

STRENGTHENING MSME RESILIENCE IN THE TOURISM SECTOR: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF POST-PANDEMIC MARKETING STRATEGIES IN INDONESIAN NON-STAR HOTELS

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the global hotel industry, profoundly jeopardizing the operational viability and long-term existence of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, which focuses on promoting Decent Work and Economic Growth, necessitates the protection and reinforcement of these small firms to guarantee the enduring and comprehensive revival of the tourism sector. This study meticulously examines the strategic alterations in marketing methods employed by Fellas Inn Family Guest House, a non-star hotel MSME situated in Malang, Indonesia, as a dynamic response to the unprecedented challenges posed by the post-pandemic landscape. We utilized a rigorous qualitative case study approach to gather in-depth empirical data through comprehensive semi-structured interviews with management and operational staff, complemented by extensive digital observation. The core findings indicate a critical and necessary strategic pivot: the corporation fully discontinued its traditional reliance on price-based marketing in favor of adopting "trust-based marketing," which successfully leveraged enhanced safety and rigorous cleanliness standards as the primary, non-negotiable selling points. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the primary factor contributing to the successful resurgence of occupancy rates was the sophisticated integration of digital ecosystems, notably the synergistic connection between social media content and Online Travel Agents (OTAs). This research significantly enhances the theoretical comprehension of crisis management within the hospitality sector by demonstrably illustrating how strategic digital transformation and agile adaptation bolster the resilience of MSMEs. The results provide a crucial, replicable model demonstrating how proprietors of non-prestigious hotels can effectively sustain profitable operations and secure market stability in an ever-evolving market environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Before The COVID-19 pandemic has had a big effect on travel around the world. It has changed the way people act, the way businesses work, and the way people move around. As travel bans and lockdowns spread around the world, the tourism

industry, especially small businesses like non-star hotels, saw a huge drop in both demand and revenue. Micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs) in the tourism industry were especially at risk in Indonesia, where tourism is a big part of the economy. Non-star hotels had a hard time staying in

business because they didn't have as much money as bigger hotel chains and relied on local tourists. Some of them had to shut down for a while or even permanently (Cheng, Yang, & Liu, 2020).

These problems made it clear that we need to find new ways to help small and medium-sized businesses in the tourism industry grow. Before, Indonesian hotels that weren't stars mostly used word-of-mouth and ads that were based on price to get the word out about themselves. But when the pandemic changed how people acted, these old ways of doing things didn't work to meet the new needs for safety, health standards, and digital engagement. Many small hotels have had to quickly change how they market themselves in order to stay in business and get back on their feet (Huang & Benyoucef, 2021).

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, have had a big impact on how people around the world talk about how to make MSMEs more resilient. We need to help small and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs) so that they can help the economy grow and get back on its feet, especially when things are tough. This is what SDG 8 says. In other words, Indonesian non-star hotels need to make more plans for the future. They also need to do things that will help the business last for a long time and help the country's social and economic goals (United Nations, 2020).

This study aims to analyze Fellas Inn's shift from traditional price-focused marketing strategies to trust-based marketing and digital integration in response to the pandemic. The study employs a qualitative case study methodology, integrating semi-structured interviews with management and operational staff, along with digital observations, to examine the hotel's modification of its marketing strategies in response to changing consumer demands. The study looks into how combining social media with online travel agencies (OTAs) can help the hotel and improve its market position. The study emphasizes the importance of digital ecosystems in bolstering resilience in the MSME sector of the tourism industry.

This study aims to evaluate the alignment of Fellas Inn's marketing strategies with SDG 8, highlighting how the hotel's practices promote economic growth and sustainable development in the post-pandemic recovery phase. This case study will improve understanding of how to handle crises and be resilient in the tourism industry. It will also give non-star hotels in emerging markets that are facing similar problems practical advice. This study analyzes a specific non-star hotel, highlighting unique strategies that small hotels can adopt to thrive in an increasingly digital and sustainability-focused market environment.

In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has made Indonesian non-star hotels rethink how they market themselves and come up with new, creative ways to stay in business and get back on their feet. By focusing on trust-based marketing and digital transformation, non-star hotels can get stronger and help the economy grow and recover in a way that is good for the environment. This research provides valuable insights into the promotional strategies employed by the Fellas Inn Family Guest House. It also shows other small and medium-sized tourism businesses how to get back on their feet after the pandemic.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated challenges for the tourism industry that have never happened before. Small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) have been hit the hardest. The shocks have impacted non-star hotels the hardest. These hotels are a key element of the tourist SME sector. Hotels and other small, medium, and micro-sized businesses (MSMEs) in the tourism industry are vitally important to both the local economy and the tourism industry as a whole. However, they usually don't have the money, stability, or brand awareness they need to deal with these kinds of problems well. This literature review looks at important ideas about MSME resilience, how digital transformation affects recovery after the pandemic, and how to switch to trust-based marketing strategies that include sustainability. All of these are important for understanding how non-star hotels in Indonesia can recover and do well in the post-pandemic world.

MSME Resilience in the Tourism Sector

Resilience is a business's capacity to handle shocks and bounce back on its feet. Resilience in the context of MSMEs in tourism is typically characterized as the capacity to not only endure but also to adapt and innovate when confronted with challenges (Badoc-Gonzales, Filimonau, & Wall, 2022). Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the tourism sector, especially non-star hotels, are more vulnerable to external events such as the COVID-19 pandemic due to their reliance on local tourism, constrained financial reserves, and inadequate marketing resources (Sharma, 2021). Badoc-Gonzales et al. (2022) studied tourism MSMEs and found that those who were more adaptable, had strategic network connections, and got help from outside sources were better at bouncing back from the crisis. The tourism company needs to be able to alter course and use what it already has instead of relying on short-term fixes.

A lot of tourists come to Indonesia because of MSMEs. The Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy says that 99.99% of all enterprises in the tourism industry are MSMEs. A lot of people stay in hotels that don't have stars. The market has altered, especially following COVID-19, so these companies

have had to change their plans. Nur's (2024) study shows that Indonesian tourism MSMEs will do well after the pandemic if they become digital, offer more services, and build more connections. These tactics illustrate that MSMEs in the tourism industry need to do more than just get through their current challenges. They also need to learn how to deal with problems that might come up in the future.

The Role of Digital Transformation in Post-Pandemic Tourism

Digital transformation is currently one of the most important things that the tourism industry can do to get back on its feet. Businesses require digital platforms to be noticed, talk to clients, and get more reservations because individuals can't travel and need to stay apart. Restrepo-Sarmiento, Gómez-Torres, and Londoño-Cardozo (2023) discovered that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technology within the tourism sector. Companies used social media, digital marketing, and online booking systems to stay in touch with their customers. Small hotels and other tourist MSMEs didn't always have the money or skills to compete with bigger hotel chains. They had to move to the internet to stay in business.

Digital transformation has been found to help Indonesian MSMEs get more clients and run their businesses better (Purnomo, Nurmalitasari, and Nurchim, 2024). Research indicates that MSMEs can enhance their visibility and reservations through the utilization of digital technologies such as OTAs (online travel agencies), social media, and booking systems (Kurniawan, 2025). But they could not be very good with technology or have the right tools. Fellas Inn Family Guest House and other hotels that weren't stars were able to get back on their feet faster than hotels that just followed traditional methods. This was due to their utilization of online media and digital marketing to operate their business. These results align with the comprehensive study conducted by Huang and Benyoucef (2021), which underscores the necessity of incorporating digital technology to improve consumer engagement and foster enduring resilience.

Trust-Based and Sustainable Marketing Strategies

Because of the pandemic, people's needs changed, and so did marketing. Price-based marketing used to work effectively for many non-star hotels in Indonesia, but it doesn't work as well now because people care more about safety, trust, and the environment. According to Urban (2018), trust-based marketing is a way to keep customers coming back by being honest, consistent, and focused on building long-term relationships. Trust-based marketing is very important in the tourist MSME sector nowadays since cleanliness, health standards, and social responsibility are very important to travelers when they make their selections (Hendhana et al., 2024).

If MSMEs want to stand out in a crowded market, they need to make sure that their marketing efforts are good for the environment. The UN's SDG 8 stipulates that we should support labor that is useful and helps the economy flourish. This strategy can be used directly by tourism MSMEs. Nosratabadi et al. (2019) found that more and more people are choosing hotels based on how environmentally friendly they are. This is especially true when businesses show that they care about the people who live there, the environment, and doing the right thing. This means that MSMEs need to make sure that their marketing plans are in line with both local values and global trends in sustainability. They could achieve this by being honest about how hard they are trying to be more eco-friendly and running campaigns on social media (Setiawan, 2025).

Fellas Inn and other hotels that aren't stars are starting to use marketing methods that aren't only about being cheap. They are also putting a lot of stress on safety, cleanliness, and sustainability, which is in line with how the whole business is changing. Some digital marketing strategies that follow these principles are giving customers feedback, virtual tours, and giving out eco-friendly credentials. These methods are very important for getting additional bookings and getting people to trust you again (Sharma, 2021).

Gaps and Research Opportunities

The goal of this study is to fill in major gaps in the current research about how the tourism business may be more resilient, how to handle digital transformation, and how to handle crises. A lot of the new study on resilience looks at how small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) or big plans for whole tourist areas can go back to normal. Consequently, there exists a considerable deficiency of empirical study addressing the particular resource constraints and strategic necessities of micro and non-star hotels in emerging economies such as Indonesia. These little businesses don't have a lot of money, and the markets they work in are very different from each other. They require localized and highly adaptive adaption models that are insufficiently covered in general SME literature.

2. METHODS

Penelitian yang digunakan peneliti berjenis kuantitatif dengan pendekatan korelasional. Peneliti menggunakan pendekatan korelasional berusaha menjelaskan dan mengkaji fenomena terkini dan aktual untuk kemudian dijelaskan atau mendapatkan penjelasan terkait dengan apa yang ingin coba digali dan diketahui dari fenomena tersebut.

Pada penelitian ini, peneliti akan mencari tahu bagaimana keterkaitan antara dukungan sosial teman sebaya dengan homesickness pada santri, dengan menggunakan pendekatan induktif. Untuk pengambilan data dilakukan dengan cara

menyebarkan kuesioner berupa gform yang sebelumnya telah diuji validitas dan reliabilitasnya. Analisa data yang digunakan dalam menguji data pada penelitian ini menggunakan uji Rank Spearman (Spearman's Rho) dengan bantuan JASP versi 0.12.2.

Subjek pada penelitian ini merupakan santri di tahun pertama sekolah atau santri kelas VII MTs IGBS Darul Marhamah yang berlokasi di Jonggol, Jawa Barat. Teknik pengambilan sampel yang dilakukan pada penelitian ini adalah probability sampling, hal ini dikarenakan peneliti ingin mengetahui data pasti mengenai jumlah populasi santri tahun pertama di MTs IGBS Darul Marhamah. Kemudian, metode pengambilan sampel yang digunakan merupakan total sampling dimana total sampling adalah teknik pengambilan sampel dimana jumlah sampel sama dengan populasi (Sugiono, 2008). Untuk jumlah sampel yang akan dipakai adalah 56 santri.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in a constructivist framework to extensively analyze the nuanced phenomenon of MSME resilience within the hospitality sector. The constructivist approach is seen most appropriate as it allows researchers to understand the subjective interpretations that hotel owners, managers, and staff attribute to their experiences during the crisis and the subsequent strategic modifications (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach, unlike quantitative techniques that seek to quantify variables, facilitates a thorough understanding of the "how" and "why" specific marketing initiatives emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study focuses on the Fellas Inn Family Guest House, a non-star hotel located in Malang, Indonesia. We chose this company through purposive sampling because it managed the pandemic crisis well as a hospitality MSME, which led to a measurable increase in occupancy rates due to digital transformation. This choice fits with the idea of a "exemplary case," which was picked not because it is statistically representative but because it may teach us a lot about resilience (Sigala, 2020).

Data Collection Instruments

More than one method was used to gather data to make sure that the marketing strategic change was fully covered. The primary methodologies employed were comprehensive interviews and digital observation. The study utilized criterion sampling to select persons with intimate, authoritative knowledge concerning the hotel's operational and strategic handling of the issue. There was also the General Manager, who was in charge of substantial adjustments to "trust-based marketing," and important operational staff from the Front Office and

Housekeeping divisions. The new marketing story is based on the guidelines for safety and cleanliness that everyone who works there follows every day. Semi-structured interviews took place from February 2025 to October 2025, and each one lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted utilizing a methodology grounded in crisis management and the Resource-Based View (RBV). All interviews were audio-recorded with explicit informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to meticulous examination to attain data saturation, characterized as the juncture at which no novel conceptual codes or themes concerning marketing strategy were arising from the collected data (Saunders et al., 2018). The interview data produced detailed, subjective accounts of internal decision-making processes and resource reallocation in reaction to external shocks.

Findings & Results

The empirical analysis of the semi-structured interviews with Fellas Inn's management and operational staff shows that the company responded to the crisis in a systematic way. This included a major change in the value proposition and the strategic use of digital resources. The results are grouped into three main themes: the strategy shift from pricing to trust, the implementation of safety procedures, and the use of the digital ecosystem to build resilience.

The Strategic Pivot: Shifting from Price-Based to Trust-Based Marketing

The research shows that MSME hospitality strategies are very different from what they used to be. In the past, non-star hotels competed on pricing and location, but because of the epidemic, Fellas Inn adjusted their strategy to "Trust-Based Marketing." The GM claimed that people's priorities altered after the crisis. They didn't need to worry about the price; they wanted to be sure they were safe. This method was more than simply a strategy to entice people to buy the service; it was a big alteration to the service itself. The GM made it plain what this distinction was:

"Trust-Based Marketing is being honest about how things operate... "Traditional [marketing] sells things like location or price." We sell proof and security for businesses. (Belinda Dyan, October 20, 2025, Fellas Inn Meeting Room)

The market's view that "low cost" indicates "low sanitation standards" altered a lot because of this adjustment. The hotel made safety a "basic need" instead of an optional luxury, which made it hard for competitors to emulate without making substantial changes to how they do business. This adjustment in strategy was also predicated on strong "Cash Flow Discipline" and the ability to be flexible. Management made bold steps to minimize expenses, like switching fixed-cost staff jobs to performance-based contracts and turning the expensive in-house restaurant into a "Central Kitchen" that produces

money for delivery services. This was done to keep the new model continuing even when money was tight.

Operationalizing Trust: Cleanliness as Visual Evidence

The marketing promise was proven when the abstract idea of "trust" became tangible value through stringent operational standards. The results demonstrate that you should always use the "72-Hour Sterilization Block" method and follow the cleaning regulations (CHSE). The biggest shift was that people on the front lines stopped doing their jobs and started talking about hazards. As "Health Protocol Ambassadors," staff workers have to show clients how to clean things to make them feel better.

For instance, the cleaning crew had to slap a "Cleaning Seal" on the doors of the rooms just after they cleaned them so that guests would feel safe. As guests checked in, the people at the front desk showed them how to clean their key cards using UV light. Customers regarded the firm in a different light because of this transparency. For instance, management saw that more people were leaving online reviews that indicated guests "Felt Safe" or labeled the area "Very Sterile." This showed that building trust worked.

Digital Ecosystem Integration and Resource-Based Resilience

The digital ecosystem was cleverly put together, leveraging internal resources in a way that was in line with the Resource-Based View (RBV). This is what led to the rise in occupancy rates. The hotel made the most of its "Human Capital," which was made up of people who were outstanding with computers and could accomplish more than one thing at a time. It also had a "Lean IT Ecosystem," which featured a new Property Management System (PMS) and Channel Manager. This technology helps an online travel agent (OTA) turn all the talk on social media into sales. The results show that Instagram, TikTok, and other social media sites clearly communicated movies and other trustworthy information regarding cleanliness. These links didn't take guests to the hotel's own website; instead, they took them to the hotel's official OTA pages on Booking.com and Traveloka.

This plan made sure that the "trust" consumers built up on social media rapidly transformed into sales on safe sites. It also made it easier to find the hotel and helped it move up in OTA algorithms. This integration also implies that new ideas will always be welcome. The GM also remarked that the company's culture has changed over time as it has become more digital and focused on strategy.

"Mindset has changed from reactive to proactive... We now consider disruption [including technology and health] as a constant variable, not an

anomaly." (Belinda Dyan, October 20, 2025, Fellas Inn Meeting Room)

This proactive strategy, which alters dynamic pricing based on real-time data from digital platforms, reveals that the hotel's strength and steady recovery were mostly due to using digital technologies and having a trust-based view.

4. CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the primary findings of the study, outlines theoretical and managerial contributions to the fields of tourism and MSME resilience, discusses the limitations inherent in the single-case qualitative design, and proposes avenues for future research. This study successfully elucidated the marketing strategies employed by Fellas Inn Family Guest House, a non-star hotel MSME in Indonesia, demonstrating how an agile strategic pivot and sophisticated digital integration bolstered the firm's resilience in the post-pandemic tourism landscape.

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