

Reassessment of the Influence of Socio-demographic Variables on Hotel Choice during Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The hospitality and travel sector has been one of the most affected sectors by Covid-19, which has resulted in a significant increase in the literature addressing the impact of the health crisis on tourism activities and tourists' perceptions and behaviours. Traditionally, socio-demographic variables have been instrumental in understanding consumers' needs and desires. However, during the pandemic, it has been unveiled that social and economic profiles have started to influence how tourists make decisions. Since studies on the changes in hotel choice during and after Covid-19 are still scarce, this article aims to assess the influence of socio-demographic variables on hotel choice based on data collected during the peak phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. A quantitative study was conducted using an online questionnaire that reached an international sample of 1113 individuals. The ANOVA and the t-test analysis results point out that socio-demographic variables under study are responsible for several differences in the evaluation of hotels. These findings reinforce socio-demographic attributes' capability to understand customers' preferences and decision-making despite the context.

KEYWORDS

Hotel Choice, Socio-Demographic, Safety Perception, Hotel Certification, Hotel Guests' Behaviour.

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1. Introduction

Marketing professionals use socio-demographic variables to get helpful information for understanding consumers' needs and wants and create differentiating offers for potential customers, which may vary according to age, gender, income or even nationality (Kotler et al., 2013). Socio-demographic variables are efficient indicators of behavioural intention development and a base to estimate the target market size. They are also important influencers of attitudes and purchase intention and to understand the changes in market segments to allow the creation of differentiating strategies in the hospitality sector (Lee & Hwang, 2011).

The hotel sector must innovate in management to achieve a competitive advantage. Therefore, hotel managers must consider this when formulating business policies (Mártinez-López & Vargas-Sánchez, 2013). In the past, Prideaux et al. (2003) stated, and ultimately foreseen, that one of the disasters that could affect the tourism sector would be a pandemic, perhaps caused by a new strain of influenza or another unknown disease. Their prediction became real when Covid-19 was officially considered a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2020). Pandemics are not new, though no previous situation reached the extent and consequences of the current one, namely on tourism. According to (Nicola et al., 2020), with the Covid-19 outbreak, the hospitality and travel sector was hit the hardest, facing potentially devastating consequences. The coronavirus pandemic has had endless global implications, leading people to believe that nothing will be the same as before.

Tourism research is currently dominated by studies that evaluate the pandemic's effects and implications and suggest measures and actions for dealing with the consequences (Sahin, 2020). Zopiatis et al. (2021) state that research has experienced a renaissance due to the pandemic, and researchers have found an opportunity to investigate the impact of the health crisis from diverse perspectives. The authors assert that in the field of tourism marketing, the topics to be addressed in the future are related to tourists' expectations, perceptions, and attitudes in the post-Covid-19 era. In the same line, (Sigala, 2020) points out topics such as tourists' decision-making and assessments of quality or satisfaction.

To face the challenges emerging from Covid-19, hotels need updated information on customers' concerns, expectations, and requirements regarding hotel services, safety warranties, and certifications. Since socio-demographic characteristics are valuable predictors of consumer behaviour (Wang et al., 2020), and there is a gap in the tourism literature regarding the influence of these variables in pandemic situations, this research aims to assess the influence of socio-demographic variables on hotel choice based on data collected during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic to fulfil the existing gap.

2. Literature Review

Businesses must consider the best way to create value for the target markets and develop strong, profitable, and long-term relationships with their customers (Lee & Hwang, 2011). The hospitality industry should identify valuable customers and how they evaluate the options when choosing a hotel (Choo-rihom, 2011). However, it is challenging to attract a specific group by identifying the determinants of their preferences (Hauck William & Stanforth, 2007). The hospitality industry implements demographic profiling to enhance its knowledge or understanding of customer demographic differences concerning expectation and perception of quality of service (Tsiotsou & Vasioti, 2006).

Several studies relate socio-demographic characteristics, namely age, gender, income, education and occupation, to consumers' decision-making (Lee et al., 2012). Tefera and Migiro (2017) reveal the role of demographics in service marketing variables; however, they have been unable to find statistically significant differences in service quality scores between gender, age, marital status, and the type of employment someone has. Similarly, Cetin (2014) found that none of the demographic factor groups (age, gender, marital status, education, nationality and income) showed significant differences in hotel guests' expectation and perception levels. However, there are contradictory results. The study by Ahmad et al. (2014) indicates that age significantly explains differences in the perception of hotel service quality. Weaver et al. (1994) also agree that age is a distinctive demographic factor affecting destination choice, as younger people look for fun and cheap places while older people seek comfort and safety. They indicate that tour-

ists under 45 tend to seek new experiences. Older customers generally unveil higher purchasing power than other groups and thus are more willing to pay more for some luxury offers, especially targeted to their financial capacity (Khare, 2011). A study addressing Gen Z developed by Wiastuti and Lestari (2020) revealed that different even inside the same age generation, there are differences in hotel preferences associated with demographics. Younger Gen Z individuals, mainly in high school or studying for a bachelor's degree, considered cleanliness the most critical attribute. Conversely, for older Gen Z individuals, the top three hotel attributes are room comfort, cleanliness, value for money and price. Cleanliness was considered important for Gen Z independently of the age segment and educational level.

Rubenstein et al. (2016) found a significant relationship between gender and service quality evaluation. However, Mirzagoli and Memarian (2015) report that gender, income, employment status, occupation, education, and marital status had no impact on customer satisfaction based on the perceived service quality.

Shemwell and Cronin (1995) present empirical evidence that women and men differ in their approaches to establishing relationships with service. When applied to hotel choice and booking Karatepe and Babakus (2015) indicate that men can be expected to place greater emphasis on the rational and cognitive aspects of hotel choice. In contrast, women are more likely to make decisions based on factors that affect them personally and maximise the interpersonal aspects of the relationships, while men focus their preferences on the core service. In support of the previous indications, Wolf and Zhang (2016) show that women place more value on uncertainties, time and money constraints, and decision consequences, while men place more value on information and goals. These differences may explain male customers' preference for resorts compared to female customers (Tran et al., 2019). In the case of gender, contradictions also exist in the literature. For example, Bor et al. (2018) suggest that gender does not influence hotel choice when considering hotel attributes. On the contrary, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1991) indicate that women tend to be more influenced by recommendations and have higher repurchase intentions than men.

Concerning employment, Tefera and Migiro (2017) showed that there are differences in expectation and perception associated with employment status. The retired and semi-retired groups present lower mean scores for expectation and perception than the employed and self-employed groups. In opposition, Tsiotsou and Vasioti (2006) indicate that employment and family status did not affect expectation, perception and customer service satisfaction, while education and age produce significant differences in average customer satisfaction. Less educated people are less satisfied with tourism services, while more educated people are the most satisfied. In addition, young people are less satisfied than older people.

Household characteristics may also have an impact on hotel choice. According to Bor et al. (2018), marital status does not determine the choice of the hotel based on the type of facilities, hotel staff, value for money, service quality, accessibility and service delivery. Nevertheless, Aziz Yuhanis et al. (2018) manifest the wife's power as a decision-maker in the family. The wife is positioned to decide what will be best for the family, ensuring that all parties are satisfied during their stay at the destination. Even though studies have shown that children are important members of family decision-making, the mother has more influence in the final decision (Lee & Collins, 2000).

The composition of the household seems to be another relevant factor. Families with children usually have a different choice process for holidays and accommodation as children can influence the early stages of decision-making regarding the date of the holidays, choice of destination, hotel and activities to be undertaken (Gram, 2005; Bronner & de Hoog, 2008). Younger children may influence choice simply by needing childcare or parental concern about meals (Thornton et al., 1997). Plus, the greater the number of children and adolescents in the family, the greater the influence attributed to children in decisions about the types of destinations, activities to develop, and the amount of money families are willing to spend (Jenkins, 1979). Huang and Xiao (2000) suggest that income affects leisure-based tourist behaviour, especially regarding the length of holiday and accommodation services used. Since income and other factors depend on tourists' country of origin, the nationality of hotel guests must also be considered, as Maoz (2007) suggested. Cultural characteristics play an important role in shaping travellers' behaviour (Andreu et al., 2017). Therefore, it is essential to recognise the differences in the behaviour associated with nationality (Tran et al., 2019).

Addressing the perception of travel risks, Karl et al. (2020) examined the effects of demographic factors on tourists' perceived risks in destination choice. They offer an integrated perspective of travel risks and affirm that the tourist's socio-demographic profile (gender, age, educational level and household income) influences travel risk perceptions and decision-making. The results showed differences associated with gender and age, and the tourists most willing to change travel plans due to perceived risks are more likely to be women and seniors. In opposition, no statistically significant differences in educational level and household income were found.

To sum up, the available evidence points out that different genders have different perspectives on decision-making (Khare, 2011) and, consequently, the study of gender, age and other socio-demographic variables can help understand the customer's purchase intention (Chen et al., 2017). Therefore, despite the contradictions, we can conclude that consumer attitudes are associated, to some extent, with socio-demographic variables (Aluri & Palakurthi, 2011). When developing marketing campaigns, marketers must consider several aspects, especially if the product or service involves a family decision (Lee & Collins, 2000). Therefore, it is worth understanding these variables' role in hotel choice during a pandemic since there is a gap in the existing literature regarding this specific context.

3. Methods

A quantitative study was developed to provide hotels with the information needed to create or adapt their strategies to meet the several targets' anxieties and requisites due to Covid-19. An online questionnaire was developed to collect data globally.

Without specific and objective criteria to assess hotel guests' anxieties, a group of tourism experts was set up, comprising four hotel managers and the researchers who employed an adaptation of the Delphi method to define the best approach to the problem. The process started with a list of items proposed by each person individually covering seven critical categories previously agreed upon by the panel: (1) Financial risk, (2) Front desk digitalisation and automation, (3) Entertainment, (4) Front desk service, (5) Hygiene, sanitation, and cleanness, (6) Hotel characteristics and space management, and (7) Food and beverage service. The critical dimensions were defined with the help of hospitality professionals known by the researchers. A list of items organised by category was compiled and later distributed among the experts. The experts were instructed to individually evaluate each item for later discussion in online meetings. The process took about a month to complete, and after five online meetings, the consensus was reached. The final list of items comprising the 52 questions distributed by the seven dimensions is presented in the appendix.

Having chosen the items, an online questionnaire was designed to collect data on the items using five-point Likert-type scales for agreement and importance. Two questions about travel habits, one ranking question to assess respondents' priorities on specific hotel attributes, and a group of questions intended to gather demographic data were included. The questionnaire was made available in four languages (Portuguese, English, Spanish, and Indonesian) on May 14 2020. The questionnaire was disseminated using multiple channels: social media pages and groups, mailing lists, and personal contacts. The questionnaire remained active until the end of May 2020. A total of 1116 responses were collected worldwide using a non-probabilistic convenience sample procedure. Three responses had to be deleted due to inconsistencies, reducing the final sample to 1113 responses distributed as shown in Figure 1. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, t-test for independent samples and ANOVA with post hoc tests. These statistical methods have been extensively used in hospitality research (Rivera Manuel & Pizam, 2015). Microsoft Power BI and SPSS 26 software were used to produce the results.

Figure 1. Distribution of the Respondents



Source: Own Elaboration

4. Results

4.1 Sample Profile

The final sample includes 728 (65.4%) females and 385 (34.6%) males. The respondents were grouped according to age under 25 (29%), 26-40 (30.4%), 41-50 (21.4%), 51-65 (19.2%). Concerning occupation, the most represented categories are Full-time employees in the Private Sector (24.1%), Full-time employees in the Public Sector (19.4%), and Students (23.5%), in total accounting for 66.9% of responses. A significant percentage of the respondents hold a bachelor's degree (42.7%), and 21% have completed a master's degree. The complete information on sample characteristics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents (N=1113)

	N	%		N	%
Gender			Marriage Status		
Female	728	65,4	Single (never married)	503	45.2
Male	385	34,6	Married or cohabitating	487	43.8
Age			Separated	17	1.5
18-25	323	29.0	Divorced	66	5.9
26-40	338	30.4	Widowed	10	0.9
41-50	238	21.4	Rather not say	30	2.7
51-65	214	19.2	Occupation		
Education			Unemployed	85	7.6
Basic Education	8	0.7	Full-time Employee in the Private Sector	268	24.1
High School	87	7.8	Full-time Employee in the Public Sector	216	19.4
Professional Degree	131	11.8	Part-time employee in the Private Sector	42	3.8
Bachelor's Degree	475	42.7	Part-time employee in the Public Sector	26	2.3
Master's Degree	234	21.0	Entrepreneur	73	6.6
Doctoral Degree	156	14.0	Liberal professional	65	5.8
Other	22	2.0	Unpaid family worker	21	1.9
			Student	261	23.5
			Retired or pre-retired	32	2.9
			Trainee/Scholarship	14	1.3
			Unable to work	10	0.9

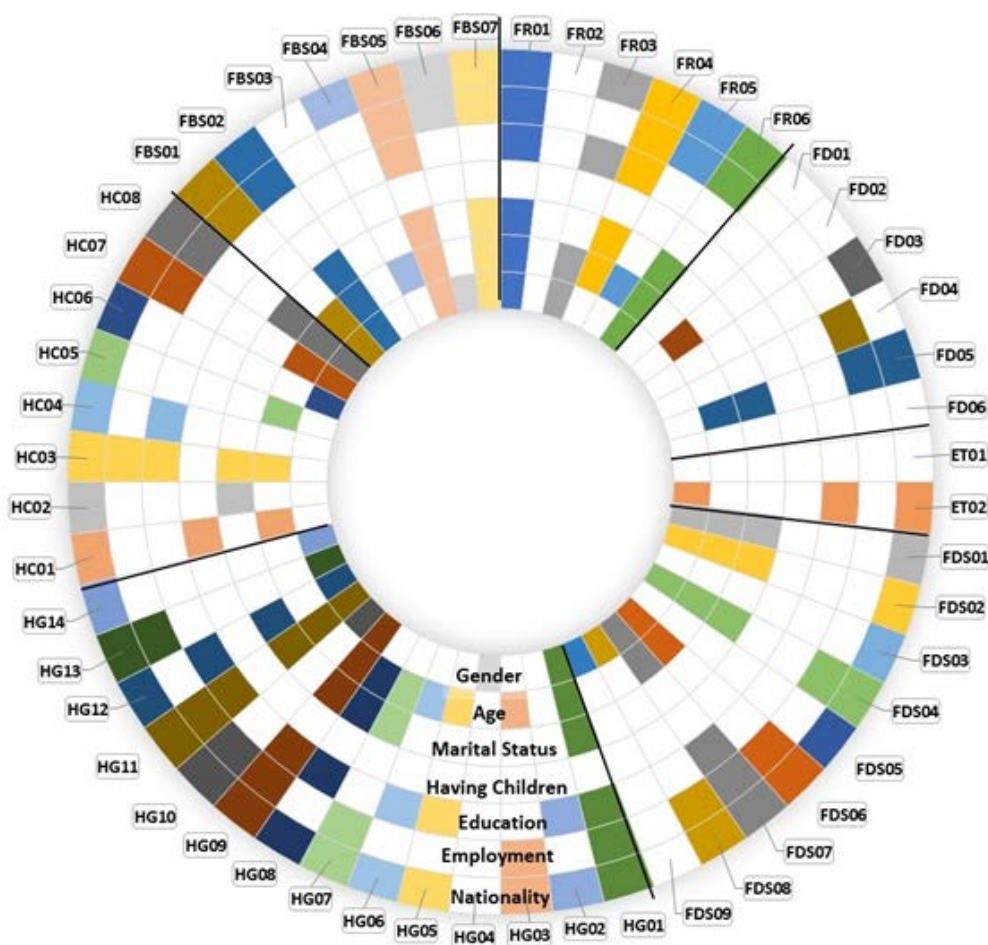
Source: Own Elaboration

4.2 Impact of Demographics on the Evaluation of Hotels

Based on the seven critical dimensions for hotel safety evaluation, the t-test for independent samples was computed to assess the difference between means by gender. Several One-Way ANOVA analyses were conducted using age category, marital status, having children, education level, employment status, and nationality as factors. In the case of nationality, only the countries with more than 50 responses (namely Portugal, Spain, México, Indonesia, and Brazil) were considered.

The results are graphically shown in Figure 2. Each ring represents a demographic attribute, and each slice corresponds to a single item (hotel safety variable) in a specific critical dimension. Coloured cells indicate statistically significant differences at a 0.05 significance level in the variable associated with specific levels of the corresponding demographic attribute. Due to space limitations, detailed One-Way ANOVA and *t*-test tables are not reproduced but are available from the authors on request.

Figure 2. Differences in Customers' Perception by Socio-demographic Variables



Source: Own Elaboration

The analysis of Figure 2 indicates that nationality is responsible for the highest number of differences (43) among the hotel safety variables under study. Regarding the other demographic attributes, age accounts for 30 differences, gender for 27, employment status for 25, marital status for 19, education for 16, and finally, having children for one single difference.

5. Discussion

The results show that all the socio-demographic variables under study are responsible for differences in the evaluation of hotel characteristics, even though to different degrees. These findings somehow explain

the contradictions in the literature regarding the impact of socio-demographic variables on hotel choice. Hospitality services are a complex product with several dimensions. Therefore, depending on the evaluated dimensions, different socio-demographic characteristics may be significant or irrelevant in explaining hotel guests' decision-making.

Five variables (FR01, HG01, HG09, HG11, and FBS05) appear to be more contingent on the socio-demographic profile of hotel guests since they are affected by all the demographic attributes under study except for "having children". In opposition, the evaluation of hotel variables FD01, FD06, ET01, and FBS03 are not affected by the socio-demographic profile of respondents.

Contrary to what was expected (e.g. (Gram, 2005; Bronner & de Hoog, 2008) (Thornton et al., 1997)), the current findings indicate that having children does not seem to be a determinant criterium for hotel evaluation. This factor only influences the variable HC01 (Staying in a hotel with a small number of rooms is safer), which is considered safer by parents with children aged between 4 and 11 years old. Front desk digitalisation and automation are the dimensions where fewer differences were recorded, as only nationality, employment, marital status, and age impact this dimension. Curiously, young clients (18-25, $M=3.05$ >26-40, $M=2.74$) students and single seem to be the ones considering that technologies that minimise direct contact will decrease the trust (FD05). Indonesian and Mexican also think that digitalisation will decrease trust.

The preference for hotels providing personalised counselling for choosing experiences at the destination (ET01) is slightly positive ($M=3.64$) and does differ according to demographic attributes. In turn, the preference for hotels with entertainment in open spaces is more important for women ($M=3.89$), Portuguese ($M=3.94$) and Spanish ($M=4.11$) clients, therefore supporting the indication of the impact of gender (e.g., (Kotler et al., 2013); Rubenstein et al. (2016)). The level of education also affects this variable, suggesting that highly educated clients tend to favour events' safety (Lee et al., 2012). In the case of front desk service, the level of education influences the existence of differentiated entrances and exits (FDS07), with a bachelor's ($M=3.65$) given more importance than clients holding a master's degree ($M=3.32$). However, this is the only difference in the front desk service dimension. Nationality has a considerable influence in this dimension since only the desire to be informed daily of the occupation rate, clients with Covid-19 and hygiene and disinfection practices (FDS09) ($M=3.92$) do not vary across nationalities, supporting the importance of nationality to explain hotel choice ((Andreu et al., 2017); (Tran et al., 2019)). Therefore, hotel managers should adapt the service according to hotel guests' origin (Nationality).

Gender also significantly affects the perception of front desk service, with women showing particular concern and importance to the safety of the front desk to men. Compared to older clients, younger clients feel more uncomfortable and upset with preventive safety measures at the front desk (FDS02, FDS04), but what to enjoy the benefits associated with protective measures (FDS06, FDS07). These findings reinforce previous indications by Ahmad et al. (2014) and Weaver et al. (1994) about age's influence on hotel choice behaviour.

Hygiene, sanitation, and cleanness are the more extensive category with 14 items. In this category, it stands out the scepticism of hotel clients regarding the effectiveness of the Covid-19 safety certificate (HG03) and the high level of difference in hotel guests' opinions associated with different levels or categories of the socio-demographic variables.

6. Conclusions and Implications

The world has gone through unprecedented times and challenges, and the COVID-19 outbreak has changed the world, notably the tourism sector. Among the lessons learnt from the pandemic is that tourism will change in the future according to the socio-demographic characteristics of tourists, namely in terms of how they start to favour some hotel profiles. This will have a major impact on the hotels' operations. Tourists will start to choose some particular destinations and then push development to some destinations, namely those located in low-density areas.

The current study was developed in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and aims to shed light on how socio-demographic variables can impact hotel choice. The novelty of the current setting made it very difficult to find studies explicitly addressing the issues of hotel guests' perception of safety and

health risks, mainly at times of crisis. The literature review revealed the scarcity of articles focusing on non-conventional contexts. Therefore, the current findings expand the existing knowledge on the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on hotel choice in a non-normal, pandemic context regarding a set of indicators related to perceived risks and safety measurements. The results help identify the socio-demographic variables responsible for differences in the evaluation of hotel characteristics during the pandemic and the magnitude of their impact. In addition, as tourism is an important industry worldwide due to its role as a source of income and socio-cultural benefits, this study offers geographically global insights capable of being considered and applied anywhere in the world.

Concerning practical implications, hotel managers benefit from having specific information about tourists' criteria for hotel choice in the post-pandemic context to support the sector's recovery. These findings reinforce the capability of socio-demographic attributes to understand customers' decisions despite the context. In the case of Covid-19, since the assessment of hotels varies according to the demographic profile of guests, hotel managers need to be aware of differences to develop solutions better tailored to each segment. This conclusion is in line with Karl et al. (2020). They assert that tourism destination managers can use the results of this type of study to identify the variables depicting potential risk-averse or risk-seeking tourists. With this knowledge, marketers can develop multifaceted marketing activities and communications plans to promote destinations among the right segments of tourists. A better knowledge of the socio-demographic variables associated with the demands and behaviours of the different segments will improve the hotel experience.

Regarding limitations, as it was globally distributed, the global coverage of the sample can be considered a strength; however, the sample size by continent and country is not homogeneous. This could introduce a sample bias to the extent that there are countries or continents more and less represented, which could lead to cultural bias, which is a limitation when assessing the results. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling method was used to collect data, limiting the generalisation of the findings.

Concerning the future research lines, studies on the impacts of Covid-19 in the travel industry should continue to offer strategic tools for helping the sector recover. The marketing strategy base is knowing the tourists' needs and desires. Thus, in this new context triggered by the health crisis, examining the impact of other variables, such as those related to lifestyle, would be appropriate. Research may also focus on the role of socio-demographic variables as moderators in analysing the relationships between other variables involved in hotel choice and behavioural intentions. Studies with international samples are needed to identify the power of cultural differences in a detailed cross-cultural analysis, considering that in this study, nationality is responsible for the highest number of differences among the hotel safety variables under study.

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APPENDIX

Indicator Description

Financial risk

FR01	I only book if I am assured that I can change the reservation at any time
FR02	I do not mind paying extra for pandemic insurance when I am booking.
FR03	I attach more importance to ensuring Covid-19's prevention conditions than to the price
FR04	For me, it is very important that hotels offer free health and personal accident insurance
FR05	I would give preference to hotels that allow the extension of the stay at reduced prices if it is impossible to continue the trip.
FR06	A higher price corresponds to higher health quality

Front desk automation

FD01	New technological ways of customer service will negatively affect service personalisation
FD02	New technological ways of customer service can positively increase service satisfaction
FD03	Being attended by digital assistants will compromise my satisfaction with the service
FD04	I only choose hotels with qualified staff capable of responding to situations of anxiety in case of crisis
FD05	Technologies that minimise direct contact will decrease the trust
FD06	Digital technologies in hotels will prevent the creation of empathy with the client

Entertainment

ET01	I prefer hotels that offer personalised counselling in choice of experiences at the destination
ET02	I prefer hotels with entertainment in open spaces, without agglomerations

Front desk safety

FDS01	At the reception, it is important to ensure health safety conditions
FDS02	The temperature measurement at the time of arrival will make me feel uncomfortable
FDS03	I prefer to have a personalised service to minimise the risk of contagion from Covid-19
FDS04	I get upset if attended by employees with mask/visor and gloves
FDS05	The digitisation of the hotel service is vital to ensure the customer's confidence regarding Covid-19
FDS06	Be able to check-in and out by appointment
FDS07	Having differentiated entrances and exits for customers
FDS08	Being serviced by appropriately uniformed employees with mask/visor and gloves
FDS09	Be informed daily of the occupation rate, clients with Covid-19 and hygiene and disinfection practices

Indicator	Description
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Hygiene, sanitation and cleanness

HG01	Hotels should only reopen if they meet all hygienic conditions to avoid contamination
HG02	I trust hotel safety against the risk of contagion
HG03	The Covid-19 certification ensures that there is no risk of contagion.
HG04	Health entity certifications reinforce the degree of trust when selecting the hotel
HG05	In hotels, there are always risks resulting from deficiencies in the hygiene of the rooms
HG06	In hotel stays, there is always a health risk associated with the poor hygiene of the common and service areas
HG07	Hotel chains have stricter health safety policies
HG08	Hotel chains have a greater ability to react to dangerous situations such as pandemics
HG09	Hotels adopt a responsible behaviour towards the risk of contagion
HG10	Hotels periodically close for general sanitisation and disinfection
HG11	The Safety and health practices in hotel choice
HG12	Promote Online Check-In and Check-out to avoid agglomeration
HG13	Offer masks, disinfectant gel and gloves in rooms
HG14	Favouring hotels that have special agreements with local healthcare units

Hotel characteristics, space management

HC01	Staying in a hotel with a small number of rooms is safer
HC02	Rural accommodations and isolated units will be preferred over large hotels
HC03	I prefer a large hotel
HC04	I prefer a higher-class hotel
HC05	It bothers me that some services are not available to minimise the risk of contagion.
HC06	Hotels have the infrastructure to ensure physical and psychological comfort in case of quarantine
HC07	Hotels ensure safety distance in common spaces
HC08	Hotels with a limited number of clients in common spaces

Food and beverage services

FBS01	Because of the pandemic, I have become more sensitive to food security issues
FBS02	The meals should not be served in a buffet
FBS03	I feel more confident in hotels that have kitchen/kitchen where I can prepare/take meals
FBS04	Because of the Covid-19, the room service is safer.
FBS05	Meals being served in reduced capacity locations
FBS06	The meals being served by appointment
FBS07	Having an option for take-away meals provided by the Hotel kitchen