

## To Maintain is To Survive: Qualitative Study on Hotel Industry Workers in Malang during COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT :** This research aim to explore the causes of stress among workers in the hotel industry and to explore the coping strategies followed by workers based on shared experiences. Researchers used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to gain insight into the causes of increasing stress levels in the hotel industry and the coping strategies practiced from the perspective of workers based on the narrative of their life experiences. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five workers from a hotel business in Malang, Indonesia. Qualitative data analysis resulted in seven themes which were categorized into two broad phenomenological problems

**Keywords:** Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, COVID-19, hotel industry, stress, strategies coping stress

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused fear and anxiety among the public. This virus is globally forcing people to run new protocols in every sector. In the report of United Nations - The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the main threats posed by the pandemic can be determined in the economic environment, namely the world recession, rising unemployment and risky jobs, business closures, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), uncertainty that burden consumer and business trust, and the trajectory of the epidemic remains uncertain<sup>1</sup>. This threat is very difficult for various sectors, especially the industrial sector where the behavior of consumers and companies is changing.

From the consumer side, Jorda, Singh and Taylor (2020)<sup>2</sup> found in previous studies that a history of pandemics in the last millennium is usually associated with low asset returns. This is due to changes in consumer behavior to become more interested in saving capital than investing, resulting in a decrease in economic growth. In addition, consumers are prioritizing spending expenses on basic needs and safety needs. This change in behavior has a major impact on the company as well as the industry.

From the company side, many negative impacts are experienced including the decreasing number of clients or customers, adaptation to new technology, reduction in the number of workers, reduction in working hours, and changes in employee commitment. In addition, retailers and manufacturers face many short-term challenges, such as those related to health and safety, supply chain, workforce, cash flow, consumer demand, sales, and marketing. Even worse, business closure policies were associated with a 20–30% reduction in non-salary workers in the food and beverages and recreation and entertainment sectors during March-April 2020<sup>3</sup>. However, the burden borne by industries outside of basic needs products and services is greater than the burden faced by primary needs services and products. For example, the tourism, hospitality, aviation, sporting events, makeup, fashion, conferences, exhibitions and other large gatherings industries have suffered greatly, even many of these industries have closed their businesses. Apart from the management and workers in the industry being harmed, the State is also at a loss. For example, the tourism industry is one of the major sources of state income. The tourism industry has always been recognized as a remunerative industry that makes a positive contribution to a country's GDP, citizens' quality of life, and job creation<sup>4</sup>. In addition to the tourism industry, the hotel industry is facing the same tough challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the number of rooms occupied and the occupancy rate to drop significantly, it can even be found that, with the severity of the outbreak, the number of rooms occupied, the occupancy rate, the total operating income, and the number of employees have decreased significantly<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, at the same time, online businesses such as online communication, online entertainment and online shopping are experiencing unprecedented growth. Thus, to deal with these losses and changes, a manager must devise a strategy to maintain their business. A manager is advised to analyze the

elements that can contribute to expand the commitment of workers to the organization and all of them will benefit the organization<sup>6</sup>. Not only managers, directors, managers, employees and their staff are also required to contribute to solutions and are required to be able to adapt quickly to new ways of surviving the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has harmed various industries in the country. Among these industries, the hotel industry suffered heavy losses. The hotel industry worldwide is one of the industries hardest hit by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic conditions<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the hotel industry has a large income for the State. In addition, the hotel industry in recent years has grown rapidly due to the promotion of tourism. However, with the limited travel over long distances and also the limited number of domestic tourists, the hotel industry has suffered a lot. One of the disadvantages experienced by the hotel business in most countries of the world is the excess supply of food ingredients. Filimonau (2020)<sup>8</sup> found that in most countries, the announcement of a lockdown came in a short time, with most hospitality businesses unprepared to close their operations almost immediately. He revealed that at the time of the announcement of the lockdown, groceries were still available in hotel businesses such as in the UK with limited time for effective utilization. While some hospitality operators freeze this excess food, the other giving it to staff, giving it to local retail outlets, and donate it to food rescue charities or cook food for public health professionals, much of the excess food is wasted.

In addition to the excess food supply, Kim et al. (2021)<sup>9</sup> argue that the theoretical framework regarding workplace safety related to the COVID-19 pandemic in the hospitality literature has not been clearly developed. In fact, work safety is the main concept that must be considered in helping workers maintain their performance in the face of the policies provided in the hotel industry.

In order to come up with solutions to these problems, the most effective plans are expected to be drawn up in the shortest time. Hotel managers are expected to demonstrate their ability to create a productive work environment, build effective new systems, and maintain employee motivation. This is a huge challenge for hotel managers to deal with the changes caused by the pandemic. In addition, workers and other ranks are required to be able to adapt to superior and government policies and to be able to survive in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to determine the stress faced by workers in the hotel industry and investigate the strategies coping used based on their professional experience.

## II. METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

The research was conducted with a qualitative approach. Qualitative approach helps researchers to understand complex phenomena, where researchers are asked to consider various "reality" experienced by research participants. Qualitative methods provide researchers with access to perceptions experienced by participants where participants are the people who best understand the phenomena that have or are happening to them. That way, researchers can get broad themes and are not limited to closed questions in answering the study that is of interest.

### 2.2. Research Subjects

The subjects in this study consisted of five workers aged 23-40 years who were working in the hotel industry located in Malang City, in Indonesia. The sample was selected through purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is used in finding research subjects based on their advantages in the possibility of providing researchers with data from someone who has deep insight into the subject matter at hand.

### 2.3 Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on five workers from the hotel industry in the city of Malang. There are three main questions that can be developed during the interview to obtain more complete information. The questions are (a) During the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the most stressful thing for you from working in this industry? (b) What personal strategies do you have for dealing with work stress? (c) What do you think hotel management and government should do to reduce stress levels in the workplace?

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using the IPAMethod (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis). The design of this analysis involves a six-stage process outlined by Howitt and Cramer (2011)<sup>10</sup> which begins with case introduction and initial comments. At this stage repeated readings are made to familiarize yourself with the topic, and some comments are made, in an attempt to summarize and interpret what has been said previously. Coding is then performed in the analysis. Along with the development of the analysis, the researcher will categorize the codes that appear, and look for patterns in them (themes, superordinate themes, etc.).

## III. RESULT

Workers in the hotel industry report experiencing moderate to high levels of stress in their workplace. High stress was experienced especially when the lockdown was announced for the first time, when flights were stopped and travel was restricted, and tourism destinations were limited. These conditions lead to a drastic

decrease in the number of hotel visitors, thus causing many difficulties for workers in the hotel industry. This change is surprising and most workers never anticipate that they will have to cope with so much stress at work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, Gursoy and Chi (2020)<sup>11</sup> found in their research that even though tourism destinations were reopened and travel restrictions were eased, customers generally still felt uncomfortable being able to meet and interact with many people, travel to a destination and stay at a hotel. Through the interviews proposed, there are several themes that can be categorized in answering research questions.

### **3.1. Causes of Work Stress**

There are three phenomenon that have been identified as stressors for workers in the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are (a) a sudden and prolonged change, (b) worker dependents, and (c) a drastic decrease in the number of visitors.

#### **3.1.1 Changes are sudden and prolonged.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has a lasting impact on the hotel industry. Workers do not know when the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will end. They feel pressured by experiencing unpredicted and unavoidably policies changes in responding to the pandemic.

The beginning of corona was really shocking, because everything changed. The workings regulations, protocols and systems are all new. There is no certainty when this will end. Some of my friends were rolled out to other hotels, some were dismissed. I am grateful that I can continue to work where I work. However, I ended up opening another small business. Whereas previously I only worked in a hotel. (participant 3)

From the narrative, it can be understood that the worker are not ready for the changes. In addition, there is hope for worker that conditions will return to normal. However, with the existing policies and possibilities, the worker choose to try to survive and adapt to the existing circumstances.

#### **3.1.2 Workers' dependents.**

The pandemic has had an impact on the management of human resources in the hospitality industry. Some of the participants know that some other workers were laid off due to the company policies in surviving the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, retained workers find it difficult with the new regulations in their place of work. They must follow hygiene protocols and must be able to keep up with changing working hours and working days. Meanwhile, these workers have dependents, namely the family. Human resource is the first thing that must be considered because it concerns business continuity. Employees are rearranged so that every three days they come to work and then another three days to stay at home. Some of the employees whose salaries were already above were transferred to another hotel. The company also hiring employees in daily basis. (participant 3)

Participant gave a narrative of work responsibilities with worried feelings. Participants pay attention to the reduction in income earned by workers for their dependents. Workers tend to try to survive even though their salaries are reduced because they realize it is difficult to support their families during the pandemic.

#### **3.1.3 Drastic decline in the number of visitors.**

Limited travel both between cities and between countries resulted in a drastic decline in the number of visitors to the hotel industry. The industrial sector that offers services is experiencing more devastating impact of the pandemic than the manufacturing industry. In addition, participants explained that the drastic decrease in the number of visitors even to the point of having no visitors in a day resulted in pressure on the hotel's financial management.

We follow government policy where rooms are only opened at half of their original capacity. I did not feel ready for the change, because it felt like there used to be a lot of rooms opened, but now only half number of it. But on the other hand, if the rooms are kept open while there are very few visitors, the spending at the hotel becomes inefficient. (participant 2)

Participant explained the conditions in which the decrease in visitors had an impact on the continuity of the hospitality industry. There is participant who explained that the decline in visitors was the result of limited travel. On the other hand, another participant thought that the room reduction policy is the cause of the decrease in visitors.

### **3.2. Coping strategies**

Stress experienced by workers is followed by several coping strategies to overcome the adverse effects experienced. Among them are individual and organizational strategies. Among the resulting strategies, workers (a) maintain rather than improve, (b) controlling expenses, (c) provide promos and discounts, and (d) collaborate with vendors.

#### **3.2.1 Maintain rather than improve**

The achievement goal of every business is an increase in income, either marked by an increase in the demand for goods or an increase in visitors for service industry. In the hotel industry, this increase is very difficult to achieve because the main business object, namely visitors, is limited to activities in public places.

I want more visitors of course. It would be nice if the rooms could be filled. However, the policies made by the government are for the common good. If you work in a hotel, of course, everyone wants visitors to come to your hotel. But that is my own wish. Common safety is paramount. So, I prefer to just survive, the important thing is to work. (participant 4)

Participant provide a scheme where personal wishes are contrary to existing policies. However, in the narrative, participants then try to understand the existing boundaries. In addition, participants changed their focus to maintain rather than on improving.

### 3.2.2 Controlling expenses.

The decrease in the number of visitors causes expenses to be greater than income. Therefore, reorganization of expenses is a policy taken by hotel managers in maintaining their business. Each hotel manager has their own strategy in cutting hotel expenses.

Income is reduced but can be overcome by rearranging expenses. Plus now there is a new expenditure, namely logistics of health protocols. So, the rooms before and after every visitor must be disinfected. Moreover, every corner must have hand sanitizer. (participant 3)

The participant explained that in dealing with the stress experienced by the hotel business they owned, an effective spending strategy was needed. Participants analyze expenses that can be reduced such as electricity and water. Participants also mentioned that there were new expenditures for the purposes of health protocols.

### 3.2.3 Promos and Discounts.

Promos and discounts are given by almost all hotel businesses in attracting visitors to choose their hotel as a place to stay. Strategies in providing promos and discounts differ from one hotel to another.

It is better now than it was at the beginning of corona. Now flights and transportation are not as restricted as before, so we have visitors, namely tourists and people from out of town. In addition to promos and discounts from the inn, in terms of entertainment, we can improve it, because people also want vacations, people are also pressured to stay at home too long, so we want visitors to be really refreshed by coming to our hotel. (participant 4)

Each participant explain the provision of promotional prices and discounts for lodging at the hotel where they work. In the narration, it is stated that the strategy adopted is very effective in inviting visitors during the pandemic.

### 3.2.4 Collaborate with other vendors.

Participants explained the collaboration between the hotel and other vendors that could support hotel in pandemic situation. This is one of the hotel industry's coping strategies that can minimize expenses and maintain the effectiveness of the performance of retained workers.

We rearrange food and beverages first, so for catering we collaborate with supermarkets and catering vendors. Then, the breakfast will be delivered to the room. Actually, many visitors say that it was not as good as usual, some visitors, according to the survey given they like catering from the hotel itself. (participant 3)

From the narrative given, participants explained that collaboration with catering vendors can help hotels to maintain the effectiveness of employee performance. This is because there are fewer workers, so that several work tasks from different divisions are carried out by the same worker. Therefore, this collaboration really helps reduce the burden on worker performance.

## IV. DISCUSSION

From the interviews that have been analyzed, it can be concluded that the conditions experienced by workers in the hotel industry in Malang are almost the same as those experienced by workers in the hotel industry from other cities and countries. For example, activity in the hospitality industry in China decreased by about two-thirds over the three days in January 2020 compared to the previous year, and employees in other tourism sub-sectors were placed on unpaid leave, as well as a remarkable decline in occupancy rates, the number of guests arriving and coming, and business income in the context of hospitality<sup>12</sup>. These impact experienced on hospitality in China is also experienced by workers in the hotel industry in Malang. In addition, Davahli et al. (2020)<sup>13</sup> in his study review found that there were several obstacles faced by the hospitality industry during the pandemic such as the recovery of the hospitality industry (discussed by 19% of journals included), market demand (18% of journals), revenue loss (16% of journals), patterns of spread of COVID-19 in industry (14% journals), job loss (10% journals included), safety and health aspects (8% journals), issues related to hospitality workforce work (7% journals), travel behavior (4% journals), customer preferences (2% journals), and the social costs of the pandemic are covered by 2% of the included papers. Almost all of these aspects have been discussed by the informants in this study, such as aspects of safety and health which have become a new category of expenditure in hospitality expenditures and also travel behavior which has an impact on reducing the number of customers. The hotel industry's income is from the large number of visitors, which is uncertain during this pandemic. The hospitality and tourism industry unlike other business sectors which can ensure a

steady income. Tourism and hospitality industry realize the potential for downtime is arising from various reasons such as seasonality, demand and crises<sup>14</sup>.

In addition to the above, there is one solution to overcome the stress experienced but not much explained in detail by the informants, which is closing or transferring property. In another study, it was explained that in order to survive, many hotel owners, especially individual hotel owners, temporarily closed or transferred their properties<sup>15</sup>. This is done in an effort to spend effectiveness. One of the informants mentioned that selling several properties and buying properties that could promote social distancing in his hotel so that visitors' trust could be earned. All sources in this study emphasize customer trust in increasing the attractiveness of the hotel.

## V. LIMITATIONS

The limitation of this study is the lack of in-depth data mining techniques for participants. Researchers are advised to seek more information about the hotel industry, especially related to terms and systems that usually apply in the industry before conducting interviews. This should be done in order to make it easier for the interview session to dig deeper into the information and phenomenon experienced by experts on the theme under study. There are several recommendations made by the hotel industry in other countries that researchers have not been able to identify from interviews that have been conducted, such as the CEO's letter. Im et al. (2021)<sup>16</sup> find that hospitality organizations need to recognize the value of CEO letters as a powerful persuasion tool to increase organizational attractiveness while reducing anticipated negative reactions from key stakeholders. He argues that the CEO's letter provides valuable consideration for connoisseurs of the corporate narrative. By identifying the key rhetorical strategies and tactics that hospitality organizations employ during crises, different audiences can make better judgments and possibly assimilate the organization's intentions in crisis management and communication.

Although many of the challenges faced and the resolutions have not been able to fully restore the hotel industry. Moreover, to restore it for large hotels will take years, some researchers are optimistic that the hotel industry can survive and return to success after this pandemic. Beckman and Morse (2020)<sup>17</sup> are optimistic that the hotel industry is a tough and contained industry. They believe that with ambition and knowledge of how to start fresh, many of the people in the hotel industry will survive and be able to start again after the pandemic is over.

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