



Brand Building in a VUCA Environment: A Study based on Star Hotels in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

The business world is becoming more unstable than ever before where organizations all over the world are influenced by the VUCA environment. Accordingly, the business organizations are required to devise and implement strategies to deal with the disruptions generated by the VUCA environment. Particularly, the tourism and hospitality industry are more sensitive towards the instable environment and the organizations in this industry need to be more responsive for sustaining their growth and survival. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of VUCA environment on brand building and responses taken by the high-end star class hotels in Sri Lanka. Researchers have used a qualitative research method and particularly the multiple case study approach in conducting this study. Accordingly, the data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews, images, and company documents and the data was analyzed using the generic qualitative data analysis method consists of coding, sorting, synthesizing and theorizing. The findings of the study highlighted the challenges encountered by the hotels in sustaining their brand during a VUCA environment, including threat for customer relations, challenges for internal operational activities and insufficiency in employee talent. The study also identified the strategies used by these hotels to sustain their brand, including innovations for sustaining the brand, novelty in marketing for enhancing customer experience and enhancement of stakeholder wellbeing.



The findings imply that hotels are required to focus on innovations while addressing the needs of stakeholders by being more resilient towards the influences from VUCA environment.

Keywords: *Branding, Case Study Method, Innovations, Resilience, Stakeholder Relationships, VUCA Environment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The tourism and hospitality industry are very sensitive to the changes that can have an impact on the related business organizations. The volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) are a collection of terms used for referring to a state of flux. Kingsinger and Walch (2012) stated that the acronym of VUCA was introduced by the U.S. Army War College to describe the multilateral world which resulted from the end of the Cold War. Bennett and Lemoine (2014) described VUCA as a cute and trendy way to address the “Unpredictable change”. In such an unpredictable situation organizational performance quickly falls into risk (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014). VUCA is also used in describing the situations in the corporate environment that have the potential to affect business operations (Šimková & Hoffmannová, 2021).

A study conducted by Khurana and Singh (2019) contended that a brand helps a company just like a lighthouse to safely go through the threats of the VUCA environment. Branding is about taking something common and improving upon it in ways that make it more valuable and meaningful (Bedbury, 2002). The service sector is the most important sector of the Sri Lankan economy based on its contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP). From 2011-2021 services are accounted for nearly 55% of the GDP (Sri Lanka - Share of Economic Sectors in the Gross Domestic Product 2011-2021 Statista, n.d.). Hotels account for the largest share of accommodation in the hospitality industry and offer both accommodation and food. Furthermore, Sri Lanka Tourism Development authority stated that the third main foreign exchange earner of the country is the hotel industry (SLTDA, 2018). So, it is



more important to consider about the hotel industry to uplift countries economy. During the global financial crisis, the hotel industry diversified and expanded geographically (Yang et al., 2012).

Suraweera (2021) showed that the role of social and environmental sustainability in driving consumer brand loyalty of young adults with respect to high-end star class hotels in Colombo examined the determinants of high-end star class hotel brands by analyzing brand awareness, brand preference and brand association. The way of brand building in the context of a VUCA environment in high-end star class hotels in Sri Lanka is research worthy due to the importance of tourism industry for the country.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

In a VUCA world, creativity matters as businesses must adapt to unexpected changes and challenges (Chawla & Lenka, 2018). According to the study of Grundey (2009) well known and established brands do not use price wars in economic downturns, instead they use marketing strategies and branding to be strong and attract low-income families. Politically fair and good marketing actions help to strengthen the brands and enhance customer loyalty during the VUCA environment. With current world situations, the VUCA level is again skipping up from the normal level and therefore, corporates must adjust to unpredictable situations. No industry is excluded from this, and the hospitality industry has recently seen a variety of incidents that have aggravated the VUCA environment in which its players operate (Mumford, 2019). In Sri Lanka, high-end star class hotels, which generate significant revenue, require attention for brand building, especially during VUCA situations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out how Sri Lanka's high-end star hotels are affected by the VUCA environment. Considering about the Sri Lanka hotel industry to uplift countries' economy is more critical as Tourism Development Authority stated that the third main foreign exchange earner of the country is the hotel industry (SLTDA, 2018). Two specific research objectives have been suggested to help with this purpose. Firstly, the study aims to explore the changes generated by the VUCA



phenomenon for brand building in high-end star class hotels. The second aim of the study is to explore how hotel managers have responded to the VUCA phenomena in terms of brand building. In order to meet the challenges given by the VUCA environment and maintain or improve their hotel's brand image and reputation, hotel managers must apply a variety of strategies, tactics, and techniques. By addressing these research objectives this study aims to advance the knowledge of the relationship between the VUCA situation and brand building in the context of high-end star class hotels in Sri Lanka.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Branding

Business organizations have moved away from selling products and they engaged in selling brands by clarifying what they stand for to the marketplace. American Marketing Association (1960) defined a brand as “A name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors.” Therefore, a brand refers to a phenomenon that an organization can use to differentiate its products and services from the existing and future rivals. Calkins (2005) contended that a brand requires to continuously update its set of associations or schema in the mind of customers.

Moreover, Grundey (2009) identified the brand as a valuable asset that helps to increase profitability, sales and also the share value. Further, Aaker (2012) contended a brand as a set of assets (or liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to (or subtracts from) the value provided by a product or service. Therefore, branding is successful in adding value to the services and products and it encourages customer loyalty (O'Neill and Mattila, 2004). The studies presented thus far provide evidence that extra value can be added to a firm when there are good brand recognition, high brand image, and good reputation.

A brand can also be referred to as a way of expressing or referring to something. Accordingly, Brown (1992) mentioned that “a brand name is nothing more or less



than sum of all the mental connections people have around it”. Therefore, a brand needs to go beyond a tool to facilitate merely to identify a product and it needs to connect with the customer at a broader level socially, psychologically and emotionally. Kapferer (2004) has clearly pointed out this idea by contending that a strong brand needs to have an intense emotional association. Moreover, Sheth et al. (1991) defined brands as value systems and accordingly the brand choice decision is influenced by five consumption values. This includes functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional values.

2.2. Branding in VUCA Environment

Brands evolve with the customers' experiences and because of the changing aspects of brand and the researchers propose the brand as a process rather than an object. Therefore, researchers identify brands should be managed as a perceptual process (Berthon, Treen and Pitt, 2018). There are different types of brands and among them, strong brands have the characteristics of being famous and desirable. To be a famous or desirable brand it should be different or give added value to customers (Grundey, 2009). Heding *et al.* (2009) introduced seven approaches for branding. Accordingly, the identity approach depicts how brand is linked with the corporate identity. Consumer based approach is the third and it depicts that brand is linked with consumer associations. Next, the personality approach identifies brand as a human-like character. Relational approach defines brand as a viable relationship partner. Community approach is the sixth and brand is identified as the pivotal point of social interaction and the last is cultural approach and brand is considered as a broader cultural fabric (Heding et al., 2009).

Brand loyalty is more important as customers with high brand loyalty remain with the brand for a long term (Aaker, 2012). Also, these loyal clients are not single entities, they have more social relations and they can influence their surroundings during their choice of the brand. This also works in the opposite direction as well. Dissatisfied customers share their dissatisfaction with friends and also shift to another brand. To support loyal clients, verbal communication, so called word of mouth is



necessary (Bettinger Jennifer, 2018). Aaker (2012) underscores the significance of brand loyalty, which not only retains customers over the long term but also leverages their social influence. This influence extends to word-of-mouth communication, as emphasized by Bettinger (2018).

During dynamic environments such as economic depressions, many companies face uncertainty and fear of losing everything. The 4P's help to create and manage brands during economic downturns. Researchers explained that brands face a variety of risks every day and the brand managers should overcome those by making clever steps to survive in those hard times (Grundey, 2009). Amidst economic downturns, brands encounter heightened risks, necessitating strategic management. Grundey (2009) highlights the importance of better brand management, utilizing the traditional marketing mix (4P's) to navigate challenging circumstances.

Significant analysis and discussion on the subject of VUCA was presented by Grundey (2009) and identified during a VUCA environment brand can affect by the price, and price wars can be created. Customer retention is the biggest concern for managers in a dynamic environment. Branding must move to retention branding from acquisition branding and retention branding builds the path to brand sustainability. Simply brand sustainability means the relationships with customers (Grundey, 2009).

During the Covid-19 crisis, many brands react by adapting their communication by incorporating social distancing references in their logos and also, develop new services, and change the business models to adopt with the crisis (Stylus, 2020; Designboom, 2020; Gorbach 2020). According to the literature it depicts that during a VUCA environment brand management strategies have no choice but to change (Baumgarth, 2020).

According to Barsky & Nash (2008) during the financial crisis, compared to other hotels, branded luxury hotels were able to maintain their pricing steady. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2005) also concluded by interviewing Korean travelers, that a positive impact on financial performance is a strong brand image. They concluded that luxury hotels with high quality do not involve in cutting prices in response to crisis, instead,



they increase marketing and cut down the cost of employees by reducing their working hours or laying off employees.

Branding is significant whether it is a crisis or not. During the favorable economic conditions, several research articles were conducted and they stated that hotel brands that are well managed can achieve higher market share, better profitability, have the power to charge premium prices, and achieve higher revenues (Keeling, 2001; O'Neill & Mattila, 2010; O'Neill & Xiao, 2006). So, this indicated that hotel brands influence positively for the performance. Despite the VUCA situation, hotels must maintain their brand and achieve higher financial profitability

2.3. Organizational Responses for VUCA Environment in Branding

During recessions, it is difficult to predict the time period required for coming back to the normal. So, businesses have to control and focus on what they can control to enhance the short-term results and minimize the losses. Reducing advertisement expenditures is a major factor that helps companies to improve their return on capital (Grundey, 2009). Moreover, this study contended that the hotel industry has changed from one single branded hotel to multiple brands as to move with different customers. As hotel chains expand, they must keep “Global brand consistency” during the VUCA situation.

It has been noted that some mini case studies like Nike, Kellogg's, Nokia, Chrysler and some global hotel brands have identified several methods to build and maintain a brand. They are brand extensions, managing meaning, considering about global brand consistency, glocalizing brands, maintaining brand investments, brand awareness and satisfying customer needs (Grundey, 2009).

Dickson and Giglierano (1986) have stated that companies need to consider about two kinds of failures as “Sinking the boat” and “Missing the boat” and during a dynamic environment they mostly worried about sinking the boat i.e. wrecking the company by making a bad bet. The lesson learned and the experience from the hotel industry in Hong Kong during the SARS outbreak in 2003, were applied during the COVID-19 pandemic. It provides the steps hotels have taken to promote cleanliness



and prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as increased cleaning and disinfection frequency, staff use of personal protective equipment, social distancing measures, and contactless check-in and check-out procedures (Wong et al., 2022).

Recently research focus on the impact of information technology and sustainability strategies in hotel branding during covid -19 crisis, evidence from the Greek environment and the results depict that each company should adopt sustainability philosophy and use information technology and they should develop new branding strategies. When following branding strategies, they can increase their market share inside their task environment and increase the company performance (Varelas et al., 2021)

Some of the researchers noted that proactive measures are the most successful strategies to overcome from VUCA situations. Laitinen (2000) stated that marketing along with investments in new product development is the most successful strategy. Also, the existing staff should remain in the tourism industry while making the work time more flexible (Alonso-Almeida & Bremser, 2013). A similar finding was there from the research about the reaction of Singapore's tourist attractions, where (Henderson, 1999) found that the staff level should keep constant in cost cutting measures. During the Asian financial crisis, Hong Kong hotel industry cuts down costs, staff, and wages while freezing hiring. This led to damage the image of the hotel by the low commitment of the employees, declining morale, and job insecurity. This measure is contradictory with the study of Alonso-Almeida & Bremser (2013) as the BEST model depicts that hotels which reduce costs did not suffer from a decrease of sales. BEST model includes the variables that impacted the best performers, and those variables includes impacts, measures, strategy, characteristics, and control of each hotel. Further Alonso-Almeida & Bremser (2013) contended that with continuous marketing, customers become loyal with the firms and these loyal customers recommend hotels to others and remain satisfied even during the VUCA environment. So, they do not switch to other hotels. In addition, hotel managers should maintain the price or increase the price as loyal customers focus less on price and more on the hotel attributes.



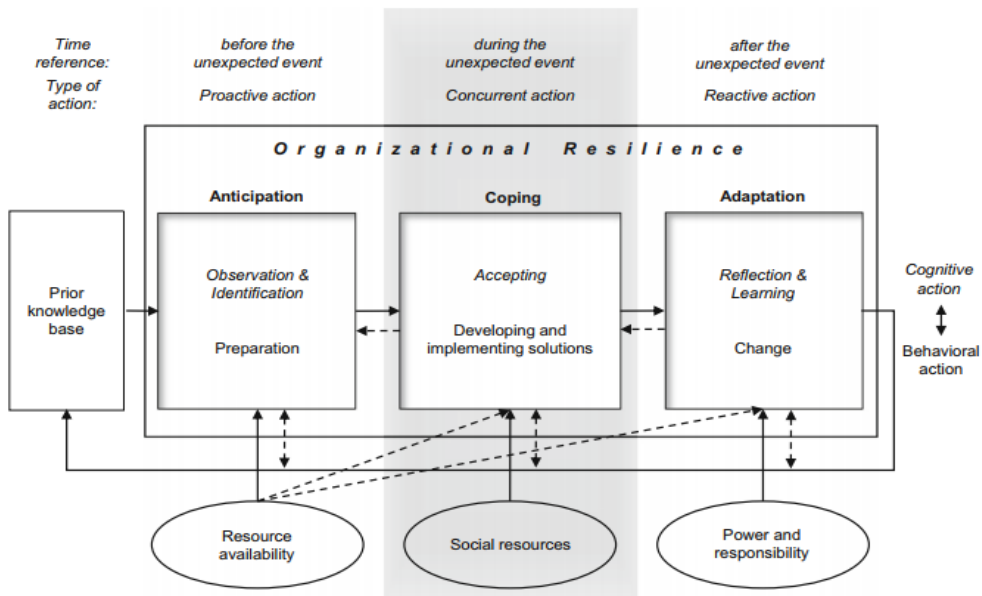
2.4. Theoretical Perspective

This section is useful for understanding the main phenomenon of this study and that is resilience which arises from the Latin word “resilire” and this defines the elastic deformation of an object that undergoes force and then returns to its original state (Radic et al., 2022). Further, Baltes et al., (2017) defined resilience as the ability to cope with unpredictable and uncertain crises to organize one's relationship with the environment to identify precaution strategies to set up the precautionary measures that are to relocate and to recover after a disaster. Thoma *et al.* (2016) identified five phases of resilience as prepare, protect, prevent, respond and recover. When considering the resilience to organizations there are three different levels identified by Cronenberg (2020) including individual level, team level and organizational level.

Resilience theory emphasizes the importance of developing resilience to recover from shocks and disruptions and continue to thrive in a VUCA environment. Business resilience helps organizations to quickly adapt with the disruptions and to maintain sustainable business operations while protecting people, assets and overall brand equity (Simeone & Cynthia (2015). Business resilience is “the capacity for companies to survive, adapt and grow in the face of turbulent change” (Fiksel, 2017).

Moreover, the main organizational and operational risks related to the delivery of goods and services, as well as the viability of business operations during emergencies, are identified and understood by business resilience. The key focus areas covered by this function include goods and services, management and staff, operations and facilities, clients and suppliers, and the entire value chain (Simeone & Cynthia, 2015). According to Duchek (2020), there are three successive stages of this resilience process as it responds to the past (reactive action), current issues (concurrent action) and also to the future (anticipatory action) as depicted in figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptualization of Organizational Resilience



Source: Adapted from Ducheck (2020)

In the context of the hotel industry, developing resilience is crucial for sustaining a hotel brand during a VUCA environment. Hotels face various disruptions such as natural disasters, economic downturns, and pandemics that can significantly impact their operations and brand reputation. Developing resilience can help hotels to recover from these disruptions quickly and effectively, minimizing the negative impacts on their brand. Furthermore, proactive planning, risk management, and the ability to adapt quickly to changing circumstances are essential components of developing resilience in the hotel industry (Brown *et al.*, 2017).

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to uncover how Sri Lanka's high-end star hotels are affected by the VUCA environment and how the brand building is taken place in the VUCA environment. Accordingly, researchers have deployed a qualitative research approach to conduct this study as it is essential to extract data from interviews and observations to achieve the above research aim (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Particularly, this



research was conducted by adopting the interpretivist philosophy where the researchers assume that reality is subjective, multiple and socially constructed. Accordingly, the real experience, knowledge and belief of hotel managers were collected with regard to how they respond to the VUCA situation and manage their brands. Mainly, the features of qualitative research including fluidity, evolving and dynamic nature were considered in conducting this study (Eranda, 2021).

This study was conducted with the case study approach and particularly using the multiple case study design (Yin, 2018). Multiple cases are more compelling and overall multiple case study is regarded as being more robust (Herriott and Firestone, 1983). Further, multiple case designs are preferred over the single case designs and analytical conclusions arise from two cases are more powerful than the conclusions from single case (Yin, 2018). The case study hotel profiles are presented in figure 2 and the hotels are named A, B, C and D due to the confidentiality reasons.

Criterion sampling method was used in selecting the respondents in the study and criterion sampling specifies the inclusionary criteria that individuals must meet to take part in the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Accordingly, the Marketing Managers of the above hotels were selected as the respondents who have experience in managing their brands. Researchers connected with the Marketing Managers in high-end star class hotels to develop a closer relationship with them in the outset which can result in collecting rich data. The data was collected using in-depth semi structured interviews, observations, and secondary data. These multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures for the same phenomenon and data triangulation was helpful to strengthen the contrast validity of the case (Yin, 2018). Generic qualitative data analysis method was followed in analyzing the qualitative data. Accordingly, the significant data was coded in the beginning and thereafter the codes were grouped into categories and finally the themes were generated by connecting the categories meaningfully.

Figure 2: Case Study Hotel Profiles

Hotel - A

This is a five-star hotel that comes under luxury boutique hotel category. This is located between Waikkala beach and Gin Oya estuary with presence of traditional Sri Lankan architecture and intelligent design. They have managed to operate the hotel during Covid-19 with their unique strategies.

Hotel - B

The is a five-star luxury hotel in Kandy and it offers stunning views of the surrounding hills. It is also close to some of the city's most popular attractions in Kandy. During VUCA environment hotel sustain with the precaution measures to prevent from the influences and enhance the staff with exhibitions that they could gain profit during the difficult time periods.

Hotel - C

This is a stunning 4-star hotel in Kandy and it provides breathtaking views of the surrounding hills and lush greenery. The hotel has taken all the safety precautions to ensure highest safety during Covid-19 and adopted innovative strategies to deal with the dynamic business environment.

Hotel - D

This is a five-star resort located in Colombo with a breathtaking view of Beira Lake. This is one of 30 leading travel destinations to receive the Safe Travels Stamp from World Travel & Tourism Council. Also, this hotel was able to manage its operations effectively during Covid-19 thanks to its innovative strategies.

3.1. Findings

As per the analysis, researchers have developed two themes related to the influence of VUCA environment on brand building.

- **Influence of VUCA Environment on Brand Building**

Each of these themes is examined below with the relevant evidence are as follows.

Theme 01: Threat for customer relations

Businesses face difficulties in maintaining positive customer relationships. This has long been a concern in business, but modern technology and increased competition have made customer relations management more important than ever. Businesses should invest in significant resources in customer relations management and adapt their strategies on a regular basis to address potential threats to customer loyalty. However, the VUCA environment threatens the customer relationship as the level of unpredictability has increased. Customers are the main revenue generators in an organization and when the environment is uncertain and volatile it is difficult for customers to interact with the organization as usual. Because of this during an uncertain environment organization face challenges in sustaining their brand and retaining their customers. The Annual Report of Hotel D elaborated it as follows.

“This resulted due to the *cancellation of bookings* due to the Easter Sunday Attack in April 2019 and the current pandemic. Further, due to the prevailing situation of the country, the Hotels of the Group have *operated with zero occupancy in the months of April and May 2020*. Most of the European and East Asian countries fully or partially lock down at the moment and with that any kind of travelling has been fully or partially stopped.”

As mentioned in the annual report during this uncertain and difficult period guests do not arrive as usual and they can't keep relationship with the hotel. Guest arrival is more important for a hotel as its main operations run through accommodation, dining,



and events. Banquet and also the buffet has to close down its operations if there are no guests.

Thus, during VUCA environment it is difficult to keep customer relations and maintain customer arrivals as usual. The Marketing Manager of Hotel B elaborated it as follows.

“During the COVID tourist board and government took three to four months in developing a policy. And internationally they tell no need to wear face masks while Sri Lankan policies communicate need to wear face masks. So, tourists were in a confusion. Sri Lanka don’t have an already developed strategy to face these uncertain situations. We never heard about VUCA. Also, French men now bring their own wine bottles from their country rather than buying from us for 9 Euros. Therefore, Sri Lanka again loses this profit. So unplanned government policies have affected the industry and country as this.”

According to the Marketing Manager’s experience, government policies are critical in ensuring public health and safety. To maintain good customer relationships, these policies should be aligned with the needs of businesses and customers. To avoid customer confusion, clear communication about policies and their implementation is essential. Face masks were required by Sri Lankan policy, but not by international policy, adding to the confusion. The absence of a developed strategy for dealing with VUCA situations has also contributed to the negative impact of government policies on industry and the country. These challenges that businesses face create negative image in maintaining customer trust and confidence which finally result in customer relations.

Theme 02: Challenges for internal operational activities

Hotel operations are affected and this impact to the hotel brand and internal operations. There is a high level of uncertainty and volatility within the current VUCA environment, and tourism and hospitality industry are impacted by any global change. Any disruption to hotel operations can have a significant impact on the

brand's reputation, as a decline in operational efficiency is directly proportional to a decrease in the quality of the customer experience. Need to understand the facts that affect the hotel operations and implement new strategies to overcome as hotel brand is crucial as the brand is a critical asset that can influence customer loyalty, revenue, and profitability. The Marketing Manager of Hotel A elaborated it as follows.

“During Covid 19 pandemic we were not allowed to have events. Even though people need to have events they don't have budgets to have events. Though they had budget to have events, but still, we couldn't have enough food and beverage. We don't have imported foods for example meat items. Those are the main challenges. Apart from that we don't have parts for machineries, can't do repairs for example if A/C machine breakdown there are no parts to fix it. Also, any new projects we are planning to do we have postponed them because of current restriction we can't import. Also, we can't import foods, but we have to keep the standard within the things available in the Sri Lankan market”.

According to his explanation pandemic has a significant impact on event planning with restrictions on gathering. Even for customers with a sufficient budget, there are additional challenges, such as a lack of food and beverage. This is because of a scarcity of imported foods. Hotels mainly import luxury food items and it enhance the brand and provides a better customer experience. With the VUCA situation these imported food and beverages are banned and have restrictions in importing them, and that lead to change the hotel menu to more traditional.

The pandemic has also impacted the availability of machinery parts which is making repairs difficult. When there is a lack in machinery parts to repair machines in hotel, they face additional operational challenges as they are unable to provide the necessary facilities and finally this affects the hotel's brand name. Despite the restrictions on importing foods, hotels and event venues must maintain their standards and provide quality services to their customers using locally available products. The Marketing Manager of Hotel D elaborated it as follows.



“Crisis impact on the way hotels operate and market the services. One effect of the pandemic has been a lack of investment in advertisements. With a decrease in guest arrivals, we had to reduce marketing budgets”

One effect of the pandemic is a decrease in advertising investment. This is due to a decrease in guest arrivals, which has resulted in a decrease in hotel revenue and cash flow. With fewer guests arriving, hotels had to cut their marketing budgets to save money and maintain their financial viability. This decrease in marketing spending has resulted in a reduction in advertising and promotional activities. The Marketing Manager of Hotel C explained it as follows.

“Hotels also have a huge impact from the taxes, high electricity bill and all. But we don’t get any relief from the government. So, it’s like we are giving “food for free” to customers and we can’t keep a considerable profit”

When taxes rise due to economic insecurity, hotel operations suffer significantly. Higher taxes can raise the cost of doing business, reducing profit margins, and making new projects and initiatives more difficult to fund. Hotels may be forced to pass on higher costs to their customers in the form of higher room rates, food and beverage prices, and other fees to offset these higher costs. Customers' purchasing power may suffer because of paying more for services they could previously obtain at a lower cost. As a result, customer purchasing behavior may shift, with customers seeking low-price alternatives or reducing their overall spending on hotel services. This may result in a decrease in revenue for hotels, putting additional pressure on their operations and financial stability.

Theme 03: Insufficiency in employee talent

To attract customers, hotels must differentiate themselves from their competitors in the hospitality industry. This necessitates a team of skilled and dedicated employees capable of providing excellent customer service, dealing with unexpected situations, and staying current on the latest trends and technologies. When the employees are not



talented enough customers cannot get the expected experience and hotel cannot provide the expected outcome. As a soft element employee skills and talent is a necessary element in sustaining the brand during VUCA situation. The Marketing Manager of Hotel B contended it as follows.

“Salary structure in tourism industry has a low portion of basic salary and high amount from service charge and incentives. So, with the pandemic most of them can’t live with basic salary. So, they try to leave tourism sector as they can’t survive with the low basic salary”.

Also, the next thing is merging of the related industry. With the pandemic most of the hotels convert them into hospitals. And the same time hospitals realize customers seek more comfortable and other facilities as of hotels in these hospitals. So, they make the hotels by including mini fridges and they are moving from core business to other facilities from health care. So many vacancies emerge in hospitals which suits to the hoteliers. Now hotel people move to hospital vacancies. As in hotel industry they get lower salary and in hospitals they can get a competitive higher salary.”

According to Marketing Manager’s knowledge and experience employees are unable to sustain themselves in the hotel with the difficult situation as they cannot survive with only the basic salary. Not like other organizational employees, lower-level hotel staff earn a lower basic salary and they receive service charge and other incentives when there are more customers. When there is a lack of customer arriving to hotel those employees cannot survive with only the basic salary. Then they try to leave the hotel and go back to their villages. The pandemic has influenced the hospitality and healthcare industries, with many hotels being converted into temporary hospitals to accommodate more patients. As a result, hospitals have begun to recognize the importance of providing more comfortable and convenient facilities to their patients, such as mini bar fridge. As a result, the hospitality and healthcare industries are merging, and hospitals beginning to incorporate elements of the hotel industry into their operations. This has also created new job opportunities in hospitals for hotel



workers who may have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. The Marketing Manager of Hotel A mentioned it as follows.

“Disasters affect as we don’t get service charge which the employees highly get and basically employees can’t stay in boarding place and come to hotel for work. Most of them left country and move to Maldives, Dubai, and other countries where they have higher job security and where they get paid well. So next retaining staff is the bigger problem we face. Because whenever there is a disaster, business drop, we must cut down the casual staff and then again at the busy time to get the skilled staff it’s a bigger challenge we are facing.”

According to his experience, most of the employees are leaving the country as there is no job security & not getting a better salary. Employees who stay at boarding places face difficulties as they can’t bear the living expenses which is increasing day by day. Also, hotels face difficulties in retaining customers during difficult period as it’s an expense to pay salaries without any revenue. Finally, hotels face the major challenge of lacking skilled labor, which causes a problem in customer service because trainers or new employees cannot provide the same level of service as experienced employees.

Table 1 illustrates the summary by including themes and the evidence for VUCA situation’s influence on brand building in high end star class hotels in Sri Lanka.

Table 1: Summary Table of Themes Relevant to The Influence of VUCA Environment on Brand Building

Theme	Meaning of the theme	Evidence
Threat for customer relations	Customers are the main revenue generators in an organization and when the environment is uncertain and volatile its difficult for customers to interact with the organization as usual. Buying power of the customers reduce and the customer arrival reduces with the uncertain time.	Operations impact is mainly we lose customers. Customers don’t have budget. When service is not good customers are complaining and that is because we lack skilled labor during this difficult time. Also, with the pandemic buying power of the customer is now less as the rupee value has gone down. So, people who come



		for two nights now come for one night.
Challenges for internal operational activities	As the VUCA situation is more uncertain and volatile and as the tourism and hospitality industry is very sensitive to any of the changes happening in the world, hotel operations easily get affected and when the operations affect it affect the brand name as when there is a decline in operations there is a decline in customer experience.	Crisis impact on the way hotels operate and market the services. One effect of the pandemic has been a lack of investment in advertisements. With a decrease in guest arrivals, we had to reduce marketing budgets During Covid 19 pandemic we were not allow to have events. Even though people need to have events they don't have budgets to have events. Though they had budget to have events, but still, we couldn't have enough food and beverage. We don't have import foods for example meat items.
Insufficiency in employee talent	When the employees are not talented enough customer cannot get the expected experience and hotel cannot provide the expected outcome. As a soft element employee skills and talent is a necessary element in sustaining the brand during VUCA situation.	Disasters affect as we don't get service charge which the employees highly get and basically employees can't stay in boarding place and come to hotel for work. Most of them left country and move to Maldives, Dubai, and other countries where they have higher job security and where they get paid well. So next the retaining staff is the bigger problem we face. Because every time when disaster come and business drop, we have to cut down the casual staff and then again at the busy time to get the skilled staff it's a bigger challenge we are facing.

The findings of the analysis depicted that the selected hotels have developed novel responses through their brand building in the VUCA environment as explained below.



Responses of Hotels towards Brand Building in the VUCA Environment

Theme 01: Innovations for sustaining the brand

In a VUCA environment, hotels must constantly seek new ways to differentiate themselves. Launching new initiatives that align with changing customer needs and market trends, such as sustainability, health and wellness, and digital transformation, is one effective strategy. Launching new initiatives can help a hotel stand out from the competition, attract new customers, and increase revenue streams. Hotels can improve their reputation and brand image by investing in initiatives, positioning themselves as industry leaders, and attracting a new generation of socially responsible and health-conscious customers. Overall, undertaking innovations can assist hotels in staying ahead of the difficult time and maintaining their brand relevance and reputation over time. The Marketing Manager of Hotel A explained it as follows.

“As a brand that truly cares about the wellbeing of all their stakeholders including their communities, our hotels & resorts announced the launch of *“Meals that Heal” in Sri Lanka; a food donation initiative to help the communities where they operate, in this time of need.*”

According to the explanation, businesses can build trusting connections with their stakeholders, such as customers, employees, and the community where they operate, by showing that they are committed to CSR. Such initiatives can help to increase brand loyalty, improve customer perception, and enhance employee pride. Furthermore, businesses can use these initiatives to distinguish themselves from their competitors and establish a distinct brand identity. In today's business landscape, where consumers are increasingly conscious of social and environmental issues, initiatives aimed at giving back to the community can be a key driver of brand sustainability. The Marketing Manager of Hotel C mentioned it as follows.

“Hotel staff engage with the Chairman’s property called frozen villa, which is in Kotmale with 50 arches, So the *staff do cultivation of vegetables and still now we use the tomato sauce which is develop with the tomato we harvest from that land.*”



According to respondents' explanation during VUCA situation committed employees can be a key driver of brand sustainability in the hospitality industry. Employees who are committed are more likely to go above and beyond their job requirements to provide exceptional customer service, and they commit when they feel secure in the organization. Launching new initiatives, on the other hand, can be a powerful strategy for sustaining a hotel brand during economic downturns. Consumers may be more price-sensitive and less likely to travel during economic downturns, making it difficult for hotels to maintain their revenue streams. As the findings hotel can sustain with their own food and vegetables as they launch the cultivation on their land and still, they serve customers with that harvest. The Marketing Manager of Hotel C elaborated it as follows.

“To lower the electricity cost we introduce a new project department wise. And for room amenities, we reduce the number of room amenities, and we provide them on request. And, for the buffet we provide only the main items and reduce the other optional items.”

As he explained, cost cutting measures can be taken as a major strategy for hotels to sustain the brand during VUCA situation. From the total expenses. operational and labor cost account for a significant portion. With the new cost cutting implications hotels can reduce their major expenses and sustain in the difficult period by improving their overall performance.

Theme 02: Novelty in marketing for enhancing customer experience

Innovative marketing strategies can improve the customer experience and placed a brand apart from competitors. Providing new experiences as personalized services and adjusting marketing activities tailored to specific customer behaviors and preferences can help to better meet customer needs. This is also helpful to differentiate the brand and stand uniquely among other star hotel brands. The Marketing Manager of Hotel A mentioned it as follows.



“As we can’t import food and beverage items now our staff is producing the food from Sri Lankan raw materials. Also, to sustain we did a drive thru as customers can order online or by calling and then collect the food at our door step without getting down from the vehicle. It generates a considerable revenue. So, this was mainly grab by our loyal client base. We mainly focus on giving a memorable experience to our guests and its simply quality over quantity.”

The hotel's primary concern is to provide guests with a memorable experience, with quality taking precedence over quantity. Hotel has adjusted its operations to meet current challenges and is focusing on customer satisfaction and engagement to sustain during these difficult times. With the economic downturn, inflations, and also with import restrictions hotels face difficulties in importing luxury food items such as cheese, beverages and other food items. Local raw materials are now used by emphasizing the cultural value and new initiatives help to enhance customer experience. The Marketing Manager of Hotel C elaborated it as follows.

“Also, we limit social media marketing as we reduce messages, we out at 3 times for a 1 time weekly. We communicate about our safety at the hotel, safety measures we take and our procedures in the website as then customers are aware that our hotel has a safety procedures and guests are safe. And we do awareness program to guests and gave to media as customers seek for safety. We have a marketing strategy as word of mouth. We have not done any marketing campaigns for banquet events but from Kandy we have the highest event numbers. We have a trust and loyal customer base. Also, we do email campaign as emailing to loyal set of customers, mobile campaign, card promotions and also recently we join with Dialog as partnership. We join with Dialog as for a payment gateway. We join for the genie customer’s offer with Dialog.”

Even though organizations need to do marketing, during the VUCA environment organizations need to decrease marketing expenses as the customers face difficulties in reaching and buying power is low. To sustain in the industry, hotels engage with customers by communicating the health protocols and by introducing awareness

programs that could drive a positive image to customers. Most trusted marketing medium is word of mouth and these hotels use it along with email marketing, mobile and card promotions that don't cost them must as tv and radio advertisements.

Theme 03: Enhancement of stakeholder wellbeing

Hotels have implemented measures to ensure the safety of their customers and employees. Hotels prioritize safety and hygiene in order to provide a secure environment that promotes wellbeing and contributes to the hotel's long-term sustainability. This theme emphasizes the significance of stakeholder wellbeing in the hospitality industry, and the changes done in hotels to sustain the stakeholders. The Marketing Manager of Hotel B explained it as follows.

“Safe kit consisting with face mask, sanitizers, pens, and all. And, we provide the sanitized towel in a sealed packed. We also seal the room after sanitizing which is a breakable sticker. So, this is to ensure the safety to customers. Also, we have an ultra-light kind of an equipment that could test the cleanliness of the area. That is the linking of health care industry to hotel industry.”

Organizations related to the tourism and hospitality industry must adopt new healthcare measures during a pandemic and need to ensure health and safety inside the hotel to attract customers during the VUCA environment. Sealing by breakable stickers have added more security as that ensures the room safety. The Marketing Manager of Hotel A stated it as follows.

“Without saying yes or no to the customer we must be open with the customers and what we have to do is open with the customers, understand the customer situation and understand why that customer made that kind of a complaint. Most of the customers are now well educated and they know about the country situation, so they hardly do complaints. Even in the pandemic. Though even after Pandemic period and after the Easter attack, we closed the hotel for two months after the Easter attack none of the customers moved to other hotels, soon after the hotel reopened, they come to our hotel. Even though the rates are high now they are coming into dining and in the

weekends most of our hotels ran into high occupancy. So, we have a good communication with not only the external customers but also with the internal customers”

As the respondent explained hoteliers need to understand the customer and their situation and the customer has an understanding towards the hotel during the VUCA situation. Because of these understanding customers don’t lose loyalty and they always seek to try out a new experience with the hotel. Hoteliers also provide promotions and discounts for buffet to adjust with the customer buying power. The Marketing Manager of Hotel C commented it as follows.

“Also, we introduce a program called *craft and exhibition as the staff can bring whatever the crafting times sell them at our exhibition and gain profit in the difficult time*”

According to the respondent staff utilized their time during the lock-down period to improve their hidden talents. This help to enhance staff revenue and help them to sustain during the crisis period as they can gain an income by selling their handcraft in the exhibition.

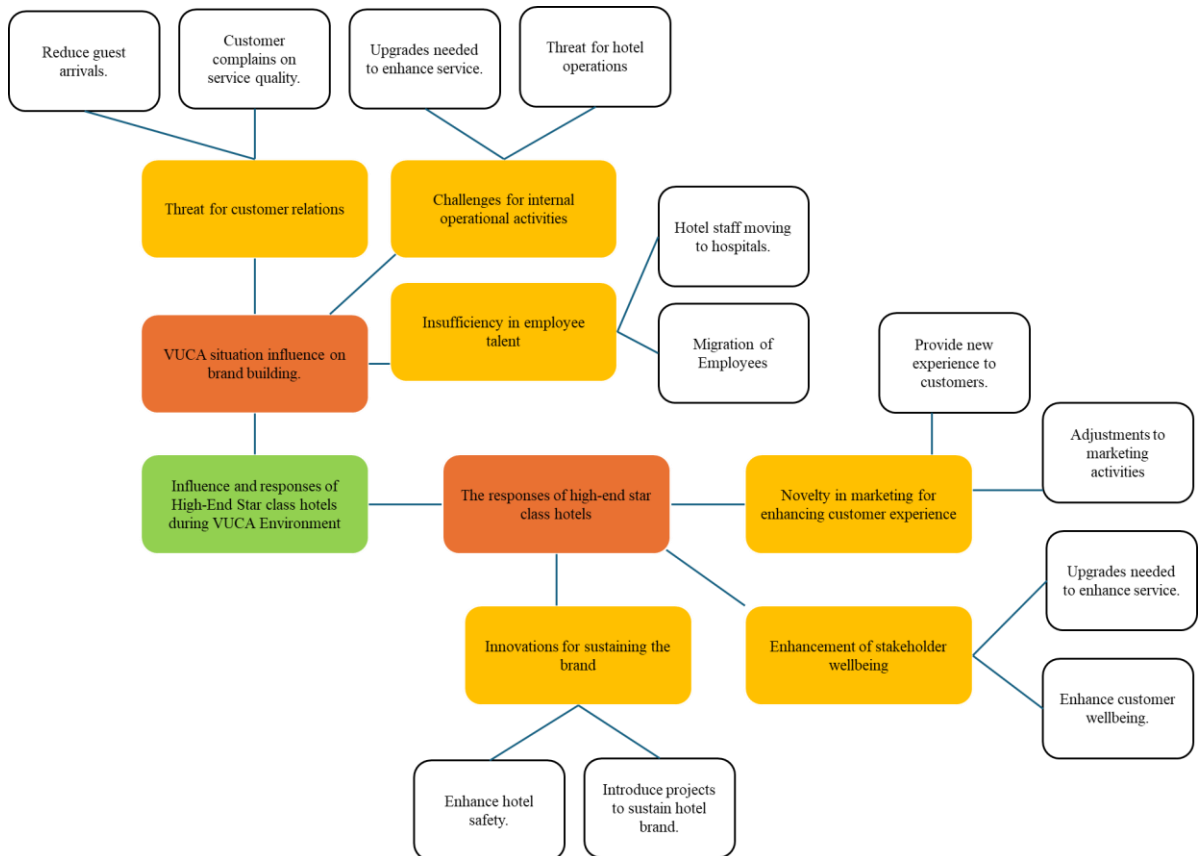
Table 2: Summary Table of Themes Relevant to the Responses of Hotels Towards Brand Building

Theme	Meaning of the theme	Evidence
Innovations for sustaining the brand	Innovations mean the introduction of new programs as to cost cutting and customer relationship building programs. Also, the programs which help to develop employee well-being and build their trust with the organization. These innovations help the hotel brand to sustain during the difficult time period.	“As a brand that truly cares about the wellbeing of all their stakeholders including their communities, our hotels & resorts announced the launch of “Meals that Heal” in Sri Lanka; a food donation initiative to help the communities where they operate, in this time of need” “Hotel staff engage with the Chairman’s property called frozen villa, which is in Kotmale with 50 arches, So the staff do cultivation of vegetables and still now we use the tomato sauce which is develop with

		the tomato we harvest from that land” “To lower the electricity cost we introduce a new project department wise. And for room amenities we reduce the amount of room amenities and we provide them on request. And also, for buffet we provide only the main items and reduce the other optional items.”
Novelty in marketing for enhancing customer experience	Introduction of novel marketing consist with the providing new customer experience as from glocalizing raw materials, providing unique experience and also the adjustments to marketing activities as mostly using social media, reducing marketing activities and changing the communications in line with pandemic.	“As we can’t import food and beverage items now our staff is producing the food from Sri Lankan raw materials. Also, to sustain we did a drive thru as customers can order online or by calling and then collect the food at our door step without getting down from the vehicle” “Also, we do email campaign as emailing to loyal set of customers, mobile campaign, card promotions “
Enhancement of stakeholder wellbeing	This includes the enhancement of hotel safety, customer wellbeing and employee wellbeing as for the employee providing flexible working hours, loyalty building and as for the customers, providing discounts and offers, better communication with customers and understanding the customers.	“Safe kit consisting with face mask, sanitizers, pens and all. And also, we provide the sanitized towel in a sealed packed. We also seal the room after sanitizing which is a breakable sticker. So, this is to ensure the safety to customers” “Also, for employees we give flexi hour and incentives. We have a program to thank giving for the family for their commitments and all. We started with the pandemic. To convey our heartiest thankfulness to their families”

The summary of the findings generated through the coding process is presented in figure 3 as a thematic map to ensure the transparency of the analysis in the study.

Figure 3: Thematic Map of the Findings



Source: Authors' construction based on the analysis

4. DISCUSSION

According to the study, hotels have experienced difficulties in keeping up customer relations during VUCA situation. This is because customers are the main revenue generators in an organization and when the environment is uncertain and volatile it is difficult for customers to interact with the organization as usual. Customer buying power and customer arrivals have reduced with the pandemic, political instability and also because of the economic downturn. This has firmly supported by the previous research findings during a VUCA situation where a decline in customer retention and customer arrival was evidenced (Okumus & Karamustafa, 2005). Also, customers postponed purchases, and their buying power has changed with the VUCA situation (Ang et al., 2000). According to Barsky & Nash (2008) in 2008 during the financial crisis, compared to other hotels, branded luxury hotels were able to maintain their pricing steadily. But according to the research findings high-end star class hotels in Sri Lanka have reduced their prices and arranged promotional discounts for their customers as they have low buying power.

As per the analysis VUCA situation challenge the internal operational activities and this finding has contributed to expand the knowledge of previous literature. Researchers have emphasized the difficulties faced by the hotel as there is no considerable revenue, hoteliers have to postpone new projects and also there is a lack of machinery parts, and also a lack in imported food and beverages. These factors are backed by previous research findings (Okumus & Karamustafa, 2005). The hotel services also upgraded to sustain with the pandemic as introducing contactless check to avoid virus touching which is also mentioned in the previous literature (Stylus 2020, Designboom 2020, Gorbach 2020).

Insufficiency in employee talent is another influence if VUCA phenomenon which has also influenced the hotel brand. This is mainly caused by the lack of customers where the staff could not get paid with the service charge, and as it is a major income for the staff. As the employees could not sustain with the given remunerations they tend to migrate for more secure jobs and finally it has resulted with a loss of skilled



labor for hotels. These research findings are in line with the Henderson (1999) which revealed that staff level should keep constant in cost-cutting measures. However, Kamoche (2003) depicted that in the Asian financial crisis Hong Kong hotel industry cut down costs, staff and wages while freezing the hiring. Findings of this study revealed that with the loss of service charge and with lack of job security many of the staff left the job and they migrated but hotels did not terminate their employees.

As a response to the VUCA environment hotels have innovated for sustaining their brands. According to respondents experience new initiatives of the hotel management help to sustain the hotel brand during dynamic and uncertain environment. With the cultivation and food donation campaigns, it has created a positive impact on the communities as well. The Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives were helpful to develop strong relationships with the stakeholders, and this enhanced the employee trust and job security. Moreover, initiatives such as food donation programs also benefitted the hotels and society during VUCA environment. By demonstrating a commitment to social responsibility and community welfare, these campaigns contributed to sustain the hotel brand during the economic downturn and inflation. Simultaneously, such initiatives can provide much-needed assistance to the communities where the hotel operates, particularly those struggling to put food on the table. By making a difference in the lives of those in need, the hotel can improve its reputation as a socially responsible and caring brand, leading to increased customer loyalty and brand sustainability. The research study of Varelas et al., (2021) is in line with these findings where they revealed that the necessity of developing new branding strategies including food donations which can uplift the living of community and enhance the hotel's reputation as a responsible corporate citizen. Positive media coverage, social media engagement, and word-of-mouth publicity can also be generated by the campaign, while increasing brand awareness and reaching new audiences.

Moreover, the novelty in marketing for enhancing customer experience was instrumental in attracting and retaining customer during the VUCA situation. The glocalization of food and beverages has taken a great place with import restrictions





and higher inflation. Hence, hotels tried to emphasize the local culture and local raw materials and introduced new local taste that would make a new experience for foreigners. These experience focused initiatives were important in generating revenue and sustaining the brand name during the difficult time. This is compatible with the early research findings as glocalizing and satisfying customer need was emphasized by Grundey (2009). Also, hotels have initiated drive-thru experience for the customers during the pandemic situation to keep social distancing and to enjoy their food to get a better experience. Further, hotels have created a memorable experience for guests and they emphasized quality over quantity. As per the findings, investments on marketing and advertisements have been reduced and aligned the communication materials with the pandemic to ensure awareness. Apart from traditional marketing, hotels used less cost marketing strategies such as credit card promotions, social media marketing, email marketing and mobile marketing which are targeting loyal customers.

However previous research studies are providing contradictory viewpoints on the investment in marketing. Ang et al., (2000) revealed that marketing activities should increase, to increase visibility of the product. Also, Okumus et al. (2005) mentioned that additional investment on marketing have positively impacted the hotels to survive during the Turkish financial crisis.

Hotels have also enhanced the stakeholder wellbeing during the VUCA situation as per the findings. Accordingly, they safety is ensured with the safety protocols and employees were provided with flexible working hours. Also, they enhanced employee bond through conducting exhibitions and family gatherings. Previous scholars also stated that hotels have taken steps for enhancing the safety and security with the use of personal protective equipment, social distancing measures, and contactless check-in and check-out procedures (Wong et al., 2022). Moreover, Enz & Taylor (2002) pointed out that the employee working hours were reduced in VUCA.



5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As per the findings VUCA situation has directly affected the hotels in multiple ways. Particularly, it has disturbed the stakeholder relationships mainly with the customers and employees. Therefore, it seems that the investments on building stakeholder relationships is crucial for sustaining a brand during the VUCA situation. This needs to be undertaken with an in-depth understanding of pain points of the relevant stakeholders. It is evidenced that most of the stakeholders are negatively affected by the pandemic and the followed-by crises. Therefore, it is important for hotels to initiate proactive approach in the preparing to respond for the difficult situations. This requires an open communication with proper crisis management strategies. Regular interactions and communications which are transparent in nature are crucial in this endeavor to strengthen the engagement with relevant stakeholders. The crisis management strategies should instill the stakeholder confidence to sustain the organizational operations. Moreover, the hotels are required to invest on building credibility considering it as a crucial step with swift actions to avoid the delays. The credibility building should also be a cornerstone amidst the chaos.

The challenged internal operational activities should also be seamlessly streamlined by paying attention to the details with the support of evidence. In this case, hotels need to audit its internal environment continuously to identify the gaps during the difficult times and visualize the inefficiencies and bottlenecks with a proactive approach. Moreover, the efforts for streamlining should be driven by goals set out with the support of different departments in hotels. The bitter experience of VUCA environment may lead the organization to be siloed and departments may undertake steps in individual level. Hence, necessary steps should be taken to avoid this and the change should be an overall effort in nature to avoid the internal operational issues. Also, it is important to avoid the low value-added tasks during the difficult time like conducting unproductive meetings and bureaucratic approvals which hinder the proactiveness of the organization.



In responding to the VUCA environment innovation is a key since it can open up new opportunities through branding by penetrating and connecting with the market place. Hotels were able to come up with new ways to do things where their conventional business model was transformed and adapted their products and services. This implies that the existing strategies of business organizations need to be considered as work-in-progress where the continuous adjustments and adaptations are essential. The managers are required to understand that gap between the strategy and the market is widening in a VUCA situation and it should be outperformed by faster and agile innovative practices. Moreover, they need to recognize that the investments in innovations during VUCA environment will enable them to outperform the rivals at the time of recovery by familiarizing with the shifts in the market place.

In the meantime, findings reiterated the significance of working towards multiple stakeholders and VUCA can be considered as the high time for refuting the traditional shareholder capitalism. The commitment of organizations has to be authentic towards its stakeholders and consider everyone as essential constituents for the survival and growth. Also, it is noted that the corporate leadership in hotels needs to maintain an effective and continuous communication with its stakeholders regarding the changes in strategies, priorities and practices taking place for inculcating a proper understanding. In this case, the way of communication is instrumental and the use of tools like storytelling is highly recommended to convey some messages that evoke emotions. Moreover, the managers need to focus maintain an effective engagement with the key influencers those who are with greater interest on organizational responses and power to create havoc in transformations. In conclusion, it is clear that the main avenues for organizations are to innovate and build on relationships with multiple stakeholders to capture the opportunities while at the same time becoming more resilient towards dynamics created by the VUCA.



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