

The essence of the hotel room in the hotel business – the hotel managers' perspective

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to gain a better understanding of how hotel management perceives the role of the hotel room from the customers' perspective and what role the room plays as regards the hotel management business. Previous research has focused on the hotel's location, the attributes of the hotel and the room, revenue management, pricing, hotel guest experiences, and customer satisfaction. In this study, 19 managers operating in Finland were interviewed: ten hotel managers from 4-5-star hotels and nine from 2-3-star hotels. An inductive approach to the data analysis was adapted and the research findings indicated that the hotel managers were deeply concerned about the customer expectations of their hotel stay. The role of the hotel room as the core element of hotel accommodation was acknowledged by the interviewees. Even though accommodation in the room is regarded as the major product of a hotel, the hotel overnight stay may be different for the customer depending on the hotel's facilities, their services and the customers targeted. In the case of business customers, accommodation with a good bed and the necessary services is all that is seen to be required. While for leisure customers, the overnight stay is perceived to be similar to a home experience during a holiday. However, the findings of this study reveal that there is a contradiction between the management's perception of the role of the room and the everyday practices of the hotel management in terms of marketing the amenities the hotel offers. Although hotel managers follow room-based accounting metrics to measure the performance of the hotel they also simultaneously attempt to grasp the intangible feelings of the guests. In order to sell experiences, hotel managers first need to sell the room.

Keywords: hotel room, hotel overnight stay, accommodation.

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1. Introduction

Eurostat (Eurostat, 2020) defines a hotel as a tourist establishment providing short-stay accommodation as a paid service. This includes the provision of furnished accommodation in guestrooms and suites. Today millions of overnight stays in hotel rooms are sold daily. The offerings of hotels range from small bed-sized rooms at capsule hotels (Chen *et al.*, 2020) to luxury hotels with condominium units (DeFranco *et al.*, 2022). According to Statistics Finland (SF, 2020), a hotel room is a unit formed by one room or group of rooms constituting an indivisible rental whole in an accommodation establishment. Overnight stays are used to measure the length of time a guest spends in a hotel, e.g., in an establishment providing overnight lodging for travellers in rooms or some other units (SF, 2020). In addition to accommodation, a range of other services may be provided such as food and beverage services, parking, laundry services, swimming pools, exercise rooms, and recreational facilities as well as conference and convention facilities (Eurostat, 2020).

Although the guestroom may play a major role in the guest's experience, and may be the core of the service offering, the hotel room, as such, has rarely been a topic of research in hospitality studies. Instead, researchers have paid attention to customers' hotel choices (e.g., Bodet *et al.*, 2017; Dolnicar & Otter, 2003; Jang *et al.*, 2018; Kim & Perdue, 2013; Theocharidis *et al.*, 2020), hotel satisfaction (e.g., Amin *et al.*, 2013), price (Chan & Wong, 2006), and willingness to pay (Galati *et al.*, 2021). Recently researchers have been interested in the value of the hotel stay (Wong & Guillet, 2018), delightful hotel experiences (Torres & Kline, 2013), the impact of the sustainability practices of the hotels on the choice of hotel made by tourists (Franco *et al.*, 2021; Cavagnaro *et al.*, 2021), behavioural intentions (Acampora *et al.*, 2022), and cultural differences related to the customers' nationalities (Pacheco, 2016). Other researchers have investigated hotel or room related expectations and the preferences of different segments of the industry, such as, leisure and business travel (e.g., Pesonen *et al.*, 2019); both these segments are seen as being the most appreciative of the essential amenities of the hotel, such as the room, bed, bathroom, hotel atmosphere and staff. Nevertheless, the essence of the room may differ between leisure and business customers, due to their differing motivations and needs. As leisure customers may expect the hotel stay to provide memorable experiences (e.g., Hosany *et al.*, 2022), the room may be an essential part of the holiday experience. In research on business travel, the room per se is mentioned only as a working space (Ye & Hu, 2020) or a place for a good night's sleep (e.g., Chen *et al.*, 2018). However, the question then arises of how the hotel management in practice adapt to these differing expectations and needs, particularly, if the same rooms are offered to both segments; this is one of the interesting aspects of this study.

In terms of studies from the perspective of hotel management, the focus has been on pricing (Kim *et al.*, 2020), differentiation (Becerra *et al.*, 2013) and location strategies (Yang *et al.*, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2014), hotel performance (Kim *et al.*, 2013), revenue management (Noone, 2016), strategy formulation (Köseoglu *et al.*, 2020) or channel management (Alarcón *et al.*, 2009; Sánchez-Lozano *et al.*, 2020). More recent studies from the perspective of the hotel management have focused on robotic technologies (Ivanov *et al.*, 2020; Pizam *et al.*, 2022), digital technologies (Iranmanesh *et al.*, 2022) or sustainability perspectives (Chan, 2021). The hotel room per se or its meaning for the customer or as part of the service of the hotel has received less attention from researchers. In the few guestroom related studies, the focus has been on price and pricing (e.g., Zhang *et al.*, 2011), guestroom attributes (Masiero *et al.*, 2016; Millar & Baloglu, 2011), design (Park *et al.*, 2010) and guestroom technology (Bilgihan *et al.*, 2016). Studies by Ogle (2009) and Anguera-Torrell *et al.* (2021) have paid attention to the guests' sensory experiences related to the hotel guestroom. Nevertheless, as has been noted above, the same space, provided by a particular room, may serve different needs for different segments, and may have a different role in the customer experience; however, for the hotel business, a room is fundamentally a space to be rented in order to create turnover and revenue.

To summarize, as can be seen previous studies show that there is a lack of research from the perspective of the management on segmented marketing to leisure and business customers (Johnson *et al.*, 2009), as well differentiated promotion strategies for different classes of hotels (Kim *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, more research is needed on the perception of the management of the role of the room and room amenities for the customer (Heo *et al.*, 2015; Ineson *et al.*, 2019; Xu *et al.*, 2019). Hence, the objective of this study is to increase an understanding of how the hotel management perceives the role of the guestroom for the customer and what the role of the room is per se for hotel business marketing and management. The data consists of interviews with Finnish hotel managers, the findings of which will be compared to the presentation of the hotel's offering on their web pages. The findings of this study will reveal whether there is a contradiction between the management's insight into the role of the room, and the everyday practice of the hotel management in terms of marketing the hotel's offerings.

This exploratory study is conducted in a Finnish context by interviewing hotel managers of ten 4-5-star and nine 2-3-star hotels.

2. Literature review

Aim of this literature review was to examine how the concept of the hotel room was introduced in different approaches to hotel related research. Hence, a review of the previous research on hotel management, segmentation, performance and design was conducted, as well as on customers' hotel choice, hotel experiences, preferred hotel attributes, hotel satisfaction and expectations. The aim was to conduct exploratively search on the role of the hotel room in different hotel related studies without relying on any specific theory.

According to Ren *et al.* (2016), the customer experience at a hotel is considered to be a holistic perception, with the guestroom being one of the core elements (Baek *et al.*, 2020), as well as being a core product of the hotel (Berezina *et al.*, 2016; Ogle, 2009). Ali *et al.* (2016) argue that the hotel should create positive emotions and experiences for the customers. Hotel experiences occur at various touch points during the hotel stay (Gołąb-Andrzejak & Gębarowski, 2018), with the hotel room being one of the measures of the quality of the hotel stay (Johnson *et al.*, 2009); this quality is affected by cleanliness, a pleasant view, comfort, quietness, and the amenities (Padma & Ahn, 2020). In their study on delight during a hotel stay, Torres and Kline (2013) characterized a hotel room as an important physical space for delivering the customer experience. As Roberts *et al.* (2018) note, guests assume that the hotel room is a private space, which is secure, clean and comfortable. They identify the hotel room as representing the person's home for that night.

In hotel choice studies, the hotel room is often referred to as one of the tangible hotel attributes (Maric *et al.*, 2016), as well as an element of hotel satisfaction (Dolnicar & Otter, 2003). Often the bed and a comfortable sleeping environment are associated with guest satisfaction and promote intentions to return (Robbins *et al.*, 2021); other important room amenities included cleanliness, room size and bathroom amenities (e.g., Jang *et al.*, 2018). Similar to hotel attribute studies, in the research on hotel satisfaction, several authors found that the hotel room is the second most influential factor that determines customer satisfaction (e.g., Choi & Chu, 2001; Kuhzady & Ghasemi, 2019; Prasad *et al.*, 2014), the first being the hotel staff and service. As hotel guests spend more time in the guestroom compared to the public areas of the hotel (Park *et al.*, 2019), hotel room design, facilities or comfort levels in the room itself have been found to be associated with customer satisfaction with their overnight stay (e.g., Anguera-Torrell *et al.*, 2021; Bogicevic *et al.*, 2018; Choi & Kandampully, 2019; Ratnasari *et al.*, 2020; Wittmann-Wurzer & Zech, 2019; Yung & Chan, 2002; Zhou *et al.*, 2014).

The role of the room during a stay at a hotel may differ between leisure and business customers, due to the different kinds of motivations to travel, as well as the needs and expectations of the stay. For leisure customers, often referred to in research as tourists, the motivation to travel, and hence the need for an overnight stay away from home may be derived from a search for memorable experiences (e.g., Hosany *et al.*, 2022), which may have positive effects on health and wellbeing (e.g., Chen & Petrick, 2013). In contrast, business travel may cause stress, but at the same time it can also bring opportunities for self-development and a sense of freedom and pleasure (e.g., Ye & Xu, 2020). It must be noted that work related travel is not only concerned with the business trips of top managers and executives, but also the mobility of workers, particularly technicians in maintenance and repair (Aguilera & Proulhac, 2015). Hence, business travellers do not only select top-level hotels but also travel as budget travellers.

As Gustafsson (2014) notes, “business travel is not an end in itself, but a means to perform work at the destination” (p. 68). Interestingly, some studies on business travel experiences focus on experiences and perceptions related to flights and stays at airports, rather than hotel stays (see e.g., Unger *et al.*, 2016). Although, when mentioned in business travel experience studies, the room tends to be referred to as a working space (Ye & Hu, 2020), the findings of Chen *et al.* (2018) highlight the importance of the quality of sleep as a determinant of business travellers' hotel satisfaction. This result is also supported by several other travel-related sleep studies (e.g., Mao *et al.*, 2018; Yang *et al.*, 2021) as well as Kim and Park (2017) and Callan and Kyndt (2001); thus indicating that a good night sleep in a comfortable bed is an important factor for business travellers, and related to work productivity.

Consequently, researchers have found certain differences between business and leisure travellers in their room related expectations. Business travellers seem to attach relatively more importance to convenience and the amenities of the room than leisure travellers (Radojevic *et al.*, 2018). For leisure traveler, the guestroom design and appearance may be the most important attributes (Kim & Park, 2017). Although hotel guests may have different needs, the hotel room should provide a retreat where guests can find temporary shelter (Ineson *et al.*, 2019).

The hotel type is an important strategic variable that is directly related to hotel services, facilities, operations, and target market segments, which may, in turn, result in different hotel performance levels (Kim *et al.*, 2013). Subsequently, different types of hotels offer different products. Product differentiation has been widely regarded as one way for firms to isolate themselves from the pressure of competitors and thus obtain superior performance (Becerra *et al.*, 2013). Hotel spaces including the bedrooms are increasingly tailored and customized to fit the individual needs of the travellers (McNeill, 2009). As Bader (2005) states, hotels are highly dependent on a profitable financial performance from a continuous demand with minimal operational costs. In this context, business travellers make a significant contribution to the hotel turnover.

Hotel performance is commonly measured based on room related measures, such as occupancy, average daily rate (ADR), and revenue per available room (RevPAR) (Enz *et al.*, 2001). Hotel room revenue is generally proportional to the number of rooms (Kim *et al.*, 2013). In studies related to room rates, researchers use different physical attributes such as: room size, room location, room type, room view, floor level (e.g., Castro *et al.*, 2016; Masiero *et al.*, 2016; Noone, 2016; Román & Martín, 2016). Room rates are effected by other factors, such as, the hotel's interaction with the travel agencies (Chen, 2022). Based on a thorough literature review on the measurement of hotel performance indicators, Pnevmatikoudi and Stavrinoudis (2016) suggest that in future studies both financial and non-financial indicators should be considered simultaneously.

The above review of the literature shows that the research into the hotel business has produced a considerable number of insights as regards the expectations of hotel guests and their experiences, the

overall hotel experience, as well as detailed attributes. The managerial implications from the research results are that, together with company specific customer feedback, these insights should shape customer awareness. Based on such insight's hotel managers need to improve their everyday hotel operations, by including the necessary service development and communications (see e.g., Narangajavana & Hu, 2008). As noted in the literature (e.g., Ogle, 2009; Berezina *et al.*, 2016; Lee & Shea, 2015), the core of a hotel offering is the room. Hence, hotels sell rooms, and measure overnight stays in rooms. Nevertheless, tourism researchers seem to mainly discuss hotel experiences (e.g., Ren *et al.*, 2016), extraordinary experiences (e.g., Gołab-Andrzejak & Gębarowski, 2018), experiences of hotel rooms (e.g., Roberts *et al.*, 2018) or hotel room experiences (e.g., Ogle, 2009). Subsequently, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research covering the perspective of hotel managers on the issue presented in this article, i.e., an understanding by the managers of the essence of the hotel room, and how they see the role of the room in the customer experience.

3. Methods of data collection and analysis

In this study, the focus of interest is on an overall understanding of how hotel management perceives the role of the guestroom for the customer, and what the role of the room is per se for hotel business management. This exploratory research adopted an inductive qualitative approach, meaning that the researchers have studied the topic in its natural setting, attempted to make sense, or to interpret the phenomenon in terms of the meanings individuals bring to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Informal conversational interviews (see e.g., Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016) were chosen as the interview method. As the interviewer, the first author of this article who has experience of hotel management found it easy to create an open atmosphere and a kind of “insider in the industry” relationship with the interviewees (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016).

In the accommodation data of Statistics Finland, hotels have an informal classification based on the activity type of the establishment: conference/business hotels, spa hotels, summer hotels, resort hotels, estate hotels, residential hotels and motels (SF, 2022). Although there is no official hotel star ranking in Finland, online travel agencies (OTA) and service providers label Finnish hotels with their own star ratings, which may differ between the OTAs. Nevertheless, in general, hotels seem to have the equal number of stars, and these are not dependent on the operator. Accordingly, this kind of ranking is presumed to be familiar to hotel customers. This study investigated 4-5-star hotels and 2-3-star hotels, as it is assumed that the expectations of customers, as well as the policies of the hotels may differ in terms of the role of the room for the customer and the hotel operators.

Hotel managers of 4-5 and 2-3-star hotels operating in Finland were chosen as the target group for the first group of interviews, as the first author has experience of hotel management in these hotel categories. The first two interviewees were chosen from the circle of the authors' acquaintances and included managers of a luxury hotel and a spa hotel. The other eight interviewees from this group were selected using snowball techniques, meaning that the study sample is based on referrals made among people who possess some characteristics compatible with the research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In terms of the sample from 2-3-star hotels, a convenience sample was chosen, representing both small private hotels, as well as international hotel chains in different parts of Finland.

Altogether, 19 people were interviewed. Five respondents from the 4-5-star sample identified their hotels as luxury brand hotels, and three hotels were identified as spa hotels since an aquapark is one of their key services and products. Eight of the interviewees from the 4-5-star hotels were hotel managers and two represented the operational and support management of the hotel business. These two interviewees are grouped in their own sub-group Pro 1-2, as they are managers involved in hotel chain

general operations, but do not manage any specific hotel directly. In the sample of 2-3-star hotels all nine interviewees were hotel managers. Notably, during the interviews, these interviewees preferred to avoid using star ratings, and rather classified their hotels as “tourist segment hotels”.

Table 1. *Summary of interviewees' characteristics*

Interviewee	Position of the interviewee	Location	Primary type of stay	Primary services	Part of the chain
Lux 1	Hotel manager	City	Business/Leisure	F&B, spa	Regional
Spa 1	Hotel manager + other duties	Resort	Leisure	Aquapark, F&B	No
Spa 2	Hotel manager	Resort	Leisure	Aquapark, F&B	Local
Lux 2	Hotel manager + other duties	City	Business/Leisure	F&B	Regional
Spa 3	Other manager	Resort	Leisure	Aquapark, F&B	Local
Lux 3	Hotel manager	City	Business/Leisure	F&B, spa	Local
Lux 4	Hotel manager + other duties	City	Business/Leisure	F&B, spa	International
Lux 5	Hotel manager	City	Business/Leisure	F&B	Regional
Pro 1	Other manager	Mix	Mix	Mix	Regional
Pro 2	Other manager	Mix	Mix	Mix	No
Tourism 1	Hotel manager	Nature location	Leisure	F&B, spa	No
Tourism 2	Hotel manager	City	Business	F&B	No
Tourism 3	Hotel manager	City	Business/Leisure	F&B	Local
Tourism 4	Hotel manager	Nature location	Leisure	F&B, spa	Regional
Tourism 5	Hotel manager	Nature location	Leisure	F&B, spa	Regional
Tourism 6	Hotel manager	City	Business/Leisure	F&B	No
Tourism 7	Hotel manager, Owner	City	Business/Leisure	F&B	Local
Tourism 8	Hotel manager, Owner	Nature location	Leisure	F&B	No
Tourism 9	Hotel manager	City	Business	F&B	International

In the sample of 4-5-star hotels, those facilities that were located in cities and focused primarily on business travelers during weekdays, and leisure tourists on the weekends, were labelled the Lux1-5 group. Hotels located in holiday resorts and providing access to an aquapark on their premises were grouped into Spa 1-3. For the Spa 1-3 group, their primary customer segment was leisure tourists, however, they also simultaneously provide services for business conferences and events.

Although the 2-3-star group hotels have slightly different locations and some specifications for the customer segmentations, they are labelled as Tourism 1-9. Five of the hotels belong to Finnish hotel chains, six to a regional European chain, two to international chains, and six are independent.

The interviews of the 4-5-star hotel representatives were conducted over a period of five months between May-September 2021, and the 2-3-star hotel managers between September-December 2022. The participants chose where and when to be interviewed. In the interviews the objective was to first allow the interviewees to talk freely about how they perceive the expectations of their customer towards their stay at the hotel, without the interviewer mentioning the guestroom. We wished to investigate whether the managers' focus was on experiences, or overnight stays in rooms as physical spaces, or something else. Then we asked about the management perspective on the core product of the hotel, which in most interviews raised the issue of the "room" in the discussion. Once the respondent identified the product their hotel sells to customers, they were asked to determine how they measure the success of the hotel. In the final stage, the respondents were asked to discuss if there was a contradiction between what the hotel sells to customers and what they think customers are actually buying. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Anonymization was used to protect the participants' identities.

The interview data was analyzed by applying an inductive approach, which is a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a preexisting coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Empirical indicators from the data, such as themes and topics were compared with each other in the analysis process, with the aim of searching for similarities and differences (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016).

Following the thematic analysis recommendations of Nowell *et al.* (2017), both the shorter quotes and longer block quotes were included in the reports, and all quotes were accompanied by a unique identifier to demonstrate that various participants were represented across the results. Comparisons between the explanatory adequacy of the theoretical constructs and empirical indicators continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). A comparison of the achieved results showed that after the 19th interview, saturation was reached. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) clarify, once the received data is conceptually dense and solid, the research has reached the core category that adequately explains the topic under investigation. In that sense no further interviews were needed.

In order to compare the information given by the hotel managers with the information that is available for the customers on hotel web pages, a rough content analysis of the information presented on the web pages of the interviewed hotels was conducted. Each hotel web page was accessed and reviewed from the customers' perspective, including an examination of the main page: hotel slogan, design and atmosphere of the page, hotel's core message to the guests. Data was recorded in an Excel table. Tests were conducted making room reservations in order to find possible differences between leisure and work-related accommodation offerings. Information about the room's facilities, ancillary services and activities were analyzed. After each interview the transcribed data was compared to the web page

information of the respective hotel to reveal similarities or differences between the managers' ideas and the actual offer by the hotel.

4. Findings

4.1 Differences in expectations between business and leisure segments

At the beginning of the interviews, the aim was to explore how hotel managers identify and understand their customers' expectations. Interviewees were asked to explain why they think their customers decided to choose and book a room at a certain hotel. According to the 4-5-star hotel managers' responses, it is initially a question of segmentation; differences between business and leisure customers, and more precisely, different sub-segments within these customer groups. Additionally, particularly the luxury hotel managers spoke about segmentation among different kinds of business customers. According to these managers, a business customer may choose a specific hotel because of *an easy and comfortable overnight stay which makes their business much easier (Lux1)*. All the services at the hotel should work well and support customers' business travel needs. Therefore, the customers can be in a comfortable environment and *concentrate on their business*. A common view among the 4-5-star hotel respondents (8/10) was that the core need of business customers is just a room for an overnight stay. One of the interviewees stated as follows:

So, it is like you come in and then you go out, that's all. People who were in the room just needed to have a bed, some electricity for their laptops, and a shower. Maybe breakfast and that's all. They just slept there. Then they leave. (Lux3)

The managers of 2-3-star hotels recognized the need for the convenience of the hotel stay for the different customer segments (Tourism 5/9), and according to them, the hotel's location (Tourism 9/9), and the hotel's room price play a crucial role (Tourism 8/9) when their customer's select a hotel. Some of these managers (Tourism 4/9) were anxious to provide the lowest price available in the area: *"Customers mainly choose us because of the pricing and location (Tourism 7)"*.

Although all the managers of the 2-3-star hotels categorized their segments as leisure tourists and business customers (Tourism 8/9), some (Tourism 3/9) were ready to sell to everyone, without making any differentiation in segmentation: *"We sell everything to everybody – that is our marketing strategy (Tourism 6)"*.

More than half of the 4-5-star hotels managers (6/10) highlighted that a clear distinction between business and leisure traveling does not exist anymore, as business travelers sometimes take their family with them. One of the managers claimed that staying in a specific hotel may reflect the status of the guest. Additionally, it is common that some customers may choose the same hotel for both business and leisure trips. Subsequently, when the focus is switched to the leisure aspect of travel it changes the mindset of the 4-5-star hotel respondents (9/10). One of the respondents described an overnight stay in the hotel for a leisure customer as like staying in *"your home during a holiday" (Spa1)*. As leisure tourists might visit the hotel only once, their expectations may be higher compared to business travelers. It is important to highlight that the brand message and image of the hotel have a high impact on customer expectations:

We trust that our brand is well recognized. We do have a lot of foreign guests. So, the brand tends to make people look first at our hotels. (Lux 4)

Once the discussion was not only about the customer needs but about expectations, the respondents from the 4-5-star hotels (6/10) talked about overnight stays:

On a leisure trip, it is more like guests are spending time with their friends. Or they come to take time off with their children. The mums come to sleep over here. Parents come to spend a weekend together. There are a lot of expectations about how the stay will be. (Lux5)

In contrast, for the 2-3-star hotel managers, accommodation was the main service they sell (Tourism 7/9): *“We sell beds in the city, not any experience or anything like that (Tourism6)”*. Unlike the 4-5-star hotel managers, the 2-3-star hotel managers tended to avoid creating customer expectations that were too high and tried to focus more on the practical aspects of the hotel stay: *“we want to create the feeling that we are people working here. So, we try to minimize the gap of negativity.” (Tourism 3)*. This helps to avoid differences between customer expectations and the actual service in these hotels. The situation is quite the reverse for the hotel managers of a 4-5-star hotel, who in order to meet the expectations of the tourists, already begin to add different services at the moment of booking the hotel room, thus enabling both business and leisure customers to tailor their own unique overnight stay:

When booking, the customer can choose if/s/he requires only a room, or a room and breakfast. Or then you can choose if the spa is included in the price - or the saunas. All these extra services or optional - the room itself does not include any special services. (Spa2)

Most of the 4-5-star hotel respondents (8/10) consider the available hotel services as very important creators of expectations. One respondent even claimed that a standard hotel is not attractive at all, but the additional services e.g., restaurants, spa, waterpark, golf, and other outdoor sports activities are. The hotel must meet the customers' expectations based on its marketing message and provide the promised level of service. These services play a role in the emotional attributes that create new and higher expectations not only as regards the accommodation but from the whole overnight experience:

You can come here at any time of the year. Because we have the aquapark, the spa and other activities as well. And of course, there are many restaurants. (Spa2)

In contrast, 2-3-star hotel managers focus and define the core needs of their customers:

A hotel does not need to be more than what it is, many of the guests just need a place to sleep, which means a clean, quiet and warm room, a good bed and a smooth check-in and check out, Friendly service and a good breakfast, also quiet and safe atmosphere (Tourism 2).

4.2 Hotel managers' perception of the core product of the hotel

When discussing the hotel business, all the interviewees (Total 19/19), at different stages of the discussions, stated that the core selling product of the hotel is the accommodation in a hotel room. Indeed, one of the respondents noticed that everything that happens in the hotel - happens in the hotel room.

Nevertheless, during the conversation about rooms, it was the 4-5-star hotel managers who took the customer's perspective and tried to understand their experiences. The majority of interviewees (8/10) in this group, including all the luxury hotel managers (5/5), defined the hotel room as a key part of the experience they are selling:

Maybe it is more the total experience and guest journey. Starting before checking in and ending after check out. But of course, the hotel stay and the hotel room are still in the middle. Yes, a hotel room is the key. Again, here it is the core. This is where everything is built around. It is also about the other items you need to book. They are very important. (Pro1)

Hence, although the 4-5-star hotel interviewees see the room as the core product, at the same time they also talk about experiences. Interestingly, these hotel managers consider that customers, when buying a room, are aiming to receive experiences:

Our business is experiences. That is the whole package. You can't sell just a room. Of course, they are paying for the room. But it is the whole experience. The expectations come from the marketing materials, and the websites, they are reading the reviews of the customers. The expectation of the experience. (Lux2)

The 4-5-star hotel managers also use different tools to create customer experiences. One of the respondents remarked on the demand for room dining services, and another mentioned spa services, and another - restaurant experiences. In addition, 3 of the 2-3-star hotel managers considered overnight stays in their hotels as a package: "So we are not selling only rooms - it's the full package and the feeling about it (Tourims₄)". Therefore, these managers see the overnight stay in the hotel as a package of accommodation, services and related attributes (Total 10/19):

But also, we are creating these experience packages – we are combining them, for example, as a fashion brand hotel – we have a shopping package for buying nice fashion. But also, we have a love package – where we combine champagne, flowers and chocolate and that kind of thing. It can also be a leisure package, where you have a spa experience. Also, an experience with the restaurant – the dining package. We combine it. It is not just a room. It is something else extra. (Lux2)

Accordingly, it can be said, that many hotels are trying to offer the customer the whole experience: "make an experience for which you are willing to pay for" (Lux₄). As a result, these packages are creating certain connotations for overnight stays. However, the managers also noticed the importance of the experience perceived within the hotel room as well. In this regard, especially the interviewees from the luxury hotels (4/5) consider the room not only as an important part of the hotel stay, but as a part of the whole package:

The room is really important, but it is part of the whole package. It has to be according to their expectations and the whole experience. (Lux2)

Nevertheless, some of the 2-3-star hotel managers still consider their rooms as "a guests' second home" (Tourism 5/9), and make every effort to make a guest's overnight stay very convenient and practical. They refer to the hotels' overnight stays as consisting of facilities and related services: "Room, good bed, friendly service, breakfast and smooth check-in and check-out. (Tourism 2)". The idea of the hotel room as a "a guest's second home" is supported by the 4-5-star hotel managers too. However, it can also be an office depending on the customer and the type of hotel stay:

What is the hotel room actually? We have already seen that people use the hotel rooms as offices. But then when we go back to that: alright, is the room an office? What is it? You have to make the decision as to the customer you are addressing with your product. (lux1)

4.3 Characteristics of the room as a product

Because hotel managers recognize the importance of the room as the core of the overnight stay at a hotel, its physical appearance, interior and amenities may play a major role in the promotion and during the stay. Customer expectations are often based on their earlier experiences, the hotel marketing brand and images, often from pictures on the hotel's web pages. Most of the 4-5-star hotel respondents (7/10)

regarded photographs of the rooms as a major attraction factor and the sales point for first-time visitors. From the pictures, customers obtain an image of the premises:

The room pictures always get a lot of likes. They seem to be very popular. People want to see what the rooms look like. That is how they base their decision – how it looks on the premises. (Lux5)

Most of the 4-5-star hotel managers (7/10) spoke about the hotel design and interior in connection with their rooms' qualities. In these respondents' opinions (6/10), especially those representing the luxury hotel segment group, hotel rooms should be in line with the other sectors of the hotel with regard to the hotel brand. For example, the lounge areas, the bar area or the restaurant area have to replicate a living room like experience. Depending on the hotel the main attraction can be the conference rooms, the lounges, the restaurants, the aquapark, or the hotel room itself. Both the 4-5-star hotel managers (6/10) and some of the 2-3-star hotel managers (3/9) claimed that the bed is an important part of the overnight stay in the hotel room, as first of all customers want to have a good night sleep:

So, the good overnight sleep is the key product for any hotel business. Because you don't come to a hotel if you don't have a need for an overnight stay and sleep. Then you start adding and come the other ones. That is the key thing. (Lux1)

Notably, in the discussion, breakfast became a really important part of the hotel accommodation. In the context of Finland, the respondents (Total 12/19), mostly from the luxury hotels and some of the 2-3-star hotels managers, added breakfast to the discussion of the hotel room:

Here in this hotel breakfast is very important. We really recognize what is the meaning of the breakfast, because in Finland, or at least at our hotel breakfast is always included in the room rate. We tried taking the breakfast off and didn't work so well... ..I see it as a really important part of the brand promise for us, that the breakfast is always included. (Lux5)

The respondents from the 4-5-star hotels (6/10) tried to grasp the concept of the hotel room by differentiating through categories, this approach was particularly common with the spa hotel managers:

Because we have different types of rooms. We have the family room There is a small fridge in there. Because if you have children, then it is good you have some food in there. But basically, the rooms – they are really basic. But then you pay a bit extra, and then you get a higher category room.... There are tea and coffee-making facilities. A bigger bed. Something you might be willing to pay extra. And then if you pay a bit more – then we have these new suites. There we do have in-room amenities, like shampoos and also a mini bar, and bathtubs. (Spa2)

The hotel managers also identified the importance of the service experiences during an overnight stay in the hotel. Customer services and the hotel staff are essential parts of the hotel accommodation and the business is very much dependent on people:

We are a hospitality business. We are a people to people business. I believe that people still want to have face-to-face experience, even though we have these digital check-ins. A big part of the travelling experience is still people, people serving people. (Lux4)

Hence, hotel accommodation is a combination of tangible and intangible parts. A combination of these two parts creates the expectations for an overnight stay:

But there are a lot of soft things that you have to add to sell the hotel room as a product. It is a whole puzzle of many pieces, that the client adds to get the experience. And to be happy about the hotel room, it might be actually from these other elements. (Spa1)

Simultaneously, the 2-3-star hotel managers believed that most of their customers have previously stayed in their hotels and are familiar with how it works (Tourism 7/9). Consequently, they tend to focus on the provision of general accommodation services, rather than creating experiences:

Since we are almost the only 3-star hotel, we don't compete with any 4 or 5 ones. Our business is not any high class- so we are for all the customers. We are for customers who want normal service. (Tourism6)

To summarize, it can be concluded from the interviewees responses that even though accommodation in the room is regarded as the major product of a hotel, the hotel overnight stay may be different for the customer depending on the hotel's facilities, services and targeted customers. In the case of business customers, accommodation with a good bed and the necessary services, is all that seems to be required. While for leisure customers, the overnight stay is perceived to be like a home experience during a holiday. Hence, the room may serve different purposes. However, simultaneously, the respondents say that though the customers pay for a room, they also expect experiences. This presents one of the first contradictions and highlights the complexity of the business:

As said – basically it is not so simple. I think that it is a complex business. In the sense that we have been talking there seems to be hard facts, and they are priced somehow. (Spa1)

4.4 Hotel managers' approach to measuring hotel performance

Finally, the interviewees were asked to discuss how different measurement tools and metrics are related to what they sell. First of all, the majority of the 4-5-star hotel respondents (9/10) referred to RevPAR (Revenue per available room) and ADR (Average Daily Rate) tools to measure hotel room sales operations. In contrast, the 2-3-star hotel managers followed total daily sales (Tourism 8/9). Hotel occupancy was observed by both groups of interviewees, but the 2-3-star hotels managers were especially concerned about this measurement (Tourism 7/9). Together with the occupancy, the 4-5-star hotel managers (5/10) referred particularly to the related costs:

Of course, it is good if you get more money from the room. But the most important is to have a lot of people here, using all the services. (Spa2).

Simultaneously, when the discussion was about customer insight, most of the interviewees (Total 16/19) regarded customer feedback as a very important and efficient tool to measure the success of the hotel room:

Customer feedback. That is one of the most important things you should follow. You should note when there are bad pillows or uncomfortable beds, or something is missing. So, I think customer rating is important. And it is also important to read the comments, to understand, to analyze why we go back to the same hotel. (Spa1)

Such themes of the hotel managers as the hotel brand, revenue management and room prices were related to the success of the hotel operations. These themes were also important for the 2-3-star hotel managers (Tourism 5/9). Often hotel room pricing was linked to the market situation. As managers tend to look at the local market to identify their own niche in it:

But one of the biggest things that affect the price is the market situation in the area.... Because of the situation at the local market or the area where the hotel is located. I would say that is a big factor in the pricing - the competition. (Spa3)

Principally after presenting all the different points of view on measuring the success of the hotel room, some of the 4-5-star hotel managers (5/10) and a few of the 2-3-star hotel managers (Tourism 3/9) added that the most important indication is that customers come back to stay in their hotel:

That is why I see the rating which they give us as so important. Because I always believe that they will come back. So, it is also necessary to make sure that they are profitable for us. That it is not only a one-night stand, that they will come for more nights. (Lux5)

Nonetheless, there is no single perspective, rule or path applicable to all the hotels. As was mentioned previously, the 4-5-star hotel managers in particular did recognize the contradictions appearing in the hotel business:

So, we are selling the experience created by the brand, it is a whole package. Basically, customers are paying for the room, but that is not the truth. (Lux2)

4.5 Hotels web page analysis

In accordance with the interviews, a rough web page analysis showed that only three of the 4-5-star hotels and one of the 2-3-hotels promoted experiences in their first main page communication brand promise. Location (Total 12/19) and hotel services (Total 10/19) are often highlighted on the main hotel web pages. An interesting notion is that even though all the interviewees did distinguish between leisure and business segments, this distinction was only indicated by three of the 4-5-star hotels and three of the 2-3-star hotels; the web pages were in most cases targeted to non-segmented customers, not particularly emphasizing any services or amenities for business customers. If there were any specifically business customer services – they could be found in the “Meetings, events or conferences” sections of the web pages. Eleven hotels offered ready-made packages for the customers on their web pages, but all the hotels offered customers the possibility to create their own customized package when the room is being reserved. Only three of the 4-5-star hotels and one of the 2-3-star hotels web pages made a reference to the “home alike” atmosphere of the hotel room. Instead, room size, room amenities and other attributes played a major role. Interestingly, 11 of the hotels including both five of the 4-5-star hotels (5) and six of the 2-3-star hotels automatically added breakfast in the room reservation, while only 8 specifically offered to only book the accommodation.

Hence, based on the information presented in Table 2, the communication about the hotels on the web pages of both the 4-5-star and the 2-3-star hotels more or less corresponded with the hotel managers' interviews, except the notion of different kinds of needs and expectations as regards leisure and business customers, which was not clearly indicated in the web page communication.

5. Discussions and conclusions

In the literature review a wide range of articles were presented as discussing what is important for different customer segments with regard to their hotel experience. Accordingly, from the hotel managers' interviews in this research, we can clearly see that the hotel managers are aware of these differences. Hotel managers acknowledge different customer segments, with business and leisure principally being the general ones. The hotel managers did recognize that business customers have different expectations compared to leisure ones, which supports the findings of earlier hotel studies (e.g., Pesonen *et al.*, 2019).

Table 2. *Hotels web pages analysis*

Hotel	Hotel front page		Leading sentence promises experiences		Leading sentence highlights location	Leading sentence notices services	Aiming leisure customers	Aiming business customers	Hotel information		Services for the business customers		Services for the leisure customers		Hotel room presentation		Home like room atmosphere		Wide variety of room images	Room amenities	Room Size	Room bed type and size	Hotel room pricing		Possibility to book only accommodation	Price includes breakfast	Possibility to create package
Lux 1	x	x	x	x					x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x					x		x		
Spa 1					x	x			x	x		x			x		x	x					x		x		
Spa 2	x	x	x	x					x		x	x			x		x	x					x		x		
Lux 2		x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x					x		x		
Spa 3	x	x	x	x					x		x	x			x		x	x					x		x		
Lux 3			x	x	x				x		x	x											x	x	x		
Lux 4		x							x		x						x	x	x								x
Lux 5		x							x		x	x					x	x	x				x	x	x		
Pro 1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pro 2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tourism 1	x	x	x	x							x	x					x	x					x		x		
Tourism 2		x		x								x					x	x	x					x			
Tourism 3	x		x		x				x		x						x	x	x				x		x		
Tourism 4		x							x		x	x					x	x	x					x		x	
Tourism 5				x							x	x			x								x	x	x		
Tourism 6		x	x	x								x	x				x	x					x				
Tourism 7			x	x								x	x				x						x				
Tourism 8		x	x	x	x						x		x				x	x	x					x		x	
Tourism 9		x			x							x					x	x	x					x		x	

The 4-5-star hotel managers recognized their business customers as being represented by “white collar” customers, while the managers of the 2-3-star hotels identified “workers” as their business customers,

along with small company entrepreneurs - who pay for the hotel stay themselves. Thus, this compels the 2-3-star hotel managers to focus on the competitive pricing of the hotel room in their marketing offer. For the 4-5-star hotel managers the question of the room price for the business customers was not of great importance, as they usually have special business offers and corporate room rates, especially when companies reimburse for hotel stays. Generally, regarding business customers, hotel managers highlight the functional aspects of the hotel stay: the hotel room, the room amenities and the hotel location, which may refer to their awareness of the stress caused by business travel (cf. Ye & Xu, 2020). A good night's sleep was emphasized, referring in essence to the bed being in a quiet room, which is in line with the findings of Chen *et al.* (2018). The hotel managers also acknowledged different room attributes that would promote customer satisfaction and also recognized the difference in room usage of the various customer segments. This also supports Ye and Hu (2020) who note that the hotel room for business customers has the role of a workspace as well. According to the findings of this study, the hotel managers perceived that for business customers, the guestroom as such is significantly more important than the whole hotel experience.

Nevertheless, the managers also noticed that there is actually a very thin line between business and leisure customers. Hotel managers tend to think they are selling accommodation, particularly hotel rooms, but according to several studies based on the customers' perspective (Cetin & Walls, 2016; Padma & Ahn, 2020; Ren *et al.*, 2016), the leisure segment customers especially may be buying experiences. This creates problems for managers as there is no longer a clear distinction between business and leisure travelling. This notion supplements the understanding of the term "bleasure travelling", explaining the erasing of the borders between business travel and leisure activities undertaken during a business trip (Lichy & McLeay, 2018). Once their work is done business customers become leisure customers and might expect to have access to other hotel services, such as restaurants, bars, gym, spa, aquapark, bowling or saunas. As one of the hotel managers commented, customers can be on a business trip and take a family with them. Nevertheless, hotel managers do recognize these customers as business travelers and try to create problem-free stays which supports the customers' business needs. According to the hotel managers, hotel accommodation is a combination of facilities and related services, which includes different attributes depending on the main customers' needs: business or leisure, or both. The managers noticed that the hotel accommodation should have features and services which are convenient and comfortable for the customer.

In terms of leisure customers, hotel managers assume that the role of the guestroom has less importance, and that for leisure customers the whole hotel experience is more important. The 4-5-star hotel managers referred to packages with a wide range of services, from spas and saunas to gastronomy and design shopping. They also paid attention to the hotel room categories and types, as for leisure customers the hotel atmosphere plays an important role. Within the hotel facilities and guestrooms, the managers recounted that they attempted to create a home like atmosphere for the customers, which supports the notion of Roberts *et al.* (2018); a notion that the hotel room can be perceived as a person's home during their holiday. The research findings also refer to the notions of Bogicevic *et al.* (2018), Choi and Kandampully (2019), and Philips (2004) that the design of the hotel room has a great effect on customer satisfaction and should be in line with other sections of the hotel. As a result, hotel managers provide facilities to create the memorable experiences customers are looking for, which links to the findings of Hosany *et al.* (2022).

In contrast, in the spa hotels – where the main attraction is the aquapark, the role of the room seems to be regarded as similar to those of 2-3-star hotels, where the managers recognize the role of the room as minor. The 2-3-star hotel managers focused on the functional attributes of the room, giving very

practical and utilitarian descriptions of amenities. In some cases, the word “experience” was stated, while in others the room was described just as a “place to sleep”.

The managers determined that the customers' perspective of an overnight stay was not just a combination of tangible items and facilities, but an actual process of being accommodated in the hotel and using the services. This is in accordance with several earlier studies suggesting that the hotel room is the core product of the hotel (Ogle, 2009) and is the most important aspect of the guest experience (Baek *et al.*, 2020; Torres & Kline, 2013).

The findings of this study are in accordance with Narangajavana and Hu (2008), who state that understanding hotel customers' needs has a direct influence on the daily decisions made by managers. Hotel managers would like to know all the small details which create the whole experience of the overnight stay in a hotel, in addition to customer feedback, staff feedback is also utilized; this acknowledges the importance of the insights of line-level employees (Fuchs *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, the research results also indicate that hotel managers are more interested in hotel room-related metrics figures. The interviewees were especially concerned about daily sales and hotel occupancy, since these figures are related to room availability and room prices in different sales channels. Although the room is what the interviewed hotel managers seem to sell, they tend to speak more about an overall hotel experience, specifically the overnight stay, rather than the room itself.

According to the findings, it seems that the hotel managers are aware of customer expectations, especially the business customer segment. However, in the marketing material of hotels, in their communication to customers, and especially on the hotel web pages, hotel managers do not seem to utilize this information. What the hotels do, and how they market, present, and introduce their offering is often in particular contrast with the knowledge of hotel managers. Notably, this is highlighted in terms of business customers. Usually, conferences and meeting facilities are marketed separately on the hotels' web pages as spaces for the customers' own business purposes. One of the main findings of this research is that the hotel web pages are mostly targeted towards leisure customers, revealing that there is a contradiction between the management's insight into the role of the room for different customer segments and the everyday practices of the hotel management in terms of marketing the hotel offerings.

Finally, the research findings show that these hotel managers were deeply concerned about customer expectations. Hotel managers tend to think they are selling accommodation, particularly hotel rooms, but in contrast, at least the leisure customers may think they are buying experiences. Hotel guests with their unique demands and expectations play an active role in shaping an overnight stay in the hotel to meet their own expectations. The role of the hotel room as the core element of the hotel accommodation is acknowledged by the interviewees. As Ineson *et al.* (2019) suggest, for the hotel guests the hotel room is a retreat where they can find temporary shelter. For some, it may be just a safe, peaceful overnight stay in a room, which offers opportunities to rest before a working day. For others, a room may be a space and a starting point for a memorable experience away from home. Nonetheless, the hotel may sell this facility, a particular room with its amenities, for both these purposes at the same time, through the same channel, with a similar marketing message. In order to sell the experiences, hotel managers need first to sell the room, as the accommodation in the hotel room is the space for building the whole hotel experience. A hotel overnight stay is the entire process of being present in the hotel, using the services and having a good night's sleep in the hotel room.

5.1. Managerial implications

The findings of the research have clearly highlighted that managers do recognize the differences in customer needs, as well as the differences in perception and usage of the hotel room by business and leisure customers. We recommend that hotel managers utilize their practical knowledge in improving

targeted marketing messages for the different customer segments, particularly highlighting the options for business travelers. Hotel web pages could be supplemented with details that are important for business travelers. As was previously noted, sleeping is integral to the hotel overnight stay – therefore information on the bed can be complemented with the bed mattresses (soft, medium, hard) options, a list of available pillows options; information on the room location – with special attention to quietness. While leisure guests tend to seek an impressive view, business customers might be more satisfied with a quiet and silent inner yard. Information on the size of the desk and the option to add a second screen might support business guests. This practical information should be easily available on the hotels' web page, making it a “businessperson friendly” hotel.

5.2. Limitations and future research

The study was only conducted among Finnish hotel managers, which may limit the transferability of the findings to an international level. Since this research focused on the hotel managers' broad understanding of the hotel room per se, it provides a subject for the future research of the potential differences of the role of the room as regards room types and categories. Additionally, the customers' perspective of the role of the hotel room during their travel may provide a complementary view, and might help hotel managers to improve their understanding of the needs and preferences of different types of customers. Hence, we encourage further studies to focus on the business and leisure customers' understanding of the meaning of the hotel room. Future research could also focus on addressing similar questions to those travelers who are making both business and leisure trips. A comparison of these perspectives will deliver a completely new field for discussion.

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