

Discovering Key Success Factors of Mid-Star Hotels during A Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to discover the factors that influence consumers' interest in staying at mid-star hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative research was applied. Data from 206 respondents was collected through online surveys that were processed through regression analysis. The findings show three factors that positively and significantly influence consumers' interest to use mid-star hotels during the pandemic: cleanliness, health protocol, and facilities. Meanwhile, the promotion does not significantly affect the dependent variable. This research could provide insight into the hotel industry, specifically mid-star hotels, to consider and apply those factors into their priorities so that they can generate greater consumer interest in staying at mid-star hotels mid- and post-pandemic.

SARI PATI

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggali faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi ketertarikan konsumen terhadap *mid-star hotels* selama periode Covid 19. Pendekatan *mixed method* yang mengkombinasikan kualitatif dan kuantitatif digunakan untuk menjawab pertanyaan penelitian ini. Data dari 206 responden yang dianalisa menggunakan regresi menunjukkan bahwa terdapat tiga faktor yang secara positif memengaruhi ketertarikan konsumen, yaitu: kebersihan, protokol kesehatan, dan fasilitas. Sementara itu, kegiatan promosi ternyata tidak memengaruhi ketertarikan konsumen. Hasil dari penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan gambaran kepada industri perhotelan, untuk mempertimbangkan faktor-faktor temuan di atas.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is currently one of the most severely affected sectors by the COVID-19 pandemic, with impacts that affected both demand and supply (Manjula Bai, 2020). Indonesia's foreign exchange revenue from the tourism sector in 2018 was around 223 trillion rupiahs, slowing down at the beginning of the pandemic, but recovering in 2021. This industry is projected to contribute around 470 million US dollars or about 5.2% of the Indonesian GDP in 2022 (Kemenparekraf, 2022). This industry has a CAGR of foreign exchange earnings of 10.8% from 2009 to 2019 (Databoks, 2019). However, because of this pandemic, Indonesia recorded a 53.56% drop in foreign tourist visits from January 2019 to May 2020 (Akhlas, 2020). According to data from the Statistic Central Bureau (BPSb) of Indonesia (2020), the occupancy of hotels in May 2020 was around 14.45%, which is much lower than the same period during the previous year at 43.53%. The Association of Indonesian Hotels and Restaurants (PHRI) also noted that, during this pandemic, there were around 2000 hotels and 8000 restaurants that stopped operating either due to loss of consumers or inability to operate due to government regulations or payment of operating costs (Piri, 2020).

According to projections from the Fiscal Policy Office of the Ministry of Finance Indonesia, the open unemployment rate in Indonesia is expected to increase by around 5-9%, and the poverty rate will also increase by 9-11%. A survey conducted by BPS (2020a) revealed that 35.78% of the sample of 87,379 respondents said that they had experienced a decrease in their income during this pandemic. As for the upper-middle class, they will be more active at home to avoid transmission of Covid-19. This data is supported by the Google Mobility Report on 10 July 2020, which states that, in Bali, a tourist spot, the mobility of people is more likely in residential areas (increased by 16%), to the grocery store (decreased by 29%), stations/terminals (decreased by 73%), and to work (decreased by 34%). This means that, during this pandemic, the mobility of the community has decreased because they do not feel secure to venture outside their homes, especially for recreation that results in a decrease in hotel occupancy.

Many tourism and hospitality sectors are trying to survive the pandemic through various methods while still following the government's regulations. Some hotels have issued initiatives to attract people within the target market to take a vacation at a hotel. Some innovations have been applied, such as holding virtual tours, giving vouchers to consumers, selling frozen food from hotel restaurants, bundling packages, and many other promotions (The Jakarta Post, 2020).

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2020), the tourism rate all around the world decreased by 44% compared to 2019. Countries are urged to provide sustainable and safe tourism. The organization also advises the tourism industry to focus more on local tourists to generate excitement for recreation. This will help tourists gradually increase their level of confidence so that they will be ready to accept the world with the changes that exist now. Hence, sales in the tourism industry will rise, and the hotel occupancy rate can increase going forward. When the tourism industry has returned to normal, it must be supported by the hotel industry, which is ready to keep tourists safe and comfortable when staying at the hotel in their local areas.

This research tries to recognize the required aspects to attract consumers to stay at a hotel during the pandemic. Specifically, it aims to identify the influence of health protocols, cleanliness, promotion, and facilities provided by hotels on consumers' interest in staying at hotels. The results are expected to provide beneficial findings for the industry to recover and offer essential advice and build confidence among consumers to stay at hotels during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Recent studies have focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the hotel industry and factors that affect consumers' interest in staying at hotels during the pandemic. Several aspects relevant to mid-star hotels in Indonesia have been identified: cleanliness (Awan, Shamim, & Ahn, 2020; Magnini & Zehrer, 2020; Shin & Kang, 2020), health protocol (Dube, Nhamo, & Chikodzi, 2020; Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Sönmez *et al.*, 2020), promotion (Awan, Shamim, & Ahn, 2020; Yuliantoro *et al.*, 2020), and facilities (Jiang & Wen, 2020; Yu, Seo, & Hyun, 2021).

Cleanliness and Intention to Stay

The hygiene and cleanliness factor is mentioned as an aspect that should receive increased attention, especially today, when everyone is seeking a clean place where they can feel safe (Shin & Kang, 2020). Empirical evidence in this journal supports the claim that cleanliness and hygiene play an essential role in hotel operations and have received attention in post-public health crises (Awan *et al.*, 2020; Magnini & Zehrer, 2020). Cleanliness and hygiene are two elements that have been widely discussed within the context of hotel industry recovery (Jiang & Wen, 2020; Awan *et al.*, 2020). Cleanliness and hygiene in a hotel are measured concretely by the level of cleanliness of each guest room. Cleanliness is the core component of a hotel's reputation, and this can include the cleanliness of the key cards, TV remotes, bed linens, and light switches in the guest room according to the hotel consumers' perceptions. A higher standard of cleanliness can demand greater investment in equipment, technology, and resources, and it might be worth considering among the hotel industry in the future (Park *et al.*, 2019).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, travelers seek healthy and safe hotels, as cleanliness has a deep influence on the traveler's psyche (Awan, Shamim, & Ahn, 2020). Cleanliness is one of the factors that influence the selection of accommodations and services (Awan, Shamim, & Ahn, 2020). Most visitors worry about the cleanliness and sanitation of hotel rooms, and some believed that staying in a hotel could be risky for their health (Sohrabi *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is important to conduct regular disinfection of surfaces within the area of the hotel (such as public areas, meeting rooms, rooms, and other hotels' facilities). In addition to the areas of the hotels, it is also important to use disinfectants and the warmest possible water to wash towels, bedspreads, and bed linens, as they can easily get contaminated by the virus (Awan, Shamim, & Ahn, 2020). Hotel cleanliness is a core factor that can compensate for the impact of the existing decision-making factors (Magnini & Zehrer, 2020). Following previous research (Magnini & Zehrer, 2020), this study quantitatively analyzed the significant impact of hotel cleanliness on hotel booking intentions. In an earlier study by Pijls and Groen (2012) that examined sensory clues of cleanliness, words such as *shine* and *reflection* were associated with cleanliness that influence the consideration to stay at a hotel (Shin & Kang, 2020).

Health Protocol and Intention to Stay

Preliminary findings indicate that sanitizing efforts (such as providing hand sanitizer at the hotel, staff wearing gloves and masks), limiting the capacity of customers served, implementing physical distancing, more frequent cleaning of high-touch surfaces in common areas, and staff training of health protocols are the most important protection measures expected by hotel customers (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Recent studies also suggest that around 40% of hotel customers are willing to pay a higher price for increased health protocols and other safety measures (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Another study suggests that hospitality workers are obliged to implement effective safety protocols such as the use of gloves and masks. Common areas in the hotel should also be disinfected to protect not only the visitors but also the workers (Sönmez *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, hotels must swiftly implement certification programs or campaigns related

to hygiene procedures and health protocols (Dube *et al.*, 2020). The implementation of health protocol shows a high responsibility to protect the consumers' health that encourages the consumer to stay overnight (Permasari, Zulkifli, & Gaol, 2021).

Promotion and Intention to Stay

Based on preliminary findings, hotels can attract more customers by offering free room updates, dining opportunities, or spa experiences. Recent research has found that cancellation fees have been charged to many customers by third-party platforms. Cancellation fees were claimed as a part of their terms and conditions (Chew, 2020). Therefore, hotels should also try to keep a pliable cancellation policy ensuring that customers feel comfortable and secure during this unsettled time (Awan, Shahim, & Ahn, 2020). Another study concludes that price promotion does not significantly affect customer satisfaction. However, the study also states that promotional programs that intersect with a promotional price can create an atmosphere of competition (Yuliantoro *et al.*, 2020). The promotion of affordable prices on social media drives the consumers, especially those who are price sensitive in considering staying at the hotel (Ampountolas, Shaw, & James, 2019). Promotion conducted by travel agents increases the revenue of the hotel (Sulistyaningrum *et al.*, 2019) and an appropriate promotion builds consumers' preference, hotel credibility and drives consumer intention to come to the hotel (Zhuang & Kim, 2021).

Facilities and Intention to Stay

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people have begun to reappraise their lifestyles, physically and psychologically (Wang *et al.*, 2020). Hotel customers are now also likely to pay greater attention to the availability of facilities related to those lifestyles such as health, healthcare, and other facilities when making travel decisions (Jiang & Wen, 2020). Another study states that services related to hygiene such as clean in-room facilities, laundry in the guestrooms, and hygiene facilities in public areas such as restaurants do influence customer retention and revisit intention during a pandemic situation, such as COVID-19 (Yu, Seo, & Hyun, 2021). Common facilities such as a swimming pool, gym, spa, and free wi-fi have become the targets for a mid-star hotel to drive intention to stay at mid-star hotels (Zopiatis, 2017).

Qualitative Research Findings

Qualitative research conducted with interviews and a focus group discussion was performed to identify the factors considered by consumers to stay at mid-star hotels after conducting a literature review to build a research model. The findings involved ten informants became fundamental to determine the four factors (independent variables) that influence the intention of visitors to stay at mid-star hotels (dependent variables) during and post-pandemic. Some assertions supported the relationships between those variables.

The cleanliness of the rooms is stated as the factor that fostered the attention of the target visitors.

“ ...to assure me, first, (hotel) should show cleanliness... apply disinfectant in every room, even put a seal to indicate that the room has been disinfected”
(Informant 6)

“...I expect the hotel to inform me of the actions that they have been doing to keep cleanliness, for instance: apply disinfectant in rooms regularly... ” (Informant 7)

Health protocol must be applied by the mid-star hotel staff to attract the target consumer to stay in the mid-star hotels. This sentiment was indicated by some comments as follows.

“The hotels are willing to perform health protocol maximally, such as wearing masks and face shields...” (Informant 9)

“On the consumer side, we feel secure and comfortable when health protocol is applied with the standard, we should be aware to take care themselves... at least hand sanitizer, masks, and body temperature checks should be mandatory”(Informant 1)

Interesting promotions are mentioned and considered by the consumers to stay at the mid-star hotels during the pandemic.

“The visitors want to stay (at the hotel) if there is a maximal big discount...”(Informant 9).

“...when [we] look at [online travel agent listing], we search for the lowest price hotel at the location that we want... (Informant 5).

The facilities inside the hotel come under consideration for a stay at the hotel since the visitors face limitations of mobility to go outside.

“ ... facilities should be provided with good service during the pandemic time... it can be a consideration for us to stay at the hotels, because we cannot go outside easily, like in normal time” (Informant 10)

Hypothesis

The hypothesis development is based on the findings from interviews, a focus group discussion, and observations combined with a literature review. Those findings led to the following hypothesis:

H1: Cleanliness affects consumers' interest in staying at mid-star hotels during the pandemic.

H2: Health protocol affects consumers' interest in staying at mid-star hotels during the pandemic.

H3: Promotion affects consumers' interest in staying at mid-star hotels during the pandemic.

H4: Facilities affect consumers' interest in staying at mid-star hotels during the pandemic.

METHODS

A mixed-method approach was applied in this research. In the beginning, the literature review was conducted to develop the main theme for this research, reveal and identify the role of each aspect or dimension, and identify the role of some items in the specific study (Lai *et al.*, 2018). Afterward, the observation on the website of mid-star hotels in Indonesia was conducted to verify the factors found during the literature review. Website analysis was used to confirm that those factors were applied in this context (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2014). Qualitative research was performed through interviews and a focus group discussion. Then, quantitative research was conducted to test the impact of those factors on the dependent variable to be tested. The findings from the quantitative research in the hospitality industry can be used to help management to make decisions in business practice (Assaf & Tsionas, 2019).

Based on those stages, four independent variables are determined: cleanliness, health protocol, promotion, and facilities to be tested in the quantitative online research. Meanwhile, consumers' interest in staying at a mid-star hotel became the dependent variable. The research model is shown in Figure 1.

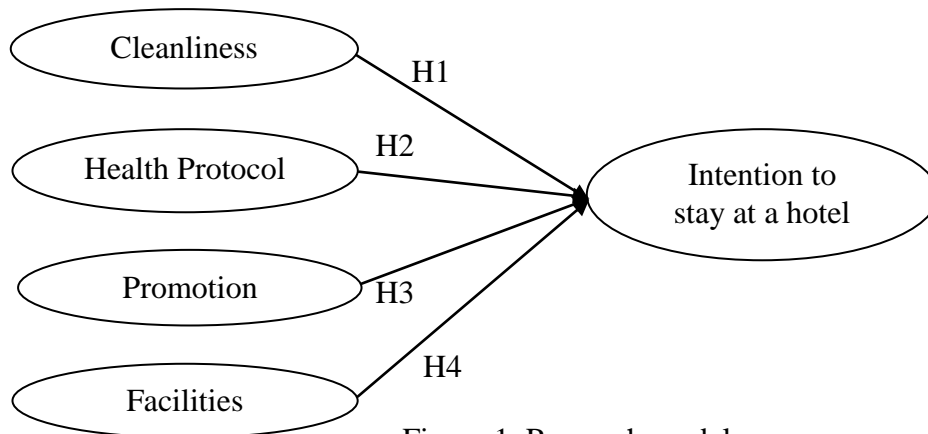


Figure 1. Research model

The data was successfully collected by distributing online questionnaires. The questionnaire was made using Google Forms and distributed to the target respondents via social media. The questionnaire contained 27 questions that were divided into several sections: (1) screening questions to make sure that the respondents are those who have stayed at a mid-star hotel during the pandemic, (2) questions about health protocol, (3) questions about hygiene, (4) questions about promotion, (5) questions about hotel facilities, (6) questions about consumer interests, and (7) the demographic profile of the respondents. The independent and dependent variables are measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

The research was conducted from November-December 2020 in Java areas representing about 50% of the total hotels in Indonesia (BPS, 2020). A total of 206 respondents were chosen using a purposive sampling method. The collected data were processed by using SPSS version 26.

The validity and reliability test of each variable was tested before regression analysis was performed. The variable is determined to have good validity if the score of Kaiser-Meyer Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) is more than 0.5, and each indicator shows a component matrix of more than 0.6, while the reliability of the data is indicated by the Cronbach's Alpha that is more than 0.6 (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Research Findings

Table 1 shows the geo-demographic information of the respondents that have proven valid and reliable data. Most of the respondents were in the range of 20-24 years old (51.5%) and 25-29 years old (27.2%). They were college students (53.3%), young employees (20.4%), and entrepreneurs (17%). The majority live in Banten (34%) and Jakarta (32.5%).

Table 1. Respondent profiles

Category	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	15-19	20	9.7%
	20-24	106	51.5%
	25-29	56	27.2%
	30-34	8	3.9%
	35-39	4	1.9%
	≥ 40	12	5.9%

Job	Student	16	7.8%
	College Student	110	53.3%
	Entrepreneur	35	17%
	Employees	42	20.4%
	Others	3	1.5%
Domicile	Jakarta	67	32.5%
	Banten	70	34%
	Central Java	15	7.3%
	East Java	27	13.1%
	West Java	14	6.8%
	Others	13	6.3%

In the beginning, the cleanliness variable had 6 indicators, the health protocol variable had 6 indicators, the promotion variable had 4 indicators, the facilities variable had 4 indicators, and the consumers' interest variable had 3 indicators. However, after the initial validity test, only 4 valid indicators remained within the cleanliness variable: 4 valid indicators from the health protocol variable, 3 valid indicators from the promotion variable, 4 valid indicators from the facilities variable, and 3 valid indicators from the consumer's interest variable. The result of the validity test indicates that the remaining indicators have loading factors (component matrix) of more than 0.6, and all variables show the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) score of more than 0.5, which indicates good validity. The Cronbach's Alpha which is more than 0.6 shown by all variables also indicates that the remaining data is fairly reliable (Table 2).

Table 2. Validity and reliability analysis

Variable	Indicators	KMO	Component Matrix	Cronbach's Alpha
Cleanliness	Cleanliness in the restroom	0.663	0.669	0.626
	Cleanliness in the bedroom		0.654	
	Cleanliness in the restaurant		0.698	
	Cleanliness in the lobby		0.727	
Health Protocol	Use of masks and face shields	0.713	0.695	0.675
	Spraying disinfectant regularly		0.718	
	Body temperature check		0.685	
	Information of staff health conditions		0.756	
Promotion	Promotion through social media	0.616	0.774	0.561
	Promotion through an online travel agent		0.724	
	Discounts from mid-star hotels		0.691	
Facilities	Availability of a swimming pool	0.683	0.692	0.673
	Availability of a gym		0.781	
	Availability of meeting hall facilities		0.772	
Consumer's Interest	Plan to stay at mid-star hotels in the near future	0.603	0.762	0.542
	The confidence to stay at mid-star		0.767	

	hotels after the pandemic			
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The regression analysis shows that cleanliness, facilities, and health protocol are significant factors that positively influence consumers’ interest in staying at mid-star hotels during the pandemic. Meanwhile, promotions do not have a significant impact on attracting customers to stay at the hotels.

Table 3. Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Standardized Beta Coefficient	Sig.	Result
H1: Cleanliness → Intention to Stay	0.183	0.011	Supported
H2: Health Protocol → Intention to Stay	0.171	0.025	Supported
H3: Promotion → Intention to Stay	0.076	0.261	Not supported
H4: Facilities → Intention to Stay	0.182	0.011	Supported

Cleanliness should be recognized at all touch points of the consumer journey at the hotel, including the lobby, bedroom, restroom, and restaurant. The lobby as the first touch point should show cleanliness since the most intensive contact with guests happens in this room (Park *et al.*, 2019). The cleanliness of the guest room will also give an important first impression of the cleanliness of the hotel.

The cleanliness of the restroom is another important indicator to attract consumers to stay at the mid-star hotel. The usage of restrooms by many people for washing, grooming, and eliminating waste demands frequent and regular cleaning. A clean restroom offers guests convenience and builds hygiene perception.

The cleanliness of the restaurant also attracts consumers to stay at the hotel. Although a restaurant in a mid-star hotel is a less important facility (Ryan & Huimin, 2007), a clean restaurant could give added value and build the perception of food safety and hygiene.

The bedroom becomes an essential place where guests spend most of their time during their stay at the hotel. This part is also the place where guests engage in private activities as well as take a rest. From a modern perspective, the bedroom has a two-sided connotation: both safety and risk (Short, 2019). A clean bedroom inspires a peaceful mind and a secure feeling from the guest’s perception.

The health-protocol factors include the use of masks, regular spraying of disinfectant, and body temperature checks for both guests and employees. The use of masks is one of the most fundamental safety protocols that customers expect from a hotel (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). Not only should the customer, but also the employees implement this health protocol, and it should be the responsibility of those on both sides. Gloves and masks should be provided by the hotel to ensure that safety precautions are implemented.

Aggressive measures to disinfect hotel rooms and public places or restaurant seats right after being used are fundamental to protect visitors and workers in the hotel (Sönmez *et al.*, 2020). Hotel staff must bear in mind that the virus can survive on surfaces for a certain period, and that is the reason the spraying of disinfectant is an important factor. Consumers think that health protocol should be applied since it is crucial to protect the health of the hotel’s workers and visitors because of the interaction and avoid the possibility of further spreading an infection to their family, friends, or other relatives. The safety perception because of good health protocol drives the intention of visitors to stay at the hotel (Robina-Ram *et al.*, 2021).

Although promotions are mentioned by informants in the interview, they are not supported as an important factor that drives the interest of the consumers to stay at the hotel in hypothesis testing. It seems that promotions on social media, travel agents or hotels do not significantly increase the interest of consumers to stay at the hotel. The research findings of Toubes, Araújo Vila, & Fraiz Brea (2021) also show that health safety is perceived as the most important thing, but promotion is not the main factor considered by the consumers to stay at the hotel.

The facilities factor includes the availability of a swimming pool, a gym, and the other facilities do significantly increase the consumers' interest to stay at mid-star hotels. The previous research findings also show that the facilities have an important and direct influence on the target market to stay at mid-star hotels (Soifer *et al.*, 2020). Facility availability is one of the factors considered by the tourists to stay at the hotel (Dong *et al.*, 2014).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

According to the research, mid-star hotel management is suggested to pay more attention to cleanliness, health protocol, and the provision of the hotels' facilities during and after the pandemic. Hotels should act confidently and practice discipline in setting up cleanliness in the areas of the hotel, such as the guest room area, lobby area, and lift area. The discipline factor should also be implemented in terms of health protocol, especially during and after the pandemic. Facilities could bring added value to mid-star hotels, but hotels should ensure the hygiene and cleanliness of those facilities.

CONCLUSION

During the pandemic, cleanliness, facilities availability, and health protocol are significant factors that have a positive impact on the attraction of consumers to two- and three-star hotels. On the other hand, promotion does not significantly influence the interest of consumers in using mid-star hotels.

This study encompasses a specific limitation in terms of the samples drawn from Indonesia, consisting of samples from Java, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Sumatra islands. Future research should explore similar findings in other countries and can include surveys, digital analytics, scenario-based experiments, or other approaches to form generalizations regarding the pandemic era.

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