FBMS Journal of Family Business and Management Studies
Journal of Family Business and Management Studies
ISSN 2821-9643 (online) Volume 17 Number 1, January-June 2025

Qualitative Phenomenological Research on COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis Management at Hotels in the Pak Chong District, Thailand

Received: 14.03.2024
Revised: 12.06.2024
Accepted: 30.07.2024

Kameta Katenga[1], Damrong Sattayawaksakul[2*]
[1,2]Faculty of Business Administration, Asia-Pacific International University
195 Moo 3, Muaklek, Saraburi 18189, Thailand
[1]kameta@apiu.edu, [2]damsat@apiu.edu

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the sensemaking process used by hotel managers in Thailand's Pak Chong District to address COVID-19 challenges. Semi-structured interviews were used with 12 purposively sampled managers. The interview data were analyzed using NVivo software. Sensemaking provided a lens through which the actions of the managers were viewed, from sensing the environment, creating a map of the situation, and acting to change the system to learn from it. As a dynamic and multifaceted process, sensemaking is integral to effective crisis management, allowing managers to interpret and respond to unfolding situations with agility and understanding. The research provided practical insights for managers facing crises and contributed to sensemaking, crisis management, and leadership in the hotel industry. While this study offers valuable insights into the challenges and strategies employed by hotel managers in the specific locale of Pak Chong, its narrow focus on select hotels in this region limits the generalizability of the findings. However, this targeted approach also allows for an in-depth understanding of the issues and approaches relevant to managers operating in the unique context of Pak Chong. The findings from Pak Chong provide a valuable point of comparison to Southern Thailand, which was severely impacted by the reduction in foreign tourists. This comparison opens up potential avenues for future research investigating regional similarities and differences.

Keywords: Sensemaking; crisis management; COVID-19; tourism, Thailand

Introduction

The term VUCA, coined by General Maxwell P. Thurman (Mackey, 1992), encapsulates the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity of the 21st-century business landscape. Given the global reach and rapid technological advancements, viral outbreaks like SARS, MERS, H1N1, Zika, Ebola, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic were inevitable. COVID-19, declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 (WHO, 2020, March 11), caused significant loss of life and economic disruption. Preparedness is crucial, as emphasized by WHO's advocacy for developing "muscle memory" through repeated responses to viral crises (UN, 2020, September 18).

A popular tourist destination, Thailand's tourism industry was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the accommodation and food service sector seeing a drastic decline. This sector's contribution to the country's GDP plummeted from 11.5% in 2019 to 5.65% in 2020 and further to just 0.84% in 2021 (Statista Research Department, 2023). Hotel occupancy rates, a key performance indicator, plunged from a high of 70.08% in 2019 to 29.34% in 2020 and an even lower 15.10% in 2021 (Bank of Thailand, 2023).

The Pak Chong district in Nakhon Ratchasima province mirrored these national trends (Tourism and Sport Ministry, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2020 & 2022). Hotel occupancy rates declined from around 70% in 2018 and 2019 to 39.98% in 2020, though faring slightly better than the national average. Guest arrivals dropped sharply, from approximately 2.5 million in 2018 and 2019 to 1,459,643 in 2020. The pandemic led to shorter stays, with the average length declining from 2.11 days in 2019 to 2.03 days in 2021. This, coupled with lower spending per person per day, resulted in a 47% decrease in total tourism revenue in 2020 compared to 2019.

Despite the pandemic, accommodation establishments and rooms steadily increased from 2018 to 2022. This can be attributed to the Thai government implementing stimulus packages worth THB22.4 billion to boost domestic tourism, including the “We Travel Together” promotion, subsidizing airfares and hotel rates, and the Moral Support promotion funding holidays for 1.2 million health workers and volunteers (Medina, 2020). These measures were part of a more significant 1.9 trillion-baht economic stimulus to mitigate COVID-19's impact. This research delves into the Sensemaking process of hotel managers in the Pak Chong district of Nakhon Ratchasima province through the lens of Sensemaking.

Research objectives

Sensemaking provided a lens through which the actions of the managers were viewed, from sensing the environment, creating a map of the situation, and acting to change the system to learn from it. Ancona (2012) defined sensemaking as structuring the unknown by placing stimuli into a framework that enables a heightened ability to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict. The essence of sensemaking is processing sensory input to make an individual’s environment comprehensible for making reasonable decisions on which to act. "Sensemaking is not decision-

making or policy-making—it is the necessary precursor to effective action" (Cordes, 2020, para. 5). The study aims to elucidate how these managers navigated the complexities of the crisis to sustain their operations and support their employees.

Understanding the responses of hotel managers to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic serves several vital purposes. By examining the manager's sensemaking process, we can identify effective crisis management strategies, helping to develop frameworks and guidelines for future disruptions. Furthermore, insights into their sensemaking processes can inform how organizations can build resilience, ensuring they are better equipped to withstand and adapt to crises. This research also provides valuable lessons for leadership development, informing training programs that effectively prepare leaders to manage and support their teams during crises.

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature on crisis management and sensemaking in the hospitality industry, filling gaps in existing knowledge with empirical evidence on how hotel managers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the findings can guide policymakers and industry practitioners in developing policies and practices that support the hospitality industry during emergencies, providing evidence-based recommendations to improve preparedness and response strategies. The research questions are stated in **Table 2,** with the themes and sub-themes derived.

Literature review

Crisis management

Gundel (2005) developed a crisis typology categorizing crises into conventional, unexpected, intractable, and fundamental. Conventional crises are predictable (e.g., Bhopal gas tragedy), unexpected crises are unpredictable but sensitive to influence (e.g., Tunnel blaze in Kaprun), intractable crises present challenges to influence outcomes (e.g., global environmental change), and fundamental crises are both unpredictable and resistant to influence (e.g., 9/11 terrorist attack).

The categorization of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to Gundel's matrix, is debatable. Shangguan et al. (2020) label it an unexpected crisis, while Petridou and Zahariadis (2021) and Blomquist and Hägglund (2022) categorize it as a fundamental crisis. As an organizational crisis, the pandemic disrupted fundamental operations, aligning with Bundy et al.'s (2017) crisis management model, which emphasizes leadership's perception and approach.

Effective crisis management requires decisive decision-making in ambiguity (Coccia, 2020; Pearson & Claire, 1998). Coombs (2007) emphasized the significance of understanding the impact of the psychological and emotional dimensions, highlighting the human element, an often-neglected aspect. As Ancona (2012) outlined, sensemaking becomes crucial for leaders grappling with the ambiguities of an organizational crisis. Studies emphasize the importance of sensemaking practices and platforms in turning ambiguity into resilience Varanasi et al., 2023).

Sensemaking

Sensemaking, a crucial concept in organizational studies, is a dynamic and multifaceted process integral to effective crisis management. It allows leaders to interpret and respond to complex situations with agility and understanding (Weick, 1979, 1988, 1995; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Ancona (2012) and Weick (1995) view sensemaking as an iterative process involving the development of plausible understanding, testing through action and conversation, and refinement based on ongoing feedback. This shared foundation underscores the adaptive nature of sensemaking, acknowledging that individuals continuously engage with and interpret their surroundings.

However, Ancona (2012) and Weick (1995) diverge in their emphasis on leadership's role in sensemaking. Ancona explicitly positions sensemaking as a critical leadership capability, while Weick focuses on broader cognitive and social processes applicable throughout an organization. Despite this difference, both scholars converge in highlighting sensemaking's collective and social nature, emphasizing its importance in organizational contexts. They also agree on sensemaking's adaptability and learning aspects, recognizing it as a learning-oriented process involving ongoing adjustments to navigate uncertainty effectively. This integration of perspectives contributes to a richer understanding of how individuals within and beyond leadership roles grapple with and make sense of complex challenges in our dynamic world.

At the core of the sensemaking process during the pandemic was the critical role of information gathering. The Deloitte and Salesforce (2020) report highlights how hotel managers had to draw from various sources, including government advisories, health updates, industry reports, and their operational data, to form a comprehensive understanding of the crisis. This aligns with Ancona's view of sensemaking as a leadership capability, where leaders must actively seek out and synthesize information to guide their organizations through ambiguity. The report also emphasizes the use of virtual communication tools, which facilitated the exchange of information and fostered collective understanding. This reflects the social aspect of sensemaking emphasized by both Weick and Ancona, where shared meaning is constructed through conversation and interaction.

As managers gathered information, they also engaged in interpreting the pandemic and helping employees make sense of it (Rosenbäck & Svensson, 2024). Piga et al. (2022) provide insights into this aspect, focusing on crisis management as a central theme. Their study illustrates how managers viewed the pandemic as a crisis demanding immediate and adaptable responses, aligning with Weick's perspective on sensemaking as a process of developing plausible understanding in uncertain situations. Building on this, the study by Bichler, Petry, and Peters (2022) further illuminates the sensemaking process, particularly from the perspective of frontline employees and managers. Their findings reveal that employees recognized and navigated paradoxical situations, balancing business continuity with health protocols. This demonstrates the distributed nature of sensemaking in organizations, as emphasized by Weick, where individuals at all levels interpret and respond to ambiguous situations.

The sensemaking process in the hospitality industry during the pandemic was not merely theoretical but led to concrete strategic choices and organizational changes. The research collectively illustrates this connection between sensemaking and action. Piga et al. (2022) identify several managerial decisions, such as implementing dynamic pricing and flexible booking policies, that resulted from managers' interpretations of the crisis. These actions reflect the iterative nature of sensemaking described by Weick and Ancona, where understanding is tested through action and refined based on feedback. Furthermore, Japutra and Situmorang (2021) highlight how the pandemic presented opportunities for innovation, with managers reimagining service delivery and leveraging technology. This demonstrates the adaptive aspect of sensemaking, where leaders refine their understanding and strategies based on ongoing experiences and feedback, as emphasized by Ancona.

Throughout the crisis, the collective and social nature of sensemaking in the hospitality industry became increasingly evident. Examples of how sensemaking extended beyond individual managers to encompass entire organizations. The Deloitte and Salesforce (2020) report emphasizes collaboration and partnership formation, while Bichler, Petry, and Peters (2022) highlight the role of frontline employees in managing tensions and implementing safety measures. This aligns with Weick's and Ancona's emphasis on sensemaking as a social process within organizational contexts.

The sensemaking processes observed in the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic align closely with the theoretical perspectives of both Weick and Ancona. Hotel managers engaged in active information gathering, collective interpretation, and adaptive decision-making, demonstrating sensemaking as both a leadership capability and a distributed organizational process. The iterative nature of sensemaking is evident in how strategies were continuously refined in response to the evolving crisis. This real-world application of sensemaking theory provides valuable insights into how organizations navigate complex and uncertain environments, contributing to our understanding of crisis management and organizational adaptation.

Research design and sample

A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to investigate managers' lived experiences and provide a detailed understanding (Nieswiadomy, 2012)

Table 1 provides statistics on accommodation in Pak Chong district.

Table 1 Internal tourism in Pak Chong District, Nakhon Ratchasima

	Year				
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of Accommodations	277	265	327	334	317
Number Rooms	8,699	8,718	9,920	10,330	11,059
Occupancy Rate (%)	70.17	70.16	39.98	26.84	50.47
Guest Arrivals at Accommodation	2,499,311	2,500,869	1,459,643	1,028,696	1,999,096
Length of stay (Day)	1.84	1.83	1.92	1.86	1.71
Person/Room (P/R)	2.07	2.05	1.93	1.9	1.69

Source: Ministry of Tourism and Sports

The accommodation sector in Pak Chong, Nakhon Ratchasima, experienced distinct phases from 2018 to 2022. Pre-pandemic (2018-2019), internal tourism was stable, with high occupancy rates and consistent guest arrivals. The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021) caused a sharp decline in all key metrics, including occupancy rates, guest arrivals, and person-per-room ratio. By 2022, signs of recovery emerged with increased occupancy rates and guest arrivals. However, the average length of stay and person-per-room ratio remained below pre-pandemic levels, suggesting a cautious return of tourists. This pattern reflects the significant impact of the pandemic on the local tourism industry and indicates an ongoing, gradual recovery process.

From February 8 to 22, 2023, the researcher purposively sampled and contacted 39 hotels, ranging from 5-star to 3-star establishments, within an average 14.7 km distance from Khao Yai National Park's northern entrance. Twelve hotels agreed to interviews, aligning with Ellis' (2010) recommendation of 10 participants for phenomenological studies.

The 12 participating hotels represented 14% of 265 (**Table 1**) accommodations in the district based on 2019 data, accounting for 1,054 rooms (approximately 12% of available rooms). The interviewees were a diverse group: 4 General Managers, 6 Front Office Managers, and 2 Sales/Marketing Managers. Three interviews required a Thai interpreter, with one manager opting against the recording.

Data collection involved introduction letters, demographic questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to gather detailed narratives about pandemic experiences. Face-to-face interviews in English allowed for individual expression while guiding the conversation.

Transcripts of all interviews were analyzed using NVivo, with Thai interviews translated into English. The data was coded and organized to identify common themes and patterns in managers' sensemaking experiences.

Hotels offered natural environments, peaceful retreats, and amenities like golf, pools, and outdoor activities. Accommodation ranged from high-end suites to budget-friendly rooms with contemporary or European designs. The portfolio included ten corporate and two independent boutique hotels, with various SHA safety certifications from base to SHA Extra Plus and SHA Plus+.

Findings and discussion

Table 2 shows the sensemaking processes, associated themes, and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis are categorized under each research question.

Table 2 Research Questions, Sensemaking Process, Themes, and Sub-themes

Research Questions	Sensemaking Process	Sensemaking themes
Research Question 1. How did hotel managers gather information about the COVID-19 pandemic and form a shared understanding?	Sensing the environment	Gather information
		Shared understanding
Research Question 2. How did hotel managers interpret the COVID-19 pandemic and help employees make sense of it?	Create a map of the situation	Managers reframing
		Managers sense giving
Research Question 3. What management choices did hotel managers make based on their understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic that led to organizational changes?	Act to change the system to learn from it	Health and safety decisions
		Operational decisions
		Organizational Change and Learning
		Leadership learning
		Thai cultural context

Sensing the environment

a. Gather information: During the pandemic, "Sensing the environment" - an organization's ability to perceive and respond to external changes (Ancona, 2012) - was critical. Hotel managers in Thailand relied heavily on government sources for credible information and guidelines to adjust operations safely (Sorthong et al., 2024), as exemplified by the Emerald Valley Lodge manager: *"I received most information from the government, including guidelines on how to act during the outbreak."* This reliance on institutions like Thailand's CCSA allowed managers to adjust operations, ensure compliance, and prioritize health (Hoang et al., 2021). Social media provided supplementary insights but was viewed skeptically, with the Oasis Valley Lodge manager stating: *"Our company obtained information based on social media. Some of them are not believable...*

We are still following the authority [sic] announcement, the government announcement."

Managers recognized health risks requiring strict safety protocols, as the Emerald Valley Lodge manager noted: *"The COVID outbreak was severe at the time, and there was no vaccine. There is also no medication—nothing."* This prompted actively disseminating safety measures (Kim et al., 2021; Bonfanti et al., 2021). They also faced financial challenges from plummeting bookings, as the Oasis Valley Lodge manager expressed: *"So actually, it is quite scary because of the entire booking of customers, especially those from overseas and even some domestic customers, it shut down"* aligning with prior research by Holtom et al. (2020).

b. Shared understanding: To align their response, managers facilitated top-down communication through meetings and messaging apps, with the Sunset View Lodge manager stating: *"We coordinate and discuss with our employees how we do [business] to survive."* The Golden Hill Hotel manager explained: *"I called all the employees and heads of departments. Then I explained the situation of the hotel to them"* - a feature common in crises (Lanz et al., 2020). The Forest Edge Lodge manager highlighted technology use: *"LINE, HR internal calls, and online meetings,"* showcasing adaptability (Dulger et al., 2023; Kwok et al., 2022).

Create a map of the situation

Two sub-themes emerged under the Create a Map of the Situation: managers' reframing and managers' sense-giving. Managers had to reframe their operations in terms of the health and safety of their employees and manage business continuity. Managers employed Sense-giving strategies by addressing employee fears, fostering hope and confidence, and empowering employees through educational initiatives and tangible actions.

a. Managers reframing

i. Health and safety. During the COVID-19 pandemic, hotel managers had to map out the situation by prioritizing the health and safety of their employees as a paramount concern. Their employees were in their direct sphere of influence. This was expressed by the Breezy Hillside Lodge manager, saying, *"Moreover, we think that employee safety holds paramount importance for our establishment."*

Managers focused on complying with government COVID-19 containment regulations such as mask-wearing, social distancing, and avoiding crowded spaces. One manager explained, *"OK, I understand that is about wearing a mask...Mask, social distancing, yes for [the idea]... is ... we do not go for any place with many people, yes, something like that. And we ... we also understand that we will stay in the house."* This clear understanding of safety protocols informed how they would proceed in their decision-making process.

Research (Hu et al., 2021) highlights that employees closely observe how seriously management prioritizes safety during epidemics. To foster voluntary adherence, managers must demonstrate a strong commitment to employee well-being through proper protective equipment, safety training, incentives, and leading by example in following protocols. When employees perceive genuine leadership

commitment to safety, they are more likely to comply willingly, creating a secure work environment that benefits employee health and minimizes economic/social impacts.

ii. Business continuity: The pandemic's financial strain led hotel managers to prioritize business continuity. They made difficult decisions about closures. Emerald Valley Lodge's manager empathized with the general state of the industry, stating, *"I believe a lot of hotels in Bangkok closed."* The Serenity Inn, while reassuring stakeholders, implements rules to instill customer confidence and showcases their adaptability and empathy.

Skyline Inn's manager's statement, "*My boss stopped me because of the COVID pandemic. He talked about how I can keep the business going..."* reflects the focus on maintaining operations despite difficulties. Margherita and Heikkilä (2021) noted that the pandemic required new approaches to handle disruptions, necessitating leaders' ability to pivot effectively.

Many managers turned to established protocols for guidance. *"We got the crisis management manual and are following the process in the manual"* (Forest Edge Lodge manager) and *"We have steps to take; we had SOP to live with it. Don't give up"* (Oasis Valley Lodge manager) show how regulations provided order amid chaos. This aligns with Fukuchi et al.'s (2022) findings that Japanese hotel managers also used structured frameworks to adapt and ensure safety.

b. Managers sense-giving:

In response to the pandemic's challenges, hotel managers employed a tripartite approach to sense-making focused on alleviating employee fears and anxieties, establishing coherence in a chaotic environment, and ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of operations. This approach included fostering hope and confidence, empowering through proactive measures, and creating a sense of structure and organization.

i. Hope and confidence: Breezy Hillside Lodge and Golden Hill Hotel proactively reassured their workforce of better times. The manager at Breezy Hillside Lodge assured staff that the situation would improve and the industry would rebound. Similarly, the manager at Golden Hill Hotel echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that the situation would improve positively. This strategy aimed to instill hope and boost confidence among employees.

Researcher Karin Högberg (2021) highlighted the importance of hope in her work, describing sense-giving as influencing how others interpret a situation, while sensemaking involves constructing meaning during uncertainty. She noted that the COVID-19 crisis required leaders and followers to cope with changing restrictions, financial losses, and blurred private and professional life boundaries. In this context, hope helped maintain a positive outlook and future direction despite the accompanying despair, fear, and frustration.

ii. Empowerment through action: Research by Permatasari and Mahyuni (2022) showed that hotel managers responded to the pandemic by creating and implementing crisis management protocols. These protocols included managing suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases among guests and staff, enforcing enhanced cleaning practices,

and adhering to local health directives.

Additionally, managers relied on Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to ensure consistent operations. These SOPs covered areas such as guest check-in/check-out, housekeeping, food and beverage services, and health and safety training for staff.

iii. Creating a sense of order: Fukuchi et al. (2022) examined crisis management strategies used by Japanese hoteliers during the pandemic. These strategies involved establishing a structured framework to ensure guest and staff safety. In response to government mandates, many hoteliers temporarily closed or reduced operations, utilizing employment adjustment subsidies to manage economic challenges. They also implemented infection prevention measures, including disinfection protocols, temperature screenings, physical distancing, and employee vaccinations.

Act to change the system to learn from it

Ancona (2012) emphasizes "Acting to change the system to learn from it" as a strategic approach for organizations to foster adaptability and continuous improvement. This principle involves responding to challenges and opportunities and actively engaging in initiatives that modify or enhance the organizational system. The goal is to create a learning-oriented culture where change is reactive, proactive, and deliberate.

Health and safety: The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges for hotel managers as they worked to protect the health and safety of guests and employees. With frequently changing government regulations, managers had to adapt their procedures and protocols to remain compliant (Hu et al., 2021). This complex balancing act, keeping hotels safe and legally operational, was exhaustively documented across the hospitality literature (Kenny & Dutt, 2022). Through careful monitoring of new mandates and quick implementation of updated safety measures, hoteliers sought to provide secure and sanitary lodging amidst the turbulence of the public health crisis.

Social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE) provision, and heightened hygiene protocols became cornerstones of these strategies, along with pursuing certifications from the Thai Safety and Health Administration (SHA) to signify a commitment to rigorous sanitation and safety standards. Additionally, implementing testing and quarantine measures for employees and guests showcased a proactive approach to mitigating health risks and ensuring a secure environment.

In alignment with the literature emphasizing safety and health management (Hamouche, 2021), the Serenity Inn implemented meticulous health and safety protocols compliant with SHA standards, underscoring their dedication to safeguarding guests and staff. This commitment extended beyond protocols to include proactive vaccination initiatives that reflected ongoing efforts to prioritize employee safety and guest satisfaction. As the Serenity Inn manager disclosed, "100% of the staff got two doses of the vaccine, and about 90% got three doses."

The COVID-19 pandemic created an imperative for hotels to implement new

technologies and strict health protocols to protect guests and employees. Managers invested heavily in training and development to equip staff with the knowledge and skills to operate safely in this new environment. As the manager from Breezy Hillside Lodge explained, "We were trained specifically for housekeeping because we are concerned with the guests," underscoring the lodge's ongoing commitment to guest well-being and satisfaction.

A study by Robina-Ramírez et al. (2021) identified key safety measures in the Spanish hotel industry during the COVID-19 transition period: aligning decisions with health authorities' guidance, rigorous cleaning and disinfection protocols, surveillance standards, and collaboration with health authorities and local hospitals - reflecting a holistic approach to address the pandemic's multifaceted challenges.

Operational decisions: Hotel managers' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic provide valuable insights into adaptive strategies within the hospitality industry. They demonstrated remarkable adaptability by swiftly adjusting operations through temporary closures, capacity reductions, and implementing screening measures. These actions underscored the industry's ability to adapt to unforeseen challenges, highlighting adaptability's importance.

Despite disruptions, hotel managers innovated to maintain and enhance guest experiences. Screening measures, cleanliness protocols, and flexible booking policies addressed changing guest expectations, underscoring creativity and innovation's importance in ensuring customer satisfaction during challenging times. The choice to temporarily close hotels for renovations revealed a commitment to quality standards and long-term sustainability.

Strategic reductions in room capacity and services prioritized physical distancing, implemented contactless services, and encouraged remote work for employees, aligning with public health requirements and customer preferences.

Financial decisions during the pandemic included reducing staff salaries, streamlining services, renegotiating with suppliers, and forgoing potential income. Singh (2021) highlighted factors influencing the distressed state of hotels, emphasizing reduced occupancy rates and revenue per available room.

The Oasis Valley Lodge manager's decision-making process was notable for negotiating with suppliers to cut costs, reflecting industry-wide cooperation and the importance of shared insights and best practices.

Regarding human resources, hotel managers employed layoffs, reduced work hours, and changed job responsibilities to mitigate costs while adapting to diminished demand. Pay reductions ranged from 20% to 100% in six hotels, aligning with insights from Abdou et al. (2022), Hamouche (2021), and Kaushal and Srivastava (2021), emphasizing strategic adaptability.

Hotel managers prioritized nurturing their establishments' reputations during the pandemic by adjusting marketing budgets, creating innovative promotions, and targeting new customer segments. They developed novel value propositions, transparently communicated health protocols, fostered virtual communities, and promoted local engagement, similar to changes highlighted by Jiang and Wen

(2020). Garrido-Moreno et al. (2021) noted flexible cancellation terms, non-refundable rates, and adaptable check-in and checkout times to enhance guest experiences.

Organizational change and learning: Managers adopted technology to minimize direct staff-guest interactions. The Forest Edge Lodge manager noted the need for new technologies like QR codes and bank transfers to enable social distancing. Breezy Hillside Lodge implemented online check-in to avoid face-to-face service. Sharma et al. (2021) highlighted pandemic-driven product-process innovations like touchless check-in and innovative room amenities.

Recognizing technology integration and health protocols, hotels prioritized employee training and development to instill knowledge and equip staff with post-pandemic skills. The Breezy Hillside Lodge manager emphasized specialized training for housekeeping improvements to ensure guest safety and comfort. Salem et al. (2022) underscored training's role in bolstering employee satisfaction and retention during the crisis.

Managers demonstrated adaptability by adjusting operating hours and introducing new amenities while adopting versatile strategies to weather the pandemic. The Skyline Inn manager noted the importance of cooperation among employees. Heymann (2020) highlighted labor management adaptability as key to facing COVID-19 challenges.

Managers addressed staff health, safety, and job concerns by providing training, support, and reassurance. Benevolent owners of Emerald Valley Lodge, Mystic Haven Inn, and Oasis Valley Lodge kept hotels operating or offered financial assistance, appreciated by the managers. At Oasis Valley Lodge, owners provided a 2021 bonus, surprising grateful employees. A manager stated: *"I believe we were just one hotel, and it happened quite rarely in Thailand that at the end of 2021, we got a bonus from the owner."* Lodging Staff (2020) highlighted similar benevolence through a foundation aiding employees with bills and needs.

Managers also grappled with educating their teams and combatting community misinformation. The Mystic Haven Inn manager noted the challenge of educating staff and dealing with local fears, highlighting the substantial knowledge gap between city dwellers and local people. Roozenbeek et al. (2020) underscored the complexity of combating vague, false pandemic information, especially its links to vaccine hesitancy. Knowledge sharing and communication were effective in educating.

Acting to change the system implies implementing intentional interventions, innovations, or adjustments within the organizational structure, processes, or strategies. This proactive stance allows organizations to address immediate issues and foster ongoing learning and adaptation, better aligning with goals, responding to environmental shifts, and enhancing overall effectiveness.

Leadership learning

Working closely with employees was pivotal for successful leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic, as demonstrated by research with hotel managers in the Pak Chong district. The findings highlight the importance of fostering strong collaboration between hotel managers and their employees,

recognizing trust, morale, and adaptability as critical elements in navigating the crisis.

The study underscores that effective leadership is rooted in developing close working relationships with employees. This approach goes beyond task delegation and supervision, focusing on cultivating genuine connections. The manager at Wildflower Retreat emphasized the value of spending more time with workers, stating, *"I think it's good for the company now. It makes employees ask: 'I go to help you?' Okay, come."* The goal is to create an environment of mutual understanding and support.

Similarly, the manager of Skyline Inn highlighted a shift from traditional hierarchical roles to a more inclusive perspective, acknowledging the collective effort of all individuals in contributing to organizational success. The manager stated, *"Oh yes. Me I am manager. We all to make to...do more job. No, not only manager."*

These findings align with existing literature on leadership styles and crisis management. Ozturk et al. (2021) demonstrated that servant leadership positively impacts work engagement, surpassing its effect on job satisfaction. Work engagement is pivotal in connecting servant leadership to various behavioral outcomes, suggesting that leadership styles emphasizing employee well-being and active support can foster higher work engagement and influence positive behaviors beyond job satisfaction.

Furthermore, Guzzo et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of crisis communication in aligning the manager-employee relationship. Adhering to health guidelines and demonstrating concern for employee well-being fostered trust among the workforce, enhancing organizational outcomes. Conversely, neglecting health-related norms in favor of strict business priorities can erode trust, negatively impacting the manager-employee relationship and overall organizational performance.

The implications from both managerial perspectives and existing literature underscore the centrality of interpersonal dynamics in crises. Fostering strong collaboration, nurturing relationships, and embracing inclusive leadership styles contribute to crisis mitigation and set the stage for a more adaptive and resilient managerial ethos during periods of uncertainty. This study provides valuable insights for hotel managers and leaders across industries, emphasizing the need for proactive engagement with employees, consideration of leadership styles, and effective crisis communication strategies to navigate challenges successfully.

Thai cultural context

The cultural dimensions explored in this research align with broader cultural literature, particularly Hofstede's dimensions and insights from other studies (The Unusual Trip, n.d.; Chaisilwattana & Punnakitikashem, 2017; Ahlqvist & Andersson, 2017). The nuanced nature of Thai culture, revealed through moderate scores on Long-Term Orientation and Indulgence surveys, underscores hotel managers' adaptability during the pandemic.

Ingrained in Thai culture, respect for authority is a recurring theme in the findings and broader literature. This

hierarchical structure empowers hotel managers to take decisive actions during crises. The manager of Golden Hill Hotel emphasized their leadership role: "*I, the leader of the employees, had to reassure them that things would get better soon. I always encouraged them so they could feel reassured that, well, at least we still have each other*." This aligns with the high Power Distance index noted by The Unusual Trip (n.d.) and supported by Chaisilwattana and Punnakitikashem (2017).

The Mystic Haven Inn manager's response shows that the emphasis on community and cooperation reflects Thailand's collectivistic nature. *"The COVID pandemic has made our Thai people love each other more. The rich people help the poor people. Yes. This is the main thing. I love this so much. The rich people, they're trying to help, they try…They… they're trying… How… As much as they could help. And make us know [that] Thai people are… Very, very fantastic. We never leave… we never leave each other. We always help. We always care. We share what we have. Yeah."* This communal spirit is substantiated by literature that notes Thailand's low score on individualism and emphasizes group loyalty and interdependence values. The manager's description of collective support resonates with cultural literature, highlighting a collective effort to support one another.

The focus on interpersonal relationships, a critical cultural aspect highlighted in crisis management strategies, is consistent with broader cultural literature emphasizing the importance of building and maintaining strong connections in Thai society. The hospitality industry's dedication to relationship management during crises aligns with the cultural emphasis on nurturing relationships with guests, employees, and stakeholders.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the hospitality industry, demanding swift adaptation and strategic decision-making from hotel managers. This research delved into the intricate sensemaking processes during this crisis.

The study highlighted the critical role of communication in crisis management. Managers employed a multi-pronged approach, including clear top-down communication, leveraging technology for real-time updates, and prioritizing health safety messaging. This fostered trust, safeguarded employee well-being, and facilitated informed decision-making, aligning with established crisis management principles. Furthermore, hotel managers exhibited multifaceted sensemaking efforts throughout the pandemic, prioritizing safety and business continuity, adapting to regulations, and displaying resilience, underscoring the situation's complexity.

Their decisions encompassed various domains – health and safety, operations, finance, human resources, and marketing – reflecting a commitment to operational continuity, employee welfare, guest safety, and financial viability. The pandemic necessitated rapid organizational changes in the hospitality industry. Technology integration, such as touchless check-in systems, effectively minimized transmission risks. Investments in employee training on new technologies and safety protocols ensured operational efficiency and guest

satisfaction. Additionally, fostering flexibility and adaptability emerged as critical traits for navigating evolving customer needs and industry regulations.

Leadership strategies emphasize maintaining positivity, employee well-being, and community engagement. Managers fostered collaborative relationships, practiced inclusive leadership, and maintained transparent communication. These findings highlighted the importance of building trust and fostering a sense of shared purpose within the organization. For hospitality businesses operating in culturally diverse contexts, like Thailand, fostering a shared vision and integrating employee participation in decision-making requires sensitivity to local norms and values. Promoting teamwork and providing culturally appropriate support resources enhanced employee engagement and guest service quality.

The research offered valuable insights that could be directly applied to improving business practices in the hospitality industry, especially during crises. Businesses built trust and facilitated informed decision-making by prioritizing clear and consistent communication. Technological integration for real-time communication and guest engagement enhanced operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. Emphasizing health safety protocols fostered a positive work environment, ensuring the well-being of both employees and guests. Furthermore, fostering resilient leadership that emphasized positivity, inclusivity, and transparency strengthened employee morale and organizational resilience. Finally, understanding and integrating cultural norms into organizational practices in diverse contexts fostered trust and improved service quality.

By incorporating these insights, hotel managers and hospitality organizations enhanced their resilience, adaptability, and competitiveness, ensuring preparedness for future challenges and long-term success.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The research opens avenues for future exploration in crisis management and leadership, suggesting potential areas that could enrich our understanding of how organizations navigate unprecedented challenges. Specifically, a comparative study of sensemaking processes across different regions and cultures could provide valuable insights into effective crisis management strategies and leadership approaches that are contextually sensitive. Extending similar investigations to other areas, such as Southern Thailand, might reveal distinct experiences and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and extend the applicability of the research findings.

Furthermore, the research's focus on immediate and short-term challenges leaves room for longitudinal studies to delve into the lasting impact of COVID-19 on the hotel industry and its recovery strategies. A longitudinal study could track the evolution of the hotel industry over time, scrutinizing the factors influencing its recovery and resilience. This could shed light on the long-term outcomes of the decisions made by hotel managers, providing essential lessons for the industry's future preparedness and

response to crises.

The research findings also highlighted the pivotal role of effective leadership and communication in the sensemaking process, facilitating the navigation through the uncertainties and complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, empirical evidence or evaluations of the outcomes of different leadership styles and communication strategies are lacking in the current study. Therefore, an empirical investigation could be a valuable area of research, focusing on testing the impact of various leadership styles and communication strategies on organizational performance, employee well-being, customer satisfaction, and crisis resolution. Such empirical studies could provide tangible insights into the effectiveness of different approaches, offering practical guidance for hotel managers seeking to enhance their crisis management capabilities.

References

Abdou, A. H., Khalil, A. A., Mahmoud, H. M., Elsaied, M. A., & Elsaed, A. A. (2022). The impact of hospitality work environment on employees' turnover intentions during COVID-19 pandemic: The mediating role of work-family conflict. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 1–18. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360731171_The_Impact_of_Hospitality_Work_Environment_on_Employees%27_Turnover_Intentions_During_COVID19_Pandemic_The_Mediating_Role_of_Work-Family_Conflict

Ahlqvist, M., & Andersson, A. S. (2017). *How values lead to barriers - a matter of life and death in a developing country*. [eMBA thesis]. Gothenburg University. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335210491_How_values_lead_to_barriers_-_A_matter_of_life_and_death_in_a_developing_country

Ancona, D. (2012). Sensemaking: framing and acting in the unknown. In S. Snook, N. Nohria, & R. Khurana (Eds.), *The handbook for teaching leadership: Knowing, doing, and being* (1st ed., pp. 3–19). Sage Publications. https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/42924_1.pdf

Bank of Thailand (2023). EC_EI_028_S2 Tourism Indicators https://app.bot.or.th/BTWS_STAT/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?reportID=875&language=eng

Bichler, B. F., Tanja Petry, T., & Mike Peters, M. (2022). 'We did everything we could': how employees' made sense of COVID-19 in the tourism and hospitality industry. *Current Issues in Tourism 25*(23), 3766–3782. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13683500.2021.1985974

Blomquist, C., & Hägglund, A. Forced digitalization as a result of COVID-19: a qualitative study on the forced digitalization and its effects on bank employees, Department of Business Administration, Degree Project, Spring 2021, Umeå Universitet. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1574276/FULLTEXT01.pdf (accessed on September 19, 2022).

Bonfanti, A., Vigolo, V., & Yfantidou, G. (2021). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on customer experience design: The hotel managers' perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 94*, 102871. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102871

Bundy, J., Pfarrer, M. D., Short, C., & Coombs, T. (2017). Crises and crisis management: integration, interpretation, and research development. *Journal of Management*, *43*(6), 1661–1692. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206316680030

Chaisilwattana, R., & Punnakitikashem, P. (2017). Thai culture and its effects on organizational engagement in Thai privately held companies. *UTCC International Journal of Business and Economics, 9*(2), 117–136. http://www.ijbejournal.com/images/files/16465202695c5d4cf46d060.pdf

Coccia, M. (2020). Critical Decisions in Crisis Management: Rational Strategies of Decision Making. *Journal of Economics Library, 7*(2), 81-96. https://doi.org/10.1453/jel.v7i2.2049.

Coombs, W. T. (2007). *Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory*. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049

Cordes, R. J. (2020, August 27). *Making sense of sensemaking: What it is and what it means for pandemic research*. Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/geotech-cues/making-sense-ofsensemaking-what-it-is-and-what-it-means-for-pandemic-research/

Deloitte and Salesforce (2020). *The world remade by COVID-19 for travel and hospitality.* https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/covid-19-travel-and-hospitality-implications.html..html

Dulger, A. S., Collins, A. B., & Songur, A. G. (2023). Communication during COVID-19 crisis: A case of hotels in Turkey. *Journal of Global Hospitality and Tourism, 2*(1), 32–52. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=jght

Ellis, P. D. (2010). The essential guide to effect sizes. https://rauterberg.employee.id.tue.nl/lecturenotes/DBB150/references/Ellis2010%20Essential%20Guide%20to%20Effect%20Sizes.pdf

Fukuchi, H., Uehara, W., Kamata, H., & He, G. (2022). COVID-19 policies and hoteliers' responses in Japan. *Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights*, *3*(2), 100067. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2022.100067.

Garrido-Moreno, A., García-Morales, V. J., & Martín-Rojas, R. (2021). Going beyond the curve: Strategic measures to recover hotel activity in times of COVID-19, *International Journal of Hospitality Management 96,* 102928.

Gundel, G. (2005). Towards a new typology of crises. *Journal Of Contingencies and Crisis Management 13*(3), 106–115. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2005.00465.x

Guzzo, R. F., Wang, X., Madera, J. M., & Abbott, J. (2021). Organizational trust in times of COVID-19: Hospitality employees' affective responses to managers' communication. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 93*, 102778. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102778

Hoang, T. G., Truong, N. T., & Nguyen, T. M. (2021). The survival of hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic: A critical case study in Vietnam. *Service Business, 15*(2), 209–229. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11628-021-00441-0

Högberg, K. (2022). Adapt or Die: Leadership Resilience during Crisis. *International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning*; *15*, (2), 4–15. https://www.proquest.com/openview/1a3938fec25338267c87c6006ac5b039/1?pqorigsite=gscholar&cbl=4425142

Holtom, B., Edmondson, A. C., & Niu, D. (2020, July 9). *5 tips for communicating with employees during a crisis*. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2020/07/5-tips-for-communicating-with-employees-during-acrisis

Hu, X., Yan, H., Casey, T., Wu, C. H. (2021). Creating a safe haven during the crisis: How organizations can achieve deep compliance with COVID-19 safety measures in the hospitality industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management 92*:102662. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102662

Japutra, A. & Situmorang, R. (2021). The repercussions and challenges of COVID-19 in the hotel industry: Potential strategies from a case study of Indonesia. *International Journal of Hospitality Management 95*(102890). https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0278431921000335

Jiang, Y., & Wen, J. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on hotel marketing and management: A perspective article. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 32*(8), 2563–2573. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM03-2020-0237

Kaushal, V., & Srivastava, S. (2021). Hospitality and tourism industry amid COVID19 pandemic: Perspectives on challenges and learnings from India. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 92*, 102707. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102707

Kenny, J., & Dutt, C. S. (2022). The long-term impacts of hotel's strategic responses to COVID-19: The case of Dubai. *Tourism and Hospitality Research, 22*(1), 71–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/14673584211034525

Kim, J. J., & Han, H. (2022, January 7). Saving the hotel industry: Strategic response to the COVID-19 pandemic, hotel selection analysis, and customer retention. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 102,* 103163. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2022.103163

Kim, S., Kim, P. B., & Lee, G. (2021). Predicting hospitality employees' safety performance behaviors in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 93*, 102797. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2020.102797

Lodging Staff. (2020, May 6). *From alternative work to relief funds: Three ways hotel businesses are supporting employees during COVID-19*. Lodging Magazine. https://lodgingmagazine.com/from-alternative-work-to-relief-funds-threeways-hotel-businesses-are-supporting-employees-during-covid-19/

Lau, A. (2020)1. New technologies used in COVID-19 for business survival: Insights from the hotel sector in China. *Information Technology & Tourism, 22*, 497–504. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/ s40558-020-00193-z

Mackey, R. H. (1992, April 15). *Translating vision into reality: the role of a strategic leader*. (Individual Study Project). U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013. https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a251129.pdf)

Nieswiadomy, R. M. (2012). *Foundations of nursing research (*6th ed. Pearson

Ozturk, A., Karatepe, O. M., & Okumus, F. (2021). The effect of servant leadership on hotel employees' behavioral consequences: Work engagement versus job satisfaction. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 97*, 102994. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102994

Pearson, C. M., & Clair, J. A. A. (1998). Reframing crisis management. *The Academy of Management Review; 23*(1), 59–76. https://www.proquest.com/docview/ 210945272?accountid=39909&accountid%E2% 80%B0=%E2%80%B01519

Permatasari, M. G., & Mahyuni, L. P. (2022). Crisis management practices during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of a newly-opened hotel in Bali. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359521108_Crisis_ management_practices _during_the_COVID-19_pandemic_The_case_of_a_newly-opened_hotel_in_Bali

Petridou, E., & Zahariadis, N. (2021). Staying at home or going out? Leadership response to the COVID-19 crisis in Greece and Sweden. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, 29*(3), 293–302. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12344

Piga, C. A., Abrate, G., Viglia, G., & De Canio, F. (2022). How the hospitality industry reacts to COVID-19: Structural, managerial and tactical factors. *Journal of Revenue and Pricing Management, 21*(5), 503–516. https://doi.org/10.1057/ s41272-021-00359-2

Robina-Ramírez, R., Medina-Merodio, J. A., Moreno-Luna, L., Jiménez-Naranjo, H. V., & Sánchez-Oro, M. (2021). Safety and health measures for COVID-19 transition period in the hotel industry in Spain. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(2), 718. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18020718

Rosenbäck, R. and Svensson, A. (2024). Management learning in public healthcare during pandemics. *The Learning Organization, 31*(3), 394-410.

Sandberg, J., & Tsoukas, H. (2020). Sensemaking reconsidered: Towards a broader understanding through phenomenology. *Organization Theory, 1*(1), 1–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787719879937

Salem, I. E., Aideed, H., Alkathiri, N. A., & Ghazi, K. M. (2022). Retaining talented employees during COVID-19 pandemic: The leverage of hotel pandemic response strategies. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 14673584221141294. https://doi.org/10.1177/14673584221141294

Shangguan, Z., Wang, Y., & Sun, W. (2020). "What caused the outbreak of COVID-19 in China: from the perspective of crisis management." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *17*(9), 1–16. https://doi.10.3390/ijerph17093279

Sharma, A., Shin, H., Santa-María, M. J., & Nicolau, J. L. (2021). Hotels' COVID-19 innovation and performance. *Annals of Tourism Research, 88*, 103180. https://doi.10.1016/j.annals.2021.103180

Singh, A. J., & Wang, B. (2021). *Impact of COVID-19 on the hospitality industry and implication for operations and asset management*. Boston Hospitality Review. http://web.archive.org/web/20210609203048/https://www.bu.edu/bhr/files/2021/05/Singh_Impact-of-COVID_BHR-PDF-TEMPLATE-July-2021.docx.pdf https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103180

Sorthong, K., Katekao, V., Chirinang, P., & ManKan, W. (2024). Thai Tourism Strategy 2023 - 2027 and Ecotourism. *Journal of MCU Nakhondhat, 11*(2), 12–20.

Statista Research Department, (2023, November 7). Total value of the tourism's contribution to the Gross Domestic Product in Thailand from 2017 to 2021. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1143427/thailand-value-of-tourism-gdp/#:~:text=Economic%20impact%20of%20tourism&text=Unsurprisingly%2C%20the%20tourism%20industry%20is,pandemic%20and%20strict%20travel%20restrictions.

The Culture Factor Group (n.d.). *Country comparison tool: Thailand*. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison-tool?countries=thailand

The Unusual Trip (n.d.). *Characteristics of Thai culture*. https://theunusualtrip.com/characteristics-of-thai-culture/

UN (2020, September 18). *COVID-19 illustrates 'woefully under prepared' world – UN health chief*. https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1072822 UNWTO. (n.d.). *COVID-19 response: Guiding tourism's recovery.* https://www.unwto.org/tourism-covid-19

Varanasi, U. S., Leinonen, T., Sawhney, N., Tikka, M., & Ahsanullah, R. (2023). *Collaborative Sensemaking in Crisis: Designing Practices and Platforms for Resilience.* In DIS '23: Proceedings of the 2023 ACM Designing Interactive Systems Conference (pp. 2537–2550). ACM. https://doi.org/10.1145/3563657.3596093

Weick, K. E. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283173025_Karl_E_WEICK_1979_The_Social_Psychology_of_Organizing_Second_Edition

Weick, K. E. (1988). Enacted sensemaking in crisis situations. *Journal of Management Studies 25*(4) 305–317. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1988.tb00039.x

Weick, K. E. (1995). Sensemaking in organizations. https://archive.org/details/trent_0116403577194

WHO (2020, March 11). WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - March 11, 2020. https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020 https://archive.org/details/trent_0116403577194