

A Qualitative Inquiry on the Effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on Hospitality Industry in Malaysia

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic grievously hit the Malaysian hospitality industry; hence, the government implemented various restriction orders and preventative measures, which impacted business operations. This paper describes the challenges hospitality managers face during the early phase of COVID-19 in Malaysia and examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the attractiveness of hospitality jobs and occupations. The researchers interviewed 13 managers from hotels and restaurants via phone interview method. Using qualitative data analysis suggested by Creswell (2013), the researchers found five main challenges: controlling costs, overseeing sales and revenues, surviving competition, managing the workforce, and prioritising human safety and health. Findings suggest that the COVID-19 outbreak has influenced hospitality job attractiveness. The industry is still recovering from the impact and facing difficulties in recruiting talent. Nonetheless, COVID-19 has accelerated the usage of technology in the hospitality industry. Many companies have invested in technology innovations such as contactless payment, QR codes for check-in and check-out customers, and food delivery robots. Since the interviews were conducted during the early phase of the pandemic, future research could investigate the current phenomenon in the post-COVID, considering many businesses have operated albeit with labour shortages. Additionally, future research could investigate employees to gather their perspectives regarding hospitality jobs and occupational attractiveness.

Keywords:

COVID-19, Hospitality, Human Resources, Job Attractiveness, Malaysia, Pandemic

1 Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19 hereafter) outbreak started in December 2019 and caused demand for the hospitality industry to decrease substantially (Chang et al., 2020). The number of travellers and hotel occupancy rates declined, thus reducing the sales and revenue of many hospitality businesses (Sobieralski, 2020). The outbreak is known as the deadliest crisis that everyone has experienced in their life. The government in various countries, including Malaysia, implemented pandemic-related restriction orders (e.g., partial to full lockdowns) and preventive measures (e.g., face mask requirement, social distancing, travel restrictions) to control the spread of the virus. Nonetheless, COVID-19 and the restrictions orders have caused a significant economic downturn for many countries. The restriction orders prohibited businesses from operating at regular hours, and some businesses even had to close their operation temporarily or permanently, which then impacted their financial stability. Business operators had to reduce their expenses by decreasing the number of employees.

Depending on the COVID-19 situation, when the number of positive cases increases, governments impose stricter rules such as total lockdown, travel restrictions for inbound and outbound, prohibition of essential and non-essential businesses from operating and enforcing a stay-at-home policy. Although governments aimed to mitigate the outbreak, such decisions severely affected hospitality businesses. While the outbreak also impacted many industries, the impact on the hospitality industry is severe because the service industry largely depends on humans (employees). As labour cost is the largest expense in a hospitality organisation, many business operators opted for a short-term strategy for business survival by temporarily or permanently terminating employees to reduce their labour costs, leaving the affected employees in financial difficulties. When businesses were forced to close or operate with limitations, the world faced a dramatic decline in economic growth and recorded the highest unemployment rate in history. The outbreak and the restriction orders affected business revenues, causing many businesses to cease their operations temporarily or permanently.

Additionally, COVID-19 severely hit the hospitality industry because discretionary spending is often the first to be cut from a tight budget. At the beginning of the outbreak, the hospitality industry experienced a spike in booking cancellations because people were concerned about COVID-19 and travel restrictions imposed by affected countries. As the world is moving into recession, many people are financially affected as money is scarce; thus, the demand for travelling and leisure activities has decreased. People were afraid to travel and preferred to save money during this crisis for non-discretionary spending such as food and housing. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a drastic domino effect on businesses, employees, and people in general. Various industries, especially the service industry, were severely hit, like hospitality (Eggers, 2020; Nicola et al., 2020). The outbreak has forced hospitality managers and employees to experience several challenges regarding finances, human resources, et cetera. Many researchers from various countries have investigated COVID-19's impacts on the

hospitality industry. Nonetheless, a limited number of studies have been investigating hospitality in Malaysia. Therefore, this paper aims to (a) identify the challenges hospitality managers face during the early phase of COVID-19 in Malaysia and (b) examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the attractiveness of hospitality jobs and occupations.

Although there are studies conducted on COVID-19 in the hospitality industry, these studies were from other countries, and researchers should have given more attention to hospitality job attractiveness due to COVID-19. Therefore, the current study aims to uncover the phenomenon from the perspective of hospitality managers in Malaysia. The researchers would like the hospitality managers working during the COVID-19 period in Malaysia to share their stories and perspectives about the phenomena. The current study makes significant contributions to the hospitality literature in several ways. First, this empirical study gathered inputs from hotel and foodservice managers who worked during the COVID-19 pandemic; hence, their experiences are significantly valuable for future managers to expect the challenges in a crisis. These results reinforce previous studies conducted in other countries (Waller & Abbasian, 2022). Second, this study investigates the challenges managers faced during the COVID-19 crisis. Recognising the nature of the hospitality business, the government of Malaysia can use the findings to develop future-proof policies for best-suited hospitality providers. Governments could develop crisis management guidelines and procedures tailored for the hospitality industry so they can better prepare to face a similar crisis like COVID-19. It has been nearly four years since the outbreak started, and COVID-19 is still ongoing, despite the World Health Organization declaring the end of COVID-19 as a global public health emergency starting May 2023 (WHO, 2023). For hospitality providers, findings could assist them when dealing with employees during a crisis. Acknowledging that employees are an asset, hospitality providers might consider other opportunities before terminating employees as their short-term strategy. Due to that, the hospitality industry is losing qualified employees and facing difficulties in recruiting talent to fill the vacant positions. Accordingly, this study advances the human resources literature on employee job and occupational attractiveness.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospitality industry was thought to be one of the indestructible industries that could withstand many challenges and resilience to any threat. This industry has experienced many ups and downs but can often rebound in the aftermath (Khan & Hashim, 2020). COVID-19 is not the first pandemic that has threatened the industry. However, unlike any other pandemic that only affected certain regions and managed to be contained, COVID-19 containment has been more elusive. Even long before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the hospitality industry faced many challenges in managing human resources. This industry is associated with high turnover due to the harsh working environment, long working hours, low pay, and toxic working culture (Kysilka & Csaba, 2013). Thus, in terms of organisational attractiveness, this industry needs to meet attractive criteria goals; however, the industry still operates very well. Despite this problem, some groups of employees are found to be quite loyal and thriving in this industry (Vasquez, 2014; Tepeci & Bartlett, 2002).

Hospitality has become one of the worst-hit industries during the pandemic; as the travel plan and lockdown continue to be implemented worldwide, most hospitality businesses are forced to close (Ntounis et al., 2022). Some managed to escape the ordeal and rebound after the pandemic. Unfortunately, some are closing their door forever as the business can no longer cope with the losses. During this time, many loyal hospitality employees saw a grim look at the industry's future as it started to lay off many loyal employees. During the movement control orders in Malaysia, hotel employees are among those affected directly as a sign of stress and depression are reported among hotel employees raised over 17% per person due to pay cuts and permanent retrenching (Khan & Hashim, 2020). At that time, these former hospitality employees with years of skill started to evaluate their options, and many decided not to go back to the industry after the pandemic as they started to see other lucrative opportunities that were more attractive than what the hospitality industry could offer (Karsavuran, 2021). Unfortunately, this will create new challenges for the hospitality industry to rebound during the post-pandemic as they will face problems regarding employee shortage (Leung et al., 2021). This problem will continue to become a significant concern worldwide as most of the younger generation shows very little interest in this industry, potentially worsening the labour crisis shortage in the future (Goh & Okumus, 2020).

Studies on organisational attractiveness often view attractiveness from various perspectives, such as career development, organisation image, brand, policy, culture, compensation, benefit, and overall general attraction (Ha et al., 2021). Despite many constructs used to test organisation or employer attractiveness, all can be traced back to the attraction theory, introduced by social psychologist Frenning (2004). Attraction theory is based on the notion that attraction stems from the forces known as

appearance, physical distance, similarity, and reward (Frenning, 2004). Despite much current knowledge highlighting other theories, such as social exchange theory, in their research, they all share similarities in how attraction works. In contrast, social exchange theory focuses on the potential benefit employees will receive in return for their service (Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). An organisation becomes attractive if it offers an attractive package that appeals to the potential employee, thus known as a person-organisation fit (Tepeci & Bartlett, 2002).

The application of attraction theory can be seen in the current literature for an organisation's attractiveness, where the principles of attractiveness, such as the appearance of the organisation in the form of brand, image, and general attractiveness, often become the keys that influence potential employee choice (Ha et al., 2021). Another principle, similarity, can be related to the current body of knowledge where a potential employee considers elements such as culture, policy, and value important (Tepeci & Bartlett, 2002). Furthermore, rewards such as compensation, economic benefits, and career development are also part of the attractive organisation package (Berthon et al., 2005). The hospitality industry relies on many employees to operate efficiently, so appearing attractive to potential employees is crucial. Without a steady supply of human resources, industries such as hospitality will not survive, as robots and machines cannot replace some functions. In the post-pandemic era, to appear attractive is more than just a matter of workforce supply for the hospitality industry. Workforce supply is the crucial factor that can make or break the organisation as the interest in this industry continues to decline (Goh & Okumus, 2020).

2.2 COVID-19 Pandemic and Its General Impact on the Economy and Employment

When COVID-19 became a global pandemic in early 2020, the world started taking precautions to stop its spread. Governments restricted the mobility of the population, and people adopted new norms such as practising social distancing and reducing outdoor activities (Davahli et al., 2020). Companies operated with employees either working from home or operating at minimum capacity. The disease spared no countries – the nations hit by the virus spiral into economic uncertainties. Demands for food, household and medical items increased (Khan & Khan, 2020), causing a shortage in the market. The situation was worse when the manufacturers could not meet demand as they had limited working hours and workforce capacity or were forced to shut down their productions. As consumers stayed home and only spent on necessities, demand for non-essential items dropped. Closed borders also meant a disruption of supply chains, thus amplifying the effects of COVID-19 on the economy (Di Maoro, 2020). As countries closed their borders and banned international travel to curb the spread of the virus (Connor, 2020), retail networks were disrupted, leaving a lot of supermarket shelves empty due to the limited inter-state travel. Companies struggle to stay afloat, and pay cuts and layoffs impact the general population, escalating the financial impact. It was the worst global economic fallout since the Great Depression in the 1930s,

affecting over 170 countries likely to experience negative per capita GDP growth due to the coronavirus pandemic (Dev & Sengupta, 2020).

As developed countries halted most economic operations, the economic impact flowed over to migrant workers. The prolonged restriction caused a loss of employment (Dev & Sengupta, 2020). As salaries were cut or employees were laid off, money being sent to the home countries diminished, causing a chain reaction of loss of income. These migrant workers were stranded in their adopted countries without employment and closed borders. A customer demand fall, especially in the hospitality and tourism industry, also caused economic damage (Szmigiera, 2021). The hospitality industry, especially hotels, was hit hardest during this time. As people are afraid to leave home, many hotels and tourist attractions are left without patrons. Restricted travel caused many hotel room cancellations, affecting not only the lodging and leisure but also the travel industry, such as airlines and other related service providers. The United States reported, by April 2020, a loss of 18 million in paid employment was recorded, with the leisure and hospitality segment incurring the largest loss at four million, followed by trade, transportation, and utilities; and professional and business services (Cajner et al., 2020).

The government of Malaysia implemented restriction orders as a precaution against the virus. Nonetheless, the series of restriction orders had a different level of impact on hospitality businesses. A stricter order, such as a total lockdown, contributed to a more severe impact than a relaxed order, such as a recovery movement control order. Che Ahmat et al. (2021) detailed the series of restriction orders and preventive measures implemented by the government of Malaysia and their impact on hospitality businesses. A direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Malaysia's economy is the devaluation of the ringgit and a 17.1% drop in GDP in the second quarter of 2020 (Rahman et al., 2020). Malaysia's unemployment rate grew from 3.9% in March 2020 (DOSM, 2020a) to 4.7% in February 2021 (DOSM, 2021). Many hospitality businesses and firms were shut down, and employees temporarily or permanently lost their jobs. From 168,182 respondents, nearly 70% of employees working in the accommodation sector and 78% working in the foodservice sector were affected by half-paid leave, unpaid leave, lost jobs, and reduced or increased work hours (DOSM, 2020b). The industrial sector (46.7%) recorded a slightly higher percentage of COVID-19-affected employees than the services sector (44.8%).

In March 2020, the Malaysian Association of Hotels reported that 4% of 54,299 hotel employees had lost their jobs, 17% were asked for unpaid leave, and 9% faced salary deductions. Kuala Lumpur, with the highest number of hotels, was severely hit compared to other states in Malaysia (Mahalingam, 2020). This disaster was no exception for big companies or hotel chains when Genting Bhd reduced about 3,000 employees during the pandemic (Ngui & Chew, 2020). During this period, it is hard for small companies to sustain themselves; employees fear losing their jobs, while employers are willing to retain their employees but not provide bonuses and overtime

(Abhari et al., 2021). In addition, countless employment contracts have been halted (Baert et al., 2020), with an 18.6% decline in jobs in the hospitality sector in 2020 compared to 2019 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020). Due to the impact on employment, many affected employees experience a significant decrease in their monthly income. Many people in the middle and top-income groups were thrust into the low-income group as companies laid off employees. Almost 86% of foodservices and 70% of accommodation employees in Malaysia experience a decrease in monthly income (DOSM, 2020b). Most employers and employees were aware of government financial assistance. The government disbursed various economic stimulus packages to alleviate the economic impact on Malaysians (Rahman et al., 2020). Based on a survey by the Department of Statistics Malaysia in April 2020, 79.2% of Malaysians received a one-off cash aid, 60.5% received a moratorium, and others received utility discounts, retirement fund withdrawals, and wage subsidies. Most Malaysians (87.3%) were satisfied with the economic stimulus package offered by the government, and 70% believed that government assistance eased their financial burden (DOSM, 2020c).

Nearly 90% of Malaysians were satisfied with how the government handled the COVID-19 crisis (Azlan et al., 2020). More than 80% took precautions such as avoiding crowds and practised proper hand hygiene during the week before the restriction order period. Starting in August 2020, the government announced that wearing face masks would be mandatory in public spaces and later re-announced that wearing face masks would be optional starting September 2022. In July 2023, another announcement was made by the Ministry of Health that masks are no longer mandatory on public transport and hospitals (Nizam, 2023). The pandemic resulted in high social disconnectedness among customers when customers avoid each other, perceive negative emotions when interacting with other customers, and are afraid of being evaluated when interacting with other customers (Miao et al., 2022). When the COVID-19 vaccines were approved at the end of 2020, countries worldwide, including Malaysia, started the vaccination program. The COVID-19 vaccination program is vital to help restart the hospitality and tourism industry and increase customer confidence to travel (William et al., 2022). When 95% of the adult population in Malaysia was vaccinated by November 2021, the government lifted some restrictions. Businesses were allowed to start their operations, education sectors were open, social gatherings were allowed, and other economic activities were picking up, with strict standard operating procedures. Nonetheless, the government still encourages cashless payment and online sales to minimise movement.

2.3 General Challenges Faced by the Hospitality Industry

The COVID-19 pandemic has shocked the world economy and caused severe business effects and challenges (Mckibbin & Fernando, 2021). Although the effect of COVID-19 is similar to the previous pandemics (e.g., SARS and MERS), the magnitude of the effect is tremendous (O'Flynn, 2020). The outbreak caused a significant decrease in revenue generation in the hospitality industry. The growing number of cases in the early year of 2020 has made China's hotel occupancy plummet by nearly 90% (Nicola et al.,

2020). Similar trends in Europe, where the hotel occupancy rates reduced significantly compared to before the pandemic (Sanabria-Díaz et al., 2021). This trend happened because, during the initial phase of COVID-19, many countries implemented various strategies, including travel bans and movement restrictions, closed borders, and strict quarantine protocols to curb the spread of the virus. These strategies caused many booking and event cancellations across the globe (Nicola et al., 2020). The hotel industry in Malaysia suffered a loss of more than RM6.53 billion in 2020, about RM300 million every fortnight during the movement control order (Kathy, 2021). Similar trends happened in the foodservice sector, where 85% of the revenue or RM105 million, was lost during the first month of the movement control order (Durai, 2020).

The financial issue is a challenge that the hospitality industry encountered during the pandemic. All the expenses need to be paid even though the hotel and foodservice sector could not generate much revenue during the pandemic. Financial issues such as the stock market price crisis during COVID-19 have made it difficult for the hospitality industry to get funds. When this happened, small firms in the industry with small cash holdings but high financial burdens and low profits made before the pandemic were the concern (Acharya & Steffen, 2020; Ramelli & Wagner, 2020). Many hospitality companies reduce the compensation and benefits of their employees to lay off employees to survive during the outbreak. The public may have concerns about their finances when this pandemic has caused massive job losses, leaving employees in the industry fearing losing their jobs. The situation worsened as many people received lesser incomes as employers reduced the working hours and put employees on leave or partial pay, while some lost their jobs due to closures. Another predicted impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry in the long term is a decrease in job attractiveness (Baum & Hai, 2020; Filimonau et al., 2020). The hospitality industry heavily relies on human capital, which is well known for its long working hours, high employee turnover, inadequate breaks, low salary, and job satisfaction (Filimonau & Corradini, 2010). When the pandemic hits the world, it becomes more worrisome. The number of job applications is decreasing (Filimonau et al., 2020). Even so, only a few available studies explore these issues and the impact of COVID-19 on hospitality job attractiveness.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

Considering the scope of the research problem, the focus of this study was to identify the challenges faced by hospitality managers during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia and to examine the effects of COVID-19 on the attractiveness of hospitality jobs and occupations. The investigation was thus designed as an exploratory study using qualitative research that would enable researchers to see the experience through the respondents' perspectives. This phenomenological approach is suitable for explaining a particular phenomenon's lived experience (Creswell, 2013). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic studied in this paper, the researchers employed a qualitative semi-structured interview and used the interview steps recommended by Creswell (2013). After deciding on the research questions and developing the open-ended questions to help understand the central phenomenon of the study, the researchers selected hospitality managers working during the COVID-19 pandemic period in Malaysia to share their input. The researchers utilised a non-probability purposive sampling method based on respondents with the same criterion. The researchers developed open-ended questions to allow respondents to share their experiences in their business setting. Some key questions include: What challenges do managers face due to the pandemic? Are you aware of a series of movement control orders implemented by the government? Do you think the hospitality industry will have difficulties recruiting employees in the future? Do you think the hospitality industry will still be a career choice for future employees?

The interviews were conducted via phone based on the respondents' preferred dates and times. Participation was voluntary, and the researchers promised not to share personal information to protect the respondents. The interview sessions were conducted between June and July 2020, when the country experienced the effects of COVID-19 and the lockdown. Conducting interviews during the event allows researchers to gather real-life experiences from the respondents. Before the interview, the researchers emailed a copy of the interview questions and the informed consent document detailing the study's purposes. The researchers used the interview protocol, reviewed the informed consent document with the respondents, and asked them to confirm their agreement to participate in the study. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission. Each interview session took about one hour, during which the respondents shared the details about their experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers reached data saturation in the tenth interview when the responses were broadly similar; hence, they discovered no additional data. However, the researchers continued with another three interviews and completed 13 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At the end of each interview session, the researchers summarised critical points in an interview summary sheet. They reflected on the interview experience with each respondent as a means to document field notes.

3.2 Data Analysis

This study utilised data analysis strategies, as Creswell (2013) recommended. The researchers prepared and organised the data transcriptions, reduced the data into sub-themes and themes through coding, and represented the data in tables and discussions. The interviews were manually transcribed by transcriptionists and analysed using content analysis. Some interviews conducted in Bahasa Malaysia were fully transcribed, translated to English, verified by a native speaker, and back translated to verify the consistency and validity of the translation. The systematic procedures in the content analysis allowed the researchers to replicate and make valid inferences based on the interview transcription with the study context (Bengtsson, 2016). Firstly, the researchers examined the data and became familiar with it before developing the coding and summarising the data in a table.

Through peer review or debriefing sessions, other researchers in the team checked and validated the coding and interpretations to check the research process. Additionally, the researchers conducted a member-checking procedure to seek participant feedback about the findings and interpretations to ensure validity and reliability. These two strategies aim to establish the credibility of the data. Themes and categorisations, consisting of codes representing a common idea, emerged from the transcripts. The researchers also invited two faculty members with hospitality and tourism backgrounds to verify the themes and sub-themes, thus improving the accuracy of the overall content. The key findings categorised in themes are interpreted and represented in the next section.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 General Findings

4.1.1 Demographic Profiles

As summarised in Table 1, the respondents are hotel managers (62%) and foodservice managers (38%), with industrial work experiences between 10 to 30 years or more. Their educational background ranged from secondary to tertiary level. All of them were aware of the series of MCOs implemented by the government of Malaysia. Some respondents reported that their businesses were opened during the restriction periods, either because they were operating restaurants (17%) or quarantine hotels (25%). Selected hotels were transformed into quarantine hotels to accommodate those COVID-19 patients and frontliners. Since COVID-19 started, Malaysia's government has provided various assistance to help businesses and its citizens.

4.1.2 Awareness of Governmental Aid Available

Based on the interview sessions, all respondents were aware of the aid offered by the government, which supported data presented in DOSM (2020a) about employer awareness of government financial assistance. One of the most popular aids applied

during the restriction period was the wage subsidy program, financial assistance offered to eligible businesses fulfilling specific requirements. For instance, a company with more than 201 employees are entitled to a subsidy amount of RM600 (US\$125) per employee per month. In contrast, a company with 75 employees or less are entitled to a subsidy of RM1,200 (US\$250) per employee per month (Wage Subsidy Programme, n.d.). In other words, a company with more employees will receive less subsidy than one with fewer employees. Most of these employees earned a monthly wage of RM4,000 (US\$836) and below; hence, the employers need to top up the difference based on each employee's monthly wage level. Some respondents mentioned that their employers applied for the aid, *'Yes, we are aware of that, and we [the company] did apply for the wage subsidy program. But we still have to top up. Employees were not allowed for unpaid leave because the company applied for a wage subsidy.'* (R03). Due to the wage subsidy requirements, some companies were not allowed to apply, *'Yes, we tried to apply, but we did not get it because of certain limitations. So, we applied for bank loans, but they are still pending. We tried to get as many discounts as we could, like for electricity bills (15% discount).'*' (R04). The wage subsidy program aims to lessen the burden on employers, albeit not all employers were eligible to receive the aid.

4.1.3 Awareness of COVID-19 Guidelines

All the respondents were aware of the COVID-19 guidelines and the standard operating procedures prepared by the government through the Ministry of Health and the National Safety Council Malaysia. During the period, the government was very strict with enforcing COVID-19 guidelines, and all respondents were aware of that. For example, R09 said, *'It is mandatory. If you do not follow the COVID-19 guidelines, your license can be revoked.'* Furthermore, the respondents informed that the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture representatives conducted regular inspections to check for COVID-19 compliance. *'From time to time, people from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture come to the hotel for inspection during the restriction period.'* (R01). Some respondents have different opinions on the COVID-19 standard operating procedure guidelines. Some reported that the guidelines were clear and practical, but others reported needing clarification with the details in the guidelines. The following are examples of quotations representing confusion with the guidelines. *'Sometimes, we were confused with guidelines from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture. For example, at that time, there were no specific gym and swimming pool guidelines for hotel customers. So, we use the basic guidelines as our reference and then adjust accordingly. Customers need to scan their temperature using the MySejahtera app to check-in. Previously, we used (...) apps developed by (...) state government. Customers need to scan their temperature and use hand sanitiser before entering a premise.'* (R12). The government enforced the use of the MySejahtera app to monitor the COVID-19 outbreaks. The Ministry of Health developed guidelines for the public, while the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture is responsible for Malaysia's hospitality and tourism industry. Despite

the confusion, most interview respondents could elaborate on the standard procedures emphasised in the guidelines. For example, R04 said, *'When customers enter our premises, they must scan their temperature without mistake. They must do the procedures once they enter the building, so we already have their public record. But then, if they want to go to our restaurant or other outlets, they must go through the same procedures again. So, we have a general and specific record from each outlet.'* Such added procedures require more work to be done by the employees.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents.

Label	Position	Area	Awareness of governmental aid available	Awareness of COVID-19 guidelines
R01	Duty manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R02	General manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R03	E-commerce manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R04	Operation manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R05	Director of operation	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R06	Duty manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R07	Kitchen manager	Foodservice	Yes	Yes
R08	Kitchen manager	Foodservice	Yes	Yes
R09	Sales manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R10	Executive chef	Foodservice	Yes	Yes
R11	Restaurant manager	Foodservice	Yes	Yes
R12	Training manager	Hotel	Yes	Yes
R13	Restaurant manager	Foodservice	Yes	Yes

4.2 Challenges Faced by Managers During the Early Phase of COVID-19 in Malaysia

Based on the data, the researchers divided the challenges into three levels: business, employee, and customer, followed by the proposed main themes and sub-themes for each level of challenge. Table 2 presents the five main themes or challenges hospitality managers face together with the exemplary quotes representing specific viewpoints from the respondents.

4.2.1 Business

At the business level, hospitality managers experienced three main challenges: controlling costs, overseeing sales and revenues, and surviving competition. During the interviews, all respondents mentioned financial as the main challenge they experienced. They shared many cost-cutting strategies done by their organisations, such as reducing the salaries and compensation for employees, decreasing the number of employees and many more. For example, one manager mentioned, *'We controlled our payroll cost. We closed some floors and lighting to minimise operational costs, stopped ordering raw materials for all our restaurant outlets, and focused on only one outlet. Other than that, we minimised items we stored in-house and only do direct purchases when needed.'*

(R04). Employees' salaries and compensation are the most significant expenses for hospitality companies; hence, most companies reduce the number of employees to minimise their labour costs. Such findings on affected employees are corroborated with previous studies (Dev & Gupta, 2020; Khan & Hashim, 2020) and aligned with the Department of Statistics Malaysia data on unemployment (DOSM, 2020a; DOSM, 2020b). Many hotel businesses opted for food delivery to promote their food and beverages. For example, one manager mentioned, *'We focused on food delivery where our employees delivered the food themselves. It was quite overwhelming. We managed to earn around RM12,000 in two weeks, enough to survive as a side income. Because our employees still get their full salary, we encourage them to give back to the hotel by buying our food delivery products or hotel stay vouchers. We asked our employees to help promote our food and beverage using their social media and networking.'* (R03). Generally, hospitality businesses had to implement various strategies to survive the pandemic impact and the competition with other hospitality businesses during the period.

4.2.2 Employee

At the employee level, the hospitality manager faced challenges managing the workforce. All affected companies implemented various strategies that impacted their employees, such as deducting employee salaries, giving employees unpaid leaves, decreasing the number of employees, and reducing employee benefits. Those affected employees include experienced employees who can be considered loyal due to their long-term services with the companies. These had caused dissatisfaction among employees. For example, one manager mentioned, *'We no longer provide breakfast for our employees; we only provide them lunch and dinner with limited dishes. We had to cut costs such as offering only one-panel clinic for employees and stop giving the transportation allowances.'* (R05). Former hospitality employees negatively impacted by their management decisions might not return to the industry when they see other lucrative opportunities offered by other industries (Karsavuran, 2021). Such situations will decrease hospitality job attractiveness (Baum & Hai, 2020; Filimonau et al., 2020) and contribute to employee shortage when the hospitality industry operates as usual in the post-pandemic (Leung et al., 2021; Goh & Okumus, 2020).

During the pandemic, hospitality managers implemented COVID-19 awareness training to educate employees working during the period. For example, *'We sanitised our rooms and public areas following the Ministry of Health guidelines.'* (R03). Also, hospitality managers used the time during the pandemic period to re-skill and upskill their employees. One respondent mentioned, *'Every week, all the employees, regardless of their department, had to attend the training for example, bedmaking, food and beverage, reception, front office. We sent back all the non-Malaysian employees, hence, only dependent on the Malaysian employees.'* (R03).

4.2.3 Customer

At the customer level, hospitality managers reported that prioritising human safety and health is their key challenge during the pandemic. Most Malaysians were satisfied with how the government handled the COVID-19 crisis (Azlan et al., 2020). COVID-19 has changed customer behaviour when many preferred avoiding crowds and practised strict hygiene and sanitisation. Although wearing face covering is now optional, some customers still prefer wearing masks or face covering, particularly in public spaces. During the pandemic period, hospitality businesses were required to apply procedures as per the government guidelines, particularly the quarantine hotels. One respondent mentioned, *‘Being a quarantine hotel, we are being inspected by the authorities on a regular basis.’* (R09).

Mixed reactions were recorded among the respondents when they shared their thoughts on customer acceptance. One respondent said, *‘I do not think we will have a problem because our VIP guests are used to the (...) brand and the VIP membership privilege. Regardless of what happened, they will choose the (...) brand for a holiday or business trip.’* (R01). On the other hand, one respondent shared, *‘Some customers were afraid to stay at our hotel because we are quarantine hotel. So, we prepared videos to show the customers our sanitisation procedures to boost customer confidence. We also share about COVID-19 prevention programs on our social media.’* (R04). COVID-19 has changed customer behaviour; thus, hospitality businesses should reinvent their strategies by offering products and services to cater for customers in the post-pandemic. For instance, many hospitality businesses, particularly restaurants, promote contactless service (e.g., kiosks, QR code) for menu ordering and payment and use robot waiters (e.g., BellaBot) to deliver food and beverages to customers. A recent study in Malaysia found customers’ attitudes toward technology significantly influenced their intention to use self-service kiosks in fast-food restaurants (Mohd Shukry et al., 2023).

Table 2: Themes generated for the challenges faced by hospitality managers.

Level of Challenges	Sub-Themes	Themes	Sample Quotes
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice cost-cutting management • Eliminate unnecessary spending • Pay for operational and other costs • Spend when needed 	Controlling Costs	<i>‘We had to decrease employee salary, but we confronted them, so they understand why we made such a decision. We started decreasing our employees’ salaries in April 2020 based on their rank levels. We have rank-and-file employees with levels A, B, C, and D. Each level has its own percentage. The higher the rank, the higher the percentage for salary reduction. The lowest</i>

			was 20%, and the highest was 40%.' (R12)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in sales and revenue • Either earning less profit or running at a loss • Fail to generate revenue like before COVID-19 • Decrease in occupancy and demand • Received many cancellations 	Overseeing Sales and Revenues	<p><i>'The biggest challenge is how we can get the revenue back. Once we do not have revenue, it is hard to sustain the employees. Now, we cannot generate revenue like we used to. Those days, normally during weekdays, we can close sales within RM40,000 (US\$8,360) to RM50,000 (US\$10,450) per day. We can generate around RM8,000 (US\$1,672) daily for room only on weekends. If there were three events, we could generate about RM150,000 (US\$31,349) to RM200,000 (US\$41,799) daily'.</i></p> <p>(R06)</p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for post-COVID-19 and the future • Flexibility and adaptability to the current situation • Standard operating procedures restrictions make it difficult to plan • Revise marketing strategy for business survival • Uncertainty of hospitality future 	Surviving Competitions	<p><i>'We use online business. We develop e-menus, use third-party apps to promote our products, and then link the apps with the internet; we also provide delivery service. We offer culinary home classes, and we developed the modules. For example, for module A, worth RM700 (US\$146), the participant can learn how to cook appetisers, main courses, and desserts. We prepare the raw materials in a bento box. Once they make the payment, we deliver. Once they receive the box, they can cook the product using our recipe by watching our channel on social media. We collaborate with a local bank. They learn from prestige executive chefs.'</i></p> <p>(R10)</p>
Employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salary deductions, unpaid leave, and reduction of team members 	Managing the Workforce	<p><i>'Starting in February 2020, our company implemented five days of unpaid leave for each employee. So, working time is reduced by about 20%, and salary is reduced due to unpaid</i></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced and loyal employees • COVID-19 awareness training • Unsatisfied employees • Employee welfare 		<p><i>leave. All employees had no choice but to follow the management order regarding unpaid leave.’ (R06)</i></p>
Customer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply procedures as per the government guidelines • Offer products and services during- and in the post-COVID-19 • Customer changes in behaviour • Educate and convince customers 	Prioritising Human Safety and Health	<p><i>‘Under the (...) brand, we were already given post-pandemic guidelines. Once the hotel opens, we must follow the guidelines. We also created a program called (...), where we thoroughly clean each room using special cleaning products from (...). Then, we must seal the door. Once we seal the door, no one can enter the room except the new guest. We properly sanitise the room key before we hand it over to the new guest.’ (R01), and ‘We strictly followed guidelines from the Ministry of Health; we also include the information on our website so customers will feel confident to come to our hotel.’ (R03)</i></p>

4.3 COVID-19 Impact on Hospitality Jobs and Occupational Attractiveness

In this discussion, the researchers have considered how COVID-19 influenced hospitality jobs and occupational attractiveness. Many hospitality employees were severely impacted by the management decisions influenced by the pandemic. It was evidenced in the analysis that many respondents reported the management decision severely impacted their employees. Unpaid leave, salary and benefit reductions, retrenchment and freezing contracts were some of the immediate decisions imposed by employers. The researchers gathered a mixed reaction from the respondents about whether hospitality managers think the hospitality industry will still be a career choice for future employees, particularly after many were forced to leave due to the outbreak. According to R01, *‘For those passionate about working in the hotel industry, yes, no doubt. But for those whose priority is to gain the money and be in their comfort zone, I do not think that will be their priority.’* Similarly, R08 said, *‘If you are a person who likes to see satisfaction when you do something, the hotel industry is the best. The hotel industry is suitable if you like to create a smile on the customer. People might come back*

to work because of the brand. Looking at younger generations, all they want is popularity.'

Before COVID-19, the hospitality industry was among the industries that consistently contributed millions of revenues to the country. However, this infectious disease is considered the worst and has impacted many industries, not only hospitality. This occurrence has somewhat influenced the jobs and occupational attractiveness of the hospitality industry. During the interviews, the respondents stressed the government's role in helping the affected people and industries. For example, R04 said, *'Most industries were affected by the pandemic, so problems not only the hospitality sector. There will still be demand for tourism, but the recovery will take time. The hospitality industry is one of the industries that contributed revenue to the country. So, the government will find ways to help recover the industry.'* R02 mentioned, *'To those who know about hotel environment, they know that it is a good career because to me, whatever happens, hotel industry does provide career development and is considered a stable career because the tourism industry will not die. There will always be demand for people who want to travel; as you can see, when the government allows interstate travel, many people book hotels. Travel in the new norm. So, demand will always be there. As a person from the industry, I can see a future in the industry. Right now, most industries are affected.'*

Although respondents were optimistic about the hospitality industry as a career choice, some think that the affected employees will not return to the industry. Affected employees felt betrayed by their employers; hence, they no longer trusted them. For example, R12 stated, *'If the person is passionate about working in the hotel industry, it should be their career choice. It depends on the person. When we want to work in the private sector, we need to choose a more stable company. It means if this thing happens again, we will be more secure. I have a colleague who worked in an established hotel brand. They said they did not want to work at the hotel anymore and wanted to change to a hospital because if this happened again, the hospital would not lay off their employees.'* and *'Not really. They would choose to work in some other industries that are more stable.'* (R03). Understanding that the hospitality industry comprises many sectors, a respondent said, *'I think maybe it still becomes a career choice for employees because it is very big. Not only hotels but also restaurants, cruise ships, and a lot more. So, I think there will be no problem.'* (R07). Based on the findings, some respondents perceived that many employees would be looking for jobs that could provide them with job security and career stability. Employees might feel a lack of confidence to re-join the industry as they consider hospitality a high-risk industry if this COVID-19 incident reoccurs. When the government allowed businesses to reopen, many employers, particularly those largely dependent on human workforce such as hospitality, struggled to recruit employees, hence facing a labour shortage (Poo, 2022). The affected hospitality employees may perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as a traumatic event that increased their perception of job insecurity, job stress, and turnover intentions (Chen et al., 2022).

Since COVID-19 started, many companies have invested in technology such as contactless payment, QR codes for check-in and check-out customers, and food delivery robots. Due to the change in how the hospitality industry does business, some respondents were frustrated because they could not serve customers like before COVID-19. *'The industry can still be a career choice, but we will feel frustrated considering how hotels should be. Hotels are supposed to provide direct service contact with customers. But after this, there will be less contact with customers. I also consider changing careers because I've worked with this hotel for over six years. But when I think about it, it is not easy to switch careers, especially with this current situation.'* (R05). Unlike other sectors in the hospitality industry, foodservice was allowed to operate during the restriction period. For instance, *'Food and beverage are one of the sectors that are easy to get jobs and provide wide career opportunities. Compared to hotels, it is more difficult to job hopping because there are not many opportunities in food and beverage for career growth and development.'* (R09). Many affected employees in Malaysia ventured into the gig economy by doing part-time jobs in the food delivery business. The study findings showed that COVID-19 and the restriction orders imposed by the government of Malaysia somewhat influence hospitality jobs and occupational attractiveness. Nonetheless, these respondents never thought they would face another problem when the businesses started to operate as usual. Many businesses worldwide, including Malaysia, face difficulties recruiting talent when businesses start recovering from COVID-19. Findings from this study confirm the impact that COVID-19 has had on employees, which in turn influences the attractiveness of the hospitality sector.

5 Conclusions, Implications, Limitations, and Recommendations

This study aims to identify the challenges hospitality managers face during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia and to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the attractiveness of hospitality jobs and occupations. The researchers gathered significant findings through interviews with hospitality managers during the COVID-19 outbreak. The magnitude of the COVID-19 effect is tremendous. The challenges of hospitality managers can be divided into three levels: business, employee, and customer. Each level of challenge represents the hospitality managers' experience in dealing with an infectious disease like COVID-19 for the first time. At the time of writing this article, COVID-19 is still ongoing, and the government keep reminding the people of the importance of wearing a face covering; even face masks are no longer compulsory. The COVID-19 impact might not be as bad as in those early days because hospitality businesses have dealt with COVID-19 for over three years. Despite that, the industry still needs more time to recover and depends on domestic travellers and travellers from neighbouring countries. Additionally, findings from this study revealed that the ripple effect of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry and the employers' decisions on employees had influenced the affected employees' behaviour. Some COVID-19-affected employees might no longer see hospitality as a career choice when they have seen how hospitality is a high-risk industry that was the first to shut down due to the restriction order and the last to recover. Nonetheless, those passionate about working in the service industry might stay or re-join the industry.

The interviews were conducted during Malaysia's pandemic and restriction order periods; hence, the findings have important implications for hospitality employers and managers. Employers and managers can now better understand the influence of their decisions on employees' attitudes and behaviour. Their immediate action on employees could influence hospitality job attractiveness. In a similar crisis, employers could use alternative strategies (e.g., salary deductions, unpaid) that are not detrimental and allow employees to maintain their employment status. Employers and managers can help employees cope with COVID-19's effects and boost employee motivation, engagement, and satisfaction at work so employees would not leave the current organisation. Our findings suggest a greater need for government interventions such as continuous financial and non-financial support and education and training programs to assist hospitality employees. These interventions are essential to attract employees to work and stay in the industry.

This study has some limitations. The researchers faced difficulties recruiting and scheduling participants for an interview due to the COVID-19 situation during the data collection period. Also, the interviews were conducted during the early phase of the COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia. Therefore, future research could conduct a similar study to investigate the present phenomenon since COVID-19 continues. Moreover, this study only interviews hospitality managers; future research can interview employees to gather their perspectives about challenges and hospitality job attractiveness. Future research can also use other approaches, such as a survey questionnaire, to gather data regarding the phenomenon.

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