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Consuming safe hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of Spain

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Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many hotels have become safe hotels. Nevertheless, the understanding of the consumption of safe hotels is very limited. This study explores pull motivations and behaviors (intention to stay and willingness to pay premium) of potential consumers residing in Spain regarding safe hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the social exchange theory, this research provides greater understanding of the consumption of safe hotels, aiming to explore the impact of the new safety attributes of hotels on consumer behavior. This research reveals the significance of these new safety attributes that have emerged from the pandemic, as part of hotels recovery plans, originating new consumer segments.

Keywords: COVID-19; safe hotel; motivation; intention; willingness to pay premium; social exchange theory

Introduction

To tackle the severe crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, literature reveals that cleanliness, hygiene and safety protocols are the most important measures carried out by the lodging industry as part of its recovery plan (Pillai et al., 2021).Consequently numerous hotels have become safe hotels (SHs) (Hao et al., 2020). Nevertheless, literature on consumer behavior regarding SHs is scarce (Atadil& Lu, 2021), and both practitioners and researchers need a deeper understanding of consumption of this type of hotels during a pandemic.

To understand consumers' behavior, it is essential to know their motivations (Pearce, 2005), butup to now research on motivation to stay at SHs is limited. Based on the push-pull framework (Uysal&Jurowski, 1994), research is focused on pull motivations, that is, on safety attributes or COVID-19 prevention measures implemented in hotels. Consumers can be attracted to stay ata SH due to a number of

safety attributes that make it more attractive than others. These attributes can be very diverse. Atadil and Lu (2021) distinguish four types of safety and security attributes (hygiene control, medical preparedness, health communication and self-service technology), while Yu et al. (2021) identify three types of hygiene attributes (hygiene of customer-use space, personal hygiene of staff and hygiene of workspaces).

Although understanding consumer motivation is essential, this only leads to a partial understanding of SHs consumption, and it is also important to analyze customer behavior (Biran et al., 2014). On the one hand, behavioral intention analysis is crucial, as intention is a key mediator that turns motivation into future behavior (Huang & Hsu, 2009). On the other, willingness to pay premium (WPP) is another key variable, as a high price may be the most relevant barrier in the purchase of a product or service (Hughner et al., 2007). SHs may have a higher price, as the implementation of safety attributes may generate additional costs.

Gursoy et al. (2021) evince that people react differently in pandemic situations regarding hotels' safety attributes. Social exchange theory (Ap, 1992) allows understanding this behavior, as consumers may decide to travel and choose a specific hotel if they perceive safety benefits outweigh risks. According to Atadil and Lu (2021), the different types of safety and security attributes influence the intention to book a SH. Yu et al. (2021) also find that the different types of hygiene attributes influence behavior (both in word of mouth and in revisit intentions) through the hotel image. However, no study examinesthe relationships between safety attributes and WPP forSHs.

Based on the social exchange theory, this paper aims to deepen the understanding of the consumption of SHs during the COVID-19 pandemic by addressing the following objectives:

(1) Considering that potential customers vary their behaviors regarding SHs, the diversity of behaviors is examined. In particular, this research aims to identify market segments by paying attention to intention to stayat SHs and WPPforSHs.
(2) To identify pull factors of SHs and toinvestigate the relationships between pull motivations and behaviors (intention to stay and WPP).

Taking into account the significance of domestic market in tourism recovery during a pandemic (World Tourism Organization, 2020), these objectives are analyzed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain, a country where tourism is one of the most important economic sectors (OECD, 2020).

Methods

Survey design

A questionnaire for potential guests in Spain was designed to measure their pull motivations, their intention to stay at SHs, and their WPP for SHs. Regarding pull motivations, literature review (Yu et al., 2021; Gursoy et al., 2021; Lai & Wong, 2020) allowed the creation of a list with 40 safety attributes. Then, a group of experts was selected, including 2 managers of SHs and 2 individuals who had stayed at SHs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the experts' discussion, the list was reduced to 28 items (Table 2). These items were evaluated by a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ("not important") to 5 ("very important").

The intention scale and the WPP scale, both measured with three items, were adapted from the studies by Han et al. (2010) and Tang & Lam (2017), respectively. In both cases, a 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 ("totally disagree") to 5 ("totally agree").

The final questionnaire also included sociodemographic data and two filter questions to ensure that respondents were adults and had stayed at a hotel in the last two years.Following Brislin's (1970) back-translation method, the questionnaire was developed in English and then translated into Spanish.

Data collection

Using convenience sampling, the questionnairewas administered online through travel forums and social networksin January 2021 for one week. Finally, 568 questionnaires were collected, of which 521 were valid.

All respondents lived in Spain. Most of them were women (53.7%), with age ranges of 35 to 49 (44.1%) and over 50 years old (38.6%). They had university degrees (52.0%) or postgraduate studies (29.9%) and were employees (48.2%), or freelancers or entrepreneurs (20.2%), with a monthly income of €1501-€3000 (29.8%) and €3001-€6000 (29.6%).

Results

Customer behavior

The customer behavior in relation to SHs was analyzed through (1) the intention to stay at SHs and (2) WPP for SHs. Table 1 shows the overallaverage value of the threeitems related to intention to stay and the overall average value of the three items related toWPP. Intention to stay in SHs was stronger than WPP,although WPP was also relatively high. Therefore, while SHs seem to have a strong image as a safe place to stay, many consumers are also willing to pay premium for their additional prevention measures against COVID-19.This is in line with previous research on short-term rentals. For example, Shen andWilkoff (2020) found thatduring the COVID-19 pandemic peer-

to-peer (P2P) accommodationsthat were perceived to be clean increased their occupancy and their income. Likewise, Hidalgo et al. (2021) found that P2P accommodations with kitchen amenities increased its premium prices during the pandemic, since kitchen amenities are attributes that help maintain social distancing.

Since potential customers vary in their behaviorsin relation to SHs, in line with Gursoy et al. (2021),a cluster analysis was employed using behavioral variables (specifically, average values of the three items of each construct) as clustering variables.

A dual process was conducted. A hierarchical cluster analysis employing the Ward method was performed to determine the number of clusters andlaterk-mean was applied for the final composition of the groups. Furthermore, a discriminant analysis was employedfor validation purposes, showing that 95.8% of the cases had been correctly classified.

Results showthree segments (Table 1). Segment 1 (25.5% of the sample) represents “customers without WPP”. Segment 2 (10.0%) represents “non-customers”, as this segment is unlikely to select SHs. Segment 3 (64.5%), the largest cluster, represents “customers with WPP”. These findings seem to be in line with previous research, that evince that most potential customers are willing to stay at hotels depending their safety attributes (Gursoy et al., 2021) and are also willing to pay premium to stay at SHs (Atadil& Lu, 2021).

Take-in-Table-1

Pull motives

A factor analysis was carried out to identify the dimensions of pull motivations (Table 2). One item (keep rooms vacant for at least a night after a customer checks out) was

excluded from the analysis, since its loading was lower than 0.4. Results show three factors that explain 70.63% of the variance: Prevention measures in relation to employees (“employees”), based on technologies (“technologies”)and in hotel facilities (“facilities”). Results by Atadil and Lu (2021) also identified a factor related to technologies, however, they grouped items on “employees” and “facilities” in a factor named “hygiene control”. The factor “employees” included items of the dimensions of “personal hygiene of staff” and “hygiene of workspaces” identified by Yu et al. (2021).

Average values show customers valued most “employees” and “facilities”. Although “technologies” is overall the least relevant pull factor in relation to SHs, it is still rated relatively high. These results are in line with the findings by Atadiland Lu (2021), who showed that “hygiene control” attributes were more important for customers than “self-service technologies” attributes.

Take-in-Table-2

A one-way ANOVA test was employed to explore the differences between the segments based on pull motivations (Table 3). The average values indicate that all segments value most prevention measures focused on employees and facilities, giving less importance to measures based on technologies. Nevertheless, “non-customers” are significantly less motivated by the three types of prevention measures than “customers” (segments 1 and 3). Likewise, the only significant difference identified between “customers with WPP” and “customers without WPP” is that the former attaches more importance to measures based on technologies than the latter. According to recent studies, this research confirms the importance of prevention measures based on

technologies after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Atadil& Lu, 2021; Hao et al., 2020; Pillai et al., 2021).

Take-in-Table-3

Conclusions

Following the social exchange theory, this research contributes to the understanding of the consumption of safe hotels during a pandemic, as it identifies three market segments according to consumers' behavior (intention to stay at SHs and WPP for this type of hotels) in the COVID-19 era: "non-customers", "customers without WPP" and "customers with WPP". These segments are also characterized according to pull motivations.This research is among the first to provide empirical evidence on market segments regarding SHs consumption. Likewise, no studyhas examined yet the relationships between pull motivations of SHs and WPP forthis type of hotels.

Regarding the practical implications, results reveal that hotel recovery plans during the COVID-19 pandemic must acknowledge the importance of the new safety attributes, and also customize safe services for the different segments.

Since most potential customers (segments 1 and 3) are attracted by COVID-19 prevention practices, especially those related to employees and facilities, managers should communicate such prevention practices in order to build aSH image.Nevertheless, and although most customers (segments 1 and 3) report their intention to stay at SHs, not all customers are willing to pay more for additional prevention measures against COVID-19.To attract the larger segment, "customers with WPP", messages should emphasize technology-based measures (e.g., contactless payment services,availability of auto check-in and auto check-out), as this segment has

a greater interest in these prevention measures. In this sense, some of these technology-based measures (e.g., air purifiers in rooms) could be offered to this segment by using upselling and cross-selling techniques. As the initial investment in some technology-based safe initiatives may be high,some hoteliers could be hesitant to invest.However, our findings might encourage this investment. SHs targeting the segment "customers with WPP" might have greater incentives to implement technology-based measures and premiumprices that reflect the cost of these measures.

According to recent research (Hao et al., 2020; Pillai et al., 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the need for technological solutions. Pillai et al. (2021) state that companies should consider investing in technologies, as the post-COVID situation will require their aggressive adoption. Furthermore, and following recent studies (i.e., Atadil and Lu, 2021; Hidalgo et al., 2021), it is reasonable to predict that the segments identified in this research mayremain after the current pandemic with long-term effects on hotels' demand. This can happen as customers may continue to perceive high risk when travelling, and safe practices may become routine practices in hotelswhen the COVID-19 pandemic is over.

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Table 1.Behavioral variables among clusters.

Behavioral variables	1: Customers without WPP (n=133)	2: Non-customers (n=52)	3: Customers with WPP (n=336)	Overall average (standard deviation)	One-way ANOVA	Differences between groups (Games-Howell post-hoc test)
Intention to stay at SHs	4.58	1.97	4.80	4.46 (0.95)	F=881.09***	1 & 2*** 2 & 3*** 1 & 3***
WPP for SHs	2.28	1.96	4.55	3.71 (1.31)	F=756.84***	1 & 2*** 2 & 3*** 1 & 3***

Note: ***p<0.001.

Table 2.Factor analysis of pull motives.

Pull motives	Factor loading	Eigen value	Variance explained	Mean
1) Prevention measures related to employees		**15.55**	**30.46**	**4.29**
Employees are meticulous in washing and disinfecting hands	0.834			4.54
Employees are aware of health and safety protocols	0.827			4.51
Surfaces of staff work areas (i.e., desks and tables) are cleaned with disinfectants	0.817			4.32
Employees wear masks all the time	0.809			4.60
Staff work equipment (telephones, keyboards, printers…) is cleaned with disinfectants	0.796			4.27
Customers are encouraged to wear masks	0.738			4.43
Employees maintain a minimum distance between coworkers while working	0.698			4.04
Workspaces and lounges used by employees are subject to regular management by professional hygiene companies	0.668			4.09
Employees are tested for COVID-19 once a month	0.628			4.00
Temperature checks are carried out on employees arrival at work	0.623			4.10
2) Prevention measures based on technologies		**2.33**	**20.10**	**3.44**
There are keyless entries or digital keys for the rooms	0.817			3.45
Service robots are used	0.748			2.45
Auto check-in and auto check-out are available	0.737			3.46
Contactless payments, such as mobile payment or contactless bank cards, are offered	0.731			3.64
Contactless use of the elevators is available	0.713			3.48
Rooms are equipped with air purifiers to prevent aerosol inventions	0.588			3.85
Temperature checks are carried out on customers arrival	0.492			3.78
3) Prevention measures in the facilities		**1.19**	**20.07**	**4.24**
There are methacrylate protection screens at the hotel counter	0.692			3.90
Hand sanitizer dispensers are available throughout the facilities	0.677			4.26
Tables and seats are separated to guarantee a minimum physical distance in common areas, restaurants and bars	0.677			4.58
More rigorous and frequent cleaning of high contact surfaces in common areas is performed	0.655			4.62
Limits have been set on the number of customers attended	0.651			4.20
Cleaning with disinfectants of the restaurant facilities (i.e., tables and seats) is carried out	0.647			4.53
There are good heating, ventilation and air conditioning controls, and good air quality	0.639			4.47
Sufficient cleanliness and disinfection are implemented in the rooms	0.612			4.44
There are signals on the floor to guarantee a minimum physical distance	0.607			3.69
There is an optional daily cleaning service: no cleaning, but towels are left outside the door	0.500			3.70

Note: Principal components method; factors with eigenvalues greater than 1;varimax rotation; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin=0.961; Bartlett's test of sphericity: χ^2=14636.961, p<0.001; Cronbach's Alpha: 0.959, 0.890 and 0.938 for "employees", "technologies" and "facilities", respectively.

Table 3.Behavior and pull motives.

Pull motives	1: Customers without WPP (n=133)	2: Non-customers (n=52)	3: Customers with WPP (n=336)	One-Way ANOVA	Differences between groups (Games-Howell post-hoc test)
Employees	4.35	2.83	4.49	F=119.532***	1 & 2*** 2 & 3***
Technologies	3.43	2.33	3.62	F=52.549***	1 & 2*** 2 & 3*** 1 & 3*
Facilities	4.35	2.92	4.40	F=118.223***	1 & 2*** 2 & 3***

Note: ***p<0.001; *p<0.05.