citizens affected by the coronavirus outbreak (Canoe, 2020). The US also provided financial support through a stimulus package worth \$850 billion to boost the economy for individuals, small business assistance, and relief for airlines and other affected industries (Breuninger & Hirsch, 2020). Germany has set aside a \$600 billion war chest for businesses to protect their workers from the economic impact of the pandemic (Bloomberg, 2020).

During the first few months of the lockdown in the Philippines, the government had a Social Amelioration Program (SAP). This financial assistance program helped the marginalized sector of the country (Gozum et al., 2021). The local government unit initiated the distribution of financial assistance. Affected low-income individuals and families received PhP1,000 per person and a maximum of PhP4,000 per household. Despite the imposed lockdown, SAP ensured that food and other non-food requirements were met. Overall, each country's cash aid eases each family's financial burden during the health crisis.

Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

The study revealed that two (2) themes were culled from the challenges faced by hotel workers amidst covid 19 pandemic; 1) financial vulnerability and (2) safety of the family. At the same time, the coping mechanisms of hotel owners include job rotation and financial assistance.

The research study's findings highlight the need for hotels to cope and embark on new opportunities for survival and conquer the effects of the disruptions.

The pandemic brought enormous impacts on the lives of everyone, especially those in the hotel industry. The pangs of the disruptions tremendously hit Hotel workers. The study was conducted in selected hotels in the Philippines between September to December 2022.

The researcher recommends the following:

Hotel owners must regularly evaluate their business environment and workers' performance amidst disruptions.

They must capitalize on their employees by providing training and seminars to acquire new knowledge and skills to survive and stay afloat with the impacts of the pandemic.

Hotel owners must capitalize on marketing and advertising their business to attract more local and foreign tourists to the country.

As the economy bounces back from the bondage of the virus, the government should help these hotels to leverage the tourism industry. Hence, this can generate more employment, strong financial performance, and contribute to the economy. Future studies may consider the challenges and coping mechanisms of other service industries in the country.

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