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Hotel Recovery Post Pandemic: Is Rebranding Required?

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Abstract

For hotel business to survive during COVID-19 Pandemic requires to conduct major adjustment in almost all aspects of operation. This qualitative study was conducted to assess the operation adjustment that may affect the hotel brand. Data was gathered from respondents comprising managers and decision-makers of 5-to-3-star hotels in Bali, Indonesia that remain open during the pandemic, using online survey and interview.

The results show that during the pandemic, hotels have made major operation adjustment to survive; whilst, maintaining the same quality standard, applying meticulous CHSE (*Cleanliness Health Safety Environment*) protocol, and keeping the customers informed through online promotion platforms regarding the hotel's condition being ready to host guests. The adjustment made includes reducing operation cost, shifting target market into domestic market to maintain cash flow to cover operation, adjusting the rate and prices to adapt the weaker customer's buying power, applying flexible booking and refund conditions, human resource policy and planning rearrangement, reducing the quantity of room offered and menu list items in Food and Beverage outlets. The hotel business resilient was owned to the professionalism of hoteliers, thus hotel rebranding is not required as the quality of the products offered is the same with those before the pandemic; at post-pandemic, it would be simply sifting the target market back to pre-pandemic.

Keywords: hotel; business recovery; pandemic; cleanliness health safety environment; brand management; rebranding.

JEL Classification: M10; Z32.

Introduction

COVID-19 has been spreading globally and covering almost all regions worldwide. It was declared as pandemic by WHO in March 2020. A Series of policies have been applied to mitigate and prevent the virus transmission, starting from travel restriction, large scale social restriction, lockdown, social distancing until the shifting of working mode into 'work from home'. The low mobilization of people put tourism as one of the sectors that was

very severely affected. The UNWTO estimates a drop of between 70% and 75% of international tourist trips compared to the previous year, which is estimated an over of US\$ 2 trillion economic loss in global GDP, that is equivalent to a loss of about 1 billion arrivals and US\$ 1.1 trillion in international tourism receipts (UNWTO 2020, October). At a national scale, a total of 1,674 hotels from 31 provinces in Indonesia have stopped operating.

In Bali, 281 hotels and 19 restaurants began to close at the beginning of the pandemic. Of course, this is increasing in line with the spread of this virus and business performance plunging down, it is shown by the facts that the monthly hotel occupancy rate in Bali touches < 5% and a significant decrease of yearly occupancy rate as presented in Table 1 (PHRI 2020). In emergency phase, many hotels are taking a defensive strategy through cost cutting measures (Wang and Ritchie 2011). Some tourism businesses collapse, employees' termination, employees' unpaid leave and the economic downturn become a reality. There are only 43 international tourists visiting Bali during the period of January-July 2021, the average occupancy rate of star hotel in July 2021 is 5.23% and 4.36% for non-star hotel (Bali Province Central Statistical Office 2021). Given this reality, the hospitality industries in Bali have been entering a serious crisis.

In this crisis situation, star hotels start to initiate various mitigation plans: some continuous to operate and attempt to pay partial employees' salary, some temporary closed with consideration of heavy maintenance when reopening. Many hotels are used as COVID-Care units, work from hotels campaign instead of work from home and sell vouchers that valid until 2021. Those strategies are made to increase business resilience, it is far from the condition that the business has run normally or has been able to cover the operating cost. They are rescued by the reserved emergency funding to survive this unfavorable situation, as the revenue is not enough to cover operation cost let alone profit.

Table 1. Room occupancy (%) stars hotels in Bali

Month	Year			
	2017	2018	2019	2020
January	59,61	52,97	53,27	59,29
February	60,82	66,66	56,48	45,98
March	56,58	61,19	55,43	25,41
April	58,54	63,53	60,33	3,22
May	61,91	67,55	51,56	2,07
June	66,72	70,32	60,37	2,07
July	72,32	74,40	61,71	2,57
August	74,86	73,83	67,10	3,68
September	72,64	69,52	63,22	5,28
October	65,93	68,06	63,3	9,53
November	54,08	55,92	59,46	-
December	50,66	57,62	62,55	-
Average	62,89	65,13	59,57	15,91

Eventually, the pandemic will reside, business will slowly move to the recovery phase, in which the number of contracted cases decreased, and that governments and the public health care have developed the capability to cope with the situation, thus travel restrictions are loosen. The favorable condition expected from Post COVID-19 phase is that people start booking vacations. Nonetheless, the pandemic abruptly changes the way people make a travel decision. They regard cleanliness and safety as the essence of their travel experience. Another key is the availability of heavily discounted tourism products as the people buying power decreases; thus, people still look for premium travel experience that meets their budgets. The majority of them are planning to take their first trip on a domestic scale (Global Web Index Study on Think with Google, 2020). Align with this propensity, there is a reverse composition of Bali's room night before and during the pandemic; in which international tourists dominated before the pandemic, whilst, the domestic tourists from Jakarta, Bandung and Surabaya dominate the hotel occupancy during the pandemic (March 2020 - Now). In addition, flexible cancellation policy promotes and generates more bookings and extends the length of hotel stay (Gunawan 2020).

The pandemic forced businesses to build a resolution path to align with the specific customers' trend. Tourism industries especially hotels are required to adjust their strategies to meet consumers' needs. The current system, the whole new strategy adopted during COVID pandemic may not change at any time soon to return to a normal scheme of the pre-pandemic (Scott, Laws and Prideaux 2008). Some strategies that have been deployed in synergy during the pandemic include: retargeting the market, strictly observing the New Normal protocol of CHSE (Cleanliness Health Safety Environment), discounted price including flexible cancelation policy;

nonetheless, some hotels cannot adjust and adopt these strategies. Shifting market from international to domestic market brings some consequences; the majority of local customers have a weaker buying power, thus required a heavy discounted rate on premium quality products which might require down-grade to adapt the production cost. The way the hotels are managed and operated during the pandemic crisis, could cause the exclusiveness of the hotel to shift in the mind of customers. Deploying a ruthless price drop requires the right strategy; ideally it should not be regarded as a reduction of quality and the essence of hotel services in itself. Departing from this occurrence it is interesting to study how the pandemic affects hotel branding. Thus, this study pursues the answers to two important questions related to hotel business survival during the pandemic: how to survive the pandemic, and how the pandemic affects hotel branding.

1. Literature Review

Brand is an image of a business, products and services being offered; it is the way people look at the business, whilst branding is defined as creating an image the business wants to be looked at. Brand is dynamic built from 3 components: products or services, brand name and symbol, and lastly brand concept (Kapferer 2008). Brand is dedicated to the targeted market segment; building a strong brand started from defining the concept which is expressed through tangible and intangible elements, the brand name and symbol are communicated, both are supported by a consistent delivery of superior product as promised.

Marketers create customers' value by stimulating, facilitating and fulfilling customer demand achieved through building brands, nurturing innovation, developing relationship, creating good customer service and communicating benefits (Chartered Institute of Marketing in Palmer 2012). Whilst Palmer (2012) emphasized the principle of placing customers first and a thorough understanding of the market segment being targeted, Kotler and Armstrong (2019) suggest using customer engagement as a way to satisfy customers' needs. Businesses build their brand through segmenting, targeting and positioning (STP) to create image in the mind of people. Bridging the targeted market and the brand image is one of the key successes of marketing activities. One important stage in buying process is 'Intention' which is a projection of expectations being satisfied when product is successfully owned (Assael 2001, 53). Customers purchase intention (Kotler and Keller 2012) is influenced and intensified by a positive brand image (Saeed *et al.* 2013).

Brand helps a firm in securing a position in an intense competition. A brand is created as the invisible sum of product's attributes which include: name, packaging, price, history, reputation, and the way it is advertised (Ogilvy 1963). Marketer sees a brand as promises, on the other side, customers see brand as a set of both expectation and perception that evolving by their experiences (Batey 2015). In other words, brand is an impact from the implementation of STP strategy (Maurya 2012). A firm takes a long journey in developing a brand, thus, without a brand strategy, it is impossible to reach the strategic advantage and the financial value. Strategy is a soul to brand management and become a platform that enables managers to keep consistency in various branding activities (Temporal 2011). Sharma (2021) takes a more holistic view of business brand and highlights 10 key elements of brand, which include: brand identity, brand image, Brand positioning, brand personality, brand equity, brand experience, brand differentiation, brand communication, brand gap, and brand extension.

Brand management strategy must uphold the establishment of 'trust' to sustain customer relationship management. Trust is rooted in the quality of the brand experience, especially in service-based firm; thus, a meticulous attention to product delivery must take place. More than anything, trust has become an emotional issue (Temporal 2011).

Losing a trust will put a firm into a crisis, even though, in some cases, there is a possibility for a change of brand. One of the reasons of a business to undergo rebranding is because of the change of target market, for example, when some managers are required to change the target market from international market into local market; the marketing focus changes as well as the audience; thus, the business and products repositioning must occur. Rebranding is a process of altering the way the customers see the business, it is started with the adjustment of products offered, changing the management and operation model when necessary to suit the new brand as the consequence of target market shifting. In creating a different image that differentiates the business with the competitors, the business might be given a new name and symbol; as brand is the results of marketing and STP strategies implementation, a business needs to deploy new strategies that supportive to the formation the new brand.

The purpose of this research is to examine the impact of the pandemic to the hotel brand in Bali Indonesia. The crisis caused by the global pandemic has forced hotels to take emergency actions to survive, which include: a change of target market which is expected to be temporary, followed by a drastic price drop and adjustment of operation that might result in a change of consumers' perception of the hotel brand. The pandemic

period is expected to end soon, yet a question raised, how the hotel businesses will restore their operations including the possibility to reinstate their brand images; thus, brand restoration might be needed.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted using qualitative method. Data were gathered through an online qualitative survey, observation, semi-structured interview, and documentation. The respondents were selected using purposive sampling consisting of general managers, department heads and top managers of hotels in Bali serving international as well as domestic tourists that still operate during the Covid Pandemic. The results of data collection are analysed to find out how hotels in Bali surviving this pandemic situation and how the pandemic affects the hotel brand.

2.1 Brand Maintenance during COVID-19 Pandemic: Is Rebranding Necessary?

In answering to the 2 research questions of how hotels in Bali surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic and how it affects the hotel brand, the research evolved 15 respondents, which include decision makers, general managers and managers of businesses, department heads, and director of sales and marketing, the respondents' profile is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Respondents' profile

Criteria	Classification	Total
Position	Position	
	Corporate Manager	13%
	General Manager	53%
	Department Heads	33%
Gender	Male	93%
	Female	7%
Age	40 - 60	100%

As it was pointed in the introduction section, indeed, most of the hotels experienced similar situations, as described by the respondents the immediate response to the pandemic ranging from panic to the immediate deployment of emergency mode of operation. Information particularly government's policy is the key, some hotels under an international management chain received an immediate assistance to respond to the emergency situation; these hotels have a fast, reliable, comprehensive, fact based, and up to date information covering local and global situations, which are also equipped with the headquarters' mitigation policy. Whilst other businesses faced and responded the uncertain and emergency situation in a different way.

Broadly, the business responses could be classified into two, operating in a modified and simplified mode or a total close down. Both decisions bring heavy consequences to the business, therefore, business needs to decide a top priority. Closing down means losing customers and the competent and skilful human resources significantly, and also the possibility of facilities and equipment damage for being unused. On the other hand, continue operating requires business operation rearrangement and modification; this second decision is taken by businesses that prioritize a principle as described by one on the respondents: 'Profit is not our focus during this challenging situation, but company existence and business resilience becomes the top priority'.

The operation rearrangement includes: reducing operating cost; shifting the target market; HR rescheduling and multi-tasking, staff taking unpaid leave, working shift and taking up partial duties, developing and agreeing on a new salary arrangement, undertaking HR development; considering on using lower cost local produce; partial business operation includes: reducing the quantity of room availability and product outlet; using the idle time for the long-delayed renovation and building expansion. Some business principles that managers want to keep holding in the situations include: 'Asset well maintained, cost efficient, when we have guests coming we are ready to serve'; another expression is 'it doesn't make high occupancy but at least we can run the property and cover the hotel operation during pandemic and then we keep our property well maintained although we don't get any profit'; 'keep the property well, the relationships and partnership, and the brand is still exist'; 'showing empathy to people especially the staff'.

Operation adjustments are made at all departments. With the implementation of CHSE policy of using 50% capacity and a prompt new normal protocol enactment, hotels have a clear operation direction. Implementing new normal protocol started from building staff knowledge and awareness, practising hospital hygiene standard for the hotel, and applying physical distancing measure in line with the national government guidelines and recognising best practices. Thus, the Sales and Marketing Department using primarily online

platforms started to broadcast that they are ready to receive guests, they expected to host their VVIP Guests, and their loyal customers. To make the stay more attractive, the hotels offer special package such as paying suite room for the price of standard room. Targeting local and domestic market means adjusting the price to the buying ability of the market. This mode of operation is applied dynamically depending on the pandemic graph, as the contracted line spiked up, the operation is ceased; and later to be reopened, this cycle was happening few times during the pandemic period, to include the plan of opening the international border wherein all related sectors are prepared, just to find out it was cancelled as the pandemic graph raised.

In relation to human resource, the options available are retaining the staff, thus perfecting the scope of operation when returning to normal; the other - the more radical option is a complete business rebuild, a new start of business operation starting from the recruitment of the HR. For the hotels chose to stay open, some policies are implemented as stated by some respondents which include: salary adjustment, only keeping the basic employee benefits of insurance and health cover for welfare, work schedule adjustment reducing the number of employees on duty per shift, and multi-tasking. The managements also place staff health as priority by providing masks, vitamins, hand sanitisers, and hand gloves to avoid exposure to the virus, and later arranged for vaccination. The deployment of daily workers and outsourcing is also encouraged in this situation.

The maintenance of the property, the hotel building, its facilities and equipment become a priority of a business. As stated by one of the respondents, the 5 substances which are abbreviated as POMEAC (Property, Operational, Maintenance, Energy, and Cost) become the issues that should perform at a maximum efficiency during the pandemic. For the hotels that are closed during the pandemic face the risk of the property, facilities and equipment malfunction because they were not used for some times.

The marketing campaign conducted through online media conveys an up dated message of the hotels offering the same product standard plus a thorough implementation of CHSE protocol to build safety trust; a heavy discounted rate, flexible booking condition and no cancelation fee policy. To sustain the spirit of travelling the marketing campaign during the pandemic places more focus on safe holidays, staycation for locals, work from hotel; in addition to the emphasise on soft selling rather than hard selling and not forcing sales too persistently, showing empathy to people that are affected by covid 19 pandemic.

This study assessed the conditions faced by the hotels in Bali in surviving the COVID-19 Pandemic. The assessment results of the need of rebranding are presented as follows:

- *Phase One: A disbelief* – One respondent said that in the beginning he didn't believe it is a pandemic, but still re-budgeted the operation for the whole year. The hotels' response included: recognizing the issue and sharing the information regarding the level of emergency situation internally. Some managers stated that they followed the government policy and monitored the situation, subsequent actions were taken to ensure employees' and guests' safety. The others demonstrated very fast response by assuring the markets that their brand is still exist, offering the same quality plus a strict CHSE implementation.

- *Phase Two: Adjustment* – Hotels closely monitored and updated their information on the pandemic by channelling through credible information sources such as: international chain hotel, relationship with association and government - local authority. Further, a respondent stated: 'always try to get accurate and update information about COVID-19 Pandemic from related institutions and trusted sources and closely follow the latest guideline by government, the policy makers provided supervision to better cope with the situation. This was proceeded with applying the CHSE Protocol, setting internal policy and guidelines, obliging all employees to follow standard hygiene and safety in the hotel, managing the employees' workloads such as encouraging sick leave; Work from Home; educating all employees about COVID-19; and exercising on how to maintain health and hygiene and safety environment by bringing the expertise to the premises, equipping the hotels with the tools and chemical needed, for example: signage, hand sanitiser, face shield, blower machine, vendor for fogging and disinfectants. Also, keeping updated with covid-19 from credible sources of information such as social-media and associations; share updated information from government to all staff members and guests; and screened for hoax.

- *Phase Three: Reducing impact and repairing the damage* – The pandemic is an unfortunate occurrence, nonetheless, the business needs to put efforts in reducing the negative effects or repairing the damage impacting the business image. These were conducted through: 'Optimising the customer relationship management (we use customer hub platform) to track down negative responses; uploaded many good images in terms of products and services in our social media'. Further stated by a respondent: 'Most plans are set in a strategic recovery plan that will be executed when owner, corporate and management decide to re-boost the business; also maintaining the online and offline promotion platforms. We strictly follow the health protocol that has been put in place by the government agency and adapt to the new normal protocol.' These are efforts made to reduce the impacts and were informed to the customers and markets that the hotel continues to operate and the management maintains

the hotel facilities, thus no serious damage occurs; keeping the hotels open in order for guests still can make reservations, whilst, saving operational costs becomes a major program. Monitoring and closely following policies and directions from the government is mandatory in regard to CHSE protocol and standard, restriction of public movement, airport operation and international border policy, domestic traveling, office hours and working policies. These were undertaken to make use of the opportunity available to the maximum and matched them with the hotel programs in surviving the pandemic.

▪ *Phase Four: Maintaining quality* – the hotels continue to provide services in accordance with hotel standards; no alteration to the service system that could degrade the quality standards are made, therefore the hotel brand is maintained. One respondent stated that: 'we always make efforts so that the brand will not be downgraded by providing services at a standard quality. Price is adjusted but did not involve any issue of quality downgrading'.

The resilience of tourism businesses all over the world in this particular context is Bali being tested in all aspects include stakeholders, business owners, managers, front liners and the overall management and operation. Nonetheless, some businesses are well surviving and still offer quality services in the new normal standard at any time during the pandemic period. Whilst high appreciation is accredited to the efforts and hard works of the hoteliers as stated by one of the respondents: 'Even though, we have run the hotel with very minimum and cost-effective operations. The hotels can survive for the last 1,5 years since the pandemic was announced officially by president of Indonesia'.

The efforts exerted by the hoteliers bring about a positive outcome that show the resilience of the hotel business. Fundamentally the same products at the same quality standard are being offered at lower rate to different market segments particularly the locals and domestic market. In addition to the heavy discount rate up to 70%, a flexible cancellation policy is applied; the meticulous implementation of CHSE protocol; some hotels also offer other benefits of add-on package. In doing so, the hotel managements have undertaken smart decisions and actions that show a sound management competencies which include: reviewing the budget plan, cost and selling price; tight monitoring of cash, wherein transactions being recorded and reported at any time; the computerised and online system are used to assist in sharing information to all relevant lines (Andika, Armoni, Mudana and Arta 2021, Wulandari, Susanto, Triyuni, Sarja and Budarma 2021); exploring the possibility of using local produce for example groceries and liquor, zero waste, and the tightening of expenses; and also closely monitoring and being up to date with the changing of government policy.

One of the triggers for a business conducting rebranding is market shifting. During COVID-19 Pandemic actually the management does not intend to change the market segment; but, are forced to cater local and domestic markets that have weaker buying power to survive the pandemic. As one of the motivations of local market experiencing tourism products is consuming the same product as the international tourists do. Therefore, to attract local market, the products offered by hotels are of the same standard and quality (Sari, Mataram, Antara and Murni 2021). For these businesses that endeavoured to remain open during the pandemic will only need to perfect the current operation once the situation returns to normal as it is before the pandemic. Therefore, rebranding is actually not required.

Conclusion

Undertaking the strategies described at the earlier sections of this article assists the hotels not just to survive, but for some generate profit during the pandemic, especially those that exploits the food and beverage business scheme. Some key features of business operation during pandemic include: remaining open, maintaining the product quality; applying the strict New Normal Protocol of CHSE and maintaining the business brand; communicating to relevant parties using the online platforms and information technology optimally; maintaining the production and operating functions in which hotel management is determined to deliver excellent services and seek a breakthrough and business opportunities. Even though those strategies do not yield high occupancy, but at least the hotel management can run the properties and cover the hotel operation cost during the pandemic, thus, the properties are well kept and maintained. For the majority, the aim is survival, not making profit. Covering the operation costs and expenses are the priority.

The government orchestrated the pandemic mitigation by establishing the parameters and updating the public with information. Currently, hotel business in Bali is still in a brink of their resilience status, wherein team and task force are redeployed, and the function of internal resources is maximized; energy saving, and review of all purchase orders are focusing only on very urgent requirements. As mass vaccination is put in place, normal operation is expected soon, promotion is made through digital or public figure to re-inform all customers that the property is ready to welcome guests and that services are available in prime standard offered in competitive

price. Building trust is the essence. Every effort is exerted to maintain product quality delivered in a meticulous CHSE standard, whilst, passing through and updating customers with the latest information. Communication needs to be updated and maintained with the customers during this uncertain situation; always appreciates the customers' feedback to truly know how to provide the quality service that keeps guests coming back and to continue providing services in accordance with hotel standards even in this unfortunate situation.

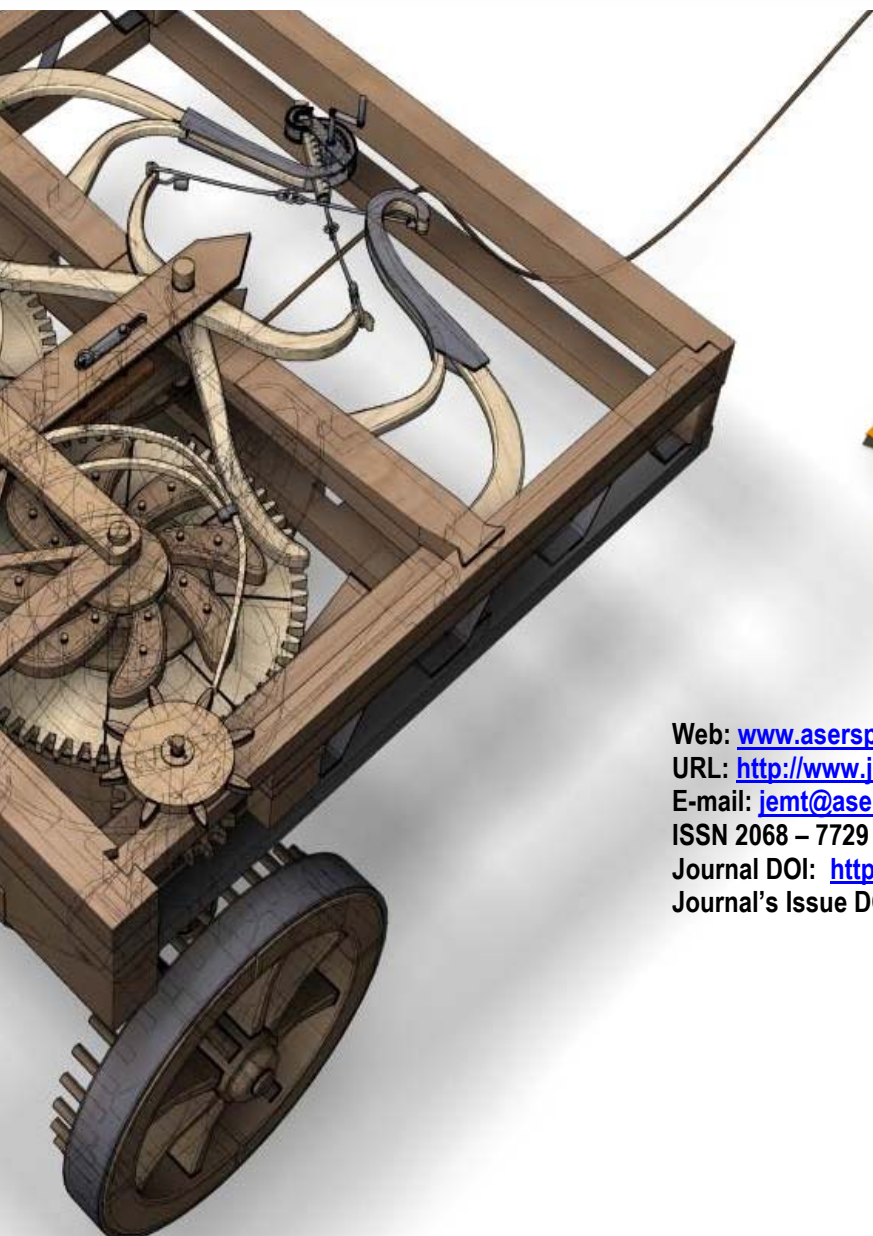
The hotel business resilient is demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic. There is no quality downgrade and no change of service delivery system made, instead, the quality standard is maintained plus the CHSE protocol is promptly applied; the coping parameters are managed internally. Whilst, keeping the customers informed, thus the business brand is maintained. For these hotels, rebranding or brand recoveries are not necessitated. When the pandemic is over, these hotels will need to normalize the adjusted operation which was made in response to the shifting of customers' needs and buying power during the pandemic. All these were made possible due to the endearing efforts made by the owners, managers and the staff who have been working and striving to survive and keep the business to still afloat despite of the challenges faced, including the reduced amount of salary paid during the pandemic.

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