

## Research Article

### COVID-19 AND HOTEL SERVICE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

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#### ABSTRACT

Due to the unprecedented level of anxiety and economic uncertainties created as a result of the Corona Virus (Covid-19) pandemic, there is an increasing need to investigate the changes and challenges experienced in hotels. The slow recovering of the hospitality industry demands that hotels are expected to make substantial changes to the strategies they adopt in their service delivery and operations. Researchers are also expected to shift their research focus to develop solutions for the hospitality and tourism industry. This study attempts to examine hotel manager's views on the effects of COVID-19 and the need to recover quickly by adopting efficient service delivery. Examining the changes and challenges may help in developing and adopting strategic planning, creative and innovative ideas for the hotel industry to thrive amidst global crises. This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview guide to sample the opinion of five managers in reputable 3star luxury hotels in Nsukka, Nigeria. The findings revealed that hotels were greatly affected by COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the loss of revenue, downsizing, job loss, and numerous changes in hotel operations and services. The study also found that the hotels have started to adapt to the new changes in terms of service delivery, operating cost, digitalization of the industry, and staff training. The study, therefore, suggests that strategic approach to service delivery in hotels will revamp the business and lead to industry recovery and profitability.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, pandemic, change, hotel, service delivery, Nigeria.

#### INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus infection or COVID-19 pandemic is among the toughest health challenges which have confronted the human race. It was the most unanticipated challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century not only for the healthcare sector, but almost all countries (Fahimullah, *et al.*, 2021). In December 2019, COVID-19 developed in China and started spreading to other parts of the world. By March 2020, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a pandemic (Ruby-Cisneros 2020). COVID-19 has negatively impacted most facets of human endeavor; the hospitality and tourism industry is faced with unprecedented global health, social and economic crises. The hotel industry appears to be one of the hardest hit as global hotel bookings were greatly affected. A report by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), shows that the hotel industry in all world regions recorded a large double-digit decline in global revenue per available room (RevPAR) with Asia (-67.8%) and Europe (-61.7%) posting the biggest decreases (UNWTO, 2020). As it concerns Nigeria, Oruonye, and Ahmed (2020) found that industries in the tourism sector, including hotels, are facing declining demand and patronage, with travel crashes and cancellations leading to revenue loss as a result of COVID-19. Since the hotel industry is service-oriented, there is no doubt that COVID-19 has brought about changes and more challenges in service delivery. Hotels are expected to take proactive steps in handling these extra service delivery challenges and changes if they are to remain viable in the long run. In Nsukka urban, Enugu State, Nigeria, for instance, the number of hotels have proliferated in the last few years; suggesting a surge in visitor arrivals in the area. However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis, there is the need to examine the changes and challenges which the hotels have been forced to undergo, and are undergoing as a result of the pandemic. This is necessary because for the hotels to contribute meaningfully to tourism development in an upcoming city like Nsukka, a good service delivery system is adjudged necessary since it affects

the total experience of guests/tourists. There is, therefore, the need to identify and analyze the changes and challenges in service delivery triggered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, so that hotels in the area can better adapt to changes, remain in business, and gain a competitive advantage. Understanding the changes and challenges of the COVID-19 outbreak on the Nigerian hotel sector, in terms of how COVID-19 has affected service delivery is very important since it helps policymakers, tourism managers, and planners to develop strategies to deal with the impacts and similar situations in the future. A thorough understanding of these cannot be without extensive research on COVID-19 and hotel service delivery, hence, this study, which was situated in the Nsukka metropolis of Enugu State, Nigeria.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Many epidemics and pandemics have impacted heavily on the tourism industry. The twentieth century was thought to have experienced three pandemics namely: the 'Spanish' flu or influenza of 1918-19, the 'Asian' flu (H2N2) of 1957, and the 'Hong Kong' flu of 1968. The twenty-first century has experienced pandemics such as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2002, 'Bird flu' in 2009, MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) in 2012, Ebola which peaked in 2013-14 (Greger, 2007; Wu, *et al.*, 2017) in Gössling HTTP, *et al.*, (2020), and currently, the Coronavirus crisis. This deadly virus reshaped the scenario of the whole world because of the unanticipated social, financial, and ecological calamities (Fahimullah, *et al.*, 2021). COVID-19 originated from the Wuhan Province of China in December 2019 and began to spread rapidly in China and to other parts of the world through the movement of people in early 2020 (Ozil, 2020). A highly transmissible respiratory disease, COVID-19 spreads through contact with other infected individuals, with symptoms such as fever, cough, and breathing problems (Yang, *et al.*, 2020). The Coronavirus pandemic, actually begun with fear and hope, social isolation, economic instability, and environmental destruction. Therefore, to curtail the spread of the dreaded virus, leaders of various countries were compelled to formulate various measures to contain the menace of the disease. Borders were

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closed, airplanes were grounded, hotels and restaurants were locked down, conference and convention venues, and other hospitality companies had to close their premises, compulsory quarantine measures were imposed on populations, physical distancing was introduced as a recommended social behavior of people (Nicola, *et al.*, 2020). Lots of infection control practices, such as the use of disinfectants, more cautious about personal hygiene to use hand sanitizers, surface cleaners, face masks, or shield were compulsorily introduced in the hospitality sector. Specifically for the hospitality sector, the World Health Organization (WHO) produced a guide titled "Operational Considerations for COVID-19 Management in the Accommodations Sector" to provide practical assistance to the hospitality sector in particular (WHO 2020, cited from Mohammad, *et al.*, (2020). The report is divided into sections for the management team, reception and concierge, technical and maintenance services, restaurants and dining rooms and bars, recreational areas for children, and cleaning and housekeeping with a list of responsibilities to help manage the threat of COVID-19 (WHO 2020, cited from Mohammad, *et al.*, (2020). In the hospitality industry, 'service' could be construed as an activity or series of activities that take place in the interaction between the customer and service employees, and the physical resources and systems put in place to achieve customer satisfaction (see Grönroos, 2001). It can also be seen as the array of assistance and efforts, as well as processes which the management of hospitality firms render to their clients aimed at enriching customer experience and encouraging the re-visit intention. Services may be defined in contrast to goods. While the latter are tangible items that can be created and then sold or used later, service is intangible, or less tangible and perishable (Blazey in Jafari (Ed). 2000:527). Services are usually created and consumed simultaneously (Blazey in Jafari (Ed). 2000:527). As a concept 'service delivery system' covers those aspects of the operation which take place at the time that a customer or client comes to the service point and requests a specific service (Lockwood in Jafari (Ed) (2000:529). The delivery system is designed to provide the customer with the required variety of services and with minimum delay (Lockwood in Jafari, Ed. 2000:529). The service delivery system, according to Ponsignon, *et al.*, (2011), describes how organizations deliver their value proposition to their intended customers or clients. Bitner (1992) adds that how service delivery system is configured influences the 'servicescape' of companies by way of providing the physical space in which services take place (structural choices), by defining the service processes and internal procedure (infrastructural choices) and the system knowledge and learning (integration choices) that guide employees' behavior. From the aforesaid, the service delivery system should be viewed as a fundamental element in the experience design processes (see, for example, Fesenmaier, & Xiang, 2017; Pine, & Gilmore, 2011). Unlike goods, hotel service is susceptible to various internal and external influences, which make it difficult, if not impossible, for one service encounter to be replicated. For instance, a crisis such as pandemics does impact heavily on service and/or service delivery in the hotel industry. Tourism as a service industry, consisting of transportation, accommodation, and hospitality (Collins-Kreiner and Wall (2015); or as an amalgam of activities across various industry sectors, is one of the most affected by the pandemic. The hospitality and lodging industry is one of the major drivers of economic growth and social development in developed and developing countries. As such, the industry's contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), job creation, community development, and provision of social services to customers, is not in doubt (Ocheni, *et al.*, 2020). The hotel industry appears to be one of the hardest hit as global hotel bookings were greatly affected. A report by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), shows that the hotel industry in all world regions recorded a large double-digit decline in global revenue per available room (RevPAR), with Asia (-67.8%) and

Europe (-61.7%) posting the biggest decreases (UNWTO, 2020). Evidence has shown that before the outbreak of COVID-19; technological innovations were being harnessed by investors in the hotel industry to increase the economic potentials and sustainability of the industry and to enhance customers' experience. An example is the current use of bed sensors for customer's comfort and the use of internet services are now used to send messages to regular customers and make reservations for them (Salazar, 2018). According to Kendall College (2018), the hospitality industry has aided in job creation and direct generation of revenue for local and domestic economies when monies are spent by tourists on hotels. Estimates in 2017, showed that the hospitality and lodging industry created 313 million jobs worldwide. This contribution translated to 9.9% of the total employment in the world and 20% of all net jobs created in the past ten years (Ocheni, *et al.*, 2020). Gossling, *et al.*, (2020) pointed out that patronage in the accommodation sector dropped drastically by 50 percent or more due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Norway, the drastic impact of COVID-19 reflects a significant temporary layoff of staff, and the same happened to the United States of America in the hospitality and lodging industry. In the United States of America, 7 out of 10 hotel rooms were found to be empty in May 2020 and thousands of hotels were all closed down (Ocheni, *et al.*, 2020). In regards to revenue loss, about 23 billion USD in room revenue was lost in the United States between February and May 2020. Estimated daily revenue lost to hotels was put at 400 million USD. The workforce in the hospitality and lodging industry also experiences significant layoffs. About 2.4 billion USD as weekly wages/earnings of hotel staff is lost as a result of Covid-19 impact on the industry (American Hotel and Lodging Association, 2020 in Ocheni, *et al.*, 2020). Covid-19 has no doubt changed the socio-economic structures and operations of many enterprises, especially hotels. Even in Nigeria, over 35,000 employees under the National Association of Nigerian Travel Agencies (NANTA) have been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Oruonye & Ahmed 2020). Even Emenike, (2020) stated that the low purchasing power and harsh economic realities caused by the impact of COVID-19 resulted in low patronage. As rightly noted by Wen, *et al.*, (2020), the pandemic is changing the behavior of tourists, as they are now more sensitive towards the health and safety standards of firms and destinations. Since the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, service delivery in hotels has become more challenging since good hygiene has been generally advocated as one of the measures to stay away from contracting the deadly virus. With this in mind, guests' service quality expectation, especially as it concerns health appears to have risen. It is inline with the aforesaid that Seyitoğlu, & Ivanov, (2020) opined that hospitality firms have to rewrite their health and safety protocols to decrease the probability of spreading the virus. According to Sigala, (2020), facial masks, transparent anti-virus helmets, and rubber gloves may become standard equipment for hospitality employees in direct contact with customers. Equally, Rosen, (2020) noted that some hotels have adopted robots for the disinfection of rooms with ultraviolet light. It is instructive to note that while the core service of hospitality companies, such as hotels does not change in the Corona Virus era, the way the service is delivered to visitors/guests is changing (see Seyitoğlu, and Ivanov, 2020). In support, Mastrogiacomes, (2020), states that the impacts of the Corona Virus require that hotels should strategize to meet up with the industry demands. Therefore, hotel managers are expected to be at the forefront in identifying and analyzing the extra challenges and changes in the service delivery system, which have been triggered as a result of the coronavirus crisis. It is because of this that the researchers set out to conduct the study on service delivery and the challenges of COVID-19 in the hotel industry in the Nsukka metropolis, Nigeria. Again, the study became imperative as much of the works on COVID-19 as it relates to Nigeria have not examined the

pandemic from the perspective of service delivery in the hotel sector. For example, the work by Onalu, *et al.*, (2020), which looked at 'COVID-19 response and social work education in Nigeria,' and another by Obi-Ani, *et al.*, (2021), which was titled 'Covid-19 pandemic and The Nigerian primary healthcare system' were very much unrelated to the study at hand. The closely related study by Ocheni, *et al.*, (2020), examined the impact of coronavirus on the aviation, cruise-shipping, and hospitality components of the tourism industry. The study, however, did not specifically study the hotel industry; therefore this justifies the need for in-depth study of the changes and challenges the hotel industry is facing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To explore the changes brought about by Covid-19 in the hotel service delivery, this study adopts a qualitative method case studies to identify, analyze the changes and challenges in hotel service delivery. The combination of case study design and qualitative methods is well established in the scientific literature. The population for this study included hotel managers from three-star rating standard hotels in Nsukka, Nigeria who are responsible for the daily operations of their hotel and are in close relationship with management, other staff, and customers. Five participants who are managers with experiences drawn from various segments of the Hotel industry were selected for the study. Relatively small sample size is adequate for a case study design because the focus is not on the size of the sample, but the richness of the data gained from the in-depth insights of the phenomenon shared by the participants in the study (Yin, 2014). Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who met the criteria for the study, which were five experienced managers in the three-star standard hotels namely; University of Nigeria General Enterprise Ltd Guest House, Jucony Hotel and Resort, Golden Valley, Jerry Marriot, and Kennan Lodge, Nsukka, Nigeria. These criteria are likely indicators that the managers have successful hotel service delivery operations in the past three years. This study adopted three forms of data collection, namely; direct observation of hotel activities and environment, document review, and in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Collecting data through semi-structured face-to-face interviews allows participants to describe and elaborate on individual experiences thereby enhancing the richness of the data through the discovery of new themes (Price, *et al.*, 2015). The format of the questions for the interviews was open-ended to encourage dialogue and urge informants to provide more insights into the phenomenon under study (Rossetto, 2014). Methodological content analysis as established by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used for this study. It goes on to interpret the content in its holistic form and setting so that the empirical materials reflect real-world settings in the hotel industry.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The five managers of the reputable luxury hotels in Nsukka acknowledged that COVID-19 has brought lots of changes and new development in the hotel industry operations and services. The hotels were all locked down because of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria and the whole world. As they re-opened, lots of experiences and changes have been witnessed in terms of the strategies they are adopting in service delivery, recovery, customer satisfaction, and retention. They emphasized the importance and need for service recovery and delivery strategies as well as new ways of thinking in the post-COVID-19 era. The hotels witnessed great economic setbacks which resulted in low customer patronage, revenue loss, staff downsizing, and reduction in salaries. As rightly pointed out by Ocheni, *et al.*, (2020), Covid-19 has no doubt changed the socio-

economic structures and operations of many enterprises, especially hotels. The hotel managers informed that low patronage as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic made them start rethinking the way forward to remain in business. Some of the managers confessed that their average room occupancy rate per month is yet to hit 20% while others were at 30% as at the time of this study. They have seriously experienced revenue loss as a result of low patronage. This supports what Emenike, (2020) pointed out that the low purchasing power and harsh economic realities caused by the impact of Covid-19 resulted in low patronage. Although some prior bookings were made by customers before the COVID-19 lockdown, most activities were postponed and are now rescheduled. None of the customers involved asked for compensation. Notwithstanding the situation, the managers expressed optimism that as time progresses, the occupancy rate would improve, since most of the events canceled might take place in later months as things normalize. In providing new service delivery strategies, the hotels aim at satisfying their customers who are referred to as the number one in the hotel business. The customer's confidence and loyalty to the hotels are now being rebuilt through determination to offer quality services. Although they try to minimize cost, some of the government policies on maintaining adequate safety and hygienic environment, made the hotels spend more on buying handwashing facilities, soaps, and hand sanitizers. The hotels are practically reviewing their health and safety protocols to decrease the probability of spreading the virus. As rightly pointed out by Wen, *et al.*, (2020), the pandemic is changing the behavior of tourists, as they are now more sensitive towards the health and safety standards of firms and destinations. The managers informed that they also embark on fumigation of the hotel surrounding to ensure the safety of their guests and staff. Hygiene and safety practices, social distancing, and wearing of face masks are being observed. Even though they are putting on a face mask while rendering services to customers, they still put on a smiling face which does not come only from the face but from the heart. Therefore, satisfying the customers, with new ways of serving them keeps the managers rest assured of customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. The managers noted that they cannot satisfy all the guests because they have different customer preferences of which the most important and urgent problem is given due attention. Even they noted that the customers make more demands with cleanliness and hygiene as a result of COVID-19. Therefore, they deem it fit to meet up the necessary demands and needs of the customers by renovating and servicing existing facilities and equipment in the hotels which are bringing positive outcomes for the hotel industry in Nigeria. Since the hotels have the reputation of offering 24-hour services to their customers it became more costly to maintain constant electricity with the high rate of electricity tariff in Nigeria, but have to consider other alternatives. They now have big and small generators to switch on the smaller generator during the time of fewer activities. High cost of things and the fluctuating economy is badly affecting them with regards to operating cost and expenses. As such, they now pay close attention to reducing their operating expenses while considering the satisfaction of their customers very important and at the same time maximize profit to keep the business moving. Even until now, the hotel business environment has not returned to its usual status as a result of the pandemic and its consequences. This supports what Orunye & Ahmed (2020) rightly pointed out that the impact of COVID-19 will make it extremely difficult for many of the tourism industry's players to continue paying staff with a sharp drop in sales and income, resulting in job loss. The managers noted that many hotels are already closing down because of low patronage and inability to meet up with payment of worker's salaries and electricity bills. The managers acknowledged that the impact of COVID-19 is making the management make adjustments in their business approaches. In these readjustments, new service delivery and recovery strategies are very essential for

their process improvement, employee improvement, and customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. This is in line with what Mastrogiacome, (2020) pointed out that the impacts of the Corona Virus require that hotels should strategize to meet up with the industry demands. Furthermore, most of all the hotels noted that Covid-19 brought about new development for the industry in terms of digitalization of the industry. Almost all the study hotels have started repairs, construction of access roads to their hotel, upgrade of their lodging facilities, information, and communication technology facilities upgrade, maintenance and replacement. They are now installing advanced technologies like more computers, digital cameras, automated machines, and making sure that their internet services are up to standard with the current demands. This is as a result of digital reservations, checking and transactions being made by the customers. The managers pointed out that new change in technological operations is costing them much but it is better to be in business with the current demands than to be out of business. They noted that as their hotels are striving to provide excellent services to their customers; the nature of the environment they work in makes service failure and human imperfections unavoidable and as such, emphasize that new service delivery approaches are very essential for their hotels. As rightly put, by Rashid, (2014), every organization aims to deliver the utmost service to the customers, but in certain circumstances, it is impossible to provide service with zero defects. He further stressed that the best organizations in the world are unable to offer excellent service delivery and escape from service failure. As such, the hotels are collaborating with related sectors to sharing of ideas and strategies on how to best move the business and survive in the face of future challenges. The managers stated that new service delivery and recovery strategies are a vital part of their daily service activities in the hotels. In meal and service delivery, more hygiene and safety precautionary measures are observed since contactless services are now adopted. Ordering of services is done through mobile or intercom calls, messages, apps, even payments are made through e payments. Most of the hotels have a culture of listening to the customers' demands and complaints through telephone and mobile conversations, text messages, and email communication. They put up a listening attitude since new development demands contactless services, in so doing, they hear out their customers and respond accordingly. Each of the hotels has a complaint and suggestion box placed in front of the office desk for customer's comments, complaints, and suggestions. This helps them to identify a particular problem that needs to be addressed and give appropriate attention to it. Covid-19 pandemic resulted in staff downsizing while some hotels instead of downsizing, embark on reduction in salary. This also enables them to reduce operating costs. The various hotels are now always providing diverse training programs for the staff at least once or twice a month. New training is always planned to create awareness of the new trend. Training on information, communication and technology skills, health and safety practices, customer and staff relationship, employee and management relationship and etcetera, are now given close attention. Since there is a leading shift in what the customer desires and expects, the hotels always have regular meetings so that new improvements will be made. The constant meeting provides room for office problem analysis and corrections to ensure that friendly interaction and relationship with the customers is established. The essence is to sensitize employees on communication procedures through which customer's needs, expectations, and complaints are effectively tackled. The approaches observed in these hotels are observation and listening to the complaints, apologizing, asking further questions for clarity, reassuring the customers about meeting their needs, making corrections, and thanking them for such information. In taking actions, the employee relates the information to the management and board for decisive action. The managers noted that there is orderliness in

the hotels. In supporting the employees, the management ensures the protection of their employees in the case of assault. In the situation where the management and board could not handle the situation, external forces are involved. The study hotels adopt a feedback analysis measure which gives them the opportunity to know the worth of their products and service delivery for their process improvement. The essence of these is to regain losses, retain their customers, attract new customers and remain in business. Therefore, the managers play significant part in ensuring that customer satisfaction and service delivery efforts are properly conducted.

## Conclusion

Conclusively, the study found that effective service delivery and recovery efforts are important in the hotel industry in the post-COVID-19 era. Hotels were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and require recovering their customers, employees and improving their service delivery operations. The findings from this qualitative case study revealed that COVID-19 has brought about new development and changes in terms of strategies hotels adopt in service delivery as well as the challenges that come with them for the hotel industry. The managers as well as documentary sources have revealed that there are now new ways of hotel operations, serving customers, and new customer expectations and experiences which need to be explored further. Health and safety practices are now more compulsory and must be given top priority attention in hotels. Digital checking, reservations, transactions, and operations have resulted in new ways of thinking with the challenges of operating costs for the industry. Digitalization of the industry helps to facilitate service delivery as the industry now requires contactless services. Even staff training has become very crucial as customers become more skeptical, sophisticated, and educated. Therefore, it has become imperative for the hotel industry to be more proactive in handling these extra service changes and challenges to remain viable in the long run especially in the post-COVID-19 era. Hotel operators should realize that adopting effective strategic planning and offering adequate service delivery strategies may lead to increase customer patronage, satisfaction, recovery, retention, and growth in the nation's economy. As rightly pointed out in the study, researchers are expected to shift their research focus to develop solutions for the hospitality and tourism industry in terms of the changes and challenges brought by COVID-19. The study, therefore, suggests that a strategic approach to service delivery in hotels will revamp the business and lead to industry recovery and profitability soon.

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