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Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on food service businesses in tourism: A case study in Can Tho city, Vietnam

Da Van Huynh

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4543-5502>

Can Tho University, Vietnam Email: hvda@ctu.edu.vn

Hieu Hong Hua

Can Tho University, Vietnam Email: hhhieu@ctu.edu.vn

Minh Anh Nguyen

Can Tho University, Vietnam Email: naminh@ctu.edu.vn

Xuan Thanh Duong

Tay Do University, Vietnam Email: duongthanhxuan@gmail.com

Phong Quan Nguyen

Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics IV, Vietnam

Email: quanphong1982@gmail.com

Vu Thanh Ngo

PhD candidate

School of Economics, Can Tho University

Kien Giang Department of Tourism, Vietnam Email: thanhvuvgg@gmail.com

Viet Quoc Mai Nguyen

Can Tho University, Vietnam Email: nmqviet@ctu.edu.vn

Correspondence details: Da Van Huynh, School of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Can Tho University, Campus 2, 3/2 Street, Ninh Kieu District, Can Tho City, Vietnam

Mobile: +84 919233876 Email: hvda@ctu.edu.vn

Dr. Huynh Van Da received his MA at The University of Queensland and obtained his PhD at Western Sydney University. He is currently working as a lecturer at Can Tho University. His is lecturing courses: tourism research methods, sustainable tourism developemt, custom process and fees, human ecology, inhabitants and environment in the Mekong Delta, World tourism geography. Da published around 30 articles both in Vietnam and overseas. His research interests are: sustainable tourism development; pollution and natural resources management in tourism; climate change, global warming and tourism; community-based tourism planning and development; tourism planning and development; eco-tourism; contemporary tourism issues.

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Abstract:

Food and beverage business is an indispensable part and plays an important role in the business activities of the tourism industry. As a business field heavily dependent on the guest market, food and beverage business operations depend entirely on the needs of customers. In the complicated situation of the Covid-19 epidemic, this business sector is definitely affected. This study was conducted in order to reflect the impact of the epidemic on the food and beverage sector and propose solutions to restore the catering business, in the case of Can Tho city. Research data were collected through a questionnaire-based survey for 50 business representatives. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. Research results show that the businesses suffered a sharp decline in the number of customers, restaurant usage capacity, and revenue. They actively implemented many activities to prevent the epidemic and limit the negative impact of the epidemic on business operations, as well as quickly recover business operations. In addition, a number of city-level state management agencies also took a number of measures to limit the spread of the disease in the tourism environment, support businesses to promote and advertise tourism, and lend them capital at a favorable interest rate.

Keywords:

Covid-19; food service; tourism

Citation:

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1. Introduction

Food is an important factor in providing real experiences for tourists, as well as promoting the destination image. Therefore, it is seen as a factor to be considered in the decision of many tourists to choose a destination and is a significant factor that creates value for the destination (Quan & Wang, 2004). Furthermore, according to Tellstrom et al. (2006), the image of local and regional food has an influence on the consumers' minds because it activates the human senses and is stored in tourists' minds for a long time.

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From a cultural perspective, food represents the origin and character of a community. When consuming food, visitors can experience the beliefs, standards, culture, and customs of the community there. According to Nguyen Pham Hung (2016), in the tourism business, culinary culture can help build brands and promote tourism images of the destinations, provide information, and create opportunities for tourists to experience traditional cultural aspects, thereby stimulating the travel needs of tourists.

In Vietnam, cuisine plays a very important role in the development of the tourism economy. In 2013, the number of international and domestic tourists in Vietnam was 7.5 million and 35 million respectively, the total revenue from tourism is estimated at 200 trillion VND. Particularly in the food and beverage sector, the expenditure levels of international and domestic tourists is 21.3 USD/day (accounting for about 20.2% of total spending), equivalent to 231,100 VND/day (accounting for 23.6% of total spending) (VNAT, 2013). Thus, revenue from food and beverage services contributes significantly (over 1/5) to the total revenue of the tourism industry.

Located in the center of the Mekong Delta and being a city directly under the central government, Can Tho city has many advantages and potentials for tourism development. Besides, Can Tho city is also an important traffic hub connecting provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta and with other regions of Vietnam. Therefore, Can Tho is really an economic, political, cultural, and social capital, as well as the tourism center of the Mekong Delta. In addition, Can Tho is home to many unique dishes that show the typical culinary style of the Southwest region, so the local food-service business for tourism has become more activated in recent decades. The development of Can Tho tourism and food-service for tourism in Can Tho has had a significant impact on tourism business and food-service business for tourism of many neighboring provinces and cities.

The emergence of the Covid-19 epidemic has negatively affected all aspects of life, in which, the tourism industry in general and the food-service business for tourism, in particular, have been heavily affected (Hale, M., & Dayot, A., 2021; Hailu, G., 2020; Gangopadhyaya, A., & Waxman, E., 2020). This study was conducted to reflect the extent of damage to business activities as well as propose solutions to recover food-service business for tourism in Can Tho city. The research results not only provide a general picture of the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on the food and beverage sector in the tourism industry, but also suggest a number of measures to help enterprises recover business activities.

2. Materials and Methods

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used for this study. For the qualitative method, a number of secondary documents (books, scientific articles) are collected, analyzed, and synthesized. Besides, business interviews with open-ended questions also obtained qualitative data.

Quantitative research was conducted through interviews with 50 representatives of food service businesses in tourism. The main interview content focused on damages caused by the Covid-19 epidemic and measures to prevent and limit its negative impact on business activities, measures to restore business operations, and supports from local authorities,

etc. Data were analyzed on SPSS 20 software by descriptive statistical methods in percentages and mean values. In addition, using statistics from state management agencies on tourism is also a quantitative research approach.

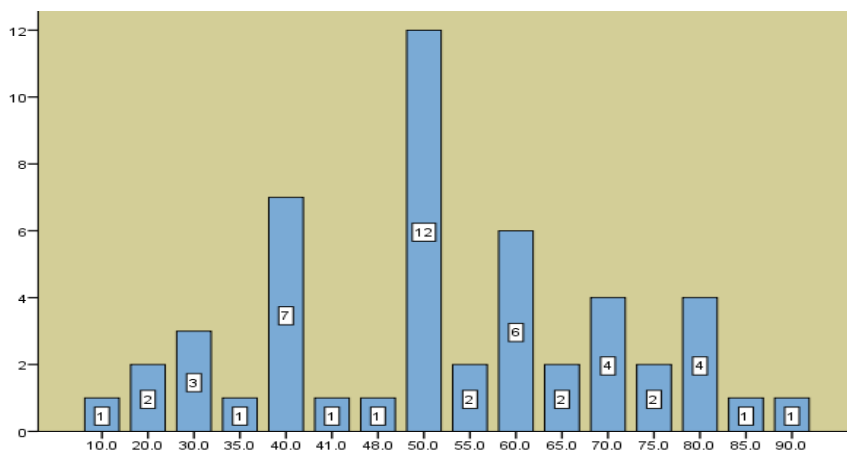
3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Impact of the Covid-19 epidemic on food and beverage businesses in tourism in Can Tho city

The decline in the number of customers

The survey results (Figure 1) show that the percentage of the decrease in visitor arrivals between catering establishments and restaurants in Can Tho is uneven. The number of customers decreased unevenly depending on the size of the restaurant. The decrease in the number of visitors was about 53% on average, the lowest decrease in the number of visitors was 10%, the highest was 90%. The lowest decrease in customers was 40 people, the highest was 4,200 people, the average was 1,088 people. In which, the number of restaurants with 50% reduction of customers is 12 out of 50, accounting for most of the total samples. After a long period of temporarily suspending business operations according to the government's directive, many restaurants and businesses when reopening face difficulties in finding the same source of customers as before the pandemic because people are still following the state's recommendations of social distancing, not gathering in crowded places, and canceling many festivals and conferences. And because of the fear, the number of tourists decreased significantly, leading to the loss of numerous restaurants. Many countries around the world have also implemented blockade measures, restricting travel, and increasing quarantine, which made the travel demand of foreign visitors to Vietnam plummet. From the serious decrease in the number of customers, many other consequences for restaurants have been caused.

Figure 1: Percentage of decrease in customer volume
(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)



The decline in restaurant occupancy

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The decrease in restaurant occupancy is proportional to the decrease in the number of customers. Out of 50 restaurants surveyed, there are 10 restaurants with 50% reduction, 8 restaurants with 40% reduction, 8 restaurants with 70% reduction, and 6 restaurants with 60% reduction in capacity. Average capacity usage decreased by 52%; some restaurants have the capacity reduced to 100% (Figure 2) with no customers during the opening days. Afraid of eating at a crowded restaurant (an environment prone to disease transmission), many customers have gradually tended to order food delivered to their homes, decreasing seriously restaurant's capacity. There were more unbooked tables than before due to lower customer bookings. Booking in advance helps the restaurant have time to prepare, plan, and use available tables more effectively, increasing the restaurant's productivity.

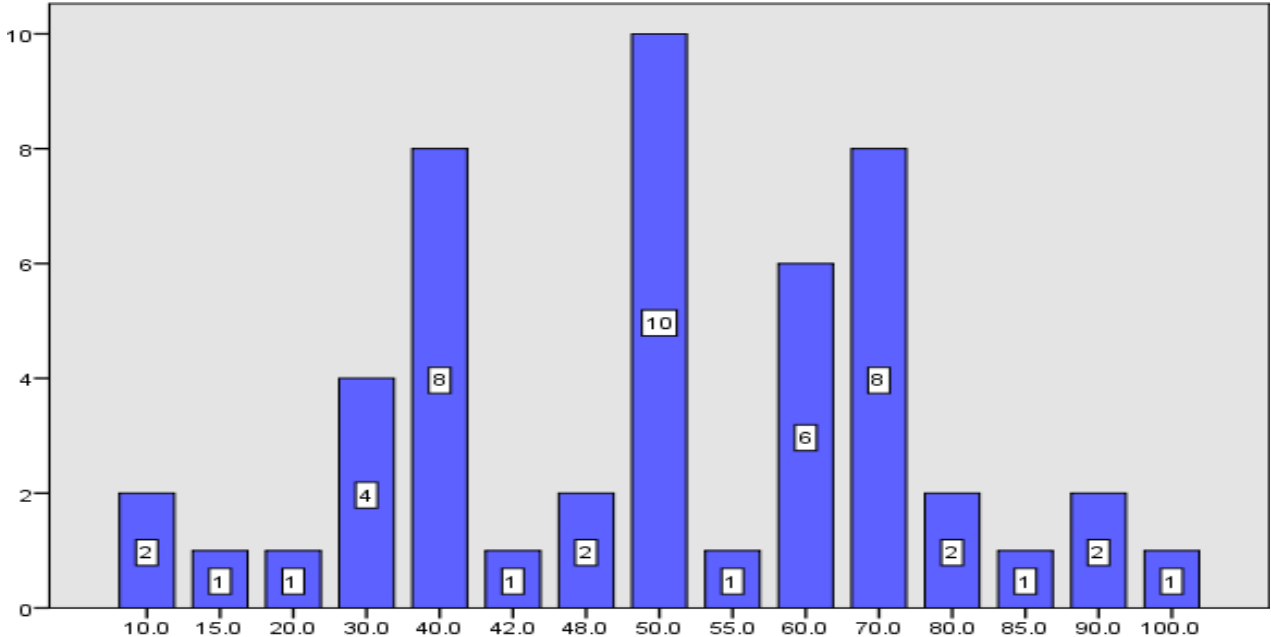


Figure 2: Percentage of decrease in restaurant productivity.
(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

The decline in restaurant revenue

According to figure 3, the decrease in sales is quite related to the decrease in the number of customers. There is a significant gap between the lowest and highest reduction percentage, with the lowest reduction being 15%, the highest reduction up to 90%. This large disparity arises from the difference in the scale of the surveyed restaurants (large restaurants and small catering establishments) in order to obtain a study covered from different perspectives. The lowest decrease in revenue was 1.3 million VND for small restaurants and up to 800 million VND for large restaurants. From there it can be seen, the larger the restaurant, the greater the number of losses. On average, revenue decreased by about 54%, of which the largest percentage was 50%, followed by 70% and 40%. Revenue is considered as the main goal to pursue and maintain, but in current difficult times due to the epidemic, restaurants are struggling to manage their business. It can be seen that the average decrease in revenue of up to 54% is a major economic crisis, therefore, many restaurants have been closed or sold, many employees have been laid off, or business activities have shrunk. Up to now, the epidemic situation has

temporarily subsided, however, most of the customers are domestic or local visitors in neighboring cities with low travel spending. The Prime Minister emphasized that Vietnam has not yet opened borders for inbound tourists, so there is almost no revenue from foreign currency.

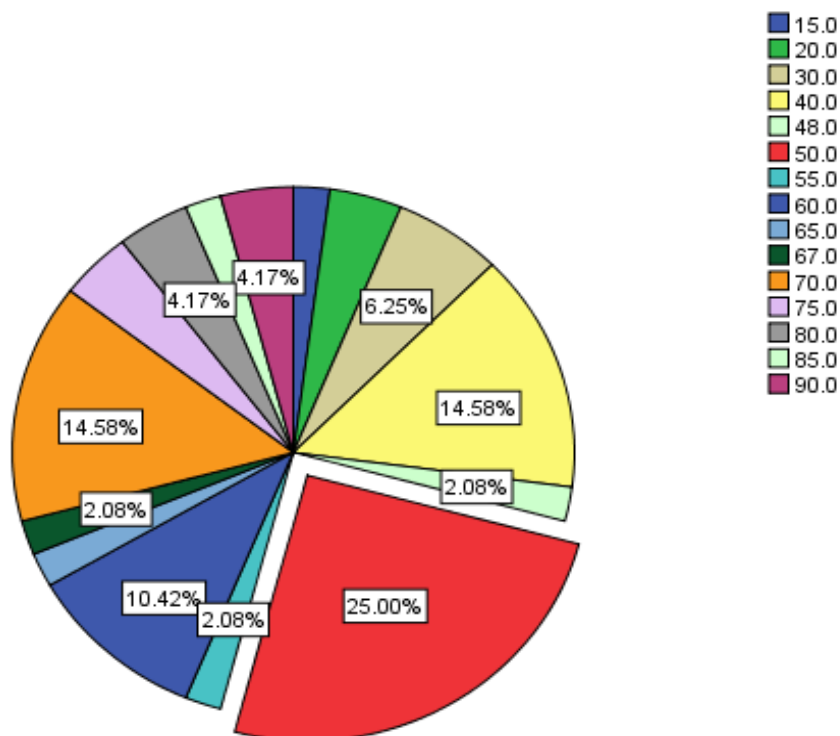


Figure 3: Percentage of decrease in restaurant revenue
(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

The extent of the impact of the disease

The interview questionnaire for restaurant representatives contains five levels of damage caused by the disease: 1 (not at all serious), 2 (not serious), 3 (moderate), 4 (serious), 5 (very serious). Figure 4 shows that, out of 50 survey samples, none of the respondents chose level 1 and level 2, only 8% chose level 3, while 54% chose level 4 and 38% chose level 5. The average damage level is 4.3 (very serious), which is not astounding in this global pandemic. There are many uncertainties caused by the Covid-19 epidemic, especially in the context that the world has not yet been able to accurately assess its danger level and control the disease. Moreover, the negative effects from the measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic have greatly affected tourist restaurants, such as reducing demand, changing spending and travel habits of visitors, leading to the risk of default and bankruptcy of many restaurants. Since then, unemployment has increased, causing many consequences for social security. In 2003, the World and Vietnam were shocked to overcome the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). So far, many experts have believed that despite many similarities with SARS in 2003, the Covid-19 is a

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pandemic with a greatly more extent of damage and impact. Although Vietnam has excelled in epidemic prevention and has become a bright spot worldwide, the tourism industry could not avoid heavy losses.

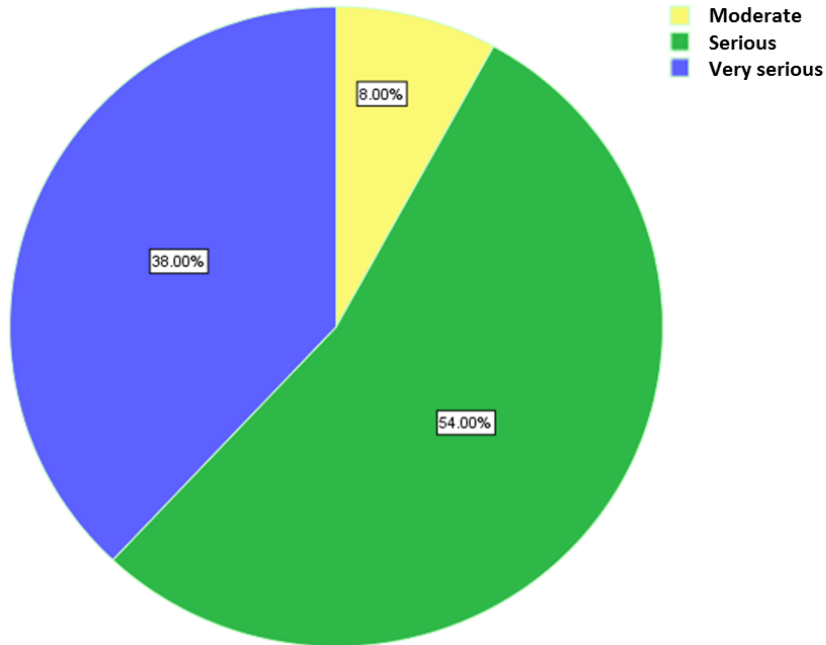


Figure 4: The severity of the pandemic

(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

3.2. Administration and Management

During the operation and management, businesses have implemented many measures to limit the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic in the tourism environment and minimize the negative impact of the epidemic on business activities and offered many appealing promotions and discounts attracting tourists to choose their restaurant as a destination, in order to recover business operations quickly.

Table 1: Measures to limit the spread of Covid-19 in the tourism environment

	Feedback	
	Votes	Ratio (%)
Advising employees and customers to implement prevention measures	46	92
Regularly cleaning the restaurant	41	82
Temporarily suspending business	35	70
Only serving customers in the locality with no infectious cases	15	30
Others	3	6

(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

From table 1, it can be seen that the restaurants have implemented very well safety prevention measures and strictly followed the instructions and recommendations of the

state during the period of social distancing. Up to 46/140 respondents advise customers and staff to wear masks, wash hands and keep distance when communicating. Most restaurants in Can Tho city have provided hand sanitizer for guests and masks for staff, and required employees to wear masks throughout their shifts. Some large restaurants are also equipped with temperature measuring devices to check body temperature when entering the restaurant, creating a sense of security for customers when choosing a destination. The second measure taken by the majority of restaurants is regularly cleaning the restaurant, with 41/140 (restaurants divide cleaning shifts for employees on duty and hourly). Cleaning staff must wipe doors, handles, furniture, decorative items regularly with alcohol sanitizer and receptionists must also regularly wipe counters, and wash hands with alcohol sanitizer. The third most-selected measure is business suspension (35/140). To ensure safety and avoid spreading the disease, some restaurants have chosen to suspend business operations during the outbreak. Some restaurants have taken other measures, such as restricting customers from foreign countries or high-risk areas. In general, as far as possible, restaurants have implemented all possible safety measures in accordance with the directives of the state to minimize unexpected scenarios.

Table 2: Measures to minimize the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on business activities

	Feedback	
	Votes	Ratio (%)
Focusing on exploiting the domestic market	33	66
Ensuring the health and safety of employees	36	72
Reducing salary of employees	6	12
Laying off employees	28	56
Saving water and energy	20	40
Others	6	12

(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

From the information in Table 2, it is not difficult to see that the majority of restaurants focus on ensuring the health and safety of their employees, considered the core force of each business. There were 36/129 votes for this measure, which is the highest number of votes in total. In addition, businesses also shifted to focus strongly on the domestic market, with 33/129 votes (focusing on the domestic tourist market is considered the most effective solution at the moment). After a period of economic freeze, tourists will probably have a high demand for travel. While international tourism has not been able to resume operations, the domestic tourism market should be promoted in this golden time, to gradually overcome the decline in the number of visitors and improve the predicament of tourism businesses. The third most chosen solution is to lay off employees, with 28 out of 129 votes (to relieve economic pressure, businesses have laid off employees for a limited time or indefinitely). In addition, some restaurants have applied saving modes for electricity, water, and energy to limit spending as much as possible during this crisis. Restaurants also apply other measures such as rotating shifts for employees, reducing working hours; serving a menu with limited dishes. Some restaurants in the tourist garden are flexible in selling new hybrid flowers to increase revenue.

Table 3: Measures to restore business activities

	Feedback	
	Votes	Ratio (%)
Discounts	19	38
Promotions	26	52
Promoting advertising and marketing	31	52
Building customer trust	42	84
Others	2	4

(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

Running promotions, discounts with attractive incentives is always a way to help businesses increase sales and brand image to customers in the shortest time. Therefore, many restaurants use this effective solution. According to Table 3, there are 19/120 respondents who choose to discount services, 26/120 choose promotions that are diverse in form and attractive gifts for customers. Some large businesses in Can Tho have run promotions from 20% to 40% for tourists such as Muong Thanh Luxury, Ninh Kieu Riverside, Dong Ha Fortuneland,... Besides, communication is also promoted by business leaders, with 31/120 votes, showing that they pay more attention to creating the image of the business through fanpage, social networking sites. Nowadays, social networking sites can spread information extremely fast, therefore they need to be paid attention to, as a successful media campaign will bring in a lot of customers. A solution that is considered the most important during the Covid-19 pandemic, with most of the votes (42/120), is to create the trust of customers. Although the epidemic has temporarily subsided during this period, tourists are still very apprehensive and confused. Therefore, creating a sense of security for visitors is a matter of great concern in the operation and management. A safe destination will definitely be the first choice of tourists during this time. In addition, restaurants also register to participate in the tourism stimulus program with "huge" discounts, to decorate, and reinforce the landscape to attract tourists.

3.3. Human Resources

The Covid-19 epidemic paralyzed the tourism industry, causing empty restaurants, precarious income, that establishments and restaurant owners are forced to reduce the number of employees or lay off staffs, reduce their working hours, rotate shifts, or reduce wages. Survey data show that the majority of restaurant employees are laid off from 20%-50%. The number of employees of restaurants and establishments that have been laid off is 1 person at least, and 25 people at most. This shows that the impact of the epidemic has put many workers in a difficult situation, especially employees working in the service industry. During the social distancing period, restaurants are closed and employees can only return to their hometown, and find it very difficult to find another job if they are not called back to work in restaurants after reopening. The general situation decreases the demand for restaurant workers because the current number of customers is insignificant. Some restaurants and establishments still guarantee the

benefits of employees when leaving work, and support employees when closing the restaurant. In addition, some staff members have quit jobs because of unstable works or to avoid the epidemic. Businesses also face erratic leave from work of married employees because they have to take care of young children who are absent from school during the epidemic season. The worry about the epidemic makes employees nervous about traveling and communicating with customers. The above difficulties have led to a state of inactive and inefficient work and disrupted connection between members and departments in the enterprise.

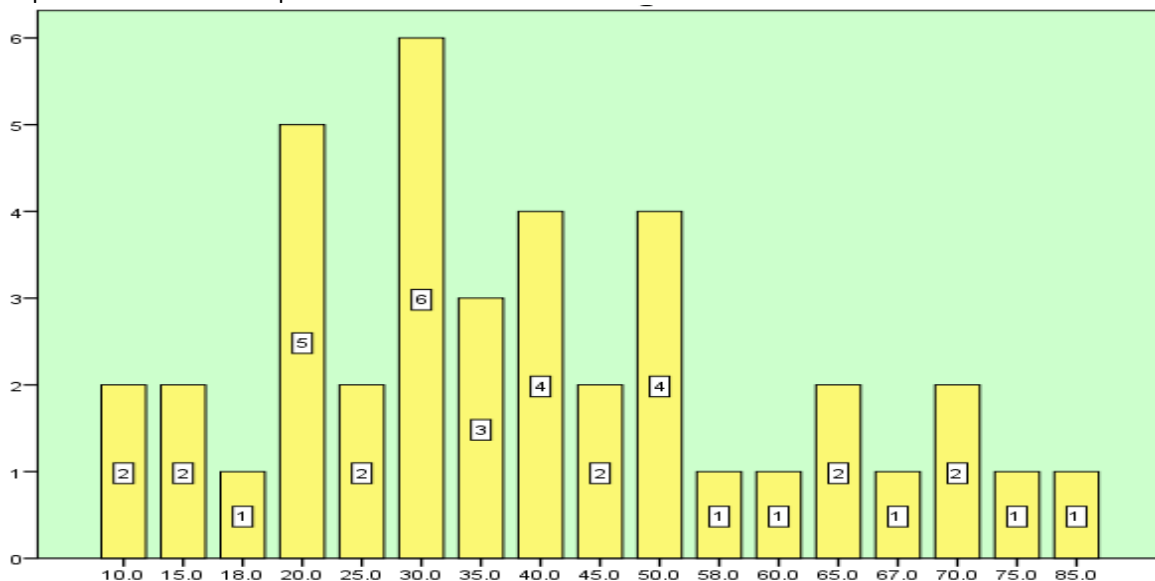


Figure 5: Percentage of employees being laid off
(Source: Actual survey results in Can Tho in 2021, n = 50)

3.4. Solutions of food-service businesses for tourism

3.4.1. Measures to cope with the impact of the Covid-19 epidemic

In order to limit the negative impacts of the Covid-19 epidemic on business operations and quickly restore business activities, the restaurant management has taken a lot of measures to deal with this pandemic. The field surveys in Can Tho obtained a lot of opinions from businesses about the solutions they have been applying for their restaurants. The first thing to mention is the safe prevention of epidemics such as providing hand sanitizer for visitors; checking body temperature before entering the restaurant; requiring employees to always wear masks during working shifts and safely interact with guests; disinfecting all dishes and kitchen utensils; arranging spacious and comfortable seating for the guests. In addition, the restaurant does not accept large groups of guests, strangers of unknown origin and or guests from high-risk areas. The hanging sign reminds both guests and staff to be aware of disease prevention in the restaurant and to keep the landscape and environment clean, which is also applied by many businesses.

3.4.2. Achievements and limitations

Overall, businesses have implemented all the measures for the safety of visitors and employees to ensure that the epidemic situation is in a controllable range, minimizing

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the worst risks and helping visitors feel more secure when traveling and choosing a restaurant. But indeed, these measures only prevent and do not reverse the disease because its incubation period is too long, causing difficulty to detect and isolate infectious cases. A typical example is patient number 470 who traveled to Can Tho. This patient has stayed, ate, and visited many places in Can Tho, and later tested positive for Covid-19. Fortunately, close contacts of this patient were all negative for Covid-19. Another important issue is the consciousness of a part of customers, employees, and establishment owners. Some restaurants at tourist destinations have not been equipped with antiseptic solutions, and have not yet ensured a minimum distance of 1 meter for customers' seats. Visitors are still subjective when entering the shop and not actively disinfecting their hands.

3.5. Recovery solutions for food and beverage businesses for tourism in Can Tho city

Focus on the domestic market

The domestic tourism market in Vietnam has begun to "revive" again as soon as social distancing is eased. This is most clearly shown through the 4th "Tourism Festival - Ninh Kieu Lantern Night, Can Tho" in 2020, organized by the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism of Can Tho city in collaboration with the People's Committee of Ninh Kieu district from November 27th to November 29th in 2020 at Ninh Kieu wharf and Khai Luong canal. This event has achieved the expectation to be an effective stimulus step after the COVID-19 epidemic of the local tourism industry. After passing the peak of the epidemic, the domestic tourism market gradually recovered at first. The most potential customers are business guests and visitors to relatives and friends due to the need to reconnect with work and close relationships. Besides, after the quarantine period, the tourism market approaching the digital environment will have many new factors in a more dynamic and positive orientation. In particular, the international tourist market is predicted to be almost impossible to recover until there is a vaccine to treat COVID-19. Tourists are afraid of the epidemic, so they also avoid traveling far and in long days. In addition, the economic situation declined, workers had to focus on working immediately after the epidemic and international flights will probably only be opened cautiously, which are reasons why tourists will consider carefully when choosing to travel abroad. While the tourists are still skeptical and worried, the domestic tourism market is quite positive because the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic is performed appropriately. These are good signs for us to focus on domestic visitors in order to quickly recover revenue.

Support tourism businesses

According to the plan, in the near future, Can Tho city will allow tourism businesses to participate in economic stimulus programs to reduce prices in order to offer appealing tour packages to attract visitors. At the same time, the city cooperates with businesses in the Mekong Delta to participate in the general stimulus program through a tourism promotion conference at the VITM Hanoi International Tourism Fair and ITE Ho Chi Minh City International Tourism Fair this August and September. Moreover, the Social Policy Bank of Can Tho City will coordinate with relevant departments and agencies to arrange capital sources to facilitate small business households in receiving loans with preferential interest rates as prescribed, in order to support businesses and business households to upgrade equipment and facilities to attract tourists,... In addition, the Department of

Culture, Sports and Tourism coordinated with the Department of Information and Communications in promoting communication activities to promote Can Tho city as a "safe - friendly - quality tourist destination" on the portal of the Provincial People's Committee, the City Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, and on social applications and mass media. The Department implements the criteria of a safe tourist destination in Can Tho city according to the criteria of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism; compiles a list of tourism businesses registered with the criteria of safe tourism businesses; guides businesses to follow the above criteria; as well as coordinate with the Health Department to check the implementation of the business's criteria to provide a safe tourist map for visitors.

In parallel with the above solutions, from May 2020, Can Tho tourism industry will organize professional training courses for tourism human resources on thematic topics about tourism economic development and tourism products; develop agricultural tourism and community tourism; room service and reception skills,... according to the needs of businesses and tourists. At the same time, tourism workers must be equipped with knowledge of disease prevention and control to ensure safety for tourists.

Organize outstanding featured events

The city's tourism industry needs to focus on organizing key events at the city level and national level to attract tourists to Can Tho because a grand event can bring huge benefits to businesses.

Focusing on developing products aimed at young customers such as team building activities and agricultural experience tours,...; or resort tourism products to restore health for elderly tourists.

Review and prepare promotional programs in 2020 in accordance with the new situation. Coordinate with the Department of Tourism of Ho Chi Minh City and 12 provinces of the Mekong Delta to discuss measures to stimulate tourism demand after the epidemic.

Continue epidemic prevention measures

Along with solutions to recover city tourism, Can Tho tourism industry will strictly implement measures to prevent and control the COVID-19 epidemic in order to ensure safety, as well as avoid cross-infection and spread of pathogens to tourists and officials, guides, and staff.

Tourism business establishments must put up instruction boards of safety, prevention, and control of COVID-19 in public areas and in guest bedrooms; measure body temperature for all staff and guests before reentering, provide masks for guests when needed; ensure compliance with regulations on safe distance and the maximum number of people; create a personal health record for each officer, guide, and employee.

Guests must wear a mask unless staying in the bedroom or when eating or drinking at a restaurant; do not share personal belongings; regularly wash hands properly; maintain a

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cooperative attitude towards tourism service establishments; immediately notify the authorities if having symptoms of COVID-19.

4. Conclusion

The food and beverage business plays an important role in the tourism development of each destination because it not only provides food service to tourists but also helps them expand their knowledge and skills in culinary. Moreover, the attractiveness, image, and effectiveness of tourism activities of a destination depend on a large extent on the food and beverage business. Can Tho city has many strengths in the field of food and beverage business such as diverse and attractive dishes, many large-scale restaurants, and skilled service staff. The food and beverage business contributes significantly to the development of Can Tho tourism industry in particular and the service sector in general.

However, during the outbreak and lull of the Covid-19 epidemic, the food and beverage business in Can Tho city was severely affected. As a result, the number of customers decreased by 53%, the restaurant capacity decreased by 52%, and the revenue decreased by 54%. Businesses assess that the epidemic causes a very serious impact on their business operations. In order to limit the spread of disease in the tourism environment as well as minimize the negative impact of the disease on business activities, food-service businesses in Can Tho city have taken many measures in the right orientation, typically advising employees and customers to prevent epidemics, regularly cleaning the restaurant, suspending business operations, ensuring the health and safety of employees, focusing on exploiting the domestic market, dismissing employees, creating the trust of customers, promoting communication and promotion. However, business establishments are currently still unable to fight against the epidemic; and the awareness of epidemic prevention of some establishment owners, workers, and visitors is not really sufficient. Some orientations to revive the food and beverage business in Can Tho City are continuing to focus on exploiting the domestic market, supporting tourism businesses, organizing highlight events, and continuing to prevent epidemics.

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