Appreciative Inquiry as an Approach for Technology-Based Business Improvements: Partnership Project at a Vehicle Rental SME in Bali

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ABSTRACT

Ketut Bagong Rental is a vehicle rental company founded in 2008, competing in an intensely competitive and saturated market in Bali, managing over 250 vehicles with exclusively foreign clientele. The SME, which is a form of tourism entrepreneurship, has a critical competitive advantage in the form of in-house renter's insurance and in-house repair shop. Ketut Bagong Rental partners with academics from Universitas Dhyana Pura (Undhira) and a Heilbronn University student were together to improve the company's business processes and develop its marketing strategy of market diversification. The Undhira team applied Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an alternative approach for community development projects, using the 5D cycle *of Define, Discover, Dream, Design*, and *Destiny/Deliver*. The stages of AI, the results obtained, and the lessons learned from applying this approach to problem-solving in service-based tourism enterprise—using relevant information technology to improve business processes and increase business resilience.

Keywords: Appreciative inquiry, Business processes, Information technology, SME, Tourism entrepreneurship

1   Introduction

Vehicle rental companies, especially motorcycle rentals, are essential for supporting Bali's tourism industry. It is due to the lack of easily accessible public transportation and the increasing proportion of free independent travelers (FIT) who prefer to explore the island on their own using rented vehicles [1]. Ketut Bagong Rental is a motorcycle and car rental company competing in this intensely competitive and increasingly saturated market. The SME is located in Dalung village, North Kuta sub-district, Badung Regency. Mr. I Ketut Marta started the company in 2008 and currently manages more than 250 vehicles (primarily motorcycles). Nearly 100% of the company's clientele comprises foreigners, tourists, and expatriates.

Since 2008, the SME has relied mainly on client referrals to reach new customers—primarily through direct word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) via online communities and review sites for foreign tourists and expatriates in Bali. Various studies in recent years have touted the effectiveness of peer-to-peer WOM [2] as well as eWOM [3, 4] in the context of tourism and rental services. A critical competitive advantage of Ketut Bagong Rental, along with its unique selling proposition, is the insurance feature. This feature makes it one of the few vehicle rental companies in Bali offering some form of insurance for rented vehicles. Employing 15 full-time staff, Ketut Bagong Rental provides the insurance in-house, as it can capitalize on its large fleet size and in-house repair shop to spread out the costs of providing this insurance feature. The insurance feature has allowed the SME to charge premium rates on its rental compared to other rentals in Bali. Additionally, it imposes an 8-day minimum rental period, as it also provides roadside assistance and vehicle drop off / pick up. These features have attracted many foreigners

to rent from this SME, especially tourists and expatriates from Eastern European countries, through WOM and eWOM in various expatriates and tourist communities.

From the initial situation analysis, Ketut Bagong Rental sought to improve its business processes and to diversify its target market—as they have been reliant on external marketing forces (i.e., WOM and eWOM), and the SME needed assistance with adopting information technology to improve its business resilience and support its market diversification efforts. The SME partnered with a team of lecturers and students from Dhyana Pura University (Undhira) in Bali, Indonesia, and one exchange student from Heilbronn University of Applied Sciences, Germany. The team set out to empower this SME to develop its business further and improve the existing business processes and customer service—with the primary objective of expanding the company's target market and increasing its resiliency when facing market shocks. The Undhira team has had previous experiences in developing information systems [5], developing marketing strategies and branding [6, 7], and using English for customer service [8].

Prior to this partnership, the company struggled throughout 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the presence of an Eastern European expatriate community who stayed in Bali during the pandemic helped the business somewhat. However, going into 2022 with the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia [9], Ketut Bagong Rental's concentrated target market (i.e., 90% Eastern Europeans at the beginning of 2022) had become worrisome for Mr. I Ketut Marta as the tourism entrepreneur of Ketut Bagong Rental. As such, the SME enlisted assistance and guidance from Undhira academics on using information technology, digital marketing, and communication training to enhance the company's appeal—especially towards a more diverse segment of foreign clientele.

The Undhira team applied the Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which refers to an approach for engaging an organization and its people based on an inquiry of the 'positive core' (i.e., the deeply-rooted competencies and qualities that make up the best of an organization and the people behind it) [10]. AI is effective when applied as a form of generative scholarship [11], as well as in various contexts, including international business [12], online C2C marketplace [13], as well as community development and tourism [14]. Moreover, as opposed to the more conventional problem-solving approach, such as using the logical framework approach for community development projects [15], AI has been found to produce more generative ideas because it amplifies the positive qualities that already exist in an organization—instead of merely focusing on the problems or weaknesses to overcome [16].
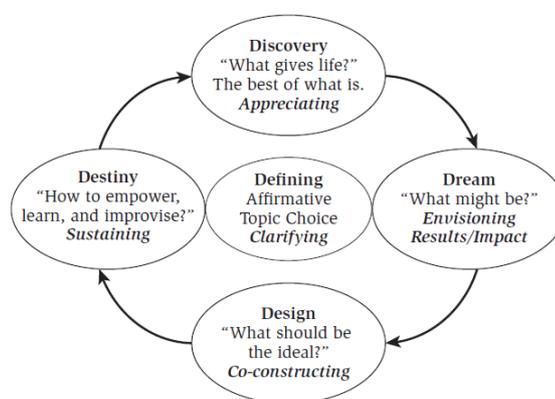

Figure 1: *Appreciative Inquiry's 5D Cycle [10]*

This paper discusses the application of AI in a service-based and tourism-related SME at Ketut Bagong Rental in Bali. AI rests on five key principles: (1) constructionist (i.e., the reality is socially constructed through conversations), (2) simultaneity (i.e., we can create change as we inquire), (3) poetic (i.e.,

organizations are like open books to be studied and interpreted), (4) anticipatory (i.e., we act based on our anticipation for the future), and (5) positive (i.e., positive inquiry tends to lead to positive change) [17]. This project applied the AI approach using the '5D Cycle', consisting of *Define, Discover, Dream, Design,* and *Destiny/Deliver* [18].

2   Methodology

The SME business development project was conducted between May and December 2022, applying the '5D Cycle' of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in its implementation. This paper presents a descriptive narrative on implementing AI in the service-based and tourism-related SME of Ketut Bagong Rental in Badung Regency, Bali—based on a '5D Cycle' model (Figure 1).

The *Define* phase is placed at the center of the 5D cycle model because it aims to define the generative topic at the focus of the process. It affirms and clarifies the most pressing issues encountered by an organization, which provides a platform for further inquiry [10]. The Undhira team applied the constructionist principle of AI with the underlying assumption that reality is socially constructed through conversations [16]. In the *Discover* stage, the team sought to learn and appreciate the good practices at the SME through personal interviews and focused group discussions. The team applied the positive and poetic principles of AI, as the AI process involves positive inquiry that is hoped to lead to positive change through inquiry and interpretation of the internal processes in the organization [16]. In the *Dream* phase, the Undhira team invited Ketut Bagong Rental team members to participate by amplifying the positive core competencies of the organization and imagining possibilities in the future—thus applying the anticipatory principle of AI [10]. In the *Design* phase, the Undhira and Ketut Bagong Rental teams focused on leveraging the good practices already discovered for designing actions. This involved co-constructing technology-supported business practices through brainstorming in a focused-group discussion and prototyping of systems and supporting technologies. Lastly, the *Destiny/Deliver* phase involved empowering, teaching, and training Ketut Bagong Rental team members with the technology-supported business practices already developed. Therefore, they will be able to carry out the business processes moving forward and create a co-created sustainable change.

3   Results and Discussion

This section discusses the step-by-step approach undertaken using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) using the 5D cycle model. Each phase is discussed at length, with particular attention given to the Destiny/Deliver phase, which includes the outputs and outcomes of this SME business improvement project.

3.1 Define

As a result of the Define phase of AI, the Undhira and Ketut Bagong Rental teams defined the main topics of the inquiry, referring to the most pressing concerns in the organization. Applying the constructionist principle of AI, three main topics were identified and clarified in this phase: (1) the use of information technology to enhance the SME's business practices, (2) the use of marketing to reach market segments, and (3) the use of communication to enhance the customer service. Before this project, Ketut Bagong Rental only used WhatsApp and Telegram to communicate with potential and current customers/renters. The organization hasn't developed any systems or a website for sharing information and keeping track of the firm's inventories. The SME also relied on external forces for business referrals. These included referrals or eWOM from Facebook groups, Telegram channels, Google Maps reviews, etc. In addition, there had been minimal organizational efforts to develop and implement the SME's marketing strategies. In addition, there is an expressed need to enhance the employees' communication skills further, especially English speaking skills related to customer service. From this phase, the Undhira team continued the project by

Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Community Engagement and Education for Sustainable Development (ICCEESD 2022)

293

applying the proceeding AI phases and AI principles to assist the tourism entrepreneur and this SME in its business development.

3.2 Discover

In the *Discover* phase, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to uncover 'what gives life' and the 'positive core' of Ketut Bagong Rental. The discussions discovered that the SME has already used information technology such as WhatsApp Business and Telegram to reach its target market (Telegram is the messaging app of choice for many Eastern Europeans). In addition, the business already has substantial word-of-mouth (WOM) in the form of referrals, especially among expatriates, digital nomads, and social influencers from Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus living in Bali, as well as eWOM from various Russian-speaking Facebook groups for expatriates and tourists. Even without having a website or Instagram page, Ketut Bagong Rental already had a following in this niche market. The discussions also highlighted that one of the company's core competencies, and its unique selling proposition (USP), is the rare in-house insurance feature among its competitors. In addition to providing high-quality, well-maintained vehicles with an in-house mechanic shop, Ketut Bagong Rental also offers free delivery and pickup. In terms of communication, the 15 employees already knew what to communicate to renters during delivery and payment collection, although the employees' English skills needed a refresher. The team also discovered that the employees' knowledge of vehicle-related vocabulary was adequate. Refresher sessions were needed to help them describe the rental vehicles' parts, functions, and features.

3.3 Dream

Ketut Bagong Rental expected a more robust use of information technology in its business activities, which was discovered during the *Dream* phase. With the reopening of Bali's tourism after experiencing a 'hard reset' amid the Covid-19 pandemic [19, 20], Ketut Bagong Rental envisions a more diversified target market of tourists and expatriates. The entrepreneur and team members realize that a website and consistent digital presence are essential in reaching Western consumers. A professionally managed digital presence would allow the business to reach Western Europeans, Australians, Americans, and other market segments of tourists and expatriates—beyond Eastern Europeans (i.e., market diversification). More effective communication (i.e., upgrading employees' English skills) would also better convey the benefits offered and counter/prevent misunderstandings. This is in line with studies suggesting that website quality [21], along with its contents (both text and visual) [22], contributes to consumers' perception and trust of a company—as well as in risk reduction related to purchases [23]. Regarding communication skills, the SME envisions that the employees could become more confident and more apt in explaining and answering questions related to the rental process, rental vehicles, and other issues they may encounter during the rental.

3.4 Design

In the *Design* phase, the Undhira team aided Ketut Bagong Rental in designing its digital presence through a professionally managed website and social media pages. The team also aided the digitalization effort by developing an information system to keep track of the rental vehicles, creating a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page, posting video tutorials to convey the terms and conditions of rental better, safety features that renters may have missed at delivery, developing a standard operating procedure for delivery and pickup, and creating an English for Customer Services module for the employees [24].

3.5 Destiny/Deliver

In the *Destiny/Deliver* stage, the Undhira team delivered various outputs from the previous phases of the AI's 5D Cycle implementation. First, this project established a professionally designed website

(https://ketutbagongrental.co.id), which the key employees are already trained to manage. The website has been indexed in Google search. Google's Search Engine Optimization (SEO) places Ketut Bagong Rental as the number one search result for the keyword "motorcycle rental" when the search is conducted in the North Kuta and West Denpasar areas (Figure 2). The Undhira team also trained key employees to manage and add to the website content—mainly in creating blog articles to upload new content more consistently and updating vehicle and price lists. The Undhira team has also made the guidelines for managing the website accessible for the Ketut Bagong Rental using a video tutorial posted on YouTube.
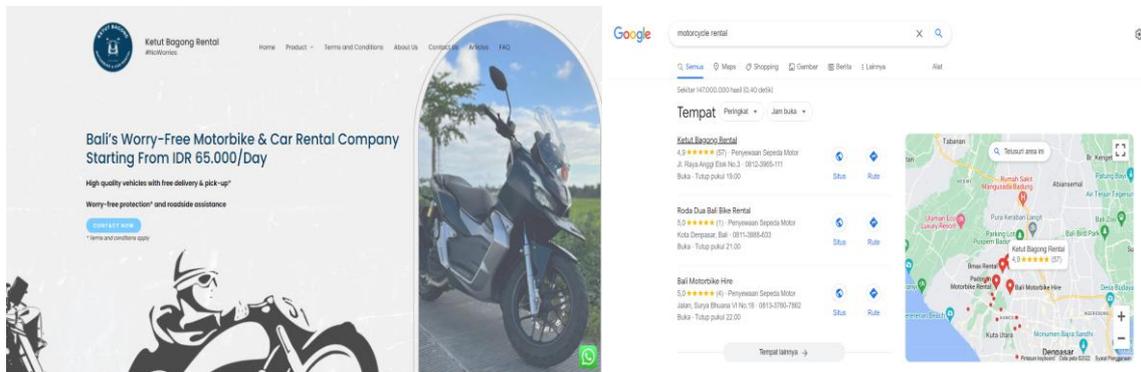
Figure 2: *Ketut Bagong Rental Homepage and SEO-Ranked Search Result*

Second, this project also resulted in a web-based information management system developed using the Symfony framework (Figure 3). This system contains a database of rental vehicles based on the type, vehicle registration number, make, model, year, date of registration, and current status (rented/idle) [25]. The team also trained the key persons at Ketut Bagong Rental to input and update this database, which can be accessed publicly through a video tutorial posted on YouTube.

Figure 3: *Ketut Bagong Rental Information Management System*

Third, this project also resulted in web content with each unit's rental information. The team helped Ketut Bagong Rental in creating content and stickers with QR codes affixed to (1) underneath the seat of each motorbike, which is direct to http://linktr.ee/ketutbagongrental consisting the SME's web page, FAQ, online version of the rental agreement, and location of the rental's shop; and (2) at the front and rear of each vehicle, which aims to direct potential customers who see the motorbike and are interested in seeking for information—directed to http://linktr.ee/ketutbagong consisting of the SME's web page, Instagram page, WhatsApp, Telegram, and location (Figure 4). In addition, the QR code application made it easier for current and potential renters to access information about the SME, supporting the SME's dream to improve its business processes and communication with information technology.

Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Community Engagement and Education for Sustainable Development (ICCEESD 2022)

295
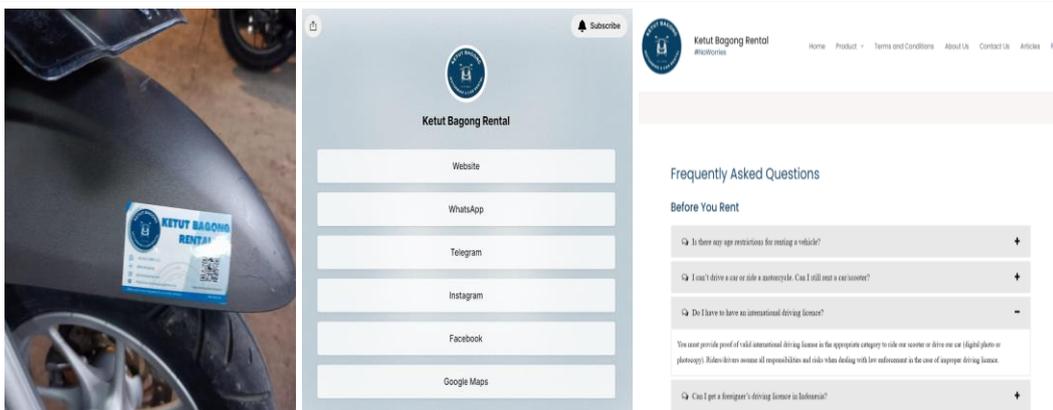
Figure 4: *Ketut Bagong Rental QR Code and FAQ*

Fourth, the project resulted in new and improved branding elements to support Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), an essential component in improving brand equity [26]. The Undhira team aided Ketut Bagong Rental in formulating the brand's logo, tagline, brand promise, and hashtags to be adopted for the SME's website, social media pages, stickers, and other forms of marketing communication. The SME adopted a blue color scheme to denote trust, with the tagline "Bali's Worry-Free Motorbike & Car Rental Company" and the hashtag "#NoWorries"—to further promote the brand promise and company's competitive advantage (i.e., in-house insurance and vehicle repair) (Figure 5). The team also trained key employees in copywriting and creating keywords to denote the company's brand promise.

Figure 5: *Ketut Bagong Rental Branding Elements*

Fifth, the project resulted in a coherent, consistent, and professional Instagram page, which was developed using the previously designed brand elements and using the techniques from the copywriting training. The media and content of digital marketing (both textual and visual) were developed using the application of visual grammar [27]. The Undhira team also trained Ketut Bagong Rental team members to upload relevant social media content and manage the SME's digital presence (mainly using Instagram, Facebook, Google My Business, Google Maps, Meta Ads, and Google Ads). As a result, the SME now has a more coherent, professionally managed online presence to support its inbound marketing efforts and can now do online marketing through SEM and targeted paid ads (Figure 6).

Sixth, the Undhira team developed a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) by applying the SECI cycle of Knowledge Management (KM)—which stands for Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Externalization. It is to help the SME capture and transform the existing tacit knowledge in the organization, then formalize it into explicit knowledge, which takes the form of a manual for vehicle delivery, payment, and pickup [28].
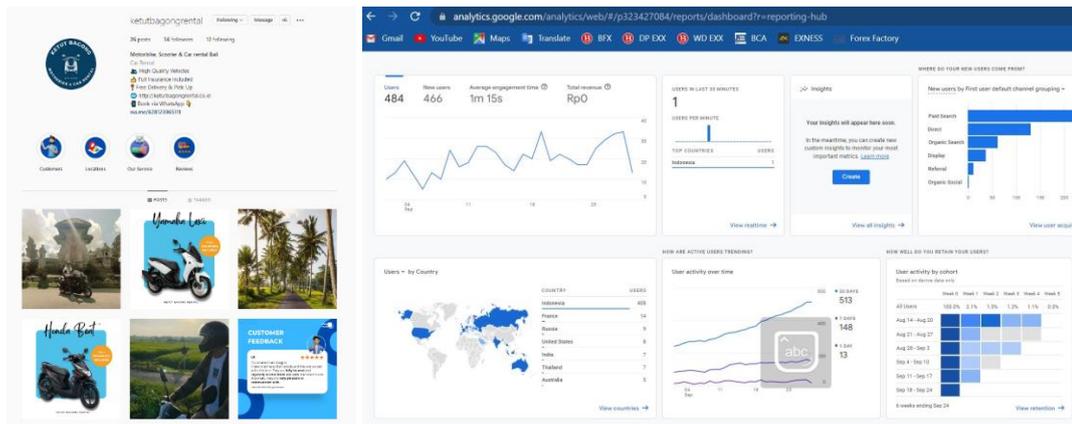
Figure 6: *Ketut Bagong Rental Social Media Presence and Online Marketing Results*

The tacit knowledge from the entrepreneur and staff was captured in the Socialization, then written down into the SOP document in the Externalization and Combination before being used for staff training in the Externalization stage (Figure 7). This effort was coupled with extensive English for Specific Purposes (ESP) training, particularly English for Customer Service, general capacity building, and a refresher in English communication skills for vehicle rental [29].

Figure 7: *Application of Knowledge Management's SECI Cycle in the Form of Rental SOP*

4   Conclusion

The Universitas Dhyana Pura (Undhira) team has been working closely with its partner from Ketut Bagong Rental to take on a novel approach to conducting a community development project—i.e., using Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This approach has amplified the SME's strengths and internal capacities (which are the bases of its competitive advantage) to improve the SME's business processes and resilience in facing uncertain business times and an increasingly competitive market. Using the 5D Cycle (i.e., *Define, Discover, Dream, Design,* and *Destiny/Deliver*), the Undhira team has helped this Bali-based SME strengthen its business processes while diversifying its target market.

As a result, as reported by the SME's tourism entrepreneur Mr. I Ketut Marta, noticeable impacts from this partnership project include market diversification (Q4 of 2022 figures indicated that 40% of renters are now coming from outside of the Eastern European market, which is one of the main objectives of this project), boost in confidence for the business to charge higher prices (as they are now better able to position the USP and highlight the 'in-house repair' and ' worry-free guarantee' features of the rental, as well as an overall improvement in the employees' capacities in customer service using the proper SOP, and confidence in communicating. These improvements eventually led to a 30% increase in revenue figures compared to before the partnership project, even though the number of vehicles rented had not increased significantly.

Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Community Engagement and Education for Sustainable Development (ICCEESD 2022)

297

This translates to higher revenue and profits with reduced workloads. Based on the application of AI in this project, the authors can recommend other academics to adopt AI as an alternative approach to design, conduct, and analyze community development projects. Although this project was still limited in scope and scale, the results have been encouraging and noteworthy.

5 Declarations

5.1 Limitations

This project was limited in scope, scale, and timeframe. As such, the results from applying Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as practiced in this project cannot be deemed sufficiently generalizable, based on the encouraging results from this project alone. Further empirical examples of the application of AI for SME and community development project is needed and encouraged.

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5.4 Competing Interests

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Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Community Engagement and Education for Sustainable Development (ICCEESD 2022)

299