



An Analysis of the Iranian Hospitality Industry Amidst Sars-Cov-2 (COVID-19) Pandemic

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Abstract: The number of researches has been done in relation to general conditions, structure, current state and development process of the hotel industry in Iran but it is still insufficient. Additionally there are limited studies on the health of the Iranian hospitality industry. Thus, to fill these research gaps, the present study tries to explore the developmental evaluation and current status of the Iran's hospitality industry in the wake of the Sars-Cov-2 (COVID-19) pandemic through qualitative research by using SWOT analysis (SWOT Matrix), confrontation matrix. Moreover, this research shows that apart from health issues, various factors are also influential on development level of the local hotel industry. The study demonstrated that the Sars-Cov-2 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a major impact on the Iran's hospitality sector. The research also provides insight into how hospitality businesses are responding to this crisis. This critical situation/slow period has also had some positive effects, which are discussed. Finally, the study made some recovery strategies for industry practitioners and policymakers in response to the Sars-Cov-2 (COVID-19).

Keywords: Hospitality industry, COVID-19, SWOT analysis, confrontation matrix, Iran.

JEL classification code: Z3, L8, M3, I1

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, the tourism industry is a significant income generating sector; however during a global crisis, the tourism and hospitality are one of the first sectors that is severely affected. The economic toll of the Sars-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic has been felt by almost every global industry including tourism and hospitality which has experienced travel restrictions and a subsequent unprecedented collapse in global travel demand (Alonso et. al. 2020; Gursoy and Chi, 2020; Kaushal and Srivastava, 2021; Niestadt, 2020). The transition of

the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China to a global pandemic has been attributed to international travel (Kalyankar and Patil, 2020; Farzanegan et. al. 2021) a pattern evidenced by Iran's status as one of the first contaminated destinations outside of China. Multiple factors drove international tourism between these two countries first of which is Iran's close political ties with China. These ties were forged for the various reasons (i.e. to maintain strong diplomatic relations; Iran's economic isolation and weakened country's finances; dependence on Chinese investment and assistance; U.S. sanctions; humanitarian assistance to China and the lack of seriousness in dealing with this crisis). As COVID-19 rapidly spread in 2020, Mahan Air (Iran's largest airline closely associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), continued operating hundreds of flights between Iran and several countries in the Middle East and between Iran and China, and helped transfer China-bound passengers in other countries, during the period between late January and the end of March 2020 (Redondo, 2020; Lim, 2020). Except the above other reasons to spread the virus are, the presence of approximately 700 Chinese clerical students in the city of Qom seminary (some of which were returned to Iran from China after the Chinese New Year celebrations), and wrong policies of the government to a rapid spread of COVID-19 nation-wide (Behravesht, 2020). When cases of the COVID-19 virus started to spread in Iran in mid-February 2020, Iranian officials admittedly suppressed the news in order to maintain active participation in the Parliament or Islamic Consultative Assembly election (Majlis-e Shura-ye Eslami), as well as celebrating the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. The Iranian government continued to deny the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic until its global prevalence became undeniable (Duddu, 2020). Accordingly, Iran was one of the first countries in Middle East to become widely infected with the COVID-19. The official statistics published by the Islamic republic of Iran revealed the country to be a COVID-19 epicenter with the death toll surpassing 145,499 people and cases topping 7,701,927 (January 2023) (MOHME, 2023). However, experts and researchers believe actual death toll and prevalence could be several times higher (Ghafari and Madani, 2020; Ghafari et. al. 2020; Mahboob Far, 2020).

Iran's tourism industry has experienced major crises in the past years, due to factors such as political issues and widespread government and social corruption (Raad, 2019), stagflation (Nemati et. al. 2018), rising domestic fuel prices (Euronews, 2017), popular protests and internet outages (DeNardis, 2012), U.S. imposed sanctions (Pratt and Alizadeh, 2018), the crash of Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752 (Calder, 2020), risk of kidnapping and the

arbitrary arrest and detention incoming tourists (Ferstman, 2019), constant protests over human rights abuses under the slogan of women, life, liberty from September 2022 and finally the Covid-19 outbreak (Cafiero, 2020). These crises certainly pose a continuous threat to Iran's tourism and hospitality industry.

The present research has aimed at addressing the global challenges and opportunities influences on the Iranian Hospitality industry and in response of those influences, the movement with strengths and weaknesses of this industry amidst the COVID-19 pandemic period. Further, the study investigating varied factors affecting the success of Iran's hotel industry activities. The main research questions that guided this research are following: what are general conditions, structure, current state and development process of the hotel industry in Iran? What are the factors affecting the success of Iran's hotel industry activities? What are COVID-19 pandemic impact on the Iranian hospitality industry? How local hospitality businesses are responding to this crisis? What are recovery strategies for industry practitioners and policymakers in response to the pandemic?

Nowadays the social transmission of Virus (COVID-19) is under control and risks are minimized. The Iranian market in the field of tourism is still a pristine and large market. However hotels are facing further conditions imposed by Government for protecting the severity of the Virus, those have affected their activities. Tourism in Iran is seasonal for incoming tourists, the problem becomes more worrying especially during the peak of these tourists' trips (September, October, April and May). In Iran, due to the lack of an international credit card, all payments must be also made in cash and this routine continues. Political issues caused western tourists to cancel most of their reservations. Religious rules that must be observed by non-Muslim tourists are seems also repulsive. The arrival of Chinese, Russian and Arab (mainly from Iraq) tourists is worth mentioning, but it is not sufficient and satisfactory. The causes of present stagflation related with the domestic tourists are, the continuous increase of prices in the country, sometimes even traveling to neighboring countries is cheaper for the Iranian tourist, and they become more inclined to travel abroad, the decrease in the revenue and unauthorized accommodation activities have caused to have no desire to reserve a room in a hotel and to look for alternative options. As announced by IHA, 85% of incoming tours and 50% of domestic tours were cancelled (Hamzehzadeh, 2023). Today, Apart from the effects of COVID-19 pandemic from 2019- 2020, the hotel industry is facing several serious challenges that the government should support this industry with all its strengths for its survival.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview of the Hotel Industry in Iran

Hospitality is one of the oldest and largest businesses in the world (Dignas, 2020) with public accommodations dating back to Babylonian taverns and inns in 500 B.C.E. (Rushmore and Baum, 2002) and Achaemenid caravanserais, 700 BC. The term ‘caravanserai’ is a Persian term for a domed building or a home for the caravans. Caravanserai not only accommodated and supported merchants and pilgrims, but also to increase security on frequented routes (Mansouri et. al. 2015; UNESCO, 2017). Nowadays, some ancient caravanserais have been transformed into attractive and comfortable lodging for the travelers in Iran (MirMohseni, 2019). Staying in this type of accommodation is like traveling and living through historic times. There is a wide variety of public accommodations in Iran, including: hotel, motel, guest houses /inns, apartment hotels, pilgrimage houses, boarding houses, homestays, eco-lodges, traditional resorts, complexes, camps in tourist areas, private rental houses, health and hygiene complexes and hospital hotel, etc. (Tehran.MCTH,2021a). Based on the latest available data by MCTH (Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization of Iran), Iran has 1272 hotels, 688 apartment hotels, 301 guest houses, 63 motels, 143 boarding houses, and 2263 eco-lodges. Only 3% of them are rated at four and five stars and more than 500 hotels are still under construction (Donya-e-Eqtesad, 2018). Khorasan Razavi (a holiest province in eastern Iran), Mazandaran) a province in the north of the country and next to the Caspian *Sea*), and the capital city of Tehran provinces host the largest share of hotels, respectively. Only two internationally recognized hotels are operating in the country: the Accor group’s Ibis and Novotel hotels, both at the Tehran airport (Varga, 2018). There are several major groups of local hotel chains in Iran that belong to the government and private sectors. Most of the country’s five and four-star hotels belong to the government sector and are owned and managed specifically by the following organizations: The Mostazafan and Janbazan Foundation (the foundation of the oppressed and war veterans :MJF); the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans; NAJA (the police force of the Islamic Republic of Iran) Cooperation Foundation; Hegta (the social security tourism holding), Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and MCTH,etc. Despite passed legislation, no action has been taken to transfer these state hotel groups to the private sector.

Despite its long history, components of the Iranian hospitality industry remain to be fully developed when compared to neighboring and similar

countries such as Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (Dubai), Malaysia and so on. Components include the number of hotels built or under construction, the hotel services quality, hotel management, skilled and trained workforce, and tourism marketing strategies (Raad, 2019).

Iran's Hoteliers Association (IHA) established in 1949, is one of the oldest lodging associations in the Middle East. Over the years, the IHA has played an important role in Iran's hotel development primarily regarding lobbying for favorable industry legislation (Hoteldaran, 2020a). Currently, the regulations for the creation, improvement, completion, grading and pricing of tourism facilities and their supervision are carried out by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts (MCTH), although some of those activities have recently been handed over to the Iran Hoteliers Association.

The majority of local hotels are managed according to the tastes of their appointed managers and not in accordance with international standards. The cost of booking a room of the public and government hotel sectors for their affiliated tourism companies have always been lower than private sector competitors, which has created unfair competition between the public and private hotel sectors. The priority of these hotels is always renting rooms to government and partner sectors rather than the private sectors (Hamshahri, 2017).

Iran's domestic hospitality workforce does not receive enough education and training (Ostadi and BazarmajKoliver, 2014). Additionally, appointed hotel managers and hoteliers are not transparent about their poor performance which is often due to lack of experience, expertise, and egotistical attitudes that do not welcome constructive criticism from specialists in this field (Soleimani, 2016).

Some other issues of Iran's hotel sector that can be added are: general mismanagement, international hostility, financial barriers from U.S. sanctions, operation of illegal lodging, as well as the organizational/governmental accommodations and entertainment facilities. In recent years, despite increasing interest in tourism and hospitality in Iran, lack of comprehensive tourism plans, political issues the risk of geopolitical tension in the region, cultural and religious restrictions, problems associated with advertising and the media, lack of participation and cooperation of all tourism and hospitality stakeholders due to political and socio-cultural barriers, internal economic, political and social issues, have inhibited the growth and development of the hotel industry. According to the IHA, consecutive changes of appointments and selection of the head and main officials of the MCTH based on political relationship,

government dominance in tourism activities and poor law /regulations are additional challenges to Iran's hospitality industry (Hamzehzadeh, 2018).

High land price for hotel construction particularly in large cities, lack of information and providing unrealistic tourism/ hospitality statistical data, seasonality of tourism, involvement of non-professional actors and government officials in the business of hotels, and many other issues as already stated, leads to hotels operating for more than half of the year with occupancy rates even less than 30 percent (Rahimpour, 2016).

International investment into Iran's hospitality is a difficult and complicated process. Most of the problems are internal due to domestic regulations, complex bureaucracy, and lack of government cooperation to providing facilities. Even if an investor goes through all of the complicated processes and the hotel is put into operation, there will be other problems such as different types of taxation across provinces, various municipal charges, etc. Even in the field of hotel equipment, Iran customs also has the highest tariffs which makes hotel services more expensive (Hamzehzadeh, 2015).

The results of a study conducted on the quality of luxury hotels in the cities of Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Yazd showed that most Iranian luxury hotels are monopolized by the government, people who work there don't have enough skills to provide quality services to guests (Alaedini and Chini, 2012). Many hotels suffer from lack of proper handling. The consumables of hotels are not of good quality for a luxury hotel. As the managers of these hotels are usually appointed by government authorities, any change of manager results in a change to the hotel's visual and service identity. Most of respondents stated that hotel staff are having difficulty understanding their requests due to the inability to communicate in English. In many cases, to earn tips, hotel staff engage in extreme and artificial exchanges with annoying guests. The majority of hotel staff have not attended the training courses, or they have not completed effective training programs. Another issue is that hotel restaurants do not offer a wide variety of continental and local cuisines (Alaedini and Chini, 2012). Out of approximately 2,500 national dishes and 109 types of drinks in the country, only certain types of food (mostly types of kebabs and several types of Iranian stew) are served in restaurants and hotels of the country (Pezeshki, 2016). In menu and catering training, which are the foundations of this science and industry, there is no planning. Little attention has been paid to food tourism and introduction/education and information regarding food diversity for public and local community. There is no standard for human resources training in this

industry. Besides, there is lack of proper introduction, advertising and marketing in this area, but possibly one of the important reasons is that the best local food is cooked and consumed at home.

Over the last decade hotel occupancy has gradually decreased. The average hotel occupancy rate in Iran was about 50% prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (EghtesadOnline, 2019a). Many government agencies have their own accommodation, and these facilities have made people reluctant to use hotels.

According to Alaedini and Chini (2012), home rentals and homestay accommodations have increased in popularity in Iran because of tourists' preferences for personal freedoms, price reasonability, accommodating large numbers of guests at a lower cost, and perceived biases. For example, some hoteliers do not desire (without a legal basis) to give room to local single women or females who traveling independently. The rental homes, home stays / eco-lodges, and the supply of schools to accommodate travelers have made the hotel market more sluggish, bringing the industry closer to bankruptcy (EghtesadOnline2019b).

In recent years, several online hotel accommodation booking sites have been offering online reservation and payment (i.e. Eghamat24, Snaptrip, Iranmarcopolo, Jabama, Iranhotelonline, Alaedin,Alibaba,Hotelyar, Raheeno, Soltansafar, Jainjas, Mehrbooking, Shab, Wego, Safarme, and so on (Azami,2021). However, even with rooms being sold on these hotel booking sites, hoteliers still structure payments to benefit them more than the hotel itself. Additionally, one challenge to further development of Iran's tourism hospitality industry is seasonality in hotel room demand (EghtesadOnline, 2016).

Iran's Hospitality and Covid-19 Pandemic

The spread of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had a severe negative impact on the development of the world's hotel industry, and Iran is no exception. The reluctance of the authorities to providing valid and recognized coronavirus vaccines (i.e. Moderna, Pfizer, etc.), and unavailability of valid vaccine across country and the emphasis on domestic vaccine production had subsequent effects on the health of society and it had as well a severe negative impact on the country's hotels.

A limited number of researches have been conducted on the effects of COVID-19 on Iran's hotel industry and tourism (Bagheri, Abdi, 2021; Foroudi, Tabaghdehi and Marvi , 2021; Salari and Murphy, 2022; GhasempourGanji ,

Johnson, Kazemi, and Sadeghian, 2022), the majority are focused on some parts of global topics. However, the present article tries to study the effects of COVID-19 from a macro comprehensive and general point of view.

Continued employment of the approximate 80,000 employees within Iran's hotel sector will be difficult to ensure considering the COVID-19 pandemic's negative financial impacts on the Iranian hospitality industry. Some hoteliers, including state-owned hotels could not afford to pay their staff for a few months. Thus, it is expected that the industry will face a massive dismissal of hotel staff in the near future. It should be noted that according to the existing rules in the country, the trend of rising unemployment in privately owned hotels will be much more severe than in state-owned hotels, where some regulations do not easily allow employees to be fired. In the meantime, several hotel owners are also brainstorming opportunities to convert hotel into another activity.

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the annual local events such as rose water festival and rose tourism in general (Zamani-Farahani and Fox, 2018) which attracts a large number of tourists to the Isfahan province. Rose and rosewater tourism takes place only during the spring rose harvest season which begins in late April and ends in June. These recent years, Kashan (the hub city of rose and rosewater tourism and festival in Iran) did not host as usual rose or rosewater tourism to protect the health of tourists and the host community. Kashan has seven hotels, four apartment hotels, 29 traditional accommodations, four guesthouses, 15 eco-lodges, and a tourist complex, all of which received low rate of customers.

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed many people to cancel their domestic and foreign trips especially for NowRuz holidays during March-April 2020 and afterwards. NowRuz, the two-week New Year holiday begins March 20 and is the country's largest national holiday celebrated by all Iranians, regardless of religion or ethnicity (Zamani-Farahani, Niekerk and Mathis, 2019). It is a busy season that attracts many domestic and foreign tourists to Iran. Traditionally, Iranians complete hundreds of domestic trips even though most businesses and workplaces and all educational centers are closed (Majlesi, 2020). During NowRuz from 2020 to 2022, hotels were the most affected hospitality sector. Furthermore, the hotel expenses such as building maintenance, green space, wages, different type of taxes and insurance, energy carriers, etc., are fixed costs for hotels that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hoteldaran, 2020b).

China is one of the largest outbound travel markets in the world (Springer, 2020; Fischer, 2020, Zamani-Farahani, 2021). Iran has sought market shares of the approximate 134 million (2019) Chinese outbound trips during Chinese New Year 2020 (Lunar New Year/ Spring Festival) (Joppe, 2020). Tourism public and private sectors mainly located in nine provinces and the free zones areas, had prepared themselves to host Chinese tourists for celebrating Chinese New Year 2020. They had taken special offers (i.e. installing welcome banners and New Year greetings in Chinese at the entrances and important places of the city; lighting most popular tourist attractions; holding temporary exhibitions with thematic connection between the two countries; serving Chinese food in restaurants (Zamani-Farahani and Lee, 2022); designing special and tailored made tours for Chinese tourists; provide discounts on accommodations, catering, handicrafts and entrance tickets to tourist attractions and museums; Chinese-speaking tour guide in museums and tourist attractions for incoming Chinese tourists during this holiday (Zina Al-Abedin, 2019). But due to the COVID-19 pandemic, inbound tours purchased by the Chinese travelers were suspended (Statista, 2020). Interestingly, while some hoteliers refused to accept Chinese travelers/guests, hoteliers within Assaluyeh, the Jam, and Bushehr regions did accept traveling Chinese employees and professionals. Though, in the recent months, with the weakening of the effects of the Coronavirus and the one-way removal of entry visas for Chinese tourists and the joint agreements between the two countries (Iran and China), the number of these incoming tourists become increasing.

The historical Abbasi Hotel in Isfahan (a former caravanserai from the seventh century, transformed into a luxury hotel in the 1950s by André Godard (Varga, 2018)) has been closed for a while due to the ban on passenger reception because of the COVID-19 virus after 53 years of operation (IribNews, 2019). Approximately 70% of accommodations in the city of Qom (the second holiest city in Iran and the center of study for religious clerics and students with around 242 authorized accommodation units including hotels, apartment hotels, guesthouses and homestays) have been closed since mid-February 2020 (ISNA, 2020a) until last year. The hotel occupancy rates in Mashhad (an important pilgrimage and recreational city, with more than 1,100 authorized accommodation units including hotels, apartment hotels and guesthouses) has reached less than 10%, which has been unprecedented in the history of operation (IRNA, 2020a). Approximately 80% of hotel reservations during NowRuz in the historical city of Shiraz were canceled and the total occupancy rate of hotels in Fars province (Fars is a province in southwest Iran known for its rich Persian

culture and history), with more than 500 accommodation units like hotels, apartment hotels, guesthouses, homestay, eco-lodges) has been below five percent in recent months (IRNA, 2020b). The Gilan province (located in northern Iran next to the Caspian Sea) is very popular by the domestic and Arab tourists due to its proximity to the forest and sea. However, none of the authorized accommodations have been able to provide services to guests until further notice (Mehrnews, 2020). In Mazandaran province, hoteliers across the 202 authorized accommodation units have reported large financial losses (Hoteldaran, 2020c). Consequently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran experienced the highest drop in occupancy rates and revenues compared to before.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local eco-lodge activities was also considerable. There are approximately 2,263 eco-lodges units across the country (ISNA, 2020b), with historical Isfahan province leading, followed by Kerman and Yazd provinces (located in southeast and center of Iran). This type of accommodation is a newcomer to the hotel sector and has developed mainly in rural areas and is considered a rustic and informal job opportunity. As eco-lodges lodging are not covered under numerous types of local insurance policies needed by an hotelier, they will need special support from tourism and government officials.

While Iran is not relying on the tourism and hospitality industry as a primary source of income, domestic hotel stakeholders are fearing financial ruin. Despite the opposition of the MCTH to temporarily halt hotel closures, Iranian provincial governors-general and governors of cities ordered these places closed (ISNA, 2020c). Then, MCTH prepared and announced regulations and protocols for the closure and reopening of tourist sites. The MCTH required tourism and travel companies and hotels to reimburse all reserved payments to travelers without fines.

A few months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, some provinces have tried to gradually reactivate their hotels by observing health protocols and obtaining health codes, but their restaurant, conference hall, wedding hall, pools, gyms, etc. were closed.

According to the World Bank (2020 a, b), in 2019-2020, U.S. sanctions progressively tightened Iran's economic activity and government revenues. Stagflation, persistence of lower oil prices and export volumes, and increased poverty and unemployment rates are among Iran's serious economic problems at present. The 2021 budget of the MCTH has increased by only about 11%

compared to the previous year, while a large part of the revenue of this ministry is almost suspended due to the spread of COVID-19 (Faraz, 2020).

Another threat that should be mentioned is local internet disorders and social network filtering that harmed the hotel activities. As we know the internet and social media are one of the important information sources that affect the travel choices of potential travelers (Liu et. al. 2020).

On the other hand, it can be said that the COVID-19 virus has produced some positive impacts. This slow period provides an opportunity to look after hotels so that they will be well equipped to deal with the current and future crises. Accommodations should maintain the highest standards to ensure customer satisfaction (Freifer, 2020) as post-Covid customers desperately need security (Physical and Financial) and peace of mind when choosing their accommodation to stay in.

Introducing new ideas and trying to the development of innovative start-ups are another opportunities. For example in 2019, Mihmansho (become guest) was launched in Iran which serves as an alternative to Airbnb. It creating a competitive market in the area, reducing prices and increasing the quality of accommodation. Mihmansho, can also creating a new source of income for families in the current economic environment (Tehrantimes, 2019)

Alternatively, in recent years, in the pilgrimage and border areas (such as the provinces of Khorasan Razavi, Qom, Khuzestan, etc.) some accommodations, a majority of which are homestays, have provided sex services with religious coverage (a system of 'temporary marriage' known in Shiite beliefs as Sigheh) to tourists and pilgrims, mainly Arabs and especially Iraqis which was also supported by some local influential politicians and clergies. Many of the managers of these establishments confirm that a common question from Iraqi visitors is where to find sex workers (Guardian, 2015). This type of tourism has angered the local communities who felt humiliated, frustrated, and that it was a threat to the purity of Iranian women. Travel restriction induced by the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced demand for sex tourism in these border areas and subsequently restored calm to communities within them.

Research Gap

A study that analyzed 15 years of research (2000-2016) on Iran's tourism and hospitality industry found that less than 10% of 180 identified publications in major international research databases specifically focused on the country's

hospitality sector (Seyfi, Hall and Kuhzady, 2018). A quantitative survey by Akbari et. al. in 2023, among 200 hotel managers aims to fill the research gaps in the relationship between Iranian chain hotels and the influence of coronavirus pandemic on marketing performance. It suggest that adopting new strategies can help improve hotels' marketing performance during such difficult times. The researchers also recommended future research with different methodologies in this field.

Therefore, the numbers of researches have been done in relation to general conditions; structure, current state and development process of the hotel industry in Iran are still insufficient. Additionally, there are limited studies on the health of the Iranian hotel sector amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and factors affecting hospitality progress, a gap which this paper aims to fill through an analysis of. It should be also kept in mind that conduction research in Iran is very challenging task in general. Among barriers are the lack of financial support; absence of easy access to information and data from domestic and international sources; shortage of accurate, correct and up-to-dated statistical data; government security surveillance on conducting a field research, unavailability of qualified human resources / researchers; lack of enough support of researches by government and society; and so on) Yadollahi et. al. 2014; Rasuli and Shahriari, 2022; Anbari, Mohammadbeigi and Jadidi , 2015)

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to investigate the developmental evaluation and current status of the Iran's hospitality industry in the wake of the Sars-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic through amidst the COVID-19 epidemic. In order to address the research questions, implemented methodology involved secondary research data (Jaelani et. al. 2020; Davahli et. al. 2020; Vithayaporn, 2021; Gautam,2021; Engidaw, 2022), including available published academic studies, government documents, current media sources, online news and websites and statistical databases during 2020 to early 2023. Following a descriptive research designed. Furthermore analysis of data are presented through of SWOT analysis and Confrontation Matrix (Ali and Parvin, 2013).

SWOT ANALYSIS AND CONFRONTATION MATRIX

Since its inception in the early 1950s, the SWOT analysis has aided strategic management within varying international and phenomena contexts and across a range of fields such as education, agriculture, and hospitality and tourism

(Benzaghtaet. al.2021; Fernando, 2021; Helms and Nixon, 2010). The use of SWOT analysis for assessing industry competencies has been critiqued for its simplicity, exclusion of diagnostics, and ignorance of historical and current contextualizing factors of an industry's health (Vlados and Chatzinikolaou, 2019). However, some researchers argue that in its simplest form, SWOT analysis can be a useful tool in strategic management and that failed applications of the analysis can often be attributed to misunderstanding of the vectors within the analysis matrix, specifically factors related to "opportunities". Everett (2014) explains that opportunities should be considered "unmet demands in the marketplace or beneficial changes in competitive, technological, or regulatory environments" (p.64) and as positive externalities that are distinct from the strategies that businesses should take to maximize these market opportunities. In agreement with this observation, this paper applies a SWOT analysis confrontation matrix to the Iranian hotel sector pre and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic with a subsequent discussion of hotel sector management strategies that capitalize on the opportunities available for Iranian hotel sector recovery amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This methodology is deemed appropriate and necessary as academic literature has yet to build upon previous studies reporting on the state or nature of Iran's hospitality industry that were conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Salehipour, 2018; TalebianTaheri,2016; Abdolvand, Heidarzadeh and Esfarjani, 2012).

SWOT ANALYSIS

The SWOT analysis can be a landmark for making a competitive strategic analysis of the Iranian Hospitality Industry. A SWOT Matrix (SWOT analysis) can be used to find out the real internal and external issues which are affecting the sustainability or viability of the Hospitality Industry of Iran. The SWOT Matrix (SWOT analysis) is presented in Table 1.

From Table 1, the above strategies can formulate and implement to make the sector very important and promising sector in the economic growth of the country. Furthermore some defensive strategies may protect this sector in the current scenario, like:

- Technological advancement in each and every stage of this sector.
- Government should take the initiatives to get importance in the macroeconomic environment of Iran.
- Should take the initiatives to reduce the fund crisis and increase the international investment in Iran

Table 1: SWOT Matrix (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the hospitality industry of Iran during the AmidstSars-Cov-2 (COVID-19) Pandemic)

<i>Internal Factors</i>	<i>Strength</i>	<i>Weakness</i>
<i>External Factors</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.To some extent sufficient number of accommodation available and many different types on offer 2.The indigenous hotel chain companies and brands are well-established 3.Cheap hotel rates due to the high rate of exchange of foreign currencies with Iranian money international customers 4. Protection measures adopted during the pandemic 5.Tax exemptions for the sector have been extended for 2 years 6.The great interest of the local people and the private sector in the development of the tourism and hotel industry 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Damage of 23 thousand billion Tomans (Iranian money) during the corona period right now 2.Closure of several hotels or changing their use due to the damage caused by the epidemic 3.Face a massive dismissal of hotel staff in the near future due to financial problems(unemployment in privately owned hotels will be much more severe than in state-owned hotels) 4.Lack of proper management at the hotels in crisis situation 5.lack of optimal oversight of hotel performance by responsible organizations 6.Lack of proper advertising and marketing program/excitation 7. Lack of trained and experienced staff in hotel industry &improper selection and hiring of staff 8. Lack of a strategic planning systems 9. Lack of access to sufficient, practical and up-to-date information concerning local accommodations (in Persian & English) 10.Low performance of services provided 11. Lack of possibility of pricing hotels based on supply and demand 12. Weakness in effective customer and employee satisfaction system 13. The difficulty of producing and supplying new products 14.Government control over the majority hotels sector 15.Unwell management in costs control 16. Severe differences between local hotels and international standards 17. Low quality and quantity of hotel services 18. Lack of economic, social and political stability in the country 19. Cultural and religious issues
<p><u>Opportunity</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. An opportunity to look after hotels so that they will be equipped to deal with the current and future crises 2.Introducing new ideas and trying to the development of innovative start-ups 3.The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced demand for religion sex tourism in pilgrimage and border areas 4.Time for reconsidering in service according to customer demands and flexibility in services 5.Need to create innovations in attracting customers 6.Time for in-service training of employees 7.Developing strategic planning in the performance of hotel HR 8.Forgiveness of premiums& taxes and 	<p><u>SO – Strategy</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) With the 4th and 5th industrial revolutions hotels will have to use technological advancements to create attraction of customers and to provide better services to them.(S1, O1, O3,O4,O5) 2) By introducing network and collaboration among the indigenous hotel chain companies and brands will help to develop new ideas and employee performance improvement (S2, S3, O2, O6, O7) 3) Government intervention to protect the Iranian Hospitality Industry amidst the Sars-Cov-2 Pandemic 	<p><u>WO –Strategy</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Government and private initiatives to control and look after the service performance, well-experienced and qualified employee selection, and use the resources economically may make the individual firms competitive and better service providers to their.(O1, W5,W7,W10,W11, W12, W14, W16, W17). 2) Innovative startups and new idea introductions will reduce the unemployment problem and also reduce the chance of crowding out effects of the new and existing.(O2, W3, W2, W8) 3) Employee training facilities and well-established strategic

<p>offering long-term loans with low interest rates 9. Need to establish a think tank for the country's hotel industry 10. Review the management of hotels and appoint qualified people to manage hotel</p>	<p>through tax exemptions and long-term loans with low-interest rates is helping to survive in post COVID-19 pandemic situation. (S4,S5,S6,O8)</p>	<p>planning management procedures for hotel HR enable the hotels to provide better and customized services to the customers of the hotel. (O4,O5,O6,W3,W8,W1,W13)</p>
<p>Threats: 1. High widespread outbreak of Coronavirus nationwide 2. Poor responsibility for informing and preventing the spread of coronavirus by country official 3. The reluctance of the authorities to buy valid coronavirus vaccines and unavailability of valid vaccine across country 4. Lack of interest in private sector investment in the hotel industry 5. Unplanned and forward looking increase in the number of accommodation like eco-lodges, home stays, luxury rental home 6. Increase the costs of active hotels to comply with health conditions to deal with the coronavirus 7. Existence of stagflation in the country 8. Continuous increasing of energy carrier, products and services prices 9. Annual increase in hotel rates due to inflation in the country 10. No plan for critical times by the hotel industry 11. Lack of available funds to review hotel services and training staff 12. Lack of proper management at the hotel level in crisis situation 13. Lack of enough support from government officials for the hotel industry (inconsistency between words and actions) 14. Lack of proper advertising and marketing program 15. Local customer uncertainty toward the online hotel booking system 16. Lack of priority of tourism in economic development of country by officials 17. Socio-political protests and unrest caused the cancellation of hotel reservation 18. International sanctions, regional conflicts and negative propaganda about the insecurity of Iran 19. Lack of priority to the development of tourism and hospitality sector in the country's macro planning 20. Local internet disorders and social network filtering</p>	<p>ST –Strategy 1) During the pandemic a preventive measures have been taken to protect the tourists or customers from social transmission of Virus from one body to another. These initiatives were taken by Government and Private Authorities both. (S1, S4, T1, T2,T6). 2) Cheap hotel rates due to the high rate of exchange of foreign currencies with Iranian money for international customers are offering all hotel facilities with low cost. (S3,T5,T6,T9) 3) The great interest of the local people and the private sector in the development of the tourism and hotel industry decreases the chances of unplanned strategy formulation and implementation. (S6, T4,T5, T11, T13).</p>	<p>WT- Strategy 1) For the crises moments Iranian Hospitality Industry should have to prepare a backup plan for fund management and the management system of the entire sector. (W4, T10,T12). 2) International standard services and the cost control mechanism have to provide and take so that low-cost international-level services can be provided. (W15,W16,W17, T9) 3) Use social media (Whatsapp, Viber, Google chat, Facebook, Instagram and others) for promoting the hospitality sector of Iran for informing the inbound and outbound tourists about facilities, beauty, services, spots, packages and offers. (W9, T14,T15). 4) Providing accurate and correct statistics required data and updating them regularly, also making them available (T2, T5, T6,T20,W9,W12,W13) 5) Appointment of qualified managers and staffs at the hotels (T12,W4,W5,W7,W10,W12,W17) 6) Revision of the macro policies and political actions of the government and officials (T16, T17,T18,T19,W14, W16,W18,W19)</p>

Source: Authors

- Internet availability and social network media should have to ensure for all and also has to improve the social network filtering facilities so that all information about offers, packages and others create attraction to the potential customers and create customer loyalty.
- Should remain a backup plan for any crises occur. It will help to minimize the cost at the time of crises
- Government efforts for better policies) domestically & internationally) and improving political connections with other countries in the world

CONFRONTATION MATRIX

A Confrontation Matrix is a tool which is used to further explore the output of a SWOT analysis. It allows to analyse each different combination of strength, weakness, opportunity, and threaten aim to identify the most important strategic issues the business is facing. It is the extended version of SWOT analysis. Now the Iranian Hospitality Industry (amidst Sars- Cov-2 (COVID-19) pandemic) condition and the current critical problem/ issue is identified with confrontation matrix and it is described in Table-2 in following:

For preparing the confrontation matrix we need to make a short summery list from a large number of SWOT list for maintaining a balance in matrix. So from the SWOT list we take the following list of Opportunities, Threats, Strengths and Weakness.

Table 2: List of the considered variables as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
S ₁ : Availability of Accommodation	W ₁ : Dismissal of hotel staff due to financial problem
S ₂ : Indigenous hotel chain companies	W ₂ : Closer of hotels due to damage caused by epidemic
S ₃ : Low rate for foreigner	W ₃ : Management inefficiency
S ₄ : Satisfactory protection measures in COVID-19	W ₄ : Lack of promotional activities
S ₅ : Government initiatives with two years tax exemption	W ₅ : Insufficient innovation practices
Opportunities:	Threats:
O ₁ : Innovative startups with new idea	T ₁ : High outbreak of Corona virus
O ₂ : Customized service provide	T ₂ : Lack of protection mechanism by country officials
O ₃ : Employee training facilities	T ₃ : Lack of interest in private investment in this sector
O ₄ : Reduction of tax rate and Long-term loan with low interest rate	T ₄ : Existence of stagflation in the country
O ₅ : Efficient management and supervision of hotel.	T ₅ : Interrupted internet connection.

Table 3: Confrontation Matrix (for finding the key negative and positive issues)

	<i>Opportunities</i>					<i>Threats</i>				
	<i>O1</i>	<i>O2</i>	<i>O3</i>	<i>O4</i>	<i>O5</i>	<i>T1</i>	<i>T2</i>	<i>T3</i>	<i>T4</i>	<i>T5</i>
S1	+/+	+/+		+	+	-		-/-	-	
S2	+			+	+	-		-	-	
S3	+	+/+		+	+			-	-	-
S4		+		0			+	0		
S5	+/+	+		+		0		0	-	
W1	0	-	+	+		-	-	-	-	-
W2		-		-		-	-	-/-	-	
W3		-	-		-			-	-	-
W4	-	0		-				-	-	-/-
W5	-	-			-	-		-	-	-
Very Negative		-/-								
Negative		-								
No relation										
Neutral		0								
Positive		+								
Very Positive		+/+								

Source: Authors

LIST OF KEY ISSUES

Negative Issues

Issue 1: For the lack of interest in private investment in this sector, the availability of accommodation is highly negatively active. In effect it will make reduction of accommodation and in turn it will create high cost for the clients in this sector. To protect this issue private investment has to influence by creating business friendly environment. Foreign investment should have to encourage with peaceful political relations and international cooperation and proper incentives and more attention to advertising and marketing.

Issue 2: Closer of hotels due to damage caused by epidemic vs. Lack of interest in private investment in this sector. For the crises of COVID-19 the tourists were not permitted to go out not even from home. So the inbound and outbound tourism both were at risk of sustaining. Now in new normal situation the industry is overcoming the crises. According to issue 1 the private and public both investments should have to encourage with new startups and new ideas in an innovative process.

Issue 3: Lack of promotional activities Vs Interrupted internet connection.

In the competitive global market and post COVID-19 scenario we are very much familiar and technologically developed with different devices, soft-wears, and social media platforms. So, an uninterrupted internet connection is the need of time. The country has to facilitate the citizens with uninterrupted internet connection and to inform the promotional activities of this industry to potential tourists from around the world.

Positive Issues

Issue 1: Availability of Accommodation will be actively presented by innovative startups with new idea.

Issue 2: Availability of accommodation also can be used to provide customized services to the tourists.

Issue 3: most of the tourists are price sensitive especially from underdeveloped and developing countries. So the low rate for foreigners may make the strategic decision for providing the customized services to the foreign tourists in this sector.

So the positive issues may be the strength for this sector but the negative issues are the critical problems and have to be concerned about those.

RECOVERY STRATEGIES

Government Actions

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran's National Headquarters of Coronavirus Disease Management was formed by the government. To prevent infection and to slow transmission of COVID-19 in all establishments that provide lodging and related services for the public, an instruction was issued by the MCTH (Tehran.MCTH, 2021b).It should be noted that in many cases, the monitoring of how to perform this instruction optimally in all provinces of the country has not yet been fully determined. Therefore, varying degrees of success in these efforts could be expected across the county. To prevent the spread of COVID-19 during the closure of public accommodations, the MCTH also considered asking private accommodations to delay or cancel the rentals (CHTN, 2020).

Financial compensation for handling of the COVID-19 crisis requires government support and short-term and long-term plans. During this period,

some of the stakeholders in the hospitality industry have called for a tax exemption of at least 50 percent for a period of one to two-year period after this crisis; deferral of loan installments without interest; not receiving insurance coverage payouts and utility exemption (water, electricity, and gas) by the government. Tax exemptions for the sector have been extended by government for 2 years. During this critical period, some of rules and regulations of hotels, hotel-apartments, inns, lodging houses, eco-lodges and traditional restaurants have been revised by MCTH. Although should be added that the details (i.e. names, knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences, responsibilities and other features) of those working on these rules and regulations are not recognizable.

To confront this global hospitality crisis and to increase hotel room bookings, Thailand's A-One Hotels Group presented in some its hotels a new tactic to booking self-quarantine package at targeted Thais or residents who wish to isolate themselves for 14 days (Folinas and Metaxas, 2020). This policy seems to be followed by other hotels companies around the world like Dorsett chain of hotels, Park Lane Hong Kong, and Fairmont Singapore, etc. Travel and hospitality industry recession and the severe shortage of Iran's medical centers led to the creation of a similar project being issued by the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME) and tourism officials. They identified four groups to stay in this type of hotel such as medical staff who need to rest; infected patients who have been identified but are in good general condition; infected patients who have recovered and no longer need to be hospitalized but are still carriers, and finally, people who cannot be cared for due to the small size of their home and would increase the risk of spreading the disease to their family. The MOHME was responsible for renting and paying for these types of accommodations. In the first stage, a number of 33, 1 to 3 star hotels announced their willingness to be evaluated by the MOHME to sign a quarterly basis agreement (ISNA, 2020d). However, evidence shows this project was not implemented in practice by various reasons like socio-cultural factors, lack of strategies for the optimal management, unresolved financial issues, and failure of many comparable government projects.

While the pandemic is anticipated to prolong, COVID-19 infections continue to rise with the spread of new coronavirus variants which probably are more contagious than previous version of the virus, it is important to provide continuous, accurate, real, and timely data on the COVID pandemic. Nations should show their efforts and solidarity to combat this difficult situation.

The financial burdens of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused many Iranian hotels to lay off thousands of their workers permanently or temporarily. To stymie the loss of hotels' employee base, financial support should be offered to hotel businesses by introducing economic assistance packages from the government to help tourism accommodation establishments' financially recover.

To help members, the UNWTO also released a COVID-19 Technical Assistance Package (UNWTO, 2020b) and stands ready to support its members as they plan for the future to drive economic and social recovery (UNWTO, 2020c). Thus cooperating closely with this kind international organization is essential.

Hotels and Private Sectors Actions

According to instructions issued, hotels that were not shut down during the COVID-19 crisis taken effective prevention and appropriate infection control measures. Some of hoteliers, airlines, and travel agencies offered special discounts for the COVID-19 severe period to see the growth of tourism in some of the country's tourist areas. Furthermore, the private sectors and the IHAs in some regions (i.e., city of Yazd) have planned to provide low-interest loans for hoteliers.

The country's medical staff and health-care providers are recognized as the forerunners in the fight against COVID-19 and are shown appreciation through a 50% discount on select hotel rooms throughout the country (Dolat,2020). A total of 676 five and four star hotels, eco-lodges, and some hotel apartments located in 31 provinces of country, announced their readiness to offer special facilities and services to healthcare workers.

To deal with impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the domestic tourism/hospitality professionals by holding meetings and exchanging ideas have been made some suggestions to officials like government and non-government advertising in target countries to counter negative publicity, tourism diplomacy to build peaceful political relations and international cooperation, increase relations with tourism international organizations, consideration of an tax exemption plan and incentives to attract investments, effective participation in tourism international events, providing travel incentive programs by governments for the people to travel, improving quality of hotel services through engaging in educational and training programs, giving priority to the development of tourism infrastructure, removing visa barriers in target countries, supporting creative projects in the field of tourism, holding tourism festivals, enhancing

economic growth through tourism as a priority sector, etc. (Hoteldaran, 2021; BazgirKhob, 2020). However, insufficient government officials' efforts to promote tourism development, lack of appropriate tourism management, inadequate human and financial resources, country's stagflation and civil unrest and political instability are some of the main obstacles encountered of the implementation of those given recommendations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH WORK

In recent years COVID-19 has quickly spread across the world and has affected our lives in many ways. It is the global challenge faced by the whole world today (Kalyankar and Patil, 2020). In a similar path, the Coronavirus pandemic has had a major impact on the Iran's hospitality sector and this activity suffered a lot, which was mentioned in the manuscript.

The findings of research has shown that despite the long history of hotel industry in Iran, in the last few decades it has been suffering from the lack of plan effectively and proper management and the involvement of socio-political and economic (stagflation) issues, which has faced obstacles to its development and growth. Thus prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran's hotel sector had pre-existing issues that were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Besides, valid and accurate data on human and financial loss due to the Sars-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic is not available. Hotels have been hit by the reduction in travel. As a result many hotels have decided to close due to the drop in demand.

In long term, the effect of COVID-19 on the local hotel sector will depend on the duration of the virus, as well as the precautions taken by the Iranian government and its citizens and socio-political situation. The condition of COVID-19 global pandemic cannot be ignored either. Considering the evolving nature of the situation, it is too early to estimate the full impact of COVID-19 on hotel industry in Iran and with the evidences it is too difficult to make any kind of forecast for the future economy growing in this sector.

This period also could considered as a perfect time to review operational strategies, cost-saving initiatives, refurbishments, improving marketing distribution channels with more emphasis on social marketing orientations (Menegaki, 2020), and staff appropriate training and job skills programs and technology upgrading. During this slow period, hotel management should

consider virtual training (through distance learning for example) for its staff to improve their skills at personal and managerial levels. Changing the approach of tourism education based on needs assessments and a review of the quality of the courses, should also be also considered.

This period provides an opportunity to look after hotels so that they will be equipped to deal with the current and future crises. Accommodations should maintain the highest standards to ensure customer satisfaction (Freifer,2020) as post-COVID customers desperately need security and peace of mind when choosing their type of accommodation to stay in.

It is suggested hospitality industry stakeholders for a recovery strategy retain contact with their key customer. Promoting flexi-services would be a strategic tool to attract potential customers. To gain the trust, encourage and convince customers, hotels should show their serious health safety measures and precautions against COVID-19. They should also maximize the marketing power of websites and social networks by offering short films, pictures, and text displays.

The cooperation of the governmental, private sectors, and local communities will be vital in stopping the spread of the virus and limiting its impact on people and communities. Close collaboration and cooperation between tourism stakeholders is also essential. An exchange of ideas and opinions must remain open between key tourism and hospitality stakeholders, and the local and authorities as part of a proactive strategic response plan (Jamal and Budke, 2020).

Without urgent government intervention, many hotel businesses may close their doors for a long time, and unable to cope with the circumstances and direct impact of the Coronavirus (Freifer, 2020). On the other hand, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic offers an opportunity to Iran's hotel industry which is to reconsider its rules and regulations, managements, services, advertising and marketing process to maintain the highest standards to keep their customers happy and satisfied in the future and regaining the socio-economic stability after the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. It is hoped that the present work will be of value to academics and practitioners and demonstrates the potential for further research on this topic in the post-pandemic period.

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