

## Revenue optimization strategies in budget hotels: Evidence from independent hotel management in Malang

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### ABSTRACT

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Budget hotels are hotels with a lower-middle market segmentation. Having a broader target market, but with the rapid growth of competition caused by the establishment of many budget hotels, it has become quite a significant challenge, especially in terms of management and business sustainability. The management of budget hotels can generally be done independently or by using a Virtual Hotel Operator (VHO), but both have an impact on revenue optimization. Given these issues, the author intends to conduct research on the implementation of profit optimization in budget hotels located in the city of Malang. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to systematically illustrate the optimization of hotel revenue. The research results show that the optimization of budget hotel revenue is carried out through independent management without involving a Virtual Hotel Operator (VHO). In addition, to increase the occupancy of budget hotels, the role of Online Travel Agents (OTAs) is also involved by limiting the share according to the level of visits. In addition, to enhance revenue optimization, it is not always accompanied by cost-cutting. This is evidenced by budget hotels that allocate funds for the use of a Property Management System (PMS) in the form of a Visual Hotel Program (VHP) with a rental system intended for data accuracy and asset security.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of hotels in Indonesia is very rapid, driven by several factors including economic growth, increased mobility of the population, and lifestyle shifts. Lifestyle changes have a significant impact on the development of the hospitality industry (Oktavio et al., 2023). Currently, most people travel for either business or leisure, placing a high priority on comfort (He & Timothy, 2024). Therefore, people who travel prefer to stay in hotels, whether for the upper class or the middle to lower class (Wong & Mohamed, 2022).

In general, hotels are classified into several groups, including homestays, service apartments, casino hotels, extended stay hotels, resort hotels, boutique hotels, luxury hotels, mid-range hotels, and budget hotels (Rashid et al., 2021; Ali et al., 2023). Each type of hotel has varying rates according to the facilities offered and the targeted market segmentation.

Currently, budget hotels are being established by entrepreneurs due to the wide market segmentation and the high interest of consumers with limited budgets in using the accommodation services offered by budget hotels. Budget hotels are hotels that provide standard services with relatively smaller room sizes at affordable prices (Wicaksono et al., 2019).

As the establishment of hotels rapidly increases, it creates competition in the budget hotel industry. Thus, challenges arise in the management of budget hotels to maintain business sustainability. In the digital era, budget hotel management can be carried out through two methods: independent management and management through a virtual hotel operator (VHO) (Wang et al., 2021). VHO is an intermediary company that collaborates with hotel owners to market rooms through online platforms (Wiasuti & Susilowardhani, 2016). Additionally, online marketing for hotels can also be done through online travel agents (OTAs) (Kusumawidjaya et al., 2021; Nathania et al., 2025). Both digital marketing media can be applied by budget hotels to increase hotel occupancy. VHO allows hotels to minimize labor costs because VHO has a management function, while OTA only serves as a marketing medium, enabling hotels to manage independently and requiring labor in the management process. Thus, budget hotels need to conduct an analysis in decision-making regarding which marketing media to implement for revenue optimization.

Budget hotels face a dilemma in managing online marketing. On one hand, the presence of online travel agents provides wide market visibility, but on the other hand, the high commissions charged by OTAs reduce the profitability share of the business. Jolene (2023) mentions that OTAs help hotels reach a wider market because they function as digital distribution channels that connect hotels with millions of tourists globally. However, hotels must pay a commission on every booking made through the OTA. In addition, there is a risk of double bookings from several OTAs that collaborate with the hotel, which can lead to financial losses due to compensation.

The optimization of hotel revenue has become an interesting issue due to increasingly tight competition and the rapid development of marketing technology. There are many components that need to be combined in determining hotel rates to optimize hotel revenue. This poses a unique challenge for management to ensure the hotel's sustainability. Asshofi et al. (2023) mention that in the dimension of revenue management, setting room rates is crucial for optimizing revenue. The determination of rates not only reflects the value of the product offered to guests but can also determine the hotel's competitive position in the accommodation market. In determining hotel room rates, there are several components that need to be considered, including the occupancy rate, market demand, market competition, as well as management policies and the distribution channels used (El-Nemr et al., n.d.). The

components need to be combined accurately through in-depth analysis to produce competitive rates and provide optimal profitability.

With the complexity of hotel revenue optimization, the author intends to conduct research on revenue optimization strategies in budget hotels located in the city of Malang. Malang City is one of the cities in East Java known as an educational and tourist city, thus having the potential for continuously growing accommodation demand. This research was conducted on a newly established budget hotel that has expanded its operations, marked by the addition of more room facilities and the provision of a restaurant. This research aims to understand the strategies implemented by the budget hotel, particularly in terms of revenue optimization. Through this research, it is hoped that it can serve as a reference for both academics and practitioners in implementing hotel revenue optimization strategies.

Research related to hotel revenue optimization strategies has been extensively conducted; however, in previous studies, most research on hotel revenue management has focused on four- or five-star hotels and international hotel chains, while studies specifically examining revenue optimization strategies for independent budget hotels are still very limited. Second, research on the contractual obligations between hotels and OTAs tends to discuss the macro distribution perspective without deeply exploring the implications of contract clauses on the profitability of budget hotels in emerging markets. Third, a study that holistically integrates the three dimensions, digital sales strategies, OTA contract management, and pricing mechanism, within a single unified analytical framework in the context of independent budget hotels in secondary cities in Indonesia has not been conducted before. Fourth, research on budget hotels in Malang is still very rare, even though this city has unique market characteristics as a tourist and educational destination serving diverse demographic segments.

The novelty of this research lies in three elements, including: first, this study introduces the integrated Revenue Optimization Quadrant Framework (ROQF). ROQF evaluates three dimensions of revenue optimization, namely pricing mechanisms, OTA work commitments, and digital sales strategies. Second, this research encompasses the context of budget hotels located in Indonesia (Malang), which is a city of education, tourism, and business with a wide market coverage but has so far been overlooked by academics despite representing the majority of the national accommodation market. Third, this research helps independent budget hotel managers develop sustainable revenue strategies amidst the dominance of the OTA digital ecosystem and increasing price competition. This research helps develop hospitality revenue management theory, particularly for segments and geographies that are still underexplored in the international literature.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study with a descriptive approach. Qualitative research is research aimed at understanding the phenomenon of what is experienced by the research subjects (Moleong, 2014). The researcher uses qualitative methods because the researcher intends to investigate the Room Sales Strategy Management in Budget Hotels, which includes room rate setting, marketing digitalization, and collaboration agreements with Online Travel Agents (OTAs). The selection of Malang City as the research location is based on the consideration that Malang City is an Educational City and a popular tourist destination, which opens up opportunities for the growth of the accommodation industry, including budget hotels that serve the segment of tourists with limited budgets. The object of the research is the management strategies implemented by hotels to optimize revenue, specifically related to: 1. Room pricing strategy 2. Hotel marketing digitalization strategy 3. Collaboration agreements with Online Travel Agent (OTA) platforms.

The selection of informants in this study uses purposive sampling, which is a sampling technique based on the considerations and objectives of the research according to Sugiyono (2019). This technique was chosen because the researcher requires informants who can explain in detail the strategies for optimizing revenue, which in this case in budget hotels are handled by the General Manager in terms of partnership agreements, the Head Office Dept. Front Office in determining room rates, and front office employees who understand the operations of budget hotels.

Data collection techniques were carried out thru three methods: in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation study. In-depth interviews were conducted semi-structured to explore topics that emerged during the interviews and to ensure that all uncharted information could be obtained. Observation was conducted to directly understand the media used in the tariff-setting process. Meanwhile, the documentation study aimed to obtain relevant documents related to the research, including pricing policies and price displays published on OTAs.

The analysis method used in this research is descriptive data analysis techniques, which examine the sales strategy management at Hotel Budget Malang. The data analysis techniques used in this research include the following steps:

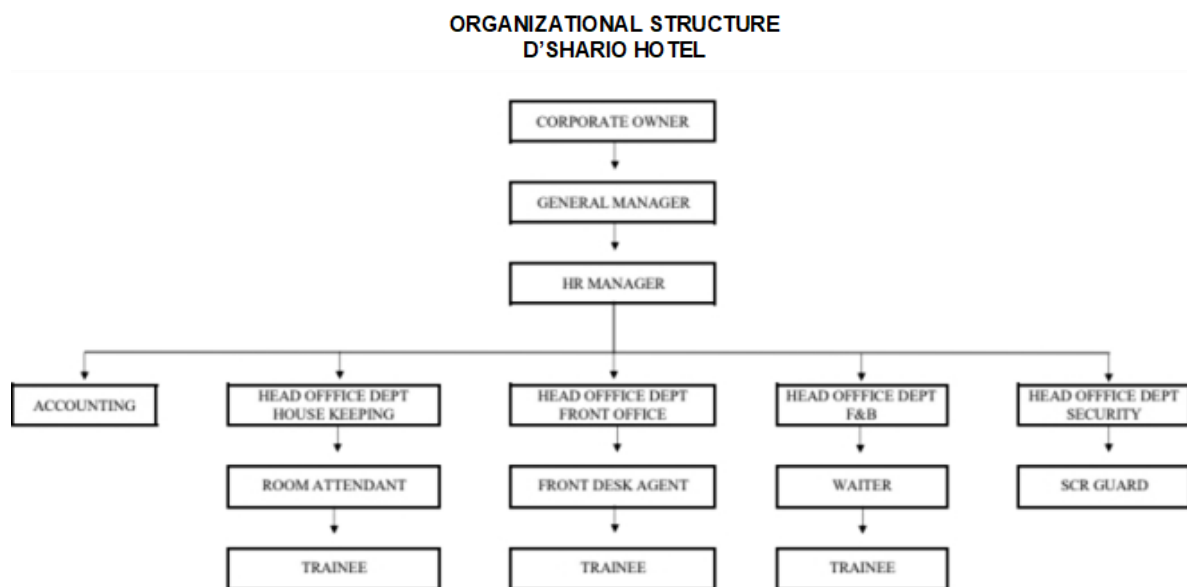
- a. Identifying issues related to sales in the era of digitalization
- b. Exploring information regarding strategies for drafting cooperation agreements, determining room rates, and profit-sharing provisions
- c. Exploring information regarding strategies to create customer loyalty in an effort to optimize profits
- d. Analyzing hotel room sales strategies in an effort to optimize profits

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Hotel Sales Strategy in the Digitalization Era at Budget Hotels in Malang

Hotel sales strategy is a series of activities aimed at ensuring that the products owned by the hotel can be sold optimally and generate optimal profitability. According to Yunus (2016) strategic management is a process or series of fundamental and comprehensive decision-making activities accompanied by the establishment of implementation methods created by the leadership and implemented by all levels within an organization to achieve its goals.

The budget hotel that is the subject of the research has a business process that is not too complicated because the facilities and services provided meet the demands of consumers who do not require many detailed facilities and services. Therefore, the organizational structure of the budget hotel is not too complex. Here is the organizational structure of the hotel:



**Figure 1. Hotel Organizational Structure**

From the image above, it can be seen that there are 5 divisions in the hotel. The divisions include accounting, housekeeping, front office, food and beverage, and security. In the organizational structure, there is no sales and marketing department because those tasks are integrated with the front office. This is in line with the statement Peng et al. (2015), which mentions that budget hotels essentially have a lean organizational structure due to the limited number of rooms, thus for profit optimization accompanied by human resource optimization for cost efficiency.

Based on the interview results with the hotel, it was found that the hotel's sales strategy is entirely determined by the hotel itself. The informant stated that at the beginning of its

establishment, there was an offer from one of the virtual hotel operators to collaborate, where the management would be under the virtual hotel operator. However, the management decided that the hotel's management would remain under the hotel's management, striving to ensure that the hotel's profitability was higher than the offer from the virtual hotel operator.

The above action is based on the consideration that with management under hotel management, the hotel has the freedom to set hotel rates according to hotel policies, thereby allowing price standards to be controlled and optimal profitability to be achieved. This is in line with the findings of Blengini & Heo (2020), which state that independent hotel management is more beneficial for the hotel because the hotel can control price standards according to market conditions. Another strategy employed by this budget hotel is collaborating with online travel agents. However, the contribution to room sales is still supported by cooperation with corporate clients, ensuring that the occupancy rate at the budget hotel remains stable. The management's decision to implement direct sales by collaborating with corporate partners is the right approach to creating stability in occupancy rates and revenue (Jaya et al., 2023). Collaboration with certain companies or institutions has proven capable of maintaining room occupancy stability because it is sustainable and not significantly affected by fluctuations in tourist demand (Poulaki & Sergopoulos, 2019; Zhang & Xie, 2023).

The strategy for profit optimization and control over hotel revenue is carried out by management by implementing a reliable property management system using the Visual Hotel Program (VHP). The purpose of using VHP is to secure the company's assets and facilitate the transaction recording process. Based on the interview results, it was found that the implementation of PMS requires a rental budget, but the costs incurred are proportional to the results obtained, namely the existence of clear revenue transaction records. The accommodation industry increasingly relies on technology in various operations to maximize revenue, and digital transformation in revenue management has proven to provide benefits such as time savings, support for decision-making processes, and higher revenue increases (Alrawadieh et al., 2021). Here is the visual display of the hotel program and the transaction input results thru VHP.

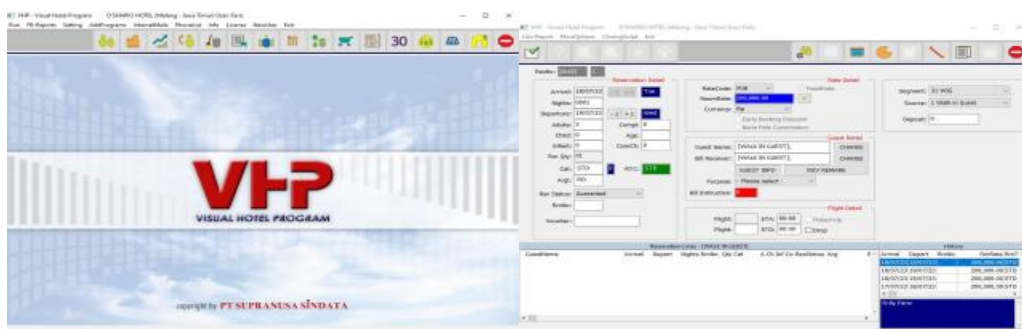


Figure 2. Visual Display of the Hotel Program

In response to the era of digitalization, this hotel continues to collaborate with online travel agents, but due to its quite strategic location, most hotel guests make transactions directly (Angkasa et al., 2023). This is quite beneficial for the company because with direct transactions, the profit generated will be more optimal since there is no need to pay fees to online travel agents. As for the strategy to facilitate consumers in transacting, the budget hotel also provides a hotel website that offers information related to hotel rates and online booking thru the website. OTA indeed plays a role as a distribution channel that promotes hotels and sells rooms thru their platform, but hotels must pay a commission for each room sold thru the OTA (Ling et al., 2014)

### **Formulation of Work Agreements with Online Travel Agents**

Formulation of Work Agreements with Online Travel Agents To increase sales and facilitate reaching consumers, collaboration with several companies is necessary for profit optimization. In the realization of cooperation with other companies, a mutually beneficial commitment is needed and agreed upon thru an official document signed by both parties. Based on interview results, it was found that the work agreement or contract with an OTA is not much different from a contract with an offline travel agent. The important contents of the cooperation contract include:

- a. The period of the cooperation contract.
- b. The commission rate agreed upon by both parties for each room sold.
- c. The method of payment by customers:
  - Online travel agent Collect
  - Hotel Collect

Online travel agent collect is a payment mechanism by customers who make transactions thru online travel agents, and the payment is deposited into the online travel agent's bank account. The second mechanism is hotel collect, which is a direct payment to the hotel even tho the booking process is thru the online travel agent. With the online travel agent collect, it creates accounts receivable with the online travel agent. Meanwhile, for Hotel Collect, it results in the emergence of a debt to the online travel agent.

With the transactions thru online travel agents, collect requires the hotel to be meticulous with each transaction and conduct periodic reconciliations, as well as prepare invoices for billing the online travel agents for overdue receivables according to the agreement specified in the contract. The amount of the receivable bill to the online travel agents is the sales transaction value minus the commission entitled to the online travel agents. Meanwhile, for transactions with hotel collect terms, the online travel agents will bill the hotel for the agreed commission amount.

Of the two payment mechanisms described above, the one with minimal risk is the payment transaction thru online travel agents because the commitment/obligation with the customer is clearer since the payment is made in advance. Therefore, the most important aspect in formulating a cooperation contract is the provisions related to procedures and sanctions in the implementation of cancelations and the compensation received by the hotel due to transaction cancelations. In addition, what needs to be considered are the provisions related to transactions between online travel agents because this carries a high risk that can affect double bookings, financial losses due to double billing, or deductions from business profits, leading to decreased customer satisfaction. Hotels should be more discerning in determining business-to-business policies among online travel agents. As stated in several studies, potential risks arise from cooperation between online travel agents (OTAs) or business-to-business (B2B) systems among distribution platforms. The simultaneous use of various digital distribution channels creates a multi-channel distribution environment that increases the complexity of reservation management and room inventory coordination (Chang et al., 2019; Stangl et al., 2016). The recommendation to address this issue is the need for integration between the hotel's PMS and distribution channels thru a channel manager. However, it should be noted that this integration process requires a considerable amount of money, so in its implementation, it is necessary to consider whether the costs incurred are proportional to the expected revenue optimization.

### **How the Mechanism of Hotel Room Rate Determination as a Profit Optimization Strategy**

To achieve optimal profit, it is necessary to determine rates accurately and precisely thru systematic calculations. In determining hotel rates, the initial step taken is to determine the cost of goods sold/service for room rentals. To determine the cost of room rentals, it is necessary to first identify the components or activities that incur costs. In providing room service, although the hotel industry operates in the service sector, it is essential to calculate the cost of goods sold (COGS) considering that the provision of services is accompanied by services and products to customers, which results in several cost components that must be accounted for.

The cost components/COGS for room rentals include the provision of bathroom amenities, bedroom furnishings, linen costs, and direct labor involved in preparing the room, which in this case is the room attendant. In addition to those cost components, if the room rental service includes breakfast, then in the calculation of the cost of goods sold (HPP) for the room rental service, the basic cost of producing that breakfast needs to be taken into account. Based on the interview results, it is known that in determining hotel room rates, there are several considerations, including:

- a. The cost of goods sold is based on the type of room offered and the facilities provided.
- b. The cost of goods sold includes expenses according to the activities.
- c. The determination of room rates is based on a market survey analysis of hotels that have previously established themselves in the area, of the same class, and we compare them with the brand and strength of the hotel.
- d. The determination of room rates is conducted periodically based on meetings with management.

Based on the interview results, it was found that hotel rates are fixed without considering market demand fluctuations. This indicates that budget hotels and star-rated hotels have different treatments in tariff determination. Ilie & Stanciu-Gorun (2022) mention that the implementation of revenue management has become an important strategy for the hotel industry to improve business performance, especially in facing changing market conditions and demand uncertainty. The core of revenue management practices is the concept of demand-based pricing and optimal inventory management, where room rates are controlled by demand expectations during a specific period, with key driving factors including occupancy rates, competitor prices, and seasonal factors. Basically, VHP is equipped with a dynamic pricing feature that can help management update rates automatically.

For revenue optimization, hotels should implement dynamic pricing to adjust room rates according to occupancy levels, tourist seasons, and market demand. Basically, VHP has been equipped with dynamic pricing. Innovation in pricing strategies such as dynamic pricing is required, which is the core of modern hotel revenue management by adjusting room rates dynamically according to demand expectations, tourist seasons, and occupancy rates (Guizzardi et al., 2022; Talón-Ballesteros et al., 2022).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study aims to analyze the revenue optimization strategies for budget hotels in the era of digitalization. The research results show that the management process of budget hotels is carried out independently without relying on virtual hotel operators. This is done to optimize profit through flexible room rate determination and marketing strategies by the hotel, referring to market conditions. The hotel's marketing strategy is relatively simple, combining direct booking sales with partnerships with online travel agents (OTAs) and collaborations with the corporate sector. The hotel's streamlined organizational structure with five main divisions allows for operational efficiency and optimization of human resources, where the sales and marketing functions are combined with the front office.

Another finding in this study is that although the hotel falls into the budget hotel category, its operational processes are supported using a Property Management System in the form of

the Visual Hotel Program (VHP). This system helps management record transactions more accurately, improving revenue control, and supporting a more effective decision-making process. In collaboration with OTAs, hotels implement two main payment mechanisms: OTA collect and hotel collect, each with different operational and financial implications. Additionally, the simultaneous use of various digital distribution channels creates a multi-channel distribution environment that has the potential to introduce complexities in reservation management, such as the risk of double booking or transaction recording errors. Therefore, the integration of the PMS system with digital distribution channels thru a channel manager becomes one of the solutions to improve reservation management efficiency.

The theoretical contribution of this research is the development of studies in the fields of strategic management and revenue management in the hospitality industry, particularly in the context of budget hotels that have limited resources but are still required to compete in the era of digitalization. Practically, the implications of this research for budget hotel managers are to optimize the use of digital technology in hotel operations and strengthen strategies. From a policy perspective, this research highlights the importance of supporting the digitalization of hotel management systems so that players in the hospitality industry, particularly small and medium-sized hotels, can enhance operational efficiency and business competitiveness. direct sales to reduce dependence on OTAs, as well as considering the implementation of dynamic pricing strategies in determining room rates.

This research has several limitations, including the scope of the study being conducted only at one budget hotel, so the research results cannot be widely generalized. In addition, the research approach used is qualitative based on interviews, so the research results are highly dependent on the informants' perspectives. Therefore, it is recommended that future research expand the research subjects by involving more budget hotels in various regions and using a quantitative approach to empirically test the impact of implementing digital distribution, property management systems, and dynamic pricing on increasing room occupancy rates and hotel profitability. Thus, the results of future research are expected to provide a more comprehensive picture of hotel revenue optimization strategies in the era of digitalization.

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