

## Strategic decision tools and organizational performance in the hotel industry

### Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate which strategic decision tools hotel managers use or do not use when formulating strategic decisions, their reasons for using or not using these tools, and the relationship between tool use and hotel performance. A questionnaire containing 28 commonly used strategy tools and 19 performance items was distributed to managers of 50 hotels in China. The three most commonly used tools were Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats Analysis, budget analysis, and core competence analysis. Several demographic characteristics of the managers had a significant influence on which tools they decided to use. Out of the 10 most commonly used strategy tools, only three showed differences in hotel performance depending on their use among hotel managers. This study provides theoretical and practical implications as well as future research directions.

*Keywords:* strategy tools, strategic decision, hospitality, hotels, China

### 1. Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to investigate which strategy tools hotel managers use or do not use when formulating strategic decisions, their reasons for using or not using these tools, and the relationship between tool use and hotel performance. Strategy tools are important techniques that employees in management-level positions need to know and understand. Because their positions entail greater job responsibilities such as formulating strategies or strategic decisions, understanding several strategy tools is crucial (Roper & Hodari, 2015).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the use of strategy tools. For example, Clark (1997) found that SWOT and PEST analysis are the most preferred tools in the United Kingdom

and New Zealand. Forest (2003) reported that small- and medium-sized firms in Western Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong use SWOT and cost-benefit analysis in strategy formulation, the comparison of alternative strategies, and the selection of appropriate strategies. Al Ghamdi (2005), Hutchinson (2008), and Knott (2008) highlighted similar findings in their studies. Roper and Hodari (2015) identified inhibitors to the use and perceived value of strategy tools, while several studies (Jarratt & Stiles, 2010; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Knott, 2006) have provided frameworks or typologies depicting how and when strategy tools are selected and applied.

However, these studies did not focus on whether there were any differences in organizational performance based on the tools used, and related studies in the hospitality industry in developing countries and/or emerging economies are rare (Roper & Hodari, 2015). Therefore, this study aims to address the following questions for researchers, practitioners, and educators:

- What strategy tools do hotel managers in China use, and why do they choose to either use or not use particular strategy tools?
- Are there any differences in demographics between managers who use and do not use these tools?
- Are there any differences in organizational performance based on the tools used?

If so, why do these differences emerge?

The remainder of the paper comprises four sections. Section 2 provides a literature review on strategy tools as well as an overview of strategy tool studies in the tourism and hospitality industry. Section 3 explains the research methodology employed in this study. Section 4 presents and discusses the study findings. Section 5 highlights the conclusions, study limitations, and opportunities for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Strategy tools*

How strategies should be developed is one of the most important research questions in strategic management. There are two dominant perspectives in strategy development: the planning school and the learning school. The planning school advises formal instructors to formulate and implement strategies, while the learning school argues that managers should (re)design strategies based on the new information or opportunities they acquire (Brews & Hunt, 1999; Mintzberg, 1990; Whittington, 2001). Therefore, academics and consulting firms have developed strategy tools as physical, processual, or conceptual documents, as well as PowerPoint and analytical models and frameworks (Roper & Hodari, 2015).

The main reason for developing strategy tools is to help practitioners make the right decisions (Rigby, 2001; Wright, Paroutis, & Blettner, 2013). Numerous strategy tools have been proposed by scholars and tested by both academics and professionals (Gunn & Williams, 2008; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Oliveira, Rosa, & Antonio, 2008). The Academy of Management identified the following common strategy tools taught in business schools: Porter's five forces model and generic strategies, SWOT analysis, the resource-based view of firms, value chains, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Matrix, the McKinsey 7S Framework, balanced scorecards, Bowman's Strategy Clock, strategic group maps, Strategic Factor Analysis Summary, and the Blue Ocean Four Action Framework (Kachra & Schnietz, 2008, as cited in Wright et al., 2013, p. 95). These strategy tools can be found online, such as on Mindtools.com, a website that provides on-demand workplace learning solutions with more than 2,800 resources (i.e., strategy tools). Mind Tools has more than 25 million users every year, including global companies such as MasterCard, Asics, Intelsat, and Kerry Foods ("About Mind

Tools,” 2017).

Strategy tools help managers and practitioners collect data and map, simplify, analyze, synthesize, or evaluate information (Morecroft, 1992; Paroutis, Franco, & Papadopoulos, 2015) as “technologies of rationality” (March, 2006, p. 211) or technologies of intended rationalities (Dodgson et al., 2013; Roper & Hodari, 2015). A number of studies have been conducted to elucidate the advantages or disadvantages of these tools. While some of these tools are frequently used, others are never or rarely used (Knot, 2008). Although different industries tend to use different strategy tools, some executives decide not to use the common strategy tools recommended by academics and professional consultants at all. This is because using such tools would limit their time, creative ability, knowledge, and skills in making strategic decisions (Roper & Hodari, 2015). Thus, further studies are needed to understand which tools managers in different industries (e.g., hospitality) frequently use.

## *2.2. Overview of strategy tool studies in the tourism and hospitality industry*

A number of studies are directly or indirectly related to strategy tools. However, in the hospitality and tourism industry, such studies are rare (Harrington, 2005). Hung (2013) found several studies in the tourism industry (e.g., Akça, 2006; Guzmán, Moreno, & Tejada, 2008; Subramoniam, Al-Essai, Al-Marashadi, & Al-Kindi, 2010) and in the hotel industry (e.g., Blery & Kapetanidou, 2008; Hung, 2013; Yu & Huimin, 2005) that only used SWOT analysis. Only one study regarding the use of strategic tools in the hotel industry was found in the literature (Roper & Hodari, 2015). The study was a case study of three hotels owned, managed, and franchised in the United States, Europe, and the United Kingdom. The authors interviewed 52 managers, including the chief executive officer, chief operating officer, executive vice president, senior vice president, and vice president, as well as directors from different functional areas. They found that

hotel industry practitioners often reject the use of strategy tools because of legitimate concerns and the need to make creative, fast, and experience-based decisions. They revealed that the use of strategy tools depends on industry-specific cultural and structural factors. However, their study did not focus on the linkage between strategy tools and organizational performance (Roper & Hodari, 2015). Therefore, more empirical research is needed to explain why managers select some strategy tools and not others, as well as the linkage between the selected tools and organizational performance in different industries in developing countries.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Development of the research instrument*

Table 1 shows 28 commonly used strategic decision tools chosen from strategy management textbooks (Hill, Jones, & Schilling, 2014) and from the Mindtools website. These tools were included in the survey alongside 19 indicators of company performance. Mindtools was used because it is one of the most popular on-demand workplace learning solutions in the world.

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To understand the tools that hotel managers use or do not use to formulate strategies or strategic decisions, respondents were asked whether they had ever used a particular strategic tool (e.g., SWOT analysis). The survey was prepared based on relevant literature (Aldehayyat & Anchor, 2008; Al Ghamdi, 2005; Barca, Koseoglu, & Ardic, 2011; Hung, 2013). When the respondents answered “Yes,” they were directed to the next question, which asked why that particular tool was chosen (e.g., easy to use and effective). When the answer was “No,” the

respondents were directed to another question, which asked why that particular tool was not used or not chosen (e.g., more complex and time consuming). Respondents were also asked to indicate the performance level (e.g., competitive position, market share, and sales growth) of the company where they worked (Avci, Madanoglu, & Okumus, 2011; Harris & Mongiello, 2001; Kaplan & Norton, 1992; Ramanujam & Venkatraman, 1987). For example, respondents were asked to rate the changes in the company's competitive position and customer satisfaction ratings on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*deteriorated significantly*) to 5 (*improved significantly*). Finally, respondents were asked several questions on their demographic characteristics such as age, gender, job position, and years of experience.

### *3.2. Sample and data collection*

Online questionnaires were developed and distributed to 50 hotels in China, including Hong Kong. The questionnaire was originally developed in English and then translated into Chinese by an executive officer and an associate professor at a public university, both of whom were fluent in English and Chinese. To eliminate any misunderstandings or errors, the Chinese version of the questionnaire was translated back into English and checked by a native English speaker (Netemeyer, Durvasula, & Lichtenstein, 1991). To inform potential respondents about the details and risks of the study and to ensure their anonymity, an informed consent form was presented at the beginning of the online survey. To maintain the validity of the data, "trap" questions were used in the online survey. Trap questions are designed to trap individuals who are speeding through, cheating on, or not paying attention to the questions as they take the survey. Several trap questions (e.g., "For this item, click Strongly Disagree") were employed. A total of 139 questionnaires were collected from 13 five-star hotels in southeastern China and Hong Kong. After the collected data were screened via listwise deletion of univariate and multivariate

outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), 44 questionnaires were removed, leaving 95 questionnaires available for further analysis.

### *3.3. Data analysis*

Nonparametric statistical analysis was applied to answer the research questions. First, quantitative descriptive analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was employed to understand the tools that hotel managers use or do not use to formulate strategies or strategic decisions, as well as the rationale for their choices. Second, since the data collected from the respondents were ordinal, a cross-tabulation with chi-square analysis was performed to compare managers who use and do not use the tools based on five demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, managerial experience, education, and job position). Lastly, as the Mann-Whitney *U* test can deal with nonparametric data and extremely small sample sizes such as the present study's sample (de Winter, 2013; Fay & Proschan, 2010; Mann & Whitney, 1947), the test was employed to answer the last research question, which entailed the comparison of the total performance scores across the top 10 commonly used strategy tools. The sample size was small because top-level employees like managers and senior executives tend to be oversurveyed and have a hectic work schedule, resulting in a limited but still acceptable number of employees available to participate in the study (Cycyota & Harrison, 2006).

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### *4.1. Demographic information*

The majority of participating managers were employees of five-star hotels. Table 2 shows that 53.7% of the participants were male, and the average age of the participants was 34.5 years old. About 71.6% of the respondents had an undergraduate degree, and the majority of respondents held either upper-level (11.6%) or middle-level (60.0%) managerial positions such

as human resource manager, food and beverage manager, and sales manager. The respondents' average number of years of experience was 6.59, and 74.7% of the respondents received training related to strategic management.

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#### *4.2. Strategy tools used by hotel managers in China*

The respondents were provided with a list of 28 commonly used strategic decision tools chosen from strategy management textbooks and the Mindtools website. They were then asked to choose which tools they were familiar with and which ones they commonly used. For the purpose of analysis, among the 28 tools provided, the top 10 most commonly used and top 10 least commonly used tools were chosen (see Tables 3 and 4). As shown in Table 3, SWOT analysis (71%) was the most commonly used strategy tool by hotel managers in China. This is not surprising, as SWOT analysis is an effective tool for analyzing the internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) aspects of a business organization (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Hung, 2013; Shinno, Yoshioka, Marpaung, & Hachiga, 2006). In addition, SWOT analysis has been included in the curriculum and taught in different fields of study at the undergraduate level for many years. As more than 70% of the respondents in this study had an undergraduate degree, it is not uncommon for the respondents to choose and use SWOT analysis as a strategic tool (Hung, 2013). Among the common reasons given for choosing the tool was that it is well known, effective, and easy to use. These findings support those of previous studies, which stated that SWOT analysis is a simple and effective tool that could be applied by any manager without using computers or scientific tools (Hung, 2013).



Table 4 presents the 10 least commonly used strategic tools by hotel managers in China. The Delphi technique (87%) was the least commonly used. A strategic tool used in the forecasting method based on the results of questionnaires sent to a panel of experts, the tool is more well-known and applied by academic researchers in the social sciences than by business organizations (Keeney, Hasson, & McKenna, 2001). As the technique requires a panel of experts to assess a program or a problem, it takes much longer for managers to make a decision because they have to wait until a consensus is reached among the panel of experts (Lunenborg, 2011). Thus, it is not uncommon for the respondents in this study not to know the tool, as the process is complex and time consuming, especially in the hospitality and tourism industry.

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#### *4.3. Strategy tools based on managers' demographics*

To determine whether the decision to use or not to use the various strategy tools differed based on managers' demographics, a cross-tabulation test with chi-square analysis was applied to compare the differences between the two independent groups, strategy tools, and respondents' demographic information. Each of the 10 most commonly used and 10 least commonly used strategy tools (see Tables 3 and 4, respectively) was compared across five demographic indicators: gender, age, managerial experience, education, and job position. The results show that several demographic characteristics of managers had a significant influence on the decision regarding which tools to use. Age and gender yielded significant differences when it came to using or not using market research and budget analysis. Age and managerial experience

produced significant differences in the decision to use cost-benefit analysis, benchmarking analysis, feasibility studies, and strategic planning as strategy tools. The use of cost-benefit analysis and strategic planning was influenced by the managers' job position and education, respectively (see Table 5).

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#### *4.4. Strategy tools and organizational performance*

Table 6 shows the percentages for hotel performance, which was categorized as “has improved significantly and has improved,” “about the same,” and “has deteriorated and has deteriorated significantly.” Median scores were also calculated. The results show that managers perceived their hotel performance to have improved for all items in Table 6. According to the managers, overall firm performance and success (83.2%) along with sales growth (83.2%) were the two items that had improved the most.

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To see if there were any differences in organizational performance based on the strategy tools used, the mean scores for hotel performance were compared across strategy tools. Since the data in this study were asymmetrically distributed and hotel performance scores were at the median level, a Mann-Whitney *U* test, as the nonparametric equivalent of the student's *t* test, was applied. Table 7 shows the differences in organizational performance based on the strategy tools used. Among the 10 most commonly used strategy tools, only cost-benefit analysis, gap analysis, and profit impact of market strategy (PIMS) analysis showed differences in hotel performance

scores.

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## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) to investigate what tools hotel managers in China use or do not use to formulate strategies or strategic decisions, (2) to explore why hotel managers in China use or do not use particular strategy tools, and (3) to assess the relationship between tool use and organizational performance. For this purpose, an online questionnaire was distributed to hotel managers in China. Despite the small sample size used in this study, consistent findings were obtained. As one of the first studies in this field, this research provides important theoretical and managerial implications.

### *5.1. Theoretical implications*

The results showed that SWOT analysis (71%), budget analysis (60%), and core competence analysis (59%) were the three most commonly used strategy tools by hotel managers in China. The respondents claimed that the tools were well known, effective, and easy to use (Hung, 2013). This finding is somewhat consistent with those of previous studies insofar as SWOT analysis is still the most common technique used by managers in strategic decision making (Al Ghamdi, 2005; Clark, 1997; Forest, 2003; Hutchinson, 2008; Knott, 2008; Roper & Hodari, 2015). On the other hand, the Delphi technique, Porter's four corners model (competitor analysis), and Porter's diamond analysis were the three least commonly used strategy tools by hotel managers. Respondents claimed that these tools were unknown to them and their colleagues, inappropriate for the sector in which they worked, or just too complex to use.

Consequently, these techniques were unpopular and not often used in the hotel industry, possibly because the industry requires relatively quick decision-making processes that can easily be understood by managers from different departments.

Several differences were found between managers who were using or not using the 10 most commonly used strategy tools based on five demographic indicators (gender, age, managerial experience, education, and job position). Gender and age were the two most influential factors in managers' decision on whether to use budget analysis. Age and managerial experience influenced the use of cost-benefit analysis, benchmarking analysis, feasibility studies, and strategic planning. The results indicated that compared with their respective counterparts, male managers, older managers, and managers with more experience tend to have different preferences regarding the use of strategy tools. The use of cost-benefit analysis and strategic planning was also influenced by managers' job position and education, respectively.

The differences caused by gender and age could be due to the high number of male employees in the hotel industry who are holding upper or middle management positions such as president or general manager. In addition, as this study was conducted in China, the differences could be due to cultural and societal factors such as work-family conflict, lack of networks, and family support (Li & Wang Leung, 2001). China is known as a gender stereotypic society (Ng & Pine, 2003). As a result, despite having more work experience than their male counterparts, females are not as well represented as males at the upper and middle management levels. This could have a significant impact on decision-making processes such as deciding whether to use strategy tools. Furthermore, although the educational level was not a factor in most managers' choice of commonly used strategy tools, these findings may be consistent with those of Jarzabkowski et al. (2013), who suggested that educational characteristics affect the use of

strategy tools. This can be explained by the educational level of the managers involved in this study, most of whom held a bachelor's degree (71.6%).

The strategy tools taught at the undergraduate level are limited compared with those taught at the graduate level based on the researchers' experience and knowledge. Among the many strategy tools, SWOT analysis is the most commonly taught tool at the undergraduate level. Therefore, since the majority of managers in this study held a bachelor's degree, most of them used strategy tools learned and recommended by academics in college. Most strategy tools are taught at a higher level of education, such as in MBA programs (Wright et al., 2013). This finding supports those of previous studies that identified SWOT analysis as the most preferred tool by many businesses in several countries including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong (Clark, 1997; Forest, 2003).

Finally, only three of the 10 most commonly used strategy tools demonstrated differences in performance scores depending on their use or non-use by hotel managers: cost-benefit analysis, gap analysis, and PIMS analysis. The total performance scores of hotels that used these three strategy tools significantly differed from the scores of those that did not use these tools.

## *5.2. Managerial implications*

These research findings have specific managerial implications. First, the results showed that strategy tools like Porter's five forces (industry forces) analysis and the BCG Matrix were among several tools that hotel managers in China were not familiar with and did not commonly use. This is unsurprising, since the majority of participants (71.6%) in our sample had only an undergraduate degree, and these strategy tools are taught at the graduate level. At the undergraduate level in programs related to business or hospitality, these tools are taught and applied in capstone projects. Hospitality and tourism schools should pay more attention to

teaching and applying these tools while considering the unique characteristics of the industry, since tool use is associated with the industry structure and company characteristics (Aldehayyat & Anchor, 2008; Rigby & Bilodeau, 2005, 2011, 2013; Stenfors et al., 2004).

Second, as the use of strategy tools was influenced by the respondents' management position, all managers should be informed of the strategy tools used in the company, especially middle- and lower-level managers. According to Pascale (1984, as cited in Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990), middle- and lower-level managers tend to be the earliest people in a company to recognize strategic problems and opportunities. They also tend to be involved in the strategy-making process by influencing top-level managers (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Hence, informing all management levels of the use of strategy tools would help upper-level management to better understand the strategy tools that need to be used to address strategic problems and opportunities.

Third, although 74.7% of the respondents received training related to strategic management, the strategy tools suggested by academics were rarely used. Training programs should be (re)designed based on strategy tools, and new training programs focusing on strategy tools should be established to formulate effective strategies. Lastly, the use of strategy tools depends on managers' age, educational level, and gender. Therefore, expectations about the use or outcomes of the strategy tools should be specified.

## **6. Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size used in this study was relatively small, and data were collected in only one Chinese province in southeastern China and in Hong Kong. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized, as the sample might not be sufficiently representative of the hotel industry in China. Second, as this study does not focus on one

particular strategy tool, the various strategic tools used might not be independent of each other and might affect firm performance. Third, the use of more advanced statistical analysis such as regression analysis, rather than a comparison of mean differences, would be useful for generating more detailed findings. Fourth, identifying and contrasting the tools used by managers at different levels would be another way to improve the study. Lastly, the use of longitudinal data or a combination of qualitative and quantitative data (mixed-methods design) would be helpful in answering the research questions proposed in this study.

Further research can examine what upper management employees perceive to be the best strategic tool to apply in the hotel industry. Through longitudinal data analysis, future studies can also investigate whether the use of a particular strategic tool would have a significant impact on firm performance.

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