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Hospitality and Tourism Management Association of Nigeria. (HATMAN)

Floor 5, Suit 99, Turaki Ali House (NNDC) 3 Kanta Road, Kaduna, Nigeria.

Website: www.hatman2010.org

Telephone: +2348034072296 +2348067992234

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THE INFLUENCE OF ECONOMIC RECESSION IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A STUDY OF SELECTED HOTELS IN UMUAHIA ABIA STATE NIGERIA

Amaechi- Chijioke, Juliet^{1*}
Omolaja, Magaret Oghoritse²
Ibeh, Phibian Vivian³

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¹Michael Okpara University of Agriculture Umudike, Abia-State.

²Lagos State Polytechnics Ikorodu

³Yaba College of Technology, Yaba Lagos State.

*Corresponding author: amajuliet222@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The study focused on the influence of economic recession in the hotel industry, at the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, for selected hotels in Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to: identify the effect of recession on hotel performance and to determine the measures of tackling the recession problem in the industry. The study adopted exploratory survey research design. Data were collected through the use of questionnaire. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 40 respondents, 5 from each hotel. The data were analyzed using simple percentages and mean. The findings from the study show that decrease in customer patronage is a problem to hotel business during the period. Strategies were adopted to maintain the continuity of the business through forecasting, hygiene practices, market analysis and customer satisfaction. The study recommends that services of hotels during economic recession can be improved through quality service delivery, staff training, maintenance and handling of customer complaint. In other words, in spite of the fact that recession negatively affects the performance of hotels due to the pandemic, there are still strategies that can be adopted to maintain the continuity of business. The hotel management should implement appropriate forecasting policies in order to analyze the market trends and assess the consumer behavior in a proper manner in order to encourage return patronage from customers.

Keywords: COVID-19, customer loyalty, customer patronage, economic recession, hospitality industry

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INTRODUCTION

Economic Recession simply means that a country has experienced two consecutive quarters of declining growth in a given year. A recession is thus defined as consecutive declines in quarterly real gross domestic product (inflation adjusted) and a decline in activity across the economy, lasting longer than a three to four months (Erik,2020). It is visible in industrial production, employment, real income and wholesale-retail trade (Soludo, 2013, as cited by Agum,2022). Also the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) the official agency in charge of declaring that the economy is in a state of recession defines recession as "Significant decline in economic activity lasting more than a few months, which is normally visible in real GDP, real income, employment, industrial production, and wholesale-retail sales" (Agri, Maliafia and Umejaku, 2017). Due to the recession factor the global meltdown affected the hospitality

industry, through a significant drop in the occupancy rates in hotels. Moreso, the major hotel chains slashed room charges by up to thirty per cent (Farazad,2020). The impact was seriously felt with the luxury hotels bearing the brunt. Recession caused serious problems for luxury hotels in particular during the pandemic, however, many hotels in certain global markets, especially those catering to leisure travelers, were less affected. The hospitality industry reported a downturn in sales of lodging, foodservice, events and other hospitality products and some have closed their doors forever due to the Coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic (Farazad,2020). *Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus (WHO, 2020)*. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 pandemic was first reported in Wuhan, China on December 31, 2019. The pandemic spread quickly all over Asia, leaving behind it health and economic crises.

On March 2, 2020, COVID-19 was first reported in the US and 10 days later Europe became the epicenter of the pandemic, both leading to even worse health and economic catastrophes. As it concerns Nigeria, Oruonye and Ahmed (2020) as cited by Anuobi, Emeafor and Okpoko (2021) found out that industries in the hospitality sector, including hotels, are facing declining demand and patronage, with travel crashes and cancellations leading to revenue loss as a result of Covid-19 as at the time of the pandemic. Since the hotel industry is service oriented, there is no doubt that the pandemic, has brought about changes and more challenges in service delivery especially in the study area. Most hotels in Umuahia, Abia State are expected to take proactive steps in handling these extra service delivery challenges and changes if they are to remain viable in the business in order to achieve customer satisfaction and generate more revenue; During the pandemic, the hospitality industry especially hotels experienced very difficult times due to an economic downturn, giving drops in occupancy, average daily rate and revenue per available room in the hotel business (Gosling & Hall, 2020).

Hotel owners and managers had to make difficult decisions as how to best cope with the trading conditions; in particular, whether to cut room rates or to try and maintain occupancy, or to maintain rates and risk losing market share to competitors. The decline in the sales of hospitality products was on a high side, which resulted not only from fewer customers in hotels, restaurants, conference and convention centre, but also from a significant decline in the average expenditure per guest (Farazad, 2020). The market experienced a contraction in demand, which drives hotel owners to be more reluctant in selling their assets, as the sale price will be reduced. The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions on business activity and travel during that period, caused a tremendous impact across all market industries, especially in hotels. Though, strategies were put in place by the government to curtail the menace, such as community lockdowns, social distancing, stay-at-home orders, travel and mobility restrictions which resulted in temporary closure of many hospitality businesses and significantly decreased the demand for businesses that were allowed to continue to operate (Bartik *et al.*, 2020).

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) the Nigerian economy slid into recession path in first quarter (Q1) of 2016 (since 2004) with real GDP of

60.36 percent, the contraction of economic activities resulted from an evaporation of confidence and no new investments, inordinate delay in government spending during the period, acrimonious legislative squabbles in approving budget, erosion in the value of Naira in the forex market, pipelines vandalism, misaligned currency and forex shortages, high interest rate environment as well as trade and import restrictions. The current recession seems to affect socio political structures, Nigeria's credit condition general living standards, imports, production and employment as well as consumption demand in Nigeria (Agri, Maliafia and Umejiaku, 2017). Large hotel chains or even smaller hotels are constantly trying to tackle the current crisis by changing their cancellation policies and supporting the well-being of their customers. The vast majority of hotels have changed the cancellation policy for bookings during the pandemic, up to the 30th of June, 2020 even if the booking was made by a third party. Additionally, they provide online yoga sessions in order to help maintain the mental health of their customers. The small number of hotels, which operated during the difficult time, adopted new standards on hygienic practices in order to ensure the safety of their customers and also stop the spread of the pandemic (Gosling & Hall, 2020).

Some of the notable impact of Nigeria's economic downturn on the hotel industry are briefly discussed below as stated by Agri, Maliafia and Umejiaku (2017):

- United Airlines' cancellation of its only African route (Houston to Lagos) in May 2016, due to foreign exchange restrictions imposed by the Central Bank of Nigeria, and low performance of the route. The route had been operational, although not profitable, as it mostly served the oil and gas community in Houston. But the downturn in the oil sector, meant significantly reduced oil-related business travel. Hence, it was no longer viable for the carrier to continue operating the route. This has a negative influence in the hotel industry because majority of the travelers who would have booked rooms and other recreational facilities in the industry were not seen, thereby reducing the revenue generation (foreign currency) of the sector.
- A substantial decrease in foreign business visitors to the country and lower domestic corporate spending. The hotel market was left with a substantially smaller demand market and hotels had to engage in price wars to maintain competitiveness

and attract demand.

The problem of this study is therefore, Poor customer patronage, high cost of maintenance, low profitability, decrease in sales volume, constant decrease in occupancy rates and revenue per available room, which imposed unprecedented challenges not only to hotel owners and operators but also to investors and lenders in the study area. Productivity and profitability of the businesses were reduced and some hotels in Umuahia metropolis got liquidated, lost revenue, downsized, lost jobs, laid off and retrenched workers, and experienced numerous changes in hotel operations and services. With respect to the analysis of the hotel industry, it has been analyzed that the industry is widely influenced by recession during the pandemic, due to the reason that the hotel industry has a direct relation with the tourism industry and decrease in the tourist arrivals directly influences hotel revenues. The COVID-19 crisis exposed vulnerabilities and deep technological limitations across the hotel industry and as well economic consequences of the pandemic have been staggering, and perhaps no sector has been hit as hard as hospitality Industry.

Hoteliers should capitalize on the importance of cleanliness and hygiene because of COVID-19 can be spread by touching surfaces contaminated with the virus (WHO, 2020). Hotel surfaces are likely to be dirty, contain higher microbial counts, and yield potential sources of disease transmission (Pakpour, 2020). In addition, aerosol transmission via central air conditioning could be another route of COVID-19 infection (Zhang *et al.*, 2020). Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, travelers patronize hotels that offer reassuring lodging services and accommodation products in terms of hygiene and cleanliness. To this end, hotels should implement regular hygiene surveillance at facilities via manual (i.e., staff rounds) and automated (e.g., robot-based) practices. Lots of infection control practices, such as the use of disinfectants, personal hygiene, hand sanitizers, surface cleaners, face masks, or shield were compulsorily introduced in the hotels and other segment of hospitality industry in order to curtail the spread of the virus.

The major steps that should be taken by the hotels in order to improve their services are as follows:

Hotels in Umuahia Abia State should increase the quality of service rendered to customers in order to achieve customer satisfaction and repeat patronage, lower rates and tariff, operational cost should be minimized, awareness programmes must

be organized from time to time, personal hygiene and cleanliness of the environment must be of utmost priority in the day to day running of hotel business, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) guidelines on Covid-19 protocols must be strictly adhered by both staff and customers in order to contain the spread of the virus.

The hotel industry should analyze the influence on their operations and understand the loopholes in their contingency planning, which can further be improved significantly for rationalizing the future implications of the business strategy and planning. Management of hotels must consider the importance of taking strong decisions in the uncertain and risky situations. Along with this, it is essential to analyze the key value drivers related to the business and assessing the business risks for taking adequate position and advantage in the form of upturn in the profitability during uncertainties.

The hotels should analyze the availability of the adequate funds and working capital for procuring their credit functioning and avoiding the situations related to liquidity. Appropriate cash management is essential with respect to the management of the treasury, funding and financing in terms of the integration of the organizational finance.

Contingency planning is the most important segment of the business strategy, which should be considered by the hotels effectively. With the assistance of appropriate contingency plans, the hotel management can adapt requisite modification in their service policies corresponding to the market environment. It will provide assistance to the hotels in the implementation of the new plan for making adjustments in the business policies and sustaining the competitive advantage.

Market analysis: Proper strategy for the market analysis should be developed by the hotel management, so that the management structure and the service portfolio can be made adjustable within the available resources. It is helpful for the hotel management in analyzing the influence of the market trends and the market environment on their operational excellence. The consideration of market trends is helpful in mitigating the risk posed by market fluctuations and adverse conditions similar to negative waves of economic collapse. It is necessary for the hotel management to concentrate on the important segments, which are generating profits for them. The objectives of this study therefore are to identify the effect of recession on hotel performance, and determine the measures of tackling the recession problem in the industry.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in Umuahia, the capital city of Abia-State in south eastern Nigeria. Exploratory survey research design was adopted, because it focuses on the discovery of ideas and insights of the study in order to collect accurate data. The population of study is made up of the hotel management and staff of five selected hotels in Umuahia Abia-state. The criteria for selection is based on the rank of the hotel from two star and above. Umuahia has sixty-six (66) registered hotels with the tourism board. The sample size is made up of five randomly selected hotels in Umuahia metropolis. Ten managers and staff were selected from each of the hotels making it a total of 40 respondents that constitute the sample size of the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to obtain the data. The selection was based on the size of the hotels. Instrument for data collection was the questionnaires and the data were analyzed using simple percentages and mean.

Table 1: Mean responses on the effect of recession on hotel operation

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	Total No	Total Score	Mean
1	Poor customer patronage	17(42.5%)	17(42.5%)	4(10%)	2(5%)	40	129	3.23
2	High cost of maintenance	15(37.5%)	15(17.5%)	5(12.5%)	5(12.5%)	40	120	3.00
3	Low profitability	17(42.5%)	17(42.5%)	4(10%)	2(5%)	40	129	3.33
4	Decrease in sales volume	15(37.5%)	15(37.5%)	5(12.5%)	5(12.5%)	40	120	3.00

Note; SA=strongly agreed, A=agreed, D=disagreed, SD=strongly disagreed.

Source: Field survey (2020).

Table1: above shows that Poor customer patronage, high cost of maintenance, low profitability and decrease in sales volume are the major effect of recession in hotels. The above listed items have mean scores above mean level of 2.5 which is above acceptance level. This implies that recession affects the performance of hotels in the study area, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The dream of every business is to maximize profit and minimize cost but the reverse was the case in the time of recession based on the respondent's responses. It is also revealed that there was always a decrease in customer patronage during recession due to high cost of products and services in the industry. Customers are the engine to every successful business. Decrease in customer patronage is therefore a very big problem to every business especially in hotels.

Table 2: Mean responses on the measures put in place in tackling recession in hotel industry.

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	Total no	Total score	Mean
1	Increase in service Quality	15(37.5%)	15(37.5%)	5(12.5%)	5(12.5%)	40	120	3.00
2	Minimizing operational cost	15(37.5%)	15(37.5%)	5(12.5%)	5(12.5%)	40	120	3.00
3	Awareness programme	17(42.5%)	17(42.5%)	4(10%)	2(5%)	40	129	3.23
4	Lower rates and Tariff	17(42.5%)	17(42.5%)	4(10%)	2(5%)	40	133	3.23

Note; SA=strongly agreed, A=agreed, D=disagreed, SD=strongly disagreed

Source: Field survey (2020).

Table 2 shows that increase in service quality (37.5%), minimizing operational cost (37.5%), awareness programme (42.5%) and lower rates and tariff are the Measures put in place in tackling recession in hotel industry (42.5%). These were all accepted with a mean score of 3.00, 3.00, 3.23, 3.23 which is the mean above the acceptance mean level of 2.5. This implies that for the hotel industry to tackle recession they must increase the quality of their service delivery, minimize the cost of their operation in order to enhance profitability, engage in market awareness both online and offline in order to increase the level of customer patronage and finally lower their rates and tariff in order to retain existing customers and as well attract new ones.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper explores the effect of economic recession in the hotel industry in time of the covid-19 pandemic. Due to recession, the productivity and profitability of the businesses has been reduced and some big business organizations have got liquidated. The negative consequences of the recession have led to the reduction of standard of living and the quality of life of the people and increase in poverty rate. In the present market overview, the hotels require integrating their procurement strategies, business strategies and practices in order to overcome the influence of economic recession. The uncertainties imposed by the economic environment, which were faced by the industry, affected the overall performance and operation ability of the industry. Therefore, the industry needs to consider a well-defined budget and specific criteria based customer service portfolio, so that the position of the industry can be raised and new business challenges can be effectively handled by the industry players. The major business approach of the hotels should focus on the sustenance of the business performance to progress in the industry and overcoming the business related threats for generating the desired outcomes.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR AUTHORS

Publication Schedule:

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The Journal covers all areas of hospitality and tourism including planning, development, policy matters, private sector activities, practical processes and procedures, culture, the environment, food technology and food processing systems, etc. Sciences.

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Floor 5, Suite F99
Turaki Ali House (NNDC) 3 Kanta Road,
Kaduna.

Website: www.hatman2010.org
E-Mail: nationalsec@hatman2010.org
08060344776, 08034072296
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Providing Networking Opportunities

Putting you in touch with over 15,000 local, national and international contacts, **HATMAN** seminars, conferences and social and business meetings aim to extend your knowledge and understanding of the issues facing the industry – and enable you to learn from the experience of other members.

It is not unknown for members to meet their next employer on these occasions! You may wish to make your own contribution to the industry's future. We welcome input from our members on various industry committees, working groups and advisory boards.

Plus Personal Benefits

Finally, a range of special offers and discounts is available including hotels, car hire, subscription to our journal and other publications.

WHO should join HATMAN?

From students to chief executives, whether in your own business or a global organization, there is a membership grade to suit all management levels.

Whilst the completion of certain hospitality courses automatically makes you eligible, we do recognize that many highly skilled supervisors and managers come directly into the industry. For them we have a point's assessment system which gives credit for work-place learning and responsibility, which leads to membership. Wherever you are in your career, there is a membership grade for you.

The grades are designed to assist career progression and reflect every stage of career development.

HATMAN Membership Grades

Hospitality and Tourism Management Association of Nigeria Membership Grades are as follows:

- STUDENT MEMBER
- AFFILIATE (AFHATMAN)
- ASSOCIATE (AHATMAN)
- MEMBER (MHATMAN)
- FELLOW (FHATMAN)

AFFILIATE MEMBER (NON CORPORATE GRADE OF MEMBERSHIP)

This grade is open to those who wish to participate in, and learn about the work of the Hospitality and Tourism Management Association of Nigeria and is assigned initially to all members on first joining the Association. Affiliate members do not have voting rights and cannot hold office.

Affiliate members are normally those not eligible for a higher membership grade or individuals studying for a recognized qualification in hospitality, leisure or tourism.

ASSOCIATE (AHATMAN)

This is the first Membership grade of the Institute that confers designatory letters upon an individual (AHATMAN). Associate Members do not have voting rights and cannot hold office. Associate Members will have met the following criteria:

- Qualifications: a Hospitality or Tourism based qualification, a degree, foundation degree, diploma or equivalent comparable qualification awarded by a Nigerian or internationally recognized organization.
- Industry Experience: have achieved the appropriate Industry Experience Points in an entry level or supervisory management post directly concerned with the hospitality, leisure and tourism industries, and/or in other areas of work.
- Continuing Professional Development: have shown evidence of an ongoing commitment to Continuing Professional Development.

MEMBER (MHATMAN)

This grade of membership confers designatory letters upon an individual (MHATMAN). Members have full voting rights and can hold office in the association. Members will have met the following criteria:

- Qualifications: have achieved Hospitality/Tourism qualification, a degree, foundation degree, diploma or equivalent comparable qualification awarded by an international recognized institution.
- Industry Experience: Have achieved the appropriate Industry Experience Points in a management or senior management post directly concerned with the hospitality, leisure and tourism industries, and/or in other relevant areas of work.
- Continuing Professional Development: Have shown evidence of an ongoing commitment to Continuing Professional Development

and have consistently participated in association's conferences.

FELLOW (FHATMAN)

This grade of membership confers designatory letters upon an individual (FHATMAN). Fellows have full voting rights and can hold office in the association. Fellows will have met the following criteria:

- Have made a significant personal contribution to the industry.
- Have been in a Senior Management position for at least 5 years
- Have been a Full Corporate Member (MHATMAN) of the association for at least five years or at the discretion of the Executive Council be considered for direct entry in accordance with the relevant constitutional provisions.
- Should be able to demonstrate a significant contribution to the aims and work of the association.
- Have shown evidence of an ongoing commitment to Continuing Professional Development.
- Applications for upgrading to Fellowship shall be supported by two Fellows of the association, who shall have knowledge of the candidate for THREE years immediately preceding the application. Referees must not be members of the applicant's immediate family circle.

Direct Entry to Fellowship

In exceptional circumstances, the National Executive Council may admit directly into Fellowship, individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the industry. They must be able and willing, in the view of the Executive Council, to personally advance the objectives of the Association and encourage others to pursue these objectives throughout a major segment of the industry. They should be supported by three Fellows of the Hospitality and Tourism Management Association of Nigeria, one of whom acts as proposer. This method of entry into Fellowship is not available by application; it is invitation only.

Student

Students following HATMAN accredited programmes of study are registered as student members and may upgrade to full membership on graduation.

Apply now

Applying is easy simply complete the application form and forward with our application form fee of N2,000, registration fee of N26,500 and one year subscription fee for your category of membership paid into designated HATMAN bank account

The application process should take about two weeks and we will keep you informed at every stage

Immediate Benefits?

Whilst your application is being processed, please feel free to sample our benefits and services free of charge.

We will send you a welcome pack, containing details of how to make the very best use of our services.

HATMAN Website: www.hatman2010.org

Professional Standards

Upholding high standards is key to the status of a professional body. We ask you to provide the name of one referee to support your application.

Membership Grades

Following a thorough evaluation of your application we will inform of our membership grade. Our assessors will provide clear guidance on how you can progress with HATMAN.

Annual Subscriptions

Subscription rates can be found within the application form. Many companies will assist employees with professional membership fees. However, you may pay your own subscription.

Welcome to HATMAN

We will send you a personalized membership card and a prestigious certificate to display as evidence of your profession status. We look forward to a long and happy relationship with you.

UPGRADING

The membership committee may also upgrade you if it considers that you have contributed significantly to the upliftment of the association and the industry. Those who have acquired higher academic qualifications may also apply to the membership committee for upgrade. Upgrading fee is N10,000 only.

Apply now!

Visit www.hatman2010.org
Learn more about HATMAN,
Download Membership Form,
Complete form, attach credentials,
Ensure your referees endorse your form,
Pay appropriate fees to HATMAN bank
Account as shown on website,
Send your completed form and your bank slip to:

National Executive Secretary

Hospitality and Tourism Management
Association of Nigeria (HATMAN)
Floor 5 suite 99,
Turaki Ali House (NNDC)
3 Kanta Road,
Kaduna, Nigeria.

You can also obtain printed membership application forms from our state coordinators as shown on website or directly from the national secretariat.

Confirm receipt of your documents and progress of your application on phone:

08067992234, 08161883944,

**Website-www.hatman2010.org
E-mail: nationalsec@hatman2010.org**