

## To Study the New Standard Operating Procedures Adopted by the Front Office Department among 5 Star Hotels of Pune

Nakul Jayawant<sup>1</sup>, Monisha Juneja<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student, State Institute of Hotel Management, Indore.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Lecturer, State Institute of Hotel Management, Indore.

### Abstract

The unforeseen outbreak of the COVID-19 has disordered the entire biosphere. Virtually every industry is shaken by the contagion. One such industry which is relentlessly hit is the hospitality and tourism being is one of the highest contributors to the development of the nation in terms of revenue generation. The need of the hour makes it vital to scrutinize the complications; and work on it in time to save the industry from sinking. Front office being the face of the hotel it becomes essential to prioritize the revised functioning of this department. The research paper aids in studying whether the new standard operating procedures associated to the front office department during the epidemic. The purpose of conducting this study is to understand the importance of these measures by the staff. The convenience sampling was used to collect the data from front office of 5-star hotel category in Pune. The data was collected using structured questionnaire which were filled by the respondents telephonically. The study finds all the standard operating procedures were being followed since the hotels came under the 5-star category as the government had issued strict norms failing which the hotel will not be allowed to function. However it was observed that couple of the measures which were being followed was not up to the mark. Firstly the safety measures on guest arrivals reason. Secondly, maintaining the demarcation to the social distancing reason. Thirdly when requested to produce the RTPCR test. The reasons identified were overcrowding, mismanagement of the crowds and guests reluctant to follow rules. The study by highlighting the non-compliances measures and has analyses the reasons. These shortcoming needs to be addressed to by the industry in order to regain its strength.

**Keywords:** pandemic, revenue generation, standard operating procedure, front office department.

### Introduction

Every multi-departmental physical business needs to have a front office or reception to receive the visitors. Front Office Department is the face and as well as the voice of a business.

Regardless of the star rating of the hotel or the hotel type, the hotel has a front office as its most visible department. For a business such as hospitality, the front office department comes with an aspect of elevating customer experience with the business. It is the one of the many departments of the hotel business which directly interacts with the customers when they first arrive at the hotel. The staff of this department is very visible to the guests.

Pune is one of the prime cities in India and second most in Maharashtra after Mumbai. Being the cultural capital of Maharashtra called as the “oxford of the east”. 5-star hotels in Pune not only provide accommodation but also focus on conducting exhibitions, meeting, conferences, events and marriages. Post lockdown the hotel industry has started picking up business and so is the case in Pune. Front office being the face of the hotel there is a need to design new standard operating procedures.

Some of the practices which have been adopted by the hotels include taking the temperature of the guest before check in and providing the guest with a sanitizer before entering the premises. Interacting with the guest to handle request for an accommodation using mask, keeping safe distance and installing a plastic barrier at the desk. While document verification disposable gloves should be used. The guest should be requested for a cashless transaction. Proper sanitization of keys before issuing it to the guest. The procedures while settling guest payments at the time of check out should be followed as the check in.

The aim of this research is to find out all the new standard operating procedures adopted by the front office department in the 5-star category hotels operating in Pune. The study will also understand if the staff is prepared for the new normal and any training requirements for implementing the new operating procedures.

## **Literature Review**

### **A Brief History about Hotels**

The word hotel is derived from the French *hôtel* (coming from the same origin as hospital), which referred to a French version of a building seeing frequent visitors, and providing care, rather than a place offering accommodation. The history of hotels is intimately connected to that of civilizations. Or rather, it is a part of that history. Facilities offering guests hospitality have been in evidence since early biblical times. The Greeks developed thermal baths in villages designed for rest and recuperation. Later, the Romans built mansions to provide accommodation for travellers on government business. The Romans were the first to develop thermal baths in England, Switzerland and the Middle East. Later still, caravanserais appeared, providing a resting place for caravans along Middle Eastern routes. In the Middle Ages, monasteries and abbeys were the first establishments to offer refuge to travellers on a regular basis. Religious orders built inns, hospices and hospitals to cater for those on the move. Inns multiplied, but they did not yet offer meals. Staging posts were established for governmental transports and as rest stops. They provided shelter and allowed horses to be changed more easily. Numerous refuges then sprang up

for pilgrims and crusaders on their way to the Holy Land. Travelling then became progressively more hazardous. At the same time, inns gradually appeared in most of Europe (Levy-Bonvin, 2003).

In the 13th-18th Century BC in Ancient Greece Inns were established, and guest rights were first recognized in this period. These inns included thermal baths for resting and recuperating. Ruins in Greece still keep reminding us of the possible origins of the modern hotel industry that has become one of the biggest industries of today.

From the 8th century BC-5th century AD in the Roman era travel started for pleasure. However, most mansions and inns were erected to accommodate Romans on government business. So, this was the official beginning of the lodging industry although the foundation was laid over a thousand years ago or maybe even earlier. In the Middle Age from 5th to 10th Century AD the hotel industry developed in tandem with civilization. Coincidentally, the use of coaches for travelling became rampant bringing in more guests. Most hotels were private homes while most nobles spent their stays in monasteries. Romans introduced the first amenities in Switzerland, England, and the Middle East. People travelled for the purpose of trade, education, tax collection, sending messages, military exercises and more. Efforts were still made by travellers to keep the trips short to a day but longer trips were becoming more and more common with land, river and sea route all open. The hotel industry took full advantage of this growing travel and saw itself growing through more inns and cottages. After the so-called dark ages, the taverns and inns became fancier and more popular from the 11th century AD. People started to recognize an industry that dealt with lodging which would soon start delivering much more than just lodging. The formal structure of the hotel industry was taking shape in this era.

The French Revolution proved to be a fabulous time in hotel history, Escoffier became a phenomenon in the industry and through him, the brigade systems emerged. Apparently he is such a popular name in the current culinary industry that one of the top culinary schools in the world is named on Escoffier. This organized the Kitchen of the Hotel industry. The 1800 was probably the most important phase in the history of the hotel industry. Modern hotel chains were established in this era.

Post-World War II that is after 1945 AD trans-Atlantic flights and cross-continental travels fuelled a veritable growth of the hotel industry as a whole. The 1970s, for instance, saw a massive proliferation of hotels built primarily for business people. Now, you can find just about any kind of hotel. In the 1990s, technology took over and clear beneficiaries were the guests which has been continuing in the 2000's.

In the 2020, the effects of COVID-19 spread across the entire world, the primary focus for governments and businesses is the safety of their people. Whilst this focus will continue, the implications for economic growth and corporate profits have to lead to a sharp sell-off in equity markets across the globe.

Due to the sudden outburst of the COVID-19 which spread over the globe like fire within a short span, one of the major industries which were affected is the hospitality industry. As travelling was banned and people were confined to their homes the sector was badly hit.

### **Comprehensive view of front office department**

Front Office is the interface between a hotel and its guests. On their arrival at a hotel guests first meet the front office staff and develop an impression about the level of services, standards, facilities and hospitality at the hotel. They interact with the department throughout their stay for any kind of information and help. As they are responsible for services such as reservation, reception of guest, assignments of room and settlement of bills, the front desk personnel have the ability to multi task and work in a fast paced environment while maintaining a high level of guest service and professionalism. There are various services under the Front Office Department: Front Desk; Uniformed services; Concierges; Front Office Accounting System; Private Branch Exchange (PBX), a private telephone network used within an organization.

The Basic responsibilities of the department include Creating guest database; Handling guest accounts; Coordinating guest service; Trying to sell a service; Ensuring guest satisfaction; Handling in-house communication through PBX.

There are two categories of Front Office Operations-First is the Front-House Operations which are visible to the guests of the hotel. The guests can interact and see these operations, hence, the name Front-House operations. Dealing with the accommodation availability and assigning it to the guest, guest registration, creating a guest's account with the FO accounting system, Issuing accommodation keys to the guest and finally settling guest payment at the time of check-out.

Second is the Back-House Operations that conducts operations in the absence of the guests or when the guest's involvement is not required. These operations include determining the type of guest (fresh/repeat) by checking the database, ensuring preferences of the guest to give a personal touch to the service, maintaining guest's account with the accounting system, preparing the guest's bill, collecting the balance amount of guest bills and generating reports.

#### **Expanded role of front office in pandemic of COVID-19**

The contact of the guest with the hotel starts with the front office department and therefore the safety measures should also start from the front office.

- Measures taken during pandemic for the guests
  1. On the arrival of the guest the doorman should check the temperature of the guest.
  2. After checking the temperature the guest should be handed over a sanitizer and pair of gloves to each member.
  3. Subsequently the luggage, including the handbags, purses, waist pouches should be sanitized before placing it on the security belt.

4. To fulfill the check-in formalities only one person from the guest's family should be allowed to stand in the queue.
5. While checking-in the guest should handover the negative COVID test report/vaccine certificate.
6. Other family members should be directed towards the lobby lounge area where they are socially distanced.
7. Precautions should be taken that a limited number of people are allowed in the lift where they are moving towards the allotted room.

- **COVID-19 Measures taken by the staff**

The staff should be checked for vaccine certificate of at least one dose.

1. The staff should be checked for temperature once they enter the hotel premises.
2. The staff should be sanitized and handed over a pair of gloves.
3. Their uniforms should be sterilized, which they should wear after entering the premises.
4. The hotel should place a plastic shield between the guest and the staff member at the reception counter.
5. The staff should check for the negative COVID-19 report/vaccine certificate of the guest.
6. The shield should be changed at regular intervals.
7. The hotel should hand over masks along with the sanitized room key card.
8. The pen used for filling the form should be sanitized and then handed over to the guest.
9. The staff should direct and guide the guests about the norms of the pandemic.
10. The staff should suggest the guest to avoid liquid money transactions.
11. Every time the staff goes for a short or a long break he/she should sanitize themselves again.
12. Every time the guest goes out of the premises the SOP of COVID-19 should be followed.

- In case the guest tests positive/ starts to show symptoms

If a guest does carry his/her negative test report/vaccine certificate then the guest should not be allowed to check-in.

1. If a guest starts showing symptoms relevant to COVID-19, the hotel should inform the concerned authorities like the corporation and doctor.
2. The people who were associated with the guest should be directed for the COVID-19 test.
3. The guest showing the symptoms should be isolated from the rest of the hotel.
4. Similarly, the people who have come in contact with the guest and whose reports are awaited should be isolated.
5. A separate floor should be dedicated for the guests showing symptoms till they are handed over the concerned authorities.
6. The staff that came in contact with the guest in recent times should be tested and instructed not to report for duty till the results are satisfactory.

- In case the Staff starts to show Symptoms
  1. The staff should be asked to stay at home till the symptoms subsidize completely since the symptoms for COVID-19 are similar to simple viral fevers too

The elaborate role of the front office department has lead us to the research objective of your study to learn from the hotels operating in Pune the Standard Operating Procedures adopted by them at front office related to the new normal.

## Research Methodology

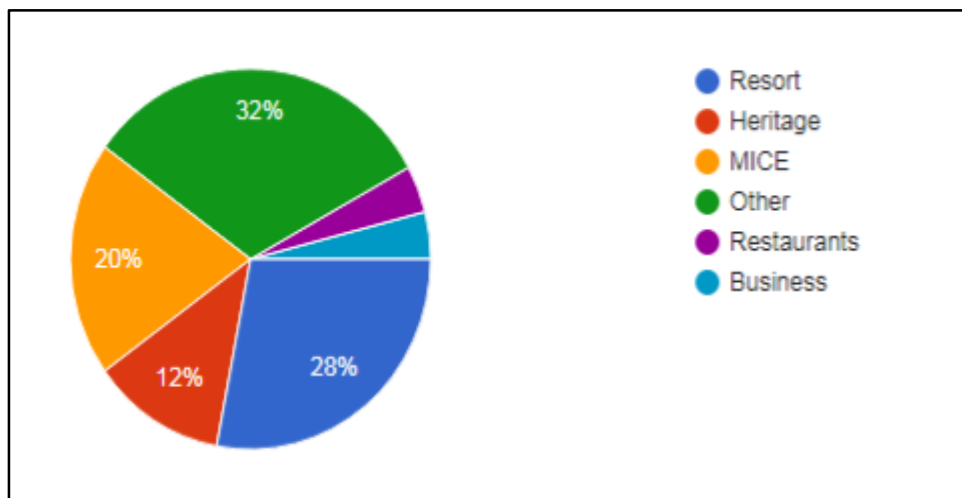
A structured questionnaire was used for collecting the data from the 5- star category of hotels. The questionnaire was prepared keeping in mind the content of data was related to the norms and rules which are introduced by the hospitality industry after the outbreak of COVID-19. All questions asked where closed ended. The questionnaire was designed in Google forms for easy collection of data from the hotels. The data was collected in the Month of January to February 2021. For the purpose of data analysis and interpretation percentage and pie charts have been used.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

### Hotel Profile

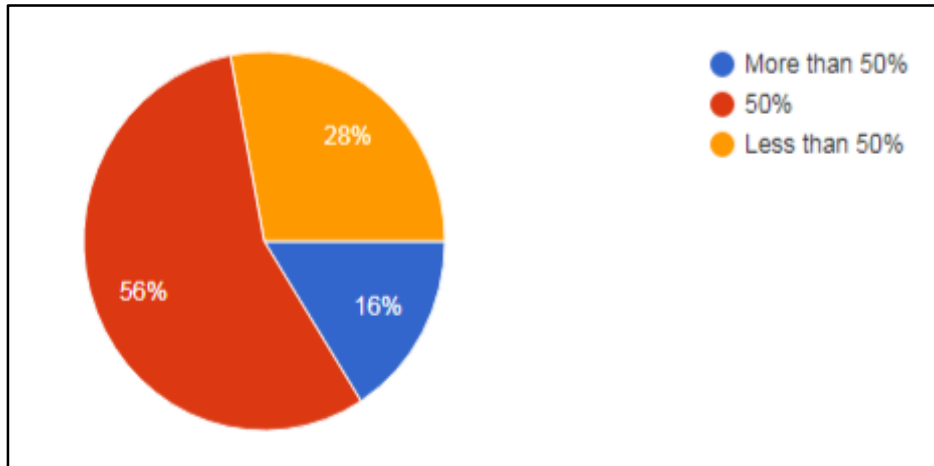
This sections covered the hotel category based on the guests catered to, Occupancy of the hotel and the front office staffing.

In the below figure 1 it can be seen that there 32 percent of the hotels falls in the other category. While 28 percent of the hotels belong to the resort categories which are primarily set up in the outskirts of the city due to the abundance of space. Whereas 20 percent of them are MICE hotels catering to the IT hub and a businesses.



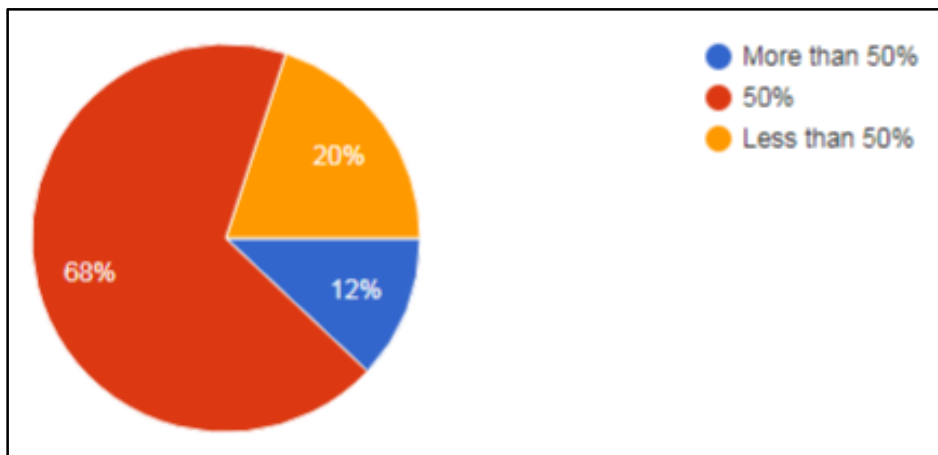
**Figure 1. Categories of the Hotels**

The occupancy of all the hotels covered in the study can be seen in figure 2. 56 percent of the hotels had about 50% occupancy and 16percent had “more than 50% occupancy”. While only 28 percent hotels had less than 50% occupancy.



**Figure 2.Occupancy rate**

Majority (68 percent) of the hotels had 50% of the staff on duty. 20 percent of the hotels operated with less 50% staff and 12percent of the hotels had more than 50% of the staff reporting for duty, 20% hotels have less than 50% working staff.

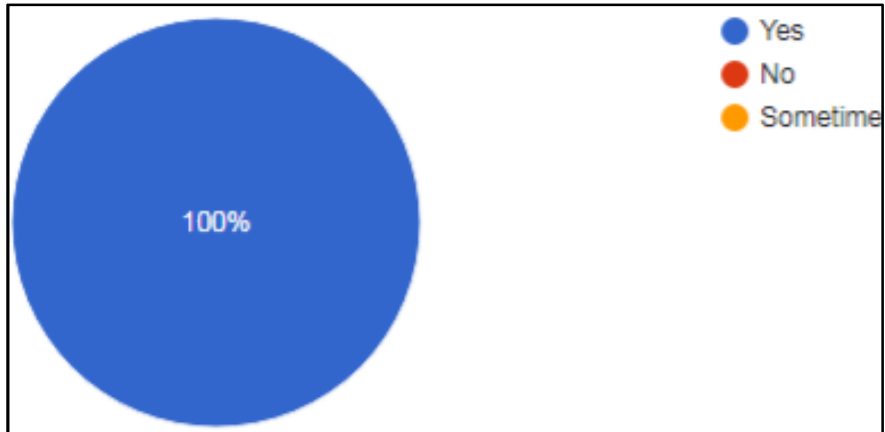


**Figure 3.Staffing of Front Office Department**

### Standard Operating Procedures during COVID- 19 for Hotels

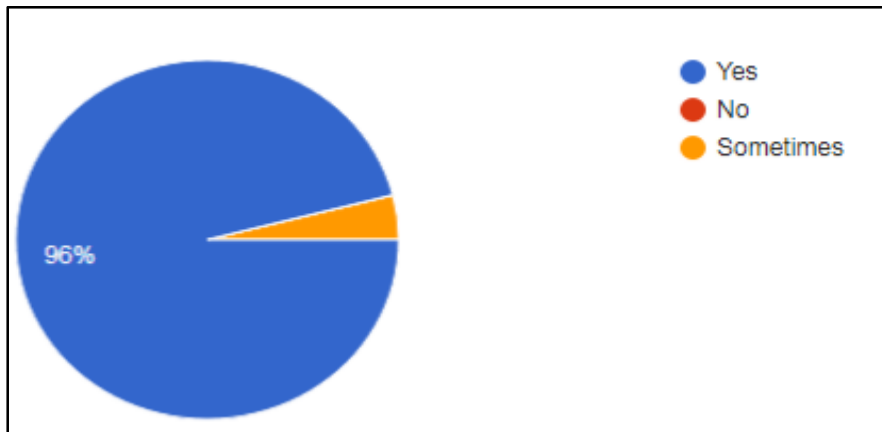
This section specifically discussed the standard operating practices being adopted by the hotels.

When asked about following of COVID- 19 SOPs issued by the Government of India all agreed opting for the option “Yes”.



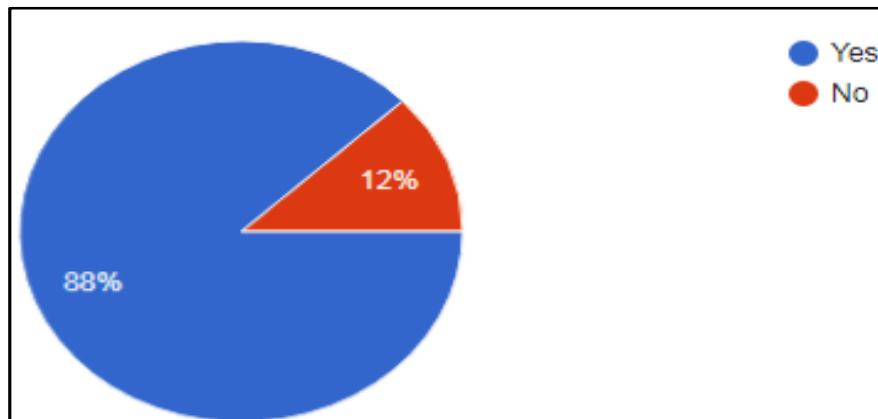
**Figure 4. Hotels following COVID-19 SOPs**

When asked about the safety measures being followed as soon as the guest arrives 96% of the hotels take COVID-19 said “Yes”. While only 4% said “No”.



**Figure 5. Hotels taking COVID-19 safety measures**

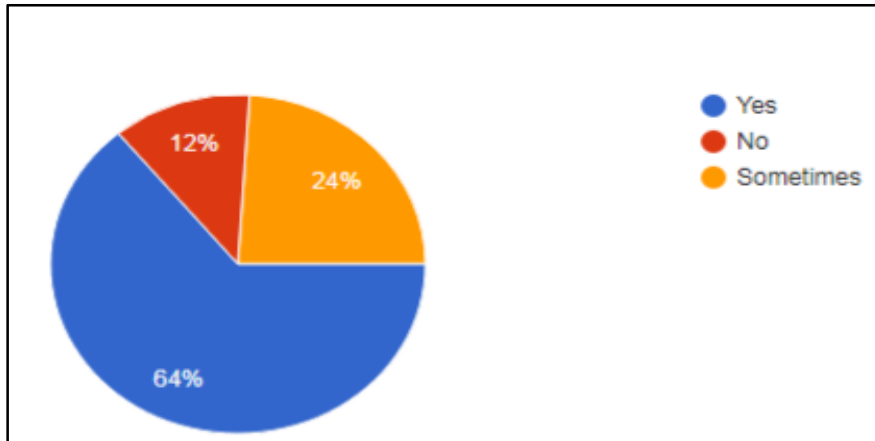
When asked about the markings on the floor for guests to stand at a safe distance 88 percent agreed saying “Yes” whereas 12 percent said “No”.



**Figure 6. Hotels making demarcations for social distancing**

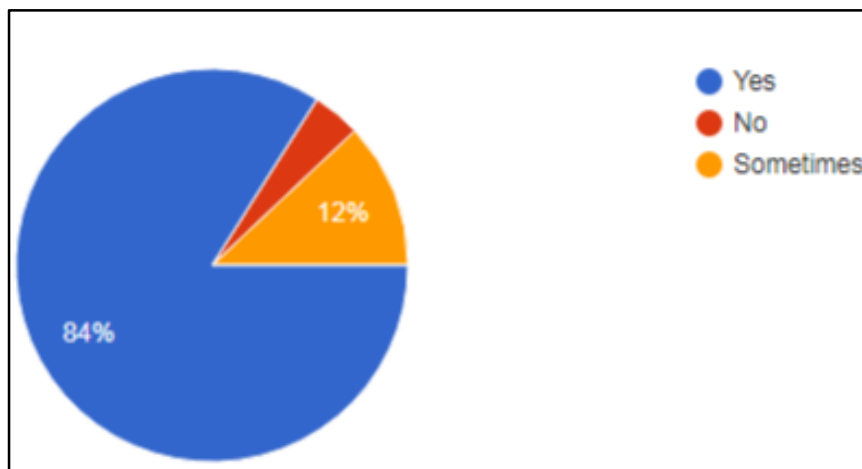


64 percent of the hotels said “Yes” for asking for the COVID-19 test report like the RTPCR test. While 12 percent said “No” and 24 percent marked the option “Sometimes”.



**Figure 7. Hotels asking for COVID-19 reports**

When asked about providing the guests with sanitary kits 84 percent said “Yes” and 12 percent said “Sometimes” and only 4 percent said “No”.



**Figure 8. Hotels providing sanitary kits**

## Conclusion and Limitations

The COVID-19 is a reality and a crises which needs to be taken seriously especially by Front office department of the hotel when handling and dealing with guests. It can be seen that majority of the hotels covered in the study fall in the other category and only 20 percent are catering to the business guest. When looking at the occupancy levels of the hotel 56 percent are 50% occupied and 68 percent of the hotels are operating with 50% front office staff level. It is good to note that all the hotels are following the SOPS issued by the government. But when specifically asked about the asked about safety measures being followed as soon as the guest arrives 4% of the hotels said “No” and when questioned about the markings on the floor for guests to stand at a safe distance 12 percent have said “No”. The reasons for this given is as overcrowding resulting

in mismanagement. For this the hotel must call upon more staff in order to deal with this problem and try to ensure the safety measures from the check in itself. When asked about the COVID negative test report While 12 percent said “No” because the guests say that they have taken the COVID-19 vaccine in the recent past under which condition the test is bound to come positive. So this SOP should be revised as per the new circumstances and maybe the certificate of vaccination should be asked. While providing the guests with sanitary kits 4 percent have said “No” as the guest claim to be carrying their own sanitary kits. The front office staff can be maybe still providing it unless the guest completely denies taking it.

Our study came across a few limitations. Firstly face to face interaction was not was not possible due to pandemic restrictions. The study location was also limited to the area of Pune. For future research similar study can be conducted across different cities of India to see if the same problems persist and the solutions offered by our study can be employed to remove those.

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