



Volume: 03 Issue: 04 | Apr 2022 ISSN: 2660-454X

<http://cajitmj.centralasianstudies.org/index.php/CAJITMF>

The Effects of the Covid Pandemic on the Hotel Industry in Samarkand, Uzbekistan

¹ Ian Patterson

² Nazokat Khamidova

Received 16th Feb 2022,
Accepted 26th Mar 2022,
Online 25th Apr 2022

¹ PhD Visiting Professor, Silk Road
International University of Tourism,
Samarkand, Uzbekistan
ianpatterson75@outlook.com

² Graduate Student, Silk Road International
University of Tourism, Department of Tourism
and Hospitality Management, Samarkand,
Uzbekistan
aysunadoniyor1993@gmail.com

Abstract: The aim of the research is to examine the state of the hotel industry in Samarkand, Uzbekistan before, during and after the COVID pandemic had diminished. It is important to determine the state of the hotel industry in Samarkand and if they are adopting innovative practices that relate to the principles of sustainability and smart tourism, so as to attract greater numbers of international tourists. This study used a qualitative methodology that involved interviewing a purposive sample of nine hotel managers in Samarkand, Uzbekistan using a number of semi-structured questions. The small sample size was the main limitation for this study as several managers were reluctant to be interviewed. The results found that hoteliers were generally cognizant of the need to take advantage of the current period of openness to organizational change, and to develop action strategies to become more sustainable and resilient to change in the future. Although there were financial problems in regard to implementing recovery strategies, several hoteliers were beginning to plan to apply sustainability principles and to introduce new technologies to attract more international travelers in the future.

Contribution/Originality: Little is known about how the hotel industry is coping with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. This paper uses a qualitative methodology to interview a sample of hotel managers in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. In addition, it makes suggestions about how hoteliers can attract more international tourists through the implementation of sustainability practices and new technologies.

Keywords: hotel industry; COVID-19 pandemic; sustainable hotels; smart technologies; Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

INTRODUCTION

The hospitality industry is regarded as one of the fastest growing and essential service industries in the world, accounting for more than one third of total global services (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2009). In recent years, the hospitality industry has become extremely competitive, and by keeping up with global trends is one way in which hoteliers can ensure that their company is able to provide a 'customer-centric' experience (Yohn, 2018). New technological developments in the hotel industry can also help them to reshape the way that they treat their guests. This is because guests have become accustomed to sophisticated facilities in a technological world and, as a result, they expect similar services to be provided by the hotel industry (Nain, 2018).

In March, 2020 the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in mass cancellations of flights, and the closing of all international borders has drastically decreased people's desire to travel, resulting in major disruptions to the global airlines and tourism industry (Folinas, et al. 2020). As a result, most countries have experienced a dramatic decline in tourist numbers with negative effects on the profitability of hotels. In North America alone, hotel revenue per available room declined (RevPAR) by 50% in 2020 (STR, 2021). Hotel closures, layoffs and furloughs had also resulted in 8.3 million job losses between March and April 2020.

The hospitality industry in Samarkand

Samarkand is the second largest city in Uzbekistan, with a population totaling 504,423. Originally, it was one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in Central Asia dating back to the 10th century, and was established as an important trade center because of its location at the crossroads of the ancient Silk Road. Samarkand is well known for its ancient mosques, madrasas, and mausoleums which are deemed to be the major cultural center of Central Asia because many are listed as UNESCO world heritage sites.

With an increasing influx of international visitors between 2016 and 2019, as well as increased tourist movement within the Uzbekistan regions, the hotel industry has been growing at a fast rate before the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the main factors that has contributed to this growth is its accessibility to its unique cultural history in Central Asia (Gonzalez, Rio et al., 2016).

Based on the most recent figures from January 2021, 1,156 hotels and similar accommodation facilities now operate in Uzbekistan (State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, 2021). In 2017 the number of hotels and similar accommodation units was 772, which increased to 914 in 2018, which was 16% higher than in the previous year. The total number of rooms in 2017 was 19,000 which also increased to 20,200 (6% increase), while the number of beds was 39,000 in 2017, which increased to 41,000 in 2018 (5% increase) (Askarovich, et al. 2020).

The increase in the number of small, privately owned hotels has become a common trend in Uzbekistan in recent years, with the majority comprising on average 50 rooms or more (Gulmira, 2017). In recent times, several overseas companies have also begun to invest in Samarkand. In October 2018, a German company RIMC Hotels and Resorts proposed to build a hotel in Samarkand that would correspond to the, "...glory of this ancient city and meet the needs of tourists." (AzerNews, September 17, 2018). In addition, a Singaporean company EXIM Investments Pte Ltd announced that they will build a modern hotel complex with 280 rooms worth over \$12 million in Samarkand on the site of the inactive hotel Afrosiyob-Palace (AzerNews, November 5, 2021).

Aim of the study

To determine the state of the hotel industry in Samarkand before, during and after the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research objectives

1. To determine whether the hotel industry in Samarkand have adopted new trends and innovations to attract tourists.
2. To confirm whether the hotel industry in Samarkand will adopt sustainable tourism practices.
3. To establish whether the hotel industry is adopting smart (ICT) technologies in Samarkand to help attract tourists.

LITERATURE REVIEW**Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic**

In December 2019 the first cases of the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2 were reported in mainland China (Gossling, Scott et al., 2020). To date, the pandemic has infected in excess of 122 million people globally with a corresponding death toll of over 2.6 million (World Health Organization, 2021). This has resulted in most countries instituting quarantine lockdowns and the closing of international borders to limit the spread of COVID-19. Globally, the level of international tourist arrivals fell 72% between January and October 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (UNWTO, 2020).

As a result, hospitality employees were encouraged to take their holiday leave, while only a small workforce remained to handle maintenance and administrative duties. The industry has attempted to provide financial assistance for many of their workers through the establishment of emergency funds and partnerships providing temporary job placements (Harvard Business Review, 2020). On a more positive note, COVID-19 has resulted in consumers now requiring contactless technology as a simple requirement for a secure travel experience (OECD, 2020). Hygiene has also become an important consideration in the traveler's decision-making process. Cyber security is becoming increasingly more important, particularly as remote work becomes more common and identities become digitized. Digitization and creativity has provided new opportunities for travel and tourism expansion (World Economic Forum, 2020).

There is no doubt that COVID-19 is shifting traveler's preferences toward more safe, predictable, and low-risk travel (Sigala, 2020). In the short term, domestic and regional holidays that include outdoor activities will become more popular. Though the long-term effects of these changes are unknown, the travel and tourism industry is beginning to rethink and refresh existing business models in collaboration with local communities (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020).

Challenges facing the hotel industry

The hotel market needs to continually develop new strategies to cater for the changing climate in order to satisfy regular clients and to increase the numbers of new customers. Customer loyalty is a corporate strategy that aims to build respect for consumers, to predict and handle their desires, and to show the capacity and obligation to fulfill their needs. Service efficiency and customer loyalty are also crucial factors for market performance (Gronroos, 1990; Parasuraman, et al. 1988).

New developments in the hotel industry have generally been in response to changes in customer expectations, new technologies, and market trends. In terms of guest standards, new technology has 'lifted the bar', and new players in the field such as Airbnb have increased competition for the hospitality industry. As a result, it is now important to investigate several of the recent trends that are evolving in the hotel industry.

Smart hotels

Hotels often employ advanced technologies to improve productivity and efficiency in their organization that are synonymous with 'intelligent hotel rooms'. Systems can now monitor lighting, noises, air

conditioning, television, and automatic door signs. Guests are able to use their smart phone or tablet to unlock and monitor certain functions (e.g., change the temperature, open the door with a unique identifier, or switch on a 3D room butler on the TV) (Benckendorff, Xiang, et al. 2019).

Jaremen, Jedresiak, et al. (2016) defined a smart hotel as a realistic business concept that uses information and communication technology (ICT) to improve productivity and deliver high-quality services to its customers. They further contended that in the case of hotels, visitors expect the following: wireless internet, the introduction of smart technology and smart computers, and efficient Internet and ICT delivery policies. Studies (e.g., Leung, 2019) suggested that the implementation of the smart hotel concept will have a favorable effect on the hotel's brand and help to distinguish it from its rivals.

Technologies in the hotel industry

Hoteliers are faced with the challenge of satisfying higher consumer expectations, while often lacking enough budgetary funding to introduce new technologies (Nyheim and Connolly, 2011). Hotel guests now expect free Wi-Fi, flat-screen TVs, and USB ports in their rooms. According to Escobar-Rodriguez and Carvajal-Trujillo (2013), social media tools are regarded as one of the best tools for hotels to communicate with their customers. The use of review sites such as Trip Advisor have become increasingly important, as it is estimated that it influences more than US\$10 billion in annual online travel transactions (Ye, et al. 2011). Hoteliers reported having a strong presence on social media sites such as Facebook and actively monitor Trip Advisor reviews (Garrido-Moreno and Lockett, 2016).

Sustainable hotels

The main environmental impacts caused by the hospitality industry are resource destruction, emissions, and erosion. As a result, the hotel sector needs to be more aware of the problems associated with climate warming, acid weather, low-level smog, and ozone destruction by oil use in the transportation of tourists and commodities. The discharge of water from laundries, kitchens, hotels, and swimming pools further pollutes waterways (Chen, et al. 2009). In addition, Lenzen, et al. (2018) concluded that between 2009 and 2013, tourism's global carbon footprint has increased from 3.9 to 4.5 GtCO₂e, four times more than previously estimated, accounting for around 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Many hotels are noting an increase in customers who are requesting more environmentally friendly options (Eskerod and Đurić, 2018). Han and Kim (2010) observed that in order to endorse green programs, participants were prepared to undergo minor inconveniences. In addition, a green hotel will result in beneficial hotel guest behavioral intentions, including their intention to return (Lee, et al. 2010). Travellers are also making greener decisions about how they will travel to lessen the impact on the environment according to Booking.com's 2021 Sustainable Travel Report, which revealed that 61% stated that the pandemic had persuaded them to travel more sustainably in the future (Coleman, 2021).

Hotel trends in Uzbekistan

Between 2016 and 2020 there has been an increase in the number of small, privately owned hotels in Uzbekistan. The amount of investment required for renovation, the high occupancy rate and the relatively low operating costs are attracting the construction of smaller-sized hotels by the private sector. Luxury hotels are now gaining greater prominence among business travelers.

Most of the travelers from western countries mainly stay in two-to-five-star hotels in Uzbekistan. However, the availability of those types of hotels are low, and are largely found in the capital city of Tashkent. Kapiki and Fu (2015) stated that hoteliers need to be develop their information and communication technologies (ICTs) more effectively in order to attract new guests, improve service quality, deliver exceptional guest satisfaction, as well as to increase market share.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research

This study uses a qualitative methodology to allow researchers to discover the inner experiences of participants and to understand how meanings are shaped in, and through culture (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). It answers the question "why" (expressed through words) rather than "how many" (expressed through numbers) which is more important to researchers. This study used an interview method that involved a face-to-face meeting approach using semi-structured questions to investigate individual hotel manager's viewpoints.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used as the means for selecting participants for this study. This is a non-random strategy that does not require any fundamental hypotheses or a fixed number of participants (Bernard, 2002). That is, the researcher determines what information is required and then seeks out individuals who will provide it based on their expertise or experience. This entailed identifying and selecting individuals that worked in senior management positions in hotels in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. For the purpose of this study, nine respondents were interviewed. They were individually approached through a telephone call to arrange an appointment for an interview.

Interviewing procedures

Interviews are helpful for learning more about a participant's experiences in greater depth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview guide (DiCicco-Bloom et al., 2006). In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer uses a list of questions to ask each manager in the same order, and allows for identical questions to be asked to all participants. All interviews were digitally recorded after a letter of consent was signed by each respondent. Interviews were conducted at the interviewee's place of work, with each interview lasting between 30 to 40 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the respondent's own language (either Uzbek or Russian).

Data analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researchers into English. The most popular approach to qualitative data analysis is to search for emerging trends or common themes, which is described as iterative that includes a deductive process which is used to classify the research questions that are identified from the literature, and then an inductive process is used to adapt the themes based on the data collected (Ngulube, 2015). Different coding categories were then created, using both positive and negative responses identified in the dataset to compare different 'pieces' of data relating to each question and to separate them into different file folders for further analysis. A frequency count of various key words or categories was then conducted to determine their significance (Miles and Huberman, 1994). All findings were presented in the next section in a de-identified form.

The following questions were used to guide the interview process:

- 1) What impact is the Covid-19 crisis having on your business?
- 2) What was the occupancy rate before the pandemic situation? Could you share the information about the number of domestic and international tourists?
- 3) How many employees did you have before the pandemic situation?
- 4) What was your occupancy rate during the lockdown due to the pandemic situation?
- 5) Have you had to downsize any staff during the pandemic?
- 6) How have you supported workers that have been made redundant?

- 7) What did you implement to survive during Covid lockdown?
- 8) What is the situation at the present time? Occupancy rate, have you hired any new employees?
- 9) What lessons do you as an industry have to learn from the global lockdown?
- 10) The industry is currently in crisis management mode. If you look at the future, post-Covid, what trends do you see?
- 11) Smart hospitality is a new niche market in the hotel industry. Do you see the potential for smart tourism in your hotel?
- 12) Sustainable hospitality is a new trend in the hotel industry. Do you think you will change your hotel to cater for this?

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A total of nine respondents agreed to be interviewed, with two females and seven males aged between 27 and 39 years who worked as senior managers in different hotels in Samarkand.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Respondents	Hotel name	Gender	Years of experience
Interviewee 1	Registan Plaza (P)	Male	18 years
Interviewee 2	Alexander (P)	Male	13 years
Interviewee 3	Dilimah (P)	Female	11 years
Interviewee 4	L'Argamak (M-R)	Female	8 years
Interviewee 5	Diyora (M-R)	Male	8 years
Interviewee 6	Malika Prime(M-R)	Male	12 years
Interviewee 7	Registan hostel (B)	Male	2 years
Interviewee 8	Minor (B)	Male	2 years
Interviewee 9	Niso (B)	Male	7 years

P = Prestige hotels

M-R = Mid-Range hotels

B = Budget hotels

After analyzing the data, five major themes emerged that are discussed below:

Theme 1: Before the pandemic – flourishing years

The situation before the pandemic was described as a prosperous time due to the high occupancy rates of all hotels. This ranged from between 70% to 95% during peak times of which 70% were international and 25% local visitors. The manager of Malika Prime stated “This hotel has an excellent reputation and it was really famous among tourists, so during these years we had our own loyal clients.” Although 25% of visitors were locals, some hotel managers stated that their hotels mainly encouraged international tourists. The manager of L'Argamak stated: “I must admit that we work only with international tourists and before the pandemic situation we were fully occupied by them.”

Overall, the total number of employees in the prestige hotels ranged from between 39 and 100, while in the mid-range hotels from eight to 20. Interestingly, the budget hotels were maintained by only between two to four people. The manager of Niso budget hotel explained why there were low numbers of staff, “Actually, there is a lack of personnel especially among hotel professionals in our country and it takes a lot of time to teach one in order to make him professional.”

Theme 2 – Negative effects of the pandemic

One of the major impacts of COVID 19 was the closing of international borders which has had a negative impact on the hotel industry. When the occupancy rate reached zero, hoteliers were forced to close and to lay off staff. However, it was really difficult for hoteliers to downsize all their staff as small numbers of workers were still required to do maintenance and office work. “Only 2 to 3 workers worked here as we had to maintain the hotel, its cleanliness and everything inside” reported the Manager of the Diyora hotel.

Several of the employees were employed on a part-time basis; others took annual holidays, while about half of them were laid off. Some of the hotels supported their staff by paying half of their wages while others went on paid annual holidays. Unfortunately, some of them had to switch to another occupation as stated by the manager of the Registan Hostel, “...the owners of this hostel also owned pharmacies so some worked at their pharmacies to help to dilute medicine”.

Theme 3. Post COVID-19 pandemic

Several managers stated that their hotels were still closed, mainly for refurbishment and were preparing to re-open. The situation was slowly improving (in May, 2021) with several of the prestige hotels stating that occupancy rates were now around 30%, with 10% being international tourists. For the mid-range hotel, bookings were mainly from domestic tourists, although several stated that they were from Russia and Kazakhstan, mainly for business purposes. For the low budget hotels, occupancy rates were also increasing. The Manager of the Minor hotel stated, “We recently opened mainly working with locals. International tourists are coming from nearby countries - one day we have locals, another day foreigners. The occupancy rate is about 40% nowadays which is good”.

Almost all hotels promoted themselves on the internet using sites such as Booking.com and Trip Advisor, as well as social media which they believed were the most effective ways to increase WOM marketing. Several hotels used tour agencies, but one manager considered them to be ineffective. Dilimah's manager confirmed that discounts and updates were available when she stated, “In fact we gain more visitors working and offering bonuses to cooperative agencies”.

Theme 4. Sustainable hospitality trends

Sustainable and green hotels are one of the main features of the big chain hotels in western countries. However, most hotel managers in Samarkand claimed that although they were aware of the movement toward sustainable and green hotels in Western countries, they did not believe that Samarkand hotels were ready to introduce new initiatives. This was part of a long-term strategy because at this moment, the main emphasis for most hotels were to re-open and, “...to build business and earn income as fast as possible”, because many of these green hotel strategies were expensive to implement. The manager of the Diyora hotel, a mid-range hotel however stated that his hotel was, “...trying to become as green as possible. My employees sort the waste material, which I more or less manage. We compost the waste from food and use it in our garden. Plastic is taken away by the local gypsies”.

When the question regarding the requirements of tourists regarding sustainability was asked, the manager of L'Argamak admitted that “...there were some instances when people from western nations such as Swiss citizens inquired about becoming more environmentally conscious”. Another manager of the Niso hotel stated, “...I recently attended an online conference on sustainable hospitality and discovered some simple ways to make my hotel more environmentally friendly. One of them is to provide customers with a variety of price and quality choices. You pay \$150 a night for limitless utilities, or \$100 for a restricted edition of their stay with usage restrictions”.

Theme 5. Smart technology

The manager of Dilimah hotel stated "...technical facilities must be updated all the time". However, although there was a general belief that smart tourism and the latest technology are important to implement in the future, presently it was seen as too expensive and most hotels could not afford it. Several managers stated that it will be between two and three years before it will be in greater demand. The manager of the Registan Plaza, a prestige hotel stated, "We want to implement the latest technology into our hotel beginning from check in to check out, and room keys will be replaced by phones...when the guest leaves the hotel, everything is automatically switched off by phones in order to save energy consumption. We are going to save our planet and be greener".

However, several hoteliers in the mid-range and budget hotels stated that many guests were not interested in the latest trends in technology or sustainable measures. They were quite happy to pay cheaper prices for accommodation and were more interested in enjoying the ancient historical and cultural features of Samarkand.

DISCUSSION

The following research objectives will be discussed in regard to the findings from the results section.

i) What was the state of the hotel industry in Samarkand before, during and after the effects of the COVID pandemic?

Prior to the pandemic, the situation was described as a time of prosperity and development as evidenced by the occupancy rates of all hotels in Samarkand as confirmed by all the managers. During the peak season, the occupancy rate was high ranging from 70% to 95%, with 70% being international tourists and approximately 30% local visitors. The average occupancy rate in Samarkand region was 82.3% which was in third place behind Bukhara and Tashkent (Kun.uz, 2020). It has been projected that the number of visitors will continue to rise in the future resulting in an increased demand for more international standard hotel accommodation (Committee for Tourism Development for the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism and hospitality industry was among the hardest hit. Lockdown procedures were used to slow down the contamination in high-risk situations. With the near-global lockdown, the devastating effects of mass cancellations created by the virus spread, and reduced people's desire to travel, created major disruptions to the tourism industry (Folinas, et al., 2020). Hoteliers in Samarkand were forced to close their establishments and to lay off employees when the occupancy rate fell to zero. However, a small number of employees were needed to perform repairs and administrative duties. Unfortunately, many employees who left the hospitality industry were forced to change their careers. For other fortunate workers, the hospitality industry provided financial assistance, including the establishment of emergency funds and partnerships with industry to provide temporary job placements (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2020)

By August, 2020 the number of deaths from COVID-19 had fallen significantly. As a result, the Uzbekistan government began to provide services for domestic visitors who wanted to travel within their own country. Hotels began to promote their businesses through social media and internet sites such as Trip Advisor. However, most managers stated that they mainly accepted bookings in collaboration with tour agencies, and to provide guests with special offers.

ii) To determine whether the hotel industry has adopted new trends and innovations to attract tourists?

All managers stated that they were aware of new trends and innovations in the hospitality industry but at this stage were not ready to implement them. Only the managers of the luxury hotels referred to international quality management standards which they stated were a key to increase the quality of

service and a way of mitigating the potential issues regarding customer and employee interactions. This technology would also allow them to have a higher level of quality control, allowing them to better manage the supply chain and, as a result, to increase their performance (Pereira-Moliner and Tarí, 2015).

The managers further stated that only new trends that could be provided at a reduced cost would be implemented, such as the provision of pleasant background music. Music has a strong influence on human mood and emotions that marketers have used successfully over many years to sell their products (Dzhandzhugazova, et al. 2016). According to the study, 75% of hotel visitors enjoyed listening to background music in lobbies, bars, restaurants, and other public areas. In addition, if there is music playing, research has shown that more than one out of every four guests spend at least 5% more on food or beverages in a hotel restaurant or bar. Another cheaper option that was suggested was to provide pleasant aromas in the rooms.

iii) To ascertain whether the hotel industry was adopting smart (ICT) technologies to help attract tourists after the pandemic?

None of the hotel managers stated that they had adopted any smart ICT technologies in their hotels in Samarkand, as the industry was going through a rebuilding of their brand post COVID. A lack of funding was considered to be a vital problem for the implementation of ICT in hotels. While this trend is popular in the western world, many local people in Samarkand were not aware of these overseas trends. According to Xiang, Schwartz, et al., (2014), guest satisfaction is defined as the sum of a guest's good or negative experiences during their stay. Managers were more concerned about providing higher guest satisfaction since it creates a stronger image, brand recognition, and loyalty from satisfied customers.

However, in a technology driven world, the lack of ICT could become an issue in future years to attract new guests to hotels in Samarkand. Interestingly, the under-construction complex of luxury 5-star hotels in Samarkand is likely to serve as a new attraction and provide the latest technological services. In 2022, this center is expected to be operational which will result in increased competition to other more established four-star hotels.

iv) To confirm whether the hotel industry is adopting sustainable tourism practices after the pandemic?

Many countries have now begun to take environmental concerns more seriously. They have emphasized the importance of striking a balance between economic development and environmental preservation (Sloan, Legrand et al., 2009). All hotel managers stated that they are aware and eager to implement sustainable practices into their hotels. Despite the cost of recycling systems, many managers wanted to follow this new eco trend in the near future. Currently, several are trying to implement recycling procedures by sorting the waste and sending it to special places where it can be reused (plastic bottles and paper to recycling factories). Hashar Week (<http://www.hasharweek.uz/en/index.php>) is a multifaceted social project that was implemented as a special project by hotels in Tashkent. This project provides a platform for effective collaboration between people, businesses, government agencies, and international organizations in addressing environmental issues, spreading environmental culture, and participating actively in the formation of a new sustainable development model in Uzbekistan. They also offer "Green office" programs which provide a waste sorting system, collection of recyclable waste, and personnel training at reasonable prices.

CONCLUSION

Taking into account all of the major themes that emerged from the interviews conducted with hotel managers, it can be concluded that the city of Samarkand is showing significant potential for additional tourism and hospitality expansion. The tourism sector in this region was growing quite fast before the epidemic, which was evident from the occupancy rates in all classifications of hotels. Unfortunately,

COVID-19 had resulted in a wide range of negative cultural, economic, and psychological effects on tourist stakeholders, some of which will have lasting effects for many years to come. However, since August 2020, the situation has improved due to the growth in domestic tourism, and hoteliers have begun to earn some income in order to maintain their hotels and to make a meager living. With the lower rate of infection from the pandemic, international visitors are slowly beginning to arrive from nearby countries.

After the Covid-19 epidemic began to diminish in 2021, tourism in many parts of the world has begun to cautiously re-open. Public debate has advocated that it is a good time for the hospitality sector to consider how it can now become more sustainable. Between 2019 and 2020, positive attitudes toward sustainability were expressed by stakeholders. When reflecting on lessons that were acquired during the pandemic, hotels have begun to incorporate these strategies into their business plans, and to implement strategic actions by their managers. In addition, many of the managers have stressed the importance of providing quality service and attention for visitors.

In the hotel sector, innovative technologies are being considered when budgetary restrictions ease, to more effectively meet customer expectations. However, this study found that in several cases, several of the hotel managers suggested that smart technology would result in increased hotel prices, and for many domestic tourists they would prefer to pay cheaper room rates. Furthermore, international visitors may not necessarily prefer to book expensive hotels with the latest ICT technologies, but to choose cheaper ones that better represent the ancient Uzbek culture and historical traditions of the Great Silk Road.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the convenience sample used in this study was small and because of this, the results cannot be generalized to hotel managers in other cities such as Bukhara and Tashkent. Secondly, a number of the hotel managers who were originally approached were uncooperative and did not want to be interviewed. This made it difficult for the researchers to contact enough hotel managers to agree to be interviewed. However, the researchers felt that the sample was sufficient in this exploratory study to assume that the saturation point was reached and that further data collection was unnecessary.

Future research

A future study could be designed to determine how hotel visitors connect with smart devices, and how the hotel can better gather comments from guests. Making a comparison between different types of hotels is another suggestion for a further study. Another study is to determine the level of awareness of hotel visitors (both international and locals) toward sustainability and to suggest steps to increase eco-education.

REFERENCES

1. Askarovich, D. Rubtzov, V. & Biktimirov, N. (2020). Assessment of the competitiveness of the hotel business in Republic of Uzbekistan. *International Journal of Engineering Research and Technology*, 13(11) 3654-3658.
2. AzerNews (2018, October 7). RIMC Hotels and Resorts eyes to build hotel in Uzbekistan's Samarkand, Retrieved at <https://www.azernews.az/region/138722.html> (Accessed November 5, 2021).
3. AzerNews (2021, November 5) Singaporean company to build modern hotel in Samarkand, retrieved at <https://www.azernews.az/region/137243.html> (accessed November 5, 2021)
4. Benckendorff, P. Xiang, Z. & Sheldon, P. (2019). *Tourism Information Technology*, (3rd Edition), Oxfordshire, UK: CABI

5. Bernard H. R. (2002). Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches. (3rd Edition). Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Pres.
6. Coleman G. (2021). The future of sustainable travel, retrieved at <https://www.3blmedia.com/news/future-sustainable-travel> (accessed November 4, 2021).
7. Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008), Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Sage: Thousand Oaks.
8. DiCicco-Bloom, B. & Crabtree, B. (2006). The qualitative research interview. Medical Education, 40(4), 314-321.
9. Dzhandzhugazova, E., Blinova, E., Orlova, L., & Romanova, M. (2016). Innovations in hospitality industry. International Journal of Environmental and Science Education, 11(17), 10387-10400.
10. Escobar-Rodríguez T. & Carvajal-Trujillo, E. (2013). An Evaluation Of Spanish Hotel Websites: Informational Vs. Relational Strategies. International Journal Of Hospitality Management, 33, 228-239.
11. Garrido-Moreno, A. & Lockett, N. (2016). Social Media Use In European Hotels: Benefits And Main Challenges. Tourism & Management Studies, 12(1), 172-179.
12. Gronroos, C. (1990) Service Management And Marketing: Managing The Moments Of Truth In Service Competition. Lexington Books, Lexington.
13. Jones, G.R. & Galvin, P. (2004). Strategic Management: An Integrated Approach. John Wiley & Sons: Milton.
14. Han, H. & Kim, Y. (2010). An Investigation Of Green Hotel Customers' Decision Formation: Developing An Extended Theory Of Planned Behavior. International Journal Of Hospitality Management, 29(4), 659-668.
15. Harvard Business Review (2020, March 10), How Chinese companies have responded to corona virus, retrieved at <https://hbr.org/2020/03/how-chinese-companies-have-responded-to-coronavirus> (accessed November 5, 2021).
16. Hotel-Online (2016, November 9). Hotel Messaging Is At A Crossroads, Retrieved at https://www.hotelonline.com/press_releases/release/hotel-messaging-is-at-a-crossroads/ (Accessed November 5, 2021).
17. Institute Of Hotel Management Catering Technology And Applied Nutrition (2017). Mumbai, Retrieved At <http://ihmctan.edu/> (Accessed November 4, 2021).
18. Jaremen, D. Jedresiak, M. & Rapacz, A. (2016). The Concept Of Smart Hotels As An Innovation On The Hospitality Industry Market - Case Study Of Puro Hotel In Wrocław, Economic Problems Of Tourism, 4(36), 65-75.
19. Jonsson, C. & Devonish, D. (2009). An exploratory study of competitive strategies among hotels in a small developing Caribbean state. International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 21(4), 491-500.
20. Kapiki, S. & Fu, J. (2015). E-Hospitality Strategies Enhancing Competitiveness: Evidence from China and Central Macedonia, Greece. Chapter 10 in Collins, K. H. (Ed.). Handbook on tourism development and management (pp. 165-190), Nova.
21. Kun.uz. (2020, January). State Tourism Committee announces hotel occupancy rate throughout the republic in 2019, retrieved at <https://kun.uz/en/90159012> (accessed November 5, 2021).

22. Lee, J. S. Hsu, L. T. Han, H. & Kim, Y. (2010). Understanding how consumers view green hotels: how a hotel's green image can influence behavioral intentions. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 18(7), 901–914.
23. Lenzen, M. Sun, Y. Faturay, F. Ting, Y. Geschke, A. & Malik, A. (2018). The carbon footprint of global tourism. *Nature Climate Change*, 8, 522–528.
24. Leung, R. (2019). Smart hospitality: Taiwan hotel stakeholder perspectives. *Tourism Review*, 74(1), 50–62.
25. Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Sage: Newbury Park, California.
26. NAIN, A. (2018). A STUDY ON MAJOR CHALLENGES FACED BY HOTEL INDUSTRY GLOBALLY. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CLINICAL RESEARCH AND TRIALS*, 6(1), 561–572.
27. NGULUBE, P. (2015). *QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: SYSTEMATIC SEARCH FOR MEANING*. (CHAPTER 8). DOI:10.13140/RG.2.1.1375.7608.
28. NYHEIM, P. & CONNELLY, D. (2011). *TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIES FOR THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY*. NEW JERSEY, USA: PRENTICE HALL PRESS.
29. OEDC (2020). *TOURISM POLICY RESPONSES TO THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)*, RETRIEVED AT [HTTPS://OECD.ORG/CORONAVIRUS/POLICY-RESPONSES/TOURISM-POLICY-RESPONSES-TO-THE-CORONAVIRUS-COVID-19-6466AA20/](https://oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tourism-policy-responses-to-the-coronavirus-covid-19-6466aa20/) (ACCESSED NOVEMBER 3, 2021).
30. Parasuraman, A. Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1988). SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64(1), 12–40.
31. Parsons, R. Skripak, S. Cortes, A. Walz, W. & Walton, G. (2018). *Fundamentals of business*, retrieved at <https://oen.pressbooks.pub/fundamentalsofbusiness/chapter/chapter-16-hospitality-tourism/#sdfootnote7sym> (accessed November 3, 2021).
32. Pereira-Moliner, J. & Tarí, J. J. (2015). Quality certification, performance and size in hotel chains. *Tourism Economics*, 21(2), 307–324.
33. Ratz, T. Puczko, L. Andrews, L. Morris, H. & Cooper, S. (2002). *The impacts of tourism*. Häme Polytechnic.
34. Singh, A. (2021). *Hotels in financial distress and their resolution*. Boston University, School of Hospitality Administration, Boston Hospitality Review, retrieved at <https://www.bu.edu/bhr/2021/05/31/hotels-in-financial-distress-and-their-resolution/> (accessed November 3, 2021).
35. Sigala, M. (2020). Tourism and COVID-19: Impacts and implications for advancing and resetting industry and research. *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 117, pp. 312–321, retrieved at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32546875/> (accessed November 3, 2021).
36. Sloan, P. Legrand, W. & Chen, J. (2013). *Sustainability in the hospitality industry: Principles of sustainable operations*, (2nd Ed.), London: Routledge.
37. State Committee of the Republic of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics (2021), retrieved at <https://stat.uz/en> (accessed November 5, 2021).

38. Str (2021, November, 5). Covid-19: Hotel Industry Impact And Recovery, Retrieved At <https://Str.Com/Data-Insights-Blog/Coronavirus-Hotel-Industry-Data-News> (Accessed November 6, 2021).
39. Unwto (2020). Unwto Report: 2020 Is Worst Year On Record, Retrieved At <https://Www.Gktoday.In/Current.-Affairs/Unwto-Report-2020-Is-Worst-Year-On-Record/> (Accessed November 5, 2021).
40. Uzbekistan News Gazette (April 24, 2019). Integrated Waste Management System In Uzbekistan, Retrieved At <https://Uzbekistannewsgazette.Com/Integrated-Waste-Management-System-In-Uzbekistan/> (Accessed November 4, 2021).
41. Westcott, M., & Anderson, W. (2020). Introduction to tourism and hospitality in BC. (2nd Edition), Open Ed.
42. World Economic Forum (2020). Annual Meeting 2020 retrieved at https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_AM20_Overview.pdf (accessed November, 5, 2021).
43. World Health Organisation (2021), 'WHO corona virus (COVID-19) dashboard', available at <https://covid19.who.int/> (Accessed November 3, 2021).
44. Xiang, Z. Schwartz, Z. Gerdes, J. & Uysal, M. (2015). What can big data and text analytics tell us about hotel guest experience and satisfaction? *International*, 44, 120-130.
45. Ye, Q. Law, R. Gu, B. & Chen, W. (2011). The Influence Of User-Generated Content On Traveler Behavior: An Empirical Investigation On The Effects Of E-Word-Of-Mouth To Hotel Online Bookings. *Computers In Human Behavior*, 27(2), 634-639.
46. Yohn, D. (2018). 6 ways to build a customer-centric culture. *Harvard Business Review* Retrieved at <https://hbr.org/2018/10/6-ways-to-build-a-customer-centric-culture> (Accessed November 3, 2021).