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Marketing approach to Nordic tourism

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ABSTRACT

The hotel industry is looking for new positioning strategies to attract more clients or capture new segments to achieve maximum profitability. In order to do this, hotel companies are trying to achieve a competitive positioning that responds to the real situation of a global, changing, connected and hypercompetitive environment. However, the absence of a common European framework regulating the types of rating for the hotel sector makes rating model difficult to define.

Literature recognises that the traditional hotel classification causes a loss of value for the contemporary tourist. It is no longer valid to choose by the criterion of the “stars” that the establishment possesses. It is necessary to provide differentiation for the customer to live a broader experience and become loyal.

Starting from the two dimensions that usually drive a client’s perception of a hotel, staff and environment, this work analyses the factors that explain Scandinavian tourists’ service experiences in Malaga that they have shared on Tripadvisor. This city was selected since it is the main destination of Nordic tourists in Andalusia (Spain).

The results obtained in our exploratory research reflect the interest of this tourism micro-segment in the face of stimuli such as innovation, design, art and new leisure options. Therefore, it is recommended to adapt tourists in order to increase the presence of Scandinavian ones in the territory analysed.

Introduction

Following the optimistic approach of anthropologist Jafar Jafari of the University of Wisconsin-Stout, we state that tourism can have favourable effects on the destination. Therefore, attracting audiences from different backgrounds can be considered a main objective for destination as well as hotel managers, knowing tourists’ motivations and preferences will be the key issue in decision-making processes.

This article has taken as a reference study the tourist market of the Nordic countries whose destination is Spain, specifically the Autonomous Community of Andalusia, being one of the most attractive for this public (Turespaña, 2018). Despite its relatively small volume of population, it shows a remarkable growth in their travel dynamics and,

according to data from the Public Company for the Management of Tourism and Sport in Andalusia (2019), it represents the seventh market in absolute number of tourists.

Berné et al. (2015) suggest that tourism has become one of the most important industries in the world, mainly due to its social and economic effects (Garrigos and Palacios, 2008; Jang et al., 2008). However, the high levels of competitive intensity in the hotel industry require that the managers of these companies pay attention to a wide range of attributes related to the overall quality of the service provided. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for them to create competitive advantages that differentiate them from the rest of the offer (Choi and Chu, 2001; Román and Martín, 2016). Attracting audiences from different backgrounds requires knowledge of their preferences. Only in this way is it possible to offer

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THE SERVICE EXPERIENCE OF THE NORDIC TOURIST IN MALAGA (SPAIN): A MARKETING ASSESSMENT

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them a service in accordance with the quality they desire and expect.

These attributes will determine the level of satisfaction of the service experience lived in the accommodation (Radojevic et al., 2015). The formal and informal institutional environment, which describes the norms, uses and customs of each of the tourist's regions of origin, has a significant influence on people's behaviour and on the assessment of what is considered good and/or acceptable (North, 1991; Scott, 1995).

Therefore, any hotel quality assessment system that does not consider the tourist's preferences scheme according to their origin will be insufficient. Traditional hotel rating models based on stars present numerous deficiencies, since they consider only supply-side attributes like hotel facilities. Moreover, there is a lack of homogeneity in these hotel classification systems. Serrat Bech (2011) BS or Radojevic et al. (2015) consider that this issue is one of the sector's most serious problems, as there are no clear references for hotel managers.

As a result, the objective of the present paper is twofold: first, to analyse the influence of the star rating models for Nordic tourists; and, second, to determine the staff and environment-related attributes that Nordic tourists value in a hotel. We contribute to literature defining a specific hotel evaluation model for the case of tourists from the Nordic countries.

To define the hotel rating model, a qualitative study has been carried out by means of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Empirical evidence shows that the Nordic market considers that staff and environment-related hotel attributes are essential to create positive service experiences and competitive advantages. Moreover, star rating systems are not linked to Nordic customer's preferences. Accordingly, Spanish hotel managers must know the institutional context of the foreign countries to better know preferences of tourists and satisfy their needs.

Theoretical framework

The "economy of experience" is a new reference paradigm for the formulation of strategies in service companies, as is the case with hotels (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). In the service industries a very important part of the product has an intangible character (Litvin et al., 2008; Núñez-Serrano et al., 2014). The level of customer satisfaction in a hotel depends, significantly, on the experience lived (Radojevic et al., 2015). Moreover, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) allow these experiences to be disseminated efficiently. Therefore, opinions after the stay have often become one of the most relevant factors when it comes to booking a hotel room (Dickinger and Mazanec, 2008; Radojevic et al., 2015).

Service experience is defined as the "internal and subjective reaction of the customer to any direct or indirect contact with the company" (2007: 118). Shaw (2005) describes the customer experience from two complementary elements: the interaction between the customer and the organisation, as well as the physical and sensory environment in which the interaction takes place. Both factors create stimuli and evoke certain emotions that the customer values in relation to the expectations that the provision of the service had generated. Accordingly, the service experience integrates some objectively measurable variables, but above all it includes other subjective aspects of the service that are difficult to measure.

This relevant role of experience in the creation of competitive advantages has been discussed by a wide range of authors, who have concluded that it is the main engine of growth and development of companies (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 2011; Shaw, 2005; Verhoef et al., 2009) and their results (Smith and Wheeler, 2002; Garg and Dhar, 2014).

As noted by Meyer and Schwager (2007), service experience is increasingly relevant in the hotel sector, in an environment characterised by a greater and more varied offer. Until not so long ago, official ex-ante star-based hotel rating systems and other approved international systems (EHQ, ISO-9002) were decisive for customer behaviour, such as

the price to be paid (Thrane, 2005). Stars were considered value tools for assessing standard quality.

As shown in Table 1, each country or region has its own rating systems, which vary in terms of the attributes to be considered, the assessment methodology and the minimum standards for achieving a given category (Vine, 1981; Núñez-Serrano et al., 2014). In the case of the Nordic countries, Sweden and Denmark have voluntary systems, while Finland and Norway do not have an established classification. Serrat Serrat Bech (2011) or Radojevic et al. (2015) point out that one of the sector's most serious problems is the lack of homogeneity in hotel classification systems. This problem makes it difficult for Spanish hotels to position themselves competitively in the Nordic market, so institutional differences force the Spanish hotel sector to establish different means of classification from the traditional ones.

In addition, rating systems often neglect some aspects that are decisive for the tourist client and that are not easily identified since they are based on experiences or emotional expectations. On the other hand, they reflect other variables – generally referring to the facilities or variety of services – that are more important to the service provider than to the client (Núñez-Serrano et al., 2014). For this reason, the category of the hotel according to the number of stars it has is no longer an effective instrument for communication and marketing strategies, nor does it facilitate the clear identification of the hotel's strategic competitive positioning by the client (De Querol, 2010; Román and Martín, 2016). It is therefore necessary for the industry to integrate new qualification criteria more related to those aspects that are key for the Nordic client (Zins, 2002; Chen and Chen, 2010).

The relationship of these new qualification criteria with the key aspects for the client would be closely linked to the already classic and well-known subjective theory of value. According to this theory, the value of a good or service is not determined by the property or work used in its production but by the value that the person gives it according to his or her expectations, needs and desires (Ricardo, 1817).

In the hotel field, different works have addressed this analysis, sometimes with a broad objective approach (Núñez-Serrano et al., 2014) and, in other cases, with a subjective approach aimed at the particular evaluation of satisfaction, through the application of the SERVQUAL methodology to the tourist environment (Fick and Ritchie, 1991; Getty and Thompson, 1994; Carrasco et al., 2012). The work of Daza (2013) addresses an interesting review of the adaptation of the referred methodology to hotel services, as can be seen in Table 2 below.

Only through a better understanding of the factors that make accommodation a unique experience will it be possible, on the one hand, to systematise the study of customer behaviour and satisfaction and, on the other hand, to guide the decision making of hotel managers. Variables close to the service experience such as the quality of the food, the price per night (Justus, 1991), the treatment of the staff – one of the most important according to the literature (Hemmington, 2007; Garg and Dhar, 2014) – the waiting time in the restaurant or at the reception desk, access to the surrounding tourist offer, the tranquility of the establishment (Knutson et al., 2009), the level of security perceived in the hotel environment (Hemmington, 2007; Knutson et al., 2009), as well as the possibilities of enjoying attractive views from the room (Shaw, 2005; Pine and Gilmore, 2011) are determining elements of both customer behaviour and satisfaction.

However, they do not always have the same importance, or can even be assessed in one way or another according to the user's profile. In this sense, some authors (e.g. Clemes et al., 2011; Ren et al., 2016) argue that the treatment that these attributes should receive depends on the type of hotel being studied (low-cost vs. full service; inland hotel/coastal hotel) and the target whose interest is to be awakened. Therefore, in many cases these attributes, which are closely linked to global experience, have been left out of the target hotel rating systems.

To advance in this field and systematise the study of the hotel industry, several works have tried to group the determining attributes of the service experience. Thus, Kim and Perdue (2013) group them into

Table 1

Hotel rating comparative analysis Spanish-Nordic countries.

Country	Official	Scope	Year of creation	Last modification	Regime	Stars	Creator Entity	Periodic Review	Funding
Denmark	Yes	Country	1997	–	Voluntary	0–5	Associations	Annual	Private
Finland	No	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Sweden	Yes	Country	2004	2005	Voluntary	1–5	Associations	–	Public / Private
Norway	No	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
Spain	Yes	Regional	1968	1983	Obligatory	1–5	AACC	–	Public

Source: Own elaboration from Arcarons et al. (R. 2008).

Table 2

Adaptations of the SERVQUAL model for accommodation services.

Model	Author (year)	Characteristics
LODGSERV	Knutson et al. (1990)	Measurement of hotel service quality using 26 indicators to measure customer expectations.
HOLSERV	Mei et al. (1999)	As an adaptation of the SERVQUAL model, three determining factors of the service were found: the employees, the tangible elements and the reliability.
HOTELQUAL	Falces et al. (1999) Casino (2001) Hernández, Muñoz y Santos (2003) Alonso et al. (2006)	Four dimensions were used (reliability, tangible elements, staff characteristics and complementary offer).
SERVPERF	Cronin y Taylor (1992)	It is based on customers' perceptions of the service provided.
RURALQUAL	Correio y Miranda (2007)	It was designed in order to know the quality in establishments, using the dimensions: professionalism, basic offer, rural and regional environment, complementary offer and tangibility.
RESORTQUAL	Valls et al. (2002) Alén, Mazaira y Fraiz (2004) Alén y Rodríguez (2004)	It was designed to measure the quality of tourist destinations.
DINESERV	Stevens et al. (1995)	Measurement of quality in restaurants with dimensions: reliability, tangibles, safety, responsiveness and empathy.
HOLSAR	TribSnaith (1998)	City and facilities; environment; restaurants, bars, shops and nightlife; transfer; heritage and culture and accommodation.

Source: Daza Higuera, 2017.

three major categories: affective factors, sensory factors and cognitive factors. Likewise, Ren et al. (2016) group the attributes of the hotel into the following dimensions: human factors, tangible and sensory factors, aesthetic perception and location. In accordance with Shaw's (2005) proposal for the definition of experience, Walls (2013) argues that the set of factors that describe experience are grouped into two large categories: 1) interaction with the human resource; and 2) the physical environment. The rest of the factors must be integrated into one of these categories.

Based on the identification and evaluation of these attributes by the client, several works are progressing along this line by analysing the relationship between objective hotel rating systems and the service experience (Núñez-Serrano et al., 2014; Martín-Santana et al., 2017). In this sense, the review of the literature provides opposing evidence since, contrary to what was expected, in some cases the higher levels of "objective" quality correspond to lower levels of customer satisfaction, as a result of higher expectations (López-Fernández and Serrano-Bedia, 2004; Núñez et al., 2004; Morillo, 2007).

As can be seen in Table 3, there are different characteristics that are relevant to clients, but they do not necessarily have to be related. The formal design of a model that solves this situation is the main contribution of this research for the case of tourists from the Nordic countries.

In Spain, there is no state law specifically regulating tourism. This

Table 3

Attributes relevant to the client.

STAFF	ENVIRONMENT
Empathy	Tangible elements
Responsiveness	Complementary offer
Reliability	Security
Treatment	Food quality
	Waiting time
	Tranquility
	View

Source: Own elaboration.

situation is a consequence of the Spanish Constitution itself that, in its article 148.1. 18°, assigns exclusive competence to the Autonomous Communities for "the promotion and planning of tourism in their territorial area". Therefore, the Statute of Autonomy of each Autonomous Community has assumed this possibility granted by the Magna Carta, including among its duties the planning, organisation and promotion of the tourism sector.

The responsible body that grants the categories of hotels is the tourism authority of each Autonomous Community, so that there are currently different regulations on the requirements demanded of hotels to obtain a certain qualification. Hotel categorisation is carried out in accordance with a series of technical and structural requirements, but the services offered by the establishment are rarely considered. The Autonomous Communities classify hotels into five categories identified by stars, although their characteristics and minimum requirements may vary from one to another. This classification does not necessarily correspond to the needs of national or international tourists, since current consumers have different selection criteria from those regulated by these statutes.

As for the Autonomous Community of Andalusia, its Statute of Autonomy, approved by Organic Law 2/2007 of 19 March, takes up the competence granted by the Spanish Constitution and grants in its article 71 to this Autonomous Community the exclusive competence in matters of tourism, which includes among other credentials, and in any case, the planning and promotion of the tourism sector. Likewise, article 37.1. 14° establishes as one of the guiding principles of the public policies of the Autonomous Community the promotion of the tourism sector as a strategic economic element of Andalusia. Currently, Law 13/2011 of 23 December on Tourism in Andalusia classifies hotels in the categories of "Grand Luxury" and five, four, three, two, one star.

From this background, as can be seen in Fig. 1, we outline the general model of analysis proposed in this paper. We consider it can be applied to any type of tourist accommodation and for tourists of any origin, by adapting it and considering the different variables that can help define marketing and business strategies.

The model is based on the fact that the concept of stars is not a determining factor in the process of contracting accommodation, but that there are other general attributes, such as cuisine, staff care, location, environmental safety, etc., that must be taken into account by those responsible for accommodation when creating competitive advantages and achieving greater customer loyalty.

In this context, the rating according to the number of stars plays a moderating role, insofar as customer service expectations are directly

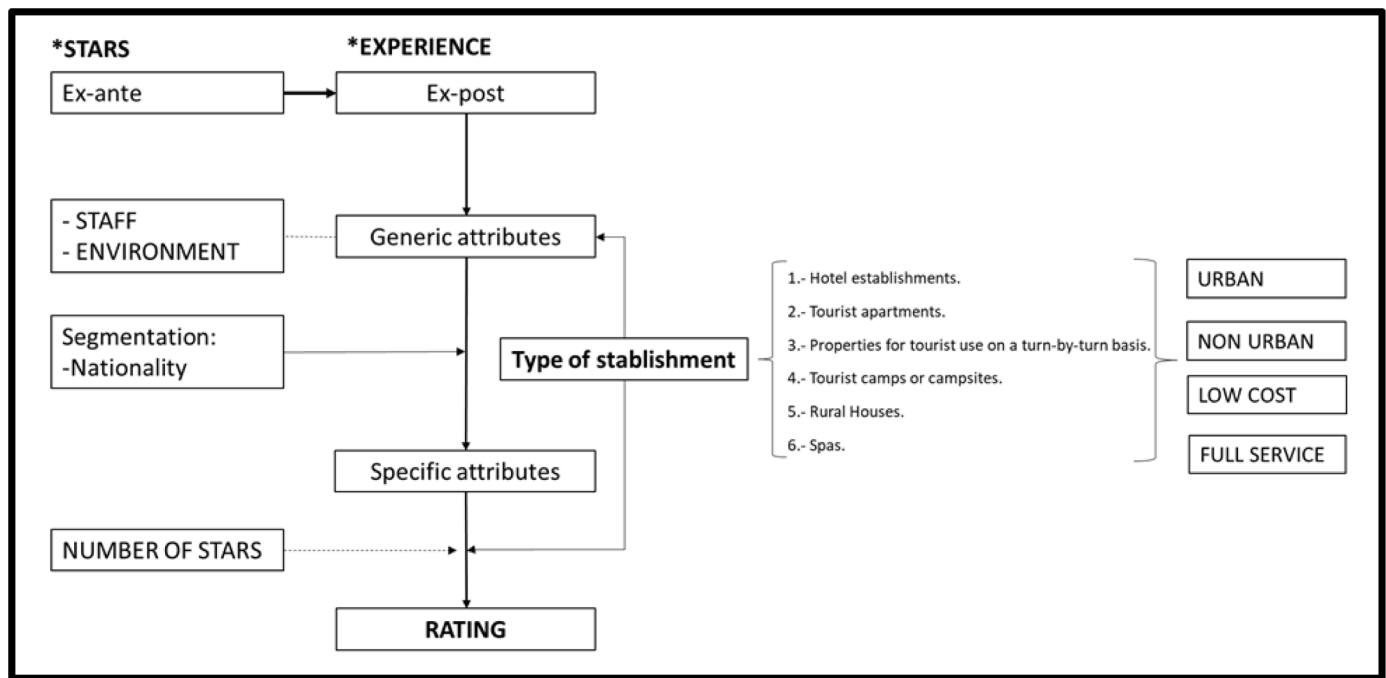


Fig. 1. General model of analysis.

Source: Authors' own work

related to the number of stars. Therefore, the higher the number of stars, the higher the level of quality standards required by customers.

Methodology

Spain is the second country in the world in terms of tourist arrivals and the second in terms of tourism revenues (UNWTO, 2018). This positive situation is a consequence of the country's economic and social stability in relation to its competitors and the high demand from foreign tourists for so-called "sun and beach" tourism. Spain received 82.6 million tourists in 2018, who spent 68,000 million euros, an increase of 0.9% over 2017 (Hosteltur, 2019), of which 4195,720 came from the Nordic countries. Andalusia is the third Autonomous Community in terms of the number of tourists, 12.7% of the total (INE, 2018). Specifically, the Andalusian Autonomous Community is also among the preferred destinations of Nordic tourists (Junta de Andalucía, 2019).

Table 4 shows the main data on Nordic tourists who spent the night in hotels in Andalusia.

To answer our research questions, Nordic tourists' opinions shared on Tripadvisor were systematically analysed by qualitative methods. Opinions written in the native languages of the countries being analysed were included in the sample (Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish). Tripadvisor is characterised by a high volume of users and from diverse countries (49 countries), and it has been used in some recent academic papers related to tourism and leisure industries (Fernández-Hernández et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2018).

Table 4

Main data on travelers in hotel establishments in Andalusia.

COUNTRY	2018 (year on year variation 2017–2018)
Denmark	129,549 (−0.1%)
Finland	85,345 (13.5%)
Norway	93,331 (−3.3%)
Sweden	169,453 (−5.5%)

Source: Own preparation based on data from the Regional Government of Andalusia (2018).

As we show in Figure 1, the analysis must be developed taking into consideration the kind of establishment being evaluated. That is why we focus on three- and four-star hotels in the province of Malaga, the main market destination of the Nordic countries (Turismo y Planificación Costa del Sol, S.L.U. 2018). The comments collected in 2018 were those with the best and worst average ratings to obtain unbiased information. Comments (a total of 149) are limited to the period between June and August, being the time of year with the highest influx from this market (Ministerio de Industria, Comercio y Turismo, 2019). Samples of comments are grouped into the following categories: 40 comments best value three-star hotel; 22 comments worst value three-star hotel; 69 comments best value four-star hotel; 18 comments worst value four-star hotel.

In this case, the qualitative study has been carried out by means of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), since we position ourselves in the interpretative paradigm. This paradigm seeks to understand deeply human values, preferences and customs from individuals pertaining to the same collective (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We consider that this type of analysis fits perfectly with the objectives of the study, since it allows researchers to identify, organise, analyse and propose patterns of relationship between the attributes of the visitors' service experiences and staff and environmental dimensions from the Nordic tourists' dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The thematic analysis was carried out in a non-automated manner, without the aid of any software. The authors consider that the use of manual data analysis is appropriate for the purpose of exploratory research. Previous qualitative research (Cheng and Wong, 2015; García-Muñoz et al., 2019; Segovia-Pérez et al., 2018; Triantafyllidou et al., 2010) has used the same process to achieve similar objectives.

The procedure was structured in different stages (Vaismoradi et al., 2013):

- The comments on three- and four-star hotel service experiences made by Nordic tourists on the Tripadvisor virtual community were identified and studied in depth (Table 5).

Table 5Sample data of www.tripadvisor.com comments.

Hotel category	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden
3 stars	18	0	22	25
4 stars	19	8	24	33
TOTAL = 149	37	8	46	58

Source: Authors' own work.

- Keywords were identified in each comment in relation to the service experience attributes and dimensions described in the theoretical framework (attributes related to staff and environment).
- The keywords of the study were coded to link the quotations of the different clients. The dimensions of tourists' service experience were defined deductively from the literature review.
- Compilation and linking of the keywords were done according to the family of dimensions described. The relative importance of each keyword was considered to define the hotel rating model.

Results

With respect to the first question, the influence of the star rating models, Nordic tourists hardly mention "stars" when valuing their hotel service experiences. Only 11 of the 149 comments show the stars as a reference for the quality of hotel service. Furthermore, when Nordic travelers mention them, it can be observed that the number of stars does

not correspond to service experience rating at all. We give some examples:

Three-star hotel customer (comment number 9):

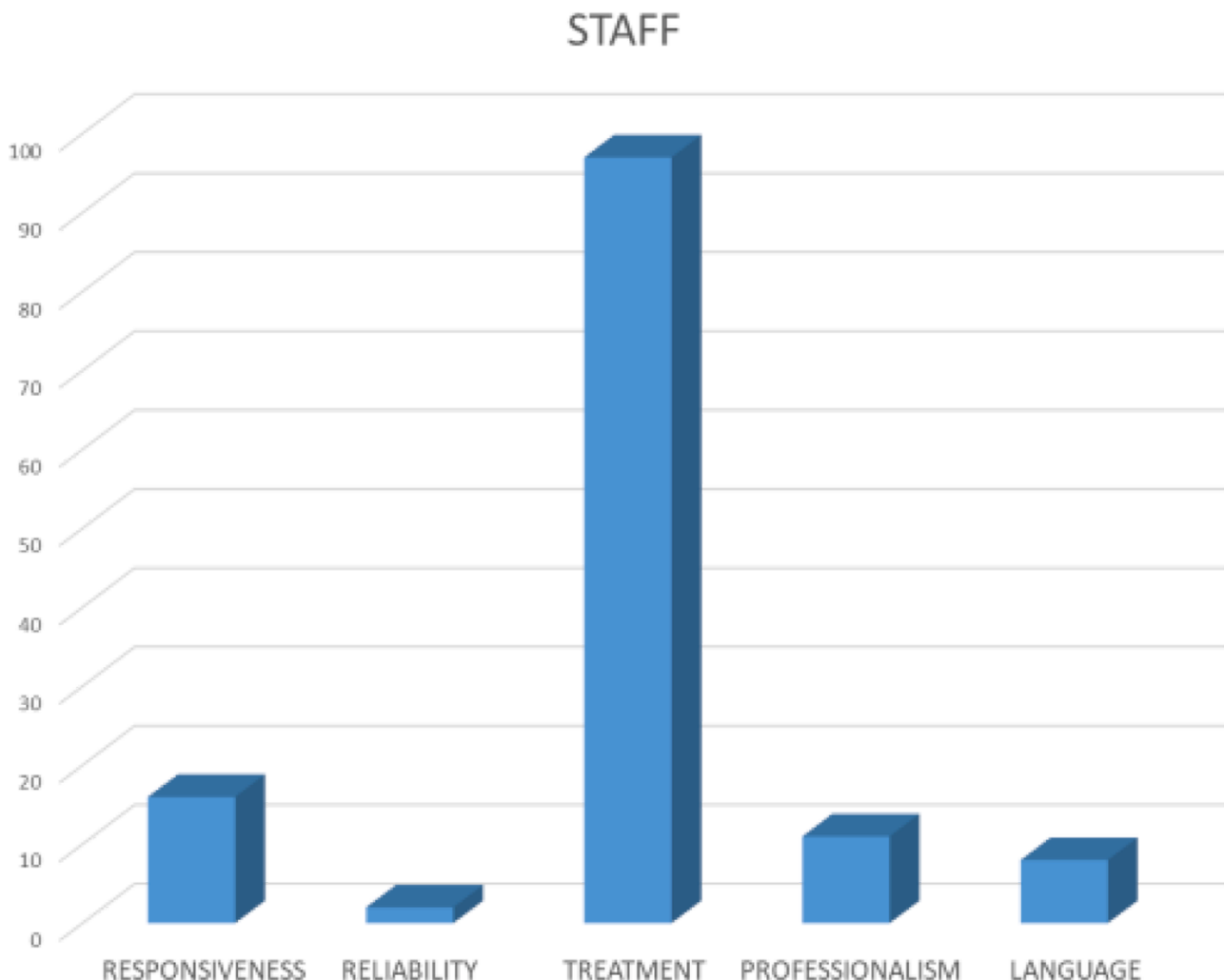
"... I have never experienced a staff so helpful and attentive. I will be there again any time. I wish you could give it ten stars".

Three-star hotel customer (comment number 51):

"... This is one of the worse hotels I have ever been. It must be close immediately. Disgusting staff. We refused to stay there any time some. If it was possible, I would give it zero-stars".

Regarding the second research question, the opinions of the Nordic tourists can be grouped into the two theoretically identified dimensions (staff and environment). Of the factors identified by the literature, in the case of the Nordic market, the most notable is the perception of customer service, i.e. helpful, friendly and professional work, as well as the ability to make decisions as problems arise. In Fig. 2, the main results are shown, highlighting especially, as can be seen, the category of "treatment received". This result is very interesting for the hotel sector since it is one of the most difficult to achieve and, furthermore, it shows that the marketing effort made by Spanish companies deserves international recognition.

On the other hand, in the environmental dimension (Fig. 3), the results show that certain tangible elements such as the bed, the size of the

**Fig. 2.** Main results of the analysis: staff dimension.

Source: Authors' own work

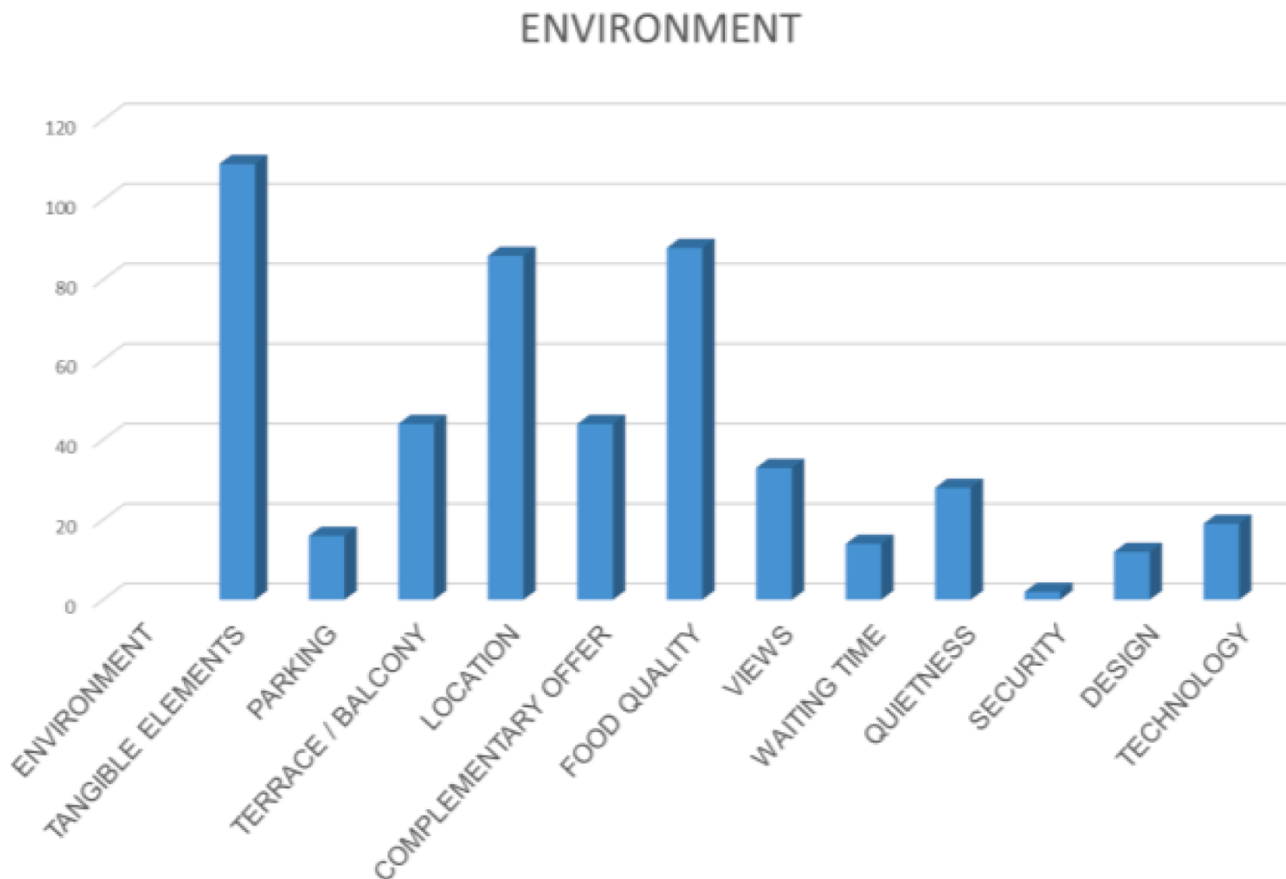


Fig. 3. Main results of the analysis: environmental dimension.
Source: Authors' own work

rooms, the furniture or the cleaning are among the factors that most frequently stand out among the clients from the Nordic countries. It is striking that these clients attach great importance to sanitary equipment, especially regarding showers, baths and taps. Other aspects that have a significant influence on this market are the quality of the food, the offer of complementary services (mainly bars and restaurants, shopping centers, and cultural activities) and the proximity of places of interest of various kinds.

At a greater distance, there are other factors such as the views from the establishment, the existence of balconies or terraces, as well as the tranquility.

Discussion and conclusions

The literature has recognised that hotel managers and their marketing strategies need to be increasingly creative in the process of creating competitive advantage. Hotel rating systems requiring a certain number of stars to be obtained are increasingly irrelevant to tourists in general, and to Nordic tourists in particular. Therefore, they are not useful to attract new customers or retain existing ones. Indeed, the fact that these systems are voluntary or non-existent in Nordic markets may accentuate their lack of influence. It has been noted that, in the sample investigated, of the 149 comments, only in 11 cases do they mention the star rating system as a comparative criterion in terms of meeting their expectations.

Accordingly, the lack of representativeness of the star rating models shown in our results supports previous empirical evidence that does not recognise in them any relevance (López-Fernández and Serrano-Bedia, 2004; Núñez et al., 2004; Morillo, 2007). Therefore, the positioning of these establishments for Nordic tourists would not be determined so

much by classification as by the experience generated by certain factors and their emotionality.

In the case of Finland and Norway, a national hotel classification system does not exist. Nevertheless, in Denmark and Sweden, the criteria taken into account when classifying a hotel establishment are basically objective (Arcarons i Simón et al., 2008), such as services (reception, catering, laundry, room cleaning, room service...), facilities (general cleaning, comfort, hygiene...) and rooms (dimensions, equipment, furniture...). Our results show that some of these objective environmental attributes notably influence Nordic customer behaviour. Therefore, Spanish hotel managers must consider these attributes to better position their establishment and make them more attractive to Nordic tourists.

Although the Swedish–Danish model does not include the staff dimension, our results demonstrate the importance of personnel for Nordic clients. Accordingly, skills, talent and competences development plans must be implemented in the Spanish hotel industry. As shown in Fig. 4, the main factor that influences the creation of a good experience is a reduced size of the establishment, which allows for more personalised attention and which, in turn, favours the enjoyment of the desired tranquillity. This issue is a big challenge since the lack of qualified personnel in the hospitality industry is an endemic problem. Accordingly, in the hotel industry, Nieves et al. (2014) considered that the higher the level of employee expertise, the greater the satisfaction of the customer.

On the other hand, a location close to places of interest, whether they are gastronomic, cultural, leisure or shopping facilities, is also key to generating good experiences among Nordic tourists.

In the case of the Nordic countries, it is believed that it is necessary to seek new sources of competitive advantage to improve the positioning of

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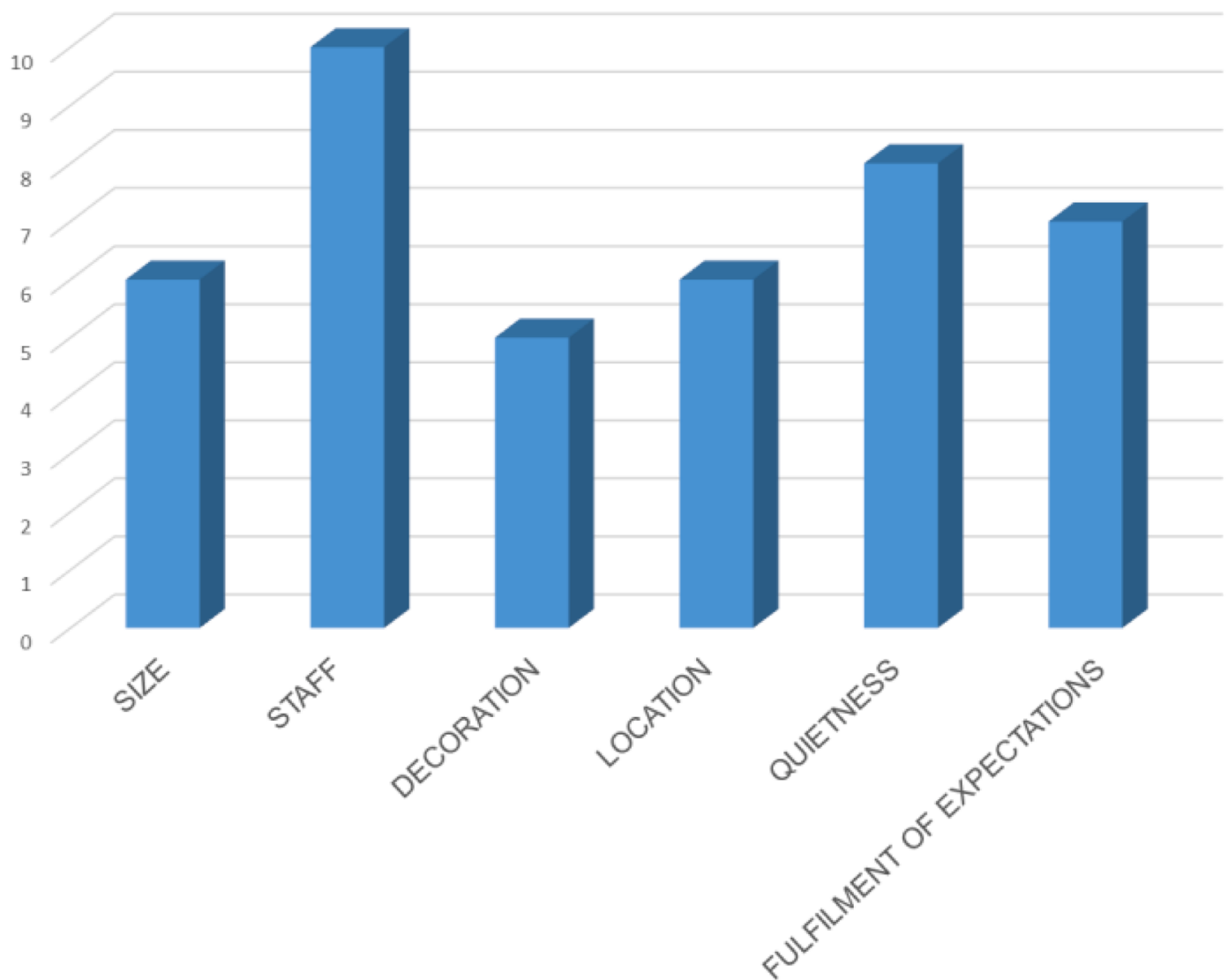


Fig. 4. Determining factors in the creation of experiences in the Nordic market.
Source: Authors' own work

the establishment and increase the degree of tourist loyalty. In this case, the references to the possibility of the “open bar” concept at no additional cost have been revealing. Also noteworthy is the suggestion by researchers to incorporate works of art in the establishments as a channel for highly intense sensory experiences.

With regard to the limitations of this study, it is worth highlighting its exploratory nature, based only on the comments of Nordic tourists and a limited sample of three- to four-star hotels located in the province of Malaga. Another limitation is that secondary sources of information have been used. In future phases of the research, qualitative techniques such as focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews with different target audiences will be carried out. Similarly, the use of quantitative methods to obtain statistical empirical evidence will be of interest in future research.

Moreover, we propose to increase the number of tourists analysed, to diversify the type of tourist accommodation studied and to approach the thematic analysis through the use of computer tools. In addition, we propose including a more in-depth analysis of the different Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to be implemented in the near future in the

business and marketing environments, as foreseen by Agenda 2030, defined by the United Nations.

Finally, since the Swedish–Danish hotel rating system is also used in other markets like Iceland, Greenland and the Aland islands, Spanish hotel managers should apply the same strategic and marketing plans for them. The degree of homogeneity of different institutional environments (countries or regions) of the tourist markets can be a relevant variable to define hotel development strategies orientated to similar markets. Moreover, better knowledge of such markets may contribute to define public policies for tourists that improve the whole destination ecosystem.

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