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Between hope and despair sensegiving and sensemaking in hotel organizations during the COVID-19 crisis

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 crisis has had a severe impact on the hospitality industry and its actors. In a very short period of time, hotels were shut down or lost most of their bookings, faced huge financial losses and went into crisis mode. During the pandemic, the hotel industry has struggled with ever-changing restrictions which have had large effects on the industry as a whole as well as on organizations and individual employees. There are obviously challenges for both leaders and followers in the hospitality industry related to this worldwide crisis. The aim of this paper is to study how leaders practice sensegiving and how employees make sense of the changed conditions during the COVID-19 crisis in hotel organizations. The following research question is asked: How do leaders practice sensegiving and how does the process of sensemaking among employees evolve over time? Data were collected in five hotels in Sweden, Norway and Denmark from March 2020 to April 2021 by conducting in-depth interviews with hotel managers and employees. A sensegiving and sensemaking approach was used as an analytical lens. The findings illustrate a reciprocal process of making sense of the crisis between leaders and followers. Furthermore, the results show that the pandemic blurred boundaries between private and professional life that had effects on both the sensegiving and sensemaking processes. To the author’s knowledge, few studies have focused on the interplay between leaders’ sensegiving practices and followers’ sensemaking process during crisis. Furthermore, few studies have investigated sensegiving at all in the hospitality industry.

1. Introduction

Almost overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, causing a worldwide crisis. The pandemic has severely impacted society with social distancing, community lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, self-imposed or mandatory quarantines, closed borders, travel bans, and varying degrees of business constraints as well as increased need for medical care (Gössling, 2021). Just like all other industries, the pandemic hit the hospitality industry quickly when the world economy suddenly was shut down (Sakurai & Chughtai, 2020). However, the hospitality industry is one of the industries most affected as the pandemic has had severe effects, with many constraints on how they do business, resulting in far-reaching effects such as temporarily closed hotels, mass unemployment in the sector, and fast-changing restrictions from governments (Gössling, 2021). In a very short period of time, hotels lost as much as 99% of their bookings, faced huge financial losses and went into crisis mode. As a result, the hotel industry has had more loss than “all previous crises combined, including the 9/11 terrorism attack, 2008 recession or SARS epidemic” (Le & Phi, 2021, p.1). It is safe to say that the impact of COVID-19 will be long-lasting and change fundamental features of the industry, for example, employee knowledge, flexibility, innovation and not least leadership. Over the years, the hospitality industry has faced many crises, for example, the tsunami in Thailand in 2004, 9/11 in New York 2001 and a range of financial crises. However, these crises have been relatively short term (Seto et al., 2018), and hence differ from the pandemic. That is, the novelty of the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to adapt to it on both macro and micro levels call for more studies (Christianson & Barton, 2020). In a recent call for research, Zenker and Kock (2020) discuss the importance of avoiding the “gapspotting” in tourism research, that is, “simple descriptive single case studies describing the obvious” (p. 1). Instead, they emphasize the need for research that studies the long-term and indirect changes in the industry in order to understand the complexity of the changes in the industry.

The present study focuses on leaders and followers in hotel organizations. In order to understand how they make sense of a long-lasting crisis, the theoretical framework of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) has been used. This theoretical framing is appropriate since it offers exploratory power to analyze how the pandemic has led to a change in
leaders’ and followers’ worldview and how they make sense of it. When people experience events that are surprising or confusing they tend to create a process of making sense of the situation— and try to answer the question of “what’s going on here?” They also try to find a solution or a way forward, i.e., to answer the question of “now what?” (Weick et al., 2005). “Sensemaking” is a socially constructed emotional process where people interact with their situation in a specific context and try to create sense and facilitate action (Christianson, 2015; Weick, 1995). It has become an important subject in the study of organizations (Filatotchev, 2014) as well as leadership practices. Recent research on sensemaking emphasizes the essential role leaders have in influencing or giving sense to employees (Christianson, 2019; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). In leadership theory, leaders’ ability to create meaning is often emphasized as important (Boyd, 1987). This includes being able to take in and process complex information, understand the context and make relevant decisions. Hence, the sensegiving process practiced by leaders shapes the complex processes of their employees, or followers (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Schildt et al., 2020). Followers should not be categorized as passive recipients of meaning, instead, sensegiving and sensemaking are an interplay between leaders and followers that involves resistance, motivation, adoption and alternation (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Sonenshein, 2010a, 2010b). Leadership is essential in the process of sensemaking during crises because a crisis, often defined as an event that is disruptive and creates uncertainty, is interpreted as threatening to the organization (Bundy et al., 2017). It therefore becomes vital for the organization and its members that leaders engage in the process of sensegiving, e.g. by sharing a vision on how to manage a crisis (Mumford et al., 2007; Sonenshein, 2010a, 2010b). There are obviously challenges for both leaders and followers in the hospitality industry related to this worldwide crisis (Zenker, 2020; Baum and Hai, 2020; Jiang and Wen, 2020). Therefore, researchers argue that “we have rarely seen a time when sensemaking was so critical yet so difficult to accomplish” (Christianson & Barton, 2021, p. 572). Recent research also suggests that there is a lack of studies that explore the processes of sensegiving and sensemaking at diverse hierarchical levels such as leaders and followers. Traditionally sensemaking research has focused on “corporate managers and elite first responders” (Christianson & Barton, 2021, p. 4) and left out, from a research standpoint, less “attractive” or powerful actors, such as frontline employees. That is, few researchers have studied several groups of organizational actors and their intertwining (Visentin, 2021; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). To illustrate this, a multiple case study of five hotels in Denmark, Norway and Sweden has been conducted. The study describes the organizational context before and during the pandemic and shows how the pandemic affected the sensemaking processes of leaders and followers. Due to its uniqueness, the pandemic offers a rare opportunity to study the interplay between the process of sensegiving and sensemaking within a context that is as complex, unknown, and quickly changing as the hotel industry (Christianson & Barton, 2021; Visentin et al., 2021). In addition, this pandemic has highlighted conventions and questions about sensemaking theory that have stayed mainly unexamined (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study aims to study how leaders practice sensegiving and how employees make sense of the changed conditions during crisis. The following research question is asked: How do leaders practice sensegiving and how does the process of sensemaking among employees evolve over time?

The present study investigates the leadership practices of sensegiving and the process of sensemaking among employees in the hotel industry. The paper exposes some critical perceptions in relation to major views on leadership and followership in relation to sensegiving. First, the study make a contribution to theory by focusing on the reciprocal process of sensegiving and sensemaking between leaders and followers and hence moves away from and simplification of leadership and followership in relation to sensegiving and sensemaking during crisis and tries to reveal their complex nature empirically (Christianson & Barton, 2021). Second, the study emphasizes the necessity of studying sensegiving and sensemaking over time and hence enhances the process of making sense of e.g. a crisis.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Leadership and followership

Leadership has been studied to a large extent since the 1950s. Interestingly, there has been much less research focusing on the “followers” (Baker, 2007; Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020). Traditionally, researchers have tended to describe leaders as “heroes” or “agents” who singlehandedly form actions, rather than being formed by them (Dvir & Shamir, 2003). For example, Yukl (1999) observes that “most research and theory on leadership has favored a definition of leadership that emphasizes the primary importance of unilateral influence by a single, ‘heroic’ leader” (p. 504). Early leadership theories that included followership tended to describe how to achieve an “effective” form of leadership (Alvesson & Karreman, 2016, p. 432) and have for example associated leadership with “success” or “good” leadership (Alvesson & Karreman, 2016, p. 139). Furthermore, leadership activities in these theories were usually described in terms of a relationship where the leader provides the follower with direction and support. That is, there is a high degree of dependency between the followers and leaders in these theories (House & Shamir, 1993; Yukl, 1999). This approach is also reflected in early theories on followership that also tried to find some practical solutions and constructed ideal models, in order to develop better leadership practices (Viitala, 2014). For example, Kelley (1988) made five classifications of followers based on whether they were passive or alienated and used critical thinking. A more recent stream of research focusing on leadership and followership has emphasized leaders as “transformational,” “visionary” and “charismatic” (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020; Dvir & Shamir, 2003). For example, researchers have emphasized that transformational leaders understand that followers are individuals and have individual needs and capabilities, hence have the need for individual guidance (Bass et al., 2005). Bass et al. (2003) also theorized that transformational leaders have ideal impact on followers. That is, they lead with a “higher purpose” (p. 73) by setting high moral standards for themselves (Avolio & Bass, 1995). By taking this stance, researchers argue that leaders taking the role of transformational leaders have the ability to gain both respect and trust by their followers, and thus become role models (Avolio & Bass, 1995; Blanchard et al., 2009; Gunliffe & Erikson, 2011). This is for example also emphasized by Sashkin (2004) who argues that: “Leaders transform followers. That is, followers are changed from being self-centered individuals to being committed members of a group” (p. 175). However, this view on leaders and followers has also gained criticism. A stream of researchers has criticized these types of theories for being too focused on the leader as “good” and followers as “passive” receivers (cf. Agho, 2009; Novikov, 2016), and for putting too much importance on transformational leadership as “effective leadership” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2016). In more recent research, leadership is no longer recognized as formal hierarchical organizational positions (Talberg, 2010). Instead, researchers have emphasized that there is a need to study the relationship between leaders and followers (Spillane, 2012; Youngs & Evans, 2021, p. 203).

Earlier research often discusses that leaders have particular dispositions such as personality, or values, that guide them in practice. However, this research has been criticized for simplifying and taking for granted that leaders act in a consistent, stable way, which forms the basis of the leadership. However, more recent theories on leadership emphasize that leadership is a process of interplay that involves both leaders and followers who are practicing their daily work in a non-static context (Baker et al., 2014). That is, the relationship of leadership-followership is constructed moment to moment (Fairhurst & Ubl-Bien; 2012). This study joins the stream of leadership research that views leadership and followership as a social construction (Alvesson &
Sveningsson, 2003; Tengblad, 2006) and aims to empirically illustrate and understand “how the things are” (Vitalia, 2014, p. 191). In the present study, the leadership-followership perspective is used to order to increase our understanding of the leadership process of sensegiving and followers’ sensemaking processes. By reversing the lens (Shamir, 2007), that is, not only looking at followers from a leadership perspective but looking at leaders from a follower perspective and moving back and forth between those perspectives, one can generate a deeper understanding of the sensegiving and sensemaking processes. By viewing both leadership and followership as a social construction (Bresnen, 1995), both leaders and followers are viewed in this study as co-producers of the sensemaking process (Carsten et al., 2010; Sparr, 2018). Both leadership and followership have been studied in the context of hospitality. For example, Deale, Schoffstall, and Brown (2016) studied followership among hospitality students, educators, and industry professionals. Schindler (2012) studied the interpretation of followership among middlelevel managers in hospitality and its effects on their leadership. Leaders in the hotel industry were studied by Huertas-Valdivia et al. (2019), who studied the relationship between leadership styles and employees’ potential.

2.2. Sensegiving and sensemaking – a short overview

Sensegiving is defined as the process of trying to understand how individuals’ making of meaning develops (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and is therefore an important part of creating common meaning among organizational members (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Weick, 1995). Hence sensegiving includes the attempts to influence others’ understanding of for example change or crisis when discrepant cues interrupt daily work practices (Weick et al., 2005; Corradi et al., 2010). Therefore, organizations are forced to rearrange their understanding of the changes, to make sense of extremely unusual and stressful situations. The concept of sensemaking describes the processes of constructing meaning in times of uncertainty and change (Weick, 1995). Similarly, sensegiving describes the processes of influencing the sensemaking process of others (Bartunek et al., 1999). Sensegiving is very related to leaders’ “doings,” and is different from sensemaking in numerous ways. Sensegiving is a process where leaders endorse how they interpret the situation or condition with their employees and organizations (Bartunek et al., 1999; Weick, 1995). Consequently, different stakeholder groups can use these interpretations in order to understand and make sense of the changes and use them in their response to them (Fiss & Zajac, 2006). It is therefore an important task for leaders as it can influence employees’ understanding of changing practices (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). As Taylor and Van Every (2000, p. 40) note, “sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard for action.” Weick (1995) suggests seven features of sensemaking, two of which are especially relevant to the present study: First, identity construction, which is an important component in making individual meanings collective ones, for example in the sensegiving process between leaders and followers (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This process involves sorting out important meanings of the change or crisis. Second, response repertoires are explained by Weick (1979) as the organized sets of responses that individuals use when observing their situation for motivations. Weick (1979, p. 32) rephrases Mead, saying that “the response repertoires control noticing,” that is, individuals observe their environment by searching for motivations that fit their “pre-defined programs of action.” Arguably, this is what happens when individuals are trying to make sense of crisis or severe changes in the workplace. The response repertoires are closely related to the bracketing process that illustrates the processing of new information and how individuals find cues that can be used in their sensemaking process, or that is in the process of answering the question of “what is happening and how do I move on?” In this process individuals try to find mechanisms that they can associate with and that make sense to them in the specific situation (Weick, 1979). When related to a crisis or extreme changes, the bracketing process evolves when individuals are trying to identify solutions to either escape the changes or find something that is useful to them. This also makes the bracketing process subjective. Furthermore, Weick (1995) emphasizes that the process of retrospectives is essential when trying to make sense of unknown situations, that is, only when we reflect upon what we have done, after we have done it. Weick (1995, p. 24) argues that “the creation of meaning is an attentional process,” and is about what has already happened.

Earlier research on sensegiving mainly focuses on the efforts leaders make to influence followers (Dundon & Jones, 2000; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). For example, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) studied middle managers’ attempts to shape the meaning and direction of employees during an organizational change. Sparr (2018) studied organizational paradoxes during organizational change and found paradoxical tensions between leaders and followers that lead to defensive reactions. One tendency within this literature is an emphasis on lingual accounts, such as storytelling, narrative, discourse and rhetoric. However, recent research points out that the research field of sensegiving lacks a clear account of context (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014; Weber & Glynn, 2006) although giving and “making sense . . . is not an accomplishment in a vacuum, it is not just context-free networking” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 251). When a situation is new and perplexing, leaders must try to gain information, analyze it, create a picture of the situation, but also share that picture, and update it as new information becomes available (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking during crisis does not differ from sensemaking processes in other unfamiliar situations (Seto et al., 2018). However, what differs is the intensity in the process (Weick, 2010). As argued by earlier research, leaders are critically important in the context of sensemaking during crises. This is because crises involve high levels of insecurity and uncertainty, and hence are perceived as threatening to organizational members (Bundy et al., 2017). Earlier research emphasizes that leaders during crisis are expected to be involved in sensegiving in order to support their followers with a vision on how to overcome a crisis (Backhaus et al., 2021; Mumford et al., 2007; Thiel et al., 2012). Both leaders and followers are likely to struggle to interpret the new situation and hence are involved in each other’s sensegiving process.

2.3. Crisis management in tourism and hospitality

There are many definitions of crisis. To mention one, Dutton (1986) defines crisis as highly ambiguous events where causes and effects are unknown. There is a large body of literature on crisis management that focuses on both the planning of crisis management (Speakman & Sharpley, 2012) and models that suggest how crisis can be managed in the most effective way (Le & Phi, 2021; Pollard & Hoto, 2006). In the large research field of crisis management, there is one stream of research that focuses on proactive approaches, which involves making plans for action and determining risks (Sahin et al., 2015). Earlier research suggests that this approach involves actions that precede the crisis itself. For example, these actions may include vulnerability analysis and strategic preparation plans (Stafford et al., 2002). Researchers have also emphasized that by being prepared and having a crisis scenario, managers may have the possibility of averting the crisis, and eventually learn from it (Alkandari & Al-Lozi, 2017; Vasičkova, 2019). Another stream of crisis management research focuses on reactive processes that can help the organization out of the crisis (Sahin et al., 2015; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019), by defining the nature of the crisis, followed by management actions. In the context of tourism, Santana (2004, p. 318) argues that a “crisis is not an event. It is a process that develops in its own logic.” However, researchers in the context of tourism have also discussed that crisis management in tourism and hospitality research has been given insufficient attention (Pförr & Hosie, 2008; Wu & Wong, 2021). To mention some exceptions, Tew et al. (2008) studied crisis management
in relation to the SARS outbreak and emphasized that hospitality organizations should develop and implement a crisis plan into their business strategy. The plan should include specific actions, e.g., how to adapt to the crisis and communicate with stakeholders. Wang and Wu (2018) studied hotel managers and states that crisis planning efforts may be affected by cultural diversity. For example, Australian hotel managers emphasized the need for tangible benefits and intra-organizational control while Chinese managers tended to focus on immaterial benefits which include organizational reputation. The mid-crisis or response management has been given much more focus. To mention some, Campo et al. (2014) studied innovation in hospitality during economic crisis. The results of the study indicate that the tendency of a hotel to innovate does not contribute directly to its short-term performance, but instead has positive effects in the long term. Chen (2011) studied the responses from hotels in Taiwan during four crises: the earthquake on September 21, 1999 (the 9/21 earthquake), the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the US (the 9/11 terrorist attacks) and the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) on April 22, 2003.

However, with the outbreak of COVID-19, a large number of papers have been published in a short period of time (Chen et al., 2020; Wut & Wong, 2021). Burhan et al. (2021) studied small hotel businesses in Pakistan and the management practices that influence the responses to the crisis. The study reveals that government support, friendly relationships with stakeholders, and formal planning are crucial factors that shaped the immediate adaption of operational activities in response to COVID-19. The relationship between the hotel management and employees is described as psychological contracts. The qualitative study uncovers the content of psychological contracts during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The study identified relevant dimensions of employer responsibilities such as safety assurance and of employee duties such as personal protection. Ghaderi et al. (2021) studied the crisis preparedness among Malaysian hotel managers. The qualitative study uncovers that the hotel managers were not well prepared to manage crisis and that the organizational culture has a great influence on the crisis preparation. This was for example revealed in the long-term adaptation, where the managers were less motivated to be “learning organizations” and were unwilling to change their organizational structures and practices in crisis preparation.

3. Research methodology

The present study draws from a qualitative, interpretive case study of leaders and followers in five hotel organizations, to explore sensegiving and sensemaking in relation to leadership and followership during crisis. The method chosen was guided by the study’s social constructivism stance. By doing so, the present study focuses on the process of sensegiving and sensemaking between leaders and followers and the communicative construction of their interactions. Consequently, for the purpose of such research, qualitative methods are appropriate since they examine individuals’ past and ongoing life experiences, such as crisis and change, and the meanings they attribute to such stories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Yin, 2003). From this perspective, the leader is “the manager of meaning” (Clifton, 2014, p. 100), because he or she has the most legitimacy in “the process of constructing organizational reality and so authors the organization and those who inhabit it” (p. 100). Hence, the research method chosen for this study relies on narratives as that has been described as “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1) and furthermore, “the preferred sensemaking currency” (Boje, 1991, p. 106). Clifton (2014) argues that the choice of using a narrative lens to investigate sensemaking is because it can reveal who is involved in the process and the meanings they construct in the sensegiving/sensemaking process. Hence, it can reveal the plurality of meaning in an organizational context and different stories told by different groups in the organization, ranging from the most powerful individuals to less powerful individuals and their process of making sense of e.g. change or crisis (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Clifton, 2014). Narratives are temporal, relational and situated (Caine et al., 2017, pp. 215–216), because they bring forth palpable insights, incidents or moments within the “complex landscapes of self, others, time, and institutional structures” (Estefan et al., 2016, p. 23). This also calls for the researcher to be reflective in the data collection and repeatedly reconsider their intentions as well as those of the respondents (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2018). The choice of method indicates that objective truths are not what the author seeks in the present study. Instead, the present study aspires to understand the subjective meanings presented in the respondents’ narratives. Hence, the study follows an interpretative method tradition that is influenced by the respondents and the researchers. Therefore, the findings of the present study should not be removed from their context or generalized (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2018).

3.1. Research setting

In early 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic broke out worldwide at a fast pace. The crisis immediately struck the hospitality industry hard. As a consequence, hotel employees, both leaders and followers, were heavily affected by the pandemic. The present empirical study took place in five hotels in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The hotels have 80–200 employees each. In this study, the focus is on leaders such as hotel managers and CEOs as well as followers, such as receptionists, coordinators, and other service-focused occupations and their experiences and reactions, that is sensemaking processes, to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2. Data collection

Studies based on narrative data collection can be based on different forms, e.g., interviews, storytelling and other narrative data sources (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this study, stories captured in interviews have been the main data source. Storytelling is regarded as one of the main tools of data collection in narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2006). Furthermore, the choice of data also relates to the ontological and epistemological assumptions in the present study, that is, that people can be viewed as storytellers. Therefore the study also takes a social constructionist stance (McMahon, 2017b). The constructivist view of self-narratives and “self-telling of life narratives” (Bruner, 2004, p. 694) echoes that “stories do not happen in the real world, but are rather constructed in people’s heads” (Bruner, 2004, p. 691).

The data was collected in five hotel organizations in Norway, Sweden and Denmark from March 2020 to April 2021. The data was collected through individual, in-depth interviews with hotel managers (referred to as leaders) and employees (referred to as followers). In total 34 interviews were conducted, including 12 follow-up interviews. Ten leaders and 12 followers were interviewed. The respondents were chosen due to their tasks in the organizations, such as hotel managers and frontline employees. Due to the pandemic, the number of employees available was limited and the selection of respondents was hence dependent on the availability of respondents. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 min and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. By doing interviews, the researcher was able to get close to the subjective interpretations of the COVID-19 crisis in relation to their work context, made by the respondents. A great emphasis was put on the respondents’ storytelling and therefore the interviews were semi-structured and had room for rich and detailed descriptions. This aligns with Clandinin’s (2006) methodology for narrative studies where the narratives are viewed as a phenomenon under investigation as well as an analytical tool. Storytelling compels people to move within, between and beyond personal and professional boundaries. This dissolution of boundaries can be liberating, because it provokes storytellers to seek distinct ways of communicating personal meaning to others (Estefan et al., 2016). Narratives of lived experience characteristically carry idiosyncratic truths and subjective interpretations of reality. These interpretive insights are grounded in the qualitative tradition of seeking emic conceptions of
truth and reality (Chen, 2011; Estefan et al., 2016). An interview protocol was developed to stimulate narratives on sensegiving and sensemaking. It involved themes such as the COVID-19 crisis, work situations, professional vs. private life, etc. These themes involved questions such as: “Can you describe how you reacted to the COVID-19 crisis?”; “How has the crisis changed your work life?”; and “What do you think will happen next?” The purpose of each theme of questions was that the respondents would be encouraged to describe and give examples based on their own life experiences. Additionally, workplace observations were conducted (24 h) where the researcher participated e.g. at formal meetings as well as coffee breaks and lunch breaks attended by both managers and employees. By participating in these situations, the researcher got an insight into the work environment, which gave a better understanding of the respondents’ narratives (Løfland & Løfland, 2006).

3.3. Analysis

The data was analyzed based on a narrative interpretive method which focuses on giving the respondents’ stories a voice (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). The data was analyzed by a spiral process where the focus was on understanding the meanings of the parts and the whole (Cole & Avison, 2007). The first step in the analytical process was to read the transcripts repeatedly and create an understanding of the respondents’ narratives. The transcribed data was coded with initial codes of recurrent themes such as “fear,” “lack of trust,” “insecurity,” “changed work” and “actions” to mention a few. During the analysis patterns of sensegiving and sensemaking were identified as well as the reciprocal process of making sense of the crisis. Furthermore, the sensemaking actions or practices from the leaders were identified. One quote from a leader illustrates this: “It is the worst thing I have experienced in my entire professional life, but I must hold on to the thought that we will survive it and that we will grow stronger when it is all over and that is what I tell my employees.” Similarly the sensemaking process of the followers was uncovered. One quote from a follower illustrates this: “I found it hard to know what to do. I mean first of all, we have the virus, what if I get it and get very ill, what will happen to my family? And then I started thinking about my work, I mean I need to work and make money. What happens if I lose my job?” Thereafter, the analysis continued with an iterative process of re-reading the themes and refining codes (Cole & Avison, 2003). The final analytical phase, analysis, was guided by a set of concepts from the concept of “sensemaking” and “sensegiving” (Weick, 1995). Concepts such as “identity construction” and “response repertoires” (Weick, 1995) were used. By coding the respondents’ retrospective narratives related to their experiences of the pandemic, both cycles of acting as well as identity construction could be identified. Furthermore, the longitudinal data, including the follow-up interviews, gave insights concerning how the respondents interpreted the crisis over time, what they emphasized, and how their narratives and sensemaking were established over time. In addition, their responses were uncovered and also gave insights on how they interpreted their new “normal.” Collecting data from both leaders and followers gave the opportunity to find a more complex sensemaking process within the organization and uncover how the respondents were involved in each other’s sensemaking processes. Throughout the process of analyzing the empirical data, the process of sensegiving from the leaders’ perspective and the process of sensemaking from the followers’ perspective emerged, which was summarized in three categories: (1) Uncertainty as the new normal; (2) Taking action; and (3) Blurred boundaries. These will be further developed in the following section.

4. Findings

The COVID-19 crisis constituted an underlying narrative within the leaders’ and followers’ narratives. Hence, COVID-19 and the hospitality industry created the context within which emotion was shared (by the leaders) and interpreted and made sense of (by the followers).

4.1. Uncertainty as the new normal

When the pandemic spread worldwide during February 2020, the hotel industry was affected almost overnight. Many hotels were completely shut down, while others were open with very few guests. This had effects on employees’ work situation and many employees were put on leave. The leaders and followers discuss that the COVID-19 pandemic was “a nightmare” and a “shock” and that the feeling of not having control was extremely stressful. Both the leaders and the followers reflect upon earlier crises such as the SARS outbreak or economic crises. They all stress that the COVID-19 crisis is far more complex and uncertain and will be a game changer, both for the hospitality industry and their private lives. The managers emphasize that it is extremely difficult to be prepared for a crisis like the pandemic and hence argue that their crisis management plans are not very sufficient and therefore they also interpret it as extremely difficult to respond and take actions. One of the leaders says: “I came to work one day and I just did not know what to say. What do you say in a time like this? So, I had to be honest with my employees and said I don’t know any more than you and I don’t know where this is going to end.” Many followers discuss the panic involved in the fear of losing their income and the lack of information from their employers. One of the followers says: “I remember thinking that this is it, I have to sell the house and find a new job. But where am I supposed to work? I have been in hospitality my entire life and there are no jobs anywhere.” The leaders emphasize that they needed to make both rational and emotional actions in order to make sense of the disturbance and uncertainty. In the beginning of the crisis these actions included reducing the hotel staff, rearranging organizational routines and taking safety precautions. Furthermore, all ten leaders describe that their main job was to keep their followers calm, but not lead them on into false hopes. One of the leaders says: “I think we all saw where it was going, and it was terrible. At the same time, we never lost hope. I decided immediately that I wanted to be very frank with my employees and not try to make things look better than they are. I mean we had no hotel guests so they could do the math, right?” Furthermore, the data illustrates that the leaders had to create sensemaking on several organizational levels. The leaders describe a high degree of concern among the hotel owners and board and express that they were “stuck in the middle” between the owners and the employees, that both wanted to have answers, or at least make sense of the situation. Not least, the leaders tried to make sense of the situation for themselves, in order to be able to formulate a sense of the crisis to their employees. Interestingly the followers reflect upon the leaders’ actions and behaviors. One of them says: “She (the manager) stood up there every morning and talked to us. She was very calm and wanted us to be calm too and to have faith. Then, when the meeting was over, she became a very different person, she yelled at people, became angry for nothing and treated people like children. To be honest, she totally lost it.” Interestingly, the followers also emphasized that they needed to create sense about the new situation for the hotel’s guests. The employees became the target for the frustration experienced by the hotel guests who often questioned the rules and regulations. One of the employees says: “I felt as if people [the hotel guests] just let go of their own responsibilities when they came to us [the hotel]. I mean we had barriers and signs everywhere, the hotel looked like a crime scene in a television show. Still, people did not understand that they had to keep a 2-m distance and they were angry when they had to wait outside because the line to the reception was so long that they could not stand in the lobby. They yelled at us and were really rude and what could I say? I didn’t make up the rules!” Hence, the findings illustrates multiple processes of sensegiving and sensemaking.

4.2. Taking action

The narratives reveal that the leaders were terrified of becoming “passive” and they all felt a need to take action. One of the leader says: “We started to make a plan right away, even if we knew that it was going
to change 30 times. We just needed to make a plan and to feel that we were on top of things, or at least tried to be.” The actions taken by the leaders involved creating a new organization adapted to the crisis and low demand. For the employees that meant that they had to run the business with very few staff members. This called for new structures and work practices for all employees, as well as the leaders. “We are usually about 300 employees, but we sent home 150 of them so you can imagine how it changed everything for us. I told everyone that from this day on, everyone works wherever they are needed, regardless of positions or education. Some people were a bit upset about it but it was necessary.” However, the need to “feel” active and avoid passivity also created frustration among the followers. One of them says: “There are new rules and routines every day. We (the staff) don’t have the time to learn the new rules before they are replaced by something new. One day our restaurant is open, the next day it is not. So when the guests ask me about it I get insecure and need to ask somebody else. It is extremely frustrating and you kind of lose motivation.” Furthermore, the need to “keep moving” and take actions created an organizational fatigue over time. The leaders and followers both describe an everyday struggle to maintain the regular business and at the same time come up with new ways of creating revenues and adjusting to the hotel guests’ changed needs. The narrative data illustrates an ever-changing work environment with new directions and safety regulations. These changes had impact on the work conditions for all respondents. For example, the leaders describe that they had to create extremely flexible organizations that put a lot of pressure on the followers and a lot of emphasis was put on giving sense to these challenges. One of the leaders says: “In order to survive I had to try to create an organization that can meet a sudden change in bookings and visitors. If the government decides to ease the restrictions, we can count on that the guests will arrive. I can’t stand here with no staff, and therefore everyone must understand that they need to be flexible and to work even when they have planned to be on vacation.” The followers also reflected upon the demands for being flexible and most of them made sense of this by arguing that it is necessary in order for the hotels to survive and their “sacrifice is for the greater good.” Interestingly over time, the actions taken decreased and the followers express a sense of fatigue among their leaders. One of the followers says: “At first, we had meetings every day, we talked and talked and changed and changed. Now, we are back to having meetings maybe once a month. Our boss is kind of invisible in between, we mostly get information from each other and everyone just feels extremely tired, almost too tired to care.”

4.3. Blurred boundaries

With the changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic the leaders and followers experienced heavy disruptions in both their private and professional lives. The experiences of coping and making sense of the changes induced by the pandemic have arguably been very emotional for the respondents and they express that their behavior towards colleagues and leaders has changed. The leaders describe a very strained situation where they were forced to lay off or fire many colleagues. One of the leaders says: “Last week I sent home 70 people. Some of them I have been working with for five years. It was a terrible day. One of the worst days in my career as a manager. I could not sleep that night and I kept thinking that I wished that I could have done something to help them. What about their mortgages, their families and their finances? It’s a part of my job that I hate.” Similarly, one of the leaders described the blurred boundaries between professional and private matters by saying: “One of my employees came to me and said I have 70 Euros left in my bank account. I thought, should I lend him money or what? How do I know how to act in these situations? I just wanted to cry, can you imagine, 70 Euros …” Furthermore, the followers described that they made sense of the exhausting demands their managers put on them, e.g. working hours and flexibility, by comforting themselves with the fact that at least they had a job. One of the followers illustrates this by saying: “My boss came to me and asked if I could take vacation half the days. That means that I work until lunch and then go home and have vacation. The thing is that my wife also works at the hotel and she had vacation in the mornings … so we never saw each other… Of course it’s absurd and I would not have agreed to it if it wasn’t for COVID.” However, the narratives also reveal frustrations both among leaders and followers related to the sensemaking of the need for flexibility. One of the leaders says: “It feels like some people just like to be put on leave a little too much, they just got used to being at home and getting paid for it. So, when I call and ask if they can work and they say that they want to take vacation, I feel like, okay, you do not have to come back here.” The narratives also expose that some followers made sense of the chaotic situation by making it a possibility to stand out and make themselves useful or even irreplaceable. One of the followers explains: “I felt like okay, this is it. It’s time to show how useful I am to this organization and that they need me. I have worked like a maniac and I am completely exhausted but I have my eyes on the prize, I want to keep my job and prove that I am worthy of it.” The followers also reflected on the actions taken by the leaders and what agenda they had. One of them says: “Of course she [the manager] is thinking about her own legacy and her career. She has built this place, made it a hit with higher and higher revenues and profits every year. For her it’s personal, she’s fighting because she does not want to lose. Who can blame her, this is her entire life.” The quotes above illustrate that the sensegiving process as well as the sensemaking process are very intertwined with personal and professional agendas and that they are not always easy or even possible to separate for either the leaders or followers.

5. Discussion

In the present paper, several processes and activities related to sensegiving and sensemaking activities by top leaders and followers (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien; 2012) have been identified. The focus has been on how leaders and followers construct new meaning on how to relate to the changes and insecurities induced by the COVID-19 crisis. The results are discussed in the following section.

5.1. Leaders’ sensegiving processes

The findings in the present study illustrate that the leaders in the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis focused on identifying the actual crisis (Burhan et al., 2012) and responding to it by taking actions. As stated in earlier research on crisis management, the managers were poorly prepared on strategies for managing the crisis (cf. Le & Phi, 2021). However, the uniqueness of the pandemic crisis also affected their actions. The pandemic created crisis on so many levels including safety, economic and emotionally, that the leaders found it difficult to be prepared. On an operational level, this included taking safety precautions, reorganizing routines and putting staff on leave. This also included action related to creating a feeling of coherence among the employees (Weick, 1995) and to gather the group of followers. Furthermore, the narrative data illustrates a need to create cues in sensemaking by taking action (Weick, 1995). However, the COVID-19 pandemic heavily disrupted how leaders and followers could take actions (Christianson & Barton, 2021). In the case of the hospitality industry, their hands were tied due to travel restrictions. They had no opportunity to make drastic changes in their core service, a bed to sleep in, and suffered from it. During these gatherings, the leaders focused on making individual meanings collective ones, (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). By putting words on the crisis, and the situation the organizations were facing, they initiated the sensegiving process among their employees. An important part of this sensegiving process was to “create” a meaning of the reality the organization was facing, and thus make an effort to avoid different interpretations (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), but also to create a shared organizational identity (Weick, 1995). This process involved sorting out important meanings of the crisis. For example, the
leaders took actions in order to focus on the group identity (Weick, 1995) and the sense of working together in order to overcome and survive the crisis. Hence, this part of the sensemaking process involved a high degree of creating cues, in the form of important meanings, such as team spirit, which is also a part of the process of response repertoires (Weick, 1995). For example, the leaders broke down organizational goals on a daily basis, and focused on what the organization actually achieved, not what they could not do or the revenues they lost due to the crisis. Over time, the leaders went back to these goals, and used them to encourage their employees but also to build a storytelling about their management about the crisis. This included retrospectives (Weick, 2010), which was important in the sensemaking process as it helped create meaning and a sense of belonging (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Furthermore, the findings illustrate that there was a strong desire among the leaders to create a distinct organizational identity linked to the organizational responses (Weick, 1979). Interestingly, the sensegiving activities initiated by the managers that were addressed towards the employees also created sensemaking processes for other organization groups such as the board and owners.

5.2. Followers’ sensemaking processes

The present study illustrates that the followers were clear recipients of managers’ sensemaking processes of the COVID-19 crisis. That is, the followers were not involved in the decision-making processes but had to adapt to them and perform accordingly. Evidently, the leaders’ actions towards creating sensemaking were often ambiguous and inconsistent which had consequences for the followers’ sensemaking processes. First, the ambiguity of new information and changing regulations did not create an overall organizational identity (Weick, 1995); instead it increased the feeling of belonging to different teams and departments. Second, the inconsistency in the leaders’ efforts to give sense, resulted in more conflicting interpretations among the leaders and followers. One reason for this was also that the leaders had different behaviors e.g. on and off stage which created a lack of trust and a failure to answer the question of “why do we do this?” (Weick, 1995) together as a team. Over time, this resulted in that many employees ended up selecting interpretations (Weick, 1995) that made sense to them and were most viable to them and hence many of them also did not have the need for information from their leaders as the pandemic proceeded.

Furthermore, the study points out that many of the followers made sense of the crisis either by taking action or being passive (Agho, 2009). The followers that took actions did so by proving to themselves and others that they were an asset to the organization. By creating a bracketing process (Weick, 1995) that included the interpretations of new information and constant changes, many followers created a process of making sense of the situation and found cues in order to find a way to move on (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This meant that the followers sorted out mechanisms, such as loyalty and the possibility of proving one’s usefulness to the organization, that made sense to them in the specific situation (Weick, 1979). Likewise, the passive followers made sense of the situation by solely adapting to the total lack of control and not knowing where the crisis would take them or the organization. Unlike the leaders, the followers felt an imminent worry about being laid off and losing their job. This obviously had implications for their creation of cues and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). In addition, the followers that were laid off during short periods had difficulties finding the motivation of creating sense of the crisis. Unlike other organizational changes or crises, the pandemic affected individuals both in their private and professional lives. Hence, followers gained information on a daily basis both when working and when not. Due to the novel experiences of the pandemic, the information was often fragmented and sometimes contradictory (Christianson, 2021). This called for individual interpretations and sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and also made it more difficult to create an inter-organizational process of sensemaking. The pandemic truly did challenge all aspects of people’s lives and demanded attention in many contexts such as home and work (Christianson, 2021). Hence, individuals experienced difficulties in determining what cues (Weick, 1995) to focus on and in what order. The study illustrates that multiple cues (Christianson, 2019) are effortful and created attentional as well as organizational fatigue both at a leader and follower level (Christianson, 2021). Finally, the present study sheds light on the specific context in which the leaders and followers are working (Maitlis & Christianson, 2013; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014), the hotel industry, and therefore also uncovers the specific challenges the industry and its stakeholders have faced.

6. Conclusions

The present study emphasizes that the COVID-19 pandemic is an event of unprecedented magnitude, duration, and reach which illuminates the importance and opportunity to study sensemaking in ways that pay more attention to more complex environments, such as the hospitality and tourism industry, over time (Christianson & Barton, 2020). By conducting a qualitative study in five hotel organizations in three countries, the study illustrates how hotel managers (leaders) and employees (followers) developed actions and processes to make sense of the COVID-19 crisis. The study sheds light on the fact that the hotel managers were not well equipped for this type of crisis and were responsive in their actions. The study hence makes a theoretical contribution by studying how sensemaking in a complex and challenging context such as the hotel industry evolves and is shaped over time.

Furthermore, the study makes a theoretical contribution by shedding light on the intertwined sensemaking process of both leaders and followers. Research on sensegiving and sensemaking highlights important roles for both leaders and followers in organizations (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Previous research on sensegiving and sensemaking has either focused on how leaders create sensegiving or the process of sensemaking among followers (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2013). By studying the interplay of the process of giving and making sense, the present study extends previous literature on sensegiving, and organizational crisis and change (Christianson, 2021). The study extends earlier research by reversing the lens (Shamir, 2007) and emphasizing the interplay between leaders and followers at different hierarchical positions in organizations (Baker et al., 2014) and suggests that both these groups are searching for cues and signals from each other to understand, cope and make sense of the crisis (Weick, 1995). The study takes on a more critical stance by involving more organizational actors in the analysis and hence enhances our understanding of where sensemaking takes place in organizations and uncovers the role actors rarely studied in sensemaking research have in the complex process of sensemaking over time during crisis (Weick, 2010). The study uncovers how both groups repeatedly engaged in cycles of interpretations, responses and adjustment actions (Weick, 1995) in order to make sense of the new situation.

Furthermore, this research adds to prior work on sensegiving and sensemaking during crisis between leaders and followers by providing analyses of the actual “doing” of sensegiving and sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Due to the pervasiveness and many stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was a long, ongoing process that involved lots of information to interpret, reflect upon (Weick, 2010) and take action on. The leaders’ sensegiving actions were affected by the persistent uncertainty induced by the pandemic and that their attempts to create sensegiving among their followers were shadowed by ambiguity and inconsistencies. Furthermore, by viewing the relationship between leaders and followers as a social construction (Bresnen, 1995), the present study sheds light on these actors as co-producers of sensegiving and sensemaking (Carsten et al., 2010; Sparr, 2018). Hence, the process of sensemaking is emphasized as part of both leaders and followers’ daily work practices (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). The study also makes a theoretical contribution by looking beyond solely the leaders’ ability to influence followers e.g. through convincing narratives (Dunford &
Finally, earlier studies on sensegiving and sensemaking tend to view these processes as “standardized operating procedure” (Kärreman et al., 2006), therefore less is known about how the processes of sensegiving and sensemaking evolve over time. Traditionally sensemaking research has emphasized that individuals act their way into knowing and learning to make sense of new conditions. However, the pandemic has heavily disrupted individuals’ as well as organizations’ ability to act which has also had consequences for the sensemaking processes. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted so many levels of our lives and created blurred boundaries between the private and professional lives, creating insecurity and sometimes fears that affected leaders’ sensegiving actions as well as followers’ sensemaking processes. Hence the study sheds light on the fact that sensemaking is an ongoing, socially constructed process (Weick, 1995).

6.1. Practical implications

The present study emphasizes the importance of hotel managers’ role in creating a sensegiving process during a crisis or organizational change and the necessity of having a strategic crisis plan. Furthermore, the study highlights the employees’ role in this process and how they sense of it. The results can guide managers on how to facilitate sensegiving among their employees. Furthermore, the results also shed light on the importance of viewing the COVID-19 crisis as a persistent, ongoing crisis that needs to be managed over a long period of time that most likely will create a need for organizations to adapt quickly and be flexible. The fast-changing regulations and conditions put a lot of pressure on hotel organizations and their employees to be very flexible and to understand the need to make sense of the uncertainty over time. Also, due to the fact that the pandemic has had an impact on so many levels of our lives, it is important for leaders to acknowledge that people meet many factors both in their work and their private lives that affect their sensemaking processes.

6.2. Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations. First, it has a small sample of data and therefore future research could collect data in more organizations. Furthermore, the process of sensemaking evolves over time and the present study has collected data only during one year. Future research could therefore focus on studying sensemaking processes over a longer period of time in order to understand how the interplay between leaders and followers develops over time.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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K. Hogberg

Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management 49 (2021) 460–468

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