

HEALTH PROTOCOLS – AN INSTRUMENT TO IMPROVE HOTELS' SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTS

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Abstract

Tourism products have sustainable characteristics as far as they target both ecological and social aspects. The recent COVID-19 virus has generated major changes in economic activities and in our daily life. Tourism is among the most affected economic sectors, the tourism activities registering a worrying decline. The World Health Organization and other official organisations have introduced specific prevention and control measures to be applied by the accommodation units. The article analyzes the main sanitary measures imposed by the official authorities, both national and international. At the same time, another objective of the article is the analysis of the plans in action introduced by the best-known hotel brands in their attempt to limit the effects produced by the virus and the resumption of the hotel activities. Also, the article presents the results of an analysis among the Romanian 5-star hotels from the most visited tourism destinations, respectively mountain and seaside destinations. The topic of the research aims the assessment of the information provided to their guests on the sanitary measures undertaken by the hotels management teams. The results obtained highlight an unexpected and also sad situation, as most of the analyzed Romanian hotels do not provide any information on this topic.

Keywords: Health protocols, hotels, COVID-19 pandemic, sustainable products.

Classification JEL: M19, M37, Z32

1. Introduction

In recent decades, tourism companies faced many challenges, from the need to consolidate earnings to meeting the needs of consumers, to enhancing visibility, adapting to globalization and technological progress and, recently, adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

As in 2020 tourism circulation had a significant decline, hotels were confronted with a critical situation. The fear of the virus spread generated peoples' fear to consume tourist products. In their attempt to convince tourists to continue booking and consuming hotel services, hotel teams applied specific measures to ensure sanitary safety within their units. Moreover, the need to protect hotel investments and cash flows and, at the same time, safeguard the hotel teams from the virus explain the efforts to introduce new sanitary measures and train employees to work in this new environment [11]. In such a context, sanitary certification is, these days, a "must do" for the hospitality industry.

The article has two main objectives. The first is to present the major responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the hospitality industry. In order to achieve this goal, the guidelines issued by the World Health Organization, the European Commission and the national authorities were highlighted, as well as the main measures announced by the major hotel brands.

The second objective referred to the analysis of information for guests provided by Romanian hotels in order to prevent and control COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, the five star hotel units from the mountain and seaside tourism destinations were selected, these destinations being the most frequented during the summer holidays. In order to evaluate hotels' communication actions, information provided by the hotels' websites regarding the health and cleanliness measures undertaken during this period of time were analyzed. A number of 10 hotels were identified, hotels which are located in Brașov, Prahova and Constanța counties.

2. Criteria for assessing hotels' sustainability

The sustainable tourism product is represented by "everything that a tourism company offers in order to meet the needs of visitors, taking into account, at the same time, the needs of the company and meeting the specific values of sustainable development" [16, p.84]. In 2010, Peattie and Belz proposed the transformation of the classic marketing mix, represented by the 4Ps, with a marketing mix specific to sustainability, which comprise 4Cs: customer solutions (instead of the product), consumer cost (for price), convenience (instead of place), and communication (for promotion). One of the main characteristics of the sustainable product refers to "dual focus - which means that unlike purely environmental products, sustainable products have a dual focus on ecological and social aspects" [14, p.12]. Social aspects have become essential nowadays, since COVID-19 pandemic completely changed our society.

Certification systems provide opportunities for industries to coordinate competition, prevent excessive government intervention, and also present a positive image [8, p.84]. Voluntary tourism certification schemes have developed largely within the hospitality sector, mostly due to these organisations being more easily defined and therefore standardised [4]. Certification schemes for sustainable tourism represent "an increasingly important strategy for encouraging the sustainable production of goods and services", and are designed specifically to encourage consumers to buy goods and services from companies that adhere to high social and environmental standards in their production [9, p.281]. The assessment of specific initiatives and their contribution to sustainable development requires both accounting for all links between the social, environmental and economic systems that are directly involved, but also the links between local, regional and global effects, as well as the links between short-term and long-term outcomes [10, p.37].

A large number of certification systems related to sustainable tourism products have been developed in recent years, and they are restricted to assessing the day-to-day management of tourism units, e.g. greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, employment, contributions to the local economy, and resource consumption and waste [15, pp. 116-118]. There is a constant desire to better understand the role of tourism management to ensure a balance between stakeholder interests and the preservation of any specificity, whether environmental or sociocultural and selecting the criteria system to enable hotel companies to establish holistic and participatory management that addresses the environmental, social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of sustainability represents a turning point for any management team [6, p.9]. The investigation on the subject could be extended to payments to the tourism companies and the extent to which they remain in national or offshore accounts, impacts on access to land, including displacement of population, cultural and societal costs and benefits of tourism, the scale and viability of assessing community participation in tourism product development and business opportunities [15, p.124]. The major difficulties associated with the introduction of managerial practices for sustainable operation are considered to be related to the lack of an environmental culture among economic operators, fear of increased costs due to investments in "green" technologies, the desire to obtain immediate profit from the completed investment associated to the lack of medium and long term plans and, also, the appreciation of uselessness of such actions in the direction of sustainable development because they wouldn't be appreciated neither by consumers nor wholesalers [3].

The certification schemes for sustainable development generate huge potential for marketing benefits including an improved company image in the market place, competitive advantage, marketing opportunities and also facilitate the charging of premium prices to smart and environmentally aware tourists [9]. An important element worth mentioning is that implementation of policies to improve the sustainability of business practices is in essence a question of leadership [10, p.41].

These tools are already considered traditional and need to be completed with sanitary elements able to certify the degree of trust given to hotels for fulfilling sanitary security measures and for the prevention of the spread of infections.

3. Sanitary measures and means to communicate them to guests

Hotel owners have multiple sources for hygiene and cleaning tips. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidance vectors in a special document "Operational considerations for COVID-19 management in the accommodation sector" [5].

Many hotel companies designed detailed materials to assure potential customers on their total implication in order to comply with all necessary sanitary conditions in the current period. Accor, one of the largest hotel groups has proved, once again, that management rapid measures are essential at maintaining a high standard of quality and competitiveness. The group launched the "Cleanliness & Prevention ALLSAFE label" plan and also performed intensive communication actions, extensively informing on their sanitary measures [1]. Marriott International also launched its Global Cleanliness Council to "elevate cleanliness standards and hospitality norms and behaviors to meet the new health and safety challenges" [5]. Hilton, Airbnb, Hyatt and many other major hotel brands are implementing enhance cleanliness initiatives to ease travelers' fears [18]. An overview of initiatives of major international hotel companies is presented in Table 1.

Table no. 1 Initiatives for maintaining the standard for quality and guests' sanitary safety

Hotel company	Tools for sanitary safety	Main characteristics
ACCOR	Cleanliness & Prevention ALLSAFE label	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New stringent cleanliness standards implemented and monitored across all Accor hotels with frequent disinfection of all high-touch areas. • An enhanced in room cleaning programme using hospital grade cleaning materials. • Regular deep cleaning on upholstery and carpets. • All bedding washed and treated at high temperatures.
Marriott International	Marriott Cleanliness Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is redefining cleaning and safety standards. • Face coverings are required for guests and associates in all indoor public areas in North America, the Caribbean and Latin America. • In public spaces, the company has added to its already rigorous cleaning protocols, the requirements that surfaces are treated with hospital-grade disinfectants and that this cleaning is done with increased frequency. • The new enhanced cleaning technologies including electrostatic sprayers to sanitize surfaces throughout the hotel. Marriott hotels are using air purifying systems that are effective against viruses in the air and on surfaces. • Food handlers and supervisors are trained on safe food preparation and service practices. The company's food and beverage operations are required to conduct self-inspection using its food safety standards as guidelines, and compliance is validated by independent audits.
Hilton	Hilton CleanStay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hilton has partnered with RB, makers of Lysol & Dettol, to help deliver an even cleaner stay for guests. • Building on the already rigorous cleaning standards to provide complete peace for guests. • The promise to deliver the same level of reliable and friendly service from Hilton, but with the added confidence of industry-leading hygiene practices created to keep guests safe.
Hyatt	Safety First, Wellbeing Always	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rigorous safety and cleanliness protocols that include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GBAC STARTM cleanliness and training accreditation process through the Global Biorisk Advisory Council (GBAC) at all Hyatt hotels; - Trained Hygiene & Wellbeing Leader or team at all locations, responsible for their hotel adhering to new operational protocols and training; - Cross-functional panel of trusted medical and industry advisors to help fine-tune safety protocols.

The self-imposed measures are complemented with authorities' involvement to guarantee the observance of the sanitary security conditions. This is Egypt's case, where Tourism Ministry awards health, safety certificates following hotels' verification atesting they have followed the health guidelines outlined by the Egyptian government and the World Health Organisation (WHO) [17]. Also, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is formulating a health and safety certificate for hotels, tourism establishments and services. The European Commission sets out principles to guide Member States when resuming tourism activities and developing COVID-related protocols for hospitality establishments that will minimize risks of infection for both guests and host personnel, included in "COVID-19: EU Guidance for the progressive resuming of tourism services and for health protocols in hospitality establishments" Communication [7]. In our country, the Romanian Government issued the Order 1731/832/2020 which stipulates specific sanitary measures for Romanian accommodation units [12].

Hotel experts proposed a variety of comprehensive plans meant to cover all aspects of hotel activities in order to ensure control for the application of sanitary measures. The main areas taken into account were teams, etiquette, reservations, web booking & distribution, C&E and sales, communication with guests, all direct services to clients such as front office activities (car parking, concierge, etc.), cleaning, room amenities, restaurant service, stocking policy and many more, as these examples are only a few out of all these planned actions [11]. The European principles for health protocols in hospitality establishments target a wide range of activities, out of which staff management and training, information for guests, physical distancing and hygiene, and infection prevention and control measures are priorities [7].

The evaluation of Romanian hotels located in mountain and seaside destinations was founded on the analyses of the clasified accommodation units presented by the Romanian Ministry of Economy, Energy and the Business Environment [13]. Based on this information, the hotels of five stars were selected, hotels located in Braşov, Constanţa and Prahova Counties. A number of 10 five star hotels were identified. The websites of these hotels were accessed and the information for guests on specific measures to control COVID-19 pandemic within the hotel were assessed. It is well-known that tourism websites are becoming more and more popular and, at the same time, the future of tourism is based on technological development and its rapid and extensive implementation at all tourism sector's levells [2].

The research generated unexpected and also sad results. From all the ten identified 5-star hotels, one is located in Braşov (Aro Palace Hotel), 8 are located in Constanţa County (Hotel Mamaia, Hotel Vega, Hotel Saturn, Hotel Inter Venus, Hotel New Belvedere, Arena Regia Hotel & Spa, Phoenicia Royal and Grand Hotel Rex) and one hotel in Sinaia, Prahova County (Ioana Hotel). Tabel no. 2 presents Romanian hotels' sanitary measures.

Table no. 2 Initiatives of Romanian 5-star hotels for maintaining the standard for quality and guests' sanitary safety

County	Hotel	Sanitary measures communicated to guests through the hotel website
Braşov	Aro Palace Hotel	It is the first information on the hotel website assuring guests for hotel involvement in guests' sanitary safety
Prahova	Ioana Hotel	Short declarations on the issue
Constanţa	Mamaia Hotel	The hotel does not have its own website
Constanţa	Vega Hotel	No information on hotel's involvement in enhancing sanitary protocols
Constanţa	Saturn Hotel	No information on hotel's involvement in enhancing sanitary protocols
Constanţa	Inter Venus Hotel	No information on hotel's involvement in enhancing sanitary protocols
Constanţa	New Belvedere Hotel	No information on hotel's involvement in enhancing sanitary protocols
Constanţa	Arena Regia Hotel	No information on hotel's involvement in enhancing sanitary protocols
Constanţa	Phoenicia Royal Hotel	The website offers a dedicated and visible section informing guests on the extended sanitary measures and protocols for safety reasons
Constanţa	Grand Hotel Rex	The hotel does not have its own website

Out of the ten hotels, two of them do not have their own website (Mamaia and Grand Hotel Rex), even if this is a mandatory criteria for classification. The 5-star hotels which provide information on pandemic situation are Aro-Palace Hotel from Braşov, Phoenicia Royal from Mamaia and Ioana Hotel from Sinaia. The other five hotels which were analyzed do not have a separate section to inform guests about their specific health and cleanliness measures for this particular context and no other information related to this topic.

4. Conclusions

The evaluations that have been the object of this article highlight some relevant elements. In order to carry out hotel activities, specific internal plans need to be implemented in order to fulfill health protocols. At the same time, the internal measures set by the management teams will have the expected outcomes if the guests are informed on the topic. The most simple and accessible instrument of communication is the website.

However, the analysis showed that only 30% of the hotels included information about COVID-19 protocols in their own websites. The causes for this lack could be numerous. One of these would be that these hotels do not apply internal sanitary protection measures and, as a consequence, there is no subject to be communicated. Another possible reason is associated with the presumed low interest of the guests in connection with the topic. Besides, another cause of this situation is that COVID-19 does not exist. Whatever the causes may be, the future will tell us who was right.

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