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## Critical success factors for virtual hotel operator partnership with small and medium-sized hotels from owners and operators' perspective

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – This paper aims to identify the critical factors that contribute to the success of virtual hotel operator (VHO) in using smart technologies and hotel management system partnership with small and medium-size hotels (SMSHs).

**Design/methodology/approach** – Qualitative method was used for this study. The data collection was acquired 25 semi-structured interviews with hotel owners and VHO management. Thematic analysis was used to elicit themes with the evaluation of hotel owners and operators' perceptions.

**Findings** –Critical success factors for VHO partnership with SMSHs are including marketing and promotion strategies, client relationship, training and human resources development, hotel operation management, innovation strategy, capital expenditures, and property management system. VHO will have a symbolic impact of mutualism for SMSHs by increasing service and product to become more competitive and profitable.

**Research limitations/implications** – The implications from this study will be useful for VHO in finding the most significant CSFs, to measure their business performance and increase resilience in the accommodation sector. Further study can measure the technology factors from VHO such as property management systems and mobile applications.

**Originality/value** – This paper is the first to identified the CSFs for VHO company from the perspectives of hotel owners and management. This study's contribution is to add to the literature on CSFs in the context of VHOs as part of hospitality sector. Moreover, the implications from this study will be useful for VHO management in finding the most significant CSFs for such companies, in order to measure their business performance and increase resilience in the accommodation sector.

**Keywords:** Critical success factors, Hotel management partnership, Small-and medium-sizes hotels, Smart technology innovation, Virtual hotel operator

**Paper Type:** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

The growth of technology in the travel and tourism sector has affected how hotel business connect to the customer effectively and marketing their products and services (Buhalis et al. 2019). Hotel management should allocate budget for the information systems to update their technology use in relation to their daily operations and maintain data management process (Buhalis and Leung 2018; Yadegari-dehkordi et al. 2018). In a more competitive business era, traditional companies such as small and medium sized-hotels (SMSHs) should adopt technology, and engage in networking and competitive coalitions, hotel managements should adapt the digital technology strategies (Dieguez et al. 2022). Hotel that does not adapt to new market conditions and form alliances will face operational shortcomings, as being single properties, have limited opportunities to gain benefits of larger referral programs and international marketing campaigns available for chain and affiliated hotels (Mohammad 2016).

New technology-based hospitality management business has arisen called Virtual hotel operator (VHO). The idea is to transform SMSHs and ensure customers' safety and comfort by unifying under their brand name, VHO create more value for hotel owners and help them develop and transform their businesses including technology adoption, staff training, standard operation, interior design, room decoration, standardize furniture, marketing strategies,

promotional materials, and customer service. The solutions ensures hotel property owner provides quality-assured and standardized accommodation at a competitive price (Arreza 2022). This form of relationship is referred to as a co-evolutionary business system in which there are relationships between technologies, institutions and actors, including the end-users or customers, and communities throughout the entire network (Aarikka-Stenroos and Ritala 2017). Although VHO offer various advantages in terms of technology and the standardization of hotel management, VHO are still in the development stage. The partnership between VHO and SMSHs have experienced certain challenges. Most of the SMSHs involved do not have any experience in using technology for hotel management systems, have a low budget for innovation, lack of strategic vision, management expertise, and ability to utilize technology to their presence on online distribution channels (Smithson et al. 2011; Mohammad 2016; Fjellström et al. 2020).

As the VHO expanding in SMSHs market, it is also important to ask the VHO management on how they operate, measure their performance, and maintain their partnership with hotels. The most prominent issue is to identify and measure the critical factors for VHO and SMSHs partnership success. However, empirical research on virtual hotel operator remains scarce, with very few discuss on revealing the success factors for benefit the whole network and transforming the SMSHs business. It is interestingly to noted that previous studies have failed to consider the key role played by VHO stakeholders (i.e., management and hotel partners), therefore, this study aims to fill research gap.

The aim of this study is to identify the critical factors that contribute to the success of virtual hotel operator in partnership with small and medium-size hotels. This study contributes to the literature on the use of technology in the field of hospitality management, especially in the context of adoption by SMSHs. This study will add perspectives to the literature and research related to hotel management agreements, partnerships between owners and operators, brand affiliations, and hotel operators. For hotel owners, it is important to understand their perspectives towards on partnership with VHO. Collaboration between VHO and SMSHs will create new competition and consolidation in the future. The following paper will discuss the theoretical background on VHO, critical success factors, follow by methodology, results and discussion's part. The last part consists of the conclusion, theoretical and managerial implications, and recommendations for future research.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Virtual Hotel Operator (VHO)**

Since the first appearing in 2013, VHO have been evolving as new entrants in the hotel group sector as an asset-light type of business. VHO focus on developing business to business (B2B) partnerships with SMSHs hotel, and VHO companies continue to expand and attract new investors (Wiastuti and Susilowardhani 2017; The Economic Times 2018; Russel 2019). VHO represent one of the most rapidly expanding types of hospitality management company in Asia region, where enormous numbers of SMSHs operate. VHO can accelerated the region's online travel ecosystem as well as a solution for hotel owners and customers who are looking for the assurance of quality standardized budget accommodation (Anandan et al. 2016).

Hotel owners who join with a VHO will adopt a management and franchise model. There are two categories of VHO business model, namely leases and franchises. The first involves property owners buying the brand franchise which is managed directly by the VHO with a royalty fee. The second involves the owner cooperating with the rental scheme or revenue-sharing for rooms booked via a VHO platform. VHO management system includes various hotel management developments such as technology adoption, staff training, standard operation, interior design, room decoration, standardize furniture, marketing strategies, promotional materials, and customer service. Most of the VHO provide hotel standard and

guidelines that helps the management teams to transform a property while calculating the estimated cost and monitoring the process of renovation (Oravel Stays 2018).

As illustrated by Sharma et al. (2017) in their case study, eight stages are involved in the hotel property listing process by VHO. First the transformation process begins with the identification of potential properties by the business development manager. The second step involves a detailed audit and negotiation with the hotel owners. VHO will share certain characteristics such as quality assurance inspection for the hotel facilities. Third, before a partnership agreement, the hotel partners must meet the quality specifications set by VHO management. Fourth, process of orientation and integration with VHO standardized facilities (i.e., hot showers, clean linen and towel, air conditioners, Wi-Fi, and in-room amenities). Fifth, VHO business development manager then prepares the transformation process, and sixth, VHO will provide capital expenditure to improve the facilities and the hotel buildings. Seventh, the final process involves hotel properties going live on VHO websites, mobile application, and other distribution channel. Eight, after the transformation, the operational team maintains the standard and trains the hotel employees in the use of the property management system and daily hotel operations.

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## 2.2 Critical Success Factors (CSFs) for hotels

Brotherton and Shaw (1996) have described CSFs as activities and processes to support organizational goals and they should be actionable, controllable, and measurable. CSFs are sector specific, the implication is that focused research in a sector on CSFs should provide specific recommendations for both the businesses and entrepreneurs (Engelbrecht et al. 2014). CSFs have become an essential concept in the hotel and accommodation sector, in relation to hotel goals and objectives. With increasingly fierce competition and the increasingly inevitable use of technology, companies need to have an innovation strategy to achieve their goals (Avcikurt et al. 2011). According to Brotherton and Shaw (1996) CSFs in hospitality services can be categorized based on both technical and human aspects. Technical aspects primarily concerned with the efficiency and economy aspect of hotel operations. Human aspects can be defined as the effectiveness of the direct provision of the hospitality experience associated with staff attitudes, skills, morale and training/development. From the earlier literature for hotel business, CSFs can be considered to be integral to corporate culture, cooperation, management style, company performance, productivity, measurements to achieve company goals and (Politis et al. 2009; Arasli 2012; Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno 2014; Spencer and Van Zyl 2015; Yadegaridehkordi et al. 2018).

In the context of SMSHs, Morrison and Thomas (1999) has explained that small-scale hotels usually have a small business scope, and they manage by the owner and financed by individuals or a small group, with most of the properties are owned and managed by people who have no previous hotel management background. Most of SMSHs still struggle to maintain quality service standards due to a lack of service knowledge, they has facing several challenges such as level of competition, operational costs, technical and management skills, appropriate e-business solutions and ownership of ICT equipment (Pine et al. 2000; Buhalis and Kaldis 2008).

There are progress and opportunities when looking into CSFs in SMSHs. One of the studies by Avcikurt et al. (2011) described hotel managers and owners perceptions for the success of hotel operations related to Internet use, service quality, financial performance, and marketing. Where the technical aspects related to Internet usage were among the main factors related to CSFs in small hotels in this study. Yadegaridehkordi et al. (2018) proposed four aspects that influence the performance and growth of small hotels. First is the organizational aspect, including top management support and financial performance. Second is human resources aspect consisting of employee preparation, education, service standardization, service quality,

and customer satisfaction. Third is the atmosphere, including benchmarking, interior and exterior architecture, and location. Fourth is information and technology.

Previous studies on CSFs in SMSHs have revealed three factors. The first is human and technical aspects, level of service quality, financial performance and marketing. The second is customer relationship management (CRM), information and technology, knowledge management capability, customer orientation and the organizational readiness. The third is physical environment of SMSHs included interior and exterior of the hotel can lead to customer satisfaction. However, there are three research gaps found from the previous studies. Diversification of the hotel business has become rapidly changing, the literature's insufficiency highlights the paucity of knowledge on CSFs related to the VHO and partnership with SMSHs. Second, some scholars have studied about CSFs in hotel operational, and some are specifically studied in the context of SMSHs. However, there still limited literature which discusses the concept of CSFs for VHO. Third, most of the research uses a quantitative method (Avcikurt et al. 2011; Wang and Hung 2015; Ahmad and Arif 2016). This approach makes it possible to obtain respondents, but the drawback is not being able to do a more in-depth exploration of the respondent's view.

### <sup>16</sup> 3 Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Design

In this study qualitative method was employed to the fact that "Qualitative research is a well-established approach to researching phenomena in the social sciences and its emphasis is on empathetic understanding, especially regarding the 'how' and 'why' of tourism-related phenomena and experiences" (Dwyer et al. 2012, P.312). Exploratory research is needed to understand the hotels owner perspectives on their partnerships with VHO, with a view to identifying the CSFs for VHO. This research used semi-structured interview with open-ended questions to meet the research objectives. It is further explained by Altinay et al. (2015) that semi-structured interview enables the participants to explain their point of view, seek new perspectives, find general trends and understand the relationships of variables in research.

The interview focused on the participants experiences, VHO goals and characteristics, and the critical factors for VHO success from both management and hotel owners. The interview conducted from June to August 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, most of the interviews were conducted using various online meeting platform (i.e., Zoom, Google meet). The participant sample was made up of purposefully selected individuals from VHO companies and hotels owners. 156 research invitations were sent to potential participants located in first tier cities in Indonesia where most the VHO properties are located, such as Jakarta, Bandung, Medan, Semarang, Surabaya, Bali, Makassar, and Yogyakarta. In total there are only 25 (16%) participants were willing to be interviewed. The interview protocol and consent form were agreed and signed by the interviewees, and all the participants' identities in this study remain anonymous. The diversity of the participants in this study helped the comprehensiveness and diversity of information from the participants' perspectives.

Sixteen participants represented VHO companies and nine participants represented hotel owners (Table 1). VHO Participants' experience ranged from four to 18 years of working experience in various fields (i.e., hotel, resort, cruise ships or restaurants). Their specialties were varied from hospitality background such as hotel operations, e-commerce, customer services, revenue management, sales and marketing, event management, pre-opening, and procurement. While another six managers are coming from non-hospitality background such as banking, insurance, consumer goods, retail sales, and human capital. Respondents job description in VHO is related to hotel operations, business development, transformation, marketing, and human resources.

**Table 1.**  
Profile of participants

VHO Management			
ID	Position	Years of Experience	
M1	Assistant general manager	12 years	
M2	Ecommerce executives	4 years	
M3	Hotel operation manager	7 years	
M4	Region head	14 years	
M5	Human Resources Business partner	11 years	
M6	Senior hotel operation manager	18 years	
M7	Country manager hotel operation	15 years	
M8	Hotel consultant	13 years	
M9	Business development manager	10 years	
M10	Operations manager	4 years	
M11	Head of Business Development	9 years	
M12	Head of Business Development	11 years	
M13	Head of Operation Excellence	6 years	
M14	Senior business development manager	8 years	
M15	Assistant general manager	13 years	
M16	Regional corporate sales manager	10 Years	
Hotel Owner			
ID	Occupation	Type of accommodation	Years of partnership with VHO
O1	Bankers	Guest House	One year
O2	Information technology	Homestay	Five years
O3	Hotel business	Guest House	Four years
O3	Hotel business	one-star hotel	Four years
O4	Social entrepreneur	two-star hotel	Four years
		three-star hotel	One year
O5	Human resource management	three-star hotel	One year
O6	Contractor	two-star hotel	Three years
O7	Wedding organizer	Guest House	Two years
O8	Retail	two-star hotel	Two years
O9	Catering business	one-star hotel	Three years

In total nine hotel owners have been interviewed, with partnership agreement between hotel owner with VHO had been ongoing for one to five years. The accommodation type ranging from homestay, guest house, and one to three-star hotels. All the hotel owners' backgrounds were not related to hospitality industry and most of them were not experienced in the hospitality business (e.g., wedding organizers, professional food caterers, social entrepreneurs, worked in retail, and as building contractors), only one participant had experience in managing family hotel business.

### 3.3 Data analysis

To avoid bias, in this study, several strategies were employed such as a data triangulation method; a script and interview guidelines were used for each interview sessions, and finally process of participants member checking was undertaken. The interviewer asked the participants for permission to audio-record the conversation. Thus, this promoted effectiveness in terms of communication both during and after the interviews. These recorded data were translated and copied out (transcribing) and summarized. Each participant was given a copy of

their interview transcript so that they could review the accuracy of the data. Researchers invited the respondents to verify the findings to improve the credibility. The participants were asked to read, correct, or strengthen the summary of the researcher's interview results. After that, all the participants signed and returned the member checking consent form to the researcher.

All the recorded interviews totaled 1221 minutes in length or, on average, 49 minutes per participant. The recorded interviews then immediately transcribed, the coding process than analyze by using qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (ver.8). The interview transcript was analyzed thematically and systematically to search for commonalities and themes to describe the data (Clarke and Braun 2017). A theme can be interpreted as an affirmation that creates a meaning or statement of meaning. Meanings were obtained from the interviews and formulated by the researcher. Validity and dependability in this study were based on data sources and data triangulation methods from two groups of participants, namely VHO managers and hotel owners.

## **4 Results and Discussion**

### *4.1 Partnership factors*

The client relationship received the highest weight among the partnership factors. VHO as light assets companies, have to maintain their property partner to sustain and expand the business. VHO partnerships with hotel owners are based on three aspects, first the visibility of the contract agreements. Second, VHO offered support center for day-to-day operation problems and any related issues for the hotel owners, customers and vendors that supported the VHO operation. Third, how VHO manage the owner's expectations for the long-lasting benefits from the partnerships (i.e. increased in revenues, occupancy rate, and average room rates). One of VHO head of business development, conveyed this view by saying:

We are not selling goods, but we build partnerships, therefore we keep the interpersonal relationship with hotel owners. We meet distinctive characteristics; we speak of culture, and it means that every person has a different outlook on how the business works. (M11)

As one of the VHO characteristics, the contract agreement between a VHO and hotel owner included how they are managing the hotel operations and standard to reach the VHO goals and hotel owners' revenue target. As a technology-based hotel operator, VHO relies on the partnership with hotel owners. Therefore, VHO offer three contract agreements which are: first, full revenue sharing, meaning that VHO share the revenue at an agreed percentage. Second, the use of a minimum monthly guarantee. Third, a self-operating business, more identical to a lease type management. The Agreements with VHO are designed to reduce the risk factors and the hotel owners' value of investments. For instance, one of the interviewees highlighted mutually beneficial agreements and commitments:

We invest funds or transformational capital expenditure to the property partner if they do not have enough capital to meet our facilities' standards. Hence, we will give them in the form of investment without return within the contract period. (M11)

One of the advantages of having a partnership with VHO, they provide a fixed monthly deposit according to the initial agreement, and this helps us. If we are looking at the capacity of our hotel right now below fifty percent, with the security deposit, we can cover operational costs. (O1)

Interviewees mentioned that the expansion process should be in line to increase revenue and profits for both the company and its partners. Ultimately the objective of the partnership with the hotel owners is to maintain sustainability and commitment together:

We want our property partners can achieve targeted revenue and business sustainability. Sustain here in terms of financial, products, services consistency, and long-lasting partnership. (M6)

One of the emerging factors from this study is the adaptation to local culture. This was mentioned by both VHO management and hotel owners, as they were concerned that the condition of SMSHs operation is varies. Most participants asserted that the educational background of the employees, owners and technological adaptation in hotels are still low, therefore VHO should adapt with the condition, as it mentioned by one of hotel owner:

As VHO typically have standard operating procedures that are globally acceptable, however this start-up company should adapt with the condition of our people and our culture. (O1)

Business development is part of VHO way in expanding their business. The findings showed that for business development division, the responsibility is to acquire hotel properties, and their performance indicators on how they increase the number of rooms, properties and maintaining relationships with hotel owners.

Business development is the one who initially acquired the property. For example, if the hotel property owners want to join, business development will explain the terms and conditions, and they will acquire the property through an agreement that has been agreed to by the hotel property owner. (M5)

As a hotel management companies VHO should adapt and adjust their approach in terms of how they maintain communication and agreement with the hotel properties owners. They should keep a mutually beneficial agreement and commitment. Moreover, continuous improvement is part of excellent business in the field of hospitality; VHO look for ways to improve any aspect of their customer's need. These results in line with those previous studies on the understanding of customer orientation relationships (Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno 2014).

#### *4.2 Marketing factors*

The most mentioned factors by VHO management and hotel owners is marketing and promotion strategies were, followed by the market segment, pricing strategy, branding and distribution channel. From the findings, it was revealed that the weak position of small hotels in the market can be overcome through VHO marketing and promotion strategies. In segmenting the market, a comprehensive market surveys assessment process is conducted by VHO management.

The VHO creates the marketing and promotion strategy for us. Previously, we had limited marketing channels; we only sold our rooms on several property listing platforms. After the partnership agreement, the VHO improves our presence both online and offline. (O7)

We inform the owners of the important data about market intelligence, market surveys, and pricing strategy. We can decide the price level following market needs. (M7)

Consistent with prior research, the importance of strategic marketing planning in a joint venture hotel related to factors such as joint advertising activities, pricing strategy, promotion activities, and market research activities (Li et al. 2006). Another finding is about sales and pricing strategy. VHO management and owner of the hotel also conveyed the importance of branding. When a property owner has agreed to have a partnership with VHO, they will automatically join their branding. From the perspective of management, brand image is currently an essential aspect of VHO success, this was further explained by interviewees:

Better branding can be achieved by selling more exposure. For example, outdoor neon boxes with the VHO logo and property name are useful for branding. (M12)



**Table 2.**  
Critical Success Factors for VHO partnerships with SMSHs

Salient Themes	Sub Themes	Key Insight
Partnership factors	● Client relationship	The objective of the partnership between the VHO and hotel owners is to maintain sustainability of VHO business model. Commitment on the contract agreement. The negotiation process and policies in term of business expansion of VHO in SMSHs sector.
	● Contract Agreement	
	● Continuous improvement	
	● Adaptation to local culture	
Marketing factors	● Business development	Marketing is part of functional CSFs where several categories are being assessed, namely effectiveness of advertising, market intelligence, customer database, and competitor intelligence.
	● Marketing and promotion strategies	
	● Market segment	
	● Pricing strategy	
	● Branding	
	● Distribution Channel	
Technical factors	● Hotel operation management	Managing the hotel operations and standard in associated with the application of technology to reach the VHO goals and hotel owners' revenue target.
	● Accessing and monitoring customer satisfaction	
	● Standardization	
	● Transformation	
Financial factors	● Professionalism	Financial factors are important to measure increasing revenue and profitability.
	● Capital expenditure	
	● Investor and capital sources	
	● Profitability	
	● Monthly guarantee	
	● Revenue	
	● Innovation strategy	
	● Size and coverage of the hotel networks	
Strategic management factors	● Quality Audit	Strategic management is related to innovation strategy and perceived as the most important factor for a small hotel business in a previous study. Both VHO management and hotel owner participants were agreed that to improve the standard and service of VHO, the human factor is crucial especially related to training.
	● Training	
	● Team commitment	
Human factors	● Staff recruitment and selection	The VHO relies on technology-based solutions and features. The use of property management systems and centralized booking and reservation system that are efficient, accurate, and consistent.
	● Rewards for the employee	
Technology factors	● Property management system	
	● Accuracy and efficiency of the central reservation system	

The result of this finding was supported in a study from Hua et al. (2009) and how brand equity increased customer intention to purchase hotel products (Castañeda García et al. 2018). VHO has undertaken several strategies in terms of how to display and promote their properties through a responsive platform, reach out to a broader audience, increase distribution, and build branding and operational efficiency. One of the most impactful ways is by maximizing online media marketing channels. In the current digitalization era, mobile applications are one of the strategies to bring customers closer to the hotel chain; the introduction of mobile apps such as the VHO application allows customers to book rooms with just three taps on their smartphone. Strategic partnerships with online travel agent (OTAs) also enable hotel owners to reach a broader consumer market.

The difference is in terms of operation. For example, in conventional hotels, the booking process until the check-in process requires an exhausting process. However, at VHO, the booking process is much simpler; just by using a mobile application, everything is much easier and more comfortable. (M8)

We have various sales channels, one of the most important is the online sales channel. (M11)

Previous study also mentioned the importance of online and digital distribution channels for SMSHs, factors that distinguish between hotels are the ability to market their properties via a multi-channel strategy. Selecting the right online distribution and manage it efficiently will benefits for SMSHs strategy (Beritelli and Schegg 2016).

#### *4.3 Technical factors*

VHO management and hotel owners talked about technical aspects such as hotel operation management, the importance of accessing and monitoring customer satisfaction, standardization, property transformation, and staff professionalism. Before joining a VHO, a hotel partner will have to undergo a transformation process. This process ensures that the hotel services, the system, and the people will meet the VHO standard:

We have to transform owner property; it is very crucial to transform. Everyone engages in the process and to convince owners to share the same perspective. (M7)

From the interviews with hotel property owners, hotel operation management factors, and assessing and monitoring customer satisfaction are two factors considered crucial in terms of technical CSFs. Participants are concerned about the continuity of the day-to-day hotel operations, they describe that:

VHO help owners to manage hotels in terms of administration, services, and products standardization. We will implement an operational standard for all accommodation that do not have a star category. For this purpose, we need people with diverse backgrounds who are specialists, such as the front office, housekeeping, food, and beverages including banquet. We also need people who are strong in accounting. (M7)

Operational managers in each active region will manage and monitor hotel properties. From personal experience, the owner feels comfortable with the operational manager. They can ask anything related to hotel operations; we also often discuss and share knowledge about managing a hotel. It will help in the future relationship with owners, and there is an exchange of ideas. (M15)

As a digital hospitality company and hotel aggregator, we offer economical and more affordable accommodation, and we are also concerned about the quality of our services. Therefore, we should offer a balance between the two aspects (affordable and quality services). (M12)

1 Physical product and service quality from SMSHs operation are crucial (Hua et al. 2009; Zhang et al. 2013). Other literature also mentions Customer orientation in customer relationship management implementation are found as a crucial factors for hotels business (Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno 2014) to enhance service quality, superior customer

service, and total quality management (Wang et al. 2012; Ahmad and Arif 2016).

The hotel industry is a service industry with a high human component that influencing the final perception of the product, as stated by Brotherton and Shaw (1996) in the three-dimensional hotel operations model, technical aspects will determine the efficiency and economy scale for the successful delivery of hospitality goods and operations. In order to ensure uniform quality in a multiunit hotel company like the hotel chain, a standardization of services system should be adopted to predict and control output activities (Ivanova and Rahimi 2016). The higher the hotel network's intangible assets such as their standard, facilities, and services the better of their presence in the customer mind (Andreu et al. 2017).VHO conducts an evaluation process on how a hotel is to have a satisfactory level of guest assessment:

We measure the customer satisfaction index (CSI) and develop a net promoter score (NPS) to measure guest satisfaction. (M7)

CSI, is being develop from the customers ratings of their likelihood to recommend VHO products and services to others on a scale of 0 to 10. The hotel owner also explained that these factors are significant for their hotel business. VHO management ensures that guests are satisfied and evaluating what happened to maintain the quality standard. Moreover, customer satisfaction tends to lead to a positive financial performance where the financial figures are essential for further adjustment and corrective action (Zhang et al. 2013; Augustyn et al. 2021).

#### *4.4 Financial factors*

With the cooperation of VHO, hotel owners now have finance in the form of capital expenditure and a monthly guarantee of income. One owner said that currently, it is difficult to get bank loans for hotel business needs. Capital expenditure becomes an attractive factor for hotel owners. VHO invests in its partners by supplying capital investment assistance and a monthly income guarantee. According to property owners, capital expenditure has become a significant factor in the development process:

What is significant is contract agreement, that they provide business capital and the other investment facilities provided. (M5)

Financial support is the most crucial factor for hotel joint venture collaborations (Li et al. 2006). From the literature the financial performance factor is the rate of return on investment, income, costs incurred for operational activities, and the company's profitability (Avcikurt et al. 2011; Padilla-Meléndez and Garrido-Moreno 2014).

#### *4.5 Strategic management factors*

The main goals for the innovation and technology adaptation by VHO are to help the property owners check daily operation performances. One of the interviewees also mentioned that with the increasing number of users in VHO application, as an opportunity to receives more value from the customers and increase chance to get more investment from the investor. This is also highlighted by the VHO management:

From one to the next two years, we are always creating innovations. We must continue to demand innovative ideas every day, out of the box and of all kinds it has become one of our corporate cultures. (M16)

Innovative technology should be based on market research so that it will be responsive to market needs and demands. This has also been mentioned by the management of a VHO:

We do marketing based on research to the standards that we set. The products we offer should meet the category of value for money. (M6)

The second factor is related to the size and coverage of the hotel network. A bigger hotel scale size and coverage of hotel networks are also critical. As the previous study discovered, geographical coverage is important for hotels; this factor will help the success of hotel operations and development (Brotherton 2004; Hua et al. 2009). For VHO, the number of existing properties and personnel in one country, helping the selling process and monitoring process effectively:

When compared with competitors, of course, we have one competitive advantage in the network. We have the most expansive network; the advantage is that we can choose to be able to sell the properties in every city, even in other countries abroad in terms of networking, standardization, and the number of personnel. We have all the support needed in every region or hub for our operations. (M11)

The third factor is related to how VHO enhance the quality of services and this is an important strategy employed by the hotel owners or managers in SMSHs to face the business challenge (Ahmad and Arif 2016). The implementation of quality audit by VHO management, by placing its personnel to monitor the operations of property hotel partners, has increased customer confidence in using accommodation provided by VHO. This is providing guarantees that the products and services they provide meet a minimum standard despite having differentiated properties managed by the VHO. In the process, the strategy to ensure quality assurance is closely related to how hotel operational management is carried out with standard operating procedures, the use of regulations, and most important the human factor and organization. Strategy in this context means that the operational management level will have more precise guidance to solve problems and be able to measure operational success and demonstrating the importance of establishing shared values to increase customer satisfaction (Arasli 2012).

#### 4.6 Human factors

Training is part of the CSFs for VHO mentioned by most of the participants. The goals are to provide standard operational management and to increase customer satisfaction with VHO products and services. Lack of skilled employees in handling customers becomes a challenging issue for SMSHs. Standard hotel operation management for all VHO properties can be improved by conducting training and coaching. Two interviewees said:

First is an improvement, then we also build educational training for hospitality. (M3)

VHO also thinks about the employee's development and for the hotel owners as well. (M11)

The owners agree that VHO could develop hotel operation human resources. There are changes made by the VHO in terms of product knowledge and the ability to upgrade the technology used by the hotel staff to help operations. The owners feel that there is a change in knowledge transfer during the in-house training process. Most owners agree that the VHO is continually active with innovative technologies related to property management systems, hardware, and their own mobile application, from the aspect of technology development. The training is not only for employees but also for the owner. It was stated by one of the owners that:

What makes our company successful is we think about our employees' development. However, the training is not only for employees but also for the owners. We conduct meetings with the owners and provide them mentoring on how to manage the hotel. (M7)

This finding supports those of existing studies by Ahmad and Arif (2016) on how training increases business growth and success in the SMSH sector and standards training for employees will improve the customer services offered (Hua et al. 2009). From the

characteristics of company owners, a top-level management is needed to overcome the challenges that exist in such a dynamic business climate. The need for innovative and sound strategy needs to be supported by a quality leadership team commitment. Increasing team commitment is important to achieve organizational goals. Process management in organizational is an essential part of teamwork and strategic plans (Yadegaridehkordi et al. 2018). VHO also considered the employee welfare aspects due to work-life balance and rewards Rewards for the employees emerged as one of the CSFs for VHO; this was mentioned by the VHO management participants, as one of them stated that:

When we receive good compensation and a good reward. Then finally, they will perform and achieve company target. (M14)

#### *4.7 Technology factors*

The VHO is one of hospitality management company that takes advantage of technological developments to maximize and empower local accommodation offerings. Interestingly only two CSFs in technology factors were found in this study which are the property management system (PMS) and accuracy and efficiency of the central reservation system.

We are a start-up company that relies on technology. Our system keeps improving by getting insights from our hotel operation team, although we already have a software engineer team. The improvement comes in more user-friendly PMS for the employee and owners. This technology was beneficial; as it meant that Hotels did not have to have large folio books, dealing with large margin of errors, and time-consuming paperwork. With this PMS, business processes for the hotel property have run more efficiently. (M7)

Moreover, data science and analytics to enhance guest experiences become crucial. The systems can be accessed in real-time and present information transparently to improve efficiency in both time and funding. The use of technology creates a more comfortable booking experience for the guests, where consumers go online and make travel-related purchases using an online platform.

What makes VHO different is promotions on the website and online travel agents and this will impact small hotel's property partners. When they join us, we will automatically help their property be more saleable by improving their online platform appearance. (M15)

To achieve a competitive advantage in the current digital era, the VHO platform continues to update its ability to use technology in the room booking process and online distribution system. VHO can use various strategies when displaying and promoting their hotel partner properties through their websites and mobile platform applications. The application has reached out to a broader audience, increased distribution, and improved branding and operational efficiency. The use of mobile applications allows customers to book rooms with just three taps of their smartphone. The concept is simple, by providing three steps of booking: go to their website/mobile application, choose a location, and find the hotel that fits with the traveler's requirements. This outcome supports the theory that notes the importance of a central reservation system in SMSHs and budget hotel sectors (Brotherton 2004; Hua et al. 2009; Avcikurt et al. 2011).

SMSHs partners will also get hotel management system applications that are beneficial to the owner in the process of checking and performance of their properties every day through a device they have. (M11)

From the result of this study, it can be concluded that the most important CSF for VHO is creating marketing and promotional strategies through several media, for example by using online, offline and micro marketing media. The strategies should be an inexpensive and

effective platform for marketing and advertising, which can increase the level of competitiveness of hotel in the marketplace (Paprocki 2017; Stylos et al. 2021). For the partnership factor, maintaining good client relationships with hotel partners is also crucial, in order to increase their brand value and achieve their goals of increased property portfolios and the number of rooms to become a market leader. In the context of cooperation and networking, Li et al. (2006) examined the primary motivation in selecting joint venture partners from local and expatriate managers' perspectives. Factors that are relevant for joint venture hotel include strategic planning, a willingness to share information and knowledge with local partners, being backed up by strong financial performance, experience in marketing, planning, and conducting market research. Furthermore, Spencer and Van Zyl (2015) also identified in that executing a project in hotel, forming task force teams will significantly assist in the delegation of tasks and control processes. Hotel organization needs to have a good relationship, both internally and externally, with the hotel business stakeholders. Resende et al. (2018) also explained that an inter-relationship among companies should be based on cooperative relationships to overcome their limitations. Affiliation with a chain hotel brand and creating associations in the customer's mind with several strategies such as assessing customer reviews, contacting the target market, offering benefits to members, and offering a corporate contract/rate for groups or companies.

In the study by Ahmad and Arif (2016) mentioned that the business strategy conducted by SMSHs owners is an essential part of facing the business challenges related to competitive pricing, better marketing and promotion methods, improved quality of the facilities, improved service delivery, customer service by maintaining good customer relationships, improving the quality and variety of the products offered (i.e., cleanliness, technology, facilities) and finally the loyalty schemes used to retain customers. Strengthening the market position of small hotel businesses should be undertaken through various strategies such as branding, factors associated with style, the philosophy of management, commitment to quality, and consistency in service delivery. Apart from the brand, comparable products, service technology, and themes also contribute to the image of a small hotel business.

## **5 Conclusions**

This study has revealed seven themes of CSFs for VHO including 1. partnership factors; 2. marketing factors; 3. technical factors; 4. financial factors; 5. strategic management; 6. human factors and 7. technology factors. The emergent themes have strengthened and reinforced the CSFs for VHO from the perspectives of VHO management and hotel owners. The research analysis also showed seven major CSFs for VHO that were highly noticeable in the number of mentioned by all participants in each themes namely: marketing and promotion strategies (CSF1); client relationship (CSF2); training (CSF3); hotel operation management (CF4); innovation strategy (CSF5); capital expenditures (CSF6); and property management system (CSF7). From the findings it is clear that marketing and promotion strategies are found very crucial from the perspectives of VHO and SMSHs owners. Moreover, innovations and financial factors are found to be very critical, especially from the perspective of hotel owners.

Although VHO offer various advantages in terms of technology and the standardization of hotel management, VHO operate in a highly competitive environment due to several factors. First, they compete with existing conventional hotels, which have more experience in managing hotel, both nationally and internationally. Second, competition with other conventional hotels forces SMSHs owners into actively managing their own hotel properties, hence professional management, and online distribution become more crucial. Third, the advance of technology has attracted digitally and mobile-savvy millennial travellers, who have become the leading market segment for VHO; they have a high expectation of value for money

in accommodation. The findings can be used as the framework and comparison with other types hotel operator or hotel group companies to determine their CSFs and balancing owners' and operators' interests (i.e., providing expertise in the marketing process and promotion strategy, implementing standards and training for hotel operations by prioritizing aspects of digital technology).

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications from this study are triplicate, first this study can add to the literature on the use of technology in the field of hospitality management, especially the application of technology for small and medium scale hotels in collaboration with emerging hotel management company such as VHO that highly depend on technology. Second, this study contributes to the body of literature on hospitality management by providing an overview of the role of a hotel operator in cooperating with SMSHs owners. This study also provides perspectives from hotel owners regarding the aspects of contract agreements and the financial benefits obtained from the cooperation process, as well as hotel management operations that utilizing smart technology. This study can add perspectives to the literature and research related to hotel management agreements (HMAs), partnerships between owners and hotel operators, and brand affiliations with hotel industry 4.0 smart technology implementation.

Third, studies have addressed the question of VHO evaluation by finding their CSFs. The CSFs for the hotel basically consist of human and technical aspects as the main factor contributing to organizational success (Geller 1985; Brotherton and Shaw 1996), Technological, marketing, financial, hotel management performance, and strategic management (Avcikurt et al. 2011; Arasli 2012; Zhang et al. 2013; Yadegaridehkordi et al. 2018; Hua et al. 2020). From the viewpoints of the hotel owners and VHO management has enabled the confirmation and the refinement of the new CSFs framework for VHO and serve as a foundation for the concepts and characteristics of VHO. The findings further show that there is elucidating theory from interview results and proposes a model for the CSFs of VHO, which consists of seven themes namely partnership, marketing, technical, financial, human, strategic management, and technology.

### 5.2 Practical implications

The practical implication from this study will be useful for VHO management in determining the most significant CSFs for such companies, in order to help them to achieve their goals and measure their performance and expanding their network. For hotel owners, the presence of virtual hotel business can be used as a solution to their product and services quality, marketing and promotion strategy in the era of digitalization. Hotel management should allocate budget for the ICT/IS to update their technology use in relation to their daily operations and maintain data management process (Yadegaridehkordi et al. 2018). In addition, this study will help to inform government especially in developing countries such as Indonesia, India, The Philippine, and Vietnam where most of accommodations are in SMSHs categories, on how SMSHs can be transformed to become standardize accommodation facilities that support local tourism. Meanwhile, for investors, VHO become a prospect for future development and investment in accommodation sectors.

### 5.3 Limitations and Future research

In terms of the number of participants this study's sample size was limited, the number of VHO properties in this study (nine properties) is still small compared to the total number of VHO operating Globally. The second limitation in this study was that sample interviews of participants were from VHO properties located in Indonesia. With the limitation on domestic travelling during the COVID-19, the researcher cannot directly observe the conditions of hotels

that were included in this study. Where VHO has expanding globally, thus, future research can be conducted with a variety of samples taken from other cities, regions in or in other countries such as China, India, Singapore, Thailand, The Philippines, USA, Vietnam where VHO operate. A future study may also include participants who are hotel owners who have not joined or who have ended their contract agreements with the VHO. It is particularly useful to compare their perspective regarding VHO and hotel management agreements.

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