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Knowledge transfer within MNC hotel subsidiaries: An absorptive capacity perspective

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the process of transferring knowledge from multinational-corporation (MNC) hotels to their subsidiaries to advance company strategies. In particular, it examines critical factors that can forestall knowledge transfer through the lens of absorptive capacity. This study revisits the four dimensions of absorptive capacity (acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation) to understand the challenges involved in transferring knowledge from MNCs to subsidiaries. We argue that several fundamental aspects of the process influence absorptive capacity, potentially interfering with knowledge transfer. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four different types of actors (expatriate and local managers, a regional executive, and a policymaker). The results reveal that competencies (e.g. education) regulate the process of acquiring knowledge, while insufficient experience (technical skills and expertise) and historical background (explicitly related to the consequences of colonisation, including a local inferiority complex) affect the assimilation and transformation of knowledge. Next, limited opportunities, notably a reluctance to hire local managers and local managers with uneven qualifications, affect transformation and exploitation. Finally, cultural discord (e.g. recognising cultural differences, such as ethnic groups, religion, and customs) and communication barriers (e.g. verbal and non-verbal communications) influence the acquisition, assimilation, and transformation process, which, in the end, arbitrate knowledge exploitation. The findings suggest that the country's historical experience has considerable ramifications for absorptive capacity.

1. Introduction

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A multinational corporation's (MNC) headquarters (HQ) and subsidiaries have recognised the importance of knowledge transfer as a source of competitive advantage (Lee et al., 2020; Raziq et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). The successful transfer of knowledge between an MNC HQ and its subsidiaries is pivotal because it provides subsidiaries with the expertise they need to execute strategies effectively (Lee et al., 2020; Minbaeva et al., 2018). Many MNC HQs resort to expatriation to transfer knowledge effectively to their subsidiaries (Froese et al., 2021; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Stoermer et al., 2021). However, this strategy is not always feasible, due to several factors, including higher costs and unwillingness to relocate. Thus, the success of the knowledge transfer process between the MNC HQ and subsidiaries depends on both sides being willing to share capacities (Kong et al., 2018; Zulkifly et al., 2020). This capacity sharing is essential, as it allows companies to develop

various forms of innovation and strategic flexibility (Miroshnychenko et al., 2021).

Traditionally, foreign managers or expatriates have been used to help international organisations facilitate the transfer of knowledge from an MNC hotel HQ to its subsidiaries (Cheong et al., 2019). However, the employment of foreign managers can forestall knowledge transfer for various reasons, including the perception of unfairness among local talent (Situmorang & Japutra, 2019). We argue that local talent development is essential for ensuring that knowledge is transferred effectively between MNC hotels and their subsidiaries in the long run (Liu, 2018). It is crucial to have qualified local managers who meet MNC hotel standards to minimise the skills gap between the MNC hotel HQ and its subsidiaries and execute strategies effectively. However, there is a problem, in that local human talent is often perceived to lack the capacity to absorb sufficient new knowledge or skills for the knowledge transfer to succeed (Limaj & Bemroider, 2019). Subsidiaries

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need skills and expertise to meet global company standards when operating their businesses. It is therefore critical to explore the factors that deter local talent from absorbing the knowledge transferred by MNC hotel HQs.

Although Zahra and George (2002) proposed the four components of absorptive capacity and combined these into two subsets with different value potentials, Todorova and Durisin (2007) refined Zahra and George's conceptualisation based on the original article (i.e. Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Todorova and Durisin's reconceptualised model of absorptive capacity thus ensures impartiality. Using Todorova and Durisin's (2007) absorptive-capacity model, we have investigated the knowledge-transfer process between MNC hotels and their subsidiaries, focusing in particular on the limitations of local human resources (Lim & Ok, 2021; Woo & Mun, 2020). The present study focuses on absorptive capacity because previous studies have shown its importance in fostering innovation and competitive advantage in the hospitality-and-tourism industry (Binder, 2020; Cruz-Ros et al., 2021; Garcia-Almeida & Bolivar-Cruz, 2020; Kale et al., 2018; Liu, 2018; Moon et al., 2021; Ponce-Espinosa et al., 2020; Thomas & Wood, 2014, 2015). However, few studies have investigated how MNC hotels acknowledge the challenges involved in transferring knowledge through the four dimensions of absorptive capacity (acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploration) (Yang & Driffield, 2022), especially in developing countries. For example, several studies of absorptive capacity in tourism businesses have focused exclusively on company performance (Kale et al., 2018), innovation (Binder, 2018; Cruz-Ros et al., 2018; Lim & Ok, 2021; Ponce-Espinosa et al., 2020; Thomas & Wood, 2014, 2015), cultural learning networks (Liu, 2018), stakeholder partnerships (Czernek, 2014) and knowledge replication (Garcia-Almeida & Bolivar-Cruz, 2020; Moon et al., 2021). The competitive advantage of MNC hotels depends not only on the quality of external knowledge (Thomas & Wood, 2014) but also on knowledge transfer among stakeholders (Czernek, 2014). This study aims to discover which critical factors hinder the knowledge-transfer process within MNC hotel subsidiaries through the lens of absorptive capacity. Our research draws on absorptive-capacity theory (Todorova & Durisin, 2007), with local human resources as the underlying factor, to explain the constraints of knowledge transfer. We argue that several factors (e.g. cultural discord, limited competencies, limited opportunities, and historical background) inhibit the effectiveness of the knowledge transfer from the MNC hotel HQ to its subsidiaries. The present study contributes to the literature on absorptive capacity in hospitality and tourism (e.g. Liu, 2018; Moon et al., 2021; Thomas & Wood, 2015). While most research on absorptive capacity in the tourism business has focused on the external competitive edge (Thomas & Wood, 2014) and stakeholders (e.g. employees, owners, and SMEs) (Czernek, 2014), our study investigates the factors that inhibit the knowledge-transfer process in MNC hotel subsidiaries. It also extends the absorptive-capacity model by revealing how these factors can inhibit local talent from absorbing the knowledge transferred from the MNC HQ to subsidiaries (Limaj & Bemroider, 2019). In addition, it explores the importance of local-talent capabilities (e.g. employee skills and competencies) in ensuring a smooth knowledge transfer, especially in developing countries (Yang & Driffield, 2022). This study shows that subsidiaries have limitations related to management skills and expertise that can prevent them from meeting global company standards when running their operations.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the literature on absorptive-capacity models. It then examines the role of absorptive capacity in hospitality and tourism among MNCs, before exploring the importance of knowledge transfer in MNC subsidiaries. Next, the methods, findings, and discussions are presented. The paper concludes with theoretical contributions, implications for MNC, and study limitations.

2. Literature review

2.1. The absorptive-capacity models

Various studies have argued that the individual absorptive capabilities of an organisation determine its ability to achieve adequate MNC absorptive capacity (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Patterson & Ambrosini, 2015; Todorova & Durisin, 2007; Zahra & George, 2002). According to Cohen and Levinthal (1990) absorptive capacities occur at the individual level, based on prior knowledge within the organisation; this combination of prior knowledge and absorptive capacity can encourage MNC employees to innovate. The authors note that absorptive capacities begin with a recognition of the value of new knowledge, before assimilating that knowledge and applying it to commercial ends. Similarly, Zahra and George (2002) have argued that absorptive capacity can provide MNCs with a competitive advantage and use their resources fully throughout their subsidiary operations.

Our research framework is based on the model described by Todorova and Durisin (2007) (see Fig. 1). This framework was developed by reshaping the model proposed by Zahra and George (2002), who reintroduced the concept of 'recognising the value' from Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) model, arguing that 'knowledge transformation' and 'assimilation' alternate. They also proposed a 'power relationship' contingency factor, influencing value recognition and knowledge exploitation.

In later studies, Patterson and Ambrosini (2015) specifically configured the absorptive-capacity model for intellectual property rights in the biopharmaceutical R&D sector. Although they followed Todorova and Durisin's (2007) model, their version has one difference, in that 'assimilation' can occur before 'acquisition'. Alternatively, 'assimilation' can come between 'recognising value' and 'acquisition'. Their findings were constructed because intellectual property rights could take a long time to obtain.

We argue that, although the absorptive-capacity model can depict the transfer of knowledge between the HQ and its subsidiaries, it is insufficient, especially in developing countries, such as Indonesia. An MNC Hotel HQ is able to accelerate its business development into subsidiaries because it can provide both current and prior knowledge. For example, when an MNC hotel HQ acquires a subsidiary business, managers must first ensure that the subsidiary has the capacity for acquisition (e.g. to sustain the hotel business). Second, all MNC hotel subsidiaries must be able to assimilate (e.g. comprehend) new knowledge. Third, hotel subsidiaries must be able to transform learning from newly acquired (e.g. MNC HQ-provided) into existing knowledge (e.g. a subsidiary's tourism resources) to create a new 'Indonesian' hospitality-and-tourism context. Lastly, MNC subsidiaries must exploit this knowledge to innovate new ways of turning (hotel-business) knowledge into innovation (Thomas & Wood, 2015).

Similarly, Liu (2018) confirms that absorptive capacity is a crucial moderator in the process of ensuring an effective knowledge transfer. Liu's study was conducted via 462 surveys of SME owners and managers in Taiwan. He argued that cognitive (e.g. education-based) and learning capabilities (e.g. creative skills) could influence the process of transmitting knowledge from the sender to the receiver. Absorptive capacity enables SMEs to become competitive by absorbing external information and transferring knowledge. Regardless of the size of tourism businesses (i.e. MNCs or SMEs), hotel companies with insufficient absorptive capacity find it difficult to effectively identify external information and knowledge. This study therefore identifies and discusses the factors that hinder the absorptive capacity of MNCs and their subsidiaries in hospitality-and-tourism contexts.

2.2. The role of absorptive capacity in hospitality and tourism

Various hospitality-and-tourism studies have highlighted the way in which absorptive capacity fosters effective knowledge transfer (Gurlek,

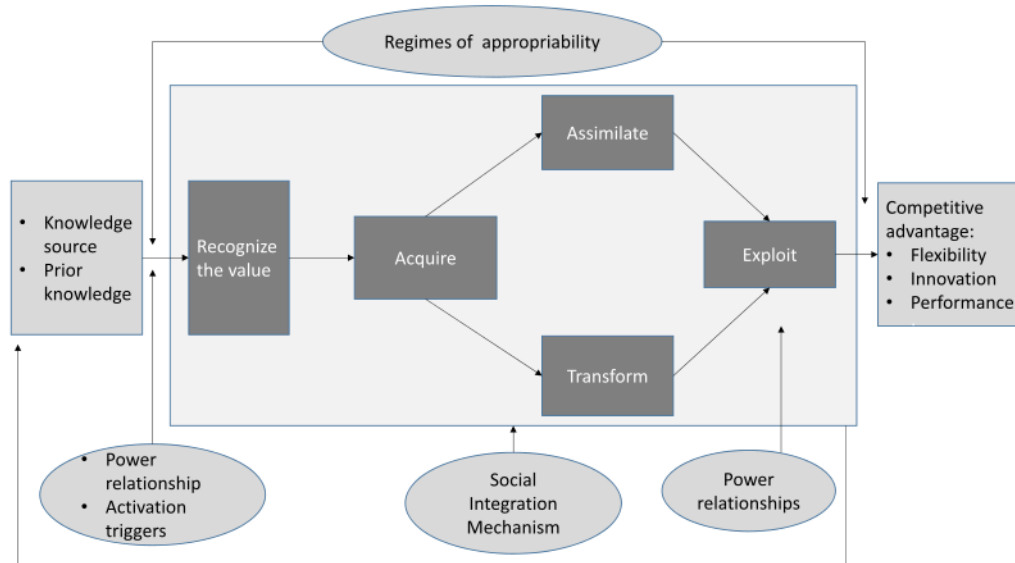


Fig. 1. Fig. 1 The absorptive capacity model.
Source: Todorova and Durisin (2007)

2020; Lim & Ok, 2021; Liu, 2018). According to Gurlek (2020), who conducted 462 quantitative surveys among senior hotel managers in Turkey, human intellectual capital increased absorptive knowledge capacity within MNC hotels, which could start the process by strengthening their employee-recruitment process and hiring employees whose capabilities fit the MNC requirements. MNCs are expected to provide comprehensive training, prepare thorough appraisals, and implement fair rewards for employees, all of which can boost employee absorptive capacity.

Similarly, Lim and Ok (2021) have investigated the connection between empowering leadership and the extent to which hospitality organisations are capable of acquiring and applying their knowledge. Their research was conducted using a third-party online survey platform, which collected 287 surveys from Europe (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) and the US. They posit that employee absorptive capacity can enhance innovative traits within MNCs, making them more competitive in the hotel industry (Ponce-Espinosa et al., 2020). Thus, the literature confirms that absorptive capacity is essential in hospitality businesses (accommodation, restaurants, and other services) and crucial for creating tourism innovation, especially in the tourism-destination business area (Font et al., 2021).

Absorptive capacity allows tourism firms to recognise, acquire, assimilate, and apply new and valuable information gleaned from their business relationships to create unique, improved products and services (Thomas & Wood, 2014). Garcia-Villaverde et al. (2021) conducted 238 surveys of multiple businesses (museums, hotels, restaurants, and travel agents) in the World Heritage Cities of Peru. They investigated how internal and external factors (e.g. technological dynamism and absorptive capacity) affect the relational antecedents of innovativeness in tourism-destination companies. They argue that absorptive capacity is crucial for increasing innovativeness within the tourism industry. The present study therefore examines the critical factors that impede the transfer of knowledge in developing countries, from the perspective of absorptive capacity.

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2.3. The importance of knowledge transfers for MNC subsidiaries

30 Knowledge transfer is an organisational knowledge exchange

between a source and a recipient unit (Szulanski, 1996). The transfer of experience and expertise between MNC hotels and their subsidiaries includes the transfer of management skills and competencies and is thus extremely important (Minbaeva et al., 2003, 2018). According to Minbaeva et al. (2003), multinational-corporation headquarters are well-known for developing and disseminating skills and knowledge in one location. According to Minbaeva et al. (2018), the dissemination capacity of an MNC HQ is a vital prerequisite for the transfer of knowledge and skills to its subsidiaries. These authors surveyed 199 MNC subsidiaries in South Korea and discovered that the process could fail if subsidiaries lacked sufficient capacity to absorb the transferred knowledge. Similarly, such transfers of knowledge depend on the HQ's dissemination capacity (i.e. ability to explain, willingness to share knowledge, and use of different media channels) (Minbaeva, 2007). The present study therefore highlights the extent to which subsidiaries are vulnerable to management limitations, including a lack of expertise, education, or technical skills.

The transfer of skills from an MNC hotel HQ to its subsidiaries generally involves an expatriation programme. Various researchers have observed that expatriate managers in MNC subsidiaries facilitate coordination and control (Cerdin & Le Pargneux, 2009; Cheong et al., 2019). According to Cerdin and Le Pargneux (2009), expatriate managers must disseminate their expertise to ensure that MNC subsidiaries can make full use of the knowledge and skills provided by the MNC HQ. Cheong et al. (2019) examined the relationship between subsidiary knowledge flow and the purpose of expatriate assignments. Their study included 156 subsidiaries from the manufacturing and service industries in Malaysia and Singapore, and found that expatriate managers would transfer home-country expertise and capabilities to MNC subsidiaries and ensure that local management subsidiaries were able to adopt these standards. Building on these results, local-subsi-dary capabilities must be further explored to ensure knowledge-transfer effectiveness. We therefore argue that MNC hotel subsidiaries must acquire qualified local managers with the same standards required by the MNC hotel HQ (Ando, 2021; Ando & Endo, 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and approach

The present study has adopted an interpretivism paradigm known to help researchers make sense of subjective and socially constructed meanings. This interpretative paradigm is adopted, not to obtain truth, but to provide reasonable interpretations based on a range of experiences and perspectives (Vickers, 2010). The present study aims to understand how knowledge transfer shapes a hotel's managerial experience, perceptions, and meanings, known as 'verstehen' (Bryman, 2012). This epistemology has been selected to enable us to understand and explore the experiences of expatriate and local managers transferring knowledge effectively within MNC hotels in Jakarta, Indonesia.

This study has applied 'why' and 'how' questions to obtain deeper insights from the investigation (Robinson et al., 2014). Specifically, it applies an inductive, qualitative approach with a case study to derive detailed interpretations of the experiences of hotel managers regarding the transfer of knowledge within the MNC hotel industry in Indonesia (Creswell, 2014). This study also uses a case-study approach, which offers unique insights into the specific context of various situations (e.g. insufficient educational capabilities and limited human talent) by using a range of different techniques, including observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis (Robson, 2011).

3.2. Data collection and participants

We selected Jakarta, Indonesia, as the context of this study for three main reasons. First, Jakarta is considered one of the main tourist attractions in the country for business and leisure because it provides a wide range of offerings that cover multiple necessities (e.g. work or holiday purposes). Second, as Indonesia's capital city, Jakarta has an infrastructure that is superior to that of any other city and acts as a central hub, working to connect and communicate with the smaller MNC subsidiaries. Third, the main offices of most MNC hotel subsidiaries are located in Jakarta.

This study gathered primary data from interviews with managers (expatriates and locals), a regional executive, and a policymaker. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed the researchers to gain more insights from participants' improvisational probing. However, enquiries are still predetermined in accordance with the corridor of research questions (Silverman, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the topic in depth by asking participants to explain or elaborate on their responses (Silverman, 2010). Observations and document analyses were used as supplementary evidence during the data-collection process. For example, notes were collected to record the participants' reactions to specific topics during the interviews.

The researchers made further observations while sitting in several locations, including hotel offices, restaurants, and lobbies. We observed the managers interacting with other managers, employees, and hotel guests. Documents for additional analyses were collected from secondary data sources (e.g. International Labor Organisation reports and the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics). Document and observation notes were analysed using the NVivo note feature and placed under relevant themes. For example, based on the observation notes, the researchers discovered that one participant 'bang [ed on] the table' when expressing feelings about his/her dealings with multicultural issues in Indonesia. This action was coded as 'multiple ethnic groups' as one subcategory. Such raw data must be processed or compiled from the written materials. In this way, the present study focuses on the experiences and insights of multiple actors familiar with the transfer of knowledge from MNC hotel HQs to their subsidiaries.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the best candidates to answer the research questions (Ames et al., 2019). According to Brinkman and Kvale (2015), participant selection should be based on qualifications, competencies, and industry expertise. We therefore selected

expatriate and local senior managers and a regional executive to represent the MNC hotel industry in Indonesia. We also gathered insights from a policymaker to represent regulators' points of view. Due to their engagement in developing the hotel industry in Jakarta, Indonesia, these four types of actors were able to share insights on various issues, ranging from macro to micro. Researchers sent invitations directly to the email addresses of participants who were acquainted with the researchers' professional network. Initially, approximately 25 participants responded to this invitation. Several then cancelled their appointments for various reasons. Some could not find the time and others could not obtain permission because their hotels wanted to protect their privacy.

Ultimately, 19 participants responded to the invitation and participated in the study (Appendix A). Of these, three were expatriate managers, one was a policymaker, one was a regional executive, and the rest were local managers. Our study recognised that all participants interpreted talent development differently, due to their own social, personal, or cultural differences. All participant names were anonymised throughout the study. The interview questions were also tailored for the four different types of actors to solicit the most appropriate responses to the research questions and objectives (Silverman, 2010). The questions were designed to probe the participants' experiences of handling the issues and situations within their organisations, based on a review of the research literature (see Appendix B). For example, their experiences of developing managerial talent provided better insights into the transfer of knowledge from MNC HQ to subsidiaries. Follow-up questions explored topics raised during the interviews, probing the participant's knowledge-sharing experiences within MNC subsidiaries. Together, the primary and follow-up questions were designed to take 2 h to complete. The interviews took approximately 2.5–3.5 h to finish.

Each discussion began with an introduction and opportunity to build rapport. The participants were asked semi-formal questions about their roles within their organisations. The interviews then continued with enquiries about previous career experiences, career development, and cultural and commercial ventures in Jakarta and other countries. They finished with an appreciation of the interviewees' time and participation; a follow-up interview was confirmed via email or a direct call. Most interviews were conducted at the participants' offices or in a convenient place, such as a hotel restaurant outlet or nearby coffee shop. The discussions were primarily held in Indonesian, except in the case of expatriates who used English. During the data-collection process, we found that a range of knowledge-transfer issues had been identified in 15 interviews and had reached saturation, with no new topics arising from 19 interviews (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2017).

3.3. Data analysis

NVivo software was used to manage the data and as subject to repetition (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Yousaf, 2021). The interviews were conducted in Indonesian for the locals and English for the expatriates. The interviews in Indonesia were translated and transcribed to English. The initial data coding began by establishing patterns, achieving familiarisation, and (re)ordering and recognising thematic matrices from the interview transcriptions (Robson, 2011). During the first stage, the data were reduced during the interview-transcription process. Next, we identified emergent topics and themes, related to each manager's experience of engaging in knowledge transfer within the MNC hotel industry (Gibson & Brown, 2009). During the second stage, we identified essential issues and themes from the transcripts, in line with the research questions, and were able to generate large numbers of conceptual solution nodes. During the third stage, the conceptual solution nodes were separated into categories and subcategories, which helped to avoid any rigid classifications that might produce different meanings, from the researchers' perspective (Spradley, 1980). In the next stage, thematic similarities were identified and examined closely; and the coded information was ordered by associating conceptual nodes

with key themes. The transcripts were rechecked many times to ensure accuracy and consistency in the coding process. The themes were revisited to check for the presence of concurring nodes; these were later merged to form a single node. The nodes were then refined, based on conceptual closeness, ensuring that the nodes within particular themes and categories were related to each other but still mutually exclusive. In the final stage, the data were interpreted by reconfirming the findings after revisiting the relevant literature for a more theoretically informed analysis. This iterative examination of the formation of themes, categories, and subcategories was further refined to identify the theoretical connection and develop links with the theory and research purpose.

In this research context, subcategories emerged through the identification of essential issues or topics in the transcript associated with knowledge transfer and absorptive capacity in the hotel industry. For example, limited education, lack of quality education, knowledge skills, transferring management skills, cultural training, Western and Asian cultures, multiple ethnic groups, insufficient global standards, overseas opportunities, lack of recognition, distinctive tourism characteristics, and colonisation heritage were considered subcategories. From these subcategories, we introduced competencies to show the hierarchy how to recognise the relationship between limited education, lack of quality education, and the supply of and demand for lecturers. Likewise, categories such as knowledge transfer were introduced to recognise the relationship between knowledge skills, transferring management skills, formal hospitality-and-tourism education, and the quality of tourism lecturers. Later, thematic similarities were identified and examined closely from other categories and subcategories. The transcripts were read repeatedly, searching for patterns and relationships from the list of categories to create a short list of themes that reflected the research question and relevant literature. These themes were then refined, based on closeness, creating an association between themes and categories. For example, competencies and knowledge transfer were elevated to become the 'limited competencies' theme. Knowledge transfer is included in this theme because limited competencies occur when the knowledge-transfer process is inadequate and local talent have insufficient competencies. For this reason, 'limited competencies' are more suited to being a theme than a category.

The formation themes were limited competencies, cultural discord, limited opportunities, and historical background. Several categories were identified: competencies, knowledge transfer, cross-cultural exchange, insufficient experience, lack of opportunity, and historical legacy. The subcategories were 'limited education', 'knowledge skills', 'transferring management skills', 'multiple ethnic groups', 'international exposure', 'the glass ceiling for a specific management position', 'MNC hesitation about hiring locals for senior positions', and 'colonisation heritage.' (see Table 1).

Finally, we shared the transcripts with participants, a process that produced additional insights, which enriched the meaning and interpretation of their responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Although participants admitted that they were too busy to take part and others could not make contact or reply, several provided additional comments via personal email. These shared unique insights and different interpretations, where were noted. For example, they agreed on the transcripts and pointed out some crucial aspects, including local-manager talent development and the current situation in tourism-industry-related educational institutions in Indonesia. The quality and trustworthiness of this study were ensured using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was achieved by triangulating many interview results, observation and document analyses. Transferability was ensured by constantly comparing the outcomes with individual circumstances and then summarising the industrial context to provide industry databases that could be used in many industrial-research contexts. Dependability was achieved by storing all recordings, notes, and other documentation for assessment and auditing purposes. Confirmability was achieved by ensuring that the authors did not allow

their personal values or theoretical mindsets to affect the complete objectivity of the research.

4. Finding

These findings are based on Todorova and Durisin's (2007) absorptive-capacity framework. In particular, we illustrate knowledge-transfer challenges and supporting factors to ensure the alignment of corporate strategies between MNC hotels and their subsidiaries. We discuss these findings in relation to absorptive-capacity theory, based on the following factors in the subsections below.

4.1. Limited competencies

Our findings suggest a scarcity of education and competencies for hotels and tourism in Indonesia, hindering the process of transferring knowledge to local talent. The participants discussed the suitability of the hospitality-and-tourism education provided to local managers, businesses, and even international hotel operators. During interview meetings, the 19 participants frequently mentioned competencies. Most participants were aware that developing nations faced many conditional factors as they worked to prepare human talent for globalisation. One participant (JK, male, local, and a regional executive) expressed concern about insufficient competency development in Indonesia. He wondered whether something was missing from the knowledge transfer between the MNC HQ and its subsidiaries or whether there was simply a lack of high-quality education in this Indonesian sector.

The exchange and interchange of knowledge, expertise, and experience enables the effective transfer of management skills and competencies between an MNC HQ and its subsidiaries. Formal education has an impact on these management skills and competencies. Participant #7 (TD, female, policymaker) explained how Indonesia approached formal education, and the need for extensive research, qualified lecturers, and social responsibility. She believed that much restructuring was needed to advance hospitality-and-tourism education, and felt that the national curriculum should be aligned with the content and aims of hospitality and tourism. Currently, many potential students receive misguided interpretations of the discipline as 'glamorous' or related to 'fun'. She acknowledged that, although more developed countries viewed hospitality-and-tourism knowledge as a science, the discipline was still regarded as an 'easy' and superficial major in Indonesia. She also commented on the government's policy on educational provision:

'In Indonesia, there is a huge gap between the demand for and the supply of lecturers. For instance, we have millions of hospitality-and-tourism students but only thousands of lecturers in this discipline. This comparison has to come to the government's attention because finding a qualified hospitality lecturer in a big city is challenging. So you can imagine how impossible it is in a smaller city or the suburbs' (TD, female, policymaker).

According to six participants (ZT, ST, UT, ZB, HH, QF), Jakarta has the best facilities, benefits, and opportunities to attract lecturers from the suburbs to work in the capital city. Despite these advantages, Jakarta still struggles to find high-quality and well-qualified lecturers.

On the other hand, one manager observed that the insufficient educational standards did not prevent local talent from gaining the right qualifications at the three-year diploma level.

'I could see more Indonesians coming forward with better qualifications in their hospitality-and-tourism degree background. But what matters now is that their (and our) competency has to be on the same level as the degree from other countries' (MD, male, local manager).

This perception may refer to local Indonesians seeking to work in the industry, who believe that a diploma degree in hospitality and tourism is enough.

4.2. Cultural discord

The findings revealed issues of cultural understanding, which were frequently mentioned during data collection. One manager (CT, male, expatriate manager) described his experience of the cultural differences between Western and Asian cultures, positing that cultural differences between local and foreign managers could be learned through pre-departure training. Most managers mentioned the importance of pre-departure training for expatriates and local managers in ensuring a smooth transfer of skills during development. One manager (HC, male, local manager) explained how crucial the chemistry of incoming expatriates is during the transition to a new property.

'I still remember working as HR director in this (international hotel brand). How much preparation we had to do for both sides (the previous property being worked at and the next property being joined) should prepare the expatriate and local managers for a transition.' (HC, male, local manager)

By contrast, another manager (CT, male, expatriate manager) believed that most Europeans and Americans who had never visited Asia before would be shocked when they arrived in Indonesia. They would face considerable differences, related to the ethnic groups, religions, customs, education, and knowledge of the local population.

These findings also suggest the importance of using both Bahasa Indonesia and English in the working environment. Both languages are essential for daily communications between expatriates and local managers. Local people who speak various indigenous languages generally use 'Bahasa Indonesia' to communicate with each other and 'English' to communicate with foreigners in the working environment. Local managers expressed the expectation that expatriates should be able to use 'Bahasa Indonesia' as a communication tool to converse with colleagues. Another set of findings showed that such communication barriers also affected networking among managers at work. One manager (ZE, male, local manager) observed that the networking gap was due to language barriers.

4.3. Limited opportunities

Our findings discussed several MNC hotel expectations that their standards would be met by their subsidiaries' workforce. It is understood that any shortcomings (e.g. areas of improvement, rare capabilities and limited skills) will lead to restricted opportunities within the local talent pool. When discussing this particular theme, some participants (BT, FS, EK, FK, TD, MQ, QF) provided similar insights into a few aspects of local talent that had to be improved to ensure maximum absorbance of knowledge transfer and a full understanding of global standards. First, the participants believed that analytical thinking and problem-solving were the primary skills needed to invent a hotel package or product. Outside-the-box creative ideas were highly desired. A deficiency in this area would require more than educational background, personal characteristics, cross-cultural dimensions, and international job exposure.

Second, another participant identified issues related to 'cost' and 'budget/expenses'. Understandably, only certain management levels are permitted to engage with hotel finances. However, there is inevitable exposure, even for first-level entry managers, who may be expected to analyse figures on revenue or expense reports. In reality, several participants (DS, JK, UT, MQ) concurred that it was rare for managers to have such capabilities. In the worst-case scenario, some managers might ignore financial tasks as not being 'part' of the job. Third, local managers identified specialised skills as a limited skillset. These 'niche' skills appear to be technical skills required by employees at particular department levels. For example, one manager (DS, male, expatriate manager) used an example from a hotel kitchen. He believed there were many different ways of making mushroom soup; his taste (expatriate) and that of other people (local) would always be different. These skills

are thus unique in each context.

Another manager (MQ, female, local manager) specifically mentioned the role of international exposure in helping managers improve their analytical thinking and problem-solving capacities.

'Our local manager should be given more overseas opportunities to develop their professional portfolio. On the other hand, I also knew that this might be costly for the MNC HQ to provide the budget for this program.' (MQ, female, local manager).

Another manager (BTP, male, local manager) believed that the MNC was hesitant about hiring local managers to specific senior positions in the hotel, due to their limited international exposure. To overcome this problem, he remembered that his MNC hotel was one of the properties that engaged in international employee transfers during his time. They (MNC hotels) send many potential employees to the same global hotel brand overseas to expose them to international experiences for a couple of years. After they completed their assignments, the employees were welcomed back to Indonesia as leaders. Such initiatives can help to develop local managers and the hotel company. He was hopeful that many MNC hotels would implement such practices because it would be difficult for local managers to self-initiate such training experiences.

In another set of themes, one manager (MD, male, local manager) shared the success story of an MNC hotel that was very well known for employing many local employees as managers. He noted that this particular MNC hotel could increase the industry sustainability of its subsidiaries by deploying more local managers. This best-practice approach could be explored further to determine whether it could give other MNC hotels an advantage by deploying more local managers. The participant urged other MNC hotels to follow a similar approach, not just because it would advance employee professional development but also to enhance the growth of MNC hotels.

4.4. Historical background

The findings suggest that an effective recruitment programme can produce an effective knowledge transfer, resulting in a smooth MNC-hotel global strategy. The vulnerability of local managers (e.g. multiple cultures, limited education, inadequate skills and knowledge) shows that hospitality-and-tourism stakeholders may be able to realise these distinctive internal and external advantages. Several participants (HC, TD, UT, EK, QF, JK, DS, ZE) agreed that human-relations skills were crucial to the hospitality industry. Although all participants identified Indonesian hospitality culture as an excellent asset (e.g. multiple cultures), local managers tended to bear grudges when they had a difference of opinions or disagreement with another manager. Both expatriate and local managers noted that local managers had much to learn from expatriates to understand how to rise above such disagreements or arguments for the good of the hotel. Multiple participants (ZB, FK, HH, MD, ZE, DS) shared that Indonesia's wealth of cultures could be turned into an asset. They described wealthy-tourism resources as beautiful destinations, popular local culture, and an unlimited gastronomy culture. Indonesian food and culture offered a wide variety of experiences that could only enrich the uniqueness of Indonesian hospitality. Several local managers (ZT, HC, ST, BTP, ZB, EK, FK, MD, ZE, QF) often imagined that Indonesia's history, and specifically colonisation, underpinned the inferiority complex that local managers experienced when working with foreign managers. For example, a local manager stated:

'Sometimes I had an epiphany about our time being colonised for so long because we have an inferiority complex towards foreign managers and guests' (BTP, male, local manager).

Many local managers (ZT, HC, ST, BTP, ZB, EK, FK, MD, ZE, QF) also believed that this strength and uniqueness could also be described as a vulnerability. The colonisation factor, which was mentioned several times in the interviews, may explain why local managers feel they are seen as second-best during leadership selection in the hotel industry. In

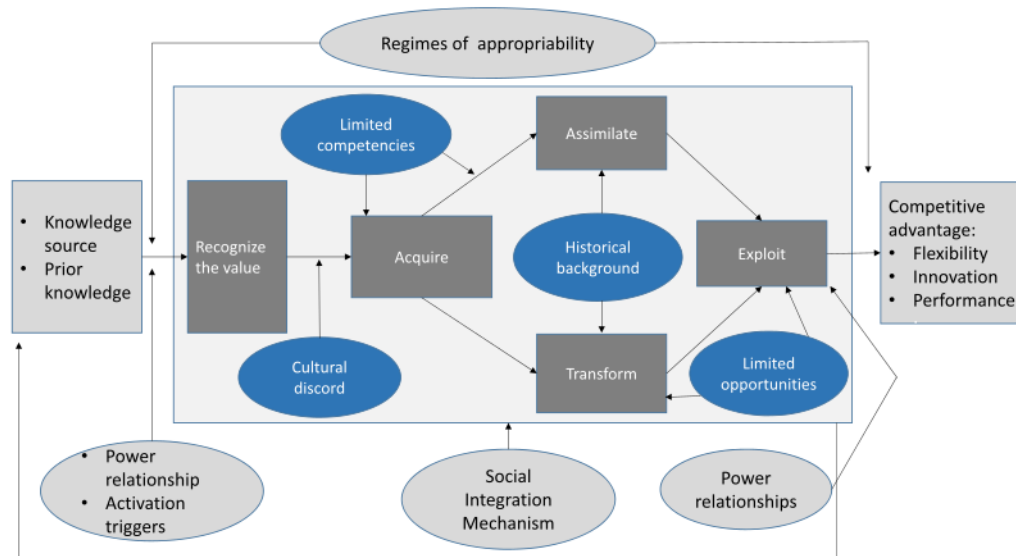


Fig. 2. Fig. 2 The new configuration of the absorptive capacity model. Source: Adapted from Todorova and Durisin (2007)

conjunction, an inferiority complex makes local talent feel second-rate, creating a strong perception that they cannot become leaders.

5. Discussion

This study explores the contextual factors, particularly in relation to local talent, that influence transfer of knowledge from MNC HQs to their subsidiaries, based on Todorova and Durisin's (2007) absorptive-capacity framework. Instead of focusing on resources, the study investigates the limitations of subsidiaries, which lead them to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit external knowledge from the MNC HQ (Zahra & George, 2002; Todorova & Durisin, 2007; Patterson & Ambrosini, 2015).

Fig. 2 provides an overview of the way in which these contextual factors (i.e. limited competencies, cultural discord, limited opportunities, and historical background) act as challenges, as well as supporting elements, to ensure that global strategies are implemented quickly and smoothly within MNC hotel subsidiaries. We have found that these factors are pivotal in influencing the process of knowledge transfer to subsidiaries in the hospitality-and-tourism industries (Liu et al., 2020).

5.1. Recognising the value of acquisition

Acquisition is an important first step, required before any new knowledge from MNC HQs can be assimilated, transformed, or exploited by subsidiaries (Todorova & Durisin, 2007). However, we argue that MNC HQs and their subsidiaries tend to underestimate the guidance that new-knowledge acquisition must be fostered from both sides to allow for effective absorption (Todorova & Durisin, 2007). MNC subsidiaries need to acknowledge the value of acquiring new knowledge before the next process (i.e. assimilation) can materialise. Similarly, to foster recognition, MNC HQs should acknowledge the cognitive structures of the individuals within their subsidiaries.

The study participants mentioned some challenges related to the cognitive structures of local human resources, such as limited competencies and insufficient education (Font et al., 2021; Lim & Ok, 2021; Ponce-Espinosa et al., 2020). With an adequate level of education, subsidiaries can demonstrate their willingness and ability to judge the

potential of new knowledge (Czemek, 2014). However, inadequate competencies and education restrict an individual's judgement. Individuals may believe that new knowledge has no connection with their current jobs. As a result, they may perceive little value in acquiring new knowledge. For instance, there is new knowledge about the use of human-resource application systems, such as SAP Concur. However, individuals outside the human-resources department may not see the value of application systems. This example shows that education plays a crucial role in whether subsidiaries recognise the value of new knowledge or not (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). It is therefore critical for management to establish education (e.g. education literacy, international experience, and learning new ideas) through several activities (e.g. training and regular employee rotation).

Apart from education and competencies, 'cultural discord' appears to impede the recognition of the value of new knowledge. Here, 'cultural discord' refers to an indifferent attitude towards another cultural background (e.g. ethnicities, norms, customs) and ignorance of social behaviour (Zhang et al., 2022). Indonesia has many ethnic groups, each with its own specific culture, which may not be the same as others. Thus, each employee needs to understand the cultures and norms of other ethnic groups because people from different backgrounds may see information or knowledge differently. Each ethnic group teaches a particular way of accepting or understanding information. For example, a manager (whether local and foreign) needs to know when to be pleasant and supportive but also when to 'bang the table' or use the 'Javanese style' (which is to be very polite). They need to know how to balance the genders to get the best out of a team because particular religions or norms view gender differently (e.g. it is understandable that there are more male than female employees in Asia region, especially in Muslim majority countries). In all of these ways, managers must know how to deal with people from multiple cultural backgrounds within their departments.

Managers who lack this capability may find it difficult to introduce new knowledge value to teams in which each individual may have different reactions to accepting the new knowledge (Ahlvik & Bjorkmann, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). This problematic situation can slow the knowledge-transfer process, as managers must acknowledge different conditions when introducing new knowledge. This can delay the urgency with which new knowledge is presented to the group. In addition,

Table 1
Themes, categories and subcategories identified in the study.

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Limited competencies	Competencies	Limited education Lack of quality education Supply of and demand for lecturers
	Knowledge transfer	Knowledge skills Transferring management skills Hospitality-and-tourism formal education Quality of tourism lecturer
Cultural discord	Cross-cultural exchange	Cultural training Pre-departure training Cultural differences Western and Asian cultures
	Blending culture	Multiple ethnic groups Communication ability Indigenous language
	Networking gap	Communication barriers Local language as communication tool The importance of the Bahasa and English languages
Limited opportunities	Ineligible global standard	Local talent development Insufficient global standards Problem-solving skills Analytical thinking
	Insufficient experience	International exposure Overseas opportunities Limited international transfers
	Lack of opportunity	The glass ceiling for a specific management position MNC hesitation about hiring locals for senior positions Lack of recognition
Historical background	Historical legacy	Wealth-tourism resources Distinctive tourism characteristics Historical legacy destinations Indonesian hospitality culture
	Colonisation	Local managers' vulnerability Colonisation heritage Stakeholder leader-selection preferences Inferiority complex

some employees may perceive a manager (or another employee) as ignorant because he or she cannot interpret a practical situation from the vantage point of various customs (i.e. different values and norms may not fit certain cultures). However, this manager saw 'one group' of employees, without categorising them into certain customs or norms. At the same time, employees may be sceptical about where the knowledge is coming; if it is does not come from their own culture, they may be reluctant to accept it. If the manager knows how to coordinate team objectives and understands the rules of the game, members of the team are likely to perform as well as a group.

5.2. Acquisition to assimilation

After acquiring new knowledge, subsidiaries need to assimilate it to ensure that the knowledge transfer runs effectively. Assimilation is an MNC hotel's ability to absorb (i.e. analyse, process, interpret, understand, internalise and classify) new knowledge (Camisón & Forés, 2010). It is critical for subsidiaries to interpret the knowledge received from HQ strategically and to turn it into suitable strategies that fit their own context (Thomas & Wood, 2014, 2015). Before transforming new knowledge into context, subsidiaries must ensure that the assimilation process operates smoothly. For example, they must ensure the complementarity (resources and capability) and compatibility (e.g. organisational cultures) of the new knowledge (Jimenez-Barrionuevo et al., 2011).

Few participants mentioned that successful assimilation could be impacted by the local talent's lack of research ability (e.g. analysing, interpreting, concluding, and implementing), as a basis for solving

strategic problems in MNC subsidiaries (Camisón & Forés, 2010). To contextualise the necessary skills, the MNC HQ could provide the competencies needed to investigate management issues in hotel subsidiaries so that local talent could deal with such enquiries (Zahra & George, 2002). However, inadequate analytical thinking and problem-solving abilities may hamper this capacity. MNC subsidiaries need local talent with the right resources and skills. For instance, local managers may find it difficult to analyse hundreds of guest comments, create a report, outline a plan, and implement each task involved in addressing the issues. Nevertheless, local managers are expected to examine such comments by analysing the necessary factors and possible outcomes and then coming up with a solution (Jimenez-Barrionuevo et al., 2011). An inadequate research capability can slow the assimilation of external knowledge (Xie et al., 2018). Therefore, MNC HQ and its subsidiaries need to invest in the research skills of local managers by stimulating the R&D division as incubator for product innovation and the research community.

5.3. Transforming the knowledge

'Transformation' is defined as the way in which MNC hotels recognise advanced new types of knowledge and combine them to devise new sets of expertise that meet the needs of new subsidiaries (Zahra & George, 2002). To achieve transformation, MNC hotel subsidiaries may add or eliminate new knowledge by interpreting and combining existing knowledge in different and innovative ways (Camisón & Forés, 2010). MNC hotel subsidiaries must be able to interpret knowledge and to understand how it can be used strategically (Thomas & Wood, 2015). Local human talent should be able to develop and refine existing knowledge and to combine it with assimilated knowledge (Todorova & Durisin, 2007; Jimenez-Barrionuevo et al., 2011). However, we argue that the historical background (i.e. colonisation) eclipses the process of assimilation and transformation in the knowledge-transfer process in MNC subsidiaries.

The study participants mentioned that the disseminative capacity of the MNC HQ should provide an effective transfer of knowledge to MNC subsidiaries (Minbaeva et al., 2003, 2018). Local managers should be able to adapt management expertise from the MNC HQ to subsidiaries. In this way, the assimilation and transformation of management expertise will lead subsidiaries towards globally integrated operations (Cheong, 2019). However, a feeling of inferiority can make it difficult for local employees and managers to assimilate knowledge and transform it into new knowledge in subsidiaries. The legacy of colonisation has become problematic in the knowledge-transfer process because it has negatively impacted the thinking and self-efficacy of local people (Laval & Poole, 2010; Alonso, 2011). This situation can impede their ability to envision an autonomous future in terms of human capital and socio-economic and national identity development. For instance, there is a feeling that local talent has always been the second-tier choice when hotels are recruiting senior managers or leaders. This feeling comes from a deep-seated belief that manifests towards foreigners (e.g. foreign hotel guests and managers) and automatically causes local people to feel inferior, due to their limited education, skills, and knowledge.

This inferiority complex implies the difficulties involved in acquiring the necessary confidence and familiarising oneself with work in a leadership role. The issue is compounded when local managers are psychologically unaccustomed to taking the lead or lack easy access to work experience, which could build self-confidence. Thus, this condition clouds the knowledge-transfer process in MNC subsidiaries because the management expertise provided by the MNC HQ is challenging to implement.

5.4. Exploiting new knowledge provided by the MNC HQ

'Exploitation', in the absorption-capacity model, is the phase in which a strategy is applied to refine current knowledge and use it to

develop innovations to sustain the business (Todorova & Durisin, 2007). MNC hotel subsidiaries need to examine their ability to innovate, acquire, assimilate, and transformed knowledge and use it to create new operations, competencies, routines, goods, and organisational forms (Camison & Forés, 2010). However, we argue that people who are unable to absorb the full value of new knowledge will not be able to exploit that knowledge well enough to innovate (Thomas & Wood, 2014). MNC subsidiaries with strong knowledge-exploitation capacity can constantly translate new and existing knowledge into innovative products and services. For knowledge transfer to be effective, absorptive capacity has to be linked through every stage of the process, from the acquisition, assimilation, and transformation of knowledge into hotel operations, where it can be applied to operations and used to generate new management strategies that benefit the subsidiary (Xie et al., 2018).

The MNC HQ can facilitate and manage the involvement of local talent in knowledge transfer by instilling their own corporate culture in subsidiaries to give them a competitive advantage (Ando & Endo, 2013; Minbaeva et al., 2003; Su et al., 2020). Where this is done, MNC subsidiaries will have qualified local talent to lead and enhance their performance in subsidiary business operations (Ando, 2021). However, MNC HQs are inconsistent in their commitment to supporting local talent in MNC subsidiaries. Local managers were cynical when they described the MNC contribution to hotel business development in subsidiaries. They felt that local talent still encountered a 'glass ceiling' and were unable to rise to key positions at their hotels. For instance, local managers expressed disappointment at the limited acknowledgement they received from the MNC HQ and its subsidiaries in the hotel industry. This minimum 'level of trust' reduced opportunities to showcase their own managerial abilities (Gurlek, 2020). This situation led to feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability, potentially slowing the knowledge-transfer process in subsidiaries.

Local managers felt that the MNC HQ and its subsidiaries did not fully recognise their leadership abilities. They believe that MNCs did not see any way for them to progress through professional development in the hotel industry. Faced with this problematic situation, some talented managers may decide to move to a different MNC hotel or find a job in another sector (Ando & Endo, 2013). Thus, MNCs need to balance the complexity of global skills with the capabilities of local talent by providing local talent with opportunities to move to higher levels of management level to secure and enhance the transfer of knowledge.

6. Conclusion and implications

This study highlights various challenges and supporting factors, from the perspective of absorption capacity in knowledge transfer, to ensure the smooth integration of MNC global strategies. It also explains how Todorova and Durisin's (2007) absorptive capacity framework can be usefully applied to the hospitality-and-tourism industry. Todorova and Durisin (2007) reconceptualised Zahra and George's (2002) model by revisiting the original concept from Cohen and Levinthal (1990). They found discrepancies in Zahra and George's (2002) model and clarified each component in the model definition by reintroducing value recognition, providing a different understanding of transformation, interpreting potential absorptive capacity (i.e. acquisition and assimilation), explaining the social mechanism and power relationships, and exploring the antecedents of absorptive capacity. We argue that several other essential elements can influence the dimensions of absorptive capacity, enhancing or diluting the transfer of new knowledge. The present study therefore extends the reconceptualisation of Todorova & Durisin's (2007)'s model into the hospitality domain, with a specific focus on MNC hotel subsidiaries.

Absorptive capacity is a systematic, dynamic capacity that represents an MNC's ability to integrate and reconfigure new and existing knowledge into new MNC routines and operations, which can provide a unique competitive advantage through innovation (Camison & Fores, 2011). Todorova and Durisin (2007) have argued that recognition of the value

of new knowledge should be reintroduced as the first component of absorption-capacity theory. We show that cultural aspects play a role during this stage. In particular, cultural discord prevents MNC HQs and their subsidiaries from accepting various different cultural backgrounds (e.g. education, ethnicities, norms, and customs), a stance that make it harder to recognise the value of new knowledge. In the long run, the inability to understand other cultures is likely to impact assimilation, transformation, and exploitation, as well as prior acquisition. For example, when MNC subsidiaries obtain external knowledge, they must spend a significant amount of time and effort on trying to understand, comprehend, and analyse because it comes from multiple organisational cultures and directions. In their operations, the MNC HQ and its subsidiaries should routinely incorporate cultural dimensions into the process of transferring knowledge (acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation). Any breakdown can cause a dysfunctional integration of the knowledge transfer.

Our findings also show that MNC HQs and their subsidiaries may underestimate the insufficient capacities of subsidiaries (e.g. competencies, education, and international experience) during the process of transferring new knowledge. Subsidiaries must interpret the new knowledge accordingly to their needs; otherwise, they will not be able to confidently devise strategies that fit their own context (Thomas & Wood, 2015). Thus, we believe MNC HQs must acknowledge that their subsidiaries have limited cognitive structures and few opportunities to develop the ability to judge new-knowledge potential (Lim & Ok, 2021). Acknowledging this can help the MNC HQ design the right type of training for its subsidiaries, enabling them to fully appreciate the importance of acquiring new knowledge before assimilation can take shape. Moreover, both the MNC HQ and its subsidiaries should aim to reduce uncertainties and avoidances through diplomatic means by engaging with (e.g. conducting research) each other's strengths and weaknesses during the process of interpretation and using the new knowledge in question within their business operations.

Todorova and Durisin (2007) distinguish between the absorption of knowledge structures during stages of assimilation and transformation. They argue that transformation capacity is not just the phase that follows assimilation but rather an alternative process. To achieve assimilation and transformation, MNC subsidiaries must be able to add or exclude new knowledge by creatively interpreting and combining existing knowledge (Camison & Forés, 2010). We identify the fact that the historical context (i.e. colonisation) slows down the process of assimilation and transformation in knowledge transfer. The legacy of colonisation has made local talent feel inferior and 'second-tier', denied access to opportunities to assimilate knowledge and transform it into new knowledge in subsidiaries. The lasting impact of colonisation has led to actual suffering among local managers, impacting their mental health and physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. It also limits their ability to establish modern global identities, a confident sense of uniqueness, and self-belief; this can ultimately impact the knowledge-transfer process. According to Todorova and Durisin (2007), external knowledge can be directly adapted to exploitation as long as it fits the firm structure. The present study shows that subsidiaries are struggling to foster local managers with the ability to absorb new knowledge. Although MNC subsidiaries have access to qualified local candidates who would be able to lead the operations, the candidates feel that they are never given a chance to show what they can do. As they are rarely appointed and have minimal opportunities to contribute to subsidiary business operations, local candidates feel demotivated perceptions and can develop behavioural changes. They feel discouraged from accepting, understanding, or developing new and existing knowledge into new products and services. This situation can also disrupt the transfer of knowledge; for a knowledge transfer to be effective, local managers must be involved from the acquisition to the exploitation stage.

Certain factors hinder the knowledge-transfer process in MNC hotel subsidiaries. These factors (i.e. limited competencies, cultural discord, limited opportunities, and historical background) can weaken some

parts of the absorptive-capacity model. However, these factors also contribute to the absorptive-capacity model of knowledge transfer theory.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the literature on absorptive capacity in the hospitality-and-tourism industries (e.g. Liu, 2018; Moon et al., 2021; Thomas & Wood, 2015). Most hospitality-and-tourism studies focus on absorptive capacity in the tourism business, aiming to strengthen external competitive advantage (Thomas & Wood, 2014) and stakeholders (e.g. employees, owners, and SMEs) (Czernek, 2014). This study highlights the factors that impede the knowledge-transfer process in MNC hotel subsidiaries. It extends the absorptive-capacity model by showing how these factors can prevent local talent from comprehending the knowledge being transferred from the MNC HQ to subsidiaries (Limaj & Bernroider, 2019; Miroschnychenko et al., 2021). Likewise, this study examines the significance of local-talent capabilities in ensuring the effectiveness of a knowledge transfer, particularly in developing countries (Yang & Driffield, 2022). Furthermore, our study demonstrates that MNC hotel subsidiaries are vulnerable in their need for management skills and expertise that match MNC HQ requirements when running operations.

Furthermore, the knowledge-transfer process must be fostered by both sides (e.g. the sender and receiver) to enable local talent to achieve innovation and a competitive edge in the hospitality-and-tourism industry (Font et al., 2021; Garcia-Villaverde et al., 2021; Lim & Ok, 2021). Our study examines the transfer of knowledge between an MNC HQ and its subsidiaries via talent development in the hotel industry. We have examined the lens of absorptive capacity and found that several factors impede the knowledge-transfer process. This study sheds light on the absorptive capacity dimension and how such factors are crucial for MNC subsidiaries. We show, not only that insufficient competencies slow down the process, but also that cultural discord and the historical backdrop (i.e. colonisation) can impact the effectiveness of knowledge transfer.

This study extends the absorptive-capacity literature by deepening the stages (i.e. acquisition, assimilation, transformation, and exploitation) that affect an MNC HQ and its subsidiaries. Our model refines Todorova and Durisin's (2007) model by adding several dimensions to absorptive-capacity theory. We have identified a unique approach to developing human talent in MNC subsidiaries, especially in developing countries. In summary, our findings highlight the importance of absorptive capacity when implementing organisational routines to achieve a competitive advantage in MNC subsidiaries (Camison & Fores, 2012; Zhang et al., 2022).

6.2. Practical contributions

In terms of managerial implications, four issues related to the absorption-capacity dimension must be addressed to maximise the effectiveness of knowledge transfers in MNC subsidiaries. First, an MNC HQ and its subsidiaries must pay attention to the extent to which local managers have sufficient absorption capacity to recognise the value of new knowledge. For example, local managers may assume that new knowledge has little value because it is unrelated to daily tasks. Inadequate competencies and education may cloud their judgement, making it hard to appreciate the importance of some types of new knowledge. To avoid this situation, both HQ and subsidiary managers must be aware that education is pivotal to the knowledge-transfer process. Cultural discord is another factor identified in this study which can make it hard for managers to recognise the value of new knowledge. In this research context, cultural discord is crucial to the way in which local managers perceive culture and norms (Zhang, 2022). These cultures and norms set the way of life and behaviour, which is an antecedent of social behaviour among local people, hotel guests, and foreign managers. Unfortunately,

the inability to recognise the cultural situation can create disharmony among local talent. To make the transfer of knowledge effective, local managers must acknowledge the cultural norms of various different ethnic groups. Our study suggests that education plays a pivotal role in enabling people to recognise the value of new knowledge during the acquisition phase. In addition, we believe that education can also minimise 'cultural discord' among local talent, helping people perceive the full value of knowledge, regardless of how it is introduced.

Second, subsidiaries must interpret HQ information and apply it strategically in their business operations (Thomas & Wood, 2015). However, several participants mentioned that local employees can be deficient in their analytical thinking and problem-solving during the assimilation phase because they are not used to conducting research that involves the ability to analyse, interpret, conclude, and implement solutions when they encounter challenges in their management practices (Camison & Forés, 2010). To overcome this situation, an MNC HQ and its subsidiaries must provide tools and expertise, ensuring that research is implemented as a routine task within the operation. In this way, analytical thinking and problem-solving can become routine management practices, used to solve problems that arise during everyday hotel business operations.

Third, local managers must develop and refine existing knowledge and combine it with assimilated knowledge (Jimenez-Barrionuevo et al., 2011). Unfortunately, Indonesia's colonial heritage has dimmed the process of assimilation and transformation in the knowledge-transfer process. The legacy of colonisation has created an inferiority complex among local talent, who see themselves as unable to compete with foreign hotels and managers. To minimise this, we suggest that local talent be strategically positioned at higher levels of the management hierarchy. MNC subsidiaries need to be managed by local employees who meet the global standards and criteria set by MNCs. Thus, the question of 'who' to select as a leader is becoming more important and decisive, especially in developing countries.

Finally, making full use of local talent will foster a competitive edge, promoting product and service innovation in MNC subsidiaries (Todorova & Durisin, 2007). The MNC HQ does provide management expertise for local talent, aiming to localise in the future (Ando, 2021; Ando & Endo, 2013). Nevertheless, MNCs and other stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, investors, hotel owners) should recognise the discrepancies between local human resources and MNC globalisation demands. It is critical for MNC subsidiaries to have local talent with competent global skills to run international hotels.

7. Limitations and future research

This study has some limitations, which provide inspiration for future research. First, our study is based only on managerial perspectives on Jakarta's hotel industry. This research might have arrived at different conclusions if carried out in another developing country with different actors (e.g. CEO HQ, owner/investors). The presents results may not be generalisable results to different types of historical backgrounds and institutional environments (Limaj & Bernroider, 2019). Future studies should therefore examine higher-level positions in the corporate hotel hierarchy with a better understanding of the entry-mode approach to opening an MNC hotel in a subsidiary. Second, this study does not compare the performance of hospitality-and-tourism education providers in Indonesia to those in other countries within the region (e.g. Vietnam and Thailand). This study only partially understands how formal institutions affect absorptive capacity. For policymakers, government involvement is crucial in determining how effectively the knowledge-transfer process operates among educational institutions (Woo & Mun, 2020). Future studies should consider the educational and political sectors (e.g. policymakers in education and investment in tourism) as unit analyses and investigate how the education sector can share and apply global knowledge at the local level (Font et al., 2021). Third, the present study uses a qualitative-research approach to obtain a

deeper understanding of the challenges involved in transferring knowledge in the tourism industry, particularly for MNC hotel subsidiaries. It will therefore be necessary to verify our findings using other methods to enhance the generalisability of the results and investigate the relationship between the dimensions of absorptive capacity, using quantitative methods or innovative research designs (Xie et al., 2018).

Credit author statement

Ringkar Situmorang and Arnold Japutra equally contributed to the paper. Ringkar was in charged of literature review, data collection, and analysis. Arnold was in charged of conceptualisation, writing, discussion, and conclusion.

Research impact statement

Our study contributes to the broader society, such as general businesses and industries (e.g., manufacturing businesses, financials and commercial services etc.), since it is related to knowledge transfer between MNCs and their subsidiaries. Our study displays that the

absorptive capacity of a subsidiary depends on the local talent, particularly competencies, experiences and cultural aspects. It is important for MNC HQs to realise that there are discrepancies between local talent supply and the MNCs' globalisation demand. However, expatriation is not always the answer to solve this issue. This condition should shed a light for stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, owners, investors, and education institutions) to cultivate good education for the future local talent.

3 Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A

Participant list.

No	Participant code	Sex	Occupation	Status	Experiences
1	CT	Male	Materials Manager	Expatriate	International Hotel Brands
2	ZT	Male	General Manager	Local	Local and International Hotel Brands
3	BT	Male	Residence Manager	Local	International Hotel & Apartment Brands
4	HC	Male	HR Director	Local	International Hotel Brands
5	ST	Female	Sales Manager	Local	International Hotel Brands
6	FS	Male	Room Division Manager	Local	International Hotel Brands
7	TD	Female	Higher Education Assessor	Government	Education
8	BTP	Male	Corporate General Manager	Local	Local and International Hotel Brands
9	MQ	Female	HR Director	Local	Local Apartment and International Hotel Brands
10	UT	Male	General Manager	Expatriate	International Hotel Brands
11	ZB	Female	Duty Manager	Local	International Hotel Brands
12	EK	Male	Director of Learning and Development	Local	International Hotel Brands
13	FK	Male	Director of Housekeeping	Local	International Hotel Brands
14	HH	Male	Duty Manager	Local	International Hotel Brands
15	QF	Male	General Manager	Local	International Hotel Brands and Restaurant Owner
16	JK	Male	Regional Development manager	Regional Executive/Local	International Hotel Brands
17	MD	Male	Pastry Chef	Local	International Hotel Brands and Bakery Owner
18	DS	Male	Executive Chef	Expatriate	International Hotel Brands
19	ZE	Male	Director of Operation	Local	Local and International Hotel Brands

Appendix B

Interview Questions:

1. Please share your role in this MNC hotel
2. Tell me about your journey to achieve your current position
3. How would you describe your preparations and challenges for this role (i.e., senior management position)?
4. What and how is the process of aligning the strategies (i.e., knowledge transfer) between headquarter and your hotel (subsidiary)?
5. Are there any specific issues related to that?
6. How does the headquarters deal with those issues? How do you deal with those issues?
7. Please share your experience in transferring knowledge to your subordinates in your department
8. Are there any specific issues related to that?

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