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International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism (IMJCT)

Published by Katara Publishing House in cooperation with Al Rayyan International University College-University of Derby UK-Qatar.

FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Professor Khalid Al-Sulaiti

Al Rayyan International University College-University of Derby UK-Qatar and CEO of Katara Cultural Village Foundation

The main objective of the journal is to publish scientific research works on the subject of culture and tourism marketing that includes management trends, government policies, and the insight related to development of new technologies, methodologies and tools.

The journal seeks to provide a platform for researchers and experts in the field of culture and tourism marketing to reach a wider audience.

About Journal

IMJCT is an international scientific journal specialized in publishing research in tourism culture and marketing, including government administration and policies, and developing new technologies, methodologies, and tools. It is published by Katara Publishing House in cooperation with Al Rayyan International University College-University of Derby UK-Qatar. The Journal publishes two issues per year and aims to provide a scientific platform that allows researchers and specialists to arbitrate and publish their scientific papers from research and studies in the field of tourism, culture, and marketing, as well as to contribute to the spread of knowledge by making these researches and studies available to the beneficiaries across this vast space.

Scope

The journal has a huge scope as it fills a void. It will help not only students, teachers. experts and researchers who are working in this area, but also cultural and tourism institutions, organizations, NGOs, companies, and the general public to update themselves about the latest research, developments, and trends in culture and tourism marketing.

Vision

To be a leading global scientific publishing platform in the field of tourism culture and marketing.

Journal

- Giving the opportunity to Arab and international researchers to arbitrate and publish their research in the field of tourism culture and marketing.
- Contributing to supporting and developing the cultural field and tourism marketing through genuine and serious research studies in accordance with international standards.
- Achieving the universality of culture and tourism in accordance with the modern vision, with its professional controls and ethics.
- Creating a knowledge base for the magazine that contributes to creating a scientific reference and a solid documentary record.

Editorial Board

Advisory Board

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General Conditions:

- The Journal is interested in publishing scientific papers and events related to culture and tourism marketing in the English language, whether it is original research, reports on conferences, seminars and workshops, or presentations of scientific thesis related to the areas of publishing the magazine.
- The journal is concerned with publishing original scientific papers that have not been previously published, by any means of publication, and have not been submitted for publication in another journal. This shall be confirmed by the written approval of the researcher.
- The researcher is not entitled to publish his research in another place after approval of its publication in the journal except after obtaining written permission to do so from the editor-in-chief.
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- The editorial board has the right to make any necessary formal adjustments to the research in accordance with the instructions and rules of publication in the journal.
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- **Commitment to objectivity and ethical values in scientific research, such as:**
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  2. Avoid offending people and bodies.
  3. The research should deal theoretically and practically with contemporary issues that are closest to human reality.
  4. Taking into account objectivity and keeping away from personalizing ideas.

- **Considering the scientific formulation of the research, through the following:**
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  2. Observing punctuation and spelling rules.
  3. Accuracy in documenting texts and evidence.

- **Number of research pages should not exceed (30) pages of regular cut (A4), including references and appendices.**
  - Font size and type: The font size is: (14), margin: (10). and font type (Times New Roman)
  - The research shall be accompanied by an abstract, provided that it does not exceed (300) words: The abstract includes the following: Research topic, objectives, methodology, more important findings end recommendations, in addition to keywords.
  - 5000-7000-word maximum length including references, tables, and figures.
  - The research to be divided and organized according to the requirements of the scientific research method, in order to maintain coordination of the research and reports published in the journal.
  - An APA approach to be followed in documenting research.
  - The researcher can view a general form of the scientific paper by clicking here: Article Template.

Procedural Steps for Publishing a Research

- The papers are sent electronically, either by uploading them via the journal’s website or by sending them to the editorial board mail: editor@imjct.com.
- The editorial board of the journal conducts a preliminary examination of the research and then decides its eligibility for arbitration or its rejection.
- The research and studies submitted for publication in the journal are arbitrated by at least two arbitrators.
- The research is returned to the researchers after evaluation and arbitration for the purpose of evaluation end modification.
- If the research is accepted for publication, then all copyrights shall devolve to the journal, and it may not be published in any paper or electronic means of publication except with the written permission of the editor-in-chief.
- If the research is published, the researcher will be sent a letter of publication with an electronic copy of the journal in which his research was published.

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Editorial

Dear academic and industry colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I present to you the seventh issue of the *International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism*, a joint publication of Katara Publishing House and Al Rayan International University College in partnership with the University of Derby.

Since its inception, the journal has remained committed to publishing high-quality scientific research in the fields of culture and tourism marketing, focusing on emerging management trends, government policies, and industry insights that contribute to the advancement of the tourism sector. By providing a platform for academics, government officials, and industry professionals, we continue to foster knowledge exchange and dialogue within these critical domains.

As we move forward, the tourism sector worldwide continues to evolve, facing new challenges and opportunities. This issue reflects our ongoing dedication to addressing contemporary developments in tourism and cultural marketing through insightful research and expert analysis. Our commitment to rigorous academic standards remains unwavering, ensuring that all published articles undergo a comprehensive double-blind peer review process.

We strive to enhance the efficiency of our review and publication process while maintaining the highest academic standards. Additionally, we continue to explore thematic editions that address pressing issues in the industry, making our journal a valuable resource for researchers and professionals alike.

I extend my sincere gratitude to the editorial team, authors, and reviewers whose dedication and expertise have contributed to the growth and success of this journal.

I warmly invite scholars and industry experts to submit their research for consideration in future issues of the *International Marketing Journal of Culture and Tourism*.

Sincerely,
Professor Khalid Al Sulaiti
Founder and Editor-in-Chief

The Effectiveness of Decision Making in the Educational Sector: "Benchmarking of Strategic Management of Colleges in Oman and UK"

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Abstract

The study aims to compare the decision-making processes in the educational institutions of Oman and the UK, considering their respective strategic management models to achieve this aim; the data regarding the decision-making was collected from the respective colleges of the UK and Oman. The target population was concerned departments' Dean, Directors, and HOD. About 14 responses were collected. Frequency and percentage of responses were identified. Three main themes were identified through thematic analysis of survey results, including information systems, internal and external threats management, and outstanding accomplishments of institutions. However, the small sample size (N=14) is the primary limitation restricting the study results. Results from a study between the UK and Oman showed differences in risk management and internal procedures. This study offers recommendations for bettering strategic management techniques and enhancing our awareness of decision-making processes in higher education. Furthermore, it highlights the need for a well-rounded strategy for making decisions that combines effectiveness with inclusion. Recommendations are offered to educational policymakers and administrators to improve strategic decision-making and entire institutional performance.

Key Words:

Decision making, strategic management, educational institutions, Oman colleges, UK colleges.

Introduction

Within the educational sector, decision-making plays a crucial role in fostering positive outcomes for teachers and students and ensuring the effectiveness of the whole education system (Mulford, 2003). The review of existing literature reveals that decision-making practices help in the optimal utilization of resources, ensure accountability, and, therefore, improve the final outcomes (Munna, 2021).

Research indicates that colleges, nowadays, are inclined towards taking data-driven and evidence-based decision-making (Wilcox, 2021). The study conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) demonstrates the reliance of higher education institutions to inform decision-making. The data include the performance of students, community demographics, workforce, and retention rate (AACC, 2018). Furthermore, there is an assertion that result-focused decision-making in colleges includes collaboration between industry and community organisations, student support services, and program selection choices (AACC, 2018).

Equity and diversity are necessary in decision-making. This diversity is necessary when making decisions for program designs, resource allocation, recruitment and retention of students and staff, and providing them support services (Aspen Institute, 2018). Therefore, universities are highly reliant on technology to get data, which could assist in making decisions by utilizing tools and software for analysis and making decisions (Nanda, 2022; Michael & Shuaieb, 2021; Power, 2015). In this regard, online platforms are employed to facilitate collaboration among stakeholders to assist in making informed decisions.

The results of a research conducted by National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in the UK showed a high dependency on data while making decisions that proves to be effective for resource allocation and ultimately affect student's development (NFER, 2017). Evidence-based practices are gaining importance in the UK education industry, providing evidence to support curriculum design, teaching practices, and strategies evaluation. (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020).

Accountability is also recognized as crucial in decision-making within the UK education sector, utilizing data and performance evaluation to ensure schools and educational providers are held responsible (CEY, 2018).

Problem statement

Oman's educational landscape is relatively unstable and underdeveloped compared to the UK's. Various factors contribute to these differences, including different management practices in the educational sector. However, the lack of research comparing the strategic management practices and decision-making process between Oman and the UK poses a significant research gap. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the strategic management practices in the educational sector of Oman and the UK. This research aims to fill the gap by gathering real-time data from college representatives of colleges of both countries. By comparing strategic managerial practices and decision-making approaches, this research could provide valuable knowledge that can enhance the decision-making process in the educational sector of Oman and the UK.

Research aims and objectives

This research aims to compare strategic decision-making processes and management practices in the UK educational sector. To achieve this aim, the following objectives have been devised:

To analyse and compare management practices in the educational sector of Oman and the UK, focusing on leadership style, resource allocation, and governance framework.

To investigate the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of decision-making.

To identify the strategic management practices that could enhance the development of educational institutions in both countries, encompassing areas such as curriculum design, technology integration, HRM, and partnership with industries and community organisations.

To provide evidence-based recommendations to improve management strategies and decision-making processes for educational institutions in Oman and the UK, keeping the specific challenges of the education system in mind.

Research Questions

This research intends to answer following research questions:

What is the difference between the management practices of educational institutes of Oman and the UK?

What are the strategic management practices through which educational institutions can enhance their progress and development?

Literature review

Oman, a country situated in the southeastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, is one of the seven Muslim-majority Arab Gulf countries (Alkindi, 2006; Rajasekar and Khan, 2013). With an area of 309500 square kilometers, Oman is divided into 11 governorates comprising a of total 61 provinces (Al-Balushi, 2017). As of 4th January 2017, the total population of Oman was reported to be 4,552,688, with 54% Omanis and 46% foreigners (Al-Balushi, 2017). Geographically, the country holds a very important position with the United Arab Emirates to the northwest, Saudi Arabia to the west, and Yemen to the southwest (Allen Jr, 2016). Since 1970, Sultan Qaboos has been the ruler of Oman with Muscat as serving capital city. Historically, before the 1970s, most of the Arab population used to live in tribal communities. Resultantly, informal education within an Islamic cultural context constituted the primary source of knowledge (Al-Lamki, 2009). These informal educational initiatives focused on improving Quranic and Arabic language proficiency, putting limitations on former schooling (Alkindi, 2006). Therefore, prior to the 1970s, there were only three schools in the whole of Oman, catering solely to males, with an enrolment of students less than 1,000 (Al Mahdy *et al*., 2018). In comparison, the United Kingdom has established an education system dating back to the 19th century. Higher education in the UK has undergone significant changes in the last four decades of the 20th century, including an overall increase in number of universities, changes in funding sources, and modifications in allocations of public funds (Haynes and Greenaway, 2003). Although public funding is reduced drastically but the compliance requirements have been rigorously practiced, including the establishment of systematic evaluations of teaching and research performance.

The review of previous literature showed a different management practice in the education sector of UK and Oman. The primary difference, as Kezar (2004) indicates, was in funding sector, training of staff, curriculum design. These differences reflect cultural, political, and economic situation of both countries and different educational priorities and objectives.

The national government in the UK contributes significantly to education management by setting rules, designing the national curriculum, and setting rules (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2019). On the contrary, the educational sector in Oman is decentralized, providing more authority to schools and provincial educational agencies (Al-Hajri, 2018).

As the research indicates, the funding structure of both countries is significantly different. According to World Bank data, the percentage of GDP spent on funding education in both countries is as follows:

Year	Government expenditure on education in Oman	Government expenditure on education in UK
2020	-	5.5
2019	5.4	5.2
2018	5.2	5.2
2017	5.8	5.4
2016	-	5.4
2015	-	5.5

The funding structure in the UK is centralized and relies on government sponsorship (House of Commons of Education and Skills Committee, 2019). Although the funding situation is continuously evolving, still the government is the primary funding body. Research explored the impact of funding in conducted by Azmat (2017) explores the impacts of changes in higher education funding in England on student's performance (Azmat, 2017). The shift from state-funded undergraduate programs to considerable tuition fee results in poor performance and means-tested grants and loans. Whereas the funding system in Oman is private, with families and private enterprises providing the major funding for schools, colleges, and universities (Al-Hajri, 2018).

Not only the funding criteria, but the eligibility of teachers also plays an important role and there has been observed a drastic difference. According to UK's House of Commons of Education and Skills Committee, teachers must have a minimum bachelor's degree and training on professional development to get eligibility. In contrast, Oman's educational sector lacks pre-defined rules for the eligibility criteria of teachers, resulting in minimal training or on- the-job training (Al-Hajri, 2018).

There is limited research focusing on decision-making in Oman's educational system. The research analysed the decision-making methods of school principals in Oman. Effective decision-making in schools was correlated with enhanced school performance and student outcomes. Moreover, the research focused on data-informed decisions and the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making. In addition, the sense of responsibility among staff and the school's culture are considered significant factors that influence decision-making (Al-Shaikh & Al-Mahrouqi, 2019).

Methodology

Research design

The research aims to analyse the effectiveness of decision making in educational sector of UK and Oman. To achieve the aim, the qualitative methodological approach was employed. The research includes two phases. Firstly, an extensive literature review to identify the effectiveness of decision making in educational sector of Oman and the UK. This leads to the second phase of research which was an open-ended interview questionnaire.

Study area

The study focuses on laying out strategies for better management of colleges in the UK and Oman. The UK is in the European union and the educational sector there is developed. On the other hand, Oman is in the Arabian Peninsula, and colleges there are not well structured. This study evaluates the strategies and management of different colleges in Oman and the UK and implements the results on the colleges in Oman.

Data collection

Based on the literature review, the questionnaire was designed to identify strategic management practices in Oman Tourism Colleges and colleges in the UK. The questionnaire had different sections, including demographic profiles of respondents, their opinion on strategic planning and future orientation, risk management and opportunities, and the academic excellence of colleges in both countries. About 14 respondents were agreed to have an interview.

Target population

The data was collected from tourism colleges in Oman and the UK. The target population was the Deans, Directors, and Heads of departments. The questionnaire was designed and approved by sending an email with the objectives and questionnaire to each department's office. Once they confirmed, the interview was conducted online or in person, depending upon the feasibility of the respondents.

Data analysis

The study implements thematic analysis technique to answer the research questions and to identify relevant themes and the strategic management practices commonly employed in higher education system of Oman and the UK.

Ethical Consideration

The participants were provided with a consent form that contained all the details about the research's aims and objectives. To ensure the participants' anonymity and confidentiality, details about their personal identity were not gathered during the research. Additionally, all the participants were allocated and identified by a number to ensure their names would not be asked. The data gathered during the research was kept confidential and inaccessible to anyone except the researcher.

Results

The table indicates a thorough overview of the critical characteristics of respondents from the UK and Oman, including their gender, age, education, and occupation. 42.9% of the respondents from the UK were female, while 57.1% were men. According to the age, 28.6% of people were between the ages of 31 and 40, 35.7% were between the ages of 41 and 50, and 14.3% were beyond 50. Regarding education, 7.1% of people possessed undergraduate degrees, 42.9% postgraduate degrees, and 35.7% doctoral degrees. Regarding occupation, there were 14.3% Deans, 21.4% Assistant Directors, and 28.6% Directors and Heads of Departments. All respondents in Oman were men, with 21.4% falling into the 41–50 age range, 35.7% of those over 50, and 42.9% between 31 and 40. The occupations of all Omani respondents included Assistant Directors (21.4%), Directors (42.9%), and Deans (14.3%), and they all had postgraduate or doctoral degrees.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	8	57.1%
Female	6	42.9%
Age		
31 to 40	4	28.6%
41 to 50	5	35.7%
Above 50	2	14.3%
Education		
Undergraduate	1	7.1%
Postgraduate	6	42.9%
Doctorate	5	35.7%
Occupation		
Directors	4	28.6%
Head of Department	4	28.6%
Assistant Directors	3	21.4%
Dean	2	14.3%

Theme 1: Strategic Planning and Future Orientation

The results will explore how much emphasis educational institutions in Oman and the UK put on long-term planning and flexibility in response to opportunities and difficulties in the future. The responses' analysis provided helpful details about the strategies used by educational institutions in both nations.

Theme 1, "Strategic Planning and Future Orientation," encompasses questions about the importance of strategic planning in higher education institutions, its impact on decision-making, and the need for continuous evaluation. Eight of the fourteen respondents from the UK said that their universities provide a competitive edge in professional development. This advantage can be obtained using various strategies, such as annual staff development plans based on needs assessments, performance reviews, and observations. Furthermore, college-funded training programs and conferences help employees improve their knowledge and abilities, which benefits their performance. In comparison, only six of the fourteen Oman respondents identified the presence of staff development committees. However, some participants also emphasized the importance of having great industry connections, teamwork, and partnerships to enhance their competitive advantage.

Responses in the UK for future-oriented plans and strategies showed a proactive commitment to managing the future, with many institutions looking to be the top educators in their specialized disciplines. Usually, the plans are well-organized and in line with the desired goals of the country. A few strategies include extending academic programs, creating professional courses based on market demands, and increasing student enrolment and training possibilities. The fewer participants in Oman gave more in-depth answers, but those who did stress the importance of being competitive and relevant in the long run. Government initiatives, regulatory organizations, and the Ministry of Higher Education's focus on outstanding research and excellent instruction are some external influences pushing these strategies.

The UK colleges' long-term institutional plans demonstrated immense dedication to long-term development and advancement. The college's brand and marketing communications needed to be strengthened, industry relationships needed to be strengthened, programs needed to be expanded, and new ones needed to meet industry demands. Some institutions also attempted to become the top universities in the Middle East, strongly emphasizing staff professional development and research efforts. Respondents in Oman emphasized the need to compete favourably in the educational field, ensure sustainability and good governance, and expand vocational training. In contrast to the UK responses, Oman's responses could have been more comprehensive. UK institutions concentrate on long-term goals and clearly defined strategies in their strategic, integrated approach to future planning. While Oman institutions prioritize competitiveness and significance, they link strategies with national objectives and industry demands.

Theme 2: Risk Management and Improvement Opportunities

Theme 2, "Risk Management and Improvement Opportunities," revolves around identifying and mitigating internal and external risks within educational institutions and exploring areas for improvement in the management system. The findings will examine how Oman and UK colleges recognize and reduce internal and external risks and their competency with particular internal procedures. The study of the responses gained an interesting awareness of how these institutions manage risk management and their areas of competence. Colleges use various techniques in the UK to detect potential risks and take steps to reduce them. Responses emphasized using surveys, input from students and staff, and regular meetings to evaluate the seriousness of challenges and identify feasible alternatives.

A well-structured set of policies and procedures ensures that risk management is applied and managed effectively. Some institutions indicated that the number of students enrolled, and the quality of the teaching staff presented external risks. At the same time, the absence of essential management positions negatively impacted organizational quality as an internal risk. However, Oman's responses could have been more thorough, and only a small number of them mentioned using risk incorporation and a community at the university level to manage risks. Still, there needed to be more references to out-of-date managerial strategies and academic and human resources concerns.

The UK colleges' skill with internal procedures demonstrated their knowledge of numerous internal processes. Course development appeared as a key strength, with many respondents describing it as an area in which they develop. Significant references to marketing and student mentoring also show the institutions' attention on attracting students and offering assistance during their educational journeys. Research and financial management were recognized, and expertise areas that assisted the overall institutional performance were identified.

Responses in Oman showed a more comprehensive range of expertise, with respondents choosing all internal procedures. This suggests that Omani colleges are taking a more equitable approach to internal process management.

The analysis demonstrates that UK colleges' structured risk management methods strongly emphasize risk policies, meetings, and stakeholder participation. While they demonstrate balanced expertise across all internal operations, Omani institutions excel in particular areas like course creation and marketing. These results indicate the sector's positive attributes as well as its limitations.

Theme 3: Academic Excellence and Institutional Success

Theme 3, "Academic Excellence and Institutional Success," focuses on the achievements of the institutions, the factors contributing to their success, and the desired academic aspects for future success. The results highlight the significant achievements of educational institutions in Oman and the UK and the aspects influencing those achievements. The responses' thematic analysis offers insightful information about the main forces that encourage excellence in both nations.

The accepted significant accomplishments in the UK centre on graduating an essential percentage of students in tourism and hospitality-related professions, which increases the job market with skilled experts. Furthermore, the universities received awards for their commitment to community service and research and for regularly raising student achievement. Some institutions emphasized successful programs like Oman Chef, OTC graduation, and other corporate social responsibility initiatives.

In Oman, the achievements were mainly concentrated on maintaining high standards of instruction, attaining national and international accreditations, and forming collaborations and worldwide recognition.

Several elements have been pointed out as contributing to the success of the accomplishments in the UK. These include hiring qualified and experienced academics, proposing cutting-edge facilities and tools, and inspiring well-organized and cooperative management methods. Their success was also significantly supported by transparent management, clear procedures, and an emphasis on staff and student motivation.

While in Oman, elements prompting success were connected to close associations with the Ministry of Higher Education, a committed culture, knowledgeable professors, and effective management techniques. Strong collaborations, teamwork, and leadership contributed significantly to the institutions' successes.

The UK universities stressed the importance of academics' continual professional development through seminars and courses to keep up with educational modifications when investigating the academic characteristics essential for future institutional success. Clearly, stress was placed on increasing a stimulating learning environment that draws students in and stimulates self-directed and ultimate learning. In addition, it was assumed necessary to integrate high-tech teaching methods and update the curriculum to replicate market demands while confirming that teachers had solid educational backgrounds and experiences.

In Oman, the emphasis was on executing creative programs to stimulate growth and success and assimilating AI technology to the institution's advantage. It also highlighted how crucial it is to increase teachers' industrial experience and link student achievement to the business world. Following is the SWOT analysis of strategic management practices in Oman as reported by respondents:

Discussion

The study aims to understand the strategic management practices and decision-making processes of colleges in Oman and the UK and highlight key areas of strategic planning, risk management, and academic excellence. Educational institutions benefit a lot from the strategic planning process as it helps to establish a direction for the future, define concrete goals, provide the tools for the optimal use of resources and coordinate the work of the staff members. The study's findings showed the UK and Oman's mutual perception of incorporating strategic planning to boost teaching effectiveness and research activities and improve cooperation within academic institutions and local communities.

With a focus on effective decision-making, the study compared the strategic management of colleges in Oman and the UK. Strategic planning is necessary in the educational institutions as a primary driver for defining goals, resource allocation and distribution to achieve those goals. The findings showed that Oman and the UK value strategic planning in their colleges (Bayraktutan *et al*., 2023).

Literature showed that strategic planning is necessary in the educational sector for effective teaching and research activities. Findings of current research highlighted the academic success and excellence as primary theme, emphasizing on achieving academic objectives to improve institutions' reputations (Hladchenko *et al*., 2015). Moreover, strategic planning helps in identifying the internal and external risks (Mbanefo *et al*., 2022).

Research conducted by Yaakob *et al*. (2019) stressed on strategic planning for regular evaluation. In addition to strategic planning, Nair *et al*. (2023) emphasized on innovative technology, the importance of introducing new programs and expanding academic offers to get competitive advantage and relevant.

Risk management is considered a crucial theme for institutions to make informed decisions. The research results showed that colleges in Oman and the UK recognizes the internal and external risks as important aspects and strive improve it (Siegel *et al*., 2018). Research has highlighted the importance of managing these risks for continuous improvement. Research conducted by Mahardhika explored this from private institutions perspective. Institutions has understood the importance of risks and how they impact the efficiency and therefore developed techniques to overcome those hazards. This proactive approach toward risks is necessary to manage future risks and difficulties (Mahardhika *et al*., 2023).

Leadership style and management also hold a significant importance in managing risks. Therefore, managerial bodies must consider evaluating the overall performance and quality of the institution. Effective planning in institutions can be helpful in identifying risk and managing it, emphasizing its importance in decision-making

(Audebrand *et al*., 2010). The educational resilience is another crucial factor in risk management. Research conducted in Tanzania found areas for opportunities and growth by fostering strategic thinking and enhancing cooperation areas of improvement for educational resilience (Nnko *et al*., 2023).

The internal procedures include research and budget allocated for it, training, and opportunities for upgrade. Successfully achieving success in these areas, institutions can be confident to handle risks and improve further (Bell *et al*., 2018). The concept of acafemic excellence is crucial yet subjective. It mostly builds around accomplishments and mentoring plays an important role in this regard. Research by Amoli et al. (2016) stressed on growth through internal academic procedures such as mentoring. Efficient mentoring can enhance capacity and transfer information and overall academia performance. By carefully planning and strategizing academic goals, academic institutions can achieve their strategic objectives (Betancur *et al.,* 2022).

Similar to other colleges across the globe, colleges in Oman and the UK might have same idea that academic achievement depend on ranking (Parakhina *et al*., 2017). Research by APavlichenko stressed on importance of exchange of internal information. It is necessary for teaching staff motivation including money management and designing course (Pavlichenko *et al*., 2022). Recent research stressed on e-learning to enhance the quality of higher education and institutional performance (Alsuwaidi *et al*., 2023). By prioritizing the academic criteria and upgrading their palms, educational institutions can improve their performance (Roy *et al*., 2023).

Present research compared the strategic management practices employed in the colleges of Oman and the UK to have a thorough understanding of decision-making process in educational sector of both countries. It was observed that strategic management practices were given the prime importance. However, the decision-making process was different in educational sector of both countries. Omani institutions followed a centralized approach, and senior management holds a key role. On the other hand, key stakeholders including faculty, staff, and students, were included in the strategic decision-making process. The educational decisions might be affected by these differences in decision-making frameworks (Nuel *et al*., 2021).

Secondly, the institutional culture, leadership styles, and availability of resources impact the decision-making in institutions. Colleges that have strong collaborative management and cooperation culture make better decisions (Stukalina *et al*., 2014).

Furthermore, universities with financial resources and human resources make informed decisions. (Latorre-Medina et al., 2013). The comparison showed that UK has a decentralized decision-making process that give a chance to stakeholders to shift the situation. On the contrary, the centralized approach, as practiced by Oman's institutions avoid the delays and speed up the decision-making process. Bhopal et al. (2020) considered balance of centralized and decentralized decision making beneficial to make active and broad decisions without delays (Bhopal et al., 2020).

By being aware of the advantages and disadvantages of numerous decision-making strategies, educational institutions may speed up their strategic management processes and expand their effectiveness. Strongly emphasizing shared governance and stakeholder collaboration can result in better decision outcomes (Kayyali et al., 2023).

This research has some limitations regardless of the helpful findings presented. First, because the study's scope was restricted to colleges in Oman and the UK, it may not be related to how decisions are made in other nations or educational fields. It would be possible to gain a more comprehensive knowledge by extending the attention to integrating more wide-ranging geographic areas and academic institutions. Second, the research mainly depended on college students' self-reported data, which may have some prejudice or errors. Future studies can merge qualitative and quantitative methods for a more consistent and objective understanding.

Theoretical contribution

The main theoretical contribution made by this study is that despite being in different countries, namely Oman and the UK, it looked at the strategic management practices and decision-making processes in higher education institutions in both countries. Evaluating the significance of strategic planning, risk management, and academic prestige is one of the objectives of this study that contributes to the increased comprehension of how these factors influence organizational effectiveness and success in the educational realm. Moreover, the comparison of centralized decisions in Oman and decentralized decisions in the UK reveals how decision-making frameworks affect the performance of these institutions.

Conclusion

Present research is carried out to investigate the efficiency of decision-making in colleges of Oman and the UK. By interviewing the key stakeholders, the study found different approaches to decision-making. Culture, leadership style, and access to resources impact the decision-making abilities and therefore impact the final outcome. Therefore, it was concluded that involvement of key stakeholders in decision-making process is necessary. By including the stakeholders in the decision-making process, institution must improve the efficiency of their strategic management. Furthermore, the research found a need of proper rules and regulations. This study offers various recommendations for improving decision-making in education going forward. It's imperative for educational institutions to prioritize strategic planning. Moreover, stakeholder cooperation, resource allocation, and staff development spending can all contribute to long-term institutional success. Based on the findings of this research, further research can be conducted for future advancements in strategic management methods in education by providing details on difference of decision-making environments in Oman and the UK.

Recommendations

Based on the results, it is recommended that educational institutions consider a balanced approach to making decisions and ensure the involvement of stakeholders to ensure diverse perspectives. Moreover, institutions must develop leadership training and prioritize strategic planning. Other than that, institutions of Oman can learn that innovation in instruction methods, investment in staff development, and high-quality research should be part of their strategic planning. Based on the results, it is recommended that Oman and the UK must embrace innovation in curriculum development to meet the continuously evolving needs of educational sector.

Oman must follow a decentralized decision-making approach and involve stakeholders in an inclusive decision-making process. For this, the decision-making framework must be reframed to include multiple stakeholders to make effective decisions. Moreover, there should be continuous professional development initiatives for teachers in Oman to deliver knowledge effectively. Besides that, the country must be inspired to use high-end technology in classrooms.

Practical examples of how educational institutions may include the findings in the policies and practices should be considered. For example, to ensure the participation of all the major players and balance the decision-making process, it is advisable to establish committees or advisory boards that will consist of representatives from university staff, faculty, students, and external stakeholders. These committees can be entrusted with evaluating the decisions made, presenting their feedback, and ensuring various views are considered before any significant policy and direction settlements.

Moreover, leadership training and strategic planning prioritization could be achieved by facilitating workshops or training dedicated to cultivating the administrative staff's and faculty's leadership skills. Such programs may be designed to tackle strategic visioning, change management, and decisive strategies, and leaders may receive the tools and information needed for an institution's success through them.

Furthermore, the implementation of the innovation in curriculum and instruction design can be initiated by the setting up of special task forces and laboratories which are assigned to investigate possible new ways of teaching, integration of technology into instruction as well as conducting research of methods best suited for the design of programmes. These facilities may stimulate a culture of innovation and continuous perfection within the college, resulting in its responsiveness to the dynamic demands of the educational world. Overall, by offering practical recommendations and feasible measures, educational institutions can transfer the findings into practical changes in their functioning, leading to higher educational effectiveness and impact.

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An investigation of the Impact of Digital Transformation on Customer satisfaction and Loyalty in Hospitality Industry

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Abstract

The hotel industry is undergoing a profound transformation due to the integration of technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), into service operations. The pattern of service delivery, which was previously predicated on human interaction, has been replaced by digital interaction due to this transformation. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is considered one of the preferred places for the tourist to visit. KSA hotels are continuously working on enhancing their tourist experience since they contribute greatly to the KSA economy. The main purpose of this research is to examine how AI tools integration can improve KSA tourists' satisfaction and loyalty level. The research was conducted on Riyadh, Madinah, and Mecca hotels that have implemented AI chatbots, AI personalised services, and AI fraud detection systems. Satisfaction level was determined through quantitative analysis and data was collected from 300 respondents. The quantitative results show that AI tools integration enhance tourist satisfaction levels. It was determined by seeing the significance values of AI chatbots, AI personalised services, and AI fraud detection systems which are less than 0.05. Similarly, the qualitative analysis was performed through the interviews conducted with 9 tourists. The interview answers show that AI tools integration enhances the tourist loyalty level. Overall, research suggested that knowing the impact of AI on the satisfaction and loyalty of tourists could potentially result in the implementation of AI-driven services in hotels, thereby potentially enhancing the preferences of tourists.

Key Words:
Customer satisfaction, Loyalty, Artificial Intelligence, Chat Bot, Personalisation Services, Tourists, Fraud Detection

Introduction

Hospitality is an activity that has been around for hundreds of years and has changed a lot since the start of the 21st century. Several quantitative and qualitative changes are currently taking place due to the cumulative impact of various socioeconomic factors. The dominant position of the trend wherein the hotel superstructure substantially surpasses the volume of tourism demand growth is evident (Lukanova & Ilieva, 2019). In the hospitality industry, satisfaction and loyalty are greater rivalry and raised standards of fundamental services and products due to a great number of competitors. Due to this, the hotel industry should pay more attention to how they provide their services and products since these are often the same for all types and groups of hotels (Korstanje & Seraphin, 2018).

The hospitality industry sector now employs cutting-edge technology, including artificial intelligence (AI). The impact of such technologies on the operational expenses and customer service quality of hotels has been a topic of some debate in recent times. There are numerous benefits of AI over human labor. Nam et al. (2021) found that one minute of labour performed by an automaton is equivalent to fifteen minutes of labour performed by one human (Nam et al., 2021). Reports from experts say that by 2030, robots will be doing about 25% of everyday jobs. Different degrees of AI are implemented based on the intricacy of the technology at hand. These degrees range from basic routine functions to more sophisticated complex operations (Willcocks, 2020). Similarly, Nam et al. (2021) mentioned research conducted by MIT and BCG that reveals that organisations implement AI for the following reasons: to maintain a competitive edge (84%), enter new markets or industries (75%), or reduce expenses (63%). It suggests that AI plays a more strategic role in organisational operations (Nam et al., 2021).

Besides the fact that AI has a strategic value, various studies have shown that the implementation of AI can bring many benefits such as cost-cuttings, operational efficiency increase, or increased revenue (Liang et al., 2024). On the contrary, as per Reim et al. (2020), only 5% of enterprises adopted AI substantially, another 23% adopted it as a prototype, and the remaining 54% implemented it at the most basic level. Some basic challenges such as data consolidation, technical complexities, cyber-security risk, modeling challenges and human–AI process-based interactions may point out to the low adoption rate (Reim et al., 2020).

The hospitality industry is not excluded from the digital age, as technology has become an essential part of our lives. It is important to note that technology serves as a vital element in helping luxury hotels to create more and greater tourist satisfaction and loyalty, which ensures increased customer satisfaction (Shahid & Paul, 2022). Jabeen et al. (2022) note that the hotel and tourism sector remains to be transitioning slowly into the adoption of robotics and AI in the field. On the other hand, there has already been a huge number of hotel cases in which these technologies have been successfully applied (Jabeen et al., 2022).

In contrast, the study regarding employee service quality and AI's impact on tourists' overall experience within the hospitality sector presented by Prentice et al. (2020) depicts important results in this matter. Based on their research, although AI technologies hold the promise of operational efficiencies and improving visitor satisfaction and loyalty, their impact on tourist satisfaction and loyalty hinges on the quality of service provided by employees (Prentice et al., 2020). Also, as Alotaibi et al. (2020) point out, despite the barriers to the introduction of AI in the KSA hospitality sector, there are also such large potential benefits that make this initiative highly relevant. The authors also state that the hotels that can implement these technologies in their operations will have a competitive advantage in the market (Alotaibi et al., 2020).

Based on the literature gap above, the current empirical study attempts to measure the effect of AI on satisfaction and loyalty of tourists in the management of luxury hotels in KSA. The research aim is to determine how fraud detection systems, AI-enhanced personalisation, and chatbot implementation improve the tourist's overall experience. KSA, being a developing country, relies heavily on the socio-economic advantages provided by the tourist sector (AlArjani et al., 2021). Since the inception of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has become more open to international visitors than ever before. Saudi Arabia wants to become an international tourism hub and one of the world's most visited countries, and it wants to speed up a $800 billion plan to do so by targeting between 100 and 150 million tourist visits by 2030 (Moshashai et al., 2020; News, 2024). According to Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) International Limited Saudi Arabian economy is projected to gain $135 billion from artificial intelligence by 2030, making it the largest beneficiary of the technology in the Middle East. Therefore, the significance behind this research is to determine how the incorporation of AI in the hospitality industry enhances its growth and catches the attention of tourists (PwC, 2023; Rostan & Rostan, 2021).

Research Objectives

The following are the research objectives for performing this research

To determine the impact of Fraud Detection Systems integration on tourist satisfaction and loyalty

To determine the impact of AI-enhanced personalisation integration on tourist satisfaction and loyalty

To determine the impact of Chatbot Implementation on tourist satisfaction and loyalty

Conceptual Framework

This research has supposed the integration of AI elements that include fraud detection systems, AI-enhanced personalisation, and Chatbot implementation as some independent variables. While tourist satisfaction and loyalty as dependent variables. The AI elements integration into hotel management can be explained through the utilisation of different kinds of theories. For the chatbot integration into hotel management, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) can be linked. The technology acceptance model (TAM) proposed by Fred Davis in 1986 is a concept of information systems that describes how to convince consumers to adopt and employ new technologies (Abuhassna et al., 2023). According to TAM theory, If tourist perceives chatbots as useful tools that can easily be used, they will adopt them and utilise them to enhance their satisfaction and loyalty.

CRM has the capability to discern the correlation between AI-enhanced personalisation and tourist satisfaction and loyalty. This is particularly advantageous in the present scenario. CRM is the framework that describes the methodologies, general approaches, and instruments used by business organisations to monitor data and contacts with customers throughout their relationship with the organisation (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2021). The concept of CRM has been created by Robert and Kate Kestnbaum. This theory relates to the current research in a way that AI has the potential to enhance individualised satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, hotel companies can leverage cutting-edge technologies to provide personalised services to tourists and enhance their overall feelings and connections, thereby optimising their hotel performance, Furthermore, an application of Travis Hirschi's (1969) social control theory would clarify the correlation between the AI fraud detection system and tourist's experience. Social control theory contends that by capitalising on the socialisation and learning processes, individuals can develop self-control and diminish their tendency to engage in antisocial behaviour (Agnew, 1985; Kempf, 2023). Social Control theory supports the execution of fraud detection systems in the sense that social control of technology usually hinders dishonest behavior. The implementation of technological monitoring systems enhances accountability and deters potential fraudulent activities, thereby fostering a secure and dependable tourist environment.

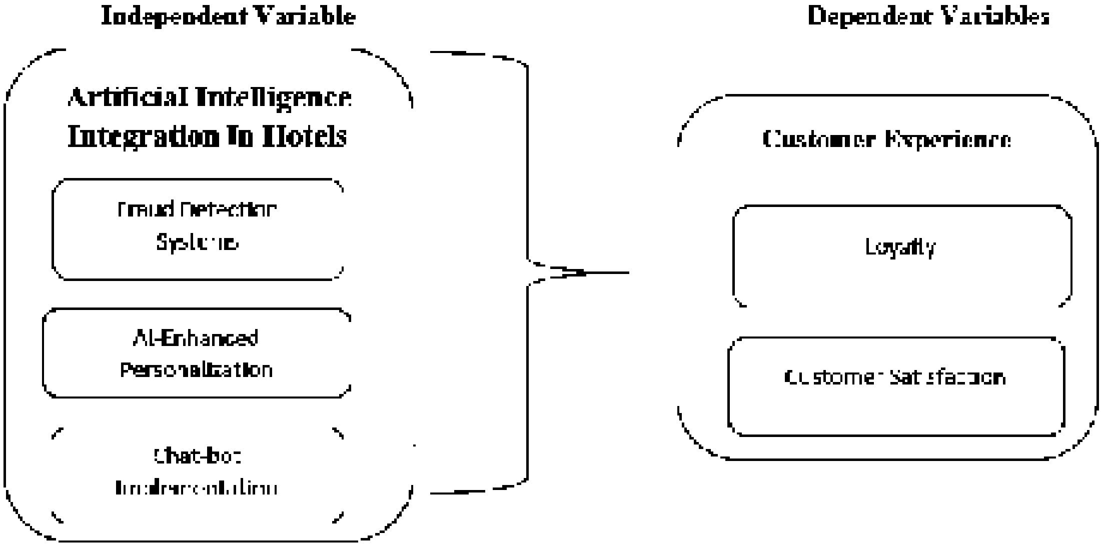

Figure # 1: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

AI Integration in Hotels

AI has emerged as a crucial technology for hotel management in recent years. The impact of AI on the hotel industry has been reported in several studies (Alotaibi 2020; Alotaibi & Khan, 2022). AI technology assists hotels in optimising operating efficiency, elevating the visitor experience, and boosting income (Madhura et al., 2023). Leading hotels around the world are using AI and robots to improve how they run their businesses. AI gives people new and unique satisfaction and loyalty by giving them new tools like robots or voice-activated helpers. It saves money and cuts down on calls to the service desk (Huang et al., 2021; Sthapit et al., 2024; Venkatraman & Miah, 2022). AI also assists hotels in meeting the expectations of their customers, especially millennials, by delivering prompt and precise responses. AI offers customised services by forecasting the desires and requirements of customers and facilitating interactive dialogue throughout their satisfaction and loyalty (Li et al., 2021). Additionally, AI can eliminate repetitive duties therefore increasing employee satisfaction, decreasing operating expenses by 15%, and boosting revenues by 10% (Zhou, 2019).

Various scholars have looked into the effect that AI systems integration into the hotel industry has brought about including. In a study conducted by Roy et al. (2020), a survey of 300 Indian customers of hospitality was conducted to assess their views and readiness to accept AI in the business. it was found from the survey that AI usually shows good attitudes in the case of booking and reservation management, personalised service. According to the research, younger individuals, individuals with higher education, and more affluent individuals are likely to use AI-based services (Roy et al., 2020). A similar investigation was carried out in the UAE by Hussein et al. (2022) concerning the ability of AI to assist hotels in attaining a competitive edge. It has been noted that the use of AI technology by hotels in the UAE is increasingly becoming prevalent as a tool to improve operational efficiency and enhance satisfaction of tourists as well as assist in gaining a competitive advantage. However, the mentioned issues were about data privacy, need for training, and high-cost of implementation(Hussein Al-shami et al., 2022).

Based on the results of Mariani and Borghi's (2021) research, it is clear that mechanical artificial intelligence (MAI) in hospitality services was received positively by consumers who viewed and rated it. The study used data from online reviews, including MAI technology, in five Italian hotels which included chatbots and virtual assistants. The researchers found that the effectiveness of MAI depended on the category and situation. Concerning the levels of satisfaction, customers are more satisfied with MAI in booking and reservation administration, but less satisfied in detailed scenarios such as custom recommendations. The relationship between the perception of quality and total happiness and loyalty about MAI was positive, hence, its capacity to enhance visitors' experience (Mariani & Borghi, 2021). Furthermore, various studies have been conducted in the past that highlighted several methods through which a firm could employ the use of artificial intelligence to ensure that it captures the attention of tourists (Mnyakin, 2023; Nam et al., 2021; Pizam et al., 2022). However, this research takes into account the following approaches:

AI Chat-Bot

A chatbot which is also known as a virtual agent is a computational program that provides guidance instead of human being by answering textual or verbal questions and commands. The chatbot program is capable of comprehending one or more human languages and can engage in dialogue through text or voice (Kim et al., 2023). A chatbot can be conceptualised as an individual that remains operational around the clock, every day of the week. In addition to its primary functions, it is capable of executing productive duties such as generating calculations and establishing alarms or reminders(van der Schyff et al., 2023).

Al-Hyari et al., (2023) mentioned that Hotel websites and mobile applications are progressively incorporating chatbots as a means to optimise operations and augment customer service. These devices implement automated systems for check-in and check-out, enabling patrons to independently complete the check-in procedure, obtain room keys, and depart without requiring any staff involvement (Al-Hyari et al., 2023). Tourists can also place food orders, request amenities, and obtain suggestions for local activities through their room service and concierge departments. They take care of plans and appointments, letting people book a room, change their ticket, and get proof (Peng et al., 2024).

AI- Personalised Services

Management in hotels is using AI to make tourists content by tailoring experiences to each visitor's likes, dislikes, past visits, and behavior by analysing large amounts of data. This includes voice assistants, loyalty programs, personalised recommendations, and predictive analytics, in addition to customised room settings (Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2023). AI-driven systems can accurately predict the amenities or services that tourists will need during their stay after studying prior visits and preferences (Wong et al., 2023).

As suggested by Gupta et al. (2023), implementation of face recognition technology using AI can enable travelers to receive personalised services despite the high level of randomness and unpredictability present in the environment. This technology can benefit several stakeholders such as insurance agents, travel agencies, and taxi drivers in handling large volumes of complex and multidimensional data. It serves as an intermediary between the desires of travellers concerning exceptional business visits and the ability of an organisation to deliver such visits. Integration of visual information in the forms of videos and images with data-driven service superiority might confer greater security to the industry (Gupta et al., 2023).

AI Fraud Detection System

Fraud is a major issue in the hospitality industry as it causes poor financial and image valuation to the businesses (Lin et al., 2023). AI provides hospitality softwares with access to a multitude of information about financial transactions and booking trends that can be used to detect outliers and prevent fraud.AI may improve the safety of hotels if it is used to analyse the behavior of tourists as well as detect security threats (Iliadi, 2023).

Various facilities are provided in hotel management, such as enhanced security through video surveillance, face recognition, access control, detection of threats, and fraud detection. AI can be utilised in the hotel industry to protect consumers, and employers from any threat and predicting and mitigating all probable risks that may be likely to happen to both tourists as well as staff members. Hotels can make tourists and employees safer by implementing AI-enabled technology that monitors what is happening in real time; identifies potential threats, while limiting access to restricted areas and catching fraud (Iliadi, 2023).

Tourist Experience

2.1.1. Tourist Satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction refers to the level of how satisfied or how much a visitor is delighted while lodging at a hotel or any other place within the hospitality sector (Delas Alas Jr & Limos-Galay, 2023). For any hotel to succeed, tourist satisfaction is an essential driver as it could either encourage one to revisit once more or spread positive word of mouth (Zhang et al., 2023). Jahmani et al (2023) indicated several factors from which client satisfaction is determined, such as quality of hotel facilities and services, cleanliness and comfort of rooms, professionalism and friendliness of staff, and overall perceptive value for money (Jahmani et al., 2023).

Moreover, tourist expects some level of personal service and swiftness in meeting their needs and preferences. Luxury hotels place significant importance on tourist satisfaction due to various factors, one of which is the potential for satisfied guests to engage in repeat business. This is even more important for luxury hotels since they become a major source of revenue (Preziosi et al., 2022). The luxury hotel industry is highly competitive and consumer satisfaction can be an area of superiority which will make a hotel different from other hotels and attract new customers. A luxury hotels' expectations of contentment must be met by the satisfaction of tourists as it is crucial for retaining current business and enabling the creation of positive word-of-mouth, advancement of reputation, development of brand loyalty, and possible competitive advantage in the market. This research has taken into account that the integration of AI tools can enhance the tourist satisfaction level (Shafiee et al., 2020). Thus, this research examines the following hypotheses:

H_1: AI Chat-Bot considerably advance the satisfaction level of the tourists

Ho_1: AI Chat-Bot does not considerably advance the satisfaction level of the tourists

H_2: AI- Personalised Services considerably advance the satisfaction level of the tourists

Ho_2: AI- Personalised Services do not considerably advance the satisfaction level of the tourists

H_3: AI Fraud Detection System considerably advance the satisfaction level of tourists

Ho_3: AI Fraud Detection System does not considerably advance the satisfaction level of tourists

2.1.2. Tourist Loyalty

Loyalty is described as the inclination or actual action of a customer to consistently buy certain items or services (Prum et al., 2024). Managers in the hotel business have prioritised the retention or growth of visitor loyalty in response to fierce competition and varied client expectations. Diverse approaches have been used and assessed to enhance the quality of service and boost the rate at which guests revisit (Latif et al., 2024). Ali (2024) demonstrated that hotel services and loyalty programs have a substantial impact on a guest's loyalty toward hotels. Previous research indicates that consumer loyalty is established through a combination of psychological commitment and recurrent purchases(Ali, 2024). Similarly, Hussain et al. (2023) mentioned that Tourist loyalty toward hotels can be comprehended with the help of attitude measurements such as repurchase intent, purchase frequency, and word-of-mouth recommendation(Hussain et al., 2023). This research aim was to determine the following objectives:

RO1: The integration of AI tools, which are AI Chat-Bot, AI- AI-Personalised Services, and AI Fraud Detection System, increases tourist loyalty.

Methodology

Current research has utilized a mixed-method approach. Mixed methods research combines qualitative and quantitative research to solve a research problem (Leonhardt & Overå, 2021). For the data collection, three hotels that provide services to tourists have been targeted. These hotels were situated in Riyadh, Mecca, and Madinah. The rationale behind the selection of Madinah and Mecca was that they are the holiest locations in Islam, attended by a substantial crowd of Muslims for the Umarah and Hajj pilgrimages, respectively. Furthermore, Riyadh was selected due to its reputation as a prominent economic and business center, renowned for its sophisticated infrastructure, which attracts international investors.

For the quantitative data, a questionnaire was performed with the aim of determining the impact of fraud detection systems, AI-enhanced personalisation, and chatbot implementation on tourist satisfaction. The rationale behind choosing quantitative analysis to assess tourist satisfaction with AI-integrated tools is that customer satisfaction is connected with tangible measurement. A questionnaire based on the 5-point Likert scale was formed. There were two primary sections to the questionnaire. The initial segment provided an overview of the demographics of the research sample. The subsequent segment comprised statements pertaining to the dependent variable (tourist satisfaction) and the independent variables that are AI Chat-Bot, AI-Personalised Services, and AI Fraud Detection Systems.

As a means of facilitating arbitration, the questionnaire was presented to a panel of experts in the respective disciplines. Following the arbitration process, the questionnaire underwent revisions and adjustments in line with their feedback. These modifications enhanced the questionnaire items' reliability and consistency with the primary objective of the research.

Three five-star hotels, each one from Riyadh, Madinah, and Macca, were targeted for the data collection. Hundred randomly selected participants from each hotel were requested to fill out the questionnaire at the time of the checkout. Overall, 300 questionnaires were gathered. Out of which 283 were filled, the rest of the 17 questionnaires were then excluded.

Furthermore, to assess the impact of the AI integration tool on tourist loyalty, qualitative analysis has been used. The rationale behind assessing tourist loyalty through qualitative analysis is due to the reason that loyalty is mostly connected to emotions, and that can be better interpreted into words instead of numeric values. For the qualitative data collection, nine tourists, three from each hotel, who spent the highest number of days in the hotel were requested to answer the questions as attached in Appendix No. 1.

Results

Qualitative Analysis

The impact of the AI tool integration on the tourist's loyalty was determined through qualitative analysis, for the interviews were taken from the selected tourists. The selection of the tourists was based on their days of stay and how frequently they visited the hotels.

AI Chat Bot

The tourists who visited the Mecca, Madinah, and Riyadh hotels have approved that the hotel's AI chatbot increased their loyalty level. One of the Mecca tourists shared his experience by coting the following words:

"The hotel's AI Chatbot has significantly transformed convenience and efficiency. The Chatbot would always respond to my queries or issues within record time. It was useful to me when looking through a myriad of hotels. Above all, the Chatbot's fast and smart replies to my questions and ability to help me with most requests, such as ordering room service or recommending the best local restaurants, was a massive improvement on my stay in general."

The Madinah tourist has also mentioned the same point of view. He added:

"I was greatly satisfied with the efficiency and promptness of the hotel AI Chatbot in assisting. It was as if one had an assistant-whenever and wherever. The chatbot responded to my questions quickly, whether I was looking for suggestions for a place to eat, information on what amenities were on site, or just inquired about something else generally.".

On the other hand, the Riyadh tourist coted:

"The hotel's AI Chatbot always provided me with the latest information and support. It also helped in understanding background inquiries and easing conversation. It helped me in providing details about nearby attractions and retrieving hotel regulations."

AI personalised Services

The responses from the interviewer regarding the AI personalised services clearly depicted that they were highly impressed with it. One of the Riyadh hotel tourists has cited the following for the AI personalised services:

"I would like to mention that the hotel AI personalisation services were very impressive. AI personalisation services always provided me with the services that I wanted until the time I stayed in this hotel. I felt very overwhelmed while staying here due to the personalisation services I have been served according to my preferences and choices."

On the same hand, the Mecca hotel tourist has also shown a positive response regarding the AI personalisation service. The tourist coted that:

"*Whenever I ordered through the hotel portal, I always got the recommendation of food, juices, and snacks that I like most. I must say, their personalised services are very well developed."*

Similarly, the Madinah hotel tourist responded that:

"The personalisation services this hotel is offering just want me to stay more in this hotel. The hotel mobile application sent me the notification as per my interest level. Well, this is their best strategy to catch the customer's attention. The technology not only retained my choices but also adjusted in real time according to my interactions. As an example, it accurately predicted my schedule and made automatic changes to the lighting and room temperature appropriately. This adaptive response resulted in a more pleasant and satisfying atmosphere."

AI Fraud Detection System

AI fraud detection system implementation not only assists the hotel consumer but also the hotel management. It ensures the security of data of both the consumers and the hotel management. The Madinah hotel tourist coted her experience by mentioning that:

"I must say, the hotel's AI Fraud Detection System gave me a sense of security and confidence in my transactions. Knowing that there is a sophisticated system in place to safeguard my information and financial transactions provided peace of mind. It seamlessly operated in the background, and I never encountered any issues. The proactive nature of the system in identifying and preventing potential fraud added an extra layer of trust to my overall experience at the hotel."

While the Riyadh hotel tourist coted that:

"I observed that the system actively monitored transactions and flagged any dubious activity throughout my stay. I am grateful for the proactive measures taken to safeguard my financial information; undoubtedly, they contributed to the establishment of a secure environment. In my opinion, this is a valuable feature that enhances the hotel's credibility."

Furthermore, the Mecca hotlists share his overview:

"Throughout my stay, I had no concerns regarding the security of my personal information. The hotel's investment in cutting-edge technology to protect guests from potential fraudulent activities demonstrates a dual dedication to delivering exceptional service and fostering guest confidence. This is undoubtedly an important measure for me when deciding where to remain, and this hotel surely delivered in that regard."

Similarly, the Riyadh tourist shared that:

"My stay in this hotel was very overjoyed. This hotel treated me like a prince. It is not wrong to say that this hotel is the Riyadh smart hotel. I found that this hotel has integrated AI into all its elements, ultimately enhancing the guest experience. I have already recommended this hotel to my friend, who is going to visit Riyadh with his family next year. As I believe, this hotel over joy the trip of the tourists."

Hotel Recommendation

To determine the tourist loyalty toward the hotel, it was also asked from them if they recommend this hotel to their family, and friends and their overall experience in the hotel. The Mecca tourist replied that:

"I will definitely recommend this hotel to my family and friends. The experience and the services I got here were up to the mark. Whenever I come here, this hotel will be my first choice for the stay."

The Madinah tourist replied that:

" I considered this hotel as one of the best hotels in Madinah. This hotel's services have just overwhelmed my overall trip experience. All the services I received from here were as per my likes. When I visit Madinah next year for Umrah with my family, I will come here to stay. I suppose this is the most suitable hotel to stay when you are with your family.

Quantitative Analysis

As mentioned above, a mixed approach was utilised to assess the impact of the AI tool integration in the hotels on tourist satisfaction and loyalty level. For the satisfaction level, reliability tests, correlation, and regression tests have been performed. The results of these tests, along with the demographic analysis, are given below:

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.823	4

Table No # 1: Reliability Analysis

Table No. 1 shows the overall reliability of the model. Reliability is basically the consistency of a measure (Gong et al., 2024). According to the Cronbach alpha value, which is 0.823, it has been proven that the model that has been considered in this research is highly reliable. Since the value of the Cronbach alpha is above the given benchmark that is 0.07.

Demographic Analysis

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Age	20-35	18	6.4	6.4	6.4
	26-50	109	38.5	38.5	44.9
	51-65	110	38.9	38.9	83.7
	Above 65	46	16.3	16.3	100.0
	Total	283	100.0	100.0	
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
City	Mecca	82	29.0	29.0	29.0
	Madinah	111	39.2	39.2	68.2
	Riyadh	90	31.8	31.8	100.0
	Total	283	100.0	100.0	
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Reason of Stay	Business	77	27.2	27.2	27.2
	Religious Tourist	41	14.5	14.5	41.7
	Cultural Tourists	77	27.2	27.2	68.9
	Adventure Tourists	58	20.5	20.5	89.4
	Other	30	10.6	10.6	100.0
	Total	283	100.0	100.0	

Table No # 2: Demographic Analysis

Table # 2 shows the demographic stats. As per the above table, 6.4% of tourists aged from 20-35, 38.5% of tourists aged 26-50, 38.9% aged ranging from 51-65, and 16.3% of tourists are above 65. As far as the hotels are concerned, 29% tourists were from Mecca hotels, 39.2% tourists were from Madinah hotels, and 31.8% were from Riyadh hotels. Among these tourists, 27.2% stayed at hotels for business, 14.5% were religious tourists, 27.2% were cultural tourists, 20.5 were adventurous tourists, and 10.6 visited hotels for other kinds of tourism.

Correlation

Correlations

		AI Chat Bot	AI Personalised Services	AI Fraud Detection System	Tourist Satisfaction
AI Chat Bot	Pearson Correlation	1	.762**	.449**	.613**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	283	283	283	283
AI Personalised Services	Pearson Correlation	.762**	1	.755**	.558**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	283	283	283	283

AI Fraud Detection System	Pearson Correlation	.449**	.755**	1	.707**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	283	283	283	283
Tourist Satisfaction	Pearson Correlation	.613**	.558**	.707**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	283	283	283	283

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table No # 3: Correlation Analysis

Table # 3 shows the correlation analysis among the variables. Correlation analysis is a statistical technique used to determine whether or not two variables/datasets are related and, if so, the strength of that relationship (Nie et al., 2023). As per the above table, AI Chat Bot and AI Personalised Services are highly correlated, having a value of 0.762. At the same time, AI Chat Bot and AI Fraud Detection System are less correlated than other variables. Since its correlation value is 0.449, furthermore, other variables are high to moderately correlated to each other, having a correlation value of more than 0.6.

Descriptive Analysis

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
AI Chat Bot	283	1.50	4.5	3.6652	.8654
AI Personalised Services	283	1.50	4.75	3.5989	.99128
AI Fraud Detection System	283	1.25	5.00	3.3940	.72370
Tourist Satisfaction	283	1.25	4.75	3.6551	.83921
Valid N (listwise)	283				

Table No # 4: Descriptive Analysis

Table # 4 shows the descriptive statistics chart. Descriptive analysis is a type of data research that facilitates the clarification, demonstration, or concise summarisation of data points to identify patterns that meet all of the data's criteria. As per the above descriptive stats, AI Chat Bots have the highest mean (3.6652), while AI Fraud Detection System has the lowest mean (3.3940). Similarly, AI Personalised Services has the highest standard deviation (.99128), and AI Fraud Detection System has the lowest standard deviation (0.72370).

Regression Analysis

ANOVA

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	137.509	3	45.836	211.000	.000[b]
	Residual	60.391	278	.217		
	Total	197.900	281			

a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction

b. Predictors: (Constant), AI Fraud Detection System, AI Chat Bot, AI Personalised Services

Table No # 5: Anova Analysis

Table # 5 is regarding the model summary. ANOVA is a statistical technique utilised to partition observed variance data into distinct components, which are subsequently utilised in further analyses. According to the Anova table, the model considered in this research is a good fit. It is also supported by the model significance value that is 0.00, less than 0.05, and the F value (211.000), which is critically high, supporting the model relevancy.

Coefficient Table

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.120	.135		8.325	.000
	AI Chat Bot	.059	.004	.711	13.259	.003
	AI Personalised Services	-.544	.062	-.643	-8.803	.001
	AI Fraud Detection System	1.012	.061	.873	16.509	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Tourist Satisfaction

Table No # 5: Coefficient Analysis

As per table # 5, all the variables of the research have been accepted since their significance values are less than 0.05. It shows that the AI integration tools, including AI Chat Bots, AI personalised services, and AI fraud Detection systems, have significantly increased the satisfaction level of tourists. Therefore, the research has accepted the following hypotheses:

H_1: AI Chat-Bot increases the satisfaction level of the tourists

H_2: AI- Personalised Services increases the satisfaction level of the tourists

H_3: AI Fraud Detection System increases the satisfaction level of the tourists

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative results of this research depict that the integration of AI tools into the hotels of Saudi Arabia tends to improve tourist satisfaction and loyalty levels. As per the satisfaction level is concerned, the integration of an AI chatbot, AI personalised services, and fraud detection system has significantly increased the satisfaction level of the tourists, as all the hypotheses of this research have been accepted. Similarly, the qualitative analysis also proved that the AI tools in hotels make tourists more loyal to the hotels. Past studies already support these results. According to several researchers, if the hotel provides personalised services to their tourists and regular customers, then it enhances their satisfaction, and loyalty level and catches their attention (Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2023; Roy et al., 2020).

This can also be further explained through the TAM model that was utilised in this research to support the implementation of AI-personalisation services. TAM serves as a foundational framework for research on consumer experiences pertaining to the adoption of new technologies. Its explanatory capacity can be enhanced by integrating supplementary variables that account for the specific circumstances of evolving consumption patterns and new technology implementations. According to TAM model, inclusion of the extra factors into the current technological system help in enhancing the overall tourists experience in hotel management (Han et al., 2021).

Similarly, the results also depicted that the integration of Chatbots has helped in gaining tourist satisfaction and loyalty. According to Nguyen et al. (2023), Chat Bot plays an influential role in enhancing the guest experience. According to this research, chatbot implementation provides the customisation, anonymity, and empathy response that ensures substantial interaction with the guest and thus increases satisfaction and loyalty levels (Nguyen et al., 2023). Satheesh et al. (2020) offer further support for the CRM framework that was implemented to facilitate chatbot integration.

The research shed light on the importance of chatbots utlisation in hotel management. The employer can utlisation chatbots to effectively interact with their customers and get information regarding their needs, and preferences, and serve them according to it. This ultimately enhances their relationship with the customers (Satheesh et al., 2020).

In the same context, Putri et al., (2020) research have shown that Chatbots enable visitors to reach hotels for customised services at any time and from any location. It is a personal front desk that provides customers with real-time, context-appropriate hotel service information and the ability to verify room availability, reserve, and price rooms (Putri et al., 2019). This customised interaction guarantees positive tourist experiences that lead to a higher satisfaction level which in turn impacts their loyalty level too as the tourists feel that their preferences and needs are acknowledged and valued.

Furthermore, the research also shows that the integration of AI fraud detection provides more overwhelming experiences to the tourist and thus enhances their satisfaction and loyalty level. In this research, the AI fraud system integration is supported by Social Control theory. This theoretical integration is well explained in Tan et al (2023) research. According to the research, the inclusion of the AI fraud detection system guarantees social security to the consumers (Tan et al., 2023). In this context, the Social Control theory posits that the implementation of an AI fraud detection system would significantly reduce the likelihood of fraudulent activities. This is because individuals would be less inclined to engage in deceptive practices, given that they would be completely cognizant of the fact that their activities are being monitored. According to Al-Hyari et al. (2023), through the integration of the AI fraud detection system, the hotel management cannot only protect its data but also ensure the full security of the tourist’s data and the transaction (Al-Hyari et al., 2023).

Limitations and Future Research

This research is limited to Saudi Arabia and did not take into account the other geographical states. More geographical states and hotels could be considered to increase the research's generalizability. The research is only limited to assessing the satisfaction and the loyalty level of tourists. The future researcher can consider hotel management to get a deeper insight into AI implementation. Furthermore, the research data was collected in a short time frame of three months. Data could be collected considering the longer time frame for data collection to catch the potential variation.

Recommendation

The research supports that the integration of AI into the hotel has the ability to enhance the overall tourist experiences. However, some recommendations should be taken into consideration to improve AI performance in hotels. The hotel management can utilise AI to collect data on customers' preferences and activities, including their lodging choices, eating preferences, and favourite activities. The hotel administration could also use AI technologies to handle typical requests like room service, maintenance, and bookings to help tourists promptly and free up staff time for more complicated duties. Furthermore, there should the inclusion of feedback system from the tourists to gather timely information regarding the tourists' experience within the hotel.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence can improve visitor satisfaction in luxury hotels by delivering tailored and streamlined services. Technological tools like chatbots, face recognition, personalised services, and AI fraud detection systems have the potential to improve the tourist experience, leading to higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty. The current research investigated the impact of AI on tourist satisfaction. The study provided theoretical viewpoints on the impact of technology in the hospitality sector and proposed recommendations to improve tourist satisfaction through the use of AI. The practical implications of the research indicated that understanding the impact of AI on tourist satisfaction and loyalty levels might lead to the implementation of AI-powered solutions in luxury hotels, thereby improving tourist preferences.

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The ROI of hotel human capital investment: What's that about… never heard of it!

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between hotel Human Capital Investment (HCI), employee productivity (EP) and the Return on Investment (ROI) of Human Capital (HC). When hotels invest in their HC, they should expect a return on that investment, a concept known as Return on Human Capital Investment – ROHCI.

Semi-structured interviews with general and operational hotel managers and a survey of employees sought to understand HCI, EP, and ROHCI and how these were measured and tracked. Participants were from international and domestic hotel brands in New Zealand.

This research reports hotel managers and senior hotel head office human resource directors do not understand or measure ROHCI at operational or tactical levels. These findings have not previously been considered or reported in the literature. The key message for industry practitioners and hospitality researchers is that they should work together to co-produce research that will help managers better understand ROHCI and its calculation.

Key Words:
Human Capital, Return on Investment, Hotels, New Zealand

Introduction

The value-generating competencies of employees, known as human capital efficiency, are vital for organisational financial success (Barros, Peypoch, & Solonandrasana, 2009). Such competencies are bought into the hotel when the employee is first employed or as a result of training and learning to improve the knowledge, skills, and capabilities, which can lead to positive individual and organisational outcomes (Pelinescu, 2015). Purchasing such competencies and ongoing investment in employee training can be considered Human Capital Investment (HCI); however, there is a lack of research and understanding of how hotels confirm the actual financial return on such investments.

While HCI should be viewed as an investment rather than an expense (Namasivayam & Denizci, 2006; Pelinescu, 2015), measuring the outcomes of such investment has been overlooked (Santos & Stuart, 2003). Surprisingly, the outcome of this research highlights the concept of Human Capital (HC) Return on Investment (ROI), which we term ROHCI, is not understood or used within the New Zealand hotel industry at operational or strategic Head Office levels. This outcome is a significant concern and missed opportunity, given that hotels report their HC as the greatest asset and should know the return this investment makes.

The adage that *if you don't measure it, you can't manage* is valid in many business contexts, and managing ROI is not exempt from this. Evaluating/measuring training as part of HCI was proposed many decades ago by Kirkpatrick (1977), with Phillips (1994) extending the model and adding ROI, which calculated training investment. In acknowledging training is only one aspect of ROHCI, there are several reported reasons for not being able to quantify HC-ROI, including the lack of managers' skills and knowledge to understand and collect the required data for calculation and measurement (Charlwood, Stuart, & Trusson, 2017). Further, Stern (2011) and Kline and Harris (2008) note that managers report not measuring ROHCI due to insufficient time, ineffective tracking systems and metrics, and lack of confidence in reporting incorrect values to higher management, dreading they may lose their jobs. These concerns aside, in today's environment where HC is difficult to find and increasing in cost, organisations should measure HCI to establish ROHCI by collecting appropriate metrics for communicating the impact of human resource work in the organisation (Birasnav, Rangnekar, & Dalpati, 2010).

The focus on ROHCI is one component of the overall productivity discussion that every business has today. Managers generally understand there is a link between HCI and Employee Productivity (EP) (Tangen, 2005); however, it is vital to know how EP finally tracks to ROI.

Past research on ROI considers benefits and costs; for example, Chambel and Sobral (2011) suggested benefits can be material or financial gain and social status, money and lost opportunity. Earlier research by Kirkpatrick (1977) focused primarily on the ROI of training. Still, there has not been any serious discussion on ROHCI in hotels, even though there are models such as those presented by Mankiw *et al.* (1992), Fitz-enz (J Fitz-enz, 2000; 2010), Prosvirkina (2014) and Manuti (2014). Arguably, the lack of interest and action in understanding this is explained by Kline & Harris (2008), who suggest, in a hospitality context, this could only be effectively done by larger organisations due to capturing data as part of the calculation.

The research reported here was undertaken in the New Zealand hotel industry, which set out to fill the notable gap in the literature related to evidence of increased productivity (and ROI) and positive returns from HCI. To achieve this, two research questions guided this research. (1) To what extent does HCI impact EP and, ultimately, hotel performance in terms of their ROI in the New Zealand hotel industry? (2) Investigate if and how hotel managers calculate or track ROHCI.

Method

This study focused on three to five-star rated hotels with 50 or more rooms from three major tourist locations in New Zealand - Christchurch, Auckland, and Queenstown. Using differing star ratings enabled comparison of results while the locations chosen were because this is where most New Zealand hotels are based. The reason for hotels with more than 50 rooms is supported in the literature (Bergin-

Seers, Jago, Breen, and Carlsen (2006). Further, hotels with less than 50 rooms are assumed to be operated by owners and are less likely to involve formal HC and strategy functions (Ladkin & Riley, 1996). Finally, it was considered that larger hotels would understand the concepts of HCI, EP, and ROHCI.

Hotels from each location were listed under their star rating in order of size. Starting with the first hotel in each list, invitations to participate were sent to hotels until at least five hotels agreed to participate, or all hotels in the classification if there were less than five.

Semi-structured interviews with hotel General Managers (GMs) and Operational Managers (OMs) sought to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of how managers (1) define/measure productivity in the hotel context, (2) perceive HCI impacts on EP, and (3) understand and measure the link between HCI and ROHCI. The rationale for interviewing GMs and OMs was to understand if there were differences in their understanding of the HCI, EP and ROHCI concepts.

Transcripts were analysed via NVivo with themes developed using a Grounded Theory approach via standard coding. Employee surveys were captured and analysed via Qualtrics.

Results

This section considers the research results under several headings and begins with the participants' demographics.

Participants

Ninety-two managers were invited to participate in the study, and 25 managers agreed: 12 general managers (GMs) and 13 operational managers (OMs), which consisted of four Human Resource (HR) managers and nine Heads of Departments (HoDs). Over half of all managers held at least a Bachelor's degree, with six managers holding a Master's degree. The majority of managers were over 35 years of age. Finally, male managers outnumber females by fifteen to ten, with males having longer tenure as a GM than females.

Human Capital Investment

Generally, GMs and OMs had different views of HCI, including how HCI impacted EP and ROI. We suggest this reflects their default job descriptions and personal key performance indicators (KPIs). OMs consistently expressed specific, role-focused interpretations of HCI and gave practical ways to do this. This went beyond their professed interpretation of HCI and was closer to the comprehensive understanding of the theory that most GMs professed.

Investment in training was generally via a *buddy* or on-job training with smaller elements of off-job training and in-house e-learning. GMs and OMs acknowledge that each type of investment has advantages and disadvantages, and budgets and staff availability drive the costs associated with each type. However, no matter which investment method was used, no tracking or measurement of its success could be linked to ROI. The value of measurement-to-manage is lost and exampled by one hotel manager who said, "W*hen it comes to budget, financials, or return on investment, you need to speak to my Chief Finance Officer, who heads the finance department*. *I definitely know we have a budget, but I can't help with these questions*".

Employee Productivity

GMs generally viewed employees as their greatest asset and HCI as adding value to their employees. Another GM suggested that adding value to employees' professional and personal development improved their productivity: "It is really about developing or adding value to people, and allocating resources for their professional and personal development. HCI is about developing talent for the future and not [just] now. Examples of the investments are training programmes, reward programmes to boost morale and productivity, and flexible working arrangements. Sometimes providing training that is externally focused and not relevant to the work they do. Their own passion makes them committed and loyal, which impacts their work."

GMs have what could be considered a balanced view of how EP is measured. For example, two GMs noted: (1) In the restaurant, when they serve 130 covers at night, is it a good 130 or 130 terrible covers? You don't only look for quantity, but I believe quality has to come in as well. (2) Productivity standards are set to match service quality levels. We don't want to stretch the employees too much because it will have adverse effects on service quality, which is more important to us than just the numbers. While OMs did not discount quality as a measure of productivity, they are more focused on quantitative evaluation exampled by: (1) "Employee productivity is the ability to complete a task within the assigned timeline", (2) Our departments, like housekeeping, have structured productivity, and it is a combination of how many minutes they have to clean the rooms.

Managers identified factors that hindered EP, the most significant being high staff turnover. However, most GMs (22 out of the 25) did not know the cost of employee turnover, and only three managers reported that they had an idea of the cost involved. A GM noted, "We spent about $3,000 to $6,000 for a front-line employee. We invest in recruitment and training. Supervisors and management roles are about $10,000 and about $25,000 for Heads of Departments. Another GM pointed out, "That is a lot of money when you have employees leaving more than expected."

Measuring Return on Investment

This research reveals that the concept of ROHCI is not understood by participating hotel GMs or OMs as exampled in the following vignettes.

Even though I know the importance of calculating and knowing your investments, we never track our ROI. It is interesting. I report to the CEO of the company and the CFO, and I get questioned on payroll costs, food costs, using too much soap in the guest rooms, etc. For over 40 years in this industry, no senior management has ever questioned me about ROI. This is something that never comes up for discussion." A further representative quote, *"Yes, we do use our profit and loss statement and balance sheets to see how well we are doing."* Finally, *"I have no idea how to calculate ROI. Our ROI financials are done at the head office. Every month, they send us reports showing our profits.*"

These statements are of concern, with the first statement from a very senior and experienced GM. The second statement is irrelevant to ROHCI as increased profit may result from increased prices, not EP. The final statement is a mix of the former and an admission they do not understand how to calculate any form of ROI. However, managers did view indicators, such as guest satisfaction score, employee retention, turnover levels, career progression, profitability, profit and loss (P&L) statement, KPIs, and productivity levels as measures of ROHCI.

Given that hotel GMs and OMs did not understand the concept of or ways ROHCI can be calculated, the researchers approached a major hotel chain head office, where a senior HR Director said: *"ROI was not calculated or tracked because it was time-consuming, owners are not prepared to invest in software that can be used to track these investments. The industry is more focused on operational aspects, and nobody has the time to sit behind a desk to calculate ROI."*

Discussion

This research sought to understand the linkages between HCI and EP to ROI. Developing this understanding is vital given the extensive discussion in the literature and general hotel industry about employees being a hotel's greatest asset and increasing productivity. Yet, there is almost no discussion or research related to checking the ROI hotels make in their HCI aimed at lifting EP.

As a prelude to this discussion and subsequent results, it is important to remember that hotels, at the macro level, are not homogenous; therefore, no two hotels will have the same KPIs, EP from HCI or subsequent ROI. That said, in the main, hotels have similar operational variables; for example, they invest in employees, have rooms to clean, and have restaurants and bars where guests are served.

With the above in mind, this research proposed the movement from HCI to ROI would be sequential (see Figure 1), and there would be a positive transitional outcome from HCI to EP to ROHCI. However, this research shows that hotels do not engage the last component (ROHCI). As such, hotels have no idea

whether HCI and EP are better or worse in different departments or if there are operational improvements from year to year from HCI. There is a disconnect between HCI and ROHCI.

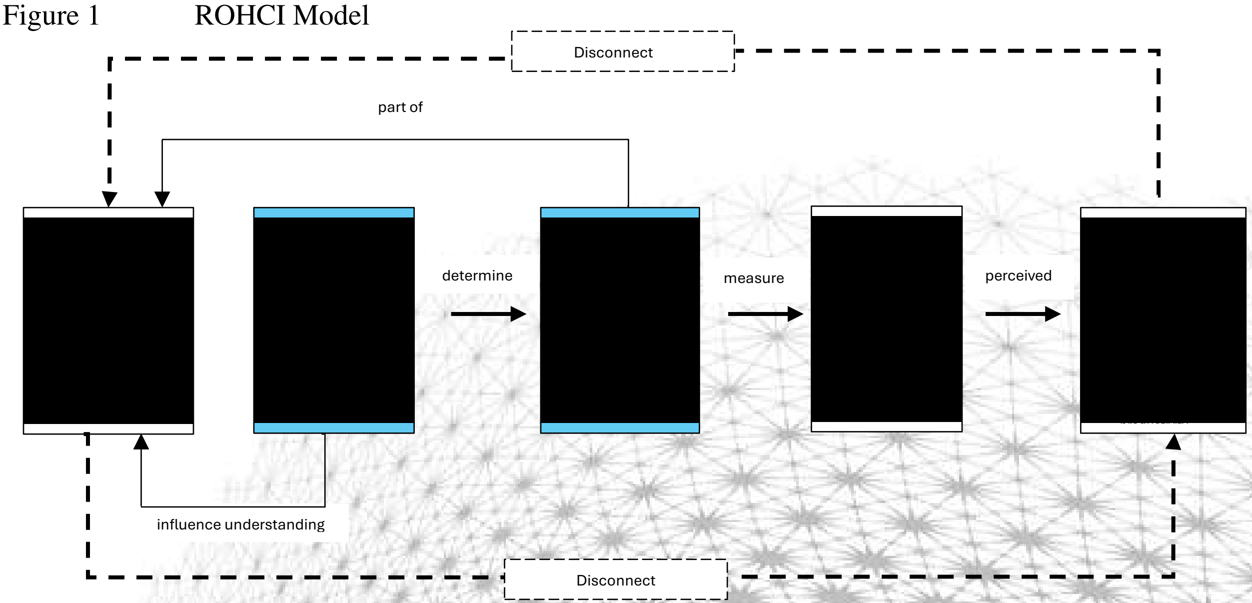
GM's default analysis of ROHCI is from the Profit and Loss Account, and they showed no understanding of the ROHCI concept as a measure of effectively managing the HCI. The assumption is that if the P and L report is better than the previous one, then the HCI has been worth it, which they further assume has increased EP, but this may not have been the case. Increased room prices may drive up revenue, but it does not necessarily mean that EP has been better. Another example is that costs in some products may have been reduced, but there is no change in HCI. GMs and OMs, including Human Resource Managers, did not discuss the concept in general operational meetings and have never been asked about it by Head Office. When the researchers queried the concept, all managers felt it might be something that the Head Office might do. This outcome is surprising and, as mentioned above, worrying, given that HC can be the most significant cost to a hotel. The researchers were even more surprised when the Corporate Head Office Human Resource Managers were not interested in gathering or analysing such information. From an overall chain perspective, such analysis would be valuable to learn where HCI and EP are better than others and take those learnings across the chain.

The general understanding is that if a hotel completes HCI, it will naturally lift EP, and there will be a ROHCI; however, there is no evidence to check this is the case. Indeed, some HCI may have a very low or even no ROHCI, while others may generate a significant ROHCI. Just because it may be challenging to measure is not an excuse not to do so. Given the present financial challenges hotels have experienced as part of COVID, arguably at any time, it is essential to know exactly where money is generating a suitable ROI.

There are various ways to calculate ROHCI; however, all require the total *costs of employees* – wages, training, etc. An issue for hotels not being able to calculate ROHCI is that none of the hotels participating in this research calculated employee turnover costs, a key factor in establishing the overall costs of employees. There is very little research on the topic of hotel employee turnover costs, but research by Davidson *et al.* (2010) in Australia noted it could be as much as $9,591.00 per full-time operational employee – being made up of recruitment, selection, orientation and training, lost productivity and pre-departure. The costs for management personnel are much higher.

Returning to the proposed research assumption of a sequential approach from HCI to ROHCI, Figure 1 notes the disconnect but adds the loop-back needed to ensure HCI is considered once ROHCI has been established. We argue that unless a hotel understands and undertakes ROHCI analysis, they have no idea if and where HCI has a positive or negative effect.

Figure 1 ROHCI Model



Returning to the details of this research, the definition of hotel EP differs depending on who you talk to. This research notes that employees and General Managers (GMs) had similar views, whereas Operational Managers' (OMs) views differed from employees and GMs. Employees and the GMs considered qualitative and quantitative forms of EP, whereas OMs were more focused on quantitative, such as the number of rooms cleaned or guests served. To be clear, OMs did not ignore the qualitative aspects, such as customer satisfaction. However, they received less attention, and this outcome is interesting if we consider the career path from employee to OM to GM. We propose that it results from the KPIs in the differing roles.

Exploring this outcome further, we note that employees are primarily focused on daily customer interaction. They are often evaluated via guest feedback and maintaining services numeric standards, so they see their role as having qualitative and quantitative EP aspects. OMs, however, generally have different drivers/KPIs, primarily ensuring guests are served within the department staffing budget and within set limits, for example, the guests served per wait staff. Here, we note guest input as part of evaluation may be less prominent as an OM seeks to meet budget KPIs if, for example, they wish to be promoted, and this will sharpen the mind and potentially drive actions.

Achieving GM status presents a different set of KPIs, which can include budget and guest feedback, and this is where we see employees and GMs having similar views on EP.

We conclude this discussion with a brief reference to the research participants. This study confirms previous literature findings regarding the demographic makeup of hotel management positions, with most GMs being male. At the same time, OMs were split evenly between genders, and Human Resource Managers were mainly female. It is, however, a continual concern that there is a lack of female GMs in today's hotel industry, something noted in the literature for some time but has not translated to change.

Conclusions and Implications

This research highlights differences in understanding of HCI, EP and ROI between General and Operational Managers and, further, of particular concern, the hotel sector's lack of knowledge and even willingness to engage in the discussion about ROHCI. This research identifies three key conclusions: A shared understanding of HCI, defining and measuring EP, and understanding and calculating ROI.

A shared understanding of HCI:

While HCI has been comprehensively investigated in the general literature, the literature is silent on management's understanding or interpretation of the concept, specifically in the hotel sector. This research highlights differences in the interpretation of HCI due to a person's job role, which is inconsistent with HCI literature. GMs and OMs have different opinions, while GMs and employees share similar opinions. This interpretation-disconnect also exists between researchers and practitioners where terms defining and measuring EP in the hospitality industry must include the key elements of quality of service, client satisfaction, and employee happiness.

While this finding may not be unique to the hotel industry, authoritative international organisations, such as the OECD, which try to standardise most things, need to acknowledge this and consider how different sectors measure productivity.

Defining and measuring employee productivity:

The second conclusion is that although hotels are considered a low-productivity sector, EP is not actively discussed within the New Zealand hotel industry as part of employee output. While there is an international definition of productivity, hotels internally define productivity differently, which differs between hotels with different star ratings.

Regarding measuring EP, the findings match previous literature, which says measuring productivity in hospitality is challenging due to the unique characteristics of services (and their inputs), including intangibility, simultaneous production and consumption, perishability, and heterogeneity. Further, this study revealed that measuring EP appears inconsistent within the industry, resulting in an understanding disconnect. This disconnect adds other dimensions to the existing complexities when assessing work outputs by managers within the industry.

It may be impossible to develop such common measures across the whole industry. Nevertheless, a hotel should define EP, which can happen between hotels of the same chains. Finally, because EP is not understood in terms of definition and practice, there will continue to be a disconnect between practitioners and academics on how the sector is perceived in terms of productivity.

Understanding and calculating ROI:

The final and most striking conclusion is that hotels do not track or calculate ROHCI at operational and head office levels. This finding is significant given labour is reported as the highest cost in a hotel's operation, and hotels often refer to staff as their greatest asset. The reasons for not doing so have been reported above, including hotels not having the necessary data or time. This may be correct, but such data can be gathered, for example, staff turnover costs. Further, without time to understand a hotel's ROHCI, even down to the department level, it may be a waste of money that could be best used elsewhere. Knowing why some departments have better ROHCI than others enables overall EP improvement.

A hotel ROHCI calculator

We conclude this paper with a suggested hotel ROHCI model, which we believe is a starting point for hotels to understand better if there is an acceptable ROI on the HCI. In doing so, we acknowledge this requires investment in gathering data and the time to complete the calculation; however, we also believe that this investment will pay dividends as a hotel is better informed as to where and why differing ROHCI appears in the hotel.

ROHCI = (Revenue minus Non-Human Capital Expenses divided by Human Capital Expenses)

Revenue: This can be a hotel's total or department's revenue over any period. A more refined calculation can include removing the cost of capital, depreciation, interest and taxes.
Non-Human Capital Expenses: Operating expenses (including human capital expenses) minus Human Capital Expenses.
Human Capital Expenses: Fixed and variable remuneration, plus benefits (meals, uniforms, health plans, etc.), plus indirect costs, including employee turnover costs, training, education, recruitment and leaving costs, etc.

Example:

ROHCI: $$\frac{\$840{,}000\text{ (revenue)} - \{\$300{,}000\text{ (all operational costs)} - \$184{,}000\text{ (HC expenses)}\}}{\$184{,}000}$$

$$\frac{\$840{,}000 - \$116{,}000}{184{,}000}$$

$$\frac{\$724{,}000}{\$184{,}000}$$

$$= \$3.93$$

The \$3.93 means that for every dollar the hotel spent related to HCI, it received \$3.93. It is important to note that every hotel or department ROHCI will differ. Still, tracking changes enables more effective strategic future HCI decisions and learnings that can be transferred to other hotels or departments.

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Stronger together: A case study of a joint industry/higher hospitality education student project to raise awareness of water-scarcity

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Abstract

It is imperative that hospitality and tourism students understand the importance of sustainable initiatives in the industry. This paper focuses on an applied project at a Swiss higher education institution undertaken by 4th semester undergraduates in collaboration with a specific innovative hotel chain to imagine out-of-the-box awareness-raising campaigns to save water in some of its properties. This paper reflects on the way project design and teaching practice were implemented and considers feedback from the faculty and students involved. Authentic projects are shown to be valuable for all parties, particularly if undertaken with a solid well-paced andragogical framework. However, climate-change fatigue might be impacting on students' motivation and willingness to engage with real-world sustainability projects leading to a need for educators and their industry partners to implement creative solutions to enthuse their students in the future.

Key Words

Applied projects, sustainability, project-based learning, climate-change fatigue, hospitality and tourism education

Introduction

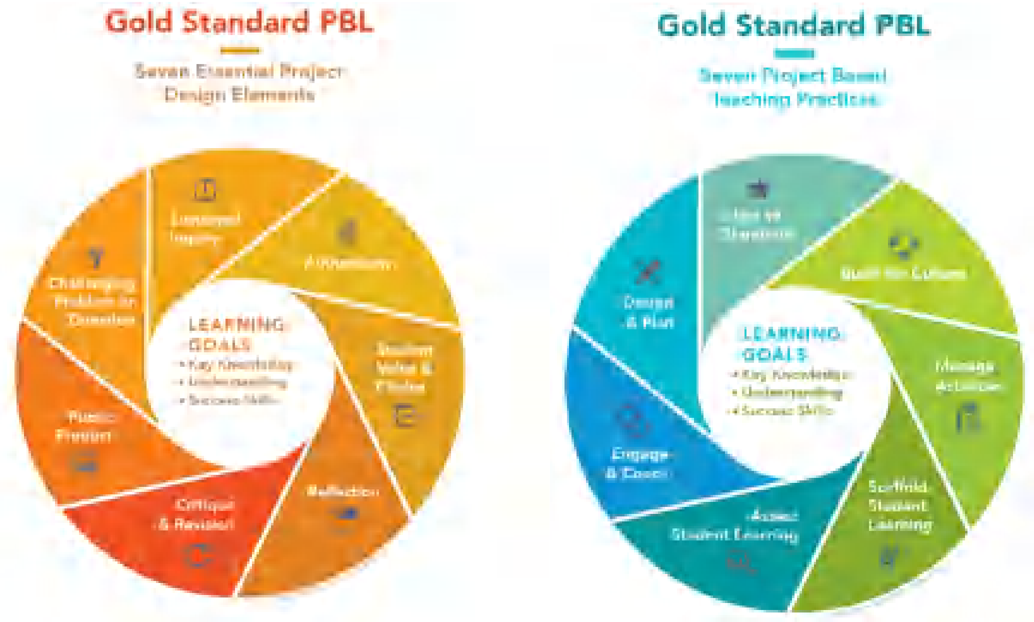
Sustainability is relevant to all students, as is evidenced by the Advance HE (n.d.) which provides practice guides for including sustainable development as a strategic priority in education. Google scholar reflects this popularity with, as of 4th October 2024, over 6 million entries for "sustainability + education" and more than 4 million entries when the term "hospitality" is added. It is evident therefore that the hospitality education sector needs to prepare its students for what Hussain et al. (2023) describe as an industry which will have a greater focus on sustainability in the future. Writing a year or so ago, Munjal and Sharma (2023), could not have expressed the situation more clearly when they stated, "There is an urgent need for hospitality education in the higher education sector to give space and focus to sustainability practices in their curriculum and ensure that the content is embedded and delivered in a contemporary way" (p. 322). One means of enabling students to engage with such practices is to collaborate with the industry. This paper describes how such a collaborative project was undertaken in an international higher hospitality education institution in conjunction with, and at the behest of, a pioneering hotel company to find an innovative solution to an intractable problem: How to raise awareness about water scarcity in staff and or guests of a hotel chain in Spain. This case study explores the undergraduate hospitality students' and their faculty's perspective on the usefulness and value of this joint project as part of an undergraduate degree program.

Reviewing the literature on project-based learning for sustainability studies in higher hospitality education

The concept of developing students' abilities by engaging them in meaningful, real world issues through experiential learning compared to them learning through memorization is far from new. Indeed, in 450BC Confucius is famously quoted as saying, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." Rather more recently, these ideas have been developed by educational psychologists such as Dewey (1938), Kolb (1984) and Rogers and Freiburg (1994) and gained much traction throughout educational levels. A common means of integrating experiential learning is through project based-learning (PBL) with research demonstrating its varied use at university-level: in language classes in tourism and hospitality (Hanak, 2021), in writing classes (Mantra et al., 2023), to teach a service quality model (Shatzkin et al., 2022), and statistics (Elder, 2023) and at post-graduate level in MBA classrooms (Cummings & Yur-Austin, 2022). The definition of PBL used in this work is that of Wiek et al. (2014): "Project-Based Learning models focus on developing case-specific problem understanding to create feasible solution options" in contrast to problem-based learning which they define as being "centred on complex problems," leading to "hypotheses building and testing to develop a deeper understanding of … problems" (p. 434). Examining the overlap between project- and problem-based learning, Brundiers and Wiek (2013) established a commonality between the two, notably, in which students are, amongst others, engaged in real-world tasks, work in small groups, have a teacher as facilitator and are exposed to formative evaluations.

In order to ensure that "gold standard PBL" is facilitated well by placing student learning through problem solving at the heart of the endeavor, several design elements are required: sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, public product and a challenging problem or question (Buck Institute for Education, 2015, 2019a) as shown in.

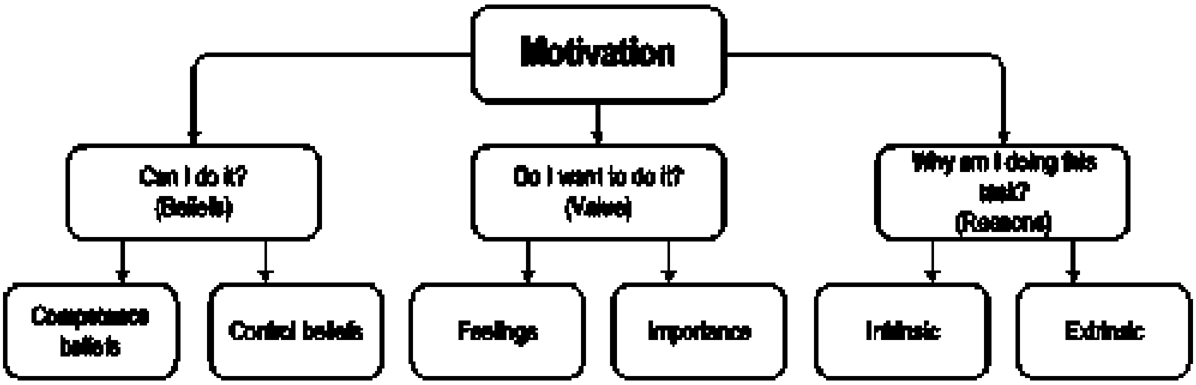
Figure 1: Design elements and teaching practices of gold standard PBL



(Buck Institute for Education, 2019b, 2019a)

Specifically in the higher hospitality education context, Molintas et al. (2023) explain that for collaborative learning to take place, effective working in teams needs to be explicitly taught and scaffolded, not expected, the task needs to be challenging, complex and difficult to complete alone, grading requires “careful deliberation” (p. 297) and groups should be carefully and heterogeneously crafted rather than randomly assigned. Although the Buck Institute for Education requirements are more detailed, Molintas et al.’s (2023) work is notable in that it specifically focuses on using collaborative learning in the context of higher hospitality education institutions on the theme of sustainability. This topic has grown in importance in higher education in recent years with PBL being used as a teaching method, particularly in engineering education (Bolstad et al., 2023). Cities, businesses and other organizations have worked hand-in-hand with educational institutions to provide PBL to higher education students (Wiek et al., 2014). Such projects have enabled students to have a “positive impact on the world” (Rowe, 2007, p. 324) demonstrating the value of PBL in sustainability education (Wiek et al., 2014). However, while it can be challenging to build trustworthy relationships with relevant industrial bodies (Whitmer et al., 2010), these are encouraged (HQPBL.org, 2018) so that students can focus on specific cases from which to create feasible solutions (Wiek et al., 2014). Such engagement “Enables students to master academic content and skills, develop skills necessary for future success, and build the personal agency needed to tackle life’s and the world’s challenges” (HQPBL.org, 2018). In order for PBL to be successful, students need to be motivated to engage in and complete the project. A recent paper by Wijnia et al., (2024) breaks down student motivation into three themes: “Can I do it,” “Do I want to do it,” and “Why am I doing it?”, as can be seen in Figure 2 below. They demonstrate that PBL increases student motivation across these constructs but its impact specifically on motivation for sustainability projects has yet to be explored.

Figure 2: Overview of motivation constructs



(Wijnia et al., 2024, p. 29)

Having established the value of project-based learning in sustainable studies in higher hospitality education and identified best practice elements of design and teaching, the next section will describe the project which is the focus of this case study.

Building bridges – the project

As part of the bachelor's degree offered at the context Swiss international higher hospitality education institution, students in their 4th semester undertake a 6-ECTS credit integrated project course. The first six weeks of this course involve an introduction to research while the second nine weeks comprise a group project which is the focus of this paper. The project was instigated by an external body, in this case, a hotel chain with a strong sustainable ethic which approached the context institution with a project to raise awareness in guests and / or staff of water scarcity, a serious issue in Spain where the chain is based. All students received the same overarching project: using innovative ideas, create or increase awareness in staff and or guests of the hotel (one particular property or the whole chain) about water scarcity. The two relevant learning outcomes for this project which can be found on the course syllabus indicate that at the end of the course, the student should be able to formulate an appropriate research project to address a specific business case and propose a feasible response to a specific business case based on research findings. The students were allocated 24 hours of class time to undertake this project in three to four person groups of their choosing. The author taught one of the two classes (groups 1-6) in the cohort.

Cohort breakdown

The cohort consisted of 32 students spread among 11 groups with the demographic breakdown indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Demographics of the 11 groups

Group 1	male	Pakistan
	female	Mexico
	male	South Africa
Group 2	female	China
	male	China
	female	United Kingdom
Group 3	female	Vietnam
	female	Vietnam
	male	China
Group 4	female	United States
	female	Tanzania
	female	Norway
Group 5	male	Switzerland
	male	Saudi Arabia
	male	Italy
	female	India
Group 6	male	United States
	male	United States
	male	United States

Group 7	male	Hong Kong
	female	Myanmar
	female	Japan
Group 8	female	United States
	female	Switzerland
	male	Saudi Arabia
	male	India
Group 9	male	Philippines
	male	Republic of Korea
	female	Vietnam
Group 10	female	United Kingdom
	female	Thailand
	male	Switzerland
	male	India
Group 11	male	France
	male	France
	female	The Democratic Republic of Congo

Presentation of the assessment to the students

Initially, the company presented itself and the project directly to the students via video link. The task was deliberately open enough to allow for creative ideas under an “innovative awareness raising” concept but sufficiently structured to provide guidance and a certain degree of systematisation for assessment purposes. Notes were taken on the classroom whiteboard by the teacher as the company presented the project, and a photograph of these notes was later shared on the class’s learning management system to enable subsequent reference to the initial shared concept. It was made clear to the students that there were two “customers” of this work who were looking for different but complimentary outcomes: the company looking for engagingly presented innovative solutions and the teachers with their academic requirements laid out in the rubrics. The faculty involved drew up an assessment schedule for the students as shown in Table 2 below and a week-by-week plan of suggested action as shown in Table 3 below. After two weeks of study, students were required to complete an initial literature review on which their peers provided structured feedback. This was a formative assessment, so students were graded for task completion rather than on the quality of work submitted. A short presentation two-weeks later enabled each group to present its progress to date, its planned future tasks, as well as a reflection on teamwork efficiency. The final assessments were due at the end of the course. They consisted of a two-part written component: an executive summary for the company and a more comprehensive academic report for the faculty, as well as a group presentation attended by the company’s representative via video link. A peer review was included in the assessment which enabled grades to be reduced if students were evaluated consistently negatively by their peers.

Table 2 Assessment breakdown

<table>
<tr><th>What</th><th>When</th><th>Weighting</th></tr>
<tr><td>Submission and review of others’ literature reviews</td><td>Midnight Wednesday and midnight Sunday
Week 10</td><td>10%</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">This will be done through Moodle and by email.</td></tr>
<tr><td>5-minute presentation – where you are up to now and what is left to do</td><td>Week 12</td><td>10%</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">You have 5 minutes to tell your classmates and faculty what you have done so far, what has gone well, what needs working on and what you have left to do.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Executive summary</td><td>Week 16</td><td>10%</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">One-page executive summary for the company summarizing the project, solutions, conclusions, and possibly recommendations must be submitted.
Here is a suggested framework:
• Introduction: states the document’s purpose, the content to follow and then the rationale behind it. It should grab and hold the reader’s attention.
• Presenters’ information: introduce the team presenting or responsible for the findings.
• Development of solutions: Explanation and justification of how solutions were arrived at.
• Solutions: Solutions that are logical and well presented.
• Conclusion: recap your solutions, possibly make recommendations.
• Close the executive summary with a strong statement that sets up the theme or central message to the story you tell in the presentation.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Final report</td><td>Week 16</td><td>40%</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">The report must be submitted using the template provided, in MS Word format, and be 2,000 words (+/- 10%).</td></tr>
<tr><td>Presentation</td><td>Week 16</td><td>30%</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">You will have 10 minutes to present the solutions to the company and the faculty (questions from the audience are not included). The use of PowerPoint and/or handouts is not mandatory but highly encouraged.
You will be evaluated on the quality of the presentation. Every group member must speak. We recommend you try to find an interesting and stimulating way to present your project - points will be awarded for creativity.
Each team member must complete the peer assessment, available on Moodle. This evaluation can negatively affect the individual grade by up to 10%.</td></tr>
</table>

A week-by-week breakdown (see Table 3) of activities was shared with the students to enable them to pace themselves and manage their time.

Table 3 Week-by-week breakdown of tasks

Week 7	Presentation to all students by the hotel
Week 8	Group formation, task clarification, drawing up of ground rules
Week 9	Group work, literature review
Week 10	Submission of literature review, review of others’ work
Week 11	Working on ideas for the campaign. Prepare the mini-presentation
Week 12	Mini-presentation showing current progress
Week 13	Continue collecting ideas
Week 14	Prepare presentation, write executive summary, work on final report
Week 15	Practice presentation in front of peers
Week 16	Presentation to the hotel, submission of executive summary, final report and peer evaluation

Results

All groups submitted the work required of them to varying standards. Students demonstrated some creativity in their presentations and reports, with one group using generative AI to produce artwork. Suggestions for awareness-raising included a water-consumption counter in the lobby linked to a rewards system for guests, a water-consumption-reduction competition per department across the hotels in the chain with a reward for the winning department, a rewards system for guests linked to partnering local green companies, using digital technologies such as the Internet of Things linked to an app to encourage water saving behaviors in customers, an encouragement of the use of grey water in addition to rewarding the use of showers instead of the bathtubs, and, finally, a rewards system informed by smart meters in the hotel enabling guests to further engage with the hotel chain.

In their presentations to the hotel representative, all students behaved with the expected high level of professionalism.

Student feedback indicated a divided response to the project. While there were no comments on the groups' composition and the course was described as "great," "perfect" and also "fun and different," other students' feedback thought the course was "boring", "childish" and "repetitive." Not all students appreciated the topic: "I don't feel very much inspired by the project … I don't feel the need of it, even though raising awareness on water saving is necessary worldwide," or its location despite its evident real-life relevance, but they appreciated a structured approach and being able to address their concerns to a real industry expert: "We got the opportunity to actually be able to talk personally with someone from the hotel if we had any concerns or doubts." Students having the agency to choose the topic and location of future projects was raised as a suggested improvement.

Faculty reflection echoes one of the student's comments: "I believe doing multiple deadlines throughout the semester so that the work load at the end of the semester is decreased could be useful. This also strips people from doing it last second, myself included." While there were deadlines in the first month, during the subsequent month, students had time either to work on their project in a timely fashion or, as this student and the author noted in other groups, procrastinate. As a result, the teacher could not provide the input she expected to on the literature review, the ideation stage regarding the awareness-raising campaign or the structure and content of the report.

Discussion and recommendations

The lack of commentary in the feedback on other group members' contributions indicates that allowing students to choose their own colleagues leads to a harmonious working experience. Whether more learning would have been achieved if students had been carefully allocated to create more **heterogenous** and potentially less harmonious **groups** as suggested by Molintas et al. (2023) is a possibility. Reflecting on the design elements of a successful project-based learning task as recommended by the Buck Institute for Education (2015, 2019), the case study under investigation required **sustained inquiry** through the engagement necessary to achieve the task. Students had to undertake a review of the literature in their chosen domain and then reflect on a potential, innovative, awareness-raising campaign. The project was, through its partnership with an existing and motivated company, **authentic**, as demonstrated to the students by the repeated intervention of the person of reference who demonstrated a keen interest in the students' work. It might however have been lacking the "personal authenticity", or speaking to students' concerns discussed by the Buck Institute for Education. The "younger generation" have a heightened awareness of sustainability (Canova & Paladino, 2023) but in this study, this supposed awareness did not translate into a systematic interest in the subject. Although it was later dropped from the list of design elements, **student voice and choice** was included in the earlier (Buck Institute for Education, 2015) version. While the company and overarching guidance was the same for all groups, students were able to choose their own audience for their water-scarcity awareness-raising campaign (to staff and or guests) as well as its implementation. The ability to **critique and revise** was integral to the beginning of the project when the groups' literature reviews were reviewed by peers as a formative, yet graded, assessment. In addition, teacher oversight of the ongoing written work was provided during class time and the notion of re-writing was repeatedly referred to in class. By presenting their work and submitting an executive summary to the company, the students' work was **public** while the nature of the project itself, in that a simple solution to the problem of awareness-raising of water scarcity has yet to be found in the industry, demonstrated the project's **challenging** nature. Student feedback indicated however that not all students grasped the inherent difficulty of the task.

The second layer of the Buck Institute of Education's (2015, 2019) guidance concerns the teaching practices required for high-quality project-based learning. The first of these relates to **aligning the work to standards**. Rubrics were provided to students for all of the assessed work (so not for the formative submission of the literature review) to ensure students were aware of the standard required. The assignment in its entirety was reviewed through the institution's internal verification process to ensure it adhered to the requirements of the semester-4 curriculum and led the students to successful completion of the learning outcomes. Regarding **building the** appropriate **culture**, class time and faculty interaction fostered the promotion of "Student independence and growth, open-ended inquiry [and] team spirit" (Buck Institute for Education, 2019b) while faculty feedback provided a focus on the qualitative element of the submitted work. Faculty interaction with the students who then worked together inside and outside the classroom provided an environment which **scaffolded student learning** while the structured scheme of work ensured **activities** were **managed in a timely fashion.** However, time management was problematic as mentioned above. Assessment of student learning was on-going, through lower-, formative, and later higher-stakes, summative work, with the topic, tasks and scheme of work structured to **engage** the students in a real-world project.

Using Buck Institute for Education's (2015, 2019b) guidance, this flexible yet structured sustainability-focused project should have provided valuable project-based learning for the students undertaking it. Feedback from the hotel indicated satisfaction with some of the groups' work and some of the student feedback demonstrated the benefits of such a study. However, surprisingly, student feedback indicated neither the topic, raising awareness of water scarcity in staff and or guests, nor the company, a particularly socially-aware hotel company, engendered the level of student enthusiasm faculty had expected. Engaging current students with sustainable practices and thinking is indeed challenging, despite their generation's supposed interest in the topic. "Sustainability fatigue" (Costa, 2020), "climate fatigue" (Kerr, 2009) and even "apocalypse fatigue" (Suttie, 2018) are terms which reflect feeling helpless and overwhelmed regarding one's individual agency toward the climate crisis. Referring back to Wijnia et al.'s (2024) motivational constructs, it can be considered from this feedback that the "value" and "reasons", more specifically the importance as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for the project, had been inadequately communicated by the faculty and poorly internalized by the students. Such findings require hospitality educators to reflect carefully about how they can frame sustainability projects, even well-conceived ones such as this case study, to engage and motivate students, inspiring them to engage rather than foster a more passive attitude in the face of such enormous potential existential challenges. Projects need to be paced to encourage students' focus and productivity throughout the course, not merely towards the end, but this must be balanced with constraints linked to an excessive assessment burden on both students and faculty.

Conclusion

Well-conceived project-based learning assessments with their inherent involvement with the real world have potential for engaging higher education hospitality students in topics related to sustainability. Providing authentic learning in a well-structured learning environment and involving learners in solving existing problems for real entities such as hotel companies should, theoretically, enable students to learn independently and deepen their knowledge of, and engagement with, sustainability issues. However, this study shows that sustainability is not a topic which all students find inspiring and motivating, leading to the question of whether the current undergraduate student body is feeling climate fatigue and challenging faculty to think creatively on the ways they can provide the new generation of learners with projects which build impactful bridges between practitioners and academia in the realm of sustainability education. Higher education providers should privilege partnerships with the industry but all actors need to be mindful of current young people's sensitivity to the issue of climate change and ensure that students appreciate the value of and the reasons for collaborative projects in the field of sustainability.

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Decoding Generation Z for Enhanced Hospitality Education: Insights from two Swiss Hospitality Schools

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Abstract

Current tourism learning in higher education system often lacks a focus on the recent technologies necessary for tourism growth, competitiveness, and adaptability. Hence, the alignment of tourism transformative education with the changing needs of the practical tourism context is pivotal to prepare students to be responsible, informed and technologically qualified learners for a best future of the industry. This research highlights the crucial role of the transformative education and strives to bridge the gap in the existing tourism literature. Through meticulous analysis, this paper aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of tourism education and its interaction with the industry by evaluating and implementing a distinctive potential of big data and blockchain synergy.

Key Words:

Decision making, strategic management, educational institutions, Oman colleges, UK colleges.

Introduction

This article presents the results of educational exercises conducted at two Swiss hospitality schools from 2018 to 2022, involving over 200 Generation Z undergraduate students. It comprises a literature review on this cohort's characteristics, followed by insights from classroom activities at HIM (Hotel Institute Montreux) and SHMS (Swiss Hotel Management School). HIM students addressed stereotypes through blog posts, whilst SHMS students discussed their views on academic modules and acquisition of hospitality skills.

The same lecturer, who is also the author of this article, led both school activities. Despite the differences between the two activities and their consecutive occurrence, the author chose to consolidate the results into a single article. This decision was made as both activities aimed to highlight Generation Z students' perspectives on their own qualities and skills. This article provides valuable insights into adult learning, suggesting ways to enhance teaching methods and curriculum. Moreover, it sheds light on how the hospitality industry can become more appealing to Generation Z.

Generation Z Characteristics

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is the second-youngest generation, following Millennials and preceding Generation Alpha. Whilst there's no universal agreement on exact birth years (Jayatissa, 2023), this group is marked by their lifelong exposure to technological advancements, including mobile phones, Wi-Fi, social media, and unrestricted information access. These factors have profoundly influenced their worldview and interactions (Dimock, 2019). Prensky (2001) coined the term "digital natives" to describe this generation, emphasizing their innate comfort with technology. Turner (2015) further elaborated that Gen Z's technological fluency extends beyond mere usage to include an intuitive understanding of digital ecosystems. They've also felt the aftermath of the great recession, observing parental job losses and Millennial siblings returning home. They're acutely aware of the growing wealth disparity and have a clearer grasp than previous generations of financial pressures related to rent and transport. Lastly, the escalating expenses of pursuing higher education have resulted in Generation Z bearing the highest levels of debt (Gomez et al., 2022).

Jayatissa (2023) has outlined Generation Z's defining traits based on various academic sources. These characteristics are categorised into positive or neutral aspects and areas of criticism.

Table 1. Generation Z Characteristics

	Positive or neutral points	Negative points
Communication skills	Tech savvy Creative Informal communication	Short attention span Soft skill Gap Lack of interpersonal skills Inability to deal with emotions and words Bad listeners
Behavioral / attitudes	Self-confident Independent Multi-tasking Pragmatic Adaptable Collaborative Attention to detail	Individualistic Social media-driven. Materialistic

Core values	Environmentally conscious Social activism Loyalty Transparency Mutual respect	Dislike authority and hierarchy
Career	Prefer stable employment Ambitious	Job hopping Dislike routine

Source: Jayatissa's literature review summarised by the author.

Furthermore, the impact of the Covid pandemic on the current generation is significant, as they have endured extended periods of isolation and reduced face-to-face interactions. This has led to a marked increase in mental health issues, making Generation Z the most vulnerable across all age groups (Parker and Igielnik, 2020).

Z.Lab by HIM

The initial class project ran from 2018 to 2021 in a Digital Marketing module for second-year students at HIM. Students were tasked with writing a blog post about their own generation, with the best articles featured on Z.Lab. The subsequent analysis focused on the first fifty articles written by students from 27 different countries.

It's crucial to note that this activity was part of a course module and not a formal research study. The blog posts weren't subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis. The primary aim was to teach students the basics of blog writing. Students consented to their articles being shared and used by the instructor. While some qualitative analysis methods were applied, such as identifying common themes and patterns, the content should not be viewed as the results of a formal research study. Therefore, the feedback and observations presented here are not definitive.

This discussion aims to compare the students' self-perceptions with the findings of a literature review conducted by Jayatissa (2023). Four main themes will be explored.

Generation Z feels unloved.

When reviewing the comments about their generation, the students initially expressed surprise and disappointment at the level of criticism directed at Gen Z, particularly regarding their reliance on social media. However, they also voiced strong disapproval of the older generations who judged them, highlighting the widespread lack of intergenerational understanding. One student wrote: " *In today's world lecturers think that when the class is boring, displaying a video on a screen will catch our attention. However, the truth is that if we were not engaged since the beginning there is no video on the internet that will make our brains process or even retain the information they want to transmit.*" (Murillo, 2018).

Similarly, another student challenged the importance of CVs in job hunting: " *We don't understand how some companies grade people based on a piece of paper! For me, it's like judging its book by its cover and we all know we shouldn't.*" (Wyngaard, 2019).

Overall, the students expressed a wish for older generations to reassess their own biases and world views. One student noted: "*Just because we prefer to hear the news from a quick video rather than a newspaper doesn't mean we have no attention span, just like wearing jeans to the office rather than a suit doesn't make Millennials lazy*." (Pow-Sang, 2019).

They saw a clear generational gap, believing that older generations should adapt to younger ones: "*It is said that depression and low self-esteem is increasing in our society, and who is responsible for this? Generation Z needs guidance to help them find their own values and not to get lost on the* *way. They need role models. Older generations are responsible of helping them on their way to success*." (Lundqvist, 2019).

Generation Z craves meaning and belonging.

In blog posts, this generation often appears cynical about the world, resulting in heightened values. On environmental issues, one student explained: "*My generation is up to date about with every news around the world; we have seen and heard about economic crisis and animals getting endangered. We are a generation that actually cares about sustainability as there might not be much left when we have children or grandchildren.* " (Talapatra, 2021).

Many students shared their career aspirations, revealing that their main priority was finding a company offering job security, personal development, and self-expression opportunities. " *I am looking for a work environment where I can thrive and where I am able to be in psychologically safe teams*." (Nguyen, 2019). They seemed less interested in large corporations, viewing them as unable to recognise individual employees: " *We don't want to work for big corporations, we don't want to be a number. We value small environments where everyone knows each other and where everyone's voice impacts general decision-making*." (Frances, 2019).

Contrary to expectations, they portrayed themselves as humble and open-minded. They genuinely want to learn and adapt, whilst also desiring recognition. "*Gen Z wants to do what they feel is right. It does not mean that we are not willing to change according to the feedback we receive. At the contrary, we want to be able to fail and see our mistakes in order to really understand why we are doing things in a certain way. When we learn something and it is recognized, we have a feeling of accomplishment that leads to higher personal productivity*." (Gullo, 2019).

Generation Z's relationship with technology is multifaceted.

All participants recognised technology's impact on their lives, views, and actions. They demonstrated a deep grasp of these tools' advantages and limitations: " *I know that we want everything RIGHT NOW, but this is how we are used to. With all the advances in technology we don't even need to wait to download any type of files, like it happened with past generations. For us everything happens fast, and everything is on our hands.*" (Gomez, 2019). Some students believe new technologies are their best means to positively transform the world: "*Our generation is hungry for improvement and driven by curiosity. What has happened in the past generations will be completely altered by the Generation Z as we will make huge world improvements, choose clean food over fast food, emphasize on diversity, and create things that may be currently unimaginable for you.*" (Wei, 2019). Nevertheless, they're aware their expectations can be unrealistic, partly due to social media: " *We are addicted to the Internet. We are free and unconventional. We are dreamer that always talking about things that are unrealistic* " (Yu, 2019).

Generation Z is tailored for hospitality.

By 2025, Generation Z is expected to constitute 27% of the workforce (OECD, 2021). A hallmark of Generation Z is their openness to the global community. This cohort travels more frequently than previous generations and shows a strong interest in varied cultures (Pitrelli, 2023). Thus, the hospitality sector is ideally suited to nurture their passion for exploration and cultural immersion. Indeed, Zandotti (2021) noted in her blog article: " *Hospitality is a worldwide industry open to welcome people from all over the world and make of it a melting pot".* Their travel aspirations are linked to their vision of a more equitable world. " *GenZ breaks stereotypes. By travelling in foreign countries, they strive for equality, less discrimination and fairness among each other*." (Labar, 2020).

This emerging generation possesses heightened emotional intelligence, which, according to Longi (2020), makes Gen Z particularly valuable to the hospitality sector: "*Today older generations find mental coaching to be a remedy to those communication skills that have been lacking over decades of theory-based education, instead we have grown in a world that needs us already equipped of 4 emotional intelligences: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and social skill*s."

Generation Z can significantly enhance the hospitality industry, which needs reinvention, as " *The world of hospitality is the last place where we can find magic!"* (Panni, 2019). Gen Z hoteliers recognise their ability to innovate with technology whilst restoring authentic customer relationships. " *Generation Z needs little to no training in technology, which saves valuable time and money*." (de Rooj, 2019). " *Authenticity through sustainability, the less-is-more concept and even taking a few steps back in order to moreforward. We value the real and pure over the fake and plastic versions*." (Bergerud, 2020).

The students' rationales align with Jayatissa's research on social media dependence, limited resilience, social engagement, and resistance to hierarchies. However, their online journal entries don't reflect a significant lack of soft skills. This cohort actively seeks and values interpersonal connections more than previous generations, possibly due to the scarcity of such interactions in their daily lives.

Soft skills gap:

The author studied soft skills with a new group of hotel management students. The students completed a questionnaire to assess their soft skills and identify which modules helped develop these skills. The author shares a summary of the questionnaire data with the students and instructors. The first group of 68 students was interviewed in January 2023, and the second group of 32 students was interviewed in May 2023. The author selected the soft skills for assessment based on the curriculum and student input. The self-assessment was voluntary and conducted during class time. The author clarifies that the feedback is not from a formal survey and includes anonymous comments from participants.

Team Player

Despite slight variations in feedback across different cohorts, it is intriguing to observe that despite considering themselves as proficient team players, students tend to have a preference for working independently. They assert that it is during hands-on serving and cooking classes that they acquire the most valuable insights into teamwork. Nevertheless, their inclination towards self-reliance leads them to favor working alone. *"Most people are very united. But there are always one or two very lazy and irresponsible ones."*

The results validate Jayatissa's examination of literature, portraying Generation Z as self-sufficient and self-reliant. The students interviewed further elucidated this characteristic by articulating their reluctance to depend on the ineptitude of others.

Adaptability and Flexibility

The practical classes are also those which helped them develop their adaptability and flexibility: *"In kitchen practice we often don't have enough ingredients to make the dishes, so we need to change something."* In general, they demonstrate a willingness to collaborate with individuals of diverse backgrounds and possess the ability to adjust accordingly. This observation aligns with the traits previously outlined: Generation Z is known for its collaborative nature and adaptability.

Working under pressure

Furthermore, the students perceive the service class and the development of their restaurant concept as valuable experiences that have taught them to effectively handle high-pressure situations. A significant number of students expressed their appreciation for the supportive and instructive nature of their instructors. *"First service practice was scary, and I felt very nervous and pressure since it is the first time doing the service run despite Mr Thompson and Mr Florent guiding us."* Effective supervision plays a crucial role in helping students cope with stress. However, this assertion contradicts the findings of the literature review.

Dealing with problems & Solving conflicts

The practical courses provide a valuable opportunity for students to develop conflict resolution skills. Many students perceive themselves as proficient problem solvers and attribute conflicts to a lack of effective listening skills. *"Sometimes during our group work, we had some different opinions and views and not all people choose to solve them easily."* In addition, group projects in other disciplines are also an opportunity for them to face difficulties and resolve them. *"There's a lot of difficulties during group projects so I have to stay alert and be tough when something unexpected happens."* Members of Generation Z exhibit a pragmatic mindset and are adept at leveraging their soft skills to tackle challenging situations.

Active listening

The module "Art of Employability" significantly contributed to the enhancement of their active listening abilities, as it provided them with the necessary tools to create compelling CVs and cover letters, as well as to refine their interview skills. Through engaging in personal development activities, both on an individual and group level, they were able to gain valuable insights into their own selves and others. Once student wrote: *"It was very enjoyable to hear a very good student share his experience." Students believe they can influence peers through active listening, contradicting Jayatissa's review of* Generation Z's poor listening skills. This raises the question of whether this generation can listen attentively when motivated.

Communication

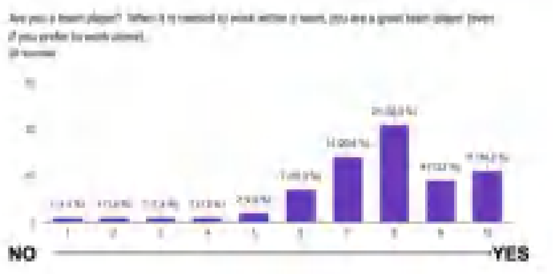
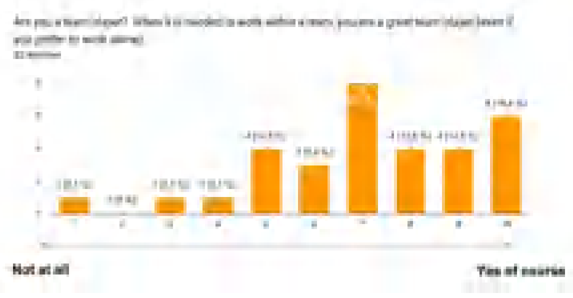
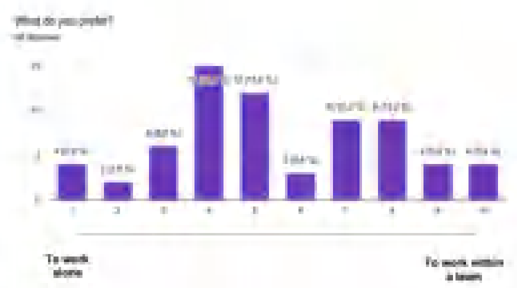
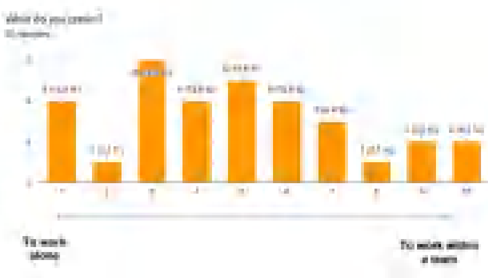
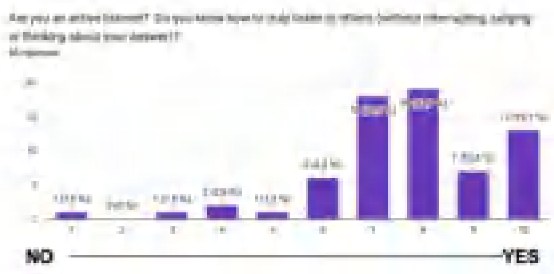
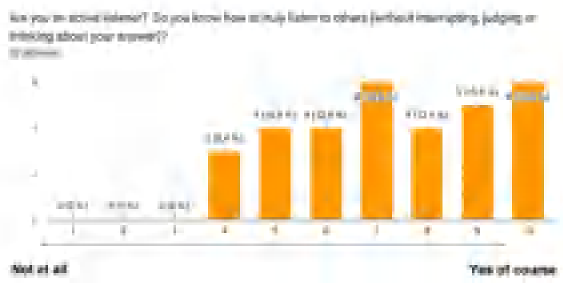
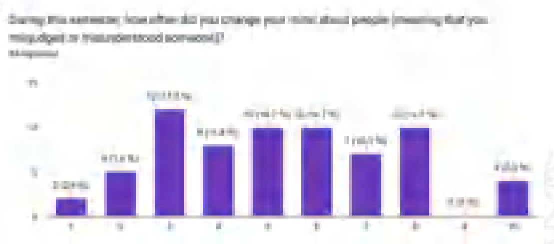
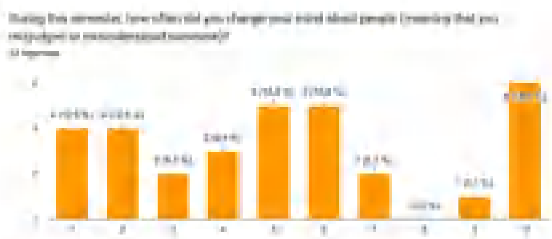
Students have expressed that the Business & Academic Communication module has been instrumental in enhancing their comprehension of professional communication, not only with their instructors but also with their peers. They noted the difference with high school: *"Here you learn to talk to people in a professional environment, different from high school, day to day classes"* Their incorrect usage of words seems to be a result of insufficient explanation and context: *" I got to learn more about the theory behind effective communication in this class, which helped me learn how to better communicate in real life."* It is crucial to offer a framework and avoid assuming that Generation Z possesses knowledge about the habits and customs of the professional world.

Receiving feedback

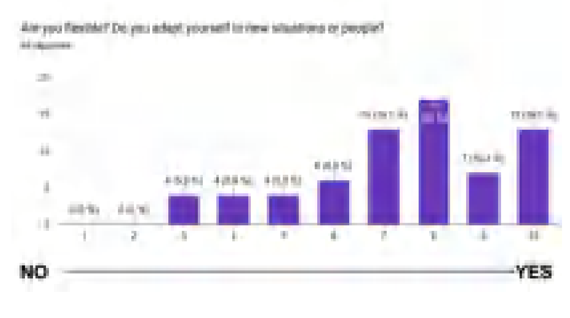
Jayatissa's literature review underscores the fundamental values of Generation Z, emphasizing transparency and mutual respect. The ability of GenZ members to embrace feedback is closely tied to these values, as they acknowledge the significance of acquiring knowledge and seeking advice to enhance their performance. The author's study reveals that practical service and kitchen courses, along with hospitality design courses, were particularly effective in supporting this developmental process. "*For my design project I had put much effort and thought but sadly my way to presentat lowered impacted my grade. Receiving feedback and seeing the critical thinking of the professor lead me to work more on this skill, which was the first step to many other personal and professional improvements."*

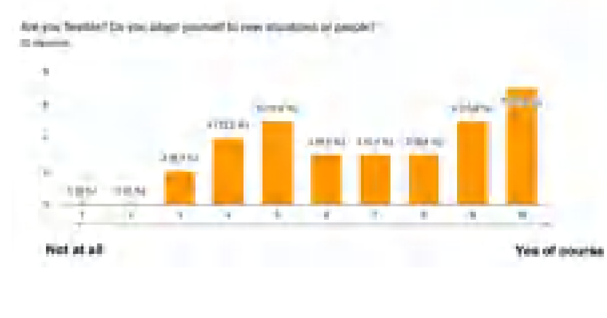
Creativity

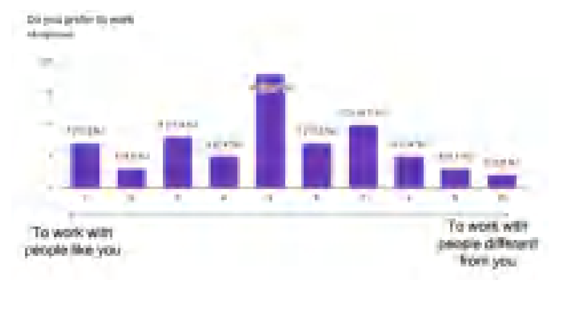
Hospitality design is the preferred module among students as it provides them with ample opportunities to nurture their creativity. It is intriguing to observe the teacher's role in fostering self-confidence among the students, as evident from the comments. *"In the module the professor showed how there is no necessary artistic background to be called creative, being presentable and innovative will give you the freedom to be considered creative."* The students who were interviewed showed a certain level of uncertainty towards creativity, which contradicts Jayatissa's literature review. They have a unique perspective on the world compared to previous generations, yet they seem to lack confidence in suggesting original solutions.

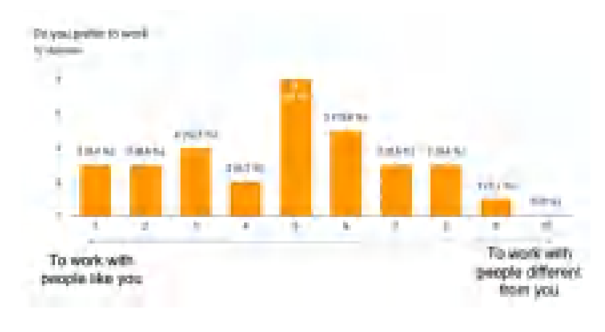
Feedback from January 2023	Feedback from May 2023
Soft skill 1: Team player	
	
	
Soft skill 2: Active listener	
	
	

Soft skill 3: Adaptability / Flexibility

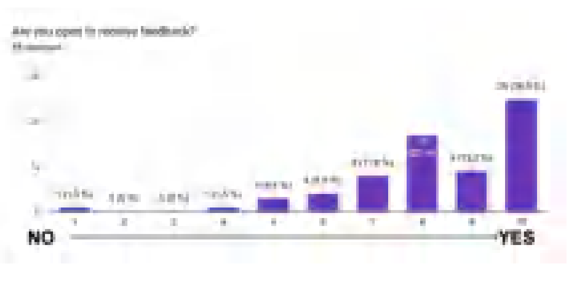


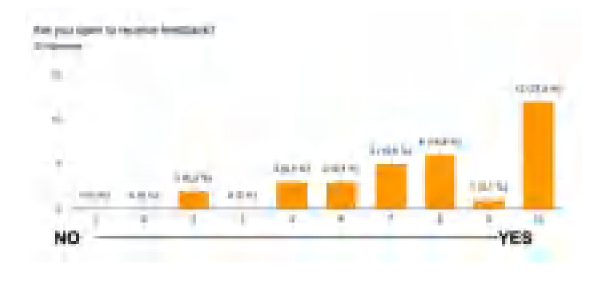


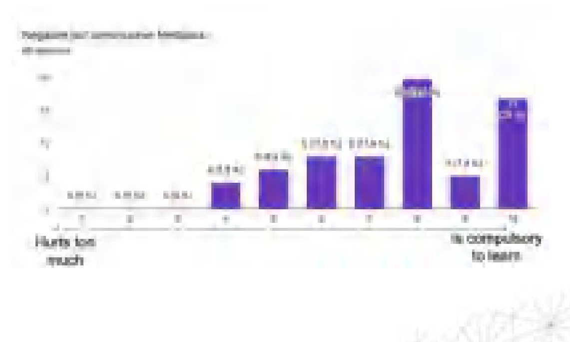


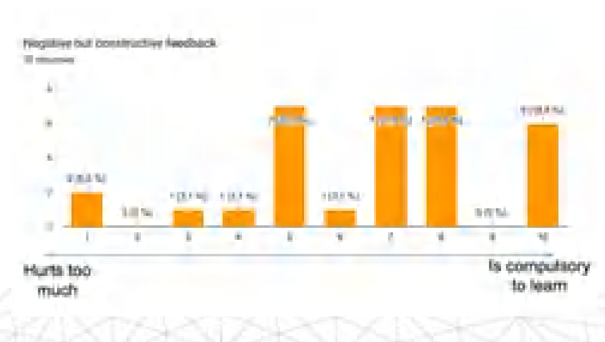


Soft skill 4: Receiving Feedback

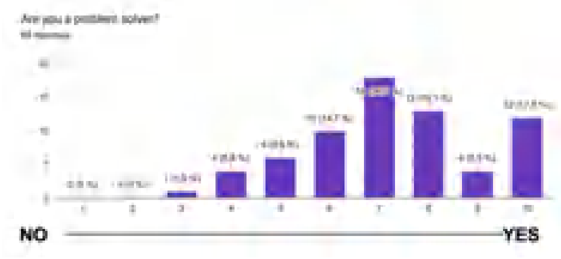


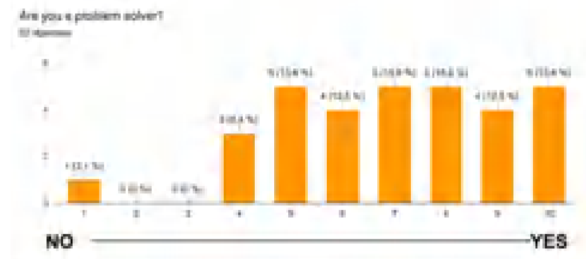


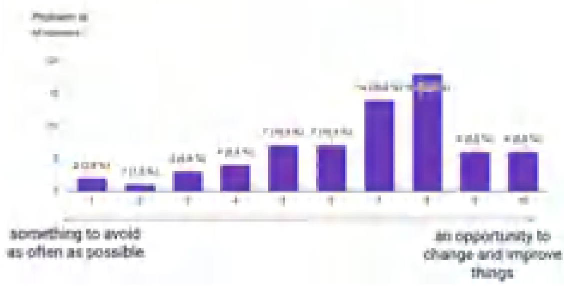


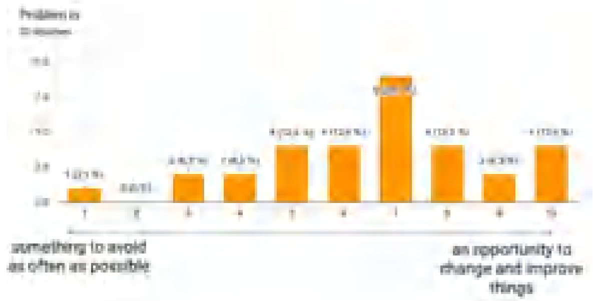


Soft skill 5: Problem Solving

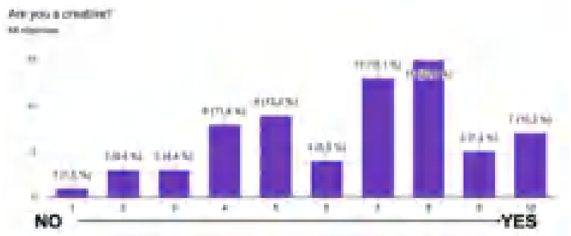


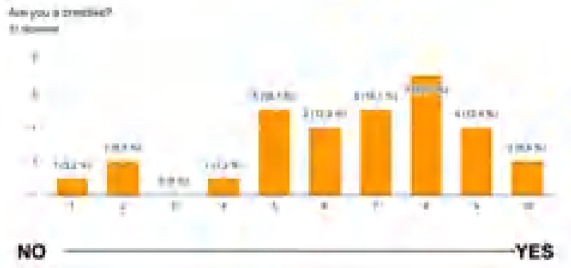


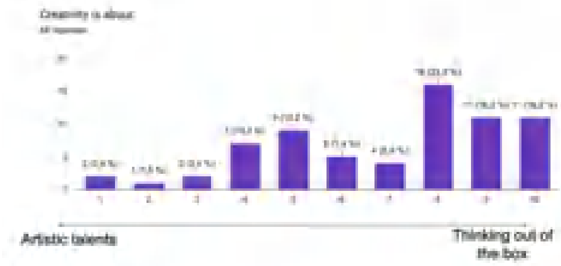


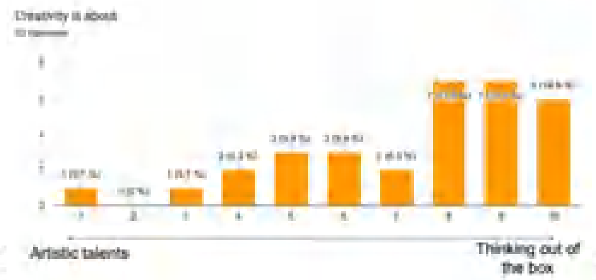


Soft skill 6: Creativity

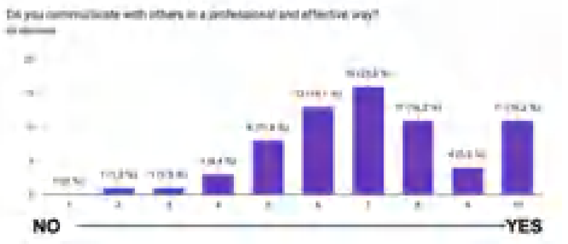


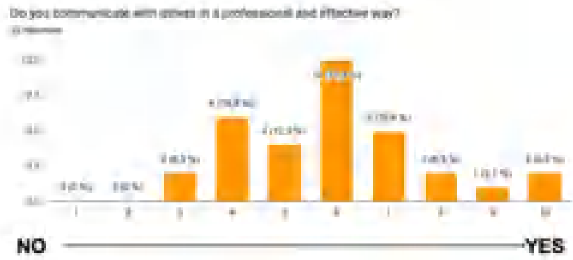


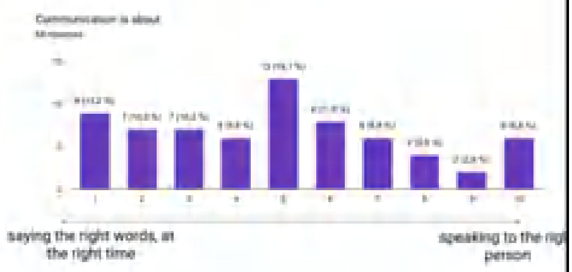


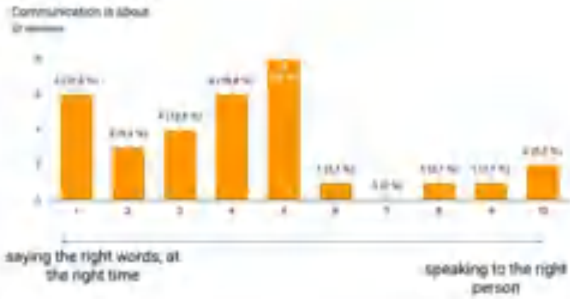


Soft skill 7: Communication

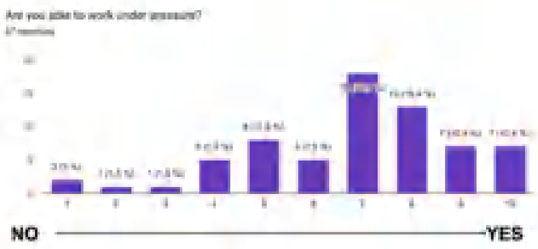


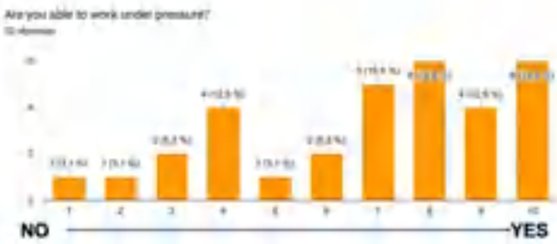


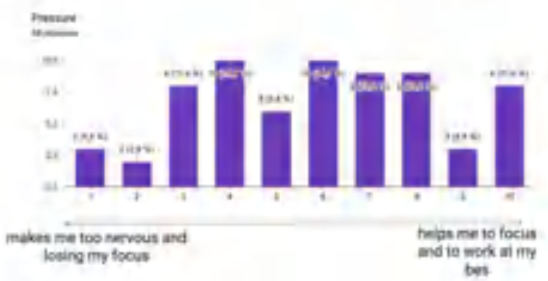


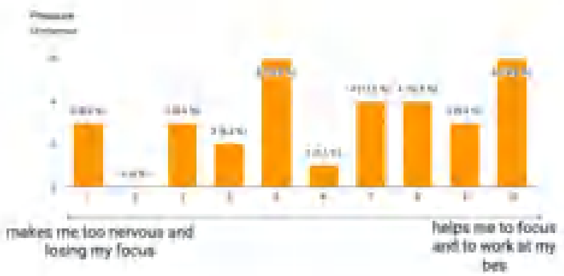


Soft skill 8: Working under pressure

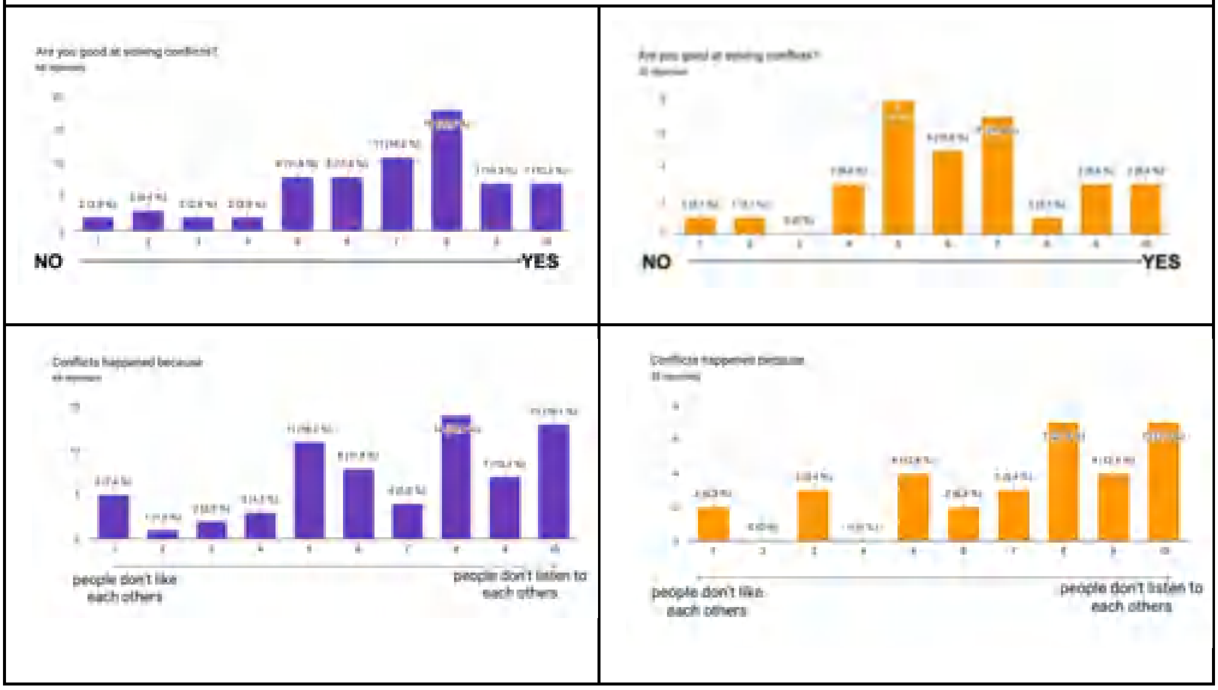








Soft skill 9: Solving conflicts



Source: Author's findings

Limitation:

The results compiled in this paper primarily consist of information gathered in class during various activities.These data were not originally intended to be used as a subject of research. However, given the diverse nature of the information collected, the author deemed it beneficial to share these findings in a more formal manner with the academic community, particularly within hospitality education. The author observed that many analyses regarding Generation Z often fail to provide these young individuals with an opportunity to express their perspectives. To further this exploration, it is essential to adopt a more structured pedagogical approach utilizing a formal academic methodology. The author fully acknowledges that this paper may be viewed as a preliminary study leading to more extensive research endeavors.

All participants in these activities who agreed to have their texts published on the blog are students from hospitality programs. This introduces a bias in the responses, given that these individuals are generally more aware of soft skills, interpersonal communication, and cultural diversity than their peers in Generation Z.

Conclusion:

The analysis of findings reveals a clear generation gap, often stemming from misunderstandings. The tendency to frequently change jobs is primarily linked to Generation Z's desire for workplaces that value loyalty, mutual respect, and environmental consciousness. While renowned for their creativity and technological prowess, this generation may struggle with emotional management and professional communication. It's evident that they require guidance and clarification, seeking more substantial support from older generations without unfounded assumptions. Generation Z displays a complex mix of traits, blending individualism and pragmatism with collaboration and flexibility.

These results can be viewed as a strong incentive to maintain vocational training initiatives: students favor experiential learning, tangible skills acquisition, and social engagement. This is precisely what hospitality institutions provide in their curricula. Highlighting vocational programs is an excellent strategy to attract young individuals to the hospitality industry.

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"Wish you weren't here" - the overtourism phenomenon

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Abstract

The paper is focused on the multilayered phenomenon of overtourism, which is in certain attractive tourist destinations increasingly considered as excessive or harmful. Huge challenges in the daily life of local communities as well as the negative impact on the unique and precious environment and, consequentially, steadily growing anti-tourism sentiments are pushing political decision makers on local and regional levels to act with the aim of reducing tourism influx to some destinations. The research points at key drivers that causes overtourism (traditionally strong seasonality of tourist demand, the growth of world middle-income class with more time and money to be spent for travel, the emergence of low-carriers, new types of accommodations, the possibility of self-organized low-budget holidays, a huge impact of the social media/platforms). To the internationally known examples of overtourism (Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam, Machu Pichu, Oahu, Galapagos, Nepal and Altamira) and countermeasures (such as entry tax to the cities/destinations and states, ban of cruise ships, high daily tourist tax, reduction of hotels and short-term rentals of private accommodations, 'respect the city' campaigns, discouraging certain types of tourists' behavior, obligatory booking and specific time slot for visiting certain attractions), we added two examples of potentially overtourism sites in Slovenia.

Key Words:
Overtourism, negative impacts, countermeasures

Introduction

The term overtourism is closely linked to the development and growth of tourism in the last decades. The positive contribution of the growing tourism industry to the world's economy has brought unpleasant effects in overcrowded destinations - damage to the unique environment, to specific heritage sites, to the daily routines of the locals, to the balanced economic and social development of local communities, etc. Some acclaim the Late Prince Philip on his tour in Slovenia 2008 was right branding tourism as 'national prostitution', and tourists as people who 'ruin cities' (Michael Hall & Lew, 2009, p. 1).

A more than a decade later, media are reporting on overtourism, antitourism and touristophobia in many diverse destinations - Barcelona, Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam (Mihalic, 2020). After a temporary recess during the pandemic period these destinations are facing even worse situation than before despite implementing crowd management policies to protect the natural attractions and civil rights of local people (Birtles, 2023). A renewed debate in public and in tourist academic forums about the adequacy of those policies early 2024 was triggered by widespread protests against tourism, mostly in Spain. Again, publications reported on "wish you weren't here" (Sophie 2019) destinations and protesters in Barcelona, who sprayed tourists with water and shouting 'tourists go home' (Pitrelli, 2024).

The term 'overtourism' come into use in 2016 as an alternative to the term 'Tourismfobia' (Koens et al, 2018). After years, the term still lacks a standardized academic characterization. Koens et al. (2018) describe it as negative impact of tourism on host communities and on natural environment, while UNWTO's definition (2018) emphasizes its excessive influence on the perceived quality of life of citizens and/or the quality of visitors' experience. Mihalic (2020, n.p.) conceptualizes it from the standpoint of sustainability. According to Goodwin (2018), the places that are overcrowded by tourist are changing their character, losing its authenticity, causing irritation and annoyance to residents. Therefore, overtourism is related to conflicts among tourists and local residents in the hosting communities (Rangus et al., 2018).

Contrary to the above, certain academics claim that there is no such thing as overtourism, particularly not in the sense as it is often discussed. For Buhalis (Butcher, 2024, n.p.) overtourism can only be a label applied to many different capacity-related issues that attend the democratization of tourism, and 'a good coin' for numerous books, papers, conferences, non-governmental organizations and global bodies. He also stated that "there is no overtourism - there is only badly managed tourism" (Buhalis, 2020, n.p.).

There is an on-going discussion over distinctions between overtourism, mass tourism and overcrowding (Veríssimo, 2020). For example, overtourism is predominantly discussed from the view point of the hosts, while mass tourism is related with places where thousands of tourists are in the same place at the same time to enjoy holidays in the cheapest way.

According to European Parliament (2018), overtourism is not limited only to urban places (e.g. Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam, Dublin, Reykjavik, Stockholm). It is also present in many heritage sites and attractions (e.g. Bagan, Machu Picchu, Tallin Old Town, Prague Old Town, Vatical City, Rovaniemi etc.), coastal areas and islands (Isle of Sky, Maya Bay, Santorini, Mallorca, Galapagos, etc.), as well as in some rural areas (e.g. Bled, Grand Canyon, Plitvice, Yellowstone, etc.).

The purpose of the study is to give answers to three research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What are the drivers of overtourism?

RQ2: How some most 'endangered' destinations/cities from overtourism try to 'fight' against it?

RQ3: Can we talk about overtourism in Slovenia?

The paper presents initial step in further empirical research on overtourism.

Research design and methods

The study is based on qualitative data and applies mixed research methods.

Most of the data were collected in desk-top research and are based on secondary sources (on selected scientific articles, published from 2016 to 2024 and on relevant non-academic publications published in 2023 and 2024). The secondary data for answering the RQ2 are supported with data collected from on-site observations of the author, who visited destinations/sites, mentioned in the second subsector of the Findings. Two on-site interviews have been performed to get the answer to the RQ3. Content analysis was used to process the qualitative data (text condensation, interpretation, citation), and descriptive method to present the findings. Findings of the research are presented in three subsectors and follow the answers to RQs.

Findings

Drivers of overtourism

Strong seasonality in tourism demand is the most important driver of overtourism (Butler& Dodds, 2022), together with demographic and economic growth which results in more middle- and upper-income individuals with time and money to be spent in tourism. Against increasing demand, transportation enterprises have enlarged their capacities. The emergence and growth of low cost-carriers (particularly in USA and in Europe) revolutionized air travel for mass market. Moreover, the technology has allowed instant online reservations for travel, accommodation and other services. Technological platforms like AirBnB are promoting affordable prices for private accommodations in central locations in most visited destinations (ibid).

These developments together with the possibility of self-organized low-budget holidays, have opened the travel opportunities to lower-income groups of customers who could not afford them in the past. City break holidays have become more attractive for Westerners where domestic travel was traditionally rather expensive. On the other hand, coastal cities with nearby attractions have become overcrowded due to the low prices of large cruise ships that can bring ten to twenty thousand visitors per single day to a certain location (e.g. Dubrovnik, Venice, Santorini, etc.).

Research show that the entertainment industry has through social media significantly contributed to overtourism by shooting movies on certain attractive locations and thus becoming a source of ideas about 'hot-spots' and 'must be' places. When tourists reach the spot, a 'must do' activity of the new-age travelers is to make selfies and post them to notify their followers: 'I was there'.

Examples of overtourism destinations/sites and their 'fight' to decrease the number of tourists

In the following cases of overtourism we show the policies imposed by authorities on a destination's level. There is, however, only limited reports on the results and success of these policies. We have chosen three cities (Venice, Dubrovnik, Amsterdam), three natural sites (Oahu, Galapagos, Sagarmatha Natural Park) and two historical sites (Machu Picchu, Altamira).

Some cities have started charging *entry fees* for daily visitors. Having an influx of over 30 Mio visitors annually, **Venice** have recently implemented daily entry fee of 5 € per visitor. With this measure, the city continues to heed the UNESCO warning of "irreversible damage" to historic center. In 2019, local government *banned cruise ships from the center* (Wilson, 2024).

Dubrovnik (Croatia) has gained popularity after appearing in TV show Game of Thrones. Birtles (2020) reports on over 500 cruise ships bringing over 800.000 passengers to Dubrovnik in 2016, who usually stay only for few hours. The noise and crowds forced residents out. There were 5,000 residents living in the Oldtown in 1991, but only 1,100 in 2017. In 2019, municipality implemented a strategy *to cap number of cruise ships* to two per day with a limit of 5,000 tourists and to schedule better cruise ships' arrival and departure time (Saraogi, 2019). A '*respect the city' campaign* banned visitors to walk around in swimwear, eat and drink around cultural monuments, as well as climb to the city walls.

Amsterdam (Netherlands) was visited by 20 Mio people in 2019. In 2024, ocean-going cruise ships were banned from docking in the city (Wilson, 2024). Local government plans to cut in half the number of docking river cruise ships in next five year (there were more than 2,000 of them). The City imposed stricter *regulations for the construction of new hotels* (a new hotel can only be built/opened if an existing one closes down - Trout, 2024) and *reduction of short-term rentals of private accommodation* units. The local authority has taken measures to *discourage certain types of tourists' behavior*, mostly related to drugs and overdrinking, has *banned new tourist shops* in city center, *beer bikes* and is *encouraging visitors with apps to visit less busy areas* of the city (Birtles, 2020).

Oahu (Hawaii) tries to reduce the tourism influx of 10 Mio travelers a year by implementing '*green' tourist fee* of 25 USD to tourists when checking into hotels or short-term rentals. Local government would use this money to take care of unique natural environment, repair coral reefs and maintain state parks and trails (Wilson, 2024). To protect flora and fauna, some natural attractions (e.g. Hanauma Bay, n.d.) are closed for public certain days of the week. Visits must be pre-booked for the date and hour of entrance.

The beauty and unique ecosystem of the **Galapagos** islands was initially meant to be shared in small, environmentally friendly doses. However, more than a quarter of million tourists visited archipelago in 2022. Endangered species are at risk of extinction because of improper practice. Over 200 new hotels were built in the years and external competition heavily reduced opportunities for the local people to fully profit from the tourism. It soon became obvious that these economic and ecological imbalances cannot be solved only by an *entry fee of 100 USD* for the visit (Reale, 2022).

In **Nepal**, the entrance fee to Sagarmatha national park (Everest base camp hike) is only 16 USD. Due to high number of hikers, there are tons of human excrement piled up every year on the way to Everest base camp. Because of the cold climate, it will take decades to decompose (Sophie, 2019). In opposite to Nepal, the neighboring Bhutan (opened to tourism from 1974) is an example of the country that so far managed to keep tourist number low due to high *daily tourist visa of 200 USD*, which encourages 'high-value, low impact tourism'.

The iconic destination in Peru, **Machu Picchu**, was not built to handle enormous increase of visitors, jumping from 400.000 tourists a year to close to 1.5 million in two decades. The UNESCO threat of putting the site on its "List of World Heritage in Danger", resulting in limitation of daily tickets to 5,600 (Birtles, 2020). Visitors must arrive within a *specific time slot* with four-hour time limit for each visit and can enter the site *only with official tourist guide*. Group sizes have been limited to16 people and visitors can only walk on defined routes (Wilson, 2024).

An example of how to match the tourism growth with protection of historical sites is the *replica of prehistoric* cave **Altamira,** Spain. As an icon of humanity and art through paintings and engravings dating back 15,000 years, Altamira also became a major tourist destination. In the 1970s, it attracted more than 150,000 visitors per year. Due to deterioration, it was closed in 1977, but reopened few years after. Allowance of only 11,300 visitors per year resulted a waiting list up to three years long. Thus, original cave has been closed again and its replica 'Neo-cave' has been built for visiting purposes. It attracts now on average quarter of million of visitors per year (Dans & Gonzales, 2018).

The chosen cases attract a lot of media attention, however, there are many usually neglected small places that also experience the mixed blessing of being touristically attractive.

Overtourism in a small Central European Country: Ljubljana and Bled

By the number of visitors in 2023, Slovenia (2 Mio inhabitants on 20.000 km2) was ranked 38th in the world's tourism. More than six million visitors spent 16 million nights (GOV.SI, 2024). This was a new record, with which Slovenia's tourism not only exceeded the numbers from 2019, but also did better comparing with the world and Europe (Tourism in numbers, 2024). The most popular destinations were mountains regions and the capital, Ljubljana. "Green boutiqueness, smaller footprint and greater value for all" is the vision of Slovenia tourism development (Strategy, 2022). But the reality is different.

With 20 % of annual increase in the number of visitors, Ljubljana saw the highest increase (GOV.SI, 2024). The city is struggling to balance between being a good place for people and the place for making money. At the expense of tourists, the city centre is barely passable at the height of the season, the structure of the population in the city has changed (Rebuza, 2023). “In the past, the cars were superfluous, now residents are” (ibid). The interviewee, a resident of the city centre, complained:

“I was very happy when I have moved to the City Centre 25 years ago, but not anymore. The public space has become so commercialised that sometimes it is difficult to move around. Tourists drink late in the night, yell and laugh, without respect to the locals, who want to sleep. They pollute our neighbourhood with thrash. Many apartments in the building, where I live, are short-rented to tourists, which make the life of permanent residents miserable”.

Bled, one of the most beautiful Alpine resorts in Europe, with the lake and island in the middle and with a castle perched on a cliff, is described as an “image of paradise”, “a tourist gem of global dimensions”, which was nominated one of the seven new wonders of the world (I feel Slovenia, n.d.). Yet, over 80% of residents are not happy with the tourism development of the site and with negative effects of tourism, e.g. increase of real estate prices, traffic, management of public space, etc. (STA, 2024). In the high season, the number of visitors and their behaviour discomfort the residents. “There are so many tourists that we can only walk like in a funeral procession” (Svet 24, 2023). The resident of Bled stated:

“*The road infrastructure is 30 years behind, causing enormous traffic jams when entering the town. The swimming spaces are overloaded and too many boats and surfs are on the lake. Despite this, every local still rents his/her last private room or garage to tourists. Increasing number of daily visitors calls for similar measures as in Venice: entrance fee. Bled deserves the prevalence of quality tourism above quantity of tourists.”*

The opinion of representatives of public tourism sector and scholars about overtourism in Slovenia is slightly different to the opinion of the residents of the two presented destinations. Yet, both groups of ‘tourism designers’ of the above-mentioned sites acknowledge that future tourism development needs to include the wellbeing of the residents more that it has been in the past.

Conclusion

The study gives some insights into how complex and multilayered phenomenon overtourism is. It certainly demands a multidimensional effort of tourism stakeholders with respect to the capacity limits, destination specificity and diversification of tourism services. It should include better congestion management, improving and adapting specific infrastructure, suggest measures towards reduction of seasonality, provide for careful planning and pricing, and sometimes include banning certain activities.

The negative impact of overtourism on local people with their historical and natural heritage clearly shows disrespect to the limitations of resources and sustainability in general. To safeguard its economic benefits, tourism development has to reorient itself from quantitative to qualitative growth, towards broader objectives of socially, culturally and ecologically sustainable qualitative growth (Benner, 2019). Only in this way, tourists can still expect a friendly smile on the lips of their hosts and feel hospitality of the chosen destination.

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The Broken Golden Egg of the Galápagos: Mistrust and short sightedness in the UNESCO World Heritage Site

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Abstract

The Galapagos Islands, known as a leading sustainable tourism destination in the world, was hit by the COVID pandemic in 2020. Tourism numbers fell by 73% from 2019 causing tremendous challenges to local tourism stakeholders. The study revealed that the UNESCO World Heritage Site, despite its excellence in the management of environmental sustainability, has been falling short concerning social and economic sustainability of local tourism stakeholders. Through an exploratory study with 586 completed semi-structured surveys in the local population, alongside interviews with diverse stakeholders and leading tourism authorities, the article explains what social and economic impacts and challenges the pandemic has generated in the local tourism sector. Additionally, the study also elucidates, on the one hand, what sociocultural modifications the studied stakeholders needed to adopt to survive during this unprecedented period in tourism history, and, on the other hand, what tourism authorities propose to revitalize tourism in the post-COVID period.

Key Words:

Galapagos Islands; tourism; sustainability; impact of pandemic; stakeholders' perception

Introduction

The Galapagos Islands in Ecuador is a 7,880 km^2 archipelago with a unique natural environment. Charles Darwin described the islands as a "little world within itself." Some 97% of the total emerged surface area was declared a National Park in 1959. The Galapagos National Park was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978, and later a Biosphere Reserve in 1985. Though tourism numbers were only about 2,000 per year in the 1960s, reaching 163,000 in 2009 (Izurieta, 2017), and 275,817 in 2018, which is a 14% increase from 2017. Lastly, Galapagos received over 330,000 in 2023 (Observatorio Turismo Galapagos, 2024).

The three populated islands, out of a total of 21 islands (not counting the numerous rocks and islets), had an estimated population of around 30,000 inhabitants in 2019 (INEC, 2022). The population has been multiplied by fifteen since the 1960s, mainly because of the growing opportunities related to tourism (Walsh *et al*., 2019: Román *et al.,* 2021). The world-renowned Galapagos Islands have been under scientific research since its creation in 1985. Nevertheless, despite the intention of various institutions (e.g., Ecuadorian Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Environment, etc.) to keep the islands as intact as possible for future generations, tourism development has been lacking an inclusive and

sustainable strategy (Ecuadorian Environment Ministry & Galapagos National Park Directorate, 2016). Tourism stakeholders believed that runaway tourism development "has been conducted in an intermittent and unconnected way, proposing solutions to acute social and ecological crises without a long-term vision or strategic plan" (González *et al*, 2008, p.1). Furthermore, governmental regulations have mainly focused on environmental issues, such as zoning and fishing, and accommodations (UNESCO, 2019), and disregarded social, economic, and cultural aspects.

As a result, this exploratory study seeks to understand an understudied aspect of the Galapagos tourism activity, which is the sociocultural impacts of the pandemic, with a focus on local stakeholders' perceptions. The article, first, focuses on the analysis of the situation of key tourism stakeholders, such as hotels, tour guides, and residents, and second, the steps tourism authorities have been taking to regenerate tourism in the Galapagos National Park.

Literature review

Being an extremely popular tourism destination the Galapagos National Park received 271,238 tourists in 2019, of which 67% were international (Observatorio Turismo Galápagos, 2024). Tourism revenues are extremely important for the local economy, because it provides 66% of GDP (Spenceley *et al*., 2021). Although the archipelago is considered a leading sustainable tourism destination in the world (Garcia Ferrari *et al*., 2021), the current economic model of Galapagos is heavily dependent on tourism, and is therefore often described as unsustainable (González *et al*., 2008; Rousseaud *et al*., 2017). This is clearly contradictory with the goal of the planning and policy-making body, the National Institute for Galapagos (INGALA) created in 1980, to achieve sustainable development (Garcia Ferrari *et al*., 2021), and also with the LOREG (Special Law for Galapagos) in 1998, which aimed at developing more tangible sustainable practices in the area of conservation management (Muñoz-Barriga, 2015).

Several studies (Walsh *et al*., 2019; Garcia Ferrari *et al*., 2021) state that the health crisis combined with the economic crisis (due to a reversal in the growth trend for tourism) revealed the extreme fragility of the Galapagos tourism industry. This is also justified by various studies that show potential threats to achieve sustainable tourism management goals (Brewington, 2013; De Groot, 1983; Epler, 2007; García *et al*., 2013; Honey, 1999; Izurieta, 2017; Muñoz-Barriga, 2020; Pizzitutti, *et al*., 2014; Rice, 2007; Ruiz-Ballesteros & del Campo, 2020; Steele, 1995; Tindle, 1983). Since the pandemic profoundly disrupted international tourism (Hall *et al*., 2020), initiatives for more sustainable tourism management were also destabilized. Due to this worldwide crisis, the islands have been coping with unprecedented difficulties with losses totalling USD 200 million (Urquizo *et al*., 2021), which has deeply affected the local population.

Until the present study, no research has focused on the challenges and impacts of the pandemic on the Galapagos population in the context of tourism. Consequently, this study seeks to fill this research gap and explore tourism stakeholders' perceptions on how the birthplace of the theory of Darwinism coped with the unprecedented situation caused by the pandemic. Additionally, the paper also reveals what lessons we can learn from one of the supposedly most sustainably managed protected areas in the world. Hence, this exploratory research seeks to answer three questions:

RQ 1: What sociocultural challenges and discrepancies has the pandemic revealed concerning the sustainability of tourism in the Galapagos Islands?

RQ2 2: What sociocultural modifications do tourism stakeholders need to adapt as far as the post pandemic tourism dynamics are concerned in the Galapagos Islands?

RQ 3: What strategy do local and national tourism authorities believe will contribute to sustaining tourism in the Galapagos Islands?

Methodology

Data collection was through semi-structured surveys administered in person, and semi structured interviews. A purposive sample of three tourism stakeholders were studied: Hotels (owners and employees), local Tour Guides and Residents. The semi-structured survey was constructed based on Magablih and Mustafa's (2018) study and adapted to the Galapagos Islands. A total of 586 semi-structured surveys and 11 semi-structured interviews were completed.

Results and Discussion

The descriptive analysis of the semi-structured interviews with key tourism decision-makers in the Galapagos Islands reinforced previously found conclusions about the high level of tourism dependency on the islands. This dependency concerns social and economic aspects. Interviews with tourism stakeholders indicate that the local economy is extremely dependent on tourism revenues.

The survey revealed that tourism stakeholders have rather negative perceptions concerning the management and decisions of tourism authorities. The results show that there is a strong mistrust in national and local tourism authorities by the local tourism stakeholders, Hotels, Tour Guides, and Residents. This mistrust is clearly indicated by the Likert scale scores for the questions in Table 1. Local tourism stakeholders feel that tourism authorities were not only unprepared for the crisis, but that they also mismanaged the crisis (i.e., the absence of a clear strategy for the local population and economy) and have failed to put in place strategies to bolster resilience if a new crisis should occur.

Concerning the impacts of the pandemic, the study revealed that 87% of the 108 surveyed Galapagos Tour Guides have a temporary, invoice-based, contract. Some 97.2% of them said that the pandemic has affected their job situation. Similar results were found for Galapagos residents; for 79.7% of respondents their economic situation worsened during the pandemic, although 56.37% of the surveyed resident population do not work directly in tourism.

Concerning the local economic reaction to the pandemic, 81.9% of residents answered that they have not had an extra source of income. This number is 67.6% for Tour Guides, showing a serious economic shock for this group. This was anonymously shared among the 70 Hotels surveyed in the study, too. All Hotels had to lay off personnel, massively, and have slowly been rehiring them in the post pandemic period, but with extremely unfair working conditions for the employees.

More explicitly, concerning the overall perception of the surveyed stakeholders, as indicated in Summary Table 1, the answers for the questions ('*National/local tourism authorities were prepared for the crisis like COVID?*') had very low scores; *mean* 1.43 (National authorities) and 1.33 (Local authorities), with a *mode* of 1 for both in the Likert scale, meaning that local residents perceived massively the readiness of those authorities in a very negative manner.

Concerning the post-pandemic strategy planned by the tourism authorities ('*The Ministry of Tourism has plans for the touristic crisis post-COVID?*') scores were very low (*mean* and *mode*, 2.46 and 1, respectively), indicating a mistrust and inadequacy of planning towards the future. Concerning financial help for tourism businesses and actors ('*Tourism sector authorities had assigned financial aid for the current tourism crisis?*') the surveyed local stakeholders evaluated very poor with a *mean* of 1.78 and a *mode* of 1, since there was no financial help for the stakeholders.

Similar values were found concerning the communication of tourism authorities during the crisis ('*Crisis management's message from tourism authorities has been clear?*'); 2.40 for *mean* and 1 for *mode*. Likewise, local tourism stakeholders reported that tourism establishments have been closed due to the pandemic, and that there have been myriad negative consequences (e.g., shorter stays and less tourism spending). Local tourism stakeholders were nearly unanimous about the catastrophic impacts of the pandemic in the local tourism industry, which also confirms a suspicion, again, about tourism authorities regarding both its crisis management and its resilience strategy.

Table 1. Tourism Stakeholders' perception of the pandemic and its management

Statistics

		National tourism authorities were prepared for a crisis like Covid	Galapagos tourism authorities were prepared for a tourism crisis	The Ministry of Tourism has plans for the touristic crisis post-Covid	Tourism sector authorities had assigned financial aid for the current tourism crisis	Crisis management's message from tourism authorities has been clear	Touristic establishments have closed because of the current situation	Tourists stay less days than before the pandemic	Tourist spent less money than before the pandemic	The current situation in Galapagos has a negative effect in the tourism sector
N	Valid	586	586	586	586	586	586	586	586	586
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		1,41	1,33	2,46	1,78	2,40	4,58	3,96	4,22	4,54
Median		1,00	1,00	2,50	1,00	2,00	5,00	5,00	5,00	5,00
Mode		1	1	1	1	1	5	5	5	5
Range		4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Minimum		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

In order to answer the research questions, the paper will now focus on more details revealed by the field work. Semi-structured, face-to-face methodology allowed participants to provide details about their perceptions.

Concerning RQ 1, '*What sociocultural challenges and discrepancies the pandemic revealed, concerning the sustainability of tourism in the Galapagos Islands?*', as a general analysis, most of the 586 surveyed tourism stakeholders have endured extremely harsh living conditions. Their previously steady life and in the Ecuadorian context, the highest GDP per capita in the country, has been turned upside-down. As an extreme example, both the semi-structured interviews with tourism authorities and semi-structured surveys revealed that there were tourist guides and other tourism stakeholders, such as residents, hotel employees, who had absolutely no economic revenues during the pandemic and those impacted families could only survive due to the solidarity and help of other Galapagos residents.

The results show that despite the Galapagos Islands' overall image as a well-managed sustainable destination, sustainability has not been fulfilled entirely. The 70 surveyed hotels also revealed that most of the establishments had not had a contingency plan for crises, including savings for such situations. Faced with devastating income losses, and without any local or national financial aid, hotels 'optimized' their operations, mainly by laying off staff. Since July 2020 and the reopening of the tourism industry in the Galapagos Islands, hotels revealed that tourism has been dominated by national tourists, with less purchasing power. Accordingly, hotels have had to make adjustments to welcome domestic tourism. As international tourism, which used to dominate, has been partially replaced with domestic demand there have been consequences affecting sustainability. Unfortunately, lower purchasing power will generate impacts on the quality of services, the environment, the society, and of course, in the local economy (Muñoz-Barriga, 2015).

To answer Research Question 2: '*What sociocultural modifications do residents need to adapt as far as the post-pandemic tourism dynamics are concerned in the Galapagos Islands?*'

Since the pandemic was unprecedented, no one was ready for such a situation in the tourism industry of the Galapagos Islands. The study revealed that all three studied stakeholders were unprepared to face the crisis and also that the sociocultural impacts were extremely devastating (such as intrafamilial violence, extreme poverty, etc.).

The semi-structured surveys that were conducted with Hotel owners and employees also revealed that 80% of the hotels faced serious economic difficulties. This unstable financial situation generated major changes in the labor settings concerning hotel employees. No less than 78.6% of the surveyed hotels had fired employees during the pandemic. As a result, after the reopening of the islands for tourism in July 2020, the former legal work contracts, with health and social security benefits, have been transformed into flexible agreements between employers and employees. As a result, employees were contracted for specific missions (often only a few hours) and paid on the spot. Although this practice is beneficial for the employers, the employees worked without any structured labor contract, which generated extremely uncertain and even exploitative circumstances in the labor market.

Room prices also dropped significatively in the case of 92.9% of the hotels surveyed, which indicates a substantial adaptation to the new situation. Concerning surveyed and interviewed hospitality stakeholders on the islands, this price drop is also the result of the fact that most of the tourists are Ecuadorian nationals. In 2019, this tourist segment represented only 32% of the tourism in the islands and around 70% in 2023 (Observatorio Turismo Galápagos, 2024). Also, the segment of international backpackers has increased, which alongside the growing domestic tourism generates lower room prices due to their limited purchasing power. As mentioned previously, this type of tourism will probably contribute to unsustainable practices on inhabited islands.

The 108 semi-structured surveys with Tour Guides revealed that they have been hit the hardest by the pandemic in the Galapagos islands. The study discovered that 88% of the Tour Guides had occasional, not permanent contracts in tourism which resulted in a very precarious economic situation while 97.2% of the questioned Tour Guides considered that their economic situation became worse during the pandemic, and 71% of them did not have basically any income during the crisis. In order to survive, these Tour Guides sold personal objects, often luxury ones, and received charity from other residents.

Semi-structured interviews with tourism authorities also revealed that despite the strong purchasing power of the Tour Guides, short-term orientation characterized their spending behaviors. Hence, the pandemic and particularly the lockdown period revealed that Tour Guides had no savings to cope with the situation. The only way 71% of the Tour Guides could survive during the lockdown period was through charity. Interestingly, as mentioned previously, the tragedy of the situation exposed that the highest purchasing power segment of the local population became the most fragile one during the pandemic.

Concerning the local population, the study revealed that only 35.5% of the Residents had some savings before the pandemic. Residents were also asked about their future intentions if the situation were to remain as it was during the pandemic. Only 6.4% of residents said they would leave the Galapagos Islands permanently, while 80.1% reported that they would stay on the islands despite the unpredictable future. The rest did not have a clear idea about how to face the future. This shows a solid attachment to their homeland.

79.7% of the residents considered that their labor situation became worse during the pandemic, and 18.9% believe that it is the same as in the pre-COVID period. The latter responses mainly represent the public service workers who continued receiving their salaries during the pandemic. It is important to note that most of the residents have various professional activities, such as commerce, agriculture, transportation services, among others, which provided alternative sources of income during the pandemic. Hence, although most residents feel their job situation deteriorated (vs. before the pandemic), those alternative resources aided them to face the current situation better than for instance Tour Guides who are more dependent on tourism revenues.

As a general answer to RQ2 (i.e., *What modifications local tourism stakeholders needed to adapt to the face the pandemic period*), the study revealed that solutions were not led and assisted by tourism authorities, or by any political and economic institution. Locals, including tourism stakeholders, were left to fend for themselves.

Research Question 3: '*What strategy do local and national tourism authorities consider sustaining tourism in the Galapagos Islands?*' Governmental regulations, prior to the pandemic, were mainly focused on environmental issues, such as zoning and fishing, and accommodations (UNESCO, 2019). Concerning the environmental impacts of the pandemic, key tourism stakeholders, among others the

Charles Darwin Research Station, revealed that although COVID-19 has contributed to less human activities related to tourism in the national park (e.g., due to the absence of scientific monitoring during the crisis), it is still unclear what exact impacts this period has left on nature. One major element was also mentioned, which is the illegal fishing activities that have increased due to the economic crisis and the lack of control in the Galapagos National Park. Undoubtedly, the sociological perspective of tourism dynamics, such as local stakeholders' perceived experience, has been under-researched hitherto (Izurieta, 2017; Muñoz-Barriga 2020). The total of 586 semi-structured surveys with the selected tourism stakeholders clearly indicate that locals have not received any economic or social assistance to cope with the pandemic, and these stakeholders do not expect any aid from those authorities in the future.

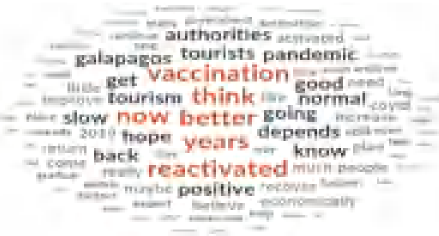
Concerning the tourism strategy of the Galapagos Islands for the post-pandemic period, the surveyed stakeholders have a rather negative or neutral perception. The results indicate that local tourism stakeholders do not perceive any comprehensive tourism strategy or guiding principles, which have been developed and/or communicated by authorities, for the medium, or long term. This lack of proper tourism planning has been part of the tourism dynamics in the Galapagos Islands since its creation in 1959. As in many other cases, economic interest associated with the environmental aspects of the Galapagos National Park have taken precedence over the social and cultural perspectives (UNESCO, 2019; Muñoz-Barriga, 2015).

Moreover, the ongoing political instability in Ecuador, added another ingredient to the already unstable circumstances of the development of a coherent tourism strategy. Through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, such as Tourism Ministry, Santa-Cruz Municipality, the study revealed that tourism authorities are very dependent on political and national decisions concerning the future strategy of the Galapagos National Park, which limits the possibilities of making local decisions. Consequently, in a highly hierarchical and centralized political system, relevant stakeholders are extremely reluctant to make important decisions and/or any strategy propositions until clear instructions are given by the elected national government.

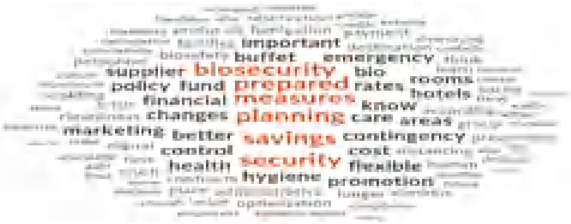
In addition, to make the context more complex, the study also underscored the fact that economic and social decisions that concerned the surveyed local stakeholders, in the past, have been short-lived and unilateral without any consultation with the relevant stakeholders. Hence, Galapagos' residents, Tour Guides, and Hotel owners/employees lack trust in tourism and political authorities and their decisions, which makes sustainable tourism management even more challenging (Muñoz-Barriga, 2015; Muñoz-Barriga y Maldonado, 2020).

The surveyed tourism stakeholders see the future of the Galapagos as being strongly correlated to the consequences of the worldwide pandemic. They believe the resilience will be dependent on health measures, biosecurity, and planning and savings. Interestingly, they do not speak of a better stakeholder relationship with tourism authorities, hence they do not foresee a collective strategy, rather individual adaptations to changing tourism dynamics. The following word clouds indicate the perception of surveyed stakeholders concerning the future of tourism in the Galapagos Islands (Word Clouds 1, 2 and 3).

Word Cloud 1. 'In a 5-year horizon, how do you see the reactivation of tourism in Galapagos? (Tour Guides, Hotels and Residents)?



Word Cloud 2. 'Do you think Hotels will make important changes to face another crisis in the future? If yes, what changes do you think?' (Hotels)



Word Cloud 3. 'What alternative would you consider viable to replace tourism as a main source of income?' (Residents + Tour Guides)

Conclusion

The global pandemic has brought about unparalleled challenges to the tourism industry in the Galapagos. The social and economic consequences of the pandemic were extremely devastating in the local tourism sector. The study revealed that the major challenges local tourism stakeholders have been facing include the lack of a sustainable strategy from tourism authorities, which mainly means three elements: the inexistant social and economic support for tourism stakeholders during the crisis; the lack of stakeholder collaborations due to highly centralized decision-making procedures; and also, the extremely high level of mistrust among locals towards tourism authorities.

More explicitly, the present study gathered primary data concerning the complexity of the tourism sector activity in the Galapagos Islands. The pandemic revealed the tension among tourism stakeholders, and the lack of proper strategic planning in relation to the post-pandemic period. Local stakeholders feel neglected and unsupported by local and national authorities. As a result, the Galapagos Islands cannot be characterized as a sustainable destination because - despite efforts made concerning environmental conservation - other aspects of the TBL framework have been completely neglected during the pandemic.

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