



DOES BRANDING HELPS IN SUSTAINING THE BUSINESS DURING CRISES? : A VIEW POINT ON INDIAN HOTEL INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT:

Purpose: This article presents a view point over the Indian hotels branding and its significant role during the pandemic covid-19 for the survival and sustaining during the unprecedented time. Specifically two hotel chain viz. Taj group of hotels and Oberoi group of hotels has been taken in consideration for their strategies for survival, sustaining and further flourishing in and after covid-19 pandemic. Also, the SOPs designed by the various international chain hotels during pandemic have been taken in consideration in view of safety and security of guest and their customer.

Design/methodology/approach: Authors has tried to create a view point over the Indian hotel industry, role and impact of brand management, strategies and SOPs formulated by the chain hotels during pandemic crisis etc. through systematic reference of studies conducted in the last decade and presented in view point.

Findings: Indian Hotel Industry has seen a substantial growth in the last couple of decades, many international brands has shown their presence in the Indian market through franchises and doing better business respectively. However, due to an unprecedented situation of covid-19, most of the hotels are struggling for their survival and even breakeven points. This article focuses on standard operating procedures, protocols etc. followed by the hotels to create a strategically image of utmost clean, aesthetically hygiene and full proof safety for the guest and staff. Also given overview over the strategies implemented by Taj and Oberoi group of hotels for sustaining and standing ever firmer during and after pandemic crisis.

Managerial and practical implications: This article will possibly add the knowledge of the strategies, SOPs etc. to the managers, stakeholders and other bodies to know and formulate the further strategies in the time line for betterment of business and their survival during crisis period.

Research Approach: Conceptual and review with viewpoint

KEYWORDS:

TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY, COVID-19, BRAND MANAGEMENT, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, TAJ HOTELS, OBEROI HOTELS.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian hospitality and tourism industry has emerged as one of the key contributors to growth in the various services sector in India. Tourism in the country has significant potential considering its rich cultural and historical heritage, diversity in ecology, terrains, and attractions of natural beauty spread across the nation. From an economic point of view, tourism is an important source of foreign exchange. However, due to the pandemic, it got a dip compared to its growth of 7% from 2016 to 2019 (IBEF, 2020). In the last financial year, the tourism and hospitality sector accounted for 39 million jobs, which was 8.0% of the total employment in the country. Further as per the expectations by economists, by 2029, it is expected to account for about 53 million jobs (IBEF, 2020).

Furthermore, according to WTTC, India ranked 10th among 185 countries in terms of travel & tourism's total contribution to GDP in 2019. During the year 2019, the contribution of travel & tourism to GDP was 6.8% of the total economy which equals US\$ 194.30 billion (WTTC, 2020). As per the report by IBEF (2020), the Indian hotel market was estimated at about US\$ 32 billion in FY20 including domestic, inbound, and outbound tourists, and further, it is expected to reach more than US\$ 52 billion by FY27, this surge in demand would be through travel agents and travelers to make sustained efforts. Moreover, In April 2021, the percentage share of FTAs was highest from United States (26.85%), followed by Bangladesh (15.65%), UK (5.87%), Afghanistan (6.92%), Nepal (4.59%), Canada

(4.27%), Iraq (2.99%), Portugal (2.40%), Germany (1.42%), Russian (1.41%), Maldives (1.39%), France (1.33%), Sudan (1.21%), Korea (1.18%), and Australia (1.02%) etc (IBEF, 2020).

1.1 INDIAN HOTEL INDUSTRY

The foundation of the hotel industry in India cannot be drawn to a definitive point of time. However, the origin of hospitality can be seen through the time of the Indus Valley Civilization and the Vedic Era. In the past days, traveling was predominantly undertaken for trade and pilgrimage. In Hindu mythology, people traveled to visit the various shrines for the sake of faith and the trade of their business (Devendra, A. (2001). The origin and evolution of the hotel industry in the country can be broadly categorized into three phase's viz. Ancient and Medieval Era, Colonial Era and Modern Era. The real development of the hotels can be seen in the colonial era, where hotels were mostly established and operated by the colonial rulers to cater to the need of the British and other foreign officials. During the period, western-styled luxurious hotels made a presence in the major cities like Mumbai, Calcutta (now Kolkata), Goa, etc. which subsidized the ancient inns and taverns. Some of the famous hotels were MacLean's Hotel, Victory Hotel, Mac Farlanes Hotels, Albion Hotel, etc. in the 18th century (Pal, 2015). The major hotels and chain hotels established in the 19th & 20th centuries like the Taj group of hotels, ITC, Oberoi, etc. The Taj group of hotels is a renowned brand having a presence in 12 countries. Similarly, Oberoi hotels have a presence in six counties including India with luxurious hotels in the world (Varma, 2009). The major hotel brands operating in India (in terms of the revenue) are The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHC, including brand Ginger), Marriott International, Oberoi Hotels & Resorts, Radisson Hotel Group, ITC Hotels, Accor Hotels, Hyatt Hotels, Sarovar Hotels, Intercontinental Hotels Group, and Lemon Tree Hotels (statista, 2019). An estimate of 65,000 to 80,000 rooms by 850 properties of foreign hotel chains are expected to be added in Indian Room inventory as per market research agency ICRA (Gosh, 2012). Furthermore, by the WTTC's Economic Impact 2019 - Indian Travel & tourism sector is the third-highest GDP contributor followed by China and the Philippines. International hotel chains are showing their interest by investing around 47% share in 2020 and 50% share by the year 2022 in the Indian tourism and hospitality sector (IBEF, 2021). Around 39 million jobs were created in the tourism sector for FY 2020, which was around 8.0% of the total employment (IBEF, 2021). It is also forecasted that the hotel industry in India is expected to reach a value of ₹ 1,210.87 billion by the end of 2023 (statista, 2019).

1.2 HOTEL BRANDING AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISES

As per the definition by American Marketing Association (AMA), a brand is a name, term, symbol, design or any other feature that identifies one seller's goods/products or

service distinctive from the other seller in the market. Similarly, hotel brands can permeate distinctive meanings to their customers or guest. These meanings and distinctive self-experiencing features create a relationship between the brand and customers (Rai & Nayak, 2019 p22). Further, hospitality is unspoken inward experiences and emotions of customers/guests to play an important role in decision making (Rai & Nayak, 2019 p23). Brands or brand images create unique experiences in the mind of the customers that serve as the primary basis for the brand preference (Brakus et al., 2009). While, (Schmitt, 1999) proposed in his study that customers of the twenty-first century are emotional as well as rational decision-makers where emotions can be created through unique brand experiences and benefits. In the purchase preference, customer and brand carry a two-way relationship, and the values are co-created (Fournier 1998). However, during the pandemic covid-19 crisis preference of the customers or guests was highly transformed due to uncertain situations and government and local bodies' regulations.

Many scholars have raised the issue of the ongoing pandemic COVID-19 and claim that the evolution and emergence of corona virus disease (Covid-19) are from China's Wuhan City, later it spread across the globe and has impacted socially, economically, and politically the lives and businesses of the mass. According to Laws & Prideaux (2005), a crisis is an incident that suddenly becomes apparent in a critical situation. The impact of the crises adversely affected the crowded or densely populated areas. Leung & Lam (2004) states that the hospitality industry involves a large number of customers and employees from various demographics and has higher exposure to both national and international places, which considerably increases the impending exposure and spreading of infections. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing crisis and only a few previous studies have focused on the impact of public health crises on the hospitality industry, as most research has focused on economic rather than public health crises (Mair et al., 2014; Jian et al., 2017).

This research is focused on examining the role of branding which would have helped in sustaining the hotel industry businesses during covid-19 pandemic crises. This study majorly tried to distinguish the inclination of customer towards the brand hotels rather to choose small, independent and uncategorized hotels. The standard operating procedures, corporate social responsibility and other such factors has been taken in to consideration to conduct the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Branding hotel portfolio, by Connel, J. (1992), highlights on definition, problems of hotel branding, asses the differential brand marketing of UK and US and other countries. Author suggests that physical consistency is important for hotel branding. Further, the factors like service range, price and location are strategic points which provide an advantage for the companies, brand attributes

should be based on the needs of target market segment.

A study by Nayak & Rai, (2019) on Hospitality branding in emerging economies: an Indian Perspective, tried to test the applicability of brand interaction and perceived quality theory in the formulation of brand's trust and effective commitment in context with Indian hospitality industry. Further, authors conclude that effective commitment is associated with brand trust and lead to advocacy of hospitality brand i.e. through word of mouth interaction and revisit. Moreover, authors stressed on self brand connection helps in individual to identify a respective organization (Nayak& Rai, 2019, p30).

Kumar, A. (2020), on "Disastrous impact on Corona virus (Covid-19) on tourism and hospitality in India", stated that individuals and business to act upon the situation wisely and with paramount precaution, the impacts such as life style change, socio-psychological, economical implication, increasing use of social media, risk assessment etc. are to be taken in consideration, however correct assessment of situation is hard to find out because the crisis is still persistent.

Guo, L. et, al., (2021), highlights the findings of various studies in the literature review under the challenges and opportunities of Covid-19 for hotel industry. The study by Hall et. al., (2020), that owing to norms of social distancing travel restrictions and border closure, hospitality industry will be severely affected by covid-19 pandemic, due to loss of customers, uncertainty and unknown duration of impact (Gossling et, al., 2021), this pandemic will pose unprecedented challenges to hotel industry. The impact of crisis has eventually affected market and performance of hotels (Hao et. al., 2020). Government led regulations and shortage of operating expenses has led to close or shutdown operations by many individual or small hotel operations, subsequently, anxiety and fear among the travelers, perception of customer has played an important role in decision making during this crisis. In a nut shell, it can be said that customer's risk perception and behavior has changed (Li, et al., 2020) because during the pandemic the main concern of the traveler or customer has become health, safety and budget making decision for travelling (Pappas & Glypton, 2021). Although, covid-19 has brought some transformative opportunities and challenges too (Brier, et, al., 2021).

Over to crisis management framework adoption for tackling the adverse situation of covid-19 pandemic, the theories and frameworks suggested in studies by various scholars falls short. As such no similar situation has been perceived yet (Reddy. et al., 2020). However, existing studies may provide us guidance in framework of crisis management.

4. THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Covid-19 pandemic crises come faster of all the time. Initially in first two quarters of 2020, hospitality and catering has seen the global shutdown for the fine dining and accommodation inventories. However, later after the first quarter of 2021, hotel and catering business tried to revive, recoup and revamp with the systematic strategies to bring back the confidence of travelers though brand value by offering services with high standards of hygiene, sanitation and safety procurements. The major objectives of the study are:

1. To examining the role of branding which would have helped in sustaining the hotel industry businesses during covid-19 pandemic crises.
2. To assess the factors for inclination of customer towards the brand hotels rather to choose small, independent and uncategorized hotels.
3. To assess the strategies of 'Taj Group of Hotels' & 'Oberoi Group of Hotels' during Covid-19 for sustaining their brand.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the secondary data collected from high impact journals, magazines, articles, books, reports and e-resource. A view point is created to understand the role of branding for the sustenance of hotels chains in this hard hit pandemic covid-19.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The hospitality business has severely affected by the corona pandemic (Covid-19). Covid-19 pandemic has been most devastating and made the tourism and hospitality business to shattered. The crisis has not only affected the industry's economic stability but it also affected the purchase preferences of the customers. The below mentioned figure: 1, depicts that crisis can be revoked or recovered by the formulating the strategies of brand management.

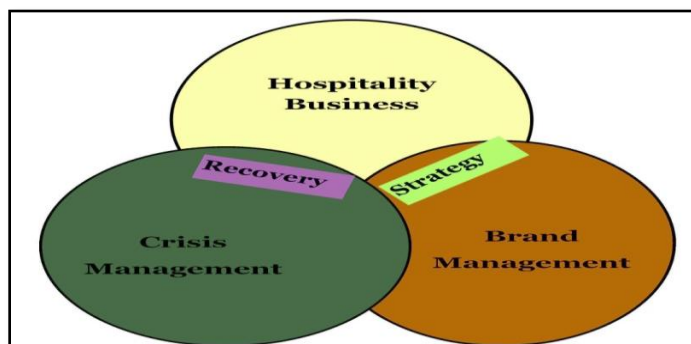


FIGURE 1, CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF BRAND & CRISIS MANAGEMENT IN HOSPITALITY BUSINESS, SOURCE:

AUTHORS, ASSIMILATED FROM LITERATURE REVIEW.

Through the figure, it is suggested that crises can be overcome or managed successfully if the enterprise is marketed well though the branding, however hospitality industry is very sensitive to the rumors, threats, bad publicity etc. moreover, the tourism & hotel industry is very prone to threats such as terrorism, disasters, pandemics, socio-economic crises, etc. and the impact of such threats widely affects social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects.

HOTEL PREFERENCE ATTRIBUTES BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

In the view of referring various literatures, social media and company websites, it will be imperative to assess the hotel brands in sustaining businesses during the pandemic with reference to brand preference through the parameters as suggested by Kim, J.J. & Han, H., 2022 are both tangible and intangible attributes. Hotel and room features with cleanliness, amenities offered are the most important features for the hotel selection and preference (Kim, et al, 2019). Wang et.al, (2020), tried to investigate the differences in hotel selection among the various group of travellers. The study indicated that business travellers,

Families and friends, couples FIT prefer the localism, values, room features, and cleanliness for their hotel selection. While in some other studies it is revealed that common hotel preference attributes by the travellers are cleanliness, accessibility, easy and hassle free check-in/check-out process, hotel class/category, interior and exteriors of the hotel property, lobby and supplementary facilities, online reviews over intermediary Apps, hygiene, professionalism of hotel staff, room features including bed, room size, bathroom etc. and the amenities provided in the room and bathroom along with value for money, safety & security etc. (Kim, J.J. & Han, H., 2022). Customers have more confidence on branded hotels due to hygiene, sanitation and safety conditions rather to relying on small and independent hotels.

During the covid-19 pandemic travellers preferred the hotels on the basis of three factors viz. social distancing, cleanliness & disinfections and tools and equipments used specially during the pandemic situation. The below table depicts the precautionary measures against covid-19 at the major hotel chain which could lead them to sustain the unprecedented time.

TABLE: 1, SUMMARY OF THE PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES AGAINST COVID-19 AT MAJOR HOTEL COMPANIES. SOURCE: WEBSITES OF EACH HOTEL COMPANY (ACCOR.COM / HILTON.COM / HYATT.COM / INTERCONTINENTAL.COM / MARRIOTT.COM) CITATION FROM THE ARTICLE BY KIM, J. J., & HAN, H. (2022).

<i>Hotel Chain</i>	<i>Norms and special features during Covid-19 protocols</i>
The Intercontinental Hotel group	• Social Distancing Norms: Social distancing protocols and enforcement of best practices in shared spaces, Social distancing operating signage, pre-packaged meal options and Single-serve. • Cleanliness & Disinfections: Intensified cleaning of high-touch surfaces, "last cleaned" logos, Availability of individual guest amenity cleaning kits, In-room IHG Clean Promise cards with cleaning procedures. • Tools and Equipments: Thermal scanners at the main entrance, Guidance on the use of protective equipment as necessary by hotel colleagues. Hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes at high-touch points throughout the hotel, Sanitized key cards and paperless checkout.
The Marriot International	• Social Distancing Norms: Signage in its lobby to remind guests to maintain social distancing, Seating are kept at 2.5 meters between tables, with only 4 people allowed in each table (reduction of restaurant capacity to 50 or 60% as per government protocols), Removing or re-arranging furniture, Less contact through services including mobile key, mobile check-in, and mobile or e-requests. • Cleanliness & Disinfections: sprayers (Electrostatic) with hospital-grade for disinfectant to sanitize surfaces throughout the property, Increased the frequency of cleaning/ disinfection using a 70% alcohol based disinfectant spray etc.
Accor Hotels	• Social Distancing Norms: social distancing enforced in all common & public areas, desk-free check in, contactless payment solution- wherever possible, maintaining 1 meter distance across tables and maximum 8 person per table capacity. • Cleanliness & Disinfections: Strengthened room and public area cleaning protocols including extra disinfection of all high touch, The ALLSAFE label- new elevated cleanliness protocols and standards, Increased the frequency of cleaning. • Tools and Equipments: Thermal scanners at the main entrance or at lobby, Individual sanitizer, masks and wipes, Guest temperature measurement practices, disinfectant mats at the entrance etc.

Hilton Worldwide	• Social Distancing Norms: Contactless check-in powered by digital key technology, restricted and limited the number of guests allowed in the closed area such as fitness center at one time. • Cleanliness & Disinfections: Hilton 'Clean Stay' Room Seal on the products, De-clutter paper amenities, increased frequency of cleaning public areas at intervals, improved guidelines for disinfecting the hotel and its peripheral areas. Working with RB & Mayo Clinic for a new standard of cleanliness/ disinfection. • Tools and Equipments: Thermal scanners at the main entrance, manual and electrostatic sprayers which use an electro-statically charged disinfecting mist, ultraviolet light devices to sanitize surfaces, room equipments and objects, ready stations for disinfectant wipes at entrances and high traffic areas.
Hyatt Hotels Corporation	• Social Distancing Norms: guidelines for specific Capacity at elevators and all public areas, contactless room service with knock and go & Plexiglas partitions at high engagement areas such as restaurants. • Cleanliness & Disinfections: sanitizing public spaces with electrostatic sprayers with increased the frequency, removal of certain high-touch items from guestrooms • Tools and Equipments: Thermal scanners at the main entrance, purification and sanitation devices at public areas and guest rooms, Sanitizer stations prominently placed throughout the hotel, employees required to wear personal protection equipment (PP kits) in all areas of hotel.

Authors tried to go deep insights about the two hotel brands of India to find out how they sustained and survived during the covid-19 pandemic. Two large premier Indian hotel chains, Taj Group of Hotels (IHCL) and Oberoi Group of Hotels are taken in consideration for generating a view point:

Taj Group of Hotels (IHCL): The Indian Hotel Company Limited is among the Asia's leading hospitality companies with the presence of 200 hotels in more than 100 global locations. The portfolio of the company spans in multiple segments and countries like North America, UK, South Korea, UAE, Zambia, Srilanka, Malaysia, Maldives, Bhutan and Nepal and operates with the name of Taj, Selections,

Vivanta, Ginger, Expressions and Taj Sats (ihcltata.com). As per the IHCL sustainability report 2019-20, company had planned to tackle the current situation of pandemic where government around the globe had forced to suspend international flights and nationwide lockdowns. In the unprecedented situation of Covid-19, company experts devised five point strategies called R.E.S.E.T. 2020 which included- Revenue Growth, Excellence in Guest Well-Being, Experience and Operations, Spend Optimisation, Effective Asset Management and Thrift & Financial Prudence. The below mentioned picture show the strategic plan of R.E.S.E.T. 2020.



FIGURE 2, RESET 2020 STRATEGY BY IHCL COMPANY, SOURCE: IHCLTATA.COM

As per the company's policy, company believed in proactive strategies to navigate the situation by RESET

2020. Further company believed that guest will prefer their trusted, reputed and time tested brand. Whereas on

the part of national level, industry will take possible measures to survive in short term, revive in medium term and thrive in long term. Strategically company took initiatives to set up engagement with customers through digital marketing by introducing brand specific websites, price check tool for corporate customers and integrating booking engines with brand websites. Also, 'Taj Inner Circle' program was refreshed and refined during the year. Charity events were organized in Taj Palace New Delhi to commemorate 115 years of operation.

OBEROI GROUP OF HOTELS:

The Oberoi group (EIH) was founded in 1934, presently operates 32 hotels, Nile cruiser and motor vessel in back water of Kerala. Oberoi hotels have presence in seven countries under the luxury 'Oberoi' and five star 'Trident' brand. Oberoi hotels and resorts group is also engaged in flight catering, airport restaurants, car rentals, tour services, project management and corporate air charters. EIH group has always been concerned and committed for the cleanliness and hygiene of the guest and its staff. Apart with the implementation of the guidelines set by the WHO and MOT, GOI, group has itself implemented number of additional measures of covid-19 protocols across all its properties. Some of the major steps are:

- Thermal scanning of all staff and guests.

- Disinfection and sanitization at all the touch points at public places and housekeeping rooms.
- Differentiated protocols for staff department wise viz. front office, housekeeping, F&B production and services etc. for smooth functioning.
- Sanitization of all materials received at hotels.
- Deployment of dedicated hygiene and safety managers at all its units.
- Mandatory implementation of RTPCR and vaccination for guest and staff etc.
- Detailed SOPs in case of covid-19 positives with diagnosis and quarantine.
- Apart with detailed standards, company also had partnership with Bureau Veritas (world's leader in testing, inspection and certification services for validating and reviewing safety and hygiene programs).

EIH'S STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING BRAND DURING COVID-19

Company's strategy aim is to deliver strong return onto its shareholders, consistent value to its stakeholders and best in class services to its customers. For achieving this goal, company worked on three principles i.e. Endure, revitalize, and Flourish. Below figure show the three principles in synergy.

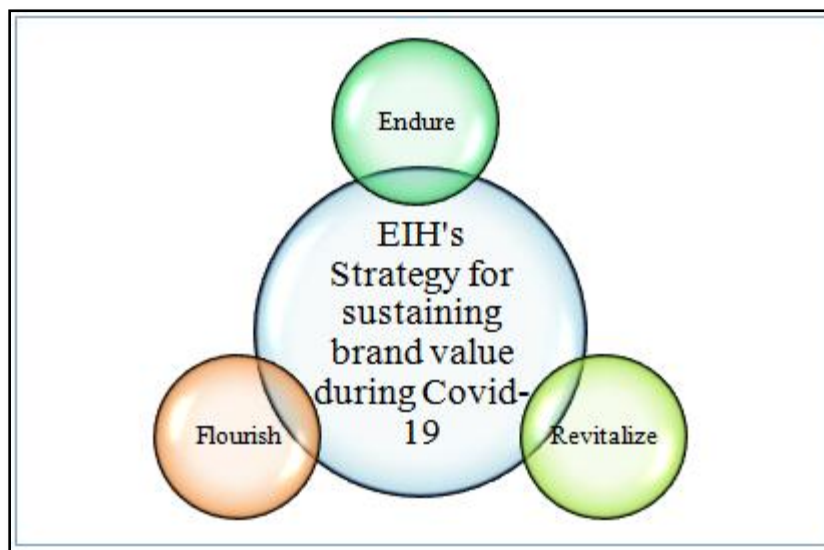


FIGURE 3, EIH COMPANY'S STRATEGY DURING COVID-19 FOR SUSTAINING BRAND VALUE, SOURCE: EIH LTD.COM

ENDURE: In the crises time employee health has been the prime focus, EIH demonstrated commitment for ensuring safety of the employees, partners and customers.

REVITALIZE: In FY 2021, following initiatives has been taken such as:

- Technology driven business
- Strategic initiatives such as technological advancements through the Oberoi Centre of Excellence

(TOCE)

- Partnership with Mandarin Oriental (O&MO) to bring together world's leading luxury brand to provide curated, exclusive and unique experience for royal members of both brands.
- Introduction of new transparent safety and hygiene norms.
- Integrated risk management for effective, ethical and

transparent practices.

- IT infrastructure for cloud computing data storage and excess.
- De-risking through enhanced F&B offerings with innovative stay dine in initiatives for attracting families, small groups to highly safe, sanitized and hygienic environment.
- Reducing carbon footprints.

FLOURISH: through this initiative, company focused on In-house project management and development of niche properties. A strong relationship is to be sustained with foreign and domestic clientele and intermediaries.

6. CONCLUSION

Tourism and hospitality industry of the country has significant potential in respect of economic contribution in the national and local GDP of the nation. As per the expectations of the economist, it is expected to grow with higher pace to any other service industry. However, due to emergence of unprecedented situation of Covid-19 pandemic, it shown a vertical drop in the growth, even many small and independent hotels are in position to shut their businesses or to transform in to other ways. Although, many chain hotels have been able to survive and recoup through their systematic strategies of branding. Branding or brand image create a unique experience in the mind of customer and serve as brand preference (Brakus et al., 2009). During the pandemic, main concern of the customer become health, safety and budget decision for travelling (Pappas & Glypton, 2021). Such concern of the customer or traveler made an array of affinity towards branded hotels or branded chain hotels. Individual hotels are striving for inclination of customers due to shortfall of policy, strategies and state of art safety and health facilities/policies due to financial and other constraints.

For survival, sustenance and recoup Taj group of hotels used rigorous brand management by working on RESET strategy which included the revenue growth, well being of customers, effective asset management etc. to give drift/thrift and financial prudence. Whereas, Oberoi group of hotels worked on three principles of branding and sustainability i.e. endure, revitalize and flourish, which ultimately helped in sustaining the brand image. The implications of branding strategy would be helpful in the view of independent and chain hotels to formulate and transform their businesses accordingly.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER SCOPE

This study highlights only on the conceptual and view point dimensions of branding and sustainability of hotel industry. Where, demography of population, perception, attitude, analysis, hypothesis etc. of customers and employees could not be measured through statistical tools. However, by seeing the present scope of branding on the sustainability of hotel business, it will be imperative to conduct a study on any specific variable in conjunction with others to find validated results. Authors are in process to conduct a study on branding and sustainability

of hotel industry in era of covid-19 pandemic with its various parameters through statistical analysis.

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