



HOTEL INDUSTRY COMPETITIVENESS IN COVID 19 PANDEMIC ENVIRONMENT IN KENYA: HOW TECHNOLOGICALLY READY ARE THE HOTELS?

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Abstract:

Since December 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the hotel industry leading to deep losses among industry players and forcing some to shut down altogether. For those that would survive the crisis, their competitiveness could be at risk unless they demonstrate strategic readiness. The competitiveness found in modern organizations is, however, increasingly determined by the strategic readiness or capability of its assets, notably technology. However, the strategic readiness of the hotel industry needed to be established. Therefore, this paper explores the strategic technology readiness of the star-rated hotels in Kenya for competitiveness in the COVID-19 pandemic environment. The paper is guided by the Chamberlain's theory of strategy. A descriptive cross-sectional survey design targeting 138 star-rated hotels in the country selected through systematic random sampling. Data was collected using questionnaires and interview schedules. Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis with the aid of NVivo software while quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis with the aid of SPSS version 24.0. Specifically, the study used the bivariate regression model to assess the relationship between the variables. The study found that technology readiness significantly influenced the competitiveness of star-rated hotels in the COVID-19 pandemic environment in Kenya. There is need for the hotels to adopt a more proactive approach in setting their technological systems for any

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eventualities as this will be less expensive and enable their users to be more acquainted with the systems in advance.

Keywords: strategic readiness, technology, competitiveness, pandemic environment, star-rated hotels, Covid 19

1. Introduction

The competitiveness of industry and firms has been one of the most important themes of research in the fields of economics and business studies since the latter half of the 20th century. At the firm level where competition is localized and intense owing to what Porter (1985) has described as the five competitive forces, possessing competitive advantages are proving to be important for the survival of the firm. Possessing competitive advantages could be key to success the hotel industry as the competition becomes fiercer owing to a world whose hotel patronage trends have been significantly altered by the pandemic. Developing competitive capabilities could be instrumental in enabling the hotel industry to remain resilient and strategically ready for times of crisis such as the current Covid-19 global pandemic. Rittichainuwat and Rattanaphinanchai (2015) asserted that low-cost destination cannot motivate tourists to visit, especially hazardous destinations. As such, whether it is man-made or natural disasters, it is very important to be well prepared or ready to mitigate the impact of emergencies and minimize losses. Coppola (2015) noted that the hospitality industry is one of the most vulnerable industries for emergencies. The hotel sector's vulnerabilities are multi-faceted and has complex factors that contribute to risk (Hosie & Pforr, 2016). Albattat and Som (2019) further observed that readiness for, response to, recovery from, and mitigation of all emergencies is important to the survival and competitiveness of hotels. Improved levels of ability will mean better levels of readiness to diminish the effects of losses already incurred during the period of crisis such as the pandemic.

Strategic readiness refers to the alignment of an organization's human, information, and organizational capital with its strategy (Kaplan & Norton, 2004; Weber, Geneste & Connell, 2015). As a business concept, strategic readiness emerged in a significant way in the early 1990s with the recognition that an increased focus on innovation sets successful organizations apart from competitors. Among the areas of strategic readiness following James (2018) for firms, is technology readiness. The face of innovation in technology is continually changing. Technological advances focus on the innovation of products, procedures, or services and how these developments can affect the hotel industry (Dzhandzhugazova et al., 2016). For example, online reservations have grown exponentially over the years (Jin-Zhao & Jing, 2009). One of the premier online reservation portals, OpenTable.com, boasted that in 2006 dining seats filled in restaurants through the use of their online reservation system exceeded one million (Ross, 2006). This was a 65% increase from the previous year.

The hotel industry is a significant economic sector in Kenya and one of the most competitive sectors in the country and the African continent at large (Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2019). As such, the country depends heavily on the sector as a source of foreign exchange, job creation and revenue. In 2019, the travel and tourism which leverages on the hotel industry contributed 12.5% of the GDP (Nominal) with majority of the receipts going to the hotel industry. However, since March 2020, Kenya's hotel industry like the rest of the world has been hit by the Covid-19 pandemic whose impact has as well had a negative effect on other economic sectors and is also shutting down some sectors (WTTC, 2020). The hotel industry in Kenya relies on both international travel and tourism has been among the most affected as a result of bookings cancellations, restrictions of movement and especially night travel, prohibition of leisure activities and suspension of meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) owing to the ban on public gatherings (Cytonn, 2020). This has caused huge losses in revenue, capital flight due to low investor confidence, low liquidity of the sector and job losses as well as other un-quantifiable losses. Further, the WTTC estimates that once the outbreak is over, it could take considerable time for the industry to recover (WTTC, 2020). The key question, however, is how strategically ready especially with regards to technology is the industry to deal with the situation and any challenges affecting competitiveness? Chamberlain's theory posits that an entity's strategy is the result of the interaction of a variety of forces in and around the entity, with the strategist's cognitive bias (Chamberlain, 2010). Chamberlain analyzes the strategy construct by treating it as a combination of four factors, these are: what it is, the forces that shape it, the processes that form it, and the mechanisms it relies on to take effect. Therefore, from Chamberlain's theory, the study analyzes the strategic technological readiness of the hotel industry in Kenya in response to the new constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Literature review

2.1 Strategic readiness and competitiveness of hotels

Assessment of strategic readiness has generally related to whether or not an organization has what it needs to face current and future challenges and opportunities that emerge in the strategy development, emergence, and implementation stages (Holzmann & Golan, 2016). Readiness in hotels has been linked with successful recovery from crises in several contexts. For example, in the aftermath of the SARS outbreak in 2003, Lee and McKibbin (2004) found that the hotel industry considerably recovered after the outbreak courtesy of the level of readiness. In contrast, in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami, the hotel industry in Phuket, Thailand successfully reopened 80% of their hotels within a week, only to see occupancy rates drop to 10% (Henderson, 2007). Hung *et al.*, (2018) similarly found that one-week quarantine of more than 300 guests and staff at the Metropark Hotel during the 2009 H1N1 swine flu exposed gaps in the partnership with the hotel industry.

2.2 Technology readiness and competitiveness of hotels

The efforts to improve hotel service and to increase its quality and efficiency is increasingly demanding a variety of technological innovations. At the same time, customers, thanks to their experience and mass use of technology, are becoming increasingly demanding and informed about various hotels products and experiences. The strength of competitive environment wherein operates suppliers of touristic services - and implicitly hotels - is related to a strong axis regarding policy and strategy developed through the process of service supply that requires introduction of the new information technologies (Oltean et al., 2014). Anser, Yousaf, Usman and Yousaf (2020) carried out a study on strategic business performance of the hospitality sector focusing nexus of ICT, e-marketing and organizational readiness. The study revealed that ICTs provide opportunities to execute e-marketing activities for achieving competitiveness. The empirical findings proved that the use of ICTs provides a basis for establishing a successful e-marketing mechanism that helps hotels to achieve SBP. Furthermore, ICT's influence on e-marketing is strengthened by organizational readiness. ICT adoption offers a broad range of opportunities for developing the hospitality sector (Salavati & Hashim, 2015). ICT adoption improves productivity (Yeo & Grant, 2019), increases output level, and boosts multi-factor productivity (Ollo-Lopez & Aramendia-Muneta, 2012; Yeo & Grant, 2019), and thus, results in superior performance and sustainability (Saleem *et al.*, 2020). Recent reviews (Stankov, Filimonau & Slivar, 2019; Law, Leung & Chan, 2019) also show that ICTs play an important role in hospitality industry's productivity and performance.

Evidently, technology plays a major role in enhancing the competitive advantage of an organization. Adaptation of technological innovation to the specifics of hotel services is a source of opportunities and challenges both for hotel managers and employees as well as for customers themselves. Technology enables operational efficiency and also enhances guest experience in the hotels. These two aspects act as enablers to favorably positioning hotels in the market. However, many businesses do not optimally use this potential strength. Instead, technology is only used for operational and functional purposes, yet it can be a source of annulment of its competitive value if the organization does not keep up with the rapid technological advances in their respective industries (Montel, Palacio, & Nuno, 2009). For instance, Gikutha (2017) assessed the determinants of strategic posture of hotels in Kenya using a Resource Based View Perspective. The study used 246 corporate hotels as its target population was the hotel industry in Kenya, specifically corporate hotels. Data was collected using questionnaires and focus group discussions. 191 questionnaires were received representing a 77% response rate. Descriptive statistics was used to provide frequencies, percentages, mean scores and standard deviations for the general information data while inferential statistics, using the binary logistics model, was used to determine the hypothesis generated for the study. The findings revealed that indeed internal resources determine strategic posture of hotels in Kenya, although at various degrees. Technology, as an

internal resource, was found to be a significant predictor of strategic posture notably though at the least significant level. This, therefore, leads to the hypothesis:

H01: Technological systems readiness does not significantly affect the competitiveness of star-rated hotels in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya.

3. Research methodology

The study was grounded on the pragmatist philosophy emphasizes the utilisation of both positivist and interpretivist philosophy and views both of them as continuum rather than contradictions (Smid, 2010; Setia, 2016). The application of both qualitative and quantitative approaches in cross-sectional study design, and also the need to test hypothesis statistically regarding the strategic readiness of the star-rated hotel for competitiveness in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya, made the positivist and interpretivist aspects in the pragmatist philosophy were useful to the study. The study focused on star-rated hotels due to their international and local competitiveness and also their longevity in the hotel sector in the region and specifically in Kenya. There are 211 Star-rated hotels in Kenya according to data from Kenya's Tourism Regulatory Authority (TRA) (2017). The hotels which range from 1-star to 5-star are located in a total of 19 out of the 47 counties of Kenya. Therefore, the study targeted all the 211 Star-rated hotels in Kenya and used the hoteliers managing the hotels as its accessible population. The number of the star-rated hotels, 211, was high enough to warrant the use of probability sampling methods. Therefore, to obtain the required sample size, the study used the Israel (2009) which yielded a sample size of 138 star-rated hotels was arrived at. The study used systematic random sampling to select the star-rated hotels while purposive sampling was used to select the managers (Oso & Onen, 2009). With the systematic random sample, there is an equal chance (probability) of selecting each unit from within the population when creating the sample (Singh & Masuku, 2014). According to Ames, Glenton and Lewin (2019), purposive sampling of primary studies for inclusion in the synthesis is one way of achieving a manageable amount of data. Purposive sampling allows for key informant selection.

Questionnaires and interview schedules were used for data collection and were administered to the top management as data collection instruments in the study. The questionnaires were closed ended for ease of response and thus took the form of Likert statements for the respondent's convenience enhance better extraction of information from respondents. The researcher also used a structured interview schedule as a data collection tool. The interview schedules greatly ensure a comprehensive coverage of the topical questions and provide clarity on any vague areas on the questionnaires bearing in mind the questionnaires closed endedness. Following Veal (2017), the study used both instruments after pilot testing them for correctness and accuracy on 14 non-participating (10% of the sample size), non-star-rated hotels sample from different counties in Kenya. The questionnaire was then given to independent experts for evaluation for face and content validity as well as for conceptual clarity and investigative bias. For the interview

schedules, content analysis was used as a measure of validity. Kamau *et al.*, (2019) explained that validity concerns often arise in content analysis which is a technique of ensuring that the content analysis has a high level of integrity in findings bearing on the content of the completed instrument.

The internal consistency method was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. This was done by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for all the sections of the questionnaire from the results of the pilot study. All the current study variables reached the threshold of 0.7, and the questionnaire qualified for data collection in the final study. Reliability for the interview schedules was also achieved through content analysis. The reliability of the content analysis manifests itself through the coding process and usually ascribes to three forms; stability, reproducibility and accuracy (Lombard et al., 2004). In this study, the accuracy reliability method was used as it closely corresponded to the standard for assumed truth and was the strongest of all the three forms (Krippendorff, 2004).

Data obtained from the questionnaires were first cleaned and edited before being coded and subjected to further analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program. Descriptive statistical analysis was done using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations to describe the basic characteristics of the data. Inferential data analysis was done using the bivariate regression analysis to assess the relationship between variables. For the interview schedules, data was analyzed using content analysis with the aid of NVivo software. According to Kamau *et al.*, (2019), content analysis is ideal for the analysis of textual information. This method is preferred for the analysis of text-based information as it enables the systematic and objective identification of special characteristics encoded in messages and decoding the information contained therein (Berg & Lune, 2001). Relevance index for the constructs and sub-themes were computed in response to the coding which produced the range of responses along the four-point continuum.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon \dots \dots \dots (1)$$

Where,

Y is the dependent variable- Competitiveness of the star-rated hotels in the Covid-19 pandemic environment in Kenya.

B₀ is the intercept

β₁ are the coefficients of the independent variables

X₁ represents Technological systems readiness

4. Results

4.1 Technological systems readiness of the star-rated hotels for competitiveness in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya

The results of the technological systems readiness of star-rated hotels for competitiveness in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Technological systems readiness of the star-rated hotels for competitiveness

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Std. Dev	X ²	P-Value
Our hotel management recognizes that technology is a key differentiator in the industry	6	83	5	5	1	3.88	0.629	30.41	0.000
Our hotel has identified multipurpose technologies that can be integrated into service delivery in the hotel	11	54	6	20	9	3.6	0.576	88.34	0.000
The technologies we have identified are flexible enough for our operations	23	43	14	11	9	3.38	0.774	42.82	0.000
The technologies we have identified can be used securely with other technologies in our possession	17	62	8	11	2	3.81	0.835	59.26	0.000
The technologies we have acquired can be customized for specific functions in our hotel	20	38	33	6	3	3.66	0.946	65.465	0.000
We make full use of information and communications technology for better correspondence	17	57	20	4	2	3.83	0.838	69.568	0.000
The technologies are reliably increasing our production efficiencies	5	43	43	8	1	3.43	0.764	73.671	0.000
The technologies increase our visibility in the market	11	58	13	13	5	3.57	1.009	77.774	0.000
Our hotel is currently applying the versatile technologies in its operations	6	45	27	15	7	3.28	0.834	81.877	0.000
Aggregate Score						3.604	0.8005		

Table 1 shows that the aggregate $M = 3.604$; $SD = 0.8005$ implies that there is little variation on whether there is technological systems readiness in star-rated hotels in Kenya for competitiveness in the Covid 19 pandemic environment, the high mean value indicates that most respondents agree on the availability of competent technological systems in the hotels. Majority (mean = 3.88) that the their hotel's management recognizes that technology is a key differentiator in the industry. Most of the respondents also agreed that their hotel had identified multipurpose technologies that can be integrated into service delivery in the hotel (mean = 3.6). Further, with a mean of 3.38, most respondents

agreed that the technologies their hotels have identified are flexible enough for their operations. The technologies identified can be used securely with other technologies in their possession (mean = 3.81) and can be customized for specific functions in most of the hotels (mean = 3.61). The findings further show that most of the hotels were making full use of information and communications technology for better correspondence (mean = 3.83) and that the technologies were reliably increasing the production efficiencies in most hotels (mean = 3.43). The technologies increase the hotels visibility in the market (mean = 3.57). Also, most hotels are currently applying the versatile technologies in their operations (mean = 3.28).

4.2 Regression analysis of technological systems readiness on competitiveness of hotels

Bivariate regression analysis was carried out to evaluate the relationships between the dependent and independent variable. The results were then used to test the corresponding hypothesis stated for the study. The decision rule was to accept the hypotheses if the corresponding p-values was greater than $p > 0.05$ and reject otherwise. The findings are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Regression Analysis

Model Summary	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
	0.445a	0.198	0.17	5.91796	
ANOVAa	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	455.554	1	455.554	13.0076	.000b
Residual	3467.2	99	35.0222		
Total	3922.76	100			
Model Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	17.753	3.006		5.90585	0.000
Technology readiness	0.445	0.104	0.51	4.27885	0.000
a Dependent Variable: Competitiveness of the star-rated hotels					

The bivariate regression analysis results show that a strong positive significant relationship existed ($\beta = 0.510$, $p < 0.05$). This is indicative of the strong technological emphasis placed by the hotel firms in their operations out of the growing technology dependence especially during the present pandemic. It shows that technologically ready hotels had a better chance of being more competitive during the pandemic, that is, the competitiveness of the star rated hotels could improve as the the hotels invested in more technologies. This finding agrees with Anser et al., (2020) whose study on strategic business performance of the hospitality sector focusing nexus of ICT, e-marketing and organizational readiness revealed that ICTs provide opportunities to execute e-marketing activities for achieving competitiveness. The empirical findings proved that the use of ICTs provides a basis for establishing a successful e-marketing mechanism that helps hotels to achieve SBP. Furthermore, ICT's influence on e-marketing is strengthened by

organizational readiness. ICT adoption offers a broad range of opportunities for developing the hospitality sector (Salavati & Hashim, 2015). ICT adoption improves productivity (Yeo & Grant, 2019), increases output level, and boosts multi-factor productivity (Ollo-Lopez & Aramendia-Muneta, 2012; Yeo & Grant, 2019), and thus, results in superior performance and sustainability (Saleem *et al.*, 2020). Recent reviews (Stankov, Filimonau & Slivar, 2019; Law, Leung & Chan, 2019) also show that ICTs play an important role in hospitality industry's productivity and performance.

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From the beta values in Table 2, it was evident that there was a significant relationship ($\beta = 0.510, p < 0.05$) between the variables indicating that Technology readiness indeed influenced the competitiveness of star-rated hotels in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya. Therefore, we fail to accept the null hypothesis and adopt the view that the star-rated hotels were readying themselves technologically for competitiveness in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya.

4.3 Qualitative analysis technological systems readiness of the hotels' for Covid 19 pandemic

The first theme to be examined was technological systems readiness of star-rated hotels for competitiveness in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya. The respondents were first asked to explain; How ready was their hotel's technological systems for Covid-19 pandemic in terms of adaptability to various functions and reliability? What effect has investment in technologies had on their operations as a hotel during the Covid-19 pandemic? And what role if any they thought technology will or has played in their hotel in the Covid-19 pandemic period? Table 3 shows the most common responses from the respondents.

Table 3: Technological systems readiness of the star-rated hotels for Covid 19 pandemic

A. How ready are your hotel's technological systems for Covid-19 pandemic in terms of adaptability to various functions and reliability?	No. of Responses
We are fairly well prepared. The systems are ready.	8
The hotel's technology systems are reliable and adaptive to different seasons/circumstances.	2
We are operating under the guideline of Public Health standards	2
We have installed temperature screening machines to detect any anomalies and use of hand sanitizers.	2
We have started installing systems that don't need human interactions.	1
It has been a challenge to adapt to the new normal.	1
The hotel initially had challenges but gradually improved in technological capability and is currently adapting well.	1
B. What effect has investment in technologies had on your operations as a hotel during the Covid-19 pandemic?	
Has led to improvement of service delivery to guests and thus improvement in the bottom line such as through online bookings and mobile payments.	3

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It has enhanced our operations within the hotel.	2
It has helped to bridge the gap brought by Covid-19 pandemic.	2
It has helped us to limit human interactions.	2
It has become a liability to the organization.	2
It has become the new way of approaching our customers.	1
Increased awareness on dangers and ways to curb or reduce the effects.	1
Ability to detect customers who have contracted the virus.	1
Technology we had invested in is proving to be a white elephant.	1
C. What role if any do you think technology will/has played in your hotel in the Covid-19 pandemic period?	
It has helped the hotel to adapt to the changes in the work environment brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.	3
There is positive response in terms of guest preference in booking with us.	3
Enhancing prevention as signs are detected as early as possible to prevent a catastrophic occurrence.	2
Technology has added value to our organization.	2
We are getting better business through Google and Twitter rather than paid technology.	2
Technology has enabled our guests to have faith with us in terms of their safety during this pandemic.	2
Technology has helped maintain our visibility and communication with our clients.	1
Technology has enabled us to tap into markets that were not readily available to such as foreign customers.	1
It has played an important role in preventing further spread of the virus	1
Technology has helped to sustain flow of customers which is at an all-time low during the pandemic.	1

Table 3 shows that most respondents were of their view that their hotels were well prepared technologically to handle the developments brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Technology readiness in the hotels had led has enabled the hotels to adapt to the changes in the work environment brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Further the respondents indicated that use of technology had led to improved service delivery such as booking and also adherence to public health guidelines and standards and had translated to increased customer confidence exemplified by statements, such as, *“Technology has enabled our guests to have faith with us in terms of their safety during this pandemic”* It is also evident that some of the hotels had invested in versatile technologies that enabled them to adapt to different environments and circumstances. As such, use of technology had added value to the hotels’ business operations. There had been considerable effort to install technologies to meet this new operating challenge and comply with the new public health guidelines. However, there were challenges associated with the technologies. For instance, some hotels were still trying to adapt to the new operating environment or “new normal” and as such they were still in the process of installing the requisite technologies. According to a respondent, their hotel initially had challenges but gradually improved in technological capability and is currently adapting well. There were also cases of adaptation failures where for instance some respondents asserted that, *“It [technology] has become a liability to the organization”*

and also another respondent indicated that, *“Technology we had invested in is proving to be a white elephant”* Word clouds were subsequently generated to extract deeper meaning from their sentiments on the hotels’ technological systems readiness.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

Based on the foregoing findings, the study concludes that technology readiness significantly influenced the competitiveness of star-rated hotels in the Covid 19 pandemic environment in Kenya. The technologies increased the hotels visibility in the market. From the interviews conducted on technology readiness, it was established that use of technology had led to improved service delivery such as booking and also adherence to public health guidelines and standards and had translated to increased customer confidence. However, there were challenges associated with the technologies. For instance, some hotels were still trying to adapt to the new operating environment or “new normal” and as such they were still in the process of installing the requisite technologies. Public health Guidelines, Customer Service and Technological system capacity were revealed as the sub-themes that guided technology readiness of the hotels suggesting that technological readiness in the hotels was largely informed by the public health guidelines on the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.2 Recommendations

Drawing from the foregoing findings, the study makes the following recommendations: there is need for the hotel industry in the country to strengthen their technology component by partnering with both local and international technology firms in developing technologies that meet their exact requirements. From the look of things, the technology component of hotel business operations will need to be stronger to withstand the vagaries of the operating environment and, hence, a closer collaboration between the hotel and the technology firms will be critical in order for them to be ready. As such, there is need for the hotels to adopt a more proactive approach in setting their technological systems for any eventualities as this will be less expensive and enable their users to be more acquainted with the systems in advance.

Conflict of Interest Statement

I assume full responsibility for this article, hence, together with my co-authors, we declare no conflict of interest in this research and publication.

About the Author

I am currently a PhD finalist in strategic management with a keen research interest in strategy formulation and implementation especially in the Hotel and Travel industry and also the Civil Construction industry where I have vast experience spanning over 20 years. I am also a Certified Human Resource Professional (CHRP[K]) Reg. No. HS932 and a

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