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EXPLORING THE RESILIENCE STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY INDEPENDENT HOTELS IN KOTA KINABALU, SABAH: A PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality industry has once again demonstrated its vulnerability to crises, particularly following the disruptions of the 2020 pandemic. These vulnerabilities vary across hotels depending on factors such as the magnitude of the crisis, ownership and management structure, technology dependence, and operational resilience. While previous studies have emphasised crisis management strategies, most focus on the pre-crisis (preparedness) and response (immediate actions) stages, with limited attention to the post-crisis (recovery) stage, especially among independent hotels. Independent hotels, often characterised by a small ownership structure, typically lack the resources to plan and implement crisis management strategies effectively. Nevertheless, they play a significant role in contributing to the country's GDP. Although many independent hotels were forced to close, others survived despite the pandemic's severe impacts. Prior research has identified various survival strategies; however, post-crisis resilience required for long-term sustainability remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework to examine the resilience strategies implemented by independent hotels in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, as they work toward business sustainability in the post-crisis stage, amid rapid technological advancements and evolving guest preferences. The framework integrates dynamic capabilities (sense, seize, and transform) and organisational resilience (absorb, adapt, and recover) to explore how these hotels can achieve sustained performance. A qualitative research design is proposed, using semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants. Thematic analysis will be employed to identify key patterns in the resilience strategies adopted. The findings are expected to provide practical insights for hotel practitioners, policymakers, and government agencies supporting the resilience and sustainability of the hospitality industry.

Keywords: Crisis Management, Resilience Strategies, Business Sustainability, Independent Hotels, Sabah

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality and tourism industry is inherently prone to a range of challenges, including natural disasters, biosecurity threats, and infectious disease outbreaks (Ritchie, 2008). Since 2020, the industry has faced even more severe disruptions, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to widespread national lockdowns, as well as rapid technological advancements and shifts in guest preferences. These challenges have forced the industry to implement crisis management strategies to ensure business resilience and sustainability. Many studies have examined how hotels responded to the pandemic; however, most have focused on larger hotels, particularly franchise establishments (Hao et al., 2020; Loi et al., 2021; Kaushal & Srivastava, 2021; Rodríguez-Antón & Alonso-Almeida, 2020; Smart et al., 2021). According to Faulkner (2001), these hotels tend to have stronger, better-qualified crisis management teams to handle such situations.

The crisis management framework proposed by Faulkner (2001) consists of six phases: pre-event, prodromal, emergency, intermediate, long-term (recovery), and resolution. It is supported by Coombs (2014), who argues that each crisis progresses through pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages, highlighting the importance of the recovery and resolution phases. As noted by Aydogan, de Esteban Curiel, Antonovica, and Cetin (2024), some hospitality and tourism businesses may be more resilient depending on the recovery strategies they adopt. Furthermore, Kasim (2016) found that independent hotels accounted for 88.1% of the hotel industry, indicating they dominate the Malaysian market. Given their substantial market share, these establishments should not be overlooked. Independent hotels often lack effective crisis management and sufficient resources due to single ownership structures and the absence of brand affiliation (O'Neill & Carlback, 2011).

Although independent hotels lack a proper crisis management framework, their flexible and less bureaucratic structures can benefit them, particularly during crises, as they have greater control over decision-making (Almeida et al., 2020; Alves et al., 2020). It is supported by Yiee et al. (2023), who found that such flexibility enabled independent hotel owners to sustain their businesses during the pandemic. Several immediate responses were identified in these studies, including shifting target markets from leisure to quarantine services and transitioning from dine-in to food delivery operations.

Crisis and resilience management have been widely discussed in the literature; however, the focus has often been on international chain hotels. Although some crisis management research has been conducted in the context of independent hotels, the findings have primarily addressed the pre-crisis and response stages, while the post-crisis stage remains underexplored. Given the lack of understanding of post-crisis resilience strategies among independent hotels, this study examines the strategies they adopt to support sustainable business recovery, particularly amid rapid technological advancements and evolving guest preferences. By integrating dynamic capabilities and organisational resilience, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to investigate independent hotels in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of post-crisis resilience strategies for business recovery and sustainability.

The study intends to examine independent hotels located in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, as this state recorded that 63.9% of its hotels were independently operated in 2009 (Belkhamza, 2009). Furthermore, the rapid growth of the tourism industry in Sabah has driven the expansion of small and medium-sized lodging (Daily Express, 2018). Consequently, focusing on independent hotels in Kota Kinabalu allows the study to examine how a tourism-dependent state with a large proportion of independent operations responds to the disruptions. This conceptual paper seeks to investigate the following research questions:

- How do independent hotel managers interpret and enact dynamic capabilities during business recovery following COVID-19?
- How do sensing, seizing and transforming capabilities translate into resilience strategies in independent hotels?

- How do these resilience strategies influence long-term business sustainability practices in the independent hotels?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The business nature of an independent hotel

Due to their business structure, independent hotels are typically managed by a single or small owner and often lack the resources needed to operate and compete in a challenging marketplace (Benedic, 2021; O'Neill & Carlback, 2011). Therefore, the pandemic outbreak, along with rapid technological advancements and changes in guest preferences, significantly impacted these businesses. Despite these limitations, independent hotel owners retain the flexibility to respond quickly to changes, as they are not constrained by formal corporate policies (Borges & Gustavo, 2015; O'Neill & Carlback, 2011). An empirical study by O'Neill and Carlback (2011) found that independent hotels outperformed competitors in average daily rate (ADR) and revenue per available room (RevPAR) during the 2009 economic recession and the recent pandemic (PHG Consulting, 2020). These findings are supported by other studies, which indicate that the flexible nature of independent hotels allows owners to adjust pricing strategies swiftly to enhance sales (Almeida et al., 2020). This flexibility is also evident in the study by Yiee et al. (2023), which found that independent hotels in Sabah adopted defensive strategies to survive during the pandemic. Specifically, these hotels shifted their target market toward quarantine services and transitioned from dine-in to delivery.

The crisis management

A crisis is defined as an unpredictable event that threatens stakeholders' expectations of financial performance (Casal-Ribeiro et al., 2023; Coombs, 2014). Crises can arise from both natural and human-made disasters. Both types have occurred in Sabah over the years, including repeated abduction cases between 2000 and 2014, the foreign militant intrusion in 2013, the Ranau earthquake in 2015, and flash floods. Most organisations adopt crisis management strategies to reduce the negative impacts of crises when mitigation is not possible (García-Gómez et al., 2021; Coombs, 2014). Organisations commonly use Faulkner's (2001) six-phase crisis management framework in addressing such situations. However, a deeper understanding of crisis management is needed, as crises are often unpredictable and associated with unfavourable outcomes (Coombs, 2014).

Faulkner's framework was widely applied during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the scale and duration of the crisis, Hao et al. (2020) proposed a COVID-19-specific crisis management framework, highlighting the importance of long-term recovery and resolution phases in revitalising business operations. However, existing research on independent hotels has largely focused on the response stage, despite the increasingly challenging environment shaped by rapid technological advancements and evolving guest preferences. Consequently, this paper contributes to the literature by extending research on post-crisis recovery and resilience.

Dynamic Capabilities

A recent study by Borazon et al. (2023) indicates that dynamic capability is closely linked to recovery and resilience. Dynamic capability refers to an organisation's ability to modify its internal and external resources to adapt to rapid environmental changes (Teece et al., 1997). According to Teece (2007), dynamic capability comprises three key processes: sensing, seizing, and transforming. It begins with identifying opportunities and threats (sensing), followed by mobilising resources to address them and achieve competitive advantage (seizing), and finally reconfiguring operational resources (transforming) (Helfat & Martin, 2015; Matysiak et al., 2018; Teece, 2007). Borazon et al. (2023) observed these capabilities in small

family-owned accommodations, such as hostels and homestays in well-known Philippine island destinations. Their findings suggest that such businesses often employ different dynamic capabilities compared to larger organisations due to resource constraints, requiring them to develop context-specific capabilities to support their survival and long-term sustainability.

Technology Innovation

Technological innovation, particularly in big data analytics and digital platforms, enhances an organisation's sensing capabilities by generating insights that strengthen its dynamic capabilities (Capurro et al., 2022). It is also considered a key determinant of competitive advantage, enabling organisations to respond effectively to rapid changes in products and services in line with evolving customer demand (Kim et al., 2015).

Innovation can be classified into incremental and radical forms based on their level of novelty (Shi et al., 2021). Incremental innovation involves moderate improvements to existing products and services, whereas radical innovation requires substantial investment and leads to breakthrough developments. In the hospitality context, incremental innovation is more common, as it is less risky and more effective in exploring new market opportunities without neglecting existing customers, particularly during periods of crisis (Zach et al., 2020). This is supported by Shi et al. (2021), who found that incremental innovations in resource management and marketing strategies enabled five-star hotels to sustain their businesses after the Chinese government restricted public-funded meetings as part of anti-corruption regulations.

Government Assistance

Government assistance plays an important role in helping organisations navigate crises by shaping the relationships among an organisation's dynamic capabilities, resilience strategies, and performance outcomes (Gan et al., 2024). During crises, governments have been observed providing financial support and regulatory flexibility to help hotels survive. The findings of Dubey et al. (2023) indicate that government support is essential for building digital capabilities during crises, thereby enhancing organisational resilience. It is because, in times of uncertainty, the public tends to rely on government information and may be sceptical about investing in innovation.

In Malaysia, the Smart Tourism 4.0 initiative, launched by Tourism Malaysia in 2018, supports industry advancement by leveraging opportunities in the digital economy. Under this initiative, the hospitality industry can benefit from tax incentives for digital adoption (Balasubramanian & Hanafiah, 2022). It enables independent hotels to adopt technologies that strengthen their adaptive capacity for business recovery and resilience, with external government support.

Characteristics of organisational resilience

Crises often present different characteristics and impacts on hospitality businesses, making organisational resilience a critical capability for achieving short-term recovery and long-term sustainability. Organisational resilience refers to the ability to survive and thrive during periods of disruption by demonstrating adaptability and employing effective strategies (Seville et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2019). It is commonly understood as the continuous capacity to absorb, adapt to, and recover from disruptions while maintaining positive financial performance (Saad et al., 2021). Shi et al. (2021) emphasise that business flexibility is a crucial factor in responding to crises, as effective change management reflects organisational resilience. Similarly, Alves et al. (2020) note that although small businesses typically have less formal risk management structures compared to larger organisations, they tend to demonstrate greater flexibility during crises due to their less bureaucratic structures, enabling them to implement changes more rapidly.

Concerning the post-crisis or recovery stage of crisis management, Schoenberg et al. (2013) identified six critical turnaround strategies, namely asset retrenchment, cost efficiency, focus on core activities, future planning, leadership reinvigoration, and organisational culture change. The authors emphasise the importance of understanding these elements to provide practical insights for enhancing organisational resilience in future crises. Cheng and Teng (2025) demonstrate that leadership reinvigoration strengthens leaders' resilience in adapting to crises, enabling them to influence employee resilience. Similarly, Sawalha et al. (2013) highlight organisational culture as a key determinant of resilience to crises, suggesting that both leadership and employee resilience are essential in fostering creativity and supporting business sustainability.

Although existing literature has examined dynamic capability and crisis resilience in the hospitality industry, empirical evidence remains limited, particularly in the context of independent hotels. Moreover, most prior studies focus on the pre-crisis and response stages, leaving a significant gap in understanding how the hospitality industry adapts, reconfigures, and sustains competitive advantage during post-crisis recovery and in the long term. This gap is especially important given that the hospitality industry is inherently exposed to multifaceted crises.

From the perspective of dynamic capability theory, organisations recover and sustain performance by sensing environmental changes, seizing emerging opportunities, and transforming internal resources and competencies. In contrast, organisational resilience emphasises the capacity to absorb disruptions, adapt to change, and recover effectively. The integration of these two perspectives, therefore, provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding not only how hotels respond to crises but also how they transform and maintain their competitiveness over time.

Furthermore, although small family-owned accommodations such as hostels and homestays have been shown to apply dynamic capabilities in crisis management and resilience building, it remains unclear how independent hotels—typically more resource-rich and structurally formalised—develop and operationalise these capabilities in practice. Hence, empirical research is needed to explore the crisis-resilient strategies and dynamic capabilities employed by surviving independent hotels in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, from the pandemic period to the present. Such research would enrich the integration of dynamic capability and organisational resilience literature and provide practical guidance for owners of independent hotels.

Although there is existing literature on dynamic capabilities and crisis resilience in the hospitality industry, empirical support remains limited, especially in the context of independent hotels. Moreover, most prior studies focus on the pre-crisis and response stages, leaving a significant gap in understanding how the hospitality industry adapts, reconfigures, and sustains competitive advantage during the post-crisis recovery and long-term sustainability stages. It is particularly critical in the hospitality industry, which is inherently exposed to multifaceted crises. From the perspective of dynamic capability theory, organisations sustain and grow their businesses through the ability to sense a changing environment, seize emerging opportunities and transform their internal resources and competencies, while organisational resilience emphasises their capacity to absorb, adapt to disruptions and recover effectively. The integration of these two theories, therefore, provides a more comprehensive lens to understand not only how hotels respond to crises but also how they transform resiliently and sustain competitiveness over time. Further to this, even small family-owned accommodations, such as hostels and homestays, have been shown to employ dynamic capabilities in their crisis management and resilience; it remains unclear how independent hotels, which are comparatively more resource-rich and have a more structured management system, develop and operate such capabilities in practice. Hence, empirical research is needed to explore in-depth the crisis resilient strategies and dynamic capability practised by these surviving independent hotels in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, for their business sustainable recovery from the pandemic period to the present, to enrich the theoretical

integration of dynamic capability and organisational resilience literature and serve as practical guidance for independent hotels' owners.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK DEVELOPMENT

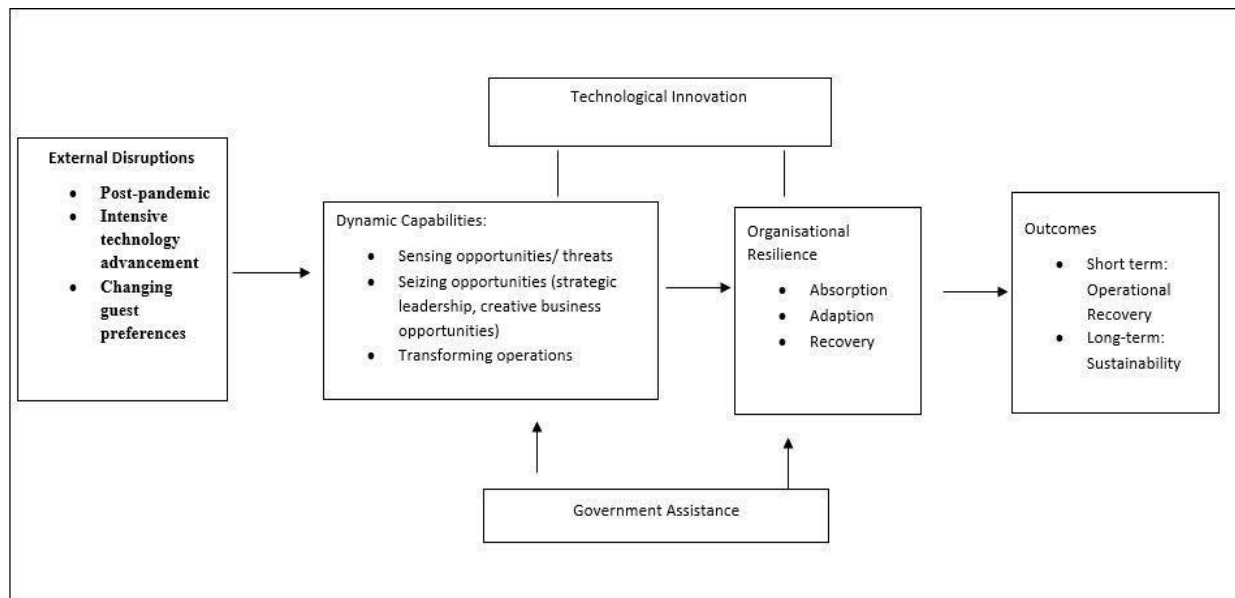
Previous studies (Saad et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021; Aydogan et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2025; Asyraff et al., 2024; Cheng & Teng, 2025) have identified various resilience strategies, including organisational innovation, adaptability, strategic leadership, dynamic capabilities, organisational culture, government assistance, and technological innovation. However, these studies have primarily focused on chain hotels rather than independent hotels, which typically operate with fewer resources, less organisational support, and greater vulnerability to disruption. This limitation highlights the need to examine resilience strategies specifically tailored to independent hotels.

The proposed framework adapts these established strategies to the context of independent hotels by integrating dynamic capability (sensing, seizing, and transforming) as the central mechanism for managing external disruptions and enabling organisational resilience (absorbing, adapting, and recovering) to achieve both short-term recovery and long-term business sustainability. Unlike chain hotels, independent hotels must rely more heavily on strategic leadership and the development of innovative business opportunities to compensate for their limited resources and less formalised structures. Technological innovation and government support are key enablers of these resilience strategies.

This framework contributes to the literature by addressing an underexplored segment of the hospitality industry, namely, independent hotels. Despite their resource constraints and structural disadvantages, the framework demonstrates how independent hotels can leverage innovation, leadership, and external support to achieve recovery and sustain performance amid post-pandemic disruption, rapid technological advancement, and significant shifts in guest preferences.

Figure 1

Proposed Conceptual Framework



Adapted from: Saad et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021; Aydogan et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2025; Asyraff et al., 2024; Cheng & Teng, 2025

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Creswell (2013), qualitative research is conducted when a study aims to gather in-depth insights into participants' actions within a specific context to address a particular problem or issue. Since this study seeks to explore how independent hotels interpret and enact dynamic capabilities and transform them into organisational resilience strategies for short-term operational recovery and long-term business sustainability, a qualitative research approach is adopted.

A purposive sampling strategy will be used to select suitable participants for the interview sessions. Clear selection criteria will be developed to ensure that appropriate participants directly involved in the operational management of independent hotels are included, enabling the collection of rich, meaningful insights into dynamic capabilities and organisational resilience practices. The study will involve two categories of participants: (i) operational managers or supervisors in independent hotels, and (ii) hotel owners or senior managers with strategic oversight. Participants must have at least five years of working experience in independent hotels, as they are expected to have observed and experienced business survival and resilience transitions since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as well as subsequent technological advancements and shifts in guest preferences. In addition, participants must hold at least a supervisory-level position, as they are directly involved in operational decision-making.

Participants will be approached via telephone, email, or formal invitation. Snowball sampling will then be employed, in which initial participants will be asked to recommend other suitable candidates, particularly when potential participants are not easily accessible through public listings. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to explore the research topic in depth. All interviews will be audio-recorded with participants' consent. Each interview will begin with a brief introduction to the researcher's academic and professional background as an icebreaker, followed by participants sharing their roles and experiences to establish rapport. An interview protocol will guide data collection and ensure alignment with the research questions.

Regarding sample size, data saturation will be used as the guiding principle. According to Patton (2014), data saturation occurs when no new information emerges from additional data collection. Vasileiou et al. (2018) further emphasise that sample size is important in ensuring the quality and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Therefore, interviews will continue until data saturation is reached, indicating that no new themes or insights are emerging, and data collection can be concluded.

All interview data will be transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes relevant to the research questions. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within qualitative data. It involves six phases. First, interviews will be transcribed through repeated listening to the recordings. To ensure accuracy, transcripts will be returned to participants for verification. Second, initial codes will be generated. Third, codes will be organised into potential themes aligned with the research questions. Fourth, themes will be reviewed and refined. Fifth, themes will be clearly defined and named. Finally, the findings will be interpreted in relation to the research questions and presented in a structured report.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Theoretically, the study advances the literature by explicitly linking dynamic capability and organisational resilience in the context of crisis recovery in independent hotels. While prior research mostly focused on pre-crisis and response stages, this study shifts the attention to the recovery phase, conceptualising it as a capability-driven process. It offers a more integrated framework for understanding how independent hotels

recover and sustain their operations amid disruptions. It contributes to the limited empirical research on recovery-stage resilience, particularly in the under-researched context of independent hotels.

In practice, the study's findings are expected to provide valuable insights and practical guidelines to independent hotel practitioners by identifying specific capability-building strategies that support recovery and long-term sustainability. In addition, the results of this study offer practical insights to relevant authorities and government agencies, such as the Malaysia Association of Hotels and Tourism Malaysia, to design more targeted support mechanisms that strengthen the resilience and sustainability of these independent hotels.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes a conceptual framework to advance understanding of crisis resilience strategies among independent hotels in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. By integrating dynamic capability and organisational resilience theories, the framework provides a comprehensive lens to explore how independent hotels navigate the recovery phase and move toward business sustainability. It provides a gateway for future empirical investigation and contributes to expanding scholarly work on the recovery stage in the context of independent hotels. Besides, this study sheds light on the substantial impact on independent hotels' practitioners and related authorities, offering useful guidelines for resilience strategies to support business recovery and sustainability.

LIMITATION

This study has several limitations. The study's population covers only independent hotels located in Kota Kinabalu; it may not represent hotels in other districts in Sabah. There are many other independent hotels located in other districts; therefore, future studies are recommended to enhance the body of knowledge. Besides, this study's future findings are based solely on the perspective of hotel managers; other stakeholders, such as customers, the government and other industry associations, should also be considered.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To enhance generalizability, future studies should extend the empirical scope to include independent hotels from other districts and regions. Additionally, the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as customers, the government, and industry associations, should be incorporated to provide a more holistic understanding of crisis resilience. Further empirical testing of the proposed framework is also recommended to refine and validate the relationships among dynamic capability, organisational resilience, short-term recovery, and long-term business sustainability outcomes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Chiu, J. S. Y., Yong, E. T. T., Pang, V. L., & Ungki, M. R. conceptualized the study and designed the methodology. Chiu, J. S. Y wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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