



PRIMARY RESEARCH

# Survival strategies of the hotel industry from the pandemic to a new normal: From dynamic capabilities to 6S sub-constructs

Hsuan-Pei Ho\*

Department of Cultural and Creative Industries, HungKuang University, Taichung, Taiwan

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## Abstract

This paper examines the business strategies employed by the hotel industry during the COVID-19 pandemic from 2021 to 2022. The study conducts a systematic review and adopts Teece's concept of 6S sub-constructs (SAFETY, SCAN, SYSTEM, SUPPORT, SPREAD, and SPEED) derived from dynamic capabilities. It analyzes 76 online articles focusing on two prominent hotel chains: Intercontinental Hotels Group and Marriott. The findings highlight several key points. Firstly, stringent cleaning protocols are essential to ensure the safety of guests and employees. Secondly, incorporating new technologies and automated systems enhances contactless customer experiences, enables proactive risk scanning, and facilitates the tracking of pandemic-related contact-tracing data. Thirdly, knowledge management integration plays a vital role in providing relevant training and equipping staff with up-to-date knowledge of evolving cleanliness and safety regulations. Fourthly, implementing flexible booking and cancellation policies and offering accommodations for medical staff exemplify the concept of "true hospitality for good." Lastly, top strategies for generating additional revenue include launching food and beverage delivery services and finding innovative ways to utilize indoor spaces while ensuring safety. The new normal presents managerial and policy implications for businesses in the hotel and tourism industry, necessitating their adaptation to radical and dynamic environments.

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, spanning from 2020 to 2022, unleashed an unprecedented global health, social, and economic crisis, compelling researchers and business managers to devise robust frameworks and strategies to battle this global menace. As per the World Health Organization, the pandemic has resulted in over 650 million confirmed cases and an alarming death toll of 6.65 million by December 2022. The tourism and travel industries were notably hard-hit, with a significant drop in hotel occupancy rates due to travel restrictions, closed hospitality establishments, and suspended flights across almost all countries. In this context, several studies, including those by [Guevara \(2020\)](#) and [Hoisington \(2020\)](#) (2020), have shed light on

the COVID-19 impact on travel, tourism, and the hotel industry.

Building on these perspectives, [Le and Phi \(2021\)](#) proposed seven critical themes for managing hotels during a pandemic: emergency transformation, business innovation, service changes, health and safety measures, analysis of negative impacts, recovery strategies, and the role of government policies. In this increasingly volatile environment, where pandemics could become recurrent events, it's essential to guide hotel businesses towards survival and adaptation strategies, facilitating their ability to weather market turbulence and other outbreak-induced challenges.

Despite considerable discourse around the pandemic's impacts on the hospitality sector, there remains a conspicu-

\*corresponding author: Hsuan-Pei Ho

†email: [jasonho0618@hk.edu.tw](mailto:jasonho0618@hk.edu.tw)

ous research gap in understanding comprehensive crisis response models like the Dynamic Capabilities (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997) and the elaborated 6S model (SAFETY, SCAN, SYSTEM, SUPPORT, SPREAD, SPEED) from Chi, Ho, and Lin (2022), specifically tailored for the hotel industry's needs. These models present a unique, theoretically enriched approach to analyze how businesses can adapt to the challenges of a global health crisis.

The primary aim of our research, therefore, is to present an empirical examination of the 6S model, studying its effectiveness and adaptability within different hospitality contexts. This is instrumental in both theoretical and practical terms, providing businesses with a proven model for handling crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and contributing significantly to our theoretical understanding of crisis management, innovation, and organizational agility. Furthermore, the dialogue will explore how this model could be modified for different sectors, thus broadening its applicability and usefulness.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 outbreak has emerged as the most devastating pandemic of 2020, impacting billions of people and a wide range of industries across the globe. While some industries are flourishing, the majority of the tourism and traditional sectors are witnessing a decline. This paper adopts the framework of the 6S sub-constructs (Chi et al., 2022), derived from the original concept of dynamic capabilities (DC) (Teece et al., 1997), to investigate the business strategies implemented by Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG) and Marriott hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim is to comprehend how companies can effectively adapt to fundamental changes within dynamic social and business environments. The concept and framework of the 6S sub-constructs serve as valuable guidance, assisting businesses in navigating the highly volatile and dynamic business landscape as the pandemic situation gradually becomes the new normal.

### Dynamic Capabilities

Teece et al. (1997) introduced the concept of Dynamic Capabilities (DC), which encompasses a firm's ability to sense, seize, and transform. These capabilities assist businesses in creating, deploying, and safeguarding their intangible assets, thereby ensuring sustainable long-term performance. Firstly, companies should leverage innovative technologies and developments to detect and capitalize on opportunities. Secondly, firms must continuously anticipate and counteract competitors' responses while safeguarding their in-

tellectual property rights. Accordingly, they should devise suitable strategies to capture, design, and refine their business models. Lastly, firms need to consistently realign their company structure and culture to either align existing capabilities or invest in new ones (Teece et al., 1997).

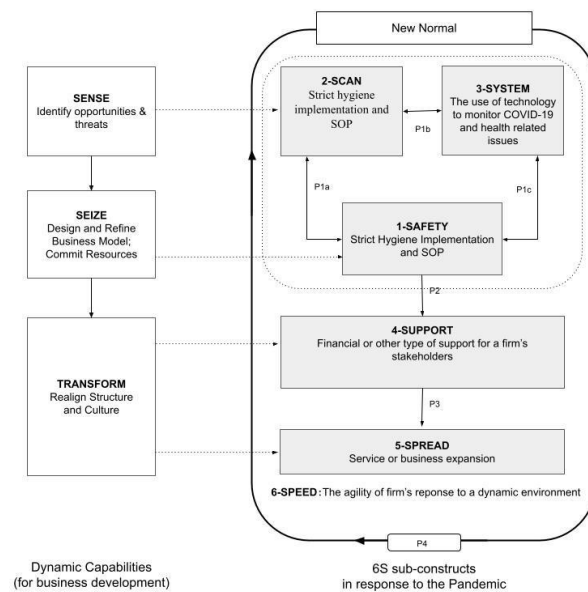
The second element of DC is the capability to "seize." A successful business model aims to integrate internal and external resources, enabling firms to operate efficiently, establish competitive business processes, and continuously generate profitability and value for their target customers. Teece (2018) also emphasized the importance of identifying unmet customer needs, organizing and aligning technologies to fulfill those needs, and deriving value from business activities as key components of a successful business model. Ultimately, the logic revolves around delivering services to customers and generating revenue.

The third component of DC is the transformative ability. Firms should consistently realign their company structure and culture to match existing capabilities or invest in new ones (Teece et al., 1997). Business transformation encompasses overall changes in various aspects of a company's operations, including long-term business strategy, operating and business models, organizational management and methods, and resource allocation practices. Companies must anticipate the future and pursue strategic business transformations to readjust or reshape their competitive advantages, increase social value, and ultimately achieve a transformed enterprise. The ability to respond to such changes in volatile economies and dynamic environments is crucial for survival and sustainable development. Consequently, firms must analyze, anticipate, and manage risks associated with transformation to successfully navigate a dynamic business environment.

### 6S Sub-constructs

This study seeks to explore how companies can adapt to significant changes in dynamic social and business environments. To achieve this goal, the study adopts the framework of the 6S sub-constructs proposed by Chi et al. (2022), which builds upon the original Dynamic Capabilities (DC) framework developed by Teece et al. (1997). Figure 1 illustrates the DC framework alongside the 6S sub-constructs. Teece's DC, presented on the left side of the framework, enables enterprises to create, develop, and sustain their intangible assets to support long-term business performance. On the other hand, the right side of the framework represents the four paths of the 6S sub-constructs pursued by the five car-sharing giants in navigating the volatile and dynamic environments imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Elements and framework of 6S sub-constructs



**FIGURE 1.** Theoretical framework

The elements, definitions, and four routes of the 6S sub-constructs are outlined as follows:

### Path 1:

- SAFETY: Implementation of strict hygiene protocols and standard operating procedures.
- SCAN: Technological innovations for identifying threats and risks.
- SYSTEM: Integration of SAFETY with technological systems, utilizing digital payment methods, pandemic foot-tracing apps, and COVID-19 monitoring apps to enhance safety.

### Path 2:

- SUPPORT: Provision of internal and external stakeholder support.

### Path 3:

- SPREAD: Business reconstruction and expansion.

### Path 4:

- SPEED: Embracing agility as the new normal.

SAFETY, the initial component of the 6S sub-constructs, aligns with the SEIZE capability in DC. It encompasses the implementation of SOPs and hygiene protocols during the pandemic. Following SAFETY, SCAN and SYSTEM utilize technology to enhance safety and service delivery, corresponding to the SENSE element in DC. These elements create a continuous loop of P1a, P1b, and P1c. Path 2 (P2) involves establishing SUPPORT sub-constructs to ensure business operations through SAFETY technologies and protocols, aligning with the DC transformation and company

culture.

Effective resource management, including vision formulation, action implementation, and value-added services to stakeholders, underpins the achievement of DC (Chien & Tsai, 2012; Größler, 2007; Sachitra & Chong, 2018; Wu, He, & Duan, 2014). Stakeholders play a crucial role in the innovation process, influencing decision-making and outcomes to drive successful innovation, diffusion, and strategy implementation (Cleland, 1997; Widén, Olander, & Atkin, 2014). Devi, Srivastava, Koshta, and Chaudhuri (2021) introduce the concept of stakeholder DC, emphasizing equitable consideration for all stakeholders and the social responsibility of companies to contribute to a better society.

Path 3 (P3) within the 6S sub-constructs focuses on SPREAD, corresponding to the transformative aspect of DC. This sub-construct relates to how businesses expand, contract, or adapt their strategies and services in response to evolving business environments. It is crucial for firms to consistently employ the sub-constructs of SAFETY, SCAN, SYSTEM, SUPPORT, and SPREAD as the coronavirus evolves, enabling effective control over business processes amidst dynamic environments and market volatility. Consequently, Path 4 (P4) signifies a phenomenon characterized by a new sense of corporate normalcy and the agility to adapt to changing circumstances.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic review methodology to investigate the impacts and strategies adopted by the hotel industry amid the COVID-19 outbreak. A systematic review is a rigorous and comprehensive summary of relevant publications pertaining to a specific research or clinical topic (Linares-Espinós et al., 2018). For this study, the systematic review process involved searching for news articles and published journals in the Web of Science database, serving as secondary data sources. The content of these sources was thoroughly evaluated to identify publications focusing on the business strategies implemented by IHG and Marriott during the COVID-19 pandemic. Denyer and Tranfield (2009) provided a framework consisting of five essential steps to conduct a systematic literature review:

- Formulating a research topic
- Sourcing the relevant literature
- Selecting and evaluating the literature
- Analyzing and synthesizing the findings
- Reporting and utilizing the outcomes

Initially, a comprehensive search strategy and criteria were developed, which involved using various keyword combinations such as "Intercontinental COVID-19" and "Marriott COVID-19" in Google search, as well as referring to the respective press releases of the two companies. The inclusion criteria for articles were as follows: they needed to focus on IHG and Marriott, investigate their business and marketing strategies in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and be published as news, research, or journal articles between March 2020 and December 2022.

To collect the data, an SEO Metrics tool called SEOquake was employed. A total of 370 online articles were found, with 180 articles related to IHG and 190 articles related to Marriott. Initial data filtering was performed to exclude irrelevant content, resulting in 76 online articles that specifically addressed the marketing strategies and issues pertaining to IHG (n = 39) and Marriott (n = 37) during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 and December 2020.

The screening process involved reviewing the titles, abstracts, and content of the articles, followed by a systematic categorization of the data based on the companies involved and the elements of the 6S sub-constructs (SAFETY, SCAN, SYSTEM, SUPPORT, SPREAD, and SPEED). While the majority of the articles focused on the impact of the pandemic on the two hotel chains, 42% (n = 33) of the articles were directly related to the 6S sub-constructs, with 3% (n = 2) focusing on SCAN, 6% (n = 5) on SYSTEM, 4% (n = 3) on SAFETY, 13% (n = 10) on SUPPORT, and 17% (n = 13) on SPREAD.

## RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

### ***Sub-construct # 1: SAFETY - Implementation of strict hygiene protocols and standard operating procedures***

Amid the pandemic, there is a heightened emphasis on cleanliness, hygiene, and the well-being of guests. IHG and Marriott have taken significant measures to ensure a safe guest experience. IHG, for instance, has partnered with renowned experts like Cleveland Clinic, Ecolab, and Diversy to introduce the global IHG Clean Promise. Marriott Hotel, on the other hand, collaborates with on-site third-party COVID-19 testing providers to verify the virus-free status of guests during their stay. The implementation and standard operating procedures adopted by IHG and Marriott encompass various aspects, including:

- Provision of personal amenity cleaning kits and hand sanitizer/wipes.
- Training employees on the proper use of personal protective equipment.
- Placement of visible sanitizer stations in common areas and workplaces.
- Introduction of new operating procedures with clear signs and signals for social distancing.
- Enhanced cleaning practices for high-touch surfaces, furniture spacing, and best practices in amenity spaces.
- Implementation of new food and beverage standards and service protocols.
- Sanitization verification of guest rooms, including labeled clean/ready-to-use items, removal of high-touch collateral, and upgraded laundry protocols.
- Mandatory mask-wearing for all guests and staff during check-in.
- Daily temperature checks for access to event areas.

### ***Sub-construct # 2: SCAN - Technological innovations and advancements for risk and threat identification***

Both hotel chains have embraced technological advancements to detect and mitigate the risk of infection, ensuring the safety of guests and staff. For instance, UV light technology is employed by many hotels to combat bacteria, disinfect rooms, and prevent the spread of the coronavirus. UV light is also utilized to sanitize guest room key cards. To screen guests for high fever symptoms, contactless temperature scanners are installed at entry points. IHG has even introduced cleaning robots in public areas and on guest floors, further enhancing their technological capabilities.

### ***Sub-construct # 3: SYSTEM-Technological innovation and development to enhance safety***

In addition to employing technology for risk detection, both hotel groups recognize the importance of utilizing technology to enhance SAFETY and improve the overall customer experience. IHG has implemented touchless check-in and integrated smart room amenities to minimize contact and ensure a seamless hotel experience. Through smartphone apps, guests can access virtual front desk services or concierge assistance, enabling them to check-in and use their smartphones as room keys, eliminating the need for direct interaction with hotel staff. Moreover, hotels have embraced voice assistants such as Amazon's Alexa and Google Assistant to assist guests with various room functions, including controlling lights, adjusting drapes, and operating TVs. These advancements further enhance guest convenience and satisfaction.

### ***Sub-construct # 4: Internal or external SUPPORT for stakeholders***

As the fourth element of the 6S sub-construct, SUPPORT encompasses the provision of financial, insurance, and other forms of internal and external support to a company's stakeholders, including investors, employees, and partners. Davidson (2015) suggests that strategic human resource planning plays a crucial role in enabling the hotel industry to meet evolving traveler expectations and effectively manage workforce-related issues, which can impact a hotel chain's brand. To ensure compliance with evolving cleanliness and safety guidelines, hotel groups continue to offer relevant training and business tools to their staff. Musumali (2022) proposes strategic human resource planning strategies that include:

- Enhancing manpower development, motivation, and professionalism as key drivers for success in the hospitality industry during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Conducting regular training to maintain the professionalism of both full-time and part-time employees.
- Making effective HR decisions that consistently support the hotel's overall strategy, thereby improving the internal and external business environment.
- Enhancing HR-employee communication to mitigate organizational power dynamics and politics that may harm the hotel's reputation.

In terms of external assistance, Marriott has implemented complimentary on-site COVID-19 testing for guests at select properties. Additionally, the hotel offers up to 50% off flexible extended stay rates if a guest is unable to return to the United States due to a positive test result. IHG has also

updated its booking and cancellation policies to provide more flexibility, along with adjustments to its loyalty program. Furthermore, IHG has launched the "true hospitality for good" program, offering discounted rates to healthcare and frontline workers, logistics professionals, and government agencies involved in the pandemic response, providing them a safe place to stay (IHG, 2011).

### ***Sub-construct # 5: SPREAD-Business/Service expansion***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the hospitality business suffered greatly as a result of reduced consumer disposable income and travel restrictions imposed worldwide due to the pandemic, resulting in a significant negative impact on tourism and casino industries (Gursoy & Chi, 2020; Jones, 2021). To adapt to this challenging and unpredictable environment, hotels have been compelled to implement cost-cutting measures or explore avenues to expand their services in order to generate additional revenue.

One effective strategy that hotels have employed is business/service expansion, as demonstrated by IHG Hong Kong during the pandemic. Recognizing the growing demand for quarantine accommodations among business travelers needing to travel abroad, IHG Hong Kong transformed its operations into quarantine hotels to provide essential support for travelers and healthcare workers. Moreover, IHG introduced a Food & Beverage delivery service across its portfolio to cater to changing demands (IHG, 2021). In Singapore and Indonesia, IHG launched a new subscription service that allowed guests to utilize InterContinental's workspaces, rooms, and facilities through specially designed "work from hotel" packages (IHG, 2021).

Another crucial strategy for hotel organizations has been the redesign of their physical spaces to ensure safer indoor environments. Marriott International, for instance, installed contactless arrival kiosks in select-service hotels to minimize contact and enhance safety for guests (Marriott, 2022). Furthermore, Marriott launched a proof-of-concept contactless grab-and-go marketplaces in two of its hotels, offering guests a convenient and touchless shopping experience (Marriott, 2022).

### ***Sub-construct # 6: SPEED indicating the new normal***

With COVID-19 causing unforeseen environmental changes and disrupting businesses, it has become crucial to balance the priorities and interests of businesses, governments, and people. Moreover, as the coronavirus continues to mutate, effectively managing the pandemic has become the new normal. Therefore, the inclusion of "SPEED" as the sixth sub-construct signifies a heightened level of agility that cor-

porations must strive for, consistently applying the principles of SCAN, SAFETY, SUPPORT, and SPREAD to navigate environmental and market volatility.

Numerous scholars have extensively discussed the various phenomena that have emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent call for a new normal. For instance, [Tengku Jamaluddin et al. \(2020\)](#) proposed safety procedures and activities applicable to different workplaces, industries, aged care services, and healthcare services during the pandemic. Organizational flexibility and the integration of internal and external supply chains directly impact agility, serving as essential mechanisms for organizations to strategically adapt their business models, company culture, and collaborative approaches ([Warner & Wäger, 2019](#); [Ramos, Patrucco, & Chavez, 2023](#)). As the coronavirus variants continue to evolve, the agility and ability of firms to respond swiftly to the pandemic will be crucial in gaining a competitive advantage in the new normal.

## CONCLUSION

As the world adjusts to the new normal and continues to confront various coronavirus variants, this study expands upon Teece's DC model ([Teece et al., 1997](#)) and adopts the new 6S sub-constructs ([Chi et al., 2022](#)) to examine the business strategies implemented by IHG and Marriott during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from 76 online articles indicate that both hotel groups have employed the sub-constructs of SAFETY, SCAN, SYSTEM, SUPPORT, and SPREAD in diverse ways to combat the pandemic. To summarize, the strategies based on the 6S sub-constructs are as follows:

- SAFETY: Establishing stringent hygiene protocols and standard operating procedures to ensure the safety of guests.
- SCAN: Implementing UV lights to prevent the transmission of the coronavirus and utilizing contactless temperature scanners to identify guests with symptoms of high fever.
- SYSTEM: Introducing contactless check-in systems and voice assistant hardware such as Amazon Alexa and Google Home to provide in-room services.
- SUPPORT: Offering on-site COVID-19 testing for guests and providing discounted rates for healthcare workers, frontline personnel, logistics professionals,

and government agencies.

- SPREAD: Expanding operations to include quarantine hotels, launching food and beverage delivery services, and introducing "work from hotel" packages to optimize the utilization of indoor spaces.
- SPEED: Applying the strategies of SCAN, SAFETY, SUPPORT, and SPREAD to effectively manage environmental or market volatility.

## Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study, like others, has its limitations. Firstly, due to time constraints and the limited availability of research articles immediately after the COVID-19 outbreak, the majority of articles included in this study were sourced from news articles. Therefore, it is recommended to include more academic papers or non-research articles to ensure a more comprehensive analysis. Secondly, future research could benefit from incorporating data from other hotel chain groups, such as Hyatt and Hilton, to enhance the framework of the 6S sub-constructs. In terms of governance and policy implications, this study suggests that hotel businesses prioritize the maintenance of a virus-free environment to ensure the safety of customers and adopt contactless and cashless services to enhance the overall hotel experience. Thirdly, leveraging the latest technological advancements proves advantageous for hotels by providing safe customer experiences, such as utilizing facial recognition technology for check-in or investing in robotic technology for cost-effective and contact-reducing cleaning operations. Close collaboration with governments and the continued provision of COVID-19 testing services are two ways in which hotel businesses can contribute to monitoring and controlling the overall development of the pandemic within communities. Lastly, as Teece's concept of Dynamic Capabilities suggests, businesses should streamline their cost structures and make necessary adjustments to accommodate additional capabilities. Identifying emerging needs and expanding services through mergers, acquisitions, partnerships, or alliances are also crucial considerations for businesses during the pandemic. The focus of this study on the business strategies implemented by IHG and Marriott during the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the new framework of the 6S sub-constructs, aims to generate further interest among practitioners and researchers in the field.

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